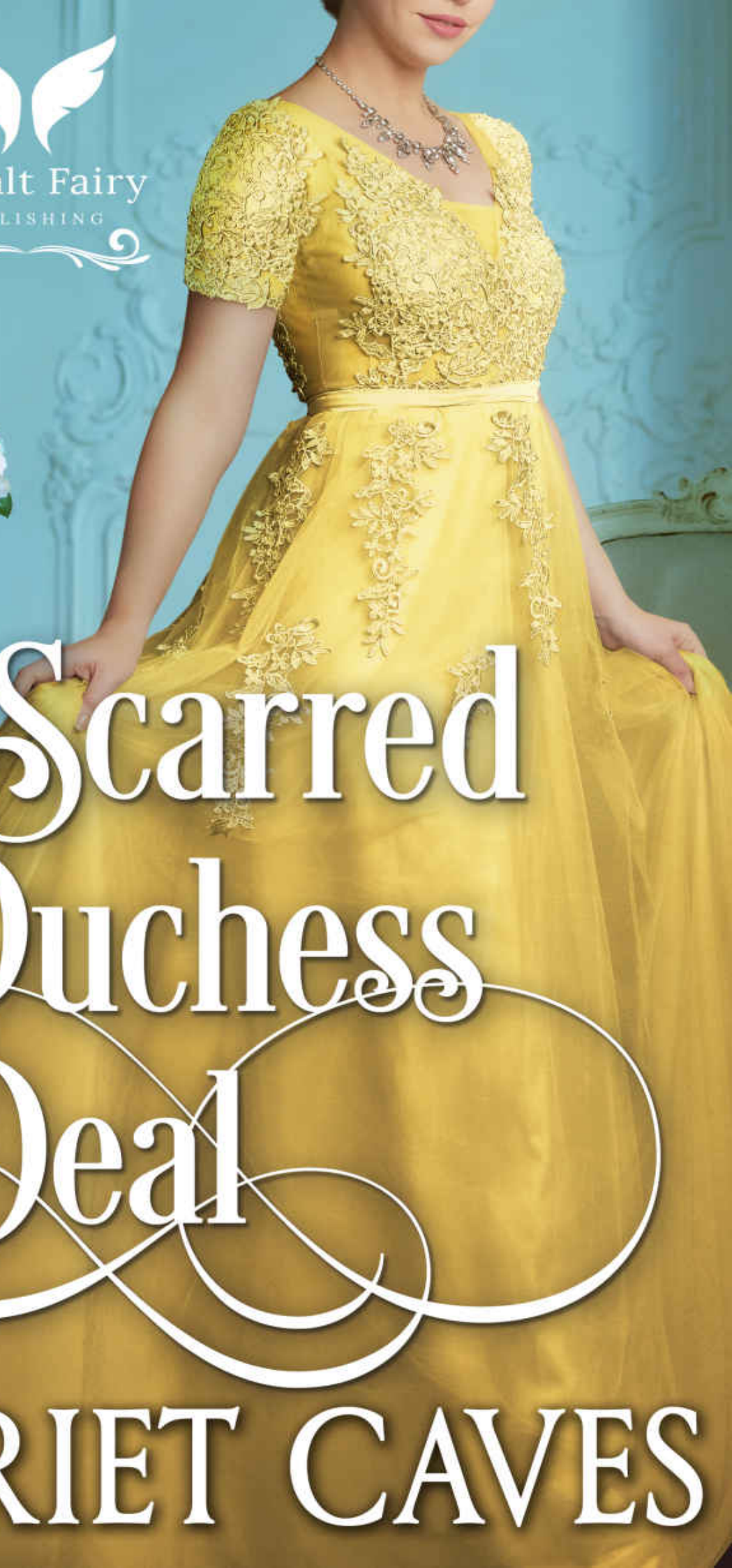




Cobalt Fairy  
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The Scarred  
Duchess  
Deal

HARRIET CAVES

# THE SCARRED DUCHESS DEAL

A Steamy Historical Regency Romance Novel



# HARRIET CAVES



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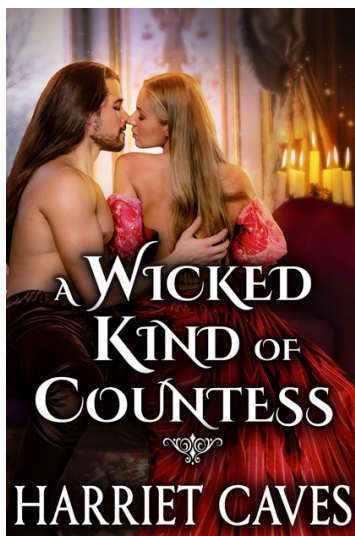
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## About the Book

***“I gave her my word that I would never marry or sire an heir.”***

Tessa’s life was ruined overnight when her own brother set their house on fire. But despite the horrible scars she now bears on her skin, the stares and whispers that tail her are much harder to live with.

In contrast to most gentlemen, who are forced into marriage, the Duke of Huxton made his dying mother a promise he can never break: never marry and never sire an heir. And he intends to honor her memory.

Until... a lady unlike any other stumbles into his arms.



## Chapter One



“**H**ow can anybody expect to create beautiful works of art with something so hideous in the room?”

The words hung in the air like pungent smoke. They lingered, unwarranted and cruel as the entirety of Anna Windrop’s embroidery group exchanged nervous glances. They all knew who Dorothea Abernathy was referring to – it was sheer ingrained social politeness that kept their eyes off the person in question. Anna could feel the burden of conversation shift to her. It was her home, her drawing room, and her embroidery group after all. Each of the members looked to her to smooth over the faux pas so that they could resume their needlework.

Anna laughed uncomfortably. She hoped that she might be able to pass off the rude comment as being attributed to Dorothea’s old age. That was no excuse for rudeness, but it was better to blame that than for Anna to admit that it might have been a mistake to invite the elderly woman in the first place. It was not as if Dorothea’s hands were steady enough to hold the needle anyway. They had not been able to display a single one of her creations in years. “Good heavens, Dorothea, your tongue wags more freely with each birthday you celebrate.”

Mercifully, the others in the room joined in the nervous laughter as if somehow they could move forward.

“More tea?” Anna added in hopes of changing the subject further as she glanced at her niece and ward from the corner of her eye. Tessa Windrop kept her eyes trained down on the

work in her hands. She had sat in the darkest corner of the room on purpose hoping that it would draw less attention to her and her... disfigurements. She hated that the heat in her face was likely to cause a blush of embarrassment that would be witnessed by everyone in the room. She could feel their eyes turn to her one at a time... but only one was outright staring at her. Tessa knew that if she looked up, her cousin Sophie would only laugh at her. She would do so in a way not to be noticed by her mother, Anna, but Tessa would be embarrassed all over again. There was not a thing she could do about it either – the embroidery group was the thing that her aunt loved most in the whole world... disrupting it would be hell for the entire household.

Needles started to move over canvases. Brightly colored bits of thread started to pass from one hand to the other again. Anna exhaled slowly. It seemed as if the worst was over – but she was wrong.

“Perhaps if she wore a little bit more rouge it would be less noticeable?” Another woman interjected. She had the decency to phrase it as if it were a helpful suggestion instead of an outright insult – but Tessa was just as offended as if she had not bothered.

“No! Only ladies of the night wear rouge that bright!”

“Then perhaps a large ribbon bound around a bonnet at all times?”

“Oh, or a decorative hat!”

“Perhaps, instead, she could style her hair in a different fashion? You know, I have heard that the women in France—”

“Do not be daft. That would only attract *more* attention to her! We wish to have *fewer* people looking at her!”

Tessa knew that if she bothered saying even a single word in her own defense that it would only offend them and make matters worse. It was all that she could do to keep herself focused on the needle and thread in her hand. She needed to make neat, orderly lines in order for the picture to come out clearly. She needed to ensure that her hands stopped shaking

so that she would not stab herself once more with the tip of the needle.

Tessa ought not to let their comments get to her; it was hardly her fault that she had been so badly disfigured. Despite knowing better, it was nearly impossible to let their comments simply roll off of her back. No matter how many times they insulted her it stung every time. She would not have wished her experience on even her very worst enemy. Yet, like clockwork, each month when her aunt's embroidery group met, the conversation would ultimately shift to her and how uncomfortable her hideous face made everybody in the room.

Later, when it was over, she would ask her aunt yet again if she could be allowed to skip the meetings. Her aunt, like always, would cry and pretend not to understand why her niece would ever wish to hurt her feelings by not attending. It always made her feel so guilty that Tessa ended up apologizing for being hurt and retreating to the safety and solitude of her room.

Exactly where she wished she was right this minute.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Needle through the fabric and back over again. She tried her best to tune out the conversation. They did not wish for her input anyway; it would not shift in topic from her scars until they were certain that she would not give them a reaction and thus further ammunition to torment her with. They wanted her reaction. Sometimes, Tessa was of the mind that they wished for her to apologize for having the nerve to look the way that she did. As if she would have chosen such a thing.

Was it really too much to hope that one of these months her aunt might come to her defense? Just once, perhaps? It would take so little effort on Anna's part to ask them to stop. At any moment, she could simply declare that her niece's scars were no longer up for discussion, and they would all be forced into silence. Yet Anna cared more for their opinions and the popularity of her group than something so silly as her niece's happiness.

*Do not cry.*

She told herself over and over again in her mind: it would be over soon. Her silent compliance would result in better treatment from her aunt for the next few days. That would be worth it. That thought brought her comfort. Perhaps she would even garner enough favor with the woman in order to get the new dress; there was one she had had her eye on the last couple of times they had ventured into town.

Her daydreaming about the pretty gown was interrupted when Sophie gasped loudly. Tessa looked up just in time to see Sophie quickly re-reading a missive in her hand and then clutching it to her chest. Tessa twisted in her seat to see the servant who had delivered the letter leaving the room. She glanced over to Anna who looked slightly irritated that the letter had been given to Sophie and not to herself.

Glancing up just long enough to ensure that all of the eyes in the room were on her, she grinned wickedly. Sophie was known to give the servants terrible orders without checking with her mother first. Sadly for her, they were all intimidated by Sophie and tended to do as she said until the master of the house – her father – got involved. Also, unluckily for Anna, her husband preferred their daughter to his wife and so often sided with Sophie.

Sophie's ego was overfed as it was without being further engorged by the knowledge that her mother was often jealous of her own daughter.

“Good gracious, child, what a sound that was,” Anna subtly chastised.

Never to be deterred from attention, Sophie ignored her mother's comment. She jumped up from her chair and spun around with the letter still clutched to her chest. She all but leaped for joy over whatever it was. “Oh, what lovely news!”

“Well, are you going to share with the group, child? We are in fits of suspense!” one of the women said.

“I have been invited to a ball!” Sophie giggled happily. Her whole face was alight with anticipation as she spoke.

Anna's cheeks flushed a light shade of pink as she rose and snatched the letter from her daughter's hands and quickly scanned over the contents. She exhaled in relief. "We have all been invited to the ball. What a lovely thing indeed. I shall have your father write back our intentions as quickly as possible."

"I shall need new slippers – oh, and perhaps new gloves, Mama, do you agree?" Sophie moved to sit next to Anna's chair so that she could beg more effectively.

"Do you already have a gown in mind, child?" one of Anna's friends asked.

"Oh, but of course!" Sophie exclaimed. "It is the first big ball of the Season! I have been plotting the best outfits to wear for the last few months. Everything is prepared. Of course, I had to wait for the invitation, but now that I have it—"

"Now that you have it, you intend on capturing a husband straight away, I hope," another woman added with a wicked grin.

"A girl as pretty as you ought to have no trouble whatsoever in having any man she wishes."

"Well, she ought to set her sights as high as possible. Use that pretty face to trap a husband well above her station. That is what I did, back in my prime."

"Trap! I never would have thought that you would admit to such a thing, Barbara!"

"Well, Dorothea would know all about that – tell us how you got *your* husband!"

The women all spoke over the top of one another. Were it not for pure shock over the nature of their conversation, Tessa would have been tempted to sneak out of the room at such a perfect moment.

"What you have to do, Sophie dear, is be sure to be seen dallying with an earl—"

"Nay, a *duke*," another interjected.

“Perhaps we ought not to be coaching my daughter in how to manipulate men.” Anna attempted to chide the women, but Sophie was raptly paying attention to their words. Her focus was so intent she was practically taking notes.

“Love matches are all well and good, my dear Sophie, but comfort and stability are what you really want. If you are seen in even a slightly compromising position with a duke then you certainly run a risk to your reputation, but he will be forced to marry you!”

Sophie nodded and leaned closer to hear more.

“May I be excused?” Tessa interrupted, standing up. She could not listen to this for another second. She clasped her hands in front of her softly and looked only at Anna.

“What? We have not finished... of course, you cannot—”

“I have no intentions of attending the ball, Aunt, and I would like to be excused if I might? I am feeling poorly.”

Sophie’s jaw hung open. Her eyes narrowed bitterly at having her spotlight stolen. “Nobody cares if you are attending the ball or not, Cousin.”

“Sophie!” Anna exclaimed in shock.

“What? I am merely saying what we are all thinking. With a face such as hers, she will be doing everyone in the *ton* a favor since she is so dreadful to encounter,” Sophie continued.

Some of the women laughed.

Tessa felt sick to her stomach. It had been a lie that she had felt poorly... it was not a lie any longer. She needed to leave this room as quickly as possible. She was only moments away from running away without being properly excused. Their eyes were on the scarred side of her face, she could feel the heat of their gaze and had to bite down on her tongue to keep from commenting on it.

“Of course Tessa will be in attendance,” Anna stated, and the room fell silent. “She is the reason that we have been extended an invitation in the first place, daughter mine. You would do well to remember that without the Earl’s sister, your presence

would be overlooked. It would be highly improper to attend without her.”

Sophie’s jaw clenched, and it seemed she was chewing on the inside of her cheek. There was no way that she could argue with that. She knew her mother spoke the truth, no matter how much she disliked it.

“They only invite her because they wish to talk about her,” Sophie remarked rudely.

“Watch your tongue,” Anna warned.

“If not that, then they only invited her because they wish to press her about the rumors surrounding her brother. It would be cruel to force her to endure such a spectacle. Would you not agree, Cousin?” Sophie added.

Tessa wished to shout that Sophie was the one making a spectacle of her, but there was some truth to her words. It was public opinion that Tessa’s own brother, Mortimer Windrop, the Earl of Rummington, was the person responsible for the accident that had burned down her family home. Over the years, they had managed to concoct all sorts of horrible, cruel, rumors as to why he would be compelled to set fire to the place with his sister inside. Most claimed he did it in order to quickly inherit the title as the accident killed both of their parents. The worst of them claimed it was a murder attempt gone wrong. Those same people tended to be of the opinion that Tessa would have been better off dead rather than alive with such terrible burns on half of her body.

The last three years of Tessa’s life had been a constant waking nightmare that people would not let her escape from no matter what she did.

How could they not see that?

Tessa could not hold her tongue for another moment. “I agree that they will be disappointed by my lack of presence to make a spectacle of – just as you will be disappointed to spend the evening at home, Sophie!”

Having had the final word, she turned to leave.

## Chapter Two



“Oh no, you do not!”

Tessa heard Sophie’s outraged remark from over her shoulder despite storming out of the room. She knew very well that her behavior was outlandish and more than a little juvenile, but she could not bring herself to care. She was so *tired* of having to stand or sit as prettily as possible while everybody in the room constantly insulted and berated her. She did not wish to have to constantly force herself into shapes and opinions that she did not desire.

Tessa yanked the drawing-room door shut on Sophie’s outraged face. It felt more gratifying than she knew it ought to. She could not help herself. She could hear her aunt uttering apologies over her behavior and muttering placations and excuses as she tried to make the best of the situation.

Sophie yanked the door open and slammed it behind her as she stomped behind Tessa.

“Who are you to keep me from something that I deserve?” Sophie nearly shouted. “You have no right to stay home when I deserve to have an evening out with Society! You *will* attend the ball. You *will* dance and you *will* be pleasant for the span of the entire evening!”

Tessa balled her hands into fists at her side and looked up to the ceiling in an attempt to calm herself. She missed her mother most in moments like this. Tessa’s mother had never been tolerant of Sophie or her constant tantrums. It was times like these that her mother would have looked at Tessa and



given her a knowing look like a secret joke between them. They would laugh and laugh over Sophie's antics until Sophie gave up and went away.

Tessa could not do that any longer. Now she had to simply grit her teeth and bear it. There was no alternative because Sophie and her family were all that she had left. They were all that she had in the whole world.

"I will not attend the ball for all of the reasons that you have already listed as well as perhaps a dozen more of my own," Tessa reasoned as calmly as possible. "I shall not prevent you from going, of course. If you have an issue with my staying home, I am certain that you are more than capable of coming up with plenty of horrible reasons as to why I had to do so. Tell them that I became scared of my own reflection and spent the night weeping for all that I care."

Sophie laughed and placed her hand on her hip. "I might, actually. Everybody who has been misfortunate enough to look at that face would believe it too."

Tessa rolled her eyes and started to head back to her room. Sophie reached out and yanked her by her arm back toward her.

"I am not finished speaking with you! You are so rude! I suppose that you have forgotten basic manners but it is rude to walk away from a conversation while it is still happening," Sophie reminded her.

"I have no interest in anything that you have to say, Cousin. You are incapable of speaking about anything other than yourself. Why would I force myself to listen to your squirrel chatter when I do not have to?"

"The only reason that you do not wish to attend the ball is that you know I am right. You know that you will be regarded as an ugly aberration and are too much of a coward to handle it," Sophie countered just before her mother joined them.

"Good heavens, you girls need to stop fighting. We have company. Theodore!" Aunt Anna called. Any time something unpleasant happened with her daughter, she would summon

her husband to deal with it. The only answer that she got was the sudden and incessant barking of her husband's beloved dog, Colonel Floppy Ears. The deep, loud bark seemed to echo as it filled the entire first floor. The darling pooch was not quite intelligent enough to locate the source of the sound but was intent on alerting its master nonetheless that he was being summoned.

"That sodding dog!" Aunt Anna clutched at her chest in fright. The mastiff was the bane of her entire existence. Anna was wholly and thoroughly convinced that her husband loved the black dog more than he loved her. The thing was nearly as large as she was and certainly demanded more attention than she did on most days. The barking scared the wits out of her, but her husband never seemed to care. Even worse, it drooled all over their bed when she was attempting to sleep. Aunt Anna hated the dog but there was nothing that she could do about it.

Sophie would not be dissuaded. The threat of her father did not intimidate her in the slightest. "You are a curse," she snapped at Tessa. "Do you know that? You bring trouble everywhere that you go."

Tessa flinched. Some part of her wished to deny it. She wished to refute the claims and stand up for herself... but it was something that she tended to think about herself most nights. She wondered why it was that she had to be the one who survived. Nobody knew where her brother was. Tessa had no idea if he was all right or if something had happened to him; he had abandoned her. Her parents were gone and she had begun to think that she must be cursed if she had to endure this life and the insults to which she was subjected.

From downstairs, she could hear her uncle speaking loudly in an overly affectionate tone to get the Colonel to stop barking. He commended his pet for being the perfect watchman and soldier, all the while ignoring his wife's summons from upstairs.

Tessa chose that as her moment to leave.

“You bring nothing but bad luck!” Sophie followed her halfway to her bedroom.

The moment that Tessa could step inside her room and quickly lock the door, she did so. She would skip dinner tonight if she had to just to avoid any more conversation about what had just happened. She would skip the next three meals if that would help.

Tessa crossed the small room to her bed and flung herself on it. She pulled a pillow to her chest and hugged it as tightly as she could. Only then did she allow the tears she had been holding in to fall. Only in the solitude of her room did she let go of it all and allow herself to feel everything.

It was not until her eyes were red-rimmed and swollen that she looked up again – and happened to catch sight of herself in the mirror on her vanity. Her hair was a mess; parts of it had come down from the updo that had been styled on her head this morning by her maid. Her brown hair used to be a point of pride for her and now it was thinning over the scarred side and did not sit as prettily as it once had. Her blue eyes were still the same – her aunt said she ought to be grateful for that. She supposed she should be grateful that she still looked mostly human and that she had not lost any of her limbs, but Sophie made it nearly impossible to feel grateful for anything at all.

Nearly half of Tessa’s face was ruined, dimpled, and scarred by the burns from where the fire had killed her parents and destroyed her family home. Her father had given his life to save her and that was yet another weight that she carried with her. If only he had been less occupied with her then perhaps he might have been able to save himself.

Even now, standing in her room, she could feel the heat on her face. She could still hear the screams. It had not felt like she was the one screaming, not at the time. She had screamed herself hoarse and had not been able to speak for weeks. Not that she had wanted to say anything after the incident. What was there to say? It had been three years now, but the pain was still raw.

The bodies of her mother and father were recovered. What was left of them anyway. There had not been any sign of her brother, and it was quickly discovered that he was not inside the house. Some of those who witnessed the fire had proclaimed that they had seen a man outside of the front door attempting to put out the fire, but it was too far out of control. The constables had decided that it must have been Mortimer, her brother, and so concluded he was the one behind the act of arson.

Tessa was the only one who believed her brother innocent. She knew her brother; he was too young at heart for his own good at times, but he was kind and generous. There was not a malicious bone in his foolhardy body. He was not capable of the things they wished to blame on him.

They said she was too overwrought with grief to be trusted.

Tessa lifted her hand and hovered it over the burned side of her face as if she could pretend in her reflection that it did not exist. This was not how she had wanted her life to go; this was not where she was supposed to be. All of these changes and not a single one of them for the better.

Frustrated, she pushed herself up off her bed and pulled her sheet free. Unable to stand to look at herself for another second, she stomped across the room and threw the sheet up and over her vanity in its entirety. In the good half of her face, she saw only her mother's features and that brought nothing but pain. The burned side evoked pain of another kind.

Perhaps Sophie was right... she was cursed.

## Chapter Three



“Interesting,” Leo Keats muttered to himself softly as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He could not remember last night at all. He must have enjoyed himself very thoroughly as he could not recall crawling into bed nor could he remember bedding the woman beside him. Or rather, the woman who was draped half across him.

Leo blinked blearily down at the sleeping beauty resting against his chest and tried his very best to recall even one single detail about her. She was stunningly beautiful, even in her sleep. There was no denying it – but apart from that, he could not recall her name let alone where they had met, what they had done. He could not have even guessed what the color of her eyes was. She was wholly and utterly forgettable, apparently.

It likely should have bothered him in some capacity that there was a woman in his bed, but it did not. What bothered him was that he would have to ask her to leave quickly so that he would not have the conversation that he hated. It was always the same. They would inquire when he would see them again and he would be forced to lie. He did not like it, but the only alternative would be to break their heart. That was eviler than being brutally honest. At least, he thought it was. He *did* value the time that he spent with these women, but that was all he felt. If only there were a simpler way to explain that.

He had rather hoped when he had arrived back in England that his reputation would have somehow preceded him and that he would not have to go through all of this again. Apparently, he

had not been nearly rakish enough during his travels in order to have accomplished such a feat.

Slowly, Leo attempted to extract his arm from where it was trapped without waking the woman. He felt that was a perfectly acceptable thing to do – no matter how disreputable it was. He managed to liberate a single leg from the tangle of bedding and pulled his arm most of the way from underneath the woman when the door started to creak open with a loud squeak. The woman started to stir. Leo glanced at her as she started to awaken. There was no way out of it.

Her eyes opened the same moment that a cat jumped up onto the foot of the bed. The creature walked in a small circle, and then its yellow eyes locked on the female guest in the bed. A low growl from the back of its throat forced her awake more quickly.

“Good morning,” she rasped in her sleepy voice.

Leo grinned with too many teeth to be genuine. “Good morning, dear. Time to greet the day.” He slipped his arm the rest of the way free and the woman fell heavily into the mattress. The cat started to growl louder and even hissed at her.

“I am afraid that is your cue to leave.”

“Leave?” she repeated in surprise. Leo nodded.

“Yes, I know. Very sad. However, there is much to do. For you as well, I would imagine. Think of the cat’s hissing as an alarm clock or take it as a cue to be on your way – either suits me just fine. You must leave before his owner comes searching for him. Things will not end very well for me if you do not make yourself scarce and quickly,” Leo explained lamely.

“What? But... I had thought–”

“I know. However, whatever it was that you thought might happen will not be possible. Now, unless you wish to have to scramble to hide underneath the bed while in the nude, I suggest that you start moving,” Leo added as he pulled a random shirt over his head.

“You cannot be serious,” she protested.

“Oh, but I am.” Leo grinned.

The cat growled and hissed. A knock came on the slightly open door. Leo sighed as his shoulders slumped.

“Any chance you wish to dive under the bed now?” he asked, knowing the answer before he even asked the question. The woman pulled the bedding up over her chest as the door started to open. An older man came into the room with a robe far too long for him trailing on the ground behind him. Even from across the room, Leo could see the cat hair covering the robe. The man’s beard had long since turned white and he walked with his arms perpetually folded, his hands hanging limply at the wrists. His spectacles sat low on his nose and he squinted to see in the low lighting of the room. Leo did not like early mornings and had forbidden the staff to come and wake him before he called for them in the mornings. As such, it still gave the impression of the evening despite the fact that breakfast had likely come and gone at least an hour ago.

“Leo... Leo my boy, have you seen Sweetie Whiskers?”

“I am not going to call him that.”

Sweetie Whiskers growled and hissed at the woman on the bed once more. Leo bent forward and snatched the woman’s gown from the floor beside the bed and gracelessly held it aloft for her to take. The woman snatched it bitterly and started to slide off the side of the bed, taking a sheet with her. She wrapped it around herself as best as she was able while still holding the gown with one hand. Leo made no effort to stop her.

“Oh, there he is!”

“Did you think that you had lost him again, Grandfather?” Leo asked plainly. He indulged himself in a deep stretch of his arms over his head as he yawned to chase away the last vestiges of sleep. He did not so much as glance in the woman’s direction as she slunk out of the room and into the hall. There would be plenty of servants to attend to her there and set her up with anything and everything that she should require. All

the better for him as that meant that he was no longer the one that would have to do it.

“Well, I was not sure what to think. Normally Sweetie Whiskers is by my side all day. When he disappeared after breakfast, I did not know what to think. I had rather hoped he had found himself a rat to chase.” Grandfather Aurelius came to sit on the side of the bed near Leo’s feet.

“I am not going to call him that.”

“What? Whyever not?” Aurelius sounded completely shocked.

“Because it is a terrible name for a cat. Not to mention it does not suit him in the slightest.”

No sooner had the words left Leo’s mouth than the cat in question started to purr loudly and rub up against Aurelius’ side affectionately.

Aurelius looked at Leo as if to say ‘See?’

“It is too early to enter into a debate with you, old man.” Leo laughed and shook his head. “Tell me this: if he is such a sweet spirit then why does he seem to hate every single woman he meets?”

“Not every single woman. Just the ones that you tend to bring here. Perhaps you ought to take that as a sign that you need to stop meddling with light skirts and search for a real woman. It is hardly Sweetie Whisker’s fault that he has a better sense of propriety than you do.” Aurelius nearly cooed affectionately as he stroked the cat, who happily purred the whole time.

Leo rolled his eyes at the suggestion and flopped backward onto the bed. “Right. I shall keep that in mind.”

“If you would only agree to attend proper and scheduled social functions, you might even meet one or two women that you like. There is one to be held in London in only a week’s time. You could make it there for the Season—”

“How many times must we have this conversation? Grandfather, I will not be married. I have no intention of ever taking a wife and you know very well why that is. As such, I have no obligation to attend such boring events. I am free to



spend my evenings only partaking in that which brings me joy,” Leo reasoned evenly.

“If you do not ever give it a chance, how do you know that a good woman would not bring you joy as well?”

Leo laughed deeply. “I have never seen a single marriage in which either party was truly happy. Have you? I think not.”

Memories of his own parents flashed before his eyes. They were the perfect example of how those societal marriages failed. The sort of marriage that was only arranged for the sake of prudence. Nothing more than business matches in order to produce high-ranking offspring. Neither love nor compatibility of personality was considered in such business-minded marriages. It did not matter that the two people had nothing in common and were prone to screaming at one another during every waking hour. At least, that was how his parent’s marriage had gone. Leo very clearly remembered how his mother had loathed his father with every fiber of her being until the day she died.

Leo had no desire to replicate that. Marriage seemed like a waking nightmare and he wanted absolutely nothing to do with it. Besides, he had made a promise to his mother on her deathbed that he would never be stupid enough to take a wife. Getting married was only good for producing children. He wanted neither children nor the responsibility of raising them. Furthermore, he had also sworn to his mother that the Huxton legacy would end with him. He would have no bastards, no heirs – and he was devoutly strict about it.

Leo pushed himself up onto his elbows and looked at his grandfather. Aurelius did not speak of his own late wife. It was partially because of Aurelius that his mother had suffered for so many years. Had this man not agreed to the marriage then she might have been spared. As it was, Leo did not feel his grandfather had any room to lecture him on marriage.

“You know, Leo, if you continue to cling to the past like this, you will find yourself in my position: old, in too large a house with only your beloved cats for company.” Aurelius smiled

like he knew something that Leo did not. “If you should be lucky enough to earn them, anyway.”

“Can we speak of something else? Anything else?”

“I am only looking for your best interests. I hope that you know that,” Aurelius continued.

“Why do you even care so much? You have an heir – your bloodline will continue. It just will not via me.” Leo sighed. This was the last thing that he wished to endure when starting his day.

“I want happiness for my grandson, that is all. I am not trying to start an argument either.”

“Good. I do not wish to fight. I wish to have some breakfast, perhaps a little spot of tea, and maybe go for a ride if the weather is nice,” Leo said in an attempt to change the subject and lighten the mood just a little bit.

Aurelius was not impressed. “I cannot be expected to sit here and be idle while you ruin yourself. You cannot expect me to watch as you cling blindly to a silly and juvenile promise made to a woman who will never know if you did or did not keep it!”

“Mind your tongue,” Leo said sharply. “You know not what you say. I was there to witness everything that my mother was forced to endure at the hands of my father. The very same hands, mind you, that *you* pushed her into! As her father, you ought to be held responsible for her misery. It is a kindness on my part that I do not demand you answer for it.”

Despite the blatant threat, Aurelius was not ruffled. He knew perfectly well how delicate a subject his daughter was with Leo. He harbored a great many regrets about the subject himself, but he had lived for far too many years to live in the past or dwell on those regrets.

“There are two sides to every story, Leo. You must remember that – just as every coin contains two faces. They do not see eye to eye either.”

It was far, far too early for Leo to attempt to understand what Aurelius meant. He could feel the irritation growing

nevertheless. Leo pushed himself out of bed and started to march around the dark room searching for his belongings. He paused only to angrily rip open one of the heavy curtains so that he could see better. He flinched when the bright light assaulted him.

“I know that you do not like what I say, Leo, but I assure you that everything I ask of you is said with the best of intentions. I only want the very best for you, and I firmly believe that the path you have chosen will not bring you lasting happiness.”

Leo scoffed and shook his head. He draped his clothes over his arm and turned back to Aurelius. “Enough. I have said no, and that is final.”

“Title or no title, duke or no dukedom, you reside in my house and, as such, you will respect my rules and wishes. It is my wish that you attend the ball in London. You can end the conversation there,” Aurelius said firmly in his naturally warm, kind voice.

“Then you give me no other option but to leave your home,” Leo threatened. He hoped that his grandfather was bluffing; he did not wish to leave, to abandon this place in the stunning countryside where he was so comfortable. The ancestral home in London, Huxton Manor, was not a property that he had any love for; he would not return to it easily.

Aurelius knew that.

Silence fell in the room as each man waited for the other to cave. Aurelius simply petted his cat and hoped against hope that Leo would eventually see reason.

He did not.

More than anything he was hurt to have to endure the same arguments with his grandfather repetitiously. His tone was low and resigned as he spoke. He had threatened to leave, and now he must carry through. “I suppose that I will be leaving then, as we cannot see eye to eye anymore. I will have the servants pack my belongings and I will be gone before dinner.”

## Chapter Four



“It is just as terrible as I remember it.”

Leo stood outside Huxton Manor as servants bustled around him. They had gone to great lengths to ensure that the Manor was as ready for his return as possible, but he had been absent from this place for a very, very long time. He had left his grandfather’s home in too much of a rush to allow his servants enough time to be wholly ready. In truth, he had hoped that he would never return here. Inside, these walls held nothing but bad memories.

His childhood had been anything but happy. Even more perverse to him was the knowledge that he would be taking over the master bedroom – the same room his mother had died in. It did not seem right. It felt as if that were the very last thing that he would ever wish to do – the furthest thing from sanity.

Perhaps he could delay that particular move for a little while. There were more than enough bedrooms to choose from. For a long time, he stood there debating while seated on his horse. So much of him wished to ride away from this place. He could buy another property somewhere else. He had the title and the means – he could build whatever he wished. Perhaps a house of his own out in the countryside. Anything would be better than being forced to stay here... but those things would all take time. That was the one thing he did not have.

As he did not fancy sleeping out of doors – he dismounted heavily and finally allowed his groom to take his horse to the stables.

“Your Grace! You have made it here so quickly! We have readied the Manor as much as possible in the short amount of time and are confident that by the time dinner is prepared, everything will be ready for you to resume occupation.” Delvin, his steward, informed him confidently.

“Thank you very much,” Leo began while pulling his gloves from his hands. “However, I do not wish my things to be placed in the master bedroom. Please place them in one of the guest rooms. I care not which one, just be certain to guide me there this evening. I will dwell there until I say otherwise.”

“Yes, Your Grace, of course. We will make all of the arrangements.” Delvin assured him and turned to start making the Duke’s wishes come true.

Leo’s feet felt heavy, as if they were filled with stones as he moved up the stairs to the front door. It was already open for the people who had come in and out of there. Not only was this a place that he had never wished to return to – it was also his first time living on his own. He had been very careful not to have any real sort of responsibility since he had inherited the title of Duke Huxton officially. He had lived with his mother and then spent years traveling around the world and burning through money before he returned home with the intention of living in his grandfather’s home for a handful of years. He had hoped he could remain there until he knew what he wished to do with his life

Now everything was to change again.

Of course, he knew how to run a household. He had been the one in control of everything while his mother was still alive, but he had not missed the burden of responsibility while traveling. It was a primary benefit of living with his grandfather. Were the choice still available, he would have gone on continuing to avoid it; served him right for allowing his temper to get the better of himself.

Enough was enough.

Leo sighed and slowly strolled inside with reluctant steps. It felt so much smaller than he remembered. Since it was a fine, grand property, it likely only appeared that way because he

had been gone for as long as he had been. He dropped his riding gloves and coat on the side table. Each room that he passed was nearly opened, some with piles of folded dustsheets in the corners. It took no time at all to reacclimatize himself to his surroundings. He paused only when he reached his father's old study.

Well, he supposed that, as he had been the one to occupy it last, it was technically his own study.

Perhaps a thorough redecorating would be ideal. He hoped that, if things looked different, that would help to get rid of a few bad memories. New wallpaper and carpeting... perhaps redo a few rooms he never used entirely. He could think of a dozen women off the top of his head who would only be too happy to assist him with such a task. Though, perhaps allowing the housekeeper to refurnish a few of the rooms under his direction would be ideal. He did not wish to have any more miscommunication. At least, not for a couple more days.

Leo lowered himself heavily into his desk chair. The worn leather creaked and protested at the sudden movement as he scrubbed his hands down his face. There was so much to consider. Going into town even for the purpose of redecorating would only invite gossip. There was no way to avoid the *ton* from finding out that there was a presumably eligible duke in their midst. If he could delay it then he would.

He had left in more of a hurry than he remembered. There were still piles of letters littered across the desk, mostly opened but some still with the wax seal intact. Leo started to push through them one at a time to see if he could remember the mindset that he had been in when he had left them. He had not been able to stay here more than a few days after his mother had died; it had simply been too painful.

One letter, in particular, caught his eye. He smiled in spite of himself as he reached across the desk for it. He pulled the parchment toward himself with a single finger, remembering most of the contents of the letter. Leo tilted his head sideways to read the thing without picking it up.

*Attested on this day, the seventeenth of March. Placement of bet on horse seven of twelve in the amount of—*

Betting records. He had been the fortunate recipient of a healthy dose of beginner's luck the first time he had taken to the races. It had been where he met Mortimer Windrop, who was a friendly, chipper sort of fellow. The sort of fellow that did not know how to frown, no matter how poorly his monetary choices were doing. He had been thrilled to teach Leo everything he knew about betting and the bookies of the *ton* – who was honest and who to avoid.

It was not Leo's fault that he learned so quickly. It did not take long at all before Mortimer started subtly asking Leo for money. Small amounts at first for little things: a carriage ride home, a shoe shine, a meal, or an opera ticket – then it quickly became much larger sums of money. In the beginning, Leo had thought nothing of it, simply helping out a friend. What was a small friendly wager among friends?

Over time the wagers were larger and more outlandish... Mortimer had not been able to stop himself. He would bet on anything and everything from the boxing matches to whether or not it would rain on a given day. It was like a sickness for him.

Mortimer lost a great deal of money. It would be most interesting to see what that man was up to these days. If Leo were to be subjected to the *ton* going forward, it would not be a bad thing to have another person whose company he could at least tolerate.

Leo folded up the letter of promise and tucked it into the pocket of his waistcoat. No doubt the man would have assumed that Leo had forgiven the debt or, at the very least, forgotten about it. Leo certainly hoped so. It would make their reunion just that much more interesting. Four years was a very long time to wait before attempting to catch up on something like that.

Pulling the ball invitation from his other pocket, Leo tossed it onto the desk in front of him. Perhaps he would have to attend after all. It might not be his choice but if he remembered

things correctly, there was not a force known to man that could keep Mortimer away from a ball – much less the first ball of the Season. Mortimer was a terrible dancer but it was also one of his life's greatest passions.

“What is the worst that can happen? He says no?” Leo asked himself rhetorically. It was not a small amount of money that Mortimer owed him either – it would be very nice to have. Spending money like that would ease the transition from country life to city life by affording him plenty of entertainment.

Very well. It was decided. He would have to attend the ball that his grandfather had asked him to – but it was certainly not with the intention of finding a wife. He could already feel his grandfather's voice in the back of his mind, gloating over his perceived victory. Perhaps if he played things right, they could believe him just another member of the *ton*.



On the night of the ball, Leo instantly regretted his choice to attend the moment he walked through the door. He had not accounted for the sheer number of people that would be in attendance. Conversation and music so boisterous and gay spilled through the very walls of the venue and out into the night air. He had heard the frivolity the moment his carriage pulled to a stop. He was of half a mind to simply tell his driver to take him back home again, but then he might never find Mortimer. That was the whole point, after all. Perhaps he would add interest to that total sum of money. Then, if he had to be pawed at by hopeful women, it would be even *more* worth it. Or so he thought outside.

“No amount of money is worth this,” he whispered to himself as he stepped into the ball. The moment he was announced, eyes were on him. He could *feel* the mothers attempting to pick him apart with their eyes so that they might figure out what his likes and dislikes were. They would do or say anything to make their daughters appear as the woman of his



dreams. Then, when he was trapped in a marriage with them, such women would reveal their true selves.

No. It mattered not if they thought him rude or impertinent, not really. He would simply remind them all he was not interested until they passed the rumor around that he was unpleasant. Would that be enough? Perhaps if he were not a duke it would be enough—

Where to start? He had hardly gotten a proper glance at the room from the stairs as he walked in. His eyes narrowed as he searched for the tall, thin frame that was Mortimer. He presumed he could not have changed *that* much in the span of only four years.

“Pardon me, Your Grace.” A soft female voice came from behind him.

Leo sighed and allowed his eyes to close for a moment as he collected himself before turning to face the young woman addressing him. She was young, likely in her first Season still. She had a youthful look of innocence on her features and she held her dance card up to him perfunctorily. It was not her fault that her mother was poised behind her, forcing her to boldly address a gentleman instead of waiting for him to come to her as she was supposed to do.

Despite his resolve to be unpleasant, he could not bring himself to be rude to her. Being so would be effective in deterring others, he knew, but how could he punish her for something that was not her fault? Injuring her pride when she was already nervous would only make her cry. He hated seeing women cry, so he tried to avoid the situation in the first place.

“Good evening,” Leo answered with a nod of his head. The girl in front of him curtsied properly in response.

“I had hoped that perhaps... my mama, you see—” The girl struggled to form words and her eyes were downcast.

“Let me stop you, dear girl.” Leo knew good and well that his actions were bound to be misinterpreted but he hooked a finger under her chin to lift her gaze from the floor for a moment before she quickly dropped it again. “Were I here to

dance, I would be only too happy to oblige someone so pretty as yourself. But unfortunately, I am here on very strict business and will not be able to dance this evening. I admire your tenacity though.”

The girl lifted her eyes demurely and smiled prettily and he hoped he had softened the blow of rejection at least enough not to sour her evening.

She nodded once more and retreated to her mother to tell her his reasoning. Her mother would see right through his comment, but it did not matter. Perhaps if he was truly lucky then he might even have the small reprieve of the room gossiping about how he has no intentions to dance this evening. That would be something that would work in his favor, in fact.

“Your Grace!” another woman called, older this time.

He would never find Mortimer if this was what he was forced to spend his evening doing. It simply would not work at all. It was entirely overwhelming.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace?” came from another side.

He could see them closing in on him from all directions. Drat. Without thought of the consequences, he weaved his way through the crowd as he headed toward the nearest exit. He did not stop until he found a way out of doors entirely.

The cool evening air held floral notes as he managed to find his way to the gardens.

“Perhaps this was all a mistake,” he whispered to himself as he scrubbed his hands down his face in frustration. He would simply have to call on Mortimer in his home whether the man liked it or not; it would be worth it to spare himself the assault from the mothers of the *ton*.

A soft noise from behind him gave him a fright and he spun quickly in place. “Hello?” he whispered loudly to the darkness of the gardens. “Is there someone out here?”

## Chapter Five



“**T**he first ball of the Season! I can hardly contain my excitement!” Sophie exclaimed as she practically bounced in her carriage seat. She tapped her closed fan against her thigh every couple of seconds to show just how excited she was.

Tessa could not help but wonder what Sophie might be like were she not to feel as if every passing moment was a performance. Tessa had been raised in relatively close proximity to her cousin her entire life and did not know if there had ever been a single time that she had witnessed Sophie in a moment of genuine emotion.

*Her anger, perhaps.* Tessa had to assume that it was Sophie’s temper that allowed her to show most of her true self. Sophie wielded her anger and sharp tongue like weapons in order to get her way. It was the entire reason that Tessa was currently seated in the carriage at all. Her uncle, Theodore, had explained to her at great length that it would be selfish and unkind to keep Sophie from the things that she wished. He had explained to her that because she was afforded more opportunities than her cousin that perhaps she took them for granted when Sophie, in fact, cherished them.

He had also proclaimed that Sophie did not mean the things that she said in anger; Tessa had struggled to keep from laughing in his face that time. Were she a lesser woman or were her morals slightly more vindictive, she would have explained to her uncle the true reason that Sophie wished to attend the ball. Certainly, her uncle would not be pleased to

hear of his daughter's plot to trap whichever gentleman she found most appealing, much less the methods that Sophie planned to utilize.

"I am certain that I shall fill my dance card right away! I will spend the whole evening dancing until my feet feel as if they are going to slip from my legs. But, do not worry—"

"I was not going to," Tessa muttered under her breath as commentary. Sophie cut her a cruel look and simply continued on with her story.

"I shall not show that my feet hurt. I will be light, and graceful, and I will force every gentleman in the room to positively fall in love with me. I expect that we shall need a great deal of tea and biscuits tomorrow in the sitting room, Mama, as I am certain to have a bevy of gentleman callers to have my choice from!"

The carriage slowed in front of the venue.

"All of them?" Tessa remarked with faux shock. "How impressive you are."

"Hmm. I did not think that was possible," Sophie remarked as her mother was assisted from the carriage.

Tessa sighed. "What is possible?"

"Your jealousy makes you even more disgusting to look at, you know. You ought to try to control yourself more. Fear not, Cousin, I will be sure to capture the hearts and minds of everyone in the room – you will be forgotten. As you should be. You can thank me for the favor of invisibility later," Sophie said scathingly bitterly before slapping on a perfect, bright smile and exiting the carriage.

Tessa had half a mind to simply stay in the carriage. She was unlikely to be missed.

"Come on, Tessa dear." Aunt Anna gestured for her to come forward and she had no choice but to oblige. She trailed a few feet behind her aunt and cousin as they made their way inside. She chose to look at the decor, and the flowers, to listen to the

music with such intense focus that she could pretend that each and every person she walked past did not do a double take to see her scars.

What was the point in announcing them inside when everybody in the *ton* knew about the scandal? They would know of her arrival before she even made it all of the way inside at this rate.

Even with all of Sophie's plotting, planning ways, Tessa did not hope for the girl to actually be caught up in a scandal. It was by routine alone that she grabbed her dance card from the table at the entrance. She listened to the announcement of her and her cousin; she felt the eyes on her and heard the whispers start the moment they walked down the stairs into the ballroom.

It was a lovely space; there was no denying that.

If only there was a way she could wander away, or fold herself into the crowd and simply disappear. She could gorge herself on small cakes and lemonade if she wished. Perhaps wine would even make the evening feel warm and pleasant as it passed... or it could loosen her tongue. That would not end well for any involved.

No. She would stay by her aunt's side, allowing herself to be chaperoned. She knew that at one-and-twenty years old, she could not yet be considered a spinster.

"Did I hear that correctly?" Sophie interjected on their way around the room. She whispered excitedly to her mother, "Did you hear that there is a duke in attendance? A bachelor one at that! It is as if God and fate have conspired to provide me with opportunity. I must find out more about him. If he is a rake then my job will be made all that simpler, do you not think, Mama?"

Anna's jaw clenched. She did not like the notion that her daughter was going to throw herself at a man just to trap him into a marriage, but she understood the tactic behind it. "Perhaps you ought to try to have a conversation with him first? See if you even like him? He could be a dog person, and then where would you be?"

Sophie rolled her eyes. "I do not mind dogs in the way that you do, Mama."

"You only say that because you do not have a husband who is obsessed with his canine child," Anna fumed. It was a subject that tended to trigger an angry response in the woman instantly.

"Yes, but I do not care if he likes me or if he likes dogs, Mama. I am not interested in a love match. Comfort. That is what I desire. I desire nice things and pretty gowns. So long as he is not horrible to look at and makes a good income, I do not care about much else," Sophie explained as if it were the most normal thing in the entire world.

"You cannot possibly have no desire for love whatsoever?" Tessa interjected.

"Why should I? Love fades. Certainly, you know that. Any gentleman in this room is only looking for the prettiest, most accomplished woman to add to his arm and bear his children. He will not care for my personality and I am equally certain that when I reach an age when my looks start to change, he will ship me off to live in some country home away from him and whatever mistress he chooses to keep. When that time comes, I would far rather be outcast as a duchess into a grand estate with every possible comfort than live in some regular house, heartbroken by a man who lied and said that he loved me." From Sophie's expression, it was clear this was the only life path she deemed possible. She could not fathom how somebody like Tessa could not understand such a thing.

Even Anna seemed to think that would be her eventual fate. She shrugged and muttered, "Certainly a better outlook than being cast aside for a drooling beast."

Tessa could hardly believe it.

Tessa's own father had been similar to her uncle, Theodore, in that he had been obsessed with a great many things in his life. Yet he had not been obsessed with anything more than he was enamored by his own family. He doted on his children. The way that father had already treated mother was nothing short

of adoration. It was the sort of example of love that made anything seem possible.

Were Tessa not deemed ineligible by the *ton*, it would have been the sort of match that she would have been expecting as well. Were she looking for a husband, she would want a love match. She would have wanted the sort of admiration and affection that overcame her – body and soul. She would have given everything to a man like that. Above all else, she had desired a great many children who would be living, breathing, wonderful manifestations of said love.

Listening to the woman in front of her, one would presume that love was only a fictional ideal that would never actually exist.

“An argument could be made, perhaps, that you are too young to be so very cynical–” Tessa spoke with sadness.

Sophie’s gaze narrowed. “And what would you know of it? You will die alone, with no husband whatsoever.”

Tessa could not deny the sting of her words. Propriety be damned, Tessa turned and walked away from her aunt and cousin as quickly as she could. She wished she was at least allowed to wear her hair down so that she might spare herself the leering from every passing face. Sometimes, when she lay awake at night, unable to sleep, she would dream about being able to scream at those same people. She dreamed that she could tell them to mind their business or that staring so openly was rude.

Even the wallflowers lingering around the edges of the room seemed to give her a wide berth as she approached them. She moved to an open space and the small grouping of girls shifted to the side so that she would not mistake their close proximity as an invitation to speak with them.

Shallow. They were all so very shallow. Each and every one of them.

In moments like this, she missed her brother more than anything in the world. He would know exactly the right thing to say. He would wrap his arm around her shoulders and pull

her close while doing everything he could to cheer her up until her sides ached with laughter.

She hoped that he was all right. Wherever he was. She had to believe that he would not have abandoned her here – to suffer like this – without having a very good reason. Someday, he would return for her. Of that much, she was absolutely certain. He would come for her – she just had to wait.

Tessa focused on that thought and only that thought as the women taking walks around the room seemed to deliberately slow as they passed her. Each of them lingered on her scarred features for a moment too long before hurriedly walking on again.

“Could you imagine?” Tessa heard one of the wallflowers say.

Did they want her to overhear? Perhaps Tessa was right in her assumption that people simply enjoyed being cruel.

Another one of the wallflowers laughed and shook her head. “I would never leave my room!”

The mocking she could tolerate. Tessa could even withstand the lingering glances... but the laughter? That she could not tolerate. She felt tears welling in her eyes as they continued to speak about her as if she did not have ears to hear them. Her chin dimpled, and she shoved away from the wall. She would not allow them to see her cry.

She cut them what she hoped was her most scathing look before she wound her way through the crowd to the door. It was not as if her aunt or Sophie would miss her company. She had been their ticket inside, and now her purpose had been served.

Tears started to fall the moment she found she was alone in the hallway. Her footsteps made nearly no sound at all as she walked quickly along the polished floors. She left the venue through the very first external door that she found, but it did not take her to the carriages as she had hoped it might. Instead, she found herself facing an elaborate garden with high hedges and a trellis that formed what seemed to be a privacy wall. She did not hesitate to head inside it.



The music of the ball started to fade behind her. The chill of the evening air did not even register until she was far enough out of the ball to feel just how dark it had gotten. She wrapped her arms around herself tightly and sank down onto her heels.

All alone, she finally gave herself permission to cry.

## Chapter Six



“Hello?” Leo called once more. “Is there anybody out here?”

He stepped between the hedges and followed the circular path set out. He walked with some urgency as he was not certain if there was an animal that was injured or if it was a person. Either way, he knew that he’d heard the sounds of something or someone in distress. It was a welcome diversion from the way he felt about his own situation.

He did not pay much attention to the direction that he was headed, for he allowed his ears to be his guide. “Do not be afraid. I can assist you?”

Perhaps it was a lost child? No, it did not sound like that at all. Leo moved so quickly that he nearly tumbled over a bush in his haste. He twisted his body at the last possible second and threw himself off course. He was forced to stop moving as he turned to apologize to the bush – and then caught himself realizing how silly that would have made him feel. Apologizing to a plant? Who had ever heard of such a thing?

Only, it was not a plant. The soft green and pink of her gown when seen out of the corner of his eye had misled him. “Oh! My deepest apologies! Please, allow me to help you up!” he exclaimed quickly.

The woman sniffled and shook her head. She did not rise nor did she turn to look at him. It appeared that she desired to be left alone. “I am quite all right. Thank you, Sir, you may be on

your way.” She had a sweet, melodic voice, despite it being very obvious that she had been crying.

“If you are all right, then why are you crying?” Leo asked without moving.

“I am not crying.”

Leo grinned. “I know what crying sounds like when I hear it.”

“I was merely... picking flowers. Besides, if I were crying, you would be quite rude to comment on it,” the woman answered, finally turning to look at him. The moment she started to stand, Leo extended his hand to offer her assistance but she either did not see it or simply had no intentions of accepting help of any kind. “See? I am quite well, Sir. Please be on your way.”

She looked up and the moonlight exposed her face to him. He could not help but stare. Half of her face was perhaps the most beautiful arrangement of features that he had ever seen in his life – breathtaking really. She had the sort of delicate yet bold features that poets dreamed of... then there was the other side. Twisted and marked by fire’s kiss. He had seen wounds like that on the hands or feet of soldiers that he had met during his travels but never anything as extensive as what this woman had. It twisted down the side of her neck and he could see similar scars on the small gap of skin below where her gown’s sleeve ended and her glove began. It was a disfigurement, to be certain, but he could not have assigned a description to her overall that was not stunning. For better and for worse. She must have suffered extraordinarily to have lived through something that could have left her marked in such a way.

“Am I so shocking to you, Sir?” the woman bit out.

Leo shook his head in surprise. “I beg your pardon?”

“You should, actually. You should beg for my pardon! Am I really so strange looking to you that you feel it is acceptable to gawk at me like that?” Tessa rarely allowed herself to react in the way that she wished to, but here in the privacy of the gardens, she gave herself permission to behave the way that she wished. It felt good. Too good. No matter how much

everything else spiraled out of her control, she would have this one moment to cling to.

“I do beg, My Lady, I beg your forgiveness – I did not mean to offend you. I certainly did not gawk in a... negative–” Leo struggled to find the words to express himself. It was hard not to look at her. He tried to look anywhere other than her face so that she would be less offended but it did not work well. “I merely came to the gardens in search of a friend of mine. With your pardon, I will resume my search and pray that you forgive my impertinence.”

Tessa deliberated for a moment. She did not know if she wished to accept his apology or not. He seemed genuine enough. “You are the only other person who has come out into the gardens. Whomever you are looking for, I assure you that they are not out here.”

“I thank you.” Leo bowed at the waist to thank her for her forgiveness when he realized that was not at all implied. “Perhaps, while you deliberate my penance for offending you... I might ask a favor of you?”

Tessa grinned in spite of herself. “That would be most bold – asking a favor when you already have a debt of politeness.”

“I know, but I trust you to be fair in your judgment of me, My Lady. I only ask that perhaps you could tell me if you have seen a gentleman by the name of Mortimer Windrop this evening? I arrived quite late and do not know if he was announced,” Leo asked hopefully.

The woman’s face shifted instantly. She went from playful to almost cold in the span of a second. “What business do you have with Mortimer Windrop?”

It was obvious that she knew him, at the very least. “Nothing sinister, I assure you. I have been out of town for the last few years, traveling, and wished to reconnect with him. Many years ago, I considered him to be one of my very closest friends. He does not yet know I have returned to town. I wished to surprise him.”

It was not a *lie*. Leo always found that it was easier to get away with things when one took the truth and simply bent it a little bit. He allowed his natural charm to do the rest.

“I am afraid that I will have to offer you disappointment then, Sir, as you are far from the only one looking for Mortimer.” Sadness bled into her tone. Leo could not explain it but everything within him wished to offer her comfort. It tugged at something deep in his gut to see her looking so sad. Even more, as he was certain that sadness was a mask that she had cause to wear very often.

“I do not understand?” Leo pressed.

“My brother is wanted by a great many people, Sir, and not half of them for good reasons. He has been missing for the last three years. I suppose that if you were traveling you might not have heard about the scandals of the *ton*—”

“Brother?” Leo repeated. He tilted his head to the side and struggled to recall her name. Mortimer spoke of very few things with animation: gambling, money, and his sister. He had practically worshiped her from what Leo knew about her. Though, he had never been given reason or cause to be introduced. Had he known that she looked as beautiful as she did – he could understand why Mortimer would keep them separate, given Leo’s rakish tendencies. “Tessa?” he hazarded.

Tessa’s bright blue eyes lifted as she nodded. “So, you really did know my brother?”

“Yes. Very well. I should love to be of some assistance to honor our old friendship. Do you really have no idea where it is that he has gone?” Leo asked.

“I suppose that you could check in with the constables to see if they have any new leads on him. He certainly has not written to me. You would have no reason to know, I suppose, though the scandal was large enough that I was certain every British citizen would have been told about... the fire,” Tessa continued flatly. She wrapped her arms further around herself as she spoke.

Leo could not tell if it was the chill in the evening air or if it was the subject that bothered her more. Either way, he found himself slipping out of his coat and boldly placing it around her shoulders regardless.

“My brother is the main suspect for the arson attack that killed our parents and left me with this particular disfigurement. I am sorry to be the one to tell you if you did not know, but he is now on the run. If you do manage to locate him somehow, I beg of you to ask him to write.”

Leo put two and two together as he looked at her. It felt absolutely impossible to him that the Mortimer that he knew would have been responsible for disfiguring his favorite person in such a way. He tried to fathom how Mortimer might have ever been pushed to such a point that he might even have made a mistake... but it was so unlike him. Mortimer had his troubles, there was no denying that. He tended to get in over his head or put himself into impossible situations from which there was absolutely no escape, but this felt a step too far.

“For your honesty, I fear that I must, too, be fully transparent. He and I were very close friends, but he also owes me a great debt of money. I fear that if I were to locate him, he would only run from me as well,” Leo confessed. “I am deeply, deeply sorry to hear this news.”

“Well, if it is only money that you are after, you will have to find him first regardless. You will have no assistance from me, Sir. Please believe that I would do anything to speak to him again,” Tessa finished sadly as she slipped his jacket back off of her shoulders and held it out to him. Leo lifted a hand in protest. She paused then said, “I have been terribly lonely in his absence.”

She did not know why she said it; she had no reason to trust this man. He was a perfect stranger to her, but his presence... speaking about her brother like this was the closest that she had felt to Mortimer in years. It felt like a weight lifted off of her chest. She could not look the man in the eye. She did not even know his name but for some reason, she had chosen to be more honest with him than she had been in the last handful of years.

Her aunt and uncle never allowed her to speak about Mortimer. They practically spat at the ground any time he was even referred to. They believed Mortimer guilty... which she would never do.

“Perhaps, if you are open to it, we could come to an arrangement that would suit both of us?” Leo proposed.

Tessa lifted her eyes to the man curiously. “I have nothing that you could want, Sir. I cannot repay his debts to you.”

“No, nothing like that. I merely mean that we could form a sort of... alliance, if you will. I have missed a great many things in my time away and perhaps you could assist me in catching up. In exchange, we could work together to help locate Mortimer. A fresh set of eyes is never a bad thing, and I could offer you that.”

“In exchange for what?” Tessa asked hesitantly.

“Companionship,” Leo answered simply.

Tessa blanched, then scoffed and shook her head. She turned and headed deeper into the maze as she spoke over her shoulder. “Of course. I ought to have known that was what you were after. Good evening, Sir.”

Leo jogged after her. “No! You misunderstand me! While I would never *reject* such a thing under other circumstances, that is not my intention here. I swear it to you! On the friendship of your brother that is not my intention. I only mean to say that it could help abate the loneliness for us both. I shall make a show of publicly courting you and that will afford us the time to be together to search for your brother. What do you say?”

“Why would courting you offer me anything at all?” Tessa gave him an once-over. It did not matter how handsome the man was, she knew nothing about him. She did not even know his name, or title – nothing about his family. While it was true that the idea she was courting *anyone* would be a thrill to her aunt and uncle...she did not trust it.

As if sensing her doubts, he said, “I know that I have not introduced myself. I am the Duke of Huxton. My name is

Leonard Keats. You can call me Leo, if you like – well, should you accept my terms, then you are welcome to call me as such.”

Tessa stopped in her tracks. She felt as if she had been doused with ice-cold water. With a humorless laugh, she said, “You jest.”

How ironic would it be if she just so happened to be standing in front of the very same duke that was the object of attention for each and every person back in the ballroom? The Duke of Huxton was the very man that her cousin had set her sights on. Oh, the look on Sophie’s face if Tessa were to walk back into the ballroom on the duke’s arm. She would have traded nearly anything to capture the look of horror on her cousin’s face.

“I am perfectly serious. Feel free to ask about me.” Leo grinned, knowing full well what sort of reputation she would hear about when she did. “But when you do – remember that I have already sworn to you that the salacious specifics of my reputation are not at all my intention with you.”

“Why would you wish to pretend to court me?” Tessa could not help but ask.

Leo hesitated. The honest answer – that he wished to avoid the attention of so many would-be wives – might get him slapped. But she had been so open with him. “Because...” he sighed, “Because I can tell that you are overlooked. I am certain that you are not treated very kindly as a result of your scars, and perhaps being seen with the most eligible duke of the Season might... ease that burden a little. You are Mortimer’s sister, and as one of his good friends, I would be remiss if I did not seek to make your life a little easier in his absence.”

“You certainly do think highly of yourself, Your Grace,” Tessa answered flatly. She knew that he was right. There would be no way to speak poorly about her, at least not in the open if she were on the arm of a duke. “I appreciate your offer, Your Grace, but I do not need your charity. I certainly do not need your pity or attention.”

Leo took the opportunity to step closer to her. To his surprise, she did not move away from him as he reached for her chin.



He took her face delicately in his hand and lifted her gaze to look at him. Her lips parted softly in surprise as she looked up at him. “Please?”

His voice was so soft that it tugged at something deep in Tessa’s chest. Her heart fluttered as she stared up at Leo. For the first time in three years, she felt *seen*. She stood there with his soft touch and felt as if he were seeing *her*. The scars on her face did not matter – nothing mattered when he looked at her like that. She had given up all hope of a man ever looking at her like this. She could not deny how good it felt to even pretend that she was desired.

It was not as if it meant anything. The bargain could be dissolved at any moment, of course. The best outcome was that he was right, and they located Mortimer. If the worst case occurred, then she would forever have the memory of her cousin’s affronted face.

“I do not offer you pity, Tessa, I offer you company... friendship, perhaps. You might not need my assistance, but I think that you might want it,” Leo said in a soft, husky voice that sent ripples of excitement over her skin.

Tessa’s gaze dropped to his lips where it lingered only for a moment before she caught herself and flicked her eyes right back to his. Even just allowing him to touch her face like this was the boldest thing that she could remember doing.

The Duke leaned forward and brushed his lips against the scarred side of her temple. It was a sweet gesture, and he lingered only a moment before stepping back from her.

“How about I call on you, and we will discuss any details that you wish. I promise you shall hear from me shortly.” Leo grinned. He felt lighter than he had in a long while for reasons he could not quite understand. “I cannot tell you how happy I am to have run into you this evening, Tessa.” He bowed his farewell. “Until the morrow.”

Tessa dipped her chin in acknowledgment. He disappeared into the night and she was left there, dumbfounded.

*What has just happened?*

## Chapter Seven



“**M**ama! Are all of the biscuits placed on the trays just as I requested?” Sophie’s shrill voice carried down the hall easily. “Make sure that the servants know to have the tea kettle on all afternoon!”

Since the moment that the sun had started to poke its head up over the clouds this morning, Sophie had been pestering the entire household. She had disrupted breakfast by occupying nearly the entirety of the household staff to assist in making sure the sitting room was as perfect as it could possibly be. She was certain that there would be a line of suitors clear out of the door interested in her. Lunch had not even happened yet as Sophie would not stop prattling on and on about her visitors.

Tessa had been forced to listen to her narrate each and every moment of last night’s ball. She listened to Sophie’s chatter, which was continuous, with her cousin without hardly pausing to take breaths in between the lengthy and repetitive recounts of her dances and how she had been the center of the whole ball.

As expected, she had not even noticed that Tessa had not been in the ballroom for the majority of the evening. In fact, such a circumstance was still somewhat shocking to Tessa herself.

She sat with her embroidery, pretending to be occupied when really she just needed something in her hands that she could focus on. The ball felt like a dream. She was half convinced that the incident in the gardens had not actually happened. She

must have fallen asleep against the wall and dreamed the entire thing. It was too surreal to have possibly been true.

When the clock on the mantel struck one with a soft chime, Tessa was yanked out of her daydream. Sophie kept changing seats. Over and over again she would ask her mother if this position or pose made her look better than any of the others she had tried. Anna could hardly tear her eyes from the scene on the drawing room floor to pay attention to her daughter, let alone answer redundant remarks.

Theodore sat on the floor with Colonel Floppy Ears. He cooed at the beast in a loving, overly affectionate, and soft tone as he played with one toy and then the next. He kept pulling out treats from what seemed like every pocket on his person. Uncle was oblivious to anything else in the entire world that was not his dog most days, and this was certainly no exception.

The clock struck two without so much as a single visitor.

At half past two, Sophie started to fret. She took to pacing the room back and forth, muttering under her breath. She seemed to be searching for any excuse she could concoct that would explain why there was nobody come to call on her. Naturally, not a single one of the reasons that she listed had anything to do with her. She seemed perfectly content to blame her problems on anybody and anything around her. At one point it seemed she was muttering about her mother complaining about the dog and how that might have been off-putting to some.

Three o'clock brought flowers. Not small bouquets of admiration but large vases with stunning and expertly arranged plumes. So many flowers, in fact, that the small sitting room was quickly overwhelmed by the sheer mass and wonder of them all. Sophie squealed happily and started to clap.

“I knew it! I just knew it! See? Did I not say? Oh, they are all so grand and lovely! I cannot even name all of these flowers! Quick, Mama – help me find the card to know who they are from. My suitor is clearly a shy but generous man. What fortune I have!” Sophie started to pick over the arrangements

quickly. She had no care for the petals that she so callously ruined in her hasty movements as she picked and plucked for a card.

Tessa rolled her eyes and turned back to her task.

Anna finally tore her gaze away from her husband and his dog to help her look. “I do not see a card.”

A moment later, when the servants had finished decorating the room in all things floral, they announced the caller. “Might I present His Grace, the Duke of Huxton.”

The servant bowed deeply at the waist before taking a step back to allow room for Leo to enter.

Tessa shot up to her feet so quickly that her wooden embroidery ring clattered to the ground – not that such clumsiness was noticed as both Sophie and her mother squeaked in joy. They both struggled to compose themselves as the Duke walked in and bowed in greeting. Sophie curtsied and giggled deeply but Leo did not so much as look at her. He did not glance in her direction for even half a second – his eyes locked on Tessa’s and stayed there.

He breathed a sigh of relief as if he had just been reunited with his long-lost love. “There you are, My Lady.”

Tessa pressed her lips together to keep from laughing over the sheer drama of it all.

“What?” Sophie blurted out, and Tessa cut her eyes to her cousin. Sophie was slack-jawed in shock. It was such an impossible notion to her that it simply could not be real. She could not fathom such a thing, and disbelief was written plain as day over the entirety of her face.

Tessa reminded herself to keep her calm. She wished that she could have a painting made of Sophie’s face at this very moment so that she might treasure it forever. Leo marched straight across the room to Tessa who lifted her hand so that he might kiss her knuckles, which he did.

“I hope you forgive the late hour. I simply could not get you off of my mind all evening, My Lady. I wished to ensure that I

had a proper gift to offer you when I came to call.” Leo gestured broadly to the flowers in the room.

Tessa had to give him credit; he was a fantastic actor to make himself appear as if he were already wholly and utterly besotted and in love with her. It was hard not to buy into it herself. Her foolish heart was thundering inside of her chest.

“The flowers are lovely, Your Grace, I thank you,” Tessa said demurely.

“I am the one who ought to be thanking you for even entertaining my company, My Lady.” Only then did he turn to Anna and Theodore. “My Lord! What a fine canine you have there.”

The bone that Colonel Floppy Ears had been working on fell out of his mouth and thudded against the floor. At that moment, the mastiff and his owner looked like twins, with the lord’s jaw gaping wide with shock.

“I hope you shall forgive me, Sir, that I did not write with my intentions, but I find myself so overcome that I thought that it would be prudent to come and declare my intentions in person.”

With a belabored grunt, Theodore braced his hand on his knee and lifted from the floor. “Why... why yes, Your Grace. I admire a man who acts first and asks for forgiveness second. Perhaps not the soundest tactical strategy but I admire your guts,” Theodore rambled. He was mainly incapable of speaking without equating everything to military tactics in one way or another. “It is refreshing, in fact – most young people these days have no courage at all! They certainly do not make proper soldiers. Say, did you serve?”

Leo shook his head. “No. I have not been afforded the honor as of yet in my life.”

“Honor it would be! In my generation, all men signed up for conscription in His Majesty’s service straight away. We knew it was the best way to transition from a boy to a man. Now every new recruit that we get is so soft and green behind the

ears that they are no match for me and mine!” Theodore exclaimed happily.

Everybody in the room knew that if Theodore was allowed to start speaking about the glory days of war, there would be no stopping him. No other conversations would be permitted to happen and they would all be stuck here until the moon was high in the sky, listening to the same tired stories over and over again.

“Your Grace, I am pleased to host you in our humble home,” Aunt Anna interrupted. “Come, would you like a spot of tea? Have a seat perhaps?”

Sophie’s bottom lip floundered and flapped as if she struggled to find something – anything – that she could say to somehow shift the conversation to herself. She could not fathom what was happening, nor could she process that the Duke simply *refused* to even glance in her direction.

For that fact alone, Tessa could have kissed him.

It did not matter to Tessa any longer that her uncle monopolized the next hour of conversation. It did not matter that Sophie kept trying – and failing – to divert the topic of conversation back to herself. It did not matter to her in the slightest that Sophie would scream at her later or that a barrage of questions would be thrown in her direction. It simply did not matter. All that mattered was the fact that the Duke was seated next to her on the settee and kept giving her assuring little glances every few moments.

Leo did not appear at all troubled by the way her aunt and uncle squabbled in front of him. If he were bothered by anything at all he did not show it. Perhaps later, when they were to speak in private – if they could – perhaps then he would tell her that this was overwhelming and he needed to back out of the deal. Perhaps later he would buckle and rant and rave to her. She could hardly blame him for it, but right now he was the consummate gentleman, perfect in every way.

The conversation happening in the room slowly started to fade into background noise as she focused on the flowers that he had sent her. She had not noticed before but they were in the

same shades and decor as her: the same soft pink of her gown last night; the green accents and the roses colored blue like her eyes. These were not just some common, perfunctory gifts but something that he had put genuine thought and effort into.

She needed to be very, very careful with herself. If she were not, he was pretending to be exactly the same sort of man that would tempt her. As this was all just a ruse, she could not allow herself to develop feelings for him. Slowly, Tessa rose from the settee where she had been sitting so silently and crossed to one of the larger vases. She brushed the petals softly with her fingers. She had given up all hope that she would ever receive flowers like this from a man after her accident.

“Is everything all right?” Leo’s voice came from directly behind her.

She was startled as she had not realized he had followed her across the room. She glanced around him to her family’s expectant gazes. She could see the expectation written all over them. “Yes, apologies.” Tessa flashed a polite smile as she glanced back at the flowers. “I suppose that I had become so used to being overlooked that I did not think anyone would notice when I left the conversation.” Heat colored her cheeks a light shade of pink. She had not thought anything about crossing the room like that. “These are spectacular.”

“I had rather hoped they would be to your taste. I chose them with you in mind. But if you are feeling uncomfortable then perhaps we could go for a walk?” Leo offered with his hands clasped politely behind his back.

Sophie shot up to her feet. “A walk? I would love to go for a walk!”

Tessa almost barked that she had not been invited.

“I only need to gather my shawl, unless you think a parasol would be more fitting?” Sophie asked the Duke as if he would have any opinion on what she did or did not wear to go for a walk.

“I do not think that they will need company this afternoon, Sophie. However, I have some tasks that would need your assistance,” Aunt Anna said casually.

“I do not wish to assist you, Mama. I wish to go for a walk with the Duke.”

“You were not invited. Sit down,” Anna said firmly as she changed tactics. Sophie’s eyes widened the way that they always did when she was getting ready to have a tantrum for not getting her way.

Anna looked at her husband expectantly. “Theodore, please speak with your daughter.”

“Hmm?” Theodore answered without so much as making eye contact with his wife. He spoke to her out of the corner of his mouth as he was too busy playing tug of war with Colonel Floppy Ears to be bothered with the real world. “See what a strong grip he has? It is impressive. Did you know that when we trained dogs for the front line, we would always—”

Tessa turned to Leo, slipped her hand delicately into the crook of his arm, and nodded. “I would love to go for a walk with you, Your Grace.”

“That is unfair! You cannot keep me indoors, Mama. I deserve sunshine as well,” Sophie whispered harshly to her mother as Leo led Tessa out of the room.

Tessa bit down on her bottom lip as they headed down the stairs. She had to hold her breath entirely until they were safely outside where she laughed until her sides hurt.



## Chapter Eight



“Oh, forgive me. I do not mean to lose my composure, Your Grace, but I cannot remember the last time that I have been so happy.” Tessa wiped a joyous tear from the corner of her eye as she struggled to get control of herself once more.

“Do not apologize to me for it. I am happy to see you laughing. Are they always like that?” Leo asked.

Tessa nodded. “Or worse! Oh, if I keep thinking about it or replaying the conversations in my head, I am going to start laughing again.” She waved her hand in a gesture that signified that they ought to start walking. She was beside herself. “I always wondered if I was simply being intolerant of their actions or if other people would find them as wholly ridiculous as I find them! I am so pleased that I am not the only one with that opinion.”

“It was... an experience, to be certain. I cannot say that I am looking forward to encountering them as a whole unit again but I can already say that I have a favorite out of your uncle’s five stories. I think he recounted the same one three times and each time it was slightly different.” Leo chuckled.

“You will note that they tend to get more and more fantastical as time goes on. He will play bigger or smaller roles depending on his mood. Sometimes he speaks as if Colonel is actually present in the stories, despite the fact that he is only just three years old and was not alive during the war. I suppose that it is only his version of the glory days and thus, he is eager

to remain present in those memories,” Tessa agreed as they started to walk around the edge of the park.

The lake in the center caught the sunlight prettily. Ducks and other small birds went about their daily lives as a soft breeze rustled the leaves in the trees. Tessa could not have asked for a prettier afternoon. It was far easier to ignore the stares and lingering glances of the people that passed them when there were so many distractions.

The handsome man on her arm did not detract from her mood either.

“I hate to change the subject so drastically, but as they have only sent a maid to be your chaperone for this walk, I presume that one or more of your family members will make themselves known sooner or later. I am unsure as to how much alone time we shall actually be afforded,” Leo said.

“I have no doubts that they will keep their distance so as to properly encourage our affection for one another. If you were not a duke, then they might have intruded more quickly. Fortunately for you, I think that they might hold themselves at bay for at least a little while. Was there something in particular that you wished to discuss?” Tessa inquired sweetly. It was just as well that she would not spend too much time in the direct sunlight as it tended to affect her scars negatively if she lingered for too long. The harsh rays would dry her already thin skin, making it far more prone to sunburn.

“I only wished to begin our search for your brother. Have you any ideas of where he might have gone? All of those years ago when the subject came up he would express his desire to travel to me, but there were not any repeating destinations mentioned. I could not say that he would have liked to go to one place more than the other,” Leo offered.

Tessa deliberated for a moment as she tried to remember if there was a spot that Mortimer might consider to be special or any place that he would have valued over and above another. “I cannot recall any dream destinations for him either. He simply would state that he was sure the world was both exactly the same and wholly opposite no matter where he wished to

go. It did not make sense at the time, but I suppose it does now.”

“What do you mean?” Leo asked.

“I only mean that my brother was of the opinion that one could find beauty anywhere in the world. No matter how exotic, beauty was abundant. He felt the same about the goodness of people. He would say that good and bad people could be found absolutely anywhere so he was certain that no matter where he traveled or what he saw, it would all be the same. Which is not at all helpful to our present mission,” Tessa explained.

“No, I suppose not.”

Silence fell between them as they walked for a bit.

“Perhaps the best thing to do would be to visit his study and see if anything remains that might be of use to us?” he suggested. “Even a letter or piece of one might give us some indication of where he might go. Travel of any sort takes money – he would have had to have arranged for passage, so perhaps there would be a receipt or bill of sale that might have somehow survived all of the misfortunes–” Leo spoke without thinking about how his words would be interpreted. He did not realize that Tessa had stopped walking entirely until he was several paces ahead of her. He doubled back quickly. “What is it? What is the matter?”

“This was a mistake.” Tessa’s expression hardened. He had offended her. He did not know how he had managed to do that, but he had offended her. Deeply, if her expression was any indication.

“What? Tessa, please – do not walk away from me.” He jogged to catch back up to her. She strode with such purpose that it was hard to keep up with her. “Where are you going?”

“I cannot believe that you could suggest such a horrible thing to me!” Tessa spat. She almost looked on the verge of tears.

A phantom knife twisted in Leo’s gut. He did not wish to be the reason that she cried. He could not stand it.

“Wait, Tessa – please... I did not mean–”

“To suggest that I return to the source of all of my painful memories? That I would somehow be magically all right to return to the place of my parents’ deaths? The place where I almost died? I cannot believe you. You might have a habit of speaking without considering your words, Your Grace, but I will not force myself to endure such torture,” Tessa rambled angrily without pausing. She was halfway back to the house before he successfully cut her off.

“I would never ask you to endure such a thing on your own!” Leo lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I would, of course, be by your side every step of the way. I would offer to go on my own, but I have never been inside your family home. I would not know where to look.”

Tessa slowed and studied his expression carefully. She decided that he was not acting out of malice, but that did not ease the pain in her chest any. “No. I cannot stand it. I will never return there.”

Her family home had been left to her in the will. All of their property and holdings had, of course, been transferred to her brother until such a time as he was declared dead. As the constables were still searching for him so adamantly, it was also a way to ensure that should he attempt to touch any of the family money or handle any of the affairs, they would find him at once.

It was yet another reason why she was stuck as a ward of her aunt and uncle until such a time as they married her off or she decided to forsake her family name and claims – something that she was unlikely ever to do. She had no desire to live any other life, but she did not wish to be a burden to them either. They all understood that she was not going to get married – not with her deformities. It left her stuck in that house until she figured out what she truly wished to do with her life.

“Tessa, please – offer me any other solution if you do not like the one I suggested. Any other lead that I can follow, that *we* can follow together and I will take it. If you have *any* other suggestion on where to begin our search I will instantly discredit this one as a last resort. Tell me plainly, do you have any other options?” Leo asked.

Tessa hated that she did not. She hated that she could not come up with any other objection to his plan other than the fact that she was terrified to see the remnants of her family home once more. She had not been back since that night; she did not know what state it was in or if any single part of it had survived.

“I promise that we will only go when you say that you are ready, and I will be by your side every single second to help you through it. Does that sound acceptable?”

Tessa’s teeth gritted together. She had no reason to refuse him. “I... do not know if I am strong enough—”

Her voice was small, bordering on fragile, as she admitted that truth to him. Leo smiled kindly. He hated that they were not alone in this park. He would have loved to embrace her at a moment like this. He only wished that he could offer her some other sort of comfort – anything to ease that pain knitting her brow.

“I think you are far stronger than you give yourself credit for,” Leo admitted easily. He did not know if, were their positions reversed, he would have been able to do the exact same thing that he was asking of her right now. He did not know that he would have been capable of being injured that badly and still have the courage to go out into the often cruel and always gossip-filled Society with his head held high as she did.

He needed to be careful or he was going to find himself overly fond of her. Leo took a step toward her until their feet nearly touched. He held her gaze. “In fact... I think that—”

Leo’s fingertips brushed against her gloved hand as he paused to look deeply into her eyes. *It would be so easy to kiss her.* Where did that thought come from? He was not supposed to want to kiss her. He was not supposed to want to have anything to do with her other than fulfilling their agreement. But she was too easy to admire.

Before he could finish his thought, they were interrupted by a high-pitched, shrill scream of warning.

“Watch out!”

Leo and Tessa sprung apart as they both noticed the black blur of fur racing toward them at top speed. Trailing very, very far behind Colonel Floppy Ears was none other than Sophie clutching a red leather dog leash in her hand.

Tessa's eyes narrowed. This was no random occurrence. Knowing her cousin, she had started to plot this the moment that the pair had left the sitting room. She would convince her father that she and Colonel needed to bond in order to set him loose and interrupt the walk that she was so clearly not wanted on.

Though none of it mattered as Colonel was not slowing. Not for anything. His large, pink tongue flopped happily outside of his mouth, and drool was flung in every direction around him. His drooping, uncropped ears bounced happily as he ran, showing off his namesake.

“Oh, look out! The lake!” Sophie screamed as loudly as she could, her voice filled with faux concern for their well-being.

The dog was going to shove Tessa into the lake. He was going to run and pounce her like he had done so many times before in his life, and given his sheer size, she would be knocked backward and into the lake. She would be humiliated.

She scrunched her eyes closed and braced for impact – but it did not come. Opening one eye, she saw that Leo had stepped in front of her with his arms held out widely. He made a loud shout of aggression that seemed to startle Colonel Floppy Ears just enough to distract him from his overly enthusiastic greeting. The Colonel – big puppy that he was – yipped in fear and nearly tumbled over his own massive feet as he corrected his course.

Leo laughed and shuffled to the side so that he could engage the dog in play, yet again proving himself to be a touch too close to perfect for her liking. Tessa pressed the tips of her gloved fingers over her lips to keep from laughing as Sophie finished running up to them – outrage on every inch of her otherwise pretty features.

Tessa did not say a word as Leo and the Colonel seemed to chase one another in half circles. The dog chuffed and wiggled

at him happily as Tessa admired their exchange.

Sophie huffed, and puffed, and scoffed, and made her disappointment loudly known until Tessa was forced to verbally acknowledge it.

“Something wrong, Cousin? Did your brilliant plan not go the way that you wished for it to go?” Tessa glanced at Sophie out of the side of her eye.

“You do not deserve him,” Sophie practically spat. “Somebody who looks the way that you do does not deserve the attention of the most eligible duke of the Season. He has every beautiful woman of the *ton* falling at his feet. What did you do to him? You have tricked him somehow... trapped him. Tell me how you have done it.”

“It must burn you that somebody like the duke might be interested in kindness and decency as opposed to your well-decorated, sour personality. Does it not?” Tessa smirked happily.

Sophie made yet another painting-worthy face of outrage. “Whatever you have done, I will expose you. Mark my words,” Sophie threatened.

“Mhm. Of course, you will, Cousin.” Tessa refused to show how deeply Sophie’s words continued to wound her. She would never tell her cousin the truth about her deal with the duke. She would never admit to it all being a ruse no matter what happened. She knew better than anyone that a duke as handsome and kind as Leo clearly would never find a woman like her attractive.

The face he had made when he first saw her scars last night was emblazoned in her mind.

No. He would never be interested in her.

## Chapter Nine



“Please, My Lady – I beg of you, turn back now.”

“Believe me, Thalia, this is not something that I relish the idea of,” Tessa answered quietly as she walked slowly down the pavement. This section of town still felt like home in the strangest of ways. She was not entirely certain what she had expected. There had not been any point where she had even considered coming back to this place. After she had been transported from the burning building to the hospital three years ago, she had outright refused to even travel to this part of town. The constables had requested more than once that she accompany them back here in order to help recount the events of the evening or to ask her to assist them in their investigation and recount events, but she could not – she would not for any reason in the world.

She did not really wish to be here today.

“My Lady... please–” Thalia attempted again. While they had only known one another for the past couple of years, Thalia was one of the only people in her cousin’s household that Tessa felt she could trust. While Tessa might watch her tongue when anybody else was around, with Thalia she felt as if the woman at least understood her. Thalia was the only one who could look at her scars or attend to her without pity in her eyes. The maid had never made her feel any less of a human simply because of the damage that had been done to her body.

“I shall be all right,” Tessa lied to the woman following her. She would not have brought her were it not for the possible need for a chaperone on this rather clandestine meeting. While



it was strictly business, the Duke was still a very public and popular figure in the *ton*. More so this year. If either of them were to be recognized while they were undertaking their investigation, it would be him.

Thalia rushed forward and tugged softly on Tessa's sleeve. She had no choice but to spin around and face her.

"If you insist that you are all right with this visit, My Lady, then it is certainly not my place to try to tell you not to. However, I fear that there is no way that I will be able to go inside that place. Seeing it in the papers all those years ago was almost too much for me to handle. I beg of you – please do not make me go with you there. Do not force me to endure it; I cannot." Thalia looked as if she was on the verge of tears as she spoke. Tessa supposed that she could not blame her. The maid might not have been there to endure the flames, but she had suffered all the same when she had been obliged to nurse Tessa back to health.

Tessa took a moment to deliberate before dipping her head in understanding. She very nearly hugged the woman for feeling so deeply about her. "Of course, I understand. If you would care to wait for me here, I shall not fault you for it. I shall call for you if I require your assistance. You will be near enough to hear me, yes?"

Thalia nodded and took a half step back and toward the iron fencing lining the pavement. "I am sorry... My Lady—"

"You do not need to apologize to me. Certainly not for this. I understand. Were my reasons for needing to return anything less than what they are, I would never dare risk such a thing either."

"I cannot pretend to understand your motivations, My Lady, but I hope that you will not think me too bold to hope you are careful... and to take great caution with yourself while heading inside at the very least."

Tessa nodded. "I will assure you of that much."

She hoped that she looked braver than she felt. She certainly did not feel up to the challenge of opening herself to those

particular sorts of memories. Yet, she inhaled deeply through her nose and steeled herself as she turned back down the familiar path. It felt like only yesterday that she was walking this path with Mortimer beside her, with him animatedly telling her one of his silly stories. If she closed her eyes, it was almost as if she could feel him beside her... almost as if she could hear his voice in her head.

It was very nearly overwhelming.

She turned the corner to see that the street was also much the same: the neighbors were far apart in this part of town, and a great many of them had moved indefinitely to their country or summer homes after the accident for various reasons. The lack of life left the street with a spooky coldness that sent a shiver of foreboding down her spine.

Yet, she still traveled onward. Were she not wholly and utterly concentrated on the effort required to keep her from losing her gumption, she might have even congratulated herself on being so brave. She might have taken a moment to admire her own personal ambitions. The closer she got to her family home, the louder the voices in her memory became. First her mother's laughter... then her brother's boisterous and animated stories... then her father's screams... her own cries.

The outside of the house looked unchanged. How was that possible? The door was nearly missing; bits of board designed to cover the space were affixed to what was once the door to her home. Black soot and scorch marks marked the top of the doorway and over the windows but the charred stain hid the inner damages well. A deep sadness and sorrow born of grief in its purest form assaulted her all at once. She swayed on the spot. Tessa nearly felt on the verge of fainting when Leo made himself known.

He appeared as if from nowhere.

Tessa would have jumped clear out of her skin were she not so focused on the building in front of her.

"I was not certain that you would show up," Leo said softly.

Tessa pulled at the fabric of her gloves as she rubbed her hand together in front of her body anxiously. “I was not certain that I would either.”

Leo turned to look at the building curiously. “Of all of the times that I walked him home after a long evening at the club, I never took a single step inside. I wish now that I had so that this would not be my first memory of this place.”

“I can smell the fire... even from here on the pavement, I can smell it... I did not remember the smell before.” She spoke so softly that she was not entirely certain that she had said the words out loud in the first place. She allowed herself a single moment of further hesitation before she forced all of her emotions from her face, boldly gathered her skirts in her hands, and strode forward.

Leo had to double his pace to close the distance between himself and the front door so that he could open it in time for her to pass through. He could not have been prepared for the sight he was met with. His jaw fell slack as he took in the carnage before him. If he had known the extent – had he even been able to fully fathom just how bad it was – he would never have convinced her to come here. To her credit, Tessa strolled inside as if there was nothing wrong with the home whatsoever. She fully ignored his shock and walked through the grand foyer and into the massive hall to the left-hand side. It had been where her family had hosted countless parties and celebrations. Now the pillars were twisted black and stood precariously. The floor still held a layer of ash that swished behind her like fresh snowfall as she walked.

She could hear Leo’s slow footsteps behind her. She did not wish to endure the look of shock on his face as he slowly put the pieces together as to what might have happened that night.

“There was a time when my uncle had tried to urge me to consider tearing it down in order to rebuild it–” Tessa lifted her hand to a painting that seemed half melted. “I could not imagine doing any more damage to it than has already been done.” She dropped her hand without actually touching the portrait. “Besides, if I were to construct a new home in the

same space it would always feel different. I do not think that I could stand it.”

Leo wondered why her uncle would even suggest such a thing; the man certainly did not seem to mind that she was staying with him. Leo would imagine that having his niece there would not only improve their social standing but provide better opportunities for his overly ambitious daughter. Unless his intentions for the home were for his personal use. Leo would hardly put it past him to wish for a second home dedicated to nothing but his war trophies.

“Come on. It is through here.”

Leo moved slowly after Tessa, concerned for her well-being. He did not like how her tone seemed lower and softer the longer she spent in there. Guilt started to gnaw at him for forcing her there. Despite knowing that there were no other alternatives to find a lead in their hunt at this junction, it was harder to be here than he had originally anticipated.

Fortunately for both of them, Mortimer’s study was on the ground floor. Leo refrained from asking about any details from that night despite his morbid curiosity. The doorway to Mortimer’s study swung open with a groan and promptly fell off of its hinges. Tessa yelped in surprise and danced backward a beat, falling right into his arms.

Her heart was racing. He could feel it as his arms wrapped around her. She leaned into his chest, clearly in no rush to remove herself from his hold. She seemed to take comfort from his warmth and stability for a long moment as she stared at the cloud of ash that lingered in the doorway.

Leo’s hand slid slowly up her back; he meant only to offer comfort but he could not deny how she felt as if she belonged in his arms. He was a moment too slow in releasing her and she was a moment too slow in trying to pull away.

“Apologies—” she muttered softly.

“Not at all,” Leo answered as his gaze lingered on her stunning blue eyes.

“We should—”

“Yes—”

Even then, it took a moment to part from one another for a reason he could not – would not – name. They shuffled apart and Leo moved into the room behind her; being at the far end of the house, it was mostly unharmed. The fire must have crept through the doorway and stopped when the carpet gave way to the hardwood flooring of the office. The books – miraculously – were as unharmed as the ledgers were still in place and a quill rested next to an open bottle of evaporated ink. Were it not for the scorch marks, it would have appeared as if Mortimer had only just vacated the space moments before. A strange frozen moment in time.

“It feels as if he is going to turn around in that chair to greet me with some silly anecdote,” Tessa said fondly. Leo could not help but grin and nod in agreement.

“It does, with that same enthusiastic energy that always seemed to be endlessly abundant.” He laughed as he spoke. “You truly have not heard from him?”

“I wish more than anything that I had – even a letter stating that he was alive and well would have been enough for me. It is not like him to simply disappear without a word. I cannot help but assume that the very worst has happened every time that I think of him, what with all of his debts and those who wished him harm.” She shook her head as if to push the thoughts away.

“Take comfort in knowing that he was also in possession of a tireless silver tongue. I have witnessed him talk his way out of scrapes many times. We must hope that talent has not left him,” Leo offered.

“He came home bloodied and bruised after one too many nights betting on boxing matches for me to take much comfort in that.” Tessa sighed and turned her focus instead to the desk in front of her. She started to gingerly push the letters and papers apart, looking for anything that could be useful to them. It seemed much the same as one would expect to find in any study: lots of correspondence and letters, but nothing useful. At least not at first.

“You sound as if you were even closer to him than I was,” Leo said, grinning.

“I should hope so – I am his sister after all,” Tessa responded with a grin of her own. Leo noted that while he was speaking of her brother in the past tense, she always used the present. He had not even meant to make the distinction.

“I am not even sure what it is that we should be looking for,” Leo admitted after a long bout of searching.

“I am hoping that we shall know it when we find it.” Tessa pulled open drawer after drawer to no avail before finally one of them came loose from the desk entirely. The heavy thing crashed to the floor and the overly dry wood cracked and splintered, revealing a treasure trove of hidden letters that had been concealed by a false bottom. She sank to the ground and she started to pore over their contents hungrily. As she finished each one, she passed it to the eager man standing over her.

“These are threats!” Leo exclaimed with shock. “I knew that he owed money to a great many dangerous people but I never imagined that the sums would be quite this high! He never went to the constables with these threats?”

Tessa could hardly breathe. Of course, her brother could not have told anyone about how much he owed because there was no way that he would have been able to repay them.

“The constables blamed my brother for the fire – as you know... but these letters prove that his life – all of our lives – had been threatened. Surely these threats will be enough proof to place some seeds of doubt into the minds of the authorities?”

Leo’s expression softened as he neatly stacked the letters together. “I hope that they will, but I would not get your hopes up too high.”

“What? Why?” She felt as if she were on the verge of tears.

“I fear that if the constables have their hearts and minds set on Mortimer as the culprit then these letters alone will not be sufficient evidence against that,” Leo offered gently.

The truth of it frustrated him. Leo knew that he was going to have to get his hands on the constables' reports one way or another, and it was not likely to be an easy task to accomplish. It would be the only way to know why they were so determined to think Mortimer was the only culprit.

Leo scrubbed his hands down his face to compose himself. "I think that I should like a bit of fresh air. Come, let us take a walk. The letters will still be there when we return."

"I should like to look just a moment longer. I am certain that there is something here that we are missing. I will meet up with you in a moment. Go on ahead." Tessa did not wish to pull her eyes away from the papers in front of her. She felt as if she stopped now, it would be the same as quitting. She could not do that until she had searched every inch of this place in the hope of learning more about her brother's final days.

"Even if that is true and you can continue searching, I cannot. Please, accompany me for a walk?" Leo held his hand out in her direction.

Tessa hesitated a moment. The look on Leo's face was pained enough that she knew he truly needed a moment to step away and process what he had just found. In truth, it was likely the wiser of the two options.

"All right." Tessa sighed as she slipped her gloved hand in his and felt braver. She allowed him to pull her to her feet, leaving the letters behind her.

## Chapter Ten



“I knew that being back in that house was going to be hard, but I never imagined that it could be that difficult.” Tessa slipped her arm through Leo’s as they walked. No doubt they made quite a picture in their current condition. Ash clung to their clothes and hair, and she was fairly certain that the ash only exaggerated the look of her scars. Yet Leo made no comment on it. Every time he glanced in her direction, little butterflies set flight in her belly.

The moment that she stepped outside of the house she felt better. With each step that put further distance between herself and the source of her nightmares, the lighter she felt.

The last time that she had walked this street had been with Mortimer. Heading toward the nearest park felt strange to do with another partner.

It was improper to walk with him like this, she knew that. She knew that it was indecent of her to be linked with him arm in arm and no chaperone in sight. Poor Thalia was likely still waiting for her to return. Tessa made a mental note not to dwell on their walk too long lest her only friend start to worry about her too much. It was hard to remain focused while being so near Leo. She was not bold enough to ask what sort of cologne he wore, but it certainly was an intoxicating scent.

The sunlight made the ordeal of the house easier on her. It certainly made it simpler neither to dwell on the contents of the letters nor to focus on just how many people seemed to wish her brother harm. Leo was right to suggest the walk.



“I must confess, I did not expect to be affected by the event either but it is hard not to... and I am not the one who endured the whole ordeal,” Leo said kindly. “You are a remarkable woman. I do not think that many of those in the *ton* would have been able to come out on the other side of things with even half of the grace or composure that you show every day.”

Tessa smiled and focused on the ground in front of them as they walked. “This coming from the man who met me while I was crying in a garden?”

Leo laughed. “I thought you said you were picking flowers?”

Tessa nudged his shoulder with hers and laughed easily. “If we are making confessions, then I suppose that I should come clean about the fact that I presumed we would find something that would somehow be the key to everything. Obviously, it is a silly notion to think there would be a note left for me specifically with his escape plan, exact whereabouts, and how to find him – but I wished that was what we would find anyway.”

“I think the letters will give us a good indication. It is my intention to study them further and, hopefully, track down one or two of the senders to see if they might have any information or if they have heard anything.”

“Even after all of this time?” Tessa did not wish to sound overly eager, but it was the first hope she had been given in three years. It would be impossible not to run with it.

“Perhaps. The memory of those with grudges tends to be long and detailed. Should they believe that I am in league with them or looking to collect my own debts, then they are more likely to share information with me. The enemy of my enemy and all that.”

Tessa sighed. “I know that you are correct, but it is simply impossible for me to actually believe that Mortimer was the enemy of anyone. He kept that part of his life wholly separate from me.”

“Would you have wished to know about it?” Leo asked honestly.

Tessa glanced up at him in surprise. “I have never truly considered it before. I suppose I would have been disapproving – at least at first. I would have wished to help him in any way that I could, naturally. I say that because it was my first instinct when the constables began pointing the blame at him. I argued even then that should he have been desperate enough to do something so horrible, it would only mean that he needed help... they did not care for that.”

“Naturally not. Though the image of a small, wounded but fierce woman attempting to boss about the constables is rather amusing.” Leo laughed.

“Oh, if only you had–” Tessa paused as Leo quickly pulled her from where she stood directly off of her feet. He pulled her in close to his body just in time to prevent her from being smacked in the side of the head by a child’s toy. The large red ball whizzed past them and landed in the grass just beyond them with a soft *thunk*.

“Oi! Wotcher!” Leo called in a less-than-refined accent. It was the sort of tone of voice he had employed often while playing sports at the university. He had not had many occasions to slip into it outside of that.

Two small boys came running up to them, repentance glowing on every inch of their cherubic faces. They were clearly frightened of what they might have caused to happen with their accident, and Leo was of a mind to scold them. His father certainly would have done a lot worse than shout at him for such a misstep. Leo would have lost not only the toy but also his playing rights and the ability to sit properly for a week.

He kept his body between Tessa and the children out of reflex, and was shocked when Tessa started to laugh. Not the sort of polite laughter that he had heard thus far, but something richer – far more like the laughter that she had displayed for getting one over on her cousin the other day.

He was perplexed, but there was more than that too. He watched her face in pure joy; there was a light feeling in his chest. It felt like he ought to laugh too so that he could enjoy her good mood – her happiness spreading all around her. The

tension melted from the children as they jogged around the couple and quickly snatched their ball back up.

“Sorry, Ma’am,” the first boy said quickly and then elbowed the second roughly. “We meant no harm... sorry, Sir.” He dipped low into a bow that made Tessa chuckle.

Tessa lowered herself to one knee to speak to the child so that she would be on the same level as them. “Oh, there was no harm done, child, never you mind us. It has been a good while since we have had such lovely weather. You are perfectly right to spend the day frolicking and playing with your friends. It was a very impressive kick! I am afraid that I missed it. Do you think that you could show it to me again?”

Leo blinked at her curiously. He had never had a natural ease with children. He did not think that he had even properly enjoyed the company of other children when he had been a child himself. He had not liked to spend time with them any more than he had enjoyed the childish activities that they relished. His youth had been spent with private tutors and coaching. He had not been allowed the time to do such wasteful things. He had not wanted to then... but he had more than made up for that lack of time in his adult years.

“Yeah! Ma’am, are you watching?” the young boy exclaimed and jogged back a good way. He made a dramatic show of rearing his foot back and then kicking animatedly forward, only to wholly and completely miss the ball. Tessa covered her mouth with her gloved hand to keep from showing that she was laughing.

The second young boy promptly kicked the ball across the gardens before the first had even been given the chance to stand up again. Now covered in grass stains, his play clothes were soiled as he beat at his thighs to try to rid himself of the dirt as he kicked dejectedly at the rock that had apparently caused him to fumble his kick.

“It is not fair! I want to try again!” the first proclaimed.

“No! My kick was proper! Right, Ma’am? Did you like it? Was it good?” the second boy called to Tessa.

Tessa clapped happily. “I think that you *both* did a wonderful job. Even if you fell, your form was spectacular. And you? Your kick was marvelous! In fact...” she paused to fish into her bag, “I think that I might even have... ah yes, here it is.” She produced a small box of sweets from her pocket. He had no idea why she had it or where it had come from but it did not matter. The faces of both of the boys were illuminated as if she had just offered them bricks of gold.

“Really? Can we?”

“Of course!” Tessa answered happily. “Two a piece, all right? Promise me that it will not spoil your supper. I cannot have your mamas come looking for me, cross that I spoiled your appetite.”

“No! Of course not! Never!” they both agreed as they spoke over one another. It only took a small squabble and the four bits of candy were divided evenly among the two children and they ran off happily.

Tessa rose to her feet and brushed her hands off on her skirts feeling very light of spirit.

“You are the youngest member of your family, is that correct?” Leo asked curiously.

“Yes, I am. Why do you ask?”

“You seem to have a natural ease with children that I simply do not possess, I was not certain if you had younger siblings you might have once watched over,” Leo admitted.

Tessa shrugged modestly. “Children do not look at me with fear – sometimes it is easier to be near them because of this. Their sense of wonder is always so refreshing. Not yet overly burdened with too much responsibility or need to present themselves in one particular way or the other. I suppose I cannot explain it properly, but I always expected to have many children someday. Well, I had hoped to, anyway.”

Sadness bled into her tone and Leo could not understand why. Not at first.

“You are still quite young, there will be plenty of years left yet for you to have children! However many you please,” Leo

answered.

Tessa regarded him strangely. “Why do you think that? Given that we have entered into a strange sort of friendship I think you should respect me enough to speak plainly. I do not need you to sugarcoat pretty lies to make me feel better. You know just as well as I do that no gentleman in his right mind would desire to have children with me. Not being able to have a family of my own is the only thing that I will regret in this life.”

There was no self-pity in her voice. She spoke her words as if she were conversing about the weather, as if such things were simply a matter of fact and to be regarded as a given course of future events. This saddened him for reasons that he did not even understand.

“Come, we should return to the study before we lose the rest of the afternoon light,” Tessa suggested evenly. Leo wanted to argue with her. The more time that he spent with her, the less obvious her scarring appeared to him. No longer was he focused on the marred skin but on the beauty of her face as a whole. It was not as if her disfigurements were some genetic abnormality; any child that she had would be stunning to behold, there was no doubt in his mind about that. He chewed on his words, unable to think of a way to put his thoughts into sentences that would not be phrased to offend her.

Tessa broke the silence again, speaking aloud what she must have been dwelling on. “Can you imagine it? Most of the men of the *ton* can barely stand to touch me for the span of a dance, let alone be near me long enough to consider intimacy.”

Her cheeks flushed red as she spoke and she tried her best not to allow herself to feel embarrassed by the subject matter. She reasoned that since he was her friend, he would not call her out for being immodest. He was a rake after all – he would know better than most, she supposed.

“You will have your own children if you desire them, Tessa. You are bright, kind, and beautiful inside and out. Any gentleman would be blind to overlook you.” Leo spoke

bluntly, and honestly, as he opened the door to her family home once more.

She paused, allowing his words to fully sink in as she stood there, blinking up at him. It felt too intimate a thing for him to say. The things that it implied— She found herself staring at his lips once more.

She lingered for longer than she meant to. Tessa's hands gripped the doorframe behind her to keep herself from swooning. "Well, it is always nice to hear such kind things from a handsome gentleman. If only my cousin were here to overhear them – she might faint from jealousy."

"Please, do not make light of my words to turn them into something less than they are," Leo requested earnestly. He could feel the heat of her in front of him – so soft. It did not help one bit that he knew exactly how well she fit into his arms, how her body felt pressed against his. He could not help but allow his imagination to wonder how she might feel pressed up against other parts of him. He knew it was wrong... but he wanted her.

"Apologies, Your Grace, I do not mean to make light of your words. You simply flatter me too kindly and I am unsure how to repay the gesture—"

A soft, overly charming half smile flickered over Leo's lips as he leaned in closer to Tessa. She straightened her spine until she was pressed against the doorframe. That intoxicating cologne washed over her until she could think of nothing but him and how close he was. Her skin felt aflame with desire and curiosity at the idea that his words had somehow, impossibly, implied that he found her beautiful. Not in the way of a passing curiosity but with a real, deep appreciation for her. It shocked her just much she wanted that to be true.

"I can think of a way that you might return the gesture," Leo answered huskily. His voice dropped just as it had in the gardens when they met. It took on a quality that made her skin tighten and flush with anticipation. She wet her lips softly with her tongue.

"Oh? Do tell... I could never be in your debt."

Leo's hand lifted to curl a finger under her chin gently to look up at him properly. Her lips slightly parted in anticipation; he was going to kiss her. She could feel it. Her whole being practically hummed. She *wanted* him to kiss her – she wanted so badly to have a good memory of this place. Something bright and happy that could be placed over the top of the other bountiful horrors that this house held for her.

*What am I doing? How selfish am I?*

Tessa's eyes snapped open and she straightened her spine further to put more distance between them. Was she really standing here, hoping to be kissed by a handsome duke as if this were not the place where her parents had died? She was allowing herself to be distracted by a girlish fantasy when she was supposed to be looking for her brother? When they were *both* supposed to be looking.

Shame rushed through her, replacing every bit of desire until it turned sour.

Was she taken in so easily by a couple of sweet words? Did she possess no self-control? He likely said such things to all women. For all she knew, it was not even an impulse that he knew how to control. From everything that she had heard until now about rakish men, such a thing certainly seemed in the realm of possibility.

She ought to be searching for her brother – and only that.

“Tessa? What is the matter? Have I said something wrong?”

She turned her face away from him, unable to meet his eyes any longer. “No. I have only just noticed the hour... I ought to be returning home. My uncle becomes very cross if we are not all home to dine together.”

“What?” To Leo, this felt too sudden. Something had happened and he had missed it.

“Thank you for helping me... and for making this experience better. Please contact me when you have heard back from them.” She curtsied in an overly formal fashion. “My maid is waiting for me. Good day.”

## Chapter Eleven



“Are you certain that there has not been any post?” Leo found himself asking for the fourth time that morning. It had been nearly a week without so much as a word from Tessa! The servants were going to start whispering that he was mad – if they had not started already. There was a very large possibility that they were whispering about him and how he had taken to pacing about the rooms of this too-large Manor for too many hours of the day.

“I am sorry, Your Grace, but there has not been anything,” the servant answered kindly.

Leo’s answering smile was thin and uncomfortable as he scratched at the back of his head absently. “Right, well – thank you.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” the servant responded quickly. She lingered for a moment – just a moment – as if in contemplation of what she might ask, but eventually decided that it would simply be too bold of a thing to ask.

Even if she had been bold enough to ask a question of him, he would not have had an answer. Leo could not explain why he felt so obsessed with a single person. He was not willing to admit to himself, not yet, the depth of his interest in the woman who had started very pointedly to ignore him.

Leo had written to her – day after day – and had yet to get a response. He was absolutely certain that his letters were being delivered. For the last two days, he had even insisted that the letter boy personally hand deliver the letters to Tessa directly



for fear that her cousin Sophie was stealing the letters or otherwise keeping things from her somehow.

But now he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she had received the letters and was choosing not to answer them. He naively wished to think that she was waiting for news of her brother before answering him. Perhaps, for the sake of their alleged courtship, she was hoping to appear alluring by creating distance between them. After all, it was often suggested that a lady should not appear too eager for a gentleman's favor or attention... but then again, perhaps he ought to just show up and hope for the best.

The thing that stopped him from arriving at her family home, arms laden with gifts, was the fear that she would turn him away. He had not produced results yet; she would be within her rights as he was not upholding his end of the bargain. But he missed her.

That was the one phrase that he had not been able to put in his letters.

There was a sort of magic to her smile. Something more alluring and addictive than any drink that he had ever sampled – sweeter than anything he had ever tasted, and he could not get it out of his mind. He had not been lying that day when he had told her that no gentleman in his right mind would turn her away. Although, the things he thought about while lying awake at night, tossing and turning, were certainly not of a gentlemanly nature.

He had not been able to look at another woman since nearly kissing her. He had tried in the hopes that he might be able to distract himself from the constant loop of thoughts centered around Tessa – but not a single woman he had attempted to speak to even compared. Their smiles were not nearly bright enough. They did not have the same pull that Tessa did. Before spending time with Tessa, he had not noticed just how performative all of the conversations were that he had with other women. Routine, more or less. It was... boring.

He should have kissed her. He should have taken the risk so that there could be no misunderstanding between them. It

would have changed the nature of their accord, but perhaps that might turn out to be for the best. Would it not? Was it so terrible to express his feelings for her?

He had to come clean and declare himself one way or another.

“Delvin?” Leo called to his steward. “I was given an invitation to tonight’s ball at the Cornelius residence, correct?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Leo scrubbed his hand down his face and nodded. “Did I send intentions to attend?”

“I do not believe so, Your Grace,” Oscar answered.

“Ah – well, I suppose that they will not be too bothered if I grace their ball with my attendance. Come, we have a social engagement to get me ready for.” Leo nodded. It might be his only chance to speak with Tessa where she could not avoid him. That was worth the annoyance of attending a social function that he did not care for; it was worth enduring the obnoxious mothers and their daughters – so long as he got to speak with Tessa once more. On his end, he wished to speak with her for reasons more than what was required by their bargain. There was no more denying it.



Whispers greeted him the moment that he stepped inside the home. It was one of those instances where his title came in handy. It was to his benefit that nobody would reprimand a duke for not having sent word or accepting the invitation because simply having a duke at their ball elevated their status. It gave all of those who fed the hungry rumor mill something to feast on while they danced and drank their fill.

Even as he walked the edges of the dance floor, he could hear them whispering. He could feel their eyes on him. The music felt further away than it could possibly be and none of the faces of those he walked past really seemed to register. They were not the face that he was looking for; they did not belong to the one woman he yearned to see above all others.

Leo was going to feel very foolish if she was not actually in attendance. He felt fairly foolish already due to the fact that he was glancing over each and every face in turn, simultaneously hoping not to see her family while also hoping to have even a slight glimpse of her. If he made his intentions clear – bargain or not – and she rejected him, he would still be happy just to see her smile one more time.

A long time of nothing and then suddenly, there she was – standing at the far end of the room in a striking dress of rich violet trimmed with a yellow so soft it was nearly white. Sophie stood beside her, dressed in a paler lilac shade that complimented her fair hair and no doubt was intended to upstage her cousin and keep all focus on herself. It suited him fine, now, that there were no other eyes on Tessa – the very notion of it caused jealousy inside of him. Perhaps the very first time that he had ever truly experienced such an emotion.

The question became how to approach her. As she did not wish to write him, he could only imagine that she did not wish to speak with him either. He had tried to conjure a few witticisms that might entice her into banter... but she would see through his antics the moment that he attempted them.

With a charming smile, he walked up to her aunt and uncle who stood beside her, and outstretched his hand toward them. “Greetings! How lovely it is to see you here.”

The couple continued arguing for a long moment before choosing to acknowledge him. Lady Windrop did not alter her expression as she took a long drink from her wine glass, but her husband, Theodore, seemed to shift himself entirely. A smile broke open across his face and his wine-reddened cheeks dimpled happily. He did not offer a hand to shake but instead enthusiastically embraced Leo before he even knew it was happening.

“Your Grace! It is so lovely to see you again! I have been wondering about your absence,” Theodore said as he took a step back and clapped Leo on the shoulders happily.

“I apologize for my absence. I had some matters to take care of,” Leo explained without actually giving any explanation at

all.

“I was worried that you had lost interest in my little muffin,” Theodore jested jovially, though the underlying accusation was not lost on him.

“Hardly. If anything, my affections have only grown in our brief time apart. In fact, I was hoping to apologize in person to Lady Tessa and perhaps make it up to her with a dance? If she will have me, of course.” Leo finally turned his gaze to Tessa.

Tessa seemed as if anything else in this place would be more interesting than looking at Leo. Slowly, the attention of her aunt and Sophie turned expectantly to Tessa. The silence stretched out, and Sophie capitalized on it.

“I would be happy to dance with you, Your Grace. Should you like that? I happen to have a space free,” Sophie said sweetly and held up the dance card dangling from her wrist.

That caught Tessa’s attention. She glanced at Leo, waiting to see if he was going to accept the invitation. It was obvious as Leo turned to look back at Tessa.

“I am afraid that I only have eyes for one dance partner this evening,” Leo said kindly, hoping that the rejection would be taken with grace. Given the public nature of their setting, it seemed rather unlikely that she was going to cause a scene. Though, from the little that he knew of Sophie, she could be a bit of a wild card. “What do you say, My Lady? Might I have this dance?”

Anna Windrop subtly nudged her niece on the shoulder, and Tessa dipped into a polite curtsy. “Of course, Your Grace. It would be my honor.”

Leo held his hand out to Tessa, and she gracefully accepted. The eyes of the *ton* were upon them. He could feel them watching his every move as he lifted her gloved knuckles to his lips and kissed them softly. “You have made me the happiest duke in the room.”

It was a touch performative, he knew. Yet he was rewarded with a subtle smirk from Tessa. “You are the only duke in the room, Your Grace.”

“Ah, she does speak!” Leo breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief as he walked them to the dance floor and into their positions.

“Why yes, I am still in control of my faculties. I can speak when I choose to,” Tessa answered dryly.

“Are you cross with me? I am struggling to come up with a reason for you to be so angry with me that you would feel the need to ignore me so.” Leo meant to phrase it as a joke but could not manage it.

“I do not wish to cancel our bargain, if that is what you mean to ask.”

“Certainly. Of course, I want to know that – but the nature of our relationship is more than that. I genuinely enjoy your company and I would like to see you and speak with you on occasion. I find your company very stimulating.”

“I find your company rather dangerous, if I am to be perfectly honest with you, Your Grace,” Tessa whispered as they moved in and out of their dance.

“Dangerous? Me?” Leo laughed.

“Yes. I find you dangerous. You wield gentle words and affection like weapons – charm yielded as a blade. I fear that you might strike me with it. An action that would leave only me injured as an outcome. I merely wish to spare myself harm,” Tessa explained.

“First, you said there was no way that I could be interested in you – and now you are worried that I am interested in you?” Leo laughed.

“It would distract us from our mission,” Tessa reasoned logically.

“I am very capable of doing many things at once. I would be more than happy to show you just the extent of my talents... should you need convincing,” Leo offered with a sly smile. Even then she did not crack. “Are my offenses so great that you no longer feel comfortable speaking with me?”

“I feel entirely too comfortable speaking with you, Your Grace, that is the entirety of my issue. I am too free when I ought to be more careful of myself. I must maintain my composure and stay focused on our original mission—” Tessa’s voice cut off as her breath hitched when he stepped in closer to complete the dance with a pose.

It was exactly what she had been referring to. She was too comfortable. They were surrounded by people and she needed to be mindful of her reputation. She ought to be thinking only of her brother and yet... she wished to kiss him.

Tessa pushed him away forcefully and struggled to regain her composure. “Thank you for the dance, Your Grace, but I must... I must—” She could not even formulate a proper excuse before turning and fleeing from the dance floor.

Leo glanced around him, aware that there would be whispers as to what he could have done to make her leave so quickly, but he could not be bothered with gossip at that moment. He needed to follow her; she was so skillful at avoiding attention that it took him a moment to find the flash of her purple gown before following her.

. No floral scent lingered on the air this evening. It did not take long to locate the woman of his desires as she stood with her hands pressed to her ribs attempting to steady her breathing.

The chill of the evening air bit lightly at his face. A soft breeze ruffled the loose hairs that had come undone from Tessa’s flight and now hung prettily about her face in soft waves. She turned the moment she heard him approaching; she must have known that he would follow. He wondered if this was perhaps a ploy to get him on his own – to be alone with him. If so, she could have just asked; he would happily take her anywhere she wished to go.

“Are you all right?” Leo ventured, keeping distance between them.

“Yes,” Tessa answered a touch too quickly and then reconsidered. “No.”

“What is the matter? Why have you run from me?”

Tessa paused and shook her head softly. “I must. I cannot trust myself around you – come no closer!”

Leo did not obey her and instead took a step toward her.

“I was content with my life’s path, Leo,” Tessa started to explain. “It seems impossible to fathom how things could change so quickly, and I am not entirely certain that I like it. I was resigned to the direction that my life would go. I had no delusions that any gentleman would come and sweep me off of my feet. I was happy to allow Sophie her way. I resolved that I would bide my time until my dowry would become my inheritance and I would live in my country home eating figs and jam and whatever else I pleased with a great number of animals.” Tessa knew that she was rambling but she could not seem to force her mouth to stop. She could not block the words coming from her. “Then you came along and offered me a deal. It was only supposed to be a farce, you know. You were there, you agreed, but now it feels different... oh, stop looking at me like that!”

Leo grinned. “I cannot.”

“You must! You will fill me with false hope and I will be heartbroken because of it. Please, Leo – you must not do this to me,” Tessa implored as Leo drew closer. He could touch her now, and he desperately wished to.

“Is that the life that you want? The house in the country with jam and cats? If that is truly what you desire, then I shall leave you to it – I promise.” Leo nervously reached out and placed a hand on her waist to gently urge her closer. “Or, perhaps, is it me that you desire?”

She could not answer. Words and all rational thought slipped from her mind as she was pulled toward Leo’s strong, broad chest, her hands placing themselves delicately on the muscles there as she tried to remember reason.

“I share your struggles, but I can deny you no longer – being parted from you is driving me mad,” Leo whispered, giving her one last moment to change her mind before he surrendered to his passions and kissed her. She tasted just as sweet as he would have imagined. Her body seemed to soften in his hold,

molding to him perfectly as his strong arms wrapped around her. She returned his kiss with every bit of passion that she had been holding inside of herself, only waiting for an outlet such as this one.

Her hands slid softly up and over his shoulders until she could wrap her arms around his neck – and she lost herself to the moment. If this was the only one that she got, then she would remember every second of it.



## Chapter Twelve



“**T**here you are! Where have you been?” Aunt Anna’s voice cut through the cacophony of noise presently rattling about in Tessa’s mind. She could hardly register the words being spoken to her, so great was her distraction.

She hardly remembered walking back into the ballroom. Tessa had *meant* to come up with an excuse on her way back inside. She had *meant* to have a reason for her absence that was believable and witty. She had thought that perhaps a lie could be the easiest – claim that she had been off crying for some reason or another, but given that she was now publicly courting the Duke, nobody was likely to believe that she would have a reason to cry. She was lucky – she knew.

Perhaps if the threat of discovery had not become so quickly evident, she might still be out there in the gardens. *Kissing* the Duke! Her! She had *kissed* the Duke! She could still feel his hands on her. She could feel the ghost of his lips pressed against hers – his tongue dancing with her own in a way so sensual that she had not even been able to fathom such feelings could exist inside of her body. Could such a small encounter really change a worldview so quickly? It felt impossible and lovely, and she wished to do it again... that much she was certain of.

“Answer me, child! I have been looking for you everywhere! It has been at least half an hour since your dance with His Grace. Where have you been?” Anna demanded an explanation. There would be no living with her if she did not

get one either. Tessa scrambled for an excuse, but nothing but murmured sounds left her lips that were curving themselves into a half smile. She could not think clearly. Everything felt as if she was in a daze.

“I was worried about you!” Anna repeated, hoping for repentance from her niece. She folded her arms sternly across her chest and waited with a raised brow.

“I... I did not mean to cause you to worry, Aunt. I simply needed a moment of fresh air to compose myself, that is all.”

“For half an hour?” Anna exclaimed in shock. Then she seemed to consider her own words and sighed. “I remember those days. I know that it might not seem that way now, but when I first met my husband, we were very much in love. I remember watching him from across the room and seeing the way people swarmed around him to hear his stories. I never thought that he could be interested in someone as plain as myself... but then he was. I do remember what it is like to have a young and infatuated mind, but that does not give you an excuse to give me such a fright. Never mind that your intended might have been looking for you as well. You cannot keep a duke waiting!”

Tessa saw an opportunity and tried to seize it. “You are right... how very selfish of me. Perhaps I ought to go and seek him out now, so I can ensure that he was not missing me as well.”

Anna started to nod, but Sophie interrupted her. She looked like the cat who had caught the mouse. The smile on her face was smugger than any expression that Tessa had ever seen her adopt. Truth be told, it was frightening.

“I do not think that she ought to bother doing anything of the sort, Mama,” Sophie huffed. She placed her hands on them as she gloated over her cousin.

“Whyever not?” Aunt Anna sounded just as appalled as Tessa felt.

Sophie smirked, savoring the moment before jabbing her finger into Tessa’s shoulder. “Because she is a vicious little liar! I do not know how she has managed to do it, or how she

managed to get His Grace to play along with her little scheme but I have found out the truth and now I am intent on exposing her!”

“Expose me?” Tessa scoffed a touch louder than she would have liked. It was impossible for Sophie to know anything about the deal. She was bluffing. She simply had to be bluffing, yet panic sent icy chills down her spine nonetheless. “For what?”

“For being a pretender! For stealing the attention of a man who *ought* to be looking at me! I am the one who should be with the Duke. Not you,” Sophie hissed viciously.

“Now, now, girls... perhaps it would be best to have this conversation somewhere else, hmm?” Aunt Anna attempted in an effort to diffuse the situation. It was a blessing that the conversation they were having, however, barbed the words were, was said in a voice just above a whisper.

“I have it from very reputable sources, Mama, that the Duke has very publicly announced that he will never marry and that he will never have children. That means that this whole courtship is nothing but a lie! Do you not think that if the Duke were to change his mind and suddenly wish to take a wife that it would be somebody like me who he is looking for instead of somebody like her? Honestly,” Sophie said to her mother.

Shocked, Anna turned to Tessa and asked “Is this true?”

Tessa noticed she said nothing to her daughter about the insulting way that Sophie had spoken to her.

Tessa rolled her eyes. She tried to push the panic of discovery down into the pit of her stomach. There was no way that Sophie could have heard; Leo would never have told her. If nothing else, he would not have had the opportunity to – if he had ever spent even a true minute alone with Sophie, she would have been rubbing it in Tessa’s face every opportunity that she got. Which meant she was bluffing. Tessa reminded herself that it was nothing more than a bluff. She hoped, anyway—

“Absolutely not. I will have you know that during our dance he even mentioned to me that he would need a private audience with Uncle Theodore this evening. I am sure you can guess the reason for needing to speak to him privately, Aunt. I can only assume that Sophie had heard of *that* and has chosen to twist the wonderful news into a vicious lie to suit herself.”

Tessa was rather proud of herself for lying so calmly.

“That is a lie! Mama! You will side with me, not her!”

Anna looked between both girls, one and then the other. “If Tessa is to be engaged, that would be most wonderful news indeed. I cannot think of anything that should make me happier than that.”

Sophie’s jaw dropped. “Me! You would rather see *me* engaged!”

“Of course, darling,” Anna said over her shoulder as she focused her attention on Tessa.

Tessa knew that the only reason Anna cared if she got married or not was that she did not wish to hear the same comments from the women in her embroidery group regarding Tessa’s face over and over again. She wished to restore her gathering to its former days of glory, and if they did nothing but sit and insult Tessa’s face, the meetings became impossibly dull very quickly.

“I do not have to listen to this. Please excuse me,” Tessa said to her aunt. Anna nodded her head softly, and Tessa turned to take her leave of the room. This time it was Sophie who followed her – a far less welcome intruder. Sophie was going to ruin Tessa’s whole night if she did not stop quickly, and Tessa could not allow that. She had only just had her very first kiss with a man that she feared she might be falling for very quickly, only to have Sophie tarnish everything with her vile words.

Did the Duke truly not want children? She had not even thought to ask him the other day. He had said that he was not good with them – that it was not an easy thing for him to do,

but she did not think that necessarily meant that he did not wish to have children at all.

She would have to ask him, but she needed to calm herself down. Just because he had kissed her in the first place did not guarantee that suddenly he wished to marry her... did it?

A hand grabbed hers. Expecting it to be Sophie, she whipped around with her eyes widened in accusation. She would not allow herself to be manhandled in such a way. Fully prepared to say as much – but it was her aunt holding her arm instead.

“Come now, we must leave. For both of your sakes. We will attract attention if we are seen speaking to one another this way and I have enough eyes on me already thanks to the stories that your father refuses to stop telling. To the carriage... both of you!” Anna’s tone was firm and left no room for question or argument. Disgruntled, both girls turned to leave for the carriages at once.

It would be bad enough that their whole family would be seen leaving the party without Theodore. It would add more fuel to the gossip mill that they had left so suddenly before the ball was over. Furthermore, Tessa was rather upset that she had not been allowed to say goodbye to the Duke. She had not been given the opportunity to speak with Leo nor make any more plans for their scheme. Perhaps she could write to him when she got home.

It was easier to plot out what she might want to write in a letter to Leo than it was to pretend that Sophie was not glaring at her so intensely she felt as if her eyes were boring into her skull. Sophie’s glower actually managed to make her otherwise sweet face unattractive. Tessa was tempted to tell her as much.

Neither girl wished to be the first to exit the carriage when they arrived back home. It was a petty, juvenile standoff that they had engaged in a great many times when they were children. But Aunt Anna got out and snapped her fingers, motioning them both inside. Tessa moved first, and it was only after she stirred from her seat that Sophie decided that she

wished to exit first and shoved past her cousin forcefully, marching past her mother to head inside.

Tessa sighed and followed more slowly. She did not make it all of the way inside before Sophie came marching right back out, holding a letter in her hand.

“What is this?” she demanded angrily.

Tessa glanced at the letter in confusion. “As it is in your hand, and I have not yet seen it, do you actually expect me to have an answer for you?” Tessa sighed exasperatedly.

“Hand it over,” Aunt Anna demanded and gestured for the letter.

Sophie did not hand it over. “I do not think so. I would like to know why there is a letter here, addressed to Tessa that the servants say has only just been delivered. At this hour of the night. She must be up to something.”

Tessa knew that if the letter was from Leo, there might be information about their mission inside of it, but if it were from anybody else, she would have nothing to hide. She needed to see the wax seal on the missive to know who it was from... then she would decide if she wished to protest or not.

She would have to gamble it.

“If you think it is quite so scandalous to receive a letter, why do you not just open it and read it?” Tessa offered.

Sophie made a smug face. “I will, actually, not that I need permission from you to open a letter.”

“Since it is my letter... you do,” Tessa countered.

“I can do whatever I like in my own home!” Sophie nearly shouted at her.

“The fact that you believe such a statement is true explains a lot about your personality.” Tessa sighed.

The insult clearly went over Sophie’s head as she ripped the letter open. Sophie started to read out loud in a mocking tone, “Dear Lady Tessa, I hope that this letter finds you and your family in good health. I would like to formally extend an

invitat—” Sophie paled then read the rest of the letter three times over in her head, refusing to say them out loud.

“An invitation?” Tessa reached for the letter and Sophie spun out of her reach.

“Why do you have a personal invitation from Viscount Thornbury to visit him?” Sophie demanded bitterly.

Aunt Anna snatched the letter from her daughter’s hand and quickly read over the contents to confirm that was what it was.

This was better than Tessa could have hoped for. It was exactly what she needed to convince her aunt that the courtship that she had with the Duke was not a lie. It was proof that he had better intentions for their relationship than a passing interest. She desperately wanted to see what was contained in that letter; she wanted more than anything to read the words for herself. Did Leo know that his grandfather was going to write to her? Why did he not warn her so that she could be prepared? This was not the sort of surprise that she enjoyed.

“The Viscount writes that he is overjoyed to hear the news of his grandson courting a lady, and he has invited the whole family to the countryside to stay with him for a few days so that the families can better learn about one another,” Anna read aloud. Her tone was guarded, and Tessa could not easily understand how she felt about the subject. “Well, that is a very generous invitation.”

She crumpled the letter in her hand and kept it so that Tessa could not read it for herself. She knew better than to ask for it; this was a reminder of her place in the household. Furthermore, it was a reminder that, while they enjoyed the benefits of her position, she was not one of them. Nothing she was allowed to have was not done so by the express permission of her Aunt. It was a reminder that she would always choose Sophie in deed, even if not in words. Tessa would not be given the letter, nor would she be allowed to read it. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from speaking.

“Well, I suppose that we should start packing our things. This is not the sort of invitation that we can afford to ignore – it is a

great honor.” Slowly, her focus turned to Tessa. “It will also allow us to learn whether or not the courtship is real or fabricated. I sincerely hope that you have not put the Viscount in a position to be humiliated, Tessa. You are too young to possibly understand the depth of ruin that humiliation would bring on such a man.”

It was an open threat, but Anna did not stop there.

“I expect an engagement by the end of our time there, one way or another. Whether it be the groom of your choosing – or one that I shall choose for you.”



## Chapter Thirteen



“I was not sure that you would come,” said Aurelius Maten, Viscount Thornbury, as he descended the front steps of his house. He walked slowly and with purpose. Leo noted that the cane that he usually held to assist his gait was markedly absent from his hands, but he chose not to comment on it.

Leo shook his head. “Yes, you were.”

Aurelius grinned. “Yes, I did know you would come.”

“How could I not when you go behind my back and summon not only my intended but her whole family?” Leo spoke plainly, waiting to see which way his grandfather’s mood was going to fall before testing his newfound resolve.

“I confess,” Aurelius giggled, “I had rather hoped that they might arrive first and then I would send your letter of invitation after the fact so that you might arrive late. Which, naturally, would supply further cause for you to dramatically question my motives. I imagined that the intrigue would be rather diverting.”

He laughed as if that would have placed Aurelius directly in the middle of playing detective.

“But, given the way that our last interaction ended... I did not think that it was proper,” Aurelius finished. He was a good deal shorter than his grandson now and looked up at him through his brows curiously. “Perhaps you will be so excited to spend more time with your intended so you might be inclined to forgive an old man for overstepping his bounds?”

Leo pretended to deliberate for a moment, but in reality, he had made his mind up the moment he received the letter; he realized he had been too hasty in leaving his grandfather's home, to begin with. He was ashamed to think of how impulsively he had acted. "There is nothing to forgive. You were only acting in a manner you thought was in my best interest."

In truth, it was Tessa that he had to thank for his change of heart. Her unwavering faith in her brother was more than admirable – it changed the way that he thought about things. She truly understood her brother. Even if he had kept things from her, she did not think of him in a negative light. She still regarded him highly, flaws and all. If she could be so understanding of him after everything that she had been through and endured, he could stand to be a little more forgiving.

Aurelius shuffled forward happily in a strange little wiggle dance that Leo could not help but laugh at. "I am simply overjoyed that you have finally decided to put aside your hate, Grandson, and give love a chance. You deserve it. So much you deserve to see real and lasting love! Of course, it shall be nothing compared to the love that you can receive from cats." Aurelius glanced over his shoulder to one of his many, many cats sitting in the open doorway to his home, lazily grooming itself.

"Is that one new?"

Aurelius shrugged. "I do not know, and it does not matter. Whatever reason he has for coming here – however long he wishes to stay – I shall be thrilled to host him."

Leo sighed. He clapped his grandfather on the back and started to guide the older man back inside. "It does not bother you how overwhelmed you are? They outnumber you three to one at this point."

Leo would much rather speak about the cats than how difficult this visit was likely to be. Even as fond as he was of Tessa, he had made an oath never to marry. He had sworn it to his mother on her deathbed. What sort of son would he be – no,

what sort of man would he be – if he broke such a sacred vow? He could not tell his grandfather that it was a farce; that would be unforgivable in the old man’s eyes. He would simply have to play along, and he and Tessa would have to ultimately come up with a plan to get themselves out of this pit that they had dug together.

*Fond of her or not.*

“Is it not a wonderful thing to behold?” Aurelius said happily as he gestured to the nearest feline. “There is much to do before dinner tonight. Come, you can assist me in ensuring that all is ready for your guests. You will have to tell me everything that I need to know about them and their family as well!”

“Of course.” Leo could feel discomfort growing; this might be more difficult than he anticipated.



That evening, he stood in the foyer of his grandfather’s home, well-dressed and groomed, ready to receive the guests. He could not deny that he was excited to see Tessa – she would make all of this worth it for him. Just her being there would make it all easier. Somehow. It always did. Things just made sense with her around. It might be unfair to attribute such things to her, but he did it anyway.

The sound of wheels crunching against gravel signaled their arrival.

“I am very excited,” Aurelius declared happily. He held one of his favorite cats in his arms, a long-haired creature with bright green eyes and fur the color of fresh snow. It purred contentedly in his arms as he stroked its head. Were it not for the noise, Leo would have assumed that the cat was asleep given how peaceful it appeared.

Then a large, booming bass bark came from outside, and the cat was awake. Its fur rose on end as it started around, searching for the source of that sound.

“What was that? Leo?” Aurelius asked softly. Leo’s eyes closed and he pinched the bridge of his nose. He ought to have known better. He should have presumed, given the man’s affinity for his dog, that he would have brought the beast here with him instead of allowing the servants to care for the hound in his absence.

Aurelius did not like dogs.

Most of his colony of cats had only ever interacted with horses. Equines were the limit of their domesticated animal education.

“Shh, calm Maurice... I am certain that it is nothing. It must be nothing... right, Leo?” Aurelius spoke to his cat mostly, but he clearly wanted Leo to take care of whatever made that sound.

Leo knew that the dog was nothing more than an overly large, excitable puppy. The dog posed no threat to any life other than its sheer size, which the Colonel could hardly be held accountable for. It was not as if the animal had asked to be born the particularly massive breed that it was.

He inhaled sharply and started to walk quickly to the door, but before he could put himself in the path of the dog, the creature came bursting through the entrance, bounding happily into the new home. He paused to sniff at anything and everything – and then he spotted the cat.

Maurice hissed and scratched his way up Aurelius before using the old man’s shoulders as a launching pad to take off down the hallway, screaming in that particularly shrill way that only cats ever seemed capable of doing.

“Grandfather!” Leo exclaimed and headed back to see if he was injured or bleeding. He appeared to have scratches over his neck and behind his ear that bubbled with blood but seemed very shallow. The cat must have only glanced off of him instead of injuring him too badly. Leo whipped his handkerchief from his pocket and pressed the fabric against his grandfather’s neck. “Are you all right?”

“What was that thing? Is Maurice all right? Someone! Come and rescue my cat at once! Find him! Find him now before that thing harms him!” Aurelius was in a panic even before Theodore sauntered into the home after his dog.

“Greetings!” he boomed, not reading the room properly until he was inside. He glanced at Leo and then at Aurelius with a perplexed expression. Aurelius glared at the man but could not form words to demand an explanation. “Your Grace. Viscount Thornbury. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, the both of you.” He did not seem to understand that either of the men he was addressing could be cross *because* of him. He simply figured that he would make the best of an awkward situation.

“Oh, you seem to be bleeding, My Lord. Ah, not to worry! It builds character. Just like we always used to say to the men, rub some dirt in it – that will make it all better.”

“Or lead to sepsis and infection,” Aurelius countered bitterly.

Theodore’s brow furrowed as if the concept of dirt not being good to rub into fresh wounds was an absolutely preposterous notion. “Nonsense! I have been doing it for years. You ought to see how many scars I have. It proves just how much of a man you are. Wear them with pride.” His voice boomed and carried naturally, no matter what he was saying. For all intents and purposes, he appeared to be existing in a world of his own that the rest of the people around him merely made guest appearances in but never fully resided in that fantasy version of the world with Theo.

“What my husband wishes to say is that he is most grateful for your invitation to host us here in your lovely home, and hopes that you are not badly injured, My Lord,” Anna said softly. She dipped a curtsy formally toward the men.

Aurelius had been full of hope moments before, but now there was only anger and indignation.

“Might I present my daughter? Sophie. And our ward, her cousin – Lady Tessa.”

Sophie dipped into a low and overly formal curtsy. She lingered in front of the Viscount, waiting for approval that did

not come from his lips. Perhaps under other circumstances, he might have complimented her gown or the pretty jewels that she had chosen to decorate her hair with as he was normally a very warm and kind person. But as far as he was concerned, he had been assaulted in his own home and that had distinctly soured his mood.

Tessa moved in after Sophie shuffled awkwardly away. “Are you all right, My Lord?”

Aurelius flinched. Leo’s hand and the handkerchief fell from Aurelius’ neck as the older man blatantly examined the scars covering half of Tessa’s face. She instantly lowered her eyes. Leo could see a muscle in her jaw twitch as she fought the indignation of being examined in such an obvious way. She did not wish to insult the man in his own home after all.

“Good heavens, child, what is the matter with your face?” He lifted a hand to touch her and Leo stopped him, his eyes posing the question ‘What is the matter with you?’ plainly and openly. It took Aurelius a moment to remember himself.

“Ah... well... I have a cat that does not have any fur... I suppose that is much the same. Very sweet cat – terrible at catching mice. All that she does is lay around in the sun all day. It is a wonder to me how she does not get burned – ah, I mean... come inside! Dinner is ready.”

Aurelius blustered and fumbled for his own pocket square to dab against his neck as he promptly turned and walked in the direction of the dining room. Anna and Sophie followed after him. Leo did not see where Theodore disappeared to, but he was fairly certain that it was to locate Colonel Floppy Ears and invite him to the dinner table.

“I apologize for my grandfather. The Colonel frightened his cat and the creature injured him. He is normally more composed,” Leo explained apologetically.

“It is fine,” Tessa said in a short tone.

“No, it is not fine at all. I do not think that I could have imagined a worse start to our evening than what has just happened.” Leo did not mean to laugh – but he could not help

himself. “It seemed as if nearly everything that could go wrong – did.”

Tessa lifted her eyes to his and inhaled deeply. He could see her forgive the comment that had been made as the tension slid from her shoulders. Her posture relaxed as she stepped to his side and linked her arm with his. She walked slowly by his side. Leo could not properly express just how happy it made him that simply being near him was enough to put her at ease.

“It does not leave me feeling very optimistic about the dinner, either,” Tessa teased as she side-eyed Leo. “Perhaps it was only the beginning, and we are yet in store for a much more theatrical and dramatic evening.”

“I can only imagine that to be true as the house is filled with felines. Which, traditionally, are not that fond of large dogs.”

“You do not think that the Colonel will harm them, do you?” Tessa’s eyes widened. She had not even considered this before.

“No. I do not. I think that the cats might harm *him* though. They are clearly in possession of sharp claws.”

“It does not bode well for peace between our families. Between the rival animals and the strong personalities, perhaps this encounter is doomed from the start!” Tessa could not help but laugh at her own comment.

Leo stopped. “We could always leave, if you like. I do not think that we will even be missed – not at first, anyway. Do you know how to ride? If not, there are horses in the stables that would be simple enough for even the most inexperienced of riders.”

“Oh, we would be missed. As tempting as that offer might be, my cousin has been in very fine form lately. She is convinced that this courtship is a farce. At least, that was how her reasoning started. Now she has managed to convince herself that you are only pretending to be kind to me in order to get to her. She intends to corner you about it this evening and explain that you can simply woo her directly – you do not need to appeal to her pets first.” Tessa rolled her eyes.

“Oh, wonderful. I simply cannot wait to enjoy that... treat.” Leo could think of few things that he wanted to do *less* than speaking with Sophie alone. He had never seen such a pretty face with such a rotten core before. Dangerous, poisonous things wrapped in pretty paper.

“As such, we shall be forced to endure at least one course, I do believe.” Tessa sighed. “Then perhaps we can sneak away – to anywhere.”

Leo liked the sound of that. “If you are not careful, I might have to purposefully sabotage the entire dinner so that we can leave more quickly.”

“You would not dare.” Tessa smiled brightly.

That, that right there, was what he had been longing for. Like heat to the freezing, it warmed his very core to see her so happy. Even if only for a moment.

“To please you? To be alone with you? I absolutely would.”



“Can you not control that *beast?!?*” Anna hissed angrily at her husband.

“Hmm?” Theodore answered as he chewed his food loudly. Nobody else around him had even attempted to eat with all of the ruckus. Cats kept running in and out of the room, looking for shelter. Some had damp heads from dog drool being shaken over them. Colonel Floppy Ears appeared to think that he was in heaven. Chase was his absolute favorite game, and he presently had an endless supply of targets that he felt certain wished to play with him. He did not know that he was frightening them. He woofed and barked happily each time he made his appearance known.

“Oh, him? The Colonel is at battle. You cannot recall the troops until their mission is completed. You know that. Honestly, woman.” Theodore laughed from his belly and downed the contents of his wine cup. He wiped his mouth with the back of his meaty hand and lifted his glass to be refilled.



“He is only playing, after all. He will tucker himself out sooner or later. I ought to have been keeping tally somehow so that he would have a war story of his own.”

“You cannot be serious!” Anna interjected. Tessa had seen her reach this level of irritation a couple of times before. There came a point where she no longer cared about decorum or the way that she was *supposed* to act. She became so angry with her husband that she was unable to hold her tongue. Usually, this happened when she felt that she was being disrespected. If she was going to lose face anyway, then she might as well go out with a bang. Anything that might take the heat off of her and place it somewhere else was a win in her books. “Can you really claim to be ignorant of the fact that your pet is making everybody at this table deeply uncomfortable? If only you had left your beast at home like I had originally asked you to do – then we would not be in this situation!”

Theodore’s brow furrowed. He looked younger at that moment than Tessa could remember seeing him in a very, very long time. “What are you talking about? Everybody here loves Colonel Floppy Ears—”

“No, they do not! You are making everybody deeply uncomfortable, and I beg of you to take him elsewhere so that we can attempt to salvage the rest of this evening in peace!”

Theodore turned to look at each one of them in turn, hoping that there would be some indication on any of their faces that his wife was wrong and that his beloved dog was a welcome, wanted member of this dinner party. As much as it pained them to see him so forlorn, they could not lie to his face either. They could not pretend that it was appetizing to hear the screams of the poor, frightened cats.

Theodore pushed away from the table so swiftly that his chair scraped awkwardly against the floor. The large man almost looked as if he were on the verge of tears as he fought to remain composed. This war-hardened veteran could not fathom anybody not being deeply in love with his dog. It was an impossible thing as far as he was concerned.

Tessa lowered further into her chair in spite of herself. It did not matter just how many times she witnessed this happening in front of her, she never could fully accept it. She wished that she could simply disappear. She wanted nothing more than to fade into nothingness until this event was over.

“Where are you going? Just because your dog must leave does not mean that you can leave.” Anna stood as well. It was a last-ditch attempt to talk some sense into her husband.

Theodore’s bottom lip nearly quivered. “If Colonel Floppy Ears is not welcome then neither am I!”

At this point, Aurelius stood and lifted his hand in hopes that they might take notice of him and calm down, even just a little bit. “Come now, there is no need to speak to one another in such a way as this. Certainly, we will be able to come to some sort of happy conclusion. I know how novel and exciting it can be for him to see cats for the first time, but we must compromise.”

Amid the chaos, Tessa slipped away from the table. She likely should have given Leo some sort of signal to come and meet her, but after witnessing all of that, she needed a moment to herself. She needed quiet. She needed to collect her thoughts and come up with a new plan moving forward.

Quickly and silently she made her way up to her room and shut the door quickly. Her body leaned against the door and allowed her eyes to close. It was enough to soothe the social anxiety festering inside of her; she needed something more.

When she opened her eyes, she was met by the sight of a very petite woman who had only just finished laying out all of her clothes for sleeping this evening.

“Sorry,” Tessa whispered. She must have frightened the poor servant by bursting into the room as she had just done.

The thin girl shook her head adamantly, took one look at Tessa’s face, and firmly affixed her attention to the floor. Tessa supposed she ought to have seen that coming.

“Might I trouble you for a bath? Please?” Tessa asked with a sigh.

“Of course – right away, My Lady,” the servant said and rushed from the room.

Yes, a nice hot bath was exactly what she needed.

## Chapter Fourteen



“**T**here you are, Your Grace! I was afraid that we might never have a moment alone to speak.”

Leo’s eyes closed as he attempted to mentally prepare himself for whatever horrors he was about to endure. He plastered on a very neutral, polite smile as he turned to face Sophie. She batted her eyes up at him and leaned forward to accentuate the fact that her dress was cut nearly immodestly low in the front. It was certainly not a dress that she would have ever dared to wear somewhere in public. Had it been pulled that low this entire time? It was a cheap ploy to garner his attention, and he did not care for it.

“I cannot imagine a single reason why we should need to speak to one another alone,” Leo answered evenly. It would serve no purpose to offend her. He could not allow himself to do so... even if it would be gratifying. Her ambition was limitless. In another life, before Tessa even, he would have admired the fact that she went after what she wanted. He might have even been flattered by the fact that she had chosen to pursue him so strongly, but he could see now it was superficial. Now that he had seen how she treated her cousin, he would never be able to consider her in such a way – not even to warm his bed for a single evening.

“Oh, Your Grace, I could not disagree more! If you are intending to court or even marry my cousin, then it is up to me to ensure that your intentions are honorable.” Sophie smiled brightly. The expression did not reach her eyes; it was chilling.

“And why would you feel the need to do that? Any intentions that I have would be far better declared to her uncle, I would presume.”

“Do you always speak so curtly, Your Grace? It is nearly rude!” Sophie giggled as if she were teasing, but he knew that she meant every bit of it.

“No, I simply have things that I need to attend to, and I am at a loss as to why you are detaining me.” Leo’s brow rose quizzically as he waited for an explanation. “Do you feel entitled to my time?”

“No, Your Grace, I would never presume to demand anything of you. However, Tessa is my very best friend and a beloved cousin. Can you really be so surprised that I should wish to spend some time with the man who might rob me of her?”

It was a very convincing display. She looked so genuine it nearly fooled him.

Leo’s eyes narrowed and he clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth disapprovingly. “I have seen the way that you speak to your cousin – and if that is the way that you feel is appropriate to treat your very best friend, then I should greatly fear to see how poorly you might treat your enemies.”

Sophie’s jaw dropped. She was rendered speechless for a moment. Sounds babbled from her lips as she struggled to recover. “I... I... you cannot – I do not know what you are implying, Your Grace, but I cannot say I care for it.”

“I would presume not. You do not seem to care for anything or anybody other than yourself.” Leo shook his head in disapproval. “Ah, look, there is Maurice! Come here, you silly feline!”

Leo was not one to normally be very enthusiastic about his grandfather’s pets; he tended to err more on the side of tolerance of the animals as opposed to a fondness for them. But, at that very moment, Maurice, the long-haired white cat was the most marvelous creature that he could have ever laid his eyes upon.

Leo crossed the room and happily snatched the cat up and into his arms. The poor, terrified thing was trembling and attempted to burrow down into his waistcoat in hopes of finding somewhere it perceived as safe. “Let us get you somewhere quiet where you can mourn the loss of one of your nine lives, shall we?”

Happily, he left Sophie behind on her own.

First, he would deposit Maurice somewhere safe, and then he would resume his search for Tessa. She had managed to slip away from dinner without being noticed and he had to admit that he was very nervous because of it. He wished that she could have been here to see Sophie’s face for the last bit of that conversation; he had a feeling that she would have rewarded him with a very large smile indeed.



“Where is she?” Leo asked himself as he stood on the terrace. He would have thought that she had run to the gardens. It seemed to be something of a regular pattern with her, and he had presumed that she might have even been waiting for him there.

She was not in any of the places that he would have guessed she was. It was most vexing to think that she had absconded before he was ready to be finished speaking with her. His feet carried him upstairs to the section of the house that had been readied for the guests. It was the only other place that she could be hiding – in her room.

While the events of dinner had been wholly and utterly exhausting, he had not thought that she would have retired to bed so quickly.

Leo knocked softly on her door when he reached it. “Tessa?” he called softly. He did not wish to alert anybody in the house that he was calling upon her in her bedroom. They had managed to be alone with one another undetected thus far, and he was not about to change that now – certainly not while they were all under the same roof. Her uncle would think it was a

sound battle strategy to smother Leo in his sleep should he think that Leo was compromising his niece. Theodore might be a touch strange, but it was abundantly obvious that he loved his family very deeply, even if he was too traumatized by his time in battle to go about things in the regular fashion. Leo did not think that he would have ever put his family intentionally in harm's way.

“Tessa, are you in there?” Leo called again, hoping for an answer that did not come. His fingers closed around the handle and he slowly allowed himself into the dim room. The candles had already been lit so she must be there. “Are you asleep, My Lady?”

Still no answer. He invited himself into the room and closed the door behind him. He heard the lock click into place as he headed toward the bed – only she was not in there either.

He was about to leave when a soft humming from the adjoining room stopped him. His head turned in the direction of the bathing chamber and his heart started to race.

“No. You cannot. You rake! See yourself out at once,” Leo muttered to himself. His better nature attempted to appeal to his baser one to no avail. “Do not go in there,” he repeated softly to himself. But his feet were carrying him in that direction anyway. His voice feigned innocence as he rounded the corner. “Tessa?”

The humming cut off abruptly and the slosh of water alerted him to how startled she was. Leo raised a hand modestly to cover his eyes in the hope of making her feel more comfortable – but he desperately wished to peek.

“Leo! You cannot be in here! This is my – you... I am in the *bath!*” Tessa stammered. He imagined that she was struggling to find a dressing gown to cover herself with from the amount of movement that he could hear.

“No need to be bashful. I do not intend to take up much of your time, My Lady. I simply wished to ensure that you were all right after the events of this evening... perhaps speak with you a little?” Leo tried to force the happy grin from his features but he could not.

Her voice raised an octave as she spoke. “Absolutely not! I am nude! While that might be commonplace for you, I have never... I would not... leave for the other room until I am decent!” Tessa exclaimed.

“Well, that is hardly as much fun now, is it? There is nobody here but us... nobody shall know that I was here in your private space, let alone how indecent you were while in it.” Leo said huskily. It suddenly felt far warmer in this room than it had any right to be.

“Leo... please—” Tessa beseeched.

“If you wish me to leave, I will... but I hope that you will invite me to stay.” His hand dropped and his eyes closed at the same moment. He heard the slosh of water as she struggled to hide herself before she realized that he had closed his eyes. “Perhaps, if I level out the playing field a little bit, you might feel more comfortable?”

He shrugged out of his coat and threw it somewhere behind him before deftly unbuttoning his waistcoat and pulling his shirt from where it was tucked away.

“What are you doing?” Tessa asked, and Leo very much enjoyed hearing the heat in her voice.

“Making us even?”

“But then you would have to be...” Tessa gasped, “No! You cannot possibly be serious!”

Leo grinned and pulled his shirt from his head and cast it aside. “Would it be so very terrible if I was serious?”

The silence he was met with emboldened him. He could feel her eyes on him, and he slowly opened his own. The candlelight flattered her skin beautifully. She clutched her dressing down to her even in the bath water. Flower petals and lavender pearls floated on the surface of the perfumed water as she clutched the soaked fabric to her skin; it hid nothing.

The scars wrapped around her entire arm and down her torso; he could see the imprint of them through the fabric where it clung to her. Swirls and whorls as if somebody had painted her. Her soft body was partially obscured by the water. Her



long brown hair fell in wet waves around her shoulders and breasts. Bright blue eyes were trained on him with a mixture of fear, anticipation, and desire. Her breathing was deep and steady as her breasts rose and fell. He wanted her so badly that it was a struggle not to plunge into the tub with her.

Would it be so bad if he did? What was the point in refraining from what he so longed for?

His hands dropped to his breeches, undoing the leather lacing, and Tessa shook her head. "Wait."

"All right." Leo nodded and walked toward the tub. "We shall go slow until you are ready."

Tessa bit down on her bottom lip and nodded slowly. Leo braced one hand on the side of the tub and stepped in with her. The water was tepid and sloshed over the side as he placed his other foot inside.

Tessa wanted to tease him for making such a mess but she could hardly breathe. She could not tear her eyes from his as he leaned down over her. Her head rested on the folded cloth meant to serve as a pillow as he sank to his knees in the tub between her legs. Two layers of cloth and some water were the only things that separated them now.

"Is this all right?" Leo asked.

Tessa nodded. "I am nervous," she breathed.

"You have nothing to be afraid of." Leo lifted a hand to trail down the side of her face and to her collarbone. A crooked knuckle traced over the skin there until he could grasp the wet dressing gown she clung to. "Certainly nothing to be ashamed of."

"But... I have never—"

Leo grinned. He glanced at the pruned surface of her fingers and lifted her uninjured hand. "See? It is not so different. It is skin, my beautiful Tessa, and nothing more. When you permit me, I am very much looking forward to memorizing each and every bit of your skin with my hands... my lips... my tongue—"

She surrendered. She released the dressing gown at the same moment that Leo's lips found hers. Leo sank the rest of the way into the tub and snaked a hand around her lower back so that he might pull her onto his lap. His fingertips traced the demarcation line between her smooth skin and that which troubled her so. He could feel the muscles under the soft curves of her hips.

Tessa wrapped her arms around him once more, the hesitation and nervousness fading with each brush of her lips against his. She allowed herself to touch him – to explore the shape of his arms and the strong muscles of his shoulders before dragging her nails up the back of his neck and burying themselves in his short hair. The friction of her peaked nipples against his chest was unlike anything she could have imagined.

She was lost in the feel of him and the heat that surged higher in her body as he explored her. His hands were everywhere and not nearly enough. She could feel the heat of him against her core despite being separated from it. The anticipation of what could happen – what might happen – in the future made her dizzy.

Leo's hand cupped her breast and pinched her nipple until she gasped. He rolled the peaked skin between his fingers, learning what reactions he could elicit from her. Experimentally, he rolled his hips upward into her as he deepened their kiss.

His other hand snaked up the line of her spine until he could hold the back of her head and allow her to float back in the water – exposed to his lips and tongue. A veritable feast for him to savor and enjoy laid out before him. He worshiped her body and became so lost at the moment that all other matters were instantly forced from his mind.

Her soft sighs were music to his ears as he captured her nipple between his lips and flicked it with his tongue. His other hand dropped between them to her core, massaging the soft skin of her inner thigh before turning to her center.

Tessa snapped upright the moment his fingers came in contact with the center of her pleasure. Her eyes widened and her

breathing became heavy as she stared at him, seeking guidance. Oh, he could do this for hours – watching each and every reaction that she made. He wanted to mark even the slightest shifts in her breathing. He longed for her to be so addicted to his touch and his alone that no other man would ever be enough for her; he wanted her more than he had ever considered possible.

He smiled and circled the skin again; she attempted to clamp her thighs shut around his and he shook his head no. She grabbed at his arm as if the sensations were too intense and she needed to stop them. He paused only long enough to hold both of her arms firmly behind her back, keeping her breasts exposed to him before he started again.

“Do not fight it. You deserve pleasure, Tessa. Do not be afraid of it.”

Oh, he loved the way that she squirmed over him, the way she bit her lip as he slipped a finger inside of her. She tried to contain herself for reasons that escaped his understanding, but when he added a second finger, combined with the circular movements of his thumb against her center, she surrendered.

So badly he wished to possess her. She writhed and gyrated over him in her confines – helpless to do anything but allow her body to feel every bit of his ministrations between her thighs and he loved it.

“Yes, surrender to it, my beautiful girl.”

Tessa tensed around him as her climax shuddered through her body. He held her closer and did not stop until the tremors subsided. And when he released her from his grip, he fitted his lips over hers once more in a sweet kiss.

It took everything in him to stop from telling her how desperately, hopelessly, in love with her he was.

## Chapter Fifteen



“I feel as if over the last few days there has not been a single moment in which I could have you all to myself,” Leo said softly as he cornered Tessa in the abandoned corner of the library. He placed his hands on either side of her waist and walked her backward, hunger in his eyes.

Heat shot like a lightning burst through her body as Tessa fought against laughing. Sophie was likely still looking for her and the library was just about the only place that she refused to go – for now. There was always the chance that if she suspected there was laughter or anything other than ‘useless, dusty books’ in this room, then she would not avoid it so determinedly.

Neither of them wanted that.

“Yes, my cousin has been in a rather fine form as of late. I think it was her strategy to cling to me like a barnacle until our final day here so that I could be sure to have as little fun as she is currently having,” Tessa agreed.

“My, my, what would she think if she knew I snuck into your bedroom at night and stole all of your clothes right off of you?” Leo taunted.

“Why, I am certain that she would consider that a great personal failing. You see, I do believe that she still thinks that you will give up this charade at any moment and run away into the sunset with her, never to be seen again.” It was hard for her to continue the conversation when his lips found their way to her neck. It was easier and easier to give herself to him. She

anticipated his presence; she craved his touch in any capacity that she could get it. It was an addiction of a very acute kind and one that likely would end just as badly as all other addictions tended to.

They still had not spoken about any of the things they were doing. She always intended to. She meant to confront him about what would come next for them – but then he would kiss her and render her incapable of speech.

Perhaps she did so because she was afraid of what his answer might be, what he might say. She knew very well that was the reason that she tended to kiss him when he spoke of anything nearing that serious subject. Tessa and her family were due to return home the day after tomorrow. Their time was almost over, and she simply wished to relish what little they had left of it.

It was also unspoken that their investigation would continue once they returned to the city. Which, once concluded, would also mean the end of their arrangement entirely. She was dreading it. The whole idea forced the unwanted question of which she would rather: keep Leo or find her brother.

But for now, she had this.

“I cannot think when you do that.” Her words were stilted and breathy as she giggled an empty protest.

“Yes, well, it is the only time that I feel I am thinking clearly. You shall simply have to suffer for my purposes then,” he said between kisses. “How fortunate for you that it is a very sweet sort of suffering indeed – is it not?”

Tessa made a show of playfully scrunching up her nose and rolling a shoulder. “Tolerable, at best.”

“Is that so? I suppose I shall have to try harder then.” Only, instead of lips against her neck, it was teeth.

“Wicked!” she gasped as her knees went weak. She would never understand how such simple things could have such an overwhelming effect on her body.

“You love it,” Leo responded.

Tessa laughed. “I love you – that is not the same thing!”

Leo froze. It was not until he stood to look at her that she realized what she had said.

“No,” she blurted instantly. “That is not what I meant to say. I do not.” She laughed nervously. “I do not love you; that is absurd. What a silly thing to say. Wholly and totally by accident.”

Leo’s expression softened, and then flickered to one of concern. “Accident?”

Tessa nodded, her eyes wide. Her heart hammered in her chest for a whole other reason. “Mmhm. A slip of the tongue, nothing more.” She could not read his expression. It was maddening.

“Is that right?”

Was he disappointed? Was that disappointment that she heard in his voice? It could not be. She was not supposed to love him. This was an arrangement; it had turned out to be an arrangement of a different sort than she had been expecting, but it was an arrangement all the same.

Leo’s hands fell from her and he took a step back. Tessa hastily righted her dress and shifted anxiously.

“I did not mean to ruin the moment – honestly,” she said but could not meet his eyes as she spoke. She plucked at the skin around her nails, hoping that he would laugh. She wanted him to do something... *anything* that might break the weight of tension now falling around them.

“So, you do not love me?” Leo asked flatly.

“What? Of course not. I have just said that.” Tessa forced herself to look at him. “Are you... upset with me?”

Leo could not have named the way he felt about anything in the world. He knew that she was lying. It should have made him blissfully happy that she felt the same way about him as he felt about her. He knew that she was only denying the claim out of respect for his feelings. It was due to their arrangement... but the accidental confession suddenly made

everything that much more real. He should laugh it off and resume their activities.

He should tell her that he loved her too.

He should confess everything right this very moment and kiss her. Now. If only he could carry her away from this place and wed her this very day – not waste another single moment before he could claim she belonged to him and only him for the rest of his life.

But even that fantasy was overlaid by the voice of his mother in his head.

*Swear to me, Leonard. Swear to me that you will end his cursed bloodline. Promise that you will never make the horrible mistakes that I was forced to make, Son. Swear it – never marry, never sire an heir.*

They chanted in his mind like a mantra turned to a curse. Here he stood – looking into the eyes of the woman that he loved, the perfect woman for him... and he was bound. Helpless. He could not break his oath. He had *sworn*. Was his word to mean nothing? Even if he broke the oath and proposed, his word would never mean anything ever again. How could he trust marriage bonds when he would be an oath breaker?

It was impossible.

“You are the most incredible woman that I have ever been blessed enough to know, Tessa.”

Tessa hated the way his voice sounded. It was a rejection. It was soft, comforting words to lessen the sting of the heartbreak he was about to inflict on her. She had nobody to blame but herself. She forced herself to smile to keep from crying.

It was the only smile that Leo never wished to see her make ever again.

“High praise, coming from you who has known so very many women,” Tessa lamely attempted to joke but the tension would not break.

“You deserve somebody better – for that exact reason. You deserve somebody free to love you the way that you deserve... and you deserve everything.” Leo spoke softly. Every word felt as if he were pulling his heart directly out of his chest.

Tessa dropped the act – it might be the last chance that she had to do so. “I do not want anyone else.”

Leo swallowed hard against the knot of emotion in his throat. “You will.” The idea of her with anybody else made him feel sick to his stomach. She was his – only his – now and forever. “In time... you will meet someone else who will provide, who will give you everything that you have ever wanted... a house full of children, happiness—”

“I want you,” Tessa insisted boldly. “Only you.”

“I am not the one for you, Tessa,” he lied. It had never been so difficult to lie before. “I am no good for you. You have to believe me.”

A single tear fell down her face before she could stop it. She did not wish for him to see her cry. She did not wish for his, or anybody else’s pity. “No. Why are you doing this? Stop saying these things.”

If only he could go back and react differently to the moment but the second that the words had left her lips – even as a joke – he had nearly lost control of his body. He had nearly swung her about in his arms and shouted for everyone in the house to know of their joy.

At the same time, he wished that she had not said anything at all. Or that they could continue pretending that it was nothing but an unspoken secret between them. But he could not. How could he touch her again without making love to her? How could he continue to live in this half-spoken, limbo state?

When he said nothing, Tessa pushed her emotions down deep. It was an art that she had nearly perfected over the last three years.

“Very well. Perhaps it is best that we refrain from indulging any further. It was only a matter of time before we were discovered anyway. And if I hope to have a husband someday,



I ought not to compromise myself any further. Would you not agree?"

Leo nodded, and it was the hardest thing that he had ever done.

"We have a task to complete anyway, and this has just been a distraction. We need to focus on finding Mortimer – and Mortimer alone. Do you concur?"

Leo wanted to protest, but he could not.

"We can keep our distance until things... simmer down, perhaps. I think that would be the very best course of action moving forward. I would even suggest that we only speak to one another in regard to the case."

"As you wish," Leo answered.

Tessa tilted her head to the side in confusion. "No, it is not what I wish at all – it is simply what must be."

"Sorry, I misspoke," Leo said thickly. He did not consider himself to be an overly emotional person, but standing there and listening to her detach herself further from him with every word she spoke gutted him.

"Good day, Your Grace," Tessa said finally. She took a step back from him and walked out of the room with her head held high.



Time passed in a daze. Leo had always heard that such a thing could happen. The floral words of poets and the way that they spoke about time while finding one's self in the captivity of love and longing had never been something that he had understood before. Perhaps, he told himself, he simply did not wish to understand. Now that he could relate to those words he had always mocked before, he wished to be rid of the pain of it. Leo found himself lamenting the new emotions that held him so very tightly.

It was an acute, special sort of pain to pretend to be happily courting the woman he loved by day and then pretending to be practically strangers by night. Tessa was true to her word, and the only conversation that passed between them in private directly pertained to her theories of what might have happened to Mortimer. It was incredibly inconvenient as all he wished to do was sneak into her bedroom. He had to constantly remind himself that his company would not be welcome. He would not be welcomed this time – certainly nothing like the last time.

He missed her.

She was so close and yet wholly out of his reach. When Leo retired to his room for the third night of Tessa's silence, his temper got the better of him. He did not like himself in such a state, certainly not when he did not have an outlet for his anger. Tessa's face would not leave his mind.

"I should go to her. I should take it back," he muttered to himself. It would spare him from the debate as to whether or not he should throw himself in the cold pond to lower the heat in his blood. Sleep was certainly not an option. If he did not do something quickly, then he would be at risk of wearing a track on the carpet from pacing back and forth.

Leo crossed to his wash basin to splash water on his face in hopes of clearing his mind but was stopped by a letter sitting on the dresser – a letter that certainly had not been there earlier this afternoon. He picked it up and turned it over in his hands, looking for a seal that simply was not there. A special thrill sparked through him. He could not open the letter quickly enough and he consumed the words hungrily.

*My dearest,*

*I cannot bear to be parted from you for another night. My love for you is such that I cannot wait another moment longer to be with you. I shall wait in the library this evening until midnight. I hope you will meet me there.*

The letter was unsigned. Overcome with excitement, Leo fully glossed over the contents and their connotation. As long as she wished to see him, that was all that mattered. He was out of

the room before he could fully process exactly what the written words stated. If this was her changing her mind or giving him another chance, he was going to take it. He would take this chance to tell her all of the things that he had refused to. It was a mistake in turning her away and denying her affections. Groveling at her very feet if he needed to.

Leo passed through the darkened hallways as silently as possible. He ought to have taken more care to have dressed himself in a presentable fashion for their reunion. As it was, his white shirt was untucked from his trousers and hung loosely around his arms. His hair, still styled from the events of the day, was accompanied by a flush of excitement that encompassed the rest of him. Leo slid into the library and quietly shut the door behind him.

Candlelight was not quite strong enough to illuminate the space properly. The warm light cast an almost romantic lighting over the bookshelves that stretched nearly to the ceiling. The library was one of his grandfather's pride and joys. It was almost shocking that there were not any number of his feline companions surrounding Leo's ankles looking for a scratch behind the ear. The large, soft couches hidden among the shelves were covered in thick, plush blankets to prevent their claws from scratching the fabric as Aurelius sat and cuddled with them, lost in his favorite books.

Leo had always wanted to feel more at home here. He was not the sort of man to take comfort in spending hours with books. He felt that he was far too restless for that sort of thing. He would rather experience the adventures than read about them. However, if this room was the place where he was able to mend his mistakes, it would become his favorite room in the whole house.

The only issue: he could not see her.

"Tessa?" Leo whispered. Somebody was here, that much he was certain of. A smile started to spread across his face in spite of himself. Too optimistic for his own good. "Are you hiding away from me?"

Instead of a giggle, he was met with a long-suffering sigh and the sound of a book snapping shut. He was wholly unprepared for the look of irritation on her face as she clutched her book to her chest. Her brow lifted in an obvious question as to what he was doing there.

He had only half-formed a speech on the way here, but now he was doubting himself.

A moment of silence passed between them as Tessa looked at him expectantly. When he could not think of anything worthy to say, she huffed.

“We agreed to keep apart from one another.” Her tone was firm.

“Well, yes, but—” Leo started, confused.

“And yet you come here to seek me out?” Tessa inquired.

“Seek you—” he echoed as the last of his hope started to dwindle away. “You invited me here. You wrote me a note requesting my presence,” Leo explained.

“A note?” Tessa’s eyes widened. “Surely you can come up with a better explanation than that.”

Leo shook his head. “No, it is not a farce nor an excuse to see you. See for yourself.” Leo started to pat at his person, looking for the letter that he had found on his dresser. It was not there. He could have sworn that he had put it into his pocket after reading it. “It is here somewhere—”

Tessa shook her head. “Oh, I am certain of that.”

She did not spare him another moment before attempting to stroll forward out of the room.

“Wait!” Leo’s hand caught her by the elbow and spun her toward him.

“Do not make this any harder than it already is, Your Grace, please.” She glanced down at his hand on her elbow. She could not bring herself to wrench out of his grip even as his thumb swept softly over the bare space of skin. “Turn me loose. Inventing stories in order to be near me is beneath you.”

Leo did not wish for her to go. The mystery of who could have written the letter if it was not her was the furthest thing from his mind. The only thing that mattered was that she was here, with him, and he could right his mistakes. “Call it fate, then.” Softly he urged her closer toward him. “I have missed your company.”

Tessa’s gaze dropped down to where they connected as she allowed herself to be pulled closer until she could feel the heat of him against her. It took everything in her power to keep from touching him.

“I confess that I have missed you as well... but we made an agreement. We both agreed that we will keep to things of a professional nature since we want such different things—” Her eyes flicked up to his as she spoke. What she saw reflected there nearly made her heart skip a beat. Never before had his blue eyes looked so open, so vulnerable.

“I must have been a madman to think that I could ever keep myself from you, Tessa. Or perhaps I felt myself stronger than I am. I cannot keep myself from you. This cannot go on. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?”

A knot of emotion formed in Tessa’s throat. She knew that his words were genuine. She knew that he meant each and every one of them... but she did not know yet if she could trust his new intentions or not.

“I... I am not certain. You say such things to me here in private but how am I to trust that you will not simply change your mind once more? I cannot handle affections that run hot and cold on a whim, Your Grace.”

“Leo. Please,” he requested.

Tessa paused, trying to hold herself together as his knuckles ran up the back of her arm. They glossed over her shoulders and sent sparks of anticipation dancing across her exposed skin. Of course, she wanted him. Of course, she wished to touch him, and be as near to him as she possibly could; it was why she had made herself so vulnerable to him in the first place.

“Even if you cannot forgive me for now, allow me a second chance to make things up to you and regain your trust,” Leo whispered, his face only an inch away from hers.

Tension rose between them and she knew that she could not deny him anything. She *wanted* him to kiss her. She wanted to kiss him and have him carry her up the stairs to finish what they had started the other evening. More than anything, she wanted *him*. No matter how improbable she felt they might be as a couple.

All of the thoughts rattling around in her head stopped the moment that his lips found hers. He wrapped his other arm around her to close that small distance; his other hand slid up the line of her spine to cup the back of her head. She fit so perfectly into his arms that he was convinced that she was made for him, and him alone.

She wrapped her hands up in the loose fabric of his shirt and used the leverage to hold onto him. His lips traveled down from the corner of her mouth to her jawline and then left a heated trail along the side of her neck.

She should stop this. She knew that she should stop this. It went against their agreement. There was still too much left unsaid between them, but she could not deny herself this pleasure. Heat pooled in her core and surged lower. A soft gasp of pleasure left her lips as Leo nipped at the exposed column of her neck.

“Ahem.” An irritated person sharply cleared her throat.

Both of them froze as if ice water had been dumped over their heads. Water would have been the kinder fate when the other option was turning to see that of all the people to have walked in on them, it was Sophie standing there. She was dressed to impress. Diamonds in her ears, and her hair styled in a very elaborate fashion. She wore her very best dress and had added even more rouge to make herself appear even more alluring. Her arms were crossed in front of her chest as she stared at them.

Tessa was unsure if her cousin was simply waiting for an explanation or if she was deliberating how best to handle the

situation. Sophie wore her outrage on her face plain and clear. All parties in the room knew that should Sophie say anything to anyone about what she had walked in on, it would lead to ruin and scandal for her by association... or a forced marriage for Leo and Tessa. As Sophie wished to have the Duke to herself, that would likely not be the option she would choose.

“You wrote the letter,” the Duke commented softly. “I should have known—”

“Of *course*, I wrote the letter!” Sophie spat.

Tessa had not known that it was possible to scream and whisper at the same time while still, somehow, being shrill. The admission that she had attempted to lure the Duke here to enact her nefarious plans of trapping him into a marriage was shocking nonetheless.

Pleading would do no good. Tessa knew this. Saying anything at all would only serve to further inflame her vindictive cousin’s temper. Sophie’s eyes narrowed as she turned her focus from the Duke to Tessa. It was perhaps the angriest that she had ever seen her look. Tessa could feel the small hairs on the back of her neck stand on end as she waited for Sophie’s next move.

Sophie lifted a single finger and pointed it at Tessa, her face turning red with the effort of keeping her thoughts and words to herself. Finally, just when Tessa was certain that her cousin was going to explode, she stomped her foot on the ground and spun to leave the room in a quick, dramatic retreat.

The door burst open before Sophie could wrench it herself, depriving her of her dramatic exit.

A feline cry of distress came rocketing into the space so swiftly that the gray blur collided gracelessly with Sophie’s legs. The poor, terrified cat was so frightened that it rolled under Sophie’s skirts and likely scratched at her legs, causing her to nearly fall on her face. Then Colonel Floppy Ears dashed into the library, chasing after the cat with the grace of a charging bull. Sophie yelped and was forced aside by the thundering canine intent on playing tag with its unwilling partner.

It was a wonder that Sophie was not trampled.

Less fortunate, however, was the fact that the Colonel was not alone. Just as quickly on his heels were none other than Aurelius and Theodore, both of whom were shouting different things at different volumes. Each of them was loud – and passionate – advocating for a different animal in the fray.

Tessa felt almost as if the walls were closing in on her. She could only imagine where their minds would go to first. Sophie smirked like the cat who got the cream as she slunk into the background. She would love nothing more than to see her unworthy cousin ruined forever. Tessa struggled to find words to explain herself as her uncle's eyes locked on her. Colonel danced in happy circles around them, attempting to nip at Leo's trousers with the hopes of enticing his friend to play.

Aurelius snatched up his cat and began speaking in soft, soothing tones while stroking the creature who looked very much like it had just lost one of its nine lives, if not two. He did not seem to realize the hush that had fallen until he finally noticed the couple in the room.

He passed through the stages of shock quickly. Each one passed over him so swiftly that it did not last more than a blink or two. First, he was flabbergasted, then appalled, then angry at his grandson – then he smiled. That was perhaps the most frightening of all of the expressions yet.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Theodore demanded. He looked as if he were going to burst a blood vessel in his neck or forehead. If Tessa was not mistaken, her uncle was turning a shade of purple.

“I can explain,” Leo said calmly and put himself between Tessa and her uncle.

“Explain?!” the man started to shout, but shockingly, Aurelius interrupted.

“Nothing to explain. The matter is settled.”

“What?” Leo sounded every bit as shocked as she presently felt. “What is settled?”



“Never mind that now. Come, Theodore, we have much business to discuss.” Aurelius said as he clutched the cat to his chest. Whatever secret plan Aurelius was referencing, it was lost on Theodore.

“What infernal business? We have matters to discuss right here and now!” Theodore demanded as he snatched Colonel Floppy Ears by the collar and pulled him away from the indecent couple as if he needed to shield the dog’s innocent nature from something he deemed to be scandalous.

“Why, wedding plans of course,” Aurelius answered happily and set his cat down on the nearest couch. He neatly folded his hands in front of himself and smiled as if he had seen this all coming. “Ah, to be young and infatuated once more.”

“W... wedding p... plans?” Theodore echoed comically.

“Pardon? Hold on a moment,” Leo started to interject but Aurelius spoke over him firmly.

“There is nothing to consider. If I had known that the couple was so excited to announce their clear and apparent engagement that they forgot themselves for a moment, I would have taken more care to provide them with more privacy!” Aurelius spoke as if were the most obvious thing in the world and they were all simply the last people to be in on the story.

Tessa’s face flushed red. She could not tear her eyes from the back of Leo’s head.

Aurelius turned to face his grandson. “That is what is happening, is it not? I know that my grandson is not compromising a woman who has very clearly endured a lot in her young life.”

Leo shifted from one foot to the other. His fingers rubbed anxiously together for a moment before he turned to face Tessa. It felt insane but it appeared as if he was looking for her approval. The choice was clearly hers.

Did he want this? Did he wish to marry her? Even if he did not, he would not allow her to be ruined; it was an impossible situation. She swallowed against the nerves and weight of her decision – and Aurelius made it for her.

“As I said, much to prepare for. I will send letters at once! We will have a wedding in two shakes of a cat’s tail!” Aurelius gestured excitedly and grabbed Theodore’s sleeve to pull him from the library while very carefully sidestepping the dog obstructing his path. He spoke his parting words over his shoulder. “Congratulations to the happy couple!”

## Chapter Sixteen



“If I felt the situation had gone poorly before, it certainly went from bad to worse rather quickly.”

Leo glanced over his shoulder to the calico cat sitting on his bed. No matter what he did, Sweetie Whiskers seemed to find a way into this room whether he liked it or not. She was a stubborn creature. She would not move, even when pushed. She would not leave the room unless she was physically tossed out.

“I have no idea how Tessa feels about this situation and now I am here, speaking to a cat.”

The feline yawned. She went so far as to get up, stretch as if bored of the entire conversation before relocating to another, presumably more comfortable section of his bed that would make it impossible to go to sleep. Not that he could fall asleep even if he tried. He felt as if sparks had replaced his blood. He was pacing again. His least favorite pastime.

“I see that my plights bore you.” He sighed and sat down next to the cat on the bed. She rolled her hazel eyes up at him and blinked slowly. “If only my mother could see me now. How disappointed she would be. I swore to her that I would never marry. I swore to her that my father’s terrible bloodline would end with me. Tessa is a woman who loves children and I shall never be able to give that to her—”

He scrubbed a hand up and down his face out of frustration with the situation.

“I love her.” He sighed. “I never thought that I could love a woman quite so much. The idea of spending my life with her, learning everything about her is more than I could have ever wanted, and yet it is something that I am not allowed to have. What a conundrum I have found myself in.”

He felt split down the middle.

“I should speak with her.” It was silly that he was nervous to leave his room again. He knew that he would be at risk of running into his grandfather and it was very likely that any conversation would be even worse than the one he needed to have with Tessa. He was not looking forward to either of them. Aurelius was likely asleep, surrounded by a whole clowder of felines. Marriage was everything his grandfather wished for him – it was the whole reason that he had invited Tessa and her family here in the first place.

Leo pushed himself upright and strolled across the room before he could talk himself out of going. By morning, his time with Tessa would be cut short. She and her family would be returning to their home in the city, and the opportunity to speak with her alone before their wedding date would be harder to come by.

Just before he pulled the door open, a soft knocking halted him in his tracks. He opened the door with bated breath to reveal a slightly frazzled-looking Tessa.

“Tessa? I was just coming to... what are you doing here?” He opened the door slightly wider and allowed her to come inside.

She held one of her gloves in her hands and she worried at the fabric. He had no way of knowing where the other glove might have gotten to. He watched as she pulled the fabric back and forth anxiously. Her hair was still tousled where he had mussed it before, but her modest jewelry was gone. He could not tell if she had been crying; he hoped that she had not.

“Are you all right?” Leo asked, knowing very well that this was far from the case.

Tessa nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Leo backed into the room until he could take a seat on the edge of the bed once more. He watched as she paced.

Tessa stopped suddenly and turned to face him. “Is this what you want?”

He was surprised by her question. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. I asked you if this is what you want. Do you wish to marry me, Your Grace? You, who are so reluctant to marry... who did not wish for a wife... I have no desire to be the reason that you feel shackled, to think that you could come to resent me over something so silly—”

“You think that the threat of scandal is something silly? That it is simply a small matter to be overlooked? You cannot think so little of yourself.”

“My uncle will press for a wedding, of course. It is a very prudent match for our family. It will elevate their social standing further than their relation to me could ever do. Of course, he will wish to capitalize on this opportunity. But if you refuse, there is not much that can be done about it.”

“Sophie will speak out,” Leo countered.

“My uncle will not take the refusal of my hand to a public forum. Sophie might be cruel, but she will listen to her father on whatever he chooses.” Tessa spoke quickly in what she hoped was a flat, level tone of voice.

“You cannot believe that.” Leo rose from the bed and crossed to Tessa. He took her hands in his own to halt her pacing. “Where is this coming from?”

Tessa lifted her eyes to his warily. “I am not the sort of woman who will suffer a husband to be miserable in a marriage that he does not want.”

There it was. Tessa felt as if her heart had been pulled from her chest and hovered in the space between them. She meant every word. While she had given up on the concept of marriage, the ideal version of what marriage might look like from when she was a girl would not leave her mind, and she did not know – if she *was* to be married – if she would be capable of settling for less.

Leo lifted a hand to brush his knuckles over Tessa's cheek. "I was coming to tell you that I love you. I cannot imagine a more perfect Duchess for me than you. There would be none other than you."

Her heart slammed back into her chest with such force it stole her breath. A smile spread across her features until she could stand it no longer. But before she could throw her arms about his neck, he spoke again.

"But."

One word. Just one word and her hopes came crashing right back down. How could one word hurt so badly?

"But I am not the only one who needs to enter into this agreement with my eyes open." He squeezed her hands affectionately and tried to hurry through what he knew needed to be said. "I will not have children. I will not be able to give you that."

Tessa pressed her lips together firmly to keep from reacting. She swallowed down her comments as the weight of his confession settled in. A marriage without children? A family like her own had been one of her fondest dreams. It had been something she wished for more than anything in the world.

"Is that truly something that you would be able to live with? Would you be truly happy in a marriage like that?"

Tessa looked down and took a step back from him. It did not matter what she could or could not live with. Her future was already set. She did not wish to end their conversation on such a heavy note. Instead, she changed the subject. "I suppose that we will have plenty of time to solve the mystery of what happened to my brother when we are wed. Uncle says that we are to leave at first light. He told me that your grandfather has applied for a special license to have us married before the week's end."

Tessa knew that if she said another word that she would say something she could not take back. She needed time to process what he had said.

“I must go before they notice my absence.” She curtsied formally and excused herself from his bedroom without meeting his gaze a second time. She could not force herself to do it. She felt as if her heart was both so full to bursting with the knowledge that he loved her and breaking into small pieces with the knowledge that the future she desired most would never be a possibility for her. She could not reconcile the two.



A week of sleepless nights passed painfully slowly for Leo. Yet the wedding seemed to happen so quickly it felt almost as if it were little more than a fever dream. He could remember standing at the altar to speak his vows. He could remember the ceremony, but the carriage ride to the family Manor he would now share with Tessa was painfully awkward.

Another week of painful silence passed before either one could summon reason to speak to the other about anything more than passing pleasantries.

“Good night, Your Grace,” Tessa said softly as they stood in the middle of the hall that separated the master suite from the one where she had been sleeping. She had not yet joined him in his bed, and he was not going to force the subject either, no matter how badly he wished to find a bridge for their present discomfort.

But he had to do something. He could not allow this to continue. It felt as if the prophecy of marital misery laid out for him by his mother was coming true. The curse of unhappiness was the result of him breaking his word and taking a wife. He could endure it no longer.

“I never wished to live in my father’s home,” he blurted out.

It was enough to stop Tessa in her tracks. She turned to face him with a curious expression. “What?”

“Here. This home. I never wished to live here.”

“Is that something that I am supposed to apologize to you for?” Tessa’s head tilted to the side questioningly as she tried

to determine whether or not she ought to be offended by the statement.

“No. What I mean is... what I mean to say was that this was never a part of my plan.”

“I do not understand.”

“Forgive me. I know that my words are not coming out in the way that I would wish them to, but I cannot stand this tension between us. Surely you must tire of the avoidance? Of attempting to skirt around one another? I suppose I am trying to express that while I never intended to live here, I do not regret it.”

Tessa still did not grasp his meaning. “Ah, well... all right then.”

“Do not go.”

“Is there something else that you wished to say to me?”

“Yes... no... I would like your company. Perhaps, if you will indulge me, I could try to explain?” He pointed down the hall to the master bedroom. He knew that it likely seemed like a ploy to get her into his bed. Not that he would complain should things end there.

“Very well... but I am most tired,” Tessa said as she walked down the hall, tightening her dressing gown around herself as she did so.

“I understand. It was cruel of me to say that I could not have children and not at least attempt to explain why that is so.” Leo gestured to the settee and sat beside her once Tessa had taken her place. “My mother and I were always very close. I suppose that is only natural for a mother and son when the father is such a deplorable human. As I have indicated before, he was not a kind man. These walls do not hold any happy memories for me. When I was only six-and-ten my mother lay in that very bed—”

Leo pointed to the master bed in which he very rarely slept because of how uncomfortable it made him.



“She had been ill for a few years prior to that, but after my sixteenth birthday, she seemed to deteriorate at a faster rate than normal. She had always hated my father – they did not have a thing in common. I am fairly convinced that the only time they willingly touched one another was the single instance that it took for her to be with child. They screamed at one another daily, and fought constantly; it was a wonder to me that the old bastard never sent us away to live somewhere out of sight. It would have been simpler that way. He could have pretended that we simply did not exist, and we would have done the very same thing. Instead, he tormented us until he died – and that was not a fitting enough punishment for him in my mother’s eyes.”

Tessa reached forward and placed her hand on top of his. “I am sorry to hear that.”

Leo nodded. “It was her dying wish that his bloodline ends with me. She told me that she was sorry I had ever been born, even if the blood that runs in my veins was not my fault. She was convinced that even a small drop of his blood would be enough to taint any living thing. She warned me that it was only a matter of time before it affected me. As such, I should never take a wife. I should never sire any heirs – no children of any kind. It was her dying wish that I swear such a thing to her.”

Tessa was shocked. She could not imagine a mother saying such a thing to her child. It was unfathomable to her that a woman could be pushed to such terrible extremes.

Leo continued. “At the time that I made the promise, it did not seem as if it would be something that I ever wanted for myself. I was a young lad and in complete agreement with everything that she said. I assumed my stance would always be the same... and then I met you. The more that I grew to know you, the more my desires changed. It could not be helped.”

He meant it as a compliment. Yet it felt as if he were telling her he only cared for her in spite of his better judgment.

“Then I suppose that I should find myself flattered by your words? This change of heart that you never wanted, living in a

home that you hate, with a wife that you will come to resent—”

“That is not what I mean.”

Tessa hastily wiped away the soft tears that rolled down her cheek. She would not allow herself to cry. “Thank you for sharing this with me, Your Grace.” She rose from the settee. “If you will excuse me, as I have said, I am quite tired.”

“Will you not stay with me?”

“Whatever for? As we are not to have any children, there is no reason to consummate our marriage, much less share a bed.” The words pained her to say. She struggled to keep from crying as she said them.

“Tessa, please... I know that I have wounded you but I cannot live without you,” Leo confessed. “Tell me how to make this better, how to explain myself more clearly. I want nothing more than to go back to the way that things were before between us. Keeping myself away from you is torture.”

She wanted that too, but could not see how to make it happen.

Torture or not, there was no alternative. “Try harder.”

“I do not wish it!” Leo crossed the room and opened his arms in a gesture of surrender. “I do not wish to be parted from you. I only meant to share this with you so that you might understand my point of view. I had hoped that you might share your own thoughts with me as well.”

“There is nothing more to say!” Tessa shouted without meaning to. “It is done! Let me resign myself to my new future in peace, in whatever way that I choose!”

Leo flinched and took a step back so that he was no longer blocking her path to the door. “I do not injure you on purpose.”

Tears swelled in Tessa’s eyes. “Yes, I know that too, but it makes it harder that way. I will come to you when I am ready.”

Leo nodded curtly. “Of course. I will be here when you are.”

## Chapter Seventeen



To keep her mind occupied, Tessa threw herself into her investigation. She found it difficult to engage with the staff of her new home; her heart was not ready yet to run a household of her very own. Instead, she spent her afternoons searching for any leads of her brother that she could get. It was beyond difficult to chase a trail that had long since gone cold.

The letters that she had recovered from Mortimer's office seemed to all lead to bookkeepers, meaning she had no choice but to involve Leo. She was not brave enough to go poking about in that particular part of town looking for shady people. Least of all by herself. Leo – to his credit – seemed to be intent on following her wishes and desires to the letter. She had said that she would come to him when she was ready, and he respected that.

Perhaps a part of her hoped that once she found out her brother's fate one way or the other, she would be able to close that chapter of her life. With it closed, she could move on to the next chapter. Instead, she was stuck in this infernal limbo where her future was unclear, her past nearly as painful as her present, and she had nowhere to go, no one to confide in or anyone to offer her advice.

Silly as it was, she wished to ask Leo for advice. He was her dearest friend who just so happened to be her husband as well.

Tessa tried to imagine what his life might have looked like growing up. She tried to imagine the things he must have endured in order to have made such a promise to his mother.

Certainly, she was not of sound mind near the end if she asked such a thing of him. Tessa could not imagine her own mother being pushed to such a place. She prayed for understanding; she prayed to see how he came to be and to forgive him. He was her husband now, a fact on which her cousin would not stop commenting.

Nearly every day another letter from Sophie arrived. Some days it was to gloat over how happy she was to be the only woman in the house or to fill Tessa in on how pleased the embroidery group was that they no longer had to see her face. Other times it was to condemn her to hell and lament her cousin's luck in falling into a marriage. More often than not, the letters implied that she was nothing more than a common whore.

Today was not a day that Tessa felt up to one of her cousin's letters. She was not in the mood to listen to anything that Sophie had to say. When Leo came into the room with the post of the day, she held up her hand in protest.

"No, thank you."

"There are a great many letters in here for you. Are you certain that you should not like to read at least a couple of them?" Leo queried as he thumbed through them.

Tessa looked down at the letters she had been poring over, the same ones from her brother's desk as if she were only moments away from finding a hidden something or another among the words she had long ago memorized.

"Not today. I have not the strength to endure it."

"They are not all from your sweet cousin Sophie," Leo teased.

Tessa glared at him. "Do not tease. I know very well that they are. Who else would have reason to be writing to me? It is not as if I have an abundance of friends."

Leo leaned against the edge of the desk that she toiled over and flipped merrily through the letters, looking for one that was not in Sophie's handwriting. "You know, I think that she must miss you terribly."

"Whatever could give you that impression?" Tessa laughed.

“Well, she takes the time out of each and every day to write to you. She must miss you, or else she is terribly bored.”

“Then it is most assuredly the latter. Not that she would ever admit to such a thing. I am quite certain that once she finds something or someone else to amuse herself with, she will be right back to ignoring me. Never you mind that.” Tessa sighed and held her hand out in Leo’s direction expectantly as she waited for the letters. If she did not take them, then he was only going to read them to her instead.

“This one is Sophie.... Sophie as well... aha! This one!” Leo plucked it from the bundle and let the others fall to the desk, ignored. He flipped it over, looking for a wax seal but could not find one. “Strange... it just has your name. I cannot say that I recognize the handwriting, but it does seem familiar.”

Tessa took the letter and opened it carefully. There was no date, no signature on the bottom, no heading on the paper that she could see. It seemed for all intents and purposes, a mystery letter from an unknown sender.

“What does it say?” asked Leo.

Tessa felt like crying. “It is addressed to My Dearest Tessie.” She glanced up at Leo. “Only one person has ever called me Tessy in my life...” she continued to read, “I hope that this letter finds you well as I am placing myself at grave risk in order to send it. I know that I have been away for quite some time now, but it was necessary to allow some of the pressure to die down. I feel that it should be safe enough for you and I to be reunited once more in honor of your nuptials. I always hoped for your happiness and am deeply sorrowful that I could not be there with you on your most dreamed-of day. Please come to the wharf to meet me. I have enclosed a small, horribly drawn map for you to follow, just like when we used to play seek and find. Come alone. All my love.”

Tessa clutched the letter to her chest for a long moment, until her hands stopped trembling. There was no stopping the tears that were flowing freely down her cheeks as she savored the moment. Mortimer was alive. She always knew he must be. Of course, he was alive, out there somewhere, waiting for the

perfect moment. He always knew when she needed him the most.

“Are you certain that it is from him?” Leo asked cautiously.

“Of course it is! Who else could it possibly be from?” Tessa smoothed the letter out on the desk where the papers from Mortimer’s office lay spread over the surface. “It is not a perfect match for the penmanship, but that is to be expected. Who knows what sort of horrid conditions he has forced himself to live in all of this time? It is hardly surprising that his style might have changed.”

“You cannot seriously be thinking about going on your own?”

“I shall take my maid, of course.”

“I will go with you.”

“The very last thing that my brother needs to see right now is a man to whom he owes money,” Tessa countered.

Leo shook his head. “That is all in the past. I have married his sister. I think that more than settles any sum of money that he owed me in the past. I would like to see my friend as well.”

“I have to do this, Leo.” Tessa placed her hand on her husband’s knee. She would not take no for an answer. “I shall be careful. I have to go to him – he is my brother. I will always do everything that I can in order to help him. If he has truly risked so much to write to me, I cannot betray that trust. Just as you must show you trust me, Leo.”

He chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment. “I do trust you, but I do not like this.”

“Nothing will happen. Mortimer would never allow anything to happen to me,” Tessa said with absolute, unwavering faith.

Leo glanced at the burns covering half of her body... and he was not so sure he shared her same confidence.



Blinded by her own optimism, Tessa did not see the error in her actions until it was too late. She had been too quick to assume the best. She had just assumed that it was Mortimer's handwriting because it must have been. The letter had called her the special nickname that only her brother had ever called her; it referenced their childhood. If it had not been written by Mortimer, he had to have been present when it was written, she had been so certain of that.

When she arrived at the wharf, she pulled her shawl around her to fight the feeling of the crisp air. The sound of gulls overhead was the only thing to greet her.

They knocked out her poor maid first – an innocent woman whose only purpose there was to accompany her mistress. They slipped a black hood over Tessa's face from behind. Fear was the last thing that she felt before the world tipped on its axis, and then nothing.



“I never should have allowed her to go. I knew it in my gut. I knew that something terrible would happen.”

He hated pacing but he could not seem to make himself stop. It had been only a little after lunch when Tessa had left to go and meet up with her brother. If it was, in fact, her brother. Perhaps all was well, and they were simply catching up, but his gut said otherwise. It told him that he only had himself to blame for her leaving. She might have very well written that note herself just so that she would have an excuse to leave him – to take the one maid that she had brought with them and move on to another life. She certainly had not been happy here.

It felt like such a crazy thing to think. It seemed and felt so wholly impossible. He shook his head as if that might somehow shake the very thoughts from his mind but it did not help. Pacing around an empty Manor full of worry was unlikely to help either. She had been so secretive about the location; she had been reluctant to read it. Certainly, he was overthinking things.

*But what if I am not?*

He could not delay a moment longer. The moon was starting to climb up into the sky he could not afford to waste another moment taking into account his own safety. He mounted the first horse that was ready and within reach and headed off in the direction of the wharf.

A freezing cold drizzle of rain threatened to slowly seep through his riding cloak if he did not find shelter soon, but he could not allow himself the time to think about such things. He checked each and every pier in turn until he came to a stretch of docks that seemed as if it had not been used in a very long time. The wood was in a state of disrepair and seemed to groan unhappily under his bulk, but there he saw it: soaked through and hardly more than a lump of cloth on the dock was Tessa's shawl.

There was not a single clue to work with. There was no way to tell if the shawl had been dropped on purpose or by accident. There were still far too many unanswered questions. As much as he wished to do this alone, he would not be able to. If she had left him, he needed to find out where she went and what she was up to. If she had been kidnapped for some nefarious purpose, he would need to be in more than one place at a time and could cover more ground with help. Which meant that he was going to have to seek the assistance of his grandfather. It was not a prospect that he relished. They were not on the best of terms once again given the circumstances surrounding the marriage, but he did not have a choice.

Leo mounted his horse once more and set off at a gallop to return home. When he finally arrived, the rain had picked up and he was nearly soaked to the bone. He slid off his horse gracefully and stormed through the back entrance of his Manor. He left muddied footsteps in his wake as he peeled layers of clothing off to keep the chill from making him sick. He would change and he head for his grandfather's the moment that the carriage was ready. He hurried to his room and changed quickly. He pulled on his thick cloak and grabbed a second warm one, draping it over his arm, for when he found



Tessa. Jogging down the stairs, buttoning the buttons on his waistcoat, only to be interrupted by a frantic knocking on the front door.

“Who in the world—”

He almost ignored it. There was no time for callers at this time of night, but that was exactly the reason he answered the door. He felt himself pale as he looked into the frantic, scared eyes of none other than Mortimer Windrop.

Mortimer had changed drastically from the last time that Leo had seen him, but was still recognizable. He still had the same build, but was thinner. His skin was paler and bordered on waxy as it was stretched over his bones. Mortimer’s eyes seemed to have a permanent set of exhaustion rings purpling the skin there. Shaking from the cold and his clothes had clearly seen better days.

Leo swung his extra cloak around the shoulders of his friend without even thinking. Mortimer was out of breath but trying to say something as Leo helped him walk into the foyer of the Manor. Asking his friend where he had disappeared to seemed not nearly enough information. He did not even know where to begin with how many questions he had for this man.

“Whiskey! At once!” Leo called to a passing servant. It might not actually warm his friend, but it would help steady his nerves at the very least.

A glass was brought to them quickly and Mortimer coughed and sputtered after he swallowed it in one swift gulp. “They have her,” he explained as he regained his breath. It only lasted a moment before he started to cough again.

“Who has her?” Leo asked as he braced Mortimer upright with a hand flattened across Mortimer’s chest and back.

“It is all my fault... I never should have come back from Scotland—” He inhaled deeply before trying to expel as much information as humanly possible in one breath. “Johnny and the debt collectors... showed up in Scotland... was bad luck that they even found me. I have been saving up to pay everything back... I was almost done... but then they found

me. Only a couple more months and I could have done it... put an end to all of this... but now they have her.”

A tear rolled down Mortimer’s cheek. Leo shifted his hold so that he was grasping Mortimer’s lapels in his fist. “Johnny? Rotten Johnny has my wife?” Leo snarled. Everybody knew of the man’s reputation. He was about as sour a man as there ever was. His underhanded debt dealings were legendary. Everybody knew that only those truly desperate ever dealt with him. Mortimer must have been truly desperate. “If they have harmed her, I will make you wish you had died all of those years ago. Are we understood?”

Mortimer nodded. “I never wanted to hurt her... never. I love my sister more than my own life.”

“If it comes to that, I shall have no trouble trading you for her,” Leo warned viciously.

“I know! I know! I want to make this right. No matter what it costs. I have harmed my dear Tessy too much. I should have known my letter would be intercepted.” Mortimer hugged the cloak around him firmly.

“Yes! You should have!” Leo barked as he dragged Mortimer through the Manor and to his readied carriage. “We will deal with the hows and whys of it later. For now, we are going to find Rotten Johnny’s hideout. Immediately.”

## Chapter Eighteen



**A**urelius was outside when they arrived. He stood in the shelter of the arched entryway to his home with his hands on his hips. In the background were five of his favorite cats. They did not ever seem to stray very far away from Aurelius. They were not quite brave enough to venture close to the door, given the thunder and rain, but they were watching all the same.

“How did you know that we were coming?” Leo asked as he exited the carriage.

“It was the cats! They always know when something is wrong. They have been pulling me from my bed for the better part of an hour now. I did not know what it was or why they were doing it at the time, but now I can see that it was for a good reason. Tell me, my boy, why have you come to fetch me in the middle of the night?” Aurelius was already fully dressed and seemed to be outfitted for an adventure.

“Tessa has been abducted. We have to get her back, but we are too few in number,” Leo explained.

“Oh dear, then we must hurry! But, who is we?” Aurelius said happily. His mood was not at all reflective of the serious situation that they found themselves in currently. Aurelius left the door open behind him as he walked to the carriage and leaned round to look inside, where he spotted Mortimer. “Ah... I see. The family resemblance is strong in that one.”

Leo did a double take at Mortimer. He did not think that he and Tessa looked all that much alike, but clearly, he was rather biased. He wondered if they had looked more similar before her accident, but there was no way to find out now.

“Given our current travel companion and our mission of the night, I think that this would be a perfect job for my dear friend!” Aurelius advised. Leo decided not to further question his grandfather’s whimsical and unexplainable methods for knowing far too many things that he logically should not know.

“Friend? We have already lost hours and we do not yet know where to begin searching,” Leo exclaimed.

“Yes, yes – he will help us with all of that.”

“Fine. Who is it? We need to fetch them quickly,” Leo said. He hoped that it might make his grandfather feel some sort of sense of urgency for their agenda, but it did not seem to faze the older man.

“Why, Theodore of course. We have become very fast friends over the last couple of weeks while you and your wife have been avoiding one another,” Aurelius explained.

Mortimer shot Leo a curious look as if he wished to inquire why they might have been avoiding one another, but Leo knew that he might snap if Mortimer attempted to play the protective older brother at a moment like this. While he might have a justified reason to be angry with Mortimer, now was hardly the time or the place. Once Tessa was safely returned to his arms, all else could be figured out.

When they pulled up in front of the Windrop home, Aurelius swiftly ducked inside for a few moments. When he reemerged, it was with Theodore thundering behind him, holding more muskets than any person should have been able to safely produce in less than five minutes. Gone was the fun-loving, dog-worshipping, dopey grin on Theo’s face; instead he wore a mask of intense focus. The carriage shook when he entered it. It was no longer a comfortable fit but one that they had to squeeze into.

Theodore was shocked to see Mortimer, shocked enough that it broke through his otherwise intense expression. He blinked twice as if he were seeing a ghost.

“How—” he started, but shook his head. “You have some explaining to do when this is all over, Boy,” he said to his nephew very firmly.

Mortimer nodded and hung his head.

The version of Mortimer that Leo had been friends with was firmly loyal to his family; there had never been a question of that. Neither had there ever been a question as to whether he was kind. He was the fun-loving sort who tended to leap without looking in most instances. No matter where or what he landed in, he always faced it with an infuriating sense of optimism. Now he just looked deflated.

Mortimer guided the carriage in the direction of Rotten Johnny’s last known hangout. They would likely meet with Leo as they knew his position in Society and they were also in possession of his Duchess. They would likely ransom her for everything that they felt they could get out of him. He would be willing to pay it, provided that they had not harmed her. If she was harmed, then all bets would be forfeited.

The carriage stopped in front of the entrance and the men exited. Unsurprisingly, Theodore had already formed his version of a battle plan for them to carry out. Leo noted that if this is what the large man was like on the battlefield, he was very happy indeed that he would never have to come across him. He could only imagine how terrifying this man and a snarling Colonel Floppy Ears would look rushing toward you on the opposite end of a musket.

“You have experience shooting one of these?” Theodore asked the group as he held out a pistol.

Leo nodded. He had spent many hours honing his shooting skills as well as practical fencing lessons. While dueling was of course illegal, he knew how to hold his own should the situation require it.

Mortimer glanced at the pistol and then quickly averted his gaze. Leo knew that he had once been a very good shot; it was interesting that he now appeared to have an aversion to weapons. It was troublesome to think of the thin man walking into such a terrible place wholly unarmed, but there was no time to argue. Aurelius, too, declined the pistol in favor of a sword on his hip that had never once been drawn and likely would not be drawn tonight either.

They met no resistance on the way in.

“Well, well, well. If it is not the prodigal son returned home!” A man addressed the group as they entered a slightly larger room. It might have once been a tavern with its lingering stench of stale ale, but now it seemed to be a gathering space. It was absent any chairs or benches in the main part of the room. Sacks and linen bags were propped up against the walls with who knew what in them. Everything smelled damp.

The man, presumably Johnny from his filthy appearance, spoke directly to Mortimer, who started to fidget where he stood. He did not seem to have any interest in speaking to the man across from him, so Leo interrupted.

“Where is my wife?”

“Ah... so you’s the Duke then? High an’ mighty like. How’s about you pay me first, then I might be in a more conversational like mood.” Johnny’s voice felt slimy. Every word felt like pollution in the air as he gestured with grandiosity. A man of too much self-importance, in Leo’s opinion.

Theodore raised a pistol. “He asked you a question.”

All of the hospitality faded from Johnny’s expression at once. Three other men sauntered into the space as if that would make the fight somehow more even.

“Now, you come in my place, pointing things, making demands of me—”

Theodore was not in the mood. He fired a round directly at Johnny’s leg. It hit him in the shin. The man yowled and

hollered in pain as he fell to the ground. He clutched at his leg and roiled around, absorbed in his own wound.

“We do not barter with the enemy! Take no prisoners, boys!” Theodore raised his pistol a second time as if he were back on the front lines sending his men into active battle. Leo followed suit and lifted his pistol as well.

“Wait! Wait!” one of the men called. He lifted his hands in surrender. “I will fetch her! Do not shoot us, please!”

“Cowards!” Johnny screamed through his pained moaning.

Moments later, the same man reappeared with Tessa, a black hood pulled down over her face. He thrust her in their direction, and Leo rushed forward to catch her so that she would not fall. He ripped the black hood off of her face and watched as Tessa’s expression quickly shifted from fear to relief.

“Shh, shh, I have you now. You are safe. All is well,” Leo whispered as Tessa threw her arms around his shoulders and clutched him tightly.

“Oh! I was so frightened! I am so sorry for going off on my own. I should have listened to you,” Tessa cried.

“Never mind that now, are you harmed? Have they injured you?” Leo asked.

Tessa shook her head against his shoulder but would not release him.

“This does not mean anything! I shall add my doctor fees to your debts, Windrop!” Johnny cried as they started to leave. “You hear me, coward?! I will take more next time!”

“If you value your life,” Leo warned the man, “you will consider those debts settled here and now. If you come near my family again you will not walk away from it.”

Theodore nodded in complete agreement. “I have been itching for a good fight since the war.”

Johnny crawled away toward his men who seemed very reluctant to help him in any way. It was unsurprising that men like that would turn on one another.

“Come on, Darling, let us get you home.”



“I still feel cold,” Tessa said as she wrapped her arms around herself. “I know that I am not; the fire is charming and I have only just finished a hot bath but I still feel cold... like the fear is still clinging to me.”

Leo nodded and pulled her into his arms. He lowered them both onto the foot of the bed and rubbed his hands up and down her arms comfortingly as she sat in his lap. “It is perfectly understandable. There is still so much to be said. Aurelius and Theodore have been returned to their homes. Mortimer is sleeping soundly in the guest room down the hall. I have servants posted at every entrance and exit of this house just in case anything is amiss. You are as well protected here in my arms as you could ever be. I swear it to you.”

Tessa rested her head against Leo’s shoulder and nodded sadly. “I know... and yet it will not leave me.”

“You have endured a very harrowing night. I cannot imagine how you must have felt. But if you should like to speak about it, I am here.”

Tessa nodded. “Thank you. Perhaps I will, in time. I feared that they had Mortimer too. Seeing him with you all was such a relief. We will have plenty to discuss in the morning.” Tessa shivered.

“It will be hard to allow you out of my sight after tonight.” Leo chuckled humorlessly. He was only half joking. “I thought that I had lost you, that you might never return home to me. It made me realize how absolutely foolish I was to deny you anything at all. Tonight made me understand just how precious our time together is... that it can be taken away at any moment.”

The tenderness in his voice tugged at Tessa’s heart. “I feared that I might never see you again... that our last words spoken were those in irritation. Even though it was only a small squabble about me leaving on my own, I could not stand it.”



“I promise from this moment forward I shall do everything in my power to grant your each and every wish – no matter how small. I want you to have everything you have ever wished for. I think that a part of me was afraid to allow myself to be happy for fear that it could be taken from me. Now I know it can be taken anyway. I do not know what I would have done with myself had we not been able to locate you or... or if–” Leo swallowed against the lump of emotion threatening to clog his throat.

Tessa lifted a finger to his lips. “Shh, I am unharmed. I am here. I shall never leave again.”

“I mean it, Tessa, my love, whatever you wish. Children, dozens of fine dresses or books... new houses... name it and it shall be yours,” Leo promised.

Tessa giggled. “You mean it?”

Leo dipped his head in acknowledgment. “Every word.”

Tessa smiled wider. “I shall have to think up some very silly things to want then, just for the pleasure of making you carry out my wishes.” She shuddered involuntarily once more.

“Still cold?” Leo asked.

“Mmhm,” she answered.

“Perhaps you would allow me to try to warm you up in another way?” Leo’s voice dropped as his gaze darkened.

“Oh?” Tessa breathed.

Leo nodded once more. He caressed her hips and lifted her just enough so that she was sitting astride him rather than next to him. His hands moved down to her rear and grasped the soft skin there. “Warmer?”

Desire started as kindling inside her and quickly stoked up to a fire. She nodded and closed her eyes to relish the sensation of his strong hands massaging her skin. She held onto him, one hand on his shoulder and the other cupping the back of his neck as his hands explored her, taking thorough stock of each muscle in her back and the way her waist curved. He slowly eased the tension from the strain of the night on her body.

His lips found her neck as his hands slid to her breasts. Nimble fingers undid the strings of her dressing down as his heated kisses traveled down the side of her neck toward her cleavage.

“How about now?” he asked in that low, rumbly voice she adored.

“Mmhm, yes.” She sighed, savoring the sensations. The heat coursed through her. She tingled with anticipation as it danced like a river’s current under her skin.

He pulled her dressing gown free to reveal the bare skin beneath it. Such a contrast from the injured side of her body under one palm to the smooth skin under the other. Never before had he seen someone who so closely resembled walking art before. He was in utter awe of her, as he always was. Ought to have told her from the beginning – so he tried to make up for it now by worshiping her with his lips and tongue.

Their touches were soft and reverent as Tessa allowed herself to be bold. Her fingers walked his shirt up his back slowly until the fabric was bunched over her hands. She flattened her palms over the muscles of his back until she pulled the shirt off of him. Her breath caught in her chest as her skin met his. She had worried that she would be nervous the first time, but she was unafraid. She felt safe and wanted in his arms. Her fingers buried themselves in his hair softly as he kissed down her chest, paying attention to each nipple before turning lower. When he could go no further, he circled his arms around her and flipped them.

Tessa landed on the bed with a soft giggle of surprise. She had expected him to continue kissing her, but instead, he traveled lower still. Her eyes widened in surprise. She lifted herself onto her elbows in curiosity to see his intentions only to fall right back as he buried himself between her legs.

She cried out in pleasure. Leo hooked his hands around her thighs and pulled her lower, closer to himself as he feasted on her. “Let me hear you,” he urged, speaking into her skin.

Tessa pulled her bottom lip from between her teeth and grasped the sheets in her hands firmly as she struggled to remain in one place. It felt like she was consumed by an

inferno. Her body wished to take control of her and arch in ways she had never known herself to do before, so she allowed it.

“Yes, louder for me – just like that,” Leo encouraged as she moaned. It might be his favorite sound in the entire world. He shifted slightly to ease a single finger inside her, curling against her in rhythm with his tongue. He wanted to make her feel everything that she had always assumed she never would. He had told her she deserved to be touched, and he had meant it. He could have watched her come apart for hours. Were it not for the particular urgency in his own trousers, he just might have.

There would be time after; she was his wife – he could have her as often as she permitted. Just that thought alone did things to him. Leo teased her center until her legs started to quiver and her breathing started to come in short gasps at which point he rid himself of his trousers. He kicked them behind him and aligned himself to her entrance.

“Look at me, My Love,” he commanded softly as he reached down and cupped her chin in his hand.

Tessa’s eyes flicked to his just as he eased inside of her. He watched every sensation play on her face and the way her breath hitched as he sheathed himself to the hilt.

“Feel good?” he asked.

Tessa’s hands moved to his chest and raked down along the lines of muscle as she nodded her consent. “I am warm all over, I feel–”

“Yes, do not fight it. I want to see you come apart for me.” He grinned and started to move once more. His hand dropped between them, knowing that she was close from the way she clenched around him. He set a steady, firm pace as he thrust into her and worked teasing circles on the sensitive bundle of nerves.

“Leo–” Tessa moaned as if about to ask a question but was forced to stop short as her climax found her. Her small frame clenched as she cried out, a soft sheen of sweat on her

forehead. With the sounds and the look of her, Leo came right along with her.

When she fell asleep in his arms shortly after, he could not believe that he could have ever wanted anything other than this.

## Chapter Nineteen



“**W**e need to alert the Constable, of course,” Aunt Anna demanded.

Tessa sighed. “We have not even yet finished our tea, Aunt. Perhaps we could have a bit more discussion before we attempt to throw my brother to the wolves yet again.”

Breakfast had been... uncomfortable thus far to say the very least. The only person who seemed to find everything very regular was Aurelius. He was the only one eating at a normal pace instead of picking at his food. He hummed softly every time there was a lull in the conversation or started to share the apparently abundant inside jokes that he now had with Uncle Theodore until the military man cracked a smile.

On the floor, curled into a happy ball behind the table was Colonel Floppy Ears. Resting on and around him were the three cats that Aurelius had decided were too dear and precious to him to leave behind when he had arrived this morning with servants to carry them in from the carriage along with all of their necessary belongings.

If only getting the rest of the family to get along would prove to be as simple as the dog and cats starting to like one another. As it stood, it seemed as if it would be a wholly impossible mission for all of them.

“I do not see what there is to even discuss. I will not sit here and break bread with the animal who was responsible for the death of my brother and sister-in-law!” Anna exclaimed as she dropped her knife and fork with an audible clatter.

Theodore's eyes narrowed, but Aurelius spoke instead.

"I know that it would be a simple matter for the Constable. However, if the boy is innocent, do you not think that he deserves the opportunity to clear his name for himself? He would not have come back if it were not for a good reason. Besides, he is family. Can you be so quick to condemn your own blood?"

"After all of the suffering and inconvenience that he had forced me to endure?" Anna was so upset that she felt moved to stand up in outrage as she spoke.

"And what inconvenience was that?"

"Her!" She thrust her arm in Tessa's direction more angrily than she meant to. It was not something that she had ever intended to say out loud despite the fact that they all knew she had felt that way for some time. "He mutilated his sister and then left us to deal with it!"

Tessa flinched. Her jaw fell slack as she did not know what to say. Knowing it and hearing it out loud were two different things.

Leo spoke next. His words were icy and laced with threatening undertones. "Be careful how you speak about my wife. You have enjoyed the benefits of her elevated station, have you not? Have you not leeches onto her every social invitation in an effort to further the prospects for your own daughter, all the while treating my stunning wife as if she were little more than an object in your home? You ought to be grateful that she has not barred you from her very presence. I certainly would support such a notion. It would be the very least that you deserve. It is only from the kindness of her heart that your own leech of a daughter is as well-known as she is. You should thank her."

Anna knew that he was correct. She could not formulate words against his accusations but her pride would not allow her to apologize either. She lowered herself slowly into her chair and focused her attention very firmly on the table setting in front of her.

“Now,” Leo continued, “the next person to say such horrible things to my wife will be removed forcefully, by me, from this house. I care not whose lips speak the words. Am I perfectly clear?”

Tessa reached over the table and took his hand. “That is not—”

“Yes. It is.” Leo closed the topic and shifted his focus very pointedly to Mortimer. “Now. Tell us plainly and clearly what happened the night of the fire. Spare no detail so that we might figure out how best to assist you.”

Mortimer nodded and took a deep drink of his tea to steady himself. “Very well... I will not deny that I allowed myself to fall into a spot of trouble. I made many mistakes that I am not proud of all those years ago—”

Tessa nodded encouragingly. Her love for her brother had never wavered, and it never would.

“That night, I had come home late and fallen asleep in the stables. I had not wished to hear my father chastise me for spending too much at the gambling den again. It was warm and I had just stabled my horse. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. I awoke to the sound of the horses crying. Their distress was the first thing. The very floor had shaken from the stamping of their hooves to try to free themselves. The smell of ash was the second thing that registered.” He closed his eyes as he spoke to let the memory overtake him.

*“Morty! Morty, where are you hiding?!”*

*A threatening sing-song voice called out for him. He hated to be called Morty; nobody with good intentions with him called him Morty. His first instinct was to hide in the barn, but the horses were panicking.*

*“Come out, come out wherever you are! I want my money, Morty!”*

*The voice was drawing nearer... it would find him here certainly. He would have to do something.*

*“Hey! You there! Go in through the servants’ entrance if you can – see what you can find inside! If we cannot find the bastard then there has to be something in this big ol’ fancy*

*rich house that will settle his debts. If you cannot get in... smoke them out."*

*Smoke them out? What did that mean? He did not understand.*

*Mortimer moved without thought of the consequences. If he simply left the house they would see him, and who knew what they would do to him. The smell of ash was getting stronger. What was on fire? No, he needed to focus. How to get out of here?*

*Mortimer went to each and every stall and untied all of the horses. He opened the gates as quickly and swiftly as possible before running to the stable doors as if his life depended on it. He ripped them open so that whoever was looking for him would have to dodge a dozen terrified horses charging for safety.*

*His intention had been to run out with them, perhaps snag one and ride away bareback until he could gather his wits about him. He certainly was not built to be a fighter. It was not something that he had ever been any good at. All thoughts of running away died when he noticed the state of the house. It was on fire. Not a small kitchen accident like had happened when he was a child, but a roaring inferno. His family was in there. He had to get inside.*

*Mortimer ran around the side of the building to the trellis that he had always climbed when he was younger to sneak in and out of his bedroom. He could access all of the bedrooms from there and get his family out. They did not know that he had left this evening. They would think that he was still in his rooms or asleep in his bed. They might think he was in danger of the fire and come for him. He had to help them. He had to do something to free them and make sure his family was safe—*

*He had only just started to climb when they found him. One of the thugs made a running leap for him. Mortimer kicked at him as hard as he could, but it did not dislodge the ruffian. He tried to climb anyway, but the weight was too much and he was forced from the trellis with so much force that the very thing came loose from the side of the building.*



*“No!” he screamed as he fought with everything that he had to get away from them. They punched and kicked at him, laughing and mocking him the whole time.*

*“See, Morty? This is what happens when people do not pay me my money. I sure hope that your pretty sister is not in there. Hmm? Would like to visit her if she makes it out. Bet she can work off some of your debt in one of my bath houses, hmm? How would you like that?” the foul man said. He leaned forward and braced his hands above his knees to speak in the most condescending tone possible. He scoffed as the sound of screams came from the house. “Which one do you think made that? One of the servants? Your dear ol’ Mama?”*

*Mortimer snarled with rage and surged forward so quickly that the two men holding him lost their grip. His forehead collided with the debtor so forcefully he was certain that he had broken the man’s nose, or worse. The debtor fell backward onto the grass with a sickening thump. Mortimer knew that he had split the skin of his head; he could feel hot, sticky blood running down the side of his face. He was lightheaded. There was so much ash in the air that he could hardly draw breath into his chest before coughing.*

*“Tessy!” he shouted. “Papa! Mama?!” He tried the servants’ door but it was barricaded from the inside and he could not budge it. He could hear the constables and the fire brigade coming this way. They would certainly be able to help, would they not? They had to be able to help. The sounds of their alarm were still too far away. Mortimer staggered around the house, looking for any way to make another entrance or to find where his family might be trying to escape from.*

*He hefted a large boulder in his hand and threw it through the dining room window. He covered his face with his arm and kicked at the glass until he was certain that he would be able to go inside. Smoke poured out into the night sky. The constables were nearer now. He pulled down one of the intact drapes and crossed to the kitchen to soak it with water to assist in getting his family out – this would cover her well.*

*“Tessy!” he called out again. She was young, and small – certainly she could make it out. The constables were here. He*

*raced out through the entrance that he had created and gestured to them wildly. "Here! Here! Over here!"*

*"Oi! You there! Put that down! What are you doing!" they called to him.*

*"Please, come and help me! My family is still inside!"*

*"You live here?" They took a look at him, covered in ash and muck from sleeping in the barn, and instantly concluded that he was a liar. He could see it written across their faces.*

*"Yes. Please. There is no time! I am Mortimer Windrop – my family, please, Sirs!" Mortimer begged and coughed.*

*One constable drew his baton and started to advance. "Did you do this?" he shouted accusingly.*

*"No! Please! There are people inside!"*

*Another scream in the distance – Tessy. He had to reach her before the constables did. He turned and swiftly rushed back into the house. He draped the wet fabric over himself as much as he was able. He could hear the constables shouting... not helping. They were chasing him and not searching for his family. They were going to arrest him; he could feel it. Constables out front. Thugs in the back. Tessie is in need of help. He wove his way through the wreckage of the house until he came to a dead end. He was trapped. Something collapsed behind him in the fire. He was going to die here.*

*"I do not recall how it was that I managed to get out of there... I think some part of my mind must have blacked the whole thing out, but when I came to, I was on a boat headed for Scotland. I remember seeing wanted papers with my name and face on them. In the span of one night, I had become the most wanted man in all of London by both the constables and the seedier sides of things, and I panicked." Mortimer's voice was thick with regret.*

*Tessa's hands covered the lower half of her face as she wept softly. She could only imagine how helpless he felt... how terrified he must have been to have resorted to such terrible measures.*

“I have no proof of my innocence. I have nothing but my word and the good opinion of family to fall back on. I reached a point in my solitude in Scotland where I felt that a lifetime of prison would have to be better than the way that I was living. And I missed my sister. I tried my very best to keep up with you from afar. I watched for mentions of you in the social papers or mentions of you in the tabloids. It was not much but it was all that kept me going.”

“You could have come back to me! I would have spoken for you! I have spoken for you on many occasions,” Tessa said.

“I... I know that now. But I was so frightened of the pit that I had dug for myself I needed the time to clarify myself... to put old habits to rest and restore myself.”

“And have you done that?” Leo asked seriously. “Are you restored?”

Mortimer nodded. “As much as I can be.”

“My old friend, it pains me to think that you lived so much on your own. Not only that, but we are now brothers joined by marriage. I would see you returned to your former vibrancy. I shall pay your debts, no matter the sum, but on the condition that you never gamble ever again. Not even a passing wager among friends. It is a sickness. A black spot on your soul that you cannot fight. Can you swear to me that you shall never gamble again?” Leo offered.

It was a very generous offer. Leo did not know the whole extent of Mortimer’s debts, but in order for them to still stand today, they must be significant.

“Y... yes. Of course. Though I do not deserve it. The offer is too generous—” Mortimer countered, shame still in his eyes.

“If you will not accept it on behalf of yourself, then accept it on behalf of your beloved sister who has missed her brother very, very deeply. Nobody deserves happiness more than her. She has suffered enough.” Leo’s comment was aimed primarily at Mortimer but applied to everybody else at the table as well. “Are there any objections?”

Nobody said a single word.

“Then it is settled. Grandfather, I will need your assistance in clearing Mortimer’s name and restoring the Windrop legacy to its former glory. I see no reason why men of our status should not be able to swiftly accomplish such a thing.” Leo lifted his glass of orange juice to the room. “To new beginnings.”

One by one, they all lifted their glasses into a toast. “To new beginnings!”

All except Sophie.

## Chapter Twenty



**T** *hree Months Later...*

“It feels so strange to walk out in public once more,”  
Mortimer confessed.

“It did not seem to take you very long to become properly adjusted to your old life.” Tessa agreed happily as they walked arm and arm. Resuming their walks had been one of the very first things that they had started to do once he was cleared with the constables. Having the Duke and Duchess as family certainly helped in such matters. Given that the constables did not have much in the way of proof on their side either, there was nothing to hold against him.

“It is a wonder what a proper bed and good food can do for one’s complexion, is it not?” Mortimer teased and gestured to his handsome features. He had filled out quite a bit in the time that he had come to stay with them. Tessa had insisted. Certainly, he could have found a place in their uncle’s home, but she had been without her brother for long enough now. She was going to keep him where she could see him for every meal of the day and ensure that he was coping well for himself.

“Yes, yes, we all know that you are very handsome, Brother.” Tessa laughed. Her face ached constantly now due to how very much she found herself smiling.

Mortimer turned to glance at his sister in order to make another teasing comment, but his eyes lingered on the damaged portion of her skin and the amusement faded from his eyes. “I do not see how you can stand to be in my

company. If I were you, I would be cross with me for all infinity.”

Tessa lifted her hand to touch her scarred cheek. “I have been angry over many things over the course of the years, but never once have I blamed you for them. Certainly, that would have been simpler. The only thing that I ever held you responsible for was leaving me to suffer Sophie all on my own. That was a cruelty far more difficult to endure than a little bit of pain.”

“Does it hurt terribly?”

“It did at first—” she started to explain and cut herself short. “I would rather not dwell on uncomfortable things in the past. At the time, the pain in my heart was nearly as much as the pain I suffered externally... they all run together. You were not the one who started the fire. Debt or not, it takes a particular sort of monster to set fire to the home of a sleeping family. You could not have known that they could be so depraved. You did your best to help me. It is a wonder that you did not die of smoke inhalation or the house falling on top of you.”

“Even still, it is surreal that so many things can happen and now we are having a walk as if nothing had ever transpired,” Mortimer said. “Some days I feel more adjusted than I do on others.”

“I will agree with that.” She snorted with laughter. “Certainly you could not have been feeling very adjusted when you dared to propose to *Sophie* of all people! You do not even like her!”

Mortimer blushed with embarrassment. “I confess, that was a moment of weakness. I proposed for all of the wrong reasons. I wished for Uncle Theodore to forgive me. I thought that perhaps offering marriage and status as an olive branch might have... it was stupid.”

“I think that might have been the biggest blow to your pride yet, Brother. You shall forever have to live with the knowledge that not only did you *propose* to Sophie – she *rejected* you,” Tessa said wickedly.

“Yes, yes. Have your laugh while I die of mortification.” He sighed. “Has anyone heard from her in the recent weeks?”

Tessa heaved a long-suffering sigh. “No. According to Leo’s grandfather, Aunt Anna is still in a state of mourning. She has donned her black dress and has absolutely no plans of taking it off any time soon. He claims that she has even gone so far as to cancel not one, but *two* of her embroidery gatherings. It is all the scandal.”

“How can she be in a period of mourning when her daughter is still alive?”

“You know our aunt. She claims that she no longer has a daughter for acting the way that she did. With the scandal of being caught, skirts lifted, with a Marquess who refused to marry her? The only way that she would be able to remain in Society herself would be to act as if in mourning. I believe that she is hoping to garner pity from the women she thinks are her friends, but I would not be surprised if she did not cancel her beloved meetings by choice but rather because nobody chose to attend. One pain is easier for her to endure.”

“Perhaps. I have tried to call on her, but she still refuses to see me,” Mortimer confessed.

“I am certain that she will come around once another scandal shakes the *ton*. After all, she is as much to blame for her daughter’s ruin as Sophie herself. All of those horrible women like to plot and scheme about the best way to trap a husband—” Tessa shook her head.

“Perhaps it was the fact that Sophie was never told the word ‘no’ growing up that she felt the prospect of a man rejecting her preposterous. Now she must live with that consequence,” Mortimer figured.

“She blames me, of course.”

“How can she possibly blame you for something that you had absolutely nothing to do with?”

Tessa chuckled. “Well, she is of the opinion that I *stole* Leo from her – that the only reason he could have ever been interested in me was through some scheme or the other. She is mad that my ‘trap’ worked where hers did not. The letters were becoming increasingly vicious. I do feel bad for her.

Even though we have our differences, she is still my cousin. I wish that she knew we would support her through this.”

“Perhaps it is best that she remains with Aurelius for the time being so that his calm, albeit eccentric, nature can soothe her inner demons. Jealousy is such an ugly thing.”

Mortimer and Tessa rounded the final bit of their afternoon walk and started to head back up into their home. Then they saw the constables’ carriage was out front of the house.

“Whatever could they be doing here?” Tessa asked. Mortimer halted. “Do not be afraid, Brother, they are not here for you. I would never let them take you.” She winked cheekily for good measure before pulling him inside.

The constables were just on their way out. They paused to bow respectfully to the Lady of the Manor as they left. “Evening, Your Grace.”

Leo stood in the foyer, grinning.

“What were they here for?” Tessa asked as she crossed to her husband.

“They came bearing very good news, actually.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Do tell! Do not keep us in suspense all afternoon!” Tessa laughed.

“They have caught the men actually responsible for the fire. They matched men to the descriptions that Mortimer gave from his account of that horrible night, and we were able to cross-reference a list of suspects from the gambling records. They were not overly happy that it was from something so unsavory, but the men have been apprehended. Justice can finally be served,” Leo explained happily. “They came here to tell me in person that it was over. Well and truly over.”

“Truly?” Tessa exclaimed and happily embraced her husband. She had never wanted to know their faces. She did not wish to have another thing to have nightmares about, but she would rest easier knowing that it would not happen to her again. The



men would not be able to come and spark a fire in their new home to injure her once more.

“Truly,” Leo confirmed. “It makes me think that perhaps in honor of their capture, it might be time to revisit the idea of repairing your family home? I know that you might not wish to reside there ever again, Mortimer, and we certainly are in no rush to have you on your own, but it seems a shame to leave such a wonderful home to rot.”

“I confess I have been toying around with a similar idea,” Mortimer answered.

“Oh?”

“Yes. You are correct, and I do not think that I will ever be able to reside in that house any more than I imagine that Tessa should wish to live there. It is simply filled with too many memories. I do not think I could live there without being haunted by the past or the memories of our parents... which is why I have been trying to puzzle out the very best way to inquire as to your thoughts on repurposing the building.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it is a large enough building that I think could be repurposed into a clinic or some sort of shelter. I am far from the final planning stages, naturally, but if a place such as what I have in mind had existed those years ago, I would have had somewhere to turn to. A shelter or safe haven for those in need... perhaps a small clinic with a doctor. We could have lodgings upstairs and the clinic where the old ballroom had once been,” Mortimer said. “I would use my own money, of course. I would like to spend it on something good, something worthwhile.”

Tessa and Leo exchanged looks and knowing smiles.

“You hate it.” Mortimer slumped. “I knew it. It was a silly idea.”

“No! I think it makes perfect sense, actually,” Tess assured him. “It would be right to have the space used for good. I think that is a perfectly wonderful idea.”

“It will take a lot of planning but I welcome a new challenge to keep my mind occupied,” Leo agreed. “If you would like my assistance, that is.”

Mortimer beamed with pride. “I would welcome it gladly. I was also thinking of perhaps purchasing another one or two of the abandoned properties in the area. I think that your grandfather would be very pleased if we turned one of them into some sort of animal shelter or refuge as well, for all of his cats.”

Leo laughed. “I think you are right. He would do anything for those furry beasts. I still cannot believe that he and Theodore have become such fast friends. It is hard now to tell who is closer – the owners or their pets. Who would have thought that Colonel Floppy Ears would have such a nurturing side to him?”

Tessa laughed. “It is a rather comical picture to witness.”

Leo wrapped one arm around his wife and the other around Mortimer. “Well, we might as well get started. There is much to do.”

A loving wife, a family, friends, and now a new venture to help those around them... what more could a man ever need?

# Epilogue

## ONE YEAR LATER



“**T**his is my very first party, I will have you know. I think that I am allowed to be a little nervous under the current circumstances.” Tessa confessed as she fussed over the same flower arrangement for what felt like possibly the hundredth time. Over and over again she had meddled with them. She had had the whole thing replaced yesterday even. “The servants likely think that I have gone mad...that I have lost my mind.”

Leo leaned against the nearest wall with his arms folded across his chest as he watched her work. “I doubt it. They are all impossibly fond of you, I will have you know.”

“They were fond of me before, you have no reason to think their good opinion of me still stands given how hard I have been on all of them for the past few weeks,” Tessa said with a hint of exasperation.

“I am unsure as to why you have allowed yourself to get quite so worked up over this whole ordeal,” Leo commented.

Tessa shot him a look over her shoulder that said she would murder him right now if he did not amend that statement.

Leo chuckled. “I only mean that it is just a dinner party for our closest family... it is not a ball. Even if something were to somehow, some way go wrong, they would not hold it against you. Besides, as Sophie has declined the invitation I have a feeling that you are about to be named honorary daughter of Anna just so that she has someone that she can speak to.”

Tessa’s shoulders slumped. “You are joking... I hope—”

“Yes. I am joking.” Leo pushed off of the wall and walked toward her. He cupped her shoulders in his hands and massaged them softly. “What is really the matter? I have never seen you like this. Perhaps if you would allow me to be in on the secret that you are wishing to share with everybody tonight then I can be of some assistance to you? I offer myself up to you, Darling, whatever you need.”

“If I tell you now, then it would hardly be a surprise would it?” Tessa teased but finally stopped messing about with the flowers. She reached up and placed her hands on top of Leo’s shoulders. “I just want everything to go perfectly.”

“There is nothing wrong with that, Darling. However, working yourself up into a tizzy is not going to help. I can have the servants draw you a hot bath if you should like?” Leo offered. “I would even be more than happy to accompany you into said bath—”

Tessa grinned and shook her head. The doctor had advised her to be careful with how many hot baths she took so early into the process. She had never done this before... everything was all new. In truth, she was dying to talk to Leo about it. The doctor had advised her to wait. He had said that with all of the trauma she had in her medical history that she needed to wait until she had missed her courses for three months before sharing the news with anyone... just in case.

“There is something that you are not telling me, My Love,” Leo said when she did not answer him. “I will not pry as to what it is... but I hope that you know that whatever it is that is troubling you so is a burden that I will gladly help you carry. You never need to face anything else alone – never again. Whatever it is, you only need to let me know how to help you.”

Tessa looked deeply into the eyes of the man that she loved. “I know. I am not keeping anything from you... I merely wished to make my announcement to the whole family at once but now that the day is here... I am so nervous that I am nearly tied in fits.”

Leo was not sure where this was going and allowed her room to talk.

Tessa inhaled slowly and pulled Leo's hands from her shoulders and lowered them instead to the space just below her belly button. She placed his hands above her womb and held them there.

Even then it took Leo a moment to understand.

"I know that you might feel disappointed at first... it was not the future that you said you wanted even though it is one of my fiercest desires. Now that it has happened it might take you time to come around to the notion... but I understand. I am prepared to give you whatever time you need to come to terms with how our lives are about to change yet again. I hope in time you come to think of this as a change for the better—"

It clicked halfway through her rambling. Leo's eyes widened slowly as he fully registered. She was with child. They were going to have a child. He was going to be a father. He felt as if he were in a frozen state of shock for a long moment. His fingers slowly splayed over her abdomen as he sank slowly to one knee in front of her.

"You are with child?"

Tessa stopped talking and simply nodded. "Yes. The midwife and the doctor are certain. We believe about three months."

"We are going to be parents?" Leo had never once envisioned himself as a parent. He had never considered what he would be like apart from the deeply ingrained desire to be absolutely nothing like his father. Some small irrational part of his brain had resigned himself to the possibility that he was simply unable to have children as he and Tessa had been consummating their marriage regularly. He had started, on some level, to refer to the promise that he had once made to his mother as a curse instead. She had cursed him as being unable to have children. It was something he reminded himself of any time that he and Tessa so much as disagreed on something.

Curse broken.

Tessa was with child. She was going to have their child. A small human that looked like a mixture of the two of them was soon to be out walking this world. A smile stretched from ear to ear.

Every bit of the promise he made and how firmly he had clung to it... modeled his life around it seemed so absolutely silly now that he had all of the things that had once terrified him.

“We are going to be parents.” Leo pulled the fabric of her dress taut over her stomach as if somehow he would see a bump or swelling that had not been there earlier this morning when they had made love before breakfast. Naturally, there was nothing there but her normal skin – but he imagined that he could feel it. He turned his head to the side and pressed an ear into her stomach happily as he laughed in disbelief. “We did it. Hello, little one, you cannot hear me yet... but I am going to be your father in only a couple of short months!”

Tessa laughed and wiped away a tear. “You are not angry?”

“Angry?” Leo jerked his head away from his wife’s stomach and his brow furrowed. “How could I ever be angry with you over something like this?” He rose to his feet and took her face in his hands. He wiped her tears with his thumbs and held her face so that she was forced to look at him. “I promised you everything that you have ever desired, did I not?”

“You did.” Tessa laughed through the tears happily.

“Are you happy?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Very much so.”

“Then it does not matter what our family says or thinks on the subject... we are starting a family.” Leo lifted her up into the air and spun her around happily as she laughed. He lowered her in his arms slowly, until his lips were a breath from hers. “Incandescently happy, that was part of the bargain. Are you that?”

“I am, My Love, that and so much more.”

*The End?*

## Extended Epilogue



Would you like to know how **Tessa and Leonard's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

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PREVIEW: ALONE WITH THE  
BEASTLY DUKE



## Chapter One



Loud footsteps jarred Jasmine awake from the realm of the book she was reading.

“Who stole my hat?” an angry voice shouted.

Jasmine looked up from her book to see her angry brother in the middle of the drawing room. She sighed.

*One simply cannot have a moment of quiet in this house.*

Jasmine’s household was always bustling with some issue or another as the five siblings of Thornhill House could hardly get along given their different personalities. William, Jasmine’s two-and-twenty-year-old brother, who was also the heir of Thornhill, was perfectly obsessed with his clothing.

Rose, at nine-and-ten, was the first daughter, but she only took interest in science and was always conducting experiments which their parents deeply frowned upon. She had her debut two years ago but was yet to be engaged due to her feisty spirit and big mouth.

Cassian and Daphne, the mischievous twins, were ten-and-six but they still played pranks like they were twelve. Cassian was often the mastermind while Daphne executed the pranks. When they were not pulling expensive pranks and vexing other members of the family, they were an adorable pair.

“Jasmine, did you take my top hat?” William asked her.

Jasmine shook her head. Jasmine was the middle child and, at just eight-and-ten, an official wallflower. She often joked with her friends that if she disappeared for a week, her family

would not take notice. Neither would the gentlemen of Ton who barely spared her a second glance. Jasmine often wondered if that had to do with her petite frame and unremarkable features.

“I did not,” she replied before she returned to her book, eager to avoid William’s wrath.

“Rose did you—”

“And what would I do with your top hat?” Rose, her older sister, said with scorn. “Perhaps, you should ask the twins. Or you should stop wasting your precious money on such useless things.”

Cassian and Daphne, who were chasing each other around the drawing room, giggled. William huffed and puffed with the self-importance of an heir.

“The hat cost a fortune, I would have you know,” William reprimanded the twins.

Rose scoffed in jest. Rose was indeed annoyed, but she was even more so with William. There was no love lost between the two eldest children. Jasmine knew William would not take kindly to being made jest of.

“You would not understand how important appearances are for a gentleman.” William turned his attention to Rose. “Perhaps if they stole one of those quizzing glasses you so much adore you would know how foolish it is that you spend your money on such things.”

“What else would I buy other than the things that interest me?” Rose retorted.

“Maybe pretty dresses like other ladies your age?” William shrugged.

Rose scoffed again.

“And what would I do with the dresses? Wear them to a bothersome ball? When I can conduct my experiments and learn exciting things? Tell me, William, do you even enjoy wearing your hat inside the house or do you simply do it because you want to appear important?”

Jasmine rolled her eyes. Rose loathed having to wear dresses and attend balls, and she always made sure everyone was reminded of the fact. Rose's words seemed to fluster William because he suddenly became red in the face.

"I do," William responded eventually, "and maybe you would have caught the eye of an eligible bachelor if you took more interest in wearing dresses and attending balls than wasting your time studying rocks and herbs."

Jasmine froze, Daphne gasped, and almost tripped over Cassian, and everyone else was silent. Rose's imminent spinsterhood was a subject that most of them stayed away from since it seemed to sadden their mother.

"William, leave your sister be," the Countess scolded as she entered the drawing room. "Now, let us have breakfast."

Jasmine was relieved that her mother was in time to separate her quibbling siblings.

"Rose is simply unpleasant, and I will not have her disrespect me. I am the heir of Thornhill and as such..." William's words continued on as he stormed off to the breakfast room.

Jasmine made her way to the breakfast room while trying to hide her book behind her dress.

"You cannot enter with your book, Jasmine," the Countess chided.

Jasmine groaned before leaving her book in the drawing room. Now, she had to actually pay attention at the table while her siblings quibbled and fought with each other.

They all settled at the table, waiting for the Earl. William, however, was still mumbling under his breath about his missing top hat.

"You are the heir and the eldest, William. How do you suppose to lead your brothers and sisters when you act so childish over a hat?" the Countess asked.

"Indeed, William! Perhaps, getting a wife would help you grow up," Rose continued.

William seethed as he clenched his fist tightly and glared at his sister.

“And you should get married with haste lest you become an old spinster that no eligible bachelor would spare a gaze upon,” William bit back.

The Countess shuddered. “Rose will not become an old spinster. She will catch the eye of an eligible bachelor, and they will get married and have a lot of babies.”

“If only Rose had gotten betrothed to Lord Glastonbury,” Cassian lamented.

Rose’s eyes narrowed in anger.

“I would rather go to a ball every day than marry him. Lord George is simply a blubbering fool,” Rose stormed.

Lord George was an eligible bachelor who was absolutely smitten by Rose. Rose, on the other hand, did not seem to care for the Lord. He had paid visits to the Thornhill house to no avail. Jasmine believed that Lord George would make a fine husband for Rose, but Rose was simply not interested in being betrothed or married.

“Lord George is from a noble home, and he cuts a fine figure for a gentleman. It would be best if you thought about it, dear,” the Countess suggested.

“Rose will marry whomever she loves,” a booming voice that Jasmine immediately recognized as the Earl’s decreed.

“I do not wish to love anyone, Papa,” Rose replied. “Especially not the blubbering Earl.”

Jasmine could not understand why Rose was simply adamant about not getting married. Ever since Jasmine had read her first romance book, she had been daydreaming about the time when she would finally meet a man who would give her butterflies in her belly like she read about.

“Thomas, dearest,” the Countess breathed as the Earl took his seat beside her.

“I am finally done with the morning paperwork, darling,” he responded, gazing lovingly at his wife and taking her hands

into his.

For a moment, Jasmine felt her heart tighten as she looked at her parents and the open admiration they had for each other. Theirs was a love so pure that Jasmine knew she could only be lucky to experience it. It was such love that she only read about in her romance books. The Earl of Thornhill was well-known for adoring every single one of his wife's quirks, the greatest of them being her love of flowers. This was why he had indulged her when she had insisted that they named their children after her favorite blooms: William, Rose, Jasmine, Cassian, and Daphne.

"I too used to think I could not love anyone, Rose, but that changed when I met your mother," the Earl related. "Her beauty struck me like an arrow to the heart, and her lovely face was the only thing I could think about. I knew at once that I had to make her my wife. And you know she is not an easy person. Have I told you the story about the lilies and the lake?"

"Papa, you have told us this story so much, we all can recite it by heart," Rose complained.

Jasmine did not quite agree with Rose. Her parents told the story of their meeting every other day, but she never got weary of hearing it in the same manner that she never got weary of reading romance books.

"I enjoy hearing your stories, Papa," Jasmine quipped.

The Earl smiled at Jasmine. "And you know I love to tell—"

"Father! Daphne pulled my hair," Cassian cried out, interrupting the Earl. Jasmine fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"Leave your brother be, Daphne."

"But, Papa, he pulled my hair first," Daphne protested while their parents tried to appease the twins.

"Cassian! Daphne!" the Countess said sternly. "We are at breakfast! You should comport yourself in a proper manner. Daphne, you will make your debut next year, yet you act like a toddler. And Cassian, you are almost a gentleman now; why do you not take the example of your brother and start behaving like one?" Rose snorted loudly, and both William and the

Countess turned a sharp eye on her that made her stifle whatever she was about to say.

“You are all to escort your mother to Bond Street later today, and I expect you all to be on your best behavior. Have I made myself clear? We do not need people starting to gossip about us,” the Earl concluded his reprimand to Cassian and Daphne then turned his attention to his morning paper.

Jasmine’s eyes fell at how quickly she had lost her father’s attention. It had always been this way. Her parents never gave her attention, and on the rare times when they noticed her, one of her siblings would cut in. She was used to being quite invisible after so many years.

“Can I buy a new pretty dress, Mama? Cassian has ruined all my dresses because he always makes me walk out when it rains. He wants to look for flowers for...Agh!” Cassian kicked Daphne under the table so that she would not uncover his secret, but their mother cut in once more.

“I am afraid not, Daphne. We need to buy some warm clothes for our travel up North. And do not even imagine getting out in the rain when we get there. I shall not have you both catching your deaths in the freezing cold.”

“How long will the trip be? I need to be prepared in case of an emergency and—” William was once again trying to lead the family, and Rose groaned in response.

“William, Mama, and Papa have already taken care of everything. Not to mention that we are going to have most of our servants with us. The castle is new, and I imagine, in need of a good cleanup.”

“Then you should not forget to bring your broom with you.”

Jasmine refused to pay attention to the rest of the conversation as she was not partial to the excitement shared between the rest of her family regarding their latest addition to their arsenal of properties. Her Father had outdone himself and bought her Mother a castle up north in which they were all expected to live for the following month. Jasmine would gladly lock

herself up in that castle by herself if it meant that she could find some peace and quiet away from her boisterous family.

Jasmine finished her breakfast quietly, and once the twins left the table, she also followed suit, so she could sneak off and bury her head in her book once more, hoping to escape this reality. Only, she did not find her book when she returned to the drawing room.

“Are you looking for your book?” Daphne asked as Cassian waved the book in the air. The twins took off, running.

*How did they manage to get in here before me?*

“Return my book this minute!” Jasmine yelled in vain.

The twins did not listen to shouts or admonishments when they chose to be mischievous. Exasperated, Jasmine took off after them and began to chase them around the house.

“I cannot believe you are still doing foolish things like that! When will you finally grow up?” Jasmine was finally saved by her mother, who collected the book from the twins and gave it to her.

“Daphne, Cassian, quit fooling around. Jasmine, we are all going to Bond Street to buy boots and warm clothes for our trip,” the Countess asserted.

Jasmine groaned with displeasure. She hated going out, especially with her family. They usually spent a really long time in the shops, time that she could spend reading and getting lost in the imaginary world of the characters in her romance novels.

Soon enough, they were all in the carriage, heading to the shops. The twins squabbled while the Countess tried to get them to stay still. William blew off a speck of dust from his top hat that he had finally found in the horse stable where the twins had hidden it. Rose looked like she would rather be in her room, studying plants.

When they finally got to the shops, William slipped off to another street with no one but Jasmine noticing. William never told anyone what he was up to, but Jasmine was beginning to be curious.



*Where is William going in such a rush?*

“Cassian, do not touch that!” the Countess yelled.

Jasmine did not quite enjoy following her mother and siblings to the shops, but her eyes perked up when she saw a bookshop in front of the modiste’s where her mother was buying fabric. Books were her favorite, and after her father’s library, a bookshop was her next favorite place.

She stood at the entrance of the bookshop, looking at all the books and wishing that she could read them all. Jasmine was lost between following her mother to the modiste’s and exploring the bookshop.

*Mama will stay long at the modiste’s. I should look at the books while she shops for clothes.*

Jasmine slipped into the bookshop without her mother being any the wiser. The bookshop was a small and dainty one, but it contained everything that gladdened Jasmine’s heart. So many books were in the shop, and she had only read just a few. She wished she could live in that bookstore forever. If Jasmine could have her way, she would buy all the books and read them in her room, but society dictated that she spent her time refining trivial accomplishments like embroidery.

Jasmine began to browse book after book, so excited at being surrounded by so many books that she soon forgot about the rest of her family.



“Hmm!” Axel sighed in satisfaction as he lay in the lake.

He waded for a moment before closing his eyes and enjoying the cold water of the lake and the chirping of the birds. A busy man, Axel scarcely had time for relaxation. This was why he enjoyed visiting the cold lake on his property every morning.

A swim in the lake would often leave him refreshed and happy, but a jarring shriek woke him up from the brief calmness.

A loud voice shouted, “*Return my book this instant!*”

The shout was followed by a commotion that Axel could not make sense of. Grudgingly, he rose from the calming lake and headed for the house. Axel enjoyed solitude, and this was one of the few things that he loved about his house. His neighbors, on the other hand, were simply barbarians.

“What can one do to get a moment of quiet in this bloody house?” Axel growled.

“Your Grace,” his butler curtsied when he met him on the way.

“What wild animal caused this commotion?” Axel asked his butler.

“It is the Thornhills, Your Grace,” his butler replied. “They are an eccentric lot and—”

“Indeed, I can tell.”

“Your Grace, if you so wish, I can ask them to respect their neighbors and not cause a racket,” his butler continued.

Axel thought about it for a moment. He did not know these people personally as he avoided all kinds of relationships with members of the Ton and their silly social events. All he knew was that they had several children who screamed like demons every once in a while.

“Do not bother. They will never stop, and I cannot live in such chaos anyway,” Axel shrugged, “I shall be better off living in the countryside.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

The Duke entered his quiet and cold house and was immediately filled with envy and sadness: envy at what his loud neighbors had and sadness at what his life used to be. There used to be a time when Axel’s house was filled with such merry noise and a warmth that made him long for home even when he was far away. At merely his twenty-and-seven, however, his house was just like his heart, cold and empty.

Axel shook himself out of his reverie, but this proved abortive when he accidentally knocked over a vase.

“Bloody hell,” he swore under his breath as he bent to straighten the vase that had, fortunately, remained intact.

It was then that he remembered how it had come to be in his house.

His dead wife had commissioned an artisan to decorate the house, and she had personally picked out the vase because she loved it so. He could not help but remember her yet again: her lovely hair, beautiful smile, and the regretful and unfortunate event that led to her death.

The Duke sighed and steadied himself as his heart beat faster.

*I cannot bear to be in this house a moment longer!*

“Maxwell, tell the coachman to get the carriage ready,” he told the butler, and soon enough, he was in the carriage.

“Where to, Your Grace?” his coachman asked.

“Take me to Bond Street,” he responded.

Bond Street was a bubbly and commercial part of town, and Axel knew he would have no time to think about his dead wife and his guilt in the shops’ noise.

Axel had scarcely spent a moment at Bond Street when he began to regret his decision.

*“How dare he...?”*

*“...Nordic Beast.”*

*“Is it true? The story about the late Duchess...”*

Everywhere he went, his presence was followed by judging gazes and hostile whispers. Mothers took their toddlers away when he walked past as though he were a beast who would pounce upon the children and devour them, and men steered out of his path as though he were a leper. While he was used to this reaction, it always bothered him.

While Axel was unperturbed, he could not hide the fact that he did not like the negative reaction. He was relieved when he came upon a bookstore and quickly slipped in to avoid the judging eyes of the members of the Ton.

## Chapter Two



**C**lang! Clang!

The jarring sound of the bell reminded Jasmine that she had been browsing in the bookstore for far too long. Her fears were further confirmed when she glanced over the window to the modiste's and saw neither her mother nor her siblings in there.

"Mama must be worried sick about me," she realized before her eyes caught a book on the other end of the bookstore.

She gasped.

"That book! I had been looking everywhere for it; I must buy it at once," she said to herself. In her excitement to pick up the new book, she dropped the other novel in her hand on a stool. She moved over to the last bookshelf to pick up the new book, having now forgotten all about her mother and siblings again.

Jasmine was disappointed when she returned to the book she had earlier placed on the stool, only to find it gone. It claimed to be a very passionate story about a lady who fell in love with a deformed man. She had turned around in confusion, looking for her book, when she slammed into what seemed like a giant.

Jasmine took a step back only to see the hugest man she had ever laid her eyes upon. His striking blue eyes, long blond hair, and broad shoulders gave him a beastly look that intimidated Jasmine but also piqued her interest.

"Could you be so kind to move out of my way?" The man spoke in a voice so deep it would make her father's voice sound like a mere whisper.

His voice brought Jasmine back to reality, and it was then that she saw that in his hand was her missing book.

“I shall move out of...” she began, only for her voice to come out croaky. She nervously cleared her throat and continued. “I shall move out of your way, sir, the moment you give me my book,” she finished, holding her hands out indignantly to him.

There was a moment of silence during which the blue-eyed giant looked down at her like she was some jester, a small smile creaking at the corner of his mouth. This angered Jasmine.

“Hand me my book this instance, sir,” she ordered, trying to make her voice sound deep but failing.

“If it is indeed your book, then I shall hand it over to you,” he agreed, clearly amused.

“It is my book,” she continued.

“Then show me the proof,” he said.

“Proof?”

“Yes, an engraving of your name on the book, perhaps?” he suggested.

Jasmine knew now that the strange man was taunting her.

“I would have bought it if you had not stolen it from me,” she huffed angrily.

“Stolen? If you have not bought it, then I cannot possibly steal it, can I?” he continued.

“I know you simply took the book to vex me,” she said.

The man gave a throaty laugh that made his eyes crinkle at the sides with amusement. As much as he vexed Jasmine, his laughter sounded like a melody to her ears.

“To vex you? How was I to know that you had even taken the book before I got here?” he asked.

Jasmine blinked rapidly as she struggled to justify her accusation.

“Perhaps, you like to go to bookstores to vex ladies,” she managed to say.

“And perhaps you like to accuse people you do not know,” he responded.

“Might you be so kind as to give me the book, so I can go to my family?” she pleaded.

“I shall not as I would like to buy the book for myself,” he refused flatly.

Jasmine laughed as she regarded the beastly man in amusement. “You do not.”

“Is that so, My Lady?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. “I would suppose I know more about myself than you do.”

“A grown man like yourself would not read a romance book, not one like this one,” she retorted.

“You, My Lady, seem to know a lot about grown men and their mannerisms. Shall I call you a connoisseur of gentlemen, then?” he asked.

Jasmine gasped and gaped at him as she realized what he meant. She blushed at the intensity with which he stared at her, and she blushed.

“Your mind is indeed indecent, sir,” Jasmine scolded, blushing.

“How so?”

“I said that a grown man like yourself would not read a romance book because I have a brother, and he only busies himself with books about business and finance,” she explained.

“Indeed,” he said, but he looked like he did not believe her.

“I promise. I do not know a lot about men, and—”

“I would love it if you would move out of my way,” he cut in.

This angered Jasmine. “I shall not. Not until you give me my book. The book is mine; I saw it first.”

The mysterious man sighed and ran a hand through his thick mane of hair. For a moment, Jasmine was enamored by his long, flowing hair.

“You are a stubborn one, aren’t you?”

“Not any more stubborn than the man that stole my book,” she replied.

“You know, for such a puny lady, you have such a huge mouth,” he said. “Very few people in London would accost me as you have.”

Jasmine’s eyes narrowed with anger.

“And for such a giant man with...with long hair, you have such...such an unlikely hobby of reading lady’s books,” she responded.

The blue-eyed man continued as though he had not heard her.

“It is such a pity that such a pretty mouth of yours is used to spout insults and not for something better,” he lamented.

Jasmine gasped and clasped a hand on her mouth. Her face heated up, and she could tell that her face was red.

“How...how dare you?” she scolded, flustered and embarrassed. “You are far from being a gentleman.”

“I am certain a lot of people in the Ton would agree with you,” he observed, a small frown taking over his face for a brief moment.

“You may keep the book,” she conceded before walking away angrily.

“I must thank you for giving me your permission,” he replied as he gave another hearty laugh.

Jasmine nearly turned back to give the insufferable man a piece of her mind, but she instead walked away. She knew he surely was a troublemaker who only sought to vex her.

It was when Jasmine left the bookshop that she realized that she had stayed in the bookshop for far too long. The modiste’s was no longer crowded, and her family was not in sight.

Jasmine walked around the street, hoping to find her family, but she did not.

Dread and fear began to slowly creep into her mind.

She headed to the modiste's, where her mother had been.

"Excuse me, have you seen Lady Thornhill?" she asked.

"My Lady, Lady Thornhill has just left. Should you make haste, I suppose you may catch up with her before she gets to the carriage," the modiste suggested.

Jasmine hurried toward the direction of the carriage, and when she rounded a corner, she saw her mother stuffing Cassian and Daphne into the carriage. Relieved that she would not be left behind, Jasmine quickened her steps. However, she was shocked when the carriage began to move.

Jasmine did not want to be left behind, so she ran to the carriage, hoping that she could catch up.

"Mother! William!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, but the buyers and sellers on the street easily overshadowed her small voice.

It was only when the carriage pulled out of sight that she finally stopped running.

"Mama!" she groaned as she looked around frantically to see anyone who could help her.

She saw no one that bore a resemblance to anyone she knew.

"How am I to get home now?" she cried, bemoaning her fate.

The sun was gradually setting now, and Jasmine knew that Bond Street was not a good place to be out late at night, even as a person from a noble family, let alone a lady. Jasmine had heard tales of scoundrels attacking nobles at night in this part of the town. Therefore, she knew she had to be out of Bond Street by nightfall.

She quickly searched for a chaise to take her home and was happy to get one. "Take me to the Thornhill's house," she ordered the coachman.

"50 shillings!" the coachman replied.



Jasmine gasped. “That is quite costly, wouldn’t you agree?” she asked the coachman.

“That is the cost,” he replied.

“I only have twenty shillings. I...” Jasmine cursed herself for spending nearly all her money on buying books.

“T’is 50 shillings.” Jasmine groaned in frustration.

“Would you be so kind as to take me to the Thornhill’s mansion? My mother shall give you the 50 shillings the moment we get there,” she pleaded.

“I would be a fool to believe a chit like you,” the coachman replied.

“How dare you! I am no chit. I am Lady Jasmine, daughter of the Earl of Thornhill, and I will not have you...”

“A real Lady of the Thornhill Family would have a mere 50 shillings, wouldn’t you agree?” the coachman argued.

Jasmine sighed. The coachman was right; she would have indeed had more than 50 shillings at hand if she had not spent all her money at the bookstore.

Knowing that she could not change the coachman’s mind, she decided to walk all the way back to her home. She soon realized though that the endeavor was futile when she could not find her way home.

Darkness was beginning to set in, and everywhere she went, scoundrels leered and stared at her from the dark corners. Jasmine knew she had to do something lest she spent the night on the streets. She shuddered with fright as the thought crossed her mind.

“Mother will surely come back for me... or William,” Jasmine said under her breath, even though she knew it was not true.

She had always been the child that the Earl and the Countess constantly overlooked. William, being the heir, got everyone’s attention, and even Rose got their parent’s attention with her rebellious ways. The twins, on the other hand, got attention with their mischief. Jasmine was always left alone, which was why she found solace in books. When she was younger, she

often slipped off to read or daydream, and her parents would come looking for her, but as soon as the twins were born, no one seemed to notice her absence anymore.

Tears welled up in Jasmine's eyes, and she attempted to blink them away but to no avail. She finally gave up and let the tears flow while she walked around the strange streets of London.

*This day cannot possibly get any worse.*

"Connoisseur of gentlemen, are you lost?" a familiar booming voice asked behind her.

Jasmine froze as she realized that the night had, in fact, just gotten worse. How ill was her luck that she managed to run into the same insufferable man twice in just one day?

Jasmine turned around to face the man, ensuring she did not show any fear or sadness.

The evening breeze blew his hair, and he had an angelic look about him that she would have trusted if he had not earlier shown that he was an untrustworthy fellow. The man easily towered over her, and behind the slight smirk on his face was a look of concern.

"I am not lost, sir," she lied.

"I do not believe that. You have tears in your eyes, and you look tired," he insisted.

Jasmine wanted very badly to trust him, but she was also very cautious.

"I am fine, kind sir. Now, if you will excuse me," she said, and she began to walk away. She had not taken two steps away when he stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

"You are not fine, and I can tell because your pretty mouth has not spouted any insults at me yet," he argued.

Jasmine looked up at him.

"I'm afraid, I do not make a habit of insulting strange men," she said.

A smile spread on his face as he looked at her, amused.

“I know you are lost. And you are fortunate enough to meet a gentleman who is kind enough to offer you a ride in his carriage,” he observed.

Jasmine’s ears perked up immediately.

*Could this be my way home?* She wanted to say yes to the blue-eyed man’s offer, but she also remembered that she did not know him. While he looked attractive, and she enjoyed talking to him, she knew she could not trust him.

“Thank you, kind sir,” she declined, “but I will find my way home myself.”

“I suppose you know that the streets of London are dangerous and particularly so for a Lady like yourself,” he pointed out.

“I can look after myself,” she argued stubbornly.

“Trust me, you cannot. The streets of London are dangerous even for a man. You may be in danger if you do not get away soon,” he said

“Why do you care anyway?” Jasmine asked.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“Because I do not want you to get hurt,” he replied.

“How do I know that I can trust you?” she asked.

“How? Because I am a gentleman,” he replied.

“Your behavior was anything but that of a gentleman when we met at the bookstore,” she argued. He took a step closer to Jasmine, and while she knew that she ought to step back, she just could not.

“I was simply jesting around,” he replied. “Now, let me get you to your house.” Jasmine swallowed and blushed as his eyes bore into hers. She wanted to go with him, but her common sense prevailed.

“I would not spend another moment with you,” she said and immediately regretted it. Being in the same carriage with this giant man could not be any worse than roaming the streets of London.

“I could make you, you know,” he warned in a slight whisper, his breath caressing her neck and causing her entire body to heat up.

Jasmine jumped back, jolted at how her body had reacted to him.

“Do you fear me?” he asked, worry etched on his face.

Jasmine shook her head. “I do not fear you.”

“Your body says otherwise,” the stranger said, pointing at her arms. It was then that Jasmine saw that goosebumps covered her arms. She clasped a hand on her arms, concealing the goosebumps.

“I am simply cold,” she argued.

“Is that so?” he asked, closing the space between them and leaning toward her. “Would you like my coat? I do not need it.”

He made to remove his coat.

“No, I am fine,” she replied, but he had already gotten too close to her.

Despite his overwhelming height, she had to admit that he cut a fine figure for a man and had a face like no other—a face that she wanted to reach over and touch. Her breath became shallow, and she caught herself in time to realize that she was already leaning into him. She was now so close to him that if she inched just a little closer, their lips would touch.

That was when her eyes caught it, a pouch hanging by his sides. What Jasmine did next surprised even her; she snatched his hanging pouch and took on her heels.

“Hey! Come back!” he boomed after her.

*Cling! Cling!* The sharp ringing sound of coins trailed her as she ran. She found a coach, and since she now had the money, she could pay for her trip.

Jasmine felt alive as the coach pulled away. She had had an adventurous day and could not believe what she had just done.

She could not believe that she had nearly kissed a man so much bigger than her size and then stolen his money.

Jasmine laughed loudly and quickly clasped a hand on her mouth, so the coachman would not hear her. Exciting things like this only happened to the heroines in the books she read. Later during the trip, though, she began to feel guilty about robbing the man.

*That is his punishment for robbing me of my book,* she thought to justify her actions. However, this did not make her feel less guilty about what she had done.

*What if he does not have any other money left? He is a gentleman; I suppose he is wealthy.*

Yet, she did not feel better about robbing him. She decided then that she would only take the fifty shillings for the coach and return the remaining money to him if she ever saw him. Having made that decision, she could enjoy the rest of the journey.

## Chapter Three



**O**n getting home, she had no sooner alighted from the coach than she heard an angry voice.

“Jasmine!” it was William, and he was standing at the gate, livid with anger.

“Where have you been?” he asked angrily. “You were roaming Bond Street unchaperoned! Do you know what the Ton would say if—”

“If they heard that you all abandoned me in the streets of London?” she finished for him.

“Had we known you had a penchant for acting like a child, I suppose we would have stuffed you into the carriage as we did to the twins,” William responded.

“Had I known that you did not care about me, I suppose I would not have gone to Bond Street with you,” she said.

“You are no child that we should watch your every step,” William replied angrily. “Now, follow me so I can lay mother’s mind to rest.”

Instead of following him as William ordered, Jasmine stood rooted to the spot.

“You are not my guardian, and I can lead myself into the house,” Jasmine replied angrily, stamping her leg on the ground.

*How dare he not notice her absence and then try to act like her guardian now?*

“You are a hopeless girl who has her head in the clouds. I am sure those books that you read already confused your head. It is a miracle that you even found your way home and some beast did not steal you,” he said before leaving her at the gate.

Jasmine’s eyes caught the bleak-looking house beside their own as she followed closely behind her brother. She had never seen the house’s owner, but she had seen the maids and butler. She wondered briefly if he was a member of the Ton that she had met before.

“I suppose your lady’s maid has packed everything you need for our trip?” William asked.

“Indeed,” she replied coldly. “What is it to you?”

“We are leaving London at dawn tomorrow, and I shall not have you delay us even for a second,” he snapped.

William loved being in London therefore Jasmine was surprised he was eager to leave for a castle in the middle of nowhere up in the countryside.

Light shone in the neighbor’s house again, and Jasmine looked over, incredibly curious.

“William, I do not suppose you know who owns the house over there?” Jasmine asked, pointing at the magnificent but rather quiet house.

“Why do you want to know?” William asked in a voice that told her he did not care to tell her.

Jasmine shrugged. “I suppose, I would like to know who our neighbor of many years is,” she said.

“You do not need to know,” he said simply. “You are better off not indulging your curiosity.”

Jasmine was taken aback. “Do you know that your refusal will simply make me even more curious?” she asked.

“But you would never know,” he responded.

“I may not know who lives in the house, but I can guess. I have never heard of a child, so I would suppose the owner is

either a bachelor, a childless widow, or an old spinster,” she continued.

“I still will not tell you,” he replied.

“The house looks rather bleak with no decoration of any sort,” she continued. “That can only point at one thing. The owner is not a woman as a woman would improve her house. I suppose, I have come to the right conclusion that the owner of the house is a bachelor.” Jasmine smiled proudly at herself for solving the mystery of the house’s owner. “Should you wish to tell me that I am right, I will not let it get to my head,” she taunted her brother.

“I will only tell you this: the person living in that house does not concern you, and you will do well to steer clear of its premises,” he replied, rather too sternly.

It was at this moment that they entered the house.

“What house?” a voice that Jasmine recognized to be Cassian’s asked before she even saw him.

“Our neighbor’s on the other side,” Jasmine replied quickly.

If one person would tell her what she needed to know about the house, it was Cassian. He made friends with many people from the Ton and had no problem telling everyone who needed to know what he knew.

“Cassian, do not!” William said in a stern voice.

“I suppose, I cannot tell you for free now,” Cassian said in his mischief-laden voice.

Jasmine sighed. “What do you want me to give you?”

“Ten shillings will do,” he replied.

Jasmine gasped. “That is a lot of money for a little gossip.”

“I suppose, you can get your gossip somewhere else then,” Cassian said as he made to leave.

Jasmine knew that Cassian did not need the money. Rather, he was simply asking to torment her.



“Fine!” Jasmine said, holding Cassian’s hand so he would not leave, “I will give you the ten shillings.”

Cassian finally smiled. “Ask me what you need to know, and you can only ask three questions.”

“That is not fair,” Jasmine cried out.

Cassian shrugged. “Nothing in life is fair.”

Jasmine retrieved the man’s stolen purse and gave Cassian ten shillings from the purse.

Cassian stared at the purse with interest. “I have never seen that purse before. Where did you find it?”

“It does not concern you. Just tell me what I need to know,” Jasmine said. Cassian shrugged.

“Who lives in that house?” Jasmine asked.

“He is called the Nordic Beast,” Cassian answered simply. There was a moment of silence where Jasmine expected Cassian to explain further.

“What?” Cassian said.

“That’s all?” she replied.

“I have answered your question. You wanted to know who lived in the house, and I told you his name, at least what everyone calls him. You can ask more questions if you would like to know more,” Cassian continued.

Jasmine knew that Cassian was mischievous, but she did not know that his mischief was to the point of giving her a limited amount of information even when she had paid him for answers.

“What does this Nordic Beast look like? Tell me in detail,” Jasmine asked.

“He is incredibly huge. He is the biggest and hugest man I have ever seen. In fact, he would tower over Father easily if they were ever to stand side-by-side. Members of the Ton believe that he has giant blood, but I say they are simply being ridiculous,” Cassian answered.

“I suppose he cannot be so huge,” Jasmine argued.

“He is. I once saw him while looking over our fence. He indeed looked like a beast.”

For a brief moment, Jasmine remembered the huge giant man she had met at the bookshop and felt a pang of guilt at how she had stolen his money. She wondered if the Nordic Beast was as huge as that giant man.

“You now have only one more question to ask,” Cassian said.

Jasmine took a deep breath. She knew she had to use her last question wisely lest Cassian tried to get even more money out of her.

“Choose your question wisely,” Cassian continued.

Jasmine’s eyes suddenly lit up, and she smiled as she realized what the perfect question was.

“Tell me everything you know about the Nordic Beast,” Jasmine said, smiling.

Cassian’s jaw dropped for a moment, and Jasmine was proud to see that she had outsmarted him. Cassian, however, recovered soon enough and began filling her in with the information she needed.

“Our neighbor, the Nordic Beast, is feared in the Ton, and this is not just because of his height. He is a recluse who neither associates with other members of society nor attends balls. There are rumors that children who wander into his house disappear, never to be seen again. In fact, it is rumored that he eats children for breakfast.”

“That is just ridiculous,” Jasmine argued.

“When he first started living here, people would send him invitations to their balls, but he never attended any of those balls. Not long after, people stopped inviting him to their events because they knew he would not attend. They say that he got married years ago, but even his wife could not stand his cold demeanor, and she tried to leave him. That was when she died.”

Jasmine gasped. “That is unfortunate.”

“Indeed, it is. A lot of members of the Ton, however, believe that the Nordic Beast killed his wife when she tried to leave him.” Jasmine shuddered at the thought of a man killing his own wife. She could not imagine it. “There is no evidence that he killed her, of course, but when has that ever stopped the Ton from believing rumors about people?” Cassian finished.

“How did the Nordic Beast’s wife die?” Jasmine asked.

Cassian held up a hand, a smile on his face.

“You have asked three questions already. I can answer one more if you will give me five more shillings,” Cassian replied.

Jasmine shrugged. “I will; now answer my question. How did the Nordic Beast’s wife die?”

“No one truly knows. She just wound up dead, and everyone believed that he killed her,” Cassian said.

“Do you think he killed her?” Jasmine asked.

Cassian shrugged.

“I suppose, I do not trust the Ton, but it is indeed suspicious that his wife died when she tried to leave him. However, I would say that there is more to it than meet the eye about the Nordic Beast, but since he is so huge, I would suppose he could easily snap her into two with his hands.”

“That is scientifically impossible,” a low, raspy voice said.

“Rose,” Jasmine observed, looking up to see her sister descending the stairs.

“It is possible!” Cassian protested.

“The only way a human could snap another human in two is if the Nordic Beast had a height and size twenty times bigger than that of his wife. Therefore, it is simply a rumor and a lie, just like most things that the Ton believe in.”

“The Nordic Beast is, in fact, very huge and very real,” Cassian argued.

“But he is not huge enough to snap his wife into two,” Rose continued. “Most of the rumors in the Ton are made-up stories that do not make any factual sense.”

“Do you suppose that Lady Essex did not lose her child because she had an affair?” Cassian asked.

“I have read a lot of books on the anatomy of the human body, and I have concluded that it is not factually possible for a mother to lose her child at birth because she had an affair while pregnant,” Rose said.

Jasmine nodded. The story had not made any sense to her either when she heard it. Cassian murmured something about Rose not knowing everything and that there are mysteries in the world.

“I suppose there are mysteries, but a lot of these rumors are simply made to scare people and also to punish people that the Ton does not like,” Rose said with a confident tone that told Jasmine that Rose had given a lot of thought to the things she was saying.

Cassian shrugged. “I do not care anyway. Now, if you will give me my five shillings,” Cassian said, holding his hand out to Jasmine.

“But you did not answer my question,” Jasmine responded.

“I did,” Cassian argued.

“You did not. You said no one truly knows,” she pointed out. “I will not be giving you the five shillings.”

Jasmine smiled with mischief while Cassian looked shocked that she had, somehow, beat him at his own game.

“I will get my pound of flesh,” Cassian said. Jasmine laughed.

“Consider this my pound of flesh for the times when you played pranks on me,” she smiled.

Cassian stormed off in anger.

“I would not mess with Cassian if I were you,” Rose said to Jasmine. “The last time I tried to outsmart him, I regretted it.”

Jasmine could remember vividly how Cassian had taken his revenge. It was at the time when their parents would often seize Rose’s science books, so she would not confuse her head. When Rose refused to make good on a promise she

made to Cassian, however, Cassian “accidentally” let it slip that Rose hid her books and science equipment in the floorboard underneath her bed. Their parents seized all of Rose’s equipment, but when Rose gave Cassian what he had asked for, he helped her steal back her equipment and even helped her hide them from the prying eyes of their parents.

“I lost an experiment that I had been working on for so long during the process, but I learned a valuable lesson: never try to outsmart or cheat Cassian,” she said.

Jasmine was not bothered. “I have nothing that Cassian can ruin.”

“Girls, why are you standing around doing nothing?” the Countess’ voice scolded. “It is time for dinner. Go up to your rooms and get ready.”

Rose and Jasmine headed to their rooms, but Jasmine could not help but notice that her mother did not say anything about her being missing earlier. It was almost like her mother never really cared.

Jasmine went into her room and changed into a green dress for dinner. She also combed her hair and washed her face to appear refreshed.

She hopped down the stairs happily to eat with her family. She was, therefore, disappointed when she got to the dining room moments later and saw that her family were already halfway into the meal, talking and laughing amongst themselves. They had not even bothered to wait for her.

She slowly approached the dining table, and when her mother saw her, her eyes widened in surprise, but then, she continued speaking excitedly about their upcoming trip and how they would decorate the castle.

Jasmine knew then that her mother had not even noticed that she was missing from the dining table. She took her seat and ate while blinking away the tears that brimmed in her eyes.

Jasmine had never felt so much like an outsider as she did at that moment.

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## About the Author

Born in sunny California, all Harriet Caves ever wanted was to become a doctor and save lives. During her sleepless nights working at the hospital, the Regency classics were her only solace. To no one's surprise, her British descent led her back to England to discover her roots and where her hidden passion lay: the Regency streets of London.

After obtaining a degree in Creative Writing there, Harriet decided to never leave this magnificent place. A daydreamer and an avid reader herself, she loves spending her days exploring the British countryside or seeking stories under the pebbles of the historical London alleys.

Though she abandoned the hospital wards, Harriet now mends hearts by transporting people back to an era of passionate love. Allow her skilled pen to take you to a special place where souls sing of love and dreams come to life!

