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A
WALLFLOWER
FOR THE DUKE

AVA MACADAMS

A WALLFLOWER FOR THE DUKE

A Steamy Historical Regency Romance Novel



AVA MACADAMS



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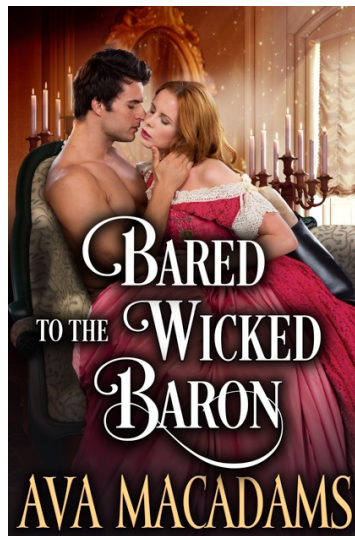
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About the Book

“I will not fall for a man like him. I am only helping him find Natalie.”

The Duke’s sister is missing. And while all evidence leads to the last person who was seen with her, Anne claims to know nothing about her friend’s disappearance.

When William forces Anne to work very closely with him to find Natalie, her wallflower friends warn her against falling for the Duke’s charm.

But even though Anne assures them that she would never lose her virtue to this arrogant and insufferable man, she can’t help but fall on her knees every time he kisses her...

Chapter One



“Do you not think that this is the most beautiful ball of the season?” Peggy leaned in and whispered to Anne. “I know that you were not looking forward to it, but it is lovely. You have to agree.”

The ballroom was absolutely beautiful, Anne Bamford begrudgingly admitted to herself. It was stunning, with candlelight flickering along with the dancers enjoying the oversized dance floor, and the largest orchestral band she had ever seen. There were instruments that she had not even seen before, which astounded her.

Then there was the expensive artwork decorating the walls, letting everyone know how wealthy the Duke of Kent truly was. As if he needed the art to show off. The mansion alone was enough.

But then what else did she expect? This was the most prominent ball of the London Season, wasn't it? Everyone who was anyone was in attendance tonight. Not a member of the ton would have wanted to miss this. Anne was not the only one who had donned her fanciest gown for the evening. If anything, her sky-blue gown, which only scooped in at the waist properly and cascaded around her feet as it should if she wore the tightest corset she could, did not look as glamorous as she thought it might, compared to that of everyone else.

It did not seem to matter how wealthy her family was. A night with the London ton was always enough to remind her that she did not have it all. Far from it.

Even her best friends seemed to have finer gowns. Peggy Mathers's pink dress might have made another wearer look too pale and pig-like, but it caused Peggy to look like a princess. Sally Winston's white beaded dress gave her an angelic glow. Then there was Natalie Hansen, whose olive-green velvet dress made her shine like a star in front of all the other guests.

So it did not make any sense that they were all standing in the corner of the room, like wallflowers, with no one asking them to dance.

Anne let out a deep sigh of frustration. She did not squeeze her waist into this corset, crushing her ribs and making it hard for her to breathe, just to be a wallflower.

“Why do none of the suitable bachelors wish to write their names on our dance cards?” Anne moaned quietly to her friends because her mother had always taught her that a man did not want to hear the complaints of a woman. She did not want to put any potential suitors off even more. “I cannot understand it.”

Her eyes scanned the scene of the ball and narrowed at the moment she spotted the last person she wanted to see today.

Harry Bamford.

Her terribly irritating older brother.

He had become even more annoying to her during the time that her father was away, traveling the world for business – and probably pleasure too – trying to control her every move, acting like he was responsible for her now.

But their father would be back soon, surely? He had not sent word as yet, but Anne was confident that he could not stay away forever. It had already been far too many months. He did leave every so often, but since their mother passed away five years ago, his trips had not been as long.

Until this one. This trip seemed to be lasting forever.

“Even Harry has asked someone to dance,” Anne complained angrily. “And I cannot imagine that anyone would want to dance with him.”

“I think you are a little too hard on him,” Peggy shot back, fluttering her eyelashes a little. It confused Anne that Peggy seemed to have taken a liking to Harry when he was nothing but a nightmare to her.

“I do not wish to hear it.” Anne held up her hand before Peggy could continue arguing with her. “My brother is terrible. He is five and twenty years old but likes to behave like he is my father. I do not like the way that he is always trying to tell me what to do. Especially when he is not really concerned about me, it is all for show. Especially now with Father on his travels. The only thing he is truly worried about is horse racing. He is so immature. *Midnight* verses *Jelly*, that is all I hear about, and it is ridiculous.”

Duke Hardson was also Harry’s biggest rival in the horse racing world. So she also had to worry that too much alcohol would cause the two men to argue and maybe even fight. It would not be the first time that her brother embarrassed her by behaving badly. He was not directly affecting Anne’s night, but she blamed him anyway. Having him here was bad enough.

“He is boring, Peggy,” Anne finished off with a flurry.

“But you find all men boring, Anne,” her friend said with a chuckle. “I have never seen you show any interest in anyone.”

Anne’s hackles immediately rose. She was sick of having to defend herself about this. “That is because I have never been approached by a man who had anything worthwhile about him. I will not settle for a dull man.”

“Even if he is handsome?” Sally teased. “And he has a good standing in society? Think of your children and how lucky they would be...”

But Anne wanted more; she always had. She could not imagine herself being courted by one of the men in this room, such as the Duke of Hardson himself who had everything going for him when it came to his looks and his money, but that never talked about anything other than himself.

He was nothing like his sister at all. Natalie was wonderful.

Anne did not want to spend the rest of her life bored to tears. Since she always had a lot to say and talk about, she expected the same of her future husband – if there ever was to be a future husband.

If all her teachings were right, then she might already be in trouble in that department. At twenty years old herself, she was already considered older than most at this ball. Plus, having interests of her own, and not being the ‘noticeable beauty’ that other girls her age were lucky enough to get the title of, would likely only push men away.

Was it foolish of her to believe that somewhere, in the midst of the London ton, there was a man made just for her?

Perhaps, but then that was another criticism that she heard from her mother far too often: that she had her head in the clouds far too much.

“I sure wish to be swept off my feet someday,” Sally gasped, bringing Anne’s attention back to the present moment. “Surely you feel the same way too. To have a man look at you like you are special.”

Peggy agreed, but Anne decided not to say a thing. She did not wish to engage in this conversation any longer. Instead, her eyes darted towards Natalie who had her hand buried deep in her reticule.

“Are you feeling quite right, Natalie?” Anne enquired. “Usually you have many a thing to say when we are talking about the shortfalls of men.”

But Natalie did not say a thing. She glanced down in horror as a trinket – a charm that would usually be placed on a bracelet – fell from her bag. A strange pinkness stained her cheeks as she bent down to get it.

“Oh, I remember that,” Peggy giggled as she caught sight of what Natalie was doing. “That charm belonged on the jewelry your uncle gave you...”

She fell into silence the moment Natalie glared at her. Anne had absolutely no idea what was happening here, but it seemed like the mention of her uncle had upset Natalie further.

Perhaps there was some family drama going on at home that Natalie did not feel quite ready to share. Anne stepped forward and rested her hand on her friend's shoulder, trying to remind Natalie that she was there for her no matter what happened. But the touch inexplicably made Natalie jump as if she had been burned. It was all very strange.

"I... I do not feel well, you are right," Natalie stammered as the color completely drained from her face. "I need to be excused."

Anne stared at Sally and Peggy in shock. That was terribly unexpected, but now she thought about it, Natalie had hardly said a thing all night long. There was definitely something that she was not sharing with the group, which was terribly unusual.

Since the girls met during their first London Season, when they all struggled to get the attention of the men who were there – much same as tonight – they had become fast friends. They shared absolutely everything with one another, because what was the fun of having any secrets?

Anne could not imagine anything that Natalie might be keeping from them.

"She must be sick," she declared decisively, because it really was the only answer. "I will go and seek her out, make sure she has a carriage ready if she needs to go back home. I shall not be long."

Both Peggy and Sally looked relieved that they did not need to leave their spot by the wall, just in case some man's glance should flicker their way and he decided to give them a chance.

In Anne's opinion, if the gentlemen here could not see for themselves how wonderful her friends were, then they did not deserve affection. She did not wish to give them the time of day. But the other girls did not feel the same way. Sally was a hopeless romantic who spent her free time dreaming of a happy ever after, and Peggy feared becoming a spinster, tossed out onto the streets by her aunt and uncle.

Though if a man wanted to write his name on her dance card, Anne would not exactly say no.

“Natalie,” Anne called out as she made her way through the crowds. “Just wait a moment, I am coming for... oof!”

A body banged so hard into her left-hand side that it took all of Anne’s strength to keep herself on her feet. She could not even begin to imagine how dreadful her brother’s teasing would become should she fall in the middle of a ball. Especially if her dress rode up at all. She would be ruined!

“Oh, my goodness.” The sharp, squeaky giggling only made Anne’s heart sink deeper. This was *not* someone that she was in the mood for – ever, but especially now. “Lady Anne, I did not see you there.”

Lavinia Thompson. The Diamond of the Season and desperately unpleasant because of it. She had always been nasty, assuming that her pretty face and her delicate blonde curls would carry her through life so she did not need to be kind to those around her. But being named the Diamond had only made her so much worse.

Especially when she had her horrid friends with her: Rebecca Smith, and Tamara Johnson, sniggering behind her. They worshiped Lavinia as if she was the best thing to grace the earth. Anne found the whole thing very sickening.

“Are you not going to respond to my apology?” Lavinia continued, clearly enjoying winding Anne up.

“For it to be an apology, you have to say the word first.”

Anne jutted her chin out confidently. She was sick of herself and her friends being tormented by these mean girls. She did not wish to tolerate it any longer, especially not when Natalie was unwell.

“There is no need to be rude!”

At first, Anne did not understand why Lavinia pressed her hand to her chest in mock horror. But then she spotted the giant, flashy engagement ring that Lavinia was desperately trying to show off.

“Oh yes, you have seen it.” Lavinia giggled. Anne had to really resist the urge to roll her eyes at this annoying woman. Then she really would be considered rude. “His Grace has proposed to me. Can you believe it? The most eligible bachelor in the whole of London wants to marry me.”

“No, I cannot believe it,” Anne shot back wryly. “I cannot believe that anyone so handsome and wealthy would wish to marry you. Or even someone with no wealth. It is utterly unthinkable.”

Rebecca gasped in horror, but it seemed to take Tamara a little longer to work out what Anne’s insult truly meant.

Lavinia scowled, twisting up her features into a less-than-pretty expression. “Well, at least I am going to get married. Unlike you and your friends. We all know that the four of you are doomed to be spinsters forever.”

“Rather a spinster than with a terribly vain man,” Anne laughed, giving Lavinia a taste of her own medicine for a change. “But I suppose that makes you perfect for one another, does it not? Because you are also terrible and vain so I could say that you deserve one another. Now please, if you are so happy in your engagement, then I see no reason whatsoever for us to continue talking to one another. You can leave me and my friends alone.”

Anne wanted to leave this conversation on a high note, so now that she had had the last word, she tried to move past Lavinia. But Rebecca and Tamara stood in her way, proving a barrier between Anne and Natalie. This was starting to become terribly frustrating, because she had absolutely no idea where her friend was, and the more time that passed, the further away Natalie could get.

“I actually have somewhere I need to be...” Anne started, but she did not get to finish her sentence. Before she could get her final words out, Lavinia dramatically tripped over absolutely nothing, so that the liquid in her glass flew all over Anne’s dress, ruining the pale blue color of it.

Anne gritted her teeth together and allowed her hands to ball up into fists beside her. But she could not react, much as she

wanted to. She had to keep her emotions tightly locked away inside so she did not let any of them reign free.

Lavinia wanted a reaction from her, and Anne refused to give it. She glared at her, trying to silently communicate that she was done with all this silliness, but Lavinia just laughed at her. Rebecca and Tamara too. Surely, Lavinia could not be as happy as she was making out, because a woman with everything going for her and nothing but joy in her life, would not be worrying about girls she used to torment in the past.

As angry as Anne was by this horrible trick which had effectively ruined her whole evening because she was even less likely to be asked for a dance now, she knew that Lavinia had to harbor some upset, or she would focus on her upcoming wedding, ignoring the wallflowers of the Season. She would not have a reason to try and ruin Anne's night.

With that thought keeping her going, Anne shot Lavinia one last glare, silently warning her to stay far away from Peggy and Sally, before storming off. She did not even bother to acknowledge Rebecca and Tamara because they meant even less to her than Lavinia did.

I need to find Natalie. She needed to know what had Natalie so troubled. Was it a secret of some kind that she was too upset to share with everyone, or was she truly sick?

Either way, Anne did not wish to leave Natalie alone. Not for another second longer.

Chapter Two



William was not enjoying himself one bit. Attending the London Season was not as fun when he had an intended waiting for him. Especially when Lady Lavinia was not the wife that he would have picked out for himself. Had his mother not pushed him to pursue the Diamond of the Season, then William would not have even given her a second glance.

Yes, she was very beautiful to look at, he was never going to deny that, and the gown she was wearing tonight was exceptionally lovely, but he did not find her very interesting. They did not share anything in common, and there was nothing for them to talk about.

Most men would tell him that he did not need to talk to his wife, because she only needed to be on his arm to attend society functions, and lie in bed with him when he wanted children. But William knew deep down that he wanted more from his life.

He could not help but worry that he had made a big mistake.

“Your Grace, there you are!”

William wondered how many other men’s hearts sank when they heard the voice of the woman that they were supposed to marry. He forced a smile onto his face but knew it was not genuine. He did not know if a time would come when it ever could be.

“I am here, it is good to see you again, Lady Lavinia.” As expected of him, he had greeted her the moment he arrived at

the ball. He had also shared his first dance with her, but now with her arm offered out to him, he could see that he was expected to dance with her once more.

He had almost forgotten that two dances were not only allowed but expected when a couple had shown their intention of marrying. Now, instead of risking gossip because of spending too long on the dance floor with one person, he had the opposite problem.

Tongues would wag if he did not dance with Lavinia enough.

“Of course,” he said through gritted teeth. “Let us take to the dance floor once more. I would love to see you spin around in your dress again.”

William had been taking dancing lessons for as long as he could remember. His parents would not allow him to reach the age of attending the Season without knowing how to properly step in time with the music. While the dance lessons had been nothing but a nuisance growing up, he had to admit now that he was grateful for them. He had seen others make fools of themselves on the dance floor before, and it was something that a person could never quite recover from.

“It is very nice in here, is it not?”

“Oh yes,” William agreed with Lavinia. “I do adore the artwork on the walls. I have been studying the new piece that the Duke has acquired by William Holman Hunt. It is a masterpiece that really reflects his journey to the Holy Land, while also managing to be secular. Have you had the pleasure of looking at it yet?”

Lavinia stared blankly at him as if she had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. He forgot how little she liked to talk about the things that interested him. He would have to seek out his uncle later on in the evening to discuss the art with him.

“I do like your dress,” William tried again.

“Oh, why thank you, Your Grace.” Lavinia lit up. “My seamstress was very proud of the way that she could sew lace

into the bodice. She told me I look like I am ready to be a bride, which is very exciting.”

Lavinia flashed her ring at William, a ring that had belonged to her mother. He could not be certain but he suspected that she was happily telling everyone that it was her engagement ring to make their relationship look steadier and further along than it was.

Perhaps at this point, William did not stand a chance of getting out of this wedding, but he also did not want to be pushed into anything before he was ready for it. If he was going to have to be a husband for the rest of his life, then he did not wish to be forced into a corner now.

He went through the dance steps with Lavinia in a monotonous way. He had never had the pleasure of dancing with a woman who excited him and made him look forward to the next move yet. The older men in his life who had been lucky enough to marry for love rather than expectation and convenience often talked of this sensation. It was something that William had always craved. But he would not be able to keep seeking it out once he was a married man. It simply would not happen,

William also knew of a lot of married men who behaved in the opposite manner and took on mistresses, but that was not something that William believed in either. Once those vows were spoken in a church in front of God, he did not think it wise to break them.

“...so then Rebecca said to me...”

All of a sudden, William realized that he had been so lost in his own thoughts that he had not even noticed Lavinia continuing to talk to him. This was definitely something that he would have to get a lot better at in the future. Whether he found what Lavinia was saying boring or not, it was rude to simply not acknowledge her.

He did not wish to be rude.

Because he had missed half of the conversation, William could not catch up. He could not truly be sure what Rebecca said to

Lavinia and what it all meant, but at least now he nodded along and made agreeable noises every so often. That seemed to appease Lavinia, which was enough.

Finally. The song came to an end and William stepped back to bow to his wife-to-be. The two dances were over now, which meant he was finally free. But he craved even more space, so he did not hesitate to make his way into the gentlemen's room to find his uncle.

Even through the clouds of cigar smoke, and the boisterous laughter which was kept away from the ladies, it did not take William long to find his uncle. He was always at the card table, his laughter booming out, and entertaining the crowds as he hustled them out of money.

"...so of course, she could not *wait* to undress me, because I was so dashing handsome when I was young..."

William chuckled. Would his uncle never change? He had heard the tales of his past conquests lots of times, and was sure that everyone else had as well. But his audience looked as captivated as always, so perhaps not.

"Ah, William, my boy, there you are," his uncle called out jovially. "Come and take a seat with us. Feel free to play a few rounds."

William rejected the cards – he had no interest in gambling – but he took the tumbler of whiskey offered to him.

"You look like you have something on your mind, my nephew. Tell us everything. Are you thinking about your upcoming wedding?"

William shot him a wary look. He did not wish to talk about Lavinia here. He had come into the gentlemen's room to escape all of that. But his uncle did not seem to get the hint.

"Ah, I see, you are worried about being stuck with one woman for the rest of your life." A lot of other men sitting around the table moaned as if they completely understood what William was going through. "Well, I would not worry about that, because when it is the right woman, you will know. A

beautiful woman like the one you are set up to marry can transform anyone into a happy family man.”

Murmurs of agreement only made William even more confused. Surely these men did not think that since they had nothing to talk about with the woman? Was it not about mental stimulation as well? There was only so long that he could sit and listen to Lavinia gossip about her friends and refuse to discuss anything meaningful with him.

Maybe she would change though, once they were married and they both had to take life more seriously. Perhaps he would change as well, he could not be sure. With no knowledge of what the future would hold, he could only go along with the plan and see where it took him.

He was not ever going to have a love match anyway, was he? At eight and twenty years of age, if it had not happened yet, then it never would.

As his uncle dove back into stories of all the women that he could have married when he was younger if he had been ready to settle down at the time, William was reminded of someone else who needed to find themselves a match, and sooner rather than later.

He had never thought that he would have to worry about his lovely, younger sister, Natalie, becoming a spinster, but at eighteen years old, he was already thinking the worst for her, because of the women she chose to align herself with.

He had tried to warn her away from the wallflowers as much as he could, but she did not seem to want to hear it. Anne Bamford, Peggy Mathers, and Sally Winston were not the sort of women who had suitors surrounding them all the time. Or at any time for that matter. Natalie did not need to get dragged down with them.

Perhaps he needed to ask Lavinia to take his sister under her wing. Her group of friends was the talk of the town, and being the Diamond of the Season was a wonderful attraction.

Now that could really help Natalie.

He had not been planning on speaking with Lavinia again for the rest of the evening, but since this was such an important ball, it might be best for him to force Natalie out into the spotlight now.

There were many dukes here who had not yet made up their minds, so Natalie still had some time. But the closer they got to the end of the season, the fewer chances she would have.

He glugged back the rest of his drink quickly and banged his glass down on the table before he rose to his feet, ready to leave the gentlemen's room.

“See? My little speech has helped,” his uncle declared with laughter. “Now look at my nephew. He cannot wait to get back out there to greet his bride-to-be. He has finally realized just how lucky he is.”

William waved, not bothering to correct anyone, and he made his way back to the much more formal room where the couples were still swirling around on the dance floor as if they were never going to grow tired. But not the wallflowers though. They were rarely seen dancing, which was exactly why William needed to get Natalie away from them.

Trying to seek out his sister, William walked around the wall, noticing that there were more people hidden away from the crowds than he had first noticed. Being in the center of everything meant he did not know about the other side of parties. This was all very strange – how could Natalie prefer this?

Ah! He spotted the group. Well, half of the group anyway, and he headed over to Peggy and Sally to see what he could find out.

“She said she was not feeling too well, Your Grace,” Peggy declared, a little moon-eyed. Not that William intended to give her any attention in that manner. Mostly because he did not want to have a scene with Lavinia.

“Yes, she did look terribly pale,” Sally agreed. “But Anne has gone to search for her. I am sure they will be back soon.”

William frowned; that was not good enough for him. He wanted to know exactly why Natalie had run out and if she was actually unwell or not. If she was sick, then it would be his responsibility to take her home. If she was not unwell but caught outside alone, then that would truly wreck her reputation. Then even Lavinia and her friends would not be able to help.

It actually was a challenge to try and protect his sister from this world, and Natalie did not seem keen to make it easy for him.

Since the only place William could imagine his sister going without her chaperone was outside to get some air, he headed for the exit. He had to admit that he was a little worried about what he might see, but that was not enough to stop him. With determination and a refusal to see some of the couples who had snuck off for a moment of privacy away from the crowds – he could not be responsible for everyone’s reputation – he made his way through the gardens.

Is that her?

A shock of brown, wavy hair caught William’s attention. He knew that it was not Natalie, but he hoped it was the other wallflower: Anne. She was standing by a bench, looking like she was talking to someone who was sitting down.

He did not wish to storm over there in case what he ended up interrupting was absolutely nothing to do with him, so he paused for a moment, half hidden by a hedge until she moved enough for him to see who was there. Just a glimpse, that was all he craved. Then he would know if he needed to step in to help Natalie, or if it would be more appropriate to get out of there rapidly.

William was very aware that he probably looked a little like a creeper, peering like this, but if it was the only way that he could find his sister, then so be it. If she was here, in this secluded spot, then there definitely had to be something worrisome happening.

Much as she was a part of the wallflower group of friends, Natalie was not likely to hide herself away from the ball for a

long time without good reason. She would *never* find a husband out here. The only thing sneaking around these bushes was trouble.

William would not allow trouble to come for his sister, no matter what.

Chapter Three



“Natalie,” Anne called out as she raced out into the gardens to try and find her friend. She wished it was not so dark so she could see where she was going in this unfamiliar environment. “Natalie, where are you?”

It was rather frustrating that she could not immediately locate her friend because she was terribly worried about her. Anne’s heart began to thunder against her rib cage. She held on to her stomach to try and contain the butterflies before their flapping overwhelmed her.

Eventually, she spotted a shadowy figure with shaking shoulders as she wept. “Natalie... is that you?”

Of course this was Natalie, who else would it be? Everyone else seemed to be having the most wonderful time at the ball, there did not appear to be drama with anyone else.

“Oh, Natalie, what on earth is happening to you?”

Anne held up her skirts and rushed towards her friend, sympathy rolling through her as she did. She might not have had any idea what was truly happening here, but she would be there for her no matter what – even if it meant hiding in the bushes of these beautiful gardens.

Actually, for Anne that was a benefit. She was not enjoying being at the ball. She was grateful to have her wallflower friends to spend time with, but out here, without any prying eyes on her, was even better. Perhaps she could even convince Natalie to hide out with her for the rest of the evening.

“Natalie, please talk to me.” Anne gently put her arms around her friend’s shoulders. “I might be able to help you.”

“I do not know if that is possible.” The sadness was rolling off of Natalie’s shoulders in waves. “I am not sure if this is something I can talk about because... because it is too much.”

Anne sunk on the small wall beside Natalie. It hardly mattered if her dress crumpled when Natalie was this upset. Whatever this was, it seemed to be more urgent than just the ball. Natalie had something else playing on her mind, and Anne needed to unravel what.

“Please talk to me,” Anne pleaded. “I can tell that this is something hard for you, but what am I if not a friend to listen to you?”

Natalie wept harder. Anne felt a little lost and useless as she held her friend. Peggy and Sally had no idea what was happening out here – they could not, or they would have been here too, to support their friend. Anne tried to recall the last time that any of them had cried this hard and she truly could not remember a time.

“Natalie, please, I am worried now.” Anne pulled back to look at her friend. The more she drank in the wine stains covering Natalie’s usually very calm and composed face, the more panicked she became. “You must talk to me about what is happening. All I want to do is help you.”

Natalie nodded a couple of times and sucked in a couple of deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself down before she spoke once more. But she could not seem to quite manage it. “Anne, my mother...” she choked out. “It is my mother, she...”

Just as Anne thought that they were about to get somewhere, the words fell apart on Natalie’s lips.

“What has your mother done?” Anne asked, worried because while the girls might criticize their siblings to one another, it was not very often that they spoke about their parents. It was simply not the done thing, even among friends. Natalie talked less about her family than anyone else, but perhaps that was

because there was truly something there for her friends to worry about.

“She...” Natalie gulped once more. “My uncle. It is him. He is the problem. I do not know how to explain it, I cannot make it make sense.”

Anne’s eyes widened like saucers. “What do you mean?” Her friend was talking in riddles; the more that Natalie spoke, the less Anne understood. It was clearly something happening in her home life, involving her mother and uncle, but what could it be? Anne was not even sure if this could be them choosing a husband for her whom Natalie did not like. Because would Natalie force herself to be at a ball that she did not need to be at if she already had someone waiting for her?

If that was the problem, then there was nothing that Anne could do to assist Natalie. It would be completely out of her hands.

“My mother and... my uncle, he...”

Natalie almost got a sentence out, but she seemed to halt herself at the very last moment. There appeared to be something there in her throat, blocking the words from spilling free. Anne wanted to grab Natalie’s shoulders to shake the information loose, but she had to be patient and understanding. Natalie had always been a little quieter; she took longer to process her emotions and open herself up to people, so Anne knew that she had to wait until Natalie was ready.

She could not rush in and be the hero, even if she really wanted to.

“I think I might just need a moment to compose myself,” Natalie gasped. “I must catch my breath. Then I will be able to talk to you properly.”

“Would you like me to sit with you while you process everything?”

Anne was not too surprised when Natalie shook her head. She already knew that her friend would want to be alone, but she offered to be kind. With regret hanging heavily over her, Anne rose to her feet and moved backward.

“I shall wait over by the door,” she reassured Natalie. “Please, come to find me when you are ready to either talk or head back inside.”

“You do not have to wait for me,” Natalie insisted. She tried to smile but Anne could see the sadness still balling up inside of her. It broke Anne’s heart; all she wanted to do was take that pain away from her.

“I want to. I do not wish to leave you alone. I shall be here for you no matter what.”

“Yes, I see.” Natalie breathed in deeply and smiled thinly. “Thank you, Anne. I appreciate you being such a good friend to me.”

Anne paced up and down just out of sight of the doorway while she waited for Natalie to appear. She should have asked how much time her friend wanted to be by herself because not knowing was excruciating. Surely by now, she was ready to at least talk about what was happening at home.

Her mother and her uncle... what could the problem be? Was this something that her brother knew also? Not that Anne wanted to seek out Duke Hardson to find out if he had any information. He was likely far too obsessed with his own self to notice.

“Natalie?” Anne could not take it any longer. If Natalie asked her for more time alone, then there was not much she could do but respect her wishes. But she had to lay eyes on her, just to check that she was not weeping any longer. “Natalie...”

What was happening? Anne was not expecting this. Natalie was not anywhere to be seen. The spot where she had been sitting only moments before was completely empty. It was almost as if no one was ever there, which made Anne’s heart leap up into her mouth.

Where had she gone? Had she gone back inside to the ball without Anne seeing her? Anne had been pacing and thinking hard, so they might have missed one another. But Natalie may also have gone home. If she was that upset, she might not have wanted to be seen again. Especially when her cheeks had gone

blotchy with the tears. Natalie did not like to be seen as anything other than perfect.

It made Anne very sad to think that Natalie had taken a carriage home alone, but if that was what she needed to do to look after herself then so be it. Anne would make sure that she visited Natalie soon enough in the hope that her friend would be more willing to open up if they were in a less pressured environment without emotions flying all over the place.

Anne took one last look around the gardens before she chose to head inside. If there was any chance that Natalie *had* decided to rejoin the ball, then there was no need for Anne to remain outside in the chilly air. As the cold air began to cause goosebumps to pop up on her skin, Anne folded her arms across herself, trying to prevent her from trembling too much.

Still lost in her thoughts, Anne was not thinking about where she was going. She accidentally ran into a thick, muscular body that she had not spotted coming toward her. “Oof, oh no, I am terribly sorry.”

“Watch where you are going!”

Anne was taken aback by the anger in the words barked at her. She was not expecting that. But as her eyes drew up the body standing in front of her, it all began to make a lot of sense.

Duke William Hardson.

Of all the people that she did not wish to see, this was the worst of the worst. The only way that this could be a great person to see would be if he knew exactly where his sister was. But since he did not typically show Natalie much attention, it was unlikely.

“Where is my sister?”

Oh! So he did want to know now. What a surprise. Anne’s expression hardened, needing to protect Natalie at all costs. She had no idea how much of a problem the Duke was in her friend’s life.

“She left not so long ago.” Anne jutted her chin out confidently. “You should already know as much.”

Anne wanted to move quickly past William but he grabbed her arm to prevent her from going anywhere. Anne was not sure why her heart thundered quite as painfully as it did. She almost could not catch her breath under the strain of it all.

“What do you mean she has left?” he growled angrily in her ear. The sensation of his breath tickling her lobe made her shudder violently. Anne hated the fact that she could not hide her reaction to him.

“What do you think I mean, Your Grace?” she just about managed to snap back through gritted teeth. “She is done with the night. She has not found a suitable man to dance with, so she has gone home.”

“How will she ever find a suitable man to dance with when she spends all her time with wallflowers such as yourself?”

Anne winced. She knew that she was a wallflower, but she did not wish to have that thrown in her face by William.

“You are no good for Natalie,” William continued, stomping on Anne’s emotions even more, not caring about the pain he was causing her. “Not only are you a wallflower, but now you are outside unchaperoned. That is terribly improper, and not a good influence on my sister.”

Anne rolled her eyes with derision. “There are times in life when there are more important things than propriety.”

“Hmph, well, it is even less proper to see you with such a stain on your dress. No wonder no one has asked you to dance.”

Anne could not believe what she was hearing. Who did this man think he was?

“The stain on my dress is thanks to your adorable betrothed,” she snapped with sarcasm coloring her tone. “So you can thank her for that. Maybe you should be more concerned with her improper behavior rather than mine since I am nothing to do with you.”

If Anne thought that this might silence the Duke, then she was terribly wrong. He had a comeback instantly. “You are the one who is causing trouble for my sister, so of course, I am going

to be worried about you too. It might even be your fault that she has left the ball early.”

It took every ounce of willpower that Anne had not to make a clever remark about it being his family causing the problems. Since she did not know enough about the situation, she thought it better to keep her mouth shut.

Instead, she snapped at William. “If you do not stop pestering me, I shall make you regret it, Your Grace.”

He smirked, making Anne angry. “Is that right? And what exactly could you ever do to make me regret anything?”

William pulled Anne toward him. Because she was not expecting this, she fell far easier than she wanted to. He was looming over her, his breath tickling all over her face, particularly her lips. Her whole body trembled with a need that she desperately did not want to be there.

She disliked this man, he was terribly irritating, but as she spotted desire in his eyes, she felt her knees buckle. The dizziness was overwhelming, she could hardly contain herself. Was she surrendering to this man?

No, she would not, she could not...

But then he leaned in a little closer, almost as if he was going to kiss her, and her whole body lit up like someone had struck a match underneath her. Anne was hardly in her body any longer; none of this felt real, it was a little like a daydream.

William was coming ever closer to her and she yearned to kiss him.

But just as her eyes were about to hood over completely, William whipped away from her, leaving Anne very much cold and alone. If that was not embarrassing enough, the nasty-sounding laughter that vibrated out of him was utterly crushing.

“I am a man betrothed,” he teased. “You must not try and tempt me. I cannot believe you would do such a thing, Lady Anne.”

Heat burned in Anne's cheeks. She felt utterly raw and very exposed. This vulnerability was not something she needed to be seen. Especially by someone she disliked as much as William.

How had she been so foolish?

Annoyed with herself just as much as she was angry with William, Anne turned on her heel and stormed away from William, back inside to the ball.

She never wanted to be near that man ever again. She *despised* him. He was horrible. Insufferable.

Chapter Four



William had not been able to sleep all night long. Not because he was not tired – the ball had well and truly exhausted him – but because he had been unable to shut his mind off.

His thoughts had been whirring endlessly around in his mind ever since he climbed into bed, and he knew there was a reason for that. Guilt. Of course, he felt guilty. How could he not when he had behaved so terribly to Natalie's friend? He had spent the whole night running through his time with Anne over and over again, and it made him feel utterly terrible.

He did not know what had come over him when he was around Anne Bamford; he had acted completely out of character. It was not like him to tease someone as he did. Especially when he thought about how he nearly kissed her. That might have been something that he'd done outwardly to try and wind her up, but there was a part of him that had definitely wanted to kiss her. In the heat of the moment only, but it was not a good feeling.

That was *not* something Lavinia would be too happy with. She seemed to have a lot of jealousy inside of her and would not like it if he was caught talking to another woman. She would have gone crazy if she had seen how close he had gotten to Anne. She would have caused a scene.

Perhaps it would be better if he wrote Lady Anne a note to apologize for the way that he had acted. If he could get her to forgive him for toying with her, then he would not have anything else to worry about.

With a deep sigh of irritation, coming from the knowledge that he had caused all of this himself, William climbed out of bed and got himself cleaned and dressed while planning what he would say. He was going to have to word this letter very carefully so as not to make this worse.

The last thing he wanted to do was upset his sister's friend even more than he had already done so. It might even be a good idea for him to check in on Natalie first, just to make sure that nothing had been said as yet. He also wanted to see if she was all right. It had not escaped his attention that she had been quieter than normal recently, and he also had not seen her since his run-in with Anne at the ball. He had no idea what had made her leave the ball, and as her guardian, it was up to him to find out.

What is happening?

William's senses intensified the moment he set foot outside of his bedroom because nothing was as it had been. It might have been a late hour when he arrived home, so it had been too dark for him to see anything, but he was quite certain his home had not been messy like *this*.

His mother took her role as Dowager Duchess of Hardson very seriously. Veronica always liked to keep her home respectable and looking lovely, so this was very shocking. William was not sure what to make of any of this, but he was utterly determined to find out. Panic careered through his body as he strode through the house in search of answers.

"Mother?" he cried out as he made his way into the drawing room. "Mother, where are you? Is there anything amiss?"

"It is my fault. All of this is my fault. My fault."

William paused in the door frame and stared at his mother in confusion. What was she talking about? Why was she tearing up the house, seemingly searching for something, while muttering under her breath? This was not how she usually behaved.

"Mother?" He stepped closer to her, the nerves zigzagging inside his body. "What has happened? What is your fault?"

Veronica met his eyes, but only for a split second. It was almost as if she could not stand looking at him. It was all too much for her. Whatever weight was pressing down on her shoulders, it was too much for her to bear.

“Natalie,” she finally whispered. “She is not home.”

It took William a moment to understand what his mother was saying to him. He could hardly process it.

“N... Natalie is not home?” he finally stammered back. “What do you mean? Did she not return after the ball last night? Because she did leave early, far sooner than Uncle Broderick and I did, so if she did not make it back...”

Sickness swirled around in his stomach. He could not imagine where Natalie would be all alone, where she would have gone in the middle of the night. None of this made any sense to him; a part of him wondered if he was still sleeping and if this was all a horrible nightmare.

“She has not been home at all tonight,” his mother stammered. “I do not know where she has gone, but I do know that this is my fault.”

William found a seat to sink into before he spoke again. This had to be what shock felt like. He did not know what to do with himself; he could hardly move, and he was certainly struggling to breathe. If something had happened to Natalie, then he would never be able to forgive himself. He was supposed to look after his sister at all costs; he was not supposed to be fooling around with Lady Anne while Natalie was in trouble.

“Mother, what are you talking about? I do not understand.”

“Natalie is not here, and she will never forgive me,” she continued to mutter under her breath, frustrating William even more. “I do not know how I am supposed to get her back...”

“Mother, what do you mean?” William snapped, a little angrier this time because he needed to be heard. “What have you done? Why has Natalie gone? Because none of us will be able to find her if we do not know why she is missing.”

Veronica looked at him again. This time, William got to see the depth of her guilt. What on earth was going on here? He could not believe that seemingly so much had been going on right underneath his nose without him noticing anything.

“She has found out about my upcoming wedding.”

William knew that he had to be in a nightmare now. “Wedding? What are you talking about, Mother? What wedding?”

“I am planning to get married very soon, and I discussed this with Natalie.” Veronica perched on the edge of a chair near William, but not close enough that he could touch her. “And I do not think that she took the news too well. I am not sure she expected me to ever get married again after your father, but I did not think that she would run off.”

William wanted to dig deep into this because it was such a lot for him to take on board, but there was one part of this that he needed to tackle first. “Mother, who are you getting married to? This does not make any sense to me. I cannot believe it. I have not seen you around another man. The only person I have seen you with is Uncle Broderick...” William’s words trailed off as a realization hit him hard. *Uncle Broderick?* Was that who his mother was talking about? He could not imagine it, but there just was no one else in her life at all.

“Is it Uncle Broderick?” he asked breathlessly, barely able to get anything like enough air into his lungs. “I did not know.”

“I love him.” Having his mother confirm this did nothing to dull the surprise. If Natalie found this out recently, no wonder she had been so quiet. “I am sorry to have kept this from you and your sister for such a long time. I did not know how either of you would take it, but we have been courting for a very long time and it is time for the world to know. It is time for us to get married and begin living our lives.”

“Yes, I understand.” William swallowed hard. Aside from the shock, he did not have any issues with this relationship. He wanted his mother to be happy and to have love in her life, especially since he and Natalie were growing older and she would soon be out of the home. He did not wish to imagine his

mother being lonely, but it was still going to take him a moment to process this. “So, you think Natalie has run away because she is not happy with this union? That is problematic.”

“How will I find her?” Veronica cried out, the agony ricocheting through her body. “I do not know how I can make this right.”

“I cannot believe that she would simply run off like this in protest.” William was stunned by his sister’s behavior. This was not typical of Natalie. “She must be staying with one of her friends in an attempt to upset you.” William shook his head in temper because this was *not* what he wished to be dealing with this morning. He did not think it fair of Natalie to make everyone worry this way. She had not even tried to speak to anyone about her issues and dislike of the wedding. William was not even aware that any of this was happening. Why would Natalie keep secrets from him?

They were always close as siblings. Their father’s death had brought them much closer together because they had relied on one another in their grief. So if Natalie was upset because their mother was moving on to get married another time, why would she not talk to him about it?

Who was she discussing it with? Natalie had to be telling someone how she was feeling if she had run away. There had to be someone who had helped her run off from the ball.

Anne Bamford.

Of course, it was Anne Bamford. He was *not* going to get a break, was he? She was the last person to be seen with Natalie, and more than that, she had acted strangely around him when they bumped into one another. Now that he was really thinking about it and not just focused on the terrible way that he had acted, he could see it. She had been *so* quick to tell him that Natalie had left the ball, without any further explanation, and then she had toyed with him.

Maybe he was not the only one in the wrong.

“Mother, I am going to search for Natalie,” William declared as he rose to his feet. “I cannot sit around here waiting for her. She must be out there somewhere, and I have to find her.”

“Broderick is already out looking,” Veronica sniffed. “I am searching the house, trying to see if I can find any clue as to where she might be.”

“You must stay at home,” William agreed. “In case she comes home. But I will go and look as well because I know different people from Uncle Broderick. I might be able to locate her.”

His mother did not look like she wanted to be left alone, but she would have to be for the time being or they would never find Natalie. Uncle Broderick did not know a thing about her. He had no clue who her friends were, or who she ever spent time with. He had not shown any interest in Natalie at all. So it was unlikely that he would find her.

William knew that he could do it though because he was absolutely certain that Anne Bamford was the answer. She had seen Natalie, she had assisted her; there was a chance that she had actually been planted there to distract William from witnessing his sister leaving.

“Will she ever forgive me?” his mother asked just as William was about to leave. “Do you think Natalie will ever be able to accept me remarrying because I have upset her so much?”

“Mother, she will find it in her heart to understand, and to come to terms with all of this. She just needs some time, that is all. But I will speak with her. I will make sure that she understands that this is love and that you are getting married to Uncle Broderick for the right reasons.”

“It *is* love.” Veronica smiled gratefully, clearly glad that her son at least saw the truth. “Broderick and I are very much in love and I cannot wait to be his wife, but I want my daughter to be there for our wedding and our happy lives together. It will not be the same without Natalie.”

William nodded understandingly. He agreed that their family would not be the same without Natalie there. Thankfully, he did not have to worry that anything had happened to her

because there was a reason she had vanished. The wedding actually made it easier because it meant she had run off and nothing nefarious had happened to her.

All was going to be fine. As soon as he found her at Anne Bamford's home, he was confident that he would be able to make it all right.

Chapter Five



Anne was out of bed a little later than normal, but since she was distracted after the activities of the ball, no one had noticed. She had even grabbed her favorite book off the bookshelf to lose herself in while she ate. Usually, this was something that would be commented on by someone, but her brother seemed to be in their own world, so it was not a problem. Thank goodness.

Harry was more concerned with the daily news. He had not taken his eyes off of the newspaper ever since Anne walked into the room, and that was how she preferred it. She did not wish to have him ask her any questions about the previous night.

Actually, she preferred to forget it had even happened.

The rest of the ball might as well not have even occurred because all Anne could recall was the dreadfully humiliating moment when she thought William might be about to kiss her. It made her burn all over to recall it, even more so now in the cold light of morning. Of *course*, he was teasing her and toying with her emotions. Why would he be acting in any other way? He got far too close for a betrothed man, but it was her fault for allowing herself to get sucked into his games.

Her body betrayed her. That was all that she could think had happened. She did not have any like for the Duke at all; she never had done and she never would do. So why did she get so dizzy? Why was she weak at the knees for him? It was almost as if he had cast a magic spell over her, making her fall for him in ways she did not think possible.

Every time she closed her eyes, even to blink, all she could see was William looming over her, looking like he wanted to kiss her. Because he had played his role very well, there was no denying it. The way that he teased her was utterly infuriating. Much as she knew that she was a fool for falling for it, even for a second, he had done his best to trick her.

If only she were faced with him now, Anne would tell him exactly what she thought of him, and it would not be pretty. She would not walk away from him again with that smug look on his face. *He* would be the shocked one for a change.

Anne wondered if any woman had ever put William in his place before. She would love to be the one to do so.

“Lady Anne.” Anne actually jumped as the voice of the butler shattered her thoughts. “His Grace, the Duke of Hardson has come to visit with you.”

Anne’s blood ran ice cold. Was this really happening? Had she conjured William up just by thinking about him? He had never come to the house before, so this was incredibly strange, and there was absolutely no reason for him to be here. He was betrothed to another woman, so this could not be related to courting... not that she could ever imagine him wanting to court her.

So, why is he here?

It *had* to be about what happened at the ball. What on earth could they have to discuss about that? There was nothing left to say.

“Why is Hardson here?” Harry sneered. “He must know that I have absolutely nothing to say to him. He has come to find out information about my horses, and I will not give him anything. I am not going to let him spy on me and my business.”

Anne only just about managed to resist the urge to roll her eyes. “Did he not just say that he wanted to visit with me?”

Harry scoffed. “That is absolutely ridiculous. He has nothing to say to you. Why would he? This is all just a ruse because he wishes to see me. I do not want to play his games. I think the Duke is a ridiculous man.”

Anne bit down on her bottom lip to try and prevent herself from saying anything. She did not even know what she wished to say. She certainly did not wish to defend the Duke because she knew better than anyone that he was a rake and not someone to be trusted. But she also was not convinced that her brother knew what he was talking about either.

“It is rude to keep *your* guest waiting,” she declared instead, narrowing her eyes at her brother to challenge him.

Harry glared at Anne with anger burning in his eyes. “I have already said that I do not wish to speak with him. But I suppose I also do not want to be rude so I should at least see what he wants.”

Anne scoffed quietly. Harry was acting absolutely ridiculous about William’s visit. He had even started to puff out his chest as if he was about to get into a physical altercation with William. Now that was something that would not go in Harry’s favor. William was far taller and broader; he was also far smarter. He could outwit Harry in a second if he wanted to. But he was not even here to see Harry, so that made this all even sillier.

But if Harry wanted to act like he was the *man of the house*, and he wanted to make a fool of himself, then Anne was not going to stand in the way.

“Tell the Duke to meet me in my study,” Harry boomed out, now talking directly to the butler.

“It is not your study yet,” Anne reminded him, but Harry simply shot her a glare. He did not wish to hear this while acting all full of himself.

“Take him there now, please.”

Once the butler was gone, Harry took a seat at the dining table and returned to reading the newspaper once more. Now he was the one toying with William. Was this all they did? Playing games with each other? Anne could not think of anything more exhausting.

“Are you simply going to leave the Duke in the study?” she asked him curiously. “That will not look very good for our

family, will it?”

She raised one eyebrow, trying to hurry her brother along, but he refused to acknowledge her. Anne would not be bothered by Harry’s behavior if this was not a visit for her. The butler had told her that William was here to speak with her, and much as she had no desire to talk to him, she did wish to know what he had come for.

He surely would not say anything embarrassing in front of her brother, would he? Anne needed to get this over and done with before she imploded. The longer that Harry wanted to tease William, the more wound up she became. With irritation, she rose to her feet and paced up and down by the door, waiting for this silliness to be over.

“What are you doing?” Harry barked as he finally put the newspaper down. “The Duke wants to speak with me. He is not going to get any information about the horses from you.”

Anne truly could not find the energy to argue with her brother, so she played to his ego instead.

“He mentioned me to the butler, so I thought it might save time if I simply come with you. If the Duke does not want me there, then I shall leave immediately and leave you with him.”

Harry frowned, not looking impressed at all. Clearly having Anne with him at the meeting was not a part of whatever it was he was trying to do. But Anne was not going to let her brother push her out.

“Fine, but if I tell you to leave, then get out of my way,” he finally declared. “I do not want this man to think that he can turn up whenever he wants to try and get information out of me. He is terribly arrogant and believes that he can control everyone around him, and I want to show the Duke that I am not to be trifled with.”

Anne wished that she could say the same thing. She kept behind Harry as they walked down the hallway to the study, her heartbeat racing in her throat as she did. She had no idea what to expect now, and that was particularly unnerving.

“Your Grace, you have come to visit me,” Harry announced with false joy as he swung open the study door. Anne tried to remain out of sight for a moment. She was not quite ready to face William yet. “I have to say that I am surprised. Can I offer you a cigar?”

Anne narrowed her eyes as she watched her brother show off by reaching up to their father’s cigar box to offer one to their guest. She resisted the urge to scoff at how stupid this all was. Harry was acting so foolishly that it was almost laughable. She had never seen him smoke in his life before, so this all had to be an act to make himself appear more important.

William said nothing as he took a cigar from Harry. He simply leaned back and watched as Harry lit his while talking about the horses. Her brother made it obvious that he was not going to give the Duke any information, even though he had not asked for it.

Much to Anne’s surprise, William did not even comment when Harry completely humiliated himself and showed off that he had never touched a cigar before by choking on the first inhale.

Harry did not even just cough; his whole face flamed red as he struggled to catch his breath once more. Anne was humiliated by him, but since Harry had put himself in this position, she was not about to step in and help him. If he wanted to puff out his chest and get burned in front of Duke Hardson, that was entirely up to him.

“I am not here to discuss your horses, Bamford,” William said as he placed the untouched cigar on the desk. “I have certainly not come to spy on you. I am here because I have something to discuss with Lady Anne.”

William turned in his chair to look right at Anne, proving that he had known she was there lurking the entire time. She could not read his facial expression, so she was not sure how he felt about her. There was no smug smile on his lips today, no desire burning in his eyes. If anything, Anne could see worry which was strange. What could he possibly be worried about? Unless he thought that she was going to tell Lavinia about the

humiliating moment when William toyed with her. Had it not been one of the most embarrassing moments of her entire life, and if Anne did not feel like she was partly to blame for falling for it, she might have wanted to tell Lavinia everything. Not to be spiteful and to upset her, despite the number of times Lavinia reveled in upsetting her, but because it was only fair for any woman to know the whole truth about who she was going to marry.

But Anne was not about to put her own reputation on the line like that. She could not imagine anything worse.

“My sister is right there,” Harry barked with obvious irritation. “If there is something you wish to say to her, then I implore you to do so.” William remained silent for a beat too long. “Well?” Harry snapped. “What are you waiting for?”

“I need to speak with her in private.”

Anne knew that she had to be in a nightmare now. There was no way this could be truly happening. It seemed like William really had come to speak with her about the previous night which made her feel sick to her stomach. She did not know how she was supposed to face him without losing the contents of her breakfast.

She was torn. Did she want Harry to refuse to leave the room so that nothing could be said, hopefully putting an end to all of this? Or did she want her brother out of there so she could tell William exactly what she thought of him? He had certainly risked far too much turning up like this, and for what?

“I do not think so.” Harry folded his arms across his chest. He was so enraged that his ears turned red. It might have been a funny sight had Anne not been so panicked about what might happen next. “I do not see that you have any reason to talk with my sister.”

“It is a family matter.”

While Anne had absolutely no reason to believe this, Harry seemed to accept it. He cocked his head curiously to one side. “There is an issue with your family?”

“My sister, to be precise,” William replied with a nod.

Was there a silent communication happening between William and her brother that she was not privy to? Because as far as she was aware, they did not have any liking for one another at all, but the mention of the Duke's sister had Harry rising from his chair, preparing to leave the room without anything like the fight Anne was expecting.

She had to be missing something.

"You may have five minutes, and not a moment more," Harry announced as he left the room. "I will not be gone for long."

Anne watched her brother leave in shock. She could hardly believe what she was seeing. He was just going to leave her alone in the study with a man? With the same man who criticized her for being improper at the ball, simply because she was unchaperoned?

As far as Anne was concerned, this was far worse, but perhaps William had come to understand that there really were times in life when there were more important things than propriety.

If this was one of them, then Anne was very intrigued. She sucked in and held a breath as she waited for William to speak, to say whatever it was that happened to be so important he had come to her home to get a moment alone with her.

This was all so very strange.

Chapter Six



Anne was not impressed, William could see that from a mile away, but right now he was not concerned with keeping her happy. As soon as he could be certain that Harry was out of earshot, there was going to be trouble.

“You have a betrothed, Your Grace,” Anne hissed angrily, trying to ignore the intensity of his gaze upon her. Clearly, she had not yet forgiven him for the previous night. “I do not think it a wise idea for you to be calling on other ladies. Lady Lavinia will not appreciate it.”

“Cut the nonsense, Lady Anne,” William snapped back. “I do not have the time for this. I am here for my sister, I just said that. Now I need you to tell me right away where Natalie is.”

“Natalie?” Anne looked like the rug had just been pulled out from underneath her. “What are you talking about, Your Grace?”

“You know exactly what I am talking about, Lady Anne.” William edged closer to her, trying to figure her out. He was not about to be fooled by lies. “You were the last person to be seen with Natalie, and yet she did not return home after the ball.”

“But she... she left.” Anne’s eyes darted everywhere as if Natalie might be hiding away in the very room they were in. “She left the ball early to go home. I was with her. I was talking to her and I told her that I would wait for her to be ready to go back to the ball, but she did not reappear. She must have gotten a carriage home.”

“I do not believe you.” William shook his head angrily. “I do not want to stand here and listen to your lies. This is far too important for that. My whole family is looking for her. If things carry on like this then there might be a scandal all around London.”

He hoped that by piling the pressure on, Anne would crack and admit that Natalie was hiding away in her bedroom, refusing to come out because she did not want anyone to discover where she was. But while this statement caused the color in Anne’s face to drain away, she did not give him what he wanted.

“I do not know where she is. When I eventually made it back to the ball and Natalie was not there, I thought she left because she had been crying.”

“Crying?” William interjected quickly. “Did she say why?”

“She did not tell me much.” William narrowed his eyes, not sure if he could trust what Anne was telling him. Would she be honest even if Natalie had told her everything? Probably not, if she thought that she was protecting Natalie. But surely even Anne understood that keeping Natalie away from her family could not help anyone. “She talked a little about her family, but she did not tell me what caused her to weep. Natalie told me she wanted a moment to compose herself, and that is when she must have gone.”

William almost bought in to what Anne was telling him, just for a moment. But then he recalled how strange she had acted the previous night when he had asked her about his sister. If only he had not gotten caught up in wanting to toy with Anne, then none of this would have been a problem.

He stepped even closer to Anne, causing her to back into the closed door behind her. Panic flashed in her eyes when she realized that there was nowhere to run. She could not escape from telling him the truth.

“Is she here?” he demanded. “Because if she is here, you have to tell me. My mother is at home crying, wondering where her daughter is. You might think that you are doing the right thing, but—”

“I truly do not know where she is,” Anne jumped in with her hands raised in a surrendering gesture. “I did not know that she was missing. I had no idea that she would not return home.”

“But you were part of the plan.” William made sure that he was looming over Anne now. It was a little too reminiscent of last night, but there was going to be a very different outcome this time around. “You were sent to distract me so that Natalie could leave the ball without me seeing her. That is why you were acting as you did.”

“I was not the one acting strange.” It took William back a bit when Anne reacted so fiercely. “You were the one throwing accusations at me, and then behaving like a man who wanted to ruin my reputation.”

“I could have ruined your reputation had I wanted to.” William was not sure why he had started to argue with Anne; it was not helpful to what he was trying to achieve here, but he could not seem to help himself. She was acting in such an infuriating manner, and he was not in the mood. The more she talked and tried to defend herself, the more convinced he became that she was holding information back. William needed everything that he could get hold of if he was going to find Natalie. Especially if she was not here.

“I would *never* have let you ruin my reputation, Your Grace.” Anne’s eyes flamed, but she did not move away from the small space that she and the Duke now took up. She stared up at him, trying to disguise the way that he clearly affected her body. He could move, but he did not want to. He would do whatever it took to find out where Natalie was. “I would not let anyone impact me in such a manner. *You* are the one who has a woman excited to marry you. You were the only person in the wrong. If anything, you were the one distracting me, although I do not know what from.”

William scoffed at this ridiculous notion. “I would not be here looking for my sister if I had helped her to escape. Since you know I am trying to help Natalie with her marriage prospects, it should also be clear to you that I would not want her to get

caught up in the middle of a scandal like this. So any suggestion that I had any involvement is crazy.”

Anne gasped in horror. “I am *not* crazy, Your Grace, and I would not want to do anything to affect my friend either. I do not like the way you are accusing me when I adore Natalie and only want to help her. I was only outside with her last night because I wanted her to talk to me, and I left her alone because she begged for a moment to gather herself up. None of this is fair. If Natalie has truly gone missing, then you should come to me for help. You should not be threatening me with a scandal one minute, and then demanding that it needs to be kept quiet to keep her reputation protected one minute later. It is almost like you do not even know what you want.”

William almost pressed his nose up against Anne’s he got so close, but not because he wanted to kiss her this time. He did not have any of those same feelings, but he wanted to intimidate her into telling the truth. He needed her to be open and honest with him.

Admittedly, he did get caught up in the matching heaviness of their breathing for a moment. He could not help but notice how she damn near turned to jelly once more. If he allowed himself to sink even the smallest amount, he knew that he would be drowning with lust too. She would not be the only dizzy one. If Natalie were not missing, then everything might be very different here.

Maybe he did not know *where* to start looking for Natalie, but he knew that he definitely had to find her one way or another.

“If you want to find Natalie,” he finally growled, “then you can help me. Because I am not going to stop until I discover who is hiding my sister and sending my whole family into disarray.” He stepped back, grateful that he did not need to keep breathing in Anne’s annoyingly intoxicating scent.

“Tell me the names of the other wallflowers,” William said, trying to think of every other avenue he could take. “Which one of those women is hiding my sister? Because you should warn them that I will find her. Maybe you should come with me to visit their homes.”

Anne instantly shook her head, no. “I will not be going anywhere with you, Your Grace. Our friends have nothing to do with this. I was with them all night, even after Natalie left the ball. They did not do a thing. They would not either. You do not know them, but I can assure you that they are not rule-breakers.”

William did not know if he could trust this information or not, because as Anne said, he did not know these young women at all. But he could not really imagine any of the wallflowers doing something that they should not. If any of them would, in his mind it would be Anne.

“You are going to have to help me find her then, if you know so much about her,” William muttered.

“I will not go anywhere with you. If I am going to assist in the search for Natalie, then that is something I will do entirely by myself.” The determination remained in Anne’s tone, surprising William. She really was unlike anyone he had ever met before. “Will it not be better to have as many people looking for her as possible? People who care about Natalie and who will look for her without causing a fuss? Because I do not wish for any attention to be put on my friend if this is not what she wants.”

William did not quite know how to respond to this. He opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, trying to think of the right answer, but he was at a loss. Visiting Anne had left him more confused rather than less.

“My friends and I care about Natalie,” Anne continued, managing to sway him in ways that he was not expecting. “We will help search for her in places that you and your family might not think of. She also might be more likely to talk to us about her worries than you.”

“But she did not talk to you last night,” William pointed out before he realized that he might be pushing Anne away, which if she wanted to help he did not need to do. It really would be better to have as many people as possible looking. “So, she er... might not want to talk to anyone.”

“It takes her time to open up. Surely you know that.”

He did. William knew it all too well. Much as they had become closer after the death of their father, a lot of it was him talking about how he felt, and the pressure now weighing down on him because he had to take on the dukedom. It really did take Natalie a long time to say anything about her emotions.

Was that why she had resorted to something so drastic when she found out about the wedding? Because she was afraid that she would not be able to talk before the wedding happened? It did seem like their mother was keen to walk down the aisle immediately. Maybe the idea of it overwhelmed Natalie.

Sadness overcame William. Natalie had a lot of people around her who cared about her. People who truly did want to help her. He had to begrudgingly include Anne in that list. So, why did she have to leave as if that were her only option? What a shame...

“Fine. I think it would be better for you to look as well,” he finally accepted. “But we will have to work together, Lady Anne, so we do not miss anywhere and we are not repeating what the other has done. I do not think you can escape with never seeing me again.”

Oh, dear. He had started toying with her again. If anything, he was supposed to be apologizing for everything that he had done, not making it worse. Yet he could not seem to resist.

“We will have to meet up and discuss our progress.” He turned and pressed his hand up against the door, trapping Anne beneath him once more. Her body stiffened up; she tried to act annoyed by his presence, but William could sense how much she ached for him. The burning hot energy surging between them was so intense he could hardly breathe. This was a sensation that he could easily become intoxicated with, given half the chance.

Not that he was going to allow himself to become obsessed with anything related to Anne.

“I do not think that will be necessary,” Anne whispered, but with much less conviction than she spoke with before. “I am

sure we will find Natalie very quickly and everything will be fine.”

The atmosphere surrounding them grew even tighter. It was as if they had become encased in a bubble where no one else in the world existed, it was only the two of them. No reputation could be ruined if there was no one else around, surely? And he could already sense a magnetic pull threatening to tug them together, to not let them go. William could sense Anne succumbing to the same feeling.

If both of them caved to temptation, then there was nothing that they could do about it. There would be no one to blame. All he wanted was to feel the delightful sensation of Anne’s lips on his. Just the once, that was it. Then he could walk away from this without any more questions.

Knock, knock.

A banging on the door shocked both Anne and William. They leaped apart as if they had been shocked, both panting with fear and unresolved need. That had to be fate intervening, reminding William that he could not cave to every whim that he wanted now. Having a betrothed meant that he had to behave himself.

“Five minutes are over,” Harry yelled through the door just before he clicked it open. “I hope you have managed to resolve your family issues.”

But William did not even bother to acknowledge Harry. He kept his eyes fixed on Anne even if she was doing everything in her power not to look at him.

“I will see you again soon, Lady Anne,” he said with a serious undertone. “Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today.”

She did not respond, but he was not expecting her to. They both had far too much on their mind to speak. Until they found Natalie, everything was going to be a struggle.

Chapter Seven



“Do I need to ask you again, Anne?” Harry commanded in that annoying, booming tone of voice of his that he used whenever he wanted to sound more important than he was. “What was that all about? Why did Hardson wish to speak with you? What is happening with his family?”

But Anne was too flustered to respond to him. She did not know what she was supposed to say. The fewer people who knew about Natalie’s disappearance the better, and since Harry seemed to believe that he had a rivalry with William, Anne did not wish to give him any information. If Harry decided to try and get at William, she did not want him to hurt Natalie along the way.

“I must go out,” she muttered, more to herself than Harry. “I have to visit Peggy and Sally. I shall be back soon.”

Harry did not want to let her out of the house that easily. He yelled out to her as she walked determinedly toward the front door, and demanded that she return to explain everything to him, but she persisted in her course of action. He had to be used to her ignoring him now. She did it all the time, so why would he expect anything different now? Certainly, he was not aware of the drama unfolding around them, but surely he was not dense enough not to see that there was *something* happening?

Harry would simply have to forgive Anne later on. That was all there was to it. Siblings had to forgive things, even if they did not always agree with one another. She and Harry had

always been incredibly different, and they barely agreed on anything, but there was a bond there. So Anne could see why William was so wound up and upset by his sister's disappearance.

Where is she? Anne thought desperately to herself. *What has happened?*

As she took a carriage ride to the street where both Peggy and Sally lived, she tried to remember every little detail of the previous night, just to see if there were any clues that she had previously missed. Thankfully, she could now think of the ball without only focusing on the mishap with William – a mishap that *almost* occurred again. It was only fortunate that Harry interrupted them when he did before everything got out of control.

Well, that was the last time. Anne was not going to allow herself to be anywhere near William again, and certainly not alone. He would not be able to play with her another time; that simply would not happen. Anne was sick of being annoyed with herself because her body had betrayed her *again*. It was not fair.

What had they been talking about before Natalie got upset? Peggy and Anne were arguing about men being boring, and Sally was wishing to be swept off her feet in a fairytale-style romance. There was nothing unusual about that; it was the sort of thing they always discussed at balls when they had nothing better to do but hug the walls.

Natalie had not said a word. Not really anyway.

No, if there were any cues as to what was happening, they were mentioned outside, but Natalie had not said anything solid. She had talked about her mother and her uncle, and things happening at home, but she had been unable to express herself fully. A lot had been left unsaid. If Anne knew that she was going to vanish, then she would have pushed Natalie for answers. She thought that walking away to give her space was the right thing to do, but clearly not.

She had been foolish, and now she blamed herself for Natalie's disappearance. Anne wondered what she might have seen had

William not played that trick on her. What if seeing *that* had caused Natalie to run off? Anne had been assuming that she had left before that moment, but maybe she was wrong.

She went to Peggy's home first, followed by Sally's. The girls took a walk around the gardens outside of Sally's home where they were sure that they could talk without being overheard. Anne was certain that it was of utmost importance that they keep this to themselves until they knew what was happening.

"What is going on?" Peggy finally demanded. "You have kept it from us for far too long. You are worrying me, Anne."

"You will only be more worried when I tell you the truth," Anne confessed. "Because Natalie has gone missing." Both Sally and Peggy gasped loudly with shock. "She did not return home from the ball last night, and her brother is out searching for her as we speak."

"How do you know?" Sally queried.

"Because he was at my home, questioning me as if I was hiding her and lying to him just before I came to see you." Anne hoped that her friends could not see her balled-up fists by her side. She did not need them to know how much William got under her skin. "He thinks that because I was the last one to see her, I know what happened."

Anne noticed Peggy and Sally exchanging a look. What did that mean? Her hackles immediately rose as she feared that she might have to defend herself once more.

"Did Natalie say anything to you while you were talking to her outside?" Peggy asked, but thankfully not in an accusatory way. Again, Anne had let William get under her skin in a different way. "I know she was upset – did she say why she was feeling that way?"

Anne shrugged helplessly. "She was talking about her family, but she did not go into any details. I cannot be sure of anything."

"Her family?" Peggy looked absolutely bewildered by this. "But she has always had such a good relationship with her

family, has she not? Natalie and her mother are terribly close. There cannot be anything wrong there.”

“What about her brother?”

Anne had not planned on complaining about William right away, but if there were any family issues, she feared it might be related to him. She assumed that might be why he was so desperate to locate her before Natalie said anything that would make him look bad.

“The Duke?” Peggy furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. “What do you think he might have done? I know that he is stern, but...”

Anne shrugged because she did not want to declare what she thought William was capable of. She had seen with her own eyes that he was nothing like the gentleman he pretended to be in public. But she could not disclose that to her friends without revealing all the ways in which he had tried to ruin her reputation. She trusted Peggy and Sally not to gossip about her, but she did not want to confess what had happened to anyone.

“We might not know what is happening behind closed doors. We do not know everything about Natalie’s life, I am sure.” Anne sighed heavily because this weighty statement was clearly the truth. “I did not think that she was the sort of person to run away, but...”

“Are we sure that she has run away?” Sally asked quietly. “I know that she left the ball early, but what if something happened to her on the way home? She must have gone unchaperoned and...”

Anne shook her head immediately because this was not an option she wished to even consider. If she allowed her thoughts to drift down that terrible path, then self-blame would get in the way of her mission. She *needed* to find Natalie even before William did.

“I believe Natalie planned this,” Anne confirmed because it was the only solution that her brain would accept. “I think she knew what she was doing, which is why she told me to leave

her for a moment to gather herself together. She wanted to run off without being seen, and without anyone trying to stop her. Something has been happening in her life that we know nothing about. But that does not mean we cannot find her and help her. I believe it is our duty as her friends. Especially because the duke seems to think that I, or one of us, is hiding Natalie.”

That caused both girls to panic. Neither of them wanted to get on the wrong side of Duke Hardson. They were the lucky ones because if William had it in for anyone, it was definitely Anne.

“The Duke has asked me to work with him to find Natalie,” Anne continued while she still had her friends’ full attention. “But of course, I told him that would not happen. If I am going to find her, then I will do so on my own, with you two.”

Peggy and Sally exchanged another look. This was starting to upset Anne now. She needed them to instantly agree with her, so they could start searching for Natalie sooner rather than later.

“Perhaps it would be better for you to work with him,” Sally eventually declared a little regretfully. “Because there is only so much that we can do. He lives in the same home as Natalie which means he might be able to discover things that we cannot, and he will find it easier to get people to speak to him than we will. No one will want to tell us anything.”

Anne parted her lips, about to disagree vehemently with her friend, but she could not make that argument. Sally was right. As young ladies, there was only so much that they could do. With a high-ranking man by her side, she would have more luck.

But that was not what Anne wanted; she had been trying to come up with a plan that kept her far away from William and helped her to find Natalie. It made her heart sink to imagine actually working with that man.

“It means you can also keep an eye on him,” Peggy agreed. “Check that the Duke is on the right path searching for Natalie, and be sure that he is not too focused on you. He will never find Natalie if he is too worried about what you are

doing, because he thinks you know more. You can keep control of the search and make him understand that none of us are hiding our friend.”

“Do you think so?” Anne frowned, still not too keen on the idea, but if it helped to find their friend, then she would do anything. “I do not know if I will be successful, but I suppose I could try. If it is the quickest way to find Natalie, then I will do so.”

“Just be careful,” Sally warned. “The Duke is a very handsome man and known for his flirtatious nature. Do not let him seduce you.”

An intense heat burned in Anne’s cheeks. Did her friends know more than they were letting on? Had they seen her out in the gardens with William? She thought they might have said something if they had, but maybe she was wrong. Perhaps they had been waiting for the perfect moment to confront her about it. Not that this was the perfect moment. There never would be a suitable time to discuss this.

“Yes, you do not wish to upset Lady Lavinia,” Sally agreed. “She will likely already be upset knowing that the two of you are spending time together, so do not make it worse by falling for him.”

Anne rolled her eyes. “I will not fall for a man like that. He is—”

Peggy held up her hand to silence Anne before she could get into her usual rant about how all the men in London were dull and unbearable. “You always say these things, but then you have never spent enough time with a man to discover that there is more to them. Maybe being around the Duke for such a long time will change your mind. You might find things that you like about him, and his flirting may well seduce you.”

“I cannot imagine that happening. I cannot stand the Duke more than any other man. He is possibly the worst man that I have ever had the discomfort of meeting in my entire life.”

The wryness in her tone did not match the way her legs wobbled. The thought of spending a lot of time alone with

William was truly dreadful, especially because she knew that Harry would be insufferable about it, even if he knew the truth of what was going on with Natalie. He was so pig-headed that he would still likely assume that it was all about him and his ridiculous horses.

“That is good,” Peggy agreed with a nod. “Because the last thing you want is Lady Lavinia making life difficult for you, more than she already does. She spilled a drink on your dress at the ball with absolutely no reason to and has been trying to cause arguments with you for years. If she thinks that you are stealing her betrothed, there will be real issues. I cannot even begin to imagine what torture she will come up with.”

Anne gritted her teeth together angrily. “I am not concerned with Lady Lavinia. She has always been nasty to me without any good reason. I am sure that she has found her perfect match with the Duke because they are both as terrible as one another.”

Sally and Peggy nodded in agreement, but Anne could still sense their worry. They seemed to be genuinely concerned that she was going to do something silly like lay her heart on the line for a man like William. That was utterly ridiculous. She could not imagine herself falling for any man, least of all someone as horrible as *him*.

She would work with William to find Natalie but spend as little time with him as she could so there could be no silly misconstrued notions that she wanted anything to do with him. She did not want Lavinia to think that, or anyone else. Not just because it might affect her reputation, but simply because it was utterly humiliating to be fooled by the games played by a man like the Duke.

“Trust my word when I tell you that the Duke and I shall have nothing more than a collaboration in finding Natalie.”

She just hoped that Natalie would appreciate her when all of this was over.

Chapter Eight



“I knew that you were going to come,” William declared smugly. He was not entirely convinced, truth be told.

The way that she had looked at him before he was sent away from the Bamford home made him believe that she was going to remain stubborn, yet here she was at his home, offering her assistance. “It is wonderful to see you coming around to my way of thinking, Lady Anne.”

Anne did not look impressed, but William did not wish to allow that to get in the way. He cocked his head to one side and waited for her to speak. He did not intend to make this easy for her.

“I was thinking that it might be wise to look in Natalie’s room, Your Grace,” Anne said stiffly. It seemed like each and every word was a struggle to get out of her mouth. “Because I have checked with my friends, and they know nothing. So perhaps Natalie left some clues in her bedchambers.”

William had not considered that because Natalie’s bedchambers were her private space and not somewhere that he would ever invade with his presence. But he acted like he was on the way there anyway because he did not want Anne to assume that she was smarter than him.

“Yes, I have been looking a little today,” he declared as he jutted his chin out. “But it might be best if you come and look too. You were friends with my sister and might know some of her secret spaces.”

Anne nodded, still very rigid. He could tell that she was far too nervous to relax around him, which only made him want to tease her more. What on earth was wrong with him? Why could he not focus on what was really important here?

“Then let us go to Natalie’s bedchambers now, Your Grace,” Anne insisted, verbally pushing him in the right direction. At least *she* had her eyes on what needed to be done. “Let us get started.”

A strange, nervous anticipation flooded his veins as he took Anne to the bedroom. This woman had been in his home a number of times before to visit Natalie, and she was here with very good intentions right now, so why did he feel so anxious about it all? Why did he feel like he was doing something wrong? Probably because he knew that Lady Lavinia would murder him where he stood if she could see what was happening at this moment. She would not have understood why he needed to spend time with Anne, not even for the sake of Natalie. Lavinia did not have the highest opinion of many people, his sister included, so she would not understand why William needed to find her as desperately as he did. Perhaps she would even suggest that he asked her for help instead of Anne, despite the fact that she would not really put in any effort...

But William could not get lost in the worries about his betrothed right now, because he had to see what Anne could find.

“You said you have been searching in here?” Anne asked in surprise as soon as she set foot into Natalie’s bedchambers. “It does not look like a single thing has been touched.”

It truly was in perfect, pristine condition, just as Natalie always left it. But this was not enough to make William admit the truth. “I did not wish to disturb anything. I do not want Natalie to be upset when she returns if everything is all over the place.”

Anne scowled at William. “Well, we are going to have to search through everything. We can simply tidy up after

ourselves. There is no reason the room has to be left in a mess when she returns, is there?"

William said nothing. He pursed his lips together and watched intently for Anne to get hunting. He intended to follow her lead when it came to searching the room because he truly did not have a clue where his sister would hide things. He did not know nearly enough about her; he was just realizing this now. He needed to spend more time with his sister because they were not as close as he thought they were.

"You should try the closet," Anne finally said decisively. "I will search through Natalie's drawers to see what is there."

William was not comfortable searching through the closet of a woman. As far as he knew, men were not supposed to be aware of what was hiding in there. He did not like the idea of impinging on his sister's privacy, but surely if Natalie had something in there that she did not want to be found, then she would not have run off as she did.

He was still very nervous as he stepped closer to the cupboard. He could not stop his hand from trembling as he reached to pull it open. It was almost as if he could hear his sister behind him, yelling at him because he was overstepping the line. But he also knew that Anne was expecting him to help her, and since she was right there, he did not want to let her down. Finally, he plucked up the courage and opened the closet.

Oh! He was not sure what he was expecting to find, but perhaps this was exactly it. The closet was stuffed to the seams with fine material. There was no way that anything could be hidden in here. But as William glanced behind himself to see if Anne would take this well, he realized that she was not just looking at the surface. She was digging deep into everything to make sure that she found *anything* that was hidden there.

Without really knowing where to begin, William began tugging bits of material to the side. It took a few dresses, but all of a sudden, a small journal tumbled to the floor.

In shock, William stepped back. Part of him knew that he needed to open up this little book to see what was inside, but

he was also intensely aware that once he overstepped that line, there would be no going back.

“Lady Anne, what should I do with this book?”

Anne practically leaped up to her feet as she spotted the journal. “Oh my, I have seen Natalie writing in that book in the past, but I never thought to ask her what she was writing about. Please, let me see.”

Clearly, Anne did not hold the same reservations as William. She opened the book instantly and scanned her eyes rapidly over the pages. William’s pulse pounded with nerves as he waited with bated breath for Anne to tell him what she had found. She seemed to study some pages more than others, which was terribly unnerving. What had she unraveled? And why was she not filling him in on the details already?

“Is there anything?” William finally asked. He could not keep himself in check any longer. He needed to know what was going on.

“I... I do not think so.” William’s heart sank with Anne’s reply. “There are stories in here. It seems like Natalie has been writing creative tales for years. I do not think this will help us at all.”

But even with that statement, Anne did not stop reading. She seemed to be drinking in the stories as if they held the answer to everything. William was even more intrigued, but still, he did not take the book from Anne. He wanted Natalie to have the privacy she desired when she returned. He felt like breaking those barriers would be accepting that she was not returning. And William did not want to accept that.

If she wanted to share her stories with him, then that was something she could do herself on her own time.

“You know what I find most concerning?” Anne finally declared as she snapped the book closed. “All of Natalie’s belongings are here. Everything that I would assume she might need if she were running away. I thought that she had planned all of this, but now I am questioning myself. Her favorite dresses do not appear to be missing from her wardrobe,” she

noted as she quickly picked out the clothing she knew Natalie favored the most. Being her best friend allowed her to be confident in what Natalie would need if she were to leave. “And she does not have any shoes other than the ones she was wearing for the ball, not that I can tell anyway... it is troubling.”

This was why William needed Anne. He would not have noticed these things on his own. He had not spent anywhere near enough time in these bedchambers to notice this sort of thing.

What he did not like was the implications of this realization. If Natalie had not left on her own accord, then why was she no longer here? He swallowed hard and tried his best to remain strong because he was terrified of sinking down into these scary thoughts.

“I will continue to look in the drawers,” Anne said in almost a whisper. The fear had gotten to her as well. “See if there is more that I can find. I am sure that there must be some clues somewhere to help us locate her. We cannot give up now.”

The shared fears bolted between them. Neither of them spoke aloud of their worries about where Natalie could really be at this moment, but William knew without a shadow of a doubt that Anne was just as concerned as him that something darker and more sinister had happened here. He tried to wade through the mud filling his brain, but he was sinking, drowning in ice-cold terror, and he could not move however hard he tried. The more he discovered, the worse this seemed. And he had not even had the chance to ask his uncle what he had discovered with his search.

“What is this?” It was Anne’s gasp of horror that finally shook him out of his shock bubble. “Oh my goodness, did you know about this?”

Anne waved small pieces of paper in William’s face. He registered the anger in her expression before anything else. Her cheeks were stained pink, her eyes alight with rage, her whole body stiff with it. Whatever she had discovered now, it was not good.

“Letters,” she finally spat out when it took too long for William to process what he was looking at. “Threatening letters. Did you know that Natalie was receiving these? They look terrifying. Look. Threats of being killed if she does not remain silent... although it does not specify what the secret is she cannot tell anyone.”

“*What?*” William was horrified. “What do you mean? There is no way that my sister is being threatened. She would tell me that.”

He might have discovered that they were not as close as they first thought, but at the same time, he did not think that she would keep something so huge from him. Natalie knew that William could help her, no matter what she was going through. He would not allow her to suffer anything by herself, that was simply not the way that they did things.

It made absolutely no sense that she would suffer in silence.

“Maybe your sister does not trust you because of your brutish attitude.”

William stared at Anne in shock. Did she really just say that to him? He was utterly stunned to the core. The only way he knew how to respond to this was to retaliate in kind.

“Well, it seems to me that you were not told anything either, so perhaps you are not quite as good friends with her as you thought. Natalie has kept secrets from you as well.” His fists curled up into balls by his side. “She did not even tell you on the night of the ball, did she? So I do not know why you are acting like I am the only one kept in the dark. Clearly, I was wrong in assuming that she might come to you. She obviously does not trust you at all.”

Anne laughed scornfully. “You do not have to be cruel simply because I am pointing out one of your character flaws. Finding your sister is far more important than beating me in an argument that we are not even having. It seems to me like you are *very* suited to Lady Lavinia. She enjoys creating drama where there does not need to be any too.”

William frowned. The more people mentioned Lady Lavinia around him, the more irritated he became. Especially when Anne suggested that they were perfectly suited. This was something that she had said before, and he had not been impressed at the time. Repeating it a second time was even more of a snide remark than what he had said to her.

Did Anne really think that she was going to keep getting away with this? She could not keep speaking to him in such a manner, not if they were going to work together. It simply would not stand.

“I do not wish you to mention her again,” he growled at Anne, his whole body tingling with anger. “I do not want to talk about Lady Lavinia.”

“Oh, I am sorry.” Anne pressed her hand to her chest in mock upset. “Have I offended your precious betrothed? I do apologize. I did not know that this was going to be such a sensitive subject. I suppose I should have guessed that your love for her would overshadow everything else.”

“No, that is not the case.” He shook his head hard. “That is not what I am worried about. I do not wish to talk about her while we are looking for my sister. As you said before, Natalie is the most important person here, and I do not wish to focus on anything or anyone else. We will never find her that way.”

There was more to it, and William saw that Anne could sense as much. He did not like being compared to Lavinia because he did not see himself like her in any way. He did not believe that he had anything in common with her. The few times that he had been forced to communicate with Lavinia he had found her boring and rather unpleasant. She did not seem to have anything nice to say about anyone.

Yet she was the Diamond of the Season, and that meant a lot. To have her as his betrothed actually made William look like a man to be envied from the outside. Others had commented on how lucky he was to get to marry such a wonderful, beautiful woman. William always took these compliments as they were intended, but inside he always felt twisted up in knots about it because they would not be the ones stuck married to a woman

who had nothing pleasant or interesting to say for the rest of their lives.

That was him. And he was not looking forward to it at all.

Chapter Nine



Anne could not stop thinking about Natalie and the threatening letters that she and William had found in her bedchambers as she returned to her home the following morning, as soon as the sun started to show. Who could possibly want to hurt her best friend? And why would Natalie not tell her about this? Anne liked to think that they were as close as friends could possibly be, that if Natalie was suffering from *anything* then Anne would have known.

But there was clearly a lot more to Natalie than met the eye. She had secrets that Anne desperately needed to unveil. The only way that she was going to do that was if she faced William once more.

Spending so much time with William was not what she wanted at all, but it was the only way she was going to solve this horrible mystery. So, wearily, she got herself dressed after a night of fitful rest, and she got a carriage to take her to the Hardson home again.

The butler hardly even looked surprised to see her when she knocked on the door. He invited her in without checking with the Duke that she was welcome. On the one hand, that made things a little easier for her, but on the other, it made her feel a little too close to William for comfort. She had always been this comfortable with Natalie, but never with the Duke.

“Ah, you have returned,” William declared in an arrogant tone that made her skin crawl. “I thought you might like to join me on the search once more.”

Did he *have* to ask it like that? Was he attempting to infuriate her further? She did not need that; she was already on the edge of her nerves. She curled up her fists in anger and gritted her teeth together. She was not going to let him affect her so badly yet.

“I would like to search through Natalie’s room some more,” Anne declared instead, keeping her emotions locked tightly away inside. As long as she did not *quite* meet his eyes, she would be fine. Any time she looked at him, an unwelcome shiver bolted down her spine. “I think there might well be something else to do with the threatening notes we discovered. Until we work out who wrote them, we will not be able to unravel this mystery further. I have to see if there are any more clues.”

William parted his lips as if he was going to say something more, but he seemed to think better of it at the very last moment. That was probably for the best because Anne was already unsure as to how long she could keep herself intact.

“Yes,” he finally agreed with a nod. “I agree with you. That is something I have been thinking a lot about as well. It does not seem right that Natalie was getting those notes, and she did not say a thing to either you or me. There has to be a reason that she was hiding them.”

Anne blew out a breath of relief and nodded. “Yes, that sounds sensible. Working together, we might be able to do this swiftly.” Their eyes locked for a moment, and Anne held on to the surge of understanding between them. They did not have to like one another to be civil and to deal with Natalie’s disappearance.

They headed to Natalie’s bedchambers and again began the search in silence. Natalie did her best to focus on parts of the room that she had not thought about before. She chose to search in less obvious areas. Since Natalie was apparently a very secretive person, Anne had to really dig deeper in her brain to try and think like her friend.

“Oh, Samuel Butler.” Anne was surprised when her hand rested on a novel that she had enjoyed herself. “I did not know

that Natalie was a big reader. She never mentioned reading this book to me before.”

“Actually, that is mine.” William took it from Anne with a small smile playing on his lips. “Do you know it?”

Anne had never had someone to discuss books with before. No one liked the same stories that she did. Because she did not read the fairy tales that the other women she knew got lost in, she was strange.

“I *did* enjoy *Erewhon*,” William continued, almost as if he was testing the waters. “But I think I preferred *Life and Habit*. I like the way he brings science into his storytelling. History too. The book might focus on the utopia he has created, but there is so much else going on around the plot.”

Anne’s eyes almost popped out of her head as she stared at William in shock. “Are you teasing me?” she felt compelled to ask. “Because that is exactly how I feel about the novel. *Life and Habit* is my favorite also. I do not know anyone else who feels the same way that I do about it.”

Had she misjudged William? Was there more to him than met the eye? She had only ever seen him as having an overlarge ego and a ridiculous attitude. That was why she thought that he and Lavinia were perfect for one another. Had Lavinia ever read anything by Samuel Butler? Anne could not imagine Lavinia ever sitting still for long enough to read anything. But perhaps she did not know her either.

“Of course I am not teasing you. I would never do such a thing. I just have not had anyone to talk to about Samuel Butler before.”

“You would not tease me? Then what do you call what happened in the gardens at the ball? Or at my own house?”

“True, but I never tease about literature.”

“Well, I suppose... we could always talk about Samuel Butler, and other writers.” Anne laughed awkwardly. “Once we have found Natalie, of course.” She was not about to let some silly coincidence get in the way of the search. Nor was she going to allow William to keep looking at her in such a manner – as if

he could not quite work her out, in the same way that she was now uncertain of him.

Anne did her best to focus on the search, but she and William actually had something to talk about now. Their conversation seemed to ebb and flow in a perfect way. Even when they did not agree, their chats about science and history were absolutely riveting. Anne had never felt so enthralled to hear what anyone else had to say before.

There were times when it was actually quite challenging for Anne to remember that it was William she was talking to. Someone she did not like at all. Someone she had never had anything to say to before. Strange. It almost made her think that she should not have wasted so much time arguing with him when they could have been talking instead.

“Oh, what do you think this is?” William suddenly asked as he found another book. “There is a stack of books. Do you think they are more stories?”

“I think we will definitely have to look through them all thoroughly,” Anne replied eagerly, glad that their search had not been in vain. “Just in case there are any more clues there. We have not discovered anything else.”

They both took a seat in the room, William in the chair near the window so the natural light could stream in on him, and Anne on the edge of the bed, and they began to have a look through the notebooks.

There were more stories. Anne was going to *have* to ask Natalie about all these wonderful stories when she returned. Where her inspiration came from, and what she was going to do with these tales. Anne had not yet had the opportunity to search through the stories fully, but she knew that once her friend was safe and sound, she would read them thoroughly.

But no clues. Not yet. There were no more threatening letters and no diary entries that might give Anne a hint as to who was trying to hurt her friend. The more she dug into this mystery, the less she seemed to know.

“I think you should read this,” William suddenly announced. “This story seems to have... I am not quite sure how to put it... I think there is a hidden meaning here. I might be wrong, but please take a look.”

Anne furrowed her brows as she took the book from William. She was unsure as to what she was going to find but very quickly noticed that there was a stark difference between this piece of writing and anything else that had come before.

Darkness overcomes me, steals me from the light. There is a monster in the closet, waiting to devour me at the first opportunity. Fear sits like an icy pool in the pit of my stomach, drowning me. Dragging me down lower into the water...

The words were darker, the tone was harder to swallow. Anne could hardly breathe as she processed each and every word. Admittedly, she could not fathom just what Natalie meant by these words, but she hoped that she would be able to figure it out, just in case this was somehow linked to what happened to Natalie. Was this a clue that something had happened to her? Or was it more linked to her state of mind?

Either way was utterly terrifying.

She swallowed hard and looked up at William, to see the same sheer terror in his eyes. What on earth were they going to do? How would they find Natalie if she did not want to be found?

“Oh, Lady Anne!” Anne’s eyes darted toward the door when she heard the voice of the Dowager Duchess talking to her. Veronica Hansen looked as beautiful and poised as ever as she smiled at Anne. “I did not know that you were here. It is truly wonderful to see you, especially now.”

Despite the smile, Anne could see the intense sadness filling the Dowager’s eyes. She was trying her hardest to hold it together, but she was clearly heartbroken by Natalie’s disappearance, possibly more than anyone else.

“We were just searching through Natalie’s room to see if she left anything behind,” William confirmed. “To see if we can find anything out. She must be somewhere, there is no denying that much, and we want to locate her one way or another.”

“Oh, that is just wonderful, thank you so much, Lady Anne. It is truly lovely to see how much you care. You must stay for dinner.”

For dinner? Anne was not convinced that this was the best idea since the air was filled with grief and worry. Anne was not sure that the family would really want her around. But William was nodding like this was the best idea, as if he wanted her to stay for dinner because that would give them more time to hunt for... well, whatever they were looking for in this home.

“That would be very kind of you, thank you, Your Grace.” Anne probably should not have said that. As soon as the words left her mouth, she wished that she could take them back and make up an excuse instead. Her family would wonder where she was, and she did not feel like she belonged here. This was more likely a polite offer than anything else. It was likely that she was not expected to take it.

“That will be lovely.” The Dowager clapped her hands together, attempting enthusiasm in the dark circumstances. “I will make sure that the cook knows that you will be here so he can set the correct number of plates for us. I am sure he will be terribly pleased to have things feeling normal for a change. The house has seemed empty for far too long.”

That made Anne’s heart sink. The last thing that she wanted to be was a replacement for Natalie. Her friend would be back soon, wouldn’t she? Anne could not stand in for her. Her eyes burned a little; she was worried that she was about to burst into tears in an already highly emotional space. She had to focus on her feet for a moment so that no one caught on to how she was feeling.

“Thank you very much,” she whispered instead. “I appreciate it. It is terribly kind of you.” She had already said that, but she was not sure what else she could say at this point. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

A thick lump of emotion lodged in her throat. She could not even swallow it down however hard she tried. She half expected William to laugh at her for acting so foolishly and

saying the same thing over and over, but he did not. He did not say a thing. The fact that he was not laughing showed the severity of this mess. She would have almost preferred to have him mocking everything she said over this lack of emotion.

The atmosphere did not dissipate when the Dowager left. There was a strange iciness left behind which Anne did not know how to warm up. Instead, she fixed her eyes on Natalie's writing again, hoping that she might be able to decipher some of it. She had to blink a few times to stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks, but other than that, Anne was quite sure that she was doing well at keeping her emotions inside.

"We will find her," William suddenly blurted out, but Anne was not sure if he was talking to her or himself. "We *will*. We have to find her. I will not rest until I find her."

Anne nodded fervently. It did not matter who he was talking to, she needed the reassurance as well. "Yes, I agree. We will find her. And we will make sure that whoever has upset her will be punished for it."

When William's eyes connected with Anne's once more, she was a little stunned to see the intensity of the anger there. It was powerful and overwhelming, burning through her body as if directed at her. Anne was not even the villain here, and for that she was grateful. This was another side of William that she had not seen before. She would not want to cross him and have his wrath erupt in her direction.

But of course, he was angry; Anne was too. Because there was so much confusion here, and they could not yet find their way out. This was why Anne knew that Natalie would not have left on her own accord for no real reason. Because she had to know that everyone would be panicking for her, wondering where she was, and if anything had happened to her. Natalie would know that Anne and her family would not simply allow her to vanish into thin air without trying to seek her out.

Where are you, Natalie? Anne thought desperately. *Why have you left us all in the dark like this? It does not make any sense... it will never make any sense.*

Chapter Ten



It had been a shock when his mother invited Anne to stay for dinner because William thought that she was grieving far too heavily to face having any company in the home. She had been sinking increasingly deeply into sadness, as if she had already given up hope. His mother might have sunk to a place where she was thinking the worst, but William would not do the same. He would not give up on Natalie no matter what happened.

So, it was far less of a surprise when Veronica changed her mind and she decided that her headache was far too painful for her to do a thing. Her eyes hurt too much and the whole mess had left her without an appetite. William should not have been shocked by any of this, yet he found himself a little speechless.

“But I believe Lady Anne has sent word to her home that she is staying here to eat. I do not know what to tell her,” William groaned.

“She can still have dinner here,” his mother moaned in absolute agony from her bedchambers. She had been that way ever since Uncle Broderick had gone away also looking for Natalie. “You can entertain her. Please, send her my apology. I do not wish for her to be upset because I am too sick to join you.”

William nodded and backed away from his mother. “Fine, yes, I will tell her to stay for some food because she has been helping me look for Natalie. I do not know where I would have looked if it was not for her.”

Actually, as soon as he said that statement aloud, he realized the truth of it. If it had not been for Anne, he did not know what he would have done. He certainly would not have found the search so simple. Anne was the one who knew where to look in Natalie's bedchambers, and what they should be looking for.

It was when the dark story that Natalie had written troubled Anne too that he knew he should worry about it. The same with threatening letters. He might have tried to talk himself out of panicking otherwise.

It was not a good feeling to know that his sister was potentially in trouble, but he knew that it was better to know something. Having no clues to go on was even worse. But if Anne did not know who was threatening Natalie, then how would they work it out? It was very troubling. He could not stand the anxious anticipation.

"She is a very good friend to Natalie," his mother called out as William edged away from her. "I have always liked her. She has a very kind heart, that one. I am surprised she is not married already."

William had to get out of earshot before he could hear anything that would make his heart skip a beat. His mother had not yet said anything about Lavinia, not even about her being the Diamond of the Season, so he had no idea how she really felt about his betrothed. She certainly had a lot of love for Anne, that much was obvious.

His pulse was pounding as he descended the stairs to find Anne once more, to let her know about his mother's predicament. There was a strange, nervous excitement burning through his body that he was not quite sure what to do with.

"Is everything all right?" Anne asked suspiciously as soon as she laid eyes on him. "You look a little troubled. Is there anything that I can do to help?"

He forced himself to smile thinly. "Mother is not feeling very well. I do apologize for that. She sends her apologies as well. She has been plagued with headaches a lot recently. After Natalie went missing just over a week ago."

Pain spread across his chest. It was almost a relief to William when it appeared that Anne understood him completely. Not having to express everything aloud made his life so much simpler. This was what he needed in his life. To have someone who he connected with, who understood him on another level. The last couple of days was the only time that he had ever felt that.

“I am sure that she is having a very hard time without her daughter,” Anne replied gravely. “I can understand that. Having no answers is hard for us all. But like you said before, we are going to solve this.”

William indicated toward the dining area with a gesture of his hand. He did not know how Anne would react to this, but she followed William’s directions and took a seat at the finely set dinner table.

His mother clearly had been planning to come to dinner with them because the candles were lit and the finest plates were laid out. She had tried, William could really appreciate that now. She had wanted to spend some time with him and Anne, but she was not strong enough to do so. Guilt flooded him because he did not feel like he had done enough. Perhaps he should have tried to coax her out of bed, in the hope that this would make her feel so much better.

But it was too late now. Only he and Anne were ready to eat.

He glanced over at Anne, wondering what on earth might be going through her mind right now. She definitely appeared deep in thought as she stared at the plate in front of her, but her facial expression was so stoic he had no idea what was really going on behind those eyes.

Had she always been this way? William had never really noticed Anne before. She was nothing more to him than his sister’s friend and one of the wallflowers. A friend of Natalie’s that he did not have any liking for at all; he had barely even bothered to look directly at her. So he could not be certain if she was always this good at hiding her feelings.

All of a sudden, Anne seemed to sense his eyes upon her. She flicked her gaze up sharply and locked eyes with him. William

was not sure what to do with his heart as it leaped up into his mouth and began to race. He could not look away however hard he tried. But he was not trying. He did not want to stop looking at Anne because the kindness of her heart shone through. It lit up her face and made her sparkle all over. He was drawn to her, a little like he was on the night of the ball. When he toyed around with her feelings and attempted to kiss her...

Maybe he should have just kissed her. Perhaps that would have made things a whole lot better. Certainly, it would have complicated matters, because he was still betrothed to Lavinia, and it was unlikely that *anything* would change that, but he would know what it felt like to press his lips up against hers. He would be able to hold on to the memory of the taste of her.

The food smelled delicious as the footmen served it to them, and the scent was utterly intoxicating, but it still was not enough to overpower his need to stare at Anne. It was almost as if he was trying to unravel her, to find out what was going on underneath the surface. He wanted to see parts of her that she did not show anyone else.

"This food is delicious," Anne gasped after her first taste. "You must have a wonderful cook."

She looked a little awkward once she finished her compliment, but William was quite sure that he could read her mind because both of them brought everything back to one issue. Why would Natalie run away from such a comfortable home where the food was so utterly delicious? Nothing about her running off made sense. Not unless something terrible had happened.

"We are very lucky," he replied blandly instead, because they had been searching for answers all day long and had not managed to dig anything up. It was not the wisest idea to keep dragging everything up. "All the staff that we have working in our home are well-trained."

Again, William found himself completely unable to take his eyes off Anne. How was this wallflower so beautiful? Why did she hide away in the shadows all the time, when really she

should have been the center of everything? If Anne put herself in view more, then William was sure that she would have plenty of gentlemen writing their names on her dance card.

That could work out well for Natalie as well. It would assist her in getting more potential suitors. Perhaps then she would not feel the need to vanish because she would have a husband to look after her.

He kept trying to shake his head, to rid his brain of all the thoughts of Anne, but since she was sitting right across from him, looking like a ray of sunshine, he was unable to do so.

Dinner eventually turned in to dessert, and William had still not managed to find his equilibrium. It had even gotten to the point where he was so consumed by Anne that he could not even hear her words anymore. She had started to talk to him about another novel she had read more recently, and much as he truly wanted to engage with her, it was hard to see anything other than her beautiful lips as they moved.

He was becoming increasingly addicted to the look of her lips, and the curiosity which came with them. He could kick himself because this was all his own fault. Anne had wanted to kiss him that night, he had felt it. He should have caved. He should have given in to temptation for the first time in his life. He should have had some fun.

“Your Grace? Did you hear me?” Anne suddenly asked, a little louder this time so he could not ignore her. “I said, what did you think about...?”

Her words fell apart on her lips and she started to giggle. He had absolutely no idea what she was laughing at until she pointed to his lips.

“I am terribly sorry. I do not mean to laugh, but you have food on your face. You must have smeared your dessert.”

Before William could react to this news, Anne began to move toward him. Stunned to the core, he immediately believed that she had been through the same roller coaster of thoughts that he had. Had she been wanting to kiss him just as much? Was

she going to give in to that temptation right now? His heart rate kicked up another notch. Nothing else mattered.

He tilted his head to one side and allowed himself to fall into the bliss of the moment. William had the sense that kissing Anne would be worth whatever the consequences were. He did not even mind that there were members of the staff in the same room who could see them. Maybe this moment would change everything, but what if everything needed to be changed? With the way that he now felt with Anne's eyes upon him, with the deep-seated desire ricocheting through his system, he was quite sure that everything needed to be changed.

But the sensation William ended up receiving was not what he thought it would be. It was not Anne's plump lips pressing to his. Instead, a napkin brushed over his mouth and left cheek. This sensation made his whole body deflate. What the hell was going on?

She was just cleaning off the mess on his face. Really? That was it? Was she *never* going to kiss him? William was stunned. Embarrassed actually, as he tugged away from Anne. Horror struck him, even more so when he noticed the cheeky smile playing on her lips. She knew what she was doing, and she was enjoying herself.

This was all a joke. She was toying with him, just as he had done with her at the ball. Only this was a lot worse. He did not really know her at the ball, and he had no clue that his life was about to change for the worst. He did not know that Natalie was about to go missing.

Flames of rage ignited within William. He was so angry that he almost damn near exploded. It was only pure self-control that kept his emotions inside. If she wanted to play these games, then he was definitely going to play these games. And he was a far better player than she was. He knew the game inside and out.

He leaned back in his chair and narrowed his eyes at Anne. But she was still smiling, beaming from ear to ear, deeply amused by what she had done to him. Every time that it seemed like they got to a good place, where working together

was easy and they did not feel like they were struggling on a battlefield any longer, then something like this happened and shifted his mind completely.

“There is a ball soon,” Anne suddenly declared, changing the subject completely, swiftly as if she had not even noticed the emotional turmoil she had just sent him spinning through. “Another ball, which I think we can use to our advantage.” William did not know how to respond to that. He had not yet processed the almost-kiss moment, so he said nothing. That did not seem to affect Anne though, she continued talking as if she had not noticed his ashen face. “I think we can find out information. Listen to gossip. See if anyone else knows anything.”

William nodded, because to be fair, that was a good idea, but he was still too stunned to discuss it properly. His head was spinning, his heart aching, and his whole body was trembling – with anger, certainly, but with something else as well: an unwelcome lust that he did not want to have for this beautiful, yet terribly irritating, woman.

Chapter Eleven



Anne was sure that Sally and Peggy were a little upset with her absence at this ball. She had hardly spent any time talking to the wallflowers this evening. But she had a much bigger mission at hand.

If anyone here knew anything about Natalie's disappearance or anything that had been happening in her life until that moment, then Anne needed to hear it. Not much of a fuss had been made about Natalie vanishing, so it was probably not common knowledge among the ton, but information that was supposed to be a secret somehow managed to spread its way around regardless.

"...have you heard about Lady Smith's youngest son...?"

"...I did not know that Lord Boxton had been seen with another Lady, did you...?"

"...they do not have the happy home that they like to act like..."

There was so much gossip flowing around, yet Anne was struggling to find something that might be of use. It was a little terrifying to her that some women only seemed to derive pleasure from speaking badly about others. It was almost as if they had to spread the misery that they experienced in their own lives. Anne could never imagine such a future for herself and her friends, no matter who they ended up married to – or if they ended up married at all.

But there was someone whom she could picture spreading meanness forever.

She had been trying her hardest not to even look in the direction of Lady Lavinia. Not only because of the drink incident and the ruined dress from the last time they were in the same room together, but also because Anne was oddly conflicted these days. It was not that she had grown fond of William or anything, she simply did not like the idea of them together. She had once said that they suited one another, but now she was not so sure.

William had more to him. She had learned a lot about him while they were searching together, and now she was less convinced that he and Lavinia would be able to make one another happy. Although as she scanned the ballroom, looking at all the beautifully dressed women, there was not another that she could imagine being his bride either.

Anne sighed to herself, wishing that she would not get so distracted by William's love life when she had her best friend to worry about. She tried to concentrate more on the sadness that she had seen in Natalie's mother's eyes when they talked. That was a mother who was at her wit's end and simply did not know what to do with herself. That was a woman who desperately needed her daughter to return home.

A gentleman tapped Anne on the shoulder, making her jump. She had almost forgotten that the primary aim of a ball was to dance with prospective suitors and to try and see if there was anyone who sparked interest within her. Just because it had not happened yet did not mean it would never happen.

But horror struck her as she turned to see the gentleman smiling at her. She did not wish to dance with anyone right now because she was so busy trying to infiltrate the gossip and pick out Natalie's name. Yet it would be seen as incredibly rude for her to refuse a dance should this man ask, which would put her at risk of becoming a subject of gossip herself. Anne could feel her control over the evening slipping away, and she did not like that one bit.

"Good evening, Lady Anne," he declared as he bowed to her. She curtsied instinctively because it was to be expected of her. "My name is Lord Lucan. I do not believe that we have been introduced before."

He took her hand and kissed it lightly. Anne knew that she should say something back but she was in shock and unable to vocalize a thing.

“I would like to have the next dance with you, if I may?”

There was something pleading in his gaze that piqued her curiosity. Why would a lord be so keen to dance with her? No one had ever asked before. Or not in a long time anyway. She could not even begin to recall the last time, because she was typically, purposefully, hidden away.

But she had put herself in this situation now, so she did the only thing that she could and nodded – right at the moment the music came to an end, which could have felt a little like a fated moment were she not so nervous about this.

Lord Lucan took Anne’s hand and led her out onto the dance floor, gripping her fingers a little too tightly for her liking. She could feel the intensity of someone’s eyes fixed upon her, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She did not need to turn to know who was staring at her, but she twisted around anyway.

Her heart leaped. Nerves bolted through her. She almost could not stand up any longer as her knees nearly buckled – just because William was giving her a strange look. Well, it was not as if she wanted to be here dancing with Lord Lucan. Not that there was anything wrong with him; he could be a very nice, bland man like the rest of them. But she did not want to dance, she simply had no choice in the matter.

Anne had been forced to stand to the side while William danced with his betrothed, Lavinia, so he could do the same thing now. This was not someone whom Anne would marry anyway, so what did it matter?

And what would it matter, even if she did? It was not like she would marry William. That was an utterly ridiculous idea. Anne was not even sure how it had managed to creep into her head.

Once the music started, and the couples began to perform the proper steps in time to the tune, Lord Lucan began to talk,

making Anne realize that there was in fact a reason that he had chosen her to dance with, and it was not anything to do with courtship.

“You are one of the friends of Lady Natalie, are you not?”

As soon as he mentioned Natalie’s name, Anne’s eyes snapped up to meet his. She started to lose her footing because she was no longer focused on what she was doing with her feet. Her imagination immediately ran wild because she could not think of any other reason that Lord Lucan would bring up Natalie unless he knew something.

“I am her friend, yes,” she replied rapidly, trying to get the words out so quickly that they fell over each other. “Why do you ask, my Lord?”

“Because I overheard something in my home,” he admitted coyly. The way he spoke with such trepidation had Anne wondering if he was torn over sharing this information with her. If he had battled himself over this, she was simply grateful that he had come to the right conclusion in the end. Because he had started talking and she was not going to let him stop. “And it is something that I believe someone should know. I would tell His Grace, but I am not close friends with him.”

That was something Anne could understand well. She had already tried to tell William that he was not exactly approachable with his gruff attitude and naturally grumpy face, but predictably, he had not taken it well.

“You can tell me anything. She is my best friend.” Anne could not keep her hope down. It was brimming to the surface, bringing out more anxiety with each passing second. The fact that Lord Lucan was going out of his way to be quiet as he talked to her was not lost on Anne. This was a secret, and potentially the very secret that she had come here to discover.

“I overheard our maids talking about how they saw Lady Hansen in a very middle-class neighborhood with a young man who did not appear to be upstanding. They were discussing it as if it were a scandal. I tried not to think too much about it, but since Lady Natalie is not here tonight ...”

Anne could not hear anything else that he was saying. It seemed like her feet were no longer touching the ground. This information stunned her so much that she actually forgot how to breathe.

On the one hand, this was very good news because it meant that Natalie was still in the city of London, and she had not vanished further afield. But it was petrifying, because what on earth was she doing? Why was she risking everything for some young middle-class man with no title?

Had she fallen in love with a lower-class man? Because no one would like that, least of all William. That would make him more furious than anything. As her head span, Anne was not sure that she should say anything at all in case it made William so furious that he lost his temper here – especially if Natalie had not fallen in love with this man but he was the one threatening her instead. Just because Natalie had been seen in public – albeit not in a public place where she might encounter anyone she knew – did not mean she was not in danger.

William would be out of control if he thought that his sister was in danger. Lord Lucan had already noticed that Natalie was not in attendance at the ball, which might mean that other people had picked up on her absence as well. William throwing a fit would certainly draw more attention to the drama.

But on the other hand, they had been working together on this mission. Anne would not have got as far as she had without his help, so perhaps it was unfair of her to even think of excluding him.

“I am sorry,” Lord Lucan declared, dragging her attention back to the present moment. “I did not mean to upset you. I just knew that if it was someone I cared about, and people were talking about them, I would like to know.”

All Anne could do was nod in agreement. “Yes, I am grateful that you told me. I cannot thank you enough. It is just a little bit of a surprise, that is all. Have you discussed this with anyone else?”

He shook his head determinedly. “No, and I would not. I do not like gossip; I think it can be very hurtful. But since the information came from maids in my home, I do not believe that it will stay a secret forever.”

That meant Anne was up against the clock. If she was going to prevent anything too upsetting from happening to Natalie, which might go on to affect the rest of her life, then she would have to move quickly. Much as she was grateful to Lord Lucan for giving her a clue that she would never have been able to find in Natalie’s bedchambers, this song seemed to be going on forever. She was very much done with dancing now. She had more important things to do.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, it was time for her and Lord Lucan to part. He bowed, she curtsied, and they parted ways. As soon as she was by herself, Anne knew that she could not hold this inside. It might lead William to getting Natalie back sooner rather than later.

“Your Grace, I...” Anne started, eagerly reaching out to touch his hand once William was close enough, but she did not get so far.

“What are *you* doing here?” Anne had forgotten to look out for Lavinia first, which was a serious miscalculation. “Your presence is not wanted here. I am just discussing my upcoming wedding with my betrothed.”

Frustratingly, Lavinia made a point of standing between Anne and William, acting like a barrier to make sure that a distance remained between the two of them.

“I just have something quick to say—”

“You do not need to say a word,” Lavinia growled, interrupting Anne. “You belong on the sidelines with your pathetic little friends. Please, leave us alone, you are not welcome.”

Anne’s cheeks burned with anger. Not because she was being insulted, but because Lavinia was brazen enough to say nasty things about Natalie in front of her brother. She might not

know that Natalie was missing, but there was still no need to be vile.

“I am not here to speak with you,” Anne replied coldly, keeping her steely gaze fixed on Lavinia. She was still not going to be intimidated by this woman, even if she did not think twice about throwing a drink over her. “So it does not matter if you welcome me or not.”

But Lavinia also did not wish to back down. Anne could almost see an evil plan flicker through her mind before she did anything. Perhaps that should have been her warning sign. Maybe she should have run, but she did not. So it was not difficult for Lavinia to step forward a little too far, and to step hard on Anne’s dress, causing it to tear a little.

“What are you doing?” Anne demanded. Her immediate reaction was to edge backward, but that only caused the dress to tear a little more. Now it was a noticeable rip, which meant another dress, and another ball had been destroyed by Lavinia.

How could William want to marry such a terrible person? She was truly awful. Anne tried to force him to look at her, but he was caught up in conversation with someone else. Flooded with frustration and sheer humiliation, Anne scooped up her skirts and turned to run.

She no longer wanted to be in this ballroom. She needed to be somewhere alone. Somewhere far away from everyone. With burning-hot tears pricking her eyes and flaming cheeks, she left the hall and raced for the nearest room where she could catch a moment by herself.

Lavinia always ruined everything, and she appeared to take a great delight in doing so too. She would certainly never offer her time to help William locate someone who was so very important to him. She probably did not even like him, only his title. She very likely did not know a real thing about him.

It did not make sense to Anne how they could commit to one another for the rest of their lives under those unpleasant circumstances. But perhaps it was not for her to know, and only for her to accept.

*“You belong on the sidelines with your pathetic little friends.
Please, leave us alone, you are not welcome.”*

Chapter Twelve



William had been suffering the night from hell. He had hated every single second of this ball; it had very quickly become unbearable, with Lavinia refusing to leave his side all night long, constantly talking about their upcoming wedding... it had truly made him nauseous.

The only saving grace for him had been watching Anne with her brilliant, stealthy skills as she listened to all the well-known gossipmongers. He had been so impressed by her, that he had started to wonder why no one had asked her to dance yet. He certainly would have done, had it not been strange.

But then Lord Lucan had asked her to dance, and the way that jealousy twisted up in his gut was incredibly painful. He hated every second of it. He did not even care that Lord Lucan was a fine young gentleman, he did not think such a man was good enough for Anne. She needed more than just a nice man. She craved intellectual stimulation and someone who shared interests with her. He could see how much fun she was having as they discussed books, and even science and history. He had thoroughly enjoyed himself as well.

If Anne did not have that in her future, then she would grow bored.

He was so caught up in a conversation with Lord Bolton that he missed the exchange between Lavinia and Anne, until Anne ran off with a very obvious tear in her dress.

“That will show her,” Lavinia declared smugly. “She cannot just walk around here like she is the belle of the ball. *I* am the

Diamond of the Season, so she needs to stay out of my way.”

“What happened?” William exclaimed in shock. “What did you do?”

“What did *I* do?” Lavinia pressed her hand to her chest in mock horror. “I did nothing, Your Grace. I simply told Lady Anne that she belongs with the wallflowers, and that she has nothing to say to anyone over here.”

“She said that she has something to say?” William felt his heart pause for a moment. He could not believe it. Had Anne found something out? “I must go and talk to her right away.”

Lavinia grabbed onto William’s arm, refusing to let him go. “What do you mean, Your Grace? You can have nothing to say to *her*, surely?”

William did not like the way she acted as if she was disgusted by Anne. Lavinia was so mean about anyone who was not within her circle of acquaintances, and he was quite certain that she only used those women as well. She did not *like* them, she simply liked that they would do whatever she wanted all the time.

What was life *really* going to be like when they got married? He had tried his hardest not to think about it, and he still did not want to. But one day, he would have to face reality and know that his life at home was going to be a nightmare.

“She is very good friends with my sister. I have to see what she says.”

“Can you not just speak to your sister directly?” The fact that Lavinia had not even noticed that Natalie was not at the ball because she cared so little while Anne was doing everything that she could to assist him really showed the difference between them. Yes, Anne had been friends with Natalie before all of this had happened. But William had a feeling that Anne would have helped him if he had asked her no matter what. She had a much kinder heart, and that was something William could not ignore...

“I need to see her. I will be back in a moment.”

William shook Lavinia off, leaving a hurricane of issues behind, and he headed in the direction Anne had run off to try and find her. He walked down the hallway but could not see her immediately. He hoped that she had not gone home or, even worse, run off. He had not yet recovered from losing Natalie at a ball. If it happened again, he was not sure what he would do.

“You belong on the side lines with your pathetic little friends. Please, leave us alone, you are not welcome.”

William was surprised to hear an all too familiar voice; then he found it hilarious to hear Anne doing a very accurate impression of Lavinia’s sharp, nasal tone.

He pushed open the door to the library to see her pacing up and down the room with the torn hem of her dress in her hand. Much as he was angry at Lavinia for lashing out in the way that she did, because it was totally uncalled for, he could not stop himself from smiling.

“Your presence is not wanted here. I am just discussing my upcoming wedding with my betrothed.”

William could not stop himself from laughing. “Oh, now that is not fair. I do not believe Lady Lavinia sounds *that* bad.”

Anne’s cheeks flamed red with embarrassment. “I thought I was in here alone. I did not know...” Eventually, she caught on to the fact that he was joking, and she chuckled too. “Well, if you think she does not sound that bad, maybe you should return to your beloved betrothed?”

William went nowhere. He stepped closer to Anne, closing the gap between them. Her energy surged through him; it was hard not to get caught up in all of her feelings.

“Do not be like that. You said that you had something to tell me?”

Anne’s eyes widened. “Yes, I do. It is about Natalie. Lord Lucan told me.” William tried his hardest to ignore the twist in his gut as Lord Lucan’s name got to him once more. “That is why he asked me to dance. Because he overheard the maids in

his home saying that they saw Natalie, with someone in a middle-class area.” She swallowed hard. “A man.”

William’s mind began to spin. There was no reason that should be the truth, but she had to be somewhere. Whoever this man was, he clearly had all the answers. It would probably have been better if William found Natalie before him because she might not live through the interrogation that was bound to come from their uncle, and their mother too. She would need an explanation for where her daughter had been.

“Do not worry, Your Grace,” Anne whispered as she also drew nearer to William. “I know that this does not sound like good news, but it is because now we have narrowed down our search a little, and we can make sure that we will search every nook and cranny until we find her. And we will find her, I have no doubt about that.”

William desperately wanted to believe that because it would be comforting to think that he could easily get Natalie back. But something about this information really troubled him. What had Natalie gotten herself in to? Why was she in such a mess? This was nothing like his sister at all; she was usually so quiet and never set a foot out of place. She was not one to break the rules.

“Do you really believe that we can find her?” he asked while tilting her chin, and lifting up her eyes to stare into his.

“Oh yes, we can definitely find her.” Anne’s smile was so sweet and reassuring. He found it utterly delicious. It was truly impossible for him to remember that he was supposed to be betrothed when she was grinning at him like this. “You mark my words, she will be home soon.”

Overcome by gratitude, William pulled her in for an embrace. He was surprised by how much he loved the feel of her body pressed up against his. He had not meant to get so caught up in the moment, but it was a little late now.

“Thank you for being such a devoted friend,” he half whispered as he pulled back to look at her. “I can see now that Natalie is truly lucky to have you. I am sure she knows that,

but I will remind her when we find her. I will make sure she knows how lucky she really is.”

During all the time that he had spent resenting Anne and the other wallflowers for pulling Natalie down, he had not picked up on how good they were to her. Natalie really was very lucky to have Anne. He would make sure that he was far kinder to her friends in the future.

But that was not what he was thinking of right now. His eyes were locked in on Anne's, and he was lost in her gaze. There were flames of desire dancing in her eyes. He felt those crazy, intense flames in the tightening of his breeches as well. There was no way that this should be happening, but he could feel his lips drawing nearer to Anne's by the second. He was breathing her in; he could feel her breath tickling his lips, intoxicating him fully.

There were many opportunities for William and Anne could pull away from this glorious, gorgeous moment, but neither of them did. They remained with bated breath in the overwhelming anticipation, just wondering what was going to happen next... even though they both knew. It was inevitable, and at this moment it felt like it had been coming for days. Maybe even longer.

Within seconds, their lips had crashed together, and they were kissing frantically like there was no tomorrow. William's hands knotted up in Anne's hair, probably making a mess of the perfect style she had set it in for tonight. But her eager fingers had hooked around the back of his neck to keep him in place because she certainly did not mind.

Anne could already feel the control slipping away from her. She did not know that a kiss was supposed to feel like this. All passionate and powerful, causing every nerve inside of her to erupt like volcanos. The burning hot lava of desire spread right through her body, heating up her blood along the way.

William did not think twice about yanking Anne's dress down over her chest because he was clearly so caught up in lust. He cupped her breast in his hand, rubbing his thumb over her

rock-hard nipple. An inadvertent groan fell from her lips, vibrating in his mouth, as pure lust gripped her.

She wanted him; it was utterly overwhelming how much she craved him, and she could also sense that he ached for her too. She honestly did not know it was possible to feel so much all at once. The sensations would have knocked her to her knees had she not been so keen to keep on kissing this gorgeous man that definitely should not have had his hands all over her body.

“I want to do so many things to you,” he murmured as his mouth moved off of hers. He tasted the exposed skin of her throat, the perspiration on her collarbone. William edged down until eventually, he took her nipple in his mouth. She cried out in ecstasy as he tugged and teased her nipple, causing her back to arch with pleasure. William began bunching up her beautiful gown around her waist seemingly eager to explore every inch of her.

Anne knew that she should probably stop him, but she could not bring herself to do so. She needed him, all of him, and nothing was going to hold her back. Even the fact that they were at a ball, in the library, and anyone could burst in at any given moment. She wanted to *feel* him, and to have him explore her in ways that he had never experienced before. Whether this ruined her reputation or not.

“Oh, William,” Anne moaned in delight as her head lolled to one side. She was truly caught up in the heat of everything and did not even have her eyes open, but she *loved* using his first name.

It seemed like William wanted to try out her name for himself as well. “Anne, you drive me wild.”

Her thighs tensed; she adored her name on his lips, and she wanted him to only use her first name from now on. The air absolutely sizzled between them. William returned to kissing her as he gripped the waistband of her undergarments. She was struck, wondering if this was *really* going to happen. Was he actually going to explore all of her? God, she desperately hoped so.

Anne's legs turned to jelly as William fully caved to temptation and slipped his hand into her drawers. She was practically purring with pleasure. As a shudder of passion raced down her spine, William was privy to every single moment of it.

The small cry of ecstasy really resonated with William as his eager fingers prized her thighs apart and grazed her soaking wet slit. Knowing this was forbidden only heightened the tension for the both of them, as did the trembling cries of elation exploding out of Anne. She was truly in heaven already.

He seemed to crave that sound as it fell uncontrollably out of her; he needed more of it, so he hungrily chased her pleasure by plunging his fingers deep inside of her. Anne writhed as he massaged all of her, touching parts of her that she had never touched before. She did not even know what was happening to her body, but it was utterly delicious and she kept telling him so which only made William more determined to coax the orgasm from her.

He eventually worked out the best ways to thrust his fingers until the overwhelming pleasure absolutely consumed Anne and she started to convulse. As her muscles clamped tightly around his fingers, the endless waves of pleasure completely washing over her, William kissed Anne harder to swallow up her moans. That made her feel more connected to him than anything else.

It felt like she was giving him a part of her, that she was leaving a little piece of her behind. She was not sure what William would do with this unexpected gift, but she would be grateful to know that they were bonded in a way that no one else was.

This was passion; it was pure bliss; it was everything that she wanted from life and so much more. She knew at that moment that he was going to leave her tonight utterly sated and thinking about only him, even though he was betrothed to another... not that she would ruin this special moment by thinking about that.

As her rasping breaths became slower and her racing heart slowed, William held her close. He clung to her as she collapsed into him, hugging him tightly, adoring the sensation of relying solely on him.

There was a part of her that always wanted to be in William's arms, even though she knew that was impossible. She would simply have to enjoy this moment while she had it, while she could.

Chapter Thirteen



The following morning, Anne could not believe how humiliated she was. That whole night had been something of a blur; it was impossible for her to pinpoint the moment that everything had turned on its head completely.

William. It was him; he was the center of everything all the time. If he had not been there, or she had not been compelled to speak with him, to share what Lord Lucan had told her, then Lavinia would never have confronted her, and she would never have ended up in the library alone with him...

But as much as she wanted to blame what had happened on other people, she could not. What occurred in the library was all on her. *She* was the one who had allowed William to kiss her, and it was also her own choice to let things spiral out of control. It might not have felt like it at the time; Anne had been wild, animalistic, and completely feral. She had lost all sense of what was right and wrong. She had become a slave to the phenomenal sensations that cascaded through her body.

It might have been a wonderful experience at the time, but now Anne was filled with nothing but regret. She should not have allowed things to get as far as they did; it was all so very wrong. It was so wrong that her reputation could be absolutely ruined. Of course, there was nothing more important than a reputation in London.

No man would ever want to marry her if he knew what she had done. No respectable man anyway, and Anne did not wish to be stuck with a rogue. And now she found herself standing in front of her brother, who was telling her that he was about to

chaperone her on a trip to London town. With Duke Hardson. His rival.

“What do you mean?” Anne asked in shock. This statement was not what she expected to have to deal with this today. After last night, she thought that William might want to stay far away from her. At least for a little while. It did not make any sense that he was here, presenting her with this.

“It is something to do with his sister, I am not too sure of the details.” Harry waved a dismissive hand. “I am not too sure, but there is a very good betting shop in the neighborhood the Duke wishes to take you, so it will not be a wasted trip.” His lips turned down into a frown. “Plus, I do not think it will be a good idea for you to be spending any more time with him than you have been.”

Anne was not quite sure what to say to that. She did not know that Harry paid enough attention to her to even notice that. But if he had seen her spending a lot of time at the Duke’s home, then maybe others had as well. It was a surprise that she did not overhear herself being talked about at the ball by the gossipers.

But Natalie’s disappearance was not widely known, so it was likely that the assumption was she was merely spending time with her friend. Anne’s reputation was already at risk; the last thing that she wanted to do was make it worse.

“Y... yes, of course,” Anne stammered awkwardly. “Then I shall dress accordingly.”

Harry looked like he had something else to ask her, but much to Anne’s relief, he kept his question inside. Since her emotions were already all over the place, she did not wish to deal with challenging, accusing questions as well. Anne made her escape quickly before Harry could change his mind, and she locked herself away in her bedchambers.

This morning, Anne did not even ask the maids to help her get dressed. She went through the process herself. It might not have been easy, but the only way she would be able to brace herself for what today would bring was to have some time alone.

What was William thinking? Of course, Anne wanted to find Natalie sooner rather than later too; she was very keen to follow up on Lord Lucan's lead, but did last night not change things? Was William not terrified to see her as well? She could not fathom what his plan was, and that unnerved her more than anything else.

Perhaps this was something that he was very accustomed to. Anne did not know what most gentlemen did, but Sally had heard rumors that they did not think twice about spending intimate alone time with ladies, whether they were betrothed or not. Sometimes, it did not matter even if they were married. They would happily spend evenings with courtesans and even have mistresses as well. Men were clearly not expected to behave in the same way that women were. It was terribly unfair. That had always infuriated Anne, but it did so even more now than ever.

But if Anne were to find out that this was all just a game to William, and that she was just a number to him, that would likely hurt more than anything else. Because he could go on with the rest of his life without a qualm, and she would be the one who would have to deal with being a sullied woman. Furthermore, it would give Lavinia just one more reason to hate her – not that she needed it.

Anne sighed to herself, wondering what on earth this day would bring now. It was going to be a very unpleasant one. The only saving grace might be learning more about Natalie's disappearance so that one day they could bring her home, back where she belonged.



As the carriage carried the three of them around one of the middle-class neighborhoods where Natalie might have been seen, Anne could hardly focus on anything other than the thundering of her heart.

Harry was being uncharacteristically quiet. He had not even asked what the carriage ride was for, and he had not even

bothered to make a snide remark about William. Anne thought he might be preoccupied with something else, but she did not wish to ask.

Then there was the painful tension surging between herself and William. Anne found it terribly frustrating that she could sense his eyes upon her the whole time, despite the fact that she was pointedly not looking back at him. There was no way that she would be able to stifle the intense blushing if she caught his gaze, and she did not want that. Harry might not pick up on anything, but she did not want him to get even the smallest hint.

The silence was utterly deafening though, and it was making Anne a little anxious. She could not think of anything that she wanted to say to her brother, so she attempted to make polite conversation with William instead.

“How are your upcoming nuptials to Lady Lavinia coming along, Your Grace?” she asked very stiffly. It was not the best start, but it was preferable to nothing. “I hear that you are planning a very grand affair.”

She caught sight of a very confused look on William’s face, but what did he expect her to talk about? She certainly was not going to bring up the previous night, was she? That was a night she would never speak of again.

“Everything shall go as it should.”

Was that it? Did he not wish to give her a little bit more to work with so they could have a bit of a back-and-forth? Harry was going to wonder what on earth this was about soon enough.

“Ah, this is the betting shop,” Harry declared loudly, seemingly oblivious to anything else that was happening around him. “I should like to stop here for a moment.”

William nodded just once, so Harry instructed the carriage driver to halt on the side of the road. Anne did not like this one bit. They would not find Natalie at this rate! But she was also grateful for a moment away from Harry. It would be even

better if William were going into the betting shop as well, so she could breathe more freely.

William remained though. It seemed like he wanted to take advantage of this moment to really talk. “Anne, why are you asking me such strange questions?”

She was a little taken aback by the way that he addressed her so informally, but they were unlikely to return to formalities after the previous night. Especially when they were alone.

“I...” Anne was speechless. How could he be so brazen? “I would like to know how well your life is going.”

“With Lavinia?” William screwed his face up in horror.

“Well, I cannot exactly ask you about anything else, can I?”

“You are also avoiding even looking at me.”

This infuriated Anne. He had to be far more experienced at this than her because he was simply expecting her to behave as if everything was absolutely normal when the truth was very far from that.

“You cannot simply ask a lady to look at you when you have ruined her life.”

Much to Anne’s surprise, William did not act contrite, as she expected him to. He did not immediately apologize for overstepping the lines. He simply stared at her like she was utterly endearing to him.

This boiled up Anne’s anger to an almost uncontrollable level. Her breath caught in her throat and she did not know how she was going to react. Her whole body stiffened with a rage so intense, she was not sure that she could control it – even though the last thing that she wanted to do was lose control of herself around this man again. It never ended well.

“You can laugh all you want, because you are not affected by these things, William.” It felt strange to use his first name as well, but there was a little part of her that liked it far too much. “But I shall be, so I am going to take it far more seriously than you.”

A heat burned in her cheeks. Anne knew that she had failed to keep her emotions off her face. She was flaming red. If Harry exited the betting shop soon, then he was likely to spot this, however much he might have missed on the journey so far.

“I am sorry that I seem to be joking when you find this serious,” William replied, but he could not keep the smile from his face. “I do not wish to upset you, but there is something I wish to tell you...”

Anne held up her hand. She was not sure that she wanted to hear anything that William had to say when she was so fraught and emotional. The last thing she wanted to do was cry in front of this man. He could not know how much he had affected her. That would not do.

“I would like to step down from the carriage for a moment,” she told him thickly. “I need some air.”

William did not fight this. He called the footman to assist Anne in climbing out of the carriage, much to her relief. This might not be the sort of area where she would normally wish to stand on the side of the street alone because it was wholly unfamiliar to her, but right now she needed to get some distance between herself and William.

He clearly had no idea what it was like to be a woman, and what he had done to her, which was thoroughly heartbreaking. Then he said that he wished to tell her something; well, if it was not about Natalie then she did not wish to hear it. They did not have anything else to discuss anymore, and she was going to make sure that he knew it.

Anne caught sight of Harry inside the gaming hell and was immediately dismayed. To her, this did not look like a short visit. He seemed very happy there like he was at home and did not wish to return to the carriage. How was he supposed to be her chaperone if he was not even interested in looking out for her? No wonder he had not noticed the tense atmosphere and the strange silence between herself and William. He was too consumed with his own desire to get here.

Maybe they would have to take the time to really look here for Natalie. Anne scanned the street and tried to picture what on

earth her best friend would be doing in a place like this, but it did not make any sense to her. It had to be a kidnapping of some kind. That was the only reason why Natalie would be here.

But who could have been at the ball from this neighborhood? Who could have stolen Natalie away? And what did they want with her? Anne crossed her arms tightly around her body, almost as if she was trying to save herself from the same fate.

I shall be fine, she tried to remind herself. *I am not alone*.

But of course, she could not trust her brother to look out for her when he was so distracted, and she did not know if she could trust William either. Just because he made her feel certain things, did not make him a trustworthy man. After all, she was not the woman that he was betrothed to. Not that Anne wanted to think about his upcoming wedding. The idea of it filled her with sheer terror. She did not like to admit it to herself, but she no longer wished William was not with Lavinia simply because she was not a nice person; it was because she did not wish to lose him.

This was not a situation that she ever wanted to find herself in, but here she was, in the middle of a very big mess.

“Your Grace!” The footman’s voice rang out so loud and crisply that it shook Anne from her deep and penetrative thoughts. Especially as William almost came flying out of the carriage to see what was happening. Clearly, he thought that whatever this was, it was urgent, and he was not wrong. “I have just had word. Your uncle has located Lady Natalie and she has been taken home already. She is safe.”

Natalie is home? This was exactly what they wanted to happen, but Anne still found herself sharing a troubled look with William.

What on earth was happening now?

Chapter Fourteen



William had been cursing himself for acting incorrectly, and wording everything wrong, upsetting Anne all over again. All he really wanted to do was let her know that last night had changed things for him completely. Or maybe had not *changed* things, but had simply opened up his eyes to how he really wanted things to be. He knew that he did not love Lavinia and that he would struggle to be married to her forever, but he had agreed regardless because he knew that it would look good for his family if he wed the Diamond of the Season. More than that, it would help Natalie get a good marriage match as well. But he could not go through with that wedding knowing that Anne had his heart. It would be wrong to do so.

However, she had given him the cold shoulder before he could get those words out. She was not in a position to hear what he had to say, so he let things slide for just a moment. But at that moment, they learned that Natalie was on her way home, so that had to take precedence.

Since Harry did not wish to leave the gaming hell and he knew that Anne would be visiting Natalie, he relinquished his chaperone duties and allowed them to travel alone, with the footman watching over them.

This might have been the perfect time for them to talk again, but Anne had returned to avoiding his eye contact completely. Since she looked to be full of concern for Natalie, he decided to leave things as they were. Perhaps there would be a chance for them to discuss everything in the future.

William was grateful that Natalie had been found, but it troubled him that he had not been the one to discover where she was. Not because he needed to be the hero, but because he wanted answers.

It was a feeling that he hoped desperately would subside as soon as he was back at the house. Once he was by Natalie's side and he could see that she was well, once she told him why she left and what happened to her while she was gone, then the tight knot in his chest would loosen and he would feel a lot better.

He had to.

Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, the carriage pulled to a stop, and both William and Anne rushed inside the house. He was not sure what he had been expecting to see, but Natalie looked all right. A little sullen perhaps, and like she did not want to be at home, but generally all right. She did not appear to be a kidnap victim who had suffered.

So, what had happened to her then? And who wrote the notes?

"Natalie!" Anne did not waste a second. She flew past William and raced into her friend's arms. She flung herself around Natalie and hugged her tight, again reminding William that he should not have been critical of Natalie's friends. They truly did seem to care about her. "You are back. I have been so worried. How are you?"

Natalie simply nodded, not giving much away. It was obvious that Anne had a million and one questions to ask Natalie, but she realized that she could not do so here in front of everyone. They were going to have to wait until they could get a moment alone from prying eyes. They would be lucky to get that today because the Dowager was watching Natalie like a hawk.

"Broderick is so wonderful, is he not?" she cried out, glowing happily. "He knew how unhappy I was about Natalie being missing, and he sent out a rescue mission to save my daughter. He brought her home to me!"

William was utterly taken aback by this. It seemed to him like his uncle really had swept in and become the hero. This

seemed more like he had acted to impress the Dowager rather than because he actually cared about Natalie. William could not pinpoint exactly why this felt wrong, only that it did.

“I am so very lucky to have a man who cares about me so much!” his mother exclaimed again. She clung to Broderick’s arm as if she was afraid that he might slip through her fingers. William knew that would never happen. Broderick was not going anywhere. “A man who wants to bring this family back together. We are whole once more.”

She moved over to Natalie, to pull her away from Anne, to give her a hug of her own. William would not have thought anything about this if he had not noticed Natalie recoil. It seemed to be Broderick that she wanted to get away from. Although their mother did not seem to notice the strange reaction – or perhaps she did not want to notice.

William knew that Natalie was not happy about this engagement, but there seemed to be something else. Something was bubbling underneath the surface, and he wished to find out what. When he caught sight of Anne noticing the same thing, he spotted the exact same reaction in her. She did not like this either, which was interesting, to say the least. During the short time that they had spent together, getting to know one another better, he had seen how astute her observations were.

Maybe their mission was not quite over yet after all.

“I would like to get some rest,” Natalie said quietly, sounding oddly afraid of her own voice. “May I retire to my bedchambers? It has been a very long day for me.”

Just as their mother started to nod encouragingly, Natalie reached out for Anne. It was no surprise that she wanted her best friend to go with her because Anne seemed to be the one person that she could discuss anything with. This was good for William too, because it would allow him the insight that he needed to understand as well.

But Uncle Broderick was not about to allow this to happen. “Ah, Natalie, if you are so tired, it might be a good idea for

you to go to bed alone. I am sure Lady Anne understands that you need your rest.”

Anne was left with no choice but to agree, even though every fiber of her being seemed to scream the opposite. “Oh yes, I can return another day if you need sleep, that is. I am sure you are tired—”

“But I would like to talk,” Natalie mumbled, but to no avail. She had all but accepted the decree before those words even left her mouth.

“I believe that Lady Anne might wish to be home tonight anyway,” Uncle Broderick said with a loud laugh. It was a chuckle that William was only just noticing now how truly obnoxious it was. “Your father is home from his travels today, is he not? I am sure he is keen to spend some time with you.”

Anne had not mentioned this to William, and nor had Harry. But this news seemed to shock her as well. It was almost as if she did not know he was arriving today. “Oh, I see. Well, yes, I suppose...”

Anne looked down to see Natalie’s hand slipping away from her. Both women appeared devastated that they were not allowed to make their own choices about what they did next. They had been apart for a long time now, so William was upset for them.

He was going to have to try and get Natalie to open up to him tonight, if Anne was being sent away. And he would take on board what Anne said to him a while back, even if the words upset him at the time.

“Maybe your sister does not trust you because of your brutish attitude.”

He would be calm and collected, polite and patient. He would not push Natalie to talk to him unless she was happy to do so, because he could not stand the idea of pushing her away. Not when she needed someone to talk to more than anything.

Then if William determined that Natalie needed Anne, he would send word for her in the morning so that they could

pick things up where they left off. They could have their much-needed talk then.

Anne and Natalie took a long time saying goodbye to one another, despite everyone watching them – some watching more intently than others, Broderick especially. There were many promises of seeing one another very soon before Anne finally took the carriage back to her home.

William did not wait long after Natalie had left the room to make his own excuses, but his mother was too smart not to see what he was up to.

“William, you must leave her tonight,” she said sharply, the warning on the edge of her tone like a knife blade. “I know it is hard for you because you are such an impatient man, but Natalie needs her time to be alone. We cannot ask her why she left until she is recovered.”

“You know, it might not be a good idea to ask her at all,” Uncle Broderick jumped in, surprising William. “If she simply ran away because she is having a childish fit about our marriage, then I am sure she will be too embarrassed to want to bring it up.” He offered the room a blasé one-shouldered shrug. “We managed to keep her disappearance under wraps, I do not think that anyone is aware of her running off, so Natalie might wish to return to life as if that never happened at all.”

Just as William was about to argue that they had to find out what was happening in her life so they could prevent it from happening again, his mother burst into girlish giggles. Maybe that was for the best, because he was not sure that he would have been able to keep his mouth shut about Lord Lucan and his knowledge of what happened.

“Oh, Broderick, you are right. Of course, you are right. Natalie is in the middle of the Season, so of course she will want to pretend nothing happened.” She moved closer to him and wrapped her arms around him. William could not help but wonder if they had forgotten that he was in the room with them and that they were still unwed. “She only missed one ball, and we have been very lucky that the gossipers have not

found us. We should focus on the future from here on out, and concentrate on finding a good match for Natalie.”

William excused himself swiftly, eager to leave the room because he did not want to witness the display of affection that was clearly about to occur, but he kept his suspicions with him as he left. Since Uncle Broderick was the one who had rescued her, had Natalie told him everything? Because if that man knew who was threatening Natalie, then it was only fair that William was at least given that information. That way, he could make sure that no one ever threatened his sister again.

But he could not ask her about it now. He did not wish to go against his mother’s wishes, because she was probably right, so it would have to wait, at least for a little while. But he would unravel this mystery soon enough. Nothing was going to stop him from looking after Natalie. Nothing at all.

He walked up the stairs carefully, trying not to make a sound, and paused outside the door of Natalie’s bedchambers. It seemed strange that this was a place out of bounds once more. He did not even know how Natalie would react when she learned that he and Anne had spent an awful lot of time in her private space, looking through all of her things and reading her notebooks and journals. She was not likely to take it very well, but they had only been doing their best to help her. To find her.

There was no noise coming from the other side of the door, so it really did seem like Natalie had drifted off to sleep right away. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she was lost to the world. That saddened William; he could almost feel his heart sinking in his chest. He pressed his palm to the door, trying to silently reach out to her, just to let her know that he was there for her always. Even if she did think of him as a brute. But he could not fully reach her, not now anyway. As much as it frustrated him to do so, he had to walk away for now.

As he left, he found his mind drifting away from Natalie though, and focusing on someone else – someone he had been given the opportunity to see a lot of recently, but now he would be obliged to keep at a distance. Without their shared mission of finding Natalie, William, and Anne had no excuse to see one another every single day. They would hopefully

meet again once one of them knew why Natalie had run off, but what then? What about when he was married to Lavinia and Anne went on with her life?

He was going to miss her a lot, of that he was certain. He did not know how to picture his life without her there in it now, which was a very strange sensation. He was not the sort of man to kiss any woman, not like some people he knew. Anne was special. He had kissed her because he knew that they both had feelings for one another. But feelings were not always going to be enough, were they? So, what would he do?

He should have told her. William should not have allowed Anne to climb out of the carriage until he let her know that Lavinia was not the one that he wanted. That was a mistake he felt he was going to regret for the rest of his life.

Especially if he had to watch her living her life without him.

Chapter Fifteen



Harry had not told Anne that their father was returning from his travels today, but then Harry was thoroughly distracted, so perhaps he had gotten the dates mixed up. Or maybe he was unaware. Broderick could have even gotten it all wrong, Anne was not sure, but it seemed like she was about to find out

Anne was trying her hardest to make excuses for her brother's actions on the carriage ride home just in case he knew and had not yet told her because she was trying not to get angrier at everyone than she already was. She was upset with William for making her feel silly about the previous night, and she was irritated with Natalie's family for clearly not respecting her wishes and not allowing them to talk because surely Natalie had a lot to say.

She did not need to be filled with rage over Harry as well. That might just tip her over the edge into a mood that she could not climb back from.

Harry did seem to be aware though because he had made it home from the gaming hell before Anne. He was there ready to greet their father and to act like the perfect son. He always did this, and Anne found it very annoying to watch. Somehow, she was going to have to put up with it today though, or she would be worse than the imperfect daughter. She would be the person causing all sorts of unnecessary problems.

"Ah, Anne, you are finally here!" Harry called out in his sharpest tone as soon as she walked through the front door. Something about the way he spoke made Anne stand up a little

straighter as if she had something to worry about. “You are going to be very excited to see what Father has brought back from his travels this time.”

Anne’s heart leaped up into her throat. How had Broderick known that her father was home and she did not? This made her very concerned that there was something here to worry her. Something to put her in the line of gossip. After hearing how vicious the gossiping ladies could be, she feared their lashing tongues even more.

She raced quickly into the drawing room where she found Harry, smirking at her, clearly delighting in something, and her father. But there was a woman beside him. A woman that Anne did not recognize.

“Oh, my goodness,” Anne gasped as she pressed her hand to her chest. “I did not know that we would be having guests today.”

“Anne, you do not need to worry quite so much,” her father laughed, a sound that was filled with misplaced mirth. “This is no guest. This is Gabrielle Pessoa, a lovely woman that I met in Jamaica. I am sure that you will both come to love her too.”

Anne exchanged a confused look with Harry. What was happening here? This had to officially be the strangest day of her life so far. Who was this woman to their father? Why was she here? He had gone traveling alone...

Her father continued though, as he put his arm around Gabrielle and tugged her a little closer to him. A little too close, Anne could not stop herself from thinking. “Gabrielle is going to be my wife.”

Anne was not the only one who gasped this time. Both she and Harry were in complete and utter shock. They had no idea of their father’s plan to ever marry again. He had never shown any interest in marrying again after their mother passed away. This was very confusing.

“You... you cannot just drop this on our lap,” Harry snapped angrily. “This is something that we should all talk about. As a

family. I did not know that you intended to *marry* this woman as well.”

“It is *my* life,” their father shot back, good-naturedly. Anne could not help but notice that there did seem to be a new lightness about him now that was not there before. Was this what love had done for him? She did not know how to process this. “I shall do as I please.”

But Harry was not going to be ignored that easily. He crossed his arms defiantly over his chest and continued to argue. “But what is the point of any of this? You do not need any more heirs.”

“Marriage can be about love. It does not always need to be about heirs.” Her father looked frustrated as Harry only blinked at him, not understanding what he was saying at all. “It shall not matter at any rate, because we shall not be living here.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Even if you are living in the countryside, any heirs you have will be problematic for me.”

Me, me, me. Typical Harry, managing to make everything about himself. But Anne did not have any contributions to make to the conversation at the moment. All she could do was watch the words fly back and forth between the men of her family while she tried to adjust to what was going to be her new reality, no matter what Harry thought about it all.

“I am not talking about moving to the countryside, Harry. I am talking about moving back to Jamaica.”

The air was sucked out of the room completely. Anne did not know who to look at anymore. Their father was thinking of moving to Jamaica? And he was only just telling them this? She wanted him to be happy, she truly did, but she did not want him to move to another country!

“I know this might be a lot to understand all at once,” her father said, in a much softer and more understanding tone of voice this time around. “But I am very much in love with Giselle. I have never felt this way about anyone before. In addition, Jamaica is a beautiful country with sunshine all the

time. I am already cold being back in the gray, gloomy, English weather.”

Anne swallowed hard. It seemed like she was going to have to be the person to say something kind here, to smooth things over a little. If their father really did intend to move away, then she did not want things to end on a sour note. She was sure that Harry did not want that either. Furthermore, what would this mean for her and her reputation? There was no telling.

“That is wonderful news, Papa.” She smiled thinly at him. “And Gabrielle, it is lovely to meet you and welcome you to the family.”

Harry stepped in front of Gabrielle and rudely examined her as if she was an exhibit from a zoo. “You no like England?” he asked her slowly, in a loud tone of voice as if she were stupid.

Gabrielle stared at him blankly. Anne was starting to think that perhaps she did not speak a word of English, in which case how could she possibly have anything in common with their father? How on earth would their marriage work? But very quickly, Gabrielle debunked that fear.

“I like it here in England very much, thank you for asking. Although I must agree with your father. The weather really is very cold.”

She spoke fluent English. Anne could not stop herself from smiling as Harry started to trip over his words because he was so embarrassed. He did not know how to come back from that foolish mistake. He should not have judged Gabrielle before he had even gotten to know her. That was a big error on his part.

“And if you would allow me to, I would love to cook you a dish from Jamaica tonight, so we can all have dinner together and get to know one another as a family?”

“Oh no, we have cooks for that, guests do not belong in the kitchen,” Harry jumped in, but Gabrielle continued to smile.

“I know you have all your rules here in England,” she said dismissively. “But I love to be in the kitchen. I would love to cook for you all.”

Anne nodded eagerly. She figured that she might as well use her time here with her father and Gabrielle to get to know her well and to see them as much as she could before they left for Jamaica.

It was surprising, but if this truly was love, then who was she to step in the way of it? Most importantly, she hoped that by showing some enthusiasm herself, Harry might step up to the plate and behave himself too.

“That sounds absolutely wonderful, Gabrielle. I thoroughly look forward to tasting anything that you have to cook. I am very excited to try the dishes you have in Jamaica. I feel very lucky to have the chance.”

Her father beamed happily at her, showing his gratitude with his smile, and eventually, Harry had no choice but to show enthusiasm as well. This would likely be a good thing for all of them in the end. They just had to put in the effort while they could. Anne was sure that she could be the instigator of that, even if she was already going through a lot herself.

She could look after Natalie, and help out her family as well. She had to, because there was not anyone else willing and able to do both.



“This is unlike anything I have ever tasted before!” Anne exclaimed enthusiastically as she hungrily devoured the food that Gabrielle had cooked for them. “It is so full of flavors. Exotic flavors that I did not even know existed. You truly are a wonderful cook.”

Gabrielle looked pleased by the compliment until she turned to see Harry’s sullen face. He was being incredibly rude, hardly trying a thing, simply pushing the food around his plate with a fork. Anne thought that he was going to behave. What was wrong with him now? She tried to kick him under the table to remind him that he was supposed to be acting like a decent person, but his leg was out of reach.

“So, has anything happened while I have been gone?” their father asked in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere. “Have there been any scandals? I have been trying to explain London society to Giselle but she does not seem to understand it at all. It is very difficult to explain it to someone who has grown up in a very different culture.”

For a moment, Anne wondered what it was like in Jamaica. She wondered if reputations were still the most important thing and if women were restricted more than men. She liked to think of them living much sunnier, much more fun-filled lives with fewer rules, if that was where her father intended to spend the rest of his life.

“Something happened with your friend, Natalie, did it not?” Her father asked. “Harry mentioned that you have been worried about her.”

Oh! So Harry had noticed more than he was letting on. Now he was using that information to put Anne in the spotlight when she really did not want to be.

“Oh, well, this is not really a scandal,” Anne admitted. “Because it is not widely known by many people, so I do not want gossip to spread from here.” She stared hard at Harry because he was far more likely to talk than her father, especially because of his silly little perceived rivalry with William. But if he wanted to bring this up, then he needed to learn to keep his mouth shut. “But Natalie went missing for a few days. Her uncle, Broderick, found her safe and sound though, so there is nothing to worry about.”

Anne was not really expecting any kind of reaction, but she certainly did not prepare herself for the icy cold silence that she did get. And not just from Harry, but from her father as well. He had suddenly switched from being very happy and jovial to serious in less than a heartbeat.

“I would prefer you to keep away from that family,” he suddenly declared in a strange, strangled tone of voice. “I know that you are good friends with Natalie, so I do not mean her, but the rest of them.”

What? Anne’s eyebrow popped into her hairline.

“I agree,” Harry piped up. But this did not seem to be in his usual interfering way. There was a strange stoic aura to him now too. “Even the Duke. I know that you were with him today, chaperoned by me of course.” He seemed to be daring Anne to admit that he had left her halfway through the day, but she did not say a thing. The less said about her time alone with William the better as far as she was concerned. “But that was because you were looking for Natalie.”

“Yes, now you should only see her here, at this house.” Their father nodded as he spoke, to make his point clear. “Because they are not... trustworthy men.”

“What...” Anne swallowed hard. “What do you mean by that?”

For a moment, she thought that her father was going to tell her everything. He looked like the truth was right there on the tip of his tongue. But for some strange reason, that Anne was never going to understand, he stopped himself at the very last minute.

“You should just trust me, Anne. I know what I am talking about.” His stare hardened. “And I am your father, so it is your duty to do as I say. I do not want to hear that you have been anywhere near them. Any of them.”

Anne found that very strange, especially when he was about to leave her to live in Jamaica. Why would he suddenly want to lay down the law now? He had never had anything to say about Natalie’s family before. Had Harry been whispering in his ear? That was very possible, especially if he had been more observant today than she realized.

Maybe he picked up on the burning tension between Anne and William after all, and he wanted her to stay away from him because of course William was engaged to be married. Soon enough, he would be the husband of Lavinia and Anne would *have* to forget about him.

Right now, that felt utterly impossible, but she was going to have to find a way or she would have to suffer from a shattered heart forever.

I cannot be heartbroken over Duke Hardson, she told herself angrily. I have never even liked him. It is just because we have been working together, that is all.

But she was not going to fool herself. She did not stand a chance. She did not think that she was willing to give her heart over to William, but she had done so anyway. She had given more of herself than she knew she was capable of giving. But he was still betrothed to another woman so that would have to be the end of things.

She was going to have to forget him and spend time with Natalie at her own home, away from Natalie's family in accordance with her father's silly new rule.

But maybe it was not such a silly rule after all. Perhaps that would be the best thing for all of them – *if* she could keep away, that was.

Chapter Sixteen



Everything had returned back to normal. At least, that was the way that his family wanted to behave, but for William, that could not have been further from the truth. Nothing was normal, and he could not picture anything being as it was for a very long time.

Now, he was even more suspicious that something more was happening, because no one other than their mother had been allowed in to see Natalie as yet. William kept being told that she was too unwell to see anyone, including him, but he could not believe that. She did not seem too unwell when she returned home, just that she did not wish to be back. So, where some sudden sickness might have come from, he was not sure.

The more William truly observed what was going on in his house, the more he could see that Broderick appeared to be pulling all the strings. No matter what he wanted, their mother would make sure that it happened, even if it meant isolating Natalie from the rest of the world.

If *this* was what Natalie had observed, and what she did not like, then William understood. He was starting to have a lot of disdain for this unexpected relationship between his mother and his uncle as well.

It was not just him. The girls – the wallflowers – had tried to visit as well, but Anne most of all. She had come to the house every single day without fail, even though she had to know at this point that she was only going to get turned away. She continued to come, to try and see her best friend.

It was a frustrating endeavor for everyone, and William was finding it increasingly hard to deal with. He had even tried sneaking into Natalie's bedchambers a couple of times, but his mother was always ready to prevent him from getting anywhere. It did not seem to matter that William was the master of the house, she insisted that Natalie was far too sick for visitation. It was a ploy, he was sure of it, and it was going to really irritate him if he could not overcome it.

He had started spending a great deal of time in his study, trying to mull over things and work out what he was missing. He had even started to consider the possibility that Natalie had left because of him. Maybe he was just as brutish as Anne had suggested, and he had pushed her away. If she simply did not wish to see him, then he would accept it.

He would not be happy about it, but he would accept it.

Knock, knock, knock.

William groaned to himself. He was not in the mood for any visitors right now. But his family knew where he was going to be, and he would not be able to get away with it. So he rose from his desk chair and unwillingly clicked open the door. But as soon as he saw the face on the other side of the door, he willingly swung it open to greet that person.

"Anne?" He felt like his heart was beating out of his chest. "What are you doing here?"

She did not wait to be invited inside but pushed her way in with a distressed look on her face. William shut and locked the door behind them so that they could have a moment alone. He did not know what this was, but he could tell it was serious.

"I have just seen Natalie," she said quickly, the worry rolling off her tongue with each and every word. "Only for a moment, and your mother was with me the whole time so I could not have a proper conversation with her. It was just... to see her. I think my constant coming to the door has become a problem so the dowager wants to placate me."

"You *saw* Natalie?" William's breath balled up in his throat. "And...?"

Anne met his eyes. His blood ran ice cold. "I do not know. Not really. She certainly does not appear to be unwell, and there has not been a doctor to see her, so I do not think that is why she is keeping herself hidden."

"Do you think my mother is forcing her to hide away?" William asked, desperate to share his theory with someone. He dropped his voice a little as he spoke to Anne so there was no chance that he could be over heard. "Because I have been concerned about the way that Mother and Broderick have been acting around Natalie. I do not know what I am missing."

But Anne shocked him by shaking her head. "I think that they are simply trying to look after her. To protect her."

"Protect her from what?"

"Protect her from a ruined reputation," Anne declared as if it was obvious. "Because she was found in an unfamiliar part of the city with a man. Maybe the same man that Lord Lucan's servants saw her with. We do not know what has happened."

William blew out a long breath of air. He had not thought too deeply about that. He had almost forgotten about what might have happened to Natalie while she was gone because he had been so worried about what was happening within the four walls of his home.

"Did she say anything to you about this person?"

"I could not ask," Anne replied with a regretful head shake. "I could not say a thing in front of your mother. But there is something in Natalie's eyes that makes me very worried for her. She is hiding something. I am concerned that she has fallen for the wrong person."

William knew that he should not laugh, but he could not stop himself. "Well, that is something we know far too much about, is it not?"

It was not exactly the declaration of love that he had been planning on, nor did it let Anne know that he was planning on cutting ties with Lavinia, but it was something. It certainly made her eyes widen with surprise.

"William, I am talking about a ruined reputation here."

He stepped even nearer to her, caving to the temptation to close the gap between them. "I know, as we spoke of the same thing the last time we were together."

An adorable pink color blushed across her cheeks. "William, I did not sneak away from the butler after he thought that he had seen me to the door already for this. I thought that we would talk."

"And that is what we are doing. Talking." He reached out and brushed a stray strand of hair from her face. She shivered under his touch, which took him right back to the night of the ball when he was lucky enough to feel her body contort in ecstasy. He wanted that again; he craved it. His whole body began to throb with need and anticipation. Anne had him captivated in a way that he truly did not know was possible, and he could not get enough of her.

Should he tell Anne that he was willing to give up everything for her? What on earth would she think? Most people were going to think him mad for giving up on the Diamond of the Season, who would certainly make him a good bride.

But William was not simply looking for a good bride. He wanted a fantastic marriage; he wanted to be beside a woman who understood him in the way that Anne seemed to, and who was interested in talking about the same things that he was. He wanted a woman who set him on fire like this.

"Not talking about us," Anne warned him with a cocked eyebrow. "We are talking about what we can do for Natalie. How we can help her."

"If you think that she is being protected, then I do not think we should do a thing," William replied honestly. He was not too certain that Anne's theory was exactly right, but he *would* try to consider things from that angle for a while, just in case. "I think that Natalie will decide for herself when she is ready to come back out to face the world."

"And if her reputation *is* ruined?"

"I thought we were ruining your reputation as well?" William could not help himself. Everything about Anne absolutely

thrilled him to the core. He could not get enough of her; she really had become his addiction. Seeing how much he affected her only impacted him more. She might be trying to push these feelings down, but William could see the way that her body betrayed her, and it set him on fire.

“You know, we have not ruined your reputation too much,” he observed with a cheeky little smile playing on his lips. “There is so much that we have not done. I do not think you should worry so much.”

Anne turned from slightly pink to bright red. “What are you talking about, William?”

At least she was no longer trying to change the subject. That emboldened him and he lightly grazed his fingers over her cheek once more.

“I am sure you know about all the other things that we could have done, had we wanted to ruin your reputation more.”

Anne rested her hands on her hips for a moment, but the magnetic pull seemed to sweep her up as well. In a manner that appeared to be completely out of her control, she swayed her hips as she walked toward him with a glazed-over look in her eyes. The passion was creeping over her, taking more control by the minute.

“Like this?”

William gasped out in shock as Anne touched him. Only ever so lightly, but she bolted lightning passion through his whole body as she touched where he had become rock hard for her. Where he did not think that a lady like Anne would ever want to touch him. An unexpected curse word even fell out of his mouth because, through his layers of clothing, the way it felt was phenomenal, unlike anything she had ever felt before.

Anne was now the one with a cheeky smile as she backed from William. She had given him *everything* for just a moment, before ripping the glorious sensations away. Like a true addict, William instantly craved more.

“You ought to be careful, touching a man like that,” he warned in a grave voice. “You should not tease and provoke a man. It

is dangerous.”

“You are the one teasing me, telling me that there is more we could have done. It is you being unfair to me. If there is more, then I want you to show me more. I think you *should* show me more.”

William’s head began to spin. He could almost feel himself starting to lose control. A dragon of desire was being unleashed, and once that was set free, there was no way to lock it up again. “You do not know what you are asking for.”

“Then show me.” Anne shrugged. “I am asking you to show me. My reputation is already on the line, but now you are promising me more. I do not understand why I would want to walk away from this without having the full experience of you.”

It was the *of you* that really got to William. She needed him, just as he did her. She craved him, and wanted to know what it was like to be with him, just in case he could not escape from his word and he ended up married to another. At least that way they would have memories to keep them going, even if they did end up in a lifetime of misery.

It was not the easiest situation for either of them to be in, but Anne was so beautiful and looking especially lovely today. In addition, she had made the effort to sneak away to see him, giving them a chance that they might not have had otherwise. He did not want to lose this chance.

He stepped a little closer to her, his resolve slipping away even more as he inhaled her intoxicating scent. It did not matter that it was wrong, as William cupped Anne’s cheeks in his hands and hovered his lips near hers, this time knowing that he would definitely get to kiss her, neither one of them would pull away at the last minute this time around, he was overwhelmed with how *right* it felt.

He did not just feel close to Anne because they had been forced together while looking for Natalie; the way that his pulse was pounding was so real, as was the intense desire sprouting inside of him. He had a real adoration for her; the way that he craved her spoke of wonderful, deep feelings.

Even though the justification for this moment was the worry that they would never get to be together again, William truly hoped that would not happen. He did not ever want to find himself living a life without Anne. Especially as his lips crashed with hers and he claimed her with his mouth.

He wanted her, he needed her, and she needed him also. All their responsibilities, duties, and expectations meant nothing when they could hold on to one another like this. Here, in his study, it was only her that mattered. Only this glorious feeling they gave one another.

A feeling that William knew he would never be lucky enough to get with anyone else.

Chapter Seventeen



Anne knew that this was utter madness and that her reputation was on the line, dangling right in front of her, about to be destroyed. But she also knew that she could not stop herself, not now. The tension had been brewing between her and William the whole time that they had been working together. Whether it was tension filled with hatred, or tension flooded with sexual chemistry, they could not avoid it any longer.

This was not her wisest day, but it was a day that she would never forget. That was all that Anne could really concentrate on right now. Finally, she had him here alone in front of her, and she needed to make the best of what she could get.

As his lips crashed to hers, Anne felt her knees go weak. It was fortunate that he had his arms around her, to keep her on her feet or she might have tumbled away. Their kiss was so passionate, so deep, and meaningful, it was easy for Anne to lose herself completely. He pushed her up against the desk, and immediately she pushed herself back on to the wood and spread her thighs a little so he could press against her.

She could feel him, really feel him, and that set her on fire. His body was all hard and tense for her, and that made her want him so much more. There was *nothing* in her brain anymore, only the man – the duke that she thought she hated but turned out to desire more than anything in the world.

His hands slid up her legs, his thumbs eagerly stroked her thighs, reminding her of the moment they shared in the library at the ball. An intense shiver tore down her spine; she could

not disguise the shudder of delight, and judging by the moan falling out of William's mouth, it seemed like he was drowning in flames also.

She did not think about what she was doing. She did not wish to get lost in rational thought. All she wanted was *him*. Her eager fingers unbuckled his britches so she could really feel him while he continued to touch and tease her all over her intensely sensitive body.

Once his trousers fell away, Anne's heart thundered against her rib cage as she slithered her hand into his underwear to grab him. Anne gasped with delight, with intense need, as she curled her fingers around his thick, throbbing steel rod. A powerful fire surged between them as Anne slowly stroked him, trying to feel every inch of his body.

"Oh, Anne," he whispered with his hands running through her hair. "You have no idea what you are doing to me. You drive me mad."

He kissed her once more, more desperately this time and with far more passion sizzling between them. His fingers prized her drawers away before he started to massage her all over again. This time, the way he felt her was far more confident. It was obvious he knew her body well; he knew just how to touch her, where she liked to be felt. While she was much less confident with her own fingers, it did not seem to make any difference. He was crying out with pleasure regardless.

His lips moved off of hers and started kissing everywhere else. He moved his hands from between her legs to start the process of untying her dress so he could see her body once more. Anne was not shy at all now; she wanted him to see all of her. She even shimmied where she needed to, to help him slip the garment off her. It felt incredible to show him all of her, and she very much enjoyed removing his clothing as well, so she could finally see his thick muscular body underneath. He really was strong and broad; he was so lovely that he made her whole body pulse with desire. He really was *everything* and she was so grateful that she had jumped into this moment with both feet because she needed it. She knew that she would die without it.

As William nibbled her ear lobes, sending pulses of pleasure bolting like lightning down to her core, Anne tossed her head back and gulped air. She let her hair mess up, spilling everywhere, as he cupped her now naked breasts. She did not stop stroking his steely length, even for a moment. She yearned to keep him exactly in this state of arousal until he had all of himself buried deep inside of her, sending her wild.

This would all be worth it; she just knew it. Just to have this moment with him in her mind always, to have the memories afterward. Not that she wanted to think about *afterward* right now. That was something she could not handle, not while such feelings and emotions were swelling up in her chest, making her want to cling to William forever. She gripped his shoulders, ran her eager hands all over his torso, touching as much of him as she could.

However, he surprised her; she gasped as he fell to his knees. She went to grab him, to make sure that he did not hurt himself but it seemed like this was what he intended to do. He wanted to be on his knees, acting like he was the one submissive to her. Now *that* was incredibly intoxicating; she liked the idea of perhaps being able to boss him around, of having control of him in all kinds of ways.

But of course, that was only a fantasy. He was really the one with all the power at his fingertips.

With his hands still holding on to her legs, he smiled up at her, his eyes flickering with delight. Anne gasped agonizingly as she could feel hot streams of his breath tickling along her core. She could not stop herself from parting her thighs a little, because this sensation was so utterly intoxicating. She needed more, so much more.

“You are so beautiful,” William murmured as he started to kiss the tops of her legs. “I am obsessed with looking at you. I could spend the rest of my life just staring at you.”

Anne’s breaths were ragged. She could not get enough air into her lungs however hard she tried. Her chest rose and fell sharply as the dizziness rapidly overwhelmed her. She wanted to tell William that he was incredibly good-looking as well,

and that sometimes she found it hard to look at him because he was so handsome, but she could not say a word. William's lips were edging closer to where she was absolutely aching for him. She rolled her hips, losing control of any rational thought as finally he connected with her.

She let out a yelp of excitement as his hot tongued brushed over her in rough strokes. Her head lolled backward, desire flooded her; she barely even knew where she was anymore. None of it mattered, only him and the way that he was tasting her body and setting her on fire. His tongue was somehow even better than the feel of his velvety fingers. This was almost bringing her to her knees.

"Oh, William," she cried out as she knotted her fingers up in his hair. "That feels... that feels..."

It did not matter if she could not express herself with words because William seemed to understand her perfectly anyway. He became a man on a mission, his tongue all over her, deep inside of her. The burning hot bliss was an onslaught, it was too much, but she also could not get enough. She kept tugging his head back towards her because it was just so wonderful. Her veins fizzed with thrills as he rapidly tasted all of her. Anne's toes curled under; the pleasure crept through her before it shot up her body, setting her core alight, burning flames of passion all over her body until she could not hold herself together any longer. She wanted to savor this bliss, to keep hold of herself for as long as she could, but William was just too good.

"Oh, William," she moaned as her body went flying over the edge into the deep abyss of pleasure. The orgasm hit her hard like a tsunami, the waves of endless heaven never seemed to stop coming. William gripped hold of her, clinging on to her tightly so she could not edge away from the bliss. He seemed to want to make sure that she felt every second of the intensity "William, oh my goodness..."

Just as she thought that she was about to sink into post-orgasmic bliss, William bolted up to his feet and crashed his lips to hers once more. Anne was surprised by the taste of

herself on his lips, but it was not an unpleasant shock. Something about his kiss excited her even more.

Luckily, she could feel the pressure of his hardness pressing between her legs, his excitement crying out to her. Anne knew that once they took this one more step, there was no turning back. Whatever she was feeling in her chest would erupt and flow through her like lava and she would not be able to shut them down again. But at least she would have this memory to keep with her. That would help her out, would it not?

In the heat of the moment, it did not matter. Anne was not thinking straight. She did not care. She was doing something for herself for a change, giving in to the physical sensations and allowing her body to get what it needed.

William finally gave Anne everything that she needed by thrusting deep inside of her. He filled her up in a way that she truly was not expecting, making her scream so loudly she was sure that they were going to get caught at any given moment. But even that thought, even the knowledge that she would be shamed and no one would ever want to marry her, could not change her mind.

She *needed* William. She had been craving this for as long as she could remember. She thought that she hated this man, but she did not. Clearly, she did not. It was a desire that she had been suppressing the whole time. He was not dull; he was the most exciting man she had ever met.

What a shame that he was betrothed to someone else. Life was so unfair.

But as he enveloped her in a tight hug, and he continued to hit all the right spots as he thrust deeper and deeper within her, Anne did not feel like life was unfair. This moment was absolutely perfect, and it was shrouding them in a heady, deep lust that she wanted to drown in forever. William was crying out her name over and over as she drove him to the peak of desire as well, which only made things that much more intense for Anne.

She loved knowing that she could make him feel special, just in the same way he did her. Both of them hit all the right spots

for one another as they used his desk to send each other to heaven.

This was *not* exactly the way that Anne thought this meeting with William would go. She had not snuck off into his office thinking that she would end up naked with him exploding deep inside of her, but she was not complaining. She would never complain about *this*.

Eventually, both Anne and William slid off the desk and sank to the floor, exhausted and drained. They continued to hold one another because they could not seem to let go. Anne loved his ragged breathing and the way that his heart would not stop hammering. It was a sound that she would hold on to forever. She would remember it always because she *knew* that this was the only moment that they would ever have. So she wanted to make the absolute best of it while she could. She wanted to savor every second of it.

Once the heat faded away from them, a horrifying thought started to strike Anne. It would not be long until she was forced to watch William walk down the aisle with Lady Lavinia, to agree to be her husband forever more. She knew the rumors that not all husbands were faithful to the ones they married, but there was no chance that Anne would be someone's mistress. Whether she loved William or not, that was not a life any respectable lady should live.

Of course, she did not want to be stuck married to a man that she did not love either, but maybe that was not something she needed to worry about. With her father leaving the country soon to be with his wife in Jamaica, and Harry constantly worrying about himself, she might not be pressured to find a man to be with.

Although could she get through life as a spinster? That idea did not appeal to her either. Not now that she had experienced what it was like to feel so alive and powerful at the hands of a man. She was not sure that she could go for the rest of her life without having that experience again.

But what could she do? She could not have William, and she could not imagine another man doing the same things to her

heart and her body.

Eventually, she noticed that William had relaxed so much he was actually snoring lightly. In the middle of his office floor, he had drifted off. It would have been nice for Anne to stay with him for a little bit, so she could embrace him for as long as she could, but she knew that was not possible. She should not have been in this room at all. She could *not* be caught naked with him.

While it pained her to move away from him, she knew that she did not have any choice. She dragged herself up off the floor and searched the room to find her belongings. She knew that she would not be able to dress herself here as well as she could at home. She did not even have a mirror to check her reflection, but that was not the most important thing. She was also going to have to find a way to sneak out of here without being seen. That was going to be a challenge that she was wholly unprepared for. Rational thought was slowly coming back to her, and she was realizing that she had made a mountain of errors. This was a day that she would not be able to forget, but she had to survive it first.

Chapter Eighteen



There was a lot that William could get all caught up in today, but he could not focus on anything other than what was right in front of him: the all-important horse race which would determine his positioning within this community. If he could win this – which William was pretty sure that he could – then he would have lots of people wanting to support him and bet on his horse in the future.

It should have been his sole goal; nothing else should have even scraped the sides of his brain, but he was still on edge and he could not help it. He worried for his sister, who was still too sick to even attend today according to his mother, which made him panic about the gossip and the way that people were going to be *far* too interested in what was happening with his family. He could not even answer any questions, even if they were flung at him since he still did not know why Natalie had run off.

Then, of course, he was very concerned about Anne because he had not been lucky enough to see her ever since their time alone in his office. She had simply run off while he was asleep, no doubt in an attempt to protect her reputation, but he had no idea how she felt. He needed to lay eyes on her, to *see* her so he could know that she was alright. But she had been avoiding him. Or at least, that was how it felt.

“I think your bride is trying to get your attention,” Harry suddenly declared wryly beside William, dragging his attention back to the present moment. “Look, she is waving wildly at you.”

The last thing that William needed to be reminded of was Lady Lavinia, who in fact was waving at him from the stands in her finest horse racing dress and a hat so large it almost knocked into the people around her. He lifted his hand to wave back, but his reaction was less than enthusiastic, something she would surely bring up later on.

“Ooh, is there trouble with the happy couple?”

William turned to glare at Harry, who was being more obnoxious than usual. “You do not need to try and get in my head, Lord Bamford. There is not a thing that you can say today which will make me lose this race.”

Harry knew without a doubt that William was the superior rider, and that he also had a much faster horse, but that did not stop him from trying to irritate the Duke. It was honestly so very childish, William did not like to engage with him, but sometimes he could not help himself. Like today, because he was already so tense.

“Your sister has not come to see you race?” Harry continued to tease, stepping on William’s toes far too hard. “I am surprised. I thought that she would want to show her face today so that no one thinks she has run off again. Unless she *has* run off again.” Harry offered William a one-shouldered blasé shrug. “I cannot blame her. I would not wish to be close to you all the time either. I would be quick to run away also.”

William gritted his teeth together in temper, curling his hands into fists. He did not wish to give Harry what he wanted, because it was ever so clear that he wanted a reaction before they even got out on the track.

“You do not know a thing, Lord Bamford, so I suggest that you keep your mouth shut. You have a younger sister, also, so do you not have any sympathy at all? I cannot believe you...”

The words trailed off as it suddenly hit William that he should not speak of Anne after their snatched moments alone. It was quite improper, and if anyone found out about it, they would both suffer the consequences – her far more than him. He did not think that he could mention Anne without blushing brightly, and Harry would certainly pick up on that.

“My sister would *never* dare to cause a scandal like that.”

Harry turned his back on William knowing that he had just delivered a devastating blow that would haunt William throughout the whole race. It was not like William was willing to throw Anne into the spotlight just because he wanted to hurt Harry. He was simply going to have to beat out Harry on the horse track and make him look a fool there. Then, with a bit of luck, Harry would leave him alone. He would not dare speak of Natalie again, because he had absolutely no right to do so.

William turned back to his horse, Midnight, who looked even less impressed with Harry than he felt. “We cannot allow him to destroy us today,” he whispered to his magnificent beast. “We must show him that he is not the impressive man he thinks himself to be.”

It was hard for him not to get caught up in the bubbling rage searing through his body. It was as if Harry knew that he was feeling particularly on edge today, and he wanted to make things so much worse. How were Anne and her brother and sister? It did not make any sense. They were so different. Maybe Anne seemed tough and a little brash like her brother at first, which was why William had never bothered to look her way before. He saw her as just another problem. But the truth of it was, she was lovely. She was sweet, kind-hearted, and with a loving spirit that lit up any room she walked into. She brought the energy with her, whereas Harry sucked it out of the room.

“We are going to win today,” William repeated, but more for himself than Midnight this time around. “We *will*. We have to.”

It was time.

Time for the race to begin.

William was annoyed to find himself positioned next to Harry because he did not want to even think about him. He simply wanted to beat him. It would not do him any good to be watching Harry out of the corner of his eye all the time. But he was going to have to get on with things and just hope that Harry was so distracted by him that he could not focus

himself. If Harry made a mistake, then everything would be fine.

William narrowed his eyes and kept his gaze fixed forwards. He could still hear Harry muttering things under his breath, but he chose not to be impacted by any of them. He concentrated on his breathing and made sure that he was only worried about the finishing line.

All eyes were upon him. The hairs were standing up on the back of his neck; he needed to shake all of that off. With a shudder tearing down his spine, William waited with bated breath for the starting pistol to go off.

Bang!

William urged his horse forward right away. Midnight tore off at a high speed, knowing exactly what he needed to do around the track. William loved the feeling of the wind rushing over his body as the horse tore off, there was a real sense of freedom. This was why he loved horse racing. For many people, including Harry Bamford, horse racing was solely about the money. William did not see him express any love for the creatures or even for the sport. It was *all* about status. For William, he loved every single aspect of it. Midnight was his muse.

Cheers from the crowd ricocheted through his ears. William could not pick out anyone in particular, but he found himself wishing that Anne would be yelling out for him, cheering him on. Admittedly, she would probably have to be outwardly supporting her brother, but he hoped that deep down she wanted him to win.

It did not even occur to him that he should have been focusing on Lavinia and her support of him.

He wished that he had not got talked into being betrothed to Lady Lavinia. Her father had convinced him that it would work out well for him, that the dowry would be significant, and that marrying the Diamond of the Season would put him in good stead.

He had been easily swayed. At the time, he was barely considering the woman that he would have to spend the rest of his life with. But the reality of that was now utterly horrible. He could not even begin to imagine what it would be like to spend the rest of his days with her. They would be expected to show up at every social event together, to procreate together, and to look outwardly happy.

He did not think that he could do it not after he had seen what it could be like to be with someone that he had real feelings for.

As soon as Anne popped into his head, a presence started to loom up behind him. William sensed a person there, and unfortunately, it was the man that he was trying his hardest to get away from: Harry bloody Bamford.

William put his head down and tried to fixate on the finishing line once more. But Harry did not seem keen to let that happen. He was growing ever closer to William with every passing second. Too close actually; this was not acceptable in horse racing. William twisted around and called out to Harry to back off, but it did not happen. Harry smirked and edged closer.

He was cheating. It quickly became all too obvious to William that he was cheating and that nothing was going to stop him. How was this fair? There were rules in horse racing, just as there were in any sport, and everyone was expected to follow them. But it seemed like Harry was more determined to win than to play properly.

The next sensation William felt was Harry bumping into Midnight. This made his heart leap up into his throat; nerves zigzagged all the way through him. He tried his hardest to get Midnight to run a little faster, which the horse did, but it was not enough. The way that Harry seemed to be tackling him showed that he did not care at all.

“Stop!” William cried as he became worried about Midnight getting hurt. “Harry, you must stop.”

William even slowed down because he was not so focused on winning the race that he was willing for Midnight to be

harmed in the process. He thought that if he allowed Harry to rush by him, then he would leave Midnight alone. But it seemed like even *that* was not enough.

Harry did not just want to win; he wanted to destroy William. He had taken this silly, one-sided rivalry too far. William was never worried about Harry because he was no competition; it was all just Harry, and now it seemed like he was willing to do *anything* to win.

The next time that Harry bumped into William, it was too much, it was too hard. William could not keep atop Midnight anymore, and since he did not wish to harm his horse worse, he let Midnight run off as his body tumbled head-first into the mud.

The air was completely knocked out of his lungs as he hit the floor hard. The shock silenced him for a moment. He could still hear the shouting and cheering coming from the raucous crowds watching the race, but it seemed to be happening somewhere else, in another realm or something. It was not quite real. He coughed a couple of times, but that only succeeded in filling his mouth with mud which was a wholly unpleasant feeling.

He turned his aching body over onto his back so he could look at the sky instead as he tried to gather himself together. What on earth was Harry thinking? Why would he do such a terrible thing? This seemed out of character, even for him. William had sensed that he was searching for trouble today, but he never thought that anyone would go this far.

“Your Grace...”

All of a sudden, William noticed a beautiful, angel-like face looming above him. Anne. She was stunning, she was lovely. The world spun a little differently as she cupped his cheeks and stared into his eyes. He could see her saying something, but the words coming out of her mouth did not reach his ears.

I love her, he realized as he stared at her, his chest warming up with the feeling. I cannot waste a day with anyone else. I cannot marry Lady Lavinia. I only wish to be with this beautiful woman right here.

“Marry me,” he murmured at her, not caring if the rest of the world heard him. At this moment, nothing else mattered to William. He simply needed this woman to know that she was his, and that he belonged to her also. It was almost inevitable that they were meant to be together. At least that was how it felt to William right now. He could not believe that it had taken him this long to see it. Did she see it too? It really felt like it with the endless, unspoken feelings surging between them. Love was not just a one-way thing, and marriage was the best for both of them.

Anne parted her lovely lips. He was sure that she was about to give him the answer that he so desperately wanted. If she ended up saying that she would marry him, then William knew that he would do whatever it took to make that happen. Nothing would get in their way; he would be certain to overcome any obstacle because nothing was more important to him than her.

But before she could say a thing, a doctor pushed her aside and stared down at William with concern flooding his face. “Your Grace, that was a terrible fall. I am concerned that you have damaged your brain. We must get you looked at right away.”

But William was not anywhere near as concerned as this man. It did not matter to him what he was saying; he wanted to concentrate on Anne. William needed to see her, to let her know that he meant what he said. He wanted to marry her because he was in love with her. That was a message he feared had been lost along the way because she was gone now, completely out of sight. William held on to the terrible fear that he would not get the chance to speak with her again.

“Anne,” he muttered under his breath desperately, because all he wanted was her hand to slip into his. “Anne, I need you.”

But no one was listening to him. The doctor did not care. It seemed like his body was not too concerned either, because there was now a burning hot pain radiating through his person, making him close down a little.

The accident might have been worse than he suspected after all. If Harry had *really* done something to him, then William

had no idea what would happen next.

Chapter Nineteen



Anne was stunned. She could not believe what William had just said to her; it was shocking. She swallowed hard as she tried to work out why those words would come out of his mouth. Did he mean them? Or was he confused about her identity? Did he think that she was Lady Lavinia looming over him?

Or perhaps what the doctor said was right, and his brain was damaged by the fall. Maybe he did not know what he was saying at all. That idea stabbed her in the heart more than anything else. Because it was not fair for William to say those words if he did not mean them. He might not have been in his right mind, but he had to know that everything which happened in his office would not have occurred if she did not have some kind of feelings for him. It was hard for her to admit, but she did feel something, and when he asked her to marry him... well, all she wanted to do was say yes.

“I did not go down there because of the mud,” Lady Lavinia said far too loudly, making sure that everyone heard her. She appeared to be talking to Rebecca and Tamara, but it was something that she wanted to share with everyone. “I know that man is betrothed to me, but have you seen these shoes? They are terribly expensive. I know that he would understand that I do not wish to ruin them.”

“Anne, come on, we must go,” Peggy declared as she grabbed onto her friend. It seemed like she and Sally were not too concerned about their own shoes as they rescued Anne. “We cannot stand around any longer. We must leave immediately.”

Anne thought that she might have been in shock since it was left to her friends to drag her off the track and into the carriage that was going to take her home. She did not even get a moment to see her father and brother before she was taken away from the race.

“That was terrible,” Sally whispered once the carriage had moved down the road. “What on earth was your brother thinking?”

All Anne could do was shake her head sadly. “I have no idea. I have never seen him act that way. Ever. He is competitive, and he has always taken horse racing far too seriously for my liking, but I have never seen him hurt another person.”

It was terrifying to Anne; she was utterly petrified that the reason Harry was behaving in such a manner was that he knew something. Or, at the very least, suspected something. He might have picked up on Anne’s feelings, or he had seen something he should not have. It shocked Anne that he had not confronted her about it, but there was a chance that he was worried about his own reputation. Any tarnish on the Bamford family name would affect all of them.

If Harry knew, or if Harry even suspected, then she did not even want to *know* what she was in for when her family was all at home. Harry was not pleasant with her at the best of times, but the knowledge that their father was planning to marry Gabrielle and move back to Jamaica had made him even angrier. He was not going to hold back if he had something – and someone – to rage at.

Anne’s stomach churned. She was not sure if she was going to be able to prevent herself from being sick, but she tried her absolute hardest. She clamped her lips tightly shut and held onto her stomach as the carriage continued to move along the road.

“Do you think Duke Hardson will be alright?” Peggy whispered as they pulled up outside Anne’s home. “He looked so pale when he fell.” Anne could only shrug because she had no idea. “Well, you got the best look at him because you ran over immediately.”

Anne knew that this was about to come up, and she had no idea how she could explain it without giving herself away. She let the words fall out of her mouth without overthinking things. “Since Natalie did not make it to the horse race, I thought it would be good for me to step up in her place.”

Anne watched as Peggy and Sally exchanged a look. This increased her anxiety levels up her anxiety levels. Did they already suspect something too? She was trying her hardest not to get too paranoid, but it really was not easy when it seemed like she was holding onto the worst-kept secret in the world.

“I have... befriended him,” she continued, trying to explain herself and prevent any more questions from coming her way. “While we were searching for Natalie and trying to find out anything we can about her disappearance, we became friends.”

“Did you ever find out why Natalie left?” Sally asked coyly. She knew that this was a sensitive subject, but it was time for them to all discuss it while the coach was still moving. “Because we have not yet seen her since she has been back. We are constantly told that she is unwell.”

Anne wished that she had an answer. “I do not know. But when she is well, I am sure she will tell us everything.”

Anne had been torturing herself, trying to work out what had driven her friend to such extreme circumstances. There was no sensible answer that she could even begin to imagine at the moment.

“Well, I think we should go inside now,” Peggy declared. “Come on, we can carry on talking in your bedchambers, Anne.”

That was code for wanting to speak more privately. They had always talked in such a manner, but this was the first time that Anne had been too nervous for this conversation. Just in case they did challenge her on her feelings for William.

But she could not exactly sit in the carriage all day long either, could she? So she followed her friends into the house, through the hallways, all the way to her bedchambers where she clicked the door closed.

“Lady Lavinia is going to be very difficult,” Peggy said the moment they were alone. “She is going to become relentless.”

Anne could practically feel the color draining from her cheeks. She had been so worried about William that she had not thought too much about Lady Lavinia. Even when she heard her crying out about her shoes, she had not thought much. But Peggy was right. Anne’s actions would certainly have given her a clue that Anne and William’s feelings had shifted towards one another. Not so long ago, they had absolutely no interest in one another. They could barely even stand one another. They never talked. The only connection they had was with Natalie.

But things were not the same now. Lady Lavinia would not take this well. She already made sure that she went out of her way to upset Anne at any given opportunity, and if she could humiliate her then it would be even better. Now she was going to take her own embarrassment out on Anne.

“I did not think about this,” Anne whispered to herself, her voice trembling with nerves. “She really is going to be a problem...”

“We will be there for you,” Sally insisted. “But... well, it might be a good idea to let us know exactly what we are standing up for.”

Anne stared at her friend in shock. Rationally, she knew exactly what Sally was hinting at, but that did nothing to calm her down. Once she confessed that she had feelings for William to someone else, then she would be forced to confront what she was going through. It would become *real* and then it would be something that she had to handle.

“I... as I said, we have a friendship,” Anne replied weakly, but it did not seem like anyone believed her. “It was hard for us not to become close because we had so much to go through.”

“Anne, the Duke is an incredibly handsome man,” Peggy told her kindly. “None of us would be surprised if you have fallen for him. We will be there to help pick up the pieces when your heart breaks.”

“Why will my heart break?” Anne asked while shaking all over. Again, she sensed her friends giving one another a *look*.

“Because he is betrothed to Lady Lavinia, and they are to be wed soon.” Sally clearly did not like having to say these words, to hurt Anne further, but evidently thought she needed to hear them. “The wedding will happen. I do not think that is something that can be changed now. But we will care for you, and make sure that you are feeling alright. However hard it is.”

Anne hung her head low, sadness radiating through her whole body. It was agonizing, but Sally was correct. She was headed towards heartbreak, and she had been ever since she first started working with William. It did not matter if he *did* mean what he said. Wanting to marry one another was not enough. It could not happen.

Sally embraced her, and so did Peggy. They wanted to reassure her as much as they could, and she was very grateful to have them there with her, and to know that she did not have to go through this alone. But she was sure that this heartbreak was going to be the worst thing that ever happened to her. She was not sure that she would be the same after all of this.



“Cheating?” her father declared angrily as he paced up and down in the kitchen where he had called a family meeting. “Why on earth would you start cheating in a horse race with everyone watching? Did you honestly think that you were going to get away with it? It was humiliating up there, watching you attack the Duke like that. He even slowed down to let you get by, and you continued to try and hurt him.”

Anne was nervous, and this was nothing to do with her. Talking about the horse race was the last thing that she wanted to do. She wanted to forget all about it. But of course, this needed to be handled at some point. Harry could not continue as he was.

Harry did not say a word, he just continued to glare at Giselle as if this was all her fault. He had made it very clear that he

did not think she had a place at a ‘family meeting’ but their father would not hear it.

“Harry, I am talking to you,” he snapped. “Are you even listening to me? I am your father—”

“You have hardly been much of a father to me recently,” Harry shot back as he rose to his feet, now turning his attention to the man that it seemed he was really annoyed at. “You have not been here, so you cannot even begin to imagine what my life is like at the moment. You cannot just come back like this and expect to lay out rules now.”

Anne sucked in and held a breath, unsure of what was about to happen next. While Harry could be very stubborn, their father was the same way. Their arguments were always incredibly painful to watch.

“It does not matter where I am in the world, I am still your father, and I will not have the family name besmirched by you. It is not going to happen.” He shook his head angrily. “You spend a lot of time trying to convince me that you are mature enough to be an Earl, but you are not showing me as much. You are not acting like the man of the house. It is pathetic. You are *not* to race horses again.”

This only increased the rage inside of Harry; Anne could see that. Redness stained his cheeks and burned right through his entire body. Anne slipped back in her chair, trying to almost hide herself away. She did not want to be in the middle of this. She glanced over at Giselle who seemed to be in the same position as her.

“You *cannot* tell me not to race horses,” Harry cried out as he balled his hands in fists. “That is my life, Father. I adore riding horses, and I love the horse race—”

“No one will ever want you to race again after the way that you behaved today. Do you not see that, Harry?”

“It was an accident. Everyone is being so overdramatic. You said that everyone saw what happened, so they know it was an accident. No one needs to act so crazy.”

No one was ever going to believe that, least of all Anne. She had seen with her own eyes that her brother was absolutely determined to knock the Duke off that horse. The one thing that really scared her was Harry might explode and declare the reason that he behaved like that was because of her. He had not said it yet though. She was still waiting anxiously for those words to come spilling out, however. She was not sure that she would ever be able to relax again.

“I did not mean to hurt anyone, least of all that horse,” Harry continued to insist. “This is absolutely silly.”

“You will not get back on a horse until you have made things right,” their father insisted, with firmness to his tone. “And I do not want to hear another thing about it. Not another word. I am serious.”

He turned on his heels and stalked off before Harry could argue anymore, but Anne could see that there was still rage burning on the edge of his tongue. Giselle absented herself swiftly. Harry turned his attention back to Anne, which caused her to bolt to her feet and hurry off as well. She did *not* want to be on the wrong end of his wrath. The best thing for Anne to do now was to lock herself away in her bedchambers where Harry could not come, so he did not have anyone to take his anger out on.

It would crush him to know that he could not get back on a horse again, but Anne thought her father’s ruling was right. It was not fair for Harry to simply get away with anything that he wanted. He could not behave like that again. William did *not* deserve that attack no matter what had happened. Harry had to understand that.

But he probably would not learn his lesson; he would simply do what he could to get back into the horse racing scene, especially when their father left again. But that was not something that Anne wanted to worry about right now. She had enough on her plate.

Chapter Twenty



William did not know how his meeting with Lord Thompson would go, but he knew that it was something he had to do. The whole time he had been healing from his injuries, all he could think about was Anne. Her beautiful face, her smile, everything that she had in common with him. She was on his mind constantly, and there was a reason for that: because he loved her. He absolutely adored her and he could not imagine another day without her. He knew that it was going to be a big scandal, but at this point, he would do anything to be with her.

So, he faced the meeting. He did not have any choice but to let the Lord down. Of course, William was worried about how he would respond and what he would say because the end of his betrothal with Lavinia would be a scandal. It would get all the gossipmongers talking. It was actually a surprise when he did not seem too shocked, and he was actually willing to hear William out.

Lord Thompson was a good-hearted man – nothing like his daughter who only seemed to want to cause strife. William had to admit that it was a weight lifted off his shoulders once the betrothal was cut. He was grateful to know that he could now go on to marry the woman of his dreams.

Of course, he was not sure what she would say because he had not been given a chance to see her since the day at the horses, but that was something he was currently in the middle of changing. The house party that he had been planning for a few

weeks now would give her a reason to come back into his home, and into his life as well. William could not wait.

“Natalie,” he gushed as he spotted her walking into the kitchen, much to his surprise without their mother looming over her shoulder. “Oh, my goodness, Natalie, how are you feeling?”

She did look a little sick, but there was a strength in her body now that he had not seen before. Natalie offered him a half smile.

“I know that you are throwing a party. I would not want to miss that.”

William’s heartstrings resonated. Natalie was doing this for him? He rushed to her side and tried to hold her upright, but she did not seem to need him.

“I am glad for you to come to my party, but you must not do so if you are worried, or too unwell. I will understand. I do not want you to put yourself in any position where you will be vulnerable.”

Natalie shook her head. “I shall be fine. It will be nice to see everyone again. I feel like I have missed out on so much.”

William had so many questions that he wanted to ask Natalie, but he forced himself to stop at the very last moment. He could not pressure her into talking about something that she did not wish to speak of. If she was ready to come to his party, that was one thing, but that did not mean she was willing to open up about why she ran away. But William had to let her know somehow that she could talk to him if she wished to. He would not be the grumpy man who pushed his sister away ever again.

But there was something that he wished to discuss with Natalie before the time came. This was her best friend after all, and William did not think it right for her to hear the truth along with everyone else.

“Natalie, I...” All of a sudden this was not as easy as he thought it would be. “I have something I wish to talk to you about.” She immediately stiffened, which made him feel even guiltier. “No, do not worry, it is not about you. This is about

me. I have something to discuss with you, about what happened while you were away.” Natalie took a seat and William did the same. She cocked her head curiously to one side and watched him curiously. “I... I spent a lot of time with one of your wallflower friends while you were away, trying to find out where you were. We were both very worried and did everything that we could to locate you.”

“Which friend?” Natalie’s cheeks burned a little. She was clearly not impressed, and he had not even told her everything yet.

“It was Lady Anne Bamford.”

“Ah, that is fine then. There is no need to worry.” Natalie chuckled. “Anne does not find men like you interesting...”

Her words trailed off though and her confidence faded as she saw the guilt on William’s face. It seemed to dawn on Natalie what had really been going on here.

“But... but you are betrothed,” Natalie stammered. “To Lady Lavinia. This is not possible. This is not going to work. You cannot fall for Anne because you will only break her heart and I do not wish for her to be upset. It is not right.” She clutched her chest, the color now draining from her face. “I do not wish to lose Anne.”

“The thing is, I think Lady Anne might feel the same way for me too.”

“What makes you think that?” Natalie’s eyes were darting everywhere; she was clearly riddled with anxiety. “She has never said as much.”

William sighed heavily. “I think that things have changed since you’ve been gone. We have grown closer.”

Natalie bent double and tried to catch her breath. All that William could do was sit back and wait for her to process this as best she could. He knew that this was going to be hard for her, but he was quite certain that she would prefer to know now rather than at the party.

“I suppose I should like Anne to be your wife, much more than I would like it to be Lady Lavinia.”

“It will never be Lady Lavinia. I have already ended the betrothal. I had a meeting with her father not so long ago.”

“So, you really might marry Anne then? That is something that truly could occur? I cannot believe it.”

William was not quite sure if there was anything that he could say at this moment. He did not know if any words would be good enough. He could almost see the cogs ticking around in her brain while she tried to get used to this.

“Is that what the house party is all about?” she asked, lifting her eyes up to meet his. “To announce the engagement?”

“Well, it is more to see if Lady Anne would like to marry me. I am hoping that the occasion will arise for me to ask her.” It made him very nervous to think about that, but he was excited as well. This was an engagement that he would look forward to. He could not wait to put a ring on her finger and claim her as his own.

Natalie nodded slowly and drank that in. “I see. I appreciate you telling me before the party because I think this might have been a great shock if I had found out there. It has been a long time since I saw my friends – any of them, including Anne – so I had no idea.”

“Your friends have been trying to visit,” William insisted. “Anne most of all. Mother and Uncle Broderick have been keeping everyone away from you. I think they are worried about a scandal. They are concerned that once we all find out why you ran away, then everything will change.”

William waited desperately for Natalie to open up and finally tell him why she left. This was the best opportunity that he could offer her, and if she was ever going to take the bait and open up, then it was now. But instead, all she did was offer him a coy smile. There was something there for sure, but she was keeping it locked away.

William knew that he needed to stop matters there so he did not say anything that hurt her, but he could not prevent himself.

“Is there anything you want to talk about?” he asked curiously. “Because if there is any way in which I can help you, I will.”

“I know,” Natalie agreed. “And if I ever need you, I know where to find you. But for now, I am just fine. Thank you for your concern.”

He watched her in confusion as she walked away, leaving him with more questions than answers. But things were changing with Natalie; she was slowly getting back to her usual self, and she had also been accepting of him and Anne. That was the best that he could hope for at the moment, so he would take it. Perhaps by the time the party came around, she would be ready to finally open up. The less time she spent controlled by their mother, the better as far as he was concerned. For now, he needed to take all the right steps to make sure that Anne would be his wife forever.



This was it; this was the moment that William had been terrified about. Sitting in front of Lord Bamford, ready to ask him one of the biggest questions of his life. But he was also looking forward to this.

“So, Your Grace, what is it I can do for you?” Lord Bamford asked with a grave tone of voice. “Is this to do with the horrible business at the horse track? Because I can assure you, Harry has been severely punished, and it is not something that you will have trouble with again.”

William had all but forgotten what Harry had done to him. The events on the racetrack were long behind him now. Much as it had been horrible at the time, he could see it as a bit of a blessing now. If he had not had the accident, then it would not have become crystal clear that he needed to end his betrothal and that he needed to marry Anne.

“No, it has nothing to do with that,” he reassured Lord Bamford quickly. “I believe that you have handled the situation in the way that you know best. It is forgotten.”

Lord Bamford's eyes widened in surprise. "I see. Then what is it that you are here for?"

"I am here to speak with you about your daughter."

"Ah yes, because she helped you, did she not? With your sister?"

William nodded. "She did, and during that time, I believe we have built up a very good connection. I think that we—"

"Oh!" Lord Bamford seemed to understand that. "You have fallen in love. Well, that is very interesting." He smiled happily. "I am not sure if you are aware, but I have very recently found a new love myself while I was on my travels. I will be marrying my lovely Gabrielle soon enough as well."

Relief washed over William. Lord Bamford did not seem too troubled by his recent betrothal. If he was away on his travels at the time, then he might not have known very much about it. And if he was newly in love himself, then perhaps he would be more understanding.

"In fact, this is wonderful news for me," Lord Bamford continued. "Because once I am married, I will be leaving for Jamaica once more. It will be much better for me to go, knowing that Anne is safe and being cared for by a good man such as yourself."

What a relief. This was the permission that William needed. He wanted the blessing of Lord Bamford before he proposed. Unfortunately, just as everything was starting to look up for him, a new presence entered the room and changed the mood completely.

"What is *he* doing here?" Harry snapped the moment he spotted William. "What is going on? I thought that we were done with the horse crash now. I thought we knew that it was an accident."

He was on the verge of throwing a tantrum. William had not been privy to this side of him before. He had seen him cold and sarcastic, even a little nasty, but never like this. It would have been funny if he were not in the middle of the most important meeting of his life.

“This has *nothing* to do with you,” Lord Bamford snapped. “Nothing at all, Harry. Do you not have something else you could be doing? Something much more important? I cannot see anything here for you, Harry. This meeting is private.”

It was obvious that Harry did not want to go anywhere. He did not want to leave when he had no idea what was happening; it was clear that he was incredibly concerned about William being around his father. But he was also not in a position to argue about it. What had happened at the horse race had obviously had a big impact on his family. This was punishment enough for Harry. He was certainly going to learn his lesson from his actions.

But if William was going to marry Anne, then he and Harry were going to be family. Eventually, they would have to find a way to get along. Harry would have to overcome his jealousy or competitiveness, whatever it was, and they would have to at the very least be civil with one another. It was not something that William could imagine right now, but it was not so long ago that he could never picture himself getting along with Anne. Now he was in love with her, so he was willing to believe that anything was possible.

Eventually, because he had no choice, Harry left, but not without shooting William a few curious looks first. There would certainly be some comeuppance from this later on.

“Well, I think that we have a most satisfactory arrangement here,” Lord Bamford finally said to William once they were alone again. “I should pour us both a drink to celebrate. This is a wonderful day.”

Everything was running smoothly for William, far smoother than he was actually expecting. It was almost as if the universe had come together to make it easy for him to find his way to a happy life.

He never thought that marriage would be the thing to make him happy; he had always seen it as one of those inconvenient things that he had to do. But of course, Anne had changed everything for him. She had changed the world for him completely and he would never be able to thank her enough.

He hoped that making sure she would have a happy life forever would be a good start.

Chapter Twenty-One



Anne did not know why William was holding such a fancy party in his own home; this was nothing like the balls of the Season which they had been attending recently. This was more of a big dinner for everyone to attend.

She almost did not wish to attend because she was so afraid of coming face to face with Lady Lavinia and having to deal with what happened at the horse race. But she had heard that Natalie would be there, and she was not going to miss the chance to see her best friend.

Harry had been stubborn and suggested that he did not wish to attend the party, which would have been just fine as far as Anne was concerned. But their father had made him attend. He yelled at Harry and told him that he had embarrassed the family enough. The least he could do now was show up and save face.

Their father was very excited to attend his first event with Gabrielle on his arm, which Anne thought was rather sweet. She was starting to get used to her father's new love. Harry might have been annoyed by the whole thing, but Anne liked seeing her father smile again. If he and Gabrielle were going to have a happy life together, even if that meant he had to leave for sunny Jamaica, then she could support that.

She only wanted to have the same sort of love and happiness in her own life, but she was not sure that was on the cards for her.

“I have heard that the Duke has a very big announcement to make today,” her father told Anne with a smile on his face as they sat in the carriage on the way to the dinner. “I wonder what it could be. I am sure it is very exciting.”

“Is that why he was at our home earlier in the week?” Harry jumped in. “You know, for the ‘private’ meeting that you would not tell me a thing about?”

This spiked Anne’s anxiety. She sat up a little straighter and her eyes darted rapidly between her father and brother. William had been at the house and no one had told her? But why? What on earth could William want with her father? That made no sense whatsoever. But she could not ask for more details. Not without giving herself and her feelings away. She had to keep her lips clamped tightly together so the millions of questions that she wanted to ask didn’t come flying out.

“That meeting was between me and the Duke,” her father replied mysteriously. “Nothing to do with anyone else. Mind your own business, Harry.” He shot a wink at Anne, which only made her even more confused. What on earth was happening? She honestly had no idea and it made her pulse pound furiously. She had been panicking on and off throughout the day about this party, and now she was overwhelmingly anxious. She was not sure she even wanted to go anymore.

But there was no turning back now. The carriage pulled up outside the Hardson home, and it was time for them to go inside. Anne did her best to focus on seeing her best friend once more, but really it was William filling her brain. She was not sure what she was about to face.

The decor inside was simplistic, but very lovely and inviting. Other guests were already inside the home, which meant Anne did not have to feel like she was the center of attention. She could be the wallflower that she was famous for being while she worked out her position at the party. Her father and Gabrielle soon found people to talk to, and Harry was sulking so he did not take long to vanish from sight as well. Anne had no idea where he was going, but she was not interested at all. She had more important things to worry about.

Where was Natalie? She could not seem to see her anywhere. She thought that with this being her first event in a very long time, she would be easy to locate. She also could not help but notice that Lady Lavinia was nowhere in sight. What was going on?

Thankfully, it did not take her too long to locate Peggy and Sally, who also had not seen Natalie.

“I think she will come to eat,” Sally said reassuringly, but she could not stop twisting her hands around nervously in front of her. “That is when we will see her, and she will be looking wonderful.”

“Have you heard that the Duke wishes to make an announcement today?” Peggy whispered conspiratorially. “What do you think it could be?” She was clearly talking more to Anne than Sally, but Anne said nothing because she had nothing to say. She did not know. “I am very curious, especially because Lady Lavinia is not here.”

“I have been worried for you, Anne. But this is good news,” Sally whispered. “She will not cause any trouble for you today.”

Anne wished that she could agree, but she was too nervous. She could not settle wholly into the idea that Lady Lavinia was not going to show. She would not put it past her to make a late and dramatic entrance.

Before Anne was forced to answer any more questions that she could not, everyone was called to the dinner table. Much to Anne’s relief, she finally did get to see Natalie there, although unfortunately, she was sitting at the opposite end of the table so Anne was not going to get any answers just yet.

She was pleased that at least Natalie was looking well now. That was really good. Anne hoped that after eating, they would be able to get a moment alone to finally catch one another up on everything.

Although maybe not *everything*. She would never be able to share what happened between herself and William with Natalie. That would destroy their friendship. She did not think

that Peggy and Sally would say anything about it either – at least, she hoped not. Maybe she needed to specify to them to keep it to themselves.

The food and drinks were served as a low hum of chatter fell over the table. Anne tried her hardest to keep her gaze from straying to the Duke and William was too powerful to ignore. She could not stop looking over at him, and since their eyes kept meeting every so often, she knew that he was looking at her as well.

The air was thick; something was buzzing in the atmosphere, but Anne was not sure what it was. It was almost as if something massive was about to happen, but she had no idea what. Perhaps it was this mysterious announcement that William was supposed to be making. Whatever that might be.

Did that have anything to do with Lady Lavinia and why she was not here? It was very curious, and Anne was sure that she was not alone in her curiosity.

The next time she caught William's eyes, he looked like he was about to rise to his feet. Anne sucked in and held a breath, wondering if this was going to be *it*, the moment that changed everything. Was this the announcement? Why did Anne feel so very tense about that?

But William did not get the chance to get to his feet. The Dowager Duchess of Hardson did so before he had a chance. William was clearly not expecting this as his eyebrows furrowed in confusion. He fixed his gaze on his mother while she tapped on the side of her glass to get the attention of everyone in the room.

Natalie did not look so shocked though. Anne recognized the sweet, blasé smile on her face. She knew that something was about to happen here.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming to our home,” Veronica declared as she made a sweeping gesture with her hands. “I appreciate this, because it is a very happy day for me here, and I am glad to share it with the most important people in my life.”

It seemed like the assumption was very wrong. It was not William who needed to make an announcement. It was his mother. She could not help but feel a little bit disappointed about this. Much as it had been worrisome, she was also very intrigued to know what William might have to say.

“You have all been there for me, through many challenges in my life,” Veronica continued. “But now, I am in a happy place. Because very soon, I shall be marrying Broderick Hansen, and I hope that is a celebration you will all be there for. We are hoping to have a wedding that will be wonderfully fun for everyone.”

After a moment of obvious shock, William started to clap, so everyone else joined in with him. No one seemed to be really aware of what this meant, but they all wanted to celebrate for the Dowager Duchess of Hardson.

“Where is Uncle Broderick?” William asked loudly. “I think we should all raise our glasses to the happy couple.”

Anne saw Natalie lift her glass first. Maybe she had come to terms with the upcoming wedding now. That was good because being in pain over something that she could not control would not do Natalie any good, especially when she had so much else to recover from. Just like it was not helping Harry to be so angry at their father; he was much better off just accepting what was already happening.

Broderick made himself known and took a glass of champagne from Natalie. To Anne, he already looked a little worse for wear; perhaps he had been hiding out somewhere and drinking because he did not like parties. But the spotlight was on him now, so he had to perform.

“Yes, married!” he announced with his glass high in the air. “Wedding... you must all come to our wedding.”

The hush in the room seemed a little awkward now. No one quite knew what was happening here. This was all a little strange. Broderick was clearly a man who did not do well at the center of attention.

“Cheers!” William cried out, to try and get things back on the right track. “Congratulations to the both of you.”

Everyone lifted their glasses before they all took a swig of their drinks. Once that was over, the low hum of chatter started up again for a moment. Until Broderick started coughing. He sounded like he had swallowed the drink wrong, and the bubbles had gotten caught in his throat. The people nearest to him tried not to pay attention because it was all a little embarrassing; his choking appeared to be because he could not handle his alcohol. At least that was how it appeared at first. The more that Broderick coughed, the more he seemed to choke on whatever was stuck in his throat. It got to the point where his face started to turn a ghoulish, purplish red.

“Broderick,” Veronica cried out, as she reached out to hold her husband-to-be in her arms. “You are choking. Broderick...” The panic started to rise in her voice. “Help, someone help. Doctor – is there a doctor here? I need help!”

Broderick’s face was starting to swell now. His eyes popped, reddening by the second. He really did look unwell. Anne could hardly breathe as she watched him because it was starting to look increasingly like he was going to die. Anne did not want to be in the same room as a man who was about to pass away from champagne.

“I am a doctor.” It was a relief when someone jumped forward and took over Veronica’s tight grip on Broderick. Not that she wanted to let him go. It seemed to pain her to release him from her grip. Luckily, she knew that was the best thing to do to help keep Broderick alive. “I will help. Step aside.”

It was a relief to Anne as her father wrapped his arms tightly around her, to pull her away from the scene. She could not look anymore; it was horrible to see the way Broderick’s body was bucking and writhing in the doctor’s arms. Anne was quite sure that she had never seen foam forming in the corners of his mouth, which could not be a good sign.

“What is happening?” Anne whispered as the other guests started to scream. The party had gone to hell in such a short space of time. “Father, what is happening? I cannot see.”

But he did not tell her, and that was probably for the best. Anne was not convinced that she wanted to know. She clung to her father, trying desperately to breathe calmly. The last thing she wanted to do was faint and add to the drama. The doctor's hands were full, she could not take up any of his time. She blinked furiously, doing her best to keep herself as steady as she possibly could, which was not the easiest task when every part of her body wanted to give up and collapse.

"He... he has been poisoned," her father told her quietly. It was evident that he was just as shocked as she was. "I have just overheard the chatter happening near the man. Someone has poisoned Broderick. They do not know if he will make it."

Anne felt dizzy. She could hardly keep upright. Her knees had become jelly-like. Not only was this man going to die right in front of her, but he had been murdered. He had been killed, and now they were going to have a lot more to deal with.

"Someone needs to get the constable," someone cried out. "We do not want anyone to be next."

Next... was there a killer in this room who wanted to murder them all? Who would do such a thing? Was it the champagne that had been poisoned? Because Anne and everyone in her family had been drinking the same thing. Were they next?

Anne's heart was pounding in her ears. She could not hear anymore. She crumpled into her father's arms, probably creasing up her dress, but it no longer mattered. The party had to be over at this moment. Now she needed to get out of here as quickly as she could, even if it meant that today she did not get the chance to speak with Natalie, or William for that matter. She had been hoping to talk to both of them, but now Broderick was dying.

This was a nightmare. It was utterly horrible, and she had no idea how any of them were going to get away unscathed.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Poison. That was one word that William could not quite wrap his head around. He had thought that his uncle was just drunk and acting a fool as he started coughing. He did not realize that everything was going to become quite as serious as this.

Now, there were people everywhere and his dinner party had been ruined. He had not even had the chance to tell Anne that he was in love with her, or asked her to be his bride, and now he would not get the chance. Everything was ruined. Most people had left, thank goodness, but a few of the guests remained to talk to the constables.

“Your Grace, please, I need your attention.” William dragged his eyes off all the doctors surrounding Broderick and faced the constable that had been trying to speak with him for what felt like a very long time. “Can you please answer my question?”

“I... I did not see a thing,” William stammered awkwardly. “I do not know who could be responsible for all of this. I cannot think...”

“We have found Arsenic in the home. Have you had a rodent infestation?” William could do nothing but shrug. He honestly had no idea. He did not wish to say no in case he was wrong. “Because if not, then we must assume that the Dowager is responsible for this.”

William felt like he had been punched in the stomach. “No way. There is no way. Why do you think that? My mother is in

love with Uncle Broderick. There is no way that she would do anything to harm him. She was in the middle of making an announcement that she wishes to marry him.”

He could not make this picture make sense. He could not fathom any reason why his mother would want to hurt the man that she was clearly besotted with, and wanted to spend the rest of her life with. So much so, that she had argued endlessly with Natalie about it.

He had even been the person to find Natalie, so there was no way that Veronica could be upset with him – not for any reason that William could fathom anyway.

So, why were the constables so determined to blame her?

“Was it Arsenic that poisoned Uncle Broderick?” he gasped out desperately. “Do we know that for sure? Because no one has said *what* caused his sudden bout of illness as yet.”

The constable said nothing, but the grave look on his face gave William everything that he needed to know. *Could* his mother have done this? He had not thought for one second that her love for him was an act, but he was going to have to see this from every single angle to be sure. Just in case he had to defend his mother.

But what could *possibly* be her reasoning? Why would she want to kill Uncle Broderick? What on earth could she possibly be getting out of this? It was not even like Broderick was a wealthy man. There was no way to profit or benefit from his death at all.

The sight of his mother being bundled into shackles sent William over the edge. He broke away from the conversation that he was currently having to try and set her free.

“No, you cannot do this,” he called out as he tried to tug one of the constables away from her. “You cannot arrest my mother, she did not do this. She would not.” He was not willing to consider the possibility that she might while the Dowager was being hauled off to jail. That would destroy their family forever. “You have the wrong person. You cannot simply jump to this conclusion.”

Veronica could not defend herself because she was weeping in obvious distress. To William, it looked like she was so worried about what might happen to Broderick that she was not even aware that her own life was in danger. How could he make her understand that she needed to take a stand now?

“Mother, listen to me.” He tried to grab her attention but he simply could not get it. “Mother, you have to tell them – tell them that you did not do this. Is the Arsenic even yours?”

It was as if he were talking to a brick wall. There was nothing coming from her; she had clearly gone into shock. He was going to have to try and reason with the constables again.

“This might have been an accident,” he insisted. “Look, Uncle Broderick is going to survive. There is no need to overreact. Perhaps one of the maids had an accident with the cleaning chemicals or something. We must not make immediate assumptions.”

“Are you saying that you believe the maids did this?”

“No, that is not what I am saying at all. I simply do not know. I am asking that we keep my mother here until we are certain.”

William would not let go of his mother. He was not going to allow her to be taken away, at least until one of the constables started to listen to him. Someone needed to hear what he had to say.

“Mother, please,” he begged. “Please listen to me. You need to take care of yourself. You need to hear me out and please tell the constables that you did not do this. You did nothing. There is no way—” The constable who had originally been interviewing him, grabbed onto William’s shoulders and tried to tug him back a little. He spun around to yell at whoever was touching him but thankfully realized that if he screamed at the constable, then he would likely end up locked in jail as well, where he would never be able to help his mother. Even through the intensity of his unbridled panic, he had to act wisely so they did not all end up in trouble.

“Please, just hear me out. Just listen to me. I want you to hear me when I tell you that you are wrong about this—”

“I tried to kill him.”

The air was sucked out of the room the moment a loud voice filled the place. Everyone was stunned to the core as they turned to see who was talking. The moment William laid eyes on her, his heart stopped beating. This was *not* what he wanted to see.

“I am the one who did this,” Natalie declared with a bright redness on her cheeks. “I am terribly sorry, but I am the one who used the Arsenic to try and poison that *man*.” The way Natalie spat out the word ‘man’ left William with no doubt whatsoever. Natalie did this. She had acted out of pure hatred for Uncle Broderick, but he had no idea why.

“*What?*” he whispered fearfully. “What do you mean?”

Natalie sighed heavily. “I know that this is going to be hard to hear, but I did what I had to do. I *cannot* let my mother marry that man. He cannot be in our family any longer. He is evil. My mother and I would not have survived if he lived. You must understand this. You must listen to me.”

A thick silence clung to the air. Everyone seemed stunned and unsure of what to say to this. It was hard to imagine sweet Natalie doing something like this, but surely she would not confess if it were not true?

A constable took her by the arm. “Before we arrest you, my lady, we will talk this through with you so we can get a better idea of what happened.”

William swallowed hard. He needed to know more himself; there was no way that he would ever be able to understand this without hearing the truth from Natalie. But she shot him a warm smile as the constable took her away, silently letting him know that she was alright. He could not understand how things were *alright*, but if she wanted him to focus on what was happening in this room here and now while she spoke to the authorities, then that was what he would do.

“Let my mother go now,” he commanded fiercely. “It has been proven now that you did in fact jump to conclusions and she is innocent, so you must take these shackles off of her.”

Veronica fell into his arms the moment she was set free and she began to sob against his chest. William knew for certain that he was missing something, and that truly made him very uncomfortable. So much had happened in his home that he had no idea about. How had he missed so much? His heart was absolutely hammering against his ribcage as the world spun uncontrollably around him.

“It will be alright,” he whispered to his mother, trying his best to comfort her. “I promise you, it will be alright...”

He just hoped that he was right, and that everything would not fall apart further around them all.



William stared at Natalie expectantly, needing her to finally tell him everything. She was twisting her hands around anxiously in her lap as if talking to him was going to be even more challenging than confessing everything to the constables.

Whatever she had said, they had left her here at home, not arrested, so it must have been a good excuse. Uncle Broderick was out of the house, and Natalie had remained behind.

“I left because I did not want Mother to marry him,” she told him in a small voice. “I did not wish to live with him in the house, knowing what he is like and what he can do to people.”

“What do you mean?” William insisted. “I do not understand.”

“You have no idea?” Natalie stared at him curiously. “I know that this is something I have never talked to you about, but I thought you might have seen some of the ways in which Uncle Broderick is a bad person?”

William racked his brain, trying desperately to think of what he might have missed along the way. He knew that Uncle Broderick was not always the most self-aware man, but as far as William had seen, that was all that was wrong.

“I have not seen a thing, Natalie. Please, tell me everything.”

Natalie sighed heavily and hung her head low. “He has been abusive to Mother. Although I suppose I can understand why you have not picked up on that because the bruises can always be hidden well. I just *know* the moment he marries Mother he will take everything from her, and he might kill her. The violence will escalate and she will end up dead.”

“Is this why you poisoned him?” William whispered fearfully. He could not understand how he had missed this, but he felt absolutely dreadful about it. “So he did not kill Mother?”

“That is not the only reason,” Natalie replied quietly. She could not seem to even meet William’s eyes as she spoke. “He has also been very... *inappropriate* with me. It has been getting worse for a long time, and when I tried to confront Mother about this, she did not seem to believe me, and she insisted that she would still marry him.”

Inappropriate? William gulped noisily. He did not like the sound of this at all. Now *he* wanted to kill Broderick. How dare this man make his sister feel uncomfortable in her own home? Broderick did not seem to understand that nothing in this house belonged to him; it was all his mother’s. She inherited the house when William and Natalie’s father died, so Broderick would only inherit anything if he married Veronica.

It all started to make sense. William felt sick to his stomach. Natalie had seen what he had been unable to. Thank goodness she was so astute. She had suffered at Broderick’s hands, but she had also acted out and tried to protect everyone else around her.

Guilt flooded William. He hated the fact that he had not seen anything.

“Why did you not tell me about this?” he rasped at her. “Why did you run off? That seems like such an extreme.”

“I was scared of your reaction,” she replied sadly. “But I also did not want you to get in a fight with Uncle Broderick. I did not want that man to harm you as well. He is capable of anything.”

“I would have defended you, Natalie. I would have looked out for you. I would not have let him hurt you again. I am sad that you ran out on me like that. It crushed me.”

William knew that Anne’s assessment of him was correct. “*Maybe your sister does not trust you because of your brutish attitude.*” He would not do that again. He was going to change here, to make sure that everything was smoother from here on out.

“But I was not alone when I ran away,” Natalie suddenly confessed. “I was actually with a merchant boy. His name is Jaden Blackmore.”

“I... I see...” William had no idea where this story was going. His nerves zigzagged through his system once more. He sat up a little straighter and nervously waited for Natalie to continue.

“I am in love with him, William. I know that this will be hard for you to hear, because he is not the sort of gentleman that I should be married to. I know you would rather me marry a man with a title, but you have found true love too, so I think you must understand.”

William was shocked, but he could do nothing but nod. He *had* fallen in love with someone he did not think he should. But it was very different from this. Natalie was in love with someone who would lower her class and put her in a different stead in life. It was going to affect everything.

But as he stared into Natalie’s eyes and saw how truly serious she was, he knew that he could not stand in the way of this true love. He opened his arms wide and invited his sister in for a hug.

“I will support you in everything that you do,” he mumbled lovingly to his sister. “If this is what you want, then I will care for you. I will make sure that you and this man have a very happy life. As long as he is good to you.”

“He is,” Natalie agreed eagerly. “He is very good to me. I think you will like him a lot if you give him a chance.”

What else could William do? He offered his sister a warm smile, knowing that he needed to be there for his family now

more than ever. His mother and Natalie needed him to be there for them, and it was William's job to step up and do what was important.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Anne's eyes darted between all of her friends as they sat in Natalie's bedchambers. This was a meeting that all of them had been looking forward to ever since Natalie went missing, but it was tense. None of them seemed to know exactly what to say.

Peggy and Sally were probably just a little bit awkward because they had not seen Natalie in such a long time – and probably because of the poisoning incident at the party as well. But for Anne, it was so much more. She had explored these bedchambers in far too much detail. She had done so for Natalie's own benefit, to try and find out what was happening to her, and where she was. But she felt guilty now because it had been an invasion of Natalie's privacy. She had seen the threatening letters, which had presumably been sent by this nasty Uncle Broderick of hers, and the short stories as well. She did not know if this was something that she should keep to herself or not.

Anne was also holding onto the secret that she had been spending *far* too much time with William and that their exchanges had been very intimate. It did not even make her feel better to know that Lady Lavinia was not at the dinner party because she had no idea what that meant.

That was why she felt guilty, and that sensation had formed such a lump in her throat that she was completely unable to speak past it. There were so many things that she wanted to say, but she did not know where to begin. She parted her lips a couple of times, but nothing came out.

“I am so terribly sorry for making you all worry,” Natalie declared with a taut tension in her voice. “That is not something I ever intended to do. I never would have wanted that. When I ran off, I simply was not thinking. I know that might not be the best excuse in the world, but I was worried. I could not see any other way out.”

Peggy immediately moved closer to her friend and wrapped her arms around her. “We were worried, but all we wanted was to help you.”

“I know, but I did not know how anyone could help me. I truly did feel helpless because of my uncle. I did not want anyone else to suffer at his hands because he is a terrible man. The way that he treated my mother was utterly disgusting, and the way that he was around me...” She visibly shuddered. “It was truly terrifying. I never knew if he was going to try and take things to the next level, and then there would be no turning back for me. My life would be over.”

Anne’s eyes filled up with tears. Natalie did not need to go into too much detail for the women to see underneath the surface. They could all tell what had been happening here, and it was horrifying.

“He has been taken to the hospital, has he not?” Sally asked in a quiet voice. “Hopefully after that, he will be taken to jail because that is *not* a man who should be allowed to be around other people.”

Natalie shrugged helplessly. “I do not know. The constable would not tell me a thing. I suppose I should simply feel blessed that I am not in jail myself for what I did. Once I explained what Uncle Broderick had been doing to torment my mother and me, he set me free.”

To Anne, it did not seem like the Dowager thought it was torment. That woman truly did seem to be head over heels in love with Broderick, but that did not mean it was a healthy kind of love. If both she and Natalie were being harmed by this man, then he needed to go. Maybe murder was not the way forwards, but Anne was not about to judge her friend

because she was not the one who had been in that situation. She did not know what she would do in that same position.

“I think the Duke will make sure that he is locked up,” Peggy joined in determinedly. “He will not let that man back out on the streets again. I have never seen a man look so angry as he was once he realized what had been happening.”

“How is your mother?” Anne jumped in because she could not stand the talk about William. It made her far too nervous. “Is she still in shock about everything? I cannot believe that she was almost arrested. That seems absolutely insane.”

“That was why I had to confess,” Natalie insisted. “I could not let my mother go to prison when I was the one who put the Arsenic in his drink. I had to make sure that she was kept safe because she did nothing wrong.”

“That was very brave of you,” Sally whispered admiringly. “I do not know if I would have been brave enough to do the same thing. When you stepped forward and called out, I was in shock.”

All the women agreed with that much. But Natalie was always one for doing the right thing, which made her running away that much more shocking to everyone.

“Where were you?” Anne finally asked. “When you ran away? Because we did not know where to find you, but we heard a rumor that you were seen with a young man.”

“Jaden Blackmore,” Natalie replied, her face softening as she spoke his name. Anne had never seen her best friend act this way over a man before.

“A merchant’s son whom I met accidentally but immediately fell in love with. He is a kindhearted soul who only ever wants the best for me.”

“But he is not a man with a title,” Sally jumped in. “That cannot be. You know that your family will never allow you to marry someone who cannot look after you fully.”

“William has already agreed. He is happy as long as I am.”

None of the wallflowers had anything to say to this. How times were changing. Life would end up very differently if Natalie married Jaden Blackmore. But Anne was determined that she would not lose her friendship with Natalie, no matter what. Even if Natalie's reputation was affected by this, Anne would not care. She knew what it was like to lose Natalie, and that was not something that would happen again.

"You are very lucky," Peggy replied with a smile. "I do hope that this all works out for you. Is that what the Duke was going to announce at the dinner? Because he never got the chance, did he?"

Anne had all but forgotten about the so-called big announcement that never happened. Her heart immediately started to race faster as she realized that no matter how hard she tried, she could not keep the topic of conversation away from William. Everyone wanted to talk about him, no matter what.

"No, William did not find out about Jaden Blackmore until after Uncle Broderick almost died." Anne did not much like the idea of Broderick remaining alive either, especially now she knew what he had done, but it was better to have Natalie right here with her.

"William's announcement was more to do with him than me." Natalie's lips curved up into a smile. "I think he wanted everyone to know that his betrothal to Lady Lavinia is over and done with."

Anne blinked a few times as these words soaked through her. Did Natalie just say what she thought she did? That William was no longer going to marry the Diamond of the Season? But what on earth could make him change his mind about this? Why would he call off such a high-profile marriage when he knew that it would be very scandalous?

Marry me?

She had a slight feeling that it might be linked to that moment on the horse racing track when he told her that he wanted to be her husband. Anne had tried her hardest to push that memory

to the back of her brain, because the doctor yelled that the fall had damaged his head, but now...

Well, maybe he was telling the truth after all. Perhaps he had called things off with Lady Lavinia because he wanted to be with her, to marry her. Harry had been complaining that William had been in their home without her knowing, which was very strange.

Or was she just trying to find what she was looking for? Was she seeking out an explanation because she was seeking out a little glimmer of hope in the midst of everything? Anne was not sure anymore.

“I fear Lady Lavinia will be ridiculed,” Natalie said, probably with more sympathy than she truly felt. Everyone knew that Natalie was not her biggest admirer, and she did not wish to be related to someone who took great pleasure in tormenting others. “Because losing an engagement never looks good, and if she does not handle it well then it will damage her reputation permanently. But I think my brother is looking for something more, something more akin to love, and that was never what he shared with Lady Lavinia.”

No one could breathe. At that moment, Anne regretted telling Sally and Peggy anything about William because it now put both of them in a terrible position. No one wanted to betray Natalie and lie to her, but they could not tell the truth either. It was awful.

“So, does anyone have anything that they wish to share with me?” Natalie made a wide sweeping gesture with her arms. “Because I have been out of society for a while.”

Sally and Peggy exchanged a strange look. Anne gulped noisily, fearing what was about to come out. Could she keep this a secret from her best friend? Should she? She was so terrified of facing Natalie’s wrath, even if she knew that she deserved it. It made her purse her lips tightly together to keep the words inside.

“I think you might have something to tell me, Anne,” Natalie continued, almost laughing. “Or something to confess? Because I know. I *know*.” She held her breath as the tension

flooded the room. “You found the notes. The threatening notes.”

Anne gasped with shock. So Natalie knew that she had been in her bedchambers alone. That was what she was talking about. Dizziness overcame Anne as she tried to work out exactly what was happening here, and how she was going to respond. Did this mean that Natalie had not found out about William at all?

“I... I did see the notes, yes,” she finally confessed. “I am sorry. I know that was an invasion of your privacy, but we were so worried about you and those notes terrified me.”

“They scared me as well, which is why I thought I had to run off. I did not know what else I could do. I thought he might kill me.” Natalie shuddered. “I was also worried that he might kill my mother. I thought that some space would calm everything down... until he found me.”

Anne had wished at the time that she and William were the ones who located Natalie, but knowing more made her feel even worse that Broderick was the one who tracked Natalie down. She wondered if her feelings for William had perhaps gotten in the way and slowed down the investigation. She hoped not, but she could not be certain.

“Anyway, I am safe for the time being.” Natalie smiled, but the look did not quite reach her eyes. “So I should take that as a positive. But of course, we still do not know what my brother was going to announce. Or more... you do not know.”

“So, you do?” Sally leaned in closer, all excited. Her eyes were absolutely dancing with delight. “What was it?”

Natalie’s eyes fixed on Anne. Anne found herself looking at the floor because she could not stand to see the disappointment on her friend’s face. It was all too much for her.

“My brother called off his engagement because it seems that there is another woman in his sights. One that he wants to marry for love.” Anne could not breathe however hard she tried. “I think it might be time to tell me everything that has

been happening. Because, Anne, I heard the two of you got very close while I was away.”

Anne tried to speak, but no words came out. All she could do was nod because there was no denying it anymore. If William had already spoken to Natalie about everything, then she could not deny a thing.

“Yes, we did get to know one another well,” she finally managed to get out. “While looking for you. While trying to find some clues that would help us to locate you.”

“I am very surprised, Anne because I thought that you found all the men around here incredibly boring. Is that not the case? But not when it comes to my brother at least...”

There was a teasing tone in her voice, which showed Anne that she was not angry. Could it be possible that she would support Anne and William if they were to get married?

“I would much prefer to have you as my sister-in-law,” Natalie finally laughed. “It never would have worked with Lady Lavinia. I could not see William being happy with her, and I was *not* looking forward to seeing her at every family function for the rest of my life.”

Natalie moved over to Anne and pulled her in for a hug. This was the nicest embrace that Anne had ever experienced because it meant that her friend forgave her. It was a forgiveness that she had not thought she would ever be lucky enough to have.

The other thing that Anne could not stop thinking about as she leaned her head on Natalie’s shoulder was that William really must want to marry her. If he had opened up to his sister about his feelings then maybe, just maybe, she was about to get everything that she wanted.

It was terrifying. Even thinking about getting her hopes up scared her, but she could hardly stop herself. Maybe these feelings for William would not have to be stuffed deep down for the rest of her life.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Making sure that Broderick was locked away in jail for a very long time was William's top priority. That and keeping the rest of his family out of jail. It was not the easiest thing to do, it took a lot of convincing, but he finally managed to make the constables agree who it was that posed a danger to society, and who needed to be left out to continue with their lives.

Natalie was no danger to anyone. She was young and sweet; she had only acted in such a horrendous way, using the poison to try and kill Broderick, because she could not see any other way out. If there had been any other option in her mind, William was sure that she would have taken it.

Broderick on the other hand – there was no telling what that man would do. His intentions were always impure. Now that William looked back over everything that had happened, he was starting to see everything that had happened with his uncle in a different light. Nothing was honest, it was all a lie. That hurt, but William knew that he could get over it in time. He would just be more careful about who he trusted in the future, even if that meant family members.

With his uncle locked away for the foreseeable future, William could focus now on helping his family to heal from everything that horrible man had done to them. Natalie was going to need some time to recover from how frightened Broderick had made her, and the way he had made her uncomfortable about her own body before threatening her and causing her to run away.

But William knew that his mother was going to be the one who took the longest to recover. She really had fallen madly in love with Uncle Broderick over the years. She believed every little thing that he told her, and was convinced that they were going to get married and spend the rest of their lives together. She had not yet come out the other side of things to the realization that he was just using her; she had not had a chance to see all the untruths. It would be hard for her to accept that she was not going to get the happily ever after that she wanted because that happily ever after was based on lies, not truth.

William was a little out of his depth when it came to his mother's heartbreak, but he was doing his best to simply be there for her as best he could. While he could not heal her heart, he could be there for her.

There was still tension between his mother and sister as well. William had no idea how long that would take to heal. He was quite sure that at some point they would need to have an open and honest conversation. But that was not something he could force. He would have to wait until they were ready for it.

As the carriage came to a halt outside of Anne's home, he pushed all of his worries about his family away. He could not think about his uncle, his mother, or Natalie when he was about to face one of the most important days of his life. Since his dinner party had been destroyed in such a bizarre fashion, he had not yet been able to let Anne know that he had fallen in love with her and that he wanted to marry her.

This was not the romantic, public proposal that he had been planning on, but perhaps that was for the best. Anne was nothing like Lady Lavinia. She did not need a public show for their engagement to feel real; she was not flashy nor wanted to be the center of attention. She was one of the wallflowers after all.

The memory of how he used to view Anne flickered through his mind. He could not have been more wrong about her if he tried. He thought that she was annoying, that she was preventing his sister from finding a suitable match, and that she was not even worth talking to. Had he known that she

would end up becoming the love of his life, then he might have been keener to approach her and dance with her at balls.

Now, he did not wish to find any other dance partner ever. Anne truly was the only one that he wanted beside him.

William waited for a little moment outside the house, gathering the courage he needed to ask Anne if she wanted to be his wife. But he did not get as much time as he needed because, almost as if she sensed him, he spotted Anne leaving her house to go for a walk around the gardens. It was fate. It had to be. This was his chance for an even better proposal than the one he originally planned.

He hopped out of the carriage quickly and started to walk towards her with a lightness in his step. He had been worrying about what he was going to say, how he was going to phrase it, but he was not concerned anymore. He knew that Anne would simply want him to speak from the heart, so that was what he would do.

“Ah, Your Grace,” Anne declared as she spotted him coming toward her. She had gone back to addressing him by his formal title, which William did not like at all. “I mean, William.” Much better. “It is good to see you. What brings you here for a visit?”

“I have come to check on you,” William said with a smile. “I have not had a chance to see you since the dinner party.”

“You are the one who had a terrible time at the party. You and your family. Are *you* alright?”

William started to nod before he slowly stopped himself. “We will be alright,” he corrected himself. “It has not been an easy time for my family, but we will survive it.”

“Good, that is very good. I am glad to hear it. You are looking very well.”

William’s face broke out into a smile. “Thank you, as do you.” He reached out to take her hands in his. She looked a little shocked but did not protest. The all-too-familiar, very addictive sizzle burned between them, making him even happier. “Anne, I have come here to speak with you about

something actually. Something I have wanted to talk to you about for a while now.”

“You have?” she whispered back curiously. “What is that?”

There were questions shining in her eyes, which William could completely understand. But underneath all of that, he found himself utterly overwhelmed by the love dancing in her gaze as well. She was happy to see him, that much was very obvious, and he hoped that she would also be pleased to know why he had arrived.

He was still a little nervous, his heart was racing, but there was a part of him barely able to contain himself with excitement.

“I want you to be my wife, Anne.” It made him so happy to get those words out and to see how happy they made her. “I really do wish for you to marry me. I think that we could have an amazing, love-filled life together. Because I do love you, Anne. I really do.” He chuckled to himself. “You know, I planned the whole dinner party around asking you to be my wife, but that did not go so well.” She was clearly stunned and unsure what to say, so he continued to talk, to make sure she understood how much he meant this. “If it makes you feel more comfortable in your answer, I have asked for your father’s permission, and he is very happy about us getting married. If that is what you want, of course.”

“I cannot believe this.” Anne clamped her hands to her chest. “I cannot believe that you are here, William, in front of me, asking me to be your wife. I am overwhelmed.”

“But happy?” he asked a little nervously. He thought that she was, but he could not be certain. He felt like he needed it spelled out clearly, so there was no miscommunication.

“Oh yes, I am very happy.” She could not seem to stop herself from giggling. Her cheeks shone with a light pinkness that spoke of happiness. “I cannot believe it. Of *course*, I will be your wife. I would love nothing more than to marry you. This makes me the happiest woman in the world. This is so thrilling.”

William could not hold himself back any longer. It had been torturous to keep away from her all the time. Whenever Anne was standing in front of him all he wanted to do was kiss her. It felt absolutely wonderful to be able to hold her in his arms and to kiss her out here in the open, knowing that he would be able to do this forever from now on. Because it was official, they were betrothed.



Anne led William to her bedchambers with her pulse pounding in her throat, but a smile so wide across her face she felt like it would never dissipate. Ever since she had talked to Natalie and had learned that William wanted to marry her, she had been desperately wanting to see him, to have this happen.

But she had no idea how good it would feel, how overwhelmingly happy she would be, to know that she really was going to get the happily ever after that she so desperately wanted. This was a love unlike anything else, and she would be able to have this for the rest of her life.

As soon as they were inside her room and the door had closed behind them, giving them some much-needed privacy, she wrapped herself around him and kissed him more passionately now, allowing her hands to explore the body that she adored so much.

But today, she had other plans for William. She did not wish just to touch him with her fingers. She wanted to taste him in the same way that he tasted her. Thinking about his tongue exploring her body was a memory that she had not been able to shake off, and Anne wanted to do the same thing for him too.

They were a betrothed couple now; this was supposed to be a memorable day for William just as much as it was for her. She could not wait to show him that she could do the same things, she could make him feel phenomenal too. She just hoped that she did everything right.

As she pulled his thick, throbbing erection free this time around, she was the one who dropped to her knees with her eyes fixed on his gaze the whole time. Shock flashed across William's face, but he looked utterly amazed by the sight of her. His hands brushed through her hair as she brought her lips a little closer to him. He felt big when he was between her fingers, and even bigger when he was buried deep inside of her, but seeing him this close up made her gasp in surprise.

He was massive, and Anne absolutely yearned to taste him. Saliva filled her mouth as she brought her eager lips closer to his tip. He was trembling all over; his thighs were tense with anticipation. Now Anne really did feel in control of him and that made her feel like a goddess. She could not wait to part her lips and take him down to the back of her throat.

William was not the only one who cried out with pleasure as he filled up her mouth. Anne moaned with bliss too, sending vibrations all the way through his body, making him shudder with desire. She twisted her tongue around him, trying to taste every inch of him. He seemed to want his hands all over her as he guided her movements up and down, so all of him plunged between her lips; the wetness of her mouth absolutely shrouded him.

“Anne, that feels...” he gushed desperately. “That feels so...”

Anne loved the fact that he could not get all of his words out. It showed that she was doing everything right. This was not an experience that she had ever had before, so she was not quite sure she knew what to do, but William was giving her all the confidence in the world. He made her feel like she could do anything.

But then he stopped her. Just as Anne was settling into a rhythm that felt comfortable and intoxicating, William tucked his hands underneath her armpits and pulled her to her feet. It seemed that he was not done with her as yet, but that he wanted to be with her again. Fully with her.

Anne knew that her body wanted the same thing, so she eagerly let him lift her from her feet to carry her to the bed. The weight of his body on top of her was a wonderful feeling.

She wriggled out of her clothing, loving the way he thrust deeply inside of her. Now, *this* was a sensation that she could not get enough of.

The pleasure did not take long to build. It very rapidly gripped hold of her core and tightened. Every nerve in her body reacted to him, every fiber of her being screamed for more. Anne knew at that moment that her body fit with William's so perfectly for a reason: because they were meant to be together. It was fate, destiny; they were always going to find their way to one another because nothing could stop this magnetic pull.

As Anne succumbed to the orgasm, she could see a wondrous future spread out in front of her. While the pleasure consumed her whole, she could see a marriage filled with love, a life with happiness and laughter, with joy and shared interests, with children to love and bring up every single day. She saw it all and moaned through it as it brought her even closer to the man that she adored.

Anne had not thought about the possibility of being a mother before; it had never occurred to her. But William had shown her that there was so much more to life than she had assumed. He had made her see that she really did want everything, and that was all because of *him*.

She fell into his arms and held him close, glad this time she was not going to have to let him go. Nothing could get in their way now because they were betrothed. This really was going to be the rest of her life. She and William. They were forever.

Epilogue



Anne could not stop looking at her white lacy gown because it could only mean one thing: that it was her special day and she was about to get married to the love of her life. It would not be long before her father took her to the church, so she could get married to Duke William Hardson at long last.

It had been a long time coming. This was a day that she had been looking forward to for as long as she could remember, and now it was finally here she could hardly contain herself. Not even the complaints that Harry had been making over the past few weeks could dampen her spirits. Of course, he was not going to be happy with her marrying the man that he perceived to be his rival, but Anne did not care.

“You look beautiful,” her father reassured her, as he stood in the door frame of her changing room before it was time to go. “Utterly lovely today. Your mother would be very proud of you.”

This brought tears to Anne’s eyes. They did not often speak of her mother these days, especially now that her father had found love with another woman. But it was nice to honor her today of all days. It was wonderful to feel her close to her in her wedding dress.

She had to admit that she felt beautiful in this dress as well. It was the nicest thing that she had ever had the opportunity to wear. She did not think that she would ever want to take it off because it felt so lovely against her skin.

But she would only wear it today, because of course she would only get married once.

“Do you think that Mother would like William?”

Her father laughed. “Oh, she would very much approve of him for you. I am sure that this is the sort of match that she would very much want for you. Especially if she got to see how happy he makes you. She would love him and welcome him into the family, just as we all do.”

Now that was true. William really did make her very happy. She had never had so much joy in her life, and she knew that it was all about to get so much better – especially knowing that she was not just gaining a husband, but her best friend as her sister-in-law as well.

To Anne, life felt absolutely perfect. She felt like she was the luckiest woman alive, and that everything was only going to get better from here on.

There were still some hurdles that she was going to have to overcome; she would still be very sad to live life without her father in the country, but it would be easier to cope with him in Jamaica if she had a family of her own. A husband and potentially children to keep her busy, to fill her life with boundless love.

“I think it is time to get to the church,” Anne said as she wiped a stray tear away from her eye. “So I can say ‘I do’.”

Her father smiled and nodded. Pride shone through him. “Yes, come on. I am sure that the Duke is already there waiting for you. We best not keep him there for longer than we need to.”

Anne’s heart skipped a beat with excitement. She could not wait to see him in his finest suit, with a warm and loving smile, inviting her down the aisle to stand with him and say those vows in front of everyone, solidifying their love and binding them together for the rest of their lives.

As she took her father’s arm and they walked outside to the carriage, excitement flowed through her veins because she knew that she was about to start the rest of her life. This was the first day of her brand-new adventure. She would start the

day as Lady Anne Bamford, and end it as the Duchess of Hardson. Nothing made her happier than the thought of being his wife at long last.

The End?

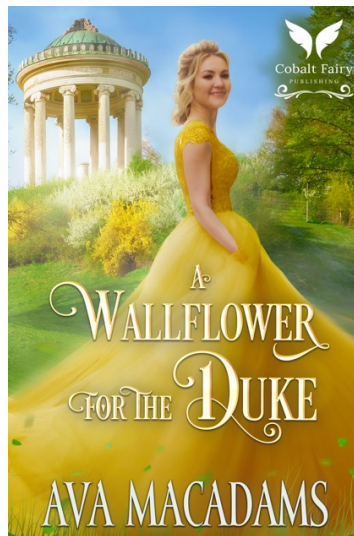
Extended Epilogue



Would you like to know how **Anne and William's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

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PREVIEW: WEDDED TO THE
BROKEN DUKE



Chapter One



The sun danced over the pond, still too high in the sky to allow the glimmering water to hide in the shadow of the adjacent manor. Margaret Dunn lay on the cool grass, her arm cast over her eyes, as the breeze tossed around stray strands of her flowing fair hair.

“There you are!” Her half-sister’s voice traveled with the breeze, wreaking havoc on Margaret’s imaginary world, and pulling her back into reality, eliciting a frown and a grumble as she slowly dragged her arm away from her face and sat up lazily on the grass. She squinted, allowing her sight to slowly adjust to the midday sun, as she saw her sister walking toward her, a cautious smile on her thin lips.

That was most certainly not a good sign.

“Here I am,” Margaret confirmed the obvious, holding on to hope her sister could be there only to ask if she wanted to go for a walk.

“Thought I’d find you out here.”

“Such a detective, my sister.” Margaret grinned, resorting to humor as she did almost every single time she came face-to-face with exasperating news. “Have you been reading my books?”

“Oh, I could never,” Sophia laughed back. “There are far too many words.”

“Well, now that you’ve found me, whatever do you want, Sophia?” Margaret asked light-heartedly, brushing a rebellious

strand of hair behind her right ear. “Can’t you see I am occupied?”

“Doing what? Sprouting more freckles?” Sophia asked, sitting down next to her. It seemed clear to Margaret she was stalling.

“Leave off my freckles,” Margaret grouched, sporting a grumpy frown. The little speckles where she had been kissed by the sun danced across the bridge of her nose and blossomed out onto her cheeks, a striking feature that often set her apart in most crowds and caused her endless amounts of consternation as most people considered the sun spots to be the mark of a lady who was less than refined and somehow unbecoming.

“If you say so,” Sophia shrugged, and then added more insistently, “but come in out of the sun.”

“Whatever for? It will be raining next week,” Margaret retorted, wanting to hold onto the peaceful moment she had been enjoying. Sophia was usually sent by the Lady of the Manor when she felt the need to chastise her stepdaughter for one reason or the other. At least her half-sister never enjoyed the task either, which was a blessed relief. Having a demanding stepmother was more than enough to deal with at present. “I must enjoy it while I can. You’ll learn that in time.”

“Marry someone in India if you crave the sun so,” Sophia giggled, allowing herself to be distracted by the conversation.

“I am sure Father would love that,” Margaret said, rolling her eyes. “Just ship me off to India, someone over there will sort it out.”

“Speaking of,” Sophia went on, offering Margaret a sheepish look.

Oh, there it was then. She had indeed been sent as a messenger, meant to do the bidding of others.

“He wants to see you,” Sophia said, keeping her eyes on the ground. She plucked a few snippets of the soft green grass and toyed with them.

“Father?” Margaret asked, raising her eyebrows. “Regarding what matter?”

“How should I know? He just asked me to seek you out and bring you to him.” She lifted her hand and allowed the bits of grass to flutter away on the breeze. Then, she turned to look at Margaret squarely. “You know he never divulges more information than necessary.”

“And where is he?”

“His study—where else?” Then it was Sophia’s turn to raise her eyebrows. “If Mother didn’t demand he dine with us, I doubt we would ever see him at all outside of that room.”

“Whatever could he want?” Margaret mulled out loud, dragging herself up from her chosen patch of grass. “Did he say?”

“Go and see, why don’t you?” Sophia bantered back. “Instead of asking over and over to see if the answer changes.”

She was a bit taken aback by this fiery turn in Sophia’s demeanor. Her youngest half-sister was normally the cooler, mellower sibling. Margaret refused to rise to the bait. Instead, she stood, straightening out her dress and brushing the stray blades of grass away from the folds. “Do you find me presentable?” she asked sweetly and gave a little twirl to make sure her sister could inspect her more closely. “I would hate for him to think me unpresentable.”

“Positively radiant,” Sophia nodded approvingly. It seemed as though her half-sister might be adding a touch of sarcasm to that quick retort, but the way her smile was situated in such a placid way on her face told Margaret she was being sincere.

“Well, that’s something at least.” Margaret paused for a moment, and then finally asked the question she truly wanted the answer to. “Was your mother there?”

“No, she’s off somewhere with Christiana.”

“Well, thank God for small blessings,” Margaret murmured, almost inaudibly. She sighed with relief, turning away, and walking toward Crauford Manor. It was a stately home, adorned on either side by a large stand of trees, and an elegant drive for carriages that came up alongside the entrance. The sea was out of view, but there were still occasional drafts of

salty air when the breeze blew strong enough to rush its way past the groves.

The study was on the first floor, with double wooden doors that opened inward. Margaret knew the staff worked their hardest to keep the spaces immaculate, and yet her surroundings didn't seem quite as polished and magnificent as they did when she was a child.

Could my perception be affected by the fact that I wish I could call just about any other place in England home? Or is the burden of caring for three daughters and a demanding wife finally starting to affect Father's annual income?

Margaret found the doors to the study standing wide open, revealing a staged view of her father's desk in front of the grand windows, his fireplace crackling away with the remnants of the morning's fire, waiting for the evening's reignition.

Her father, Bernard Dunn, the Earl of Crauford, was behind the desk, looking overworked like he always did, though Margaret had never seen him do much besides shift a pile of papers from one corner of the desk to the other. Like he was wont to do on many occasions, he currently sat in the sturdy armchair, browsing through a small stack of papers and documents, flicking through them with disinterest when she entered.

"Father?" she asked, drawing to a stop a step or two away from the desk, shelves of books on her right, and a pair of lounge chairs on her left. "You asked for me?"

He continued to read the contents of what seemed like a letter for a moment, before clearing his throat gruffly and shuffling it into a neat stack, looking up at her with the same mild disinterest he reserved for the weather.

"I did," he replied at last as if hosting this meeting was too exhausting to bear. He rested his hands on the desk and paused before finally announcing: "I have some news."

But before he could say anything else, a familiar voice interrupted the older man. Though Margaret wasn't surprised,

she certainly was agitated by the fact that her stepmother was around after all. Tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up and saluted as she felt her stepmother's cold presence when she stalked further into the room.

"Oh good, you're here," the Countess' icy voice slipped over the words, giving the quite innocuous phrase an almost ominous feeling.

Margaret's hands twitched involuntarily against the skirt of her gown as the tall, lean woman stepped into the room, her dress trailing out behind her like some illusory tail.

"I told you I would handle it, Edith," her father mumbled as his wife took her place by his side, standing so stiffly she could have very well been mistaken for a statue. "She is my daughter, after all."

"Cease at once, Bernard," the Countess chided. Then she looked straight at Margaret and said, "Your father has found you a match, thank God."

"A match?" Margaret asked, her eyes widening in surprise as of all the things she anticipated meeting with the two of them regarding today, this had not even crossed her mind. "You mean—"

"Yes, girl, a husband," the Countess of Crauford said, unfolding her small fan and wafting it gently. She had the poise of an ancient statue that had suddenly come to life and didn't quite know how to regain mobility just yet. "And it is high time he did, for that matter. Season after season you fail to impress potential suitors, so we..." she paused dramatically, and corrected herself, "he had to find one for you."

"That's not entirely true, dearest." Lord Crauford fumbled his own words, sheepishly attempting to defend Margaret, but his wife's unforgiving glare made him pause as usual. Also, as usual, he gave in without even a semblance of a fight. That was her father all right—a shadow of a man. He was smitten with her stepmother, from the very day he met her, and even now, after all these years together, he still kowtowed to her whims. The slim, pompous woman looked straight at Margaret as she continued, dominating the room.

“Christiana is eight-and-ten as of last month.” She mentioned this unnecessary detail as if the Earl hadn’t spoken at all. Margaret resisted the urge to roll her eyes. How could *I* forget about *my* stepsister, the most beloved and perfect *Christiana*?

It was no secret that Lady Crauford doted upon her eldest daughter. And so, as the favorite, Christiana was given every luxury. It was she who received presents of new gloves or hair clips. And it was Christiana who usually received all the love from the Earl and Countess.

As if to add emphasis to Margaret’s thoughts, the Countess continued by saying, “And frankly, Christiana is a more accomplished young lady than you have ever been. She has far better prospects at Court.” She paused and cleared her throat delicately. “Come now, Margaret, do try to refrain from blushing. It is rather unbecoming as it highlights your freckles.” She shuddered slightly as she closed her eyes for a moment, as if the sight of Margaret’s features made her feel disgusted.

“I am not blushing,” Margaret protested, looking at her father for any sort of reaction, but there was none. Her hands flew to her cheeks instinctively. She patted them. “And we know that I cannot help it if my face is freckled.”

“You can. You just choose to be obstinate. Do not think for one second that I am ignorant to the fact that you lolled about in the grass all morning.” The Countess’ stern gaze went to the frock Margaret was wearing. “You are filthy and hardly fit to be seen. My Christiana would never be so... unkept.” She sucked in a deep breath and her thin nostrils quivered. “But I must not allow you and your... alarming ways to cause me to digress. We are talking about Christiana.”

“No,” Margaret interrupted. “My father and I were discussing my betrothal. *You* are the one who mentioned Christiana.”

Lady Crauford narrowed her eyes and a small smirk crept onto her face. “Yes, yes, you are to be married, Girl. But that is only because everyone knows that it is unbecoming for Christiana to be married before you. Since you are the older child...” she paused and licked her lips as if her next words were

distasteful, “nearly five-and-twenty... your father and I must employ all our energies into finding you a husband.” She snorted with derision. “I never thought I’d see the day a woman of nearly five-and-twenty willingly remained a spinster!”

“It is not as if I planned my life this way. And I have no intentions of remaining unmarried forever,” Margaret replied, resentfully. She had tried to love her stepmother, she truly had, but the older woman had made it impossible time and time again. “I have been attending events throughout the Season and actively looking for the right man.”

Her stepmother scoffed. “The right man? Bernard, have you always indulged her frivolity in such a way? She would have us believe that she remains unmarried because the perfect companion has yet to tickle her fancy.”

“I have tried, Stepmother,” Margaret ground out. She did long to find someone she could love and call her perfect match, but the going had been exceedingly difficult. Be that as it may, she refused to allow her stepmother to continually berate her or to remain silent, much as her father was doing. “Though it seems I have no need to continue the search. Father was just preparing to share with me the name of the man I am going to marry.”

“Names are overrated,” she said, shaking her fan faster. “He is wealthy, titled, and willing to marry you. What else matters, at your age?”

“So,” Margaret said, looking down at her shoes for a moment, unsure of how to proceed, trying not to be tempted into losing her temper. She had always been the least thought of member of the Manor; Margaret was pleased enough to have a match and start a life without the Earl and Countess of Crauford, but still, she had no idea whom they intended her to marry, and her vivid imagination didn’t paint the best of pictures. Her stepmother was eager enough to get rid of her that any man, no matter his reputation or character, would do. “Who am I to marry?”

“Um,” her father said, looking down at the papers on his desk once more, studiously avoiding her gaze. “The Duke of Haddington, as I am reading.”

“Haddington?” Margaret asked, taken aback that he had to once more consult his ever-so-important notecards. She could feel the urge to scream growing in her throat; he didn’t even bother to remember her betrothed’s name! She was his firstborn and yet this was how little he cared. “I do not know a Duke of Haddington.”

“You should be thankful, Margaret,” her stepmother replied dryly, still flapping her fan. “From what I have read, he is quite above your station.”

“Am I not the daughter of an Earl, just like my sisters?” she asked, finally losing the battle to keep her temper at bay. “Am I not Lady Margaret Dunn? At least for the time being?”

Her stepmother snapped closed her fan and used the end to tap the Earl meaningfully on the shoulder.

“Margaret, that’s enough now,” her father intervened.

“Oh, by all means, Girl,” the Countess taunted, standing so tall and proud Margaret wondered if her insides were just as brittle as her exterior. “Continue being ungrateful, even when we went out of our way to find the husband you couldn’t entice in any of your many seasons.”

“I am not ungrateful, Stepmother. I am thankful for the roof over my head, the food on the table, and the marriage I’ll soon be entering,” Margaret hissed back firmly, feeling her cheeks grow hot with her temperament. “But what my sisters receive as rights, I am granted with reluctance. What they receive as gifts are given to me as though I am being wasteful. You would be happier giving me scraps, I know that. I’ve always known that. And yet I am not a burden that must be dealt with, as you seem to indicate with your every action and word. I am my father’s firstborn.”

“Daughters should be their husband’s responsibility long before old age,” Lady Crauford huffed, laughing at her own

snide remark, but there was no real humor to that strangled, crackling sound. “Even firstborns, Girl.”

“I’ve come to expect nothing but disdain from you,” Margaret snapped, and though she didn’t scream, her voice was filled with a deeply rooted resentment. “But you, Father—” she turned her eyes toward the Earl, trying her best to hold back the tears. “Is it too much to ask that you treat me as your daughter? And not just as one more number to be accounted for in your ledgers? You have summoned me today to announce my betrothal and yet I always imagined that was meant to be a happy occasion, but I feel as though I have been sentenced to the guillotine rather than—”

“Margaret, you go too far,” he interrupted by raising his voice, but it lacked any sort of real emotion. His anger was dull, as was his jubilation. He had been broken down long before this day, and Margaret feared the man he used to be was no longer in front of her. “I care for all of you girls, and I make the decisions in this Manor. I will not sit here and listen to you lament this situation or try to exaggerate regarding the matter. I must remind you to mind your manners.”

“Your father has only done his duty,” her stepmother interceded. “It is high time for you to do the same and bring some relief to your sisters.”

“I suppose I should take up residence in the stables for the remainder of my time here,” Margaret replied snidely, not deterred one iota by her father’s rebuke. “As it seems I am of no more importance than one of the horses, meant to be traded to benefit the more crucial members of this family.” She turned and began marching briskly away, feeling both furious and humiliated by the way the argument had unfolded.

“Margaret! Come back here at once!” her father commanded. The largely apathetic man, it seemed, had at least some limits to what he would endure.

“Oh, let her go, Bernard.” As she stomped down the corridor, Margaret heard the cruel woman speaking about her. “Margaret has always been fractious. She refuses to see what a gift has been bestowed upon her.”

Margaret resisted the urge to shout the multitude of replies that were swimming around in her head. Instead, she buried her thoughts and rounded the corner before dashing out the double doors into the fresh air, far away from the oppressive Manor she soon would escape for good.

I should not have reacted as I did. I do wish to be married and to a duke... that does seem rather fortuitous. But why, why then, do I have this aching suspicion that this betrothal is not quite as it seems?

She ran for the patch of grass where she spent the morning lounging but pulled up short before reaching the spot.

My stepmother was far too pleased with the match and only too eager to point out the fact that I ought to fall to my knees and thank them for the opportunity.

Margaret did not consider herself a superstitious person, but her body thrummed as all her senses tingled.

Something is amiss here.

She walked slowly toward the pond, looking out at the horizon, watching as gray clouds gathered overhead, covering the warm sunshine that had brought her so much contentment this morning.

As she moved closer to the waterline, the root of her anxiety reared its ugly head. The truth of the matter was not that she was afraid of this betrothal. The real question was... would her future husband's home afford her any happiness, or was she simply exchanging one misery for another?

Chapter Two



It was not the idea of marriage that disturbed her. In fact, she had been looking forward to becoming a bride since she was a girl. She idealized the concept in her mind, imagining a love so strong that defied all else. In her stories, in her books, which she read and reread to her heart's desire, knights in armor and their fair maidens, gentlemen lords, and their ladies, all lived and breathed for their true love. Margaret was, in spite of what the world had shown her so far, an optimist, a dreamer, and ultimately, a believer in the power of love.

She had begun attending balls and soirees when she was days shy of turning eight-and-ten, hurried along by her already impatient stepmother, shown as one would a prize pig at the market. And the men! They were no knights, though some of them certainly were lords. They owned large tracts of land, enormous sailing ships, and some even had hoards of treasure stowed away in their sprawling estates or manors. Some had even been stationed in the army and the navy... but, without an exception, all had been either dull, rude, or downright unbearable.

Why should she pretend to be interested in them? Let the other ladies, eager to smile and nod and find themselves a husband at whatever cost, take them.

Who is this Duke of Haddington? Margaret had certainly never heard of him. Why has he never shown up at social events?

She kicked at a tuft of grass.

Why was *he not* here today? Did he not wish to make the proposal himself and perhaps meet me *before* he made such a decision?

Her romantic ideas were all thrown aside by the Duke's absence today. *Even though* she did not recognize his name, it was possible they had met or at least interacted. Perhaps he had fallen in love with her from afar. But if that was the case, why was he not here now, kneeling in front of her, professing his desire to make her his wife?

She groaned aloud at her own foolishness. Stooping to pick up a large rock, she nearly toppled into the water.

Had I fallen in, or bumped *my* head, no one would have been here to rescue me. I could have been grievously injured and my family members would not have been disturbed in the slightest.

Margaret's sensibilities smarted. She knew she might be over reacting a tad, as her *father* had intimated back in his study. But was it too much to ask for a little compassion? Was she really being so difficult in expecting the announcement of her betrothal to bring about happy smiles rather than aggrieved groans of disdain?

I cannot stay here.

Motivated by that all too true concluding thought, Margaret lifted the hemline of her skirt, stepped carefully away from the banks of the water, and scurried across the lawn. As the gray clouds thickened, creating a blanket over the horizon, she continued to rush away from the Manor, as far as her feet would allow her to go. She dashed through the meadow heading toward the thick, forest-like park up ahead, letting the dappled shade dance across her path as the breeze continued to pick up, tugging at her garments and sending the stray leaves up in a hypnotic swirl.

Time kept slipping through her fingers like water would if Margaret tried to capture it. No man, no woman could pause time, after all.

It wasn't until her lungs began to hurt and she realized she was struggling to catch her breath, that she finally came to a halt. Her legs ached, and as she turned to see her surroundings for the first time since she left the Manor, Margaret realized she was utterly, hopelessly lost. The sun no longer shone above her; it seemed that rain would not wait another week to arrive. Dark clouds loomed threateningly above her head as if plotting how to make humanity pay for all those days of pleasant weather they had been awarded.

"Stupid," she muttered out loud. Didn't she already know how quickly the weather could change in this part of the country? Had she not noticed the disappearance of the sunshine? And just how long had she been running aimlessly?

Margaret was usually more level-headed, and more conscious of her surroundings. Yet being so far from home was incredibly liberating. A dark thought filled her mind then, as tempting as it was ridiculous. If she kept on walking and walking and walking... she could very well run away from home. But how could she survive with no money, no change of clothes, and no companions? It was laughable, of course, but oh-so-enticing at the same time.

Don't be silly.

She admonished herself, though she couldn't help but giggle at the idea, imagining the look on her stepmother's face, imagining how she'd explain to her betrothed the bride-to-be had gone missing. The ridiculousness of her predicament helped her push her concerns away. Surely, she'd find her way back home sooner or later, and perhaps her absence would help to teach the Earl and Countess a lesson.

Her thoughts were promptly interrupted by a single raindrop falling on her nose. It wasn't so bad. Oh, but then came another and another and another, and soon the whole sky seemed to have collapsed over the trees, onto the ground, drenching Margaret's clothes before she could even walk ten steps forward.

She didn't scream in fear or concern, though; the rain was warm, and the late summer breeze held her comfortably as she

giggled to herself. It was liberating, perhaps even cleansing. Wasn't rain used often as symbolism in the books she adored? Rain brought with it change, new paths, and possibilities in stories. Perhaps, then, it could be a good sign as well in her own life.

She began running. She paused continuously to shelter under the larger tree branches, seeking out a reprieve from the relentlessness of the rain. But after a while, she shifted her focus from finding her way back home to merely seeking out a road or pathway that had been traversed by any other human being. Her gown, drenched and heavy, clung to her figure. It was a relief no one was around to witness the scandalous sight. It took her what felt like an eternity to finally step out of the increasingly unstable mud and onto the road.

There. I can and I did find my way—all on my own.



Dark, threatening clouds gathered overhead, casting an ominous shadow onto the busy London streets, which seemed to match the Duke's foul mood. Philip Bolton, Duke of Haddington, watched from the foyer as the carriage drew to a stop just before the entrance to the accountant's home, his eyes darting between the coachman and the sky, which showed clear signs of an imminent storm. He winced at the pain in his left leg, and shifted his weight further onto his cane, frowning with discomfort. Rain brought not only memories of death and mind-numbing pain, but also humidity, which made his old wounds seem like new ones.

"Oh, I know how the dreary weather impacts your mood, Your Grace," the clerk attempted to make small conversation now that the papers had been signed. He had made his way through the open office door after filing the papers away in a short cabinet. The two men who had accompanied the Duke had already left. Both Gilbert Andrews, the Earl of Ramsbury, and Evan Drake, Baron of Caldwell, had offered to keep the Duke company and even extended an invitation to him to join them

for dinner, but the tall, brooding man had rejected all requests designed to engage him further.

The Duke of Haddington rarely indulged in social calls, after all, and mostly kept to himself at Haddington Manor, his family's ancient manor, unless business and investors demanded otherwise.

"Tis the season for it," Philip grumbled, rubbing his leg idly, hoping the pain would go away soon. He was once an athletic, active young man. Though he was now only one-and-thirty years of age and would still be able to make any pretty young lady swoon just by smiling her way, Philip was nothing like the man he had once been. Broad-shouldered and strong even after the accident, he had come to learn that while he looked much the same, his body and mind did not respond as they once had. He used to be able to ride his horse for hours, but now, he struggled to get into the saddle. And at one time, he had been an accomplished swordsman, but these days, even jousting with his friends, Lord Caldwell and Lord Ramsbury proved to be tedious endeavors as he was prone to tripping over his bad leg.

He glared at the menacing clouds outside and thought bleakly of all that had changed these last few years. He'd lost his beloved wife. That was the material point, but in burying Mary, he also felt the rest of the man he had once been crumble and nearly disappear. His hair, brown and abundant, had started to turn prematurely gray. Lord Caldwell liked to joke that this only helped improve the air of sophistication and elegance he had once been celebrated for by saying, "When the summer gives way to the gray," but Philip thought that was all rather preposterous. His whole body was decaying and the salt-and-pepper dots that coated his hair were just external cues of how shattered he felt on the inside.

"Well, everything is in order then, Your Grace," the clerk added. He shifted nervously from one foot to the other and Philip felt sorry for him. It was evident that like many others Mr. Joustine, the clerk, did not quite know how else to speak to the perpetually moody man when no one else was around.

“We shall send you the documents as soon as we have everything copied.”

“No,” Philip said, turning halfway around to address the fidgety clerk. “Have them sent to my solicitor. You have his information.”

“Yes, of course, Your Grace,” Mr. Joustine nodded promptly and seemed relieved to go back to his other chores.

“Are we prepared, Mr. Marston?” Philip opened the door and called the coachman. The carriage had pulled up outside of the small office, and Mr. Marston, a stout man on the other side of forty with a bushy mustache was hurriedly bringing down the steps.

“Ready, Your Grace,” he replied, moving with surprising grace for a man of his size.

“Then let us make haste,” Philip said curtly, as he drew his summer coat tighter around himself, his brown eyes, ever alert, ever vigilant, darting back and forth between the ominous clouds and the carriage. “This rain will soon be upon us.”

“We have not that far to go, Your Grace,” Mr. Marston reminded him. “We should make it there before we are met by the rain.”

“I shall hold you to your word, Mr. Marston.” Philip offered his servant the ghost of a smile, though as usual, it didn’t reach his eyes. He made his way toward the carriage, leaning heavily on his cane as he walked, the resounding clacking of ivory landing on stone both familiar and disquieting.

He was a young man, though he no longer considered himself one. No war had been responsible for his injury. He could not tell stories of his bravery during dinner parties. No. He struggled to walk because of a stupid, senseless accident, and yet he was the lucky one if anyone could find a silver lining to his pain. His late wife would, of course, never walk again. Never smile again. He should count his blessings, and yet he refused to.

Philip folded himself into the carriage with a bit of effort, stretched his leg out, and rested it on the opposite bench.

His head rolled to the right and he glanced out the window down the drive, to the swirling clouds and the red light of the sun setting on the horizon. It was muted by those thick gray clouds, but he stared at the glowing crimson orb, praying it would hold out against the intense pressure of the clouds.

The business meeting with Mr. Joustine, Lord Caldwell, and Lord Ramsbury wasn't supposed to last this long. He had known it the moment Evan, his cousin and reluctant heir had been convinced by their good friend, Lord Ramsbury, to add a second ship to the deal. New documents had to be drafted, and prices discussed. It was a good investment, Philip knew this, and so he had no arguments to protest the changes. He trusted both Evan and Gilbert with his life, of course. And they were right that the deal would only work in their favor with these modifications. So, his only motivation to reject the idea would have been the fact that he wished to be back at home before the rain arrived. And he couldn't very well admit such concerns out loud in front of such distinguished company. Even though Baron Caldwell was his relative and Lord Ramsbury was his dearest friend, they both would have nodded at him sympathetically and he just could not abide their pitying looks. It was too much to be borne.

"Bloody boats," he mumbled, and lifting his cane, he gave the lid of the coach a few solid thumps. "We could have scheduled a second meeting for new investments."

Mr. Marston led them down the drive and onto the main road. The fog of London could be seen far in the South, the chimneys pumping out their coal smoke and the foundries blasting away on the warm summer evening. Philip turned his eyes northward, his head resting on the back of his seat as he counted the oncoming raindrops. It had started to rain all right.

"We'll be all right, Sir!" he heard Mr. Marston calling down to him, shouting as the rain picked up its pace, splattering down against the thin glass of the carriage windows harder and harder with each passing moment.

Philip knew full well they still had plenty of ground to cover, and his mood was souring further as the weather worsened.

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, wishing he could eliminate the steady thrumming sound the rain was making as it dropped heavily onto the roof of the carriage. "Should have stayed in London," he murmured. "Evan would have happily offered me a chamber, as well as fine company during dinner."

Alternatively, he could have instructed Marston to inform the staff he would be taking residence at his city dwelling, something he had refused to do for years. His cousin's company would be far more pleasant, of course, but it would allow Philip to avoid having to offer any explanations or excuses.

He had no love for the City, and his residence there had never felt like home, but if there was one thing he hated more than a weekend in London it was traveling alone in the rain. His leg throbbed painfully as his mood worsened.

Is it too late to call on my cousin?

Of course, it was. He would have to explain he was worried about the rain, and his pride wouldn't allow it.

They rolled on for a little while, the rain picking up until it could be described as nothing short of a storm, and Philip shrank further into the corner of the carriage, even though he was very much protected from the downpour. As the carriage wheels turned on, sloshing through the quickly developing puddles, he began to drift off, only to find himself stirred awake again and again, a haunting cry floating through his mind. He wished the past could remain buried, but still, it would come clawing back with the pitter-patter of rain. And London was famous for its gray skies.

He tensed as he noticed the way the carriage began to slow down. Philip sat upright so suddenly a jolt of pain rushed from his leg into every corner of his body, forcing him to muffle a scream of pain. His aching leg was still perched on the opposite bench, but he carefully lowered it back to the floor of the coach before fidgeting in his seat to get a better look at his surroundings. Using his sleeve to clear the condensation away

from the firmly closed window, he attempted to see what the matter could be, but the rain was like a curtain keeping the outside world from his sight.

“Your Grace!” Mr. Marston called out from above. “There is someone on the road!”

Philip frowned, reaching up to open a small hatch at the top of the window so he could better communicate with his driver, taking care to avoid the splashing of rain.

“Then go around them, as you would,” Philip responded dryly, in no mood to be cordial.

There was no need to stop or slow down.

Philip bit his tongue to avoid reproaching his driver.

I appreciate that Marston is being cautious, but it is not so very difficult to go round other people who are using the road, especially if they are standing between me and my home.

They passed workers and farmers on the road all the time, and he struggled to understand why that evening should be any different.

“It is a woman, Your Grace!” Mr. Marston protested. “A proper lady, methinks.”

“What? In this weather?” Philip asked incredulously, concerned by the sheer idea of a woman out walking this road, at this time of day, in this ceaseless rain.

“She’s flagging us down, Your Grace.”

“Well then, you had better stop,” Philip said. His forehead wrinkled as he tried to process the quickly unfolding events that made very little sense to him. He knew he simply could not abandon a young woman to the fate that likely awaited her if he drove away and left her all alone. What if she was injured or attacked? “Go and fetch her,” he ordered as his mind revolved around all the calamities that might have already befallen her if she really was a lady who had lost her way.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mr. Marston answered, and the carriage grounded to a slow and final halt.

Philip jerked his cane off the bench and leaned forward heavily on it as he nervously awaited a report. He would have gone out himself, of course, were it not for the rain, and perhaps his leg. What on Earth is a woman doing out here?

He strained his ears and tried to listen to the exchange of words between the stranger and Mr. Marston, but he couldn't make out more than a faint murmur over the discomfoting sound of the rain until he heard the heavy squelching of the coachman's boots coming quickly toward the door of the carriage. He tried to sit as straight as he could, mortified by the idea a Lady would see him trembling in a corner, afraid of a storm.

Mr. Marston swung the door open, and Philip could see the way he bent his head, trying to protect himself a little as the rain came down over the brim of his hat. Hastily, he stepped aside to let the young woman escape the rain. Philip felt his heart leap the moment he laid eyes on her. She seemed almost like a beautiful apparition. She was but a slip of a woman, petite and delicate in stature. She smelled woodsy, of pine and moss, giving her an almost ethereal quality. Just as he should, the coachman offered the lady his arm to help her climb inside and Philip sat staring at her, transfixed.

Her *eyes*.

She blinked and ran a slim hand over her brow, wiping away the rain drops that clung to her thick fringe of dark eyelashes. As she moved her hand aside, he lost himself in the sparkling green eyes that were nothing short of mesmerizing.

Chapter Three



To Philip, the stranger was stunning, a vision for sore eyes. Anyone would have found this woman beautiful, of course, with her spritely freckles, full lips, and slightly sun-tanned skin. Her long, fair, lovely hair hung against her head and shoulders, as soaked as her gown, which embraced her figure scandalously. The fabric clung to her body, her every curve, revealing the swell of her breasts, the roundness of her hips, and the slim legs hiding underneath the skirt. But what stole Philip's breath away were those green eyes, which glimmered with a light of their own.

"Good... good Lord," he spluttered before he could hold his tongue, before realizing the stranger shifted uncomfortably as she sat on the opposite seat. Philip was mortified to realize he had been staring... no, not staring. Gawking.

"He does have a sense of humor, does he not?" the woman replied with some humor, and yet there was a clear discomfort in her posture, as she moved her arms in front of her body. She was trying to cover herself, a futile effort given the fact every piece of clothing on her was sopping wet as if she had gone for a dip in the neighboring pond without bothering to don a bathing outfit.

"Here," Philip said as he recovered quickly. He reached swiftly to take off his coat, flustered by the sudden arrival of this mysterious woman and the way her clothes clung to her body, distracting him from any concerns about the rain, at least momentarily. He fumbled the coat as he leaned forward, awkwardly knocking his cane against the wall of the carriage.

Cursing himself from his clumsiness, Philip attempted to apologize, but his words were promptly interrupted as the carriage jounced and wobbled down the muddy road. Though Mr. Marston was usually fully capable of evading both rocks and bumps, it seemed the rain was challenging his skills.

He was just righting himself and pulling the jacket off further when a sudden jolt sent Philip tumbling forward, much to his dismay, forcing him to land squarely on top of the beautiful stranger he had rescued from the elements.

It was the first time in years he felt the warmth of a woman pressed underneath his body. Her curves were impossibly enticing. Her scent beckoned him closer like the hypnotic appeal of a woodland nymph or perhaps a dryad. And for a moment, he caught himself aching for her, lusting for this stranger in a maddening way that demanded his immediate attention. Their eyes met, and though he saw apprehension and uncertainty in those green, beautiful orbs he also caught a glimpse of something else. She too was full of an intoxicating curiosity. It appeared that she too was consumed by a yearning, and he wanted so badly to satiate both their burgeoning desires.

Tension built up in the span of a single second to brand new heights, as his heart thumped faster than it had in years. Suddenly he felt alive, almost painfully so, the ache in his leg momentarily forgotten. Nothing seemed to matter but her exhilarating beauty. Those eyes, those lips, her skin as soft as silk, they all bewitched him. But it was her breath, heavy and irregular, that aroused him so greatly.

She tensed underneath his body, and though that was to be expected, given the fact that a complete and potentially dangerous stranger had fallen on top of her, she didn't scream. She didn't seem paralyzed by fear, far from it, and yet—

How can I know one way or another? What am I to this young woman other than a menacing presence?

“S... sir?” she spoke softly, her voice so gentle. She may have been worried, yes, but terrified? No.

Besides, there was something else there. It was enigmatic and he couldn't quite pinpoint the elusive quality that was blossoming between them.

Or perhaps this was just wishful thinking. Philip snapped out of his apparent trance, giving his head a definitive shake. He was not prone to flights of fancy, and he had nearly allowed himself to become overwhelmed by the sheer proximity of this alluring woman. He forced himself to snap out of such a tempting spell. After all, the Duke of Haddington knew better than to kiss a stranger, than to indulge himself in such devious desires. Not only because of his reputation and his refusal to experience intimacy with any woman after losing his darling Mary, but also because a gentleman would never take advantage of a woman's vulnerability in such a careless manner.

"Please forgive me," he said awkwardly, pinning his back against the seat to make sure another such incident couldn't possibly repeat itself. "I swear I meant no harm, Miss. It was an accident." He paused and looked her over carefully. "Are you all right?"

Her skin had turned a bright shade of red, and how lovely she looked as she flushed. He forced himself to stare at the ground until he was certain he could look her in the eye without letting his gaze wander.

"I am fine, thank you," she replied gently, though clearly rattled. She clung to the coat he had meant to offer her before unceremoniously falling forward onto her body. She shifted the material, stretching it to cover most of her body. She seemed as embarrassed as he was, but at least not angry or scared. And oh, those green eyes, still filled with that tantalizing curiosity. "Thank you for stopping and inviting me inside your coach. Several others passed by without even slowing their pace. I like to imagine the passengers were in a dreadful hurry." A small smile quirked at the corners of her lips.

It was clear she wanted to pretend the last few seconds hadn't happened, and Philip was all too happy to comply.

“You are not hurt then?” he insisted, and she immediately shook her head.

“I was unscathed when I entered the carriage and your little... spill forward did nothing other than take me by surprise,” she replied, as her grin broadened ever so slightly.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but I feel compelled. I can tell you are Lady of the *ton*, which begs the question: What were you doing, walking alone, along this roadway? How did you find yourself in such a predicament?” Philip asked, struggling to imagine what string of events might have led to this woman flagging down his carriage. She was, after all, clearly not a maid or a farmer’s wife. Her dress was finely made, but not overly extravagant. Her poised accent was distinctive and indicated that she had been properly educated. She was of noble birth, certainly, though he suspected not astonishingly wealthy. She was carrying little jewelry, after all. If she had none at all, he might suspect she had been set upon by robbers. But a silver necklace adorned her cleavage, and she wore a ring that could be nothing short of an heirloom, though it had seen better days.

“Well, I am embarrassed to admit I got myself lost, but I dare not tell falsehoods to the man who stopped to rescue me. Though it bruises my pride to admit as much, I ran through the woods and simply lost my way.” She smiled softly, and he watched with fascination as she combed her damp hair away from her lovely face. His first impression of her, that she was some sort of forest nymph with that cascade of blonde locks flowing so wildly down her shoulders, floated back and taunted him.

He caught himself gazing admiringly at her again and jerked his head to stare out the window instead. A man didn’t usually see a woman in such a state unless they were married. His coat served as the perfect blanket to keep her curves from view, but the image of her luscious form would forever remain frozen in his mind.

“When I found a road I recognized, I felt certain that I’d be able to walk back home. That proved to be more difficult than I thought because the sky darkened even further as night set in

and well—” she paused and gestured to herself. “You can see how well I was faring. Thank you for coming to my aid. I would have walked under the rain and through the mud for another hour if you had not.”

“Do you get lost in these woods often?” Philip asked against his better judgment, knowing he shouldn’t be indulging himself in such conversations with a woman he hadn’t been introduced to in any sort of formal setting. He should just ask for her family’s name, rush her home, and introduce himself to her parents or husband, explaining the situation to prevent the possibility of a scandal. That’s what he should do, of course, and yet—

“Perhaps not as often as I should,” she replied, a little smile dancing on those full lips. It was a rather curious admission, implying that she found getting lost preferable to being in her home. But before he could venture to say as much, she quickly added, “Do you admit strange women into your carriage often?”

Philip blinked at her question, at the sweet playfulness with which she teased him. From the moment she had entered his carriage, she had not been at all befuddled or unnerved. She did not seem nearly as affected by his presence as hers and that was unsettling. While he meant her no harm, she should have been more careful and perhaps a touch less spirited.

“I cannot say it is a habit of mine,” Philip responded somewhat stiffly, and the carriage was filled with a short but lively chuckle. It was the first time anyone laughed in that carriage in a long, long time. Suddenly he felt so old, sitting in front of this charmingly beautiful woman. An old, brooding cripple, that was what she surely saw when she looked at him. Why would she fear a man who couldn’t even walk without some kind of aid? Without his overcoat, there was no hiding his cane or the awkward rigidity of his bad leg. Philip felt terribly self-conscious about it all, though there was no judgment or mockery in her gaze. “You said you were an hour’s walk away from your home.”

“Give or take, but only because it’s already dark outside. And the storm! It came from nowhere, did it not?”

“I always know when a storm is coming,” he replied moodily, unconsciously rubbing his left knee, and immediately regretting it. “What I meant to ask is where I should instruct my coachman to take you, Miss—”

She opened her mouth to answer but seemed to think better of it and gently shook her head.

“Good sir, I will be forever grateful for the fact that you helped a young woman such as myself in a time of need, but there are people in my life who might not believe the kindness of such actions,” she said cautiously, and there was a fire in those green eyes as she spoke. “I hope to avoid suffering any further humiliations today, and since only the two of us know I climbed into a stranger’s carriage, I believe it would be unwise to share that knowledge with people who might wish us ill.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t welcome a scandal either. I promise I’ll be discreet.” He straightened his shoulders which had become taut at her words. He tried his best to maintain a certain air of dignity. But her words rang in his ears.

Who at her home would use such information against her? She seems to be implying that if I know the names of her parents or if I have Marston deliver her directly to her house, she will suffer at the hands of her—? I do not know. Who could wish a lady such as this any sort of harm?

He allowed himself to look at her, completely unfettered by his previous reticence. She carried this mysterious, mystical air about her, and suddenly, he wanted her to be just as impressed with him as he was with her.

He fidgeted even further upright in his seat, thinking of how, years ago, he might have been able to make her swoon, just by flashing a dazzling smile in her direction. He had been told that even with his limp he was still an attractive, desirable bachelor, though not in such a direct manner, by several mothers and would-be matchmakers in his few—and almost universally forced—social appearances since the accident. And yet he couldn’t comprehend why any woman could find him desirable, or even attractive. He was broken, plain and simple, and yet, for the first time in years, he felt excited to be

around a woman, to enjoy her company. Philip decided to squash any such feelings as swiftly as possible.

“There is a barn not far from here. I am certain it is visible from the road. I know the people who tend the animals there. ’Tis but a short walk from my family’s home, and they’d help me from there... or I would certainly be able to find my way after that,” the lady said, breaking Philip out of his reverie.

“What sort of gentleman would I be if I abandoned you in this weather? I must insist, Miss, let my coachman take you home.”

“In doing as I requested, you would be the sort of gentleman who respects a lady’s wishes,” she replied without hesitation, the determination in her voice startling Philip. “Please. You may be discreet, but there are people in my life who would not be quite so kind.”

He found himself nodding despite his better judgment and slid open the small window to give his coachman the necessary instructions. Once that matter was handled, Philip decided it would be best if he remained quiet. Nothing could be gained from speaking with this woman or even looking at her for a moment longer than necessary. She was too attractive, too lovely, and those eyes—

Philip forced himself to look out the window, refusing to ask any other questions, not even her name. It went against his upbringing, and his instincts, and yet he managed to do so... until she broke the silence for him.

“I am to be married soon, so I am told,” she said suddenly, interrupting his thoughts unceremoniously. The beautiful brunette shrugged softly, giving him an embarrassed smile. “I apologize for saying as much. It is just that my betrothal is consuming my thoughts. Since this short journey will remain a secret between the two of us, I feel as if I can talk through my anxiousness with you and you will not tell anyone else of my feelings.” She paused and looked at him, her eyes widening as if she meant to draw him into her tale with her mesmerizing stare. “I learned about it only a few hours ago. My father and stepmother would not even consent to tell me the man’s name.

I do not know the day I'll become a wife either, but if I am not mistaken, it will be awfully soon!"

He was puzzled by her sudden announcement, and she let out a self-conscious little chuckle as he gave her a confused look.

"I hope you will not think me uncouth... or silly," she added, and he shook his head politely. "My father arranged it all. And I am grateful, of course. But oh, it is all so sudden. I am betrothed, and I do not know my husband-to-be's age or his face, or even whether he enjoys reading or not. Could you imagine, marrying someone with no love for books?"

As much as he tried to avoid it, Philip found himself offering the strange young woman a smile, however small and perplexed it might have been.

"A horrible sin, allowing a book to go unread," he murmured at last.

"Exactly." She nodded in agreement, her smile growing brighter. "I can bear with many flaws, but can I marry a man who enters his library once a month?"

"Why do you assume your husband-to-be will not be an avid reader?" he inquired, unable to restrain his curiosity. For the first time, he thought of the business arrangements he was making in preparations for his own wedding. He did not know the lady who might one day become his bride, but he was not nearly as perturbed by that notion as the woman across from him was. He assumed that in engaging the hand of a lady who was an aristocrat and said to be accomplished in many ways that he would find a companion who at the very least enjoyed reading. He wondered why this lady would think otherwise of the man she was about to wed.

"I suppose I should be more optimistic," she replied, and by the look in her lovely green eyes, Philip realized she was—usually. There was a glimmer there, one only the dreamers seemed to share. Mary used to be like that. He supposed he used to be that way too, a lifetime ago. "After all, luck was on my side when it allowed your carriage to cross my path."

He couldn't quite get over the strangeness of this encounter, and yet he'd be lying if he said he wanted it to come to an end.

She was so painfully beautiful, and now that she had managed to relax, the young woman wasn't clinging to the coat he had lent her quite so firmly. He could see glimpses of her soaked clothes here and there, as the constant rocking of the carriage wobbled their bodies lightly. Philip tried to shake himself out of these lustful thoughts, trying to focus on the rain or a small stain on the floor, but he could not stem the excitement her voluptuous, enticing figure elicited. It had been so long since he felt anything resembling arousal, but his body seemed not to have any problem reminding him of the symptoms.

"I do not think you silly for worrying about your future husband's character or even his likes and dislikes. But since we are being candid, I do think running off to the woods in the middle of a storm is nothing short of foolish. Particularly if you are worried about creating a scandal so shortly after the announcement of the betrothal."

"It was not raining when I left," she protested briskly, giving him a look that was somewhere between amused and aggrieved.

"Of course," Philip replied, and he found his lips curling into a smile a second time. "The clouds looming across the sky could not have been a clue."

"I was otherwise distracted." She narrowed her eyes, pretending to be appalled by the mild affront. "I had a lot on my mind."

"Wondering whether your new husband enjoyed reading books," he retorted, surprised by how easily this conversation seemed to flow. Philip knew that his social skills had rusted over the years, much like everything else, but this mysterious woman had a strange effect on him.

"What else is there to be distracted about, pray tell?" she joked sweetly, her voice acquiring a sing-song quality. She was like a breath of fresh air, and he had been locked away in a room for so long. But he needed to remind himself not to be so foolhardy. He could not allow himself to be beguiled by her.

They were both betrothed to be married to others and this chance encounter would be nothing but a distant memory soon enough.

“And getting in a stranger’s carriage so readily, even when the weather is frankly appalling—”

“I knew it would more likely than not be safe,” she interrupted him, earning a quizzical look from Philip. She immediately offered an explanation, but the clarification only served to make matters more puzzling. “You are clearly a wealthy man, you see.”

“Beg your pardon?”

The gorgeous fair-haired lady leaned forward, speaking enthusiastically as she explained her thought process, and he found himself doing the same to listen, though it was hardly necessary. Her voice filled the carriage with little effort. Her proximity, though, was simply too pleasant.

“Wealthy men have too much to lose to take advantage of a crime of opportunity. No, if you were to take advantage of a young woman, you would more likely than not plan it ahead of time. Think of the possible outcomes. Worry about the consequences. This road is not nearly secluded enough, and your carriage is too elegant, your clothes tailor-made. Your boots are hardly worn. Your cane is crafted out of ivory. In short, you are not the kind of man who’s likely to risk your wealth and reputation for a quick rush of pleasure. I know there is room for error, but that’s the reason why I decided to get into your carriage without asking any questions. It was a safer option than to continue on foot.”

He took a moment to ponder her reasoning, and finally nodded slowly.

“There is some merit to your words,” he admitted, impressed by the young woman’s deductions, and wondering how many mystery books she had read over the years. He couldn’t help but find some delight in the way her face brightened up when he praised her. Though he rarely indulged in jesting, he added, “You read more than sermons and poetry, then.”

“Cookery books, mostly,” she joked back at once, and again her laughter filled the carriage. But then, she nodded in earnest. “I adore mystery novels, yes—”

“What else were you able to deduce?” he teased. Now that the ice was broken between them, and he understood that she fully trusted him, he allowed his own guard to slip.

“Well, if you should know, there is another reason I thought it was safe to accept your aid. When I first saw your coachman, he looked so very startled. And as he opened the door to the carriage, you wore nearly an identical expression. The two of you were certainly not up to nefarious purposes looking as bewildered by my appearance as you did.”

“I... I don’t usually encounter young ladies walking by the side of the road. Certainly not in such weather,” Philip protested with amusement.

“Still,” she continued as she grinned so prettily. “It is not a dangerous man that walks around looking surprised.”

“Perhaps you underestimate me,” Philip bantered back. “I am not some old man, after all.”

And yet he had thought himself an old man only minutes before. What a bizarre effect this stranger had on him.

“I would think old men are far more dangerous than younger ones,” Margaret muttered as a small frown replaced her smile. “And are you truly trying to convince me you are terribly frightening? I am usually rather determined, but when someone cautions me to be wary, I—”

“I am not—” he interrupted, shaking his head as a slight smile graced his face. “I suppose it was my idea of a joke.”

“I admit one of my guesses was entirely wrong, however. I expected a carriage of this size to carry more than a single occupant.”

“It has before,” Philip replied without thinking, being overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of nostalgia.

She seemed puzzled for an instant, and he saw the way her eyes darted toward his left hand, as though she were in search

of a wedding ring.

I just told her I was betrothed... or did I fail to mention that aloud?

He could not be certain if his upcoming marriage had only flashed through his own mind or if he had spoken of it to this lady. He was quickly finding himself so wrapped up in this conversation that a fine line lay between what he was willing to share with this absolute stranger and what was left to his imagination.

Before he could explain his comments fully or even try to remedy the sudden tension that had sprung between them, the carriage came to a smooth stop, and both looked out the window at the same time.

“We’re at the barn,” she spoke first and Philip realized just how disappointed he was that their encounter had come to an end.

“How am I in good faith to leave you by the wayside?” Philip pressed on, and he wondered if he was being gentlemanly or if he was looking for an excuse to hold onto her presence for a moment or two longer.

“How?” the young, beautiful brunette asked with a reassuring smile. “The same way you found me—I suppose.” Her grin was earnest, sweet, painfully enticing. Philip wished to taste her lips and he knew if he ever meant to make good on that desire, he had to do it now, while there was still a chance. That was not a thought a proper gentleman should indulge himself in and he instantly rebuked himself for such thinking. “Truly, I appreciate the kindness you’ve shown me, but I am afraid this is where our paths must separate.”

Just then, the woman reached forward and opened the door herself, not waiting for Mr. Marston to aid her down, or for Philip to bid her goodbye. She smoothly leaped down onto the muddy road, before removing the coat from her petite shoulders and handing it back to its rightful owner.

“Good evening, Sir, and thank you for your kindness.” she stood there for an instant, and Philip struggled to avoid

allowing his gaze to enjoy the wonderful sight of her body. The way her gown clung to her every curve was alluring, shockingly seductive, and likely to forever remain imprinted in his mind.

“Good luck in your upcoming nuptials,” he replied, fighting the urge to insist a third time to take her all the way to her family’s estate.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

[Wedded to the Broken Duke](#)

Thank you very much!

Also by Ava MacAdams

Thank you for reading *Wedded to the Broken Duke!*

I hope you had a good time reading it!

If you did, may I ask you to [please write a review HERE?](#) It would be amazing to read your insightful comments and honest feedback...as they will only help me get better!

Some other bestsellers of mine:

Wedded to the Broken Duke

The Viscount's Secret Wish

Her Deal with a Beastly Duke

Always the Bridesmaid, Never the Duchess

Her Night of Passion with a Duke

Her Gambit with the Duke

Also, if you liked this book, you can check out my full [Amazon Book Catalogue HERE!](#)

I feel blessed that you're by my side!

Much love,

Ava MacAdams

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And even if this book was not exactly your cup of tea, there's a lot more of where this came from! Click [here](#) to find stories with your favorite trope!

About the Author

Born and raised in rural Louisiana, Ava's rebellious nature would always find her riding her horse through vast farmlands or lying under a tree, getting lost in one of her favourite historical romances. Always itching for adventure, she was only nineteen when she decided to embark on her biggest adventure and travel through Europe.

She studied art and theater in London, where she met several people that filled her with valuable experiences. Taking part in a writing competition upon her professor's encouragement, she realised that this was what she always wanted to do. Married to that same professor a few years later, she decided to return to her roots to settle down and write about her favourite era.

Let yourselves be lured into an intense experience of desire and passion, alongside irresistible Lords and seductive Ladies of the Regency Era. Ava's skilled writing hand will throw you back in time, when tales were told and songs were sung...

Ava is part of [Cobalt Fairy's](#) team of authors! Visit cobaltfairy.com for new, bargain and free deals for every dedicated bookworm there is out there!

