

When  
a Duchess  
Sins

LISA CAMPBELL

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# WHEN A DUCHESS SINS

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*Love will touch them one time and last for a  
lifetime...*

**LISA CAMPBELL**

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# CONTENTS

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[Thank you](#)

[In Lords We Trust](#)

[About the book](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

—

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[In Lords We Trust](#)

[Do you want more Romance?](#)

[A Way to Betray the Duke](#)

[Never miss a thing](#)

[Thank you](#)

[About the Author](#)

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

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*By breaking his heart she ruined her life...*

Lady Isabel made **the wrong choice**: instead of running away with her true love, she married the old Duke her parents approved of. **But now he's dead and she's free**, rich, and determined to stay away from men.

*Until she meets Anthony again.*

Anthony **will always curse the day Isabel walked out of his life**. He blames her for the cynical rake he is now. And for the position he's found himself in. For his father, tired of his scandalous ways, has given him an ultimatum: **either marry in three months or go to America**.

*Anthony would never forgive Isabel—until she asks him to.*

What starts as practicing forgiveness soon turns into **re-ignited passion**, threatening to consume them whole. But



then, every communication between them abruptly stops.

**Is Anthony finally avenging his broken heart, or is Isabel too afraid to risk her newly found freedom? One thing is certain...their second chance is no bed of roses.**

*Love will touch them one time and last for a lifetime...*

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## PROLOGUE

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The King himself could have been there that fateful night and Isabel wouldn't have noticed. Even though her mother had decorated their home with the grandest décor of the era and there wasn't a surface or railing without ribbon, exquisite fabric, or candlelight, all she could see was Anthony Moore. The second son to her father's best friend—and her childhood love. She had the distinct privilege of witnessing his transformation from a rosy-cheeked, round-eyed little boy who loved nothing more than chasing bugs and sticking them down the backs of his brothers' collars to the sophisticated and witty young man in front of her that night. His chestnut tresses were expertly pushed back from his sharp-jawed face, with those coffee eyes sparkling at her.

She could have almost forgotten they were dancing because she was so enraptured by him. Any time Isabel's attention fluttered to the grin on his face, her heart skipped a beat. While his smile had always been charming — this was not per se the reason for her palpitations. No, it was because she recognized that smile as her own. It was hers because she was the one who inspired it, and because that night was supposed to be the beginning of their forever. It was her Debut ball, but she knew that the hunt for a potential suitor was over before it had barely begun. Anthony had been her everything ever since they were kids; she just hadn't realized that her fondness had outgrown friendship until the year leading up to her Debut.

*“I’m feeling lightheaded,”* she had whispered to him.

His eyes narrowed at her before he asked, *“Do you need to sit?”*

Isabel, biting her cheek to hold in her excitement, she shook her head. *“I could dance with you forever.”*

Anthony chuckled and quirked a brow at her. *“Then why are you lightheaded?”*

He spun her on cue with the music and when she landed chest to chest with him, she finally answered in another whisper, *“I think this is what love feels like.”*

When their eyes met, he replied, *“If that is the case, I believe I too am lightheaded.”*

Isabel hadn’t been *lightheaded* since that Season; a Season which her mind had affectionately dubbed the Era of Love. It was the last time she felt joy and romantic love against her fingertips and in her heart. It was a melodramatic thought, to be sure, but it was also true. And even after all these years, almost ten to be exact, she still wondered:

*What if he had been the man I married?*

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## CHAPTER ONE

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A sharp knock on her bedchamber door startled Isabel and she jumped to her feet out of habit, which she inwardly cursed herself for. Robert wasn't there; she didn't need to be standing when he entered a room. Amy, her dear maid, peered inside as the door opened. "Baroness Pratt is here, Your Grace," she informed.

"Rebecca?" Isabel breathed.

While her sister's visit should not have surprised her given the circumstances, she hadn't given it much thought. She was so used to being alone on the estate that it never occurred to her that people might try to visit her. Isabel followed her maid to greet her sister, clearing her throat and smoothing her dress.

She heard a commotion in the foyer as she exited her room. She watched Rebecca order the footmen as she approached the stairs. "Be careful with that trunk, now. My gowns are in it and they are worth quite a fortune! I would like a room with a view of the garden."

Isabel blinked; her sister appeared to have plenty of belongings to stay for far more than one night. She Isabel

approached Rebecca, dismissing the way she addressed the staff as exhaustion from traveling.

“What a lovely surprise,” she said faintly; hating how feeble she sounded – mostly because it would seem like she was still grieving that awful husband of hers but also because she knew it was what years of being his wife had done to her. Weak, small and as quiet as possible.

Rebecca spun about and took hold of her shoulders. While she was only a year her junior, Isabel didn’t think she had ever looked so youthful to her before. Flawless porcelain skin, bright and well-rested eyes, and not a single blonde hair out of place. Her face shifted into a sympathetic pout.

“Oh, Bellie! It is so wonderful to lay eyes on you,” she oozed. “I have not been able to get you off my mind in weeks. I considered continuing our correspondence to see how you are doing, but I felt compelled to come see for myself.”

Isabel nodded but her attention turned to the footmen hoisting trunks up the stairs. “What is... what is all this?” she questioned.

Rebecca’s sky-blue eyes had shifted to a rather serious gleam by the time Isabel looked back her way. “I have tried giving you time to mourn, Isabel, I really have. However, the thought of you rotting away in this big house all alone for all of winter?” She clamped a hand to her chest. “I simply *cannot* stand the thought of it. No husband nor children to keep you company, and I know you haven’t been much of a social butterfly since you married.”

Isabel had to bite her tongue from saying what was really on her mind at her sister's last comment. That yes, she hadn't been social—but because Robert wouldn't allow her to be. After she told him about her childhood friendship with Anthony, though she left out the details of their blossoming love, he became terrified that she would find a man to have an affair with. Women were also labeled as dangers, with the claim that they would be negative influences on her. Isabel was *thrilled* they had never had children exactly because of his need for control and cruelty. He blamed her for her barrenness, but he blamed her for everything anyway, so their marriage was nothing out of the ordinary.

*Stop. Stop thinking about him right now. He will only spoil your mood.*

She shook her head in an attempt to clear her thoughts. “While I sincerely appreciate the thought, I do not deem it necessary for you to stay all winter.”

“Your husband passed *two months ago* in that hunting accident,” Rebecca stated matter-of-factly, as though Isabel was overlooking the fact. “You should be alone no more. I wished I could come sooner but I wanted to give you time to mourn. Furthermore, with Edmund around, I did not want to rub my marriage in your face.”

Isabel shifted slightly and folded her arms. She could sense herself succumbing to her sister's ways. Maybe she should have someone around preventing her from being alone with her thoughts. Rebecca, however, was a commanding presence, and all Isabel yearned for was to find herself. Having her there would mean living by her sister's wishes and desires rather than her own. And Isabel didn't have the heart to turn her away, especially since she knew Rebecca was well-meaning.

“What about Edmund? Where is he now?” Isabel asked; seeing it as her only way out of this discussion.

Rebecca clasped her hands together; looking all too delighted to share her answer. “He has been sent away on business and shan’t be back until after New Year.”

Isabel was perplexed as to why she was so excited to announce her husband’s absence, but she attributed it to the fact she was probably quite enthused to spend time with her. She had lost all of her lingering resistance at that point because even if she was aware that she would have to learn to navigate her life as a widow in a more gradual manner, she couldn’t turn her sister away. Not when it meant she, too, would be alone for the winter, despite the fact that she would most likely have friends who would pay her frequent visits.

“Very well.” Isabel sighed. “Let’s get you settled in.”

Rebecca clapped and pulled her sister in for an embrace. “We will endure this cold, miserable season together. Even if we can’t go to parties or balls, we shall enjoy ourselves. I’m certain of it.”

Ah yes, Isabel wasn’t allowed to socialize until she reached six months into her widowhood. Robert was stunting her ability of being an individual even beyond his death. Even though she had been granted personal and financial freedom when he passed, Isabel was still under the control of a husband because of society’s look on men, women, and marriage. As the sisters ascended the stairs to oversee the unpacking of Rebecca’s belongings, she thought back to the question of what life would have had been like if she married Anthony. It was a

question she would never have the answer to, and their time together would be the only Era of Love she would experience—and that had to suffice. She had experienced love and knew what it was like, and she had known the cruel and dark reality of marriage. From then on, it was the Era of Isabel. Her person would not be defined by a man again – ever. People would come to know her as Isabel, the Dowager Duchess of Edington. Not the wife of the Duke of Edington or any other edition of the notion. It would take time for her to learn how to be on her own and fill all the gaps left by her married life, but she would do it. Isabel would forge her own path and have a prosperous future. She would never marry again.



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## CHAPTER TWO

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### *A FEW MONTHS LATER*

One of the few thrills Anthony was left with was the silly, erratic giggling of mild-mannered women when he whispered salacious ‘sweet nothings’ in their ear. He knew he shouldn’t enjoy making women teeter on the edge of discomfort and carnal intrigue, but he couldn’t stop himself. Their flushed cheeks, their feeble pleas for him to stop, and that awful little laugh they all shared. And the woman before him was no exception. She fanned herself and tried to look anywhere other than at Anthony, but her gaze always returned to him. Her dull eyes sparkled with interest and a silent beg for him to keep flirting.

“Lord Moore, you are simply too much,” she replied in a hushed tone.

He smirked and dared to allow his fingertips brush against her arm as he reached for the drink one of the club’s servants had poured him just moments before. “My dear, you do not know the meaning of *too much* until you have spent a night... having dinner with me, shall we say.”

The sharp inhale of breath was followed by a burst of nasal laughter. One of her delicate hands flew over her mouth, trying to muffle the sounds so they didn’t draw attention to

themselves, but it was far too late. Anthony Moore was followed everywhere he went, hoping for a taste of scandal from the Duke of Mondale's disgraced son. Since his best friend, Ernest Cecil, married, Anthony felt he had calmed down. He no longer brashly disrupted balls or paraded around London with a harlot on his arm as if she were a family jewel. But he still needed to find ways to pass the time, didn't he?

"My Lord!" she gasped once she had recovered from her giggling. She batted her lashes at him and attempted to convey coyness in her face. "I haven't any idea what business a lady such as myself would have joining you for *dinner*."

He allowed his eyes to rake over her with a smirk on his face. Anthony knew better than to lie to himself, even if he would go so far as to say she wasn't his type. These days, any woman was his type. "I can think of a number of *businesses* we could involve ourselves in together."

Anthony turned to see who it was when he heard a loud scoff on the other side of him. When he saw his father standing before him, red-faced and nostrils flaring, his face fell. "Anthony, could you escort me to my carriage?" his father asked, his tone stern and foreboding.

"I have yet to finish my drink," Anthony remarked meekly.

"Leave it," the Duke demanded. As Anthony plucked up his glass and gulped down the remaining brandy, his father turned to the lady and muttered, "If you will excuse us."

Anthony sat his glass on the counter and gave the lady one last shrug before following his father out of the social club. He

could feel his anger radiating off him as much as he could feel the first warm breeze of the year on his cheek. They climbed into the carriage, and before Anthony could even sit, his father smacked his shoulder with a ledger he'd been carrying. "What in the Heavens is wrong with you, son!" he shouted.

"What did I do?" Anthony asked, genuinely confused by the level of anger.

"You *cannot possibly* be so daft," his father snorted – glaring hard at him. When Anthony clearly conveyed he was clueless as to what the problem was, his father took a deep breath before jutting a hand in his direction. "I have overlooked your *fascination* with lower class women, but you cannot be flirting with married noblewomen in broad daylight! Are you really so bold?"

Anthony was bold indeed but he was unaware of his father's claim. His gaze darted out the window, despite the fact that the club had already vanished from their view. "She was married?" he muttered, though he wasn't sure if it was to himself or his father.

"That is the wife of Count Richard Vanderbilt!" his father exclaimed before taking a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his face. Anthony's mood softened at the sight. His father was getting older, which made his heart weaker than ever, and intense feelings like rage or discontent truly exhausted him. His face was an even darker shade of red than when he first approached him in the club. Once more, his father had to take a deep breath to compose himself and likely lower his heartrate. A pang of guilt coursed through Anthony. Never would he have wanted his own actions to impact his father's health. He appeared to have gotten by since the Duke's health had deteriorated without upsetting him too much.

When he settled, his father's dark eyes sliced into him. "I have had enough, Anthony. I have always attempted to look the other way as you dragged our family name through the mud and galivanted through England with careless abandonment. And I even foolishly allowed myself to believe that once it was announced your partner in crime would marry, then you would soon follow suit. Or, at the very least, you would have subjugated your antics. You would not behave in such a way if you had a wife waiting for you at home."

It didn't surprise nor offend Anthony to hear himself and Ernest coupled in the same thought. The two of them had grown to be quite notorious and had for the longest time acted in the same ways. However, he was a bit annoyed that he was expected to follow his friend along to married life. He had advised him to marry Lady Helena because he could see Ernest was in agony. Anthony too wasn't overly happy but he wasn't miserable either. He'd found ways to keep himself entertained and content with life.

Shaking his head, Anthony retorted, "Marriage has nothing to do with one's behavior. If that was the case, no one in the House of Lords would have a mistress, or a slew of them for that matter."

"I will not deny the unsavory actions of our colleagues," his father replied as calmly as he could. "However, what is the difference between your galivanting and theirs? Discretion. When you have a wife at home whose reputation rides on your behavior, you operate with an abundance of caution. And that is precisely what you are missing, my son. Someone to hold you responsible and make you accountable for your actions."

"I don't think that is entirely fair—"

“What *isn't fair*, Anthony, is you disgracing not just our family name but that Countess' reputation and her husband's to boot! And all in the name of what? A cheap, temporary thrill for you?” his father interjected. There was a tense silence then, Anthony knowing his father was right in that regard. Sighing, the Duke continued, “Do you really think that you would be flirting with any woman that so much as glanced your way if you had a wife whose wellbeing was determined by your social stature?”

Anthony wanted to say yes because he never imagined himself changing for anyone, let alone a wife he did not care for. Marriage was not in the cards for him, and it hadn't been in nearly a decade. But he knew that wasn't the answer his father was looking for. “What do you expect me to say? What do you expect me to *do*? That is *not* who I am.”

His father fussed with the buttons on his jacket. “Well, it will be. You have done enough damage to our name and I shan't have any more of it especially after this escapade is surely to be splashed across the gossip columns come tomorrow morning. No. Either you find someone to marry, or you will be sent to oversee the family merchant business in America.”

“You cannot be serious,” Anthony breathed.

“I am,” his father snapped. “Either you find someone and secure a wedding date this upcoming Season, or you shall embark the first boat to America come summer.”

“You cannot force me to go to America,” he muttered meekly.

“I cannot, but I can cut you off. “You will no longer have access to the family finances, and I will sell or give your townhouse to your brother Thomas when he returns from military service,” he said, closing his eyes. His father was struggling to remain composed and it was eating Anthony up inside. He was used to his father being frustrated with him, but he wasn’t used to seeing it physically affect him.

The carriage came to a halt outside Anthony’s house. His father said one last thing. “You have until the first of June to make a decision. Good day, son.”

“Good day, Father,” Anthony murmured and stepped out of the carriage.

With a cloudy head, he moved into his townhouse and made his way up to his study. The room perpetually smelled of tobacco and brandy, and it always brought him a good bit of comfort. Anthony felt the full weight of his life crash down on him as he sank into his expensive, custom desk chair and looked around at the stacks of meaningless paperwork on the desk he had re-stained four times until it was the perfect shade of amber. His father could truly cut him off without it being a burden or even a relief to him. Anthony had been assigned various duties in the dukedom to assist his father, but they had all been allotted to busy work. It gave him the appearance of being important despite the fact that he was not.

But he supposed he’d be kissing it all goodbye. If he chose to remain in contact with his family, America would be his new home once a ship sailed him across the ocean blue. Marriage wasn’t even a second thought for him, knowing full well that he didn’t want to marry—and couldn’t. Ernest had lucked out with Helena because he was a Duke, and because of the external forces at play on both parties. It had been a beautiful, perfect storm that guided his friend to true love and happiness.

Anthony wouldn't have such luck, nor would he entertain it. His longing for love and marriage had started and ended with Isabel Wynn; though he supposed she went by Isabel Swinton these days. The day she refused to run away with him was the day his heart resigned from women forever—other than physically, of course. He had forced himself to try again for a couple of seasons but entertaining the idea of having anyone but Isabel by his side turned him bitter. The bitterness turned him into the carefree and careless, womanizing rake he was. When a person gave up on finding a life partner, they only had personal freedom to enjoy. As a result, Ernest and he turned it into a game; to collect women like trinkets and make as much of a scene as possible at balls and other various soirées when others dared to invite them.

It had been his glory days, even if Ernest no longer saw it that way. The two of them had lived life to the fullest being indulgent and reckless. He sighed, knowing that he would either have to say goodbye to the life he had grown accustomed to, or leave for America.

And so, he had a feeling he'd be sailing away come summer.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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“*B*e more openminded,” Rebecca fussed as the sisters moved downstairs.

“I am openminded,” Isabel defended. “You, however, need to be more realistic. We can’t just go off to France without your husband. And you are not taking into consideration that I have so much to do here.”

“What on Earth do you have to do that’s so important? Father cares for your properties for you. All that is left for you to do is sit about and enjoy life. We might as well do it in style,” Rebecca snickered at her last remark. “If you are so worried, once we reach France we could write Edmund and ask him to join us.”

Shaking her head, she informed her sister, “We are merely a few weeks away from spring, and I shall like to take care of the garden my way this year. Robert had always overseen it so I never had the chance to have a say in it. It’s important to me, Rebecca.”

Rebecca frowned and crossed her arms as they then stood in the foyer. “What is the point of a garden done your way, if you could be spending the warm months in the south of France



instead? Think about all the fantastic wine we could be drinking and the dressmakers we could visit! I've heard such wonderful reviews about some of the seamstresses there—”

Isabel silenced her sister by placing a loving hand on her cheek. “I know you mean well, sister. You only want us to enjoy ourselves and make the most of these days... But I am alright. I do not need to be distracted with extravagant trips, wine, and dresses. Now, please let this go, won't you? Let's not spoil our dinner.”

Her sister physically deflated under her delicate touch. “Very well, Bellie. I'll leave it alone. Just know if you change your mind, I'll be happy to accompany you wherever *you* choose to go.”

She chuckled at her sister's sweet persistence and her thinking that it was the lack of choice in destination that was off-putting to Isabel. It was, but the main point was that she needed to get a handle on her life before she considered taking long vacations. All winter, she had succumbed to her sister's demands and ideas. Rebecca's idea of winter fun was Isabel's least favorite things of all. Embroidery and gossip, practicing music together until they could duet flawlessly, and adhere to a rigid daily routine. Rebecca felt a routine was best to help Isabel establish normalcy in the wake of her husband's passing. Truthfully, Isabel felt it was a bit much.

For example, if Isabel was not up by eight o'clock in the morning, she would be startled awake by her younger sister. And she had agreed to everything because, if she was honest with herself, being bossed around and following someone else's routine was something she had – sadly – grown accustomed to over the years.

Still, it had felt like a new kind of personal purgatory, with nothing changing inside or outside of her in all those months. Well, she supposed she had found her voice when it came to her sister; that was something. “You will be the first one to know should I change my mind,” Isabel assured her and dropped her hand.

Just as they moved down the hall toward the dining room, there was a knock on the front door. They paused and turned, watching as the butler opened it. Perhaps it was wrong of her, but Isabel rejoiced at the sight of her brother-in-law, Baron Hyndhope. Edmund was five years her senior but he had a rather youthful look to him. The true mark of his age was his well-kept blonde beard.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” Edmund greeted as he stepped inside.

“We are in-laws, are we not? No need for such formalities,” Isabel replied, doing her best to talk to him with the same confidence she had learned to talk to Rebecca.

Before Edmund could respond in kind, Rebecca chimed in, “What precisely are you doing here? Why didn’t you write first?”

He eyed her with annoyance as he approached. “I did write, but it appears that I arrived before the letter.”

“Unannounced visits are rude,” Rebecca huffed.

Isabel managed to not roll her eyes, impressing even herself with the restraint that took. Rebecca had come over unannounced and stayed for months! Really, she hadn't any idea how her sister couldn't see the irony in that. "It's quite alright," Isabel said to Edmund. "We are just about to have dinner. Care to join us?"

"I would love to," he remarked, bowing his head.

The three of them made their way to the dining room and as soon as they were sat, servants filed in to bring in the meals. Isabel looked to her butler, James. "Is there any chance there is enough for the Baron?"

"Of course, Your Grace." He nodded. "We shall serve him at once."

"You're a gracious host, Isabel," Edmund remarked with a smile as a servant filled his glass with wine. "I apologize it has taken me this long to come by for a visit. I have to say, that husband of yours and I had never gotten along all that well."

Isabel forced a polite expression. "It seems Robert had that charm to him, being hard to get along with."

Edmund chuckled and nodded. "I could count on one hand the number of people who enjoyed his company in the House of Lords, but I did not know of a single one!"

"*Edmund!*" Rebecca hissed, glaring hard at him. "How dare you come into my sister's house and speak ill of the dead. And so shortly after his death!"

“It is fine. There is a stark difference between speaking ill of someone and being honest,” Isabel said to her sister, hoping to calm her down. She could tell that Rebecca was angry over the surprise of her husband showing up without warning, but it wasn’t any reason to make a scene. Turning her attention back to Edmund, she asked, “And how was your business trip?”

Edmund was finally served his plate, and he grinned over to Isabel. “Oh, very standard indeed. I shan’t bore you with all the details of trades, tariffs, and taxes. Though I will say, traveling so much in such a small amount of time is quite tasking. I am ready to return home and have a nice long rest before spring. Aren’t you, Rebecca?”

It was his subtle way of requesting her to return home with him, and of course Rebecca reacted in an anything but subtle fashion. She addressed her husband without so much as looking at him. “You cannot expect me to leave my sister so soon, Edmund. She has never been alone and she needs me here.”

“I think you should return with Edmund,” Isabel blurted out. Her sister looked to her with wide eyes. Isabel quickly backtracked, “It’s not that I do not appreciate and value your company, but I need to acquaint myself with living alone, and I believe I am ready for that. Besides, spring is upon us, and I know you will need to prepare for balls and any parties you may be attending or hosting.”

Oh, how she hated the wounded look on Rebecca’s face right then, it made her feel absolutely awful. Isabel needed to be alone though, she needed to break free of the routine that her sister had forced her into since her arrival. It wasn’t that it upset or annoyed her, but it was time to say goodbye.

“If you insist,” her sister muttered, sounding all too defeated.

“We shall leave after dinner. Is that alright with you, Isabel? It is a long ride home and I am ready to rest these bones in the comfort of my own bed,” Edmund asked.

“That is just fine. You are welcome to stay here if you wish, but I understand needing comfortable surroundings after months of discomfort,” she assured him.

With a lighter feeling, Isabel cut into her chicken. Guilt knotted in her stomach over the sense of relief she felt. While she regarded it wrong to wish her sister gone, Isabel knew the visit had lasted for far too long. She couldn't have picked a better time or a more plausible reason to send Rebecca on her way than Edmund's arrival, as it would spare her sister's feelings. Isabel didn't need space because she wasn't wanted or appreciated — but she would never find herself unless she remained alone. She was still a weak individual who was easily swayed by her suggestions and demands. So, having time alone would help her change that. Her only hope then was that Rebecca would accept it and not take her own frustrations out on Edmund. He seemed kind and welcoming enough. She watched as he looked to his wife with affection and patted the back of her hand as it rested on the table. Surely, they were happy; Rebecca hadn't spoken a bad word of him in all those months.

Isabel relaxed and continued making small talk as they all dined and hoped that her own giddiness wouldn't show. Never did she think in all her years that she would look forward to being alone, but here it was. She had to learn herself over again, and she couldn't do that with her sister, or anybody for that matter, peering over her shoulder every step of the way.

By the time she had cleared her plate, the first time she had such an appetite in a long while, she was already contemplating what she would do first.

But before that, she needed to help Rebecca pack and be on her way.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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### *A COUPLE DAYS LATER*

Sipping his sherry, Anthony eyed his pocket watch and let out an irritated sigh. Ernest had always been a fashionably late sort of man, and it generally didn't bother him—but that day it did. The tea had been requested urgently first thing that morning so that he could talk to him about the ultimatum his father had given him. He was nervous, his legs aching to bounce beneath the table, and he needed his friend to pour all his thoughts onto. As much as he tried to accept his fate of going to America, he simply couldn't. Anger and dismay wretched in the very center of his being whenever he thought about it for more than a couple of minutes.

At last, there was a commotion out in the foyer and when he looked up just a few moments later, his friend was before him. “Sorry for the late arrival.” Ernest sighed as he walked to the dining table and sat across from his friend. “Caroline awoke with a fever this morning. The physician came by to check on her, she's alright, but was giving Helena an awful time when laying her down for a nap.”

Even though Ernest's son, Simon, was nearing three years old, it was still strange for Anthony to hear his friend talk about such *domestic* issues. After all, Ernest was a far more attentive father and husband than most noblemen. Anthony found it

admirable, but still just as strange considering their shared past.

“How old is that one now? Six months old?” Anthony asked.

“She’s only a month old, Anthony,” Ernest corrected with a chuckle.

“Oh, how slowly time passes,” he muttered.

Ernest retorted, “Pretty sure it goes quickly the older you get. You just happen to still be young at heart.”

Sighing, Anthony shook his head. “I’m afraid I am soon to catch up to all you old-timers. It seems I have had the scandal to end all scandals.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

He quirked a brow. “You mean you haven’t heard?”

“Of all the people you know, you think Helena and I skim the tabloids?”

“Fair enough,” Anthony said. “The slight indiscretion happened at one of our frequented social clubs. I may have accidentally flirted with Count Vanderbilt’s wife.”



“You old dog!” Ernest laughed. “Will you ever learn your lesson?”

“It appears I am being forced to,” he mused and polished off his brandy before pouring himself a drink. He didn’t bother to ask Ernest if he wanted any, knowing he limited his drinking since he married. Predictably, the Duke opted for tea with a hefty pour of cream and sugar. “Father may have walked in on the ordeal and flew into a rage. Privately, of course. He has given me an ultimatum: propose to a woman by summer with a wedding planned, or be shipped off to America to oversee our merchant business. Or... he shall cut me off.”

“You’re lying,” Ernest exclaimed, shocked by the announcement.

“You have my word,” Anthony confirmed. “He even stated that he would either sell my townhouse or give it to my younger brother Thomas when he returns from military service.”

“So, he really does mean it,” Ernest breathed.

“Taking into consideration he looked as if about to sprout a second head... I’m going to say yes, he certainly meant it.”

“So, where in America will you be living?” Ernest questioned, grabbing some of the scones and smearing them with jam.

“I take that as a declaration of your lack of faith I can find someone to betroth,” Anthony said with a noticeable lack of amusement.

“I don’t want you leaving England at all, my friend. However, with your reputation and age, I know too well what an uphill battle that is,” Ernest clarified. “But you’re right, you’re right. Neither of us should be so pessimistic. So, let’s discuss what to do to sort this mess. Whether it be convincing your father to call off the ultimatum or persuade a lady to marry you.”

Anthony produced a weak smirk then. “Persuade... or trick?”

“A little of both could go a long way.” Ernest grinned as he lifted his teacup to his lips.

“Perhaps I could win a bride with bribes,” Anthony suggested.

“Is that not *all* marriages?” Ernest snorted.

“Ah, you have me there, old sport.” Anthony sighed. “Then I suppose I shall have to seduce whatever poor girl’s mother first to get her on my side—”

“Or use it as blackmail,” Ernest added on.

“Brilliant, bloody brilliant!”

The pair laughed and Anthony felt a weight lift from him. The situation was heavy still, but he was glad to have his friend there to help him feel better about it. Outsiders looking in on their conversation could consider it childish that the two men, just years away from thirty, still resorted to making jokes as a

way to solve their problems. However, Anthony rejoiced in it, especially in recent years since Ernest found his voice again.

They blurted out other absurd ideas to trick a young lady to marry him, each being a different degree of crime and manipulation — none made in serious earnest try. When their sides began aching from laughter and Ernest was nearing the bottom of his pot of tea, the two men met gazes. “So, in all serious, old chap... What are you going to do?”

Anthony sat back, swirling his sherry as he contemplated. “I suppose the only options I truly have before me are to be cut off from my father’s money and make it on my own somehow or go off to America.”

The room was quiet for a few moments before Ernest leaned forward. “Won’t you give marriage a chance? You have until summer so you might as well attend some balls and see if—”

He raised a hand to silence the Duke. With a sad sort of smile, Anthony answered him, “My chance at love has come to pass. To ask a lady to tolerate my lack of love I would surely have for her, well that would simply be cruel.”

Ernest clasped his hands together and narrowed his eyes at the Lord. “Isn’t it you who coached me into trying to find a wife? And I had a much steeper hill to climb, Anthony, with being a mute.”

“You did, but you also had the rather awesome bargaining chip of being a Duke. While I am aware that Helena’s aunt was desperate to marry her off to just about anyone, if you were merely a lord and had such a reputation, I doubt she would

have pushed Helena into your arms. Besides, I'm older than you were then, even if you are a year older than me."

"Hardly older, but I see what you mean," Ernest sighed. "Still, I must implore you to try, Anthony. Where is the harm other than your pride?"

Anthony smirked. "It's a mystery why I have any of that left at all, isn't it?" When Ernest didn't seem to drop the serious expression he wore, Anthony gave a nod. "I'll give it some thought, but I make no promises."

"Thought is all I can ask for at this point," Ernest remarked and then peered down at his pocket watch. "I should be getting home to check on Caroline."

"Such a doting father. Truly a role model for the masses. A rake turned caregiver, who would have thought? Forever beautiful, charming, and oh-so-loving," Anthony oozed to his friend in a gentle tease.

"Yes, yes. I have traded in soirées and late nights drinking in clubs for lullabies and the affection of my wife. It's really quite embarrassing," Ernest sarcastically replied.

The two men stood and sauntered through the townhouse toward the door. "I'm sure all of London is still in awe that the Silent Duke has been transformed into such a gentle soul."

"I'm shocked that they haven't accused Helena of being a witch and threaten to burn her at the stake for it."

Anthony chuckled. "I shall send word at once if I see torches in the streets."

"How will you be sure they are for Helena and not you?" Ernest questioned.

"Fair point."

They stepped outside and Ernest gestured for his coachman to wait. Ernest cleared his throat and shifted his gaze to the sky. Anthony knew the look well enough, though it was a rare sight those days. It meant he had something serious to say, even more serious than his request for Anthony to consider marrying someone... "Now, I know it is too early to worry about it all. I have faith that you will make most of the Season, no matter what your decision will be. However, I want to simply offer... If you do not find someone to marry, and wish to stay in London, then perhaps I could find work for you in my dukedom. I would have no say in what your father does with your townhome, but..."

Anthony placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I appreciate you, Ernest. However, I think if this is a lesson in anything, it is that I need to learn to do things on my own. I've ridden on a Duke's coattails my entire life. I shan't take a ride on yours."

"Just know the offer is there," Ernest stated with a weak attempt of a smile.

"Duly noted, old sport," Anthony assured him.

It warmed his heart to know that Ernest really did seem to be trying his best to find solutions to keep him around. It gave the walk a sense of ‘goodbye’, like they both knew an era was coming to an end. While Ernest had been away from the night scene for years, their friendship would have to once again undergo change. While he would keep to his word to think about the possibility of marriage, he was certain both of them knew Anthony either wouldn’t have luck or wouldn’t go through with one. Somewhere, deep down inside, they both knew he would be departing for America.

Anthony panned his vision over to Ernest to speak, but something familiar, something *peculiar*, caught his eye. Peering down the street, Anthony blinked rapidly. Surely his eyes had to be deceiving him. There was no way in that life, or the next, that Isabel would be on his block in London and walking his way. *But she was.*

He knew it to be true, as she looked different from the last time that he had laid eyes on her. It was at a ball, only a few years after she had married the Duke of Edington. She had spotted him from across the ballroom but she had been glued to her husband’s arm and didn’t seem to so much as register who Anthony was after that single glance. She couldn’t have been more than twenty at the time, youth had oozed out of every detail of her face. The woman before him then was twenty-six and still radiated youth but had a mature refinement to her features. Her cheeks weren’t as round, but instead had an elegant slope to them. Her hair, the color of the burning sun, was braided neatly with gentle strands of wavy copper framing her pale face. Isabel Wynn—Swinton—was still wine to that day. Full-bodied, made of the sweetest summer berries, aged to peak perfection, and he was dying of thirst.

“I’ll be,” Ernest muttered under his breath as he too watched her walk down the street, a maid at her side.

Isabel stopped just a few paces before them and gave a slight smile that was still beautiful enough to inspire the likes of Leonardo DaVinci or Louis-Michel van Loo. “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” she greeted, her voice as soft as spring’s first petals and summer’s rain.

Anthony was rendered speechless, his body in a complete and utter state of shock.

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*M*y dear reader,

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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*How can this be? The day I return to London...*

It had to be fate. *It had to be.* How else could anyone explain that Isabel bumped into Anthony Moore, a man that had been on her mind an embarrassing amount the past few days, the very day she returned to London? And on her first outing, too! She had left the house to get a look around, to try and reacclimate to the airs of the city. Granted, she had taken a carriage into the heart of London and then had ventured that way on foot, truly having no idea that Anthony would be in that area. The two of them had been out of contact for so long, she wasn't even sure where he was in town anymore.

When the two men only gawked at her, Isabel dipped her head politely. "I know it must be quite the shock to see me... It's been years, hasn't it?" The Dowager Duchess tried her best to sound friendly and pleasant, and not convey the nervousness she was wrestling with inside. After the words left her mouth, however, she realized they very well might have been gawking at her attire. Widows had to wear black for six months, making her current circumstances known to all just by looking at her. She wished she didn't have to, Isabel longed to move past it. However, she knew there would be pointless drama if she disregarded the customs.

Her eyes fell to Anthony, her heart pounding away like a war drum. He still had a wild sort of beauty to him. At a glance, even when he was doing nothing in particular, one could sense the liberty that lived within him. A man that wasn't afraid to do what he wanted, so long as it added pleasure and laughter to his life. And there was a ruggedness to him then. A stubble peppered his cheeks and jaw, which she knew would be deemed unseemly by others, but she quite liked it. His bone structure was more pronounced, his lips appearing fuller somehow. Eyes the color of roasted coffee beans with a tousle of hair to match that was only ever slightly pushed back to just barely pass as presentable.

Still, he said nothing. With a heart growing weaker by the moment, Isabel tried once more, "How have the two of you been?"

"Quite well, thank you," Ernest replied.

Isabel nearly jumped. She stared at the Duke, blinking from her shock. "Duke... you... you can talk?" she breathed.

He gave a lopsided smile and cleared his throat. "I take it you don't read the gossip columns either?"

"Certainly not," she stated definitively.

"Then you've missed quite a bit since you left London," Ernest replied kindly.

Her eyes continued to study him. She had been around Ernest quite a bit growing up and recalled the silence that followed

his father's death. Anthony had been so worried about him, he had confided in her about it from time to time. Whatever had happened since then, it would seem that Ernest had in fact gotten better. "I will have to agree with you there," she replied with a polite laugh.

"We shall have to catch up one day, you need to meet my darling wife."

"Darling *wife*, you say?" Isabel smiled. Maybe rumors weren't all that true, as she heard the pair of them had been quite the notorious noblemen. And surely, Ernest wouldn't have married, or at least wouldn't talk so voluntarily favorably of his wife, if he was the rake she had heard he had become in adulthood. It gave her a little hope that all she had heard of Anthony wasn't true, either. "Well, I will have to meet her soon enough." Glancing to Anthony, she mustered up the last ounce of courage she had to merely utter, "And you, Lord Moore?"

Even though Ernest moved in a way that made it seem as though he was adjusting his own jacket, she noticed him elbowing Anthony in the ribs; sly, but not sly enough for her not to catch it. She suppressed a smile, not wanting either to know she had witnessed the interaction.

"Yes, hello, Your Grace," Anthony finally blurted. "It is quite a shock to see you in London, especially in this neighborhood \_\_\_"

"I was just out for a walk. Wanted to get reacquainted with the city after so long," she hurried to say. Did he live around there? She was concerned that her presence would make her appear strange, if not creepy, and she wanted to explain

herself. Maybe Isabel phrased it that way in the hopes that he, too, would want to reconnect.

“Very well,” he muttered and continued to look anywhere but at her directly. “I wish you all the best with that endeavor. Now, if you will excuse me, Your Grace, I really must be on my way. Ernest, shall we?” Then, Anthony pivoted on a heel and darted to the coach standing by, climbed inside with grace, and shut the door rather forcefully behind him.

Isabel was stunned into silence, not at all knowing how to react to such a display. None of it had been particularly rude or improper, but there was an aggressive edge to both his voice and his movements. When her eyes returned to Ernest, he gave her a shrug and a smile. Then, he bowed and extended a hand. “It was lovely seeing you, Duchess. Perhaps we shall catch up sooner rather than later.”

“Perhaps we shall,” she replied with a smile of her own. Then, she watched as he too stepped into the carriage and climbed inside. Taking in a deep breath, Isabel went along her walk with the intention of circling back to her carriage as well. The encounter had given her enough to think about for one day.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Your Grace,” Amy began softly. “Who were those men?”

Isabel dared to let her eyes fall back to the carriage, watching as it pulled off and rolled easily down the cobblestone street. “Dear, dear old friends of mine,” she breathed. “Maybe we will see them again soon as the Duke suggested, but I doubt it.”

Amy didn't inquire as to what she meant, but Isabel's mind was already racing. Her heart felt impossibly heavy after seeing Anthony again. She had foolishly imagined that if they ever met again, it would be a grand reunion. That he would pull her in for a hug, set her down with tea, and catch up with her, as if the only thing standing between them was time itself, rather than feelings, heartache, and her late husband. But as it seems, he would not have spoken to her if it hadn't been for Ernest.

Even though she had considered writing him upon her return to London to catch up as old friends, she knew she had better not. It would be improper and foolish to do so after such a horrible interaction. There was one thought that felt like a lead ball in her chest. No matter how much she tried to pluck it out and toss it away, there it stayed.

*He really does resent me, doesn't he?*

Perhaps it would be enough for her to move on. After all, it wasn't as if he had no right to be frustrated with her, and she certainly wasn't entitled to his friendship. Yes, Isabel would concentrate on redecorating and re-entering the social scene as soon as she was able. She had a lot of self-improvement to do before that, and she didn't need the distraction of Anthony's anger anyway. She'd already spent far too many years worrying herself sick about a man who didn't seem to like her, as well as the rage that accompanied him.

And yet, as they climbed into her carriage and headed back toward her townhouse, she could still feel that little lead ball in her chest. She wondered if it would go away, and why she doubted that it would.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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Anthony's face was firmly buried in his hand when he heard the carriage door open and close once again. "What's the matter, Anthony, didn't want her to know we were standing in front of your house? Afraid she'll stalk you in the night or rob you?" Ernest questioned in a mocking tone.

"Spare me," Anthony grumbled.

"Spare you from what? I'm only curious as to why you dove into my carriage as though your life was in danger in the presence of such a petite, charming Duchess."

Anthony pried apart his fingers to glare at Ernest. "I am afraid to inform you, *old sport*, that we have drastically different definitions of charming."

"Oh, you old dog. Don't play coy with me," Ernest teased.

"Please, can you get this carriage moving before she thinks us odd for sitting here?" Anthony grumbled.

“I fear she already has all the reason to think that.” Ernest chuckled. “Besides, if you don’t find her charming, why should you care what she thinks?” When Anthony glared, Ernest rolled his eyes. “What do you want? For us to circle the block?”

“Take me to Moses’,” Anthony replied hastily. There was no way he could be alone with his thoughts right then, not in the wake of Isabel Swinton. He would surely spiral and drink himself into an absolutely oblivion.

Ernest called to the coachman and then continued to study his friend. “Moses? When did you and your brother become friendly?” Ernest inquired.

“We aren’t *not* friendly. We simply have never been close,” Anthony muttered. It wasn’t worth getting into, as it was a tale as old as time. Moses was the heir to the family dukedom, meaning his father generally took interest in Moses alone and it created rivalry between the brothers. Their father only really turned Anthony’s way when he was in trouble, much like the Baroness Vanderbilt incident the other day.

“If you are seeking his counsel instead of mine about the reappearance of Isabel, I must go ahead and tell you I am wounded by such action,” Ernest commented, continuing his incessant mocking.

“Have mercy and spare me all this kidding around,” Anthony urged his friend, finally uncovering his face. “Need I remind you that is the very woman that shattered my heart beyond all repair all those years ago? Or have you forgotten because of your own sweet reverie?”



“I haven’t forgotten,” Ernest confirmed. “You never know, she could be a good match. I think I heard of Robert Swinton’s passing back in October, so she would be eligible for marriage before the year is out.”

Anthony thought back to her black dress. Even though most people would inwardly gawk at such attire because it was the clothes of a widow, he had to admit to himself she made it seem stylish. If he happened to see her at a ball, dancing about the floor in that same dress, he wouldn’t have given the color of her dress a second thought other than perhaps she was making a fashion statement. It had contrasted her milky complexion in such a lovely way—

*Stop it, Anthony. Stop fantasizing. Remember what she did.*

“I won’t hear of it,” Anthony stated firmly. “I understand you are making light of it to try and alleviate the tension, but I must insist that you allow me to stew in my own contempt. Once I sort out my thoughts, it will pass. However, I will not consider Isabel as a romantic interest nor friend. She had years and years to write me, to speak to me and try to make things right. Just because she is now a widow does not give her the right to disrupt my peace.”

Ernest only watched him with soft eyes and a knowing smile that properly stoked the rage building in Anthony’s stomach. “Ah, yes. Because you are so well known for your peaceful ways,” he remarked. The carriage came to a stop, no doubt at Moses’ already. Ernest leaned across the carriage and clasped his shoulder. “Keep an open mind to her, Anthony. Much time has passed since then, you both have changed, and you no longer know her heart.”

“I’ll think on it,” was all Anthony could get himself to mutter, along with a goodbye, before he stepped from the carriage. He hated when Ernest had moments of wisdom. He was right, time had changed him; only, he feared it was for the worse rather than better. Even if Isabel tried to make amends, he didn’t think it was in either of their best interests to be friends. Her refusal had changed the course of his life and turned him to poison; he didn’t think he could forgive her. He wasn’t good for her because he was poisonous. No, it was not a good fit.

Walking up the stairs, he knocked on Moses’ front door and informed the butler he was there to see his brother. He was gestured inside and told he was in the back parlor. Anthony kept his stride slow, wanting to completely compose himself before seeing him. The last thing he wanted was for his brother to pester him about his attitude and pry into things until he got it out of him that he had just seen Isabel Swinton. To be frank, he didn’t know why he had chosen to go to his brother out of all places. It had been the first thing to come to mind that wasn’t his own home.

Finally rounding the corner into the parlor, he found Moses lounging on a couch with a newspaper in his lap and drink in hand. His brother’s face turned to him and cracked a wide, handsome smile. “Well, isn’t this a lovely surprise. Welcome, welcome,” Moses remarked and stood. “Would you care for a drink?”

“A stiff pour of rum, if you’ve got it,” Anthony sighed and sat down in an armchair.

“Of course.” Moses chuckled. Not more than a minute later, a drink was plopped into Anthony’s hand. “I am assuming you are here because of the ultimatum Father has given you.”

If Isabel had done anything, she had granted him a brief break from contemplating his fate. Even when Ernest mentioned Anthony marrying her, he didn't think of it in terms of the ultimatum, but rather as light ribbing about a romantic connection between the two of them.

“Yes,” Anthony lied. “He's put me in quite a tough position. All because I didn't realize a Lady was married before flirting with her. In a rather mild manner for me, mind you.”

Moses chuckled and topped up his own drink before sitting back down on the couch. “While I agree Father might have overacted, you are well aware of your own track record, Anthony. I need not remind you.”

“You do not,” he mused, not wanting his other brother to take the opportunity to go down such a path. It would only drive a wedge between them, and their relationship was already rather delicate.

“Would you care for my opinion?” Moses asked.

Anthony was surprised at his true response to the question, “Yes, I would.”

Moses sipped his drink and sat up straight. “I think you should absolutely go to America. It would be a fantastic chance for you to start over, don't you think? Business is going well there, and you would be able to take charge, expand it even further, and make a name for yourself. It's unlikely that anyone would be up to date on London gossip around there. At least not enough for you to be recognized solely by your name. It would be a blank slate with a whole new pool of women for

you to do what you will. Whether that be the antics you're known for, or even finding a wife. All without the embarrassment and frustration that you will experience here should you try."

Scratching his chin, he took a minute to let the words really sink in. He made an excellent point; it would be a great opportunity for him to start over. While he would still use the family fortune to land comfortably at first, he could do his best to expand the business and make it his own. From what he had heard about America, he didn't think his age would run him into any problems when it came to women either. There were even such things as bride catalogs there, to help people find spouses. He wouldn't have to worry about her being of nobility, either, since America didn't have such a thing. It would be a chance for marriage in the name of love—if it ever came his way again.

"You make a fair point, Moses," Anthony finally replied. "You've given me much to consider."

"Happy to be of assistance." Moses smiled. "And I hope that if it is a decision you make, that we can find ways to spend time together before you sail off. Feels as though we haven't seen one another enough in recent times. Life has such a way from running away from you the older you get, doesn't it?"

Ernest had made similar remarks, and Anthony felt isolated once more. Since the day Isabel left him to marry Robert Swinton, time had stood still for him. It had all been a routine of cheap thrills for fleeting happiness, so he didn't have to think about anything. To think about her. And now she'd returned, along with everything he'd been running away from. That didn't matter. He would outrun her. He'd sail to America and start over – never think about her again.

Anthony downed his rum and sighed, wishing he could wash down the thought of her too.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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The next morning came on gently, Isabel appreciated the feeling of waking up in London. The countryside, while beautiful, was extremely isolating. And isolation was not the same as being alone. Being alone was often a choice, but there were options for dealing with it if it became lonely. Isolation provided no solutions and only deepened solitude. She could go for walks or frequent cafés in London to be around others and on her own time. Everything was on her terms, including when she awoke.

Tossing her legs off the side of her bed, she started her morning just as slowly as it started her. Even though London clearly had surprises in store for her, like bumping into Anthony the previous afternoon, being there seemed to already boost her morale. She felt more confident, capable, and determined to make a life for herself more than ever. Maybe it was because she was surrounded by possibilities rather than just her wishes. Talking seemed to be good for her too, as she was already feeling all the more confident in her voice after just a single afternoon of greetings in passing as she walked through the city.

She went about getting ready for the day, though she didn't bother fetching her maid right away. Isabel chose her dress, which was of course black, laid it on the bed, and sat at her vanity to brush her hair. She studied her features in the mirror

by tilting her chin side to side. Was she any different? Did she appear too happy — maybe leading people to grow suspicious of her during her time of mourning? She smiled at herself and looked deeply into her own eyes for the first time.

*Who cares if I wear a smile? If they should care enough to question it, that is their own misery and boredom speaking for itself. I can't be made to be a criminal for finding enough joy in life after marriage to have a smile.*

Just as she relished in her blooming confidence, there was a knock on the door. “Oh, you’re awake,” Amy said as she entered the room.

“Good morning to you, too,” Isabel chuckled and continued brushing her hair.

Amy stopped a few paces away, clasped her hands behind her back, and lowered her chin; the small little action made Isabel realize for the first time that the staff was also still recovering from Robert’s harsh rule. “I must inform you, Your Grace, that your sister has arrived and is waiting for you downstairs.”

The Duchess groaned. She was fine with her sister visiting, but she would appreciate some notice. Beyond that, she knew it was because Rebecca was worried about her and didn’t believe Isabel when she said she was fine. Still, she swallowed it down, afraid that her mild irritation was not really directed at Rebecca rather than the state of transition in her life. Her sister was right to be concerned, but she was fine and not in mourning. It would still be wrong for her to project her resentment onto her sister. “I suppose I should join her,” she sighed.

Amy stepped forward and helped Isabel prepare for the day. She never failed to thank her maid for her help, truly appreciating her quick, skilled hands and never-ending kindness. No matter the pinch they were in, the maid could have the Duchess dressed and prepared for any occasion in record time. Moving from her room, Isabel went downstairs to find her sister.

Rebecca had taken it upon herself to sit in the dining room, breakfast already served to her as she skimmed what was surely to be the gossip columns. Her bright blue eyes found Isabel's and she dropped her paper to clasp her hands together from excitement. "Oh, good! You are looking just fine. I was getting worried about you, sister."

"You could have simply wrote a letter to me," Isabel replied with a small smile to soften her words as she sat down across from her.

"That would have taken *twice* as long at least than for me to come here! With a letter coming this way and having to travel back. My heart simply could not bear it," Rebecca replied and waved at a servant to serve the Duchess. "I am so glad you have decided to come to London. Think about all the things we can do together here! While of course I appreciated our time together in the country, we were limited in activities. Though, I know we can't attend parties or anything yet. Still! Think of all the shopping we can do and all the cafés we can frequent. It will be a joy to do so together."

"It is always a joy to spend time with you," Isabel started gently. She thought for a moment longer, trying to organize her thoughts into the proper sentiment; thankfully, a servant presenting her breakfast and filling her teacup offered as a nice distraction. When the room was cleared again, Isabel took a deep breath and held her sister's gaze. "That being said, I'm



afraid your heart is in the wrong place. Now, please do not misunderstand me, Rebecca. I know you mean no harm, in fact, quite the opposite. But enough is enough. I've been doing things your way for months, and it's time I stood up for myself. While I value our time together and the suggestions you've made to help me cope with my loss, I don't need to be accompanied every step of the way. I meant it when I said I was ready to move forward on my own and needed to figure out how to be alone and function in society as a widow."

Rebecca's face was completely unreadable for a few minutes, which made Isabel worry that she had hurt her feelings. However, she did not amend her words because if they did in fact hurt her, then so be it. A cruel sentiment, but a necessary one.

When it came to being true to oneself, sometimes people had to be offended for progress to be made. The Dowager Duchess was certain that her sister would heal and move on from it, just as Isabel herself needed to. Her sister's mouth opened as if to speak, snapped closed, before opening again. "Bellie, I never meant any offense. I know you are a strong woman that does not need another to lean on..." Rebecca's voice drifted off as she nibbled nervously on her bottom lip. "However, it's the very thing you are trying to do that I worry so much about. While of course you need to learn your new life, you are trying to navigate the world as a widow for the first time. Walking around in those black dresses is nothing more than a calling card to everyone that, '*This Duchess has money and no husband to control it!*' People will take advantage and I am only trying to protect you from that. Especially men who may be looking for a quick way to a fortune."

Isabel smiled very sincerely then, her amusement sparkling in her eyes. "I can assure you that it is not a quick fortune they will find. I have absolutely no intentions of remarrying. Of *that*, I can assure you!" The two sisters shared a small laugh of

relief before Isabel continued, “No, no. I believe I have learned the very long and hard way that marriage is not for me. On the other hand, I do hope to make some friends.”

“Friends are always excellent,” Rebecca nodded before sipping her tea.

“I was thinking about reconnecting with some old ones. Figure they might be a good place to start in terms of re-entering the social sphere. Robert never did allow me any friends other than my maid. I feel out of practice. Like being thrown into water after a decade of never swimming.” Isabel sighed.

Rebecca nodded along understandingly. “Certainly. I think that could be good for you. It would certainly establish connections prior to being able to go to parties, that way when you *are* able to, you have a bounty of invitations to choose from.”

“That’s the spirit.” Isabel grinned. Her hands busied themselves with buttering a slice of toast as she thought about her next question. After the worries her sister had just voiced, she knew she needed to come off as casually as possible. “Did you know Ernest Cecil could talk? I bumped into him yesterday and nearly fainted at the revelation.”

Rebecca giggled and confirmed, “Of course I did. You really need to at least read the gossip columns if you can’t get out more.”

Isabel shook her head. “I’ve never cared what lord is cheating on their wife or who is marrying a duke’s daughter that I’ve never heard of. It isn’t for me,” she remarked before shuffling her posture and eyeing her sister with caution. “Anthony

Moore was with Ernest, however. Have you heard or read anything about him?"

It must have jarred Rebecca to so much as hear that name, Isabel watched as her sister briefly choked on her tea and had to catch herself before it spewed from her mouth. Isabel's only reaction was to toss a cloth napkin her way. Rebecca blotted her mouth and cleared her throat. "I can assure you that I have, and he is a man to avoid, Bellie."

"Really?" Isabel remarked with skepticism. "I mean, I have heard snippets of rumors over the years, but never paid them much mind."

"Well, you really should have. Moses is the only Moore worth anything," Rebecca stated firmly before taking a deep breath. "Now, I know you do not need to be watched... But since I am already here, what would you like to do today?"

Isabel wouldn't bother to push the issue further since it had been nothing more than idle curiosity; though she didn't quite understand her hostility. Sighing, Isabel shook her head. "I don't know. I really wasn't planning to do much other than rest."

"Rest? What for? You've been resting for months," Rebecca retorted. "We should do something, perhaps go to the theater this evening."

"I can't go the theater," Isabel reminded her. Theatre was deemed a social event and therefore it was forbidden for her to go yet. "I really think I shall stay here today. I'll need some time to adjust to my new surroundings. And, while the trip

may seem insignificant to you, I haven't left the countryside in a long time, so the change is quite exhausting."

"If you don't start getting out there now, you won't at all," Rebecca urged. "Sitting around here will do nothing but give you time to overthink. Let's go shopping."

"Rebecca—"

Rebecca stood and put her hands behind her back and bowed slightly at her waist for emphasis, "I won't take no for an answer."

As much as Isabel longed to deny her sister if for nothing else other than to get the point across that she really needed to start taking her at her word, she supposed Rebecca had a point. Sitting around the house all day would surely lead to her overthinking. "Alright, alright. Let's go."

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Isabel had to admit, her sister's unbound energy was rather admirable. Everything seemed to excite her, from having a few imported jams for breakfast to two horses pulling Isabel's carriage and *everything* in the shops. Rebecca's eyes were as wide as a child's on Christmas Day every time she looked over to her older sister.

She would be holding an item and sound off, "Would you just look at this, Bellie? Is it not the most divine trinket you have ever seen?"

To which Isabel would give a polite smile and nod along. Isabel would agree without hesitation when Rebecca requested her to buy her something, claiming she had left her purse at home. Isabel felt a surge of pride the first time it happened that day, knowing she could buy her sister something without worrying about what Robert would say later. However, Isabel managed to tune it out for the most part; she only took notice when Rebecca explained in front of the shopkeepers that she had left her purse at home. The Duchess spared her the teasing, knowing full well that Rebecca was trying to save face and ensure no one assumed she couldn't afford the items herself.

They went from shop to shop, Rebecca buzzing along no matter what they were looking at. Isabel found herself bored with the task at hand. It was a little overwhelming seeing so many shops, so many items, and so many people in such a short amount of time. It was a completely different experience than her walk through London the day before. Of course, she had seen people and even exchanged words with some of them, but not in such close quarters. It was all a whirlwind of faces, dishes, clothes, and trinkets.

Still, Isabel said nothing. She had agreed to such an outing, so she would go along without complaint. Perhaps it was Rebecca's one little way of throwing her into the deep end and forcing her to swim based on instinct rather than memory. If that was the case, she gave Rebecca props. She was, in fact, able to hold herself together while in public. Thankfully not too many people seemed to stop to talk to her, whether they did or not, she shot anyone who looked her way a polite expression and occasionally a little wave.

She collected her own items along the way, a new candleholder for her dining table, a new tea set, though not much more. Isabel still hadn't had time to really get a feel for the townhome yet, let alone how she wanted to redecorate. The pale blue paint on the teapot, with gold flowers atop it, inspired her though. Perhaps she could do the entire dining room in similar colors. Just as she started to get an idea, her sister was tugging her along to the next shop after dropping their items off at the carriage.

"There's a draper just around the corner!" Rebecca exclaimed. "I've been meaning to get some new drapes for my bedchamber. The ones I have in there now are so dull! Not at all like the rest of the room."

“Very well,” Isabel replied. “After the draper, however, I really think it best if—”

“Lady Rebecca?” a voice called. Isabel looked forward to find a gaggle of ladies approaching. The one approaching looked vaguely familiar to her but she couldn’t place her right away. As the women neared, they peered at Isabel and paused. “Oh, Your Grace,” she muttered, curtsying and her friends followed suit.

“Good day,” Isabel greeted kindly, though her mind was busy trying to figure out who she was.

“Lady Alicia Leeson, though you likely know me as Alicia Neal,” the woman informed her, as though she could see Isabel flipping through the pages of her memory to get a name for the face.

*Oh, the Neals! They worked closely with Father over the years.*

“Of course. It’s a pleasure to see you again.” Isabel grinned. “How is your father? Charles, isn’t it?”

“Just the same.” Lady Alicia nodded. “He is doing well, thank you for asking.” Her eyes fluttered to Rebecca and her smile widened. “So, Lady Rebecca, will I be seeing you at the Vanderbilt ball later this week?”

“Of course, you will.” Rebecca beamed back to her. “Tell me, what colors will you all be wearing?”

And just like that, the scene before her exploded into a cacophony of chatter. Immediately, and through no fault of the women around her, Isabel felt *othered*. Othered because she couldn't attend the party they were so excited about, and because she hadn't the slightest clue who they were talking about when the conversation flittered to gossip. Just as it all started to get to her, she spotted something fantastic beyond the crowd.

They were right by the park! Not just any park, either. It was the park her family used to frequent to socialize with other families when they traveled into London. There were so many memories there, and it had been a decade since she had last seen that place. Flickering her attention back to the ladies, she muttered a pardon that was hardly acknowledged, and slipped around them.

Isabel finally felt that sense of wonder after such a tiring day. While Rebecca was more interested in the social events and shopping that London offered, she was more interested in the memories it held at the time. She wanted to taste and relive her previous life, to get a sense of who she was before she was known only as the Duke's wife. Prior to the addition of Dowager to her official title, Duchess meant nothing. She aspired to be more, and she was more. It was simply a matter of determining what that 'more' was precisely.

Stepping through the entrance, a breezy sigh escaped her. Spring was still around the corner so most of the branches had only little green buds instead of leaves, but just seeing the landscape before her... She could very clearly imagine it in full bloom once again. Many of the trees flowered delicate white blossoms before turning to leaves, and wildflowers would cover most of gentle hills tapering the horizon. Strolling through the paths, she relived many great memories of being there as a child. Her mother would buy herself and Rebecca sweets in town and let them snack as they rested in the grass



atop a quilt. At times her mother would bring them there to meet her Lady friends, Rebecca and Isabel would be able to throw little tea parties of their own with the other patronage daughters. Only on those rare, clear blue-sky days, of course. At least, that was how her memory recalled them—sunny and joyous.

More often than not, however, they would come there to socialize with the Cecil and Moore families. Both were the dukes to the closest dukedoms to her father, so it was only natural that their families mingled often. It wasn't the first time Isabel had met Anthony at that park; she had known him before she could form memories, but it was the first time she had taken notice of him.

Little Isabel couldn't have been more than five years old; she remembered that as she had still been at the age she longed to cling to her mother. However, she supposed there was adult business that needed to be sorted, so her mother urged her to join the other children. She wasn't scared of them, but simply felt awkward and didn't know what to do. As she sat on the corner of the children's quilt, as close to her mother as she could get without getting scorned, she happened to lock eyes with Anthony.

It was certain to her as she looked back on the memory, that even as a six-year-old boy he must have recognized how uncomfortable she was and wanted to make it better. For in the next moment, he crossed his eyes and hooked his index fingers into the corners of his mouth and stretched his mouth wide. It made her laugh harder than it should have, and it was in the wake of that laughter she recognized just how very cute he was. Rosy cheeked, button eyes, and an infectious smile.

From that day on, they had become quick friends. They chatted about books their parents read them, griped about their

siblings, and shared sweets. Even when they came of an age that their parents felt the need to separate them, they found ways of communicating. Notes would be slyly exchanged and when that wasn't an option, they had been so in tune with one another, they could communicate with mere glances and gestures alone. And, of course, Anthony was forever on a pursuit to make her laugh. It had seemed he knew no limits when it came to such a task, never caring if his pranks or stunts landed him in hot water with his father.

She noticed it right away, a tree near and dear to her heart. Isabel approached it slowly, as if the tree might uproot and flee before she could relive her memory. She and her family spent her fifteenth birthday at the park at her request, and of course, the Cecil and Moore families joined them. She and Rebecca had been given permission to go for a walk while the families stayed at the picnic. Anthony and Ernest had received the same message a few minutes earlier and had caught up to them. Anthony had taken it upon himself to offer Rebecca a sweet wrapped in a cloth napkin as they walked. When she opened it, she discovered it was a frog. Rebecca had already gained some distance before Isabel realized she had run away because the other three were so distracted by their howling laughter at Rebecca's disgusted screams and jumping around. She was off to undoubtedly cry to their parents about the prank.

Her fingertips brushed against the bark as she circled the massive trunk slowly. When she was in pursuit of her sister, she had stopped at that very tree to catch her breath, her hand resting against the surprisingly smooth surface. A whisper sounded in her ear just loud enough for her to make out over her erratically beating heart.

*“Quite a bit of work I had to put in just to give you your present,”* Anthony had stated before pressing a tender kiss to

her cheek and ran off himself; no doubt in attempt to outrun the trouble Rebecca was surely to get him in.

Isabel had been quite lucky that her labored breath and sweat along her brow had proven to her parents she had run after her sister, so that her flushed cheeks still lingering from the kiss was attributed to it as well. The kiss had stayed on her mind all day, keeping her cheeks rosy, to the point that her mother thought her ill and sent her to bed early. It hadn't bothered her in the slightest, as it had given her peace and quiet to think about Anthony and if there was a future for them together.

As she circled the tree, her finger still tracing along the rough edges of bark, Isabel was rendered to a stop. Standing just before her, on the opposite side of the tree, was Anthony Moore.

*It really must be fate.*

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## CHAPTER NINE

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Anthony had no idea what had brought him to the park that day. He hadn't been anywhere and had decided to stop for a while. He should have known better than to enter that one in particular, knowing full well the memories that would evoke. His anger and resistance to Isabel had been the dominant forces up until that point, but as he walked through childhood memories, a dormant sense of longing began to emerge. Ever since he saw her the day before, he simply couldn't get her off his mind. When he stood below the tree that he had kissed Isabel's cheek under for the very first time, his mind released his anger for a moment, and he allowed himself to remember the fondness he once had for her. It seemed so long ago...

When a soft gasp sounded at his side, Anthony looked in shock at Isabel's face. Never would he have thought that she would have been there on the same day, at the same time as him. As he cleared his throat and shuffled his posture as though the noise and physical distraction would be enough to keep her from noticing the slight heat that came over his cheeks.

"It must be fate for us to bump into one another here," Isabel breathed cheerfully.

He shook his head and looked about the park. “No, Your Grace, I believe it is what they call coincidence,” he mused. He felt like a child again, caught with pockets full of biscuits just before dinner, that Isabel had captured him in a moment of sweet, sinful gluttony. All he had wanted was to taste the past again, not be confronted with it.

“*Really?*” she nearly snorted. “Then pray tell, Lord Moore, what is you are doing under this very particular tree?”

Anthony didn’t answer, knowing she would not accept his lie of claiming it to be ‘only a tree’ to him. And admitting that he was trying to remember her fondly would not go over well, either. Instead, he resorted to stewing in silence. Already, Isabel was awakening that same frustration in him just by simply interrupting his reminiscing.

“How have you been?” Isabel inquired, her voice still as sunny and pleasant as a summer’s day.

“Fine,” he curtly stated.

“Have you been in London all this time? I only have been able to visit very briefly before now. I feel all out of sorts here. If it weren’t for the ghosts of past memories, it would be like a brand-new city to me.”

*If only you had allowed them to remain ghosts, Isabel. Dead ones are always more favorable to the mind and heart.*

Anthony didn’t wish to answer, but he knew he needed to at least be cordial. They were in public, and he had given Ernest

his word he would attempt to be open-minded to her. Attempting to swallow his anger, he replied, “London has changed considerably in the past decade and yes, I’ve been around to witness most of it.”

“Lovely.” Isabel nodded. “It seems as though you and Ernest have remained close through the years. Though, I never had any doubt. He was your partner in crime, wasn’t he?”

“That’s what everyone seems to consider us,” he muttered. No matter how pleasant she seemed, her words stoked the flames inside him. In fact, he was pretty sure it *was* the pleasantness that was doing it.

“It’s good to have friends like Ernest. I highly doubt Moses would have gone along with your froggy plan,” she remarked in light jest about the tree they were under.

Anthony’s patience had finally run out. His heart couldn’t take her talking to him as if they were long-lost friends and that day was nothing more than a funny thing that happened once upon a time. That his first display of romantic affection was merely a friendly prank!

“What is you want from me, Isabel?” he snapped, slipping up and using her given name in the heat of the moment. “I can’t seem to understand if your want is to torment me with mock-kindness much like the ladies of the Ton do to one another to see one another squirm like bait on a hook, or if you are really so blind to the discomfort your presence provides me,” he seethed.

Oh, his heart gave way momentarily at the sight of her reaction. The Duchess looked as though he had struck her with his hand, and he never thought he would see such an expression from her. And yet, she did not back away. In fact, her chin held strong and she attempted to blink away the emotion that had just flooded her face. “Surely you cannot still be angry with me after all these years,” Isabel whispered.

“I assure you, I can,” he retorted hastily, putting not an ounce of thought into the response.

The hurt in her expression returned, and he winced. Even if he didn’t want to admit it, the same amount of control she had over his emotions all those years later, he had over hers as well.

Her face tightened, clearly struggling to remain composed as she asked in a rather meek voice, “Are... are you angry enough to not consider a friendship with me?”

Even though her pain was palpable to him, seeing it hurt him; it seemed to be in spite of the number of times he had daydreamed about hurting her back over the years. Even so, the prospect of the two of them becoming friends again made Anthony laugh. With such a tumultuous history, how could they ever be more than acquaintances? She had chosen status and wealth over him, the alleged love of her life. They could have lived a life worth remembering, a tale for the ages—

Isabel stepped closer to him then. His breath caught in his throat as she was close enough for him to really see the color of her eyes again. Her blue pools were deeper than the stormy sea and could only be compared to the soft darkness of the sky at twilight, where it still held some color just before the blackness settled in. The light fractions that glistened within

them were constellations that, if you looked closely enough, told the story of her soul. However, the stars had dimmed to the point where it took his breath away. There was a pain inside her that wasn't caused by his touch.

She spoke velvety soft then, "I understand your hesitance, Anthony. I am not naïve nor trying to hide from the fact I have greatly hurt you because of my past choices. And perhaps one day I can mend those wounds I have caused." Her eyes sparkled up at him with such sincerity, they were as bright as the Northern Star. He would be a liar if he said he didn't notice her chest heave as she took a deep breath of attempted bravery only for it to lodge in her throat. Another long, tense moment passed before she whispered, "I could really use a friend these days, Anthony."

Her words made him all too aware of the color of her dress then, a midnight black that matched the one he had seen her in the day before. The Duchess wasn't so much as six months removed from her husband. It was no wonder that she could use a comrade in such dark and gloomy times, but Anthony feared that was not a role he could fill. There had been too great a love lost between them, and too much bitterness had seeped into his bones over the years. How could he befriend the woman who broke his heart, especially when that very heartache was what led him to be the vile man he now was?

Anthony's anger and care for her were caught in a tug-of-war. His mind was paralyzed on what to do, unable to form a response in any sort of truthful way. Seeing the pain on Isabel's face was enough to make his bones ache, but how could their shared history allow him to comfort her in the loss of her husband? It wasn't a role that he should have, as he couldn't foresee any favorable outcome. One of them would end up hurting the other, and based upon who he was presently... he was fairly certain that this time it would be him causing the damage. The fantasy of longing to hurt her was



fading, but that didn't mean he wanted anything more to do with her.

Her rosy lips parted as she held his gaze for dear life. She asked, "There were so many times I longed to write to you. To try and make amends with you, to just know how you were doing... If I had been able to write such letters, and if I had managed to send them, would you have replied?"

The wording of her question struck him as odd, but he wasn't sure why at first. Once again, he didn't know what to say to her and he started to ponder if his lack of response should have been enough to tell him the real answer. In truth, he had never even entertained the idea Isabel had wanted to write to him and hadn't been able to. In his version of things, the very act of never receiving a letter in her sweet handwriting had been enough to tell him that she hadn't thought of him.

*Tell her this. Be honest. You never know what could come of it.*

Just as he attempted to swallow a bit of his pride that had coated his tongue into silence, a new voice merged. In a single note, it crumbled the little world that Isabel and he had apparently slipped into together and once again they were thrust upon reality. "There you are, sister," the woman cooed before her vision panned to him. In an instant, her tender eyes hardened. "Oh, it is you, Lord Moore."

His eyes locked onto Lady Rebecca and took to biting his cheek for a moment, needing to restrain himself physically from unleashing the undeserved, backhanded remarks his mind had ready for her. Well, perhaps they were a bit deserved. Isabel's sister had *never* liked Anthony before he was a rake, and even before the innocent pranks of his youth that she was occasionally victim to. In fact, it had been that

inexplicable hatred she had for him that had made him comfortable making jokes at her expense from time to time. Without it, he would have never teased the sister of the woman of his affection.

“Good day, Lady Rebecca,” he managed to get out politely.

However, Rebecca snapped her head around so that he wasn't so much as in her peripheral. “I've been looking for you everywhere,” she said to Isabel, her voice conveying worry. “Why did you sneak off like that?”

“I told the lot of you I was stepping away,” Isabel muttered, her eyes falling away from the both of them. Something about her posture struck Anthony as odd. The Isabel he knew would have never entertained her sister talking to her as though Rebecca was the authority figure. It wasn't like Isabel had been mean to her sister ever as far as Anthony was aware, other than childhood rivalry, but she had always been the older sister through and through. The guiding force, the voice of reason. Isabel looked slightly defeated. But why? Had it been because their conversation had been interrupted before she received answer, or was there something more to it?

“Well, we should be going.” Rebecca sighed and linked arms with her sister. Without turning to Anthony, she called, “Good day to you, Lord Moore,” and tugged Isabel along.

Despite the lingering tension between himself and Rebecca, he supposed that her arrival worked out for the best. Even though he knew that he would likely spend late nights occasionally contemplating what could have been if she had penned those letters, he knew it didn't matter. Their paths had diverged years ago, and they were now very different people. There was no changing the past, and he knew the person he was back

then was not open to her affection, even if traces of it lingered in his heart.

“Your Grace,” he called. Isabel paused and looked back at him. “We will never know now.”

It was the answer to her question if he would have written back to her through the years. Isabel nodded at him and then turned back around and proceeded to leave with Rebecca. He wasn't sure why he had felt the need to answer, but he did. While he wasn't sure what would come of it, at least he had finally said something back and it had been truthful. They wouldn't know and perhaps there in the park was the last time they would speak to one another so directly. It was a sentiment that should have given him some peace, and yet as he walked the other way to leave the park, his heart felt... heavy.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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Isabel was caught in the eye of a hurricane. Her emotions were heavy rain, thunder, and lightning, and her thoughts were dark, swirling clouds. Anthony had been the warm air blowing over her cool waters, creating the ideal storm. She had so easily folded to Rebecca in her state of agitation. Not only was she in the eye of a hurricane as a result of running into Anthony, but she had also been caught doing something Rebecca would not approve of. It had put her in a familiar frame of mind. She had that fear and guilt with Robert all the time, like when she had saved up enough money to buy herself a nice pair of gloves. The reprimand she received back then—

*Let's not think about that now.*

“I can't believe you were talking privately with that man!” Rebecca exclaimed as soon as the carriage door was shut behind them. “What will people think seeing you talk to one of the most notorious lords of London? Anthony Moore is nothing more than a flea on the beast that makes up the worst of society, Isabel. I mean, really! What on Earth were you thinking? I've already warned you of him. I shouldn't have to warn you again.”

Her mind started to submit to her sister's scolding, especially with Robert's harsh words fresh on her mind. Isabel dug deep within herself, however. She was the Dowager Duchess of Edington and had no one to answer to but the King and God himself. Propping her elbow against the wall of the carriage, Isabel brought her hand to her forehead and gently massaged her tender head. "Please, Rebecca, settle down."

"I shall do no such thing," Rebecca huffed. "This is exactly what I meant when I suggested you needed me about. Clearly, you need me to protect you from men like him. To keep you from straying down a dark path such as that."

"Will you stop?" Isabel asked, her tone growing a bit snippy. "I do not need such protection because there is nothing to protect me from. We were only talking, Rebecca, and I am allowed to talk to whomever I like."

She looked to her sister out of the corner of her eye as she clasped her hand over the one that remained in the Duchess' lap. Rebecca's brow furrowed in concern, her lips slightly pouted to show she was hurt by Isabel's response. "You know I mean well, sister. I am only worried someone like him will use you. That he'll manipulate your emotions and fashion the past the two of you have shared into a weapon against you. To get at your fortune and properties. He's not like his brother, and he's not as noble as his title suggests."

"You speak awfully fondly of Moses, and at moments where he has not yet been mentioned. Care to explain to me why?" Isabel retorted, her tone full of accusation. While it was interesting enough that Rebecca found it necessary to compare the brothers at every opportunity, Isabel knew as soon as the words slipped from her mouth she had gone too far. The look on Rebecca's face that resembled being struck with a bitter sting of a palm confirmed it for the Duchess.

As much as Isabel longed to hold onto her frustration with Rebecca, and just as it started to form in the pit of her stomach, it dissipated. For she knew that her dear sister wouldn't have felt so strongly if it wasn't from a good place. Never before had her sister attempted to boss her, at least not since they were small children. It was an abundance of care that her sister was displaying, even if it wasn't in the kindness of ways. Isabel turned her hand over to squeeze her sister's back.

"I'm sorry, forgive me. I spoke out of deflection, not sincerity," Isabel breathed with a frown. "Again, I shall remind you that I am not interested in romance. Do not worry over me or my assets if it concerns me remarrying. Anthony and I do have a complicated past, that I will admit to. However, it is his friendship I first had in life, and it is that I am interested in now," Isabel explained softly and sincerely. "I know you do not like when people speak ill of the dead, however it is *my truth* to share with you. And it is important to me for you to know that Robert truly limited my ability to do much of anything. More than a husband typically does, and that includes socializing with anyone but you, Mother, and my maid. Even with those, he executed caution and skepticism. And so, it is vital for me to now connect with people again."

Her words were passionate but not forceful, as she wanted Rebecca to understand where she was coming from without feeling criticized for her behavior. However, Isabel did stop herself before adding on: *And even more vital to connect with people who mattered most to me. Never have I connected with anyone like I did Anthony.* It would only serve to reignite Rebecca's concerns about romance.

Rebecca's lips pressed together in a flat line, but then her shoulders heaved from a heavy sigh. "Very well, Isabel. I can

understand that. However, I must still stick by my disapproval for Anthony. You do not know what all he has done since you left for the country and I must say, I don't think you would consider him a potential *anything* if you did."

"Have you spoken to Anthony directly?" Isabel challenged.

"Well, no—"

"So, then all your information is based upon the gossip columns?" Isabel queried, a brow raising on her face.

"Not *all* of it, but most—"

Isabel raised a hand to silence her. "Then I must ask for you to soften your stance with him. You really must know by now that those columns are dramatized and peppered with lies to sensationalize reality."

The carriage reached Isabel's home and the women departed; footmen approached to help each of them carry their selections from shopping. However, Isabel stopped before the stairs to the townhome and looked to her sister. "I am going to retire for the day. I love you, sister. Thank you for spending the day with me."

"I love you too." Rebecca sighed. The footmen moved in the background to load Rebecca's absurd quantity of shopping into her coach. Then, she stepped forward and squeezed the Duchess' hands. "I will not go on about it today, but it isn't only the columns that make me skeptical of Anthony. I implore you to be leery of men with reputations like them.

While it may not all be true, there's always at least a grain of truth that mounts such suspicions about one's character."

The sisters kissed each other on the cheeks before parting ways and Isabel went straight to the study upon entering the house. While she knew she should have spent her evening surveying the entire place to decide what changes she wanted to make, she simply had too much on her mind to concentrate on anything. Sitting at the desk to think, she noticed the room was nearly identical to the study at the country estate; the only noticeable difference was that this room was slightly smaller, and the paintings depicted slightly different scenes. Her gaze was drawn once more to a stack of parchment and a quill.

*We will never know now.*

His words echoed through her head and rattled about her chest. As dismissive as they were, Isabel simply did not agree. While yes, she could not rewind the hands of time and send those letters she dared not back then – they still had the present. Anthony was angry and had every right to be, but there was no fooling her. Even after all those years, she could read him fairly well and she had witnessed the softness in his eyes as they spoke under their tree. And what was even more telling was the way he stayed there and listened to her. It would have been too easy for him to mutter an excuse and walk away, much like he had the day before.

Maybe Isabel was nothing but a fool but such a realization made his words feel like a challenge to her. She couldn't go back and send the letters she wanted to, but she could send one now. Isabel could tell him all the unsent letters she'd written to him and then burned so Robert wouldn't find them. All the heartache that marriage had instilled in her, the loneliness that had defined her life, and the constant regret she had felt since the moment she declined Anthony's offer to run away. It might



not be as poignant as letters would have been through the years, but it didn't make her words any less true. And if there was so much of an ounce of love left for her in him, he would open his heart to her. Not in a romantic way, but as a human.

Motivated, Isabel snagged a piece of parchment and the quill. Dipping the tip in ink, she positioned her hand over the open canvas. Her breathing grew labored as she tried to sort through her thoughts for a starting point. There was so much to say, but she needed to word things properly so not to come off as trying to win him back or doing anything other than trying to explain herself and reconnect with her dear old friend. But what should she start with? What if she said the wrong thing and he didn't so much as read past the opening lines before he balled it up and discarded her letter, and therefore discarded her?

Telling herself that she was over thinking it, Isabel decided to simply go at it. It would be a draft, and she could edit the final draft to send once she put all her thoughts on paper.

*Dearest Anthony,*

No, what if that was off putting to him? He clearly wasn't feeling very open to the idea of being friends again. Drawing a line through the words, Isabel started again.

*Anthony,*

*You are right. We will never know how things would have been had I sent those letters. However, it was not without cause that I remained in silence for as long as I did. Robert was a strict duke, and an even crueller husband.*

That time, Isabel violently scribbled out her writing. Even though she doubted Anthony wouldn't feel as strongly as Rebecca about talking about the dead unfavorably, it felt disingenuous to lead with that. It was not his pity that Isabel was after, but his understanding. Taking a deep breath, the Duchess realized that if she was going to write him, she needed to put a good deal of thought into it. Balling up the paper, she tossed it into the waste basket before standing. A letter that was to act as a bridge from the past to the present was going to need more thought than what she was attempting right then. She would sleep on it and if she still felt so moved to write him the next day, she would.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Isabel's father summoned her to his study only hours before the next ball, at the height of her dizzying delight, in the aftermath of her budding love showing its first petals. Her foolish heart had thought it would be the news that Anthony's formal proposal for her hand in marriage had been accepted, and she had practically danced her way down the corridor to his door. She'd asked him, her cheeks tingling, what the significance of his summons was. Her heart was racing, her entire being anticipating the words that Anthony would be her betrothed.

His first words had even teased the idea: *"A proposal has come for you, sweet Isabel. I think this one holds a very promising future."*

*"I think you are correct in that,"* she replied naïvely, her smile managing to stretch her face even further.

The Duke of Radford looked pleased with her reaction. *"I have already accepted on your behalf, as I do not believe we will receive a better offer than this,"* he informed her. In all her excitement, all Isabel could do was nod. *"You shall marry the Duke of Edington by the end of Summer."*

The words did not make sense to her, for she had been that certain it would have been Anthony's name he would have uttered. It had to have been a joke, but her father's pleased expression did not shift to one of amusement. *"What do you mean? What... what about Anthony, Father?"* she stammered, her heart's flutters turning to a painful patter.

He sighed and shook his head. *"I know you are fond of Anthony, dear. I have a soft spot for him myself, as he is Duke Moore's son... But he is the second son. He holds only a courtesy title and is entitled to nothing. While I would have considered a proposal if nothing better came along, Robert Swinton's offer is truly too good to refuse."*

Robert Swinton was several years her senior and she hadn't so much as interacted with him other than a quick hello at her Debut. Why should she marry a man she did not know when she had a childhood friend she was deeply in love with right there? All for status? It was absurd!

She stepped forward and pressed her hands together as if in prayer. *"I beg of you, Father. I beg of you to reconsider."*

*"There is nothing to reconsider, Isabel. If anything, you should be grateful. You shall be the Duchess of Edington. That is one of the most lavish dukedoms in the Kingdom. You will never want for anything."*

*"That is where you are wrong, Father. I will want for Anthony,"* she voiced. It had been the bravest that Isabel had ever been in all her life. *"I love him, and I know you are not blind to that."*

*“Love does not a secure future make,” he sounded off and stood from his desk. “I know this is not what you once thought your life to be, but this is how things are. Have your cry about it, share your woes with your sister, and hold whatever resentment you must for me—but it will not change what is already in motion. Robert Swinton will give you a highly respected title, you will reside on land he himself owns, and he has provided the best Marriage Settlement possible to secure your hand. In the event of his untimely passing, every shilling shall be left to your child, which you will have control over until a son reaches of age, or a daughter marries. And if you do not have an heir by then, you shall inherit everything.”*

Isabel scoffed at him, *“I will get nothing. I am aware enough to know the laws of women, Father. I cannot own property, so the properties will belong to you! Are you really willing to marry me off just so you can acquire more properties someday?”*

He placed his hands firmly on the top of his desk without slamming. *“You will be the one entitled to the profits! I will be only responsible for the management of the lands. Do not speak so out of turn, young lady, and this is your only warning. Word is already on the way to the Duke, and the announcement shall be printed in the morning paper. I suggest you accept it and enjoy the last ball of the Season as a free woman.”*

The hours that had separated her from Anthony that day had felt like years. It had been a mix of denial and anger. Despite her father’s words, she kept everything inside and did not seek advice from her sister or mother as they prepared for the evening. Speaking it aloud would make it real, and she foolishly believed that if she didn’t talk about it, it wouldn’t happen. She had almost convinced herself of her delusion at one point. However, the moment she saw Anthony at the ball,

her fantasy was shattered. She had no choice but to tell him—to break his heart.

They danced together for the last time that night, and Isabel had to fight back sobbing the entire time. She didn't want her tears to taint the memory with him, but she could see in his face that he was well aware something was wrong. They planned to abandon her chaperone, Rebecca, and have a private conversation in the garden. Isabel hurried away from the scene and slipped outside after pretending to be sick in the hallway and sending her sister to fetch her some tea.

They met in the pale moonlight, tucked away behind the spring foliage, and Isabel finally cried and told him of the proposal her father had already accepted on her behalf. Anthony moved through stages of shock, denial, grief, and anger in the span of a couple of minutes. He paced about the grass, a hand wiping at his mouth as he thought of solutions. When he came back to her, he took her by both hands and pulled her into his chest. *“Run away with me. We will start anew – together. Away from your father and that horrible Robert Swinton.”*

Delight moved through her like a breeze at the offer. It was there, and then it was gone. Her lip trembled as she asked, *“With what money? Where will we go?”*

*“France, Spain, bloody America if we must. Anywhere we can be without their rule. I'll... I'll take what I can from my father. I know he keeps a little money in his desk drawer! It should have at least enough for us to flee the country. We will take what we can and use it to board a boat.”*

Isabel shook her head. *“What will happen when we arrive, Anthony? How will we support ourselves? How are we to*

*survive on our own?"*

Anthony took hold of her face, cradling her cheeks as his thumbs caressed her skin. *"I don't know the answer to that. But I know together we will find a way. And that will be all that matters, wouldn't it? Us being together."*

Oh, it had been such a romantic and enticing offer. A *yes* lodged in her throat, and she had to keep herself from tossing her arms around his neck and kissing him passionately to seal the deal. But she didn't. Her heart was the one burning to accept, but her brain was playing devil's advocate and it had some very real concerns.

*"What about our families?"* she whispered. *"We could never speak to them again if we ran away. My father would surely hunt us down if we tried. And our fathers are good friends, they would tell one another if one of us reached out."*

*"Then we won't write to them,"* Anthony replied as though it were so simple.

Isabel shook her head. *"I cannot ask you to leave your family behind for me."*

His fingers pressed into her cheeks a little more, his hold unflinching. *"You are not asking me, Isabel. I am offering."*

She thought as quickly as she could, but Rebecca's voice was in the distance. They were losing time, and Isabel was losing faith that such a plan could work out. When Rebecca sounded as though she were nearing, Isabel took hold of his face.

*“Then I am sorrier than words can express to say I must decline. We can’t, Anthony. I just don’t foresee it working.”*

*“Have you no belief in us?”* Anthony retorted, anguish clear in his voice.

*“It is not our love I do not believe in, it’s my belief that two children of nobility could establish a life from the ground up with only a boat ticket. And the fact it is my personal fate that would prevent you from contacting your family. I can’t do it. I’m sorry,”* Isabel wept lowly. Anthony closed his eyes tightly and lowered his head. When she squeezed his face and he hesitantly looked to her, the tears in his deep brown eyes broke something in her that would never be repaired. *“Please forever remember that it is you who holds my heart, even if it is another that has my hand,”* she pleaded and then she pressed her lips to his. Their mouths had moved in the most bittersweet kiss that she had ever experienced. It was a kiss of a final confession of love just as much as it had been an apology and a goodbye.

The day played over and over in the Duchess’ mind. She’d hardly slept because it was so insistent. She dreamed it even after she had fallen asleep. It was still there when she awoke. As upsetting and lingering as the memory was, reliving it had provided her with much-needed clarity.

She returned to the study in the early hours of the morning, as the sun was just beginning to light the sky. She took a deep breath and resumed writing the letter. Only at that moment did she realize she didn’t need to argue her case or point fingers at him. She only had to be truthful, open, and sincere.

*Anthony,*



*Even after your words indicated you very likely would not like to hear from me, you still plague my mind—much like you have through the years. Only now, I have nothing holding me back from doing so. I want you to know I have missed you so dearly. It has not been the loneliness I have faced in recent years that have led me to miss you, but merely your absence. Not having you in my life has been like missing one of my arms. It has left me incomplete and constantly reminded of what is missing just by going through daily life.*

*I am aware you feel differently about me now, and with good reason. I, however, still hold onto the feelings of our past. It has been only a few months short of a decade since we last spoke, and in all that time I have never considered anyone above you. You will forever be my best friend.*

*All this to say, I will respect any decision you make in regards to this letter. Your feelings surrounding me are legitimate and I cannot change them if you do not wish to speak to me. However, if you do find yourself thinking of me, and you do choose to write back, know that your words will be greatly welcomed. I would seize an opportunity to make things right with you, if for nothing but to help you heal from this. If friendship were to come from it, I would be happy. However, I will be at your discretion until such a decision is made.*

*If I do not hear back from you, know that I hope these years have been kind to you. I hope your years have been void of loneliness and misfortune. You have never deserved anything but the best, and I stand by that belief even now. I hope that your future holds only greatness. Take care, and be kind to yourself.*

*With warmth,*

## *Isabel*

She didn't allow herself to reread the letter, knowing good and well she would overthink it and spend the entire day writing draft after draft. Folding the parchment, she delicately scribed Anthony's name and stamped it closed with a bit of wax; she made a mental note to have her own seal stamp made. If he were to write back and start a friendship with her, Isabel did not want her letters sealed with the intricate 'S' for Swinton.

Going back to her room long enough to dress herself and tie up her hair, Isabel found her way downstairs and handed the letter off to a footman. She uttered a good morning greeting along with it before telling him, "Deliver this to Lord Anthony Moore at once, please."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Isabel felt relieved as soon as he left. It would be up to Anthony whether or not to respond, and she wouldn't have to wonder what would happen if she did write to him. She had, and now she felt liberated from the never-ending loop of thoughts about him. Isabel smiled to herself as she turned to face the foyer. It was finally time for her to do what she had been planning for weeks: make that townhouse her own.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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There should have come a day in Anthony's life that he learned his lesson about what happened when he overindulged in drink—and yet, he hadn't. His troubled, foolish mind had resorted to the tried-and-true methods of comfort. Women and lots, *and lots*, of sherry. It had been so much sherry, in fact, that he barely had a grasp on his memory from the evening. There were only brief flashes of liquor sloshing from his glass, a woman hanging on his arm and batting her lashes at him and stumbling their way to an Inn on the outskirts of London. It was truly a feat in itself that he had found his way home.

And despite his aching head and churning stomach, sleep managed to evade him once morning came. No matter the amount of tossing and turning the Lord did to try and fight his way back to sleep, he was forced to remain in the land of the living. It was no matter, as there wasn't anything planned for his day and so if his typical methods of curing himself of such illness, he could lie about and relax. One of the many benefits of being the *second* son to a duke—they weren't expected to do much. Of course, the thought of his place in the family brought his mind right back to Isabel and that was the moment he leapt from his bed. There was no possibility of him moping about over her.

He made quick work of freshening up and dressing for the day, though not a moment before he had another drink of sherry to take the edge off his pounding head. As though he were trying to literally outrun his thoughts, Anthony hurried himself down to the dining room. It wasn't until he was sat in front of a gorgeous spread of freshly baked bread, jams, butter, ham, and eggs, with a piping hot pot of coffee and its accoutrements served alongside it, that Anthony's mind settled.

“Beautiful.” He sighed and fixed himself a heaping plate of everything, as well as a sugary, creamy concoction of coffee.

Perhaps he would pamper himself that day. Eat himself sick, take as many naps as his body would allow, have a scolding bath, and if he felt so inclined, have Ernest over and try to convince him to play a few songs. He quite liked the idea. His sore mind busied itself with trying to think of absurd songs to request his friend, though he doubted Ernest would come without it being an urgent matter. He could lie and say it was, but he didn't want to abuse him in such a way. Perhaps before Helena came along, he could have and been granted forgiveness, but currently that would mean pulling him away from his wife, son, and sick infant daughter. Anthony might have been notorious for various reasons, but not for being *that* much of an arse.

Anthony was as full as he could be, but he grabbed another piece of bread and slathered it in butter and jam, hoping that the food would cure his illness and allow him to take a long nap once he was done. A voice at the door cleared their throat just as his teeth sank into the cloud-like bread. Hugh, his butler, called out, “My Lord.” When Anthony locked his gaze on him, he chewed his food as he watched the man walk over to him. “A letter has arrived for you,” he said as he extended the envelope.

Nodding, he took the letter and dismissed the butler kindly. His mind tinkered with the idea of it being a dinner invitation to join Ernest and Helena, after all his friend knew he was in a sore spot. But at the sight of the handwriting on the exterior of the parchment, Anthony choked on his breath. Turning his head and hacking until it cleared, he let out a frustrated, “Bloody hell!”

A servant hurried in with a pot of tea and he thanked her, taking a sip to recover from the incident. Once his throat was soothed, Anthony’s attention turned back to the letter. He could see servants beginning to clear away the dishes from breakfast, leaving only the tea, but he couldn’t hear the clattering of dishes and silverware. No, there was only the slow, ominous beating of his heart, which sounded more like a warning of impending war than a pulse per se. The sight of her lovely, delicate handwriting was enough to trigger Anthony’s memories of all the times they exchanged notes and letters when their parents thought it was inappropriate for them to be friends. Oh, her words had been as sweet as her smile and as lovely as her penmanship.

But why, *why* was she writing to him then? He had been so dismissive to her the day prior, so why would she take it upon herself to send him a note? There was only one way to find out. A stubborn side to Anthony wished to walk into the kitchen and throw it into the wood stove and watch it burn into ashes. It felt deserving, considering the mere arrival of the letter had disturbed his peace—let alone whatever the content of the message was. Yet, the urge was fleeting because the curiosity within him was burning hotter than the cooking fire at that moment. Turning it over, he scowled at the ‘S’ stamped into the concealing wax but did his best to brush away the disdain it brought him. He was far more interested in the contents of the letter than the stamp she used. After taking one final deep breath, he peeled away the wax and unfurled the parchment to drink in her words once more.

There were sentences and sentiments that drove daggers into his chest, and ones that drenched him in something he didn't wish to have when it came to Isabel: *hope*. When it came to romance, it was foolish more than anything to have hope. Hell, Isabel wasn't even asking for his love, but just his companionship. It felt the same, however, because of the damage already done. It was the second sentence that had planted such a seed, hearing that she had missed him dearly. As much as hearing her say he 'plagued her mind' and notions of helping him heal annoyed and insulted him, the feeling he was left at the end of the letter didn't resemble such things. Instead, he was left with concern and curiosity.

*Why had marriage been so lonely for her? How was my absence so present if she had a husband to tend to?*

No, something certainly did not feel right about it. And while Anthony knew he would continue to battle with his resentment and hesitance when it came to Isabel, her letter had managed to worm its way into his heart. Telling himself he did not really care did not make it true, and he felt compelled to make sure she was alright. After all, Anthony wasn't sure if she'd ever express such emotions to anyone else. She had stated in the letter that he would always be her best friend. The thought of her feeling alone for so many years, and then being alone after losing her husband, did not sit well with him. But how could he respond to her? How could he be concerned for her well-being while also harboring such heartbreak?

Before he could sort it out, there were once more footsteps approaching the dining room. Anthony peered up and much to his surprise, he saw his brother Moses standing before him. It wasn't at all like his brother to visit him.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Anthony called to him as he tucked the letter away in his breast pocket.

Moses looked well-rested and radiant that morning, a wide smile on his face as he tucked one arm behind his back and with the other gestured to the table. “Might I?” he queried, requesting to join him for tea.

“Of course,” Anthony nodded and looked to his servant who scurried off and fetched Moses a teacup and saucer. Being an honorary Lord meant he didn’t have many employees at his home, but the ones he had were diligent.

Moses fixed himself a cup of tea. It had always appalled Anthony that he preferred his tea without sugar or cream and waited until it was nearly room temperature before drinking it. It was a subtle reminder of how completely opposite the brothers were. Moses had sandy brown hair and hazel eyes like their mother. He liked gossiping, rubbing shoulders with the elite, and attending concerts. Anthony drank his tea piping hot with sugar, had darker features and an even darker sense of humor, enjoyed mocking the aristocracy (especially after a few too many drinks), and preferred philosophy and history. It was no surprise that the brothers had never bonded, despite the rivalry their father had instilled in them.

As the Marquis busied himself with stirring the tea needlessly, he looked to his little brother. “I have come to talk to you about going to America,” he announced pleasantly enough. “After all, I think I have more information on the business than you do at this point. I want to make sure you have all the details required to make an informed decision.”

“How... noble of you,” Anthony muttered, trying his best not to gawk at Moses. His brother was far too chipper and

forthcoming for Anthony to be at ease.

Moses placed the spoon on the edge of the saucer and retrieved a bundle of papers from his coat pocket. He arranged them on top of the table and gestured to particular ones as he spoke, “So, the business is stationed an hour from a port that is south of Boston, Massachusetts. I know you might be thinking to yourself that Boston is an already oversaturated market. However, our shop is located far enough south that it has really began to gain traction from the folks in rural areas who are on their way to Boston to buy, trade, or sell goods. And because it is so close to a port, but still far enough away that people who have traveled a long distance will take us up on doing business to avoid the extra travel, we have weaseled our way into being middlemen as well!” He sounded so proud of his words that Anthony assumed it had been something that he helped organize somehow.

“We also have employees who stay near the port to snag imports as soon as they arrive so that we can charge more when we resell them. That may sound bad, but I assure you that it is only marginal at the moment. It’s only a couple of percentage points. Just something to earn a little more money and keep our shelves stocked.” He rifled through the papers and presented Anthony with a map that had the shop marked, as well as the route to the port before adding on, “And because we are so close to the port, we save a lot of money on goods we sell ourselves.”

Anthony studied the map and papers, though it was more of an act he was putting on than anything else. He should have taken it more seriously and actually thought about what he was being presented, but he was far too distracted by Isabel’s letter to care much about pricing, stock, and trade. “Sounds like it’s already a fleshed out and established business,” was all Anthony could think to say. “I’m not sure what I could do to expand on it.”



“Where is your creativity?” Moses chuckled. “There is so much that could be done. We could start a farm to sell our own products, or we could build an inn or tavern next to the shop. Perhaps a cart down at the port, to sell our fine items to sailors and the like as they come off the ships.”

He supposed that was a fair point, but Anthony could only eye his brother for a long moment. “You seem very invested in convincing me to go. Has Father put you up to this?”

Moses put a hand over his chest and did a sort of half bow while sitting. “I assure you, I am acting of my own accord.”

“Then, is it that you want me gone?” Anthony asked blatantly. There wasn’t any point in dragging it out and trying to find polite ways to ask. “Has my behavior embarrassed you as well?”

“I assure you, brother, that your actions, for better or worse, do not bother me when it comes to transgressions against the Ton. There is gossip, sure, but nothing has ever been said to me that I couldn’t fire back at with a silver tongue and sharper wit,” Moses grinned. His hands then came together and while his expression stayed pleasant, it morphed into something more sincere and less humored. “I only want the best for you. Forgive me if I seem to be overstepping any sort of boundary. However, I simply think this would do you a world of good and that is all I have ever wanted for you. I am sorry if I haven’t always been the best as showing it.”

Anthony softened in response to his brother’s words, realizing that he had been overly assuming and suspicious of him despite his best efforts. That, of course, did not mean he

would simply give in to his wishes and thoughts. The letter in his coat pocket felt like it was burning a hole in his clothes at that moment. He would not put his whole existence on hold for Isabel, but he needed to sort through his thoughts and decide what he would do before making any life-changing decisions. “I appreciate all the information and consideration, Moses. I will certainly keep it in mind when it comes to making a decision. However, I do have a few months to think things over and I intend to use them.”

“Very well.” Moses nodded. “I just hope you think of the long term, Anthony. Whatever decision you make, please ensure that it is good for your future rather than just your immediate needs.”

“I shall.” He sighed and fidgeted with his teacup. There was a thought nagging at him that he was attempting to deny himself. It would do nothing but harm, wouldn’t it? Anthony eyed his brother, feeling awful for even thinking that his brother would use something against him. The two had never been close, but the way Moses spoke—he wanted them close. Making up his mind, Anthony cleared his throat and asked, “Moses? What exactly do you think of Isabel?”

The Marquis hedged, his eyes locking on Anthony from across the table as he was raising his teacup to his lips. Setting the cup back down, Moses sighed and folded his hands. “I think that Isabel was once a positive force in your life. She had all the charm, beauty, and softness that a man like you would benefit from. However, now... things have changed. Getting involved with her will only cause problems for you, Anthony. Of that, I am sure.”

There was a quality to his voice that made his words almost sound like a warning, as though Moses was privy to information that Anthony was not. He needed to shake it off,

to turn the conversation lighter so that his brother did not pry further. “At the very least, you managed to narrowly avoid Rebecca all those years ago.” Anthony chuckled weakly.

Moses laughed along awkwardly. It hadn't gone unnoticed that Rebecca had been *very* fond of Moses in their youth, and at times it had seemed as though his brother had entertained the idea. However, they had never been destined to be since Moses' marriage to Mary had been arranged before her Debut even took place.

“Oh, I don't know,” Moses commented, still chuckling. “Worse things could happen.”

“Worse things than married to that nightmare of a woman?” Anthony snorted.

Moses shrugged and lifted his teacup once more. “At least, a nightmare is a dream, right? Rather than a boring reality. She's... fiery.”

“She's... something, all right.” Anthony snickered, shaking his head.

His brother finally drank his tea and they exchanged small talk that amounted to nothing more than talks of the weather, how fast Spring was coming, and their plans for the day. Once his disgusting cup of tea was all gone, Moses departed.

Finally, Anthony took the letter from his pocket and read over her words again and again. It was at the end of his third read

through that he realized his concern was for her, but what about himself? Moses was thinking long term, and he was concerned that establishing a line of communication would do him more harm than good. Still, there was a tone to her words that piqued his interest and made him nervous.

He tried to carry on with his day while thinking about it. Anthony took a bath until the water ran cold, did some paperwork, tried to nap, and did whatever else came to mind. Nonetheless, his thoughts kept returning to what ifs. What if he didn't write to her and something happened to her? He was never going to be able to forgive himself. What if talking to her was his one chance to heal? What if they could both heal from the wounds of loneliness and rekindle their friendship? Every sweet thought was followed by a bitter bout of angry, vengeful ones demanding that he not care about her or what happened to her.

However, by the time lunchtime arrived, Anthony could take no more thinking. Even if he was still hurt and bitter about what had transpired between them, he owed it to his future self to listen to her. He'd be able to put it behind him once and for all. Writing her a letter would save him years of late nights staring at his ceiling, wondering *what if*.

His handwriting was hasty, knowing if he didn't put down his first thoughts and send it on its way, he would back out and continue torturing himself for the days to come. Once the words were scribbled onto the parchment, he folded it, sealed it, and handed it off to his footman to deliver back to the Swinton townhome.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The Duchess of Edington stood in her dining room with strips of wallpaper, an array of colorful placemats, and a few saucers with an array of patterns sat before her after a quick trip back into town to fetch the samples and items she should have had the day before when out with Rebecca. Her choices had been made for no other reason than she liked them. Their bright patterns, such as birds, flowers, and stripes, gave her a whimsical feeling. And anything was preferable to the dark and dull colors that were already on display in the house. Isabel was trying to figure out what she wanted now that the samples were spread out in front of her. While out and about, Isabel had also ordered a new dining table with matching chairs and a chandelier, so she had wood tones and upholstery to consider in her choices. She was nearly overwhelmed by the number of contrasting patterns, colors, and styles.

And yet, just as her mind threatened to shut down and pack it all away for another day, Isabel found herself smiling. It felt good to be so lost in an activity, to have something all her own to do and obsess over. Lifting a sample of blue and white striped wallpaper and holding it near the wall, she held a teal and gold dish next to it. It was difficult for her mind to picture it all against the deep maroon walls and dark wood furnishings.

Her attention was drawn to a pattering of feet from nearby. Isabel turned around and smiled at her maid. “Amy, would you mind coming here?” she called to her. And of course, Amy stepped to her with a pleasant and curious expression. “Would you look at this? Do you think the blues would clash? Is it *too* much blue? Perhaps I should go for something simpler, plainer... Perhaps keep the white dishes we already have?”

The brunette studied the samples and then looked to the Duchess with sparkling pale blue eyes. “Do you like these?” she questioned softly.

Isabel looked back to her selections and after a moment’s thought, she sighed. “Maybe not. I just saw so much blue at the shop, you know? It is clear that it is the new fashion. And I like blue, but... I think these are my favorite.” Isabel then lifted a lavender wallpaper strip that had fine, white flowers swirled over it, and a white saucer with a gold trim and a scene of a garden in spring detailed in cornflower blue. “But I worry it is too much color... and that it will look silly, being two different colors and designs.”

Amy nodded and folded her hands behind her back. “And what will happen, Your Grace, if you make up the dining room and find that you do not like the wallpaper or the dishes?”

“Well... I... I suppose I would just have to have them replaced,” Isabel muttered, looking back over the dark and gloomy room. “And I suppose anything would be better than this, wouldn’t it?”

“Precisely, Your Grace.” Amy beamed. “And I think having your favorite things selected is the perfect place to start. Anything you decide you do not like, can be changed again.”

Isabel opened her mouth to lament the costs of having things changed, but the words died in her throat. The cost was unimportant. She was in charge of her own spending, and her dukedom's wealth could pay for her to move homes on a regular basis, and it would only be a drop in the bucket. There was no one around to mock her or tell her she was wasting her money. It was *her* money, *her* homes, and she wanted to make them pleasant for the first time in her years occupying them. Besides, her life was already robbed of its color because of the rule she must wear black at all times. If she could not express herself in her dress, she would in her home.

With a single, confident nod, Isabel agreed with Amy, "You are more than correct, my dear Amy. Thank you for your words of wisdom."

"Always a blessing to speak with you frankly, Your Grace," Amy replied.

Isabel did not have to formally dismiss her maid for Amy to give her some space. Going back through the selections, she picked her favorite of everything. Wallpaper, dishes, flatware, candlesticks, placemats, and tablecloths were all chosen in a liberating frenzy of self-expression and gratification. She admired her choices for a few minutes and said a silent prayer that the soft purples and blues she picked would go well with her new teapot and the white and blue fabrics.

Once they were in a neat little stack, Isabel called for one of her footmen. She sent him on his way to place her orders, with a comment to ensure they would be delivered that very day—no matter the cost. As he hurried on his way, the Duchess let out a deep breath of satisfaction and panned her vision around the room once more. It would be the last time she looked at it

in such a state, and she was glad for it. All she had to do was get through the first year devoid of Robert's dreary posthumous existence and she would be free to live her life in endless color and hope.

Calling Amy back, the two cleaned up all the remaining fabric samples for curtains and upholstery, as well as wallpaper strips, and went into the parlor to start planning its renovation as well. The dining room alone would cost more than she had ever spent during her marriage. The only thing Robert would let her buy were dresses, but they had to be in colors and styles he liked, so they never felt like her own purchases. Isabel felt energized and inspired, and she imagined herself styling and planning rooms until her legs gave out beneath her and she had to retire for the night.

However, as Amy assisted her in holding swatches to the curtains as Isabel attempted to pair them with a selection for the couch, her butler appeared in the archway. "A letter has arrived for you, Your Grace," he announced.

Isabel's breath caught in her throat. She truly had managed to purge Anthony from her mind until that very moment. Was it possible that he had already replied to her? Or was it something from her mother or sister, and the timing was just meant to toy with her? Nodding, Isabel gestured for him to bring it to her. With nervous fingers, she accepted the letter and glanced down. Sure enough, it was in Anthony's handwriting. Though, she could tell by splatters of ink and the sharpness of his lines that he was not as careful with his words as he once had been in their youth.

It caused her anxiety to spike, but she took a deep breath and did her best to clear her mind. She hadn't any idea if she were ready to read his message, especially with little clues that it had been written in haste and some sort of emotion—but



Isabel knew she needed to find out. She opened it and read along:

*Your Grace,*

*I wish to begin this letter with acknowledgement that my heart is far from healed and I do not believe “friendship” is possible. It is hard for me to imagine you have missed me all this time, considering you never did write. I am beginning to suspect, however, that there very well may be a reason as to why you did not.*

*I am having a hard time grappling with rationale and reason right now. I have spent so long angry with you, Your Grace, that it feels insurmountable. And yet, I find myself caring for you still. It is nothing more than an ember next to the blazing sun which it used to be, but it is alive, nonetheless.*

*It is because of this small amount of care I still seem to have, that I am trying my best to be open to the idea of talking. There is no telling if friendship will come from it, but if you are willing to talk to me in spite of my harsh feelings toward you, then I would be comfortable in us arranging a private meeting to discuss things in person. I fear I am too easily persuaded by your beautifully written words and would like to hear them in person if a conversation is to be had past this letter.*

*I appreciate your well wishes, though the years have been dreadful.*

*Regards,*

*Lord Anthony Moore*

She had to sit down while reading his words, her heart pounding with tidal waves of conflicting emotions. Even though she was aware of his feelings for her, reading his own admission of them did not make it any easier. And his anger seemed *insurmountable*. Despite the fact that he sounded resentful in parts of the letter, there was a ray of hope in it all. *He still cared for her.*

Her heart was bursting at the seams. He was correct; there was no telling if friendship could be sparked from a single ember—but there was a chance. A chance to rediscover the friendship that had shaped not only her childhood, but her entire life. Isabel had to tread carefully to avoid overextending herself while also remaining true to herself. She wanted him back as a friend, but she wanted him to want to be her friend, not a friend with the memory of her. The years had changed them both, and she hoped he would be willing to accept that. His final words before his signature, while were devastating to read, also gave her some hope that he would be understanding that the years hadn't been exactly kind to her either.

“I shall be right back,” Isabel said to Amy before heading out of the parlor. Going to the study, she prepared her parchment and quill. Her answer would be concise and to the point in order to respect his wish to first talk in person. Internally, her heart fluttered a bit at the notion of her ‘beautiful words’ easily persuading him.

*Anthony,*

*I have read your letter, though I am still digesting your words. However, I wanted to let you know posthaste that I am open to conversing in person. Would you be willing to dine with me*

*tomorrow night? Supper is served at seven o'clock. And it is then we can talk about this anger you have for me, as well as what the entails for our future.*

*With warmth,*

*Isabel*

Looking between the letters, she considered rewriting it with their formal addresses, as he had. However, she quickly changed her mind. Even after all those years, she felt it was only natural to address them by their given names in private. She hoped he wouldn't take offense and would instead see it as her maintaining her desire to be friends. Isabel used the Swinton stamp once more to seal the letter and returned downstairs.

The letter was off with another footman, and Isabel returned to Amy in the parlor. "What do you think of this, Your Grace?" she asked. She held fabric samples of lily-white she indicated to be for drapes, a pale yellow for wallpaper, and a beige for the couch.

"Very good," Isabel nodded in praise. "Though, what if we swapped *this*... for this?" She replaced the wallpaper for one that was a purplish-pink. It was soft and vibrant, the color of the pink variety of evening primrose. It might have been looked at as a bold choice, but she did not care. It was her parlor and anyone who joined her in it would be surrounded by *her*.

"That also looks wonderful, Your Grace." Amy nodded, though there was an edge to her voice that let Isabel know she

wasn't as onboard with the selection as she was willing to admit.

Isabel chuckled and patted Amy's hand. "You send those off with whichever footman comes back first, and make sure they know to send for the laborers at once. I want the parlor and dining room completed by tomorrow at supper. I know it is a lot to ask for, but I could be having a dinner guest and I want things to be not so... so..." Isabel gestured with her hands to the dark walls and clunky, cheap furnishings. But it wasn't just a disdain for the décor, it was the *Robertness* of it all.

"Your Grace," Amy interjected. When Isabel panned back to her, the maid gave her a soft smile. "I understand. I'll see to it the footman understands the urgency."

"Thank you, Amy," the Duchess breathed, relief and admiration hanging in the air around her. She appreciated Amy so very much. If it hadn't been for her, she was certain that she would have gone mad over the years. Robert had hated their friendship, thinking a maid was beneath a duchess—but he had limited Isabel too much to ever say much about it. There could be weeks that Amy would be the only one she really had a conversation with. *Weeks*.

If the dinner with Anthony went well and a friendship was formed, Isabel vowed to herself that she would never abandon her friendship with Amy. The woman had done far too much for her over the years for her to simply discard her. Isabel looked around the parlor, just as she had the dining room, as Amy dashed off to wait for the footman.

Only this time, instead of eagerly waving goodbye to the relics of a bad marriage, she imagined Anthony waiting for her

company. It was more difficult to visualize than the renovation itself.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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*I shall see you tomorrow night at seven o'clock, then.*

She could hardly believe it when the same evening, she received yet another note from Anthony. It had been only a single sentence, but it had been one of acceptance. She was as giddy as one could be, knowing that at last, Isabel would rekindle a relationship with someone who meant the world to her. It was so exciting to her that she hardly slept a wink that night, though it didn't bother her any. Isabel was full of energy and longing to ensure that everything went perfectly.

As soon as the sun was up, she was too. She busied herself all day, barely pausing for tea or a meal as she oversaw the installation of the wallpaper, the arrival of her new dining table and chairs, and the hanging of drapes in the windows in the color of her choice. It was all coming together perfectly, though some tasks took too long or certain items didn't arrive when Isabel expected them to, and she became concerned that it wouldn't be finished in time for Anthony's arrival. Nonetheless, she did not rush or yell at the laborers. Nobody was slouching. They were working diligently and hard, and she knew that speaking harshly to them would only lower morale.

Still, she flittered about, going from room to room, making sure everything was proceeding as it should. When there wasn't anything she could comment on or ask about, she found herself fretting over the foyer. Part of her wished she would have focused on it first, seeing as how it would be the first thing people saw when stepping inside. However, she reminded herself it was more important to make the rooms she and her guest would actually spend time in comfortable and to her liking. Even if the foyer was a dreadful dark green color with bulky portraits of members of the Swinton family. Members she had only seen sparingly through the years, or not at all. It would be improper of her to remove their paintings. What should she do about the foyer then? Just have it wallpapered?

“Your Grace,” Amy called as Isabel studied the lobby. Her eyes went to the maid, who stood at the base of the stairs. “We should get you ready. Supper shall be served in an hour’s time.”

“Is it six already?” Isabel breathed in disbelief but then nodded and headed upstairs. They walked through her room and into the dressing room, where she was immediately defeated by the collection of black dresses. Oh, how she longed to wear something of color! Especially on such an important night to her. She felt as if she didn't have the choice of what color to wear if society didn't force her into black dress after black dress. It would only serve to irritate her. Furthermore, she would be given the option of white, gray, or lavender in just a few weeks. The transition into half-mourning, the period of six months to a year following a husband's death, would give her a little more freedom. Both in terms of attire and social standing.

Her eyes lingered on a particular dress of hers, one that was such a dark green that it could have passed as black in certain lighting. Even though she toyed with the thought of wearing it

for the dinner, she declined herself before ever uttering it aloud. She wouldn't want to give off the wrong impression, unsure what Anthony would think of her ever-so-slightly breaking a custom without understanding her heart when it came to her marriage. It wasn't her trying to display disrespect but rather a fierce, burning desire to express herself even in the most subtle of ways.

No matter, they opted for one of her black dresses. As they went about applying the various layers, Amy spoke up, "Your Grace, might I ask—who is joining you for supper?"

A phantom of a smile dared to spread across the Duchess' lips. "Why, my dear, old friend, Lord Anthony Moore. The man we bumped into the other day."

"Really?" Amy breathed. "Well, that is quite the development."

They exchanged soft, awkward giggles before going into her room to redo her hair. Isabel looked in the mirror as Amy styled her ginger hair into a subtle but elegant partial updo with braids on top and the rest of her hair falling in soft, natural waves. Her cheeks were flushed for the first time in what seemed like an eternity. Isabel was redecorating and planning the dinner with Anthony, and she was reclaiming her identity. What a time to be alive, indeed.

"I only hope he will forgive me," Isabel breathed and looked at Amy in the mirror. "I really hurt him – years ago before I married Robert. We were the best of friends and I am hoping this dinner will give way to mending old wounds."



Amy continued to work on her hair, occasionally her eyes shifting to the mirror to look at the Duchess. After a long pause, Amy replied, “Well, I am sure that he will forgive you. Sometimes things just need a little time and a little care.”

“I hope you are right,” Isabel replied with a meek smile.

She watched in the mirror as her maid’s mouth opened and snapped shut. After a few moments, however, she tried again. “Your Grace, might I speak out of turn?”

“You know it is never out of turn with me, Amy,” Isabel remarked tenderly.

“It’s just... well... do you think you’ve given yourself time to really grieve the Duke?” Amy asked as delicately as she could. Her fingers anxiously continued braiding.

Isabel was hurt by the words. Amy was the last person she expected to ask that question out of all the people who could have. She had witnessed firsthand, on far too many occasions to count, how horrible Robert had been to her. Amy had had nearly as many instances of having to console a distraught and sobbing Isabel after Robert had said particularly nasty things to her or dismissed the smallest of requests. Such as going to see her mother or writing to her sister without his supervision. Isabel’s gaze was drawn to the surface of the vanity, where she studied the wood grain to keep herself from becoming overly emotional. “To mourn would be to process a loss of... *something*. A loss of love, of companionship, or even acquaintanceship.”

The Duchess paused, knowing her words were coming out too sharply and she didn't want Amy to think the edge to her voice was aimed at her. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she took a calming breath before opening her eyes again and staring herself down in the mirror. Once more, she was looking at a stranger. A woman that had once teemed with life, love, hope, and happiness was now nothing more than a woman beaten down by words and mind games. Was there still light behind her eyes, or did they only capture the lights around the room? Would she ever be whole again? And most importantly... Should she be mourning? A life was lost tragically and suddenly—and yet, in what was meant to be her darkest hour, after hearing the news of his passing, she had breathed a sigh of relief.

*Am I even human anymore if I feel nothing at all about his death?*

The thought was bitter in her mouth as she contemplated uttering them to her maid. She wouldn't dare, however. No, it was perhaps a thought, a realization about herself, that Isabel would surely have to take to her grave. If Amy, of all people, thought she should grieve despite all she had seen, then no one would truly understand. And maybe they shouldn't. Maybe Isabel *was* the problem after all. And yet, she would not bring herself to lie to her closest confidant—though she could omit her darkest truth.

“Robert was...” the Duchess began, having to search for something truthful, “my husband. And he so eagerly wanted my hand that he made a deal with my father to give me the profits of the dukedom in the event of his passing before my own. And I shall be grateful, as much as I can, for that. However, he twisted my spirit into something I no longer recognize because of his need to isolate me. To keep me like a prize that no other should dare to look at without his permission and supervision. While also tearing me down day

by day to ensure I did not believe there was a better world out there. He almost got his wish granted. There were days when I convinced myself that I deserved how he treated me. But he could not erase my memories of Lord Moore and the ways he demonstrated to me that men could treat a Lady with kindness and decency.”

Tears pooled in Isabel’s eyes as she continued to hold Amy’s gaze through the reflection. Her body begged to let out a sob, a cry, even a whimper, but she swallowed it down. No longer would Robert make her cry. She would regain her strength no matter what, and never again would a man reduce her to something as pliable and weak than her husband had made her feel.

Wiping her eyes, the Duchess did her best to compose himself. “So, yes, to answer your question. I have mourned him in the manner appropriate for a husband like Robert Swinton. And now I am in the process of grieving the loss of the person I used to be. And I have accepted that I shall never be the same person I was before Robert. But I’m hoping that reconnecting with people like Lord Moore will assist me in discovering who I am now. Because they knew me previously and will be able to instill the same life I once knew in me. If they are willing.”

*If Anthony is willing.*

“I understand, Your Grace. Please know I meant no harm,” Amy breathed in response. When Isabel turned to stand, Amy withdrew a handkerchief and blotted the Duchess’ eyes. “I... only meant to come from a place of concern and I don’t think I phrased my question correctly. But I don’t know how else to say it politely.”

“Speak your mind then,” Isabel urged her, taking deep breaths to calm herself.

Amy fumbled to find her words before taking a sharp inhale herself and locking eyes with the Duchess. “I know that you do not need this much time to grieve the Duke. However, society might disagree and find it... distasteful to have another man over so soon.”

Ah, there it was. The risk of scandal that everyone seemed to be so petrified by, and yet Isabel couldn't seem to bring herself to care about it. Perhaps she was simply oblivious to the consequences, given that her name was only mentioned in the press four times: her birth, her debut, her marriage announcement, and Robert's death. She couldn't get her mind around caring what people thought about her having dinner with an old friend! Widows were allowed to have friends of any gender as long as they were discreet.

“The Ton will talk if they wish. The fear of my name in people's mouths is not enough to keep me from making amends with a friend,” Isabel replied. “This is not about finding another husband, romance, or anything else the Ton may try to make it out to be. And that is all that matters as long as I know the truth.”

Amy's expression flashed with a look of pride when Isabel uttered her final words. “Yes, Your Grace,” was all she said.

The women moved across the room and as Amy opened the bedchamber door, Isabel could hear a murmuring of voices in the foyer. It was Anthony! “A bit early,” Isabel whispered to Amy, “but I suppose that's better than late. I would have gone mad with worry waiting on him, thinking he potentially changed his mind.”

The women shared a little smile and then Isabel moved to the stairs. From the top, she could look down at Anthony and her heart sang the song of morning birds. As beautiful as ever, he was. He was dressed sharply in a black coat, cream vest, gray trousers, and a scarlet cravat. His hair was more tame than usual, though it still had that signature disheveled toss to it that came from him running his hand through his tresses too much.

And his eyes were on her, and her alone.

“Your Grace,” he greeted as she descended the stairs.

“Good evening, Lord Moore,” Isabel called back to him. “I wish to thank you for accepting my invitation to dine with me.” He only nodded in response. As she neared him, she noticed the emotion swimming in his gorgeous brown hues. He was conflicted about being there with her, and she understood. “Dinner is not yet served. Would you care to join me in the parlor for a drink?”

“Certainly,” he muttered.

She guided him into the parlor, her heart a flutter both at his arrival, and the sight of the room. The Duchess hadn’t been granted a chance to see it upon completion. It was perfect and gave her hope the rest of the evening would be as well.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Anthony peered around the room and noticed the stark contrast to the foyer, but he mentioned nothing about it. He sat in one of the armchairs, making sure they weren't sitting too close together. She approached the bar and asked him for his drink of choice; he chose his usual sherry. He did, however, watch with interest as she poured herself a brandy, a much stronger drink than the Isabel he knew enjoyed.

*She's nervous.*

It felt wrong of him to take comfort in such an observation, but he couldn't help it. It made him feel less alone in the storm of emotions raging through him. Never would he have thought he would be alone with her ever again, and even in his fantasies when they were alone it was only for him to have a chance to tear into her for all the pain that she had caused him. Perhaps that would still happen, but her letter had still managed to soften him to the point he didn't know what to do with himself. Never before had he been in the unique and troublesome predicament of being caught in the middle of hatred and concern.

Isabel handed him his glass in such a way that her hand brushed against his palm as he took it from her. It felt supernatural, the sort of calm the lightest touch from her

casted over his troubled mind. He watched as she sat across from him on the longest couch in the room and took a large sip of her drink. Without anything to say, Anthony too sipped his beverage.

“Do you like the parlor?” the Duchess questioned, gesturing about the room. “I had it redone just today. This is the first time I’m actually seeing it.”

“It is nice,” he responded rather curtly.

They seemed to stare at one another, look away, clear their throats, and do absolutely nothing else. The tension was high and the awkwardness between them was palpable. Neither of them knew what to say or how to act. It was Isabel, however, who finally broke the ice. “Why do we call the early days of history the Dark Ages?” she asked, her voice sincere and curious as a crease formed between her brows.

The question was so bizarre and random that Anthony’s mind couldn’t even make sense of the words for a moment. “Well, that’s because it followed the fall of the Roman Empire and was—”

She shook her head and raised her glass to her lips. “It’s because it was full of *knights*.”

Her eyes remained locked on Anthony’s as she sipped her brandy. As much as he wanted to resist the laughter that was building in his chest, he could not. The pun wasn’t all that clever necessarily but it was the setup, execution, and timing that seemed to strike a chord within Anthony. Laughter

escaped his lips against his will, and it brought a brilliant, charming smile to Isabel's face.

"How absurd," Anthony responded as his laughter died to little snickers. "Where on Earth did you hear that one?"

"I'm not certain," she admitted. "But it was a long time ago. It came to mind whenever I managed to sneak away to read, and I thought of you."

*There it is again, that peculiar phrasing.*

"You remember my love of history," he commented, his lips defying him by fixing into a smile.

"How could I ever forget? Your love for history is what sparked my own."

Anthony shook his head. "That, I don't believe."

She finished her brandy and stood to pour herself another. "And why don't you?"

"Your father has that remarkable library," Anthony pointed out. "And I have browsed it a handful of times in my life, and I recall some rather outstanding books lingering on those shelves."

"So, because my father owns some books you enjoy means that I had a natural predisposition for appreciating history?"



That is *mighty* presumptuous, My Lord.”

Anthony’s eyes were sparkling then as they narrowed at her in curiosity. It was alarming how easy it was for him to get lost in her. Lost in her company, in conversation, in her eyes—even from across the room. “That is fair to argue, I do suppose. Then pray tell, Your Grace, what was it about my love of history that sparked your own?”

“Who wouldn’t be absolutely charmed by an adorable young man gushing about mighty gladiators and Vikings, the fascinating shift in the English language due to the French and Danish invasions, or his own conspiracies about the Holy Grail and the Dead Sea Scrolls?”

The two broke out in a small batch of snickers and giggles before Anthony replied, “I suppose I could find the charm in that. Though I wouldn’t call my takes on such legends as *conspiracies*.”

“You’re right. What shall we call it? Enthusiastic speculation?” she fired back with a wicked smirk.

For the first time in her presence, Anthony cracked a toothy, wide grin. “Now, Your Grace, that is an extraordinary phrase and perfect for the situation.”

“Thank you,” she said, her smirk stretching into a true smile. “If we must be specific, it was your fanatical retelling of Mesopotamian lore about the Goddess Nanna rising to such heights of glory that her father, the Sky God, had to kneel before her.”

“You know,” Anthony remarked as he did his best to look serious, “they say our favorite memories and stories say a great deal about our inner self. Should I warn the Duke of Radford that his daughter is gunning for his dukedom?”

When she nibbled on her lip then, his thoughts very faintly darkened to inklings of his second nature: seduction. Just as soon as they formed, however, he batted them away. That was far from being on the table and merely a byproduct of the rake he was. Thankfully, she spoke again which brought him back into the moment. “I would go on and deny such claims, however, that wouldn’t make you believe me, now, would it? Because if I *were* gunning for his place, why would I tell a soul of my plans?”

Her humor was brilliant. She was as sharp, articulate, and quick-witted as ever.

“You make a fair point, Your Grace,” he purred. “I suppose I will have to keep a keen eye on you to ensure you do not initiate any nefarious schemes.”

“You will not find me complaining about such an arrangement.”

His throat tightened, noticing only then how quickly they had started *flirting*. Flirting, after all his huffing and puffing about being angry! He was still angry, which was the most maddening part of all. How was it that Anthony could have such a duality in his thinking? How could he long to laugh and flirt with the same woman he wished to scorn?

Anthony was a fly whose wings had been clipped after being severed from her web. Despite this, he had been drawn back into it. The question was whether he would willingly rest into her finely spun silk and allow her to trap and wrap him in her luxurious comfort. He could stay enveloped in her web until the end of his days in bliss, or until she swallowed him whole.

Needing something to say, Anthony remarked, “The wallpaper reminds me of the dress you wore for your Debut. Well, the dress was a little more purple, wasn’t it? This has a bit of a pink tint to it.”

The Duchess blinked. “You... remember the color of my dress?”

Anthony’s mind hedged on what to do. As much as he wanted to be embarrassed and shrug his shoulders, he realized there was no part of their shared history that he was embarrassed about. Not a single instance. So why would he be ashamed of himself? “Of course, I do,” he stated tenderly. “It was a big event in my life.”

Isabel’s expression melted into something rather affectionate. Her eyes were gleaming, her cheeks flushing, her lips curling into a smile warm enough to melt the outer frost that encased his heart. “I’ve never had more fun than I did with you that Season.”

“Oh, pish,” Anthony mused.

“It’s true!” she urged. “You had an infectious sort of... of airiness. Like the wind itself was the only thing that could carry you, and it did. Taking you from adventure to adventure,

joke to joke, dance to dance. It was inspiring. It made me want to be airy and move with the wind too.”

“And that you did,” he breathed, a smile once more making appearance on his face. “You were a lovely dance partner.”

“You know I have two left feet,” Isabel chuckled.

“Perhaps at first you did. But after a dance or two, you moved like a swan on water.”

“I think you’re only trying to flatter me, so I don’t feel awful about all the times I stepped on your shoes,” she stated, crossing her arms carefully.

“Nonsense.” Anthony grinned. “And I am sorry, Your Grace, but I must not allow you to slander yourself.”

“It isn’t slander if it is the truth,” she challenged.

“Then we must put it to the test,” Anthony declared, rising from his chair. He paced over to the bar and set his drink down before approaching Isabel. As she placed her hand in his, her deep blue eyes were wide and full of wonder. They walked together to allow her to set down her drink before he bowed to her to initiate a dance.

“But we haven’t any music.” Isabel giggled.

“Where is your creativity?” Anthony tutted. When she curtsied and they assumed the waltz position, the sensation of her body so close to his raised the hairs on the back of his neck. His hands yearned for more than her one hand and the respectable position on her waist. But he didn’t let his thoughts wander. If he did, he’d second-guess himself and perhaps her for falling so easily into a sort of rapport as if nothing had ever happened between them. He was going to allow himself that moment for the time being. To have her, even if just for a dance. He might kick himself later for it.

Anthony started humming a song he remembered her liking. They’d heard it at a concert their families had attended together, and she’d hummed it for months afterwards. Anthony’s breath was taken away by the brilliance of her eyes. “That song,” she whispered. “I remember that song... it’s been so long. What’s the name of it?”

“I can’t remember,” he whispered back. Though, he wasn’t sure why they were being so quiet. Anthony’s humming continued as they moved through the dance. They moved as one, every little thing feeling absolutely perfect. As he allowed himself the privilege of getting lost in her eyes, he really could relax his mind and be transported back before the heartache, before Robert Swinton was a name he would curse until the death of the sun. Back when the future was bright and pink and *Isabel*.

It was equally glorious as it was cruel that things simply felt right when he was with her. Giving into her kindness and affection was as involuntary to him as breathing. He could resist briefly but soon his chest ached for her just as it would for breath. As she twirled and let out a laugh that soothed something dark that lingered in his soul, Anthony dared to wonder how it was he ever fooled himself into hating her.

Only, he received his answer shortly after that particular thought.

The dance came to an end, and they were chest to chest. Giggles escaped from her throat with irregularity, her cheeks rosy, her breath sweetened by the brandy. Anthony dared to allow his other hand to fall to her waist as they stood there and move her a little closer. His eyes continued to fall to her lips, remembering just how divine the taste and feel of them had once been. He caught her doing the same to him, her hands resting on both of his shoulders as her precious blue hues flickered back and forth between his gaze and his mouth.

“Might I call you Anthony?” Isabel whispered sweetly.

“Of course, you can,” he replied, though it was something lower than her voice. It was hard for him to think around the beating of his heart, let alone speak. “So long as I can call you Isabel, Your Grace.”

“I would love nothing more,” she purred. Then, she cupped his cheek, and he could hardly keep himself steady from how lightheaded he was with anticipation. “Thank you for dancing with me, Anthony. I haven’t in so long, and never quite as wonderfully as when it is with you.”

There was his answer to his question: how could he burn with desire for her and hate her at the same time?

*Because she should have always been mine. We could have filled one another’s lives with merriment and love, instead of the pain that persisted ever since she left me in that garden. Her choice robbed both of us of a lifetime of joy.*

But it was his rage that was the ember next to his sun of affection for her at the time. In her presence, the pain became manageable, almost forgotten. He was a bee, and she was a flower. She was a flame, and he was a moth. Or maybe she was an anemone and he was a clownfish. Regardless of the metaphor, Anthony was drawn to her by the laws of nature. Whether it was for mutual benefit, as with the clownfish and the animal it called home, or for his demise, as with the moth and her unrelenting flame.

“Do you really believe in fate, Isabel?” he queried at the same volume as before, recalling the remark she had made in the park the other day.

“I didn’t,” she admitted. “But I’m starting to.”

He wasn’t sure who was moving, or if they both were, but they were drawing closer together. Her lips were parted, and his eyes were closing.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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*J*sabel was suspended in that moment in time as though from a wire that was pulled taut. The tension, the fragility of such a circumstance was almost too much to handle. And she was afraid to ruin it with ever so much as an out of place glance or breath. Anthony, and his wonderful lips, were close and almost hers once more—

“Dinner is served, Your Grace.”

The sudden voice was enough to make a small yelp sound for the Duchess, a hand flying over her own lips. Turning to the archway, she saw the butler just approaching the entryway and she said a silent prayer of gratitude that he hadn't seen them so close to kissing.

“Thank you, James,” she breathed. “We will be there momentarily.” Once he pivoted on a heel and headed away from them, she looked back to Anthony to see him struggling to hold back laughter. “And pray tell, Anthony, what is so funny?”

His lips pressed together in a flat line and his eyes analyzed her expression closely. “I just... didn't know you were still so easy to scare.”



She gawked at him and crossed her arms as she turned to head after her butler. “I have never been easy to scare. What happened to not standing for slander?”

“Is it not you who said it is not slander if it is true?” he retorted cheekily.

“Tell me of one instance where I was easily scared, and I shall concede,” she demanded as they walked into the dining room. She took a breather and looked around the room. To her delight, it looked absolutely stunning in the colors and patterns she chose. Even her table and chairs had arrived! They were a slightly different color stain than she had originally chosen, but custom made would have taken far too long, and the carpenter had these ready. Besides, they looked great in that particular tint, the slightly darker hue actually contrasting nicely with the rest of the décor.

“I take it this is another room you have had redone?” Anthony questioned as he sat down across from her.

“How could you tell?” she gasped.

“Other than the fact it’s the only other brightly colored space I’ve seen in my short time here?” he positioned. “Because it’s all so very you. The florals, the desire to not have everything match because monotony drives you mad, and the mere... *airiness* of it.”

A smile so wide that her cheeks ached spread across the length of her face, knowing good and well he was referring to their conversation from earlier with his word choice. “I see you

have not lost your charm in recent years,” Isabel commented but then tossed him a playful glare. “However, you are avoiding the topic at hand. I have yet to hear you recount a time I scared easily.”

“Your Grace,” he gaped, a hand flying to his chest in dramatic fashion. “It is not that I was avoiding it, but merely trying to move past it to spare you the embarrassment.”

“Spare me not,” she challenged further.

Anthony smirked and chose to focus on slicing into the chicken on his plate for the moment. “Oh, let’s see. I must have been no more than twelve at the time, so you eleven depending on the time of year... This must have been winter, however, so surely you would have just turned eleven...” She didn’t bother holding back the need to roll her eyes, knowing good and well Anthony only flourished his stories with such nugatory details when he was bluffing—or trying to torture the listener by making them wait. Anthony took a bite, though she was surprised his mouth could remain closed with how extravagant the curl of his lips was. “It happened at a party hosted by one of the Duchesses... Oh, how could I forget! It was the Duchess of Atholl.”

Just as Isabel started to form a sassy remark back that he was only bluffing and making something up, the memory came back to her. Ernest Cecil’s parents had hosted a dinner party around Christmas that year, and the story he was about to tell clicked in her mind. Despite knowing recognition must have shown on her face, Isabel turned toward her meal and shook her head. “I don’t recall such a party.”

“Let me refresh your memory,” Anthony replied in a tone that was far too smug. “All three of our families were in

attendance. We all shared such a hearty meal, didn't we? A large, succulent ham, Cornish hens, and all the potatoes and bread we could stomach. So much so that we had to wait for dessert. And it was one of those very, very rare occasions that our mothers allowed us to eat anywhere but the dining room. As everyone listened to my brothers duet some Christmas carols in the music room, Ernest and I helped in handing out desserts. I think... I think I might have accidentally placed something in your jam tartlet."

Her stomach churned just thinking about it brought back the memory. Her young mind had completely lost it when she saw tiny little bones in her cherry jam tartlet, tricking her into thinking it was blood rather than cherry. She had screamed bloody murder before crying, startled and convinced she had eaten a baby bird. Of course, it didn't take long for the parents to figure out it was Anthony and Ernest up to their usual tomfoolery.

"I'm not sure being disgusted at the thought of eating bones is the same as being scared," she mused, trying her best to sound as though the idea of it was absurd.

"I'm unaware of anyone ever *screaming* and crying from disgust," Anthony smirked. When Isabel glared at him, he chuckled, "If it is any consolation, it was intended for Rebecca. I simply confused the plates when handing them out."

Isabel snorted—*really* snorted, the sound piggish and goofy to her own ears but was quickly drowned out by her own laughter. "The two of you are oil and water, aren't you? Never have you mixed well at all. It's as though resentment was born in you both."

“With... the appropriate amount of respect I’m supposed to fain,” he began, as cheeky as ever, “Your sister is overly reactionary and has never surmounted to anything beyond being an entitled brat. It makes her the perfect target for such harassment, really. She gives you a theatrical reaction that a prankster could only dream of getting, and it really takes the sting out of any moral dilemma one might have when playing jokes to know your target is insufferable.”

“She’s not that bad.” Isabel chuckled. “Perhaps she can be a little... over the top, but she has a heart of gold.”

“Fool’s gold, perhaps,” Anthony remarks. When Isabel gives him a look that pleads him to drop it, he sighs and tossed his hands up in surrender. “Very well, I relent. Besides, I have always felt she had a bit of a fondness for me—but wasn’t fond of that fondness.”

“Oh, so all this animosity between the two of you is merely just unrequited love?” the Duchess snickered. The idea of Rebecca feeling anything for Anthony but a tremendous disdain was absolutely absurd to her, but that was what made it so laughable.

“It’s her strange way of pulling my hair like children do when they like another,” Anthony nodded, appearing to be oh so confident.

“I don’t remember pulling your hair at all, or you mine.”

She watched as his breathing labored for a moment, her eyes softening at the same sort of tension that had settled over them in the parlor. The tension between them was magnetic, not one

of malice or contempt, as she had felt when they met in public. Even after all those years of heartbreak and loneliness, they still shared a romantic spark. Had she been hoping for it to be rekindled after all this time? Isabel was certain that all she was looking for was friendship. However, a part of her mind was already wondering what she would do if it did turn into something more.

The Duchess shut those thoughts down, wanting nothing more than to embrace the evening. Worrying about tomorrow would do nothing but spoil her spirits. After so long feeling lost from her identity and all those around her, Isabel was wholly taking in the experience of being with Anthony in such a capacity. She had felt more herself in the past hour than she had at any point in time in the previous decade.

Their conversation remained light, playful, witty, and flirtatious at times. Isabel let out nervous, excitable giggles whenever he cracked a lopsided grin or inserted some sort of innuendo, while her cheeks reddened and her heart pattered away. She had only had one brandy, with a sip from the other she poured, but she was completely intoxicated. Not from the liquor but from Anthony. When they finished their dinner, they returned to the parlor. It did not go unnoticed that, this time, Anthony chose to sit next to her instead of alone in a chair. As he sat, he handed her the unfinished brandy and poured himself a glass of sherry. When they relaxed, his arm moved along the back of the couch, and Isabel was completely enthralled by having him so close.

“So, tell me, Isabel,” he purred, swirling his glass and watching as the dark liquid shifted about. “What is your favorite memory? Of all time. From birth until this very moment.”

“This evening is ranking among the best,” she commented with a grin of her own. A finger tapped her chin as she cast her memory back. It had been such a lovely evening of reliving their best moments together. There were so many dear memories for her. Their childhoods had truly been a parade of good times, wholesome fun, and an endless symphony of laughter. To pick only one would feel unfair to the rest. However, she knew the memory she would bring up—one that would help her gauge exactly how he felt about her.

“It’s nearly impossible to pick just one... However, the one that stands out to me the most is my fifteenth birthday,” she answered breezily. It was a reference to the first time he kissed her cheek under that very particular tree. That tree would forever hold an astounding amount of meaning for her. It was where their love began, and where it was found once more.

The gleam in his warm eyes let her know he knew exactly what she was talking about. She watched as emotion flooded him, and then subsided enough for him to say, “That’s near the top of my list, too.”

The next words she spoke were daring, but she was encouraged by his affectionate expression and the close proximity of his heart. “Why do you think we fell in love so many years ago?” Her voice was caught between a breath and a whisper, as if her body wasn’t as brave to speak as her heart. She was pleased with herself for being able to utter those words, for she had always wanted to ask him but had never had the chance.

Anthony did not flinch, nor did his face shift at all to display anything other than the same warmth it had been for the past little while. When he did move, it was with a careful touch that he brushed little strands of hair away from her face. He sighed softly, a tiny hint of a smile pulling at one side of his mouth.

“Because God knew we would not be together, and He has a cruel sense of humor.”

Her heart was about to leap into her throat as she tried to laugh a little, but it was futile. Even her own ears weren't convinced by the little chortles. Her spirit was twisted with a mixture of hope and anxiety, leaving her unable to do anything but consider her next question. “Anthony?”

“Yes?” he replied in kind before sipping his sherry.

“Do you... Do you think that love will ever be in the cards again for us? Whether it is with one another, or others? Or do you think what we had as children will be all we will ever know?” Her mouth was dry from nervousness, and she didn't dare to sip her drink. She was afraid she'd choke on it or spill it on herself. It was a loaded question with far more meaning than it was asking of him. It was her unsubtle way of telling him he was the only man she had ever loved and saw herself loving. It also acknowledged that love for them was far more complicated and rare at that point in their lives, whether that love was shared or not.

Her breath was lodged in her chest as his fingertips grazed the sensitive skin of her cheek. There was nothing else in the universe but his eyes. Never before had she felt so completely immersed in the moment. Not before when they almost kissed, and not in her youth. She wouldn't have noticed if the entire world was burning down around them. Isabel didn't think he would have noticed either, based on how deeply he was looking back into hers.

“Being with you is something of a feverish daydream,” he breathed to her. “It's surreal, dizzying, and almost too delightful... Maybe more so now than ever before. Because

back then it felt so real, I could have picked up our love like a trunk or vase, or whatever the hell else, and could have carried it around every day and to the ends of the earth. And perhaps something I am becoming aware of in this moment, was that it was so real, so tangible, so rich... I felt entitled to it.” His fingers then traced the shape of her jaw, before finding their way back to her chin. “Presently, I’m still angry and I’m still hurt. I’ll be honest with you now in saying that I’m not sure I’ll ever get over it enough to fully embrace your love again. And that it is apparent to me now that the only thing more persuasive than your written word, is breathing your air.”

Isabel didn’t speak, only continuing to get lost in his eyes as she drank in his words and shivered at his slight touch. Anthony continued, “I foolishly thought that coming here would help me keep my wits about me, that I wouldn’t be able to look into your eyes without feeling that nauseating rage come over me. That it was only in person I could really give you a piece of my mind, to make you feel an ounce of the hurt I have borne much like a cross of my own over the years... And here I sit, not just unwilling but unable to do such a thing. Not only because of the concern I have for you, but because much to my chagrin, I cannot simply answer *no* to your question and remain truthful. To my bewilderment, delight, and dismay, it would appear that some fraction of my love for you has withstood these arduous years apart.”

His hand cradled her face as he brought himself nearer to whisper in conclusion, “So, to put it simply... I’m not sure.”

Hearing such words should not have moved her so. After being so vulnerable with him, her bones should have ached at the slight rejection. Nonetheless, she was elated. Some of their love had survived. It should frighten her, knowing full well that she had sworn off the idea of allowing another man into her life. But how could she be afraid of such a thing? Her gaze left his only to peer down at his lips, watching them inch



closer to her. Isabel, swept up in the bliss of the moment, grabbed his cravat and crashed her lips into his.

Never before had the rubbing of her skin against another's felt so natural as it did with him. And the hold it had on her heart! Its beating was so fast and erratic, she was certain it would burst. But what a way to go out if ever there was one. Lips moving in a sensual rhythm, tongues grazing each other, her fingers twisting into his wild tresses, and his hands groping their way down her sides to take firm hold of her hips.

They'd never shared a kiss as passionate as that before. Their brief kisses and lingering hugs had only been tokens of affection. There was something greater right at that moment, something more primal, desperate, and sensual. Isabel wasn't sure if he had pressed his chest against her or if she had pressed hers against him, but they were as close as they could get without undressing. Strong, large hands slid between their torsos, physically ravishing her chest.

Her body began to cry out for him, her legs instinctively pressing together as if he were aware of her physical arousal. Isabel had had sex before but she had never enjoyed it — let alone made love. Even if their feelings were complicated and messy, she knew that would be the case with Anthony. It would be everything she had hoped for and more. There was no telling what his deft fingers could do to make her body react to his touch.

As his lips ripped away from hers and nipped at the side of her neck, her mind darkened. If they continued, Isabel would almost certainly allow him to take her right there in her parlor. She had to stop herself, but how could she when she had never felt such passion in her life?

At the sound of her small moans, Anthony pulled back from her neck. Their eyes locked momentarily before he pressed a softer, sweeter kiss into her lips. He pulled away from her again, leaving only his forehead resting against her. “We should stop, shouldn’t we?” he muttered.

“That’s probably for the best,” she got out between labored breaths.

He was struggling to catch his breath as well. They sat like that, leaned into one another but no longer acting on their desires. Once they evened their breaths, Isabel could think a little more clearly. It wasn’t exactly encouraged, but it certainly wasn’t forbidden, for widows to have lovers. They *could* take things further and romp about in the privacy of her bedchamber, but there was more to the situation than what the public deemed appropriate.

It wouldn’t be right for them to go any further until they knew what was really happening between them, or else they’d both end up hurting even more. Anthony had just told Isabel he wasn’t sure he could ever love her again, and Isabel wasn’t sure she could either. They needed time to think, and they most likely needed to think alone. They both appeared to have realized something but did not express it. With trepidation, they finished their drinks, which had been set on the ground in the midst of the passionate haze. They stood up and made their way to the door to say their goodbyes.

“When you have had time to think on things,” Isabel began as he straightened his cravat, which she had skewed, “Will you write to me?”

He studied her briefly before leaning down and pressing one more gentle kiss to her lips. “I shall,” he promised.

With that, he went into the night, leaving Isabel with a heart more confused than ever—and a sense of desire she never before experienced.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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The thud of a newspaper shook the dishes, spilled the tea, and completely startled a sleepy Isabel. She blinked and looked at the paper before turning to face the thrower. Rebecca appeared, red-faced and as if she had rushed out of the house in a frenzy. Her hair was sloppily tied back, her coat didn't match her dress, and her sister's usual touch of powder and rouge was left undone.

"Good morning to you too," Isabel greeted meekly before placing the newspaper to the side so she could continue eating her breakfast.

"Do not play nice with me," Rebecca hissed, her voice so clearly dripping with disdain and fury. "You... you are a fool, dear sister! You have been back to London for less than a *week* and you are already creating scandals for yourself."

Isabel sipped her tea and shrugged. "I haven't broken any law, so my freedom is not at stake. What would I care about a scandal for?"

It didn't take a genius to figure out that undoubtedly somehow the news of Anthony coming to visit leaked to the press. Perhaps someone saw him on his walk home, maybe one of

her staff whispered it to another—though she doubted the latter, as they really appreciated and liked her. She couldn't imagine them doing anything that would tarnish her name.

Rebecca scoffed, "It is not your freedom that is at stake, Bell. It is your good name! What will the people of your dukedom think of a story like this?"

"Well, I can't accurately say since I haven't read it, nor do I care to—"

The Duchess was cut off by Rebecca snatching up the paper and glaring hard at her sister. "Allow me to do the honor of reading it to you then," Isabel tried to protest.

But Rebecca spoke over her, "The youngest Dowager Duchess of England is allowing her youth to show in the most heinous displays of disrespect of her late husband. Isabel Wynn Swinton, Dowager Duchess of Edington, has been portrayed as nothing than the quiet, recluse beauty since her marriage to the late Robert Swinton. And yet, only months after his passing, the Dowager Duchess has made all of London aware of the sort of company she longs to keep—even if it is in the shadows. The stain on the aristocracy reputation, better known as Lord Anthony Moore, was spotted leaving the widow's townhome in the heart of London late yesterday evening. While the unassuming could speculate that it was merely a friendly dinner among old friends, as the childhood love affair was no secret to the Ton, we would be remiss to overlook Lord Moore's reputation of bedding any woman which has a beating heart."

Isabel tried to interrupt, but Rebecca went on, "No matter the occasion for the late-night visit, it is clear that the Dowager Duchess is uncaring about respecting her late husband. Having

a rake of a man to *his* townhome so soon after his mortal departure is nothing less than spitting on his grave. Dowager Duchess Isabel Swinton has shown her heartless, careless ways. Why is it that the good must die young, and to be outlived by the cruel and evil?”

As much as she did not care for the opinions of others, the final line of the column surely put a sour taste in her mouth.

*Clearly, they did not know Robert like I did.*

She shook her head and sighed. “I do not care about the opinions of bored columnists. I mean really, Rebecca, do you expect me to? What impact will it have on my life?”

Rebecca tossed the paper down on the table and crossed her arms. “This is exactly the sort of sensational gossip that gets people interested in you, sister. And I would expect you of all people to understand you do not want people taking a keen interest in finding the finer details of your life. Digging up things that should be kept secret.”

The Duchess had a crease form between her brows and eyed her sister with true confusion. The only secret Isabel had in life was her relief when her husband passed, but not a soul knew that. Not even Amy! “What do I have to hide?” Isabel questioned. “I have no woes about someone looking into my life. If anything, they will find it remarkably dull.”

“*Really?*” Rebecca retorted, sounding as though what Isabel had just said was the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard. “Are you really sure about that?”

Isabel's gaze panned around the room, her mind casting over her life to try to understand what she could possibly be worried about people knowing. The article had mentioned her and Anthony's feelings for one another as teenagers, which they were obviously aware of the night before...

But she couldn't think of anything else that would be so titillating for others to discover that she needed to keep it hidden. "I am quite certain. Unless you know something I do not."

Rebecca continued to eye her in a way that truly made Isabel uncomfortable. Finally, she spoke, an eyebrow arching high on her face. "So, there is nothing to know about why on Earth you were left *everything* in Robert's will?"

Isabel gawked at her. While it hadn't been a secret, she couldn't recall a conversation in which she had explained it to her. The only reason she would have mentioned it to her sister would be to explain why their father was so adamant about the union. Rebecca, on the other hand, had been overjoyed when she learned the marriage was to a Duke. In fact, she had never even asked her how she felt about leaving Anthony behind. She assumed Isabel would be just as thrilled to be a Duchess as her sister was.

It wasn't worth asking her how she knew, however, assuming that she had overheard it from her father somewhere throughout the years. Wouldn't she know it was part of her Marriage Settlement, though, if that were the case? Shaking her head, Isabel replied, "It was part of my Marriage Settlement. I had nothing to do with it, it was between Robert and Father. I have absolutely nothing to hide about that."

The blonde woman before her looked ready to challenge her over it, but then the anger popped like a bubble. Rebecca's shoulders slumped and she sank down in the dining chair next to Isabel. She rubbed her temple and shyly looked over to Isabel. "Please forgive me, I know I appear erratic... It's just... Edmund informed me of such a thing. He told me he overheard members of the House of Lords discussing it." Rebecca took a deep breath and reached over to take Isabel's hands in hers. Her hands were cold, almost clammy, mirroring the fear in her eyes. "Anthony is a member of the House of Lords." There have been rumors and jokes about him sleeping with the "young Dowager Duchess" in order to amass his own fortune. After all, he has no rights because Moses is the Marquis. They also claim that the Duke is sick of his scandals and wishes for him to marry and settle down."

Oh, Isabel almost wanted to laugh at such a notion, but she knew that doing so would only upset Rebecca more. If anything, Isabel had pursued Anthony and he attempted to avoid her. She gave her sister's hands a squeeze as she replied, "I can assure you, Rebecca, that it is nothing more than a rumor. I know you are concerned for me, and I am immensely grateful for such a thing. However, Anthony is not after my money. To be honest with you, he wasn't even all that inclined to talk to me. And even if something romantic were to transpire, it does not mean I am willing to remarry."

"Can you not see that being around him is poisonous? His own peers are speculating that he would go after you for the money."

"It is but rumors, Rebecca." Isabel sighed, taking her hands away. Already, the Duchess felt exhausted of the conversation that she knew was about to unfold. "Do not believe everything you read in the papers. We have been over this."



“It isn’t just the papers!’ she urged. “I have seen his behavior before my very eyes. It’s only been on occasion, but it’s been enough to make an impression. I’ve seen him stumble into balls, already having had too much to drink and make a complete scene. He flirts with women of any class without care. Married or not! He’s like a human typhoon in London, Isabel. He wreaks havoc anywhere he goes and does not care.” Rebecca snatched one of her hands back and stared deeply into her eyes. “Edmund has seen Anthony leave social clubs with harlots too... Too many times to count.”

Isabel’s heart ached when she heard personal accounts of Anthony’s behavior from her sister and brother-in-law, no matter how hard she tried to resist. It wasn’t, however, because she was disgusted by his behavior. Sure, she knew it was a terrible thing for him to flirt with married women and cause such scenes at parties. Simply put, she knew Anthony better. That wasn’t his true personality, and there was a reason for it. He was a decent person, even if he didn’t always behave as such.

“I must urge you to *please* stop this nonsense before it escalates,” Rebecca stated softly. “Please, enjoy the life you have now and do not do anything to put it into jeopardy. And even if you do not wish to believe it, getting involved with someone like Anthony will do just that. He will pull at your heart strings, use your affection for him against you, and convince you to marry. Do you really want that to happen? You might think it’s rekindled love but remember how awful marriage itself is. A contractual prison where he will pretend to be pleasant at first, and then change the moment you are forever bound to him.”

There was such venom in the words that Isabel knew it wasn’t simply directed at Anthony. Had her sister been suspicious of how terrible Robert was, but only didn’t speak about it because he had passed away—or was there something going

on in her own marriage? A worry blossomed in the pit of her heart. “I promise you, I have no intentions of ever remarrying. And I need you to take me at my word on that,” Isabel told her as gently as she could. She was being truthful, but the kiss returns to her mind, daring her to romanticize what was going on with Anthony. However, there were more important things to consider at present.

“Now, is there something you need to talk about?” Isabel asked with the same care. “Is something going on with you and Edmund?”

“There is nothing going on,” Rebecca assured her, though her tone edges on annoyed. “I am not under the delusion that love is for anything other than tall tales or idle fantasy. And just because that is so, does not mean that my marriage is trouble. I do not appreciate the insinuation, sister.” Had Isabel overstepped some sort of boundary by asking? It would appear so, from the outburst of emotion that seemed to be sparked by it. Why would Rebecca think she was insinuating anything at all? Before she could ask, Rebecca stood from her chair and smoothed her dress. “I will be on my way now. Please consider what we talked about. And remember that while you might not feel you have anything to hide, things and people can fall apart around you because of your actions. Good day, sister.”

Isabel remained sat, her breakfast cold, and her heart heavy. She had absolutely no idea what to make of such a morning.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Anthony was having a serene morning, something of a rarity for him. There was no ache from a hangover or exhaustion from a sleepless night. The evening with Isabel had lingered in his mind, but not in the way it had previously. He slept peacefully and dreamed of the kiss they shared. There was nothing else on Earth like the pure passion and bliss that had surged through his veins when their lips met.

However, the lord should have known better than to think such a pleasant morning could exist for him. Just as he finished his eggs and ham, and reached for a basket of scones, he was rendered frozen at the sight of his father storming into the room. *Never* did his father come to him. If they were to meet, which was rare, Anthony was summoned to the family home. The Duke of Mondale stopped short of his son, his face nearly beet red.

A newspaper was tossed onto the table. Anthony did not have to glance at it to know that he had once again made his way into an article—no doubt about his visit to Isabel’s. However, when his father gestured for him to read it, he did so to appease him. “What did I say, Anthony?” his father barked as Anthony looked back up to him. “What did I say about getting your name in the paper again for such foolishness?”

“Father,” Anthony urged, “I can assure you that this is all nonsense – senseless speculation. Isabel invited me to dinner. It was only to talk.”

“Did you not read what they said about you? About *her*?” he hissed.

“Can I not have dinner with a friend?!” Anthony exclaimed. “I mean really, Father, you know they will make news out of anything these days. Nothing scandalous happened. They jumped at an opportunity to embarrass a young Dowager Duchess, and I am an easy target.”

“It is Isabel’s involvement that makes this so much worse,” his father snapped. “You and your reputation *will not* drag her down. Need I remind you that her father and I are very good friends? I will not have my son getting her slandered and mocked in gossip columns!”

Anthony bravely stood from his chair and brought both hands to his chest. “Need I remind *you* of the history that Isabel and I share?” The words seem to deflate his father slightly but he still saw the gleam of anger in his eyes. “This was a dinner between two old friends. We ran into each other at the park and later agreed to meet for dinner. She is seeking friendship now that she is alone, and I am seeking to heal from the pain of our past.”

The Duke sighed and shook his head. “That is all well and good, son, but there is more to it. You’re back on the scene, which I warned you not to do, and your name has brought her down with you. I cannot allow this to happen, especially not to Isabel.”

Anthony was internally torn about whether or not he wanted to see her again, knowing that clearly he did not have the will power to not fall into her welcoming embrace. However, he wanted the choice to be his to make, not his father's. There had to be a way to smooth it over with him, for him to be allowed access to Isabel. If he didn't, he could foresee his father already forcing his hand in the decision to go to America or be cut off. His mind was running a mile a minute until it found a solution, and immediately, words spewed from his mouth to put it into action.

“I must implore you to see reason. Isabel nor I thought we were doing anything wrong at all, as it is not against customs for her to be able to dine with a friend in private, no matter the gender of the friend. And beyond that... we have history. I am sure that you are well aware she is the only woman I have ever loved. And while I know it is rather unlikely that anything will develop between us, and that it'll be a long time before we can legally marry... And, if I am to stay in England at all under your terms, can you think of anyone better for me than her? Who else would be willing to marry me? I'm older, and I have the reputation of a snake... What lady would be interested in me?” He could tell by the somber expression on his father's face that he had him on the ropes. “If you insist, Father, then I shall accept my fate and ready myself for America. You can be rid of me then so I can no longer cause you embarrassment.”

The final remarks were accurate, but guilt nipped at his spirit. He didn't like the idea of using Isabel to stay in England, either in theory or in practice. Anthony, to be honest, never imagined the two of them getting married. But he preferred to make his own decision and to have the time to do so in England. He fought himself over it, but his mouth had other ideas and added, “If things do work out with Isabel, then it will benefit everyone. I'll have held up my end of the deal, and I will have financial support from her side of the marriage. You won't have to support me, and I can assure you that I

cannot dishonor a woman like her by bringing scandal upon us.”

His father was silent, clearly drinking in all of the conversation that had happened in rapid fire succession between the two. At last, the Duke sighed and ran a hand over his face. “Alright, Anthony... I will allow it, but tread carefully. I mean it! So much as your name appearing in the same sentence as hers in the paper, and I will disown you on the spot. There will be no choice between here or America. Rather, it will be which work camp you shall end up at. Do you understand me? I shan’t have your reputation poisoning her. She has been through too much for you to put her through more.”

“Understood,” Anthony muttered. “I won’t let you down.”

His father’s dark brown eyes lingered on him as he sighed and replied, “I really, really hope you won’t.”

It was the first time Anthony really felt as though his father cared whether he stayed or went. It was clearly by the sadness in his voice and face, that he did care. That he wanted him to stay. The Duke left the room without uttering another word, not even a goodbye. Once he heard the front door open and close, Anthony headed out of the room and toward the stairs. To his surprise, Moses was also there and they nearly collided.

“Oh, Anthony—”

“Not now,” Anthony interjected and paused only when his hand rested on the banister. “Unless it is life or death, I shall need to speak with you later.”

“Very well,” Moses nodded. “Will you come by this evening? Before dinner.”

“I shall,” Anthony said before heading up the stairs. Usually, he would not have been so rude to his brother, but his mind was singularly focused on getting word to Isabel about what had just happened. He told himself he only felt so obligated to write her right away because he felt guilty for using her as a way to stay in London, and it was only right for him to give the friendship a chance because of it.

Sitting down at his desk, he dipped his quill in ink and immediately sprawled out his thoughts on paper:

*Dear Isabel,*

*I am uncertain if you have read the paper and discovered the “delightful” article written about our dinner. And whether you have or not, I do apologize for my presence being so controversial. I must go ahead and tell you that I only discovered what had been said because of my father. To say he “isn’t happy” would be a gross understatement. Perhaps it shall warm your heart to know that he is mostly upset about my reputation tarnishing yours. He cares about you greatly still and does not want my past grievances to affect you.*

*And be that as it may, he does approve of a friendship between us. However, to protect both of our reputations, he is insisting that we operate with discretion. So, for the time being, would you be open to conversing through letters with me? I know I said before that I was too persuaded by your words to remain objective. After our evening together, though, I have done a great deal of thinking. I want it to be clear that my heart still has a tremendous amount of hesitance about getting close to you again, but I think we owe it to ourselves to at least try. As I*

*fear the “what ifs” that would follow turning my back to you now would haunt me for the rest of my mortal days.*

*I will be hesitant, I might have to work through this resentment I still hold for you, but I think it is time that I do. So long as you are willing to give me a chance, and have a forgiving heart as I challenge myself with this arrangement, I shall be awaiting your response in kind.*

—Anthony

Looking back at his words made him feel sick to his stomach. Did he really want to take such a risk and start a relationship with her, no matter how serious it turned out to be? Just a few days ago, he would have laughed at the thought! And yet, as he sat there, reading back his own words, which he had thought he had written in haste and panic, he realized there was genuine sincerity behind them.

There was no denying that Isabel had hurt him more than he ever thought possible, and he thought he would carry the anger it had sparked for all his days. However, Anthony was approaching a crossroad in life. No matter the decision he made when it came to staying in England or going to America, he was no longer going to be able to continue to live the way he had in his adulthood. He was to marry and settle down or start anew in America. Neither of those had a chance of bringing him any amount of happiness if he did not try and heal.

If he knew all this, why was he so damn nervous? Standing from the desk, he sauntered over to the bar cart and poured himself a stiff rum before returning to his letter. He downed the bitter drink and took a deep breath. As soon as he sent that



letter on with his footman, he knew that it was the start of something new.

And there would be no turning back.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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*J*sabel and Anthony stood on the balcony of her bedchamber at the country estate. The full moon was so grand in the sky, and every star in the Heavens was visible for them. “Isn’t it a beautiful night, Anthony?” she breathed.

“I’ve never seen one more perfect,” he agreed. His hands rested on her hips as he stood behind her. “Though, every night with you is just as grand.”

She giggled, but then her laughter caught in her throat as his hand pressed through the fabric of her dress, between her legs. His other hand lifted to move her hair away from her neck and then graze across the skin. It was then that she noticed down below, in her lavish garden, there was a ball taking place. There were lanterns and candles lighting a dancefloor; everyone looked to have a glass of wine, and there was a glorious rumble of music. Anthony’s lips touched her neck and she shuddered.

“There are people just below,” she whispered to him.

“Are there? I hadn’t noticed,” he whispered right in her ear. Bunching up the back of her dress, he slid his hand between

her legs. “Why would I look down there at all those people, when I’m up here with you and the stars?”

*Her face turned to look at him, and she witnessed the love and adoration in his eyes. Their lips connected in a loving kiss, and she was grateful for it to smother her moans as his fingers slipped into her wet, needy flesh. His face pulled back and smirked at her. “Turn around. Wouldn’t want anyone to think we are up to no good.”*

*Isabel did just that, looking back over the railing, up to the sky as he pleased her with his hand. It was so intense and dangerous! What if someone noticed? From down below they had to look like just a couple stargazing, right? Oh, Isabel didn’t care. She was lost in the rhythm of his hand, though she wanted more of him.*

*Just as her pleasure began to mount, his hands were gone. “Oh, do not tease me so,” she breathed. There was no response. Turning to Anthony, she only gaped at the discovery he was no longer there. Peering into her bedroom, she noticed it too was empty. Unsure why her mind thought to do so, she stepped back to the railing and looked down over the party. There, in the middle of the dancefloor stood Anthony with a woman wearing a scarlet dress and painted red lips to match. While he held her gaze, he kissed the neck of the woman. Then, he held up a small velvet sack. Her purse!*

*Rushing down after him with tears running down her face, she was determined to ask him why he would do such a thing to her. However, by the time she reached the dancefloor, everyone was gone. There was no music. It was just her, alone. So very alone...Isabel jerked awake, cursing herself for taking an afternoon nap. She had no idea it would turn into such a nightmare! Why would her own mind torment her so? She stood up from her bed, smoothing her hair and attempting*

to leave the dream behind. Her mind, on the other hand, was obstinate and kept replaying it.

She and Amy set about redoing the foyer, the main decision being the wallpaper. They talked about patterns and colors, but her mind was elsewhere. What if her dream had been a warning? What if there was some deep, inner part of Isabel that didn't wish to reunite with Anthony because she knew that he really was the beast everyone made him out to be?

“Do you like this pattern, Your Grace?” Amy asked.

“That is alright,” Isabel absent-mindedly responded, not even glancing at it. She continued to flip through swatches, though her mind did not absorb any of them.

He had been rather upset when they ran into one another. She supposed it was a little odd he so easily accepted to have dinner with her, and even more so how pleasant it was, despite his dismissal prior... What if Rebecca was right and he was just trying to seduce the Duchess to get to her money?

“Your Grace? Your Grace?”

Isabel wasn't sure how long she had been lost in thought, but she shook her head and looked up to Amy. “Yes?”

“Are you feeling well?” Amy asked gently. “You... you've been looking at the same five samples for a while.”

“Oh,” Isabel muttered, looking down and only then noticing there really were only five in her hands. “I suppose I have a lot on my mind today.”

“Understandable.” Amy nodded. “I shall not pry, but I am here if you need to talk, Your Grace.”

“Thank you.” Isabel sighed. She was glad Amy was willing to talk to her if she needed it, but she wasn’t yet ready. Her mind felt too cluttered to make sense of anything at all at the moment. She needed more clarity before she had an intelligent conversation about it at all.

Just as she tried to focus on the task at hand, the butler approached her with a letter. Her heart fluttered and sank all at once when she saw it was Anthony’s handwriting. Excusing herself, Isabel walked to the study to read it privately. Sinking down into the chair, she unfolded the note and read away. *Oh my*. She certainly hadn’t expected all that he had said, especially the inclusion of his father. The mention of his father did worry her a bit, remembering what Rebecca had said about the Duke was right. That he had tired of Anthony’s scandals and told him to marry. What if that was all it was, a plot to marry her for her fortune?

Her heart didn’t want to believe it, especially since he was so open and vulnerable about his emotions and desires with her. Isabel wanted to help him overcome his pain more than anything else, and they were finally at a point where he was willing to face their demons together. And to exchange letters for a while... That was completely romantic to her. She reminded herself not to get caught up in such thoughts. Not with her doubts about him and her own future.

There was only one way to figure out what was his intentions really were. Her eyes fell to her new quill and stamp she had just purchased that morning after Rebecca left; thankful she had gotten a stamp with an *I* that very day.

*Anthony,*

*I am sorry to hear that your father had such a reaction—Rebecca had a rather similar one. While I do not care about the opinions of the columnists among the Ton, I do agree that it would be beneficial to have some distance for a little while. That way we can sort out our thoughts and feelings separately, and also together, in private. I fear if I mention your name one more time in front of Rebecca, a vein in her head might burst.*

*I am glad to hear you are open to talking about everything and to try and move forward. I am just as willing as you. So, tell me, Anthony, how have the years really been for you since I left London? With Warmth, Isabel*

Isabel read over both letters and found herself wondering what exactly her own parents would think about the two of them. They remained at their country estate most of the time, which was quite a distance from London. Did they know of all Anthony's supposed antics? Would they disapprove if something more was born out of their friendship? Isabel wasn't sure but knew that writing to her mother right then would be premature. She first needed to get an understanding of what it was her heart wanted. Next time she saw her in person, perhaps she would find a way to discuss it.

Sealing the letter with her new stamp and putting his letter in the same drawer that held the others, Isabel headed back down to the foyer. Once the letter was sent off with the footman, Isabel felt the same sort of clarity that happened the first time

she wrote him. It would take time to understand his intentions, but at least they were headed in that direction.

As she and Amy resumed picking out decorations for the foyer, her maid asked, "Have you given much thought to the country estate?"

"Not too much. I plan to redecorate but since it is so large, it will take a long while to complete." Isabel sighed.

"What about the garden? I know you wanted to do one this year," Amy suggested.

Isabel blinked and looked up at her kind mind. She had forgotten about the garden since her arrival to the townhome. "You're right," she breathed.

"If you are going to do one, I would suggest we head that way sometime this week to oversee it. One of the other maids mentioned that we had our last freeze of the season last week."

"Very well. I think we shall head that way tomorrow. How exciting." Isabel grinned.

Her mind busied itself with thinking about arrays of floral bushes, manicured hedges, and all the peaceful afternoons she could have in the gazebo overlooking all that hard work. There was no telling what direction her life was headed with Anthony back in the picture, but she knew no matter what, there was a great deal of sunshine and flowers in it. Much like her fondest memories of childhood.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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### THE NEXT DAY

*J*sabel,

*I am not a proud man to admit that I have been absolutely abhorrent since we parted ways in our youth. Most of the rumors you have heard, are likely true. I have been a sinner, to say the least. I have overindulged in drink, smoking, and women. With the same frequency a frog leaps from lily pad to lily pad, I have leapt from vice to vice. However, I want to be clear that is not because my soul is black or evil. Instead, it was corrupted by the heartache you instilled in me.*

*Now that I am writing these words out and have them stare at me... Well, I feel conflicted. Because I have, in fact, blamed you for every indiscretion I have done. My reasoning was that if I weren't in such pain, I wouldn't act that way. Therefore, the fault must lie in the person responsible for the pain. And yet, I know it was my hand that picked up each bottle of liquor, and my inherently foul words that swindled women into bed time and time again. You did not force my hand, even if you set the ball in motion. I'm unsure how to feel. My anger wishes for me to continue placing the blame solely on you. My heart, however, wishes me to be wiser to take the blame for myself.*



*What about you? You have mentioned a number of times that you have been lonely. How can that be if you were married? What was life like for you in the years that separated us?*

– *Anthony*

Before her letter ever arrived, Anthony had made himself swear not to sit about rereading his own words. It would only drive him mad and cause him to overthink. Instead, he would speak to Isabel solely from the heart and send the letters on their way. That was exactly what he did, passing it off to his footman once it was sealed. He stepped outside, sighing. He had nothing to do for the first time in a long time.

Typically, he would spend his days with nothing particular planned, frequenting social clubs or attending a variety of seedy soirées. He knew he couldn't, however, because of his father.

Well, he assumed that there was still a lot he could be doing. In reality, Anthony should be preparing for his trip to America. Doing more research, packing his belongings, and making plans to see all of his acquaintances and friends before leaving. It appeared to be his most likely outcome, and he should begin working toward it while he sorted things out with Isabel, but something in him did not want to begin that process just yet.

Moving over to his coach, he decided to travel to Ernest's for a surprise visit. He knew that it was improper at such a phase in his friend's life, but he knew he would be forgiven. Besides, half of social interactions among the Ton were unannounced visits. As the carriage rolled down the street, he tried to decide what the purpose of such a visit was. Of course, they wouldn't be upset if there wasn't any purpose at all. However, it was bothering him. It felt as though there was something that his

mind was trying to work out behind the scenes that it wanted Ernest's opinion on. But what was it?

Well, hopefully it would come to him – eventually.

The carriage ultimately came to a halt, and he stepped out. The butler motioned him inside the townhouse as he approached the door. Much to his surprise, he could not hear the little boy's constant laughter nor the infant cry. Were they asleep, perhaps? But Ernest appeared at the top of the stairs, holding paperwork.

He peered down at Anthony and headed toward him. “A surprise visit? I thought Anthony Moore only made such appearances if there were brandy and... affectionate women about.”

“Don't tempt me with a good time,” he retorted with a light chuckle. He then peered about dramatically. “Where are the wife and kids?”

“They've headed out to the country estate. You know how important the garden is to Helena.” Ernest chuckled.

“'Tis the season,” Anthony nodded.

“I shall be following after them this evening. Just had some business to sort. But fret not, Anthony, we will be back next week.”

Anthony followed after Ernest as he paced down the hall, clearly something on his mind. “Well, now. Who said I would fret in your absence? Do you think I am so codependent?”

The Duke of Atholl stopped at a table and scribbled something down on the paper he was carrying. “Oh, who would ever accuse you of such a thing?” he asked, his tone edged with sarcasm.

“Careful, old sport. You are treading horribly close to hurting my feelings.”

Ernest rolled his eyes and the two shared a bit of laughter before they moved to the parlor to sit. “What’s going on?” he asked gently.

“Bored, mostly.” Anthony sighed, tossing his head back on the couch to stare up at the ceiling. “I haven’t anything to do.”

“How is it you have nothing to do? Don’t you have an ultimatum you should be seeing to?” Ernest snorted.

“It is on hold for the moment. I have come to peace with the fact I shall be setting sail for America come summer. Well, as much peace as one can make with such a thing.”

“*Really?*” Ernest breathed. “But... why? You would hate America.”

“Hate is a rather strong word, don’t you think?” Anthony retorted. It did not go without notice how strongly of a

response Ernest had to the news. It both intrigued and flattered Anthony.

“Perhaps,” he mused but scoffed just the same. “However, I really cannot see you enjoying yourself in such an underdeveloped society.”

“Underdeveloped?” Anthony chuckled. “The country that is one of few to win a war against the Crown? And has more natural resources than we can wish to have?”

Ernest scanned his dear friend with skeptical eyes. “Forgive me, Anthony. For I thought it was drink and women you had a love affair with—not the country of traitors and bandits.”

“Oh, you are *so* sore this afternoon, aren’t you?” Anthony responded with a wide grin that he couldn’t get rid of even if he tried. Not that he ever would, because seeing Ernest fume even more because of said amusement made him giddy with delight.

“I just want you to really think about what you’re giving up when leaving here,” Ernest urged. He sat up more and folded his hands. “It’s not just your family and friends you would be leaving behind, but all the comforts you have ever known. As I highly doubt it’s New York City that your father would be sending you to. Where is the punishment in that?”

The Duke looked all too impressed with himself, a smirk tugging at his lips. Anthony rolled his eyes. “I’ll give you that much,” he murmured. “However, I would only be an hour from Boston. I’m sure that I could secure a flat or townhome in the city after a while.”

A servant brought in a tray of tea, which Ernest thanked her for. A cup was offered to Anthony, which he begrudgingly accepted. It felt wrong to ask for anything else in his home. After all, he never indulged in alcohol anymore. Not after he broke his vow of silence and started anew with Helena. He stirred in a few lumps of sugar and waited for his friend's response.

After a loud slurp of his beverage, and setting it down on the saucer, Ernest's intense gray eyes locked onto Anthony's. There had always been something about him that could almost unnerve him: his ability to go from playful and humorous, to so serious that it almost came off as deadly. All in the blink of an eye. And yet, just as fast as the viperous look overcame his face, it dissipated into something else entirely.

"Have you even given marriage a chance?" Ernest inquired before taking another sip of his tea. "Or have you been too busy having rendezvous with the Duchess of Edington?"

"Of course, you have heard of our *singular* meal," Anthony grumbled, slouching a bit in his chair.

"How could I not when it was so scandalously detailed in the paper?" Ernest snickered, sounding all too pleased with himself. "It does leave to ask why you haven't told me about such a development. After all, last time we spoke about Isabel, you gaffed at the idea of so much as considering having a conversation with her."

Anthony shuffled uncomfortably, knowing how strange reading about such things in the paper would appear to his friend. Especially after watching him successfully destroy his

own life in a fantastic parade of parties, drinks, and scandals for years and years. All with the context of knowing how he felt about the woman he blamed, who had forever changed the course of his life. Even until just a few days ago.

“I didn’t know I had to run every little decision by you,” he muttered, though he knew as the words poured from his lips it was a false argument. Of course, he didn’t need to run his every decision by his friend, but something so important and transcendent usually was. Granted, it had not often been that it was Anthony who needed to confess such changes and seek counsel over it. And honestly, he probably should have so that he hadn’t tackled the issue with such reckless abandonment. The kiss played across his mind, but he shook his head to set the memory free.

“If you must know,” Anthony muttered before Ernest responded himself. “We bumped into one another yet again, and after the exchange, she wrote to me. In other words, I agreed to meet her for dinner so that we could discuss any potential friendship that might develop. Or to determine once and for all whether we should avoid one another like lepers.”

Ernest was silent, drinking in the revelation just as he did his tea. “I see,” he eventually replied, “and what was the verdict?”

Anthony sighed heavily, having not the slightest clue how to answer such a thing. To answer it, would be to read the future—a power that he did not hold. “I suppose you could call it a draw.” He shrugged. “We have not become friends, nor have we agreed to part ways. We are still exploring such a possibility.”

“Fascinating,” Ernest breathed. “Absolutely fascinating.”

“What is?” Anthony snorted, setting his tea to the side.

Ernest’s mouth pulled upward on one side. “How easily you give into her. It’s... *endearing*. An adjective I don’t believe I’ve ever heard uttered in the same sentence as your name.”

“Don’t flatter me so,” Anthony remarked sarcastically and folded his arms. “To be completely frank with you, it is an absolute mess of a situation. One that my gut tells me to run from the hills from—”

“*But?*” Ernest commented, as though continuing Anthony’s sentence.

Annoyingly so, he was. “*But...* I suppose if there were ever a time or a chance for forgiveness and new beginnings, it would be now. I owe it to myself to give it a go even if it is foolish.”

“I wouldn’t consider it foolish at all. No, not a single bit,” Ernest said. “Though, it does beg the question why it is you are, at the same time, exploring friendship with a lover lost to circumstance, and priming yourself for America. Does that not seem a bit bisected in thinking?”

“I don’t see it that way,” Anthony stated simply. “I can have friends from across the Atlantic. Can I not?”

“You can,” Ernest muttered. “But what about the option of staying?”

Anthony batted away the notion with a wave of his hand. “That is not in the cards, old sport. You should know better than to think such a thing when it comes to Isabel and me. She’s a Duchess, she’s not going to, nor should she give that up. And I don’t think I can foresee such a thing being a possibility for me, even if she were willing.”

“And why not?” Ernest asked. “If she was willing to marry you, why would you not want to? Clearly you are working on forgiving her if you are willing to be her friend.”

It was the question his mind couldn’t put into words that drove him to Ernest’s townhouse. He had an answer ready for him, but Anthony knew before he said it that it wasn’t entirely accurate. It was simply how he *anticipated* feeling about it. “Forgiveness does not mean that my heart will ever be open to more than just that.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Ernest nodded. “But why not see if it could be? Would it really be so bad?”

The truth rattled about in his chest like winter air. Frigid, stinging his lungs and making every inhale and exhale feel as though it did more harm than good. “I have placed my heart in her hands once and she crushed it. While I am starting to understand that perhaps, together, we can mend the damage that has been done... To have it happen again would surely kill me.”

There hadn’t been a woman he approached in all his years that the thought of rejection made him so much as blink, let alone frown, cry, or feel fear. That was because love had never been on the table, no matter how much he thought a woman pretty or liked conversation with her, no one ever compared to Isabel. Even though his heart was bitter and bruised from her refusal



to run away with him all those years ago, it was branded with only one name. And it belonged to her. It was hers to keep, take, or break. He'd had enough drink and chance encounters to ignore her name on it, but that didn't change the fact that it was there.

He was staring down at the floor, ashamed and vulnerable. Never would he had thought that coming there that day he would have such a revelation about his own heart. Frankly, he didn't know what to do with the information. Should he tell her? That didn't seem right. Not so soon after her husband passing, and not so swiftly after meeting again. She had her own life to navigate and all she had requested of him was friendship.

*Do you think that love will ever be in the cards again for us? Whether it is with one another, or others? Or do you think what we had as children will be all we will ever know?*

Her words hummed somewhere in his mind, but he wasn't sure what to make of them, of the kiss, of the look in her eyes every time their gazes met. Isabel clearly yearned for love, or at the very least hoped she could find it again one day. But Anthony was terrified of the prospect of facing her rejection again. And it was only natural for him to feel this way! She turned him down. It was supposed to be the final statement, the final interaction. Anthony speculated selfishly that her arrival in London was nothing more than the universe intervening. His heart hurt and his head was a mess. What should happen after that? What else was he supposed to do but embrace the idea of America?

There was a hand on his shoulder then. Anthony hadn't even noticed Ernest walking toward him. Glancing up at his friend, he took note of the softened expression on his face. "Might I implore you to consider a course of action?" Ernest asked

lowly. Anthony nodded in agreement. “Talk with her, work through this hurt. There is nothing saying your mended heart could not be open to others.”

Anthony opened his mouth to dismiss it, but Ernest went on, “You said you owed it to yourself to give friendship a go, to heal. Do you not owe it to yourself to make an effort to remain in the life you know and love? With your anger gone and your heart repaired, do you really think it impossible to find a lady to settle down with?”

“I suppose *impossible* isn’t the correct word...” Anthony mumbled.

“I’ll be back in town in a few weeks,” Ernest informed him. “When I return, Helena is throwing a dinner party for some of the ladies she has gotten close with over the last couple of years. Come, let me wingman for you like we used to back in the day. Only this time I shall be able to talk.”

“You always could though, couldn’t you? You were just too stubborn and dramatic,” Anthony mused with humor, trying to lighten the situation. Ernest only looked at him and he sighed. “Very well, I’ll... I’ll give it a go.”

“Good man,” Ernest stated, patting his shoulder.

Anthony and Ernest exchanged some small talk, mostly about the country estate and their plans for the garden. Then, with brief goodbyes, he headed back to his townhome with his heart heavy, confused, and conflicted.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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### THE NEXT DAY

*A*nthony,

*I understand your confliction about your life up until this point, and whose blame is it to hold. I think, in part, we can share the blame. I will not shy away from the part which is mine to bare, as I know that my actions have consequences. And I want to reiterate again that I am sorry. I will scream it to the heavens if I must, along with my gratefulness that you are willing to talk with me.*

*Now that is out of the way, I want to make it clear to you as possible. I do not, nor will I ever, judge you for such actions. It would be wrong of me to take ownership in the turmoil that you have been living in, only for me to shame you for how you have coped and survived such circumstances. In my eyes, you have done nothing that isn't worthy of understanding or forgiveness. And through it all, I hope you experienced true joy and contentment, even if it was fleeting.*

*Yes, I have stated in so many ways that these years have been hard and lonely for me. I cannot speak on this without speaking ill of the dead, so I hope that I have your kindness, patience, and trust.*

*Not only did I break your heart, and my own, when I agreed to marry Robert Swinton, I also sealed my fate for a miserable life. One could never imagine a duchess describing their life in such a way, can they? Why, it's meant to be filled with fine clothes, jewelry, parties, and holidays even. But mine was not. While I am not so out of touch to claim that the lower-class women had it easier than me, I will admit that the marriage was so suffocating I often daydreamed of leaving. Some days a workcamp would have been preferred to cohabitating a house with such a man.*

*I will skip his lesser transgressions, like his unwavering cheap nature. However, it felt as though he sought after ways to make my life as small and miserable as he could. His need for control was never fully satiated. I was unable to read anything that he did not first preview, in fear I would give into radical, progressive thinking. He watched over my meals to ensure I did not gain weight, nor was I able to drink anything but unsweetened tea. That was, of course, because he intended to make me lay with him as wife. Then he would grant me a couple of sherries.*

*And there were the other forms of control he had over me. I was to be standing when he entered a room, or else he would raise his hand to scare me. It was rare that he ever laid a cruel hand on me, but it was his tongue which held venom. Insults and picking me apart physically, emotionally, and intellectually was a daily occurrence within a matter of months. I was taught that I was ugly, selfish, stupid, mean, uncaring, cold, and any other negative adjective that you can think of. By the end of the first year of marriage, I was convinced he was all I deserved. Most days, at least. And it was those days, I am ashamed to admit, you felt like nothing more than a sweet daydream.*

*But all in all, it was the memory of you that kept me from disappearing. Without the love we once shared, Anthony, I would not have remembered what it was like to be a person. To be valued and thought of as more than property. I had all but succumbed to what he wanted me to be: the ideal object of a wife. One that does not speak unless spoken to, that respects her husband more than anything—even God. A wife that costs him next to nothing, and one that wants for nothing and does not have the spirit to voice her thoughts or feelings.*

*In the sake of honesty, he was always cruel... But it was when he found me penning a letter to you six months after our wedding, that his cruelty was unleashed like chaos from Pandora's box. Robert became paranoid that I would commit infidelity, and perhaps even run away. His cruelty increased tenfold.*

*Before that day, he could be demanding and cold. After that, he was heinous. Any egregious words that came to his mind were hurled my way. Only, they were never careless. They were smithed from the darkness of his heart and sharpened to cut me where it hurt, and as deeply as he could. My looks, my heart, my intelligence—they all had targets on them. He claimed deflowering me caused my youth to drain away. That he had paid for a young, bubbly bride and now all that's left is an old hag. That I was fortunate he had pity for me.*

*Robert would start a conversation on topics I was not keen on. And within moments, would be belittling me for not being smart enough to understand what he was talking about—that my mother wasted her time teaching me to read. I'm not sure if this was the most painful, or his accusations of me being heartless. At times, he insinuated if I had any heart at all, I would spare him from a life with a stupid, ugly hag. Though, Robert always reminded me shortly after that taking your own life was a sin against God. I don't think he was ever happy unless he rendered me into a puddle. A crying, confused*

*puddle of a person. I remember there were times I wish he would have raised his hand to me rather than open his mouth. His hand surely stung, but the pain never lasted as long as the hurt of his words.*

*He made sure that not only did I not have the confidence to leave him, but that I did not have anything awaiting me on the outside world. No money nor friends. Following that letter I was writing you, for months he forbid staff to collect letters from me. If I were to talk to anyone, it would be someone he approved of, and a letter which he proofread to ensure I did not speak ill of him or lament that I wanted to leave. I only had Rebecca and my mother for the entirety of my marriage, but I only ever spoke of pleasant things and kept the focus on them.*

*He robbed me of existing in my truth, even in the eyes of the ones I loved most. I questioned my sanity. I wept. I was alone. If not for the memory of you and the kindness of my maid, Amy, I would have surely withered into nothing. I felt that was what he wanted. Because he wanted my everything. For him, I surrendered my last name, my freedom, my social life, and true love. And in spite of him, all I could do was keep him from satisfaction. I persevered because he could crush, mangle, and shatter my spirit—but it was the one of two things he could not own. The other being my heart.*

*I am sorry if this letter has been a perpetual rambling that lead to nowhere but pity. It is not pity nor sympathy I am after here. Rather, a taste of freedom. At last, I can share my ~~story~~ truth with another, and no one can stop me. There is no other than you that I would rather share my truth, mind, and spirit with.*

*I am unsure what else to say. Writing this has awakened emotions that I'm unsure I prepared myself to divulge so explicitly. But rest assured that I will be fine, and I sincerely*

*hope that this letter did not offend you. We can discuss anything at all. You don't even have to respond to what I've written here. It is only important to me that you are aware of this. For someone other than my maid and me to know the truth about me.*

*With warmth,*

*Isabel*

*P.S—I am currently at my country estate to oversee the gardening for the season. So that you and your footman are aware. However, I shall be coming and going frequently. I intend on having lunch at the Winston Café upon my return to London, at precisely noon on Monday. Perhaps we will see one another there.*

Isabel was ill after writing such a letter. Her mind could not bear rereading such details of her marriage, as they were all too well-known to her. Putting them on paper had been therapeutic but having the ink stare back at her was nothing short of painful. Not to mention the tears drying on the parchment.

No, it was the postscript which she focused on. Part of her felt it was too forward, too risky, for her to suggest a happenstance bumping into one another. After all, it had been just a few days since the news of their dinner together splashed across the newspaper. And perhaps she was only suggesting it because writing about Robert had left her feeling raw, vulnerable, and in need of reassurance.

Perhaps that was too much to ask of him.

And yet, she sealed the letter after convincing herself that there was no better route to take than to be true to herself. Besides that, was there really any harm in letting him know where she would be having lunch? Whether he decided to be at the same café, at the time as her, was up to him. After she handed the letter to the footman, Isabel crossed the foyer to carry herself back to bed.

“Your Grace,” Amy’s voice called from behind her. Isabel turned to look at her maid. “The gardeners have arrived and are waiting for you outside.”

The Duchess hedged at the news. They had come all the way out here to oversee the garden and it would be silly for her to turn her back on the plans right then. She, on the other hand, was in no mood to do anything but wallow in her misery. She put an end to her own request before she even opened her mouth to order the gardeners away. Not only was it unjust to do so but what good would crying in bed do for her?

“Very well.” She sighed. The two women made their way out of the house. Almost immediately, the Duchess’ mood improved. It was, at last, another wonderfully warm day. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, and there were flowers to select and arrange.

Approaching the head gardener, she immediately noticed just how kind and respectful he was. Isabel had prepared herself for any laborer to be stubborn and talk down to her. The only thing that really seemed to overshadow class in England, was prejudice of sex and race. The gardener’s pleasant attitude and passion for plants really helped her get lost in the task.

“Which ones would you like for around the stairs, Your Grace?” he asked, showing her a catalog that had lists of plant



names and sketches of their blossoms next to them. “We have all of these seeds with us today. But just so you know, these,” he stated, pointing out a variety of flowers, “bloom the earliest but that also means they lose their flower faster. Still, they make for wonderful shrubbery.”

Her eyes scanned over all the options. She had never really learned much about flowers or plants but she had always thought them to be beautiful. Once she found one with gorgeous clusters of petals, and pink listed out in the variety of color choices, she pointed to it. “These, in pink, please.”

“Rhododendron, excellent choice, Your Grace. However, you may want to find a couple of trees to place in front of the estate for these. In the summer, these flowers yearn for shade.”

It went on like this, all of them walking together, gesticulating to plots of land, the gardener telling her what would work best in such an area, and Isabel listening to his advice when it came to making her choices. The team was on their way to gather supplies by the end of the afternoon, ready to begin the process first thing in the morning.

Isabel took a step back from the property to get a better look at it. When she first arrived with Robert, she thought it was lovely and only needed a Lady’s touch. White-washed bricks, elegant columns that supported a few balconies, and large paned windows. The house itself was beautiful, but it felt... isolated. It was squarely situated in the middle of a vast field that she had mistaken for a blank canvas. Instead, she came to think of it as the never-ending chasm that separated her from the rest of the world.

Well, no more. It finally *was* her canvas. She would turn what had once felt more like a prison than a home into a place

teeming with life. Flowers, trees, and shrubs. Colorful wallpapers and new furniture! And parties. She swore there would be people walking those halls by the end of the year. She was going to reinvent the estate if it was supposed to be where she spent her time. Isabel and her surroundings would be reborn with love and care. Even if she was the sole provider of such notions.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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MONDAY

*I*sabel,

*I am writing this as we sit across from one another in Winston's Café. I am rather sure you have noticed me doing this. However, I want to explain why I haven't responded in the last few days.*

*Since it appears we are allowing one another to see the beautiful and the ugly, I will not hide that some of my thoughts were not savory. I am mostly moved by rage toward your late husband. How he could treat you in such a way is beyond me. And yet, in the same breath, I find myself thinking his treatment was karmic. Now, it is not to hurt you that I admit this. It is to show you of my process. I am in a strange position to want to spit on the grave of your late husband, while also finding a sick sort of amusement in it all.*

*I do not believe that this is the truth of my heart, Isabel. And I had to wait until today, to see you again—even at just a distance—to be sure of that. I did not want to write you and continue this camaraderie until I was certain that these awful thoughts of mine, are merely my body purging itself of the resentment I have carried.*

*It is with confidence I can say this, because the moment I watched you walk in the café, I felt every heavy, rancid feeling evaporate from my heart. You are the willow bark in Ancient Egypt. You cure my pain, even if it is from your branches that I gained my wounds. And now that I have had this clarity, I know that it is sorrow truly feel when I think back to your letter. Because I cannot fathom wanting someone as beautiful and kindhearted as you, to suffer in such a prolonged, personal way.*

*All this to say, I do not pity you and my heart is conflicted when it comes to sympathy. But I am, above all else, honored to be the one you entrust your story to.*

*With this newfound freedom of yours, what is something you long to do? Other than write to silly old flames like myself, of course.*

—Anthony

He folded the letter but held onto it a while. There was no possible way that he was going to walk it over to her, nor send his footman after her as soon as she left. It would draw attention. Hell, it was likely a risk for him to keep looking at her... but he simply could not help himself. The more time went by, the more he realized just how absolutely smitten he was with her underneath it all. It was like the atmosphere shifted the moment she entered a room. Isabel brought with her not spring, but summer. She was a heat wave of merriment, beauty, and extremes. For the very last thing he could feel about her, was anything *mild*. Either his hatred burned with the intensity of a thousand suns, or it was passion that burned just the same.

Even the act of watching her sip tea and pick at her lunch from across a café felt intimate and invigorating. Such feelings had intensified when she finally spotted him. They shared a soft smile and then proceeded to act as though they were strangers. But they both knew seeing one another there was prearranged, an overt sign of affection on Anthony's behalf, and treaded the line of more scandal being made. All it would take is a wink, a flirty wave, or a longing stare for someone in that café to spread the gossip like wildfire.

It... *thrilled* him. It had been quite some time since Anthony had found anything that gave him such a rush as that. Well, their kiss, of course. But that tension, that little game she had initiated, was surely addictive. The thought was solidified by him finding himself opening the letter back up and adding on:

*P.S.—I shall be shopping at a bookshop called The Temple of Muses around two in the afternoon tomorrow. What would the chances be of us running into one another whilst there?*

Once the ink was dried, he folded the paper. With a shifty gaze, he glanced her way again. The Duchess' table was just by the door, her back to the entrance. Anthony contemplated ways to sneakily give her the letter himself but knew that any wrong move could result in others seeing the exchange or the letter in the floor for anyone to collect. He would have to think of something else, but he longed to be near her.

He wasn't thick enough to not understand his words could provoke her. It was a risk for him to admit such horrible thoughts, but he needed her to see him for who he was. A man who was dark and cruel, but not to the extent that Robert was—and who was striving to be better. He could only do this if he was honest, because he would need her help to grow.

Mustering up his bravery, Anthony stood from his table and headed for the door. He couldn't hear the chatter of the café over the sound of his own steady, but loud, heartbeat and footsteps. As much as he tried not to look her way, he couldn't help himself. Peering over, he found her magnificent blue hues looking right back at him. They both casually looked away.

With quick thinking, Anthony put together a plan to near her without controversy. Whistling a tune and looking all about casually, he pretended to be in his own little world. Then, as he neared the exit, he carefully swept his foot to the side to trip himself on her chair. His arms flailed lightly to sell the idea that he tripped before he caught himself by grasping the edge of the table. Lifting his head, their eyes locked from only a foot apart. Anthony was risking everything just to get this up-close look at her. Everything he felt from the moment she walked into the café was cemented in his heart at that very moment.

Time slowed. There was only breath, beating hearts, and the longing gaze into one another's eyes. From the moment his foot made contact with her chair and the words, "Pardon me, Your Grace," passed his lips, was only a second or two. Most likely nobody would notice, and those who did would hopefully buy his act that it was merely an accident.

But it was everything to him. He needed that moment, to see the longing in her ocean eyes and color in her cheeks. Everyone there likely wouldn't see past her mourning dress, but Anthony saw her. Isabel wasn't a widow in mourning, she was a woman freed. A woman that loved him, even if it was a different sort of love than when they were teens. And yet, in those few moments at her table, he could see the future.

If he so chose it, their love could be restored. It was up for him to decide. In his heart, Anthony wasn't sure. But right then, in that moment, he wanted nothing more than to kiss her just as they had in her parlor.

"All is well," she breathed in response and dipped her head.

Standing back, he bowed and moved for the door. Patrons were coming in at the same time, so he stood to the side which put him and Isabel back-to-back. His fingertips ever so subtly grazed across her shoulder blades before he finally walked out of the café.

Spring was in the air and as fickle as his heart was, he was fairly sure love was too. Clearing his throat, he tried to rip himself out of the clouds he soared into with that little stunt he pulled.

"Follow me," he called to his footman, who was waiting by the carriage. The young man hurried to match his stride. For a while, Anthony was silent. It wasn't until they reached a part of the street where the crowds had thinned that he held out the piece of parchment. "Ensure that the Duchess of Edington receives this not a moment sooner, nor a moment later, than her arrival back to her townhome. Understand?"

"Yes, m'lord," the young man nodded and then took off into the distance.

Anthony busied himself with thinking about if she would find his admittance of darker thoughts and emotions to be too much, and if she would write back to him before their meeting at the bookshop. Just as he was about to retire for the night, he

noticed his father and brother Moses walking out of a shop ahead of him. They, too, seemed to notice him so he approached them cautiously.

“Good day, brother,” Moses greeted happily before patting their father’s shoulder. “I was just telling Father about our talk of America, and how keen on the idea you seemed.”

“Is that so?” Anthony muttered, taken aback by the idea.

“I have to say, son, I am stunned to hear such news,” their father remarked. “Particularly after our talk last week.” His tone was pregnant with insinuation that he was referring to their talk about Anthony potentially courting Isabel.

“As am I,” Anthony breathed, shooting his brother a confused look.

“Father, would you pardon us? I would like to talk to Anthony more about this venture of his,” Moses asked.

All their father did was nod and then pivot to leave, seeming distracted by something else. Anthony was sizing up his brother, his arms crossed, and eyes narrowed. “Did we have another conversation about America that I have completely no memory of? Was I in a stupor? Perhaps I was sleepwalking during this supposed conversation.”

Moses positioned his arms in an act of surrender. “Alright, alright. You’ve caught me. But I assure you, I didn’t exactly *lie*. Merely, I was telling him about the last conversation we had and just changed some details.”



“Such as?” Anthony mused.

“Like you asked for the details I willingly provided. That is all,” Moses stated before crossing his heart.

“But... *why?* Why were you talking about this?”

Moses sighed and relaxed from his theatrics. With a gesture with his head, Anthony took a walk with his brother. “It is not what you think,” he insisted. “I am not trying to force you to leave, nor am I trying to get him to put more pressure on you. Instead, I made it appear to him that you were genuinely interested, and perhaps even planted a few ideas in his ear about how ‘you’ could expand your business. All in the hopes of currying his favor and obtaining more comfortable accommodations for you.”

“More comfortable accommodations?” Anthony repeated, completely confused by the explanation. “Why wouldn’t I have suitable accommodations?”

Moses shook his head. “Perhaps I phrased it wrong. Rather, making a decision soon will give him the time to arrange for you better accommodations. Perhaps a flat in Boston, along with assuring the ship you would go over on has room for your furniture. If you wait until the last minute, you very well might be going over with merely a pack on your back.”

Anthony was trying to process and understand where it was coming from. “But I *haven’t* made a decision, Moses,” he finally stated.

“Really?” Moses breathed, genuinely sounding surprised by such news. “Forgive me for my transgression, then. I suppose I have convinced myself of the decision that somewhere in my thinking, I forgot you were not. I must ask, however, why is it you are not yet decided?”

In response to the question, Isabel came to mind, causing him to pause. Anthony had always been certain that no matter what decision he made, he would use all of the time allotted to him by his father. So those should have been the natural responses to such a question. The thought of Isabel at this time was strange to him. There was no time to unpack it at the time. “I am exploring all of the options that Father has given me,” Anthony said simply.

Moses scoffed, and then brought a hand to his chest and bowed his head slightly, a silent plea for forgiveness. When he fixed himself and cleared his throat, he dropped his hold onto Anthony’s shoulder. “Are you sure of such an endeavor, brother? I do not wish for you to go to America with such a bitter heart.”

Anthony brushed his brother’s hand away. “Such a vote of confidence you have for me, brother.” While it of course was appropriate to use such terminology with one another, it accompanied with Moses’ chipper attitude, and sudden involvement in Anthony’s life was not sitting well with him. It all appeared very well intended, but something was simply... *off*. “I know you have said before that it is not your wish to rid of me, but it is certainly feeling that way.”

Moses’ disposition dissolved, something washing over his expression that he could not decipher. When he regained himself, Moses hung his head slightly. “I suppose I must admit

to you now that when I heard of father's ultimatum, a sadness came over me. A sadness that we have never been close and there was a good possibility you were about to go on your way. Across the sea, likely to not return even for a visit for quite some time... Something in me was stirred. I felt a duty to you, brother, to be here for you in the best ways possible. To make up for lost time, and for time we very well may lose in the future." He let out a sigh and gave a sad smile. "While I know it is misplaced, there's a sort of guilt that has settled into me. After all, had you been the first born, none of this would be happening. I can't change our birth order, but I want to make it as easy on you as possible. As I would hope you would for me, if the tables were turned."

Anthony softened, a guilt of his own forming in his stomach. It didn't feel right to be so suspicious of him, even if it had only been briefly. "All is well," he assured his brother. "It means a great deal to me that this is all out of kindness. However, I need to use this time and not make a hasty decision. I shall start to prepare to leave for America, of course... But I would still like to *try* and make it work here. I even have a dinner party to attend do where Ernest and his wife shall introduce me to some available ladies. Even if it does not work in my favor, I'll use these months to say goodbye to others and explore all options to ensure that leaving is truly necessary."

"I understand," Moses nodded and sighed. "Forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive," Anthony assured him.

Then, just as the brothers prepared to part ways, he noticed Moses eyeing him curiously. "Your hesitation would have nothing to do with your reunion with Isabel, now, would it?"

"No," Anthony lied with ease.

“Good.” Moses nodded. “There isn’t any need to get your heart broken twice by the same woman.”

“Agreed,” he muttered and said his goodbye before hurrying away. As Anthony rounded the corner and headed back to his carriage, he found himself wondering why Moses was so confident that Isabel would hurt him again. And perhaps, more importantly, why the sentiment was souring his mind.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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### THE NEXT DAY

*A*nthony,

*I am writing this letter to you just before I leave for the bookshop. I have to say that it took a great deal of contemplation for me to convince myself to meet you. Your last letter has shaken me. While you state the darkness is not your true self, I have to speak my truth as well.*

*Hearing someone I care about so dearly even suggest that the mistreatment Robert performed is karmic is almost too much for me to bear. Anthony, I want to be as clear as rain: I am understanding and sympathetic to your anger and your hurt. And I am more than eager to correct the misdeeds of the past. However, I will not allow this level of negativity into my present. So, I pray, for both of our sakes, that you have fully purged such horrendous thoughts from your mind and heart. For if you feel the need to share anymore which posit the mental and emotional torment I have lived through as some cosmic punishment for a decision I made in my youth that I thought was best for both of us—well, then I shall have nothing more to say to you. You shall be out of my grasp of sympathy.*

*I have no sympathy for the cruel, Anthony. I have faced enough cruelty for an entire lifetime.*

*I am penning you this and going to this bookshop in hopes that you can understand this. And then together, we can find ways to move past this. I am sure that you are tired of the heartache. Let us move on from this. Tell me what I can do to make it right, and it shall be done.*

*You are beautiful, Anthony. You are Luca Giordano's painting of Saint Michael. With the mind as capable as Plato. And I know it to be true, you have a heart like Hadrian, Emperor of Ancient Rome. A warrior who perseveres and rules with the good of others in his heart. I long to experience you freed from this burden.*

*– Isabel*

The letter was folded and hidden within her purse as the Duchess headed into the bookshop. Even if Anthony did not appear, it would be a momentous day for her. It had been far, far too long since she was able to grace the aisles of such a store. And she longed for the knowledge and stories held within those books. It was almost too delightful to bear, to know that she could buy whatever she wanted and as much as she pleased.

As she entered the store, she noticed small nods of respect around the room but everyone remained silent. She was grateful for that. Nothing could be heard louder than the soft chatter of friends and clerks. The aroma of ink and parchment lingered in the air. Oh, she could stay there indefinitely. It felt good to be around people, and she didn't feel overwhelmed in this situation. She almost forgot she was there to see Anthony.

Isabel headed down the first aisle. She strolled so very slowly, reading as many spines of books as she could. There were so many options, but she didn't feel the same sort of fatigue she had when shopping with her sister. She could go at her own pace, and the choices didn't feel as large as wallpaper. Wallpaper was visual, it had to be paired with items that would match, and required many laborers and hours of work. If Isabel chose a book she didn't end up liking, then it would simply be put in the library and she could buy another.

By the end of the first row, she had two books stacked in the crease of her arms. One on medieval politics, and a biography of Leonardo da Vinci. Medieval times and the renaissance had always been areas of interest she had but hadn't gotten the opportunity to research. After all, her teen years had been filled with reading whatever it was Anthony was ranting and raving about so she could talk with him about it just as informed and excited. They had debated things from the meaning of *Beowulf*, to whether or not Cleopatra and Mark Antony were really in love or merely used one another. It had been quite a way into one another's hearts to converse so lively.

She also had a third book, a copy of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which she had managed to slip her letter into its pages. The thoughts carried her down the rows until she spotted a section for ancient Rome. Of course, Anthony was there. Isabel admired him from afar, wanting a good look at him before he knew she was watching. The Lord held his shoulders high, though his posture was relaxed. There was a natural breeziness to him, while still being confident and regal in his own way.

He was holding a book with *Hadrian* etched on the front, and her heart skipped a beat, thinking about her letter. Hopefully, he would be softened by such a reference. "Good day, Lord Moore," she greeted softly as she neared. Her eyes remained

on the shelves the best they could, but they deceived her by continuously flickering to his face. “What a surprise to see you here.”

“Your Grace,” he greeted back and bowed slightly. “A pleasure to see you.”

She sighed softly to herself, understanding exactly what Anthony had meant when he had mentioned his anger evaporating at the sight of her. She was experiencing it then, for him. However, the feeling was not as final for him as it had appeared. Even in the wake of his wild beauty and charming smirk, Isabel managed to hold onto a grain of hurt that his words had inflicted upon her.

“Hadrian,” she commented. “A fine choice. He’s one of Rome’s five good emperors.”

“They only have five?” he questioned, his brow scrunching though his lips stretched into a more sincere smile.

“According to Machiavelli,” she replied, “the sixteenth century Italian author and diplomat.”

He closed the book in his hands and tucked it into his chest. “My, my, Your Grace, you are more well-read than I was led to believe.”

“I always managed to sneak away with a book or two in my youth,” she stated simply and turned her attention to the shelves. “Being a fast reader also helped.”



“Have you lost a knack for the talent?” he queried, still sounding humored. He was very proud of himself for arranging their meeting, wasn’t he? All too overjoyed that he found an excuse for them to be together and talk person to person.

“I haven’t had the chance to test it.”

Her voice was curt enough then that he seemed to understand her mood. His posture shifted and he cleared his throat. “Might I ask what you have selected to read?”

She opened her arms and read him the titles, “*The History of Early Medieval Politics*, as well as *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci*.”

“Fascinating,” he breathed. “Would you care to explain what led you to these selections?”

She looked up to him, trying not to get lost in the depth of his brown eyes. “England is a country rich with history, and yet I know so little of the history of it or the government. And... I simply happen to like da Vinci and would like to know more about him.”

“He’s nothing short of a visionary,” Anthony smiled. “I hope to one day hear what you have learned about him in that book.”

“Perhaps one day you can borrow it,” she replied with a slight shrug.

Lord Moore was staring at her intensely, as though he hadn't any care in the world who saw them at that moment. However, as his eyes lingered on her and she did not return the passionate stare, Anthony dropped his gaze to her books once more. "What is the other book?" he questioned.

"Oh, yes." Isabel sighed and then held the book out for him. "*The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. Here, you have it. I think I've changed my mind on it."

"Well, I'm not sure I would like to read such—"

"I highly recommend it, my lord," Isabel interjected and at last, stared into the depths of his eyes. "I believe it shall have a message for you that you will hold dear to your heart. At least, I would hope."

She extended the book further, placing it in his grasp in such a way that her hand cradled his for a wonderful moment. His skin was warm and soft, the mere touch of it was enough to send jolts of excitement through her body. Their eyes locked in a similar fashion as they had in the café. Only, that time she was trying to silently plead with him as well.

*Please understand me. Please heed my words instead of taking offense to them. Take them in, savor them, and accept them. I don't want to lose you, Anthony.*

The burning desire in his eyes simmered and something shifted in his expression. Isabel could only pray to God that it was recognition of what she was trying to convey. After a moment and the smirk returned to his face. "I see," he

breathed. “With such a high remark, I shall certainly give it a read posthaste. Thank you, Your Grace.”

“With pleasure,” she said. They held eyes for a moment longer, but she knew their time was up. Lingering together any longer would certainly draw attention. The Duchess turned to the shelf and selected a book on Cleopatra, being sure to flash the spine of it in Anthony’s direction. “Good day, Lord Moore.”

“Good day, Your Grace.”

Turning all around to ensure no eyes were on them, Isabel made the most bold move of all. As fast as she could, she closed the distance between them and daringly kissed his cheek. She whispered hurriedly, “The pages hold a message themselves. Act five, scene one.”

Before there was time for him to have a reaction, Isabel went on her way, her heart pattering a bit anxiously. The message lying in the book was not only hers but in the story written on its pages as well. Her note was tucked between the pages of Act Five, Scene One where Prospero declares to his brother, Antonio: “Flesh and blood. You, brother mine, that entertain’d ambition. Expell’d remorse and nature; who, with Sebastian. Whose inward pinches therefore are most strong, would here have kill’d your king; I do forgive thee, Unnatural though thou art.”

A story of forgiveness, even when at face value, it was not expected. It started as a tale of revenge, but ended with forgiveness. She hoped hers and Anthony’s would be the same.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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*I*t had taken all of Anthony not to unfold the letter right there in the bookshop and feast upon her words. The words she whispered to him felt coded and somehow intrinsic. He would have if there were no other customers, as the shopkeeper was one of the few people in England who treated Anthony with favor and kindness. Reginald, the shopkeeper, would have taken care of his own affairs. But there were too many people around, and he knew their encounter would be enough to attract attention. Reading a letter soon after her departure would undoubtedly pique the interest of the Ton's bored ladies and lords.

He took his time in the store, strolling through the aisles and collecting himself a few books. Of course, after her inclination toward Cleopatra, he selected one himself on Cleopatra and Mark Antony. It made his heart flutter to see her make such a selection, remembering all the heated conversations they would have about the pair. All the while, falling a little more in love with one another.

While his mind was still a mess in the wake of his encounter with Moses, he was aware of it. He prayed for her letter to quail the brewing storm in his chest.

“Good day, my lord,” Reginald grinned as he took hold of the pile of books Anthony selected.

“Reggie, old sport, it’s been too long, hasn’t it?” he replied kindly. He absolutely adored Reggie. The man was lanky and tall, with thin gray hair and a bushy mustache to match. His charm was completed with a pair of glasses that balanced just on the edge of his nose; if you caught him at the right angle, the glasses made his gray eyes seem larger than life.

“That it has, my lord. Where have you been off to?” he asked, taking note of the selections for inventories sake.

“Oh, I was saving a herd from wolves, repairing a dam before it bursts to save a hamlet, and even rescuing a baby from a tree... It’s still a mystery to me how an infant so tiny could climb up a tree so tall,” Anthony mused as though he was recounting the weather.

“So, the usual,” Reggie snickered.

“Quite right, Reggie,” Anthony grinned.

After the brief small talk, the books were handed back to Anthony. “You go off and stay out of trouble, my lord. Remember, you’re supposed to outlive me.”

“Oh, that old deal of ours.” He sighed. “I’m afraid I simply can’t do it. I can’t, Reggie. You’re what? Two hundred now? How is a man supposed to reach such a goal?”

The shopkeeper laughed and waved him on. “Go out there and choose to be happy, my lord. Happiness is the secret for living a long life.”

When Anthony left the shop, a true smile was on his face. It was such simple wisdom, but it felt profound to him. He needed to choose happiness. Not what made the most logical sense, nor what his past self would want—but what would presently make him happy. Happy enough he could live to be as old as Reggie. Denial continued to play tricks on his heart, but he was seeing more and more clearly that his happiness could very well be Isabel. Her pale, sweet face, her eyes as cast and infinite as the Heavens... Yes, he did believe he could make a home for himself in her presence.

Climbing into his carriage, he placed his books on the seat next to him and kept only one in his lap. *The Tempest*. His hand grazed the cover, remembering the feeling of her hand as she placed it in his. How was it the same person that filled him with such hate and dread for all those years, could excite him with the slightest of touches?

With a satisfied sigh, he flipped open the book to find her letter wedged between the exact pages she requested him to read. Out of curiosity, he indulged in the scene before the letter. The character Prospero was talking with his servant, a spirit named Ariel. Ariel details the horrible scene of a shipwreck, that he too would weep if he were able. Upon hearing the humanity of the spirit, Prospero was inspired to put his harsher feelings aside and sends Ariel to rescue the people—even though among them are conspirators and his awful brother, Alonso. They return, and Prospero wearing a disguise parts forgiveness on them all. Even his terrible brother.

*I do forgive thee, Unnatural though thou art.*

With a crease between his brows, Anthony unfolded the letter. By the end of the first paragraph, anxiety rattled in his chest. By the end of the second one, he could barely see straight. Heartache, fury, and consternation dizzied him. Once the letter had been read in its entirety, Anthony rubbed his face aggressively as he struggled to breathe around the pit forming in his chest.

As usual, his initial reaction was to respond in haste with aggression and dismissal. Oh, how he longed to angrily scratch out words on parchment to curse her for not understanding him, for twisting his words and being so dismissive herself. Was she unwilling to accept his truth? Anthony knows he hasn't been a standup fellow. In fact, he's been despicable and horrid for most of his adult life. And yet, he could feel her stolen kiss on his cheek as two lines of her letter haunted him.

*Then I shall have nothing more to say to you. You shall be out of my grasp of sympathy.*

If Anthony could not overcome the emotional barriers on his own this time and instead took out his frustrations on Isabel, he knew he would lose her forever. She had compared his words to Robert's cruelty, a man who had belittled and degraded her. *And even raised his hand to her.*

His eyes closed tightly, squeezing them so firmly that no daylight was allowed in. The Lord scoured the depths of his being for comprehension and patience. To somehow get around himself and see things from her point of view. Anthony knew what Isabel would do in a situation like that when he found nothing but his own festering feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. In her youth, the woman he once considered his little dove had been virtuous. A fleeting thought made him

wonder if she was still alive, as she had mentioned God to him several times.

With his hands clasped together around the letter, Anthony prayed for the first time since his baptismal. He did not pray for compassion on Isabel's behalf, nor did he ask for her love. Even rife in sin, Anthony knew that such things were outside of requests God was willing to fulfill. Like any man lost in a storm at sea, without a coastline or star in sight, Anthony prayed for clarity.

“Depart Your shrewdness upon me, a lord who is attempting to humble himself. Take mercy upon a sinner who not only lost his way long, long ago—but embraced the wilderness of sin. I became one with the jungle and swung from the vines of the Forbidden Tree with glee... But I feel somewhere in my heart, even if it is not quite clear to me yet, that Isabel might be worth leaving my jungle for. I do not know if that is in the name of love or friendship, but I care not. All I care for at this moment, is for her to be in my life to whatever degree.”

Anthony's voice cracked, a heat coming over his cheeks. Even though he was in the privacy of his carriage, he felt embarrassed by the act of praying. Especially right then, as he was on the brink of tears.

“I want clarity. I wish to shed this lens of self-destruction and rage. I cannot promise to attend church or be a better man because I am not certain I could uphold such commitments. What I can do is swear to try more. To be more whenever I can. To no longer live just for myself, but for those around me... Amen.”

Silence was the only thing to follow his prayer. He wasn't sure what he expected to happen. Whether it was clouds parting



and a sunbeam encasing his carriage in Holy light, or for God's voice to boom down to him like thunder. Nothing happened. Anthony sighed and slumped in his seat.

Maybe he deserved to be alone. If not even Isabel could handle his nefarious thoughts, perhaps they should never be spoken aloud. But why is that? Was there not a soul on the planet to whom Anthony could be himself, for better or worse? Ernest, he assumed, but even he was unaware of Anthony's true depths and darkness. The majority of their interactions were laced with wit and sarcasm. Then his own words returned to him. Words he had written in the letter that had elicited such a response from her.

*I do not believe that this is the truth of my heart.*

If it had not been his truth, why would he share it with her? Anthony worried that the desire to 'show her his process' was merely coded to be more palatable. He was seeing clearly then that if that had been the case, he could have put it not so explicitly; as it would have spared her heart. Only, Anthony hadn't *wanted* to spare her. Even as he was bathed in admiration for her in that café, there was some sick part of himself that wished to twist the knife a little more. To make her hurt just as he did. It was the same part of him that he needed to leave behind if he wanted her in his life that penned those words. Anthony had to find a path of forgiveness.

A familiar sight came into view from his carriage window. It was Isabel, walking home all alone. He wondered if she had sent her maid on an errand so she could have some alone time, or if she had braved the walk and the speculations that came with it. They passed right by her, and Anthony knew in his heart that he couldn't leave things like this.

While he feared his words would fall short whether they were written or spoken, Anthony called to his coachman, "Circle the block, good man."

Anthony's eyes frantically searched about the streets, trying to come up with a plan that would allow them to speak without drawing attention. Perhaps he could be dropped off on the other side of the road and he could act as though they once again bumped into one another. Isabel was walking alone, and it would be only proper for him to offer to walk her home. That might work if he were any other man, but because he was him, he knew it would be reported in the papers that they were seen walking to her townhome together.

As they turned the corner to circle back around, he noticed not a soul was out on that particular street. It was a street of only residential homes, not stores nor clubs. Still, there would be the risk of someone watching from the windows. If he acted swiftly enough, however, perhaps they would think their eyes had deceived them. Anthony knew the plan he was hatching in his head had a slim chance of succeeding, but there were some things in life worth risking everything for. One of them was Isabel's company.

"Stop right here," Anthony hastily instructed. "Wait."

They were just around the corner, where no windows were visible to him. People could still see if they looked at the right angle or protruded their heads from their homes, but Anthony hoped that it just so happened that no one was looking. He twisted himself to look out the carriage window, back at the street, and waited for Isabel to pass by. Soon after, he noticed her black gown emerge from around the building.

*“Isabel!”* he shouted in something akin to a whisper. *“Your Grace!”*

Her head turned toward the side road and she stared at him with alarm. Anthony waved her over. The Duchess’ eyes shifted about before taking the risk and walking his way. As soon as she neared the carriage, he opened the door and reached out, pulling her inside. The Lord ordered his coachman to move along as he pulled the curtains shut on the windows.

When he finally looked back to Isabel, she was studying him with wild eyes. “Are you mad? What if someone saw us? While I’ve never cared a day in my life about gossip, I know that this will get back to your father and—”

Anthony grabbed both sides of her face and pressed his lips against hers. Her stiff form relaxed, and she was kissing him back earnestly in no time. He dared to trace the outline of her bottom lip with his tongue before pressing past it, his fingers caressing the length of her jaw. The kiss was the most tender and intimate of his life. He poured his love, frustration, and commitment into every brush of their lips and tongues. Clearly, he needed to work on his verbal communication, whether it be written or verbal. He could, however, show her how he felt through action and touch.

Anthony drank in her features as they finally pulled away from the kiss. Her swollen, pouted lips, the color in her freckled cheeks, and the brilliance of the stars in her eyes were all restored. Isabel’s mouth moved to say something, but he kissed her lips again. Then, as he withdrew from her lips, he brushed his nose against hers as he stroked her cheek.

“You asked what could be done for me to forgive you,” he whispered through the dizziness of his hormones and emotions. Anthony hadn’t thought about what he was saying and instead, opted to speak from his heart in that moment. For he never felt such clarity as he did when in her presence. He once mistook it for confusion, but that was only because he was still desperately trying to hang onto the anger he once harbored toward her.

“And that is to forgive me,” he breathed. “I’m a bastard, and I know it. But for you, I’m willing to change. I won’t be perfect and I’m sure I’ll still have my moments of being a complete ass, but—”

That time it was her that interrupted with a kiss. His heart soared to a height he had forgotten existed. *Happiness*. True happiness. He had felt glimmers of it before with drinking, high jinks, and women, but they had only ever been the shadows of what real happiness was. There was no way to describe the feeling in his chest other than unbridled joy.

Isabel gently pushed him back and stared deeply into his eyes. “Shall we embrace forgiveness then? Together?”

Anthony clutched her small, gentle hand in his and raised it to his chest. He wanted her to feel just how erratic his heart was beating, and how it was beating that way just for her. Slowly, he nodded and added on, “I am willing to try and embrace more, so long as you are.”

Her blue eyes widened, and a small gasp sounded from her. “Are you certain?” she whispered.

“I am,” he breathed. “I wasn’t before now, but I know it to be true. In the throes of fear of losing you because of my own awful thoughts, I prayed for clarity. You know I’m not a devout man. I’m not sure if this, right now, is Holy clarity or if maybe just seeing you and gaining understanding to my own feelings when with you now. Whatever it is, I know there is still love for you in my heart. And it’s more than just love for fellow man. Or a friend.”

Isabel blinked rapidly, no doubt to hold back tears that were daring to escape her beautiful eyes. She inhaled sharply as her fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt. “There are not words to express how happy I am to hear that,” she breathed. “Is it alright with you if I have a little while to think?”

He was certain that such words would have broken him before the carriage ride. Heartbreak and rage would have torn him apart if he hadn’t received confirmation of her love in return. For a change, Anthony tried on empathy and realized that, for Isabel, it wasn’t as simple as admitting her love as it was for him. The Duchess could love him until her heart stopped beating, but it would not mean she could consider more with him. Choosing to love him in any capacity that existed outside of closed doors would result in her losing the title of Duchess. Anything less than marriage would be temporary, as he would be sailing to America without it.

His heart panged with pain, but only because he knew that he would have to keep his father’s ultimatum a secret. Never would he want her to make a decision based upon his fate. Once the time was right, and decisions made, only then would he tell her.

“Take all the time you need,” he purred. His thumb dragged lightly along her lips. “I shall wait for you.”

“Thank you, Anthony,” she replied, a smile flickering over her lips.

“No thanks is needed,” he assured her. “Will you write to me when you are ready?”

Isabel nodded ardently. “I am returning to my country estate in the morning, so expect a little delay.”

“Returning?” he frowned.

A little giggle sounded from her. “Only for a few days, maybe a week at the most, to oversee the gardening. I shall return.”

He breathed a sigh of relief and the two kissed again. Only that time, he knew it was a goodbye. Without another word between them, the two peered out of the curtains and waited for a moment of privacy before ordering the carriage to stop and Isabel hurried out. Immediately, he ordered his coachmen to take him away so he could flee the scene before anyone spotted them.

As his heart pattered with hope and love, he sank into the fabric of his seat.

Perhaps he would be staying in England—and with the only woman he ever truly wanted.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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Isabel's head was so high in the clouds, that she swore she could see a glimpse of Heaven as she walked home. Her heart hadn't sung such sweet songs since her youth, when she first fell in love with Anthony. There was no doubt in her mind that she did, in fact, love him. Her only hesitation in admitting it was what would happen next. She didn't see herself marrying after Robert. Would Anthony be willing to enter into the same kind of agreement that many widows did with gentlemen, where their love and affection would be kept hidden? Her heart sank at the thought, and she felt wrong asking him for such a thing. Her father was sick of his scandals, and she was certain that such a deal would only prolong public interest in them.

She had time to think, so she would make use of it. Perhaps she would have a clearer mind after taking care of her garden.

Walking into her townhome with her books in hand, she greeted her butler and maid. As she walked toward her study to put her books away, she noticed Amy on her trail. "Your Grace," she began, nervousness edging her voice.

"Is everything alright?" Isabel asked as she peered over to her dear friend. Amy fidgeted with her hands, seeming to not know what to do with them. "What's the matter?"

“I just thought you should know that Lady Rebecca was just here.”

“I see,” Isabel breathed. Her sister hadn’t spoken to her since she confronted her with the gossip column. She wondered if she had stopped by to try and make amends. Still, that did not explain the nervousness of her maid. “Was everything alright? Did something happen?”

“Well, she came into the house. She said that she didn’t believe you weren’t home and wanted to look about for herself. Once she did, however, she left,” Amy explained.

That explained the nervousness, she supposed, as it was not customary for servants to allow folks into the home when their employers were not home. She smiled gently and patted Amy’s shoulder. “Everything is fine, Amy. I’m not upset that she wandered about in my absence.”

“You are not?” Amy blinked.

“Of course not. She’s my sister.” The Duchess chuckled.

Amy still had her face fixed in an anxious expression, but just as Isabel started to wonder if there was more to it, the maid nodded. “Very well. Thank you, Your Grace.”

“No thanks is needed,” she assured her. The words filled her with warmth, as it was one of the final things that Anthony had said to her in the carriage. With a grin on her lips, Isabel



looked to Amy once more. “Let me set these books down, and we can start planning how to redecorate my bedchamber.”

They both appeared to be in need of a reprieve. Amy’s friendly smile reappeared, and she nodded and bowed to the Duchess. Isabel went into her bedchamber after putting the books down in the study. Amy arrived soon after, having fetched wallpaper swatches and fabric samples. The curtains were drawn, and the women sat planning. Isabel was making decisions faster than ever before, and she was more certain of what she liked and wanted than she had ever been. The process was more invigorating than ever, whether it was because of the practice of designing other rooms or because she was more in touch with herself than she had been in years.

And yet, in the blur of samples and chatter, there was something eating away at the back of her mind. When there was a lull in chatter, Isabel finally voiced it, “Amy?”

“Yes, Your Grace?”

Isabel chewed on the side of her cheek. Even though she hoped Rebecca had only come to seek forgiveness, she found it strange that she would barge in to look for her if that was the case. Furthermore, she had always been abrasive and a little rude to the staff. She asked, clearing her throat, what she wanted to, “Did Rebecca say anything while she was here?”

There was a pause and Isabel wished she could see Amy’s face right then, but her back was facing her as she held different samples up to the curtains. “Only to ask where you were, and to let us know she was going to have a look for herself.”

Isabel deflated a little and sighed. She wasn't sure what to really feel about it, but her mind plagued her with worry. After all, Rebecca had made comments about her own marriage being unhappy. What if she had come by, needing somewhere to escape Edmund and a shoulder to cry on? There had been so many times that Isabel had contemplated doing the same.

She didn't want to assume, however, knowing good and well that she was deflecting onto her sister. Isabel would write to her once she got to the estate to ensure she was alright. The Duchess only wished that her sister would have waited for her to return home, as she hadn't been gone long so the wait wouldn't have been either. Sighing, she threw herself back into the task at hand.

The day passed with ease. Isabel and Amy planned the renovations and went about placing orders with the shops until dinner time. Once the Duchess' belly was full, she retired to her bedchamber for a rather restless night. There it was again, conflicting thoughts and feelings about Lord Moore.

By morning, Isabel knew that the only way to progress the conversation, would be to explain her thoughts. She mentally labored over her words as she readied for the day and had her morning tea. She decided to write down her thoughts after there was nothing else to do but leave for the countryside. She would send it off if she was satisfied.

Isabel sat at her desk, placing parchment in front of her and reaching for her quill. Her brow furrowed only when she discovered the old quill in the spot where she had left the one she had purchased along with her stamp. Had she taken it somewhere? Isabel had no recollection of doing so and had no idea what else could have happened to it. Knowing she was wasting precious daylight in the garden, it would have to wait and be found later.

Using the old quill, she dipped it in ink and rolled her shoulders before getting to work on the letter. After just a couple of paragraphs, she chose to start again.

*Dearest Anthony,*

*I must start this letter off with a confession of love. I do love you, and more than a friend—I always have. You are my first and only love in life. There isn't a mountain I would not move nor valley I would not brave for you. And yet, it is because of this love that I find myself at a crossroad.*

*My love longs to cherish you, as well as protect you. And I fear that indulging in this love will only end in heartache for you. I have broken your heart once, and I do not wish to again. I don't think either of us could bear it. All this to say, I worry that we should not explore our love further than we have. It is not from a lack of want nor desire, but hesitation.*

*Because when I think of loving one another, I know that there is only one road for it to end well—and that is marriage. I know, I know... I am getting ahead of myself. But I do not believe that I am being too precautious in thinking of the future because of the decision before us. If we choose to embrace one another and it goes well, the day will come when it will be socially expected of us to court, and then marry. As the only other option would be for us to meet in the cover of night and behind closed doors. And I cannot ask that of you because never would I want it to be so much as fleeting thought that I am embarrassed of loving you.*

*And marriage is something that I am unsure I ever see for myself again. While I know that life with you—so long as we continue on our road of forgiveness and healing—would be one of love and laughter, it is a major sacrifice for me.*

*Anthony, I give you my heart, my commitment, and my compassion eternally. I would give up tea, reading, or any other worldly pleasure if that was the price England asked me to pay to be yours in life. However, they want all of me. My name, my title, my properties, and fortune—If such things did not equate to freedom, then I would sacrifice them all when it came time for such a decision.*

*Unfortunately, the question that will eventually have to be asked is if I value love over personal liberty. After so many years imprisoned by the sanctions of marriage, I am heartbroken to say that I am not yet sure. And I fear that I will never be sure and that is why I am writing you now. So that you may make an informed decision moving forward. If you wish for distance, I understand.*

*If you do not, then perhaps in the exploration of our love, I will find my answer. I simply needed you to know that even with this mutual love, there is a chance for pain. And it is a pain that I cannot spare you from beyond sharing these thoughts with you.*

*I am leaving now for my estate. I shall not anticipate a letter in response, but I hope that you will write me soon.*

*With love and warmth,*

*Isabel*

She reread the letter four times, ensuring that the words were exactly what she meant, and that no greater clarity came to her. When it did not, she decided to go ahead and send it. Once the

envelope was sealed, Isabel stood, gathered her books purchased the day before, and headed downstairs.

Outside, she found her coachman and maid waiting on her. Turning to the footman by the door, she handed the letter over to him. "Please deliver this to Lord Moore, posthaste," she requested gently.

The footman bowed as he accepted the letter. "Yes, Your Grace."

The Duchess climbed into the carriage and gave Amy a half-smile. They continued on their way, London passing them by. She wondered if Anthony would receive her letter as well as he had the day before. At the memory, her hand rested on her chest. If he could take her harsher words positively, then she could only hope his response to this particular letter would too be positive. Anthony's temper was the only variable she couldn't predict.

"Who is that?" Amy asked.

Isabel peered out of the window to see them approaching her estate. Only, there was already a carriage waiting there—and she knew that carriage like the back of her hand. It was her mother's. As they neared, Isabel's brow furrowed at the sight of Rebecca emerging from the coach.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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The day following the bookstore came with another surprise for Anthony, as he awoke with a summons from none other than his mother; she requested him to join her for tea that very morning. As soon as he was dressed and ready for the day, Anthony made his way to his familial home. His first thought upon receiving the invitation was that she was attempting to have a family breakfast, but she did not mention it on the summons for fear of discouraging him.

However, when he entered the dining room of his childhood home, he found his mother sitting alone at the table. She peered up to him with gentle eyes and a kind smile. “Good morning, Anthony,” she called, gesturing for him to sit across from her.

“Morning, Mother,” he replied, clearing his throat as he followed her instruction. “To what do I owe the pleasure of dining with you this fine day?”

His mother chuckled. Beyond Isabel, she was the first person he ever charmed. As mischievous and reckless as he could get as a child, Cynthia Moore typically only laughed along with him. The most punishment his mother dealt out was a pinched cheek with a less-than-stern warning to behave himself. She

had been loving, sincere, and the person who gifted him his sense of humor.

Those were the same reasons that it hurt him to be around her as an adult. Anthony had never been the man she raised him to be; it caused him hurt and anxiety. For there were few things in life that he feared more than seeing disappointment in his mother's eyes.

“Must a mother have a reason to share a meal with their child?” she asked, her tone lightly teasing.

Anthony chuckled weakly and shrugged. “I suppose not, but something tells me there is.”

She poured herself a cup of tea as she attempted to hide the smirk that came over her features. “Nothing gets past you, does it?” she snickered and then lifted her hands in momentary surrender. “Very well, there is purpose.”

“I pray it's not to discuss... recent events,” he grumbled and made his own tea for an excuse to slightly turn his head. It was a meager attempt to hide the heat coming over his cheeks. Of course, she was aware of his and Isabel's past, but he hated the thought of her learning anything about him through the papers. Especially his escapades.

“This meal is for nothing but us to spend some time together, and for me to see how you are faring,” the Duchess of Mondale assured him. When he lifted his face to glance her way, he was once again met with a warm smile. “I am well aware that much is happening, your heart and mind must be flooded. I want to see for myself if you are alright.”

He should have expected this. It was a wonderful, but overwhelming, sense of relief. His mother was not someone he liked to speak to thoughtlessly. As he piled scones, fruit, ham, and cheese onto his plate, Anthony pondered his words. He didn't meet her gaze again until he had gathered his thoughts. "I am many things at present, but as of right now, I am mostly hopeful."

"Really?" the Duchess of Mondale breathed. When Anthony nodded, he watched in surprise as his mother's face faltered. As the confusion seeped into his expression, she waved a hand. "Forgive me, Anthony... I just... of course, I'm happy you are hopeful. However, I didn't think it would be America you are hopeful for."

"America?" he muttered, his head tilting to the side.

His mother suddenly appeared shy, and her shoulders lifted modestly. "I may have overheard your brother and father talking about your decision, and it sounded to me as though you are choosing to go to America."

He swallowed a lump as it formed in his throat and shuffled in his seat. "Yes well, it would appear that Moses has gotten ahead of himself and has been sharing with Father what he himself thinks is best for me, rather than my actual judgment."

"Oh?" she breathed. "So, you do not plan on going to America?"

His heart pattered a solemn rhythm as he contemplated his next words. He could see the relief in her face and no part of



him wished to rob her of that—however the truth would, at least a little. “I am preparing for America in case it so happens that I must go, even though it is not my intention to follow through with it.”

A hand covered her heart, and a smile stretched across the length of her face. “That is absolutely wonderful to hear, Anthony. It is such a relief.” With her other hand, she reached across the table and clutched Anthony’s. “I want what is best for you, my dear. Of course, if you thought your best was waiting for you in America, then I would kiss your cheek and send you on your way... I would be remiss to say a mother always wants her children nearby.”

He offered her a weak smile and patted the top of the hand which held his. “All is well, Mother. While I will go if necessary, I do not wish to.”

The Duchess withdrew her hand, and she resumed her breakfast. “I only wish that your father would practice more patience. I think his heart, as erratic as it is these days, makes him fly off at the handle and land at the nearest solution. I hope you know, darling, that I’ve tried to talk him out of it, but you know how stubborn he gets.” Her eyes sparkled and her lips twitched upward. “Much like you.”

“I have no ill-will toward Father for this... predicament he has placed me in. I know that I have tested his patience all my life, and it was bound to run out,” he remarked with mild humor.

“That you have, but it does not mean he needs to risk disowning you,” his mother frowned and sighed heavily. “I hope you know you will always be my son. No matter what your stubborn, quick-tempered father tries to say.”

His heart squeezed. Even though he knew he would always have the love of his mother, her confirming it was well-received. “I know it to be true.” He nodded.

She eyed him for a while, her hands folding in her lap. “Might I ask then, Anthony, what your plan is? If it isn’t America, that must mean you are attempting marriage?”

His lips pressed together. “I’m unsure,” he stated truthfully. “But I know one thing to be certain, I shall marry for love and nothing less. If I happen to find that before summer, then I shall. If not, then I shall proceed to America.”

Oh, how his mother’s eyes sparkled then—he knew that was the moment everything was coming together in her mind. Anthony doubted she would put it into words, but he knew that she understood his decision had at least *something* to do with Isabel. Considering how fond of her she had always been, he knew that the gleam in her eyes was sincere and held a hope of her own.

“Absolutely splendid,” she breathed.

They spent the rest of their meal making small talk and cracking jokes. Anthony had spent so long avoiding his mother out of fear of her disapproval that he had almost forgotten how revitalized he felt being around her. He was cut from the same cloth as she was, both enjoying far too much humor, even if it drove the Duke insane, and he shared her love of history. She had been the one to speak to him of stories of ancient Rome and medieval knights, as he clung to her skirt and listened to her intently.

A couple of hours passed as they sipped tea, chatted, and laughed. When it was finally time for them to part ways, the Duchess of Mondale walked him to the door. “Don’t be such a stranger, Anthony,” she smiled. “Have tea with your mama every now and again.”

“I certainly will.”

She pulled him into a tight hug, squeezing him around the shoulders. Then, she whispered ever so faintly that for a moment, Anthony thought his ears were deceiving him. “I shall pray that you find healing in your journey, Anthony, as I think once you will, true happiness awaits you.”

His breath caught in his throat as emotion dared to bubble to the surface. Squeezing her back and kissing her cheek, they parted ways. As he rode back to his townhome, he felt something... cosmic stirring within him. It felt as though all the signs in his life were pointing him to happiness—and that happiness happened to be Isabel.

He hadn’t felt the bitter anger return to his heart since he snatched her into his carriage. There were still aches and pains, but it appeared that the wounds were closing. They might leave scars, he couldn’t be sure, but they were finally healing. But the question of whether there would be more to their reunion remained, or if they would remain friends despite being separated by the ocean.

Anthony stepped out of his carriage, pondering what he should do with his time. Perhaps he should begin sorting through his belongings in preparation for the journey. His heart didn’t want to, at least not right now.

“My lord,” Hugh, his butler, greeted. He then extended two letters. “These came for you while you were away.”

“Thank you, old chap,” Anthony replied, taking the papers. Swallowing his nerves, he glanced down at them as he moved into the parlor. The first was a summons from Ernest, requesting him to join the family for supper that very night. And the other was from Isabel, and his heart panged.

She wrote much sooner than he thought she would. Anthony poured himself a small glass of brandy and sat down on a couch. His fate awaited him beyond her wax seal, didn't it?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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“*I*sabel, darling,” Isabel’s mother greeted with her usual croon. The Duchess of Radford had always been a soft-spoken woman who would much rather listen than interject herself into spirited conversation.

Approaching slowly, she kissed each of her mother’s cheeks and embraced her briefly. “It’s good to see you, Mother.”

She squeezed her for a moment longer before letting her go. “So sorry that it has taken me this long to visit again. You know this time of year is oh so busy.”

“You need not worry. I understand,” she assured her. Isabel’s eyes shifted to her sister. “Good day to you, Rebecca.”

“It’s a rather cloudy day, isn’t it? Not sure I would exactly call it *good*,” Rebecca mumbled with her arms crossed.

Isabel pursed her lips, assuming that her sister was still frustrated with her over the gossip column. What on earth had she come here for? Or was she now irritated that she hadn’t been home at the precise time she called on her? It would have

to wait because Isabel wouldn't risk a heated argument in front of their mother; it would only upset her.

“Well, would the two of you like to see the progress in the garden? I have yet to see it myself,” Isabel suggested.

“Oh, lovely idea, Issy. I would love to.” Their mother grinned to her.

Amy and the footmen took their belongings inside as the three women walked toward the garden. The trees suggested by the gardener had already been planted. They were already enormous! Isabel was intrigued as to how they had managed to get such large trees there. And the holes for the floral bushes by the stairs were already dug, which she hoped would arrive within a week.

Her own gasp escaped her as she rounded the corner of the house. Since her last visit, the gazebo had been built. It stood in the middle of the garden, had a domed roof, and white-painted wood sides. The gardeners appeared to be using it as a reference point, as the plants that were already in the ground surrounded and spread outward from it. Even from a distance, she could tell there would be a spiral path leading up to the beautiful structure.

“Splendid!” her mother exclaimed. “I love what you have selected, Issy. What wonderful taste.”

They walked along, admiring the shrubbery, trees, and flowers. There were evergreen plants every couple of spots, as Isabel didn't want the garden to look so barren in late autumn

and winter. The flowers were various shades of pink, purple, white, and yellow.

“You are doing fantastic, my dear,” her mother complimented again.

“Thank you.” Isabel beamed. “The gardeners, however, deserve all of the credit. They were extremely helpful in planning everything. I simply decided I wanted a gazebo and flowers.”

The two Duchesses chuckled together, and they all moved back toward the house with the decision to have tea in the dining room, whose redesign had commenced the previous week. The dining room resembled much of the changes which she had made at the townhome. A pale blue wallpaper with delicate white flowers covered the walls, a new chandelier with fantastic crystals hung just above the table. It was the same as it had been before, but Isabel had paid laborers to stain it a new shade of brown. It was all coming together, and she had hopes that by summer, both of her homes would be completely redone to her liking. The cleansing of years past would be completed by then, she so hoped.

As they settle in with their teas, Isabel felt her mother eyeing her curiously. She contemplated asking, but she could see the questions bubbling just under the surface. Soon, her mother popped and looked at her with tender yet severe eyes. “Isabel, I think it’s time for a change.”

Her brow furrowed and for a moment, she wasn’t entirely sure if her mother was serious. They had just spent an hour talking about all the changes taking place. “What can you mean? Do you think the renovations aren’t happening fast enough? Because I’ve contracted as many laborers—”

The Duchess of Radford held up a hand to gently silence her daughter. “No, my love. That isn’t what I mean. You are doing a wonderful job maintaining your homes and I am proud of you... However, I am concerned for you. You’ve been spending so much time alone and you have hardly written to your sister or me in quite some time.”

Isabel’s cheeks dared to darken. Admittedly, she knew that she could have taken initiative with communicating with the two of them. Decorating and Anthony had consumed her life as of late. “I’ve merely been making time for myself, Mother,” Isabel replied meekly. “It has been such a life-changing sensation for me – I’ve been making the most of it.”

“That’s all good and well, Issy. But I think it’s been long enough. So much time alone is not healthy for the mind,” her mother pressed before her lips tugged into a warm, polite smile. “In just a little less than two weeks, you’ll be transitioning out of mourning and into half-mourning. I think you should celebrate the occasion with a ball – here.”

“In two weeks?” Isabel repeated, her stomach churning. “I don’t know, Mother. There’s still so much to be done here—”

“Much of it can wait, as you are aware. Besides, Rebecca and I shall assist you in planning and organizing. It will be beneficial for you to have people around you again! Don’t you agree? Particularly at home. It shall bring your house good spirits!”

Isabel resisted the urge to squirm. She really wasn’t sure she wanted to take on such a task, nor was she really ready to simply dive right into such large social gatherings. She hadn’t



attended balls in *years* because of Robert. However, she knew that voicing any of that would only make her mother urge her more. And without a good reason to refuse it, she had to concede. Nodding lightly, she sighed and replied, “Very well, Mother. I will see to it.”

“Splendid, my love,” she replied with a massive grin. “Rebecca and I will be leaving shortly, but we will meet you in London when you return. Of course, take your time, but write when you’re ready. Then, we shall commence planning.” Once Isabel nodded in confirmation, the Duchess of Radford excused herself to freshen up before departing.

When Isabel’s eyes left her mother and fell to Rebecca, she found her sister no longer able to even attempt to mask the contempt on her face. “What is the matter with you?” Isabel asked in a hushed tone, her brows drawn together. “You seriously can’t still be angry over a gossip column from two weeks ago.”

Rebecca didn’t utter a word as she slammed a quill down on the table. It wasn’t just *any* quill, however. It was Isabel’s new quill—the one she had been missing the day before. Her eyes widened in immediate comprehension of what was going on, but Rebecca’s cold words confirmed it all. “I found your drafts to Lord Moore. You certainly sound *very* fond of him, sister.”

Isabel reached across the table and snatched her sister’s quill. Her rage and embarrassment erupted in her chest. Her drafts had always been more sentimental and lovey than her final drafts, which she had sent to Anthony because she had feared that strong convictions would drive him away until recently. Someone else going through her belongings and reading her private thoughts was extremely embarrassing. Thoughts she hadn’t even shared with him. “How dare you come into

my house and go through my belongings, Rebecca! It is completely inappropriate and impolite!”

“What’s *improper* is you writing love letters to another man so soon after your husband has passed,” Rebecca hissed. “I mean really, Isabel! I know you grow frustrated with my watching over you, but clearly you need guidance. Who knows how far this would have gone had I not found those drafts? You are risking everything to have this... this *sick* affair with him. You must put a stop to it at once.” Her sister’s tone carried authority, bitterness, and disgust. Her face was pinched with the same emotions as she stared at Isabel. “Unless you wish to become penniless property again.”

Isabel rose to her feet, her hands firmly placed on the table’s surface. Rebecca was testing her patience to the limit. “Please correct me if I am mistaken, but I am both the older sister and the Dowager Duchess of my own dukedom. And I do *not* take orders from anyone except the King, very much less my little sister,” Isabel stated coldly and firmly. “And your accusations are extremely presumptuous. You discovered drafts, which meant they were not final versions. My private thoughts and reflections do not imply action. Lord Moore and I are friends for the time being and will be for the foreseeable future. And if that is ever to change, Rebecca, that is not your decision to make. The decision will be mine and mine alone. So, while I appreciate your concern, I can assure you that there are better uses for it than worrying about what will happen to my fortune and freedom.”

The sisters glared hard at one another for a while. The air was so thick about them, Isabel was certain if a match were to be lit, the entire dining room would be up in flames. It wasn’t until their mother returned, that they broke eye contact. Rebecca rose from her chair, and the women all moved to the entrance. After parting goodbyes, Isabel stood on the steps of

her country estate and watched her mother's carriage pull away.

She looked to one of the footmen. "Urgently ride into town and inform the staff at the townhome that *no one* is to be allowed in without my express permission. Not even Lady Rebecca."

"Yes, Your Grace," he replied, bowing his head before hurrying off to his horse.

She took a breath as she stood there watching him vanish over the horizon. She had no idea what had gotten into her sister, but she despised the nauseating feeling it had left her with. Who could Isabel trust if she couldn't even trust her own sister?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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Anthony had read her letter so many times that afternoon, that he practically had it memorized. It would be a lie to say her words hadn't hurt him, but he wasn't angry about it. If anything, he understood and was feeling something akin to what Isabel had depicted with her words.

Anthony would have to leave for America in the coming months if marriage was not an option for her. As much as they could possibly love each other, they knew that being together was not in the cards. Anthony could not force Isabel to marry him, just as Isabel stated she could not ask him to be her secret lover. Especially after the prison she had been in with Robert... She must have felt like a bird finally released from a cage. He never wanted for her to feel trapped or obligated to him.

Anthony's decision was nearly made up by the time he left for Ernest's. They could stay friends, and he would always love her from afar—even from America. Still, he was trying to change and didn't want to make any hasty decisions.

As soon as he rounded the corner into the Cecil's parlor, warm smiles greeted him. "Welcome, old sport," Ernest called from an armchair. Simon, his son, was on his lap with a wooden toy in hand.

“Thank you for having me,” he called back before approaching Helena. She never failed to look as youthful as the day he first saw her at Galway’s Ball. Anthony held a handout for her, kissing the back of it before flashing her his most endearing smile. “Looking as marvelous as ever, Your Grace.”

“Always such the charmer.” Helena chuckled. “Good to see you in good spirit, Anthony.”

“Careful, she’s a married woman. Wouldn’t want her husband to get jealous,” Ernest teased.

“I know for a fact the man hardly packs a punch. I think I can take him,” Anthony cheekily retorted. The men shared a false glare in the wake of Anthony bringing up the very night he baited Ernest into punching him, which led Ernest to breaking his vow of silence. Their attempts of looking angry faltered and gave way to laughter.

With that, he moved to take a seat in an empty chair and get a good look at the little family. Caroline, Helena’s daughter, was almost certainly in the basinet with her. However, the baby soon awoke, and Helena picked her up. Ernest swooped to their side. They spoke softly to the infant, cooing to her that everything was fine and that it was almost dinner time. Simon even offered his toy to the fussy baby.

*Old age must be softening me,* Anthony thought to himself as his eyes dared to become dewy at the scene. Though, it wasn’t simply because it was an adorable and wholesome scene before him. Rather, it was the realization of just how far his dear friend had come in the past couple of years. Just a few

years ago, no one would have ever thought Ernest would be such a devoted and loving husband and father.

He couldn't help but wonder if family life would ever be for him. If he and Isabel remained only friends, would he open his heart to another? Did he want a family, if it wasn't with her? Did he want one at all? Already, Anthony's mind was swimming and he worried he shouldn't have come to dinner.

"Dinner is served, Your Grace," a servant announced from the parlor entrance.

They all moved into the dining room and sat down for a lovely dinner of chicken, potatoes, peas, and bread. Throughout the meal, the three of them engaged in light and playful banter, only occasionally interrupted by one of the children. Anthony didn't mind the kids and thought Simon was quite amusing. When Ernest asked for his opinion, the little boy would thrust his fork into the air before blurting out a jumble of words and gibberish.

They were pleasant, amusing, and gracious hosts—but Anthony's heart was simply not in it. He kept his smile on and joined in the conversation, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Everything reminded him of Isabel. He was troubled by her and the decisions they had to make. He realized at dinner that night, as he reflected on things, that time was no longer his friend. It was possible that spring would pass without them reaching an agreement, and he'd be on a boat wondering *what if*.

Once the dessert plates were cleared, Anthony cleared his throat to say goodnight and go on his way. However, he was interrupted by Ernest. "Anthony, might I get your opinion on a business matter?"

Anthony arched a brow and shrugged. “Very well. What is it?”

“Oh, I will have to look at the papers. Follow me,” Ernest stated, nodding for the door. The two men headed into his study. Once the door shut behind them, however, Ernest was quick to ask, “What is going on with you?”

“Ernest Cecil, a man of *true* subtlety,” Anthony murmured. “You know, I highly doubt that even Helena bought that little excuse of yours.”

“I don’t expect her to. I was merely trying to grant you some privacy,” Ernest snorted. “So, out with it. You know better than to think you can hide this mood that clings to you like a perfume.”

Anthony paced across the room and sank down in one of the chairs in front of the desk. “I’m not daft, I know you have a bottle about here for a rainy day. If we are to talk of this, I want a drink.”

Ernest stiffened his posture, but then sighed and paced across the room. “I want you to know that I do not have a rainy-day bottle. Rather, I bought one as a wedding or parting gift for you,” the Duke grumbled as he opened a desk drawer and took out a bottle of sherry. It had, indeed, not yet been opened.

“My, my, Ernest. I have to say I’m stunned by just how sober you have remained all these years,” Anthony mused.

“I made a promise and I intend to keep it,” Ernest informed him. Ah yes, the Duke of Atholl had promised Helena to stay clearheaded after she learned he could actually talk. After pouring Anthony a glass, he scooted it across the table and sat in his own chair. “So, tell me, what has happened?”

Anthony swirled the glass, watching the dark liquid slosh side to side and cling ever so briefly to the walls of the cup. A great deal has happened since he and Ernest last spoke about the state of his and Isabel’s correspondences. There were many ways he could start the conversation, but he figured it best to start with the biggest bombshell of all.

“Isabel has confessed her love for me. And I for her,” he announced solemnly.

Ernest remained silent for a brief moment, as if to allow him to finish his thought. When nothing more came, he replied, “This is good news, is it not? Why are you not singing from the rooftops?”

He weighed his response before responding, his eyes not yet leaving the liquid as he moved the glass around methodically. “It is bittersweet news,” Anthony modified, his voice quiet and calm.

“What do you mean? Doesn’t this solve everything? I mean, I know your father wishes you betrothed by summer, but surely —”

“Because marriage is not in the equation for the two of us,” Anthony interjected. A scoff sounded from him, his head shaking slightly. “I don’t know if I even want marriage.



Marriage has long since left my mind... but I know to ask for her hand would be an act of cruelty.” At last, he raised the drink to his lips to rid his mouth of the bitter taste of his final word.

“Come now, Anthony. You really can’t be so self-deprecating. Not you, not the man I have seen attempt to bed Ladies which rub elbows with the Royal Family.”

Once all the sherry was gone, he placed the glass down on the desk and gestured for Ernest to pour him another. The Duke obliged.

As he poured, Anthony answered him, “It has nothing at all to do with my self-esteem, old sport. It has everything to do with love. Though I have not written her back, we seem to be approaching an agreement that we should not pursue romance. We may love one another, but friendship is all that will remain in the cards for us. Isabel doesn’t wish to marry again. She does not want to ask me to be her lover, not that I will be around to do so, and I do not wish to pressure her into a marriage she does not want.”

Ernest’s brows were drawn together dramatically as he studied his friend’s expression. Anthony’s throat was dried from emotion, even after his drink. But his face remained calm and flat. There was no need to get worked up or break down. Not there, not in that moment.

“I don’t understand,” Ernest mused, his hands folding together and resting on top of the desk. “I don’t understand why *marriage* is the concern right now. Why not simply reach an agreement to court after a while? Surely that will be enough for your father, considering it’s Isabel. I mean, so long as you remain behaved.”

“I would never indulge in proclivities while courting Isabel,” Anthony stated harshly, insulted even by the suggestion that he would not behave himself. Then he simmered and sighed, his eyes dropping to the floor. “This has all happened so quickly... But I cannot deny my feelings for her. Just breathing the same air as her makes me weak. As angry as I can get, and as righteous as that rage can become, all it takes is a moment in the same room with her to put me right back where I was ten years ago... In love, naive, and utterly enslaved to her gaze.” His lip snarled and his grip tightened on his glass as the root cause of it all came to mind. Robert. Had he not been a bastard and would have treated her half decently in his lifetime, perhaps there wouldn’t be such a weight to the decision.

Shaking his head again, Anthony continued, “I’ve forgiven her for leaving. I suppose not fully, as I haven’t really sat with the decision. But I have chosen to do so, even if it takes time. When I was faced with the choice to forgive or lose her, it only took me a few minutes to collect myself enough to know that having any of her was better than none of her at all.” His mouth twitched, knowing that it all must seem confusing for Ernest right then, as his declarations had not yet explained why they could not court or marry. “I almost lost her because I admitted that some part of me thought her husband’s abuse was karma. It feels sick to admit aloud, when I know all he did to her... And yet I expressed that to her, in a letter. I shan’t share the atrocities committed by Robert Swinton against her, but know it is enough to make me never want to press her for marriage. Robert imprisoned her, and it was only with his death that she was released. I cannot ask her to go back into a cage. Maybe things would be different if I had spent years with her instead of months, but that is not the case. As a result, the way I see it, I will be departing for America. At the very least, I’ll have two friends to write to now instead of just one.”

“You’re writing all this off because she does not wish to enter a cruel marriage again?” Ernest snorted. “Where is your imagination, old sport?”

Anthony’s jaw set in place, and he took a swig of his sherry. “Do not make a joke of this, Ernest. I am warning you now.”

“I’m not attempting to. No, all I am doing is speculating on why you have succumbed so easily to this way of thinking. And I believe you are surrendering right away because you do not want to confront your feelings for her. For it is one thing to acknowledge your love for a woman; and it is quite another to truly comprehend it. It is far easier to regard her as a potential pen pal than it is to solve the problem,” Ernest remarked.

“What do you propose I do then, Ernest? Want me to tell her of my father’s ultimatum and really lay on the guilt and pressure to get her to agree to one day marry me so that I may stay in the country?” Anthony practically spat.

“What I want you to do, Anthony, is prove to her why a marriage to you would be different,” Ernest stated firmly. “I’m sure you have done a fine job of showing your less-than-savory side if you told her that life with Robert was deserved. Spend time with her and show her why a life with you would be one worth the gamble.”

He shook his head and once again stared back down into his drink. “It’s not so simple. I can be as sweet as summer wine to her, that won’t make marriage worth giving up the life she has right now. Come winter, she will be free of societal mourning norms and able to live her life as a free woman. Ernest, what can I give her that she does not already have? She possesses properties, a fortune, and a bloody title...”

Anthony was sinking into a place of self-pity, knowing that there really wasn't anything of worldly value that he could offer Isabel that she couldn't obtain for herself. To marry him would be of no gain to her, only loss.

A hand clasped his shoulder, nearly making him jump. He peered up only to find his friend looming overhead with tender eyes. "You can give her true love. And I assure you, there isn't a price one in love won't pay for it."

"She already admitted that she loves me," he mused.

"So, she's done the first step for you," Ernest urged further. "Now all you must do is convince her why a life with you is worth giving up her title. I think you'll be surprised by just how easy it is."

"I think you're just trying to improve my mood," he muttered.

"If I wanted to do that, I would have suggested we go down to the club for a little while," Ernest corrected and squeezed his shoulder. "What I am trying to do is get you to choose happiness, rather than what is logical. Happiness and love are rarely that." There it was again, that funny little word. *Happiness*. Every time he had heard it as of late it had been synonymous with Isabel. "The worst that can happen now, is that you break your own heart for a little while by asking and being rejected by her. But at least then, you will never spend a sleepless night in America asking yourself *what if I had asked her? What if I hadn't so easily conceded?*"

Immediately, Anthony knew he was right. Letting out a shaky breath, he once more looked to his friend. “How on Earth do I convince a Duchess that a life with me is worth surrendering everything?”

“Hell if I know,” Ernest snorted and smiled to his friend. “But we can plot ideas together.”

The thought relieved Anthony’s heart, and he nodded slowly. The Duke walked away and returned to his desk. He felt a flutter in his chest. He would never force her into marriage, but Ernest may have been correct.

Perhaps he could show her that he was worth the great sacrifice. He couldn’t believe it. Anthony had gone from despising Isabel to realizing that he didn’t just want to love her in whatever way he could—he really wanted to marry her.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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### *A FEW DAYS LATER*

*I*sabel had not yet left the countryside. While she knew that her mother was waiting for her to return and announce that she was prepared to initiate plans for a Ball, it was both her anger toward Rebecca, and anticipation from a letter from Anthony that kept her there in the country.

She wasn't yet ready to be face-to-face with her sister after such a fight. The Duchess knew her sister all too well and knew that it would be Isabel that was expected to apologize. But no such apology would come from her, not after she had violated her trust and privacy by searching her home! Her contempt for her younger sister, however, was beginning to fade as the days passed. Rebecca had a habit of doing inappropriate things, but it was impossible to be mad at her because she had always meant well. Even after going through her study, she knew it was because her sister was afraid of Isabel getting too close to Anthony—and he hadn't done himself any favors over the years to have favorable judgment bestowed upon him.

*Anthony...* Her heart panged at the thought of him as she walked into her garden. The work had progressed greatly, and it would no doubt finish before the potential Ball, and yet, even as she took in the sight of flowers and leaves, it was he she thought of.

She was worried because she hadn't heard from him in a long time. What if he had decided to abandon her entirely? Isabel didn't think she'd blame him or put it past him if he chose to stop contacting her to save himself the heartache.

Had she possibly done the very thing she had gotten angry at him for doing? Was she being too truthful in a hurtful way? She had put a lot of thought into her words and had tried her hardest to assure him of her love. Oh, she despised the sensation in her chest. If only things were simpler! Isabel sighed as she stepped up to her gazebo for the first time since it was completed. The garden was supposed to be her escape from everything, including her own thoughts.

She leaned against the railing, taking in the scenery from her vantage point. Tall trees and dense bushes obscured the view of the spiral garden. Should one walked the trail, however, they could tell. She couldn't believe the garden was almost finished. And in a matter of but a mere couple of weeks! But she figured that's what happened when money was put to good use. Laborers had swarmed the grounds earlier that morning to begin work on her requested projects. They promised to return soon to finish the job. Isabel had dispatched them all for high noon. It was the first hot day of the year, and she wanted them all to eat well without overheating. They had thanked her repeatedly as they rushed off to the open field to eat bread, meat, and tea prepared by her own staff. She believed that good morale resulted in good work. Her gracious treatment was undoubtedly a factor in the garden's success.

A somber thought occurred to her then.

*What shall I do once the garden and homes are finished? How will I spend my days then?*

Isabel tried to dismiss the thought off her mind. She had hobbies, of course. Her days would be filled with reading and walking the garden. Maybe she could take up painting or get a foal to raise herself. But how long could such things really keep her attention for? For a Dowager Duchess in her position, the possibilities were limitless. Her money and status had bestowed upon her freedom, and freedom had bestowed upon her time. She had so much of it that she wasn't sure what to do with it. *Or with whom to spend it.*

“What a gorgeous sight,” a familiar voice purred from behind her.

Isabel spun around, her eyes widening at the sight of Anthony entering the gazebo. She blinked quickly, as if he were a feverish vision that would pass. But that wasn't the case. He was truly there. She approached him with zeal, but fear rose in her throat.

“What on Earth are you doing here?” she asked hoarsely. “Your father—”

“The funniest thing happened.” He sighed, though the hint of a smirk on his lips let her know that whatever he was about to tell her was one of his fictitious yarns. “I was out on a lovely ride through the countryside, Your Grace. What do you know, one of my carriage wheels broke! Completely skewed, it is. As a result, my coachman, horses, and I are all stranded. Just a short jog away from where we are now—but out of sight. While I could have sent my coachman along, he has been suffering from a nasty cough. I took pity on him and journeyed to the nearest estate myself. And, surprise, surprise, it's yours!”



“How very lucky of you to find an old friend nearby.” Isabel giggled, playing along for the moment. “Do you think it will be an easy fix?”

“Oh, certainly... perhaps once someone puts this back on,” Anthony said, taking his hand from his pocket and produced a little piece of metal which helped fasten wheels in place.

Isabel laughed and shook her head. “You really think that your father will believe that your carriage just so happened to break down near my estate?”

“Absolutely not.” He snickered. “But it’s believable enough that it shouldn’t raise concern.” Anthony leaned in and whispered then, “My coachman is a very good sport, and his loyalty comes at a cheap price.”

So, he paid off the coachman to play along with his little rouse just to have a little time with her? Isabel was grinning ear to ear. “You have gone through a lot of trouble to be standing here, it seems.”

“That I have.” Anthony nodded and stalked forward. “But I would have done much more to have another moment alone with you.”

“How romantic,” she breathed. As much as she tried to make the comment come off as teasing, she knew sincerity gleamed through the feeble façade. Anthony raised a hand toward her face and brushed a curl behind her ear. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she couldn’t seem to keep herself from asking, “I assume you received my letter?”

“I did.” He nodded.

The way he was looking at her was melting her insides. There was so much affection and passion glistening in his coffee-colored eyes. She could watch him look at her in such a way forever, right there in her garden. If only time could freeze for her in such a way, as she knew it was limited. When Anthony’s gaze flickered to her lips, she had to make a conscious effort not to kiss him. “You haven’t written me back...”

“I wanted to come and see you in person. I just had to figure out how,” Anthony purred.

“What do you think? I’m sorry if my words hurt you as I know \_\_\_”

He tugged her and his fingers grazed along her jaw. “Why should we waste this time together worrying about a future that has not yet shaped? Let’s enjoy this time together right here and now.”

Isabel gripped his arms lightly, as he was hovering just over her then. He was so firm, warm, and inviting... Anthony had the aura of a siren or something similar. She had to stay strong—even then, as he grazed his nose against hers. His lips were in her reach, all she needed to do was move an inch forward. But no. They needed to talk.

“Because savoring this moment will only leave your heart broken. I cannot possibly do that again, Anthony... I... I’m not certain what I expected to happen when I wrote that first

letter to you, but I suppose I never fully conceptualized this feeling, this situation. I've always loved you, but I assumed that time would have changed us in some way. Or—”

“Isabel,” he urged gently. “Do not worry for my heart right now. You mean well and I thought the same as you after reading your letter. However now I understand that the only way for my heart to be broken, is to never try.”

“Try what?” she asked curiously, though her attention was split between their conversation, and the awareness of just how close his lips were to hers.

“To deserve your love and embrace it. No matter what happens.”

The words were so heartfelt and romantic, Isabel was breathless. Thankfully, there wasn't any need to have an intelligent response back. The gap closed between them, and their lips melded into one. Never had she known a thrill like kissing him. Lightning shot through her with every brush of his lips against hers. It was addictive, a high that she had nothing to compare it to.

And, as before, it was quietly developing into something more than just sweet, fiery kisses. His tongue traced her lip before gliding past it and brushing against hers. Isabel's back was against the railing, and her hands gripped the fabric of his shirt. Sexual excitement was something she had never experienced before, and it belonged solely to her Anthony. He caressed her sides and caught her hips tightly, pressing himself against her.

Isabel could feel his manhood pressing into her hipbone as they kissed passionately. She gasped lightly, but not because of him, but due to the sensation between her legs. Her excitement increased as she sensed his arousal. Between them, a hand appeared, pressing into the fabric of her gown.

As he caressed between her legs, her mouth hung open. His movements were precise and deft, the pad of his finger easily finding her sensitive bud through the fabric. His touch sent ripples of delight through her. Her body yearned for more, for *him*. However, as Anthony yanked his mouth away from hers and began to nip at her neck, Isabel became aware of their location once more. Out in the open, in her garden. All it would take for them to be caught is for the laborers to return early, a servant to step outside, or a visitor to arrive.

“Anthony,” she breathed, though it was more of a moan.

He moved his head to look her in the eye. “Isabel,” he purred.

Prickles of desire coursed through her. Oh, how tempting it was to find somewhere more private, to take him as her lover—But they shouldn’t. There was more to their connection and dynamic than just carnal desires. It was hard to see it though, as he continued to rub her and press brief, tender kisses to her lips.

“We shouldn’t,” she groaned, her hands finding his neck and curling about the strands of his rustled hair. “I have laborers about,” she informed him. “They could be back any time now.”

Anthony immediately dropped his hand from her dress, though she longed for it again. His head fell to her shoulder, and she held him and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You’re right, you’re right,” he grumbled. “Forgive me.”

Isabel’s fingers combed through his hair. “Nothing to forgive, I assure you.”

They pulled away from each other after another minute of lingering in the embrace, and he studied her for a long moment. She was curious about what was going on in his head, but she didn’t ask. Not with her heart as erratic as it was and her breath still trying to elude her. Anthony smiled softly and extended his arm. “Do you think it would be too scandalous for us to take a walk through this lovely garden of yours?”

Isabel giggled and shook her head negatively, though her eyes panned about for anyone lingering nearby. It appeared that they had managed to get away with yet another risky, stolen moment. If anyone happened near, they could step away from one another and share the story he had prepared for such an occasion. Taking his arm, the two of them stepped out of the gazebo.

“Absolutely breathtaking,” Anthony complimented. “And your garden is none too shabby either.”

Yet again, Isabel was in a fit of laughter and her heart fluttered about. There he was, *her* Anthony. Had he really managed to free himself from the hatred and hurt she had inspired in his heart for all those years? The Duchess was hesitant to believe so, but the man before her, in that moment, was all that she remembered him to be. Clever, witty, and far too flirtatious for his own good. She had seen brief moments of it before then in

her parlor and at the bookstore, but he was different in her garden.

“You are in very good spirits today,” she commented with the same endearing grin on her lips that hadn’t seem to leave her in his presence.

“I am.” He nodded. “A new era is upon us, my dear Isabel.”

Isabel’s pulse raced at hearing him call her his Isabel again. She hadn’t been referred to in such a way since their teenage years. “And might I ask what this new era is?”

“An era of second-chances and love,” he announced with bravado to his voice, peering down at her from the corner of his eye. “You have freed me from my anger, and I shall attempt to free you from your worries.”

“Whatever do you mean?” she asked, her laughter a little nervous then.

Anthony came to a halt and turned to face her. He didn’t even bother to look around before taking her hands, which both surprised and alarmed her. Was he no longer concerned about scandals or rumors reaching his father? Isabel had never asked why he heeded his father’s words so gravely when their first splash in the paper took place. She knew that making him unhappy would surely have consequences.

His thumbs stroked the backs of her hands as he scoured the depths of her eyes. “As I said before, I felt the same as you when I read your letter. I thought about writing you back and

insist we remain friends and that perhaps letters were the way to move forward. However, I admit to you now that I sought counsel in Ernest. And he seemed to believe that I was relenting to your suggestions because it was what was easy. And I think he was onto something there, but not just about me.” Isabel started to ask for clarification, but he provided it with ease. “Happiness does not always come easy. It was my own anger and stubbornness which stood in my way. And I know for a fact that your worries about marriage is what is threatening your happiness.”

“Anthony.” She sighed, her shoulders deflating a little. “To call it a worry is a bit of an understatement.”

“I know it is. But this fear you have... We don’t have to face it for a long while. All I ask, is to let me prove myself to you. Prove to you why choosing a life together would bring both of us endless happiness.” Anthony pulled her closer, and she was transfixed. “Life apart made us miserable, Isabel. All I am saying is life is short and we have already lost a decade. Let us explore this,” he reached for her cheek and briefly stroked it with his fingertips, “to know for sure. Do not worry about breaking my heart. I shall be the decider of that.”

Her heart and mind were completely torn by his words. While her heart took every syllable as gospel to live by, her mind anxiously debated if it was best to end it now. Even in the wake of his sweet, devoted words, Isabel simply wasn’t sure marriage was in her future. And so why explore the love further, if it would risk him hating her again? She shook her head lightly. “You know I want to, Anthony... But I don’t want to risk losing you again.”

“I am not going anywhere,” he urged. “I know after the way I have acted, it will take time. But I shall give you all of it. My heart, and my time, are yours forever, Isabel.” His voice

dropped to a delicate whisper. “Let me prove to you that a life with me would only be the price of your title. Nothing more. Never will I make you feel trapped. Only loved and cherished.”

Her eyes welled up with tears. For years, something deep within her had wished to hear such words from him. Perhaps she was caught up in the moment and her emotions, which was why she was so easily persuaded—but damnit, she didn’t care. Anthony was right; they needed to try so they could be certain. Her heart skipped a beat at the prospect of being courted by him one day. Perhaps she owed herself as much, if not more, than the freedom of being a Dowager Duchess. Was she truly free if she couldn’t love the object of her affections?

“Very well.” She smiled to him. “You my do your best to convince me so.”

“I promise you my very worst.” He smirked.

Anthony stole another kiss and she savored it more than any of the others. It was the kiss of a new era, just as he declared it to be. The pair walked the rest of the garden, discussing plants, though neither of them knew much of botany. Even such a simple talk with him was better than a conversation with anyone else. Once they made their way out of the garden, she could hear Amy looking for her in the distance.

“I suppose I should return this part to my carriage.” Anthony sighed.

“Will you write to me?” Isabel asked. “I shall be returning to London tomorrow. Perhaps we can arrange to meet again.”



He smirked and leaned to her ear. “Check underneath the tree nearest to the house.”

With that, Anthony sauntered away from her. He never failed to leave her in a flutter and marvelously confused. Turning to the house, she walked swiftly along the wall toward the tree, wanting to recover the meaning of his words before calling out to her maid. And just as he stated, the tree at the corner of the home had a book lying underneath it. It was a poetry collection, and within it was a letter—bookmarking *Hero and Leander* by Christopher Marlowe.

Isabel held it closely as she walked toward the house, eager to read both his words and the poem.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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*J*sabel,

*There is no more denying my feelings for you. As much as I try to deny them even to myself, all it takes is laying eyes on you and I am transported in time and place back to the days of blissful youth. Where nothing could ever be the matter because we had one another, and the future was ours for the taking.*

*Our days together might have been disrupted, but the future can still be ours. I speak with confidence because I know it to be true. For not time, nor anger or pain could extinguish our love all these years. I know that the predicaments set before us now are nothing in comparison.*

*While I write this, I know that I am not a man that deserves you. But I will be. I shan't stop until I am. Even if we end up half a world away from one another, it is with love and fondness that I shall write you.*

*With love,*

*Anthony*

Isabel's heart was singing all the way back to London, the book Anthony had given her and his letter still in her hand. She'd only released it from her grasp to bathe and then slept with it tucked under her pillow. She held it until the next evening, her fingers lightly tracing the single mark he made within the book.

The poem had been one of love at first sight turned into forbidden love, as Hero promised to the Goddess Venus that she would remain chaste. Leander is pained by the separation and sets out to swim after his love. Once united, they try as hard as they can to uphold her chastity, but moved by their love, they break the sacred vow. The poem ends with them embraced, and morning upon them—they do not know what will come of their actions, but they are so enamored. Anthony had underlined the line which struck the deepest chord within Isabel.

*It lies not in our power to love or hate, For will in us is overruled by fate.*

Never before had she read anything that had such an impact on her heart. Her and Anthony's paths were predetermined by fate. It made her heart ache in a new way, as if she was afraid her desire to remain a widow was selfish or ill-conceived. Because she was completely moved by his love for her.

After sending a note to her mother to inform her of her arrival back in London, Isabel paced about her library all afternoon in search for a book to gift him in return.

“What are you looking for, Your Grace?” Amy called to her from the doorway.

“I’m not yet sure,” Isabel sighed. “All these books on law and trade routes... I really need to return to the bookshop.”

“Perhaps if you could give me an idea, I could help look? I’m not the best at reading, but I am sure I could help find a title...” Amy suggested.

Isabel crossed her arms and stood back. “I really wish I knew. I need something to gift Lord Moore. But I want it to be meaningful.”

Admitting her actions so bravely aloud was jarring, even to her own ears. However, she knew that Amy was not dim-witted. Her maid had witnessed the hours Isabel had stayed in the study, reading Anthony’s letters and drafting her responses. To try and tread delicately over the topic would be a waste of time.

“It seems the two of you have gotten very close,” Amy commented as she ventured further into the room.

“We have,” Isabel admitted. There was a silence and before it was uttered, Isabel knew what her maid was going to ask. “Go ahead, Amy, speak your mind freely.”

Amy spoke as evenly and as bravely as she could, “I just worry for you, Your Grace... I fear that not only are you acting boldly and will increase attention drawn to you, but that this... relation is not what you need right now.” Isabel sighed and looked to her maid, whose blue eyes were rounded with worry and deepened with compassion. “All I mean is, I know what being with the Duke did to you... And I worry that you

are positioning yourself to be in a similar situation very soon. The staff saw the two of you walking in the garden at the estate.”

Isabel softened and looked back to the shelves as she contemplated her response. She supposed they hadn't been as careful as they should have. In fact, they had moved with careless luck for the most part. “And what is it that I need right now?” she asked sincerely, trying to swallow her embarrassment.

“To... to adjust to being on your own. To enjoy it just the same.”

“I am enjoying it,” Isabel confirmed. “I have adored these weeks decorating with you and overseeing the garden. I can assure you that I have no plans to surrender myself so soon to a man...” She swallowed a lump in her throat and took in a deep breath. “However, I think what I am realizing now is that being a Dowager Duchess is a prison of its own. I might have all the wealth and time I could ever desire, my sweet Amy... but am I truly free at all if I am unable to love?”

“You have a fair point,” Amy conceded slightly. “I just want what is best for you.”

“As do I,” Isabel agreed. “I have no idea what it is, and I don't believe anyone ever does. It's all just educated guesses that guide people's life decisions. However, I do not believe that logic or reason can be used to deduce love. I wish I could, however...” The thought carried her to a section of philosophy. She thumbed through a couple of the books as they spoke.

“It’s just been such a brief period of time, and I fear you are becoming... consumed with Lord Moore,” Amy commented, a frown audible in her words.

“Because I am,” Isabel admitted. With her book selected, she tucked it under her arm and stepped to her maid. “I am still trying to process all of this but I know that as soon as I was free of wifhood and my sister’s watchful gaze, Anthony was on my mind... For me, freedom means being able to be the person I was before marriage. And who I was, loved Anthony wholly, entirely, irrevocably. No decisions have been made, and they will not be made for a long while. For the time being, I am embracing this... It is what gives my days meaning... Is that really so foolish?”

Amy softened then and slowly shook her head. “No, Your Grace. I don’t believe so.”

“Good.” Isabel sighed. “Now, I’m going to go write this letter before my mother and sister arrive. Even though I have just announced my return, you know they shan’t waste time.” The women shared a light chuckle. There was a slight pause before the Duchess asked, “Amy... Do I need to worry about the staff spreading word that Lord Moore was at the estate?”

“Of course not, Your Grace,” Amy assured her. “We all adore you and do not wish to trade your privacy and trust for a quick shilling.”

Her shoulders relaxed, and she thanked her maid before entering the study. Sitting at the desk, she took a moment to appreciate her staff. While Isabel had never wanted anything in return for her kindness other than for them to be happy, she was relieved to learn that they all had her best interests at heart. She’d have to do something special for them soon. She

wasn't sure what it was. She began by opening the book. It was a study on Sophocles with many excerpts, quotes, and essays. It was a line in *Oedipus at Colonus* that had caught her attention as she flipped through the books.

While Isabel had been against marking in novels in her youth, their little exchanges gave marking a different meaning. For no matter what happened between them, she was certain they would hold onto the books. And if he were to ever open that book again and read that play, he would see a mark from her quill.

*One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life: That word is love.*

After a long time of studying the line and analyzing her thoughts, Isabel wrote Anthony a note:

*Dearest Anthony,*

*A heart conflicted sees clarity when it peers through a lens of love. I know it to be true: I love you. I sincerely wish you luck on your endeavor to prove to me that a life together is a life worth the sacrifices I would make.*

*Enjoy this book on Sophocles. I know your inclination is toward Ancient Rome—but give Greece a chance, won't you?*

*With all my love,*

*Isabel*

Tucking it into the pages, she stood from her desk and headed downstairs. Approaching a footman with a smile, she ordered, "Please deliver this directly to Lord Moore."

The servant eyed her and bowed his head, "Yes, Your Grace."

He dashed away, and Isabel turned to walk back inside when she noticed her mother's carriage approaching. Her note had only arrived a few hours ago but they had wasted no time. The Duchess of Radford and her youngest daughter made their appearance. Before entering, the Duchesses exchanged cheek kisses and a brief embrace, as is customary. The two sisters exchanged no pleasantries once more, though Isabel noted that Rebecca did not appear as angry as she had at the estate.

"We haven't much time to plan if we are to host it the day which marks your entrance into half-mourning," her mother informed as they all sat in the parlor; Amy was entrusted to serve the tea. "So, I think there are two orders of business to see to first. One, the invitations. And two, a dress appointment. You'll need something in gray or a shade of purple."

"Lilac," Isabel commented, though it was more blurted from her mouth than anything. Lilac had been the color of the dress she wore to her Debut Ball. Nothing would make her happier than wearing a dress in such a shade.

"I do believe that is suitable." Her mother nodded with a smile. Something about her expression made Isabel believe that her mother was onto her. But how could she? It was surely all in Isabel's mind. "Now, about the guest list..."



Her mother launched into an entire list of names and sent Amy to fetch her a quill and inkwell, as she had brought with her an entire case of invitation cards. Grace Wynn, their mother, had always been a woman of detail. She was soft-spoken, but she made herself known through the effort she put into everything. Handwriting her invitations, being the one to tie every little bow on centerpieces, and ensuring every guest was greeted—the Duchess truly made throwing a ball seem like an art form.

“Your Grace,” a voice called from the entrance. Isabel looked up to see her butler, James, holding a box. “This has just arrived for you.”

At her command, he paced across the room and handed her the package. Isabel assumed it was a delivery she had ordered for the townhouse. However, it was not silverware or art that she discovered in the box. It was a pair of purple jade and gold earrings shaped like flowers, as well as sheet music. Her heart swelled at the sight, and she knew it had to be Anthony. There was no way her footman had already arrived at the Lord’s residence, so they had to have sent their correspondences at the same time. To her, the idea was incredibly romantic.

It took genuine effort for her to not emote when she placed the name of the sheet music. It was Niccolò Paganini’s *Sonata Op. 3 No. 6: Andante innocentemente*—the song Anthony hummed to her in that very room as they danced. In spite of her, her cheeks darkened at the sight. Before closing the box, she made quick work of retrieving the note from the box and tucked it into her pocket.

“Let’s see, then,” her mother urged, curious what was in the box.

“It’s sheet music and earrings,” Isabel commented, holding up the jewelry for her mother to see.

“My, my. Not even out of mourning and my daughter has a suitor,” the Duchess of Radford teased.

“They are from a friend,” Isabel muttered. “They are purple, perhaps it is to celebrate more color coming into my life.”

“My friends don’t send *me* jewelry,” she teased further.

“I’m going to powder my nose,” Rebecca announced before quickly exiting the room.

Isabel did not dare look into the direction of her sister, fearing the expression on her face. She was simply not in the mood to engage with her sister’s behavior, which was bound to be one of disgust or anger. Not in front of their mother, anyway. When Rebecca was no longer visible, her mother added, “I hope you know, Isabel, that I am supportive of your endeavors. Whether that be painting, playing the harpsichord, or finding love.”

“Really?” Isabel breathed. “Don’t you think it’s too soon?”

Her mother studied her for a long while. “I think ten years without love is long enough.”

Never had she heard her mother confess aloud that she knew Isabel was unhappy with Robert. It was as liberating as it was nauseating. Why hadn’t she said anything before? It was

beside the point. Shaking her head, Isabel replied, “You know what I mean... I’m not meant to engage with suitors for a year after the passing of my husband.”

“No, my dear. You are not to *marry* for a year. And as far as I am concerned, those were earrings and not a proposal. Or am I mistaken?” the Duchess of Hyndhope queried, sipping her tea.

“You are not,” Isabel muttered and then nibbled on the flesh of her lip. “If I were to take interest in a suitor... Do you think it would it be worth to pursue it?”

“Why not?” Her mother shrugged.

“Because I’d give up everything. My title, my properties, my wealth, my name...”

The women locked eyes and her mother narrow her own slightly. “Then it isn’t true love you feel.”

“It could be,” Isabel defended immediately.

“No, I simply do not believe it,” her mother replied, waving her hand dismissively. “When it comes to love, there is no price one is unwilling to pay. I know I would give away everything I own if it meant staying by your father’s side.”

Isabel lowered her brow, almost offended by her mother’s words. “It is not so simple. It is not a mere matter of fortune — it is one of freedom. To do as I please, to roam the Earth on

my own terms. I can rise in the morning whenever I want, read whatever I want, and speak to whomever I want.”

“Either you are being stubborn, or you have a very poor taste in men,” her mother mused.

“What are you saying?” Isabel huffed. For the first time since childhood, she had an ounce of attitude toward her mother. It was foreign to her, but she knew that she could not take any more of the presumptuous statements.

“If a suitor demanded so much of you, I would walk away. While marrying again means forsaking your legal rights to your money and property, it does not mean you will be without them. You can have it all as long as it is true love and the man is respectable... Aside from your title, of course, depending on his. Isabel, I mean it. You must stop viewing the world in black and white.”

Isabel was silent from awe. Never had she put things together quite as well as her mother just had. She was without a doubt, absolutely correct. To fear losing her everything, it would mean she expected Anthony to be the same as Robert. Just because a marriage to the Duke of Edington had been a sacrifice of everything, did not mean a marriage to anyone else would be.

Rebecca entered the room and Isabel finally stole a glance at her sister. She seemed pleasant enough, an easy smile on her face and a calmness about her. “I have a dress appointment Friday morning,” she said to Isabel. The appointment would be in just two days’ time. “You are more than welcome to join me.”

“Very well,” Isabel nodded, eyeing her sister carefully. It had to be that Rebecca was awaiting an apology that she was being so pleasant.

“Back to these invitations,” her mother stated.

They all moved into the dining room to make filling out the invitations easier. Isabel peered down at her lap as she worked on her stack and gathered the note from Anthony.

*Dearest Isabel,*

*Please join me for dinner on Thursday after nightfall so that we do not draw attention to ourselves. I assure you it will be worth it.*

—*Anthony*

There was also a page ripped from a book, it was *The Wild Honeysuckle* by Philip Freneau. Underlined were the final two lines of the poem:

*The space between is but an hour, The mere idea of a flower.*

She smiled at it. Though the poem had a different meaning, she read it as he would. The honeysuckle was common and underappreciated flower, and though it could come and go without anyone noticing—he would. Even in the days that separated them, the idea of her would keep him going. The smile on her face grew even more, realizing that the earrings

were selected because of the poem. The gem being purple, she was sure, was him signifying the end of her time in mourning.

As soon as her mother and sister would leave, Isabel would write to him again to accept the invitation. They would have dinner together the night before the ball! What wonderful timing. Everything was falling into place.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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*FRIDAY*

“*W*hat do you think, Anthony?”

His father’s voice sliced through his daydreaming. Anthony was in the process of writing Isabel love letters every day. Between then and Thursday, he would shower her with his endless love. While there was nothing he could buy her that she couldn’t provide herself, he would ensure all the gifts and words he sent her were thoughtful.

Life was still going on around him, however. Much like the business meeting he was sat in and hadn’t heard a word of. “Apologies. I didn’t quite understand what you said,” Anthony admitted.

The Duke of Mondale sighed heavily and shook his head. “Oh, father, you must forgive him. You know there is a great deal he is considering at this time,” Moses spoke up.

Anthony glared at his brother, knowing that sentiments of America would soon spill from his lips. “Yes, there is, Father. And it has nothing to do with America. Not anymore.”

“Really?” the Duke exclaimed. “Do tell, my boy.”

His eyes panned back to his father, seeing a true curiosity burning in his eyes. “If it is alright with you, I would like to have this conversation in private.”

After a moment of hesitation, the Duke nodded and gestured for Moses to leave the room. Moses scoffed, “Come now, brother. You should be able to say whatever it is to me.”

“I would rather this stay private, Moses. I do hope you understand,” Anthony remarked in a tone that sounded sincere, but was condescending at heart. He loved his brother, but he did not care for his advice at present.

After another moment of resistance, Moses gave in and left the room. Once the door was shut behind him, the Duke spoke up, “Alright, what is it then?”

Anthony folded his hands together and sat up straight. “While it remains unofficial as of now, I do believe that once it is socially acceptable, Isabel and I shall commence courting.”

“Really?” the Duke muttered out of shock. “I have to say, this is unexpected.”

The two of them had discussed Isabel before, but it had been at a time when even Anthony wasn’t sure he wanted her as a friend. So it came as no surprise to him that his father had also dismissed it. “Yes,” he stated. “We’ve been writing to one another and meeting occasionally, though always in private.”



“I have to applaud you for doing so.” The Duke nodded. “After all, I haven’t heard a single whisper of the two of you together.”

“We have done our best to keep it discrete,” Anthony said, though he knew it wasn’t entirely true. Pulling her into his carriage and visiting her estate were both risky moves. He assumed it had been just secretive enough to avoid the attention of gossipers, or it had been subtle enough to avoid much speculation. If anyone had seen them in the gazebo... He was certain it would be the end of everything. “I have come to announce to you my plan of asking for her hand.”

“This feels very premature,” his father stated with a frown.

“It is. However, I know you have asked me to marry or go to America. I want to position you a new deal between the two of us,” he stated confidently and clearly. That portion of his plan was not his own, but an idea of Ernest’s. He had to pray that it worked.

“Go on,” the Duke mumbled.

“I shall stay scandal free and remain discrete with Isabel until the appropriate time, and then I shall marry her. If something happens and our relationship dissolves prior to the marriage, I will leave for America as soon as a ship can take me,” he announced.

“Interesting, very interesting,” the Duke said, his fingers drumming atop his desk. “I believe you forget the fact that you need ask her father for her hand. While it is not exactly required of widows, her father and I are friends and—”

“I know. I would never try and disrespect the Duke of Radford in such a way. And I am not daft in my thinking. I know it will be difficult to persuade him because he is well aware of my reputation. This is why I’m coming to you now rather than later in the summer. My hope is that we can spend time together as a family. Not only do I have to prove myself to Isabel, but also to you, Mother, and her parents. I want everyone to be happy and at ease with our future union, and I understand that this will take time. And I know that requesting family dinners or afternoons together will not be well received. When the time comes, I’m hoping you can persuade her father.”

“You have given this a good amount of thought,” his father praised.

“I haven’t thought about anything else.”

The Duke eyed him curiously. “I have to say, Anthony, I am impressed. And while I am a bit skeptical all of this will go accordingly, it seems as though you are taking this seriously and I must commend that.” There was a pause, but then his father simply came out with it. “Have you told her of my request? Have you pressured her in some way?”

“I have chosen to keep that from her for now, as I want to win her over for the right reasons,” Anthony clarified. “I had all but decided to go to America, but then... all my feelings came rushing back to me. There isn’t any reason for me to stay in this country except her.”

“How romantic.” His father chuckled and kept a light smile on his face. “Very well, Anthony, I can agree to all this. But I

must request you tell her of this agreement between us prior to the wedding—if that truly does transpire. I do not want Isabel to think she has been deceived or manipulated in any way.”

“Of course,” Anthony promised.

The Duke was still smiling. “I have to say, Anthony, I am impressed. Not only have you gone as long as ever without scandal, but you have come to think rationally. I am delighted to see how everything shall unfold, and once the timing is right, I will start speaking to the Duke of Radford. Wingman you, if you will.” He smirked. “You will need it. Gerald is not exactly a man easily convinced.”

Anthony felt a lightness wash over him after the father and son shared a small laugh. He had not anticipated the conversation going as smoothly as it had. His father appeared more relaxed than usual, and he wondered if his mother had gotten in his ear after their breakfast together. He was grateful for whatever it was.

Anthony was dismissed and he headed for the door with every intention of returning home to write to Isabel. As soon as he stepped into the hallway, he found Moses leaned against the adjacent wall. “What do you want?” Anthony huffed.

“Have you grown cold to me, brother? I have to say, I’m offended. You sounded rather lively in there.”

“Eavesdroppers are about as low on the societal bracket as thieves,” Anthony snidely remarked before walking past him.

“I mean no harm, I assure you, brother,” Moses chimed. “In fact, I was waiting for you to finish with Father so that I may speak to him. We were supposed to have dinner the night of Isabel’s Ball, so I only wanted to see if they wished to attend together.”

“Isabel’s ball?” Anthony repeated, his brow furrowing.

“Yes?” Moses answered, confused with a chuckle. “It’s Friday next. Have you not received your invitation?”

“No,” Anthony grumbled. “But I haven’t been home today, so perhaps that is it.”

“I received mine first thing this morning.” Moses shrugged.

Anthony walked away, his thoughts racing. He reminded himself not to jump to conclusions as he breathed in the fresh air. Isabel had clearly been busy, despite the fact that she had not written to him or responded to him since their time at the country estate. Perhaps she was waiting for their dinner to extend her invitation. Hopefully, by now, she had accepted his invitation for Thursday.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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The two sisters rode to the dress shop in relative silence. Isabel had no intention of being the one to apologize—it didn't feel childish or stubborn of her at the time. It was simply the right thing to do, and she would stand by it.

“Are you going to be quiet all day?” Rebecca groaned.

“I simply have nothing to say,” Isabel reported quietly. Alright, perhaps there was a bit of immaturity to the grudge.

Rebecca huffed and Isabel could see her sister cross her arms out of the corner of her eye. “Very well, Bellie. I am *sorry*. I apologize for going through your things. It isn't my fault you're reckless, however.” When Isabel glared to her, Rebecca raised her arms in surrender. “It still does not make it *my* business. I'm sorry. I won't do it again.”

“Thank you,” Isabel replied. “And I suppose I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you once I found out. You have to admit, though, you would have been angry as well.”

“I would have,” Rebecca agreed. “Can we now pretend it never happened?”

Isabel pointed at her sister. “Just as I told you when we were children and you would steal my sweets and ribbons, I will forgive you, but I will not forget.”

“Then how was it I always managed to steal more?” Rebecca asked with a mischievous grin.

Isabel snorted. “Because I am clearly too trusting.” The women smiled at one another, and the atmosphere dissipated around them. “And thank you for letting me join you today. I don’t think I would have had the time to make an appointment for myself.”

“All is well. I know Mother is hurrying you along with this ball. She forgets that just because she can party plan in her sleep, doesn’t mean the rest of us can,” Rebecca snickered.

“Did the invitations go out alright?” she asked. Rebecca had been tasked with delivering the invitations to the postman when they finished them Wednesday afternoon. Her mother and sister tried to persuade her to have the footmen deliver them, but Isabel refused. She had claimed that it was too large a task for her staff to handle, which was true, but she also needed to keep her footmen available to correspond with Anthony.

“Of course, they did. I even tipped the postman a little extra to ensure they went out hastily. As you know how often things end up lost in the post when they sit about.”

Isabel was relieved to hear it and wondered how Anthony was reacting to the news. He must think it's amusing that she's hosting a ball, given that she's never hosted one before, and he knows better than anyone that she's never been particularly good at dancing.

She was overjoyed the moment she walked into the dress shop. While she was still limited to certain colors, she knew that in just a week, she would be wearing more than black. Most purple shades were permitted, which happened to be her favorite color. That was, aside from chocolate. But not just any chocolate, but the chocolate of Anthony's eyes.

*How fanatic.*

Rebecca and Isabel finally enjoyed their time together at last and went through fabrics until she landed on the exact color she wanted. Lilac—a shade between pink and purple but favored the latter. It was a dramatic thought, but it was true: wearing that color was the last time Isabel had felt the infinite bliss that only youth could provide. Before the harsh realities of life shaped your heart into something else. It would still have the same shape, but it would no longer be spotless. Time and trials have weathered and worn it.

Her eyes grew misty, and she had to blink them away quickly before anyone noticed. Isabel's story had begun and ended with a ball dressed in lilac—and a new story would begin similarly.

“What do you think of this, sister?” Rebecca asked, holding up an emerald fabric that had a bit of shine to it.

“I think that’s wonderful. Such a beautiful color.” Isabel nodded.

“Perhaps I will bring it back into fashion.” She smirked. “Everyone is fawning over yellows and pale blues right now. I hardly ever see anyone wear emerald.” The two sisters chatted a little more, picking out the shapes and details of their gowns. Once they were ready to place their orders, Rebecca turned to her. “I know you have already purchased me so much, I promise that I have not left my money at home—but Edmund has been upset with my spending lately. Would you mind purchasing mine for me? Just to spare me the trouble.”

“Of course not,” Isabel promised. They placed their orders and once they were back in the carriage, Isabel eyed her sister. “Are you sure you are happy, Rebecca? Every time you mention Edmund, I get the impression that your marriage isn’t so wonderful.”

Rebecca let out a long, heavy breath and stared out of the window. “He does not treat me poorly, if you’re implying so,” she mused. “Edmund is fine. He’s kind and he’s intelligent. He also happens to be boring, annoying, and unattractive. Not to mention, he’s a mere baron. He can’t afford the things I want... Perhaps it is me that is the problem. I always thought my life would be more than this. A simple baroness with a simple home and a simple husband. It’s all been so very... ordinary.”

Isabel understood and her heart went out to her sister. Rebecca had always been a dreamer. More often than not as a child she made-believe she was a princess. It made sense to her why Rebecca had latched onto her as soon as Robert was no longer in their way. There was concern, to be sure, but also *boredom*. Reaching across the cushion, she squeezed her sister’s hand. Rebecca peered over to her with shy eyes. “We may not be



able to make life anything but simple, but we can have fun too. After the ball, I should be able to attend theatre and concerts... we will make the most of it.”

Isabel couldn't make sense of Rebecca's expression. “We will see,” she said, her smile obviously forced. Isabel was fine with it, knowing that bringing up Edmund would likely irritate her sister.

Her sister's carriage dropped her off at her townhouse. Her heart sank a little as she discovered she still hadn't received a letter from Anthony. Was something wrong? She couldn't imagine him having a change of heart after their conversation at the estate. And the gifts...

Isabel stepped into the parlor, having left her writing tools in there whilst planning the ball. She scribbled out a quick message for him.

*Anthony,*

*Are you alright? I have not heard from you since your gifts. Did you receive my book? I am so looking forward to dinner together—that is, if you still want for me to come. If not, that is alright too. I promise to save you a dance at the ball.*

*Please let me know what is going on. I shall be returning to the country estate for the afternoon to oversee preparations but will be back late this evening. I pray to find your response upon my return.*

*—Isabel*

Approaching her footman, she gave an uneasy smile. “Please ensure this arrives to Lord Moore. Do not hand it to his butler nor footman. It shall go in his hands, and no one else’s.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” He nodded and took off.

Isabel took a deep breath and tried to collect her mind before going about preparing to leave for the estate. It was going to be a very, very long week.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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*THURSDAY*

What a long and exhausting week it had been. Isabel had visited her estate and townhouse far too many times to count. Her mother, bless her, had chosen to stay at the country estate for a couple of days before the ball, with Isabel's permission, to help ensure everything was in order. She'd only been back in town for a day for her final dress fitting, and she was hoping to still have dinner with Anthony. She would call on him whether he wrote to her or not.

Stepping out of her carriage at the dress shop, she was greeted by Rebecca. "Good day, sister."

"Good day," Isabel replied. "Ready for your fitting?"

"Oh, I just checked inside. The seamstress needs a little while and asked if it was alright to wait a few more minutes."

"Oh," Isabel breathed. "Very well. Shall we wait inside, then?"

"Let's go on a walk. I've been antsy all day," Rebecca suggested, taking her sister by the arm and starting down the sidewalk.

Isabel didn't argue because a walk sounded like exactly what she needed. Well, what she truly really needed was to hear from Anthony, but for the time being, a walk would suffice. Out of the corner of her eye, she observed her sister. "What has you so jittery?"

"I think I had too much tea this morning," Rebecca laughed lightly. "Mother kept me up all night last night making centerpieces, so I indulged a little too much at breakfast."

"Oh, you stayed with her at the estate?" Isabel asked.

Rebecca nodded. "I hope that's okay."

Admittedly, Isabel was a little irritated—but not with her sister. Her staff had been instructed not to allow anyone in without her permission. Though, she supposed that they would have assumed it was fine since their mother was there. "It's fine," she assured her, trying to clear her thoughts. "I hope she didn't drive you mad, though."

"Nothing I can't handle," Rebecca assured her. Their stride came to a halt and as Isabel panned her vision to see why, she noticed a familiar face across the road. It was Anthony and Moses! They were emerging from a store. Isabel locked eyes with him and her heart pounded away. Would he come her way?

"Lord Lock, good day to you," Rebecca greeted.

Isabel followed her sister's gaze to find a vaguely familiar face. Oh, yes. It was Michael Lock, a Marquis to a dukedom which Isabel could not remember the name of for the life of her. "Good day to you as well, Lady Rebecca," Michael smiled before looking to Isabel. "And Your Grace, might I say, it looks as though you have not aged a day since the last time I saw you."

"Oh, you are too kind," Isabel replied meekly. "It has been a while, hasn't it?"

"That it has." Michael nodded and then reached to take her hand. She blinked at his boldness as he gently pulled her forward. "My heart goes out to you, Your Grace. As I just lost my darling Frances last spring. I know it is a tough time you are going through."

"Thank you, my lordship," Isabel replied as kindly as she could, though she was longing to pull her hand away from him. She did not want to cause a scene, however. "Shall you be attending the ball tomorrow?"

"I shall." He grinned. "I cannot wait to see you there." He then bent forward and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. Isabel gave a polite smile, but it was so very forced. He finally let go of her a moment later. "Perhaps we can have tea together sometime?"

"Perhaps," Isabel muttered, her eyes anxiously trying to spot Anthony across the street.

"Until tomorrow then," Lord Lock stated and then bowed before Isabel.

She muttered a goodbye, her eyes fixated on the store across the street. But alas, Anthony was already out of sight. What was going on with him? “Come on, Isabel, perhaps the seamstress is ready for us.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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“*T*here is nothing in here you can buy her that she can’t buy herself,” Moses chastised as he followed Anthony around the store.

“Thank you, dear brother, for stating the obvious,” Anthony muttered. “I don’t know why you invited me out shopping if all you are going to do is critique me.”

“I just think it’s an effort you should give up, Anthony.” Moses sighed. “A complete waste of time. No woman in their right mind would give up being a Dowager Duchess for a lord.”

“Never did I say she needed to be in her right mind,” Anthony corrected and smirked at his brother. “As I don’t think anyone in love is anyway.”

Moses rolled his eyes and followed along the trinket store. “She didn’t even invite you to the ball. Clearly, she does not want to be seen with you.”

“I invited her to dinner tonight. *Clearly*,” he stated, using a mock voice of his brother, “she is waiting to do so in person.”

“The night before the ball?” Moses snorted, rolling his eyes.

“Yes,” Anthony stated matter-of-factly.

“Such a hopeless romantic you are turning out to be. Whoever would have thought?”

“Anyone who knew me as I was as a teenager.” Anthony let out a heavy breath and placed down yet another meaningless trinket that did not seem right. “Let’s get going. Nothing here is right.”

Moses patted his shoulder and they headed for the door. When they stepped out into the sidewalk, Moses gripped the same shoulder. “If she does not invite you, we can meet for dinner tomorrow. Mary and I stay home and we can have dinner together.”

“Will you cease your negativity?” he groaned and batted his brother’s hand away from him “I can assure you that I have enough worry about it all. I do not need you adding onto it.”

“Sorry, sorry.” He chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. “I know I am being a bit much.”

“You are,” Anthony agreed. “What’s gotten into you?”

Moses frowned. “I merely remember how deeply she hurt you all those years ago. I don’t want that to happen again.”



Anthony shook his head and replied, “Your concern is appreciated, but unnecessary. I shall look out for myself, Moses. You are not burdened with protecting my happiness.”

Moses started to nod, but it seemed as though something caught his attention. His head turned sharply, and his eyes widened. “Is that Isabel and Rebecca?”

“Do not tease me so,” Anthony muttered. Though, he followed Moses’ gaze and sure enough, there they were. Even from such a distance, Anthony and Isabel locked eyes. He yearned to speak with her, to learn why there had been such silence from her end. Anthony had written to her every day, sometimes more than once! Had she reconsidered giving him a chance to prove himself?

Only, who was that with them? “Who is the man?”

“Looks to be Lord Michael Lock. He’s a Marquis, I do believe. His wife passed last spring,” Moses informed him as they studied the scene.

Anthony was about to say something, but the words died in his throat as he watched Lord Lock kiss Isabel’s hand and she smiled at him. His heart ached in an all too familiar way at the display. “No, this can’t be,” he muttered to himself.

“They have a good bit in common. Widow and widower, as it were,” Moses mused. “Perhaps she *is* interested in love. But perhaps not from one man *only*.”

Anthony did not believe it to be true. No, she herself had stated that Anthony was her only love. But why hadn't she contacted him? And why was she seen out with another man the day before her Ball—the same day they were supposed to have dinner? And she most certainly noticed him, their gazes had locked.

Moses threw an arm around Anthony's shoulders and pulled him away. It wasn't until then he realized a few tears were gliding down his cheeks. "Shall we reschedule that dinner for tonight?" His brother comforted him by whispering. "Mother can keep an eye on my children. Mary and I will keep you company tonight so you don't revert to old habits. I shall come with you now, and send word to Mary from your house and inform her of the plans. We can have a drink and forget about the rest of the world."

"Thank you, brother," Anthony murmured. It was all he could get out. He didn't know what to make of what he had just seen but he knew he felt *hollow* once again. He hoped a drink, or *twelve*, could fill it.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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Isabel dared to wear a dark purple dress to her dinner with Anthony on the eve of her transition into half-mourning. Even if she was noticed by someone of the Ton, she hoped the dim lighting would make the dress appear black. She simply wanted to look and feel her best, and it also went well with one of his gifts to her.

She stroked her earrings as she sat in her carriage, working up the courage to approach his door. Isabel shouldn't have been nervous, but their silence had left too much hanging in the balance. The moment of truth would arrive once she entered the townhome. She would finally know whether or not he wanted to continue their relationship.

Isabel finally stepped out of the coach and made her way up the stairs, holding the sheet music in her hand. She could hear the commotion from within as soon as the butler opened the door, and her brow furrowed. There was a distinct sound of voices. Had he invited anyone else to dinner? The butler led her into the parlor. She was taken aback by what she saw as she rounded the corner. Anthony, Moses, and the woman she assumed was Moses' wife sat in the parlor. The woman was sipping her tea quietly and gave her a sympathetic look. Meanwhile, the two men were roaring with laughter and splashing their drinks all over the place.

Isabel hedged at the doorway, contemplating turning around and leaving. However, Anthony turned and looked at her. Red-faced and glassy eyed, he grinned at her, “Brother, would you look at that! The Duchess has graced us with her presence!”

“Your Grace, it’s an honor,” Moses greeted as regally as he could, though all the while he was holding back laughter.

“I... I am sorry. I must have read the invitation wrong. I do not mean to interrupt,” Isabel muttered.

“Oh, pish! You have the date correct, my love. Come, come,” Anthony urged, waving her over.

He really was drunk to call her such affectionate names in front of others. Still, it was a relief to know she was wanted there. Gradually, Isabel made her way over to Anthony. “How much have you had to drink, my lord?” she asked, forcing a bit of awkward laughter.

“Not enough to rid my memory of you.” Moses and Anthony both snickered. Isabel couldn’t tell whether he was being flirtatious or sincere. Her gaze was drawn to the wife, who could only frown. She, too, appeared perplexed. He firmly gripped Isabel’s arm and pulled her down into his lap as she moved to sit next to Anthony on the couch. He slurred, “Have a seat on the throne, Your Highness. You shall find it is made of the finest wood in all of England.” Moses was struggling for breath by the sound of the two men giggling like children.

Isabel shot back up, her cheeks darkening from embarrassment. “Anthony! Do not do this. I will not be treated in such a manner.”

“Come now, love,” Anthony purred and stared up at her with a smirk. His eyes were so hazed by the drinking his eyes almost did not seem real to her. They reminded her of a doll’s, or something else equally as lifeless. “Everyone in London knows just how well I treat my *ladies*.”

Her mouth gaped open, as if she’d been punched in the gut. She knew exactly what he meant when he said “ladies”—he meant harlots. He couldn’t possibly compare her to them. Is that all he wanted? Had all those weeks of opening up to one another and flirting been some strange, elaborate ruse to get her to bed? Was that his plan of retaliation? To make her fall in love with him again, trick her into bed, and then discard her?

The only hope remaining within her was a dull ember ready to burn out, but it was still there. All of this could be attributed to his drinking.

“Do not dare attend the ball tomorrow, Anthony. Not if you intend to be a drunkard,” Isabel warned, pointing a finger at him before turning to Moses’ wife. “Would you like an escort home, My Lady?” she inquired softly. Isabel could not leave a woman alone with two raving drunks in good conscience. She would personally walk her home or give her a ride if it made her feel more at ease.

“All is well,” Moses’ wife assured her with a weak smile. “Someone has to look after them.”

Isabel nodded briefly and gave the two Moore men another glare before hurrying for the door. “Thank you for the invitation, Your Grace!” Anthony called after her. “I shall see you there!”

Once she was outside and the door was closed behind her, Isabel could no longer hold in her emotions. Her chest heaved from the sobs which broke inside her. With blurry eyes, she glanced down to the sheet music. The thought of dancing together in her parlor to the sound of his hums seemed so long ago. The Anthony then and the Anthony in his townhome were not the same man. And her heart couldn't make sense of it.

Isabel balled up the sheet music and threw it to the ground, as though she could leave the memory of him behind with it. Climbing into her carriage, she cried her way home feeling small and stupid.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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*I*t was the worst hangover of all time. Anthony's head was throbbing before his eyes even opened, and while he was nauseated, the sour taste in his mouth and cramp in his stomach told him that he had already expelled the contents of his stomach at some point during the night.

He finally dragged himself out of bed hours after waking up and forced himself downstairs after only taking the time to dress. The only thing that could make him feel better was more drinks, food, and coffee. His brother Moses was sitting at his dining table, much to his surprise. "Are you still here?" he asked, yawning.

"Wanted to make sure you lived." He chuckled, though winced himself. Clearly, Moses was always hungover.

"Where is Mary?" he asked as he sank down at the table and poured himself a drink of rum. The smell was enough to make him feel ill but he was desperate for pain relief.

"She left at dawn. Apparently, she was none too happy with our behavior last night." He sighed.

Anthony's brow furrowed momentarily, but then it came back to him in brief flashes. They had gotten rather rowdy, hadn't they? There had been a good deal of laughter and far too many drinks shared.

"I see," he grumbled before downing the rum and going about fixing himself a cup of coffee.

"So, would you like to ride together this evening? Father will be taking a carriage of his own, he said in case he wishes to leave early."

"Go where?" Anthony asked.

"The ball, of course. Don't you remember? Isabel finally invited you last night."

More flashes returned to his mind, and all he could do was wince. That was right, she had come after all. Oh, the things he'd said to her... One of the hazy memories gave him pause as his mind attempted to defend his own actions. Earrings... He had sent her earrings, which she had been wearing. His shoulders hunched. While none of it made sense to him, he knew he'd made a huge mistake.

*I think I gravely misunderstood the situation with Michael Lock... I reacted emotionally, rather than empathetically.*

And Moses had been right there alongside him to fan the flames of his madness.



“I’ll ask around and see if I can find a Lady willing to go with you,” Moses suggested, wagging his brow.

“Quiet you,” Anthony snapped. “I do not wish to hear another word come out of your mouth. All the advice you have given me has been nothing but poison. I know you mean well, but clearly you are not in touch with my situation.”

“Anthony—”

“Good day to you, brother,” Anthony stated.

Anthony snatched a piece of bread from the table and dashed toward the front door, desperate to get away from his brother and clear his mind. He’d go for a walk and give Moses some space to clear his mind. Biting into the bread, he inhaled fresh air and tried to recall the events of the night before. He’d been so obnoxious and cruel to her.. If she ever spoke to him again, it would be a miracle. A flash of white caught his eye as he stepped down the stairs. He knelt and pried a scrap of paper from the bushes. His heart sank as he unfolded the ball. *Sonata Op. 3 No. 6: Andante innocentemente*. The sheet music that he had gifted Isabel...

As his self-pity threatened to deepen to even new depths, it gave him an idea. One that could very well make things right—or blow up in his face entirely.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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“Let’s put a bit of this on,” Amy suggested softly as she helped with the Duchess’ makeup. The maid used a little more powder around Isabel’s eyes to conceal the dark circles hanging around the area. The ball was only an hour away, and she looked terrible. She wouldn’t have cried all night if it hadn’t been for Anthony’s crude behavior. And she would have stayed in her bedchamber all day, no matter how many times Rebecca or her mother summoned her.

“Thank you, Amy,” Isabel said, though her voice was distant and void of emotion.

As her maid bent down to expertly apply rouge, her eyes searched the Duchess’. “Your Grace, might I ask what happened last night?”

“No, I’m sorry,” Isabel frowned. If she had bothered to drink anything all day, perhaps she would have been able to produce tears right then, as a sob threatened to break in her chest. “All that can be said, is that it would appear everyone was right. I think I was a fool to spend my time on Anthony.”

As her maid finished her hair and makeup, there was silence. Isabel looked presentable after only a half-hour. Her hair was

half-up, with curls framing her face, and the lilac color of her gown was stunning. Then again, she was pretty sure she would have *gladly* worn anything other than black.

When she stood, she pulled Amy in for a hug. It was very rare the two embraced, but Isabel couldn't help herself right then. "Thank you, Amy," she breathed. "Thank you for being by my side... And always managing to make me look human."

The Duchess laughed, but the maid did not. As she pulled back, Amy gripped her hands and looked into her eyes with anxiety and concern. "Your Grace, I think you should know that.... That sometimes things aren't as they appear."

Her heart dropped and her brow creased. "What do you mean? Has something happened?"

"I'm afraid it isn't my place to say... But—"

There was a loud crash outside the room, making both women jump. Following the sound of the glass, there was the distinct sound of Rebecca yelling. Isabel sighed and looked to Amy. "We will talk later. Alright?"

Isabel emerged from her bedchamber for the first time that day. She turned her head side to side and saw Rebecca yelling at a servant who was crying and picking up the shattered pieces of a vase. Isabel rushed over to the scene, her brow furrowed. "What on earth is going on?" she asked.

"This careless servant dropped a vase! These flowers were meant to go in the foyer," Rebecca informed in a huff.

“Why does it matter so much?” Isabel frowned.

“Because it isn’t hers to break. I think you should deduct it from her pay.”

Isabel shook her head and bent down to help collect the vase’s broken pieces. She touched the servant’s shoulder after they were all collected and placed in the girl’s apron. She smiled warmly when the young girl’s eyes met hers. “Why don’t you go downstairs, rid yourself of that, and then fetch yourself some tea and a scone? There must be thousands of them.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” the girl sniffled before hurrying away.

“*Tea?* You are wasting tea on servants?!” Rebecca exclaimed.

“It is not a waste,” Isabel told her firmly. “And don’t you ever talk to my staff in such a way ever again. Do you understand me?”

“For a Duchess, you sure are soft on them,” Rebecca remarked as though it was an insult.

“I am not *soft*, I am human! The girl clearly did not break the vase on purpose. And it is not as though it’s a family heirloom or some rarity. You are being harsh and for no reason. Really! What is the matter with you today?”

Rebecca's face pinched and her posture squirmed before she sighed and reached for her sister's arm. "Forgive me. I've been running ragged on Mother's orders to ensure this evening goes smoothly. I must have forgotten to eat and am a bit grumpy from it."

Isabel didn't believe her story, but there was no time to care. There was chatter below, indicating that guests were starting to arrive. "Do not let me catch you talking to anyone in my employment like that ever again. And go eat something. Don't make a fool of yourself, Rebecca."

Isabel turned to walk away, and her sister called from behind her, "I do hope your evening is just as I envision it. Enjoy the ball, Isabel."

She could hear it in her sister's voice that it was half-hearted. She, on the other hand, was not going to let her sister's mood affect her. Isabel took a deep, all-encompassing breath; exhaling slowly through her mouth once her lungs were full. It was time to go down and greet everyone. For the first time ever, it was time for her to be a host, no matter how much she didn't want to and how loud every fiber of her being screamed at her to retreat to her room. Most Duchesses her age were seasoned at throwing Balls or soirees. Even the ladies were. There was no time to waste anymore. She slowly descended the stairs, a polite smile fixed on her lips to the guests who had just entered.

Then, there was him. Anthony stood in her doorway, his brown eyes watching her every move. How she loathed how handsome he was in his deep blue —almost purple—jacket and matching cravat. How was it that Isabel was absolutely and entirely doomed to love him, even when it made no sense at all?

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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Anthony had gone through the entire day leading up to the ball by taking a bath, shaving, and agonizing over what to wear. Before he knew it, he was riding with the Cecil toward Isabel's country estate. His knee wouldn't stop bouncing as he stared out the window, terrified that she'd expel him with a single glance. It would have all been for naught, and he'd be sailing to America in a few months, broken-hearted and with nothing left in his spirit.

"Would you stop it," Ernest mused. "You're going to make me sick with all your bouncing."

"Really? How is it you have two children then?" Anthony fired right back, suggesting that if Ernest's stomach was so weak then he couldn't possibly withstand lovemaking.

"Enough, you two." Helena sighed. A hand was then patting his knee and he looked across at the wonderful Helena, who offered him an easy, reassuring smile. "You have a wonderful plan, Anthony. Stick to it and you will win her back."

"I hope you're right," Anthony murmured as the carriage rolled to a stop.

They emerged from the carriage. Ernest, holding his violin case, looked at Anthony. “Yes, the plan is so very romantic, but did you *really* have to pick a song from one of the most complex composers?”

Anthony chuckled and shrugged. “It’s her favorite song from our time together. What did you expect?”

“Come on, love. I wish to see the garden,” Helena whispered to Ernest, though Anthony could hear.

The two exchanged waves before walking to the side of the house to admire the garden. Helena has always been fond of plants. Anthony took a deep breath and moved toward the house, following the small crowd that was making its way inside. He saw her as soon as he walked through the door.

Looking as breathtaking as Persephone or Venus, Anthony watched with careful eyes as she slowly descended the staircase. The light, pinkish purple shade of her dress suited her and brought back his fondest of memories. Her Debut. They had danced the entire night away, staring lovingly into one another’s eyes and smiling so much that their cheeks ached by the end of the night.

If he was lucky, that evening would end the same. And it would be without scandal, considering it was a Ball and everyone was expected to dance. Even the widow and the rake. She neared him then, and he caught a glimpse of the earrings he had sent her. Maybe there really was a chance for them after all.

“You are utterly radiant,” he breathed to her.

“Thank you,” she curtly responded and waved at other guests as they entered behind him.

He understood her coldness—for he had not yet earned her warmth after the way he treated her. Just as she turns to walk into the ball room, he leaned in and whispered in her ear, “I swear to you, I will make things right by the end of tonight.”

Her dusk-blue eyes found his and with a severe look, Isabel replied, “You better. Or else I wish to never speak to you again.”

He nodded and walked away. As soon as the Duchess entered the ballroom, her mother was by her side, and a crowd gathered around her. Isabel was the lady of the evening once more. His sole objective was to win her heart which was only the most massive task he could possibly have.

He crept into the ballroom slowly, practically clinging to the walls to get around everyone while remaining unnoticed. Sitting at a corner table, he absorbed all of the effort that had clearly gone into putting on such an evening. The ballroom appeared to be overflowing with flowers. Vases were placed on each table and hung from the streamers and fabric that directed the flow of the room. It was all pink, purple, and white. So romantic and so spring. The air was filled with the sweet notes of a band in the corner and wafted with the smell of florals. It was the ideal setting for a springtime ball.

Anthony allowed himself a single glass of wine, just to take the edge off. He remained seated as he nursed the drink and took in the scene. The room was filled in no time, and soon, people were dancing. Ernest and Helena eventually joined



him, smiles on their faces as they sat down. “What a party,” Ernest commented.

“Of course, it is,” Anthony murmured. “It has a gracious host.”

Anthony’s gaze was fixed on Isabel as she fluttered around the room. He could tell she was just trying to sit, but people kept approaching her and she kept talking. Anthony scowled as Michael Lock approached her. If ever there was a time for his plan, it was now.

“After this song,” Anthony told Ernest. “Let us do it after this song.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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Everything was so overwhelming. There were so many people surrounding her at all times. Every widowed woman in the room approached her and invited her to their tea parties, soirees, and knitting circles. Others approached to express their condolences for Robert's death, while others simply complimented her dress and garden.

It was draining. She was constantly being pulled in one direction or another, no matter how much she wanted to just sit down and have something to eat and drink. And just as she was about to have a glass of wine, she was faced with Michael Lock. The last person she wanted to talk to at the time.

"Your Grace," he greeted with a bow. "I can see that everyone has been stealing you away. Perhaps you would like a break." Just as she relaxed, glad someone noticed her struggling, he continued with extending his forearm. "Would you care for a dance?"

"Oh, perhaps later—"

"I must insist," Michael grinned.

There were so many people around them at the moment, she knew refusing him would have caused a scene or at least embarrassment on his behalf. Neither option was favorable. She had to dance with him. Nodding only once, she took his arm. Michael guided her to the dancefloor with a charismatic smile on his face. “You know, this is my first dance since my wife passed.”

“Interesting,” she mumbled.

Isabel did not bother faking a smile as all her effort went to preventing a scowl from appearing on her face. “I wasn’t sure I would ever dance again. But I’m glad it’s with someone so lovely,” he stated flirtatiously. It truly wasn’t on purpose but Isabel tripped over the tip of his shoe then. He gripped her firmly, though his face flashed with annoyance. “I suppose it’s been a while for you too.”

“You could say that,” she mused.

“Are you well, Your Grace? Something about your demeanor seems... off.”

Isabel pondered her response. She knew the right thing to do was to ask for forgiveness and make an excuse for her bad mood. However, after potentially losing the love of her life, Anthony, and being bombarded with people talking about her deceased husband as if he were a saint—Isabel had had enough of pretending to be fine. “I am fine. However, I have absolutely zero interest in flirting over the likeness we may or may not have because our spouses are dead. After all, if *death* is all we have in common then that’s not very romantic, is it?”

Isabel tripped over his shoe yet again. Lord Lock huffed and took a step back at that point. As the Marquis stormed away, Isabel stood alone in the center of the dancefloor. It didn't matter; she'd rather stand there alone than with him. She didn't even know him, and he was openly flirting with her while using the dead as a tool. It was, to say the least, repulsive to her. She walked over to her mother's table as the song ended. Her father appeared to have arrived, and she had yet to greet him.

Then the next song's notes began to play. To her ears, the only sound in the ballroom was the warm yet solemn notes of a violin. It was not the same as the one from before. It had a distinct feel to it. Isabel's gaze darted around the room. When she found the band, she noticed Ernest Cecil leading them with his own violin! She didn't have to wonder what he was up to because the song told her. It was Niccol Paganini's composition, and it was the exact song Anthony had gifted her.

Anthony was sauntering toward her then, a gentle and shy expression on his face. When he neared, he bowed his head and extended his arm. "Might I have this dance, Your Grace?" he asked, his voice velvety and as gentle as waves on a lake.

"Very well." Isabel nodded and took his arm.

They made a small circle before moving chest to chest. He held her waist while she rested her hand on his shoulder. They waltzed slowly to the song's beat. The song was slow and surreal, moving like a cool summer breeze. Isabel gradually lost control of time and space, note by note. She could swear they were teenagers again, a young Anthony Moore looking down at her with only love and hope in his eyes. Their future was all around them, as it had been the beginning of what should have been her eternal life.

They were there, though, weren't they? A future of love and nothing but laughter and warm embraces were within their reach. Yet again, they were on the brink of greatness. All that remained between them was time and the confusion which the last week or so had created.

"I don't think there are words to explain to you how sorry I am about last night," Anthony stated lowly as they danced along. He calculated her missteps and moved with them, preventing her from tripping on him. "But please know from the depths of my soul, I am. I made an ass of myself, and that is putting it graciously."

"I would say so," she murmured. "You embarrassed me more than I think I ever have. Comparing me to harlots and making such sexual remarks in the presence of your sibling and his wife—"

"I know. I know." He sighed. "There were better ways to respond to your silence, yet I chose the worst one. I... I simply lost hope and belief in your love when I saw you with Lord Lock. I know I shouldn't have. I was weak when I should have been strong."

"My silence?" Isabel repeated. "What on Earth are you talking about?"

"You... never responded to my letters," Anthony stated hesitantly.

"You never responded to *mine*," Isabel corrected. "I sent you a book just before your gifts arrived. I never heard back. You

never even confirmed dinner plans with me, let alone accepted my invitation to the ball—”

“I never received an invitation,” Anthony asserted. “I haven’t received a single scrap of parchment from your hand since we spoke at the estate.”

They stared at one another in confusion. “I haven’t received anything but your gift.”

“*Gifts*,” he corrected. “I’ve been sending you letters and gifts every day. Sometimes more than once.”

“This can’t be,” she stated, shaking her head. “My footman has even delivered a letter directly to your hand. Just the day before last.”

“I never received such a letter, Isabel,” he exhaled, slowly shaking his head. A brief silence fell over them as they tried to figure out what was going on. Their footmen had clearly failed them, but how and why? Anthony’s grip on her tightened a little more. “We shall figure it out together. I must know, Isabel. Do you still love me?”

Her eyes sparkled and she studied his handsome, angular face. “With my entire heart,” she admitted. “And you love me?”

Once again, his grip tightened on her. “I always have, and I shall until my very last breath.”

Isabel smiled, her heart pounding an excited beat. “I have given this a great deal of thought, Anthony. I think I am happy to consider a life together. Once we are able.”

“Do you mean it?” he purred, his eyes shimmering with hope and emotion.

“I’ve never meant anything more,” she croaked, tears threatening to take her voice. “My mother made me see clearly... That being with you is nothing more than giving up a title. For a marriage to Robert and marriage to you are two different things. One is a prison, and one is destiny.”

“Don’t cry,” he urged, his hand daring to brush the small amount of exposed skin on her back at her shoulders. “Or else I will as well.” The song was coming to a close and they bowed together. When their eyes met again, he whispered, “Shall we turn a turn about the garden and talk?”

“Let’s.” She nodded.

“Excuse me, Your Grace,” a male voice sounded from behind her. Isabel turned around, all too ready to send the suitor on his way. However, she could only blink at the sight before her. It was the Constable. She would know his bushy white mustache and potbelly anywhere. He was the one which had delivered her the news when Robert passed. “Would you mind speaking with me in private?”

“Oh,” Isabel breathed. “Is everything alright?”

“It’s a private matter. I think it’s best if we leave the party to talk,” the Constable said.

“She won’t be going anywhere alone with you,” Anthony asserted. “I have heard the tales of private talks with constables or their men. I won’t stand for it.”

Isabel was touched by the protective edge to his voice, but gently placed a hand on his arm in an attempt to calm him down. Then, she once again addressed the Constable herself. “Can you at least tell me what this is about?”

The man shuffled and sighed. “We have received very serious allegations against you, Your Grace.”

“What sort of allegations?” Anthony demanded to know.

The Constable’s steely eyes shifted between the two of them before locking onto Isabel. “That the Duke of Edington’s death was not an accident—but an assassination ordered by you.”

The world was spinning around her, and the only thing keeping her grounded was her grip on Anthony.



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## CHAPTER FORTY

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Around them, the party had come to a halt. Everyone was staring at them, and the only people who came close were both sets of their parents. “What is the meaning of this?” enquired the Duke of Radford. The short man was still the type who commanded attention in a room. Anthony, who had a problem with authority, frequently deferred to Gerald Wynn’s commands.

“He’s accusing me of plotting Robert’s death!” Isabel cried out. Anthony locked his arm around her, needing to keep her steady.

“Preposterous. Absolutely preposterous. How dare you interrupt my daughter’s ball with such nonsense!” the Duke shouted at the Constable.

“It is not I who accuses her,” the Constable corrected, glaring at the Duke.

“I assure you, whoever it is, is surely lying. Never would I have done such a thing,” Isabel urged, her voice cracking from emotion.

“I will warn you only this once not to perjure yourself and to accompany me to my office. This can be handled in private.” He sighed.

“No,” Anthony remarked. “Her innocence must be heard by the guests. I don’t want a ballroom full of people considering Isabel to be a murder conspirator.”

The Constable jutted a flat, pointed hand in their direction. “It was her very own servant who came forward, claiming to be the one who executed the man!”

There was a collective gasp that echoed throughout the room, followed by a distinct wave of whispers. “What?” was all Anthony could get out. “That’s impossible. What could have possibly been her motive?”

The Constable reached into his jacket and retrieved a large envelope. “We have received information that appears to confirm the two of you are having an affair. There is enough here to speculate that the Duchess was unhappy with her marriage and sought to have him killed so the two of you could be together at last.”

Another round of gasps and whispers moved through the room. Anthony could only shake his head. “This is utterly absurd. We hadn’t spoken in a decade until last week. Something is amiss here. That servant’s confession is cooked, I tell you! He’s lying! Someone must have paid him to do it.”

Isabel’s face lifted then, her wide eyes peering up at him before looking to the Constable. “My maid. My maid knows something! Amy! Amy, where are you?” she called out.

For a long time, there was silence, until a portion of the crowd split like the biblical Moses did the sea, allowing Amy to emerge. The maid was almost in tears, her hands furling and unfurling nervously. “Amy,” Isabel breathed. “Can you please explain what you meant earlier? When you told me everything might not be as it seems?”

“I’m so sorry, Your Grace,” Amy wept. “I should have said something sooner. I was afraid... I was not sure you would believe me. Normally, I know that I have your trust. However, this was so large... I was afraid I would be accused of meddling in affairs that were not my own.”

“Enough, Amy,” Isabel comforted her. “I assure you, I am not angry. We just need to know. What is going on?”

Amy’s eyes shifted about the room nervously and then her eyes fixated on the floor. “While I do not know anything of this conspiracy... I have overheard one of the footmen conspiring with someone to intercept letters, Your Grace... Wi-with Lady Rebecca.”

“*What?*” Isabel and Anthony exhaled in unison.

*That explains why we haven’t been receiving each other’s letters—though it’s more likely that her footman has recruited one of mine to prevent me from reaching her.*

“FILTHY LIAR!” Rebecca screeched from across the room. There was a clacking of shoes across the hardwood floor as her little sister stormed to the scene. “I did no such thing! Why would I make such a report against my own sister?” she asked,

her eyes attempting to murder Amy with just a glance. Then, she looked to Isabel. “You really can’t believe that to ever be true. Can you, sister? Besides, where would I have the money? You had to buy my bloody dress for this ball!”

“I suppose you’re right—” Isabel meekly muttered before being interrupted.

“Enough,” a familiar voice announced. They all turned to see Moses stepping forward, leaving his wife’s side. Anthony’s eyes were wild then, not liking where it was this was going. “I cannot have any more of it. Never did I think assisting Rebecca would lead to all this.”

“Assisting Rebecca?” Anthony repeated, his face scrunched with confusion.

“*What in the bloody Hell is going on!*” their father hollered. Anthony peered over to see his mother comforting him, his face beet red.

Moses turned to face his wife, his face etched into a look of reluctance and shame. “I’ve had an affair with Rebecca for a couple of years... We had always been fond of one another growing up, and eventually, when we ran into each other, it sort of happened a-and never stopped,” he announced, making sure to say it directly to Mary’s face. “I apologize, my darling... I... I don’t know what to say—”

Mary raised her hand to silence him. “Explain what is going on, we shall talk about this later.” The pain in her voice was enough to hurt even Anthony. He couldn’t believe it either, as the two of them always seemed so happy. So, what had

changed? Or had nothing happened, and Moses had forsaken his marriage just for the thrill of it?

Moses hung his head for a moment and then looked to the Constable. “Lady Rebecca has never liked Anthony, and certainly did not want him going after her sister’s fortune. So, she asked me to persuade him to sail off to America, at any means necessary. When that did not turn out as we wanted to, we arranged for the whole run in with Lord Lock... I thought that was the end of it. You would get drunk and make an ass of yourself. It would be the end all, be all... But, given that Rebecca began blackmailing me a week ago, I was suspicious that she was planning something else. I paid her to keep her from telling my wife or the press about our affair. That is where she could have obtained the funds to pay off the servant.”

Anthony’s temper flared, but he bit his tongue. He knew something had been off about him being so persistent with trying to persuade him to go to America! They’d have words later, and he wasn’t sure their fragile relationship would survive the fallout. However, there were far more pressing matters at the time.

Rebecca screeched like a creature of the night, “Yes, fine! Alright! I did it. I paid off the servant!”

“But *why?*” Isabel urged. “How could you do this to me? I’m your sister.”

“An ungrateful sister who has never appreciated what she had,” Rebecca hissed, her hands flying to her hips. “You married a duke and that wasn’t good enough! He died oh so tragically and oh so young. You’re left everything, *everything!* And yet you want more!” Her screams were so high-pitched

and frantic that her words were barely intelligible. “How is it that you get to have everything anyone could ever want, *and* love? How is that fair? How is that fair when I’m just stuck at your side with a boring, simple, *unbearable* life.”

Isabel was speechless as she stared at her sister. Anthony locked his gaze on her. While they had never liked each other, he had never wished her death until that moment. He couldn’t believe Rebecca was the mastermind behind all of this! To meddle so deeply in their lives out of jealousy.

“Lady Rebecca Pratt,” the Constable announced, making his way over to her and grabbing her arm. “You are hereby under arrest for conspiracy, perjury, and I’m sure many other misdemeanors.”

“Oh, my Lord,” Isabel’s mother cried. “Oh no.”

Everyone in the room was shouting at Rebecca and talking among themselves. Anthony remained silent, his gaze fixed on Isabel. She was crying, and it was taking all of his remaining resolve not to wipe her tears away. They were already such a focal point, and the last thing he wanted was for the story to shift away from her sister and toward them.

Once Rebecca was dragged screaming from the ballroom, Moses approached again. “I am so, so sorry to the both of you... I hadn’t any idea what the money was being spent on. I just thought she had tired of me and was getting what she could from the situation.”

“You tried your damndest to keep Isabel and me apart. All because of the wishes of your mistress?” Anthony hissed,

keeping Isabel tucked into his side.

“I assure you... While she did push me to, I was also doing what I thought was right. I know it means nothing now, but I really did think America was best for you. I’m sorry to you Isabel, for merely assuming you would break his heart again.”

“Enough.” Anthony sighed, his anger toward him dissipating slightly. At least his heart had been in the right place, even if his actions had been shortsighted. “We shall talk later. Go speak with Mary.”

Moses nodded and dashed away to find his wife, who had apparently fled the room amid the commotion. As the guests began to leave the room, all of their parents approached them to ensure that they were okay. After they assured them that they would be fine, Anthony noticed both of their fathers watching him closely.

“Once everything settles, Anthony. I would like for us to have a chat about this,” he gestured between the two of them, “and where it is heading.”

His tone was pleasant enough to give Anthony hope that it would be a positive chat. He nodded once. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Despite the gravity to the atmosphere, as the group moved away from them, Anthony’s father peered back at him and gave a subtle wink before patting the Duke of Radford on the back. Anthony smiled to himself, knowing that his father was going to talk to him and win his favor even more.

The room was empty except for them, but he knew they both needed some space from what had just happened. “Would you like to take that walk with me now, Isabel?” he asked as carefully as he could.

She nodded and sniffled, “Yes, let’s.”



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## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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The fresh air was to Isabel's head what a hearty meal was to a starving man. She breathed in long breath after breath, allowing it to declutter what it could of her messy mind. Never again would she question her intuition. Every step of the way with Rebecca, when something felt off, Isabel had explained it away as sisterly love or her aggressive nature. Never again would she ignore a feeling that her gut tried to warn her about.

Anthony was humming the song which Ernest had played for them, and it brought her back to the moment. "I have to say, you were very clever this evening. With winning me back."

"I thought so too." He smirked. "I'm thankful to be back in your good favor, and that Ernest hasn't yet tired of me."

"As if he could ever." Isabel chuckled. "I shall have to send him thanks tomorrow."

"I think there will be enough on our plate in the coming days. And thanking him is something that can wait," Anthony sighed and then stepped up into the gazebo. "Would you dance with me, Isabel? One more time."

“You can’t possibly still be in the mood to dance.” She chuckled.

“I am always in such a mood. At least, when it comes to dancing with you,” he assured her. Taking hold of one of her hands and allowing his hand to fall to her waist, he once again moved them in a slow waltz.

“Even with my two left feet?” she asked, her eyes sparkling up at him.

“*Especially* because of them,” he assured her, an easy grin on his face.

“You truly are too charming for your own good. What a dangerous man you are.”

Anthony chuckled and shook his head. “No, my dear... I once was. I was a man that mothers warned their daughters about. But now, I am merely back in my original state. A man so absolutely, so hopelessly in love. No amount of time, rage, or *conspiracy* can keep me from being so, as it would seem.”

“So, it would.” Isabel smiled weakly, though she wasn’t quite yet prepared to joke about the crimes her sister committed. There wasn’t any telling what would come of her, either. Rebecca could be jailed for years or forced into labor camps for her misdeeds.

“And what of you, Your Grace?” he asked cheerfully. “Are you in love?”

Her disposition softened and she let out a dreamy, soft sigh. “Of course, I am. I always have been.”

They danced a while, Anthony even twirling her again and again until she let out a little rumble of laughter. When he pulled her back in, they swayed side to side. “I have to confess something to you.”

“Haven’t there been enough confessions this evening?” she asked, a smile stretching her lips up into her cheeks.

“There have,” he nodded. “However, I have a question to ask—but I want you to be fully informed.”

“You’re worrying me,” she groaned. “Do I need to be worried?”

“No,” he assured her. “As I hadn’t told you until now because I did not want you to feel pressured nor obligated. After all *that*, however... I think it won’t be a factor anymore.”

“Very well... What is it?”

Anthony twirled her once more before slowly bringing her into his chest. “Just before we met once more for the first time... My father had issued an ultimatum to me. Either I was going to ask a lady for her hand in marriage this spring, or I was going to be on a boat to America. He was sick of my scandals and bad behavior. Those were my options, or I would be disowned.” He paused and swayed them some more, but Isabel could tell it was a nervous dance for him. “I had sworn to myself that I would sail off to America... But then I fell in

love with you, and I realized I had a reason to stay. I merely did not want you to feel obligated or pressured to marry me or even consider it. Not once since we discussed it has it been motivated by a desire to remain here. Because you are the reason I am staying in England.”

“I see,” she breathed, her mind mulling over all that he has said. “So, were you preparing to leave in the summer? Were you going to tell me?”

“I was preparing in case... sort of. I had all the intentions of preparing but I never brought myself to,” he admitted. “And I might have persuaded my father to extend my time to court you.”

“How much time did he give?” she asked curiously, her grin returning.

“As much time as it took—or until I landed myself in another scandal,” he answered with a chuckle. “I don’t think today counts, however.”

“I think you might be onto something.” She giggled. “So, what is this question now that I’ve been educated?”

Anthony stopped dancing and gripped both of her hands. They stood so close, she could faintly feel the erratic beating of his heart. “When we are able,” he breathed. “Would you say yes if I asked to court you?”

Isabel never thought the answer would be so easy. However, she had to ask a question of her own before giving her answer.

“Do you swear to honor me always? To treat me fairly and like a friend? That the life we share, is *shared* and not your own that I happen to exist in?”

“Of course,” he breathed. “I want for nothing but your company and love.”

“Then you may have more than just a courtship with me, if you like,” she whispered. His face lit up like it would on Christmas morning. “But I must wish you luck on convincing my father.”

“Oh, my Isabel, I’ll do whatever he asks of me. I’ll sign any agreement he wishes, I’ll do any job—hell, I’ll clean the family stables if I must,” Anthony oozed. He then cradled her face and stroked her cheek. “I thought happiness was out of the question when you left me all those years ago. How fortunate am I that you’ve returned to me, my Happiness.”

Isabel kissed him on the lips. As insane as the previous month had been, let alone that hour, kissing Anthony felt like the most logical thing in the world. Never before had she felt more centered, more herself, than when their lips were locked in such a passionate embrace.

She had no desire to marry again after Robert, and that was not what she was agreeing to. Anthony predated Robert, and she was simply agreeing to do what she was fated to do. To love Anthony, above all.

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## EPILOGUE

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### *ONE YEAR LATER*

There had never been a more picturesque first day of spring. The air was warm, the sky was blue with just enough clouds to keep them all from squinting. The flowers were in full bloom, and she was holding hands with the love of her life before all their friends and family in her garden. Amy, as skillfully as ever, had braided her hair and even placed flowers throughout the long, intricate plait. They were small pink blossoms, the first of the year, to match her wedding dress.

And Anthony had never looked more handsome or happy in all his days. He even had styled his hair, though she had a feeling that Ernest was behind such a detail. However, the little flower pinned to the chest of his jacket to match the ones in her hair, was a touch all his own.

“Anthony, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?” the clergyman asked Anthony.

“I will,” he breathed, tears shimmering in his dark brown eyes.

The clergyman then looked to Isabel, though she could only tell from her peripheral vision, as her eyes were set firmly on Anthony. “Isabel, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will,” she confirmed.

Her father then stepped forward and took hold of one of her hands and placed it in Anthony’s, though his hand remained atop them both. “I, Anthony, take thee Isabel, as my wedded wife. To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth,” Anthony recited sweetly and quietly, as any louder and she was sure he would have cried. Seeing so much emotion in his face was nearly enough to make her weep from happiness.

Her father released his hand and stepped away. Holding both of Anthony’s hands then, Isabel recited her vow, “I, Isabel, take thee, Anthony, as my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.”

The minister had them exchange rings. More scripture was read, and they were asked to answer more questions, but she could hardly register it. She was in a state of absolute awe. It

felt unreal to be marrying her first friend in life, her only love—at last.

When the minister finally uttered the words, “I now pronounce thee husband and wife,” they were kissing before he had even finished the sentence. There was a laugh from the crowd. Isabel and Anthony kept it brief, though their eyes both burned with the desire for more.

A crowd followed them into the ballroom, where a grand table had been set with a breakfast feast nearly spilling over the table’s edges. As they took their seats, music filled the room. Isabel’s cheeks were already aching from all the smiling she’d done that day. She never imagined her life would be so perfect: her home, all done to her exact specifications to make it uniquely hers, her adoring husband, and all their loved ones. She almost wished she could be pinched to make sure she wasn’t dreaming.

Then again, Isabel couldn’t help but momentarily think of Rebecca. Her sister had been put on trial, and she had only been spared from work camps because of Isabel and her father’s generosity. Their father saved her from prison, and Isabel paid the penalties on her behalf so that she could remain free. However, their family disowned her, Edmund had divorced her, and the last they had heard, she was living in a shared flat in another town, working at a local yarn business to make ends meet.

But her focus should not be on her and instead, of all those there who were celebrating them gayly. Moses and Mary had seemed happy once again, though it had been a rather hard year for them both. She was with child once more, that time they were hoping for a son as they had two daughters already. And to make the Moore clan complete, Thomas, the youngest brother, was home from his military duty just in time for the



wedding. Isabel watched with loving eyes as their fathers made over the well decorated sergeant, and then his mother pulling him away for a stolen dance.

“What is on your mind?” Anthony whispered in her ear. “You’re awfully quiet.”

“Everything is simply... perfect,” she breathed. “I don’t think I could be any happier than I am right now.”

He smiled and held her hand under the table. They stayed just like that, picking at their food, and chatting with their loved ones and watching them dance for the remainder of the morning.

It wasn’t until well into the afternoon that the crowd eventually dissipated. By sunset, it was just the two of them. They made their way up to her —*their*—bedchamber and looked out over the garden as they watched the orange and purple hues dominate the sky. Anthony wrapped his arms around her waist from behind. “So, how would you like to spend our eternity, Happiness?”

The nickname he had bestowed her with was adorable, even if it was a little goofy. She turned around and looped her arms about his neck. “As long as I am with you, I could do anything at all.”

“Anything at all?” he repeated, his voice teeming with challenge. “What if I decided to climb a mountain?”

“I just might need to borrow some trousers,” she replied in jest.

“And what about sail the world? Nothing but us, a boat, and pirates.”

“I get a little seasick but for you, I would bear it,” Isabel replied with ease.

He tapped his chin, contemplating. “And... if I longed for a safari in Africa?”

She nodded confidently. “I would buy us matching hatchets to cut through the overgrowth.”

He chuckled and tugged her into his chest. “Well, I don’t think a safari or mountain climb is in the cards for today. But I have something else in mind.”

“Oh—?”

That was all she was able to get out before his lips covered hers. Of course, she melted into him instantly. The same desire which had always been there rushed through her veins as they held one another and kissed so lovingly. The only thing different that time, was that they could finally act upon their lust.

They stumbled toward the bed, their lips never leaving one another’s. As they stood next to it, Anthony pushed his jacket off as she loosened his cravat. Article after article of clothing

was removed from their bodies until they stood before one another, completely naked for the first time. She did not blush, for she wasn't embarrassed of her form. Anthony never failed to make her feel beautiful and adored, why would she shy away from his affectionate gaze?

And Anthony himself was something of a fantasy. His body was lean with slight muscle definition and looked perfectly matched to hers. His arms wrapped about her and gently laid her on the bed. Their lips connected again as their hands liberally explored one another's body.

He made her understand what lust truly was, as never had she yearned for a man's body quite like she did his. Even just a daring glance from him was enough to drive her wild. With their new, intimate petting, her sex was aching for attention.

And he gladly obliged. His fingers caressed her lower lips as his hand snaked between her legs. Her excitement lubricated his attention, and her body shivered with delight. Isabel began kissing his neck as her fingers became entangled in his hair, desperate for an outlet for the hormones coursing through her.

"Endlessly," he whispered to her.

"What's that?" she moaned. He was between her legs then, his body positioning over hers. She could feel the heat of his manhood pressing against her center, preparing for entrance.

His arms were around her and his nose grazed hers when she lifted her face to look at him. "I'll love you now and forever, endlessly," he promised her.

She kissed his lips briefly. “And I will love you just the same.”

He then thrust into her, taking care not to hurt her. Isabel couldn't stop the rumble of satisfaction that ran through her. Never in her life had sex felt so good. She was in a world of her own, even with simple strokes and delightful petting. She realized why it was so different as they continued to roll around the sheets, Anthony kissing her breasts and eliciting moan after moan from her. It wasn't just sex; it was making love.

Her hips flexed into his movements, sending him deeper within her. Their divine, long and gentle actions were soon hungrier, rougher, and more sensual. Not even for a second, however, did she feel as though it was anything less than an act of love. Isabel was on top of him then, her hips grinding into his as their tongues intertwined like vines deep within the hot, moist jungle.

*Passion.* It was what had been missing all along. A man that wanted to please her until the death of the Earth, and she who only wished to do the same in return. Passion had to have been the very thing which brought them back together, or at least couldn't keep them apart once fate had put them both in the same orbit. And now that she had it, never again would she let it go. Never would she let *him* go ever, ever again.

She could have stayed like that forever. Melded together, their bodies as one. Every little movement of their hips sent waves of deep satisfaction through her flesh that she had only ever fantasized about. It was the love, the desire, the seduction of a lifetime. Her mouth wouldn't dare leave his, unless he forced her away to pepper her exposed skin with adoration and worship.

Isabel jerked him into ecstasy with rough, short jerks. They both twitched, moaned, and collapsed under the power of the pleasure waves. They lay naked atop the blankets, petting each other as they caught their breath. Anthony was already flirting with her sex, caressing her hips as she lay on her side, studying his face.

“What a fool I was,” she thought aloud.

“A fool for what?” He chuckled, pressing kisses to her shoulder.

“For ever going against our destiny,” she clarified. “I am just grateful we found our way back to each other.”

Anthony smiled tenderly at her and pressed a loving kiss to her lips then. “We always would. We are made for one another.”

“I think you’re right.” She grinned.

They kissed again, and then they were back in the pits of desire. They would make love until the morning, and they would do so for weeks. There would be no untouched, unexplored, or unravished skin. She waited a decade to study literature and history again, but this time it was only Anthony’s most carnal desires she wished to comprehend and imprint onto memory. She would, however, have the rest of their lives to master it all.

Never would she tire of him or his love, in any capacity.

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## EXTENDED EPILOGUE

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# IN LORDS WE TRUST

Book#1

[The Duke of Silence](#)

Book#2 (this book)

When a Duchess Sins

Book#3

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## DO YOU WANT MORE ROMANCE?

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If you're a true fan of the steamy Regency romance genre, here are the first chapters of my previous best selling story, and it's called: **A Way to Betray the Duke**

Finding herself at a terrible crossroad, Rosaline is torn: should she join a competition to ruin the man she loves in order to save her father, or should she let her own Papa rot in prison? Whoever she chooses to betray, one thing is certain: neither could ever forgive her...

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# A WAY TO BETRAY THE DUKE

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## CHAPTER ONE

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“*Y*ou wait here, Mama,” Rosaline said, stopping her mother when they reached Fleet Street. Her mother was looking up at the red brick façade of Number nine, Fleet Market with a pale face. From the outside, a passing stranger might consider it a perfectly normal building situated on the popular Fleet Market square, but any Londoner worth their salt knew the truth.

“Very well,” her mother said quietly, tugging her shawl around her shoulders and gazing up at the debtors’ prison in despair. As many months as they had been visiting, her mother could still not cross the threshold without swooning with stress. “I shall go and fetch us some ribbon then.”

“Yes, do,” Rosaline encouraged her mother kindly. “Do not worry for me, Mama, I have done this many times.”

“I only wish there was no need for you to do so,” her mother said sadly, lifting a hand to cup Rosaline’s cheek, her fingers tucking a piece of Rosaline’s fiery red hair back into place.

“One day soon, there will be no need,” Rosaline smiled softly at her mother. “Go and fetch the ribbon, Mama. I should like green if they have it.”

“Of course, dearest,” her mother said, turning her eyes from the building. Rosaline squeezed her mother’s hand and watched her cross the market square to the stall with the ribbons hanging loose and blowing in the breeze. Then, assured that her mother was comfortably browsing the day’s wares, Rosaline squared her shoulders and set her sights on the door of Number nine. As she approached, she saw a gaggle of wealthy women and their gentlemen suitors waiting outside the door.

“Oh, I hear it is much less savage than Newgate,” one of the ladies was commenting loudly, fluttering an expensive fan in the breeze. “Why, you might even see a gentleman ensconced here!”

Rosaline hated the prison tourists, the wealthy ladies and gentlemen from outside London who thought it a great excitement to tour the capital’s prisons and mock or exclaim at those unfortunate incarcerated souls. She kept her back straight and her basket held out in front of her as she brushed past them, well aware of her tattered hem and patched shawl.

“Oh, how I should like to see that!” another lady exclaimed. “We have nothing so lurid to entertain us at home!”

“Well, ’tis not free to gawk, madam,” the warden at the door said snidely to the lady as Rosaline approached. He eyed her familiarly, nodding and opening the large door as she discreetly slipped a coin into his palm. Rosaline was well versed in the procedures of the prison by now. Bribery was the name of the game.

“Well, now, how is it that the young wench should be so freely admitted?” Rosaline heard the lady behind her demand as she slipped past the door warden.

“She must be visiting a person inside,” the first lady said knowledgeably.

“Her? Such a pretty young thing?” Rosaline bristled as she heard one of the tourist gentlemen commenting behind her whilst she stood inside the door, waiting for a second warden to quickly peruse the basket of food and essentials she had brought in. She caught the warden’s eye as he wordlessly slipped one of her mother’s home baked scones into his pocket. Nothing was free in prison and Rosaline knew that.

“You’d be surprised, milord, at how many pretty young things pass through these doors,” the door warden chuckled darkly. “Either visiting or staying.”

“Well, it seems to me then, that pretty girls have no sense,” the gentlemen scoffed. Rosaline felt herself blushing deeply. As soon as the warden had cleared her to proceed she turned around to glare at the gentlemen standing on the doorstep.

“Maybe so, but at least I have enough sense to know that touring inside these walls to gape at unfortunate souls is nothing short of ghoulish,” Rosaline snapped, spinning on her heel, and marching her way down the corridor, hearing the warden’s chuckle behind her and the gentlemen and ladies exclaiming with dismay. She found she cared not what they thought about her as she stalked angrily past barred doors until she reached the next guard.

“Aye, for Mr. Arnold is it?” the guard said, looking Rosaline up and down with slightly leering eyes that made her uncomfortable.

“Yes,” Rosaline said briskly, throwing back the tea towel covering her basket so the guard could take his pick. She only hoped she would not have lost all of her mother’s famous scones by the time she got to the cell.

“Not hungry,” the guard grunted. “At least, not for that.”

“Very well,” Rosaline sighed and pulled a coin out of her purse, offering it to him. He shook his head, smiling nastily.

“What if I have something else in mind, lass?” he said lewdly, leaning forward. His rancid breath was sour on her cheeks. Rosaline tried not to show her disgust and fear. She had been visiting Number nine, Fleet Market for months now. She knew that some of the guards and wardens traded in more than favors, coins, and food with visiting ladies; she was not naive, but she would not let herself be taken advantage of. She was suddenly very glad her mother was not here to see this.

“Then you’ll put it out of your mind or get nothing,” Rosaline said sharply, pulling a second coin out of her purse and offering it to the guard. “What will it be?”

He eyed her suspiciously for a moment and then pulled back, snatching the coins out of her hand, and opening the door, leading her along until they reached a familiar oak door with a tiny, barred window.

“A short time only,” the guard snarled, setting a key from his great ring of keys at his waist into the lock and turning it. “If you want longer you know what it will cost.”

Rosaline stiffened and said nothing, waiting until the door had swung all the way open to enter the room, refusing to look at the guard. She would not give him the satisfaction of thinking he had unsettled her. Over the last few months, Rosaline had developed a spine of steel. She had needed to. She was the only one keeping her family together.

“Rosie!” A thin but happy voice exclaimed. “How lovely to see you!”

“Hello, Papa,” Rosaline smiled, setting her basket down upon the threadbare bed and walking into her father’s warm embrace. He was standing by the window with his sketchbook, which he set down on the sill in order to hold her close. He felt much thinner than the last time she had visited. She pulled away, frowning at him. “You seem reduced, Papa. Have I not been bringing you enough food?”

“No, more than enough, it is only ... well,” her father coughed, and an abashed look crossed his wan face. “I may have made some trades for art supplies.”

Rosaline shook her head at her father and bit back her reproach. After all, it was her father’s trading and borrowing in order to finance his painting and work as an artist that had sent him to Fleet Market in the first place.

“Mama sends scones,” Rosaline said, removing her shawl from around her shoulders and setting it down on the thin

blanket. "I have included some scouse for you, and some fresh apples too."

"And books?" her father asked hopefully, a mischievous smile flickering across his face.

"Yes," Rosaline sighed, rolling her eyes. Her father was an impossible bookworm and being locked up all day had done nothing to dim his habit. "A collection of the works of Shakespeare and Marlowe."

"Well, perhaps I can read the different parts to myself when I become lonely," her father joked softly. For a moment, he looked distinctly forlorn, and then he reached for Rosalind's hand. "I do miss you both so. How are you?"

Rosaline looked down at her hand in her father's. She swallowed back the truth, that her mother seemed like a shadow of herself without her husband, and that Rosaline was always fearful now of her father's creditor knocking on the door, or that he might send ruffians to their house to steal away more of their furniture or goods. She could not tell her father the truth, that his incarceration was the worst thing to have happened to her and kept her awake at night, worrying about the pennies in her purse, and how they would survive this. Rosaline was only two-and-twenty, with no large fortune or wealthy brother or uncle to support her. She knew there was only one way for her family to make it through this tragedy of circumstance and poor decision-making. Rosaline was determined to make it happen.

"We are well," Rosaline said quietly, stroking the back of her father's hand with her thumb. "Do not worry yourself, Papa. Soon you will be a free man again."



“Oh, have you been saying your prayers, my sweet Rose?” her father chuckled. “Or perhaps someone we know has died and left you a fortune in gold to repay my debt?”

“That would surely help matters, but no,” Rosaline smiled and kissed her father’s cheek. “Do not worry, Papa. I have a plan. I shall see it through.”

“I am only suggesting that the performance would have been greatly improved if more time had been given to the soprano’s talents,” Owen said, falling in step beside Henry and Matilda as they exited the opera house.

“I suppose that had nothing to do with the fact that the soprano tonight was exceptionally beautiful, did it?” Matilda asked, smiling cheekily as she slipped her arm through her husband’s.

“Not a whit, I merely appreciated her talents,” Owen said stubbornly, flicking his cane as he walked.

“I am sure you did,” Henry said drily, raising his eyebrow. “After all, in that gown her talent was more than on display.”

“She was playing the goddess Athena, so, of course the garb of Ancient Greece was perfectly appropriate,” Owen said, refusing to rise to the bait.

“You know, I heard a strange little rumor last week, husband,” Matilda began, eyes sparkling, and Owen just knew that his best friend’s wife was preparing to make fun of him.

“Oh, really, love?” Henry said, smiling at Owen evilly. Owen glared back at his friend, who never once came to his aide when his beautiful wife began to tease Owen mercilessly. Owen sometimes thought Henry enjoyed it even more than when he used to beat the stuffing out of Owen at university back at Oxford. “And what was that?”

“I heard that the lady soprano in question, I believe her name is Mademoiselle Elise, received the most fabulous bouquet last week, as well as a gentleman caller after curtain call,” Matilda tapped her gloved finger against her lips mischievously. “Tell me, husband, which young bachelor do we know who always favors giving roses to those he courts?”

“Lady Linfield, you are incorrigible,” Owen said flatly, staring between his laughing best friend and his best friend’s wife.

“She is!” Henry sighed, wiping his eyes, and squeezing his wife’s arm. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“I imagine it is more endearing when it is not directed at your affairs,” Owen said tartly.

“Oh, do not be sour, Owen,” Matilda giggled, winking at him conspiratorially. “If you do not wish to be subject to rumors, then you must try to conduct a less exceptional love-life.”

“I shall bear that in mind, my lady!” Owen sighed, shaking his head ruefully but unable to stop himself smiling. The truth was that Lady Matilda Linfield was quite exceptional. She was Henry’s oldest friend, aside from Owen, and it had been Owen’s great pleasure to watch their courtship evolve. There was an ease about their companionship that Owen longed for

in a spouse. After all, here was Matilda, a fine lady of the town, teasing her husband's best friend about his dalliances! It was certainly unorthodox, but Owen relished the friendship of Henry and his wife. And he adored being godfather to their only daughter, Iris, and, sometimes, when he saw his best friend rolling with laughter at a witty comment his wife had made, Owen was filled with crushing envy.

“So, you are acquainted with the soprano?” Henry pressed, guiding them further along the street towards the carriages.

“Can a gentleman not send a young lady of exceptional talent a bouquet to congratulate her on her performance?” Owen demanded.

“He can, but if he is the young Duke of Lennox he cannot be surprised when there are rumors about it,” Matilda said tartly.

“Or when it ends up in the scandal sheets,” Henry said warningly.

“I am scrupulous about protecting my reputation, as you well know,” Owen said airily. “And what is a bouquet sent in congratulation for a perfectly sung aria? If that is all the scandal sheets can conjure up then they are surely dragging their feet.”

The truth was that Owen had indeed had a secret dalliance with Mademoiselle Elise, which had ended in an eager tumble in her dressing room, but he had no intention of revealing that to Matilda. She saw him as a romantic flirt, as the gentleman who would dance with every lady, complement each one lavishly, and then send them all roses afterwards. Henry,

however, knew the truth. Owen did not like a cold bed. Since they'd gone up to Oxford, Owen had enjoyed the company of many fine ladies, and many pretty professionals. His father's premature death had launched him into his dukedom earlier than expected. He had imagined he would have a few more years of bachelorhood to enjoy before settling down and finding a lady to marry. Then he would have felt ready to assume his father's title, his days of carousing fully behind him, just a part of any young man's youthful indiscretions. Yet now, he found himself, a year from being thirty years old, a duke of substantial property and fortune ... and still unmarried.

"Every scandal sheet I open seems obsessed with you," Henry commented lightly, his eyes fixed on Owen.

"Oh, you open many scandal sheets, do you?" Owen teased drily.

"No, but I do, and I simply have to tell Henry all about them," Matilda said, stepping towards the carriage. "After all, it is such a delight to be so intimately acquainted with someone so famous!"

"Oh, why is that?" Owen said sarcastically. "Are there benefits in Society to being a dear friend of the Duke of Lennox, recently branded the most flirtatious duke in the land?"

Owen had not known whether to be flattered or insulted by the title, but then had arrived at his club to raucous laughter and had sorted his feelings out quite quickly. He loathed the scandal sheets. He hated the people who published them, who sent spies into balls and parties to take notes on who he danced with, spoke to, sent flowers to. It had become practically unbearable, especially because he had gotten no closer to

discerning who the spy might be. It kept him awake at night, wondering who in the *ton* was in the pocket of the newspaper men. It had even gotten to the point where he had become convinced he could hear footsteps following him wherever he went, as if everyone in the *ton* was fascinated with exactly what His Grace, the Duke of Lennox was doing at each moment. It was almost unbearable. The hair on the back of Owen's neck rose just thinking about it, and he had the horrible feeling that a pair of eyes was following him even then. He caught Henry's eye and saw that his friend was watching him with a thoughtful expression.

"Oh, no, merely that I get the opportunity to correct public opinion of you at every turn," Matilda said lightly, with a beautiful smile. "After all, most people seem wrongfully convinced that you are some kind of charmer. And as we all know, you are a perfectly hopeless dunderhead in real life."

"How dare you!" Owen laughed, shaking off the sensation of being watched from the shadows. "Just because your sister-in-law refers to me as such does not give you leave to go repeating it in company!"

Henry's sister, Althea, was never short of playful insults for Owen, which he never hesitated to return in kind. Althea was a friend with whom Owen could always be freely himself, as much family to him as Henry and Matilda.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Henry said, smiling as he helped his wife into the carriage. "Get comfortable, my love, I must catch a word with our resident dunderhead, if you do not mind."

"I shall bear it," Matilda chuckled, smiling as Henry closed the door. Then he gestured for Owen to join him in a side alley, his eyes full of understanding.

“Again?” Henry asked quietly. Owen nodded curtly.

“It’s the fourth time this week,” Owen sighed in frustration, running his hands through his hair. “I feel as if I am going mad, always imagining footsteps at my back and eyes on the back of my head.”

“You are not going mad, do not worry,” Henry squeezed his arm affectionately. He knew how hard being thrust into the sudden spotlight had been for Owen. “We will find the answer to it soon enough.”

“Thank you,” Owen said, breathing a sigh of relief. It was good to have a friend on his side. But for some reason, he had the unnerving feeling that they were only just beginning to unravel the mystery of who was watching him and why, and it would only get more complicated the more questions they asked. “I am glad you are with me.”

“I always shall be, my friend,” Henry said.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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“Come, Mama, we cannot dally!” Rosaline said firmly, tugging on her mother’s hand as they walked through the art gallery. Rosaline ran her eyes over the crowds of gentlemen and ladies bustling around before paintings and holding glasses of champagne. She could practically taste her heartbeat in her throat. For her plan to work, she needed to blend in as best she could with the other members of the *ton*, who were milling around and gossiping. She had deliberately worn her best gown, a soft, pearly satin of pale green, adorned under the bust and at the edge of the cap sleeves with the green ribbon her mother had purchased yesterday at the market. Whilst she never expected to be the most beautiful girl in the room, Rosaline prided herself that she could at least appear to be a respectable member of the *ton*. No one here would look twice at her or her mother and find them wanting.

“I do not know why we have to rush,” her mother mumbled and then, casting her fearful eyes around the gallery, sucked in a sharp breath. “Goodness, I have not been in the company of some of these people for more than twenty years.”

Rosaline slowed her feet. For a moment, her quest went entirely out of her head. She stared at her mother, at the slight lines around her beautiful eyes and her sad expression; her face was a picture of mourning.

“I am sorry,” Rosaline said quietly, slipping her hand into her mother’s. “I can do this alone, Mama. You can go home.”

“No,” her mother breathed out slowly, closing her eyes and then opening them again. “If twenty years has not made me strong, then nothing will.”

Rosaline said nothing and watched as her mother glanced forlornly around the room, her eyes lingering on a beautiful painting three times the size of Rosaline.

“Do you see the brushwork there?” her mother said softly, her eyes becoming gentle with affection.

“Yes?” Rosaline said, looking at the painting.

“That is one of your father’s,” her mother whispered so that no one else could hear.

“Papa’s?” Rosaline whispered in astonishment, looking up at the enormous painting surrounded by fine people. Why, the cost of the frame alone would surely be enough to settle a large part of her father’s debt!

“Yes, one of his earliest,” her mother mused quietly, looking at the painting with fondness. “One of his first big sales. In the days when he was still the talk of the *ton*, and I was just a young slip of a thing at her first ball.”

Rosaline watched as her mother drifted into memories. She was doing that more often these days. With a soft smile on her



face, wearing a beautiful blue gown, and her head tilted to properly examine the painting, Rosaline caught a glimpse of the type of fine lady her mother would have become if she had never met Mr. Arnold, the new and exciting landscape painter, who had burst upon the *ton* twenty-five years ago. Rosaline had heard the story of their love many times as a child; it had been her favorite bedtime tale. Rosaline knew how her father had been invited to the seat of the Earl of Edgecombe to paint a landscape of the grounds, how her mother had caught sight of him ... and instantly fallen in love with his perception and gentleness. As a child, she had begged over and over to hear the romantic tale of how her parents had fallen into a secret love affair and, afraid of the earl's disapproval, eloped. The infant Rosaline had considered it the pinnacle of romance, but now she knew romance was not without its sacrifices. Rosaline had never met her grandfather, the Earl of Edgecombe. She had never come out into Society or gone to balls or afternoon tea with other young ladies of the *ton*. Her mother had married out of Society, throwing her lot in with a talented but scatter-brained painter with no head for numbers or finances. She had never once complained, but Rosaline knew it must be hard for her mother to stand in these halls with these people again and not think about the family she had lost and the life she might have had.

“Do you ever regret it?” Rosaline asked, knowing what the answer would be.

“No,” her mother looked at her fiercely, her voice suddenly low and powerful. “How could I regret the greatest love of my life? The love that brought me my own little Rosie?”

“Thank you, Mama,” Rosaline said, smiling as she squeezed her mother's hand. “And you do not regret all you lost in leaving the *ton*?”

“There is nothing to regret here,” her mother said, sniffing disapprovingly as she looked around at the surrounding ladies and gentlemen, all traces of nostalgia vanished. “I still have not the faintest idea why you insist upon this reintroduction.”

“I have my reasons,” Rosaline said, twisting a curl by her ear. Her mother watched her shrewdly.

“You are as much a gambler as your father,” her mother said, shaking her head. “Don’t you realize, precious one, that if there is so much of a whiff of the debtor’s prison about us, then this reintroduction shall all be for nothing? Less than nothing.”

“Well, it cannot be less than nothing,” Rosaline said glibly.

“It can,” her mother said firmly. “*Nothing* is what we are to them, Rosaline. They care naught for us; they do not know our names or our circumstances. It is worse, much worse, that they should know us and despise us. Then, we shall be in an even more terrible situation than when your father and I eloped.”

“Mother,” Rosaline said in a soothing tone. “You shall have to trust me. I have our family’s best intentions in mind. I am going to free father and make sure that we are all happy again.”

“I suppose you shall also end all wars and fill every hungry belly in the city?” her mother joked sarcastically, shaking her head at her daughter. “Really, Rosaline. You cannot expect miracles.”

“I do not. I only need you to trust me,” Rosaline said, staring into her mother’s eyes. “Can you please trust me, Mother?”

Her mother looked at her for a long minute, eyes tired, but then she sighed, her shoulders slumping for a moment before she rolled them back, her face becoming firmer by the second.

“I shall trust you, sweet Rose,” her mother whispered, tucking her daughter’s hand into her elbow. “Besides, for you to appear as a proper lady of the *ton* you must be appropriately chaperoned. Come. Let me show you some other pieces of interest.”

Rosaline allowed her mother to guide her around the gallery, talking in a level voice about the pieces of art on display with such clarity and an informed manner that Rosaline could feel some of the other ladies and gentlemen looking at her with approval and interest. It amazed Rosaline to see how these people of the *ton* communicated so often with nothing more than sideways glances, significant looks, and whispers behind fans. It was a world that ran on gossip and intrigue.

“You know, Mama, I think Marc would have loved to have joined us here,” Rosaline mused, thinking of her lifelong friend, Marc, the son of an Italian artist with whom her father had worked many times.

“I have never known Marc to enjoy art,” her mother commented. “Perhaps a life of over-exposure to his father’s work has ruined him.”

It was true, Marc’s father was a much more successful painter in Italy than Rosaline’s father had ever been in England.

Perhaps to spite his father and his consistent criticism of Marc's life, Marc had permanently relocated to England and declared himself finished with Rome. Consequently, he spent a lot of time with the Arnold family. Now, unlike some other fair-weather friends, he had become an even more ardent supporter following the incarceration of her father. He was a true friend.

“No, but you know he would revel in the intrigue,” Rosaline whispered. Marc had taken a job working at the local newspaper preferred by the *ton*, working in the gossip and scandal section. It suited him well. The only benefit, he always said, to living inside the art world for so long with his father was the plethora of delicious titbits about Society he gleaned whenever the painters gossiped together. He and his father had not spoken since Marc took on work at the newspaper, but where other Society folk might judge Marc for his profession, Rosaline would never dare. *After all*, she thought darkly for a moment, *am I not benefiting from his profession too?*

“Oh, yes!” Her mother laughed, throwing back her head. “My, how Marc has a talent for always knowing exactly what is going on, everywhere!”

“Helena? Helena Arnold, is that you?”

Both Rosaline and her mother turned towards the voice. Rosaline felt her mother's hand tighten on her arm in fear. Rosaline knew her mother had been most dismayed by the prospect that someone might recognize her from her younger days and bring up her elopement. However, as soon as they looked into the face of the smiling woman in front of them, Rosaline felt her mother relax.

“Your Grace, how wonderful to see you,” Rosaline’s mother said, relief in her voice as she dropped into a curtsey. “Your Grace, might I introduce my daughter, Rosaline? Rosaline, this is the Duchess of Sinclair.”

“Lovely to meet you, Your Grace,” Rosaline said, copying her mother’s respectful curtsey before the beautiful older woman. Rosaline knew her mother had kept one friend from her younger days, the only friend who still kept up correspondence with her and had never judged her. But Rosaline had never imagined that such a friend would be none other than the Duchess of Sinclair, the most fashionable duchess of the *ton*!

“Now, none of that,” the duchess said firmly, reaching out to take hold of her mother’s hands. “You must call me Frances, if I may still call you Helena?”

“Of course,” her mother said, smiling broadly with slightly wet eyes.

“As for you, you beautiful child,” the duchess said, reaching out to take Rosaline’s hand, “you may call me Frances also. I have known your mother such a long time.”

“Thank you, Your Grace ... Frances,” Rosaline said, feeling humbled but also a little anxious. For her plan to work, she needed to blend in and be as inconspicuous as possible. That was hardly a possibility with the Duchess of Sinclair around. She was known for her excellent sense of style, her talent for rooting out gossip, and her knowledge of everything to do with the *ton*. Rosaline thought it best to distance herself a little from her mother and the gracious duchess, and so she carefully attempted to move away. She gazed at a painting with feigned interest, hoping to hear some whispers about the gentleman who was the real focus of her attention, the only reason she

had come at all to the event. Then, as she gazed at a portrait of a stern-faced admiral, she heard none other than the Duchess of Sinclair mention his name.

“Mrs. Arnold, please meet one of my son-in-law’s closest friends, the Duke of Lennox.”

Rosaline whirled around, unable to stop staring at the man who, at that moment, was bowing so formally and respectfully to her own mother. *The Duke of Lennox*. The very man she had come to the gallery to find, whose footsteps she had been haunting for days now but had never seen face to face, being always hidden around corners and away from prying eyes. And yet here he was!

She swallowed hard, feeling terror pooling in her belly. She did not know whether to run and hide or brave it out, but for the plan to work effectively it would be so much safer if she was not known to the Duke of Lennox. Perhaps she should simply duck into another room of the gallery? But, unfortunately, her mother was already looking over in her direction. Rosaline tried not to hold her breath as the faces of her mother, the Duchess of Sinclair, the lovely looking couple whom Rosaline recognized as the Duke of Lennox’s friends, and that of the man himself, turned towards her expectantly.

“Darling do come over here,” her mother called, and Rosaline walked forward reluctantly, her head in a daze as her mother slipped an arm through hers.

“Allow me to make introductions,” the duchess said smoothly. “Miss Rosaline Arnold, please meet my daughter and her husband, Lord Henry Linfield and Lady Matilda Linfield—”

Rosaline curtsied before the tall blond gentleman and his dark-haired, very beautiful wife. Lady Linfield smiled at her courteously, but Rosaline was sure she spied a glimmer of excitement cross the lady's face as she looked significantly at the Duke of Lennox.

“—and this is a great friend of our family, Owen Barton, the Duke of Lennox.”

He was taller than Rosaline had noticed before, always capturing sight of him at night, from behind or far away. He towered above her. She took in the dark hair that curled close to his head, the strong, masculine jaw, and the rather unhelpfully beautiful pale-blue eyes that reminded her of forget-me-nots and were twinkling with a roguish type of mischief. Rosaline couldn't help it. She stared into them, feeling tingles run up and down her body. There was no other word for it; he was the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Arnold,” the duke said, bowing low.

“And yours, Your Grace,” Rosaline whispered, watching as the duke straightened up. There was a distinctive note of playfulness in his eyes, and she was sure, just for a second, that he had winked at her. Against every part of her mind crying out that she absolutely must feel nothing for this man, Rosaline felt a flutter of excitement in the pit of her stomach. Her heart began to race, thumping furiously in her breast. Her hands felt sticky as she was mesmerized by those forget-me-not eyes.

*Oh, bother!* Rosaline thought to herself. *This is going to make everything so much harder.*

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Owen had little interest in art galleries under usual circumstances, but as worried as he was by the haunting footsteps that seemed to dog his every move, he found the gallery event for the Prince Regent almost intolerable. It helped a little that he was not alone. Matilda had asked him to escort her, her warm hand was now resting on Owen's elbow, and Henry strolled at his other side. There was comfort in their presence. Nevertheless, the dreadful feeling of being watched persisted.

"I feel as if I am going mad," Owen muttered to his friend as they entered the long gallery. "Whenever I am out in public, I am sure I can hear the footsteps."

"I am sure you are not mad," Matilda said quietly, tilting her dark head down so her voice would not carry to the other members of the *ton* passing by. "I fancied I heard footsteps myself as we entered the gallery."

"Aye, I too have the persistent feeling that we are under scrutiny," Henry said quietly, "and it is not the usual kind."

Of course, Henry referred to the scrutiny that had long followed him and his wife and her family. When Matilda was



still a child, her stepmother and father had been the victims of a brutal scheme to claim the dukedom of Sinclair. It had been in all the papers, and the perpetrator of the crime, none other than the duke's own sister, had been on trial for attempted murder before being sent away. Then, in the past five years, Henry had endured his own fair share of scandal when his first attempt down the aisle was thwarted, publicly, by a woman trying to defame his reputation. The lady in question had never officially been caught, and Henry had happily married Matilda to save his reputation, but there remained no shortage of public interest in the Sinclairs and the Linfields. Owen had no desire to join their ranks. He liked his privacy. Yes, he had enjoyed a modicum of roguish notoriety among the clubs in the city, but he had no desire to be a spectacle.

"It is rather like being followed by a ghost, isn't it?" Matilda mused. "For when I feel a prickle at the back of my neck and look, there is nothing there."

"A most unfriendly ghost," Henry muttered. "Perhaps even a malicious one."

"Or you could have an admirer," Matilda reasoned beside him.

"An admirer who stalks my waking steps is no admirer I wish to meet," Owen said ruefully, gazing quickly back over his shoulder, fancying that if he were only swift enough, he might catch his unfriendly ghost in the act. Yet no one was there. He stared down the long gallery, eyes drifting over the paintings. It all seemed so pleasant, so serene, yet he could not shake the feeling that, somehow, he was the one on display.

"Oh, look, I did not know Mama was attending," Matilda said, sounding delighted. "Look!"

Owen followed her gaze down the long gallery. The Duchess of Sinclair was standing in rapt conversation with what looked to be a good friend, but it was the lady standing behind them, looking up at the painting in front of her, who caught Owen's eye. She was beautiful, no doubt about it. She was perhaps the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and something about her captivated him. It was not her red curls, which were as wild and tantalizing as a Renaissance painting, nor the long curve of her elegant neck. It was not even the captivating allure of her figure as she stood there in a simple moss-colored dress with pink silk roses pinned in her hair. It was the glimmer in her hazel eyes, the inquisitive tilt of her head as she stared at the painting. As they approached her, Owen could see the way she bit her bottom lip and her eyebrows furrowed gently with concentration. All of that, on top of her unassuming beauty, made her utterly compelling to him. He had a sudden, almost visceral fantasy of striding over to the young lady, wrapping an arm around her, tipping her back, and kissing that slightly bitten lip.

"Owen?" Henry hissed at him as they approached. Owen snapped back to himself, staring at his friend, who shook his head in amusement.

"Do try to keep your head and be discreet," Henry chuckled, turning to Duchess Sinclair and the lady beside her. Owen smirked and tried to control his gaze from wandering over to the beautiful lady. He paid adequate attention as he greeted the duchess and her friend, Mrs. Arnold. Yet he kept the beautiful lady in the corner of his eye.

"Mrs. Arnold, please meet one of my son-in-law's closest friends, the Duke of Lennox." the duchess said.

Owen bowed respectfully, and as he rose, he saw over Mrs. Arnold's shoulder that the beautiful lady's eyes flickered over to him in interest. He caught her gaze. For a moment, she looked oddly stunned, as if she had never expected to see him there. Her eyes, he realized, were not quite hazel at all; they were a combination of all the colors of autumn leaves and were full of an intensity, a fire, that he felt reflexively in his gut, like a kick or a punch. *She is truly the most astonishing creature I have ever beheld.* Then, as if Mrs. Arnold had followed his gaze, she turned and addressed the young lady.

“Darling do come over here,” Mrs. Arnold said. Her voice was so proprietary, so commanding, and loving that Owen knew the young lady could only be one thing—Mrs. Arnold's daughter. Owen tried to bite down his excitement at the coming introduction as the beautiful Miss Arnold ducked her eyes away from his and stepped up beside her mother and the duchess.

“Miss Rosaline Arnold, please meet my daughter and her husband, Lord Henry Linfield, and Lady Matilda Linfield ...” the duchess said, but Owen struggled to listen.

*Rosaline.* Owen could not think of a more perfect name for her. From her red hair that reminded him of rosy sunsets, to the delicate petal-like blush on her creamy cheeks, everything about her spoke of the delicacy of his favored flower, except for those eyes. Those perfect, fiery eyes, which had surprised him with the desire he felt in response to her gaze, eyes he longed to look into again. He waited impatiently for his introduction.

“—and this is a great friend to our family, Owen Barton, the Duke of Lennox.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Arnold.”

He bowed low, as elegantly as he could, and smiled at her sincerely, hoping to catch a glimpse of those eyes again. But she kept them hidden from him, her gaze sliding away from his.

“And yours, Your Grace,” she whispered, and he caught his moment as her eyes finally met his. Her voice said she was shy, but her eyes were different, full of charm and curiosity, and all the other things Owen adored in a young lady. He could not help himself. He gave her the merest flutter of a wink. He saw her eyebrows slide up in surprise, but she showed nothing on her face, not the normal creeping flush or tittering laugh young ladies so often indulged in. She merely smiled shortly and looked over at the painting she had been staring at.

“Mama, I had no idea you were coming today,” Matilda said, slipping into conversation with her mother. “What a delight it must be to meet such an old friend as Mrs. Arnold!”

“Oh, yes, well, Mrs. Arnold’s husband is a great painter, as my father was,” the Duchess of Sinclair said warmly.

“Is that so?” Henry asked politely. “Is he accompanying you today?”

“He is not,” Mrs. Arnold said slowly. Owen thought she sounded a little wary, and then Rosaline spoke.

“Papa finds it a little awkward to visit the galleries where his early work still hangs,” she said easily, her eyes drifting to a painting a few feet away.

“One of these is by your father’s hand?” Owen asked Rosaline, hoping to catch her eye, but she merely nodded, those hazel eyes focused on her mother for some reason. Owen found himself longing for her attention. “Might you show me which it is? I should like to know.”

“A good idea,” Matilda said, giving Owen a very subtle nod. “I should like to show Mama the statue further down. I have it in mind for our own gallery at Glavensbourne.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Henry teased her gently, his hand reaching up to rest on his wife’s back. “Well, I suppose I should look at it too, if you are planning to populate our house with yet more art.”

“Mrs. Arnold, I should be glad of your assistance,” Matilda said pointedly, glancing between Owen and Rosaline, and leaving Owen with no doubt that his best friend’s wife had noticed his partiality for the beautiful young lady. “You must be much more knowledgeable than I.”

“Well, I do not know about that, but I should be glad to share what little expertise I have,” Mrs. Arnold said, her face pleasantly flushed, as if she were flattered. Owen risked a glance at Rosaline, who was looking at her mother with a slight frown on her face. Then, she caught his gaze and smiled tightly.

“I would be happy to show you, Your Grace,” Rosaline said quietly, stepping away from the group as her eyes drifted down the gallery. “This way.”

Owen happily followed her, watching the rest of their party move further down the gallery towards the sculpture Matilda had been eyeing.

“It is this one,” Rosaline said quietly beside him. “From his earlier years, before he married my mother.”

“This one?” Owen looked up at the painting appreciatively. It was a huge landscape of a morning sunrise over the Thames. He could see the real skill and talent that had gone into its creation. “It is quite charming. Reminiscent of Turner, is it not?”

“Father found him quite inspirational,” Rosaline said, nodding sagely. “Though Turner’s fascination with the elements prevails in his works, Father’s interest is rather more earthly. He finds inspiration in the daily lives of those around him.”

“Similar to Leighton, then?” Owen asked, not wanting to test her, but at the same time, he felt an urge to truly understand the lady in front of him. Surely, she could not be as intelligent as she was beautiful.

“Not truly. Father has no interest in the minutiae of domestic life,” Rosaline said, easily answering his question as if it had been nothing more than a vague comment. Her expression was even mildly bored. Owen felt she was used to this level of inquiry and was more than equal to it. “Nor have I, in truth. I do not look at art to see myself.”

It was on the tip of Owen's tongue to ask if that were the case, then how could she bear to look at any representations of the goddess Aphrodite, but he swallowed the trite compliment. She had ventured a serious opinion, and he felt the urge to interrogate it.

"You find no virtue in it?" he questioned her closely. "In Leighton's work we find not the gods or goddesses or high lords of old, we find the ordinary gentleman, the ordinary lady. Is there not virtue in that representation of our daily life?"

"For what end?" Rosaline asked, her eyes fixed on her father's painting. She seemed undisturbed by his casual questioning of her views. Where other ladies might have demurred or begun a debate, the thought did not even seem to cross Rosaline's mind. "There is no transformation in it, is there? Surely, the goal of art is to illuminate the heavenly in the earthly. In that, I fear Mr. Turner has much more to offer than Mr. Leighton."

"You see nothing of heaven in humanity?" Owen pressed. "Nothing of god in the bodies given to us?"

She turned to catch his eye, and he was sure that, for a second, she completely understood the flattery couched in his question. He held her gaze steadily, taking in those fiery eyes that he was sure, if committed to oil and canvas, would prompt gentlemen all over the world to fall to their knees in prayer. Then, she turned away.

"To be sure, there is holiness in form, but I suspect that so often we are little more than tremendous disappointments to our maker," Rosaline sighed flippantly. "There is so much

despair in humankind; I have seen it. Yet in the sky, the trees, the sea ...”

Her voice trailed off, and Owen held his breath. It was a privilege to see her like this, her head slightly tilted, her red hair catching in the bright sunlight streaming from the high gallery windows. He wondered absurdly what he might title a portrait of her in this moment. *Aphrodite in Thought*, perhaps? He tried to distract himself from the way she licked her bottom lip slightly, how it glistened and, to his mind, longed to be kissed.

“You find more of the holy in the creation around us than in ourselves,” he said softly, not wishing to break her thoughtful trance.

“I do,” she replied, and she gave him a warm smile that sent hot tongues of flaming desire leaping down towards his gut. “For such things cannot sin nor fail, can they?”

“You are quite the pessimist, Miss Arnold,” he laughed, shaking his head.

“I am a pragmatist, Your Grace,” Rosaline said, shrugging lightly, though Owen imagined he saw a playful twinkle in those eyes. “A realist. I speak as I find.”

He longed to question her as to what a fine lady such as herself could have found in the world of High Society to have given her such a realistic understanding of the human condition. He longed to probe her opinions more, but before he could, they were joined by the others.



“Oh, Mother.” Rosaline turned to her mother with a smile. “I hope you were able to give Lady Linfield good advice.”

“She certainly did, for she advised Matilda that, actually, she would do better by seeking out the artist in person and commissioning a piece more to her taste,” the Duchess of Sinclair said, giving Mrs. Arnold an affectionate smile.

“I shall have my own marble of Lord Linfield before the year is out,” Matilda announced, and Owen noticed Henry’s wince when she teasingly pinched his arm where it was linked with hers.

“Yes,” Henry said in a deadpan voice, “for I have always desired a marble effigy of myself to stare at.”

“Lord Linfield shall recover!” The Duchess of Sinclair laughed, shaking her head at her son-in-law. “It is only right that a great lord be etched in stone, and we are indebted to your mother for her excellent advice, Miss Arnold. Consequently, I have invited you both to the Sinclair ball next week.”

“I have accepted,” Mrs. Arnold said, fixing her eyes on her daughter’s face with an oddly intense expression. “Though, I have regretfully given your father’s apologies, since he will be away on business then.”

“He shall be missed,” Owen said promptly. Rosaline’s eyes slid from her mother to him, eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Am I to understand that we might see you also at the ball, Your Grace?” she asked in a casual tone that had Owen’s heart leaping. Was it possible she was excited too, and hoped to see him again? *God above, let it be so!*

“Of course!” Henry smiled, clapping Owen on the shoulder. “A ball cannot be thrown without the Duke of Lennox!”

“I shall be in attendance,” Owen said to Rosaline, giving her a small bow. “I shall look forward to continuing our discussion there.”

“Unless, Miss Arnold, you are free this evening?” Matilda jumped in. Owen turned to look at her in surprise, but she was only smiling kind-heartedly at Rosaline. “I hope you will not mind the late invitation, but we have a spare ticket for the opera tonight.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Henry said, nodding and explaining to Mrs. Arnold, “My sister, Althea, was going to attend with the duke, but she has been called away to visit a friend. We would be happy for your daughter to join us in her stead.”

“That sounds lovely,” Mrs. Arnold nodded enthusiastically and looked at Rosaline. “Don’t you agree, Rosie?”

*Rosie.* The name sounded so perfect when put against Rosaline’s beautiful face and coloring. Owen had to swallow back the desire he felt. How urgently he wished to whisper her name into her ear and see her blush!

“I would be delighted,” Rosaline said, smiling at Matilda and curtsying before averting her eyes to glance back at her father’s painting. Owen was a little disappointed by her apparent disinterest in him. He had hoped for a secret glance or shy look. Yet was that a pale blush creeping up her white neck? Owen felt another twinge of desire.

“Until tonight then,” Owen said, bowing before her. They said their goodbyes, and he walked with Matilda and Henry back down the gallery and out onto the street. He fancied to himself that perhaps Rosaline’s eyes had followed him until he was out of sight.

“I hope you are grateful,” Matilda chuckled at his side as Henry gestured for their carriage.

“For your meddling?” Owen said, smirking down at her very smug expression.

“For my orchestrating more time for you to spend with the lovely Miss Arnold,” Matilda giggled. “You are quite enraptured with her, are you not?”

“I have no notion of what you speak,” Owen said loftily, but he caught Matilda’s eyes with a playful and knowing smile.

“Well, I suppose you shan’t be bored at the opera, at least,” Henry said jokily, opening the door of the carriage for his wife. He nodded at Owen significantly, looking over Owen’s shoulder. Owen turned curiously to look. He caught sight of Rosaline and her mother walking down the stairs of the gallery. The sun was behind them, and the light illuminated Rosaline’s beautiful green gown and astonishing red hair, and

she actually looked as if she was glowing. *Angelic*. She looked up for a moment and stared at him. He fancied her eyes betrayed a complicated mixture of curiosity and puzzlement. It was so unlike the way young ladies often looked at him, as if he were a horse to be chased or a meal to be devoured, that it made his heart skip a beat. There was something about her that intrigued him, something more than her delicious figure and perfect face. Something deeper, something which made him think of ... souls. At the very least, she had completely taken his mind away from dwelling on those haunting footsteps.

“No,” Owen smiled, turning away, and climbing into the carriage. “I certainly shan’t.”

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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“*W*hat think you to this one, Rosaline?” her mother asked, holding up a gown from the wardrobe. Rosaline looked around from the window, where she had been staring down on the street below.

“Oh, it is quite fine,” she said absently, turning back around to the window, unconsciously biting the edge of her fingernail. She could not quite work out why she was so unsettled. On reflection, everything at the gallery had gone better than she could have imagined. It had been hard dogging the footsteps of the Duke of Lennox around town without being seen, but now she would have no need to do so. How much better it was, surely, to enter into the duke’s social circle and gain his trust. Perhaps he would never reveal his secrets to her, but anyone who had any sense knew that it was in the gossip at balls and events, in the words whispered behind fans, and passed over the lemonade, where the real secrets were to be found. How much easier it would be catching the duke in the act of a liaison if she was close by, lingering in the shadows at a ball. *It will hardly be a hardship*, Rosaline thought absent-mindedly *since he is so very handsome to look at*.

“Rosie, I require your full attention,” her mother snapped.

“Yes, I’m sorry,” Rosaline spun around, holding her hands behind her back, since her mother always reprimanded her for chewing her fingers when she was anxious. Her mother shook out the mauve gown towards her with a flourish. “It is quite lovely, Mother.”

“It will not do,” her mother shook her head at Rosaline’s lack of interest. “Honestly, my dear, you cannot go to the opera without a new gown.”

“We must make do, Mama,” Rosaline sighed heavily, rubbing her brow. “Papa’s debt ...”

“I know, I know,” her mother said, waving her hand. She did hate it so very much when Rosaline brought up the debt. “It is all right, darling, I have a plan. I had a few gowns made up for you by the dressmaker as soon as you told me you wanted to attend the gallery.”

“That was a week ago. Think of the expense, Mother!”

“I have already done so,” her mother said calmly, crossing to the dressing table to open her jewelry box.

“What is that?” Rosaline asked warily, watching as her mother slipped her wedding earrings into her purse. “Oh, Mama, you cannot mean to sell your earrings!”

“Well, it is necessary, is it not?” her mother said sharply. “You did say we must go to the gallery, and that I must trust you. Be honest with me, Rose. Is it necessary for you go to the opera?”

Rosaline sighed and looked at her mother carefully. She had deliberately not revealed as much of her plan as she probably should have to her mother. She preferred to keep her in the dark about the less than ladylike methods she was stooping to pay her father's debt. Three weeks ago, Rosaline had seen an advertisement in the local newspaper that caught her attention. "Reporters of the *ton* wanted, particularly ladies. All shall be well reimbursed for their trouble." Fresh from the visit to her father, she had felt desperate. She had sought out Marc, her friend who worked in the scandal section of the newspaper.

"Oh, that," Marc had said, rolling his eyes drolly. "Yes, you'd be more than suitable, I'd imagine, though it's not honorable work, by any means."

"Does it pay well?" Rosaline had pressed, too haunted by the memories of her father in that horrible prison to interrogate the true meaning behind Marc's words.

"Very well, if you're successful!" Marc had laughed. "Come down to the office with me tomorrow. I shall introduce you to the editor."

Rosaline had agreed, but the meeting had not been what she'd expected. The memory of it flooded over Rosaline as she stared at her mother.

*Marc had left her alone with the editor, giving her a friendly squeeze on the shoulder to bolster her courage as he left the room. Rosaline had quailed under the editor's gaze, his intense stare from beneath his bushy eyebrows, yet she stood her ground, refusing to be cowed. She was there for her father, and she would not give up until she had exhausted every avenue.*

*“You are interested in the reporting role, Miss?” the editor of the newspaper had asked, leaning back in his seat behind a grand desk and staring at Rosaline appraisingly.*

*“Yes, though the notice was a little sparse on information,” Rosaline said, feeling the words catch in her throat. “What is needed? If you can tell me more, then perhaps I can decide if I am suitable.”*

*“Well, you certainly look to be,” the editor snorted, looking Rosaline up and down. “Here’s the matter in short: we have been trying to catch out the Duke of Lennox. He is undoubtedly involved in some terrible scandal, but our man in the department has none of the right connections within those circles, and a man caught following the Duke of Lennox could be quickly identified as a threat.”*

*“You speak of Marc?” Rosaline had asked. Marc had told her how his work was more to do with sleuthing around parties and overhearing gossip than actually writing copy.*

*“Oh, our man is a friend of yours, is he?” The editor said, eyeing her with new interest. “Well, we shan’t give the prize money to both of you. In fact, since he is an employee here he cannot enter the competition—”*

*“What competition?” Rosaline interrupted.*

*“Your friend did not tell you?” The editor pushed a declaration across the grand desk towards her. Rosaline looked at the words in astonishment. “We are running a discreet competition. The first reporter to bring me evidence of*



*the Duke of Lennox's involvement in a scandal will receive the reward."*

*"Two thousand pounds?" Rosaline whispered, staring at the editor. "In truth?"*

*"In truth," the editor nodded. "Will you take part?"*

*Rosaline stared at the number on the piece of the paper. It was more than enough to settle her father's debt. As Marc had said, it was not honorable work, far from it. Sneaking around in the shadows was hardly a proper endeavor for a young lady, but Rosaline was more than just a young Society lady. She was a lady with a father in debtor's prison and a mother who was barely hanging on. She had a family to save. So, who was she to turn her nose up at the opportunity to do so, no matter how unseemly the work?*

*"Yes, I shall."*

Agreeing to follow the Duke of Lennox around town to try to catch him in a liaison in an attempt to free her father was hardly the decision of a fine lady. But Rosaline had decided then and there that she would do what she must to protect her family. Yet, when she had agreed, she had known nothing of the Duke of Lennox. Now, all she could think of was his sparkling blue eyes and charming smile, which was deeply unhelpful. Before then, he had not been a real person, a human being, and with such kind-hearted friends who were somehow connected to her mother. It felt horrible to be using another person in that way, to be taking advantage of them. But then she thought of the tiny cell her father was held in. She thought of the blueish bags under her mother's eyes, the way she ate less and less, and became increasingly more drawn every day her husband was in debtor's prison. Perhaps it was immoral,

perhaps it was a low thing to do, to abuse the Duke of Lennox's trust in such a way, perhaps even to take advantage of the way his eyes lingered on her face with an eager, warm expression. Still, she knew it changed nothing, and she still needed to answer her mother's question.

"Yes, I must go to the opera," Rosaline said quietly, looking down at the windowsill. "I promised I would free Father from that place ... and I will."

"All right then," her mother said, briskly setting aside the gown and gesturing for Rosaline to join her. "Come, to the dressmakers! Let us collect the gown."

Rosaline obediently followed her mother out of her bedroom and out of the house. As they walked the few streets to the dressmakers, Rosaline found herself lost in thought. She couldn't deny she was nervous about attending the opera later that night. She remembered the way the duke had spoken to her. He had asked her sincere and interesting questions, when she had expected a man of his stature and reputation to be concerned only with talking about himself. Debonair gentlemen like him were usually only concerned with flattery, yet the duke had engaged her in genuine conversation, sincerely seeming to want to know her thoughts on art and life. Rosaline had felt strange speaking her mind to the gentleman she was manipulating; she had been so surprised by his intelligence and insight that she had answered automatically, not censoring her thoughts as she commented honestly. It had been refreshing, especially since her life at that moment involved so much subterfuge. The only trouble was that the very person she had shared her thoughts with so honestly was the person with whom she could never be entirely truthful. *I wish I had met him before I decided to take part in the competition!*

However, she had to consider what difference it really would have made. Nothing changed her father's debt, not even the handsome face and sparkling blue eyes of the Duke of Lennox. It was no wonder to her that the duke was rumored to be caught up in so many scandals. He was surely the most charming man she had ever met. For a brief moment, she wondered what it would be like if she was one of those young women caught up in the flattery of the delightful duke. *How would it feel if his eyes chased me around a ballroom? How would it feel if I were the type of lady the Duke of Lennox seeks?*

"Rosaline, come along," her mother said brightly, opening the door to the shop and approaching the dressmaker. "Good afternoon! I believe you have a dress waiting for me."

*"Oui, Madame Arnold,"* the dressmaker said, smiling at Rosaline appreciatively. "Ah! It will look *très belle* on the young lady! Please, come through."

The dressmaker guided them to the back part of the shop, where there was a small dressing area. Rosaline disappeared behind the curtain with the assistant, who helped her out of her green dress. As she did so, her mother stood outside in the waiting area by the full-length mirrors.

"I propose that tonight I give your father's excuses again," her mother called softly through the curtains.

"Yes, that is best," Rosaline said quietly. "We shall simply explain that he is away on business. He so often travels for work, anyway."

“That will suit,” her mother sighed heavily. “I apologize if I took you by surprise this afternoon. I admit I had not prepared myself for meeting the duchess again.”

“You did well, Mother,” Rosaline said. “We are lucky that the *ton* generally do not care for what takes place outside their bubble.”

“That is true,” her mother said softly. “Oh, the dress looks lovely! It will suit you very well.”

The dressmaker had come into the small, curtained space, and helped Rosaline into her new dress. Then, she drew back the curtain, inviting Rosaline to climb up onto the small pedestal facing a tall, gilded mirror.

“It is a lovely fit,” the dressmaker said, very pleased with herself. “*Très belle*, indeed. I must only place a few stitches in the sleeves and hem. Please stand still, *Mademoiselle* Arnold.”

Rosaline looked at herself in the mirror. Her mother had chosen a beautiful russet velvet, with a froth of ivory lace at the bust and peeking out from under the cap sleeves. As the dressmaker busied herself at the seams, Rosaline admired the way the color flattered her skin, making it seem as creamy as a marble statue’s. She noticed how the crimson shine of the fabric enhanced the red of her hair, making it seem darker and more fiery than its usual sunnier, honey-like tones. She caught her mother’s eye in the reflection in the mirror and saw her smile.

“Yes, it shall do well,” her mother said quietly. “You look as flawless as any other young lady making her *début* into

society.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Rosaline said, brushing her fingers against the velvet and enjoying the soft touch. “This shall surely help me on my way to my goal.”

It was essential to fit in as much as possible, especially if she hoped for further invitations to join the duke’s social circle. Then, she could move gracefully around the edges, gathering gossip and rumors. She would be in the perfect position to catch the duke in a liaison, for she was sure that his friends and family turned a blind eye to some of his encounters. Rosaline had liked the look and first impression she had gained of Lady Linfield and her husband, Lord Linfield. They seemed perfectly pleasant people, but she imagined they would shelter their friend from scandal where they could. Rosaline’s job tonight, and at the ball next week, would be to ferret it out, and to do that, they must let their guards down around Rosaline. If they trusted her, if they believed she was truly one of them, if she looked the part, it could only help.

“I am sure it will,” her mother said with a broken smile. “Your father would be pleased to see you looking so radiant.”

Rosaline’s throat felt tight for a moment. Her father loved her, Rosaline knew that, but it was hard sometimes, even inevitable, not to feel resentment towards him for the trouble he was putting them through. He had made poor decisions, taken bad advice, and now they were all paying for it terribly.

“I am sure you are right,” Rosaline said, twisting in the mirror to look at the back of the gown, holding her hair up as she changed the subject. “I shall perhaps wear the black velvet ribbon at my throat and in my hair. What do you think, Mama?”

Rosaline caught her mother's eye and noticed, with a dropping of her heart, that a familiar melancholy expression had fallen across her mother's face. Rosaline knew what was coming. Her mother had ensured the seamstress had ducked into the back of the shop to find her embroidery scissors before she turned to Rosaline and spoke quietly.

"How was he, when you saw him?" her mother asked delicately, not daring to say who 'he' was or where 'he' might be, yet Rosaline knew she was asking about her husband. Rosaline's mother had not been able to visit him at Fleet Market since he was incarcerated there; she could not bear to cross the threshold. Consequently, she had no real knowledge of how much her husband suffered.

"Well enough," Rosaline said, swallowing hard, "given the circumstances."

Her father was a gentleman who was easily contented as long as he was fed and had access to a sketchbook. But even with his meagre needs and expectations he had been struggling. The prison was a dire place, and it turned Rosaline's stomach to think about their visits. But Rosaline feared to share the truth with her mother; that her father looked as thin as a wraith and as weary as his wife. She swallowed it all down and looked back at her reflection.

"Does he eat well?" her mother pressed, frowning deeply. "Does he sleep?"

"Of course, he does. How could he not, when you make such excellent scones?" Rosaline said jokingly, hoping to get her

mother to smile and push her out of her melancholy. It worked, and her mother nodded, smiling widely.

“I am glad,” her mother said, “and, of course, yes, the black velvet would look lovely at your throat, dear Rosie.”

“*Très belle,*” the dressmaker said, standing up from Rosaline’s hem. “*Finite!* All finished. If you shall come and settle at the front, *madame,* I can wrap the dress and you can be on your way.”

“Of course,” Rosaline’s mother said smoothly, rising to her feet and following the dressmaker into the front. Rosaline saw her clutching her purse quite hard, and she knew that this was the moment when her mother would part with her earrings. All for a gown. All so that Rosaline could fit more perfectly into the *ton* and infiltrate the duke’s world. All so she could save her father from debt. She had to believe it was worth it. Rosaline squared her shoulders and looked at herself in the mirror, turning to one side and then the other, imagining how the low candlelight of the opera house would make the fabric glow, perhaps making her appear even more enticing. She caught herself wondering if the Duke of Lennox would look at her the same way he had when she had caught his gaze on leaving the gallery. His eyes had been so fixed and intense upon her, and she recalled the terrible and exciting tremor in her belly when she realized she was the sole subject of those piercing, unrelenting blue eyes. Perhaps it had just been idle curiosity; she was a lady he had never seen before, and since he was likely so attuned to ladies, he had noticed her. But it in that moment, it had felt like something more. She had almost stumbled on the step from the intensity of his gaze, pinning her from thirty feet away. She could not deny how earnestly she longed to feel it upon her once more, how much she desired to be the sole focus of those enchanting blue eyes. *This does no good. If I want this to work, then I cannot think of him in such a way. I must not.* Yet, no matter how much she told

herself that, when she twisted from the mirror and saw the way her figure looked and imagined how much more enchanting she would look when she was wearing her opera gloves, with her hair piled up, she could not stop herself from wondering what the Duke of Lennox would think of her new dress.



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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Owen looked around the beautiful opera house, his eyes fluttering over the gentlemen in their best clothes and the ladies in their pretty dresses. In a gathering such as this, when the ladies of the opera were present, Owen couldn't ignore the familiar chorus girls and soloists who had willingly tumbled into bed with him in the past. Such ladies could always be relied on for their discretion, since Owen could be sure they regularly tumbled into more beds than his. When it came to the ladies of the *ton* itself, much more delicacy was required. Owen caught the eye of a pretty married lady as she passed, noting the slightly knowing glance in her eye. When she had been newly engaged, they had once enjoyed a private tryst in the country. Of course, no one knew of it, and they would never speak it. Yet as she passed, the moment bloomed before them for a second, and then, she was walking away, happy and content on her husband's arm. Owen looked away. He bore no ill will to those ladies who had used him for a brief but exciting romance before settling down. Hadn't he used them equally ... eager for their soft kisses and enticing figures?

"Say, I recognize her," Henry said quietly in his ear. "Did you not have her?" Owen jerked in surprise, looking at him quite guiltily, for it would do no good for Henry to know about his past dalliances with an engaged young lady. Henry could be oddly upstanding about such things for a gentleman who, before marriage, had been quite the rake. But Henry was looking at the soloist, who had now taken to the stage to

prepare for her performance. Owen recognized her instantly. She was a beautiful opera singer, with dark, curling hair and an ample bosom, and with eyes that glittered green and enticing. She had been one of the ladies who had come to their club in town after one of her performances, and Owen had been most pleased to accompany her into bed.

“I am sure I do not know what you mean,” Owen muttered back, catching Henry’s smirk.

“What is her name?” Henry asked. “The duchess is looking for a performer for the ball next week. From what I recall, she has a lovely voice, though I cannot imagine her voice was of much interest to you.”

“She is quite talented,” Owen said drily. “I do not recall her name.”

“You are quite terrible,” Henry chuckled, taking his seat in the box beside his wife, while Owen took a seat behind them.

“Why is Owen terrible?” Matilda asked conversationally, turning in her seat. She looked quite ravishing, dressed in her favorite shade of blue, a color Henry was particularly fond of. Owen wondered if there was a color he would most like to see on Rosaline. She had looked so fetching in green that afternoon at the gallery, he could not imagine her wearing anything else. In his mind’s eye, he saw her glowing like an angel, with the light behind her.

“For all the usual reasons,” Henry said, winking at Owen and taking his wife’s hand.

“Well, I hope you shall be better behaved tonight for Miss Arnold,” Matilda said sternly, but her eyes showed a flicker of amusement. “She is a sweet lady. Ah! I think I see her now.”

Owen looked over the edge of the box and, indeed, saw Rosaline and her mother, accompanied by the Duchess of Sinclair, crossing the stalls to approach the stairs to the box.

“She is quite the beauty, is she not?” Matilda said, turning to Owen with a cheeky grin. “Perhaps even enough to satisfy your tastes, Owen.”

“It is always pleasant to be surrounded by the roses of the *ton*,” Owen said neutrally, and Henry snorted with laughter. Owen ignored his friend’s teasing and watched Rosaline move from above. She was so easy to pick out, even at a distance—that beautifully vibrant red hair was the perfect contrast to the blondes and brunettes around her. Owen admired the way she moved, so elegantly and gently through the crowd. He was surprised he had never noticed such a beautiful lady before and wondered what her story might be. Why had she been hidden from his eyes among the *ton* for so long? For surely, as inspiring a beauty as Rosaline was, she was not a fresh debutante. She was not a flushed sixteen-year-old girl; she must be at least one-and-twenty and wore the light of experience in her hazel eyes. *So how has she been hidden from me for so long?*

“Mama, Mrs., and Miss Arnold, will you not join us?” Matilda smiled as the three ladies appeared in the doorway to the box. “My, Miss Arnold, what a beautiful gown!”

“Thank you, Lady Linfield,” Rosaline said, curtsying politely as her mother moved forward to be greeted by Henry. She self-consciously brushed her hands down the front of her gown.

Matilda was right, the gown was beautiful, but it was classically simple too, even Owen could see it. It was the lady inside it that made it exceptional. The glowing russet color of the gown picked up the red tones in Rosaline's beautiful hair and made her skin glow softly. Rosaline's sparkling eyes caught his, and she curtsied appropriately. "Good evening, Your Grace."

"Good evening, Miss Arnold, how lovely it is to see you again." Owen reached eagerly for her, to kiss the back of her gloved hand as he bowed, allowing himself the tiniest indulgence of squeezing her fingers softly, seductively. When he looked up, Rosaline's eyes were fixed on her hand, upon his lips, and he stood up slowly, smiling secretly. He could tell his gentle indulgence had surprised her, perhaps even excited her with the desire it created inside her. It was one of Owen's talents, he flattered himself, that he could always manage to awake the latent desire in a young lady. He had high hopes that Rosaline would be one of those young ladies. "Will you come and take a seat?"

Owen deliberately gestured to the chair beside him, and Rosaline, nodding politely, slid into it. Her mother took the chair on her other side, whilst the duchess took the seat in front of them beside Matilda. Owen took his seat beside her and allowed his knee to occupy a space close to hers, close enough gently brush against Rosaline's leg.

"Do you enjoy the opera?" Rosaline asked quietly, tucking a piece of reddish gold hair behind her ear. Her hair was piled on top of her head in a tumble of red curls and set off nicely with a black silk rose. Owen had the overwhelming desire to pull it away from its seat and watch the curls tumble loose. He wondered how long her tresses were when hanging loose.

“I do not, generally speaking,” Owen confessed, tilting his head down so his voice did not carry too far. “But Matilda is intent upon my education.”

“Well, someone must be,” Matilda said smartly, turning her head to roll her eyes at Rosaline with friendly mirth. “If Owen had his way, he would only ever hunt and ride, and that would be all the culture he absorbed.”

“I am sure he is a lucky man to have your attentions, Lady Linfield,” Rosaline said, smiling back.

“Oh, do call me Matilda, Miss Arnold,” Matilda said, reaching back to gently pat Rosaline’s folded hand.

“Then you must call me Rosaline,” Rosaline said softly, eyes glowing with happiness. Owen imagined it could only be because of Matilda’s higher station in life, both as Lady Linfield and as the daughter of a duke. Yet he felt suddenly envious of Matilda at sharing the intimacy with Rosaline when he could not.

“What of you, Miss Arnold?” Owen asked, trying to draw her attention. “Do you enjoy the opera?”

“I am not as versed in Italian as I should be,” Rosaline confessed, “but I do enjoy performances like this one, where one can hear recitals from different operas. Then I feel as if I am at least learning something.”

“Well, then I must assist you,” Owen said eagerly as the soloist took to the stage and a hush descended. “Will you

permit me?"

"If it pleases you, Your Grace," Rosaline said in a quiet whisper as the soloist began to sing. She had a soaring voice with a beautiful tone and, to Owen's delight, sang in Italian. Owen leaned closer to Rosaline, so he could speak softly and not bother the audience below.

"Do you understand it?" he whispered. Rosaline seemed to stiffen, but she did not pull away, merely smiling at him and answering quietly.

"Am I right in my translation that she sings of love?" she asked quietly. "Or is that too sweeping a guess for an opera?"

"Aye, she does," Owen chuckled, his voice no more than a whisper. "You are quite proficient. Should you like to know the details?"

Owen was close enough to admire the soft tendrils of red hair at the base of her neck and the way her creamy skin pinked up under his gaze.

"Very well," Rosaline whispered back, and despite the pink flush at her throat, her eyes were full of quiet boldness. "If it shall help you concentrate. After all, Matilda is trying to induct your education."

Owen bit his lip to stop himself from laughing out loud. Rosaline smiled, as if satisfied.

“I shall not be distracted, do not worry,” Owen whispered, leaning a little closer. “Now, she sings of a love she should not have, for a man who is above her in station, yet she finds herself longing for—”

“How inconvenient,” Rosaline said, and Owen grinned at her humor.

“So it must be,” he chuckled. “Yet she sings of her lack of regret, for if she had not loved the gentleman then she would never have known love at all.”

“She is a romantic, then,” Rosaline grinned back. “For a pragmatist would never say such things.”

Owen remembered what Rosaline had said about being a pragmatist and a realist earlier that day and smirked at her, wiggling his eyebrows knowingly.

“Is there no such thing as romantic pragmatist?” he teased gently.

“Are you two going to whisper throughout the whole performance?” Matilda giggled, looking significantly over her shoulder. “What do you talk of so secretively, I wonder?”

Before either Owen or Rosaline could answer, Mrs. Arnold laid her hand upon Rosaline’s arm.

“Rosaline, I fear I must take my leave,” her mother said in a hoarse voice. “I ... I do not feel well. I should like to take

some air.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Rosaline said, sounding as if she thought her mother’s illness was entirely her fault. “Let me escort you home, Mama.”

Owen felt suddenly disappointed that Rosaline must leave so soon, deep pangs of regret filling his heart. He would not be able to spend the performance whispering the meaning of the romantic Italian lyrics into her ear. But as Rosaline looked so distressed by the notion of her mother’s upset, he could not say a word. Luckily, the duchess turned around, frowning at her friend in concern.

“No, no, dear Rosaline, let me see your mother home in my carriage,” the duchess said, reaching out to take her old friend’s hand affectionately. “There is no reason for you young people not to enjoy the evening.”

“Yes, Rosaline, stay,” her mother said, looking a little frail, it had to be said. She smiled wanly. “You look so beautiful, darling, it would be a shame for you to miss the performance.”

“Are you sure, Mama?” Rosaline said, frowning. Owen worried for a moment that Rosaline would insist on going with her mother, but then a thought struck him.

“I am more than happy to see Miss Arnold home,” Owen said quietly to Mrs. Arnold, who looked into his face, smiling gratefully.



“Thank you very much, Your Grace,” Mrs. Arnold said, lifting her shawl off the back of her chair and wrapping it around her shoulders.

“No, it is fine, I shall take the carriage home,” Rosaline said abruptly, averting her eyes from Owen’s gaze. He thought he saw that endearing flush creeping back up into her cheeks. “You need not trouble yourself, Your Grace.”

“It would be no trouble,” Owen said quietly, but Rosaline would not catch his eye. She leaned over to give her mother a kiss on the cheek and murmured her thanks to the duchess as the two older ladies exited the box. Rosaline sat back in her seat, folding her hands delicately in her lap and keeping her eyes fixed on them.

“I am sure your mother shall be well,” Owen said quietly, leaning closer. “The duchess is very attentive, and she will ensure your mother gets home safely.”

He expected Rosaline to light up again, with that familiar glitter in her eyes that demonstrated her wit and excitement with life. But she did not. She simply nodded meekly and fixed her eyes on the soloist. Owen knew from her stiff posture that it was no longer appropriate to engage her in their formerly flirtatious conversation. Rosaline was perhaps worrying about her mother, or perhaps had taken Matilda’s teasing to heart and no longer wanted to whisper covertly during the performances. By the time the performance finished she had still not seemed to reawaken, biting her lip in a thoroughly distracting way that Owen couldn’t help but think was both infinitely attractive and a symbol of her distraction. As Henry and Owen quickly exchanged a few words at the end of the performance, Owen saw out of the corner of his eye that Rosaline was talking to Matilda and looking, if possible, more and more pensive. What could Matilda possibly be saying to

make Rosaline look so uncomfortable? Owen dearly hoped Matilda had not put her foot in her mouth and said something indelicate about him. He moved forward, capturing Rosaline's attention.

"Did you enjoy it?" Owen asked gently, gesturing to the stage. Rosaline jumped and looked at him as if she was surprised to find the performance was over.

"Oh, yes, very much," she nodded, rising from her seat. "But I fear I must take my leave. My mother shall be waiting."

"Let us escort you out," Henry said, rising from his seat and offering Matilda his arm. "We should be getting home also."

"Thank you," Rosaline said politely. Owen wordlessly offered Rosaline his arm and was gratified when she gave him a soft smile and slipped her small hand on his elbow.

"Well, that was not the best part of your education, Matilda, I have to say," Henry said ruefully as they walked down steps of the grand opera house. "I think, the next time, perhaps we could take in a play rather than an opera."

"Or the races," Owen joked, trying to catch Rosaline's eye. "Since I am so fond of horses and sports."

Yet Rosaline only smiled shortly, a smile which did not quite reach her eyes. Owen was slightly baffled as to where the enigmatic and witty young lady who had whispered with him at the start of the opera had gone. Could she really be so attached to her mother?

“Oh, dear, I fear it is raining,” Matilda said, sighing heavily.

“It is all right, we have umbrellas,” Owen said, nodding to the doormen, who offered them to Owen and Henry. They both took an open umbrella to hold over their ladies as Henry gestured for the carriages to be brought around. Rosaline was once again silent at his side. Owen struggled to think of something to say, and they stood silently in the cold darkness, the rain pattering against their umbrella. Finally, he settled on the thing he was thinking. “I only wish that Althea could have joined us tonight.”

“Althea?” Rosaline asked quietly. Owen was sure, for a split second, that he felt her hand tense on his arm.

“Yes, my sister,” Henry said lightly, Matilda huddling close to him under the umbrella. “She is enamored with all types of performance. A great lover of the stage and the arts.”

“Consequently, she drags me around to these things often,” Owen sighed heavily, rolling his eyes. “Just another lady seeing to my cultural education!”

Both Henry and Matilda laughed heartily, smiling fondly at Owen as they thought of their sister. She was Owen’s dearest friend, excluding Henry, and was often the fourth person in their adventures. Owen smiled down at Rosaline, expecting to see her smiling too. He’d anticipated that a lady of such quick wit might want to join in with his friends’ friendly jibes, but instead he felt himself caught in her intense, winsome gaze. Those hazel eyes were fixed upon him with the same intensity he had seen that first time in the gallery. It was an intensity that hit him squarely in the stomach, like the feeling of being

caught in the gaze of a wild animal. It was strangely predatory, as if Rosaline was hanging on his every word, and yet he did not feel threatened. Rather, he felt as if he would like to be pursued by her for his whole life. Her eyes were so beautiful, full of depth and intrigue, and her face so enraptured, as if his simple words concerning Althea were the most intriguing she had ever heard. In fact, she almost looked completely astonished by them.

“Miss Rosaline?” Owen said, placing his other hand on top of hers, jerking her back to herself. She stared up at him with those astonishing eyes, but now they were veiled with something else. They were no longer full of wit and hunger and intrigue. Now, they were tempered with disquiet, perhaps even fear. She stared down at his hand upon hers and then withdrew it as if burned. “Are you well?”

“Oh, yes, I am quite well,” Rosaline gabbled, stumbling away from him. Owen reached out for her to steady her, but she pulled further away, tucking her shawl tightly around her shoulders. She glanced around her, hardly seeming to see the other ladies and gentlemen waiting for their carriages in the rain. “Excuse me, I think I see my carriage.”

“Let me escort you,” Owen said, frowning as he stepped forward, but Rosaline seemed determined to retreat from him, shaking her head in denial and stumbling through puddles, ruining her pretty shoes.

“No, no, Your Grace, you are too kind. Thank you for a lovely evening, Lord and Lady Linfield!” Owen caught sight of Rosaline’s sharp eyes once more before she turned away and fled through the rain. “Good evening, Your Grace!”

Owen stood in the rain and watched her run, utterly baffled. But before he could think of running after her, his own carriage pulled alongside him, the footman jumping down to open his door. Henry caught his eye ruefully as he helped his wife into their carriage, parked behind Owen's.

"She's an odd sort of young lady, isn't she?" Henry mused. Owen smiled reflectively.

"Not odd," he said, winking at his friend. "Fascinating."

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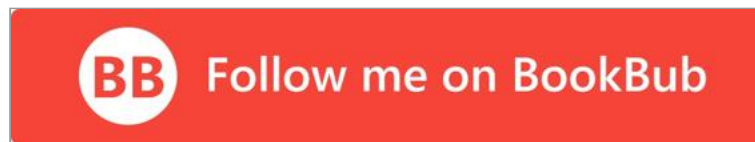
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Lisa Campell is an American author specialising in Steamy Regency romance tales. She came to realise her lifelong dream of becoming a writer at a relatively mature age, after an inciting event taught her that it's better late than never. Transferring the intricate storylines of her boundless imagination to ink and paper has been her passion ever since.

Her historical fiction novels have been distinguished for their intriguing plots, their well-situated characters and the attention to detail level they display.

Lisa lives in Santa Clara, California, together with her dear husband. They are the parents of two children. Before devoting herself to Regency romance, Lisa split her time between being a mother and working as a travel clerk. She now finds her youthful spirit to be revitalised every time she brings one of her stories to life.

### *Note from Lisa*

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