



Cobalt Fairy  
PUBLISHING

The background of the cover is a romantic scene between a man and a woman in a bedroom. The man, on the left, has brown hair and a beard, and is wearing a white shirt and a brown vest. He is looking down at the woman. The woman, on the right, has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a light-colored, possibly blue or grey, dress with lace details. She is looking up at the man. The room has a window with white curtains on the left and a bed with a brown headboard and pillows on the right. The overall lighting is warm and soft.

A Duke's  
Promise

SALLY VIXEN

# A DUKE'S PROMISE

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL



SALLY VIXEN



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## BEFORE YOU START READING...

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

***“You will call me by my name, and you will not curtsy to me.”***

Lady Isabella absolutely loathes rakes. And the Duke of Sutterton, the man she accidentally finds herself on top of, is the most wicked of them all. She might have no choice but to marry him, but she is determined to stay away from him. Until his lips touch hers, and she finds herself unable to resist him..

After his father’s unforgivable betrayal, Henry made him a promise: he will make a mockery of his title and he will never sire an heir. Until a spirited spinster enters his life. And he starts wondering just how many promises he will break to get her into his bed as well...

When she also threatens to enter his heart, only one question remains: do reformed rakes make the best husbands after all?

## PROLOGUE



*London, England*

“*W* here is she? I have to see her. Hawkins, tell me where she is.”

Henry burst through the door of Haycliff Manor with so much vigor that the heavy oak door ricocheted off the wall on the other side. The poor butler, whom Henry was calling to, leapt back in alarm.

“My Lord, you’re back.”

Hawkins hurried towards him, and the two met in the middle of the grand corridor. Any other time, Henry would have happily stood and admired the mahogany paneling or the carved white stone ceiling full of light thanks to the lofted stained-glass windows, but not today. The Tudor manor was the last thing in his thoughts.

“Where is she?” Henry asked another time, pushing back the loose tendrils of his dark brown hair so he could see the elderly butler a little easier.



The kindly man reached out a tentative hand and laid it on Henry's shoulder, trembling slightly.

"You must prepare yourself, My Lord."

"Hawkins, don't tell me that." Henry said sternly, not wanting to hear the inevitable. "Once your letter reached me, I have not stopped. I left my lodgings in Venice within a minute of your letter's arrival. I have raced across oceans to be here. Pray, do not tell me I am too late..." Yet, Henry trailed off, for he could see the truth on his butler's face. The aging features seemed to crack further. "No." Henry's voice became but a whisper.

"She's in her chamber, My Lord."

Henry lost all sense of himself. To his shame, he forgot to thank the butler for his kindness. He was so lost in his grief that he stumbled past the butler and ran for the stairs, taking the steps two at a time.

"I'm so sorry, My Lord!" Hawkins' voice followed him up the stairs.

Henry reminded himself he'd have to thank the butler later for all that he had done. If it hadn't been for Hawkins's decision to write to Henry, he feared he would not know at all about his mother's sickness.

*Why has my father not written? Could he honestly not find the time to put a*

*few words down to paper?*

Striding across the corridors of the upper landing, Henry began to sprint. Somehow, he shook the frock coat off his shoulders, dropping it to the floor in his haste, and he pumped his arms fast. When he reached his mother's bedchamber door, he found it ajar with just a slither of light escaping the room.

“Mother?” Henry called to her and opened the door wider.

There was a man standing over his mother. At first, Henry thought it could be his father, but then his eyesight adjusted to the bright sunlight in the room. It was the family doctor, Davis.

“Davis?” Henry whispered, watching as the doctor moved away from the bed.

Davis came to stand beside Henry. Just as Hawkins had done, he laid a gentle hand on Henry's shoulder.

“I am so sorry, My Lord. I know it brings little comfort now, but it may do in the future to know she passed peacefully,” Davis said softly. “She spoke of you till the end.”

The sudden lump in Henry's throat became unbearable. The stinging in his eyes was too much, and the doctor had the goodness to walk out of the room, ignoring the signs of those tears, and leave Henry alone with his mother.

Slowly, Henry stepped towards the bed. It was a surreal feeling as his gaze settled on his mother. At first, he could have easily persuaded himself she was sleeping. Petra Arnold, The Duchess of Sutterton, could have been dozing peacefully. Her dark brown hair, which was so like Henry's, was wild on her pillow. Her cheeks, which were usually pink and so full of life, were now a ghostly shade of white.

“Mother,” Henry murmured and hurried towards her.

When he reached the bed, he dropped to his knees and reached for her hand. Yet, her palm was cold to the touch. That iciness broke the last barrier he had against his tears. They began to stream down his cheeks without restraint.

“I am so sorry. I should have been here sooner. I did try, I did...” His breath hitched with his tears. “I did not know you were so ill.”

Raising himself up, he bent over her and brushed a loose lock of hair back from her face. He took comfort in that she did look peaceful. Hopefully, the doctor was right, and her passing was not a difficult one.

*How could she be so ill, and yet I did not know it?*

Bending down, he brushed his lips against her forehead, kissing her goodbye. His mother was always the one who had been there for him. She was the one with tenderness, love and happiness. Where his father had gone about his days seeming to seek out misery and make everyone else sad, just for the hell of it, Petra had been different. How often had she taken Henry off to other

parts of the house where they could escape together into their own worlds? She was the best of mothers.

Henry stood tall and slowly released her hand. He pushed it under the covers, somehow thinking it would help to keep her warm, even though in the back of his mind he knew how absurd such a thought was.

“Goodnight, Mother. Sleep well,” he whispered to her and bent his head.

He sent a silent prayer to heaven. He wasn't sure how he felt about God, but Petra had always been a firm believer. She'd told him time and time again to put his faith in God.

“Even when all seems lost, Henry, he is the one we can turn to. Trust in him,” Petra used to say.

He finished the prayer and kept his final thought to himself.

*God, if you exist, why not allow me to get back here to my mother in time to say goodbye?*

There was the creaking of floorboards somewhere behind him. Henry didn't have to turn around to know whom those steps belonged to. He'd spent years listening to his father's heavy gait on such floorboards. Even when his father cleared his throat, evidently wanting Henry's attention, he did not give it.

Slowly, Henry lifted the blankets around his mother's shoulders, tucking her in a little more, and brushed one last strand of hair back from her face.

"Goodbye," he whispered sadly.

At last, he turned to look at the doorway. His father's hulking figure, as tall as his own, was stepped back from the door, still in the corridor. With a sudden tightening of anger in his gut, Henry left the room, but quietly. He didn't want his mother's peace disturbed by the angry shouts he knew would shortly be escaping him.

Stepping into the corridor, he closed the door softly behind him.

"She's gone, Henry."

"I know." Henry's voice was sharp, even firmer than his father's own usual demanding tone.

Casting a quick look at the door behind him, Henry advanced down the corridor, encouraging his father to follow him with a quick jolt of his head.

Gregory Arnold, The Duke of Sutterton, followed slowly, his fair eyebrows arching high.

"Why did you not write to me?" Henry asked as he reached a large window at the end of the corridor.

It was a bright day outside, and the sunlight shone so strongly on the two of them that it hurt his eyes. His father's face seemed almost glowing white in an uncomfortable way.

"Hawkins wrote to me. He said she had been ill for months. Why did you not write to me and say yourself?"

"You are here, are you not?" Gregory asked with a shrug, his broad shoulders rising and dropping quickly.

"Don't talk like that," Henry said sharply, stepping quickly towards his father. "I was in ignorance of her state. You cannot surely be so blind a father and husband not to notice her illness, nor to think it unimportant to tell me of her state."

"What difference would it have made?" Gregory asked, seeming unbothered by Henry's words. He slowly sat on the windowsill, looking perfectly at ease. "She was dying anyway."

"I could have been here for her before she died!" Henry pointed out wildly and gestured down the corridor.

"Here we go with your emotional state again. Are you not able to have a calm conversation, Henry?" Gregory's usual complaint returned.

Henry was always too like his mother for Gregory's liking. He was too emotional, too passionate about things, too wild and adventurous. He was also stubborn, though he reckoned he got that from his father.

"Of course, foolish me! How absurd for a son to be emotional at his mother's passing?" His thick sarcasm did little to affect his father, who simply raised his eyebrows again.

"Enough shouting. I will not have you shouting in this house."

"What good would it do to stop me?"

Henry marched towards his father, feeling this urge to hurt him. He'd always known Gregory cared little for Petra, but his lack of a reaction now at her passing was beyond the pale, beyond Henry's greatest fears. He barely managed to curl his hands at his side to stop himself from hurting his father.

"You cared so little for her. You either didn't notice how ill she was, or you didn't care to tell her son she was going to die. So? Which is it, Father? Which is it!?"

Gregory wiped a spot on his cheek as if Henry had spat at him in his anger.

"Speak, Father!"

"How can I speak when you are in such a rage? You'd be better suited to

Bedlam Hospital than the corridors of a duke at this moment.” Gregory waved a wide-palmed hand towards Henry in derision.

“That is all you care about, isn’t it? The state of a duke and how he looks.”

Henry turned away and thrust his hands into his hair, pulling on the tendrils in frustration. Stepping a little away from his father, when he flicked his head back around, he did it with such firmness that he saw his father flinch. It was the first time he’d ever thought his father might be a little afraid of him.

“Did you care about her at all?”

“She was my duchess.” Gregory’s answer made Henry sick.

“Why in God’s name did you marry her if that’s all she was to you and nothing more?” Henry stepped back, his legs feeling weak beneath him.

“It’s the responsibility of a duke to marry and provide an heir. You’ll understand that someday—”

“That is why?” Henry froze. It was as if his body had become a statue and the only moving parts were his lips. “For that reason, you married her. You only ever thought of the dukedom, of producing an heir, not about the woman you married? Ever? She died alone when I could have been here with her. *You* are the reason for that!”



Gregory shook his head and folded his arms.

“Not everyone loves the person they wed, Henry. If you are so foolish as to think people do, then it is time you did grow up—”

“Do not tell me to grow up,” Henry snapped boldly.

He'd been traveling for the last couple of years and had met couples across the world. He knew what real couples could be like, ones that loved each other. It was hardly a great secret that Gregory didn't look at any other human being with compassion, especially his wife. He saw everyone as chess pieces, rather than people, and his wife was simply another pawn on the board.

“So, she did what she was supposed to. Is that how you see her?” Henry growled. “She sired an heir, and that's all that mattered to you?” Such anger filled him that he could feel his blood pumping through his body, to the point it echoed in his ears.

When Gregory said nothing, but there was a small quirk to his lips as if fighting a smile, Henry knew he was right.

“You foul bastard!”

“Language, Henry!”

“Enough, Father.” Henry waved a hand in the air. “I will not be cowed by you over language when you cannot even bow your head in respect for the death of your wife.”

Shuddering, Henry turned in a circle once more.

He wanted revenge on his father. Not just for this moment in time, not just for the passing of his mother that was going unacknowledged, ungrieved, but for *everything*. Henry wanted revenge for every callous thing Gregory had ever said to Petra and him. Vengeance for the years of the two of them hiding in other parts of the manor, just to get away from him and his unreasonable demands on what a duke should be.

“From this day forwards, Father, I wish to make you a vow.” Henry’s words clearly startled Gregory, for the Duke sat taller on the windowsill, his chin jerking upwards. “A promise I shall always keep.”

“What is that?”

“Well, I know what you prize most in this world.” Henry smiled a little, but it was a sardonic smile. “You prize me, hardly as a loving son. We both know neither you nor I are capable of that emotion towards one another.”

“Emotional, again,” Gregory muttered angrily.

“What a surprise?” Henry’s sarcasm silenced his father on this occasion. “You prize me because I am your heir. You prize me because you think I will

live on in the Duke of Sutterton's good name, make it go from strength to strength, admiration to adoration, respect to reverence. Know this..." He paused and stepped forwards, lowering himself close enough to his father's face that he could drop his voice to a whisper. "I have no intention of living out the fantasy you have created for yourself."

"What do you mean?" Gregory asked, blinking.

"Once I am duke, the Sutterton name will be dragged through the mud, I'll see to that." At Henry's quick words, Gregory stood quickly, forcing Henry to back up. Gregory's lips parted and closed in horror. "Every scandal, every shame I'll take part in. I'll be sure the name Sutterton is whispered in dark corridors and written about in horror in the scandal sheets."

"Why would you do such a thing? There is honor in this family, Henry!" Gregory thundered, stepping towards his son.

"I see no honor before me." Henry looked his father up and down, watching as his face turned purple. "Lastly, I will defy your final wish. You desire the dukedom to live on, do you not? You want me to marry and sire an heir of my own."

"You have to. It's what we do."

Gregory walked towards him, reaching out to touch him, but Henry backed up.

“Then I vow never to sire any children. Your use of my mother, the way you used her for your own gain without thought to her happiness ends here.” Henry turned and walked away down the corridor, his voice echoing back through the mahogany walls. “The dukedom will die with me.”

## CHAPTER 1



*Three Years Later*

“*A*nd the bonnie lass’s hand he will take...” Isabella sang softly under her breath as images from the past filled her mind.

Each time she uttered the words from this song, she was transported back by four years to the night of her debut.

The gentleman she was dancing with took her hand gently and led her towards the dance floor. His hand was large compared to hers. Whereas she often felt her fingers were too long for a gentleman’s palm, this man did not make her feel so different. Her hand was almost small in his.

He was tall too, even taller than her, which was a grand feat. As he turned to face her, that lopsided smile the ladies talked so much of struck Isabella to her heart. She could feel her heart beating harder in her chest as the gentleman drew her into a dance.

It was a waltz, a bold dance for her first at her debut. Yet, the gentleman took hold of her easily with such confidence she was almost breathless. When she walked on her own two feet, she was usually a clumsy fool. For most of her dances that night, she felt like a deer trying to walk on ice, but not with this man. He had such a commanding control of the dance that she felt safe.

Each touch was illicit, exciting, and those bold blue eyes of his shone as they spoke to each other.

*What a dance that was.*

“And the bonnie lass’s hand he will take, not just for a dance, but for their life—”

“Isabella? Are you in here? We cannot be late!” Susan’s voice echoed through the corridors, cutting off Isabella’s song.

Sharply, Isabella looked up from the book she had been reading, tossing aside both the pages of the book on the studies of the human mind, and her song.

*I should stop daydreaming of such a moment. That was far in the past now.*

Isabella often told herself such a memory was pointless to keep recalling, yet something in her mind found it impossible to abandon.

“Isabella?” Susan called again and appeared in the doorway of the sitting

room. “There you are. Do be quick, or we’ll be late. Both Father and Irene are in the carriage already. Goodness, are you reading again?” Susan practically scurried into the room on the balls of her feet.

Isabella had to hold in her laugh. It was her youngest sister’s first season, and Susan had developed this habit of rushing everywhere so fast that she barely put one foot in front of the other.

“Careful. Continue to run so, and you’ll end up like me, falling over everything and everyone. You wouldn’t want a reputation as being clumsy now, would you?” Isabella teased as she moved to her feet.

“Hopefully not!” Susan laughed and darted her gaze down at the book Isabella had been reading before rolling her eyes. “Only you would read a book when we are supposed to be on our way to a ball. What will Father think?”

“Does it surprise you I do not care what Father thinks?” Isabella asked as her sister led the way back towards the corridor. “Here, your shawl is slipping.” Isabella reached for her sister’s shoulders and pulled up the silken shawl she had wrapped around her. “It is a chilly night, you should wrap up warm.”

It was always the way for Isabella. She cared for her sisters as naturally as she breathed. With that came a few harsh realities that she was trying to protect her sisters from.

“Father is not so bad, you know,” Susan insisted as they reached for the door of the house. “He has promised to introduce us to many gentlemen tonight.”

“Hmm, that’s nice then.”

Isabella purposefully made her voice upbeat, though she darted a wary look at the carriage with the words. She glimpsed her father, Andrew Sculthorpe, the Earl of Sinclair, as he paced by the door of the carriage, fearing she knew what he was up to already.

*How many creditors do you owe now? How many gentlemen have demanded the repayment of their honor as well as their money?*

Time and time again had Isabella witnessed the potential foulness that existed in their father’s heart. When they were young, she used to hide with her sisters in her bedchamber and distract them with games.

When her father had brought back his courtesans or married ladies from the *ton* to their home, she had made such noise in the bedchamber with her sisters that it was impossible for Irene or Susan to learn of what their father was doing. The rake’s secrets were kept secret for a little longer.

These days, Isabella couldn’t protect them from everything. Both Irene and Susan knew their father was not perhaps the most honorable of men, but they did not understand the extent to which their father had gambling debts or still participated in drunken duels when he had cuckolded another man.

“Isabella?” Irene called excitedly from the carriage and poked her head out of the door.



Irene's auburn hair was pristine tonight, pulled back into a neat bun. Her green eyes which were mirrored in Isabella's face were alight with excitement, though Isabella had no such light in her own.

*How many balls have I been to now? Too many! I'd infinitely rather read my book at home.*

"Is this not exciting?" Irene asked as Isabella and Susan climbed into their carriage, moving past their father.

Irene and Susan sat on one side of the carriage together, arm in arm. The two sisters were a year apart in age, but they had often been mistaken for twins thanks to their matching hair color and their habit of usually going everywhere arm in arm.

"A ball to celebrate a wedding." Irene sighed wistfully.

"What a wedding," Isabella murmured with a humorous smile. "Up until a couple of months ago, everyone thought Lord Hillson one of the greatest rakes of the *ton*."

"Does that not make the tale even more romantic?" Susan asked, then copied her other sister's wistful sigh. "A rake bound to marry the woman he loves and turning his back on his errant ways. I think it's romantic indeed."

"Or unreal," Isabella muttered to herself so quietly no one could hear her. Her green eyes darted towards her father as he climbed into the carriage and sat

beside her.

These days, his handsome looks were beginning to age. Fewer women traipsed through their corridors thanks to his slim features becoming haggard, but enough still came that Isabella resented him for it. She had seen over the years that her father, one of the most infamous rakes there was, would never change. The only thing that had changed was his age and frequency of bed partners.

“I am glad to see you two so excited about the ball tonight,” her father said, his voice high-pitched as he rubbed his hands together.

Isabella could have shuddered at the sight. When he clasped his hands together in such a way, it usually meant he had a foul business deal afoot or was planning to gamble.

“It’s high time you turned your attention towards marriage.”

“Us?” Susan giggled at the idea. “It’s my first season, Father.”

“You are not too young.” Andrew smiled and clasped his hands together again.

“I’d beg to differ,” Isabella muttered, getting a sharp look from her father in answer. She merely offered him an innocent smile in return.

“What of Isabella?” Susan asked. “You hardly ever speak to her about getting married anymore.”

“There is a reason for that,” Isabella said.

“Very true.” Andrew shifted uncomfortably on the bench beside her. “Susan, where you and Irene are still fresh to the *ton*, Isabella has been amongst the *ton* for years now.” He cast an uneasy gaze over his eldest. “They clearly do not like what they see.”

Isabella held his gaze, knowing exactly what he thought of her. How often had they argued late into the night about this subject? He was furious that her bluestocking ways were driving away any potential suitors, and she was angry in return that he kept demanding she practice things she was no good at, like the pianoforte or dancing.

“Father!” Irene said in protest. “That is an ugly thing to say.”

“We must be practical, girls,” Andrew said slowly, turning his gaze on Susan and Irene as the carriage rocked them from side to side. “Your sister has driven away most of the suitors she had.”

“Oh, be still my beating heart at such an idea!” Isabella said with drama and clutched her chest. “Will I die of a broken heart because of it?” Her sisters fell about laughing on cue, but Andrew merely raised one dark eyebrow in her direction, clearly disliking her humor as much as he always did. “Must a lady survive on the affection of a man alone? Oh, then I cannot breathe...” She continued to play up the character she had adopted and heaved a deep

breath.

Susan and Irene laughed so hard on the other side of the carriage that one of them snorted. Andrew merely shook his head.

“Have you had enough of this nonsense yet?” Andrew asked.

“I am sure I could continue it for a while.” Yet, Isabella took pity on her sisters who were clutching their stomachs and sat still once more. “It may startle you to realize this, Father, but I am in no hurry to be wed, nor do I see a need to marry at all.”

“Not marry at all?” Irene asked, her voice soft. “Why not?”

“Because...” Isabella broke off. She could happily give an honest answer if her father was not in the carriage, but she feared his reprimand if she was completely honest at this moment. “Because perhaps I do not believe a gentleman would be completely faithful.” It was the most diplomatic answer she could give without accusing most men of being rakes.

Her father clearly took the insult anyway, as he turned his gaze out the window and cleared his throat.

“That is a sad thought,” Susan mumbled.

Her bubbling excitement from earlier was now tempered, and she sat

slumped against the carriage bench. Isabella smiled and reached towards her, tapping her on the knee to encourage her once again.

“That is my thought, not yours, and you shouldn’t let yourself be tempered by my fears. Be excited as you were before, Susan. You never know what fun you could have tonight,” Isabella said, watching as her sister smiled once again.

“Yes, yes, you are right.” Susan turned excitedly to Irene. “Will Lord Maverick be there?”

“Oh, I hope so.” Irene bobbed in her seat. “We did have a particularly good dance last time. What of Sir Tobias Mayhew?”

“If only.” Susan sighed and fluttered a fan in front of her face.

Clearly, Sir Tobias had turned her head, but Isabella was nervous of the liking. She wasn’t sure what sort of man Sir Tobias was.

*He could be a rake, just like most of them.*

Isabella cast a sideways glare at her father, who didn’t notice her look, for he was too busy staring out the carriage window.

“Maybe Lord Pine will be there?” Irene said with a mischievous smile as she turned to face Isabella. At once, Isabella pretended to swoon and fell back on

the carriage bench, prompting her sisters to laugh. “I take it you look forward to seeing him again?”

“No chance of that!” Isabella roused herself. “That man has a habit of wandering hands when he dances.”

Isabella despised Lord Pine for two reasons. Firstly, he showed no inclination of observing the courtesies or respect of the *ton*. Secondly, her father seemed a little too interested in pushing her towards the older gentleman. Even now, her father persisted in avoiding her gaze.

*I wonder if he owes the man a great debt. Is he thinking he can repay the debt with my hand someday? No chance of that!*

When the carriage pulled up outside Lord Hillson’s house, they all descended in turn. Andrew led the way inside, with Isabella and her sisters following behind. Irene and Susan admired the decorations and the fine flowers that covered the pillars of the great hall. The summer blooms of roses and lilies filled the air with their delicate scents, contrasting the acidic smell of wine, champagne and spirits from the drinks tables.

“I shall greet our host,” Andrew said, turning his warning gaze on Isabella. “Behave whilst I am gone.”

“I shall stand on a spot and not move a muscle,” Isabella answered her father, forcing a smile.

When he walked away, Isabella purposefully took a step forwards, showing she had every intention of defying him. Her sisters laughed as soon as their father was out of earshot.

“You are so fond of testing his patience,” Irene said between fits of laughter.

“He is used to me by now.” Isabella shrugged and drew her sisters towards the nearest drinks table. “Come, if we are to enjoy this evening and celebrate the poor marriage of a woman to a rake, we need a drink for this.”

“She might be happy, Isabella,” Susan pointed out as Isabella passed her a glass of champagne.

Isabella chose not to answer and kept her thoughts to herself.

“Goodness, there are so many people here tonight,” Irene gushed, sipping her champagne as she looked around the room. “Such feathers thrust into headdresses, and turbans too. Oh, fashion! It makes everything sparkle.”

“Yes, it is blinding, isn’t it?” Isabella said with humor, then poured a glass of champagne for herself.

“Everyone seems to be staring at someone,” Irene observed. “Oh, my! Who is that? I have not seen him before.”

“Neither have I.” Susan craned her neck to look through the crowds and

observe the same man. “Though I think my eyes will be happy for a good long while now I have seen him.” The sisters giggled together. “What a man. Who is he? Isabella, do you know?”

As Isabella turned around to follow their gazes, she nearly choked on the champagne. The bubbles entered her nose and stung her senses. Coughing a little, her eyes widened as she stared at the man that fascinated her sisters so much.

The tall figure from her memory stood on the opposite side of the ballroom. His broad shoulders strained a little against his tailcoat, and his dark brown hair had been cropped short these days, framing his angular features better than before. His sharp jaw was turned as he laughed with the gentleman at his side, Lord Hillson.

In a flash, Isabella recalled that dance with him at her debut. Never had she danced like that again, nor had she felt such a thrill from any other man. But it was long ago.

“That is the Duke of Sutterton.”



## CHAPTER 2



“The Duke of Sutterton?” Irene spluttered, choking on her own champagne. Isabella lifted a hand and patted her sister’s back, helping her, before brushing a loose lock of hair back from her sister’s face. “Isn’t he the one they always talk about in the scandal sheets?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” Isabella muttered tightly and took a rather big gulp of her champagne, finding it difficult to look elsewhere from the Duke.

Infuriatingly, he was as handsome as he had been the first night she had seen him. She’d rather hoped he’d become less so, or put on some weight, to lessen her attraction to him, but her hopes were in vain.

His tall frame, athletic figure and broad shoulders had her mouth so dry she took another big gulp of champagne and nearly knocked her sister’s glass out of her hand with the movement.

“Oops, sorry, clumsy me,” Isabella said and turned back to the table, refilling her glass.

“I thought he didn’t come to these balls?” Susan asked. “It’s what I read in the scandal sheets.”

“He’s not been for three years.” Isabella could remember it well.

Four years ago, on the night of her debut, the Duke of Sutterton had paid particular attention to her. Where she felt tall, lanky, inelegant and clumsy, he didn’t seem to notice any of that. He’d asked her to dance and set her heart fluttering so much that the night after she had barely slept, as she had kept thinking of him.

Strangely, he had not returned to another event for a year after that. She had been so nervous upon seeing him again that when she had done, her usual clumsiness had become worse than normal and she’d spilled a glass of champagne over his jacket when she’d tried to talk to him. His expression had made plain two things.

He hadn’t recognized her at all from her debut. He had also looked at her with disdain for what she had done.

Since then, the Duke of Sutterton had made a name for himself.

“He’s a rake,” Isabella said simply to her sisters. “So, it is probably wise that you both cease gawking at him so much. Irene, look away, and, Susan, close your mouth a little.” She raised a finger to her sister’s chin and closed her mouth for her.

Susan giggled. “Goodness, was I that obvious?” she asked.

“Just a little.” Isabella shrugged. “Remember what I said about men like him though—”

“We remember, don’t we, Susan?” Irene cut her off and appealed to Susan.

The two sisters began to recite Isabella’s words in unison. ““Never give your eye, let alone your heart, to a rogue.”” They smiled.

“How long have you been telling us that?” Susan asked. “Since we first started asking about men?”

“I believe the first thing I told you was, Susan, do not stare at the footman so much,” Isabella reminded her sister, watching as Susan blushed bright red and Irene laughed.

Isabella could still remember the initially awkward conversation she’d had with her sisters about gentlemen and what happened between husbands and wives.

Their mother had died so young that she had not had the chance to tell them herself. Isabella had learnt what she knew from overhearing the courtesans with her father and what the housekeeper had blushinglly told her one day when she had asked questions. Isabella had been the one to tell her sisters of such things, for she didn’t want them learning about it the way she had done, wondering why so many women went to her father’s chamber at night.

“Worry not, Sister, we will not look his way again,” Irene assured her. “No matter how difficult it is.”

When Irene playfully tried to look in the Duke’s direction, Isabella took her shoulder and purposefully kept her gazing the other way. She herself refused to look in the Duke’s direction again. Not only had she been humiliated by their last meeting, but she had been ashamed too. For she had often thought of their dance together, even to this day, and it had clearly meant nothing to him, so much so that he had no clue as to who she was.

Sighing, Isabella tried to mask her sadness by raising her glass to her lips and taking another big gulp.

“Ah, Isabella?” Susan whispered, moving to her other side.

“Yes?”

“We have a problem.”

“What is it?” Isabella put down her glass, initially alert to how she could protect her sisters.

“It’s not my problem.” Susan shook her head, evidently sensing Isabella’s protectiveness. “But your own.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look.” Susan nodded her head towards the crowd.

Isabella followed her sister’s gaze, looking to see that Lord Pine had arrived and was gazing directly at her.

The gentleman was at least twenty years her senior and had married once already in his life, though his wife had died after bearing their first child. Lord Pine seemed to spend more time at the *ton*’s events, with his eyes wandering towards Isabella, than he did with his son.

“Why is he looking at me like that?” Isabella muttered in fear.

“He leaves little to the imagination, doesn’t he?” Irene closed in on her other side. “His eyes can’t even stay in one place.”

Lord Pine’s eyes wandered down Isabella’s dress and back up to her face before he began to walk towards them, trying to get through the crowd to come to her.

“If he asks me to dance, what excuse shall I say tonight?” Isabella asked.

“A headache?” Susan suggested quickly.

“I’ve used that one about twenty times already!” Isabella muttered, panic beginning to make her hands tremble.

“I’m so ill I’m dying?” Irene suggested, then flushed red at the madness of her idea.

“Yes, that’s wonderful! Shall I keel over and pretend to die here too?” Isabella gestured towards the drinks table. “I might shatter all the glasses.”

“That would certainly get you out of dancing,” Irene noted with an amused smile.

“We will say you needed some air. Quick, run to the garden before he can get here.” Susan waved her hand in a rush. “Quick, go now!”

They were running out of time. He was so close that Isabella had mere seconds to escape. As reluctant as she was to leave her sisters’ sides, the last dance she had shared with Lord Pine had frightened her so much she had nearly hurt him.

“Very well, I shall go. Please, be careful whom you agree to dance with tonight,” Isabella pleaded with her sisters, just as Irene stepped in front of her and thrust herself into the path of Lord Pine.

“Lord Pine, you have just missed my sister. What a shame...”

Isabella smiled at her sisters' protectiveness as she made her way to the door of the ballroom to head out to the garden.



“Well, Henry, I must confess I’m glad you deigned to join us tonight,” John said as he took Henry’s glass to fill it up.

“I wouldn’t have missed it, John. You know that.” Henry smiled as he took the glass and toasted his friend. “Even if I’m amazed this day has come for you.”

“Did you think it wouldn’t?” John laughed as he tipped his glass back and nearly swallowed the liquid whole.

“Part of me did, yes. Are you trying to be drunk for the announcement of your nuptials?” Henry poked fun at his friend, who merely shrugged in happiness. The Duke didn’t think he’d ever seen his friend so happy.

John Bolton, or Lord Hillson as he was known to most, had been a good friend to Henry since their university days. Yet, back then, John had been a cad. When Henry had gone about trying to ruin the dukedom’s reputation, John was the first one he’d turned to for advice.

The rake was no longer a rake though, and John was settling down.

“Sometimes I can’t believe you are marrying at all,” Henry acknowledged, watching as his friend looked around for his betrothed.

“The right woman, Henry. Turns out, that was all I was waiting for.” John smiled as he caught sight of his betrothed across the room.

Henry had to admit Lady Eloise was a beauty. With long black hair, bold blue eyes and elfin features, she and John fitted well together.

Though Henry liked to avoid the *ton*’s events as much as possible, he couldn’t turn this one down. He wished to attend the ball to celebrate his friend’s betrothal.

“I’m very happy for you, John.” Henry offered his hand, which John took and shook warmly.

“Thank you, truly. It’s high time we saw you with as silly a smile on your face as I have,” John said and gestured to his own smile. “Perhaps you should consider throwing off this absurd idea of yours never to marry. It could bring you happiness—”

“You know why I can’t do that.” Henry shook his head.

There was only one person in the world who knew what Henry had been through with his father, and that was John.

After Gregory had died, Henry had returned from his grand tour of the continent to run the dukedom, but he had not returned to say goodbye to his



father. Henry had wanted his father to know the loneliness that his mother had known before she had passed.

The moment Henry had become duke, he changed his life to keep to the vow he had made to his father. John alone knew of the full tale.

“I know, sadly, I do know.” John clasped him on the shoulder with a friendly touch and offered a sorry smile. “Well, I am glad you have come tonight anyway. I feel lucky you have ventured out on my account.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” Henry promised him. “Speaking of which, someone is wanting you elsewhere.” He gestured towards Lady Eloise, who was beckoning for her betrothed to join her. “I’m guessing that means I lose the pleasure of your company for a few minutes?”

“Afraid so, Henry, afraid so.” John laughed and hurried off to Lady Eloise. As they parted, Henry chuckled and shook his head.

*What must it be like to be so enamored that you feel compelled to go at the crook of a woman’s finger?*

Henry couldn’t imagine a woman having such power over him. As the thought took over him, someone appeared at his side. This was a woman that he had power over... Lady Hampton. As a widow, she busied herself with having affairs these days and had no need to marry. It suited Henry very well indeed, and the two had often kept each other company late into the night, concerned only with their pleasures.

He knew so little about her. He didn't know what she liked to drink or what made her laugh, but oh yes, he knew how to pleasure her.

“In need of a distraction, Your Grace?” Lady Hampton asked with a sultry smile on her dark pink lips. “I certainly need one tonight.”

“Then allow me to oblige.” He didn't take her hand but nodded his head towards the door that led to the garden.

More than once, he had found himself in the corner of a garden with Lady Hampton. It seemed to add to their satisfaction, the illicitness of pleasuring one another outdoors, where they could be caught at any moment.

He slipped out of the ballroom first and heard her follow behind him. Taking a few steps down the stone terrace, the coolness of the summer air brushed over him, but it wasn't so cold that he was worried about what they were going to do.

They passed gentlemen smoking on the stone terrace, and Henry led a path through a line of yew trees. He'd been to John's house so many times, he knew these gardens like the back of his hand. He led Lady Hampton down the gravel path and to a circular stone bench, completely masked from the view of the house and boxed in on three sides by tall yew bushes.

Turning to face her, he sighed with excitement, feeling his body stirring.

*Yes, this is how I survive.*

He indulged in lust, and it had two benefits to his life. He satiated his desires, and the whispers of him being a cad spread throughout the *ton*, damaging the Sutterton name.

Lady Hampton turned her dark eyes towards him before she stepped closer, lifting her lips expectantly.

“We will not have long,” she whispered, “and we are at risk out here, but I cannot resist.”

“Then allow us to go straight to the greatest pleasure, Lady Hampton.” His deep whisper had her chuckling.

Henry lost himself in that kiss. Lady Hampton was good at these sorts of things, well-practiced and able to elicit the greatest stirs of desire from his body just by placing her hands in the right places. Even now, she grabbed his hip and then lowered her hand further, reaching for his manhood through his trousers.

Things moved quickly. Excited by the thought of them sharing their pleasure out here under the stars, Henry moved things even faster. His jacket was shed, his shirt unlaced so part of his chest was exposed, and then, he drew his trousers down his legs.

He was reaching beneath Lady Hampton’s skirts, pushing her back onto the stone bench, when they both heard a sound. Any pleasure they might have been about to indulge in faded as they stared at one another wide-eyed.

“Someone is coming,” Lady Hampton muttered hurriedly as the footsteps grew nearer. “Your Grace! We will be caught.”

Henry backed up from her instantly. He may have been glad to risk his own reputation, but he would never go past what the lady wanted. Lady Hampton was willing to have her affairs, but she hardly needed it witnessed.

She pushed down her skirt and ran off through a gap in the yew bushes, disappearing so fast that her skirts became a flash out of the corner of his eye, then they were gone.

“So close,” Henry muttered as he pulled up his trousers.

Indulging with Lady Hampton would have been a good way to distract himself from the curious stares of the guests in the ballroom.

Turning around, he was scarcely prepared for another lady appearing in the clearing around the stone bench. The woman moved fast and tried to skid to a halt on the gravel path, but she failed miserably. Her long arms moved through the air before she collided straight with his chest.

Henry reached out to stop her from toppling over. His hands took hold of her waist before he looked down and stared into intense green eyes. Atop high cheekbones that were red with her effort to run through the garden, she was striking.

*Have I seen her somewhere before?*

“Oh God... not you,” she muttered.

## CHAPTER 3



“*I* believe the words you are looking for are ‘thank you,’ not, ‘not you.’” Henry’s smart remark had Isabella tongue-tied.

*Oh no, oh no, this cannot be happening!*

She had run through the garden so fast in the endeavor to escape Lord Pine, she had not considered for one second that she might be running towards another man she had been trying to avoid. Now, she felt like a fool. For in dark corners of gardens, couples could be getting up to anything, especially rakes.

Her eyes shot down to their position. In their collision, the Duke had taken hold of her waist to stop her from falling, and he still hadn’t let go. Those long fingers were wide on her waist, making her breath hitch with sudden excitement. His shirt was partly open, revealing a flash of his bare chest and the dark brown hair that curled down the center.

*What is wrong with me!?*

She felt a mixture of attraction and anger that manifested itself in her shoving harshly against his chest.

“Do not touch me!” she ordered, then backed up.

“Wait, you are about to fall over—ah, again.”

He had taken a step towards her, apparently in an effort to stop the inevitable from happening, but it was too late. Isabella, in her clumsy way, had fallen straight over the stone bench and ended up in a tussle of skirts on the earth.

“Well...”

At the abruptly deep voice, Isabella looked up to see the Duke standing nearby. His head was tilted at an angle as his eyes looked over her now exposed legs.

“Hardly what I was expecting out here, but a pleasant surprise.”

“Heavens, does your arrogance know no bounds?” she muttered and scrambled to her feet. “Of all the people to run into out here, I run into you.”

She could have called to God for an answer to the absurdness of this. Why couldn't it be any other man, rather than the one whom she thought about so often?

“You know who I am?” Henry asked, his eyebrows raised high.

Isabella stood tall, trying not to be cowed by the realization that he *still* didn’t recognize her. They had met three times, and there wasn’t a flicker of recognition on his face. Out of fear of him remembering how she had spilled her drink on him, she scrambled for a lie.

“I’ve read about you in the scandal sheets,” she explained quickly. As her eyes shot down to his exposed chest, she felt heat rush into her cheeks. “Do you now know how to put clothes on?” She covered her face and waved a hand at him. “Dress yourself!”

“Your blush suggests you do not mind my state of undress, My Lady.”

His mischievous tone had her dropping her hand from her face. He stood a short distance away from her, his arms folded across his chest and a smile planted on his features. That smile simply made his sharp and handsome features soften. It was sort of like seeing a night sky with the stars and moon shining. It transformed the darkness.

*Heavens, I have no control over my attraction to this man. He is dangerous!*

“Of course I mind. I am simply stunned.”

“Then keep your eyes averted,” he suggested with a wink.



“You could lace up your shirt!” She waved both hands towards him now.

“You should expect men like me, My Lady, if you wander into dark corners of gardens. What else do you expect to find out here?” he asked and stepped towards her, holding his arms outwards as if displaying himself in all his grandeur.

She felt a kernel of hatred for him at that moment. It was both a hatred for his arrogance and despair that she had run directly into him.

“I came out here to find solitude and peace from the ball. I was hardly expecting a half-undressed man.” She gestured towards him, noting the way he reached down to his trousers and seemed to check the fastener. “Oh, good Lord, was it a good job I wasn’t here a minute or so earlier?”

“You could say that.” He looked off down a path through the dark yew bushes, as if searching for someone.

“What have I walked into?” Isabella muttered in alarm and turned madly in a circle.

She couldn’t believe that after all her years of knowing the Duke of Sutterton was a rake, she had actually walked into one of his nightly exploits. It was a cruel thing to face after being so attracted to him.

“I should encourage you to walk on, My Lady.” The Duke gestured towards

the path she had come down.

Isabella turned round, ready to escape that way, when she stalled. Despite Irene's best endeavors, Isabella had caught sight of Lord Pine following her out into the garden. She couldn't risk walking back and running straight into him again. That man had such wandering hands that he might take advantage of having her out here alone.

"I can't go that way," she muttered, then backed up as much as she could.

She was not even thinking of where Henry was, so when she walked into him again, she startled herself. He took hold of her waist, stopping the next collision.

"You have a habit of doing this," he whispered in her ear.

The action reminded her that he was one of the few men in the ballroom taller than her. For a change, she didn't feel gangly, giant and out of place, but rather ladylike.

"You have a habit of taking hold of me too. Release me," she ordered as she scurried away from him, rounding the stone bench behind him so that there was something between them. In the darkness, her foot got caught on something, and she slipped, falling over completely on her rear once more. "Dear God, will this night not end?"

"Do you want some help up?" the Duke asked, his amused expression back.

“No. I wanted to stay down here on the earth, with gravel in uncomfortable places.”

Her sarcasm made Henry tilt his chin back and laugh raucously. It was a different kind of laugh compared to what she had heard before. Rather than the snickers and chuckles he had just shown, it was a full laugh.

She pushed the gravel out from the heels of her shoes and off her legs and moved to her feet, only halting to bend down and lift what she had tripped over. She found a tailcoat in her grasp and turned to look at the Duke.

“That’s mine,” he pointed out.

“Oh, I thought it belonged to the bench.” She tossed the jacket in his direction, watching as he laughed once again. “Cover yourself up, for goodness’ sake.”

Henry pulled the jacket over his shoulders, yet he didn’t lace up the shirt beneath. There was also a waistcoat missing somewhere. Isabella found herself turning on the spot, frantically searching for it so she could throw it at him too.

“Why don’t you take your leave back the way you came if you do not want to see me so undressed, My Lady?” he taunted her, gesturing towards the path she had come down once again.

“I cannot go back that way,” Isabella answered simply, fearful of meeting Lord Pine. “I have come to take refuge out here. Perhaps you are the one who should flee, as I have so clearly interrupted your nighttime exploits.” She gestured towards his state of undress.

“Such a derisive tone.” He tutted with a smirk on his lip. “The lady I was here with a few moments ago did not seem so derisive.”

“I am not that lady!” Isabella snapped, amazed at how easy it was to be angry with this man.

He ignited something in her, a fury and an attraction that was baffling.

“I noticed.” He actually rolled his eyes.

Isabella could have been transported back three years to when she had last seen him. All at once, she was standing in Almack’s assembly rooms, where she was building up the courage to talk to the Duke of Sutterton. She’d approached him, her hand shaking so much that, when he had turned to face her, the glass had slipped from her fingers. The liquid had spilled out over his jacket, and people nearby had turned to face them at the sudden curse that had escaped his lips.

He’d looked at her with that same expression then, before turning his eyes up to the sky as if pleading with the heavens for help to bear with this moment.

“If my company upsets you so, Your Grace, then you should be the one to

go.” She gestured towards the lane, desperate to be away from him.

This place amongst the dark yew bushes seemed like a good place to hide from Lord Pine. She could easily mask herself here whilst he wandered the garden looking for her. She was reluctant to leave.

“It seems we have reached an impasse then.” The Duke shrugged as if it was no great matter.

*He is amused by this meeting. That is all this is to him, an amusement.*

Such horror filled Isabella that she was seeking out all sorts of insults to hurl at him when a sound reached her ears.

“God’s blood,” the Duke whispered as his own smile fell.

Voices were growing nearer, and footsteps too.

“I have to get out of here,” Isabella murmured, then backed up. She nearly collided with the stone bench again but managed to circle herself around it this time. “If we are seen together... With you like that too...” She gestured between them.

“I know!” Henry hissed. “Shh. You have to be quiet.” He hunched around the stone bench, glancing over his shoulder repeatedly out of fear that someone would walk into the clearing at any minute.

“How can I be quiet? We have to part ways now—hmm!” Isabella could say no more, for the Duke latched a hand over her mouth. Her eyes widened at the audacity of the touch.

“If either of us runs out now, we will be seen,” he murmured, his words reminding Isabella of the terror of this moment. “Go back the way you came, they will see you. If you take this path.” He nodded his head towards the second path through the yew bushes, one so narrow she hadn’t seen it before. “And you will be seen, regardless, by those on the terrace.”

“Hmm—hmm!” She tried to speak against his hand, but it was no use.

“You have to be quiet, and you have to trust me if we are going to get through this unseen.” He glanced over his shoulder as the voices were getting closer.

They were ladies muttering between themselves, talking animatedly.

With his distraction, Isabella lifted her hand and took his wrist, tearing his hand away from her lips.

“You expect me to trust you? Oh yes, a perfectly wise thing to do, when I have just walked in on you in a tryst in the garden, half undressed with God knows who—hmm!” she complained as he latched his hand over her lips again.

“I know how bad it looks,” he assured her, stepping closer. “Hardly a situation to encourage trust, but you’ll have to. Oh God, they’re nearly here.”

Isabella could hear the voices distinctly now. Lady Eloise’s mother, Lady Travers, was amongst them. She knew that tone well enough.

“I can scarcely believe this is where my daughter will be living. What a house to call home! Quick, come this way, ladies. There is quite a secluded spot in this beautiful garden. Here, we can gossip where no one will hear us.”

Isabella could see the Duke’s eyes widening. The blue orbs could have been silver in the moonlight.

“Hide back there, now,” he whispered, pushing her towards the opening of the second lane.

Isabella tried to retract herself from his grasp and turn towards the lane, but her foot somehow ended up latched around his own.

“What the...” he trailed off as he tried to push her away, but it was too late.

She was falling. Her clumsiness had chosen the worst possible moment to take effect, and she found herself tipping towards the Duke.

The two of them fell down onto the earth, Henry’s body hitting the gravel so much that the stones scattered away from them. Isabella fell on top of him,

colliding with him in such a way that one of her legs fell between his own and both of her hands landed on his muscled chest.

*Never did I think I would know such a chest...*

Any marveling sensation she had for how toned his chest was she could not dwell on. The Duke winced in a little pain, with his hands around her waist, before his expression suddenly narrowed, realizing what position they were in.

“This was not what was supposed to happen!” he muttered angrily.

“You think!?” Isabella’s sarcasm made his lips flicker into the smallest of smiles, but it didn’t last. “Release me.”

At her order, he abruptly lifted his hands away, not touching her. She scrambled to get up, but in order to stand, she had to put down one foot beside his hip.

“Well, that looks no better,” he remarked, lifting his head to look at her.

“Shh.”

Yet, as she tried to stand, the voices from nearby drifted closer.



“What was that sound? Oh, heavens!” Lady Travers appeared in the clearing with one hand on her chest and the other over her lips in shock.

There were two ladies on either side of her, faces that Isabella recognized immediately.

One was Lady Bellamy, a notorious gossip of the *ton* and a scandal sheet writer. The other was her daughter, Mrs. Harriet Walters, whose reputation as a gossip was almost as great as her mother’s.

*This cannot be happening.*

Isabella leapt to her feet and jumped away from the Duke, but the damage was done. She had been seen as good as straddling the Duke of Sutterton outside of a ball in the middle of the night. To say her reputation was damaged was the greatest understatement ever.

*I am well and truly ruined.*

All three ladies turned their stunned eyes on Isabella.

“Lady Isabella? The Earl of Sinclair’s daughter?” Lady Bellamy asked, clearly wanting to be certain of the gossip. “Well, well, what a story this shall make in the scandal sheets tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER 4



Henry felt numb at first as he looked around the clearing. The way Lady Bellamy was taking pleasure in what had happened was so apparent, he wasn't sure what to make of it. Lady Travers looked away as if her eyes had been burned by the sight before her.

*We didn't even do anything!*

Yet, Henry would have been lying to say he hadn't felt something stirring. The lady with him was an enigma, something of a mystery, and an exciting one at that. Striking in appearance with her height and her bold green eyes, he'd been quite happy to stay out here in their playful argument. He hadn't realized it was going to lead to anything though.

"Lady Isabella, what will your father say about this?" Lady Bellamy continued, her words now disgusting Henry.

Hurriedly, he stood to his feet, knowing he had to take control of this situation.

*Lady Isabella, daughter of the Earl of Sinclair. Why do I know that name?*

His eyes flicked towards Isabella, that sense of familiarity returning. He had thought there was something familiar about her when she had first run into him. He didn't have time to think more about it now. She was blushing bright red, one hand latched over her mouth as her eyes became wet.

At once, his guilt raged. Henry may have been a rake, but he had busied himself with widows and married women who were not cared for by their husbands. He never wanted to risk a young unmarried woman, someone who had her reputation to lose.

“Such tales to be spun now,” Lady Bellamy drawled and actually laughed at her own words.

Henry spun on his heel to face her, moving so fast that, at his sharp movement, he saw in the moonlight the way the three ladies flinched.

*There is only one thing I can do now to stop a further scandal.*

“How dare you speak to the future Duchess of Sutterton in that way?”

His words had an instant reaction. The three ladies exchanged looks with one another.

“The D—Duchess?” Lady Bellamy stammered.

“That is right. Now, give us some privacy.” He stepped towards them, taking command completely. “And do not let your tattling tongues run away with you, ladies. I do not doubt what damage you could do with them, yet to do so would only be hurting yourselves in my eyes.”

Lady Travers looked ashamed, but neither of the other women did.

“Be gone. Now.” Henry gestured towards the lane, demanding they leave.

The ladies hurried away, moving so fast that their skirts fluttered behind them. Even when they were a little distance away, he could hear them talking and laughing. He didn’t doubt that, despite his request, they would spread rumors the moment they returned to the ballroom.

“What have you done?” a small voice asked.

Slowly, Henry turned round to face Isabella.

*Isabella. That is her name.*

Her bold green eyes were wide, and her full lips opened wide, apparently searching for words.

“I’ve done all I could do.” His voice deepened as he suddenly felt overwhelmingly dizzy with the realization of what he had done. He reached towards the nearest yew bush, holding onto a branch to keep himself standing just as Isabella moved to the bench and sat down with a heavy thud. “If I didn’t offer to marry you, then what comes of your reputation, My Lady?”

“I don’t wish to be married.” Isabella began to shake her head firmly, casting her brown curls repeatedly around her cheeks. “Least of all to you.”

“So kind,” he said with a sardonic smile.

“This cannot happen.” She waved a hand between them. “You do not wish to be married, nor do I. Just because we fell—”

“I believe you were the one who fell, and I just cushioned your fall.”

“Are you actually trying to seek blame in this?” she asked, scowling. “I could point out that fact that your shirt is so undone it left little to the ladies’ imagination!”

Henry had to concede she was right in that regard. He raised his hands and laced up his shirt before noting she had discovered his waistcoat beneath the stone bench. She threw it at him, but he was so unprepared for it that it fell over his face.

“I see there is kindness in you,” he muttered sarcastically, earning a huff from her in answer. He reset his clothes as he looked at her. She seemed on the

edge of tears despite her anger towards him. “What else would you have me do? I had to offer to marry you, or you would be ruined.”

“There has to be another way, there has to be,” she said repeatedly, clinging to the bench.

“No matter what that is, we cannot stay out here anymore.” He buttoned up the waistcoat. “We have to return to the ball.”

“And be faced with a wall of gossip?” She laughed, though there was no real humor in it. “You may be used to being gossiped about, Your Grace, but I am not. People usually say nothing about me.”

He tilted his head to the side as he watched her, convinced there was something familiar in her manner now.

*We have met before, I am certain of it.*

Yet, he still couldn't place where he had seen her.

“Then you'll simply have to find the courage to face them tonight.” He shrugged on his tailcoat. “Come, let us return to the ball. You will find your family and head home. I will come to see you tomorrow.”

He took a step towards the lane, only to notice she did not follow. Isabella remained firmly on the stone bench, staring down at the gravel beneath her

feet.

“Lady Isabella?” Henry turned back to face her. She flinched when he said her name and jerked her head upwards to meet his gaze. “We must go before anyone else finds us here.”

Slowly, she moved to her feet. She fell into step alongside him, yet she kept a distance between them.

Henry wasn't sure what to feel about that distance. He'd been happily attracted to this woman minutes before. If she'd been a widow, he might have actually propositioned her seriously, rather than just having a laugh with her. Yet, now, he faced getting married.

*I vowed never to marry, yet what has become of me?*

He felt trapped, stuck, with no other option. He may have been happy to destroy his own reputation, but damaging a young woman's reputation was another thing entirely. He wasn't callous or cruel, just self-destructive.

“Tomorrow, I will come to see you,” he muttered, his voice business-like.

“We do not have to marry,” Isabella said again. “There must be another way out of this. There must be.”

“What way is there?” he asked sharply. “Think about it. Ladies' names are

ruined by this sort of thing. Their entire families are dragged through the mud.” At his words, her footsteps slowed. “No time to slow down now.”

“My sisters.” She swallowed with terror in her tone. “They will be so hurt by this.”

“You have sisters? Then it is settled more than ever.” He huffed and walked on, his fast pace urging her to hasten her steps. “I will come and see you tomorrow. Did they say you were the Earl of Sinclair’s daughter? I know that name. He lives in James Square, does he not?”

“Yes, Sinclair House,” Isabella answered quickly.

They stepped up onto the stone terrace, where Henry caught sight of the gentlemen smoking. Apparently, the ladies hadn’t stopped to tell them about the news on their way back to the ball, for the men barely turned to acknowledge them. When one of the gentlemen knocked into his friend, spilling a glass, Henry had a sudden recollection.

In his mind’s eye, he saw a glass of champagne dropping from a lady’s fingers. It spilled over his brand-new tailcoat. He’d already been unhappy that evening, vowing it would be his last *ton* event for a while, but that had been the last straw. As he had shaken off the droplets from his jacket, he’d looked up to see who had dropped that glass.

It was the lady who stood beside him now, Isabella.



“Wait.” He looked at her. Isabella hesitated from walking into the ballroom, moving back and forth on the balls of her feet and wringing her hands together repeatedly. “You spilled a glass of champagne on me once, didn’t you? That was you?”

“That’s what you remember?” Her lips thinned before she shook her head. There was something strange about the reaction before she laughed at him. “What a privilege, eh?”

“Privilege?” Henry repeated in surprise.

“I suppose I should be honored for such a *great man*, one of such lofty standing, to even recall a brief meeting he had with me.” There was tartness in her tone as she reached for the door and hurried back into the ballroom.

“Wait, you remembered me?”

Henry followed her into the building, wondering why she hadn’t said before that they had met. As he hurried behind her, something else came to his mind.

It was a brief image of him with his hand on Isabella’s waist and his other hand clasping her own. Were they dancing? He could almost remember humming along to the tune, practically whispering in her ear.

*And the bonnie lass’s hand he will take...*

The image broke off. Was it a memory? Surely not. Had he just imagined it?

Isabella had come to such a sudden halt that he nearly walked straight into her back. Wary of touching her again now that they were in a ballroom, he leapt to her side, angling his head around just as he saw why she had come to such an ungainly halt.

Many in the room were staring their way, and their gawkers weren't being subtle. There was open whispering and pointing in their direction. Henry lifted a hand and pinched the brow of his nose, fearing what he had done.

*This was never part of the plan to ruin a good woman's name.*

"I wish the ground would swallow me whole," Isabella muttered at his side.

"Me too." He lowered his hand and took her arm. She started so much that she wrenched her arm away from his grasp. "Please, be calm. We have to talk reasonably now."

"Oh yes, perfectly easy to speak reasonably at such a moment as this," she said with sarcasm.

Any other time, Henry would have laughed at her dry humor, but not at this moment.

"Go to your family," he pleaded with her. "Ignore the whispers and the

gossip, and just depart for the night. I will see you tomorrow. Don't make eye contact with others, and do not be drawn into conversation. If you have any scandal sheets arrive tomorrow, burn them without reading them."

"Sound advice indeed," she muttered.

She was no longer looking at him but staring someplace over his shoulder.

"Lady Isabella." He said her name a little sharply, in the hope of capturing her attention. As he hoped, her eyes flicked towards his. "We will sort this out. Trust me on that."

"That's the second time you have asked me to trust you." She shook her head. "Yet, I cannot. We will find another way out of this, a way that does not require marriage."

"Then your hope will be a vain one." His answer was simple, though she didn't appear to pay attention to him.

She scurried past him, leaving him at the side of the ballroom without a word of parting or a single goodbye.

As Henry turned round, he saw her hurrying towards two young ladies who waved at her, clearly trying to get her attention. Across the ballroom, he saw John's face. He was in deep conversation with his future mother-in-law before his expression became one of humor, and he lifted his face to search for Henry amongst the crowd.

*At least someone can smile at this mess, but I cannot.*



“What have you done?”

Andrew had Isabella’s wrist in a vice-like grip and was dragging her out of Lord Hillson’s house, towards the carriage on the driveway.

“I didn’t do anything,” Isabella protested, though her words fell on deaf ears.

Behind her, her sisters scurried along, carrying their pelisses and shawls, even Isabella’s shawl, which she had neglected to pick up herself.

“Have you not listened to what I have said? I stumbled across the Duke of Sutterton outside—”

“Oh yes, a perfectly understandable explanation,” Andrew said tartly and flung open the door of the carriage so hard that it banged on its hinges.

Susan yelped in shock before Irene ushered her into the carriage. Isabella went to follow, but her wrist was still caught in her father’s grip, and he spun her back around to face him.

“Ow, Father, you’re hurting me.”

“How can you do this to us, Isabella?” he asked, his tone wild. “You’ve ensnared a man into marriage?”

“I did no such thing.” She straightened her spine and stood as tall as her father, refusing to be cowed by him. “I am not capable of such artful evil as to trap a man in such a way.” When her father refused to release her wrist, she bent her hand back at such an angle that he was forced to release her at the risk of being hurt himself. “I didn’t want to get married. If I can help it, I still won’t.” She turned on her heel and clambered into the carriage.

At first, Isabella tried to sit on her usual side of the carriage, but her sisters took her arms and pulled her back to their side. It was a squeeze with the three of them sitting on one bench, but they kept her there, perched in the middle as if they could somehow protect her as Andrew clambered up into the carriage and slammed the door shut behind him.

“Have you lost your good sense?” Andrew roared as he hit the side of the carriage, signaling to the driver to set off.

“I have told you for many months I have no intention of marrying,” Isabella reminded him.

“This changes things, surely you see that.” He gestured towards her with a derisive hand motion. “The one thing about being a bluestocking, spending every day and evening with your head in your books, should surely mean you have some intelligence in that head of yours.”

“Father!” Isabella snapped at him.

Normally, if her father ever lost his temper, she would try to get him as far away from her sisters as possible, yet trapped in a carriage with him, that endeavor was now an impossible thing.

The stench of whisky wafted off him, and judging by the way he swayed in his seat, he’d had a fair amount that night. It went a good way to explain the wildness in his eyes.

“I perfectly understand what has happened, and that being seen with the Duke has ruined my reputation—”

“The family’s reputation!” Andrew added, waving both palms towards Irene and Susan.

“Yet, I did nothing wrong.” Isabella shook her head. “I bumped into a man in the garden. Why should I marry a man for that?”

“That is not what the gossip said.” Her father lowered his voice and leaned towards her. “Everyone in that ballroom was talking about seeing Lady Isabella *on top* of the Duke of Sutterton.”

“Is that true?” Susan asked in amazement, her eyes wide.

“No! I mean, yes... not exactly!” Isabella hurried to add when Irene whistled in incredulity. “I tripped and fell over him.”

“You tripped?” Andrew scoffed at the idea, his lip curling in scorn.

“You of all people are always pointing out how clumsy I am.” Isabella turned her focus on her father. “You know I fall over as other people find it as easy to breathe.”

“This is not like tripping over the corner of a rug, Isabella,” her father boomed. “You fell on a man!”

“It was not my doing.” Isabella’s voice was now losing its strength as she slumped back against the bench.

She sensed the truth of the matter, that when her father was drunk, she was not going to have any success in her argument. Her sisters took her hands, trying to offer silent comfort.

“I must commend you conning such a man into marriage though, I’ll say that.” Her father laughed derisively. “The Duke of Sutterton. He has more money than any other man in London.” He suddenly froze and sat straight, the corner of his lip tilting upwards in a smile. “Yes... you will have a wealthy husband indeed now.”

“You’ve changed your tune,” Isabella murmured, noticing how different her father’s manner was becoming as he realized how it could be to his

advantage.

*The madman is now thinking about how he can use the Duke's money to pay off his debts. It will not come to that. Never.*

“Maybe this is all some dreadful misunderstanding?” Susan asked, her words carefully uttered.

“Yes, it is,” Isabella agreed with her.

“If you do not wish to marry him, you do not have to,” Susan assured her, tapping her hand.

“Thank God—”

“Have you both lost all your senses?” Andrew snapped, looking between Isabella and Susan. “Susan, she has no choice. If she does not marry the Duke of Sutterton now, both you and Irene will be ruined. Every man who passes you by would rather look at the ground you walk on rather than *you*. They’ll think you no better than a courtesan.”

*I’m surprised he scolds the idea of courtesans, considering how many of them he’s bedded.*

Isabella wondered if her father could read something of her thoughts in her gaze, for he broke their connected stare and looked away, brushing a hand



over his waxed hair.

“Come what may, Isabella, you will have to agree to marry the Duke of Sutterton.”

“We’ll see about that.”

## CHAPTER 5



“*H*ow did I get here?” Henry sighed with the words as he climbed off his horse.

Passing the reins to the stable boy who had hurried forwards to greet him, Henry looked at the house before him, the Sinclair estate.

This early in the morning, the summer dew was still present on the grass. In the sun that rose over the distant rooftops of nearby houses, the white Palladian-style frontage seemed to gleam. The roses that framed the front door were untidy and in need of pruning. There were other elements too that suggested the house needed some work and some money spent on it, such as the chipped front step.

*It seems the Earl of Sinclair needs some money.*

Henry pushed the thought away. Rather than hurrying up to the house, he stayed very still on the driveway and scratched his chin in thought. He’d been up for most of the night, thinking over what he had committed himself to, but he saw no way out of it.

He had to marry Isabella if he was going to protect her reputation. It was against his plan, in every way, but that didn't mean he had to break his vow to his father completely.

*As long as I never sire an heir, I will keep to my promise.*

With this in mind, Henry breathed deeply, lifted his chin higher and stepped up towards the door. Taking off his top hat, he tapped on the door and waited. The butler greeted him with no knowledge of who he was, and he had clearly not been told to expect Henry's arrival. It seemed that Isabella was not convinced Henry intended to stay true to his word.

Henry was shown inside by the butler and taken all the way to a small parlor, where he was asked to wait for Lord Sinclair. As the door closed behind the butler, Henry looked around the room, trying to discern something about the family he was soon going to be connected to.

There were fabric samplers on one side of the parlor, suggesting one of the daughters had a keen interest in embroidery, and there was sheet music spread out on top of a harpsichord. Closest to where Henry stood was a table on which lay a book that detailed research on the human mind. Henry reached for it, rather startled that one of the daughters would have such an interest. He decided it might belong to the father instead.

"Your Grace?" an excited voice called to him as the door opened.

Henry felt his stomach sink as he looked at the Earl of Sinclair. Henry had

indeed met Lord Sinclair before, but it was some years ago. Back then, Lord Sinclair's reputation had been even worse than Henry's was now. He was known for being a rogue with both ladies and his money.

*Lady Isabella is his daughter? She is nothing like him!*

It was with some relief he noticed the stark differences in their appearance. The only thing father and daughter seemed to have in common was their brown hair, though he could remember Isabella's was a little wilder. He'd imagined the night before running a finger through the locks that had escaped her updo.

"You've come."

Lord Sinclair bowed in greeting and stepped forwards, before rubbing his hands together, as if he was about to make a good return on a bet he'd made on the horses. The closer he came, the more Henry could smell the stench of alcohol.

"Lord Sinclair." Henry bowed, trying to take a subtle step back so that he was further away from the strong odor of ale.

*Has this man been drinking so early in the morning?*

"I take it you have come after the... the erm..." Lord Sinclair struggled for words.

He waved a hand in the air as if that would do for a word. Rather amused by the man's struggle to come up with a word, Henry waited for Lord Sinclair to think of something to say.

"The unpleasantness of last night," Lord Sinclair finished.

Henry felt the temptation of his hands to ball into fists at the words.

"Your daughter and I ran into each other at an inconvenient moment. I hope you understand that, Lord Sinclair."

"That is what she says, and what you now say too... but who knows."

The way Lord Sinclair shrugged had Henry rethinking everything he knew about the night before. Was it possible that Isabella had tricked him? Had she conned him into offering to marry her after all?

"Yet, I understand you have come to make things right today," Lord Sinclair threw in, gesturing for Henry to sit and taking a seat himself. "Of course, we can discuss the formalities, such as her dowry, the cost of the wedding and the money..." he trailed off with a certain gleam in his eyes.

Henry didn't sit, despite Lord Sinclair waiting for him to do so. He felt so disgusted at the way Lord Sinclair preoccupied himself with talking about the money alone that he actually walked away across the room, putting distance between them. The Duke made the appearance of walking towards the window as if he wanted to look at the view outside.

Something through the glass caught his eye. There was a rider out on the estate. It was hardly a huge estate for being in the center of London, but it was ample enough and backed onto a parkland that it would afford a good ride. The horse galloping through that open space raced with vigor, traveling fast towards the house. Only when the horse reached the driveway did the rider tip back her head, making her cloak drop and revealing her face.

*Lady Isabella.*

She was flushed with her morning ride. There was something in the athleticism of the way she rode and gripped the reins that had Henry's blood stirring. He was reminded of the feeling of Isabella above him the night before.

"Did you hear me, Your Grace?" Lord Sinclair tried to bring Henry's attention back to the room.

"You wished to talk about money," Henry spoke tightly. Isabella's eyes shot towards the window. When she saw Henry, she leapt down from her horse and practically ran into the house. "Something tells me we are about to be joined by another." Henry placed his back against the window, his eyes on the door.

"As I was saying, Your Grace, the money..."

Lord Sinclair was clearly one-track-minded when it came to these affairs. He had not busied himself with talking about the scandal. He hadn't even sought

to confirm that Henry was here to make a proposal but had just accepted it as a given.

The door to the parlor abruptly opened, and Isabella rushed inside. She tripped on the edge of a rug and nearly fell onto the settee where her father was sitting but managed to put out her hands to grip the back of the chair to stop herself from falling any further.

“Quite an entrance,” Henry said with humor.

Her eyes simply shot towards him, narrowing to thin slits. That expression was a far cry from the one that had intrigued him so much last night. As much as he hadn’t wanted to be fascinated by her the night before, he had been.

“What is happening?” Isabella asked, looking between Henry and her father.

“He is here to discuss the particulars of... of... what happened.” Lord Sinclair still struggled with how to talk about it.

Henry was rather amused to see Isabella look at the ceiling as if pleading for help from God with dealing with her father.

“Your Grace, please, allow me to speak to you for a moment.” Isabella hastened across the room. Henry’s eyes darted to where she put her feet, half expecting her to trip again. This time, she managed to stay upright. “What happened would blow over for you in a few days, a couple of weeks at most,

would it not?”

“Yes. That I do not deny. The *ton* is more forgiving when it comes to gentlemen. Yet my reputation is not the thing that concerns me.” He shook his head, just as she came to a stop a couple of yards away from him.

Isabella wrung her hands together, and he recognized it as a stressful habit of hers. She fidgeted so much that she pulled at the riding habit she was wearing and her long sleeves. The dark green fitted habit flattered the curves of her figure and brought out the color of her eyes.

*Stop looking at her so much.*

“This will be about saving your reputation and protecting your family,” Henry said simply, seeking to hold Isabella’s gaze.

“Well said.” The Earl nodded, and his words were not welcomed by either of them, who glanced quickly at him.

“We will marry, Lady Isabella. That way, the scandal of what happened last night will be forgotten in a couple of months,” Henry stated.

“Not completely,” she whispered.

“It will be the best we can do.” Henry shrugged. “Now, that is sorted out.” He stepped away from the window, intending to depart.



“Wait, before you go, Your Grace. I will consult my books.” Lord Sinclair was on his feet. “I will just confirm the exact value of Isabella’s dowry.” With these words, he hurried out of the room.

Apparently, the Earl had no qualms about leaving them alone without a chaperone, not after Henry had already confirmed they were going to be wed.

In the silence that followed, Henry gazed at Isabella, finding it quite entrancing that she stared back at him. Despite the heaviness of his glower, she kept her chin raised and didn’t waver.

“I suppose I should congratulate you on a ruse well pulled off,” he said after a minute of silence.

“What do you mean?” She frowned.

“Quite a performance last night, entangling us together in such a way. You trapped me into marriage so expertly that I never even suspected it. Bravo!” He raised his hands and clapped.

She backed away from him. The way she increased the distance between them and lifted her chin a little higher had his hands pausing. She was strikingly attractive, really. It was distracting.

“Is that what you think?” Her voice suggested disgust. “After I pleaded with

you last night not to hold true to your promise to marry me and have now just asked again? Are you deaf or just dumb, Your Grace?"

Her question was such a surprise that a laugh fell from his lips.

"You are a plain speaker, Lady Isabella."

"With you, it seems, it comes naturally." She stepped forwards, moving her hands to her hips. "I have no intention to be insulted, not by any arrogant man such as you, and not defend myself. I will always defend myself when I am accused of something I am not guilty of."

Henry matched her stance, walking towards her with his hands on his hips.

"If that was not your aim, why were you out there last night? Tell me that." He tilted his head to the side, smiling. They were so close that he could smell her scent. The rosehips were mixed with the smell of fresh grass, as she had been out riding. He rather liked that scent. "Because you hardly seemed in a hurry to leave. Perhaps you just liked what you saw," he added in a whisper.

"Insufferable."

Isabella shook her head and stepped even closer to him as if she was preparing for a fight. He was rather reminded of going to one of the illegal boxing matches in London, seeing the fighters stare each other down before their tussles. Unable to resist, he matched her step and moved even closer to her.

“I was running away from someone, and I did not know where else to go. Had I left the yew bushes, I might have been seen.”

“You were seen,” he reminded her.

“Not by whom I was running from.”

“And who were you running from?”

“That is not important.” She refused to answer him, her full lips pressing together. Henry’s eyes darted down to those full lips, thinking of what it could be like to kiss them. Had she been a widow, he might have persuaded her by now into one of those kisses. “What is important is that I never wanted to marry.”

Her words captivated his attention, and his eyes widened.

“You never wished to marry?” he repeated.

“No. What advantage is there in marriage?” she asked, holding her arms out wide. “Vowing to *obey* a man? Absurd. I would not keep to such a vow. Having my property owned by a man? Myself owned by a man?” She gestured towards him. “What sane woman would wish to agree to such a thing when the trade for such a state of being is merely being ignored and derided.”

There was something in her words that reminded Henry of an ugly marriage. He thought of his mother and father and bent his head for a moment.

“I would definitely rather be alone, Your Grace,” she affirmed defiantly, her eyes not blinking once. “I would read my books.” She gestured towards the book on the human mind, sparking his interest. “And keep my own company with people I like.”

“So, you think nothing good can come from marriage?” He saw an opportunity to tease her, reminding her of exactly what had happened last night and the tension that had been in the air.

“Nothing.”

“Truly? Because I could recall last night where your eyes kept wandering.” At his words, he pointedly lowered his gaze to his own chest. She folded her arms, silently refuting such a claim. “You looked quite a lot.”

Isabella scowled. “I did not.”

“You did.” He smiled a little more. “And I remember when we fell together there was a brief second where you were not clambering off me.” Desiring to test her, he lowered his head towards hers. He was so close that he could have kissed her, with his lips hovering over hers. “There are some advantages in marriage, I don’t doubt it. Some excitement.” He watched as her eyes flitted down to his lips.

Tension hovered in the air, and for a brief second, he thought she might kiss him.

But Isabella jerked her head back and ended up scurrying away from him. The hesitation had been enough for him to know she was affected by him, as affected as he was by her. She collided with a chair and fell into it.

“You have a habit of falling over,” he remarked.

“I’m a clumsy person. That or it’s just my haste to get away from you.” She looked away from him, fiddling with her riding habit.

“You do not need to fear me, Lady Isabella.” At his words, she fell still. “I’m offering a marriage in name only, nothing else.”

At last, he had her full attention. Her expression altered with her eyebrows lifting high in understanding.

*Despite this excitement, we cannot spend nights together. That is too risky. Then... there could be a child.*

“What did you say?” she murmured.

“You heard, Lady Isabella.”

Before any more could be said between them, Lord Sinclair returned to the room. He looked a little flustered with papers in his hands.

“Your Grace, I have confirmed the value of her dowry with my books. It stands at eight hundred pounds.”

Isabella looked away and closed her eyes upon hearing the words. Something seemed to pass between her and her father in the room, something Henry did not understand. He glanced between them but did not ask.

*It is none of my business what has upset them both.*

“The dowry is not my concern.” Henry’s words had Isabella’s attention returning to him.

Slowly, she moved to her feet.

“Do you not want it?” she asked, her voice light in surprise.

“When we wed, it will be yours.” He motioned towards her, seeing how her lips parted once again.

Long ago, Henry had vowed if he ever did come to marry, he would not do what his father had done. His father had taken his mother’s money and used it

to line his own coffers. She'd never seen a penny of it.

"I have enough money and have no need of your dowry. It will be yours."

The Duke walked towards the door, watching as Lord Sinclair scurried back. The Earl's face was an equal picture of shock as his daughter's.

"I will depart now, but I will be in touch over the next few days with a special license," Henry hurried to explain.

"A special license? Is one really needed?" Isabella asked and followed him out of the door. They left Lord Sinclair behind in the room. He was apparently too shocked to follow them.

Henry hastened to the front door where he collected his top hat off a coat stand. Isabella stood beside him, clinging to the skirt of her riding habit.

"Isn't the announcement of the betrothal enough to stop whispers?" she asked.

"No. Not for the sake of the family's reputation."

"Then, how soon will it be until we are wed?" she demanded, following him to the door.

“Eager, Lady Isabella?” Henry teased, watching as her expression darkened.

“Dreading,” she corrected him.

“Then dread the next week. We should be married by then.”

He placed the top hat on his head and stepped out, feeling Isabella’s eyes burning into the back of his neck.

There was something about that feeling he rather liked.



## CHAPTER 6



“*H*ow is it you always bet on the right horse?” John asked at Henry’s side as he collected his latest winnings.

“Luck.” Henry shrugged, hardly caring what he did win or lose.

The Duke had a rule when it came to gambling. He never risked more than he could afford to lose. When he enjoyed such days as this at the races with John, he always gave himself a budget, and he never broke it.

Taking the winnings he was due, he and John stepped out of the betting stall and returned to the track, where the next race was already being prepared. The stalls were full of gentlemen and ladies, all gathered for the day with vast and impressive hats on their heads. In the parade ring, the horses were taking their turn, with their jockeys walking beside them to show them off.

“So? Has today worked to distract you from what bothers you so much?” John asked with an easy smile as he leaned on the white fence around the parade ring.

“Oh yes, completely distracted. That’s why I have such a smile on my face.” Henry pointed towards his deep-set frown.

“Worth a question.” John laughed with his words. “I always knew you’d marry.” He seemed to be having difficulty controlling his mirth as Henry leaned beside him, shaking his head.

“Can you stop laughing?”

“I fear I cannot.” John wiped away a tear from his eye, for he laughed so much. “At least I have won a bet with Eloise.”

“I thought we were betting on horses.” Henry nodded his head in the direction of the horses in the parade ring.

They both had to lean back when a spooked horse passed them, whipping its tail so wildly it nearly hit them across the cheeks.

“I may have put a bet on you that you would marry someday.” John smiled all the more when Henry frowned at him.

“Why would you bet on that? John, you knew the vow I made.”

“Yes, I do, but we all surprise ourselves.” He gestured towards himself. “There was a time I thought I’d never marry. That was the idiocy of youth and having my head turned so often. Now, I’m very happy about the idea of

being married.” He turned his focus on the tallest steed in the paddock. “What about that one? Reminds me of you, so tall that everyone is staring at it. If we pass one more group of ladies who ogles you, I swear—”

“It is not that bad.” Henry brushed off the words, though he knew them to be true. He often got stared at. “Why do you think I would marry, John?”

“Granted, I didn’t think you would marry quite like this. Though you have to admit, there’s something humorous in the idea.” John shot Henry a smile.

“You are making my stomach knot.” Henry waved his rolled-up program for the day’s events in his friend’s direction. “Why is it humorous?”

“Because you were always so keen to be careful in your affairs,” John explained with a shrug. “It seems you couldn’t be as careful as you wished to be.”

“For the last time, Lady Isabella and I were not outside for any sort of assignation.” Henry shook his head firmly. “I was with another, and she just stumbled across us. Quite literally.”

Henry recalled the way she had fallen against him, and he’d taken hold of her waist to hold her up. There had been a heat in that touch, instant attraction.

“There is another element that is humorous to me too,” John remarked, lifting his head high as he considered the idea. “The fact that it is Lady Isabella you shall be marrying.”

“Why is that?”

“Yes, I think I’ll bet on the tall one. Come on.” John backed up, heading in the direction of the betting stalls.

Henry didn’t even bother to look at the horses as he raced after his friend, catching up with him.

“John, what did you mean by that? Why is it funny I am marrying Lady Isabella?” The Duke did not get an answer for some time.

He had to stand to the side whilst John placed his bet, tapping his booted foot restlessly on the grass beneath his feet. When John returned, he offered Henry a second betting slip, showing he’d placed a second bet for him.

“What’s this, John?”

“There’s a horse called Bella running.” John smiled broadly. “I thought she might be lucky for you. Come on, the race is starting.”

Henry stuffed the slip in his pocket before hastening to follow John to the side of the fence. This race was a relatively short one. They watched as the horses lined up by the starting post with some restlessness. Henry looked for his horse. She was a tall chestnut and the most restless of the lot, going around in circles.

“You’ve bet on a bad horse, I fear,” Henry muttered.

“Let’s just see how she does,” John encouraged.

As the starting pistol was fired, they both leaned over the fence, watching with the other punters as the horses raced down the green. Bella, the mare, was at the back, and Henry began to lose hope.

“What did you mean, John?” Henry called to his friend, trying to be heard over the cheering people on either side of them. “About it being humorous that I was to marry Lady Isabella of all people?”

“I see you do not remember her.” John continued to laugh. “Henry, long ago, before your mother had passed and you made this vow to your father, you were back here in London between your trips to Europe. You told me you had a rule not to dance with any lady on her debut. You remember that?”

“I do.” Henry’s eyes widened as the mare suddenly began to sprint faster, eating up the ground between her and her opponents. “Ladies at their debuts are usually silly with excitement. I couldn’t handle that.”

“Yet, you broke that rule. Once.” John turned to face him with a small smirk. “There was one lady you danced with at her debut, and do you know who that was?” Henry shook his head, though he had a feeling he knew what answer was coming even before he heard it. “It was Lady Isabella.”

This time, Henry recalled the memory clearly. He had actually escorted his mother to a ball that night. Petra hadn't fallen sick yet and had been keen to attend such balls. Gregory would certainly never take her. Henry was back between trips to France and Spain, and he had taken his mother himself.

That night, he had been captivated by the green-eyed lady at her debut. She was striking but not traditionally beautiful. Whereas most gentlemen wanted pretty and elfin features, Isabella had been different. She was curvaceous and tall with willowy limbs, and her face had bold features with full lips and high cheekbones. It was little wonder he'd asked her to dance.

*What a dance that had been.*

"God's blood," Henry muttered aloud and shook his head. "I completely forgot about that. How had I forgotten that?"

"It was just one dance out of many," John reminded him. "You went back to the continent after that, and then you had the whole ugliness with your father." He shuddered at the recollection. "I guess it was easy for you to forget it." He suddenly grinned. "By the way, Henry."

"What?"

"Look that way." John pointed to the racing track.

Henry returned his focus to the race as the mare came up to the second place. She was so close to the leading horse that Henry began to cheer her on,

shouting for Bella to pip the leader at the post. He called along with some others beside him in the stall. It came right down to the wire, but she pulled ahead at the last second. It was a thrilling win as Henry retrieved the betting slip from his pocket and waved it in the air.

“Do you want your bet back?” Henry asked as they returned to the stalls.

“No, I made that bet for you. I thought it was too serendipitous for the horse to be named Bella.”

“I don’t believe in serendipity,” Henry called back to his friend as he ran ahead.

“Do you believe in luck? You might need it if you are going to be wed!”

“Don’t remind me,” Henry muttered under his breath as he collected the winnings from the bet.

As he counted out the money, he became distracted and had to count more than once to be sure of the amount. He found his mind was on other things completely.

*How could I forget I danced with Lady Isabella once?*



“So, you will be a duchess?”

Susan’s question had Isabella’s hand stilling over the cards.

Isabella and her sisters were playing cribbage, something she generally preferred, yet they always seemed happy to join in with her. This evening though, the game appeared more like an excuse for her sisters to grill her with questions.

Susan pushed one of the candles that lit the parlor away from her elbow as she fixed Isabella with an unblinking stare.

“Yes, I suppose I will be,” Isabella replied, “though I hadn’t thought of it like that. I will be a duchess in name.”

“Goodness,” Irene muttered. “I don’t think our father ever expected you to make such a marriage. What I mean is…” she trailed off, realizing how her words sounded. Blushing bright red, she lifted her hand of cards in front of her face.

“Irene, you do not need to fear me.” Softly, Isabella took her sister’s wrist and lowered the cards. “I know very well what you mean. I have seen for the last few years that I am not what a husband seeks out. How many times has our father lectured me, repeatedly, on how a gentleman wants a wife who is not so spirited? How he wants a lady with accomplishments, who can play the piano and do other such fine things?”



“You can sing,” Susan pointed out.

“Barely, and I sing for my own amusement, not as a performance. I do not have the confidence for that, and that riles our father even more.” Isabella shrugged off the idea. She hadn’t been bothered by her father’s lectures, for she was happy without a husband. “No man wants a bluestocking for a wife, that’s what he said.” She sighed deeply. “Yet, I am marrying despite all our expectations.”

Isabella still felt numb about the idea, uncertain of what to think. Despite her words, the Duke had insisted on marriage. What had shocked her more than anything was his attitude towards her dowry. He had told her it could be hers. That had riled her father in some respect. He had ranted over dinner about him saving for a dowry when it had turned out that the Duke of Sutterton had no need of it. When Isabella had pointed out that the dowry should have been double what it was worth now, her father had become angrier still.

*He has gambled the rest away, I know it.*

The Duke refusing to take her dowry, though, had been an act of kindness, something she hadn’t expected after reading about his rakish ways. She had thought he would be just like her father, yet that had been the first thing that had suggested he wasn’t.

“Perhaps it will be a good marriage,” Susan said softly. “You never know.”

“Unfortunately, I do know.” When Isabella heard the sounds of a carriage, she placed her cards on the gaming table and stood to her feet. Crossing to

the window, she looked out across the street. “The Duke of Sutterton is known for being a rake for good reason. Once he marries me, he will not change. I believe he will have mistresses, regardless.”

She knew she shouldn't mind such an idea. After all, she hadn't wanted to wed, so, why should it bother her? She guessed it was the idea of being embarrassed in what would be her future home.

*If he ever brought a mistress back to that house... it would be unbearable for me to watch.*

“Who is it? Has father returned?” Irene called, gesturing towards the window.

“Yes,” Isabella said tightly, watching as the carriage pulled to a stop and her father clambered down.

Yet, he wasn't alone. A lady followed him, and judging by the clothes she wore, she was one of the courtesans from the theater he had been to that evening.

Determined to protect her sisters for as long as she could when it came to the extent of their father's depravity, Isabella abruptly closed the curtains.

*I swear that man has a new woman here most nights.*

Her sisters looked at her, but they didn't ask for an explanation.

“Let us talk about something else for a while,” Isabella suggested and returned to the table. “Let us play.”

The three sisters tried to absorb themselves in the card game, but after a few short minutes, Irene and Susan were back on the subject at hand.

“I still don’t understand how you and the Duke could become so *entangled*,” Irene said slowly, as if wary of upsetting Isabella.

“It just sort of happened,” Isabella uttered in a small voice. “I didn’t mean for it to happen, but it did.”

Susan softly patted her hand. “We know you didn’t mean for it to happen,” she whispered.

“Our father does. Oh, even the Duke of Sutterton suggested I could have done it on purpose.” The mere thought had a lump forming in Isabella’s throat. Something about the whole situation felt wrong to her.

She was going to marry a man she had not stopped thinking about for years. Yet, the man she had thought of was merely an idea, not the real man himself. She had thought of the Duke she had danced with at her debut, not the rake he had become.

A light tap at the door had them all turning their heads.

“Come in,” Isabella called. The housekeeper appeared a few seconds later.  
“Ah, Doris, is all well?”

“Yes, My Lady.” The way Doris glanced backwards and hurriedly closed the door behind her suggested to Isabella that the housekeeper had also seen the courtesan come into the house. “This has just arrived for you, My Lady.”

“Thank you.” Isabella took the proffered letter and broke the seal.

She didn’t pay attention to the seal imprinted in the red wax, too distracted thinking about her father’s brazenness to have such affairs with his daughters in the house. Eventually, she turned her focus to the letter.

*Dear Lady Isabella,*

*I am writing to inform you that I have received our special license. We are to be married in three days on Saturday. I shall confirm the arrangements with your father.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*The Duke of Sutterton.*

## CHAPTER 7



“This is for happiness,” Susan murmured, thrusting a white daisy into the posy. “And this is for faithfulness.” Next, she tried to press in a chrysanthemum.

“Perhaps take that one out,” Isabella said, unable to rouse herself from her seat, even though she was dressed and ready for her wedding day. “I do not believe my husband intends to keep to such a vow of faithfulness.”

“Well, we can keep it in here for now.” Susan forced a smile and pressed the chrysanthemum into the bouquet.

Irene stepped in front of Isabella and offered her hands. “Time to stand, Sister,” she whispered. “Come on, now. You’re reminding me of the first day I was to go to an assembly. I was so nervous I didn’t want to go. Do you remember what you did?”

“What did I do?” Isabella asked softly.

“You took my hands like this.” Irene took both of Isabella’s palms and drew her to her feet. “And you reminded me that I was still healthy and happy. Nothing was really wrong in the world. It was only my own fears that made my life so worrisome.” Irene smiled and fiddled with Isabella’s loose curls. “You need not worry so much, Sister. I believe your life will be a good one with your husband.”

“I envy your optimism.” So captivated by her sister’s kindness, Isabella drew Irene forwards and embraced her.

“Wait for me!” Susan called on the other side of the room.

Isabella laughed and opened one of her arms. Susan put down the bouquet and ran towards her sisters, ready to be enveloped. The three of them stood there for some minutes in silence, just holding onto one another.

Eventually, Irene was the first to pull away, revealing a few tears in her eyes. “Oh, I am being silly. I will still see you all the time. It is just the end of an era.” She hurried away to get a handkerchief and pressed it to her eyes.

“I know what you mean.” Isabella found there were tears in her eyes too.

Irene produced another handkerchief for her sister, and she dried her tears.

“You look beautiful,” Susan said softly. “Come, look at your reflection.” She took Isabella’s hand and drew her towards the standing mirror at the side of the room.

Isabella looked at her feet for some time, reluctant to see her face. She had never felt beautiful. She wasn't like her sisters who were much more petite than her and certainly had an elegance she could never muster. It had been a secret fear of hers if she ever got married that she might trip on the church aisle and fall flat on her face.

*That might just happen today.*

“Look, Isabella,” Irene pleaded and tapped Isabella’s chin, urging her to look up.

Isabella smiled a little at the reflection she found there. It had been difficult to produce a wedding gown within just a few days. With their father lacking the funds, Isabella had made her own gown by using two old ones.

Made of cream and golden silk, it was a startling light dress. The brocade around the bust and the empire waistline was embroidered with detail Isabella had taken off one of her old gowns. There was an underskirt of cream chiffon and an overlay of golden lace with a small train that trailed behind her.

“Quite beautiful,” Irene said with a sigh. “I am sure your husband will think so too.”

*I am not so sure.*

Isabella took the bouquet that Susan offered her, finding one thought that occurred to her more than any other at that moment, and it was a strange one.

*I am marrying a man who took such little notice of me that he could not remember at first that we had met twice before.*

Her peace with her sisters was soon disturbed as Andrew knocked on their door. He hurried them all out of the room and down the stairs, into the carriage that awaited them. Rather foolishly, he seemed intent to be the perfect picture of a kind father and repeatedly offered his hand to Isabella.

She never took it, not once.

As the carriage pulled up outside the church, their father's conversation changed.

“At least married to a duke, your fortunes will change, Isabella,” he said, looking eagerly out the window and at the church.

The yellow-stone building was a plain one on the edge of town, for the Duke of Sutterton had said they needed a church out of the way, in order not to attract interest in the ceremony.

“There will be funds now,” Andrew continued to mutter. “For debts...” He said the words so quietly, lost in his own world, that Isabella wondered if he'd realized he'd said them out loud.



Isabella waited until her sisters stepped down before she took her father's arm, pinning him to the spot in the carriage.

“What is it?” he asked, his brows furrowing.

“Let me make myself clear, Father. You may have run your own finances into the ground because of your need to spend on your courtesans and your debts –”

“This is no way for a young lady to speak!” Andrew was outraged, his nose and cheeks turning purple as he tore his arm from her grasp.

“If you didn't want it spoken about, then you shouldn't have behaved in such a way,” she said with a small smile. “You have destroyed your own state of comfort, but I will not have you harm the Duke's. If you try to make a plea for his money, I will fight you all the way.”

Her words had clearly startled him, for as she stepped down from the carriage, he did not follow her at first. When he took her arm by the church door, his arm was stiff beneath hers. He no longer offered a kindly touch as he had pretended to do in the carriage.

As the church door opened, Isabella swallowed, feeling her nerves grow so much that her fingers began to tremble around the bouquet. There wasn't even organ music as she walked down the aisle. Her eyes darted around the church, finding it was sparse in every way. There were no flowers and very few guests.

Her own family were the only ones on her side, and on the Duke's side, there was Lord Hillson and his betrothed, along with a couple of other people who sat in the front row. Isabella recognized one or two of the faces, but she thought nothing more of it. Her focus was on the duke, who was standing at the altar.

At first, he didn't turn to look at her, not until Lord Hillson elbowed him. Slowly, Henry turned round.

When their eyes connected, Isabella could have fooled herself for a brief second that she was looking at the man she had danced with all those years ago. He actually smiled at her. There was nothing sardonic or mischievous in his smile. It was genuine. She found herself returning that look, yet it didn't last with either of them for long.

As she reached the altar, Lord Sinclair gave her away to the Duke. He seemed so eager to get the task done that he rushed it and hastened to the pews afterwards.

Henry's eyebrows lifted as he looked at Isabella, showing he had seen it all. Slowly, he placed her hand on his arm. It was such a tender touch, light compared to all the touches during that night they had met in the garden.

Her mouth felt dry.

*Who are you really, Your Grace? You seem like two entirely different men to me.*

Henry drew her towards the priest, a little distance from those who sat in the pews.

As they waited for the priest to say a prayer with his back turned towards them, Isabella whispered, “Are you certain about this, Your Grace? If you wish to turn back now, you can.”

Henry angled his head towards her, his eyes wide in surprise.

“I’m not the best of men, Isabella, Lord knows that, yet neither am I a demon walking this earth. I gave you my word, and I intend to stick to it, just as I do not intend to see you ruined.” With these words, he faced forwards, ready for the ceremony to begin.

Isabella was so stunned she could not summon a response. She thought only of the sentiment of his words, and one other thing.

*He dropped my title. He called me Isabella.*



Henry opened the carriage door and stepped down. As he turned to face his wife, she stalled in the doorway. Isabella’s chin jerked up to face the house, and her body froze, with her hands pressed to either side of her. The position showed off the fine gown and the neckline in a rather flattering way. He groaned inwardly and turned away from her.

*She is too tempting.*

“I forget this place can elicit such reaction,” Henry murmured, standing beside her and waiting for her to move.

It had been a strange day indeed. They’d married that morning, with the ceremony stilted, cold, and with little cause for celebration. The few friends and family who had gathered barely wished them well. John was the only one who managed to wish the Duke well.

In the carriage, Henry had scarcely uttered a word to Isabella. He’d simply reiterated the need for them not to have a wedding breakfast.

“This is hardly a celebration, is it?” he had argued.

Isabella hadn’t disputed his words.

Now that they’d arrived at the Duke’s house, it was all beginning to feel very real to him. Not just the idea of being married, but that Isabella was his wife.

“This is my new home?” Isabella muttered in amazement.

“You’re going to close your jaw, or would you like some help with that?” he teased and leaned back through the doorway of the carriage.

He tapped her chin once, making her mouth close. At first, she didn't pull away from his touch. She seemed to realize all at once how still she was and then jerked away from his hold.

"It's a house, nothing more," Henry pointed out.

"This is not a house. This is a... castle!" She waved a mad hand through the doorway.

Henry returned his focus to the Tudor manor. He could see what Isabella meant about the architecture being more akin to a castle in places. The red and white brick frontage was built on top of old rampart ruins. The mixture of grey stone against the red bricks spoke of its age.

"The dukedom goes back a long way," Henry explained quietly. "It was something my father was always keen on. 'A home should befit the man, Henry. That means a duke can have nothing less.'" he scoffed loudly as he repeated his father's words. "By right, that man should have lived in a hole in the ground then."

Isabella flicked her head towards him in surprise.

"What does that mean?"

"It hardly matters." Henry wasn't going to go into great depths about what his father was like. "It's a fine home, I know that well enough, but I don't have to like it very much. Are you ready to see it up close?"

He offered his hand to her. Gingerly, she took his hand, though her fingers barely touched his, and she flinched again as he helped her down from the carriage.

The Duke cast a quick glance at the footman, who was now removing her portmanteau from the back of the carriage. Seeing he was far enough away so they would not be overheard, Henry stepped closer to Isabella and whispered in her ear, “You jerk at my touch?”

“I didn’t.”

“Of course not,” he said sardonically. “And the King doesn’t expect all his servants to bow.”

At his words, Isabella frowned a little. “Are you always this sarcastic?”

“About as much as you, from what I know about you so far.” At his words, she smiled a little, though she appeared to fight that smile by pressing her lips together. “You can smile in my company, you know. I’m not wholly bad company.”

“You forget the last time I indulged your company alone.” She removed her hand from his and stepped down the driveway.

Her face was still an expression of awe as she gawked at the house.

“Maybe that night in the garden is not the best moment to judge me by,” he argued hurriedly as he followed her.

“You think not?” She laughed at the idea. “A rake half undressed in a garden? Quite an apt way to find you, I should think.”

“Isabella?” When he reached her side, she flinched, as if he had touched her again. “Firstly, let us discuss this.”

Henry glanced at the footman. Seeing him walking close by, He moved to stand very near Isabella. She stiffened at the movement.

*Why does she do that? Does she actually think I would hurt her?*

“Discuss what?” she asked hesitantly.

“You jumping as if I have burned you with a candle flame.” Henry shook his head, frowning. “I will not touch you, Isabella.”

“What do you mean?”

Her brows furrowed deeply that it crinkled her expression. The Duke had so often seen those fair features contorted into anger or frustration. He wondered what it would be like to see her truly laughing, giving way to happiness and

joy.

“You seem scared of me,” he replied. “I have no idea why—”

“None?” she asked, her tone now ironic. “I wonder why...” She turned and tapped her chin in thought, wandering in the direction of the house. “Rakes hardly make the finest of husbands, do they? And from what I have seen of your appetites,” she said, glancing at him, “you hardly hold back from your desires. Who cannot control themselves at a ball?”

“Isabella?” When his use of her name only made her walk on towards the house, he tried something else. “Bella?” His new name for her had her pausing on the spot, her fine shoes scuffing the gravel beneath her. She turned to face him, her wide eyes showing her surprise. “Well, that got your attention.”

“I’ve never been called that before.”

“Never? Hmm, I quite like it.” He closed the distance between them. “Let us make a few things clear so there is no more confusion between us. Firstly, I will not touch you. Ever.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Her head tipped back, and her arms folded across her chest. Henry was instantly distracted. Her gown was a fine one indeed and flattered her curvy figure. Her crossed arms accentuated the neckline of her gown, and he



groaned and lifted his head to look her in the eye.

*This is a hard resolution to make, but it is one I must keep to.*

“This will be a marriage in name, and nothing more. That is resolution one between us.” He raised his eyebrows, waiting for her reaction. She simply mirrored his look, lifting her eyebrows, though she said nothing. He continued towards the house, with her at his heels. “The second thing I wish to discuss between us is how we address one another. This house was beholden to formality, unnecessary curtsying and addresses for many years. You will call me Henry, and you will not curtsy to me.”

“Henry... you surprise me,” Isabella murmured. “I thought dukes were fond of such... deference.”

“I am not such a duke.” An image appeared in Henry’s mind of his father. For many years, that man had demanded his wife curtsied to him every day and addressed him as ‘Your Grace.’ Henry would not be his father. “In return, I will call you Bella. I quite like it. It rather suits you. Do you have any objections?”

“No.”

The smallest of smiles appeared on Isabella’s lips as they reached the front stairs of the house. He wondered if she secretly liked the name, but he didn’t feel he knew her well enough to ask.

They walked into the house, where the conversation abruptly finished between them. Henry waited as Isabella paused in the hallway. She turned around, staring at the mahogany panels, the white molded ceiling and the bright sunlight that shone through the windows.

*She finds it beautiful.*

“Anything else you would like to discuss?” Henry asked, clearing his throat and drawing her attention back to him.

“There is one thing I do not understand.” Isabella flicked her head back and forth, clearly making sure that the footman had hurried off and there were no other staff members around. “In our initial meeting, you made plenty of comments,” she began slowly. “Now, you are telling me you will not demand I share your bed?” She held out her hands in surprise. “I heard men have needs.” She didn’t look pleased as she said the words. “Is that not true, after all?”

“As you have seen, such needs can be satisfied in many different places.” At his statement, he didn’t miss the curling of her lip. She clearly took no pleasure in what he had to say. “It may shock you to hear this, but I ask for nothing from you.”

“Nothing?” she spluttered in surprise as he practically circled around her. “You reject my dowry and now... *this* too?”

“Yes.” He stilled, meeting her gaze. “It’s a marriage in name only. There will be nothing more between us, of that, you have my vow, and I do not intend to

break it.”

## CHAPTER 8



*J* sabella was reeling, unsure what to say or think.

*He wants nothing from me.*

Something curdled in her stomach, and her hands loosened from their folded position. She took hold of her skirt and crumpled it beneath her palms.

*Nothing...*

In her mind, she saw the night they had first met when they had danced together. The excitement the Duke had caused in her that night had always stayed with her, yet it seemed that thrill was never something to be indulged in.

The idea of marrying a rake might have worried her over the last few days, but she'd be lying to herself to say she hadn't been curious as to what sharing his bed might have been like. The comments from their night in the garden

and all the flirtation had resulted in a tension and a burning curiosity.

*Now, I will never know what it will be like to share His Grace's bed. No, to share Henry's bed.*

His name had felt strange on her tongue. It brought an intimacy into their relationship that he was already rejecting.

“You are blunt. I suppose I should be thankful for your candidness.”

Isabella turned away from him. At that moment, staring at his handsome face was only painful. It was a reminder that the fair face hid a heart that could be as dark as night.

*Is that who he really is? Is he so dark of heart that he would marry me and then keep his mistresses anyway?*

“Speaking of being candid, come this way.” He beckoned her forwards.

She followed him through a doorway and into a front room.

Isabella stumbled on the threshold, for her eyes were so busy taking in the parlor. It was a grand room indeed. Where many people's parlors were small and snug affairs, offering comfort and coziness, this one was ostentatious, with furniture that announced wealth rather than warmth at all. The fireplace was ornate with carvings in the mantelpiece, and the walls were either

paneled or covered in ancient-looking portraits.

“Cold, isn’t it?” Henry asked her. “That is another thing we should discuss. If this is to be your home too, then you should be comfortable here. Change anything in this house you wish to. The housekeeper will help you.”

He walked on suddenly, passing all the furniture and heading to a door in the far wall.

Isabella hurried after him, almost tripping on one of the chair legs, for she was too busy looking around her.

“You have no love for this house?” she asked in quick realization.

“You can change it to anything you see fit.”

Henry didn’t look at her as he spoke. There was an iciness between them now, a coldness that hadn’t even been there that night in the garden.

*Who are you really, Henry?*

Before, she had thought him two completely different men in one. Now, she was beginning to wonder how many different versions of him there were.

*The skilled dancer with the charismatic smile, the rake with flirtatious comments, or the cold husband... Is he all of them?*

They walked into another room, this one dotted with so many suits of armor that they glistened in the sunlight.

“Are you certain this isn’t a castle?” Isabella murmured, nearly bumping into Henry.

He reached out and caught her arm, keeping her standing straight. Such heat passed through that touch that she avoided looking him in the eye.

“This room was once the grand hall. It is in the oldest part of the house. My father used it for balls and grand dinners. It hasn’t been used for a long time.” He shook his head and looked away from the suits of armor, beckoning her on.

She followed him, heading towards what was a more modern part of the house. They walked through a music room full of instruments and then entered a dining room, where the oak table was so long that an immense crowd of people could be fitted around it.

“Now, let us talk about finances.”

“You seem to be rattling through these subjects,” Isabella observed, stopping at the foot of the table that was to be her new place.

Henry went to the head and stood behind his chair, leaning over the backrest.

“I am.”

He held her gaze. For a brief second, Isabella was looking at the man she had seen in that garden. He was staring at her as if they were discussing something more than money.

“As I said, I have no need of your dowry, so you can do what you like with it.”

“Completely?”

“Completely,” he confirmed with a sharp nod.

“Good.” She mirrored his position, leaning over the back of her chair. “Then I would like to make something clear myself. I do not want any money, anything of mine or yours, to go to my father.” She could see the surprise right away. His eyebrows shot up, softening the harshness of his features. “Not a single shilling.”

“Curious,” he said quietly and tilted his head to the side. He examined her so intensely that she shifted her weight between her feet, uncertain if she liked that look or not. “Why is that?”

“He cannot be trusted with it,” Isabella said in a rush. “I do not wish him to



have anything, but I'd like my dowry to go to my sisters' dowries. That way, they can still hope to make good matches themselves. My dowry was initially supposed to be more, Your Grace. I do not wish my father to whittle away their money the way he has done mine."

"Henry."

"What?"

"You called me 'Your Grace,' again." His expression was a serious one. "As I said, call me Henry." She nodded, feeling strange at the intimate air that was between them. "Money is no issue, Bella. If you wish to give your money to your sisters and more of our own, then you can."

"Are you certain?" Isabella raised herself off the chair in alarm. "You would not even make me ask for it? Good Lord! In my last home, I had to beg for money."

"Beg?" He chuckled softly, then shook his head. "Begging doesn't suit you."

"Suit me?" She was flummoxed at the idea and rounded the table, walking towards him. "What does that mean?"

"It means..." He paused and waited for her to reach his side before he folded his arms. "I will not have my wife begging me for money. Besides, if I try to imagine you begging..." He hesitated and tilted his head to the side, his eyes traveling down her gown. Her breath hitched at that look, for she wondered

what he was thinking. “I imagine you begging for something else rather than money.” When his eyes tarried on her gown, her lips parted in shock.

“You are vile,” she hissed. “You want your wife to beg for you to share her bed, is that it?”

He chuckled and stepped away, walking around the table. She hurried to follow behind him, shocked at his audacity.

“You’d be surprised what power it can have over a man to see a lady begging for his touches, Bella.” The words sent a shiver through her. She wasn’t sure if she feared what he meant or longed to know more of what he was insinuating. “Yet, as I said,” he continued, glancing over his shoulder at her, “I will not touch you. Therefore, do not even think about begging.”

He opened another door and continued with their tour. Isabella followed a little slower now, unable to understand why disappointment made her palms clammy.

*Even if I begged, he would not touch me... I’m powerless. Will I never know what the thrill of a man’s touch could be like?*

Henry showed her another couple of rooms before he came to a stop in the hall. He rang a bell and waited.

“I will introduce you to the housekeeper, Mrs. Walters, then I will leave you to get settled in your chamber.” He looked over her shoulder, showing no

interest at all in talking to her anymore.

“That’s it?” she asked in amazement. “Am I being dismissed from your sight, now to live a meek and mild life hidden away in the rooms of this house where you will not see me?”

“I do not expect you to live like a mouse.”

“That feels very much like what is being described to me.”

“You misunderstand.” His gaze flicked back towards her. “As we are to live with one another, I want you to be happy. Yet, we will live as separate lives as we both wished to from the outset. Neither of us wished to marry at all, least of all each other, remember?”

Isabella froze, for she heard the sound of a door opening and closing further down the corridor. Mrs. Walters was clearly hurrying towards them. Isabella only had time to say one more thing before their privacy would be disturbed.

“No, neither of us wished to be married, but perhaps I hoped my husband would be a friend to me, rather than insist we remain strangers.”

Her words had a sudden effect. His lips flattened, and his brow furrowed so much his temple wrinkled. It affected that handsome face almost more than any other expression she had seen on him, but he didn’t get a chance to reply to her.

Mrs. Walters was suddenly beside them.

“Mrs. Walters, may I introduce my wife, Isabella, the new Duchess of Sutterton.” Henry’s introduction had Isabella’s mouth turning dry.

*Good Lord, I am a duchess now.*

“Your Grace, I am delighted to meet you.”

Mrs. Walters was a slender and short lady, though her wide hands that were clasped in front of her showed she was a woman who was used to hard work. Her face was fair, and in her youth, she must have been a beauty. The auburn hair that was beginning to grey was tucked up into a neat chignon.

“I am pleased to meet you too, Mrs. Walters.” Isabella bobbed a curtsy in return.

“It is so long since we’ve had female company in this house,” Mrs. Walters said with a giggle. “I shall be able to decorate the house with flowers again.”

“I’d like that.” Isabella was fond of Mrs. Walters at once. Her smile was a broad one, and she stepped forwards, eager to please.

“I have your chamber all ready for you. I even asked the lady’s maid to prepare a bath in case you wanted one after the wedding...”

As Mrs. Walters continued welcoming Isabella warmly, the Duchess grew aware of Henry taking his leave.

He didn't say goodbye. He simply walked away and opened a door that Isabella hadn't seen. He offered no smile, no parting wave, though in the doorway he hesitated and looked back at her. There was something in the keenness of that stare she could not understand.

*I do not think I know him truly at all.*



Henry knocked the glass of brandy back, letting the burning feeling travel down his throat. It had proved a good way to distract himself tonight, even if drinking wasn't usually how he liked to indulge in pleasure.

"I will not go," Henry muttered aloud and reached for the decanter beside him to refill his glass.

He was sitting at his desk in his study. After his father had died, he'd ordered a redecoration of this one room so he would not so easily be reminded of his father when he sat here. The desk was a rather plain one, made of oak, with the occasional glass and brass inkwell scattered across the top. The silver tray beside him often presented him with open decanters, though he didn't always drink.

But tonight, he needed that brandy.

“No matter what the temptation, I will not go,” he muttered aloud again, somehow hopeful that if he kept repeating the words, they’d have control over him.

*Bella.*

His mind kept going back to his wife, who had long retired for the night. She had driven him mad all day, though she plainly had no knowledge of it. That fine wedding gown had hugged her curves perfectly, taunting him with images of what could play out between the two of them.

It didn’t seem to matter how distant or cold he had been with her that day, his mind kept returning to the night in the garden, where she had fallen on top of him and ended up straddling him. That look in her eyes, the hitching of her breath... it brought such pictures to his mind that it was as intoxicating as the liquor in his grasp.

He could picture Isabella being in this room with him now. Introducing such a lady to pleasure, he would be slow. First, he’d lay her on his desk, knocking away all the inkwells, just so he could lay her flat and bring the skirt of that wedding gown around her hips. He’d gather the cream and golden material, pulling tightly at it. He wouldn’t care if he ripped it. God, he’d even rip it from her body if it meant getting closer to her faster.

He’d delight her with his hand first, watching her first realization of what pleasure was. When he had her dithering on his desk, begging for more, her hands clutching the wood beneath her, then he would enter her. With their bodies joined as one, he’d ride out her pleasure on the desk, driving her into oblivion not once, but twice, before he found his own release.

“God damn it.”

Henry lowered the glass to the desk with a heavy thud. Some of the golden liquid dripped over the rim, and he wiped it away with the sleeve of his shirt, before rolling the sleeve up to his elbow.

*I have to stop thinking about her. I vowed I would not touch her.*

Sitting back in his chair, he looked at the one thing he kept of his father in this room. It was a vast portrait on the wall opposite him. Gregory Arnold’s face stared back at him. The heavy features were almost haggard, for the painting was completed when he was older, though Henry knew even then the painter had been kind. There were no pockmarks on his father’s face, and the hair wasn’t as grey as it should have been.

*The painter was too eager to flatter my father’s ego.*

He kept the painting there as a staunch reminder of his vow. He would not sire an heir. The dukedom had to die with him.

*That means I cannot bed her.*

“Well, I could.”

The words had him cursing and reaching for another brandy, pouring it out fast. Henry wasn’t so much a fool that he didn’t know how to be with a

woman without risking a child, yet he feared what the temptation of Isabella would do to him. It was always a risk, and then he would have broken his vow.

He downed his glass of brandy, grasped the one candle that had been keeping him company and hurried out of the study. He moved so fast that the candle flame flickered and the wax stick wobbled. Upon reaching the stairs, he walked up slowly, constantly wondering what he was doing, yet his addled brain seemed to have taken over.

*I'm not thinking clearly. I'm thinking of one thing only...*

That image of Isabella on his desk came back to him. He pictured the moment he would enter her and what her face would look like. Would those high cheekbones blush a deep shade of red? Would those dark green eyes, the color of stormy oceans, stare up at him? Or would they be half-lidded with her pleasure?

“Enough,” he whispered to himself as he traipsed the corridors.

Rather than ending up at his chamber door, he found Isabella's instead. He hovered outside her room, with his candle in his grasp, neither reaching for the door nor moving away.

*Why am I here?*

He couldn't answer his own question and didn't seek to. He just continued to



stand there, wondering what he would do next.

Closing his eyes so he shut out the light of the candle, he tried to think back to the first night he'd ever seen Isabella. Since John had reminded him of the dance he'd shared with her, the memory had kept returning.

Isabella had been announced at her debut, and she had walked down a set of steps on the arm of her father. She had been striking in her different beauty and astonishingly tall in the way that meant many looked at her, agog. Henry had stood at the bottom of those steps, his eyes tracing her long limbs, feeling an instant attraction.

*One dance, just one.*

When he'd built up the courage to ask her, for back then, he had little experience with ladies and was not so confident, her face had lit up with her smile. Those bold eyes had crinkled a little with her smile as he drew her towards the dance floor, and her gloved fingers had wrapped around his palm.

The sound of the door opening had Henry's eyes shooting open. Before he could even think of moving away, Isabella stepped out of her chamber.

Wearing nothing but her nightgown, with her cinnamon-colored hair loose around her shoulders, she turned and walked straight into him.

"God's wounds!" she exclaimed, falling against him.

Her hands were splayed across his waistcoat as his one free hand came up to grab her waist, holding her there so that she did not fall over.

## CHAPTER 9



“We should stop bumping into each other like this, Bella.”

Henry’s words had Isabella’s face instantly blushing. She thought he was making fun of her. Wherever she seemed to go, she was always falling over, always clumsy, and many of the times they had crossed paths, she had ended up falling against him.

“We can’t all be elegant like gazelles everywhere we walk.”

She pushed herself off him. His hand dropped from her waist as he smirked, but it took Isabella a few seconds to realize her hands were still against his waistcoat-clad chest. She snatched them away quickly, causing a soft chuckle to fall from his lips.

“Why are you here, Henry?”

“Why are you escaping your chamber dressed like that?” he shot back, his

eyes flitting downwards.

Never had Isabella felt so exposed. Her nightgown left little to the imagination, and her chemise reached just past her knees. It was cinched at the waist, highlighting her curves.

“I do not have to answer you,” she muttered fast. “I may have sworn to obey you in that church today, but you should know, it’s not a vow I intend to keep.”

“No?” He raised his eyebrow. “I can imagine a situation where it would be rather fun to give you orders. Playful orders, not strict ones.”

“Oh! Back to the flirtation?” She moved her hands to her hips in surprise. “This man has been missing today, has he not?” She nodded her head at him. “The last time I saw him was at the ball standing in the garden half undressed.”

“He doesn’t always make an appearance,” Henry said simply, still with that insufferable smile in place.

*It is unbearable, that smile!*

Yet at the same time, her eyes lingered on it, for part of her liked it.

“Where are you going?” he asked again. “Were you coming to find my

chamber?”

“You think I was going to try and persuade you out of your resolution not to bed me? Arrogant man indeed.” Isabella folded her arms across her chest. She had merely been restless, unable to sleep, and was looking for a distraction. Lying down in bed, she had stayed awake thanks to thoughts of what it could be like if Henry visited her. “I was simply going to take a turn around the house. I thought everyone had retired for the night.”

“And who takes a turn dressed like this?” Henry moved the candle down and up, lighting her figure in the thin white silk material even more. She grabbed hold of the candlestick and purposefully lifted it higher so it did not reveal her figure so much. “You like to take control, Bella.”

“I am not fond of being out of control.”

“Intriguing, indeed.”

She didn’t know what he meant, nor what that lopsided smile now hinted at. It suggested he was thinking things, and part of her longed to know what they were.

“What are you thinking?” she asked slowly.

Henry closed his eyes and lifted his head, purposefully tearing his gaze from her.

“Something tells me you would not be glad to know my thoughts.”

“I asked, did I not?”

“Well, unless you wanted to hear of what a rake thinks in the darkest hours of the night, you should return to your chamber, Bella.” He opened one eye, looking at her again. There was something in his words that sent a shiver up her spine, one of excitement. “Return,” he repeated.

“Not until you tell me why you are standing here?” she asked, raising her chin. “You can hardly say you just happened to be passing my chamber, can you? Mrs. Walters gave me a full tour of the house. Your chamber is far away from mine. Yes, another thing, how come you seem to have put me in the chamber that’s furthest from yours in this entire house?”

“You have to ask?” He quirked one eyebrow before leaning towards her an inch. “To make us both resist temptation.”

“Temptation?” She laughed, scoffing at the idea. “You think I’m tempted by you, Your Grace?”

“Henry,” he corrected her, his voice firmer now.

“I’m not.” She folded her arms once more, using them as a barrier between them.

*I will not be attracted to him. I refuse to allow myself to be!*

She tried to ignore the heat in her cheeks and across her chest, as well as the warmth that was spreading between her legs. She'd heard of what happened between men and women, she knew well enough what passed, but she hadn't thought the mere anticipation of it could have such an effect on her body. The hairs on her arms stood on end, and she felt heated, despite standing only in her nightgown.

“You are not tempted at all? Do not deny it.”

He stepped towards her, and she backed up and flattened herself against the door. She could have reached behind her and turned the door handle to retreat inside her room, yet she didn't. She stayed flat against the door with Henry standing in front of her, inching his head closer to hers. “We talked before of your reaction when you fell on top of me in that garden. You did not move off right away.”

“It was shock. That was all,” Isabella insisted, her voice deep. Yet, when her eyes flicked down to his lips, he smiled, showing he had seen it all. She closed her eyes firmly. “Why are you talking like this when you have already told me you will not bed me? What do you stand to gain from such conversations as this?”

“Amusement.” His chuckle had her eyes shooting open.

*He toys with me only. That is cruel.*

“Let us be honest with one another, Bella.”

His use of his new name for her had her wriggling against the door. She couldn't explain why she liked it so much. It made her feel like another woman entirely, a married woman free from home and the family she had grown up in. She felt someone new...

“We may not bed one another, but we'd be fools to deny there's an attraction here, isn't there?”

“I deny it. Full-heartedly.” She tilted her chin up again defiantly.

“Oh, truly? Not attracted at all?”

“I'd rather kiss a toad,” she said between gritted teeth.

“Let me find that toad and see which of us you'd rather kiss then.”

He moved closer towards her, his lips hovering over hers. The movement was so sudden that her hands reached out to the door behind her. She still could have taken hold of that handle, but she didn't. Her palms flattened against the door, and she held herself still.

They both breathed in short, stuttered gasps as they held themselves close to one another. Henry's lips were a mere hair's breadth from hers.



“So near,” he murmured, “yet so far.”

“What does that mean?”

She could have sworn for a second that she caught the scent of alcohol on his breath. It would have certainly explained his sudden return to this boldness and flirtation, when all day he had been completely cold to her.

“Let us agree, Bella, there’s attraction, but there will be no satisfaction. We will not lie to one another on that score.”

When his lips brushed her cheek, her breath hitched.

*No satisfaction...*

She swallowed uncomfortably, too tempted by the idea.

He backed up instantly, increasing the distance between them. He took his candle with him so he was bathed more in the orange glow than she was.

“Return to your chamber,” he begged with a quick wave of his hand. “Let us not find one another outside at night again if we are to keep to my vow.”

“You’re clearly tempted not to keep to it.”

At her words, he hesitated, his eyes flicking up from the candle flame to meet her gaze.

“Very tempted,” he said, his voice deepening. “Yet, I remember how you flinched earlier today as well.”

She *had* flinched. She could remember it all too easily. All through their wedding ceremony, she had feared that a rake would want satisfaction as soon as they were wed, but she was wrong. Henry was not what she had thought him to be at all.

“Goodnight, Bella.” He nodded his head towards the door again.

“Goodnight, Henry.”

When her voice deepened with saying his name, his head flicked a little higher, but he said nothing.

With a flailing hand, she reached for the door handle behind her and pushed the door open, stepping back inside. She didn’t even look at Henry when she closed it, yet she leaned against it and turned the lock hurriedly.

*What did any of that mean?*

She had no answer to her question, but a few seconds later, she heard the floorboards creak beneath his feet as he walked away.



“What do you think, Mrs. Walters?” Isabella held out one of the wallpaper samples that the housekeeper had been so kind to prepare for her that morning. “I’m fond of the color.” The paper was a soft duck egg blue. “But I’m not sure if it is too fussy. What do you think?”

Mrs. Walters smiled widely and placed a hand on her chest, as if in shock.

“You wish to know my opinion, Your Grace?”

“Of course, I would value it.”

“Thank you.” Mrs. Walters’ smile seemed ever fixed in place as she took the sample. “I think it very fine indeed. When it is up on the wall, it will not seem too fussy or busy, I think.”

“Yes, I believe you could be right.” Isabella took the sample and held it up against the wall.

She was standing in her favorite room of her new home, a much smaller drawing room. She preferred it to the large parlor and the grand hall, but it felt cold and needed some redecorating. Mrs. Walters had been happy to

assist her, and what had passed between them was a very pleasant morning indeed discussing the particulars.

*This is what I need. A chance to distract myself from what occurred last night with Henry.*

She could still picture the intense way his blue eyes had stared at her before she had retreated into her chamber.

A distant bell rang in the house, announcing someone's arrival. A minute or so later, the door was opened.

“Ah, good morning, Mr. Hawkins,” Isabella said as the butler stepped inside. It took her a minute to realize something was wrong. The butler was wringing his hands, and his face was turning red. “What is wrong?”

“There is a gentleman here who insists on seeing you, Your Grace. He says he is your father, yet he—”

Poor Mr. Hawkins was pushed to the side as Lord Sinclair appeared in the room.

“Father!” Isabella snapped. She turned to Mrs. Walters and took her arm. “Mrs. Walters, would you assist Mr. Hawkins, please? Tell him I am sorry for any injury caused.”

Mr. Hawkins recovered from where he had been flung against the doorframe, and Mrs. Walters ushered him away.

“I shall bring tea too, your Grace,” Mrs. Walters called.

“Yes, thank you.”

Isabella turned her focus on her father. Andrew was now pacing the room, with a cane gripped so tightly in his hand she thought he might break it. He did not hold the cane for any use, but for fashion alone, though she thought it made him look older than he was. She waited for the door to close behind the staff before she spoke.

“No wonder my new butler doubted you were whom you say you are. You stride into this house as if it is your own.”

Andrew turned to face her. His head had been flicking back and forth as he admired the room, though his eyes flashed with anger as they settled on her at last.

“I have not heard from you yet.” He shook his head.

“I have only been gone a day.”

“A day is all that’s needed.” He stepped towards her, his heavy features looking even more tired than they had done the day before. He hurriedly

pushed his greying hair back from his temple. “Do you have no duty, Isabella? No sense of doing right by your family?”

“I do not understand you.” Flummoxed, Isabella sat back in her seat and brought forwards all the samples she had been looking at. “What exactly are you talking about?”

“Money!”

At Andrew’s booming voice, she stilled, with the samples on her lap.

*I will give him none.*

“Any loyal daughter would recognize the situation her father is in. Now she is married, with a wealthy husband indeed, you would think she could muster it in herself to make use of him.”

“Do not talk about my husband in that manner.” Her voice was sharp, though she still didn’t look up from the fabrics. A strange protective tone took over her voice, one she only used when speaking about Irene or Susan.

“Isabella, do you not understand what is afoot?” Andrew shoved her samples out of the way, tossing them to the floor.

“Father!” she gasped.

Isabella tried to pick them back up again, but she and her father ended up tussling over the duck egg blue wallpaper sample she had been admiring with Mrs. Walters. They both tugged so hard on it that the sinews of their wrists turned white.

“I am in need of money,” Andrew hissed.

“To pay off your gambling debts? Or your courtesans?” Her sneer was plain and made him lean backwards. “Either way, you can hardly expect me to pay for them. I will not do it.” She held his stare, wanting him to know the truth. “I have already decided I will apportion my money to Irene and Susan. It will go towards their dowries, but not to you.”

“This is serious.” Lord Sinclair said firmly. “I am in trouble. If I do not pay my creditors soon, then they... they threaten violence against me.”

Isabella did not believe him. The hesitation was enough to persuade her he needed an extra second to think of some sort of emotional blackmail against her.

“Oh, really?” she said, pretending shock. She tried her best to retrieve the sample, yet he snatched it from her completely. “Give that back.”

“It is time you helped your family.” Andrew stood to his feet, still gripping the paper. “I am coming to you out of desperation. Do you not understand I would go anywhere else if I could?”

“Strangely, I do not believe you would, no.”

Isabella had no confidence in her father’s good heart. She could only think of the way his eyes had lit up once he had understood she was to marry the Duke of Sutterton.

“You will not help me at all?” he asked, wide-eyed. “You would cast your father out into the street. Even worse, you would put him into debtors’ prison.”

“Emotional blackmail again,” she murmured to herself and pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration.

But he showed no sign of having heard her.

“You must help me, Isabella. Now you are married, you are in a position to do so. I have such debts that if they are not paid off, they will hurt me. You can guarantee that will not happen. Do you want your old man walking around on crutches for the rest of his life?” Lord Sinclair pleaded.

“You walk with a cane,” she reminded him. He tossed the cane to the side, showing it was a fashion statement only. “If you are so in need of money, Father, why do you buy such useless things of fashion as that stick?”

“Isabella, you are not listening to me!” he bellowed. “Do you want your father to go to debtors’ prison?”



“Father.” Slowly, she moved to her feet. She matched him in height, so she was able to glare at him. “You are the one who has put yourself at risk of prison, not I.”

His reaction was sudden. He tore the sample in his hands in two.

“What are you doing?” she asked and tried to pick up the two scraps from the floor, but he kicked them out of the way.

“Reminding you what it’s like to see your life disappear before your eyes.”

“It’s a sample, hardly something of great worth.”

“I cannot understand you.” Andrew backed up, heading for the door. He was so angry at her that his face had turned puce. “May you be judged forever for refusing to help your father.”

“You could have helped yourself a hundred times by now,” she pointed out. “How many times have you fallen into debt? How many times do you continue to gamble regardless? I saw you borrow money from our family only to lose it all at the gambling dens instead of paying off what debt you did owe. Why would I help such a man who could not be trusted a single shilling?”

Her father didn’t answer but thrust the palm of his hand against the nearest chair. That chair tottered backwards and made a loud thud that echoed throughout the house.

“Father!”

Lord Sinclair stormed out of the drawing room, like a petulant child who had not gotten his way. He scurried down the hall, with Isabella hot on his heels.

“You cannot treat a house that is not your own in such a way.”

Yet, her words fell on deaf ears. She followed him all the way to the front door, which he flung open. He hesitated enough to look back at her.

“You are no daughter of mine, are you?” he said derisively, looking down his nose at her. “A true loving daughter would help.”

“A loving father would not ask his daughter for help in a mess of his own making.”

For a brief second, Isabella was afraid. She saw her father’s hand curl at his side as if he was tempted to strike her, then he was gone. He flew out of the house and banged the door shut behind him.

Breathing heavily, Isabella backed up from the door.

*Surely, he would not have struck me, would he?*

Shaking a little, she placed a hand on her stomach, breathing once deeply, and turned on her heel. She was about to return to the drawing room when she found someone in the way, standing in the hall and staring at her.

Henry was there.

“How much did you hear?” she whispered.

## CHAPTER 10



“Some of it.”

Henry’s voice was deep. He could not understand half of what he had just overheard. The thuds of furniture falling over, the shouting of voices, it had been a long time since his house had been privy to such arguments.

*Not since Gregory died.*

Henry had emerged from his study in time to see Isabella’s father taking his leave. She was trembling a little, though she was clearly trying to hide it with a hand to her stomach.

“Oh God,” she murmured and hurried past him, returning to the drawing room as quickly as she could.

Unable to let it go, Henry followed her.

“What exactly just happened?”

“If you heard something of what he said, then I am sure you can guess well enough.”

She walked into the drawing room and dropped to the floor.

Henry nearly tripped over her in his rush to follow her and jumped back. She was picking up pieces of a sample that had been torn into two pieces.

“This was the one I liked,” she murmured, talking to herself. She took just one piece and held it up against the wall, clearly trying to resume her redecorating plans, though her breath was still jittery. “What do you think? Mrs. Walters likes it.”

“Is this what you do to handle things like this? Carry on regardless?”

“What other way is there?” She shrugged and moved the sample against the wall.

Henry wasn't sure what took over him. All he knew was that he couldn't return to his study, not now. He crossed the room towards her, took the torn paper out of her hand and tossed it over his shoulder.

“Oi,” she said, her voice put out.

“You can decorate this place any way you like, I told you that,” he assured her in a rush. “What I wish to know is why your father is tossing over our furniture?”

He did a double take when he saw the tipped chair and moved towards it. He righted it quickly.

“Because he’s an odious man!” The sudden rant caught his attention. Flicking his head towards Isabella, he saw her clench her hands at her sides. She was trembling. “You cannot have been blind to what it is he wants. When you came to say you would marry me, I do not doubt he gave something of his character away.”

“You mean the want of money?” Henry asked calmly and leaned on the back of the armchair.

“A want? Ha!” Isabella tipped her head back and laughed derisively. “He wants money the way an ant craves sugar, or a bee wants honey. He *has* to have it. If he could die tomorrow drowning in cash, just for that money I think he might do it.”

“Irony or seriousness?” he asked. Isabella didn’t answer but raised a single eyebrow. “You frighten me.” He pretended to shudder out of fear.

Her angry face cracked into the briefest of smiles, and he smiled with her.

*That's better. It is how she should always be.*

“He asked for help” She gestured towards the door her father had just walked through. “Do not think me hard-hearted for refusing to help him.”

“Believe me, I wasn't going to.”

Henry knew what uneasy relationships with fathers were like. He wouldn't judge another for something that was so complicated.

“From the day my mother died, I saw him for who he really was.” She stepped forwards, her eyes glistening wet. Henry released the armchair and slowly walked towards her, yet she didn't let those tears fall down her cheeks. “I saw at such a young age what a gambler he was. He was disloyal too. He brought courtesans into our home. Can you imagine that? My youngest sister was a baby. Even the nights when she cried and wanted attention, he would be busying himself with the courtesans.”

Henry was horrified at the idea. He held himself still, waiting for Isabella to go on.

“He got himself into debt with his courtesans and gambling. He borrowed money from family and friends to pay off those debts, then never paid it off, and just made his situation worse.” She shrugged her shoulders. “If I gave him anything, it would all go the same way. It doesn't help.”

“I see.”

Henry's simple words seemed to take the wind out of her. She moved forwards and picked up the scrap that had been tossed to the floor. With one sniff, she showed she wasn't going to cry, then she returned to the wall and pressed the scrap flat against it.

"I like this one," she muttered quietly.

"Then have it." Henry's words were quiet and deep.

Nothing passed between them for a few seconds. There was only silence.

Henry felt as if he had glimpsed more of Isabella's heart at that moment. There was a fierce protectiveness for her sisters there, and good intentions too.

*She's a good woman.*

Sighing, he walked forwards, coming to lean against the wall beside her.

"Bella, I know something of what awful fathers are like." His words made her attention snap towards him, and her lips parted. "I do not blame you in the slightest for what has just happened."

"He's going to keep coming here, isn't he?" she whispered. "Asking for more



money.”

“Perhaps, but it doesn’t have to stay that way.” Henry shook his head as an idea occurred to him. “Shall I remind you that you are a duchess now? It is certainly higher standing than an earl. You have power when it comes to society. For the sake of your sisters, use it if you wish to.”

His words prompted a great smile to appear on her face.

*Now that is the smile I have been waiting for.*



“Oh.” The surprised tone had Henry turning around.

Isabella was standing a short distance away from him on the threshold of the stable.

After their discussion about her father the day before, Henry had avoided her. He hadn’t really been able to explain why he had felt the need to be apart from her, he just knew it had to happen. His plan to go on an early morning ride before she could rise this morning was now thwarted.

“You have come for a ride?” he asked in surprise, noting the riding habit she was wearing.

The dark green riding habit was the same one he had seen her in at her father's house the day he had come to propose. The high cinching of the waist had his eyes drifting down her body in such a way that she blushed.

“Are you waiting for my answer? Or did you need me to perform the answer instead?” She waved her arms in the air, showing she knew what he was doing.

Offering a mischievous smile, he looked away, seeking out his horse. The stable boy brought the black steed forwards a few seconds later.

“Thank you, Thomas.”

“Your Grace,” The boy turned to Isabella, “did you wish to go riding too?”

“Well, I...” she trailed off, her eyes darting to Henry.

“Do not let my intention to ride stop you.”

Henry was rather curious to see her ride again. When he had glimpsed her through the window of her house atop a horse, she'd looked athletic indeed, in command of the animal.

“Very well. Then, yes, please.” She moved towards the stable boy as he prepared a grey mare for her. Once they were prepared, Henry led the way out of the stable, with Isabella following behind on her mare. “Are we to ride

alone or together?” she asked as their horses ambled alongside each other.

They ambled down the driveway, the gravel audibly crunched beneath the horses’ hooves.

“Together?” Henry offered, seeing the surprise on her face. “What is it?”

“I could have sworn you were avoiding me,” she remarked quietly.

“Perhaps I was.” His confession had her head flicking towards him and her green eyes widening. “I’m not always good around temptation, Bella. I’ve told you that you tempt me well enough.”

Isabella smiled a little, and he had to look away from her, or he’d be tempted too far by her.

*Ah, to see her smile in a different way.*

“Come on then, let’s see just how good a rider you really are.”

Twisting the reins of the horse, Henry urged the animal to gallop down the driveway. Glancing back a few seconds later, he found Isabella riding with ease after him. She may have been riding side-saddle, yet she rode as well as any man did riding with his legs straddling the horse.

She followed him with ease as he tested her. First, he drew her into the forest, so she had to traverse the heavy tree roots and the thick low-lying branches. Next, he rode down a path up a hill. The steep climb had his steed snorting beneath him, yet the grey mare followed with such speed that she soon overtook him. Henry was forced to fall back, watching as Isabella rode out in front.

When she reached the top of the hill, she slowed the animal and turned to face him with a victorious smile.

“Was that a race?” she asked happily. “If it was, I think you’ll find I won.”

“I wish to say it wasn’t.”

“Why is that?”

“Because, usually, I win such races.”

He urged the horse to circle her own, just as she mirrored him, so they were circling around one another.

“Well, at least you have a true challenger now.”

At her words, he tipped his head back and laughed. There was something bold about Isabella he liked very much. She had never shied away from arguing with him, challenging him on all scores. It was nice to have someone

with such strength.

“Let us have a true race then,” he challenged confidently. “What do you say?”

“You just want a chance to beat me this time,” she accused with narrowed eyes. “You will cheat, I know it.”

“I promise not to.”

“You think I can believe such a promise?”

“Do I need to ask you to trust me again?”

“Hmm.” She lifted one of her hands from the reins and tapped her chin, as if deep in thought. “You are asking me once more to trust a rake. Goodness, that is like asking a gambler to hold onto some money for you!”

“Oh, harsh indeed,” he said sardonically and clutched his chest as if she had wounded him with her words. “I will struggle to pick up my hurt feelings now.”

“I daresay you’ll do well enough alone.” She laughed at him, then brought her horse to a halt, facing the path they had just taken to come up the hill.

Henry stopped beside her, moving so close that his leg nearly brushed hers as she maintained the side-saddle position.

Isabella did not comment on it, yet her eyes flicked towards their legs, and she raised her eyebrow, showing she had seen what he had done.

“Ready for that race?”

“Tell me where we are going then.” She motioned towards the trees.

“If you follow this path, a turning will appear on the left.” He gestured towards the tree line. “Take that path and ride all the way to the bottom of the hill. Our finish line will be the river that borders the house lawn. What do you say?”

Isabella chewed her lip in thought.

Henry’s eyes darted towards her lip, finding it stirred all sorts of imaginings in him. Her flushed and breathless appearance thanks to the ride wasn’t helping him, neither was picturing how her legs were slung around the pommel of the saddle.

*Behave!*

He was beginning to think his resolution to stay away from her might have been too harsh on them both. They were clearly tempted by one another.

*What if we had just one night of pleasure? Maybe it would work us out of one another's systems.*

“Very well.” She stopped biting her lip and wrapped the reins around one of her gloved hands. “On the count of three?”

“One,” he began, nudging the horse forwards a single step.

“Two,” she said, taking another step forwards.

“Three.” At his count, they both shot ahead, making the horses gallop fast.

One second, they had been standing calmly at the top of the hill, but now, everything was a rushed blur to Henry. He could see out of the corner of his eyes Isabella racing at his side, but he had to focus ahead on what he was doing.

Urging the steed to jump over a fallen tree trunk, he continued on, with the horse snorting once in complaint beneath him. Isabella jumped over the same tree a mere second later, and her mare did not protest in response.

Henry took the turning he'd described to her, and they shot down the steep incline, heading back towards the lawn and the river that surrounded it. There were just a few bridges along the river, but he knew from having had this ride before that his horse could jump across the gap well enough and land on the

other side. He just had to be prepared for that jump.

When they emerged from the trees, Isabella caught up to him. They were riding neck and neck, with neither one of them out in front. Glancing at his side, Henry felt a huge thrill. He could not remember feeling this sort of happiness on this estate for a long time. Isabella looked equally happy, her face spread into a large smile.

“Get ready to jump!” he called as he reached the river and made the horse leap.

“What—Oh!” Isabella’s words panicked him.

Landing on the other side of the river, he twisted in his saddle, looking back as he pulled harshly on the reins. The horse whinnied as he turned round.

Isabella had plainly not expected the river to be so near. Rather than jumping across the river, the mare ran straight into the water. But the river was deeper than it looked. The horse’s legs disappeared beneath the water, then she panicked and reared backwards.

“Bella!” Henry called in fear, standing up in the stirrups.

Isabella was tipped backwards in her saddle. She clung to the reins for so long, but it was impossible to stay there forever. Her side-saddle position gave her less purchase on the leather, and she slipped off, falling towards the water.



“No! Bella!”

Isabella splashed loudly into the water, creating such a fountain of droplets that it even coated Henry.

## CHAPTER 11



The impact of the water stung. Isabella floated under the water for a minute, watching as the horse's hooves moved away from her and bubbles surrounded her. All at once, she regained her senses. Finding the riverbed beneath her feet, she drove her boots into the silt and pushed herself upwards.

It was deep enough that she was up to her chest in the water. Unable to stay still, for it was so slippery underfoot, she kept wobbling from side to side.

Sudden laughter escaped her lips. Yes, the impact may have hurt, but it had been a long time since she had fallen off a horse. There was something so entertaining about the idea of riding so free and falling that she couldn't resist it. More than once, her father had told her she was too wild when she rode. He had insisted she should be practicing her pianoforte, something she had always refused to do.

Henry dismounted his horse and stood gawking at her, his mouth wide open.

"You're laughing? Good Lord! Are you hurt? Did you hit your head?" He

shrugged off his jacket fast and jumped into the water, creating more splashes.

“Ha! Do you mean have I lost my mind?” Isabella wobbled on her feet and fell backwards again. “Ah!” She dropped under the water but managed to recover herself, spitting out some of the river foam as she stood once again. “Look at me,” she said between bouts of laughter, turning to face Henry. “Do I look like a duchess now?”

The flicker of a smile appeared on his lips as he shook his head.

“This is really not the response I was expecting.” He began to chuckle, striding towards her through the water. “I thought you had injured yourself.”

“It would take more than that.” She tried to step back, aware he was coming close, but her boot stepped on something slippery. “Was that a fish? An eel? Ah!” She fell backwards again.

Any laughter that might have been tempted to escape halted under the water.

Before she could push herself upwards again, a pair of hands found her. Henry took hold of her waist firmly and tugged her upwards, making her stand.

“Puh!” She spat out some of the water to her side, staggering to stand, when she realized Henry had still not let go of her. “I do not need your help, Henry!”

“No? All right then.” He released her, and she abruptly fell again. “Wait.” Before she could slip under the water, he caught her.

“Cruel man,” she muttered, prompting him to laugh.

“You said you didn’t want help. I thought you wanted me to release you.”

“You are being difficult on purpose.”

She tapped him round the arm in reprimand, only to find he laughed again. Suddenly, it was easy to laugh with him, as if they had done it hundreds of times before.

“Put your feet down so you stop falling over.” His hands slipped a little, moving down to the curve of her hips.

“They are down. The ground is just slippery.”

Isabella planted her feet wide apart, hoping it would help. When she became settled, her gaze shot down to her clothes. Her riding habit was plastered to her, leaving little to the imagination of just how her corset hugged her figure. Henry’s palms were firmly on the curve of her hips, his fingers eliciting an excitement that shot somewhere deep between her legs.

“You’re holding on rather tight.”

“You might fall again,” Henry said with a mischievous smile. “As amusing as it is to be the one to pull you out, I might get curses thrown at my head if I release you.”

“You are holding my hips, Henry.”

“I had noticed, Bella.” His sarcastic reply had her tapping him round the arm in reprimand once more, a little firmer this time. He merely laughed and tugged her forwards, using her hips to direct her towards the riverbank. “Shall we get you out of here? Before I’m tempted to move my hands.”

“Move them? Where?” she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Oh, do not tempt me to answer that question.”

He turned her around so she was facing the riverbank and he was standing behind her, with his hands still on her hips. Then, he paused.

“I thought you were going to help me out?” she asked.

“I’m just enjoying the moment.”

“Henry!” she chided through laughter, and he chuckled too.

“Ah, it’s too easy to tease you,” he whispered in her ear.

That abruptly ended her laughter and had a shiver running up her spine. She wondered what more he would tease her about if he had simply not put in this silly rule not to bed her.

*Why won’t he bed me, anyway? What is so wrong with the idea?*

He hoisted her onto the bank with his hands on her hips, lifting her as if she weighed nothing, despite her height. The firmness of his grip had her imagining things, wondering what it would be like if he held her hips when she was bare.

*Stop it, you fool.*

He released her, and she stumbled away on the riverbank, increasing the distance between them.

“Now, I don’t know who won that race.” Henry stepped up and looked down at his sodden trousers. “I think it may have been me.”

“You?” Isabella turned to face him with her hands on her hips. “I reached here at the same point as you.”

“Yes, but I did cross the finish line.” He smirked as he pointed at the river. “Or should we adjust the rules retrospectively to the aim being to fall into the river?”

“Oh! Cruel indeed.” She stepped towards him and thrust a finger against his chest accusingly. “You did not mention the river was so nearby. I was not prepared for it, or I could have made the mare jump.”

“Or...” He bent over her, lowering his voice. “You could concede I won.”

“Never,” she murmured with a smile.

“Would it be so bad? Losing to me?” he asked as her smile faltered.

She looked up, wondering exactly what he meant by those words. His lips hovered over hers, just as they had done outside of her chamber a couple of nights before.

“What does that entail, exactly?” she whispered, thinking of the short distance between them. He could have easily closed it if he wished to, yet he hovered there, teasing her.

“Many things,” he murmured, plainly talking about other things than their race with the horses. “How much do you know of what a man and woman do, Bella?”

“Enough.”

“Enough? That is not a good answer.”

He leaned closer to her, his breath tickling her ear. His lips traced a path up her neck. She bent her head back, so intoxicated at his proximity, and she wondered if he would kiss her, but his lips never quite found her skin firmly enough.

“Do you know what happens when a man pleases a woman, Isabella?”

“I know what happens when they share their bodies completely.”

“No, Bella.” His voice grew huskier. “I meant when a man is there *purely* to see a woman pleased.”

His words confused her. She blinked, uncertain of what to say. Henry moved his face in front of hers and smiled, his mischief so plain she was tongue-tied.

“Ah, I see you do not. If only I could introduce you to it. I would feel as if I had won then.”

*Why don't you show me, Henry?*



The words nearly escaped Isabella's lips. She was so tempted to push him further. He was clearly attracted by the idea of being with her, as she was with him, so why had he made this silly rule between them? It hardly made sense!

"Your Grace? Your Grace?" A boy's voice approached them.

Henry released her, backing up so suddenly that Isabella tottered on her feet. She reached towards the grey mare, who had pulled herself out of the river, and clutched the reins, keeping herself standing.

The stable boy, Thomas, and the stable master were running towards them.

"We saw the accident," Thomas hastened to say. "Is everything well?"

"Your Grace." The stable master moved to Isabella's side. "Are you hurt? Is there anything you need?"

"That is kind of you, but I am well, I assure you." Isabella was truly touched by their kindness.

"The horse may be a little spooked, but nothing more, I think," Henry said with ease, as if they hadn't just been talking about the most intimate things that could happen between a man and a woman.

*How can he be so calm?*

“You are good to come and check on us both.”

Henry clapped Thomas on the shoulder good-naturedly. It struck her the way both Thomas and the stable master looked at him with wide smiles.

*They do not just respect him, but they like him too, very much.*

She thought of the way her family’s staff stared at her father. They always looked at him with suspicion and fear.

*Henry is nothing like him though, isn’t he? They both may have earned the title ‘rake’ in their time, but they’re different men.*

“Perhaps we’ve had enough riding for one day.”

Henry took the reins of his horse and began to walk in the direction of the stable. The stable master collected the reins of the mare and led her back, allowing Isabella to hurry behind.

*Rake.*

The moment the word had occurred to her, she’d been unsettled. A few minutes ago, she had been wondering what it would be like to give herself

completely to Henry. Now, she thought herself a fool. Had she forgotten he was a rake? She was hardly ignorant of the fact he'd declared he would have mistresses!

*I'd be opening myself up to heartbreak.*

Yet, as she waited for them to put the horses away, she hovered in the stable, in no hurry to leave Henry behind and return to the house. As she watched him, she both disliked him and liked him very much. She was attracted to him. She wanted to know what a kiss would be like, yet she also feared what power he had over her.

*I don't know what to think of him anymore.*

When he appeared beside her, done with the horses, they walked back towards the house together. Neither of them said anything, though they both tried to shake off excess water thanks to their dip in the river. Isabella took down her updo as she walked and squeezed the water out of her hair. It seemed to capture Henry's attention, for he hovered on the front step of the house, watching her, before he gestured for her to go inside.

Resting her hair on her shoulder, Isabella nodded her thanks and walked inside.

*What does all this silence mean?*

Henry cleared his throat as they both reached the bottom of the stairs

together.

“For a minute, it was like our first night again, wasn’t it?” he asked, his voice soft.

“What do you mean?” Isabella looked at him as they climbed a few of the steps.

“The flirtation.”

“Before you put a ban on anything more intimate happening between us?”

“Ah, so you do remember,” he teased her, though he did not smile. “Very much like the first night.”

Isabella froze on the stairs, not quite following him. Her halt had him turning back to face her, a few steps up.

“It wasn’t the first night we met.”

She felt a temptation to tell him the truth. She had dreamt of that night so many times over the last few years. The fact that he’d never spoken about it and couldn’t even remember her gutted her.

*Maybe all these touches and flirtations are the work of a rake, and he means nothing more by them at all. He could bed me in the end and then return to his mistresses.*

“You mean when you spilled a drink on me?” Henry asked, quirking an eyebrow as he put his hands in his damp pockets. He realized what he’d done a second later and pulled his hands back out.

“No, that’s not what I meant.” she said quietly, wondering if he would ever remember. “Never mind.”

Taking hold of her damp skirt, she hitched it a little higher so she could walk up the stairs freely. Suddenly, he caught her elbow as she was about to move past him.

“You mean at your debut when we danced.” The sudden words had her freezing. Darting her gaze towards him, her hair flicked around her shoulder. “Ah, you thought I had forgotten, hadn’t you?”

“You did forget. You did.” Her eyes were wide. “You had no idea who I was when we met in the garden.” She moved one step up so his hand dropped from her elbow. It made her taller than him. “You couldn’t recognize me amongst the other ladies, the way you could not recognize a star from another.”

“Oh, I could.” He took a step up himself so he was above her head height once again. “It may have just taken a while for the memory to stir.”

“To stir!” she repeated in amazement, taking another step up.

“Is this a competition?” he asked, pointing towards the stairs and matching her movement. “In the end, you’ll run out of steps, and I’ll win.”

“You never said.” She ignored his words and thought only of that first night. “You pretended you did not know me at all.”

“As I said, it took a while for the memory to stir,” he repeated in a rush. “I remember that night. I recall the dance.” His smile was suddenly broad. “I seemed to think at the time you rather liked me.”

“Well, in our second meeting, you made it abundantly clear what you thought of me. It was not quite the look of a lover, was it that night I spilled my drink on you?” she asked with thick sarcasm, and his smile fell. “You glared at me as if you despised my very being,” she mumbled.

“Bella—”

“Your Grace?”

Mrs. Walters’ voice had them jumping away from one another. Isabella backed up against the banister, uncertain what emotion raged inside her more. Was it anger at what had passed between them in the past? Or attraction now?

“Your Grace.” Mrs. Walters hurried up the stairs in Isabella’s direction,

holding onto a letter. “Goodness, what has happened?” she asked, gesturing towards Isabella’s gown.

“An accident.” Isabella waved the issue away.

“Well, a letter arrived whilst you were out. I thought you should see it at once.”

Isabella took the letter and recognized her sister’s handwriting on the face of the envelope. She tore open the letter, then her eyes danced over her sister’s words, which had been written in clear haste.

*Dear Sister,*

*Pray, let me call on you later today. Something has happened that I must speak to you about! It seems our father is determined to do what he can to repay his debts. I had no idea they amounted to so much, but he plans to use Susan and I to sort out his situation.*

*I must speak to you.*

*With love,*

*Irene.*

## CHAPTER 12



Henry couldn't leave, not now. He'd sent a hurried letter to John to explain that, regrettably, he couldn't join him for a hunt that afternoon. The moment Isabella had received that letter from her sister, her manner had changed.

*I feel a strange responsibility to stay here with her.*

He sat in the corner of the drawing room, where their redecorating had begun. As he sat in the armchair trying to read a book that Isabella had left behind on the study of the human mind, he was aware of her pacing back and forth. Even when he attempted to talk to her about the studies in the book, she would not be drawn in. It was a testament to her fear.

Soon enough, Irene arrived. She was shown into the drawing room by the butler with tears already on her cheeks.

"Irene!" Isabella flung her arms around her sister. There was such love in that embrace that Henry had to watch. He discarded the book on the table beside him and sat forwards, his gaze on the two sisters. "Goodness, Irene, what has



happened?” Isabella stood back. She searched her sleeves, but finding she had no handkerchief, she looked at Henry. He reached into his pocket and produced one. “Thank you. Sister, you remember Henry?”

“Of course. Your Grace.” Irene bobbed a curtsy to him through her tears before she took the handkerchief from her sister and tried to dry her cheeks.

“Please, call me Henry,” he said hurriedly. “I am not one for formalities in my own home.” His words had her smiling briefly.

“That is kind.”

“What has happened?” Isabella’s question had Irene’s focus returning to her.

“It is Father.” Irene’s breath hitched. “He wishes to marry Susan and me off.”

Henry watched as Isabella’s body stiffened. It wasn’t just a straightening of a spine, but a rigidness that absorbed her entire body, as if the words had converted her skin to the hard surface of the marble.

“To whom?” Isabella asked, her voice growing deep.

“His debtors!”

Irene wailed and hid her face in her hands. Isabella backed up, placing a hand over her mouth. She turned in a circle, her eyes never meeting Henry's, though he sought out her gaze. He would have been happy for her to look at him pleadingly then, asking for help.

*I would do anything.*

He'd seen firsthand what it was like when a woman was married to a man she did not love.

*What happened to my mother will not happen to another.*

"God's blood," Isabella muttered and looked back at her sister. "I told Father I would help with your dowries. He plainly intends to use them to pay off his debts by marrying you both off."

"It's true." Irene's words were muffled by her hands over her face. "It gets worse."

"Why?" Isabella peeled her sister's hands away from her mouth. It was a careful and slow action, one done with love.

*She has tenderness in her, devotion too.*

Henry could not stop watching Isabella. It wasn't just her face that entranced him at that moment, but these small actions, with her hands taking hold of her

sister's.

“I met a man last week,” Irene whispered in a rush, blushing and hanging her head in embarrassment. “I know it is absurd to have such hope of courtship after one meeting, but I cannot help it, Isabella. He is so kind in manner, and I believe he likes me too. We danced twice together.”

“Then he did like you,” Henry said simply from across the room.

The Duke knew no man would risk the talk of a connection between him and a lady without being fond of the woman.

Irene smiled a little at the words before she gave way to her crying.

“Now, what chance do I have of ever seeing what could happen between this gentleman and me if I am to be married to another regardless?” Her breath hitched, and she hid her face in the handkerchief.

Isabella returned to her pacing, with her hands on her hips.

“This is absurd, madness, every wild word I could possibly think of. Has Father taken leave of all of his senses? I know him to be a fool, but not one so careless as this.” She turned her head back to face her sister. “What has he told you of times? Does he intend to make these marriages happen fast?”

“He keeps talking about how you two married by special license.” Irene

gestured between her sister and Henry.

Henry sat back in his seat, aware that Isabella looked at him at last. There was a fierceness in her expression, a strength he had not seen before. He couldn't help admiring it.

“That will not be allowed to happen,” Isabella spoke firmly before softening her tone and taking her sister's hands once again, lowering them from her face. “Irene, it cannot happen. I assure you of that.”

“I can help,” Henry offered, unable to stay quiet anymore. Isabella flicked her gaze towards him, a deep frown of evident suspicion on her face. “The word of a duke can help matters like this.”

“No.” Isabella's word came so quickly that he was stunned. She shook her head firmly. “Thank you, Henry. I know you are trying to help, but no. It is not your battle to face. It is ours.” She gestured between her and her sister. “I would not ask it of you.”

“I'm offering it, you are not asking,” he pointed out.

“It is the same thing.” She waved a hand at him, dismissing his offer all the more. “It is my battle to fight, and I will fight it.”

She turned to face her sister again so quickly, she could not have possibly seen his expression. He was smiling, quite in awe of the command she had taken over the conversation.

*She sometimes has the capacity to be very impressive indeed.*

“What do I do?” Irene asked between her tears. “I cannot imagine marrying a man I feel nothing for. Whose presence I cannot stand to be in. The mere thought...” She broke off, her breath shuddering. “Surely, such an existence would be a miserable thing?”

“Indeed, it would.”

Irene didn't look at Henry upon hearing Isabella's words, though the Duke felt there now could be a duality in the meaning of what had been said.

*Isabella is tied to a man she would not have married if she'd had a choice, isn't she?*

Henry looked at Isabella, waiting for any kind of glance from her. Despite all his vows not to go near her, he frequently did, didn't he? Disobeying his own requests. There was more to the attraction though. He wanted her to be happy and content in this house, to view it as her home, even if he could never be to her what another husband might have been.

*Ah, Bella, I am so sorry.*

Feeling the guilt writhing in his stomach, he sat forwards, resting his elbows on his knees.

“We will do something.” Isabella stepped towards her sister, her manner abrupt and her head held high. “Irene, I need you to trust me on this.”

“Of course I trust you.”

“Then trust that I will get you and Susan out of this.” Isabella threaded her hand through her sister’s, entwining their fingers together. “Whom you both marry will be of your choice. I will make sure of that, I promise you.” She leaned towards her sister, clearly waiting for an answer.

Irene managed to pause her tears and offered the smallest of smiles.

“What can you do, Isabella?”

“Leave that to me.” Isabella was firm, not for one second cowering, second-guessing herself, or even biting her lip with nerves. “There are many ways to change our father’s mind. It just has to be done. Where is Susan now?”

“She’s at home arguing with him. He keeps saying her betrothed is coming to meet her tonight. Oh, he is old compared to her! He is three times her age. Can you imagine Susan married to such a man?”

There was something that made Henry quite sick about the idea. He could remember seeing Susan at his wedding. She was little more than a child if that, perhaps nineteen years of age at most. To think of a man in his sixties

trying to bed her made nausea swell in his stomach.

*It must be stopped. Isabella won't let me help her, but it must come to an end.*

“It will not happen, I promise you that.” Isabella took her sister’s arm. “Trust me, I will sort everything out. Now, you go home and look after Susan. Keep her away from this gentleman if you can this evening, and I will arrange it all.”

Henry caught the end of their goodbye. He let them say goodbye to one another at the door, not following for fear of intrusion. When Isabella eventually returned to the drawing room, he held out his hand.

“Well? What are you going to do?” he asked slowly.

Isabella stood very still, her hands on her hips, back to making that impression of a marble statue. She said nothing for a minute before her lips parted.

“I do not know.” Her whispered confession had Henry moving to his feet.

“Come with me, please,” he beckoned her to follow him through another door.

They walked out of the drawing room together and took a narrow corridor that curved back round to his study. Henry strode inside, holding the door

open for Isabella to follow him. She cautiously walked inside, turning her head right and left.

“This is where you like to hide then?” she asked as he closed the door behind her. “Don’t think I hadn’t noticed you often like to hide.”

“Let us not talk about that for now.” He was in no mood to explain he sometimes shut himself away from her, just to keep her beyond his reach. “Take a look.” He leaned against his desk and gestured towards his father’s portrait.

Isabella turned to look at it, her movements growing slower as her eyes found his father’s.

At once, Henry felt a strange stirring in his gut. It was all too easy to picture himself introducing Isabella to his father in reality. That man would have been cruel in their meeting, Henry had no doubt. Gregory would have belittled her and made it clear that he thought her an ill-fitting wife for his son. He would have mocked her bluestocking ways and the fact she had not married when she was younger.

*He would have been foul indeed.*

Isabella looked between the painting and Henry.

“Meet my father,” he explained, his voice strained.



“You do not look much like him,” she said slowly.

“Thank God. Though I wish we looked even less like one another in truth.” He sighed deeply, his eyes tarrying on Gregory’s face.

The memory of the last time he had seen his father came back to him. Henry had already committed to his promise to ruin the name of the dukedom. In his journeys abroad, he’d misbehaved, and that reputation had followed him home. One night, he’d acted badly at the theatre, drawing a widowed lady to spend a few hours with him. Nothing was ever known for certain, yet whispers had spread like wildfire.

When Henry had returned to the house that night, Gregory had been waiting on the doorstep. They had argued outside. His father hadn’t backed down from his fury, outraged that Henry had been working so hard to undo the ‘good’ reputation he’d built over the years. Even when Henry had tried to point out that few people had actually respected Gregory to begin with, thinking him a cruel and distant man, he had not been able to accept it.

“I have respect wherever I go. Look at my staff,” his father had stated arrogantly.

Henry had laughed in his face.

“You think your servants care about you? You think they like you? They cannot stand you!” Henry’s words had made his father back up in surprise. “You think any human could be fond of another when they are so foul, so stuck up, so concerned with their own business. Hawkins puts on a brave face

in front of you, but when his wife died, you didn't even ask how he was coping with it. You sent no well-wishes, did you? Nothing!"

Gregory had backed up further still, stumbling against the doorstep. It was at that moment Henry had realized his father hadn't even paid attention to the fact Hawkins had lost his wife. Gregory had been too busy thinking about his own problems to think of anyone else's issues.

"You keep this here?" Isabella's question had the memory fading. Henry shifted where he perched on the corner of the desk, trying to find some sort of seated position that was more comfortable. "I have seen no other pictures of him in the house."

"That is because I have had them all taken down," Henry hurried to explain.

"Then why keep this one?" Isabella looked between the chair where he would sit at the desk and the painting. "God's wounds. It is as if he's watching over you as you work. Examining you!"

"Sometimes I feel he does," Henry whispered.

Isabella turned to face him now with burning curiosity in her gaze. He only hesitated briefly, wondering if it was a good idea. Never did he think he would tell the truth about his father to anyone but John. At this moment though, Henry saw how it could help Isabella to know something about how another father had run his life.

“I told you before I know something about awful fathers.”

“You did,” she murmured.

Slowly, she turned her body and sat beside him on the desk. Her arm brushed his, distracting him momentarily, though she didn’t seem to notice.

*Maybe she has more of an effect on me at the moment than I do her.*

“What does that mean, exactly?” she asked, her words coming slowly and carefully. “What kind of man was he?”

“That may take a while to explain.” Henry shifted his gaze from hers to the portrait, looking at the depths of his father’s eyes.

“We have time,” Isabella whispered.

“True. I can tell you his story.” Henry sighed deeply. “What I have to say, many do not know about the last Duke of Sutterton. Some think him a respectable man, but I know the truth. I know what sort of heart he truly had.”

## CHAPTER 13



Isabella waited for Henry to go on, holding her breath. There was a tension that hung in the air between them, but not the sexual kind that had often lingered there. This was a tension that came with revealing secrets.

“What you need to know about the last duke was that his reputation mattered to him more than anything else.” Henry paused and looked at the ceiling before cursing. It was plain he sent a plea to God for help for the strength to tell this story. “It mattered more to him than me, and certainly more than my mother.”

“More than anyone?” Isabella asked.

Henry nodded slowly, never once taking his eyes off the painting.

“I always knew he wasn’t like other fathers.” His next words came in a rush as if he had to get it off his chest quickly. “Growing up, he didn’t play games, nothing of the sort. I remember being very little and coming to find him once in this room. I thought he might play with me.” He laughed at himself, yet the short sound didn’t last long. “He sent me out of the room with a clip to my

ears.”

“For just asking?” she whispered.

“Yes.” Henry cleared his throat and blushed a little. It was clearly painful to speak of, though he went on regardless. “My mother decided to keep us apart for as much as possible. God, I loved her for that. She was devoted.”

He smiled suddenly. That smile was such a genuine one that lit up his features, Isabella couldn't help smiling a little himself. It was as if his mother's ghost walked before them, holding out her hand to her son, for he didn't look at the painting but at the air itself.

“She played with me. She was a true mother. Never once did she leave me to the care of a tutor or even a maid. She was always there.” Henry adjusted his position on the desk, sitting back a little further with his gaze still on the empty air. “When my father went into one of his tempers, unhappy with something we had done, she'd take me off to a different wing of the house, create a world for me that was far away from him.”

“She sounds like a loving mother,” Isabella whispered, her voice soft.

“She was,” Henry agreed, his voice startlingly firm. “He belittled her, frequently.” He waved a sharp hand in his father's direction. “As I grew up, I saw their relationship for what it really was. He insisted she curtsied to him every time she walked into a room. She addressed him as ‘Your Grace.’” The scorn reminded Isabella of what Henry had said on the first day of their marriage. He had insisted she would never do such a thing. “I don't think he

ever cared for her.”

“Not at all?” Isabella asked in shock. “He married her.”

“Because she came with a dowry and was born into a good family. As he said, ‘she did her duty.’” He huffed loudly. “By that, he meant she bore his heir. Me.” On the final word, he laid a hand on his chest, his voice pitching high in disgust. “It was all he wanted, for the dukedom to live on. It disgusted me. The first chance I had, I got away. I went to the continent and traveled.”

“When was this?”

“After my university days. My mother and I wrote to one another practically every week. My father only wrote when he wanted me home, to show me off as the next heir.” He shook his head in plain derision. “One of the times I came home was the night of your debut.” He glanced at her, though his gaze didn’t linger long. “A year later, I returned again, though my father should have made me come home sooner.” He paused and breathed deeply.

Sensing it was difficult for him, Isabella slid a little closer to him on the desk. Her arm brushed his, and the slight touch had the words tumbling from his lips.

“My mother was sick. It was the white plague,” he muttered darkly.

Isabella blinked, for she’d heard and read much about it. She knew how cruel a sickness it was to die from and the pallor it gave to the sufferer’s skin.

“I’m so sorry, Henry,” she whispered.

“You see?” He waved towards her suddenly. “You never met her, yet you have empathy for her. My father, who was married to her for so many years, did not shed a single tear. He had no empathy in him, nothing.” His tone had darkened to something that could have been frightening had she not seen the pain in his expression. It made his eyes narrow, never once blinking. “He revealed a heart of stone. He didn’t tell me she was sick. Hawkins did that.”

“Your kind butler?”

“Yes,” Henry replied, looking at the painting. “Hawkins wrote to me. I came running, but I was too late.” He swallowed uncomfortably. “She died a few hours before I got here.”

He glared at the painting. There was not a sound between them for a minute. The only sound in the room came from a ticking clock on the mantelpiece.

Unsure what to do, all Isabella wished for was to make Henry smile again. No teasing would suit this moment, and she didn’t know how he’d respond to an offer of affection.

*Be brave, Isabella.*

She raised her hand and laid it gently on his upper arm. When that touch

made him take a deep breath, she lowered her hand down his arm, and the back of her hand brushed his. Their fingers slid against each other in the softest of touches. It was tender, and it made her heart flutter in her chest.

“I challenged my father on why he didn’t send for me,” he whispered, his voice barely audible at all. “It was as if the idea hadn’t even occurred to him that we would want to say goodbye to each other. Instead, he let her die alone. The doctor assured me she died peacefully, but it’s not the same, is it?” He shook his head, knowing the answer without having to wait for one. “It’s not the same as having the son you love beside you when it happens.”

“No, it’s not,” Isabella agreed. She turned her hand against his, giving him the opportunity to take it in his own. He took that chance, his hand grasping hers. The way their fingers intertwined had her heart slowing in her chest. “He should have given you the chance to be there.”

“He should have,” Henry said firmly, his glower still on the painting. “All the misery he put my mother through, all those years, and he couldn’t even give her a comfortable passing. I hated him for it.”

Isabella was startled that he didn’t cry. There was such passion in the way he spoke, yet he seemed to wear armor over his face. There was anger, but he did not show vulnerability. He kept it firmly hidden.

“Fathers... they can destroy our lives if we let them, Isabella. This is how I know what it is like to have an awful father. I lived with him for too long,” he whispered, raising their joint hands and gesturing towards the painting with them. “But that is the past.” Slowly, he lowered their hands and breathed deeply. “I have chosen my life since.” He revealed the flicker of a smile.



“You can do as you see fit, Henry. You are a duke. You have the independence to live life as you wish to.”

“I do,” he agreed with a nod. “Yet, that shouldn’t be singular to me.” He turned to face her, that passion still in his expression. “You should have that chance too, as should your sisters. We are not defined by them.” He nodded his head at his father. “If I was to be defined by him, then I would be truly miserable by this point in my life. I will not let him win.”

Isabella smiled at his words.

*He’s trying to help me.*

She knew Henry now better than she had ever known him before. He’d let her into a part of his world she had known nothing about, purely in the aim of helping her.

“Do what you wish to help your sisters and defy your father. You say it is your fight,” he said hurriedly.

“And it is.” She raised her eyebrow.

His lips twitched into the smallest of smiles.

“Defiant as ever.”

“I am.”

“I’m here if you want any help. Believe me, I’d give it in a heartbeat.” His eyes quickly flicked to the painting before he returned to looking at her.

They stared at each other for so long that the air shifted between them again. Isabella was aware of how close they sat with his head bent towards her and their hands clasped together.

“You confuse me,” she confessed.

“Confuse you? How?”

“Sometimes you seem like two completely different men.” She held his gaze, watching as his eyes narrowed a little.

“Who are these men?” he asked.

“The flirtatious rake,” she replied, “and this man here.” His eyes widened. “Who are you exactly, Henry?”

“It sounds like you’re getting to know me.” He merely smiled, not quite answering her question.

*You confuse me indeed.*

They sat there smiling at one another. They were sitting so near to one another that Isabella didn't want to resist that distance. His head was bent towards hers. Remembering what his lips had felt like when they had traced her neck outside of her chamber, she wondered what it would feel like now.

*Would it be passionate? Or would such a kiss be tender and soft to match the air we have created here?*

She held her breath, wondering if he would kiss her.

Abruptly, Henry cleared his throat and stepped off the desk. When he released her hand, she found her palm cold without his touch. It ended all too fast for Isabella's liking. One second she had been praying for his kiss, and now she was limp on his desk, wondering why their moment had ended.

"Now you know my story, you know me better," Henry said, casting a weary glance at his father's painting. "I tell you to stir you into action and to let you know I'm here if you wish for help. So, what will you do about your father?"

"I have an idea."

Something began to build in Isabella's mind. It was a way to get her father to leave Irene and Susan alone. It would hardly end his gambling and manipulative ways for good, but it could be enough to get him to back off so for now, her sisters could make their own decisions over whom to marry.

When Henry said nothing, she understood what he wanted. His back was towards her, indicating that no more discussion was to be had.

*He wishes me to leave the room.*

She stood to her feet and moved towards the door, walking around him so she could look him in the eye.

“One more thing,” she said, waiting for him to look at her. “Maybe someday soon you should take that painting down.”

“Why?” he asked, his nose wrinkling at the very thought.

“Because having a permanent reminder of a man so disliked must only bring unhappiness every time you step into this room. Don’t you think?” she pointed out, then she was gone, striding out of the room.

As she walked, she raised her head higher. There was something empowering about Henry’s story. He’d taken control of his life, and she intended to do so as well.

*For Irene and Susan’s sake, I have to try.*



“Good day, Wetherby,” Isabella said as she strode into her father’s house. “I am here to see my father.”

“Of course.” The butler didn’t question her and motioned for her to wait in the sitting room. “Shall I send for Lady Irene and Lady Susan too?”

“Not yet.” She stood uncomfortably in the room, repeatedly fidgeting with her gloves. “I do not wish for them to hear this part of the conversation I am to share with my father.”

“Very good, Your Grace.” Wetherby bowed to her, using her new title, and left the room.

Isabella was glad he forgot to ask for her gloves, as it meant she had something to wring between her fingers in her stressed state. Looking around the room, she had no desire to sit in the chairs she had once called her own. Striding into the middle of the space, she remained standing and waited for her father to appear.

“Isabella?” her father called as the door opened. He immediately smiled. “I am so glad you have changed my mind.”

“I beg your pardon?” She nearly dropped her gloves in surprise.

“Well, that is why you are here, isn’t it?” he asked, crossing the room towards her. To put distance between them, she moved and stood beside a rococo settee, not letting him touch her. “You are here to give me that money,

after all. I knew you would not let down your old man.”

“Prepare yourself, Father, for you are about to be greatly disappointed.”

“What?” The smile on his thick cheeks began to fade. “But you are here...” He gestured towards her. “You wished to see me.”

“So that we could talk with no confusion between us.”

She motioned for him to take a seat. At first, he refused, but then she insisted. It was as if she had the greater power now, even though he was her father, for he did as she asked and sat, perching on the edge of his chair.

“If you think I have come to offer you money, then you are mistaken. I will hold true to my resolution not to give you a shilling. Nothing.”

Andrew sat motionless, his hands loosely curled around his kneecaps. He stared at her as if they were strangers to one another, with no hint of affection.

“I will not take my husband’s money to pay for your errors.”

“What of your own?” he asked hurriedly. “I gave up a dowry for you to be wed, and I heard your husband say he has no need of it. You could give it back to me, Isabella.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why would I give it back?”

“So I can pay my debts!” he replied, frustrated. “I did not know my investments were to go so foul until the evening after you were wed. It’s imperative I now have that money back.” He emphasized the words so much that spittle formed at the corners of his lips.

Isabella fiddled with her gloves, buying time before she replied. As far as she could see, her father didn’t look at her as if he was her father at all. He stared at her more as a pig farmer might look at a swine in a meat market.

*He looks at me only to ask for money.*

“When you talk about investments, do you really mean business?” Isabella asked with a knowing smirk. “Investments? That’s a funny term for the gambling tables. I haven’t heard it called that before.”

Her sarcasm had his expression darkening. He looked at her with such hatred at that moment.

“You cannot judge me,” he hissed.

“I can judge you however I see fit.”

“I will not bear this.” He moved to his feet.

“Well, you will have to bear it a little longer.”

“Why?” he barked.

“Because I have news for you, Father.” She smiled at him with a sense of victory. “I am here to tell you that you will not be forcing Susan and Irene to marry those you owe money to.”

His angry expression lapsed for a moment into humor.

“Do you think you have such power over me, Isabella? You are my daughter, after all.”

“And a duchess.”

Isabella remembered something Henry had said. She might have told him she didn't need his help, but as he had reminded her, she could use their position. It was something that gave influence and could make others shudder at what



power there was in such a title.

“Let me speak plainly, Father. If you attempt to marry Irene and Susan off to any man that is not of their choosing, then I shall ensure that my husband weighs in on the matter.”

“How would the Duke stop it?” Lord Sinclair asked, holding his arms wide open.

“I would ask my husband to speak to the local magistrate. He’s already told me he would be happy to do so.” She bent the truth a little, just to scare her father. “The magistrate will be informed of the sheer extent of your debts. Once they know more about your affairs, they will start investigating. I imagine the gambling tables don’t pay nearly as well when you’re sitting behind the bars of a debtors’ prison. What do you say, Father?”

Andrew stared at her as if he was looking at a ghost. His eyes didn’t really focus on her but looked through her.

“You would do that to me? Have you no love? No conscience at all?”

“Do you?” she countered, her voice louder than his. “If you did, then you would not be intending to marry your daughters off to your gambling friends. You have no love for Irene and Susan now, do you? No sense of conscience at all. So, I am warning you of this now. Continue with your ruse to pay off your debts by marrying Irene and Susan off, and I will ensure you see a debtor’s prison.”

## CHAPTER 14



*A*ndrew had been shouting for so long that a tea tray had been brought up and Isabella had finished one cup already. She let him shout, for there was nothing he could do to change her mind. He ranted, raved, paced up and down, even knocked her cup from her hand when she was finished with it. Fortunately, it didn't break because it fell on the rococo settee. She returned it to its saucer on the tray before she stood, showing she was unmoved.

“Do I have your word, Father? Or do I need to arrange a conversation with a magistrate?” Her question knocked the wind out of Andrew at last.

He stood a short distance from her, his breathing heavy as he glared. She rather imagined he'd morphed into a bull with his nostrils flaring in anger.

Just over his shoulder, Isabella caught sight of the fact that the door had been opened somewhere during their exchange. Both Irene and Susan had popped their heads through the gap and were listening intently. Judging by their red eyes and the screwed-up handkerchief Susan held against the door, both of them had been crying.

“Father?” Isabella flicked her eyes back to her father, not wanting him to see they were there. “Do I have your agreement?”

Reluctantly, he nodded. It was sharp, short and sudden. Turning his back on her, Lord Sinclair ran his fingers through his hair and pulled on the tendrils, walking all the way to the window. Isabella used the opportunity to wave at her sisters, encouraging them to hide behind the door. Irene went first, and judging by the sharp retreat of Susan, Irene must have tugged on her skirt to remove her too.

Andrew turned to face Isabella one last time.

“You have made an error here today, Isabella. You have driven this family apart.”

She stared, her lips parted, stunned at the audacity of his statement.

“You think that? Well, perhaps you should have been a better father, Andrew. You were so loving, weren’t you?” she asked with sarcasm. “You loved your daughters, cared for them when they had bad nightmares or were scared of the world, didn’t you? Oh no, that’s right, you didn’t. You would rather keep your courtesans company and gamble away any money you had to prepare for your daughters’ future. Don’t ask for love now, Father, when you offered none yourself.”

Andrew fell down into the nearest chair, dropping his face in his hands. Sensing victory, Isabella left the room and closed the door behind her. Walking straight into her sisters, she barely managed to stop herself from

yelping at the collision.

Irene took her hand and dragged her all the way to the garden, with Susan following behind. The moment they were out in the safety of the garden, far away from where Andrew would be able to hear them, both Irene and Susan embraced her tightly.

“I cannot believe you did it,” Susan muttered in amazement. “You threatened him!”

“What else was there to do?” Isabella asked with a laugh. “I wasn’t going to stand by and watch him make your lives a misery.”

“Oh, thank you. Thank you so much.” Irene clung to her neck.

“Irene, need to breathe!” Isabella strained against her sister’s hold.

“My turn.” Susan knocked Irene out of the way and was the next to cling to Isabella’s neck.

“Still can’t breathe!” Isabella’s complaint had both sisters laughing and stepping back.

“I can’t believe you fixed it,” Irene said repeatedly, shaking her head. “Do you think Father will keep to the agreement?”

“He may waver, yet if he does, I will remind him of debtors’ prison. That should keep his intentions at bay. You’re both safe.”

Isabella knew her father well enough that he would do anything to avoid that. She’d once heard the housekeeper’s suspicion that he’d stolen from one of the maids, just to repay his debtors a few coins. He would risk anything to avoid losing everything completely.

Susan clung to her hand and Irene held onto her arm, bobbing up and down.

“We are safe indeed,” Irene murmured.

“Now you can tell that gentleman caller of yours that all is well,” Isabella said with mischief, watching as Irene blushed.

“We’ll see.”

They all laughed together.

“How about you?” Susan asked. “How are you and your husband?”

“What do you mean?” Isabella flinched, uncertain how to handle the words.

“I’m all too aware of what has just happened,” Susan murmured. “You have saved us from forced marriages, but is that not what you have yourself?”

“Well...” Isabella offered a strained smile. “We can’t all be so fortunate. Henry has kindness in him as well. He’s not so wholly unlikeable.”

“I’d think you would say that after you fell *on top of him* in a garden,” Irene said playfully.

“When did you get so audacious?” Isabella pretended to be outraged at her sister.

They spent next few minutes teasing one another, and Isabella tried to find out more about Irene’s suitor, though she discovered little. It was plain Irene was keeping things a secret as much as she could for now. Eventually, Isabella said goodbye. She took the carriage, and her sisters waved her off in the driveway. Through the window, she caught sight of her father who watched her leave too, though he did not bother to wave or smile at her.

*Our relationship is damaged forever now, but it had to be. It had to be to save Susan and Irene.*

Isabella did not regret it. As the carriage took her home, she continued to smile to herself, so delighted and proud of what she had done, that she had the desire to tell a certain someone about it.

*Henry.*

The moment she arrived home, she planned on telling him the good news. He had been clearly concerned about her sisters' predicament. That morning over breakfast, he had actually joined her in the dining room. They'd sat together, and he had nudged her many times, trying to discover what she had planned to do about her father.

"You will let me know, won't you?" had been his final words before she had left.

*He cares. Of that, I'm certain.*

The image of a caring Henry didn't quite add up to the rumors she'd heard of him being a rake. It didn't even match the man she had seen in that garden, half undressed and clearly spending elicited minutes in a tryst.

*God's wounds, who is he really!?*

When she reached the house, she thanked the driver and hurried inside. Hawkins opened the front door with his usual kindly smile and bowed.

"Good day, Your Grace."

"Good day, Hawkins. Do you know where my husband is?"

“Yes. His Grace is in his chamber. I believe he has just returned from a ride.”

“Ah, thank you.”

Isabella hesitated. It was only natural for Hawkins not to think there was anything worrisome in pointing a wife towards her husband’s chamber.

*He thinks I have been in there before.*

Swallowing past her nerves, Isabella headed for the stairs. She wanted to see Henry, and she was not going to be cowed by the fact he was in such an intimate space as his chamber. Rushing through the house, she stopped at his door and knocked speedily.

“Well, that’s a hurried knock,” he called from inside.

“It is I,” she called back.

“You can come in.”

She opened the door.

“I just want to—Oh heavens!” She came to a sudden stop, her heels driving into the floor just as the door closed behind her.



“Heavens?” Henry faced her with a pleased smile. “Now, I can’t remember ever having that reaction before.”

He was not fully dressed. He was wearing his trousers and his hessian boots, but his shirt was missing. In front of him on the bed, a clean shirt was laid out for him, but he hadn’t yet put it on.

Isabella’s mouth turned dry. She parted her lips to say something, yet no words escaped her. With anxious movements of her eyes, she looked at him, taking in everything.

From this position, the broadness of his shoulders compared to her own was plain to see. There was a liveness to the muscles in his chest, showing how he kept himself fit. His arms were toned, where hers were willowy, and his stomach muscles dipped into a v shape beneath his trousers. When her eyes lingered on that area, a chuckle escaped his lips.

“Distracted, are you, Bella?”

“No.” Realizing she was ogling him so openly, she turned on her heel, quickly making a circle before she looked at him again. “You didn’t have to say I could come in!”

“You saw me nearly without my shirt on before, may I remind you?” he said with that same mischievous smile still in place. He picked up the shirt, as if ready to pull it over his head, but he did not busy himself with the task. “Besides, you were the one impatiently knocking on my door.”

“I... erm... that was because...” Isabella couldn’t help it. She rather imagined she had no control over herself anymore. She was too busy staring at him, thinking of his chest, which was on display.

*No, do not let your imagination go wandering!*

Yet, it did, regardless. She thought of herself sitting on the edge of the bed, where his clothes were now, with her fingers running over his exposed chest. Would he tip his head back and indulge in her touch? Would he bend forwards and kiss her?

“Bella?” he called.

“Hmm?” She looked up again.

“You wanted to tell me something, didn’t you?” he asked and dropped the shirt on the bed.

“Yes, I...”

When he moved away from the bed, she mirrored his actions but stepped back. He continued to walk forwards until her back pressed against the wall, then he stopped in front of her, with one of his hands planted on the wall beside her waist.

“I...” She tried again. Her eyes shot downwards to look at him before she closed them firmly.

“Ha! Well, I’ve never quite had this effect on someone.”

“Oh, do you think saying things like that helps?” she scoffed, opening her eyes again. “That simply reminds me of what a rake you are.”

“Really? Quite different from my thoughts. Because I was just thinking that I am a married man, half undressed, and my bride has walked into my chamber.”

“Do not tease me now,” she pleaded.

“Why not?”

He moved an inch towards her. One of his boots moved to stand beside her own, with his legs brushing the side of her skirt. He came so near to her that she couldn’t think straight. He’d addled her mind the same way that liquor could, making her think up was down.

“I came to talk of something serious,” she murmured, her breathing making her chest flutter restlessly. He must have noticed, for his gaze shot down to her chest. “Henry!” She flicked her hands in front of his face, making him look her in the eye again. “You and I talked about this before. You said you would not bed me. You made that a vow. If you really meant it, what is all this teasing about? What is *this* about?”

She gestured towards his chest. When her fingers accidentally brushed against his skin, she snapped her hand away.

“Ah,” he sighed with a smile on his face. “Call me weak, Bella. I made a promise to you, but if you asked me kindly, I might just be willing to break it.”

“Break it?” she repeated.

Images filled Isabella’s mind of her pushing him back on his bed and begging him to show her what truly could happen between them. She was still curious to know what he’d meant that time he’d whispered to her about a man being there just to pleasure a woman alone...

“If you asked me, I might break the promise.” He moved towards her. “Is that what you wish for, Bella?”

She was breathless, her lips parting, ready to give in to him. It would be so easy to say yes, to see what he meant by such taunts. When she said nothing at all, merely remaining silent, he moved even closer to her.

“Bella?”

The way he whispered her name made a shiver run up her spine. Her hands flattened against the wall behind her, but she made no movement to get away

or escape. Why would she, when being trapped between him and a wall felt this exciting?

He moved his lips to her cheek. It wasn't quite a kiss, merely a taste of what could be, then he inched his lips downwards and found the curve of her neck. She gasped at the briefest of touches he left there, reminding her of the near kisses he'd given her that first night outside of her chamber.

*Just one kiss. Oh, to know what that could be like!*

“You are not pushing me away,” he observed quietly, moving his lips further down her neck.

When he found a sweet spot on her collarbone, he pressed his lips more firmly against her skin, giving her the first proper kiss she'd ever known. Her toes curled in her shoes at the sensation. It was a thrill, and it somehow seemed to reach deep down her body, right into her core, even though he'd only touched her neck.

“Do you wish me to stop?” he whispered, kissing her on the collarbone again. This time, he parted his lips to playfully nip her too.

She scarcely managed to hold back a sound of pleasure and bit the inside of her cheek, stopping that sound from escaping.

“Bella?”

He was taunting her as he raised his lips back up across her neck. His touch was feather-light before it reached her cheek and then her lips.

Isabella could so easily close the distance between them and kiss him. It was clear what he was waiting for, for her to make that move.

“Your Grace?” a voice abruptly came behind the closed door.

Henry’s hands flattened against the wall behind Isabella with a thud as he jerked his head back.

*So close...*

## CHAPTER 15



“*A*h, so near,” Henry whispered to Isabella as he backed up from her.

He’d been overcome with desire at that moment and his need for Isabella. To fully make her his wife had been so great a temptation, and had she given him that single kiss he was begging for, he might not have been able to hold back.

“Your Grace?” Hawkins called again behind the door.

“What is it?” Henry asked, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice.

His eyes were still on Isabella, watching as her chest heaved up and down with heavy breaths. She hadn’t once taken her eyes off him, and he found he loved that look.

*Just keep looking at me in that way, Bella.*

“You have a visitor, Your Grace. She is most eager to see you. It is the Marchioness of Paulbridge.”

Henry turned his eyes to the door in surprise. The words had broken the spell Isabella had on him.

“Who is that?” Isabella asked softly.

“You saw her at our wedding,” Henry answered in a rush as he returned to the bed. He pulled his shirt over his head. “She was sitting on my side of the pews. She is an old friend.”

“I see.”

“Thank you, Hawkins, tell her we’ll be down momentarily,” Henry called to his butler.

“Will do, Your Grace.”

As soon as the footsteps had receded from the door, Henry took the opportunity of being alone with Isabella again. After tucking his shirt into his trousers, he pulled on his waistcoat and walked towards her. She still hadn’t moved away from the wall.

“If only we hadn’t been interrupted,” he said with mischief, then winked.



Her lips flickered into a smile, then she stepped away from the wall, at last.

“Don’t tease me now,” she said. “You have a visitor.”

“We do. She has probably called to congratulate us on the wedding.”

Henry hurried to finish getting changed, and Isabella stood there beside him the entire time. He found he liked her eyes on him. It was full of promises of what more could be shared between them.

“As you have watched me change, does that mean I get to see you do the same sometime?” he asked playfully.

In answer, she rolled her eyes and turned her back, heading for the door. He chuckled warmly as he followed her. Despite her wit at times and her resistance towards him, she had nearly melted then, as much as he had done.

*There could be something passionate here if we both just indulged.*

They strode out of the door together and hurried down the stairs. When Henry’s eyes fell on Lady Paulbridge in the hallway, he smiled at once. She was a good friend, and they had known each other for so long that they knew each other’s quirks through and through, as well as each other’s demons.

Lady Paulbridge knew about his difficulties with his father, and he knew about her need to be admired, which was plain to see in how she dealt with everyone, especially since her marriage to the Marquess of Paulbridge.

“Mary?” Henry called to her as he stepped off the staircase.

“Henry!” She turned and smiled sweetly.

Mary’s fair hair was swept back in an elaborate coif, and her blue eyes were bold. The narrow cheekbones and softly pointed chin announced her beauty easily. She did not quite have the striking beauty that Isabella had, the one that Henry found himself glancing back at now. Mary had more of a sweet face, one that some men coveted.

“It is so good to see you again, Henry.”

Mary didn’t bother curtsying, as they had known each other for so long they didn’t bother with such formalities. She strode towards him, meeting him in the middle of the room and clasping his hand instead.

“It is good to see you too.” He went to release her hand, but she didn’t let go of it straight away.

Startled, he stood there staring at her for a beat.

“Ahem.” Isabella’s forced cough had him dropping Mary’s hand in an

instant.

“You will have seen my wife at our wedding,” Henry said, happily turning to Isabella, who had a rather forced smile in place, one that was very unnatural.

*To see her smile again as she did moments ago!*

Henry found he resented Mary’s arrival, despite their friendship. He would have happily spent more time alone with his wife.

“Allow me now to introduce you properly. My wife, Isabella, the Duchess of Sutterton. Bella, this is my good friend of many years, Mary, the Marchioness of Paulbridge.” Henry gestured between the two of them.

Isabella offered a deep curtsy, despite her superior station, and Mary curtsied in return.

“I’m delighted to meet you properly at last,” Mary said. “To meet the woman who has made dear Henry settle down. You are quite a miracle worker, Your Grace!”

The praise made Henry uncomfortable. He pulled at his cravat and looked at his wife.

“Hmm, a miracle indeed,” Isabella murmured with sarcasm, though Henry seemed to be the only one aware of her sardonic tone.

He shared a playful look with her, as Mary continued.

“I had to come and congratulate you both properly now that you have settled into your marriage.” Mary gestured towards the door to the sitting room and walked inside. “I hope you don’t mind, but I asked your butler to prepare some tea for us.”

“Of course not,” Henry said and followed her. He only took one step before Isabella took his arm and wrenched him back. “Something wrong?” he whispered to her.

“She has made herself quite at home, hasn’t she?” Isabella muttered under her breath, nodding her head at where Mary had disappeared into their sitting room.

“She’s an old friend.” Henry shrugged, not thinking anything of it.

“Oh, dear! Henry!” Mary called from inside the room. “You are making changes, I see. What possessed you to choose this color?”

Isabella’s lips tightened together, and she raised a single eyebrow.

“I didn’t say she was the politest of friends,” Henry said in a rush and threaded Isabella’s arm through his. “Trust me. When you get to know her better, you’ll see she can be a good friend to you too.” He drew his wife into

the sitting room.

“What cloud are you living on?” Isabella murmured before they had to fall quiet in their conversation.

Mary was gesturing around the sitting room to where Isabella’s changes had already been made. Some of the footmen had put up the new duck egg blue wallpaper, and new chairs had been covered in soft whites and creams to compliment the look. On nearby tables, there were tablecloths rimmed in blue and white.

“Gosh, what color it is,” Mary said with a giggle, then covered her eyes. “I’m almost blinded.”

“I like the changes,” Henry stated and released Isabella. She seemed rather keen to get away from him to his dismay, as she sat down in a nearby chair. “It was too drab before.” He felt it was the truth.

His father had kept this room dark, but Isabella had brought light and color into it.

*It feels much cozier now than it ever did before.*

“Well, I suppose one can get used to it.” Mary waved off her previous words and sat down on a settee opposite Isabella. As a tea tray was brought in, both ladies reached forwards at once to serve tea. “Oh heavens! What must you think of me.” Mary giggled in that childish way of hers. “I was so used to

taking on the role of being a hostess in this house when I came to visit that it felt quite natural to do the same now.”

“Hostess?” Isabella murmured, firmly taking hold of the teapot and pouring three cups of tea. “Your friendship has been a long and... close one then?” She looked at Henry with the words.

*She suspects it's more.*

“Long,” Henry said simply and sat down beside Isabella in another armchair. He'd put himself between them, and Mary used that opportunity to reach out and tap his knee.

He thought nothing of it at first. How many times had Mary offered such informal touches in the past? It was the way they were.

“He's being modest,” Mary said sweetly. “He's been a kind friend to me. For all your rakish ways, Henry,” she whispered, then gasped as if his reputation was a great horror. “You have always treated me differently to other ladies, have you not?”

“Have I?” he asked with a little sarcasm, though Isabella managed to outdo him with her own.

“What a surprise,” Isabella drawled and pushed his teacup into his hands. He had to catch it in a kerfuffle so he did not spill it.

“I am so glad to see you again,” Mary said, leaning towards him. “It is so long since we have talked openly for a good deal of time. I have nowhere to be today. I hope you will allow me to stay for a while so that we may talk a good deal?”

“Of course,” Henry said automatically.

“The surprises keep on coming,” Isabella muttered sardonically.

Henry was the only one who noticed, and Mary continued rattling on as if the Duchess hadn’t spoken at all.



Isabella was reeling as she stared at Henry and Mary at the other side of the table. Forced to sit at the foot of the table, as they had guests, the sheer length of the mahogany wood between them separated her a long way from her husband. Mary had opted to sit beside Henry. With every conversation they had, every laugh, Mary seemed to tip herself more towards Henry.

*She’ll be in his lap in a minute.*

“More wine, Your Grace?” Hawkins asked with a kind tone as he approached her side.

Isabella looked up at the butler through the orange candlelight, seeing he was smiling softly at her.

“Yes, indeed, Hawkins. You have read my exact thoughts.”

He refilled her glass, his smile growing for a few seconds before he retreated into the shadows of the room.

Mary had stayed for many hours, and for dinner too. Isabella looked at the clock repeatedly and wondered when this lady would leave, but she showed no signs of intending to depart. There was also no sign of Isabella and Henry returning to that intense moment they had shared in his chamber earlier that day.

*It's as if that Henry is gone.*

Isabella stared at the man sitting at the head of the table. He was so busy laughing at a joke Mary had made, it was as if she didn't recognize him. It was hardly the first time Isabella had thought him more than one man and presumed that she didn't really know him well at all.

“Did we not have fun, Henry?” Mary asked, leaning towards Henry across the table.

The Marchioness laid her hand on his wrist in the most intimate of touches. That simple brush of her fingers made Isabella nearly choke on her wine. She coughed a little until Hawkins appeared at her side and offered a handkerchief.

“Th—Thank you,” she stammered through her cough and wiped her lips with



the cloths.

“Yes, well, you did always enjoy your riding,” Henry agreed before nodding his head at Isabella. “You’re a fine rider yourself, Bella, are you not? I don’t think I’ve seen anyone else with your skill.”

“I didn’t think you had noticed,” she said, earning an amused smile from him.

*He seems much more concerned with noticing Mary this evening.*

“She is a fine rider?” Mary asked in plain surprise. She turned her beautiful blue eyes in Isabella’s direction.

Mary’s classic beauty had Isabella feeling inadequate. Repeatedly, the Duchess glanced down at the silver gown she was wearing and adjusted the bodice, though it did little good.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, I’d heard you were something of a *bluestocking*.” Mary whispered the last word as if it was scandalous.

“I am,” Isabella said without shame. “Though what is there to be ashamed of in reading a good book?”

“Nothing at all,” Henry was quick to answer. “I saw the other day you were reading a book on the latest studies of the human mind and phrenology. What do you make of it?”

“Phrenology? I do not know, really,” Isabella said with interest. “Some of it seems of interest, then other parts just seem quite absurd.”

“I agree. The idea that the shape of a man’s head can determine his character.” Henry shook his head, baffled. “It seems quite mad.”

“It does.” Isabella smiled at him, glad they were talking once again.

Henry returned her smile, but it didn’t last long. Mary laid a hand over his wrist and redirected his attention towards her.

“Do you remember when we last went riding together?”

Mary started speaking about one of their adventures out riding, and Isabella’s mind wandered.

She thought of the day she and Henry had gone riding and they’d both ended up in the river. The proximity between them that day, the heat of his touches, had left her a quivering mess. Yet, there had been more to that day than just the tension. There had been happiness and laughter.

*It would have been easy to mistake us for a truly happily married couple, as if we had chosen one another.*

“Oh, I long for another of those rides. I’m sure your wife could spare you one of these days, could she not?” Mary looked at Isabella, then didn’t even wait for an answer. “I’m sure she could.”

Isabella felt like a fly on the wall. Not only did she not matter to Mary, but Henry barely looked at her now. He was staring at Mary.

*Am I so blind a fool?*

When Mary laid a hand on his wrist, he didn’t push it away.

“God’s wounds,” Isabella murmured under her breath and stood to her feet, moving back her chair so suddenly that Hawkins jumped forwards to help her with it. “Thank you,” she whispered to him.

“Bella? Is everything all right?” Henry called to her from the head of the table.

“I’ve had quite enough of dinner tonight.” Isabella looked between him and the woman she now presumed was one of his many mistresses. “If you would excuse me.” She stepped away, heading for the door.

“I am so sorry, Henry,” Mary said in a rush to Henry. “I hope my presence has not made matters awkward for your wife.” Her words had Isabella stalling in the doorway.

*It is as if she is flaunting the hold she has on Henry in front of me.*

“Enjoy your evening,” Isabella called to the two of them and strode out, letting the door close firmly behind her.

## CHAPTER 16



“*M*ary, would you excuse me?” Henry moved to his feet.

The sudden way in which Isabella had left was disagreeable to him. Not only had she walked out when they had a visitor, but every time she looked at him there was darkness in her eyes.

“Stay a few minutes longer, please.” Mary reached towards him and laid a hand on his arm.

He stepped back, letting her hand drop away.

“You are very eager with your touches tonight, Mary,” he whispered, frowning.

“We are always, are we not?” Mary asked with a growing smile, but Henry continued to scowl as he backed away from her.

*That was a long time ago.*

He asked Hawkins to ensure his guest was well cared for, then he walked out of the dining room. It was a while until he found what room Isabella had retreated to. She hadn't gone to her favorite room, the sitting room, but had instead ended up in the great hall. She was stomping around the suits of armor, which were all reflecting the orange light from the fire that had been lit.

“An unusual place for you to come and hide.” Henry’s voice clearly made her jump. She whipped round to face him, with her hands on her hips, breathing heavily. “I would have thought you’d find a finer room than this. You and I both know this one is cold.” He pretended to shudder, but she didn’t even crack a smile. “What is wrong?”

“Do not do that.” She stepped forwards, plain anger in her tone. “You cannot be kind and charming to me now.”

“Why not?” He frowned. “What is wrong?”

“You ask me that?” She lowered one of her hands from her hips and gestured towards him. “I know what you said. I know you intended to keep your mistresses when you married. You’re a rake. Why would you give them up, after all? You made that quite plain!”

“Bella—” Henry stepped towards her, ready to calm her, but she just continued ranting.

“Yet I never agreed to have your mistresses flaunted in front of me.” Her words had him freezing in his spot. He was so in shock that his jaw dropped. “I shouldn’t have to sit at dinner watching her touch you, fawn over you, put up with her company for hours. That is unfair and you know it.”

“Wait, wait, Bella.” He stepped towards her as she turned to leave. Taking her hand, he pulled her back. She fell against his chest, her palms flat against his stomach, though she didn’t back up from him again. “Mary is no mistress of mine.”

“What?” Her head jerked up, her eyes meeting his.

“Mary is a friend, not my mistress.” He shook his head firmly. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Truly? You expect me to believe that?”

“Yes!” he said firmly. “She is a friend, that is all.”

Isabella stared at him, her lips parted, before her scowl deepened.

“Do you even realize how you were together?” she whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“She touches you as easily as she breathes. She rests her hand on your wrist, like this.” She demonstrated for him, stepping away from his chest to place a hand on his wrist. “She leans into you like this, whispering to you.”

She mimicked the action. Isabella’s proximity, with her lips so near to his ear, had a thrill coursing through him, but it didn’t last, for she backed up, leaning away from him.

“She does all of this, and you do not see any intimacy between you? Oh yes, you really must think your wife is blind.” She spun on her heel and marched down the great hall.

“Bella, wait!” He hurried down the hall, following her. He caught up with her beside one of the suits of armor, but she walked around it, trying to escape him. “It is not like that. Please, believe me. She’s a friend, and we’ve known each other a long time.”

“What man, let alone a rake, would not have noticed her affection for you? Or even her beauty?” she demanded as he dived the other way around the suit of armor, coming to meet her. She backed up in surprise. “You would have noticed.”

“A man needs more than beauty to inspire affection,” Henry said, his voice deep.

“You noticed, then?”



“I’m not blind.”

“Neither am I!” She marched away, and he followed her again. They ended up with their cat-and-mouse game repeating around a second suit of armor. “I see how she looks at you, and I saw time and time again this evening how you did not pull away from her touches. Do you expect me to believe that there has never been anything between you?”

Her question had him stalling. His feet came to such a sharp halt on the wooden floor that the armor jangled beside him, shaking with the movement.

“Ah, I see that look.” Isabella pointed towards his expression. “What a surprise, the rake couldn’t resist a woman that beautiful.” Her sarcasm cut deep.

Raising a hand across his face, Henry pinched the bridge of his nose and then rubbed his temple in frustration at himself. With all his might, he wished he could deny there had ever been anything between him and Mary, but he could not in all good conscience.

“There was one night, but that was many moons ago. In fact, it was years past.” He lowered his hand and sought out Isabella’s gaze with his own. “It was a mistake. I was in my cups for one thing, and Mary admitted herself that it could damage our friendship. We both agreed it meant nothing, and we returned to what we were.”

Isabella shook her head and placed her hands on her stomach as if she felt a little nauseous. She didn’t believe him, it was easy to read.

Henry could have asked why this affected her so much. After all, she had made it plain she did not wish to marry him in the first place. She would have been happy to let her reputation be ruined and avoid marrying him.

*Much has changed between us though, has it?*

The memory of what had passed between them that afternoon was sudden. How close they'd come, the way she had panted in his ear as he'd pressed his lips down her neck. That intimacy felt as far away from them now as the stars did from where he stood.

“We agreed to be friends.” Henry walked towards Isabella. “What you saw tonight is simply us being close friends. It's nothing more than that, nothing, I promise you that.”

Isabella sharply turned her back on him. Unsure what to say or do, he pulled at his hair in frustration. It took him a minute or so before he realized what Isabella was now looking at. He lowered his hand from his hair to see she was staring into the one mirror in the room. She was looking at herself, shaking her head.

*What is she thinking?*

“I wish to believe you,” she whispered, blinking hard. “But I will believe what you said to me when we first married. You said you'd keep your mistresses. I know I can't stop you from doing whatever it is you wish to do, I can't.” She turned her back on her reflection, shifting to look him in the eye

again. “Though I don’t have to watch you flaunt another woman in front of me.”

“Bella, that is not—Bella!” She was already leaving him, marching across the room.

“No more following me. I’m retiring for the night.”

She reached for a door and left hurriedly, slamming it shut behind her. When the nearest suit of armor wobbled so much at the heavy thud, nearly falling over, Henry was forced to jump towards it and catch it.

He stumbled with it, scarcely managing to keep it on its feet before he heaved against it, shoving it back in place. Sighing with relief, he stared at the suit as a sudden memory stung in the back of his mind.

He had been just a child playing in this room with his mother. Petra had been teaching him how to play with a wooden sword, and they had been play fighting, having fun and re-enacting battles of great knights. They had run around the suits of armor, playing and laughing together. When Henry had knocked over one of the knights in his game, they had both stood back with their hands covering their mouths.

They’d known at that moment what anger this would have brought upon them. Gregory would not forgive their games. Petra had called the butler to help them, and together, they had begun to put the knight back together.

“Why do people like knights?” Henry had asked his mother as he handed her one of the gauntlets.

“It’s because they are men of honor, dear,” she had said sweetly.

The Duke sighed as he was brought back to reality.

“Men of honor,” he muttered, backing away from the suit of armor, feeling strangely out of place in that room.

Eventually, the silence in the great hall got to him. He retreated from there, moving to the main entrance hall, where he looked at the staircase in the hope of catching a glimpse of Isabella. She was far gone though, and there was no trace of her on the stairs. By now, she would be in her chamber, and Henry wanted nothing more than to follow her there and persuade her that, for a long time, the only woman he had thought about bedding was her.

Yet, he couldn’t. He had a guest, and he had to be polite.

Sighing deeply, he returned to the dining room. Hawkins was pouring out a glass of wine for Mary, and she waved a hand at him dismissively. She didn’t say thank you, something that irritated Henry deeply.

*Has she not said thank you to Hawkins before?*

As Hawkins retreated to the shadows, Henry moved to his side.

“Thank you,” Henry said, wishing to make up for Mary’s error.

“It is my job, Your Grace. I’m happy to help.” Yet, the old features of Hawkins didn’t spread into its usual wide smile. There was a reticence there this evening. “I hope Her Grace is not unwell.”

“As do I,” Henry said softly.

He’d known the butler ever since he was a child. In his own way, Hawkins had looked out for him, repeatedly, like the time he had written to him to tell him of Petra’s sickness.

“Would you ensure Bella has everything she needs, Hawkins? Could you check on her?”

“Of course, Your Grace.” This time, Hawkins smiled and bowed. He left, leaving Henry alone in the room with Mary and one footman, who carried a carafe of wine.

Henry returned to his seat at the head of the table, sitting so heavily that the chair creaked beneath him. Mary leaned towards him at once, resting her chin on her hand.

“It seems our friendship has made your wife jealous,” she said with glee. The way she didn’t even attempt to hide her smile left Henry curious. He tilted his

head to the side, watching her closely. “I am sorry to cause trouble,” she muttered rather dramatically, “but it cannot be helped, can it? When there is a friendship such as ours?” She lowered her hand and let her fingers trail across the back of his hand that rested on the table.

Henry’s eyes shot down to where she was touching him. He hadn’t thought much of Mary’s touches all night, but now, his eyes flicked to the empty seat at the foot of the table, where Isabella should have been sitting. He withdrew his hand from Mary’s touch.

“I do not enjoy making my wife envious,” Henry said slowly. It cut deeply, for it was not something he had intended to do. “In fact, maybe we should consider ending this evening.”

“Ending it?” Mary asked in shock, leaning back with her lips parted. “I was enjoying our time.”

“Well, that enjoyment can come to an end,” Henry spoke gently, even as his eyes flicked to the door. He thought of Isabella, who was now hiding in her room.

*I must make amends. Somehow.*

The thought that Isabella believed him to have a mistress when he did not cut deeply. He tried not to think about why he didn’t have a mistress. For some reason, he hadn’t longed for one. For all his rakish ways, it didn’t seem right. Why would he bed another when Isabella was in the house?

“Let me stay for a few minutes more,” Mary pleaded.

She cast a quick glance at the footman, who was standing at the side of the room and seemed to be busying himself by tidying the carafes and glasses in a nearby cabinet. Apparently, finding she wasn't being watched, she found the confidence to lean even closer to Henry. When her lips moved near his ear, he stiffened in his chair.

“There are many rooms here where we can go, undisturbed by your wife or servants, are there not?”

Pushing back his chair, Henry tried to put distance between them.

“Mary, what do you mean?” he asked.

She stood as he did and moved towards him. When her hand found his chest, he jerked back from her, but her fingers curled around the lapel of his waistcoat in such a way that he was forced to stand still.

“Henry, there is no harm in us indulging, is there?”

As she trailed her hand down his chest, he was in no doubt of what she had meant. He took hold of her wrist and pulled it off him.

“If when you say ‘indulging’ you are referring to an illicit affair, then remove your hand from me at once.” At his words, Mary snatched her hand away, her

eyes going wide. “We are friends, Mary, yes, but it is nothing more than that.”

“Nothing?” she repeated with a small smirk. “You remember that night... do you not?”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Easily remembered though.”

“Really? I had forgotten about it already.” Henry didn’t care at that moment if his words were cold. All he wanted was to get Mary away.

*Good God, Isabella was right.*

“Take your leave, Mary. I offer friendship to you, but nothing more. If you think I ever wanted anything more, then you are wrong. May I also remind you that you are married?” He backed away from her. “James,” he called to the footman. “Would you be so kind as to show our guest out?”

James bowed and opened the nearest door.

Henry caught sight of the anger in Mary’s eyes. It flashed there for a second, then her cheeks blushed bright red, and she stormed out of the room, striking the floorboards heavily as if she were a petulant child rather than a woman. As the door closed behind her and James, Henry rubbed his hands over his



face.

“What do I say to Bella now?”

## CHAPTER 17



Isabella couldn't stop staring into the mirror. Hawkins had come and gone, leaving a port for her that she had hastily drunk. The glass was nearby on her bureau, taunting her with its emptiness. Her lady's maid had also left after helping her to change into her night rail.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. The night rail sat delicately on her shoulders. It was gathered at her waist, then dropped just beneath her knees. She was trying her best to see something of her figure and her face, which was framed with her brown hair that fell past her shoulders in soft waves, in the candlelight.

She was nothing like Mary. Where Mary had a delicate and soft beauty, Isabella's features were strong and a little intense at times. She was tall too, compared to Mary's slight and delicate figure. Isabella's height, coupled with her curves, meant she took up most of the mirror in a way she despised.

"Mary could tempt him for a night, but I cannot, can I?" Isabella realized sadly. For all the tension between them, and despite his teasing that afternoon about being willing to reconsider breaking their vow not to share a night together, it was all talk. With Mary, he could spend a night, but not with Isabella. "Good Lord, why do I wish him to?"

Sighing, she stepped away from the mirror and retreated across the room. Sitting down heavily on the bed, she flung herself back and stared at the canopy above.

*I wish I could turn back time and return to this afternoon. If only this evening had never happened.*

Yet, it had happened. Every time Isabella closed her eyes, all she saw was beautiful Mary leaning towards Henry and laying her hand over his.

Suddenly, a sharp sudden knock sounded at her bedchamber door. Isabella sat up, startled by the sound.

“Bella?” Henry’s voice came from the other side, and he knocked again. “I don’t believe you have fallen asleep that fast, not after our argument.”

“You overestimate your effect on me,” she called back.

“Oh, yes, you sound fast asleep!” he called with sarcasm before softening his voice. “Please, open the door. We must talk.”

She considered leaving him out there for a minute. After all, she had been forced to witness his intimacy with Mary all night. There seemed to be something fair about leaving him stewing out in the corridor.

“Bella!” he called again. “I’ll end up waking the whole house if I keep calling to you in this way.”

“It’s practically a castle, you’d have to knock very hard for that.” At her words, he knocked so hard just once that she leapt to her feet and ran to the door. She flung it open, staring at him. “So peaceful,” she said wryly.

Henry stomped past her into the room. He seemed agitated. His tailcoat was missing, and his dark brown hair was ruffled from where he had been running his hand through it in frustration.

“Yes, do come in,” Isabella said sardonically and shut the door behind him. “Why are you here, Henry?”

“I sent Mary home.”

He stopped in the middle of the room and turned to face her. He folded his arms, which outlined his sinews and muscles, for he’d pushed his sleeves up to his elbows. Isabella purposefully looked away from the exposed skin. She was too upset to be drawn in by her attraction towards him now.

“Why? I would have thought she would offer to spend the night with you.”

“I sent her home,” Henry reiterated. “Mary is not my mistress.”

“Very well.”

Isabella had to believe it. Henry had confessed they’d shared one night together. She supposed he could have even denied that if he’d wished to pull the wool over her eyes. She walked past him and sat on the chaise longue near her window, wishing to put some distance between the two of them.

“You came to tell me that?”

“Yes, and to ask you something.” Henry turned to face her, following her with his eyes. “How come you minded?”

“I beg your pardon?” She stiffened on the chaise longue, and the corner of his lips flickered into a small smirk.

“Was it jealousy?”

“I’m not jealous of Mary.”

“No? Then why would it matter?” Henry walked towards her. “Say for a second Mary was my mistress—”

“I don’t have to hear this.”

Isabella leaned back on the chaise longue away from him as he bent down over her. When he placed his hand on the backrest of the seat, she stilled, aware of how close they had become.

“This is hypothetical,” he said, his brow raised high. “If she were my mistress, why should it matter to you? You didn’t want to marry me, did you? Never. You looked at me at our wedding ceremony as if I were a demon.”

“I never said that.”

Isabella couldn’t tell him the truth, that deep down there was a part of her that had always been attracted to him. That same part had been gutted when he had not remembered her.

“Then why would you care if I had a mistress, Bella?” he asked, moving even closer to her.

“I don’t.”

“Then, why were you angry?”

“Because I do not have to have it flaunted in front of me.” She moved to her knees. With his hand still on the backrest of the chaise longue, the movement brought them very close together, practically at head height with one another. “Do you think that’s kind? To flaunt a mistress in front of me?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said darkly. “Though I think you are jealous.”

“I’m not!”

“Why deny it?” he asked, moving his head close to hers. She breathed heavily, both furious at him and just wanting to kiss him. It was an insane feeling, one she couldn’t handle nor make sense of. “If you’re jealous, then tell me, for God’s sake, Bella.”

“Why?”

“Because then I’d happily abandon my vow not to bed you and show you what real passion is,” he said in a deep voice. “Is that what you want? Hmm?”

“Enough of this.” Her voice matched his firmly. She placed her hands on his chest, intending to push him away, but he didn’t move, and she didn’t truly push hard enough to shove him away from her. “I am not jealous.”

“Then I don’t affect you at all? All the tension between us, that moment this afternoon, it didn’t affect you?” He spoke fast and bent towards her. “When I did this, it did nothing?” He placed his lips on her neck and kissed her.

She gasped at that touch.

“Nothing,” she murmured, her voice losing some of its strength as her body

began to yield to him.

“What if I did this?” He kissed her again on the neck but made it something bolder.

He nipped her neck playfully, then soothed it with his tongue. It was such an intimate kiss that Isabella felt her insides squirm, longing for more.

“N—Nothing,” she stammered, her voice even quieter than before.

“What if I did this instead?” He lifted his head enough to find her lips with his own. The kiss was sudden, so bold and firm that Isabella responded with equal fervor.

Her hands curled around the edges of his waistcoat, pulling him towards her. Their kiss started as a press of lips together, before he nipped her lower lip and pushed her lips wider apart. Isabella gasped into the kiss, allowing him to take her tongue with his own. He explored her, as if their tongues took part in some cotillion at an assembly, dancing together.

He pulled back from her sharply. The move was so abrupt that she was left breathless, leaning away from him against the backrest of the chaise longue.

“Nothing?” he whispered. “No effect at all?”

“Nothing,” she lied, though it was plain as day she was affected. Her cheeks



were blushing red, and her body quivered, with her chest heaving up and down.

“Perhaps I should test you then, to see how much I don’t affect you at all.” He took hold of her waist and pulled her towards him so she was flush against his chest. “Tell me to stop at any time.”

When he kissed her again, she had no desire to say stop. She just wished to know what else he could do to her, just how badly he could drive her mad with these tempting touches.

He lowered her down to the chaise longue so their bodies were pressed together. As he kissed her, he rested his weight on his forearm as his other hand went wandering, running his fingers over her night rail.

Isabella arched into his touch, finding it impossible to stay back from him. As his hand lowered from her neck and cupped her breast through the material of her night rail, she raised one of her legs, needing to be closer to him. His reaction was sudden. He released her breast and went for that leg. Taking hold of her knee, he lifted it high, past his hip, so her body was open to him on one side.

“No reaction?” he murmured, pulling back from her with a smile on his lips. “Hmm, I beg to differ.”

“Don’t stop, you fool,” she muttered, prompting him to laugh.

He kissed her again, but he only met her lips briefly, before he pressed more kisses on her neck.

When he stayed there for a while, nipping her repeatedly, she arched into his touch. The entire time he kissed her, he lifted her knee higher so that her leg was practically wrapped around his hip, then he shifted his hips against her own. Rocking their bodies together, she gasped aloud, struck by the sensation he elicited from her. Wetness began to pool between her legs.

*This is what the maids talked about in back corridors. This excitement...*

She longed to know all of Henry.

“There.” Henry lifted himself from her neck. “Marked.”

“Marked?” she repeated in surprise. Lifting her hand, she touched the now tingling spot on her neck. “What did you do?”

“Perhaps I was tempted to make sure it was known you’re my wife, Bella.”

“People already know that!” she insisted.

When he kissed her again, she lost all wish to argue. That spot was still tingling pleasantly, and she had no wish to stop what they were doing.

As Henry rested his body between her legs, he shifted his weight to his other arm and reached for her other knee, lifting it by his hip too.

“Remember, you can tell me to stop,” he whispered between their kisses.

“I don’t hear that word on my lips,” she said as he parted from her, raising himself up on his hands.

He smiled mischievously before he reached down and took hold of the hem of her night rail, lifting it around her hips.

Isabella held her breath, feeling a sudden chill across her hips and core. Any embarrassment she might have felt at being revealed to Henry soon disappeared as he touched her. His fingers began trailing paths across her thighs and up to her hips. He gripped her firmly across one hip, holding her in place, then his other hand went exploring between her legs.

“What happens now?” she asked, her voice deeper than she had ever heard before.

“Remember what I said to you?” he murmured, leaning towards her. “Of a man being there to only pleasure a woman?”

“I remember.”

“This is what I meant.”

He pressed his fingers to her core.

The pleasure was sudden. It may have been a fleeting touch, but it elicited such a thrill that Isabella panted. She arched her back on the chaise longue as he plunged his fingers inside of her. Quickly, that gentleness faded away. He pleased her strongly, repeatedly moving his fingers back and forth.

When her hips began to rock, trying to meet each one of his thrusts, he released her hip with his other hand. He moved upwards, bending over and kissing her as he continued to slide his fingers in and out of her core.

With her legs shaking around his hips, Isabella indulged in the feeling that was engulfing her body. She supposed it was a mimic of the feeling that would take over when she completely shared herself with Henry. His hand showed what his length would be doing, and she adored the feeling. It was so intimate to know him this well and to be known by him. What struck her the most was the vigorousness with which he moved.

Between his kisses, he panted, as if he couldn't do this enough to satisfy his own needs. She quivered around him, and that sensation had him chuckling as he raised himself up.

“Wish to know something more?” he whispered.

“There's more?”

He didn't wait for her answer. When she didn't stop him, it was apparently all he needed.

His hand left her, and she whimpered at the loss of his touch, then he flicked the hem of her night rail up higher.

"This needs to come off," he said playfully, pulling at the piece of cloth until he tugged it over her head.

Isabella had to lift herself to allow him to remove it completely. By the time she could see again, having dropped the white cloth to the floor beside her, Henry had changed their position.

He'd pulling himself back across the chaise longue and was kneeling on the very edge, bending down towards her. She went to close her legs, confused at his new position, but he took one of her knees and pushed it wide again.

"Stay there." He was mischievous in his orders.

Any other time, Isabella might have poked fun at his demanding ways, but she was too caught up in the passion and curiosity of what would happen next to possibly think of teasing him now.

He lowered his head towards her core. When his lips found her center, Isabella gripped the chaise longue beneath her. Her knuckles turned white with the sheer intensity of her grip. He began to pleasure her as he had done before, but this time, it was his tongue mimicking what their bodies could do.

The intimate kisses to her core worked her into such a frenzy that her head jerked back and forth on the seat. Unable to settle, she quivered, her hands looking for other things to hold onto. At one point, she reached down and threaded her fingers through his hair, holding him to her, then she moved her grip back to the seat, needing it to arch her back off the chair.

Her pleasure became something new. She rather imagined it was like being struck by some wave from the ocean. It grew and grew until the thrill overcame her suddenly. Short unintelligible moans escaped her lips as she panted, her head jerking back and forth. She felt her center tighten with her release. At all times, Henry continued to pleasure her, kissing her in the most intimate way with one hand cupped under her rear and the other at her knee, holding her open to him.

As he did move back from her, returning to his knees, Isabella could say nothing. She was too busy trying to catch her breath, watching as Henry moved over her and kneeled between her legs.

“Unaffected by me?” he asked, his lips stretching into a smile. “I’m glad that’s not true, Bella.” He moved his lips to hers, kissing her. She could taste herself on his lips before he pulled back. “Now that was something special.”

*What does he mean by that?*

Yet, he didn’t explain himself. He just continued to kiss her, moving his lips against hers as her body came down from her high. Eventually, he pulled himself off her and took her hand, tugging her to her feet. She wobbled on her feet, slightly dizzy after what he had done to her body. He chuckled and

wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her upright.

“Shall we get some sleep?” he whispered.

“You mean... you’re going to stay here for the night?” she asked, walking slowly towards the bed with him behind her.

“If you do not want me to go away, that is.”

“Tempting,” she teased him. “Stay.”

“Thank God!” He kissed the side of her neck before releasing her and urging her into the bed.

Isabella pulled back the covers and clambered in, before turning to look at him.

Henry unbuttoned his waistcoat and flung it over the nearest chair, then turned his back to pull his shirt over his head and kick off his hessian boots. Isabella’s eyes traced the muscles in his back, thinking of running her fingers over them.

She had thought he would want something more from her, perhaps his own release and pleasure, but he made no such request. Instead, he blew out the nearest candle and climbed into her bed.

They said nothing but somehow ended up entangled. It felt natural to touch him, for Isabella to reach out and run her fingers over his chest. He growled in a low voice at that touch before pulling her against him. They ended up with him on his back and his arm across her waist, with her head resting on his shoulder and one of her hands softly on his chest.

Soon, his breathing levelled out, and she heard him fall asleep, but she could not find peace so easily. Her mind was worked up with everything that had just happened.

*What did any of that truly mean?*



## CHAPTER 18



*H*enry woke up suddenly. Hearing Isabella's soft breathing had him raising his head to look at their entangled limbs. Somehow, they'd ended up even more entwined through the night. His arms were wrapped around her completely, with one of his legs intertwined with hers.

*How did this happen?*

By the looks of things, he was the one who had initiated it, for he was practically lying over her, with Isabella's face softly resting on the pillow beside him. Her eyes were closed, and her lips were parted as she breathed evenly.

Henry swallowed, uncertain what to think of what had passed between them. The night before, he had been so caught up in his passion for her, this need for something to take place between them, he hadn't thought his actions through.

*All I thought about was the heat.*

He tried to pull away from her. It was slow, gentle, disentangling himself in such a fashion that he would not wake her. She nearly stirred at one point, her eyelids fluttering. He held himself still at that moment, waiting for her to drift deeper into sleep before he pulled himself away completely. Tucking the covers of the bed around her, he stood up and reached for his shirt.

As he dressed, he repeatedly glanced back at her.

*I slept beside her. I've never done that before.*

In all the years where he'd worked hard to ruin the reputation of the dukedom by being a rake, he'd never spent a night with a woman. There had been trysts in gardens and quiet rooms, even sometimes creeping into ladies' bedchambers, but he had never once had a woman under his roof, nor had he slept beside a woman.

*I like her.*

The realization was sudden. It was not supposed to happen, this natural bond that had formed. Liking could lead to something much more intimate happening between them, repeatedly, and then that could lead to a child.

*That is something I cannot do. I would be breaking my vow.*

Henry retreated from her as quietly as he could. Once he'd changed, he left the room and headed back to his chamber. He called for his valet, who prepared a bath for him, and he tried to lose his thoughts deep in the hot

water. But it didn't help. His bare skin against the water simply reminded him of touching Isabella, thrilling her, watching her arch her back off the chaise longue as she reached her climax.

He longed to repeat the moment. He could easily go back to her chamber now and show her completely what it was like for a man and woman to be together.

"I cannot let that happen," he said firmly aloud.

Dropping down beneath the water, he hid his face in the depths as he made a resolution.

*I must let our passion be controlled if I'm going to stop myself from fathering a child. It must be controlled!*



"Ready for this?" Henry asked as Isabella took his arm.

"I suppose." She wasn't sure how to speak about what she felt.

Her fingers slid slowly across his arm as they left the carriage behind and walked into Almack's assembly rooms. Many other people were arriving, each one talking animatedly to their friend about the assembly that evening. A few looked their way, clearly intrigued about the newly married couple who had rushed their wedding because of a scandal.

“Do not think of their whispers,” Henry murmured.

“Yes, it’s as easy to ignore as what we did last night,” Isabella said sarcastically, earning a narrow look from him.

Henry said no more about it as they walked into the assembly rooms together.

*Why has he been avoiding me?*

Since Isabella had woken up that morning, she’d noted the difference between them. Any intimacy she might have hoped there would be had vanished. Henry had put some distance between them and had barely spoken to her all day. She half wondered if there hadn’t been an assembly tonight if he would have avoided her completely.

Walking into the building together, Isabella looked briefly at the different rooms. The grandest ballroom was decked ready for dancing. Violinists were sitting at one end, and the walls were draped with fine roses and camellias. Another room to their right had been prepared for the light supper that would commence later, with tables adorned in crystal glasses and carafes.

Isabella looked at it all with little interest. She sought out faces instead and looked for her sisters.

“You never told me what happened between you and your father yesterday,” Henry said.

“I tried to.”

“We got rather distracted.” He smiled and looked at her. “You came to tell me in your bedchamber, did you not?”

Isabella frowned at him, confused how he could wish to deny talking about their intimacies in one breath then refer to it in the next. Wishing to move the topic on as they walked through the assembly rooms and collected their drinks, she told Henry everything that had transpired between her and her father. She revealed the argument in full and her resolution to help her sisters.

“For now, they are safe from his games,” Isabella said as she took a sip of her claret. “If my dowry can be used to add to theirs, then that keeps their prospects safe.”

“Indeed, it does.” Henry smiled again as he poured a glass of claret for himself. “I’m impressed.” The compliment took her by surprise, and she nearly dropped her glass. “Shocked?”

“A little.”

“You did well, very well indeed,” Henry continued as he sipped at his wine. “You have protected your sisters from what could have been a nasty future.”

“I just hope my father will not think of any more games to play,” she said in a low voice, fearing what would happen.

“I doubt he would after what you said to him.” Henry laughed and shook his head, clearly amused by the idea. “I’m very impressed.”

“You said that already.”

“Now I’ve said it again.” He looked straight at her without blinking. That tension suddenly returned between them, and Isabella felt her breathing become a little restless. “You should not look at me like that, Bella.”

“Why not?”

“Because you are tempting me to return to what we did last night,” he whispered.

“Would that be so bad?”

He didn’t answer her question but lowered the glass from his lips. It was hardly a smile he offered her, more a wary look.

“Strange, I could have sworn you enjoyed last night too,” Isabella said and turned back to the table, finding she needed more claret.

She went to refill her glass, but Henry did it for her.

“I would never deny that I did,” Henry whispered in her ear, his voice deep.

“Then why have you been avoiding me all day?” she asked.

Their fingers brushed across the glass, and they both jolted. It was incredible to Isabella after how much they had shared about themselves the night before that such a simple touch now could cause such excitement, but it did. It was as if a lightning bolt had struck her in the center of her chest.

“It’s complicated,” he whispered, then glanced over her shoulder. “Your sisters have found you. Shall I leave you to talk to them openly?” he offered with a smile.

“Thank you.” Isabella would have happily had Henry stay, but he was already retreating, leaving her alone as Irene and Susan hurried up to her.

“Isabella!” Susan squealed as she reached her side, bouncing on her toes. “Oh, we are so glad to see you. Have you ever seen such a fine assembly as this before?”

“I’m sorry?” Isabella asked distractedly, looking in the direction of where Henry had retreated to.

“Ah, she’s distracted.” Irene giggled and took hold of Isabella’s chin, turning her to look away. “See? She can barely take her eyes off her husband.”

“Yes, I can.” Isabella purposefully looked between her sisters, avoiding looking at Henry at all.

“I’m just glad you at least like your husband after all,” Susan whispered, moving closer towards Isabella as she poured out a glass of champagne from the table beside them. “I feared you would not.”

“Of course, she likes him,” Irene declared happily. “Do you not remember the talk about how they were found out?”

“If you talk about that one more time...” Isabella turned a mock glare on her sister.

“All I’m saying is that there must be affection there.” Irene giggled and held up her hands in innocence. “Who falls on top of a man?”

“I do, apparently. You’ve seen how clumsy I am.”

Isabella blushed and hid her face by raising her glass to her lips. She could hardly explain away what had passed between her and Henry the night before as her clumsiness. Their taunts of one another had culminated in something incredibly passionate.

*So, why has he been ignoring me?*

“Enough about me, tell me about you two,” Isabella pleaded. “I hope our



father is behaving himself?”

“So far, yes.” Susan nodded and passed one of the two champagne glasses she had poured to Irene. “He has not talked about marrying us off again, though he has quite retreated into himself.”

“Really?” Isabella asked.

“Yes,” Irene confirmed. “He’s been gambling more, and he brings ladies back to the house.” She wrinkled her nose and looked over her shoulder, showing how scandalous it was. “I do not think I realized before just how many he brings back.”

“That is because I rather eagerly closed the curtains of the sitting room every time he did so you could not see the carriage arriving,” Isabella explained. As much as she wished she could keep her sisters protected from their father’s rakish ways all her life, it was impossible now that she lived in another house. Sooner or later, they would see for themselves the extent of his depravity. “Nothing worse than a rake.”

“But your husband...” Susan said with a nervous swallow. “What of his reputation?”

Isabella took a hefty gulp from her claret glass. The image of Mary holding her hand over Henry’s, trailing her fingers delicately across his wrist, raced through Isabella’s mind.

“The statement stands,” Isabella muttered. “Nothing worse than a rake.” Her gaze lingered across the room, seeking out Henry. He was talking to his friend, Lord Hillson.

“Yes, that explains why she is gawking at her husband.” Irene laughed and elbowed Isabella, pulling her attention back towards them.

“Let us talk about something else,” Isabella suggested. “Irene, what about your suitor?”

“Oh, him.” Irene blushed and smiled.

“At last! A blush.” Isabella pointed at her sister’s face. “Now, this is much more of an entertaining topic for us to discuss. Pray, tell us about him.”

“I am not sure I should. You will simply tease me for it,” Irene said in a rush.

“Good, it’s about time I repaid all your teasing.” Isabella placed the glass down behind her and rubbed her hands together, readying herself for the challenge. “Come on, tell me his name.”

“I will not.” Irene shook her head.

“His name is Jeremiah Puxton, the Viscount of Burton.” At Susan’s declaration, Irene’s jaw dropped.

“You traitor.” Irene put down her glass and marched towards Susan, who hastily hid behind Isabella.

“Well, isn’t this amusing?” Isabella laughed, putting herself between her sisters. “Irene, unless you wish to cause a scene in these assembly rooms, then pray, stop looking as if you wish to attack our sister.”

“How did she know?” Irene asked widely. “He has been very discrete.”

“Hardly.” Susan rolled her eyes as she peered around Isabella’s shoulders. “She thinks I have not noticed that every time I have a piano lesson, he comes to visit her. Flowers turn up with his name on the card too.”

“Truly?” Isabella’s eyebrows raised as Irene blushed and wrung her hands together.

It seemed Irene was having a traditional courtship, a loving one.

Isabella wondered briefly what could have happened if Henry had ever courted her, then she dismissed the idea at once. It was not in his nature to have ever done such a thing. She couldn’t imagine him sending flowers or coming to visit her.

*I can only imagine what happened between us last night!*

She had a brief image in her mind of Henry above her, kissing her as he pleased her. She placed a hand on her neck and the thick banded necklace she'd placed there to hide the mark he'd left on her skin.

“Aren't these good things, Irene?” Isabella asked, trying to calm her sister's embarrassment. “You have a true admirer.”

“I know.” Irene sighed and stopped trying to chase Susan, who came out from her hiding place. “I just can't help being nervous about what happens now,” she explained in a rush. “He is clearly under pressure from his mother to marry well, and I hardly have the largest of dowries.”

“You'll have the money I gave you as well,” Isabella reminded her. “Henry has seconded my opinion. We'll make sure you have the money you wish for.”

“Thank you.” Irene smiled.

Isabella looked across the room, intent on finding Henry. She caught sight of him in the corner of the supper room, yet he was no longer with Lord Hillson. There was a widow beside him. It was Lady Hampton.

Isabella stilled. Her palms beneath her white gloves felt abruptly sweaty, and she felt ridiculous bearing such a large necklace to hide the mark Henry had put on her skin. He'd pleased her the night before, and here he was in a corner with Lady Hampton.

*She was mentioned with him in a scandal sheet once. I read of it the morning before I met Henry again.*

Lady Hampton whispered something in Henry's ear, and he did not pull away.

"He is such a cad," Isabella muttered.

"What was that?" Susan asked softly.

"Nothing."

Isabella forced a smile and turned to face her sisters, but she felt numb now and joined in conversation very little. All she could think of was Henry standing with Lady Hampton.

It seemed he had swapped Mary for Lady Hampton and in between had spent a night with Isabella. Lady Hampton wasn't as beautiful as Mary, but she held herself with such confidence across the room that she must have been entrancing. As a matter of fact, Henry didn't once look away from her.

*He moves from one woman to the next so swiftly. I wonder how he could spend the night sleeping beside me at all when he can act like this as easily as breathing?*

## CHAPTER 19



“*H*ow many of those have you had?” Andrew’s question left Isabella stilling with the claret glass in her hand.

She’d only had two, but because of the lack of food, the wine was making her a little light in the head. Turning slowly round, she found her father standing beside her.

He’d dressed well for the night, and judging by the elder lady’s eyes that raked over him as she passed, he had already been up to his usual tricks of charming ladies. The duality between Andrew and Henry made Isabella abruptly nauseous. She placed her claret glass down on the table beside her.

*At least Susan and Irene are having fun and do not have to put up with our father tonight.*

She glanced quickly in their direction to see both of them dancing. Susan was dancing with an old friend of theirs, Sir Tobias Mayhew. The man seemed quite entranced by Susan’s company and was happily drawing her back to the dance floor for a second dance. Irene was dancing with her suitor, Jeremiah

Puxton. The two looked at one another so intently that anyone who cared to glance their way would see the affection between them.

“Don’t Irene and Susan look happy, Father?” Isabella asked and pointed towards the dance floor, purposefully avoiding answering his question. He glanced their direction, his body stiffening with the movement. “How nice it is to see them have a choice in whom they dance with, whom they may even court.” She drove the point home, wanting her father to be as uncomfortable as possible, to know the misery he’d caused them. “I’m delighted for them.”

“Delighted, you say?” he scoffed and shook his head. “Few daughters would find delight in ruining their father.” She didn’t answer but turned to face the drinks table and refilled her glass. “How many of those have you had?”

“Desist with acting like a father now,” Isabella said darkly as he moved closer to her. “You do not get to act protective.”

“No? Perhaps I’ll just comment then that few happily married couples spend their evenings apart at balls such as this, with one drowning themselves in claret.”

“I am not drowning myself.” She looked sharply at her father, noting the way his nose curled in her direction. “Do you hate me, Father? You certainly look as if you do.”

“I was simply trying to understand you.” He shook his head in bemusement. “For a while, I thought I knew my daughter. Now, I’m beginning to think I do not know you at all.”

“That is where we differ.” She didn’t take a sip of her glass but held it in her hand between them as if it was some sort of weapon. “I never purported to know you well. Oh, I know of your character. I know you’d rather spend a night with a mistress than in the company of your daughters.” She lowered her voice to a whisper, but he looked around them all the same, clearly wary of them being overheard. “Yet, I never really knew what was in your heart. For instance... I have never known if you had any affection for Mother at all.”

The words made Lord Sinclair flinch. Abruptly, he moved again. He turned to the table and poured a glass of brandy for himself.

“How many of those have you had, Father?” she shot his words back at him.

Andrew downed his glass. “That is none of your business.”

“I guess I am just wondering what leads a man to be a rake,” Isabella said in a rush. “If you missed our mother, I could perhaps try to understand it then. Perhaps you’re trying to ignore your grief, but there’s something in my mind that suspects your behavior began long before she died. What sort of man does that, I wonder?”

Her father stilled and turned to face her completely, his lip curling in distaste.

“If you are despairing of what it is like to be married to a rake, then you should not have gotten yourself into a mess with the Duke of Sutterton in the first place.”



Andrew's cruel retort had Isabella falling quiet. She no longer felt the desire to argue with her father and just wished to be away from him.

Turning her back on him, Isabella left the drinks table and stepped towards the ballroom, where she could glimpse the dancing taking place through a vast archway. Relieved to find her father did not follow her, she crept around the ballroom with her eyes on her sisters.

Seeing Susan and Irene so happy offered a little comfort, though her smile could not last for long. She tried to busy herself by looking at Irene's happy face. Repeatedly, as Irene and her suitor left the dance floor did Jeremiah reach for her hand. He seemed to realize it was not appropriate when they weren't officially courting, so he offered his arm instead, and she took it, smiling sweetly up at him.

They crossed the room together, and Jeremiah began to introduce Irene to those Isabella suspected were his family and friends. His eagerness to show her off to them had Isabella smiling once again.

*She is falling in love, as he is with her. At least Irene will have the future that she truly deserves. She will be loved!*

Then, Isabella's eyes were drawn away by another. There was a round gentleman circling the dancers. He seemed to be searching for someone, turning his wide head back and forth.

"Oh, no," Isabella muttered aloud.

Seeing Lord Pine's face, she began to back up. At first, she presumed he would have long lost his interest in her. She was married now, so he could hardly continue to push her into dancing with him at events such as this.

Even as she reached the edge of the ballroom though, wishing she could disappear into the shadows between the standing candelabras, his gaze found hers. He smiled a little, his wide lips curling, then he began to walk towards her.

"God's blood," she muttered and stepped away. She turned sharply on her heel, intending to make her escape back to the other room when she found someone in her way. "Oh!" She nearly spilled her wine on him, but a hand came up around her own and stabilized her glass. "Henry?"

He was looking at her in surprise, his eyebrows raised.

"Well, at least I saved you from spilling wine on me this time," he said, smirking.

At that moment, Isabella didn't know what to think of him. Should she be happy he was being playful again? Or angry that he'd been so cold and distant all day?

She took the glass further back from him, forcing him to release it, then looked over her shoulder. Lord Pine was getting closer. He was even waving one of his hands in the air, trying to get her attention.

“Excuse me, Henry.”

“What? Where are you going?”

She walked around him, trying to escape the ballroom, but he followed her.

“Anywhere else,” she muttered and retreated into the supper room.

Going as far as the corner, Isabella placed her glass down on the table, deciding that maybe she’d had a little too much and relied too heavily on the claret after seeing Henry with Lady Hampton.

The thought of the two of them together had her glaring at him as he joined her by the table.

“I could have mistaken that look for one of hatred.” He raised his eyebrow, and she chose not to correct him. “Rather than ask you if it was, I’ll ask you something else entirely.” He pointed towards the archway that led into the room. “Who is that? He’s clearly following you.”

Isabella held her breath as her eyes sought out Lord Pine. He stood under the archway, turning his head back and forth as he looked for her.

“Lord Pine,” she said in a rush, then turned her back to the archway in the

ridiculous hope that Lord Pine would not recognize her across the room.

“Lord Pine?” Henry repeated, looking at the gentleman in question. “I have heard the name before. I do not think I have been introduced to him.”

“Then count your blessings.” Isabella pushed the glass away and flattened one hand on the table, keeping herself standing upright.

“He’s coming this way.”

“Damn,” Isabella muttered, rounding the table.

Henry followed her, and she now had two men trailing after her.

“Bella, what on earth is going on?” he asked. The two of them came to a stop at the back of the table, flanked by a pillar and a standing candelabra. In this position, it was more difficult for Lord Pine to follow them, as there was not much room on this side of the table. “Why is he following you?”

“He has a habit of doing that.”

“I beg your pardon?” Henry frowned.

“He was the one I was running away from that night I stumbled upon you in

the garden.” The moment the words were out of her lips, Isabella wondered why she had said them. She supposed it was the liquor loosening her tongue. She moved her hands to her hips restlessly, glanced in Lord Pine’s direction, then returned her eyes to Henry. “You could say he is persistent.”

“Truly?” Henry looked at Lord Pine again, his expression darkening.

“What? What does that look mean?” Isabella raised her hand and pointed at Henry’s face.

“What look?” Yet, he didn’t once turn back to look at her. He kept that glare firmly in Lord Pine’s direction.

“The one that suggests you would rather throw something at Lord Pine’s face than talk with him.”

“Hmm, it seems you know me well already, wife.” The way he addressed her as his wife had her spine stiffening.

“How amusing. I could have sworn you had forgotten my position this evening.”

“What does that mean?” he asked tartly, returning his gaze.

“Wife,” she reiterated. “Lady Hampton was most eager to talk to you, was she not?”

Henry's brows furrowed.

"You clearly can't trust me, can you?"

"Coming from the man who straight after our wedding ceremony declared he intended to keep his mistresses," she shot back.

His lips flattened together, but he did not argue. He continued to stare at her.

"Your Grace? Your Grace?" Lord Pine was calling to Isabella.

Now, realizing there was no way she could avoid Lord Pine, she slowly stepped out from behind the table. She moved towards him and smiled a little.

The thought of dancing with him had always repulsed her, but not at that moment. Suddenly, she saw an opportunity. She had been forced to put up with watching Henry with one of the ladies he had bedded twice. There was something intensely tempting about giving him a taste of his own medicine.

She curtsied, then said, "Lord Pine, how are you? It's been a while since I've last seen you."

“I am delighted to see you again.” Lord Pine bowed deeply. “I understand I must congratulate you on your marriage to the Duke of Sutterton.” He continued to smile sweetly, despite his words, and even nodded his head in the direction of the Duke.

Isabella followed that look to see Henry had kept his place behind the table. He was leaning against the wall behind him with one palm flat against it, and he seemed to be breathing heavily as he stared at Isabella.

“Thank you for your kindness.” Isabella shifted her focus back to Lord Pine.

“He has a strong stare, does he not?” Lord Pine asked with a laugh, yet he pulled at the collar of his shirt, evidently feeling it was suddenly a little tight.

“Indeed, he does.”

An image flashed in Isabella’s mind. It was not of Henry’s stare now, but of the way he had stared at her last night as he had pleased her.

*That look gave me such a thrill...*

“Anyway, do not let my husband’s unpleasant stare bother you,” she said.

She adopted a sweeter countenance than she normally would do with him. Already, he was moving uncomfortably towards her, reminding her of why she disliked him so much. The man seemed to have little awareness of

politeness and people's boundaries.

“How are you, Lord Pine?”

“I am well and am eager to dance tonight. Of course, I am longing for a good dance partner.” He bent towards her.

At that movement, with him coming so close, Isabella couldn't resist letting her eyes wander Henry's way. His eyebrows had shot up so much at that closeness that they nearly disappeared into his hairline.

“I know it is perhaps not the done thing for me to ask you for a dance tonight after you are so recently married, but nothing would give me greater pleasure than to be your dance partner tonight.” Lord Pine moved back a little. “If you would oblige me.” He held his hand out to her.

Isabella hesitated. Her body rejected the idea at once. The last time she had felt pressured into dancing with the man, his hands had wandered. She had thanked her good fortune that no one had seen it, as the dance floor was too crowded, otherwise, by now, she could have found herself forced into a rather hasty marriage.

*Another hasty marriage, but not with Henry.*

The memory of seeing Henry with Lady Hampton that evening had her react quickly.



“I’d be delighted to accompany you in a dance, Lord Pine.”

She took his proffered hand toward. His jowls shuddered as he smiled, clearly thrilled. As his eyes wandered down her dress, Isabella felt a little sick, so much so that she had to remind herself she was doing this for a reason.

*Let Henry know how it feels!*

“I believe a waltz is the next number,” Lord Pine said and stepped away, clearly intending to escort her to the ballroom, ready for the waltz.

Isabella didn’t step forwards to follow at first. She was too busy fearing where his hands would wander, against her will.

“Apologies for the intrusion.” Henry’s voice was suddenly there. Isabella jerked back as he stepped between the two of them, pointedly separating them. All the Duke had to do for Lord Pine to release her was glare down at his hand. “I cannot let you dance with my wife, Lord Pine. I forbid it.”

“Forbid it?” Isabella murmured in shock.

“Yes,” Henry said simply, showing no awareness at all of her heavy glare on his back.

*He thinks he controls me now! I cannot let this happen...*

## CHAPTER 20



“*F*orbid?” Lord Pine’s cheeks flushed as he stared at Henry. “But Her Grace said yes, Your Grace.” He seemed to remember that he and Henry had not been introduced, as he bowed hastily.

Henry felt such disgust for this man that he barely bowed his head in acknowledgement. The thought of Lord Pine being the reason Isabella had raced into the garden that night disgusted him.

*She was running away from Lord Pine. He frightened her!*

There was not a chance that Henry was going to let Lord Pine near Isabella now.

“She is my wife, and I am not happy with the arrangement. Surely you would agree that no man should be forced to watch his wife dance with another that he does not approve of? Yes?” Henry said sharply, waiting for Lord Pine to reply.

“Well, yes, of course, I suppose...” Lord Pine stammered, his eyes flicking over Henry’s shoulder as he searched for Isabella’s face.

“Then that is the end of the matter.” Henry waved his hand dismissively. “You are excused, Lord Pine.”

Lord Pine stood tall, his eyes turning back to Henry with clear distaste.

“Well, I never! The impertinence,” he muttered to himself. “Never in all my days...” He wandered off, his voice fading as he disappeared through the crowd.

Slowly, Henry turned back to face Isabella. He found her eyes narrowed and her hands folded firmly across her fine gown.

“Did you actually wish to dance with him?” Henry scoffed. “If you ran away from him once, then surely the idea does not appeal to you.”

“It doesn’t, but whom I dance with is my decision, not yours, Henry.”

Her words caused a wave of anger to ripple through his body. That feeling filled his blood to the brim.

“I will not watch you dance with a man like that. Not any man, in fact.”

“No man at all?” She laughed. “Oh, I see the rules we are to play by.” Her voice took on a sardonic tone. “You can have Lady Paulbridge in your house, fawning over you, and you can charm Lady Hampton in public, at a ball, where everyone can see you, but I cannot even dance with another man? What fair rules they seem to be.”

“You simplify something that is not simple,” Henry said in a low voice, stepping towards her. “I was speaking to Lady Hampton. It was nothing more.”

“Her lips were a mere hair’s breadth from your ear at one point.” Her words had Henry pausing.

*Is that what really happened?*

He thought back to the conversation. Lady Hampton had approached him suddenly in his discussion with Lord Hillson, and he had told her quite plainly that whilst he had enjoyed their affair, it had come to an end. He was a married man. She’d wished him well, then said in a low voice in his ear that she hoped someday he would change his mind. He vowed he would not, and they’d parted.

“Your Grace?”

Henry found it hard to turn his head at the sound. Someone was calling him, but he was so busy staring at Isabella that it was impossible to think of turning to look at anyone else. Images played out in his mind where he ended this argument between them by kissing her. It was something he could not do

in public.

“Your Grace?”

The voice was so near that he had no choice this time but to turn around, as did Isabella. Only, Henry realized that the gentleman in question wasn't calling to him at all, but Isabella.

“Mr. Rufford?” she said in surprise, then bobbed a curtsy to him.

“Good evening, Mr. Rufford.” Henry bowed to him, as the gentleman hurried to bow in return.

Henry had met Mr. Rufford before on more than one occasion. He was a wealthy landowner, and though he had no title, he had a vast estate and income. There was something in Henry's mind that niggled at him. He was certain the night of Isabella's debut that Mr. Rufford had danced with her that night. Yet, Mr. Rufford had been travelling around the continent for the last few years.

“How are you, Sir?” Isabella asked warmly. “I understand you have recently returned from your travels to Europe?”

“Indeed, I have.” Mr. Rufford smiled at her softly. “I'd be glad to tell you about my journeys. I remember from our last acquaintance that you are a fair dancer.”

“You are kind, for I am not so great,” Isabella said with a wrinkled nose.

*She is.*

Henry could remember how he had danced with her. She was bold in her dancing, striking, impossible to look away from.

“Perhaps we could share a dance now, Your Grace, of course, that is if your husband does not mind?”

Mr. Rufford turned to Henry for approval. Any relief Henry might have felt at Mr. Rufford asking his permission was short-lived. Before Henry could even turn the gentleman down, Isabella had taken his hand.

“My husband will not mind. He has ladies he wishes to dance with himself.” Isabella gave Henry a pointed look.

“Bella—” Before Henry could say any more to stop her from leaving, she was gone.

Hand in hand, the Duchess and Mr. Rufford walked towards the ballroom, ready for their dance.

Henry followed as quickly as he could, so put out that he was tempted to march across the dance floor and stop the dance before it could begin. As he reached the side of the dance floor, Mr. Rufford and Isabella had already

begun the dance.

Cursing under his breath, the Duke backed away from the dancers. He went so far that he practically collided with the wall at the far end of the room. He ignored everything and everyone around him. He didn't think of the ladies gossiping nearby, waving their fans in front of their faces, nor of the gentlemen who were guffawing with laughter, so deep in their cups. He only thought of Isabella.

She danced happily with Mr. Rufford. The two took part in eager conversation, making Henry think much of the dance he had shared with Isabella at her debut. It was a long time ago and difficult to remember in places, though he could still recall the way she had smiled and the way his hand had rested on her waist.

“There had been excitement,” he murmured to himself. “Even then, before I really knew her.”

She was happy now with Mr. Rufford, smiling as she had not done with Henry all evening.

“Hark, what's going on here then?” a familiar voice called to Henry.

“Not now, John.”

Henry barely turned to glance at his friend, who leaned against the wall behind him with an amused grin on his face. They'd already greeted one

another that evening and partaken in a few jests, but that seemed like some time ago to Henry.

“I thought you had returned to your wife to dance with her.”

“I had,” John muttered, then sighed deeply. “She is now, unfortunately, dancing with an old family friend, so I must watch on with jealousy from the side.” He turned his back against the wall and folded his arms to mimic Henry’s position. “Shall we glare at the dance floor together, fueling our feelings of jealousy?”

“Jealousy? What do I have to be jealous of?” Henry rejected the idea at once, shrugging it off. His eyes still danced over Isabella. Her lips curved into a full smile, and as Mr. Rufford drew her under his arm, she giggled. Mr. Rufford’s hand drew softly across her waist, and Henry’s brows quirked at that touch. “He doesn’t have to be so intimate with her when they dance.”

“Yes, I see what you mean. You’re not jealous at all.” At John’s words, Henry shot him a warning glare. “Oh, come off it, Henry. What is so wrong about being jealous of your wife dancing with another man, even if it means nothing? Look at my wife with her friend.” John pointed towards his wife, who was on the dance floor.

It was plain Eloise was enjoying her friend’s company, but the way she repeatedly looked at John showed where her heart really lay.

*Why does Isabella not look at me?*



“You are jealous,” John observed.

“I’m not. It’s just...” Henry couldn’t put his feeling into words. “I am not happy with her dancing with other men.”

“I’m sure that is part of the definition of jealousy.”

“John!”

“Merely pointing out the obvious.” John continued to chuckle and looked at Eloise dancing.

Both men fell into silence, watching the dancers together.

Henry couldn’t stop staring at the way Mr. Rufford touched Isabella. Whenever he placed a hand on her waist, it had Henry’s mind back to how he had cornered Isabella against his bedchamber wall the day before. His hand had been so close to touching her.

It had been a far cry from what they had experienced last night. Then, he had held her hip with one hand as the other brought her to the edge of ecstasy.

He sighed audibly, longing for that feeling again.

“How does married life suit you then, Henry? In all seriousness now.” John’s voice had become more pensive. “I’ve never seen you stare this way at a woman before.”

“It is... fine.” Henry lied, feeling it made his tongue flick across his mouth uncomfortably. “I just didn’t think I’d be as possessive over her as I am now. For a marriage of arrangement, that seems absurd.”

“I put it to you that the marriage isn’t one of arrangement anymore.” John’s raised eyebrows made Henry still, his breathing coming in short, stuttered breaths. “Perhaps there is more to the marriage. She has always been the one who caught your interest more than any other. Should I remind you of that night when you broke your rule to dance with her at her debut?”

“Not when I’m watching her dance with another man,” Henry said darkly.

“Shall I talk then of how eager you were to save her reputation by marrying her, despite your endeavor never to marry?”

“Is there a point to all of this?” Henry flicked his head towards his friend.

“I’ll speak plainly.” John cleared his throat and eyed his friend carefully.

“A serious countenance doesn’t suit you, John.”

“Then I’ll speak quickly as well.” John offered a small smile before it faded

and went on. “I think you have always had your head turned more by your wife than you wish to admit to yourself.”

Henry said nothing. His hands fidgeted, and he moved from crossing his arms in front of his chest to letting them hang limply at his sides.

“I think it is the truth, and what is so wrong with that if it were the truth.”

“May I remind you of my vow?” Henry murmured.

“Ah, that’s why you seek to deny yourself a happy marriage then,” John said dramatically and shook his head. “May I remind you that your vow was not to have children, to see the end of the dukedom?”

“Yes, it was.”

John rolled his eyes. “Well, we can discuss another time the madness of that particular resolution.” Henry stood taller, feeling a little irritated at his friend. “For now, let us discuss the matter at hand. Just because you have vowed not to have children does not mean you cannot have a happy married life, just like any other married couple. Does it?”

Henry didn’t answer.

“I thought that might catch your interest.” John allowed himself a small smile at last. “You can still have a wife, Henry. You never know, it may even be a

wife that you love, if you give yourself a chance to feel it.” He clapped Henry on the shoulder in comfort. That action was so sudden that Henry was shaken by it and jolted off the wall as if he had come out of some hypnotic trance. “Forgive me whilst I return to my wife. I’m tired of being jealous and watching her dance with a man that is not I.”

John wandered off towards the dancers. As he approached, his wife looked at him and smiled, clearly enamored of him.

Henry turned his eyes on Isabella, thinking of what his friend had said. It was true there were certainly ways for him and Isabella to be together without facing the risk of having a child. With such a possibility there, would it be so awful to let himself admit he was jealous of seeing her with Mr. Rufford? Would it be so bad to know the truth, that he cared for her, and it was a much deeper feeling than that of friendship or mere respect?

The music ended, and the dancing finished. All the couples bowed and curtsied to one another. As John took to the floor and collected his wife, he returned her to the middle, clearly eager to dance with her himself.

Henry knew he could have done the same. He could have persuaded Isabella to dance with him, but what he had in mind was far more intimate than a dance.

*I do not wish to be around these other men. Not anymore. I need to be with her openly, and alone.*

He pushed off the wall, then strode towards the dancers. Mr. Rufford was

leading Isabella away from the dance floor. When her eyes caught Henry's, there seemed to be a triumphant look in her expression.

*She did it on purpose, did she not? She wanted to see how I would respond.*

“Mr. Rufford?” Henry approached them hurriedly.

“Thank you for lending me your wife, Your Grace,” Mr. Rufford said politely and bowed to him. “I was glad to see her again after all this time.”

“We had a most interesting conversation,” Isabella agreed, holding Henry's gaze the entire time.

“I am pleased to hear it,” Henry said without feeling. “If you would excuse us, Sir, I must talk to my wife.”

Isabella loosened her hand from Mr. Rufford's and went to follow her husband, but Henry caught her hand swiftly and took her away, tugging her across the assembly rooms.

“That is a rather insistent grip,” she said with a low chuckle. “Let me guess, you did not enjoy seeing me dance with Mr. Rufford?”

“He was too eager to touch you.” Henry felt the words coming swiftly out of his lips. It angered him just to hear the words. “He was bold!”

“Bold?” Isabella shook her head as she walked beside him. “Hardly as bold as Lady Hampton was this evening.”

Henry led her all the way to the front door of Almack’s assembly rooms.

“Henry, where are we going?”

“We are going home. There is something I must say to you.”

## CHAPTER 21



Isabella clambered up into the carriage with Henry following her. They had escaped the assembly rooms in such a rush that she was still pulling on her spencer jacket. Henry didn't even bother putting his top hat on and tossed it to the side of the coach's bench. He sat opposite Isabella and tapped the roof of the carriage, signaling he was ready for them to set off.

Isabella stared at him with her spencer jacket sitting on her shoulders, amazed at this outcome. She may have wanted Henry to know what it felt like to see his wife getting attention from elsewhere, but she hadn't expected his strong reaction. He was breathing heavily, unable to settle. Repeatedly he leaned forwards, resting his elbows on his knees, so his face was more visible in the lantern light that swung over their heads, then he would lean back again.

"Comforted now we have left?" she asked, knowing her words would rile him.

"You agreed to dance with Mr. Rufford purely to antagonize me."

"Not to antagonize you, but to show you that I am not under your rule," she

said. “If I had wanted to dance with Lord Pine—”

“As if you wished to dance with a man you had run away from in the past.”

“It was my decision, Henry,” she reiterated. “You do not control me.”

“So, you’re saying that no part of your agreement to dance with Mr. Rufford had anything to do with seeing me jealous?” he provoked her, leaning forwards and resting his elbows on his knees once again.

At this angle, the orange lantern light bounced off his cheekbones.

“So, you were envious.” Isabella couldn’t help smiling in triumph. “Now you know how it feels like to see Lady Hampton whispering in your ear, or to witness Lady Paulbridge practically sitting in your lap at dinner.”

“That is not what happened!” Henry protested, his voice growing louder. When she simply raised her eyebrows in a silent question, he went on, but quieter this time. “Believe me, that is not what happened. You are my wife, Bella, in case you haven’t noticed. I’m married to you.”

“You said you’ve had mistresses.”

“And have bedded none of them since our wedding day.” His words had her wriggling in her seat, uncertain whether she believed him or not. The vehemence with which he had spoken certainly made her wish to believe



him, but she couldn't quite be certain. "Good God, Bella, the only woman I am thinking about bedding is you."

"After last night, I wish to believe you. Then today... you were so cold."

"I can change that."

He crossed the carriage suddenly. He dropped to his knees in front of her, startling her so much that she gripped the backrest behind her with both hands. Placing his hands on either side of her on the bench, he held himself still as the carriage rocked them from side to side.

"Believe me, all my intentions are at this moment is claiming you as my wife, completely."

He bent towards her, so close to kissing her that she stilled, wanting that kiss. Yet, he hovered a little away from her, teasing her with the promise of his desire, but not quite acting on it.

"Claiming me?" she scoffed. "I am not your possession, Henry!"

"I do not wish to treat you as my possession, but as my wife!"

"What does that entail, exactly?"

“Let me show you.” He reached up and took hold of her neck, bringing her forwards so that they kissed.

At first, Isabella was so startled by the suddenness of his touch that she didn't respond. When his lips parted hers, she was overcome with such passion that she didn't hold back. Angling her head against his own, trying to deepen that kiss, she used her hands, which were braced against the backrest, to push herself forwards. Sitting on the edge of the coach bench, she pressed her hips against Henry's, with her legs on either side of him. He growled into the kiss as his other arm came up around her, holding her to him.

The kiss went on for so long that Isabella lost sense of time. She thought only of being closer to Henry, of needing more of him. He angled her head back and began to press kisses down her neck. Suddenly, his hand curled around her necklace and snapped it away.

“Did... Did you break that?” she asked in surprise.

She actually had no great attachment to the necklace and had used it only to hide the mark he had left on her neck.

“I'll buy you another.”

He pressed his lips to the place where he had left a love bite the night before and gave her another. Isabella mewled at his touch, arching her body into his. One of her hands left the seat behind her and wound itself in his dark brown hair, holding him to her.

The carriage continued to rock them, but they didn't pull away from each other, not once. They simply used their free hands to keep themselves close to each other.

"You are my wife, Isabella." He used her full name as he lifted his head from her neck. "I haven't seen anyone else since we married, and I have no intention to."

"Truly?" she murmured, wishing to believe him.

One of his hands slid up her waist, wrapping tightly around her. She gasped at that touch, wishing the fabric of her gown was not between them.

"Truly," he promised her. He went to kiss her again when the carriage came to a sudden stop. "Damn," he muttered. "You're going to have to walk in front of me out of here."

"What?"

"I'm revealing a little of myself."

He smirked as he stood to his feet. Isabella's eyes shot down to his trousers, where his length was plainly pressing against the fabric. She had to bite her lip not to laugh.

"Something amusing?"

“No,” she said teasingly. “Just enjoying seeing what is happening.”

He offered her his hand. “This isn’t over, Bella.”

“I was hoping you would say that.”

As they climbed down from the carriage, Isabella walked in front of him. At all times, he kept behind her, hiding himself from the looks of any of the footmen, and even Hawkins when they walked into the house.

They hurried up the stairs, with Henry’s hand on her waist, gently steering her forwards.

“Are you able to let go or not?” she asked playfully as she turned her steps towards her bedchamber.

Henry turned her back at the last minute, pushing her towards his chamber instead.

“Not in the slightest,” he confirmed with a mischievous smile, then reached for the door.

They stumbled inside, with Henry reaching down to kiss her so fast she

didn't have much time to look around the room.

She merely caught a glimpse of the four-poster bed she'd seen before and the fire in the hearth. Candles had been lit around the room, ready for his return, but to her relief, the valet was not there and had already left out a night shirt for Henry.

Unable to look anymore as her lips were caught by Henry's in a kiss, she reached up, pushed her hands under his tailcoat and reached for his shoulders. He kicked the door shut behind them, then pressed her against it, caging her with his body.

"No more teasing," he said between kisses. "And no more making me jealous."

"You started that."

"That was not my intention," he argued, moving his lips back down her neck. This time, his lips trailed across her collarbone and to the opening of her gown. He kissed the mounds of her breasts, causing her to gasp. "But I'm ending it." His hands reached for her waist, clutching her to him momentarily before he urged her to turn around. "This is coming off. I don't want there to be a thing between us for this."

"Not a single stitch?" she asked teasingly as she faced the door, with her hands flat on the wood. He unlaced her gown hurriedly.

“Not one.”

“No chemise?” she asked.

“No.”

“A corset?”

“No. Nothing.”

He moved his lips to kiss the back of her neck, making her spine shudder with the thrill of it before he rolled the gown down her shoulders. Isabella stepped out of it, and he turned her around, pressing her against the door again.

They returned to their kissing, yet this time, Isabella reached for him. The tailcoat was pulled off his shoulders, as was the waistcoat. She pulled at his shirt restlessly, needing it gone. It broke their kisses for a brief minute as they tossed the shirt away to the side, then he returned to her.

Distracted, entranced by the idea of doing something she had thought so much about, she let her fingers trail down his chest, exploring him. Each firm muscle she caressed had that excitement swelling inside of her. Already, she could feel the wetness she had known before pooling between her legs. It was only made stronger when Henry moved one of his legs between her own and rocked his thigh against her center.

“Nothing between us?” she murmured, leaning back from him.

“Now you’re getting it,” he said playfully.

She nodded her head down at his trousers. “Isn’t it time those came off then?”

Smiling, Henry reached down for his trousers and began to unbutton them. Standing so near, she flattened herself to the door, wanting the chance to see all of him. He lowered his trousers and kicked them away along with his Hessian boots before turning back to face her, with his hands on either side of her on the door.

His leg muscles were carved thickly, and at his hips, his muscles narrowed downwards into a v shape to his length. She had not expected his manhood to be as big as it was, and it left her with a dry mouth, wondering how what they were building up to was going to take place.

“Your turn,” he whispered and reached for her stays.

He unlaced the bodice at the front, slipping it from her shoulders, then took hold of her chemise and pulled it over her head. He slipped her stockings down her legs slowly. The whole time, he gazed at her as he did this, teasing her with the briefest of touches to her skin, then dropping the stockings.

All these fleeting touches left her body quivering, longing for that touch to be somewhere more intimate. He must have sensed it, for when they were

completely bare, he stood before her at the door, his hands on her hips.

“Tell me to stop at any point, and I will,” he murmured the same words he’d said to her before.

“I thought you wanted to claim me as your wife?” she teased him, loving the way he smiled at her.

“I do.” His voice had deepened.

Abruptly, he reached for one of her knees and lifted it around his hip, inching her other leg to the side so she was open to him. He held her gaze as his other hand found her center.

As before, he moved his fingers to her core and began to pet her, pleasuring her. The feeling was so sudden that she gripped the door with one hand and his shoulder with the other, longing for more. He began to sway their bodies with the movements, showing her what it would be like when they were completely joined.

He continued to pleasure her for so long that her standing leg grew weak. She had to clutch at both his shoulders to keep herself upright.

“Henry,” she managed to mumble through her gasps, feeling the tingling sensation spreading throughout her body. “More,” she begged.



He growled at her words and removed his hand from her. Suddenly, he took hold of her waist and lifted her in the air. She gasped in surprise before he carried her across the room. With her legs wrapped around his hips, her core was near his center. He rocked his hips against her own, just once, teasing her with that movement as he gazed at her. He never once looked away, not once.

Now that Isabella was on the bed, she dropped her legs from around his waist, allowing him to move freely over her. He leaned over her and kissed her. That kiss though deep was brief, taunting her. She growled in complaint at him for not giving her more. His peppered kisses across her body were coupled with his laughter at her response. When he reached her breasts, he hovered there and softly kissed the mounds.

Stunned by the new sensation, Isabella brushed her hips to Henry's, experimentally. She could feel him moving against her now, his length coming close to her center. Longing to feel him completely, she placed her hands on his shoulders, stilling his adoring touches.

He looked up at her questioningly.

“Not enjoying it?”

“Can't you guess?” she asked wryly, prompting him to laugh again. “No holding back, Henry,” she pleaded. “Please.”

“A minute more,” he murmured softly, his voice deep with the words.

She growled once more in frustration, though it was a pleasant frustration indeed. He kissed between her breasts and down her stomach, before reaching the apex of her thighs. Small fleeting kisses he pressed to her thighs, then he moved down to her center.

Unlike before where he had been firm as he had explored her with his tongue, today, he was soft. They were only small kisses, taunting touches, but they had equal power over her. Her body writhed, wanting more from him.

“It will only hurt the first time,” he whispered between those kisses.

Isabella barely registered his words, for she was merely thinking of the sensations he was causing. It had her toes curling, her hands balling on the bed sheets beneath her.

“Henry, please,” she begged again.

Slowly, he released her. His kisses to her core ended, and his hands left her thighs, where he had been rubbing small circles. He moved his body up over hers and lined himself up at her entrance. She felt him nudging her as he placed his hands on either side of her head.

“Are you ready?” he asked, his blue eyes boring into hers, needing that final confirmation.

“Don’t make me beg again,” she pleaded, her words coming in a rush.

## CHAPTER 22



*A*s Henry pushed inside Isabella, the pain was sudden. Her hands found the tops of his arms, and she gripped them hard. All the pleasure seemed to freeze, hovering in the air, as she thought of the pain.

“I’m so sorry, Bella,” he whispered to her. His lips found her temple, and he kissed her there. It was the softest and gentlest kiss he’d ever given her. Startled at the softness, she laid her head back, looking up into his eyes. “It will pass, I promise.” He kissed her on both cheeks, then found her lips.

Isabella threaded her arms around his back, reaching up to press her palms against his shoulder blades, pulling him down towards her. At that closeness, and with his kiss, she discovered the pain was beginning to subside. It was as if a wave was receding on a beach. What had come fast was now trickling away, rushing backwards.

“Henry,” she murmured as he parted from their kiss. “It’s gone.”

His smile flickered into place. Lifting a hand, he brushed away one of the loose locks of her hair that had come out of her updo. It was caring, a sweet

thing that had her smiling back at him. Then, he lowered his hand down on the bed and moved his hips back and forth.

The sudden sensation was soreness at first, but then it became pleasure. Isabella recognized it as the thrill she had felt before in his arms, but somehow, it was lodged deeper inside of her this time, and it was much more intense. There wasn't a part of her body that wasn't responding to him.

Her hips raised on either side of him, even higher than before, as she just wanted to drown more in this feeling. She continued to cling to him, her hands moving down his back. He began to moan above her as he rocked their bodies together. Her head moved from side to side, her sounds of pleasure becoming mixed with his own.

It abruptly stopped. Isabella looked up as Henry pulled out of her. She wished to protest, to beg him to come back, but he was trying to change their position. He lifted one of her legs and flipped it over the other so her hips rolled onto one side whilst she stayed on her back. He found her center again and slid into her.

That sudden feeling of pleasure was overwhelming this time. The way in which he made love to her was fast, firm, but somehow, he kept giving her those sweet touches too. He bent down towards her, kissing her softly, then held her gaze as he moved. He put his hand on her legs, gently keeping her in place, and raised his other hand to push more hair out of her eyes.

*Is it supposed to be like this? Somehow passionate and tender?*

He changed their positions again. It seemed to her he couldn't do everything that he wished to do, for he pulled out of her, took both legs and slid her down the bed. He clambered off so he was standing on the floor and moved her so that her derriere was on the very edge, with her legs on either side of his hips. This time when he drove inside of her, he could move fast while standing on the floor. He made his thrusts smaller, as he moved faster.

Isabella began to climb such heights that she thought of how she had finished before with a release that had made her body shudder and tremble for him. As fast as she could remember, it came now. Her body arched off the bed, and she flattened her hands against the sheets. One of his hands found hers, and he intertwined their fingers, holding onto her as he rode out her climax.

She was on such a height, feeling herself slowly coming down, that when he pulled himself out of her, it was abrupt. He turned his body away and spilled on the bed sheets beside her. His body still touched hers, and their hands were entwined, but he didn't finish inside her.

Isabella was too caught up in pleasure to think of what such a thing meant. She knew a man had to finish inside of her for there to be children.

*We haven't talked about such things yet, that is all. This was something else altogether.*

Trying to catch her breath, Isabella laid her head back on the bed, panting. Henry stood straight and moved away, releasing her hand. Rolling onto her side, she reached out towards him, but he was back within seconds. He had a cloth he used to dry himself, then took another to clean her up too. When he reached for her center, she moaned in surprise, tilting her head back. He chuckled softly at her reaction.

“Now that was something else,” he said quietly, then tossed the cloth away to the side of the room.

Clambering onto the bed, they didn't pull the cover over them but stayed bare. Henry hovered over Isabella and kissed her. She raised her hands and buried them in his hair, wanting to hold him to her for just a beat longer. When she found her tangling her fingers in his hair made him growl, she vowed to remember such an action, for he seemed to like it.

“Something else, eh?” she teased him as he raised his head and looked down at her.

“Just so.” He smiled. “Wife.”

He lowered his lips and kissed her temple. It was one of those soft kisses he had given her before. Uncertain of what to make of it, she curled her hands around his biceps, clinging onto him.

*What does that softness mean?*

All night, their pent-up frustrations had been bubbling. This passion had overwhelmed them, along with their jealousies, but it didn't explain the tenderness.

*Does it mean something more? Does he care for me more than just for this*

*excitement? It would explain why he said he had no mistresses, nor did he want one.*

The mere thought that he could care for her deeply, and potentially even be as devoted to her as she was to him, had her curling herself around him, wanting him nearer.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he whispered in his ear, apparently sensing her thoughts without having to hear them. “You’re going to be sore for a little while, you know.”

“Am I?” she asked in surprise. She supposed if she wriggled her hips, she could feel that soreness, but she had thought nothing of it before. She’d only thought of the thrill he’d given her. “Oh.”

“Yes, oh,” he mimicked her sound and rolled the two of them over so he was on his back.

It was so warm in that room, with sweat beading across their chests, that neither of them reached for the blanket. They stayed as they were, with Isabella resting her head on his shoulder and Henry toying with one of her hands.

“Stay here tonight,” he pleaded. “I just realized I said I’m not going anywhere, but I don’t want you to go either.” He didn’t look at her as he asked her to stay, even though Isabella lifted her head to try and meet his gaze.

“I won’t leave,” she promised.

Sitting up, she turned to face the bedside cabinet and took out the last few pins that kept her hair in place. The long brown locks fell down past her shoulders. Distracted with her task, it took her a few seconds to realize Henry had reached up towards her and was trailing his fingers through her hair.

“There’s something intoxicating about these wild locks, you know?”

“Intoxicating? Ha! You make it sound as if I am some heady drink,” she teased, turning round to face him again.

He pulled her back down to rest her head on his shoulder, then toyed with her hair, trailing his fingers repeatedly over the locks.

“That’s because it feels like you are,” he said with a deep sigh. “My wife.”

“You keep saying that tonight.”

“Perhaps I like saying it,” he murmured, then turned his head towards her and kissed her on the temple.

Isabella almost asked what those soft kisses meant. Her lips parted, ready to utter the words, but then she feared the answer and she stopped.



No matter what Henry had told her, still that evening Lady Hampton had whispered in his ear. Just because Henry was close with Isabella now, it didn't mean he wouldn't change his mind in the future. Scared of telling him just how much their lovemaking had meant to her, she closed her lips and replayed every single moment in her mind. Soon enough, she heard Henry's breathing level out, and when she lifted her head, she found him in a deep sleep.



“Bella? You might need to wake up soon.” Henry moved towards the bed and pulled playfully at the sheet.

“A few more minutes,” she mumbled, tugging the sheet back over her body.

“Don't tease me by pulling at the sheets like that.” He was playful, tugging on the sheet again so her breasts were revealed. She laughed with her eyes closed and covered her body once again. “Such a tease.” He flicked the sheet back down.

“Why do I have to get up?”

“Because I have prepared something for you.” At last, his words made her open her eyes.

Henry felt a smile grow across his cheeks as Isabella sat up, rearranging the sheet so it covered her breasts. Henry moved the dressing screen to the side of the room.

He'd used it after he had woken to mask the fact Isabella was in the bed. He'd called for his valet, who had prepared a bath and brought up breakfast for the two of them on a tray. Though the valet must have suspected Isabella was behind the screen, he was very discreet and never mentioned it. He simply carried out his duties, offered Henry a smile and then left the room.

“What’s this?” Isabella asked, pushing her mussed dark hair away from her eyes.

“A bath, for you,” Henry said swiftly and reached towards her.

“What are you doing—ah!” she yelped in surprise as he lifted her from the bed, with her still clutching the sheet to her breasts. “I can walk to a bath, Henry.”

“Indulge my fantasies,” he said deeply, then lowered her back down as he reached the copper bathtub. It was placed beside the fire, with a table of soaps on one side. “This will help with your soreness. Plus, you don’t need this anymore.” He easily swiped the bed sheet away from her.

She wobbled on her feet, nearly falling over in surprise.

“This seems hardly fair,” she protested and held her arms over her breasts. She flattened them, making his eyes dart down towards them. “I’m bare and you’re not.”

She flicked a finger, making his eyes meet her own once again. He was

wearing the trousers and shirt he'd hastily pulled on that morning.

“Well, I could hardly greet my valet wearing nothing, could I?” He laughed deeply. “You bathe first.”

He helped her step into the bath.

“Thank you.”

She dropped down into the water. As she released her arms from her breasts, Henry couldn't resist admiring her figure. Her long, willowy limbs folded themselves into the bath, and she sat back with a deep contented sigh, indulging in the heat.

“Ooh, I am sore,” she murmured, wincing only a little.

“I hope it won't be for too long.” He stopped behind the back of the bath and bent down, kissing her exposed neck and drawing a giggle from her. “What do you wish to do today then?” he called as he crossed towards the silver breakfast tray that had been brought in for the two of them.

He lifted the tray and carried it towards a table much closer to Isabella. He laid it down, then he poured two cups of tea.

“I had not thought,” Isabella said softly. “Do we have no engagements today?”

“No. There is just a ball on Saturday,” he replied as he passed a cup of tea to her.

She thanked him as their fingers brushed over the cup. That simple touch had his mind wandering back to what they had done the night before.

The way he had made love to Isabella he had never experienced with another woman. They'd been passionate, certainly, and he'd wanted her so badly that he had performed three different positions, even though it was her first time. What had shocked him equally was how tender he had been. It had hurt to see her in pain, and it had changed things for him. The way their hands had been entwined as he had climaxed seemed to have imprinted itself on his memory.

“Henry?” Isabella called, sipping her tea. “You seem distracted.”

“Apologies, I was thinking of last night.” He winked at her. “I wonder why.”

His amused tone had her giggling then taking another sip. He returned to the tray and sat in a chair beside the table, trying to concentrate on their conversation.

“I was wondering if we could go for a ride with the horses,” she suggested with a smile.

“You might be too sore for that too.”

“Oh! I am not that bad.” She wriggled in the bathtub pointedly, then winced.

“See?” He raised his eyebrow.

“I’m sure I can cope, and I’d like to go riding again. Would you come with me?”

“I’d like that.”

Henry didn’t hesitate. It struck him that he’d suggested to John last night they could go shooting together today, but he could easily send a letter to explain he’d come another time. After his conversation with John the night before, somehow, he didn’t doubt his friend wouldn’t mind.

“You could show me more of the estate? As much as I like my reading, I’d like to know more about where I live.”

“I’d be glad to. I’ve been meaning to ask, what interests you in your reading about the human mind? Psychology and so on.” Henry looked at her curiously.

“I’m not sure. I’ve always been interested in it,” she replied, pausing long enough to take a small sip of her tea. “I guess it fascinates me the way people can become so different, even if they have the same upbringing. Look at myself and my sisters, we are certainly alike, but so different too. I think our

childhoods can change us, affect our adulthoods, yet perhaps some of it is in our genes too.”

“Perhaps.”

Henry found himself thinking of his own childhood and his late father. Had it not been for all the pain that had happened in those years, he wondered how differently he’d feel about having children.

As his eyes wandered over Isabella, he found he could imagine her being a mother. Just as she protected her sisters, she could fiercely protect any child and love them dearly.

*That is not a life I can indulge in.*

“I have some more books on the subject here in the library. You can look at them any time, you know.”

“Thank you,” she said with a growing smile, then shifted and winced once again beneath the water. “Will it always be this sore after we...” She nodded at the bed.

“No, just the first time, and it doesn’t always have to take place in a bed,” he assured her, watching as she blushed and looked away from the bed.

Chuckling, he returned his teacup to the silver tray beside him to see that the

butler had kindly placed his post on it. Shifting through the letters, he recognized the handwriting of some business associates and pushed them away, but the handwriting on the last envelope, he knew it well.

*Mary?*

Pulling the envelope forwards, he broke the red wax seal and read her letter hurriedly.

*My dearest friend, Henry,*

*I am so sorry to have caused such a rift between you and your wife the other day. Perhaps I had partaken of one too many drinks. The bond between us is a close one, but I would hate for that to be spoiled by my foolishness after too much liquor.*

*May we begin again and forget that night? I hope you know I only ever wish the best for you.*

*Your friend,*

*Mary, Lady Paulbridge.*

“Is everything all right?” Isabella asked. Henry lowered the letter and looked at his wife. “You’re scowling at a bit of paper, so it can’t be good.”

“It’s from Mary.” His explanation made her stiffen in the water. “Worry not,” he assured her, “she is apologizing for the other night. For her causing trouble between us.”

“Oh.” Isabella frowned all the same. “Is she genuine in her apology?”

“I do not know, in truth.”

Henry wanted to believe Mary would not cause trouble on purpose. After all, he had known her for many years, and she had been a good friend to him, comforting him in times of need, and she had been fun to be with, but the other night still bothered him.

Despite Mary claiming she had just had too much to drink when she had moved towards him, he was not sure he had seen her drink that much. The possibility that she had been quite sober when she suggested intimacy between them rankled him.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think I’m bothered to know.” He shifted his attention towards the fireplace beside them and tossed the letter into the flames.

“Well, it makes it more difficult to reply to her now,” Isabella said with a laugh.

“I have no intention to reply today. So, where shall we go? Do you wish to



see the whole estate?”

“Take me wherever,” Isabella said.

Henry smiled, for he had many ideas in mind of what to show her.

## CHAPTER 23



“*I* don’t think I have ever seen you so happy,” Irene observed as she took Isabella’s arms.

“Happy?” Isabella repeated distractedly.

The last couple of days had passed by in a blur for her. She had spent much of the time with Henry, and today was the first day they were spending time apart. He had gone to see his friend, Lord Hillson, and she had come to promenade with her sisters.

She and Irene walked down the path of Hyde Park, arm in arm, as Susan walked ahead of them, holding flowers that she had picked from the garden. To their left was a vast lawn with a bandstand and cellists on the platform playing. Surrounding the cellists were families and couples who had come to picnic. To their right, paths stretched out through the park, with courting couples walking arm in arm as their chaperones hurried to keep up with them.

“Your ridiculous smile,” Irene said pointedly, then mimicked it. “Don’t your cheeks hurt yet?”

“About as much as yours do.” Isabella gestured towards her sister’s smile. “May I take it that your friendship with your suitor is progressing well?”

“Very well.” Irene’s smile became huge.

“Oh, yes, that’s quite a small smile,” Isabella said sarcastically, earning a playful elbow from her sister. “May I predict a courtship will soon be on the cards?”

“I truly hope so.” Irene sighed with contentment.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were in love.”

“I’m sure she is!” Susan called back, evidently having heard their conversation. “She keeps sighing intermittently as if she were acting Juliet on the stage. All that is missing when she receives a letter from her beau is clutching her chest and sighing dramatically ‘woe is me!’”

“I am not that bad,” Irene protested.

“You are,” Susan insisted and hurried ahead again, picking another flower.

“What about you?” Irene asked, elbowing Isabella once again though softer this time, and with a more serious tone.

“What about me?”

“I mean this smile.” Irene motioned towards her sister’s lips. “You have happily been speaking of your husband all morning too. You have said three times what a kind gift he gave to you this morning.”

“He gifted me a horse. I was going to buy one with my own money, but he was so keen for that money to be used elsewhere, towards you and Susan for your dowries, so he bought the horse himself. Is that not kind?”

Isabella had nearly knocked Henry down that morning as she had run towards him and hugged him so hard to thank him for the horse. He’d laughed and whispered in her ear to save knocking him flat for the bedchamber.

“He is hard to resist, that is all.”

“Oh! Hard to resist, eh?” Irene laughed at her. “Then, it must be love.”

“I never spoke of love.” Isabella shook her head. “I like him, that is all.”

“You don’t love him?” Irene raised her eyebrows, shocked by the idea.

“Is there a possibility for love? Yes, I suppose so, but I’m not in love with

him.” Isabella shrugged, unsure what to make of the idea. “There’s certainly a devotion to him, an affection that runs deeper than I had thought possible. He’s still argumentative, trust me. He is frustrating and possessive.”

“If these are bad things, why are you smiling so much?”

“I don’t know.” Isabella sighed deeply. “His virtues outweigh his flaws. We all have flaws, do we not? No perfect man exists.”

“No. But love certainly does exist.”

“Even if I do love him, I would not be blind to those flaws...” Isabella paused, realizing what she had just said. Her feet halted beneath her, and Irene laughed, releasing her arm.

“Susan, I think she just admitted it!” Irene called.

“I didn’t.” Isabella shook her head firmly, wishing to deny it. “I said ‘if.’”

“You still said the words.” Irene continued to laugh as Susan returned to their side. “I do believe our sister to be in love with her husband.”

“Thank God for that,” Susan declared loudly.

“Shh!” Isabella pleaded and walked to catch up with them. “I didn’t say I loved him. I said ‘if.’”

Yet, nothing Isabella could say could quell her sisters’ excitement now. She walked ahead, and they trailed behind her, talking at length about Henry.

“I suppose they make a good couple, don’t they?” Susan said. “Both so tall and striking.”

“Indeed, they do. Especially if he smiles as often as she does now that they’re growing so much closer.”

Isabella turned back and hissed, “Irene! Susan! For the Lord’s sake, lower your voices. I do not need the whole of Hyde Park to hear that I... that I care about my husband.”

“She nearly said it,” Irene said and then snickered, unable to hold in her laugh.

“You can just say you love him, Sister,” Susan pointed out and hurried to catch up with Isabella. “There is no harm in it.”

“I didn’t say I did.”

Isabella couldn’t think about it. She and Henry were so happy, so much closer, that talking about such depth of feeling made her a little afraid. What

if talking about love scared Henry off?

“Very soon, there will be little versions of Isabella and Henry running all over that fine estate, you mark my words,” Irene said confidently, striding forwards. “Our sister will have others to take care of instead of us soon enough, Susan.”

“How sweet that will be. We’ll be aunts!”

Susan started talking happily about what she would buy her nieces and nephews. Isabella hung back, walking slower behind them, struck by their words. Children weren’t something she and Henry had yet talked about, though the possibility had her turning to look at the families that were picnicking by the bandstand nearby.

One mother was reaching towards her young daughter, who was just beginning to learn to walk. The mother held her arms out to her daughter, and the toddler fell into them, their smiles both wide.

*Maybe it is something we could discuss.*



“Henry? Are you home?”

“In your new sitting room,” Henry called back to Isabella from where he was sitting surrounded by the soft duck egg blue and white tones.

He was strangely happy in this room and found himself retreating here more often than he did his study at the moment.

Lifting his gaze from the paperwork he had strewn across the table, he admired the room. It was significantly warmer than when his father had been alive. He was beginning to think it wise if he encouraged Isabella to extend her redecorating to the whole of the house.

“Henry?” She appeared in the doorway.

Her cheeks were a little flushed from her morning walk, and her hair was coming down out of its updo. When Henry’s eyes settled on her, he felt such a stirring in his gut that he sat back in his chair, quite forgetting about the paperwork for the tenants he had been dealing with.

“How are your sisters?” he asked conversationally, though his eyes were already running over her.

“They’re well. Irene certainly has hopes for her suitor, but Susan is so young I don’t think she’s given much thought to love yet. I’m a little relieved.” She sighed and crossed towards him. When she perched on the table beside him, capturing his attention, he abandoned the papers entirely. “There is something I wished to speak to you about.”

“What’s that?” he asked and turned to rest a hand on her waist.

Slowly, he slid her down the table so she sat there in front of him. Clearly



startled by his touch, Isabella's lips parted, and she broke off from whatever she wished to say.

"You're looking at me in that way again."

"What way?" he asked and reached for her waist with both hands.

"The way you were doing in the carriage the other night."

"I don't know what you mean," he said innocently, then lifted her off the table, drawing her on his lap.

Her smile began to grow as she knelt beside him on the vast chair with one leg, then drew the other up so it was on the other side of his hip.

"Oh, you have no idea what I mean?" she asked and rested her hips against his.

"Well, perhaps a little," he murmured, turning his chin up towards hers. "I'm glad you came home."

"Me too." She hovered over him, finding his lips with her own.

Henry responded instantly to her kiss. By now, he knew she would not be

sore anymore, and she had not complained either from any feeling of tightness. The assurance made him long to know her better, to explore her completely once again.

“Henry,” she murmured between kisses.

“Yes?”

He didn't let her lips go for long before he recaptured them. Repeatedly, he drew her closer, his hands splayed across her waist in an intimate touch.

“We are in the sitting room. Anyone could walk in if we were to stay here.”

“They might not, but if you wished to be sure.”

He put her back on the table so suddenly that she jolted in surprise. He hurried to the door of the sitting room and jammed it shut with a spindly chair so it would not open if anyone pressed against it, then he moved towards the windows and closed the white curtains, blocking out the view of the garden, in case any of the staff decided to take a walk.

“There, we are completely hidden now.”

She laughed as he rejoined. He didn't hold back as he reached for her. There was something about this passion that was so overwhelming that he just needed to satisfy his desire again. From the moment that morning when she

had nearly tackled him over with her gratitude for the horse, he had been thinking of this rush of feeling.

When she responded to his kisses, arching towards him, he moved quickly. Standing between her legs, he kicked the chair away to give himself room, then brought her knees up around his hips. Lifting the hem of her gown so it was around her hips, he rocked the two of them together, just once.

“Such a tease,” she reprimanded him, her voice teasingly firm.

“Ah, talk to me in that way and I won’t be able to hold back.” He turned her around, determined to try something new. “If you don’t like it, then you can tell me to stop, at any point.”

“You’re always quick to reassure me.”

“And I always will.”

He kissed her neck, then urged her softly down to bend over the desk. Her breath hitched as she leaned away from him, her hands over the wooden surface. With her hips in front of him, Henry continued to lift the hem of the gown and chemise higher.

He knew they could not risk being completely undressed in their sitting room, but for now, they could certainly do something. With the gown gathered around her hips, he brushed his hips to her behind, letting her feel how aroused he already was. At that movement, she moaned. The sound seemed

to reach deep into his core, making his body stand completely to attention.

His fingers moved between her legs so he could reach for her center. He not only wished to check she was ready for him but wanted to give her as much pleasure as possible. There had been something so heady about seeing Isabella climax before, he found that moment as powerful as his own release.

He began to caress her with his fingers. When she rocked back against his hand, needing more of it, he withdrew from her. She growled in frustration, and he chuckled, releasing his length from his trousers and moving towards her.

“Impatient, wife?” he teased her.

“Not at all,” she said with sarcasm.

He laughed, loving her humor, even at this moment of heavy steam and need. When she was the one who rocked back against his length, he tipped his head back, feeling the pleasure suddenly engulf him. He started slowly at first, thrusting gently that she soon began to quiver.

Leaning down on the table, she arched her back and lifted her hips, opening herself to him completely. The sight and feel of her had his body tingling with excitement. His movements became faster and harder. She responded to him, her back arching all the more and the moans growing louder from her lips. He prayed all the staff were in the far recesses of the house, though he didn't care too much at that moment. He just wanted to hear her pleasure.

Their speed increased, and with each thrust Henry made, she matched it, bouncing back against him. The heat and excitement were overwhelming, to the point that Henry could feel his heart racing, not just with their activities, but with the thrill of it all.

When Isabella reached her pinnacle, it was sudden. Her body tightened around him in such a way that he came very close to finding his own release.

*Not like this.*

He barely managed to pull out of her in time. He reprimanded his own body for being weak to her as he spilled his seed in a handkerchief, but that protest was soon lost. She turned round and embraced him, kissing him strongly, and he returned her kiss with passion.

*It's too easy to lose myself in her.*

She laughed as she parted her lips from his, sitting back on the table. He moved his hips against her, promising her that more could come if she wanted it.

“You were right,” she marveled. “There was no pain this time. Only...” She paused and shuddered with delight, running her hands over his arms. He tipped his head back at her touch, startled by how such a simple thing could have such power over him. “Only pleasure,” she finished her sentence.

“Each time it will be pleasurable.” He kissed her cheek, her temple, then her

neck again. “Oh, hang on.” He pulled back. “Weren’t you coming to talk to me about something? Apologies, I think I distracted you,” he said playfully.

“You did, but I was happy to be distracted.” Her smile broadened. “It can wait.”

“Good. Then I’ll kiss you again.”

He moved his lips over hers, wondering in the back of his mind what it was that she had at first thought was important to talk about but now thought no more of.

## CHAPTER 24



“*W*hat do you think, Mrs. Walters?” Isabella asked as she strode down the hallway with samples in her hand. “Henry was quite keen for the changes to be extended elsewhere.”

“I think it a wonderful thing, Your Grace. This old house has been too cold and dark for a very long time.” Mrs. Walters lowered her voice as she followed Isabella and glanced over her shoulder, clearly about to impart gossip. “Since the days of the late Duke of Sutterton, these corridors have been so dark. It will be nice to see light in them again.”

Isabella was made curious by the words. She’d heard Henry talk about his father once when they sat in his study together, and he had urged her to carve her own path when it came to her father. But not for the first time did she feel there were things to be learned about the late Duke. Even the housekeeper blushed as she gossiped, then turned her face away.

*There is something more to the tale, there has to be.*

“Then it’s settled, we will make changes,” Isabella said with a smile.

She held the sample of wallpaper up to the wall of the hallway. It was a softer color than the dark wood that surrounded them, made of cream and golden swirls.

“What do you think, Mrs. Walters?”

The housekeeper praised it and made a few suggestions. Isabella longed for Henry’s opinion, but he’d urged her to make the alterations alone, trusting her taste. He had left the house that day regardless, for he’d gone to check on his tenants and was then to visit Lord Hillson.

His absence from the house had made Isabella long for his return, so when a carriage arrived and a knock sounded at the front door, she quickly turned around, still grasping the samples in her hand. Hawkins hurried through the nearest doorway, adjusting his tailcoat, before he opened the door.

But it was not Henry standing on the other side.

*Why is she here?*

Mary strode into the house. She didn’t even acknowledge Hawkins’s presence with a smile or incline of her head but walked past him.

“Ah, there you are, Your Grace.” Her eyes found Isabella’s, and she hurried towards her. “I am so glad to have found you. Is Henry in?” She looked



around in anticipation.

“No, he is not.” Isabella handed the samples to the housekeeper, who was standing beside her. “Thank you, Mrs. Walters. We will finish another time.”

“Of course. Shall I bring tea for the two of you?”

“No th—”

“Tea would be lovely,” Mary spoke quickly before Isabella could completely turn the offer down. Shared tea would mean Mary would stay for longer. “I am so glad to be back here again.”

Mary strode away from Isabella, heading towards the sitting room with her head held high. Taking off her spencer jacket, she flung it over a nearby chair, as if this house were her home.

Isabella followed and hovered in the doorway, with her hands clasped together in front of her. She offered no warm greeting, nor a welcome, yet Mary continued to talk and act at ease as if Isabella had offered such pleasantries.

“Between you and I, Your Grace, I am glad Henry is not here today.” Mary’s use of the Duke’s Christian name had Isabella wincing and shifting her weight between her feet uncomfortably. “I so long wanted the chance to talk to you alone.” She sat down on a rococo settee and patted the space beside her, encouraging Isabella to sit there.

Feeling like a guest in her own home, Isabella walked forwards but chose a different chair. She sat in the grandest armchair opposite Mary, wishing to make a statement. Mary simply shrugged it off and lifted her chin higher, pushing the loose blond curls of her updo backwards to reveal her full face.

“I wished for the chance to apologize to you personally.”

“Apologize?” Isabella repeated in surprise.

The Duchess could still recall Henry talking about the letter Mary had sent him the morning when they had each bathed in his chamber. That day, his brow had been wrinkled as he had tossed Mary’s letter into the fire and refused to reply to it.

*He was unsure if she was sincere in her apology.*

“What for?” Isabella prompted Mary, wishing to hear the apology in full.

“My behavior the other day.” Mary hung her head forwards, pretending to be demure, but it struck Isabella there was no blush on her cheeks, and she constantly glanced upwards at Isabella, as if checking how she was reacting to the act. “My closeness with your husband... it is not something I wished to cause a rift or any argument between you. I dearly wanted you to know that.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the sentiment.” Isabella was confused. She frowned

at Mary, for all of these words could have been put in a letter and did not require her presence.

“I thought it wise you knew our whole history,” Mary said eagerly, then moved to the edge of her seat. She was no longer maintaining that act of demureness but lifted her chin high. “We were friends when we were so young. You know, when he had all those problems with his father.” She dropped her voice to a whisper as if conspiring with her. “Of course, you know all of those problems. He must have talked to you about them at length.”

“Of course,” Isabella murmured tightly.

*We had but one conversation on the matter.*

Before they could say anymore, Mrs. Walters returned carrying a tea tray. She placed it hurriedly down on the dumbwaiter table between them, and Isabella thanked her. Mary offered no such kindness, to the point that Isabella glared across the silver tray between them. Unwilling to let Mary take command of her own home anymore, Isabella moved towards the tray fast and poured two cups of tea.

“How did you meet?” Isabella asked, finding her curiosity won out.

“Our mothers were friends,” Mary explained, taking the proffered teacup from Isabella. “We used to play together as children, and we grew up, often side by side.” She giggled as if embarrassed. “You should hear the tales of some of the things we did together as children.”

“I’m happy not to hear them,” Isabella murmured, though Mary showed no signs of having heard her.

“You see, it was the keenest wish of our mothers that we two should marry someday.” Isabella’s hand slipped with the teapot. The Duchess narrowly avoided spilling the tea over the rim. “Oh, have I shocked you?” Mary seemed to take delight in Isabella’s reaction.

Isabella didn’t raise her eyes to meet the Marchioness’s gaze, not wishing to give her the satisfaction of seeing the shock she’d caused.

*Henry never said. Not once. Why would he hide such a thing?*

“It was my dearest wish we should marry,” Mary continued. “Yet, there were complications, things that made it an ill match. At first, Henry declared he had no wish to marry at all. Then, of course, there is his stance on children.” She sighed deeply and dramatically as if she were a great actress on stage and was trying to convey her emotions to a watcher sitting far away in the recesses of a building, rather than Isabella, who sat opposite from her. “Of course, you know all of that.” Mary nodded her head towards Isabella.

As she raised her teacup and took a sip, she held Isabella’s gaze the entire time, not once blinking.

*She is riling me on purpose, trying to assess my reaction.*

“His stance?” Isabella asked, finding she couldn’t raise her teacup.

She was not interested in tea, or any cake that Mrs. Walters had kindly brought up for them. All she could think about were the words Mary had said so openly.

“Well, when he explained his feelings on the matter, I knew a match between us wouldn’t do. That is when I met my husband, the Marquess of Paulbridge.” Mary smiled broadly. “He is a good man, though no Henry, of course.”

“Excuse me, Lady Paulbridge, you are jumping ahead.” Isabella sat forwards. “What feelings on the matter? You talked about children with Henry.”

“He made himself quite plain on that score.” Mary laughed, then abruptly faltered, staring at Isabella with wide eyes. “Goodness, do you mean to say he did not tell you?” She held a hand to her chest in shock. “My dear friend, then allow me to be the one to tell you, for it is cruel indeed for you to be in the dark.”

*We are not friends, let alone ‘dear’ friends.*

Isabella could see Mary was trying to cause trouble. It was plain as day, but she still wished to know what the Marchioness had to say.

“You know he had no wish to marry, do you not?”

“Yes, he said long ago he had no intention of being married,” Isabella muttered quickly.

“That is because he has no wish to father a child,” Mary said plainly. “Did he really never tell you about it?”

Isabella didn’t answer. She moved to her feet, leaving the tea unattended.

“I think it’s time you took your leave, Lady Paulbridge.”



“Well, Henry, I do not think I’ve ever seen you so happy. It is good to see indeed.” John clapped Henry on the shoulder as they walked across the long fields, heading back in the direction of John’s house, which was on the outskirts of London.

Henry couldn’t make his smile falter. It was naturally in place as he walked by his friend’s side, with a shotgun slung over his shoulder.

“I am happy,” Henry said with surprising contentment.

“You listened to my advice then?” John asked, elbowing him in want of an answer.

“Perhaps you’re able to give some good advice on occasion.” Henry playfully

narrowed his eyes at John. “Forgive me for not taking it on board at first. You are usually always jesting, it is hard to realize when you are being completely serious.”

“Serious in this regard, I assure you.” John nodded firmly and gestured ahead towards the house. “Will you come inside before you leave? My wife would be glad to see you. She was talking the other day about inviting you and your wife around for dinner.”

“I’d like that dinner very much, but for now, I must leave.”

Henry checked his pocket watch in his waistcoat. The hours had passed so fast, and he wished to return to Isabella.

That morning, he had urged her to turn her redecorating to the rest of the house, and he was eager to hear of her planned changes.

“Thank you for the shooting,” Henry said as he passed the shotgun into the hands of the steward beside him.

“Think nothing of it and return soon.”

John stood on the driveway and requested Henry’s horse to be brought around. It was done within minutes, but as they waited for the horse to be saddled again, the two of them stood at the side of the driveway, deep in conversation.

At first, they talked about John and his happiness, how he had never thought he would choose one woman over another, yet how wrong he had proved to be. Eventually, the conversation moved on.

“I’m in love,” John declared plainly. “That is what it means, choosing one woman over another. I suppose I didn’t believe in the emotion at first, but that was me being a fool. Naturally, you’re the same.” He waved a hand at Henry.

“I beg your pardon?” Henry jerked his chin towards his friend.

“Come off it, Henry. No one can smile as much as you have done this morning and deny they are in love.”

“I never said I was in love.” Something about the very words had Henry feeling uncomfortable. He pulled at the sleeves of his frock coat and rearranged creases that didn’t exist. “I am fond of Bella, certainly, but that is all. Fondness and admiration can make for a happy marriage.”

“Certainly, but one that is as happy as this?” John gestured towards him. “Is it so awful if you are in love with your wife, Henry?”

“I didn’t say that either.”

Henry didn’t know what to think or feel. These last few days, he had been so happy with Bella that he had not thought to put a label on it. They had made love with passion, and when they had been in one another’s company, they



had either teased each other or talked at length about all sorts of subjects, especially her reading. She'd shown an interest in helping with his tenants, an interest that warmed his heart.

"I'm fond of her," Henry insisted.

"You think that if you like," John said with a smirk. "I know the truth."

"You're just causing trouble. I'll take my leave before you say anything more."

Henry shook his friend's hand, then mounted his horse. Leaving quickly, he waved into the distance, but his entire way home, he thought of what John had said to him.

*Am I in love? Is that what this feeling is like?*

Henry had no answer to his question. He had never been in love before, so he couldn't be certain that was what he was feeling.

When he arrived home, he jumped down quickly and passed the reins to the stable boy that was awaiting him in the courtyard. After thanking him for his good work, Henry entered the house via a back door.

"Bella?" Henry called, but there was no initial response.

He walked towards the hallway, where he found some samplers had been laid across a hall table, ready for redecorating. In the sitting room, he found a tea tray with two cups that had been half drunk, though the tray hadn't been collected, as if Isabella hadn't called for a maid or Mrs. Walters to take it away.

Curious, Henry checked the other rooms, where Isabella wouldn't normally be. Opening the door of the great hall, he found her pacing up and down the room lined with suits of armor. He was strangely reminded of the night when Mary had come to see the two of them and Isabella had hidden in this space. With her hands on her hips now, she paced up and down, muttering something to herself and breathing so heavily that her cheeks were flushed.

"Bella?" he called again. She stopped walking and turned to face him. "Is something wrong?" He moved closer to her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked bitterly. "Why did you never tell me that you have no wish to ever have a child?"

*She knows.*

## CHAPTER 25



“Henry!” Isabella said his name sharply when he didn’t answer. He stilled, and he stared at her with a blank expression on his face. “Why did you never tell me?”

Slowly, he placed his hands in his pockets and looked down at the floor. He seemed to be gathering his thoughts before he raised his chin and looked at her again.

“Who told you?” he asked, his voice strangely quiet.

“Lady Paulbridge came to see me.” Isabella took a step forwards then one back, finding she couldn’t stay still. They were frantic movements, making her restless. “Oh, I do not doubt she came to tell me just to congratulate herself on hurting me.” She motioned towards the doorway, behind which was a corridor leading to the sitting room. “She sat before me as if she was mistress of this house and took pleasure in telling me you never wanted children. Can you imagine what that felt like? Hearing that from the woman who would be happy to be your mistress?”

“She’s not,” Henry reiterated, his voice firm. “Whatever pleasure she takes in being cruel, you must ignore it, Bella.”

“Then, is it untrue?” She flicked her head back round to face him fully. “Tell me once and for all now. Is it a lie she told just to cause trouble, or is it true?”

“It’s true.” He didn’t hesitate in his answer.

The suddenness of the words had Isabella backing up. Holding a hand over her mouth, she restrained herself from shouting, for that was what her heart wished to do.

*There will never be a child. I shall never be a mother!*

Any fleeting imagination she had ever had of being a mother now played out before her eyes. She saw herself with a young baby, kissing her on the forehead as she fell asleep, then she saw herself playing in the garden with a young boy who was hiding behind tall standing daisies, trying to play hide and seek.

*None of that will ever be real.*

The lump in her throat became so strong, and her eyes stung. She turned her back on Henry. She couldn’t face him, not at that moment, for he would see just how overwhelmed she was with this news.

“Children wasn’t something we ever discussed,” Henry said with a strangely measured tone. It wasn’t one she could copy.

“You could have told me!” she snapped. “Henry, you have robbed me of the chance of making such a choice.”

She turned back to face him as a tear rolled down her cheek. When he saw that tear, he stepped towards her, but she moved back, showing she could not bear to have him near her. She wiped the tear away quickly with the back of her hand.

“When you offered to marry me, you could have said this was the deal, that I would never be a mother.”

“I was saving your reputation.”

“I know!”

“What else was I supposed to do?” Henry was growing angry now too, holding his hands out questioningly. “I vowed long ago never to be a father. That had nothing to do with rescuing your reputation, did it?”

“It had everything to do with it!” She outmatched him in volume, making him fall still. “I had the choice of my reputation falling, but I haven’t expected to have to choose never to have children. You should have given me a choice.”

Henry stood stockstill. He was as unmovable as the suits of armor that surrounded them. Isabella's breath hitched in her throat, and she couldn't stand staring at him anymore. There was no emotion on his face, none. Her heartbreak was not mimicked by him, and his resolve on the matter showed he could not understand it either.

"Do you not see how this hurts? How it makes me ache?" Isabella asked, placing a hand on her chest.

"It was never about you, Bella." Henry's voice was quieter now but just as firm and resolute. "I made this vow long ago, and no matter what the temptation, it is a vow I intend to keep."

He couldn't understand her point of view, she saw that now. There was no apology for not having told her, and he made no effort to come towards her.

Feeling as if her heart was breaking in two, Isabella had to get away from him. Her breath hitched as another tear escaped. Turning, she fled the room. She ran hurriedly through the nearest door and at no point did Henry call out to her to stay. He let her go without a single word on the matter.

Isabella ran all the way to her chamber. Mrs. Walters passed her en route and called out to her, asking what was wrong. Isabella simply thanked her for her concern but gave no reason. She went all the way to her chamber and flung the door closed behind her.

She flung herself down on her bed, then she hid her face in the covers, trying to breathe deeply and stop her tears.

*Life will never be what I thought it could be. Not now.*

Any thought she might have had of raising her own children was now gone. She felt as if all the pictures she'd imagined over the last few days now turned to dust and slipped through her fingers, for she was unable to cling onto that dust.

“I cannot believe it has come to this,” she whispered through her tears and buried her face completely into the covers, wishing she could hide from the world.



Henry couldn't move from the study. He'd retreated there after Isabella had run away from him and barely moved since. Sitting in his desk chair, he steepled his hands in front of him and stared across the room, into the eyes of his father. Sometimes, the paintwork felt too realistic for comfort. Gregory could have truly been in that room staring at Henry.

Henry didn't doubt his father would be furious with the way he had run his life, but that was the whole idea. Henry wished for his father to be turning in his grave over all that had happened.

*He would probably be delighted that I had at least married.*

Huffing quietly, Henry bent forwards and rested his head against his steepled hands.

“Ah, Bella,” he murmured, disliking how she had run away from him.

There was much he wished to say to her and even more he longed to say about Mary and her interfering ways, but there was one thing in particular he knew he had to tell Isabella now if he ever had a chance of getting back the happy days they had spent together.

*She needs to know the truth.*

Henry was just debating ringing a bell and asking Hawkins where his wife was when there was a gentle tap at the door.

“Come in,” he called.

The door opened slowly, revealing a figure in the dark corridor. The candles Henry had lit the study with cast a white glow on the person, revealing Isabella’s face.

“Bella,” he said softly.

Isabella walked in and closed the door behind her, though she didn’t look at him as she turned and leaned against the wood, but stared down at the floor. Her eyes were red, as were her cheeks, showing she had been crying. To see he had been the cause of that pain had something tightening in his chest uncomfortably.



“I’m sorry for not telling you.” The words were out of his mouth before he had thought much about them. They had to be said. At last, her eyes flicked up towards him. “You’re right, I should have told you,” he whispered as he lowered his hands down to the desk. “I guess part of me was afraid.”

“Afraid?” she repeated, with her head tilted to the side as she stared at him. “What of?”

“Of this.” He motioned towards the distance between them. “We have been happy, haven’t we?” She nodded, but she didn’t smile. “I feared what you’d think if I told you the truth.” He angled his head, returning his eyes to his father’s painting.

“What exactly is the truth?” She stepped away from the door and moved towards the desk. “You have told me you made this vow long ago, but you have not told me the reason for it.” She placed a hand on the desk, capturing his attention. “Tell me why, please. Are you not fond of children?”

“I have nothing against them.” He shook his head and sat back in his chair. “On the contrary, a cousin of mine came with his son last year, and I had the most fun I’d had in months in this house playing with that boy.” At his words, Isabella’s lips flickered into the smallest of smiles, but it didn’t last long. “I’m good with children, I like them, but I cannot be a father.”

“Why not?” she asked, her voice quiet. “At least if I understand your resolution, Henry, then perhaps I can try to move past this.”

*Can you?*

Henry faltered, uncertain whether it was possible or not. He felt as if there was a chasm between him and Isabella now, and he was the one who had caused it.

*I have to tell her.*

He nodded his head at the painting, urging Isabella to turn her chin to look at it.

“Do you remember what I told you about my father?” he asked.

“Yes.” She rounded the desk and stood beside him, her eyes never leaving the painting. “I remember. You said he was cruel and unkind, both to you and your mother. He put an emphasis on duty and respectability but had a foul temper and belittled his wife.” She sighed. “Then, he did not tell you she was dying.” Isabella’s voice quietened with the words, betraying her horror.

“Precisely.” Henry moved to his feet so sharply that Isabella stood back in surprise. He turned to face her, waving a hand towards the painting. “That man put more stock in the dukedom than he did any human being. He did not see my mother as a wife to him, nor did he even see her as the mother of his son. He saw her only as someone who performed her ‘duty,’” he scoffed, recoiling at the idea. “Those were the very words he said.”

Henry went to stand in front of the painting. He placed a hand on the wall and leaned forwards, just beneath the painting.

“It was all that mattered to him, and why he had me, so that I could carry on the dukedom and be ‘respectable,’ be someone that made people revere our family name. God, even repeating his words makes me feel sick.” He shuddered and stepped back, gesturing towards the painting wildly. “Can you imagine hearing those words? What is worse, can you imagine hearing them after your mother has died?”

Isabella flinched at his words. She rested both hands on the desk, plainly needing it to support herself.

“My father clung to those words his entire existence, and when faced with death, even then his priorities did not change. He showed the true color of his heart, and it was as black as night.”

Henry felt a thick lump in his throat. He his back on Isabella, not wanting her to see his weakness. He glowered at his father’s painting instead, tightly folding his arms across his body as he breathed deeply.

Once that lump had dissipated a little, he continued. “I vowed the day my mother died that I wouldn’t let my father win. His focus on duty and respectability would all be for nothing.”

“You wanted vengeance,” Isabella muttered.

“Justice,” Henry corrected, then continued, “So, I made a vow to him. I told him that I would ruin the dukedom. I wished for the Sutterton name to be dragged through the mud.” The memory of their conversation flashed in his mind so strongly, Henry almost forgot where he stood in the study. He

thought only of shouting at his father in that corridor outside of his mother's bedchamber. "I vowed to ruin the dukedom's name, and then let the line end."

"Henry..." Isabella rounded the desk and hurried to his side, bringing him back to this moment. "Why? What purpose does it serve?"

"He was crippled by it. I achieved what I wished to," Henry said in a rush, turning to face her. "Everything he ever wished for was gone. I acted out, became the rake that everyone talks about and writes about, all to humiliate him." He thrust a finger at the painting.

Isabella's lips parted, betraying her amazement. Her eyes were wet, but she didn't let her tears drop this time.

"That's why you became a rake? Out of no wish of your own, but just to take revenge?" She shuddered and stepped towards him. "That is no way to live, Henry!"

"It is my life," Henry said simply, holding her gaze. "I have completed half my vow. By the time my father died, he was humiliated, and for all the belittlement and use he made of my mother, it came to nothing. He won nothing from it, thank God, but to continue my work, I must keep to the other half of my vow." He paused, breathing deeply before he said the words. "The Dukedom of Sutterton dies with me."

Isabella reached out a hand. It was the softest touch to his cheek. Henry leaned into it, longing for more.

“What pain you carry with you,” she whispered. Henry closed his eyes, fighting the tears that threatened to come at her words. “I understand why you did this.”

“You do?”

“How could I not after all that you have said? You wanted your justice, and you let your father die believing you had it,” she said. “He went to his grave seeing the dukedom stained by gossip and believing you would never continue the line, but what more purpose does your resolution serve now?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, opening his eyes.

“I mean he’s gone.” Her voice was light as she uttered the words. “He cannot see what happens now. All you’re doing is punishing yourself by holding onto vows that serve no purpose anymore. You had your revenge.”

“No, no.” Henry shook his head, just as her hand dropped away from his face. The loss of her touch made him ache, but he didn’t reach for her hand to have it back again. “It is not just about that. Do you remember when I said we may not be able to choose our fathers, but we can choose the paths of our lives?”

She nodded.

“This is the path I’m choosing.” He laid a hand on his chest in emphasis. “I

will not lead the life my father wished but will carve my own.”

“I see.” Isabella looked away from him, down at the floor between them. Henry breathed deeply and blinked a few times, pushing away the tears that had threatened to fall. “Thank you for telling me, Henry.”

Her abrupt words drew a line under the conversation. It showed their discussion was at an end, no matter what more he could say on the subject to try and explain himself.

“Do you know what I think?” Isabella backed away from him as she lifted her head, meeting his gaze once again. “I think you are making yourself miserable, for no good reason.”

“I beg your pardon?” His head jerked back in surprise.

“You had your justice, as I said, he’s gone,” Isabella said slowly and quietly, reaching as far back as the door behind her. Her back pressed against it, and she took hold of the door handle. “Yet, why would you let the man’s shadow hang over you forever more?”

She motioned with a quick hand towards the painting that hung overhead.

“Why have him stare at you, watch you constantly?” she asked softly. “It does no good. The only thing it does is let him cast darkness over your life for the rest of your days.”

“I do not see it like that.” Henry’s voice was sharp as he shook his head, but Isabella didn’t rise to the argument. She opened the door and hovered in that space for a minute.

“The way I see it, you’re letting him win after all,” she murmured, casting a glance at the painting. “You say you’re choosing your own life, but you’re not really, are you? You’re letting it be dictated by his memory, even though he is long gone.” She backed out of the door. “Thank you for telling me, Henry. At least now I understand you better.”

She disappeared down the corridor, leaving the door open behind her. Henry moved forwards, for a second intent on following her, then he fell still. What she said made his heart pound. Looking back at the painting of his father, he no longer knew what to think or feel. His eyes analyzed the shape of his father’s face, the wrinkles, and the darkness of the eyes that met his keen and unyielding gaze.

“Is that what I have done?” he asked as if the painting would respond to him. “Have I narrowed my life and let you dictate it, after all?”

## CHAPTER 26



“*T*he Duke of Sutterton to see Lady Paulbridge, please.” Henry’s voice was sharp and firm as he stood on the doorstep of the Marquess of Paulbridge’s house.

He’d ridden during the early hours of the morning through the pouring rain and now stood on the doorstep drenched. The water dripped off his frock coat and top hat in such rivulets that the Marquess’s butler stared at him in surprise.

“Yes, of course. Erm...” The butler shifted his weight between his feet, a little nervous. “Perhaps I could put you in the garden room, Your Grace? There is quite a puddle.” The butler gestured down towards the water dripping off Henry.

“The matter is urgent, so put me wherever you wish to.”

Henry walked into the house behind the butler, hardly caring if he left puddles in the fine house. After what Mary had done, the very least she deserved were a few streaks of water on her floorboards and grand carpets.



Henry was put in the garden room, where the floor was made of tiles and would be easier for the maids to clean later. He paced up and down between potted palm trees before his restlessness left him. Abruptly, he sat down in a wicker seat, feeling strangely still.

All night, he'd barely slept. He had thought much of what Isabella had said to him, and every time he had tried to sleep, he had seen her crying face. It had made him ache. When morning came, he had to speak to the person who had caused Isabella's tears.

"Henry!" Mary's voice was full of delight as she hurried into the room.

Closing the door behind her, she didn't even ask for a maid or anyone to come and chaperone them.

"Is your husband away?" Henry asked in surprise, staring at the closed door.

"He is travelling." Mary hurried towards him. When she got close to the wicker chair, he leapt to his feet and stepped around the nearest potted palm, determined not to let her come too near him. "I am so glad you have come to see me. You read my letter?" she asked with unrestrained excitement.

"I did. I burnt it." Henry's words made the smile slip from her face. "If what you had said to Bella yesterday was in a letter, then believe me, I would have burned that too."

“What I said?” She offered an innocent look and shrugged her shoulders, clasping her hands together. “I was simply talking to her. As a friend.”

“What sort of friend reveals secrets in that manner?” Henry asked sharply. “Such a discussion should have been saved for Bella and me alone. You should have had no part in it. You only intended to do one thing by visiting her yesterday, and that was to cause her pain.”

“That is not quite what I intended—”

“Do you think I am that blind?” Henry’s firm tone startled her. She flinched and backed up a small step. “Do you think Bella is? She said you told her with practical glee! I don’t doubt you put on an act. You probably tried to act demure. Kind as well. There is no way such acting could hide your true motives, Mary. No chance of it. What purpose did it serve other than to hurt her?”

“You ask me that?” She lifted her chin high. “Come off it, Henry. How long have you and I known each other? How close have we always been?” She rounded the potted palm and came close to him. He escaped the other way, trying to keep his distance there. “You and I both know that what passed between us that night long ago was something special.”

“Special?” he repeated. He tried to escape her so far that he ended up knocking over one of the palms. The pot smashed when it hit the floor. “I’ll pay for that.”

“Henry, please, don’t change the subject.” She stepped over the fallen palm

as Henry fled towards the door.

*Perhaps coming here was a bad idea.*

“You and I have a bond that can’t be ignored. I wished for Isabella to know that. To be put on her guard.”

“You wished to hurt her!”

“Henry, please.” Mary looked desperate as she reached towards him. He pushed open the door of the garden room and stepped into the corridor. “Just because we are married to other people does not mean we have to be separated from one another.”

“Is that what you intended?” Henry froze. His breathing was stuttering as he glared at her, feeling as if he understood Mary completely for the first time. “You hoped to drive me away from Bella so that I would be closer to you again.”

She said nothing but offered a smile she evidently thought was sweet and demure. He saw it for what it was—cold and calculating.

“You married the Marquess of Paulbridge, Mary, for I never wished to marry you. That discussion was had long ago.” At his words, her smile faltered. “Don’t think because I’ve married now I have any intention of having an affair with you.”

“Henry?” she called to him as he turned and hurried down the corridor, heading back in the direction of the front door. “Henry!” she shouted as she chased after him. “You can’t leave now. You can’t!”

“I intend to, and I’m not bothered to see you again.” He reached for the front door and flung it so wide that it bounced off the wall.

“Henry!” she practically screeched his name, bringing him to a stop on the front step. “You will come back to me, you will.”

Her words baffled him. He turned to stare at her, feeling as if he was seeing her for the first time—a woman crazed.

“You will,” she muttered, much quieter this time.

“I was never yours.” He shook his head in puzzlement. “Whatever dream you have been having, Mary, some fantasy of an affair between us, forget it. It will only ever be in your imagination.”

Turning, he left as quickly as he could, returning to his horse.

As he rode away, he caught sight of Mary standing in the doorway, staring after him.

She looked immovable, like some marble statue.



“Can we not be as we were before?” Henry asked Isabella.

The Duchess struggled to reply at first. Clinging tightly to his arm, she walked into the ballroom. There was comfort in being so close to him, but there was also a strange distance. Every time Isabella looked into his eyes, she was reminded of their conversation in his study, and it stung deeply.

That evening, she had been in no mood to come to the ball, but she knew she’d had no choice. They had agreed to come, and her sisters were going to be there too. She hoped their company could give her some excuse to smile.

“Bella?” Henry whispered as he led her around the edge of the ballroom.

“I don’t know, I just don’t know,” she said quietly, continuing to hold onto him. “I wish to be, but this is hard to deal with, Henry.” She looked up, seeing his face appear as pained as her own. “I need time to deal with all that you have told me.”

“That I understand.” His voice was deep and soft. “At least, promise you will not shut me out in the meantime. Deal with this by talking to me, so we can be open with one another.”

She nodded, though she was confused about what he meant. What more was for them to discuss? He had no wish to be a father. That was it! There was no more to say.

“I think I need a drink,” Isabella murmured, finding the temptation of claret quite strong at that moment.

“I shall fetch it for you.” Henry released her arm. “Do you wish to find your sisters?”

“Later. I shall stay here.”

Isabella chose a corner of the ballroom. It was a chance to watch others from a distance, without having to approach any of them or make forced conversation. Henry nodded and promised to return soon before he hurried towards the drinks table on the other side of the room.

Isabella watched from a distance. Henry was caught up by Lord Hillson approaching him for conversation. Lady Hampton also grew near to him. The sight of the woman had Isabella’s stomach knotting tight, but it didn’t last. To Isabella’s amazement, Henry held up a hand. His palm was turned towards Lady Hampton, warning her not to come any closer. The widow left quickly, showing no further intention to talk to him.

*He is loyal.*

The realization had Isabella leaning against a pillar beside her, stunned at the change in him.

*He told me the truth when he spoke of Lady Hampton.*

Isabella was beginning to think that maybe she and Henry could be happy again. She would never have the child she wanted, but she could be a doting aunt when her sisters had children. What was more, she longed for the happiness that had been between the two of them to return.

“Maybe we can make it work,” Isabella whispered to herself, thinking of what she would say to him when he returned to her side.

She stepped off the pillar as someone appeared before her.

The sight of Mary’s face had Isabella stumbling back. Mary had dressed so grandly that her position was instantly noticeable as a marchioness. She wore a bold gold gown with so much jewelry that she glittered in the candlelight.

“Your Grace.” Mary barely bobbed a curtsy and didn’t smile. All the pretense she made to be a friend to Isabella the other day had vanished.

“Lady Paulbridge.” Isabella kept to her politeness and curtsied properly. “I did not imagine you would wish to speak to me this evening. Have you not achieved all you wished to by speaking to me as of late?”

“There is something more I wished to say to you.” Mary glanced over her shoulder, looking in Henry’s direction across the room, before she stepped towards Isabella and lowered her voice. “You have poisoned his mind against me.”

“If he dislikes you, that is your own doing, not mine.”

Isabella took a step away, intending to escape, but Mary reached up and took her arm. It was a surprisingly vice-like grip for one so slight. Isabella looked down at where the Marchioness was gripping her arm, imagining she was like some sort of slim kestrel. Elegant yet fierce when it wished to be.

“You have poisoned him against me,” Mary said again, clinging to the lie in her desperation. “I cannot have it. He will come back to me. Henry always comes back to me, no matter how many ladies he seduces.”

Isabella snatched her arm away from Mary’s grasp.

“In case you had not noticed, I am not just another lady. I am his wife,” Isabella reminded her sharply.

Mary’s nose wrinkled in distaste, then she lifted her chin higher.

“I see I am not making myself clear,” Mary spoke in a rush. “You are to end your closeness with Henry, bring the relationship to an end.”

“We are married!” Isabella hissed.

“Many couples keep a distance under the same roof, as so shall you be,” Mary said with delight, stepping forwards once again. “End your bond with him. Isolate him. Make him lonely.”



“Why on earth would I do that?” Isabella shook her head in bafflement, wondering if this woman was so delusional that she imagined Isabella jumping to her tune.

“Because of what I can do.” Mary nodded her head across the ballroom. Isabella followed Mary’s gaze, only to find her staring at Irene and Jeremiah, who were dancing together. “I see your sister has been as indiscreet as you were.”

“I beg your pardon?” Isabella snapped her head towards Mary, hearing the insult plainly.

Mary continued to smirk, taking pleasure in the Duchess’s discomfort.

“I caught your sister and Lord Burton in a corner together, earlier this evening. Oh, they did not see me there. No, they were far too caught up in one another.” She pretended horror, holding a hand over her mouth. “Imagine that. Another of the Earl of Sinclair’s daughters behaving in such an unladylike manner. They were kissing, Your Grace. I saw it with my own eyes.”

Isabella swallowed. Despite the simple action, it could spell great danger. Looking at Irene, she noticed the way Irene and Jeremiah smiled as they circled around one another in their dance. There was such tension between the two of them that it was easy to believe they might have misbehaved a little.

*Oh, Irene, what have you done?*

“What do you wish for by telling me this?” Isabella hissed, returning her focus on Mary.

“I can tell others what I saw here tonight,” Mary threatened. “I can reveal their actions, and I can say much more happened too. You’ll find I have quite an active imagination in that regard.”

“Cruel. That is cruelty itself,” Isabella snapped. “My sister has done nothing to you, but you would seek to destroy her so? It is brutal!”

“It can be stopped.” Mary said simply before her smile grew again. “All you have to do is agree to leave Henry.”

“I cannot leave the house,” Isabella muttered. “It would cause a scandal.”

“Then, stay in the house but distance yourself from him,” Mary said with a shrug as if she was talking of no great matter at all. “Distance yourself, completely. Or I will reveal everything that I saw and more to do with your sister and Lord Burton.” She waited with her lips parted, clearly in anticipation of Isabella’s reply.

Isabella held her breath, uncertain of what to say. Her gaze sought out Henry across the room. He was talking to Lord Hillson as he poured a glass of claret for her. The small smile that appeared on his features made her heart hurt. She wanted that happiness between them back, but that was now impossible, wasn’t it?

She turned to look across the ballroom. Irene and Jeremiah were stepping off the dance floor hand in hand. Their proximity to one another showed Isabella that any rumors about them would be believed, at once. Mary could invent any rumors she wished, and the *ton* would not doubt it.

*I cannot see Irene ruined. It would break her heart and damage Susan's chance of finding a good match too.*

“I cannot believe I am about to say this,” Isabella whispered as she turned to Mary, who was already smiling in triumph, knowing she had won. “I agree to your terms.”

## CHAPTER 27



“Something’s not right.”

“What do you mean?” John caught Henry’s shoulder. “And would you stop pacing? You’ll wear my carpet out.” He pushed Henry down into the nearest chair. “Now, explain yourself properly. I’d offer you a coffee, but you’re so worked up, I’ll offer you tea instead.”

Henry could not sit still. His knee bobbed up and down, and he repeatedly thrust a hand into his hair, pulling at the strands. The maid came and went, delivering tea, and John passed Henry a cup before sitting opposite him.

“Tell me properly what is afoot.”

“I don’t know. I wish I did.” Henry lifted the cup to his lips too soon and burnt his tongue, for he was so distracted. “The last few days, Bella has been avoiding me. Under our own roof, she’s avoiding me. I don’t think it’s to do with our argument either. She was talking to me after that. She said she needed time, that was all.”

“Is that what she is doing? Taking time to consider your position on children?” John asked with much more calmness than Henry felt.

“I don’t think so.” Henry was sharper in tone, frantic. He sat back then sat forwards, again, nearly dropping his teacup.

“Try not to spill your tea,” John warned and sat forwards. “So, if you don’t think that is what is on her mind, what is?”

“I don’t know.”

Henry looked down into his teacup, thinking of all that had happened. Isabella hadn’t even joined him for dinner the last few days. Whenever he saw her, she would mutter something and run away. He had chased her once through the house, before coming in front of her closed chamber door, and she’d refused to let him in. He’d begged her to open the door, to explain what was wrong, but she just said she couldn’t explain it, and then fell silent.

“I think something else is amiss.”

“Then be patient, talk to her when you can,” John suggested. “In time, I’m sure she’ll come round. Lover’s quarrels are swift to mend, according to my mother.” He rolled his eyes as if he’d heard it all before. “Thankfully, so far I’m discovering she is right.”

“How are you and your wife?” Henry asked, trying to change the topic. “You

seem happy.” John’s smile abruptly grew in answer. “Very happy... what has happened?”

John pressed a finger to his lips and moved to his feet. He hurried to the door and closed it, then returned to his seat.

“We have not told anyone yet, but I have to tell someone, or it will just burst right out of me.” He placed his teacup down on the tray between them. “I’m going to be a father.”

“What?” Henry stiffened in his seat, unsure if he’d heard his friend correctly. “John... you are to have a child?”

“I am.” John abruptly laughed. “Isn’t it mad? To think I will be a father. I can’t believe it.” He moved to his feet, so excited he could not sit still.

Henry followed him, then shook his hand warmly.

“I could not be happier for you, John. I’m truly thrilled.”

“Thank you, my friend.” John laughed again. “I cannot believe it. To think there will be a baby soon in this house. I have never known this feeling before, this excitement!” In emphasis, he jumped up and down once, and Henry laughed at his reaction.

“You are as giddy as a child yourself.”

“I am.” John laughed and returned to his seat, sitting back heavily. “I don’t even know how to be a father.”

“You’ll learn.” Henry clapped him on the shoulder in comfort and returned to his own seat. “We should be drinking champagne not tea.” He laughed and raised his teacup, in a toast to his friend. “To you, your wife, and child, John. I’m delighted for you.”

“Thank you, Henry.”

They chinked teacups and smiled broadly.

As John talked of his wife’s condition and how she was suffering from a little morning sickness, Henry found his mind wandering. The last few days, he had been considering what it would be like to abandon his vow and have a child. He’d pictured Isabella as a mother, and that image now came through stronger than ever before.

He thought of Isabella standing with a baby in her arms. The baby would have her eyes and his strong features. It was a beautiful image and one that made Henry’s heart pound stronger than he had expected it to.

*The thought of a child makes me happy. When did that happen?*

Henry found he couldn’t stay long after that. So caught up with needing to

talk to Isabella, he congratulated John another time and returned home.

When he arrived, he jumped down from the carriage, only to find Isabella in the courtyard, mounting the horse he had bought for her.

“Bella?” he called to her, desperate for her not to run away this time. She flicked her head round at his calling her name, then tugged the reins, urging the horse into action. “Bella!” Henry ran down the driveway as she rode away. “Will you not talk to me?”

He hardly cared if the footmen and stable boys were standing at the side of the driveway, wondering what was going on. All he wished for was for Isabella to talk to him.

She didn't come back. She was gone all too quickly, with the horse's hooves kicking up mud behind her.

Standing still in the middle of the driveway, Henry's breath heaved up and down as he stared after her.

*I miss you, Bella.*

He wanted nothing more than her company again and a chance to see her smile.

“Your Grace?” Hawkins approached his side. The butler had evidently seen



something of what had happened from the house. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Your kindness knows no bounds, Hawkins.” Henry offered his good butler a smile, but it was one that he couldn’t hold for long. “Thank you, but no.”

“Shall I order the carriage away?”

“No. There is somewhere else I think I’ll go first.”



The Earl of Sinclair’s house was unwelcoming to Henry. The Earl glared at him through the window as he walked up the front steps, and when Henry told the butler he was there to see Irene and Susan, he could hear the Earl shouting in the sitting room, evidently angered that the Duke had not come to see him.

Henry was shown into the garden where Irene and Susan sat together. They had evidently been playing battledore, for the rackets were down by their sides.

“Your Grace!” Irene jumped to her feet at his arrival, hurrying to curtsy. Susan followed behind her.

“Please, call me Henry,” he said. “I must speak to the two of you, it’s about Isabella.”

“Ah, then you should listen to what the two of us are already saying.” Irene grimaced.

“Quite changed all of a sudden, isn’t she?” Susan picked up one of the rackets and the shuttlecocks, then hit it away across the garden. The sharpness with which she struck it spoke loudly of her anger. “She won’t see us.”

“She won’t?” Henry asked in surprise, taking the garden seat that Irene had indicated. “I don’t understand. She seems to have cut herself off from us all.”

“From you too?” Irene’s brows furrowed. “Something is wrong indeed. The other night at the ball, she left barely having said a word to either of us.”

“I don’t understand it,” Susan added as she struck another shuttlecock.

“Dear, we’ll have to get them all back at some point,” Irene pointed out.

“It helps.” Susan struck the third and final one they had away.

Sighing deeply, Henry hung his head in his hands.

“I prayed she had said something to the two of you. Something is clearly wrong, but she won’t tell me what it is,” Henry said slowly, then raised his head. “I don’t know how to mend things when I don’t know what upsets her so.”

“I wish I could help.” Irene reached towards him and patted his hand that rested on his knee comfortingly. “Isabella has sometimes been like this in the past though.”

“What do you mean?” Henry asked.

Irene sat back and exchanged a look with her sister.

“Isabella practically raised us,” Irene began slowly. “She was our mother when we had none. I may not have always noticed it, but these last few years, I saw repeatedly how when things upset her, she felt she had no one to share it with. Wishing to protect us, she withdrew into herself and dealt with it alone.”

“Like the time our father wished to sell our mother’s jewelry,” Susan added with an angry huff. “She was very quiet for a few weeks after that.”

“She keeps her troubles to herself,” Irene explained. “She does not share them easily.”

“That is what I fear.” Henry sat back in his seat, feeling his sadness grow. “How do I get her to share the truth with me?”

“I wish I knew, Henry. Perhaps there is something I could try to do for you,” Irene offered, then sat forwards.

Henry was nodding even before she'd made her suggestion.



Isabella walked around the kitchen garden. Repeatedly, she laid her fingers on the herbs and trailed them through the fragrant leaves, then raised them to her nose. The walk and the scents helped to distract her from her thoughts.

She'd discovered in the last few days that the kitchen garden was a good place to hide from Henry. Not once had he thought to look for her there.

*I miss him.*

Isabella had to remind herself why she was pulling back from him. It didn't matter if she had forgiven him for not telling her the truth about not wanting a child when they first married, none of that seemed important now. All that was important was protecting Irene.

"I have to keep her safe," Isabella muttered.

"Who?" The question had Isabella stumbling. "Don't fall!"

Yet, Isabella tripped on the corner plot of herbs and ended up falling into the rosemary bushes. They were twiggy and poked through the skirt of her gown, scratching her legs.

“Ow,” Isabella yelped as she looked up to see her sister. It was as if Irene had been summoned by her thoughts.

“Always clumsy.” Irene laughed good-naturedly and walked towards her, offering her hand. “Let me help you up.”

Isabella gladly took her sister’s hand and pulled herself to her feet. She had to release the skirt of her gown from the rosemary bushes with a few tugs.

“You found me,” Isabella murmured.

“Well, I knew where you liked to hide back home.” Irene didn’t release her hand. Instead, she linked their arms together. “A little bird tells me you’re running away and hiding in this house too now.”

“Perhaps.” Isabella didn’t elaborate.

“If you are to walk so restlessly with your own thoughts, then I will at least keep you company as you do so.”

Irene pulled her forwards, and they walked together around the kitchen garden, arm in arm. They said nothing for a minute. Isabella merely trailed her fingers through the herb bushes, and Irene tipped her chin high, admiring the blue sky.

“We shall have to talk eventually, you know.”

“About what?” Isabella shrugged as if nothing concerned her.

“How about the fact you are avoiding your husband?” At Irene’s question, Isabella tried to retract her hand, but Irene wouldn’t let her and tightened her grip. “Or that you are being distant with me and Susan too? I know you like to deal with problems on your own, but, Isabella, I am no child anymore.”

She brought the two of them to a stop on the path, earning her Isabella’s gaze.

“No, you’re not,” Isabella sighed in realization. Where she had tried to protect Irene from the troubles of the world for so long, she could see it wasn’t something that was always attainable. Irene was no longer a young girl. “I like to protect you.”

“I don’t need it,” Irene said strongly, shaking her head. “Especially when you are merely trying to protect me from what is going on in here.” She reached forwards and tapped Isabella’s temple. “Maybe you cannot talk to your husband about whatever is troubling you, but please, Sister, tell me.”

“I…” When Isabella faltered, Irene huffed dramatically and lifted the hem of her gown. “What are you doing, Irene?”

“Getting your attention.” Irene dropped to her knees on the garden path and clasped her hands together. “If I beg you to tell me, would you do it?”

“You’ll get your gown dirty. Come here.” Isabella took hold of her sister’s hand and pulled her to her feet.

“I thought that would get a single smile from you, but it seemed I was wrong. Come on, tell me the truth.” Irene tugged on their hands. “What worries you?”

“I...” Isabella breathed deeply before the words escaped her. Irene was right, they could share their woes completely now they were both grown-ups. There was something about sharing the truth with Irene that gave Isabella comfort. At least then someone would understand her. “Lady Paulbridge saw you and Lord Burton.”

“I’m sorry?” Irene frowned in confusion.

“She saw you kissing.” Isabella’s words made her sister’s jaw drop.

Irene blushed deep red. “I can explain, we were just—”

“I hardly need an explanation for that.” Isabella waved her hand dismissively. “Caught up in affection is something I understand. What I don’t understand is Lady Paulbridge’s need to cause division.” She sighed and hung her head. “She made me a simple threat. She was prepared to tell the *ton* not only what she saw of the two of you, but to invent that something greater had happened. She is prepared to spread rumors about you.”

“God’s wounds,” Irene mumbled quietly. She mimicked Isabella’s position

and hung her head too. “That is vicious indeed.”

“It is!”

“What is her aim? For what purpose would she seek to do this?”

“She promised not to spread rumors if I agreed to distance myself from Henry.” Isabella looked up and met her sister’s gaze. “I didn’t want to do it, but what choice did I have? I won’t see you hurt, Irene. Not for anything.”

“You have put me first? Good Lord! Why?”

“You are my sister, you fool,” Isabella reprimanded her and tapped her on the shoulder. “I’d protect you with my dying breath, so what else was I supposed to do? I agreed to distance myself from Henry, and she promised to keep what she had seen a secret.”

“Henry should know,” Irene said with sudden fervor. “Your husband should know this.”

“No. That was also part of her vow. If I told Henry, she would speak of what she had seen. Don’t you see, Irene? I can’t tell Henry. Now I will swear you to secrecy too. Please, please, do not tell him.”



## CHAPTER 28



“*H*enry? Henry!”

Henry nearly fell out of his chair in relief at that voice. He jerked up from the table in the sitting room, where he had been working, only to realize the tone of that voice wasn't quite right. It wasn't Isabella who had been calling him, but Irene.

“I'm in here,” he called to the open door. She appeared a few seconds later, flushed from her running, her hair wild. “Did you find her?”

“Of course I did.” Irene smiled as she closed the door behind her and moved into the room. “You need to do a better job of searching your grounds. She's been hiding in the walled kitchen garden.”

“Ah.” Henry sat back down again with a huff. He had never thought to look there. “She talked to you?”

“She did, and you will not like what she said. God’s wounds,” she muttered, turning in a circle and wringing her hands together. “She made me promise to keep this a secret from you.”

“Secret? What secret?” Henry was on his feet again, desperate to know.

“I cannot keep that promise. Not when I know I am the cause of all of this.” She turned back to face Henry. “I apologize, for I am the cause.”

“You’re not making sense, Irene.”

“Then listen carefully.”

Irene told him all that she had discovered. Henry was reeling, not just from Mary’s attempts at manipulating him, but the fact she had succeeded in driving Isabella away from him. He let out such a long series of curses that Irene laughed.

“I apologize for my words,” he said in a rush.

“Do not apologize for that. After what she has done to my sister, I only wish to agree with you.” Irene waved the matter away before her smile fell. “Yet, you see now why Isabella has been distant with you. It was to protect me only. I am so sorry I have caused this. What happened between Lord Burton and me... it just happened.”

“You would not be the first to let passion dictate your actions.”

Henry could hardly blame her for it. His reputation was hardly that of a saint in that area, and he knew the truth these days that if he and Isabella had ever courted traditionally, he might have found it difficult to stay away from her. He certainly would have made up inventive reasons to get rid of their chaperone for a while.

“What do we do?” Irene asked, holding out her hands.

“I know exactly what we should do.” Henry smiled as a plan began to form. “You have your dowry, Irene, do you not? We have added to it.”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“And do you love Lord Burton?” he asked. “I know what I am to suggest might be hasty, but pray, think it through to avoid any scandal befalling the family. Do you love him? Could you be happily married to him?”

She didn’t even hesitate. Her smile broadened.

“With all my heart.” Her simple answer had him mirroring that smile.

“Then, I say it’s time you and I paid a visit to Lord Burton.” He snatched up his tailcoat from the chair and strode out of the room, with Irene at his heels.

“Now?” she asked in surprise.

“Now. Between you and I, Irene, I do not trust Mary to keep her mouth shut about what she saw. Some way or another, she would let it slip. From what I have seen of her lately, she enjoys causing Isabella misery too much to hold herself back. So, we must stop this before it can become a scandal.”

Irene didn't dispute his words.

He arranged the carriage in a rush, and the two of them left within the next few minutes. They rode through town towards Jeremiah's house. Upon their arrival, Henry announced their presence to the butler. At once, he showed them through to the garden, where Jeremiah was practicing his fencing skills with his brother.

Lord Burton broke off when he saw Irene and tossed the sword to his brother before walking towards them.

“Irene?” he called to her.

He took her hand and kissed the back of it. The obvious affection had Henry's stomach tightening with anticipation.

*It's just possible this plan might work.*

“I do not believe you have met my brother-in-law properly.” Irene nodded her head at Henry. “This is His Grace the Duke of Sutterton.”

“You are most welcome here, Your Grace.” Lord Burton offered a friendly smile and bowed deeply in greeting.

“Thank you, Lord Burton. I apologize for coming unannounced, but there is a grave matter you and I must discuss with Lady Irene.”

“Of course.” Jeremiah’s expression became serious, and he urged Henry on with a wave of his hand. “What is the matter?”

“It is the fact that you and Lady Irene were seen when you were...” Henry struggled to say the words.

“Ah.” Jeremiah clearly didn’t need to hear the words. He took Irene’s hand in his own and turned towards her. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said with a small smile. “There were two of us there at that moment, were there not?”

“But who saw us?” Jeremiah asked in a panic.

“Someone who intends to cause trouble for us all.” Henry held up a hand, pleading with Lord Burton to let him finish, for the man looked ready to speak again. “Yet, with your help, I think we can avoid all of that. First off,

may I ask you how strongly you are devoted to my sister-in-law? If the devotion is anything small, then I will not go on with my suggestion.”

“I am completely devoted, Your Grace.” Jeremiah took a tighter hold of Irene’s hand. “I am no great wordsmith, no poet, but believe in my strength of feeling for her, I beg of you.”

“Good man.” Henry smiled, seeing there was a way out of this mess. “Then here is what I suggest happens next.”



Isabella saw Henry riding towards her atop his horse. She tugged the reins of her mare, trying to turn the animal round.

“Time to go,” she pleaded with the animal and nudged her towards the trees.

The mare snorted in surprise at the movement but abided by the order, flying between the trunks with speed.

“Bella!” Henry called after her, yet he was faster than her today.

Even as Isabella rode away, he caught up with her. She jumped over tree trunks and fallen logs, but he seemed to gain ground, no matter what she did to get away. Uncertain whether she could continue to escape him on her horse, she came to a sudden halt by the lake in the middle of the trees on the estate.

Flinging the reins over the nearest tree branch, she jumped down and began to hurry around the lake.

“You cannot run from me our whole lives,” he pleaded with desperation in his tone as his horse appeared beside her own.

He tossed his reins over the same branch and leapt down with greater alacrity than she had managed.

Running around the lake, she didn't let up her pace. In her gut, she felt the way he must have hated her for all her running. She couldn't blame him for it, but she'd rather run than say anything cruel to drive him away from her. She couldn't do that, no matter what Mary may have threatened her with.

“Bella!” he shouted again as he ran around the lake, following her. “I know what she did! I know what Mary said to you.”

The sudden words brought Isabella to a stop.

She skidded to a halt at the side of the lake. It was so abrupt that she nearly lost her footing.

“Careful!” he called, continuing to run after her.

With her feet sticking in the mud, Isabella turned back to face him.

“What did you say?” she asked anxiously.

*He knows. How can he know?*

“I know what Mary said to you. I know the threat she made. This ends now!”

At his words, she backed up, scarcely able to believe it.

*She warned me not to tell him, and I didn't.*

Her feet ended up in the shallows of the lake. With her thoughts caught up in what had happened, she didn't look where she was going. Tripping on something beneath her, she fell backwards.

“Bella!”

She fell under the water. The shallows disappeared into deep depths. Isabella's eyes opened under the water, and she saw the bubbles around her mixing with the murky blue hues. Her hands pushed against the riverbed, trying to force herself back up again, but the skirt of her gown had become entangled in reeds, and she couldn't pull herself out.

There was splashing around her. She turned to see what was happening when a pair of hands reached for her. Henry's face appeared above her in the water



before he took her waist and tried to tug her upwards. When she didn't move, she pulled at his bicep, pointing at what was wrong. He must have seen it, for his other hand reached for the reeds. He was stronger than her, and he pulled the reeds out at their roots. They came away, releasing her skirt.

Isabella pushed upwards as Henry pulled her. Their heads emerged above the surface, and Henry pushed her towards the shallows. She coughed and spluttered, with his hands never leaving her, not once.

“Th—thank you,” she stammered between her coughs.

“You have a habit of ending up in the water. And falling over.”

“I'm clumsy!” she pointed out.

“I noticed.” He laughed.

His laugh was sudden, and it captured her attention. As her feet found shallow ground, she turned to face him. His hands were still on her waist, and this time, she touched him too, clinging to his biceps.

They were both soaked, their clothes sodden and their hair stuck to their temples, with rivulets of water dripping off them.

“Are you all right?” he asked in a panic.

One of his hands ran over her. He cupped her cheek and tilted her head back so he could look more closely at her neck, then his eyes moved to her shoulder and down her arm.

“I’m fine,” she assured hurriedly. “What were you shouting? You know? You know what she said? She told me not to tell you, or she would...” Isabella broke off, swallowing uncomfortably in fear.

“All for Irene. All for your sister,” Henry said in a rush with a smile breaking through. “The kindness in you. You were prepared to make yourself miserable, to see her safe.”

“What sister would not do the same?” Isabella pulled on his arms. “She saw them together. Lady Paulbridge said she was going to spread lies about them doing much worse than stealing a quick kiss. Irene would have been ruined. Lord Burton’s mother, who wishes so much for a fine marriage for him, would have surely not allowed the marriage then. What else was I supposed to do?”

“Tell me!” Henry replied without hesitation, then his voice softened. “If Mary ever does anything like this again, you tell me, Bella, please.”

He raised his hand back to her cheek and brushed the water away from it. Isabella felt cared for at that touch. It prompted her body to lean towards him. They stumbled together in the shallow water of the lake, but this time, they remained standing.

“You can trust me, with everything,” he whispered. “You need to know that.”

“What happens now?” she asked. “If Lady Paulbridge finds out that you know—”

“Her threats won’t work.” Henry shook his head.

Isabella’s stomach knotted at his words.

“What do you mean?”

“Irene and I visited Lord Burton this afternoon and explained something of what had happened.” He continued to smile as he talked. “Lord Burton proposed to your sister before I could even finish the suggestion. He didn’t hesitate. He loves her, and your sister seems equally enamored with him, so I don’t doubt they will be happy.”

“They’re to be married.” Isabella raised her hands to her mouth in shock. “It is fast!”

“Not as fast as our marriage,” he reminded her with a chuckle. “The point is that they shall be safe from gossip. The betrothal will be announced in the papers tomorrow. Anything Mary could say now would be tempered, for people will know they intend to wed. Don’t you see, Bella? Your sister is safe. Mary can’t harm her anymore.”

Isabella breathed deeply as she lowered her hands from her mouth.

*Henry did all of this?*

“You saved her from harm,” she whispered, staring up at him. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

She flung her arms around him and embraced him tightly. He laughed as he caught her and stumbled on his feet.

“Careful, or we’ll end up back in the water.”

“I don’t care. I just want to thank you.”

As she clung to him, she felt herself being lifted off her feet. He wrapped both arms around her waist and held her tightly against him as he walked the two of them out of the water and back onto the riverbank.

“I can’t believe it, I just can’t,” she kept whispering repeatedly.

“You pulled away from me because of all this?” he asked in her ear. “I feared you may hate me because of what I told you about not having children... and my father.”

“What? No!” She pulled back far enough as he lowered her to her feet, to look him in the eye. “I understand why you did it. That night at the ball, I was ready to tell you that I could move past it. That we could be as we were, then Lady Paulbridge spoke to me.”

Sharp curses escaped Henry’s lips. His fury brought a smile to Isabella’s lips.

*There truly is nothing between them. He cares for me, and I do him. Why should I not tell him the truth about how I feel? All of it!*

“You could move past it?” Henry asked slowly. “For there is something else I must tell you about that resolution, something I’ve been thinking—”

“I love you.” The words were out of her lips before she could stop them.

Henry froze and stared at her, his lips parted.

“Y—you do?” he stuttered.

“I do.” She nodded. “All my pulling back was only because of Lady Paulbridge, nothing more, Henry. I need you to know that.”

“Thank God!” He tipped his head back and called the words to the heavens again, then bent down towards her, kissing her hurriedly. It was fast and chaste compared to their other kisses, yet it mattered just as greatly to Isabella as if it had been the most passionate of kisses. “I love you too.”

The words overwhelmed Isabella. She clung to him and kissed him again. When they parted, it was some minutes later. Their hands were entwined, and their hips were pressed together, their sodden clothes still dripping water.

“What do we do now?” Isabella asked, afraid to disturb their happy moment yet knowing she had to. “About Lady Paulbridge?”

## EPILOGUE



“*P*repared for this?” Henry asked as he took Isabella’s hand and helped her out of the carriage.

“You seem certain.”

Isabella chewed the inside of her mouth as she stepped down. Rather than letting go of her hand, Henry entwined their gloved fingers together and led her towards the Marquess of Paulbridge’s house. She stared at it uncertainly, not sure what to think of what was now to pass.

The night before, she and Henry had stayed up for hours. They had not lost themselves to passion, but only tenderness. They’d laid in each other’s arms in her bed and talked openly to one another. Henry had told her he loved her again, confessing that, for a while, he just hadn’t been sure what that truly meant. But when she had pulled away from him, he had learnt the truth of it.

“I missed you. So much,” he had whispered.

Isabella felt closer to him now than she had ever been before. She'd apologized repeatedly for distancing herself from him, and he had told her he'd forgiven her without needing to hear her apology. He understood why she did it and was only sorry that he hadn't proved himself trustworthy enough for her to come to him with the truth at once.

He vowed to change that from now on so there would never be a secret between them. That was why he had brought her to the Marquess of Paulbridge's house, to see the conversation that was to take place between him and Mary.

"Will she see you?" Isabella asked him as they stood on the front step. "After your last conversation?"

"I somehow don't doubt she will."

He knocked on the door, and they were soon shown inside. With hurried bows, they were welcomed into a vast parlor that was decorated so sharply in white that it hurt Isabella's eyes.

"I think I'll take Lady Paulbridge's comments about my own decorating with a pinch of salt," she whispered.

The Duke laughed deeply and nodded in agreement.

"Henry? Henry, you're here?" Mary's voice reached the room.



Isabella turned just as Henry released her hand. They both faced the doorway as Mary stepped inside.

The excitement in her manner disappeared instantly. With her hands pressed against the doorframe, her bright blue eyes darted between Henry and Isabella.

“Oh,” she gasped, then her eyes narrowed at Isabella. The hatred was plain to see.

“If looks could kill,” Isabella said slowly, earning a smile from Henry.

“Then we’d both be dead,” he finished for her.

“Do you think she’s heard yet of my sister’s betrothal?” Isabella continued to speak to him, enjoying watching the shift in Mary’s expression, for it had darkened even further.

“Shall we tell her?”

“You can have the pleasure.”

“A pleasure indeed.” Henry shifted his focus to Mary and cleared his throat. “It has been announced today that Lord Burton and Lady Irene are betrothed. Is that not wonderful news, Mary?” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Surely you will be seconding us on sending our congratulations to the couple.”

Mary said nothing. She stepped into the room, letting her hands drop to her sides. She seemed unsteady on her feet and reached for the nearest chair, clinging to the back, with her fingers turning white.

“They’re to be married,” Isabella emphasized. “So, none of your rumors can hurt my sister now.”

“But...” Mary looked between them. “You told him.” She pointed towards Henry. “That was not the deal.”

“She didn’t tell me, but fortunately, another did. Thank God!” Henry said with loud emphasis, making Mary flinch. “The scales have fallen away from my eyes. I’m beginning to wonder if you ever were a true friend, or if you only wished to manipulate me.” He glared at her openly.

Isabella could see a twitch in Henry’s eyes. It betrayed the depth of his anger and disappointment. Someone he’d thought was a friend turned out to be anything but.

“Henry, please.” Mary adopted a sickly-sweet countenance and rounded the chair, coming towards him.

“As sweet as sugar,” Isabella muttered wryly.

“Just so.” Henry smiled at her words.

“She has poisoned you against me. Can’t you see what this is?” Mary asked.

She went to touch him, but he backed up before she could.

“Don’t touch me,” he snapped. “Enough of your games, your pretenses, all of it. This is the end.”

“End? What end?” Mary looked at Isabella, her manner abruptly shifting. “You did this. Can you not see what you have done? You have driven him away from a true friend!”

“Some true friend,” Henry drawled.

“If that were the case, then I’m glad,” Isabella said, lifting her chin a little higher. “You were not the friend he deserved.”

“I can still harm your sister.” Mary stepped towards her. “Their betrothal may be announced, but no one will take kindly to hearing they rushed things, will they? Especially if I tell them—”

“No more!” Isabella surprised herself with her sharp tone. She’d reached her limit of listening to Mary threatening her sister. “You will not say a word against my sister.”

“Why not?” Mary crossed her arms and lifted her head so high, Isabella thought it a wonder she stayed standing at all and didn’t fall backwards.

“Because if you do, I will talk to your husband.” Henry’s threat cast silence in the room. Mary looked at him, her lips flattening together. “I do not imagine Lord Paulbridge would take kindly to hearing his wife has been trying to seduce me, nor that she involves herself with trying to destroy the reputations of the Earl of Sinclair’s daughters.”

“He wouldn’t believe you,” Mary said so quietly, it was plain she didn’t believe her own words.

“He would.” Henry was firm. “You forget Lord Paulbridge and I used to know each other well. We were friends. We’ve drifted apart, moved on, but I could persuade him to believe me. I do not doubt it.” He strode forwards and offered his hand to Isabella, who took it in an instant, smiling at him. “Leave London, Mary. I think it is wise to do so. Maybe you should follow your husband on his travels for a while or go to his country estate. You’re certainly not welcome here anymore.”

Leading Isabella away, Henry walked to the door. They didn’t give Mary a chance to answer, but Isabella glanced back. She caught a glimpse of Mary’s spine slumping and her body crumpling down into the nearest chair.

*She has given up.*

The thought filled Isabella with relief. As she and Henry walked out of the Marchioness’s house, a laugh bubbled out of her lips.

“I cannot believe it is at an end,” she murmured. “Do you think she’ll go? Leave London, I mean.”

“I truly hope so.” Henry gestured towards the carriage. “Let’s go home, Bella. I’ve missed you for too long and wish to be alone with you again.” He raised her hand and kissed the back of it.

Isabella found herself nodding eagerly, longing to be alone with him too.



“Has she gone?” Henry asked, leaning across the settee towards Isabella.

The Duchess tried to hold back her smile but couldn’t.

“Impatient?” she teased him.

He laid a quick peck on her neck. “You have no idea how much.”

She giggled and angled her head, checking that she could no longer see Mrs. Walters through the doorway. They had just finished their tea and discussed some new changes for the house with their housekeeper. As Mrs. Walters left, though, they were alone at last.

“She’s gone.”

“At last.” Henry stood to his feet and pulled her towards him.

“Ah!” Isabella yelped in surprise, but he didn’t hold up. He continued to pull her out of the room, drawing her towards the staircase. “I’m surprised you didn’t take me to the bedchamber the moment we got home.”

“Had Mrs. Walters not been standing on the doorstep waiting for our return, I probably would have.” Henry’s tease had Isabella racing up the stairs after him.

On the landing, they became distracted. Henry pushed her against a wall, parting her lips and caressing her tongue with his own. Reaching up behind his back, Isabella clung to his shoulder blades, holding him down. When he brushed his hips against hers, she moaned into their kiss.

“Now who’s the impatient one?” he teased as he pulled back from their kiss.

“Then... why are we still out here?”

Her question had him reaching for her hand and pulling her off the wall. They sped across the landing again, and Henry took her to his chamber.

They rushed in through the door, and Henry kicked it shut behind them. Isabella backed up, pulling him towards the bed, but they didn’t get that far. Her hands became entangled in his tailcoat, trying to pull it off him. It

dropped to the floor, just as he reached for her gown, trying to undo the laces.

“Why are there so many laces on this thing?” he complained.

He spun her round, breaking their kissing so he could see what he was doing.

“To build the anticipation?”

“Such a tease.”

He at last undid the laces and dropped her gown to the floor. She stepped out of it, moving back round to face him, and he collided with her.

They ended up tumbling down to the floor, with Isabella beneath him. They laughed together, his lips moving over hers, stealing kisses in between.

“Well, the night we met again, you fell on top of me,” he whispered. “Seems apt, does it not?” He placed soft kisses on her neck.

“That was an accident!” she protested.

“A happy accident, it turns out.” Sliding an arm under her waist, he rolled the two of them over so he was on his back. Isabella ended up on top of him, straddling him. “Much like this, wasn’t it?” he asked with a wink.

“You are wishing to relive that night?”

“Something like it.”

His voice had become deeper with such huskiness that Isabella reached towards him. Her hands tangled in his waistcoat, pulling at the buttons to release him as he reached beneath the hem of her chemise, pulling it up around her hips. Grabbing her thighs, he adjusted her position a little so she was completely straddling his center.

When she brushed against him, she released a breathy moan, feeling his length beneath his trousers. He went to help her, removing his waistcoat and his shirt. They were tossed to the side, exposing his torso completely.

As she trailed her fingers down his chest and towards his stomach, he reached one hand across her bare thigh and pressed it to her core. The touch was sudden, with a passion that was so instant that she bucked against his hand in surprise. He smiled, clearly knowing the control he had over her and loving that power.

“I think you should be in control today,” he said with mischief, rocking his hips upwards so it moved his hand against her, mimicking what their bodies would soon be doing.

“Me?” she asked in surprise, looking down at him again.



“If you like.”

He moved his hand from her core and laid his hands down on the rug on either side of him, showing she had complete control.

Isabella leaned down and kissed him. His lips moved fast against hers as she reached down, trying to get hold of his trousers flap. She found it and unbuttoned it, then reached beneath and released his length. The first touch had him growling into their kiss. She experimented with a few strokes before she felt him smiling into their kisses, and pulled back.

“You’re rather good at that,” he said as he tipped his head back on the rug, his eyes half-lidded.

She adjusted herself. She’d missed this feeling of being with Henry, and now, knowing the truth of what was between them, that he loved her as she loved him, she didn’t want to hold back.

Releasing his length, she sank on him. As she rolled her hips tentatively, his hands lifted from the rug. His fingers splayed around her corseted waist as if he could not stop touching her. Feeling the power she had, she began to rock her hips back and forth. His lips parted as his eyes opened. They looked at one another the entire time as she moved over him.

Isabella slid her hands down his chest and towards his stomach again, using the support to move faster. The rocking motion of her hips made her core throb in pleasure inside out.

Her movements became frantic, rocking faster, for she just wanted more of that feeling. When she reached the edge, she stilled above Henry. Her body was unable to move anymore, for she was so overwhelmed with a tingling feeling that spread from her core, engulfing her entire body.

Tilting her head back, she whispered Henry's name before his hands took a firmer hold of her waist. Henry rolled her on her back while still inside her. Taking hold of her knees, he raised them high around his hips and resumed thrusting inside her.

When he neared his climax, Isabella clung to the rug beneath her. She was still tingling from her climax but was now focusing on Henry, thinking of the way he was bucking against her, with his cheeks reddening and his lips parting. She readied herself for him to pull out of her, yet he didn't. He bucked his hips against her one last time and stilled.

Isabella leaned forwards in amazement, her face coming closer to Henry's. Not only the sensation of him finishing inside her had startled her, but the act itself surprised her. She stared at him, her eyes running over his face and figure as he came down from his climax. There was sweat beading on the center of his chest, and his eyes found hers as his movements stopped completely.

Placing his hands on either side of her, he leaned down, prompting her to rest her head back on the rug again.

"Surprised you?" he whispered playfully, then pressed his lips to hers.

Intoxicated by that kiss, Isabella raised her hands and buried them in his hair, holding him to her. Their kiss lasted for a good minute before they parted from one another, both still panting as they tried to catch their breath.

“Henry, I don’t understand,” she murmured, shaking her head.

He raised a hand and pushed the loose strands of her dark hair from her forehead. Her hair had become entangled across her face in their lovemaking, and he seemed to take his time with the task, wrapping the tendrils around his fingers before he released them.

“You said... you said you did not wish to have a child. Yet... what just happened—”

“I know.” His smile was so great that she was left tongue-tied. “It was what I wished to talk to you about before, back at the lake, but we ended up speaking of other things instead,” he whispered. “These last few days, I have thought much about what you said in the study, that I was letting my father cast a shadow over my life.”

He lowered himself down a little, resting his elbows on either side of her head to hold himself up. Isabella lowered her hands so she could trail her fingers up and down his back. At the movement, he rocked against her just once. Their connection had her gasping.

“I don’t want that shadow anymore.” Henry shook his head firmly. “None of it. You were right, all that you said. I had my justice, I let him think he had lost what he wanted most in this world, but there’s no reason to continue to

carry it with me.”

“You are sure of this?” she asked, needing to hear the words again. “Completely certain?”

“I am.” He nodded. “John is to have a child,” he revealed softly. “Something about hearing those words filled me with contentment I had not known before. I was excited for him. Now, perhaps I long for that excitement myself. That is of course if you’re excited by the prospect too?”

“Can’t you tell?” She wound her hands around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. When they parted, they were both smiling ridiculously at one another. “So, we are going to try for a child?”

“We just tried once, but I’ll happily try again if you like.”

He rolled the two of them together again so Isabella was on top, with her knees on either side of Henry’s hips. As he tilted his hips upwards, rocking their bodies together, Isabella lost all sense of time and thought only of Henry.

Somehow, falling on top of him in that garden had brought her to this moment. If she could go back, despite all the humiliation and embarrassment that had followed, she wouldn’t undo it, not for the world.

She wouldn’t know the happiness she knew now without it.

*The End?*

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PREVIEW: THE DUKE AND HIS  
SPINSTER



## CHAPTER 1



"Dearest, do tuck your head back in or you shall catch a cold!"

Amy smiled a little before conceding to her aunt's wishes by drawing her head away from the window of their carriage and allowing the curtain to drop back into place. She, along with her father and Aunt Dorothy, were on their way to attend the ball held by the Countess of Glendale—yet another one of the endless functions she must be subjected to as an eligible female of the *ton*.

"I just do not see the point of prancing about in balls and soirees," she sighed, irritation edging her tone. Her green eyes, normally shining with intelligence and wit, held a trace of scorn in them for the very event she was about to attend.

Her father, the Marquess of Irington, let out a soft sigh and shook his head at his daughter's words. Amy had already acquired a reputation amongst the *ton* as a rather... *difficult* woman, and it was becoming increasingly arduous task to find a suitor for her.

Or even just a man who would not be so intimidated by her rapier wit and even sharper tongue.

"Oh, poppycock!" her Aunt Dorothy muttered. "We all know that you have no intention of ever getting wed, my dear girl."

Amy grinned in a rather unrepentant manner. "Precisely."

"But," the Marquess told her in a firm tone, "you cannot just back away from



a task without exhausting all possible options for it."

Amy narrowed her eyes slightly at that. "Whatever do you mean, Papa?"

"I meant," he enunciated clearly, "that it has already become very clear to us that you intend to become a spinster and I *will* allow it..."

Amy felt her smile growing wider on her face.

"...as long as you *consider* the men who will approach you this Season," he finished.

She felt her world tilt and sway at her father's words. "What?"

"I believe that you are a rather intelligent young lady, but let me make it clearer," the Marquess of Irlington smiled benignly at her. "You are not to *refuse* any suitor who wishes to pay a call to you, nor will you attempt to dissuade anyone from doing so."

"But... but," she sputtered, "I will go *mad* trying to hold an intelligent conversation about the latest fashions and the weather which is all a 'proper lady' is expected to talk about!"

"I am most certain there is at least some sane fellow in the whole of London who would appreciate a lively and intelligent conversation." The Marquess paused and added, "I most certainly would. It was why I was so taken with your mother, you know—*she* was the only one in that entire ballroom to talk to me without boring me to tears."

Amy had heard the story of how her mother, the late Marchioness of Irlington, captured the heart of her father so many times that she had learnt it by heart.

Unfortunately, she had already come to the conclusion that the story of her parents was more of an exception rather than the norm in the *ton*.

Most of the men she encountered were all rather disappointing—and those were the ones she could mostly tolerate!

The rest did not even bear mentioning.

She glanced up at her father suspiciously and found him looking at her with an unwavering glint in his eyes. It would seem he truly was set on this...this

*arrangement* if she could call it that.

"You really will allow me to become a spinster?" she asked him.

"Only if you agree to my conditions."

"And what if, at the end of the Season, no suitor wants me for a wife?"

"My dear daughter," the Marquess smiled at her, "the many fops you are acquainted with might not be as astute, but I doubt that the whole of England is filled with such men."

She crossed her arms over her chest and pursed her lips. Her father had never lied to her before or gone back on his word. He truly believed she could find herself a husband by the end of the Season.

But would she be able to stomach living with a man for the rest of her life? One who might be particularly inclined to lord over her entire existence?

"As long as he is willing to accept me for who I am," she finally said begrudgingly. "Then, I shall not outwardly refuse him."

"Of course," her father nodded with a twinkle in his eyes. "I would not have it any other way, dearest."

"I wager that you will lose by the end of the Season, Papa."

She caught sight of her Aunt Dorothy looking from her father to her before sighing in a long-suffering tone, "Proper young ladies are *not* supposed to wager on anything."

But Amy had never done things the way a proper young lady should.

A proper young lady would have gladly accepted the attentions of her suitors, happily promenading about in the Park...

Not so much for Amy Clarke.

She knew that at the end of the day, the men of the *ton* were nothing more than selfish creatures with base desires, and she would never allow herself to fall prey to their devices.

No, she would much rather live out the rest of her life alone.

In peace.

Even if it meant taking her father up on his ridiculous offer to *consider* the notion of a lifelong match with one of the dandies of London.

After all, it was just *one* Season. Since she had already successfully evaded the marital noose for four Seasons, she had no doubt she would be triumphant in this endeavor, too.



There was already a crush in the ballroom by the time Amy arrived with her Aunt Dorothy and the Marquess of Irington. When their arrival was announced to the rest of the guests, hardly anyone turned to glance at her.

She had, after all, garnered quite a reputation for herself already. Any man who dared approach her risked having his dignity torn up into ribbons by her sharp tongue before she served it up to him with a scathing smile.

But this Season was different, for this time, she must at least *try* to be pleasant. To her father, it might be the bare minimum, but Amy was never one to withhold her opinions however strong they may be.

She sighed inwardly at that. Her father's challenge was proving to become far more difficult, the more she thought of it.

*If no man ever approaches me until the end of the Season, that would be most ideal, she thought to herself. After all, it is highly unlikely that any man would like to strike up an inane conversation with me, knowing my reputation...*

"There you are! I have been looking everywhere for you!"

Amy turned to find a young lady with wide blue eyes and thick brown hair. Esther Follet was her dearest friend in all the *ton* as well as a known bluestocking—much to the dismay of her father, the Earl of Farthington.

Fortunately, she had a much milder temperament compared to Amy—much to the relief of her mother, the Countess of Farthington.

"I was afraid that I was going to lose my mind having to humor Lord Chauncey with a discussion of the classics," she complained. "But if I turned him away, I would never hear the end of it from Mother. She is most eager to see me married off this Season."

*You and me both, my dearest friend*, Amy seconded in her mind, recalling the agreement she had with her father earlier in the carriage.

Amy smiled a little as Esther complained a little bit more about her conversation with a young lord. Her best friend could have easily been acclaimed one of the most brilliant minds in London if only she had not been born a female.

Lord Chauncey, on the other hand, was a blithering idiot—and she was already being kind in saying it. However, like most men, he was so puffed up with his own self-importance that it would never occur to him that he was wrong.

For an intellectual like Esther to have to sit through his drivel would have been a feat worthy of martyrdom.

But such was the fate of women in the *ton*—one that Amy was determined to avoid at all costs.

"Do not look now, but I think that someone is looking over our way!" Esther suddenly hissed in warning.

"Oh?" Amy tilted her head as a wry smile graced her lips. "Is it Lady Manderley and her friends?"

Because the only time anyone would consider the both of them was to make fun of them both. Other young ladies of the *ton* were, most unfortunately, rather shallow and vain—which was why Amy rarely associated with them.

She would much rather cut off her own arm and bleed to death on the carpeted floor...

"No!" Esther told her urgently. "It is a group of *gentlemen!*"

Amy felt her heart sinking. That somehow sounded worse than Lady Manderley and her gaggle of friends.

"Well, do not make eye contact with them!" she warned her friend. "Perhaps if we ignore them, they will... move on to other pursuits."

It sounded ridiculous to her ears, though. After all, which gentleman in his right mind would pursue either of them, for they were a well-matched pair of curiosities in the *ton*.

But still, her father's stern challenge resounded in her ears and maybe—just maybe—she *should* consider being more approachable. She would not want to lose out on their agreement.

Not when freedom was so close at hand.

*I did promise not to refuse anyone...I never promised that I would not try to ignore potential suitors...*

And if Amy was to refuse any potential suitors...well, they *had* to at least have the courage to approach her.

Perhaps if she made herself a little bit less approachable, her father would not mind it so dreadfully.

*Yes, that would be a wise course of action*, she thought to herself.

After all, London was filled with spineless men looking for biddable wives and gentlemen were forever looking for the paths with least resistance—socially *and* economically. They would never consider someone with *her* reputation.

She had no idea just how mistaken she was in that aspect.

## CHAPTER 2



The Glendale ball was proving to be a dreadful bore to Evan Hatcher, the seventh Duke of Leonbridge, and his two friends—the Viscount of Drew and the Marquess of Repington. The ballroom was filled, as usual, with a gaggle of young ladies eager to find a suitable match for themselves.

Unfortunately, none of them had been able to catch his attention for he felt they were all the same—shallow, vain, and well-versed in the art of spending a gentleman's well-earned money.

There *were* exceptions to the rule, though.

He raised his eyes languidly from the glass he had been sipping and met with a pair of vivid green eyes from across the ballroom. His lips curled into a smirk at that.

Lady Amy Clarke was the bane of every young gentleman's existence with her sharp tongue and fiery temper. She was also possessed of some very odd notions about how society should function—none of which the *ton*—or Evan himself—would ever take to heart.

*An odd outlook for an extremely odd creature*, he thought to himself. Perhaps, it was only to be expected.

"Who are you looking at?" Charles Lock—the Marquess of Repington—queried drolly, following Evan's line of sight. When his gaze landed on Lady Amy Clarke and Lady Esther Follet, his lips curled into a sneer. "Do not tell me you are intrigued by the two of them?"

Evan snorted. "Do not be daft, Lock. Why should either of them interest me?"

Benedict Burk, the Viscount of Drew, regarded the pair from across the room with a hint of amusement in his gray eyes.

"I saw Lord Chauncey walking off the ballroom with a supremely satisfied look earlier," he remarked. "The Lady Esther, however, looked rather pained."

"That is because Chauncey is an absolute nincompoop," Evan shook his head. "And Lady Esther is a verified bluestocking."

The two other men nodded in agreement at that observation.

"Well, if Chauncey had approached her friend, he would have found himself in a much livelier discussion," the Marquess chortled. "Lady Amy would have flayed him alive with that vicious tongue of hers."

"I swear, no man would ever dare to associate with her," the Viscount agreed. "The woman is a virago of the worst sort."

"Well, perhaps it takes someone made of sterner stuff to be able to withstand the lady in question," Evan remarked. "After all, no woman is impervious to wooing."

He smiled at that. A little arrogantly, perhaps, but Evan was rather proud of the fact that no lady could ever refuse him. All he had to do was simply walk into a ballroom, and every unmarried young miss and her mama would be falling over him, eager to be his duchess.

As if his titles and wealth were not enough, he was also possessed of the physical attributes that would render any woman's defenses nonexistent.

But Evan was not looking for a wife. He was only in it for the physical pleasure which was why he steered clear of innocent misses who wished to tie a matrimonial noose around his neck.

No, he very much preferred the wild widows, the gorgeous opera singers... even the occasional ethereal ballerina.

All of them, of course, were quite willing to spend some time in his bed.

A wife would only put a damper on his fun. Or bankrupt him.

After all, wasn't that all a woman was good for? To please a man in bed, give him heirs, and spend his money?

"Perhaps," Benedict mused, cocking an eyebrow at his friend, "no woman has ever refused you because you have never spent enough time with a single one—outside of bed, that is." He shook his head. "Truly, Evan... it is almost like you treat women as objects."

"That is definitely not true," he argued.

"Oh, but it is," his best friend grinned at him.

Evan was about to refute it when Charles beat him to it.

"And is that not just a woman's place in society, though?" he smirked. "Such delightful creatures in bed but outside of it? Do men and women truly have anything in common?"

*He sounds just like my father,* Evan thought derisively. His sire hardly inspired any fondness in Evan, and he was quite honestly relieved that the man had passed on to the afterlife...wherever that might be.

When he had been alive, the sixth Duke of Leonbridge held very much the same beliefs as the Marquess of Repington did.

And while he had raised his son to succeed him, Evan did not share his father's beliefs. Or those of his friend.

"I do think that a man and a woman can find something to agree on. The survival of the species has to rely on us sharing a common goal."

"Which is basically what Charles just said," Benedict smirked in triumph. "You think you need women simply to satisfy your physical needs and make heirs. There you have it."

For some reason, the thought of it irked Evan. Of course, that wasn't it, but his own history with women offered very little in the way of proof. He *did* sleep with them to slake his own physical desires, but it was hardly anything like the way Benedict was making it out to be.



The reason that he was never in a long-term relationship with anyone of the female persuasion was simply because...he was not exactly a prime candidate for a spouse or fiancé.

"You know that is not the point," he insisted. "I just have not found anyone of interest yet."

"Well then, prove it," his friend challenged him. "How about you spend two weeks with a lady and *not* be rejected."

Evan raised an eyebrow idly at that. "Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely."

Charles merely stood back and regarded their argument with some amusement. "A sort of societal experiment then? This should be interesting..."

Evan smirked at his two companions as he cast his gaze over the crowd in the ballroom. His blue eyes wandered over the familiar ones until he settled on a voluptuous woman clad in deep blue velvet.

"That one!" he declared.

"The Countess of Hamilton?"

Evan nodded in affirmation. The countess in question was a widow with very particular tastes, and as he could recall, they were well-matched in bed. He could easily spend two weeks with her, romping about in the sheets.

But Benedict snorted at his suggestion. "You merely intend to bed her for two weeks, not get to know her."

"Oh on the contrary, I *do* know her, and I know that she will not refuse me. Is that not what you want?"

"And that will only prove that you associate with the female population merely to slake your lust." The Viscount shook his head. "How is that any different from what Charles is claiming?"

"Oh, do keep me out of this. I would much rather be a spectator in all this."

"How about *her* then?" Benedict gestured to a pair across the ballroom.

Evan dragged his gaze to where his best friend was pointing to a young woman with hair the color of rich chocolate.

He was pointing at Lady Amy Clarke!

"Absolutely not!" he retorted. "We agreed on a *woman*, not a viper."

"Well, she should provide a fair challenge to you," Benedict grinned. "And not only that, but she would also be remarkable proof of your infallible charms, should she agree to accommodate your presence for two weeks. Nothing physical, mind you."

*I hardly think that I might even be able to approach the bloody creature without being flayed alive!* Evan bristled at the thought of that.

But his pride was on the line here, and Benedict *did* have a point—if he could approach Lady Amy Clarke, accompany her for two weeks, *and* still live to tell the tale, it would be the perfect way to prove that he, Evan, was right.

The only problem was that the Lady Amy Clarke was just as determined to *resist* every man in existence.

"Well, good luck with that!" Charles chuckled, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. "This should be an entertaining two weeks. I look forward to your... ah, excursion, Your Grace."

Evan shot him a brief glare. Somehow, the Marquess gave off the impression that he was mocking him and his title.

"So, do you accept, or do you give up?"

*Just how did I get myself into such a conundrum?* Evan thought to himself.

Still, his pride was on the line here, and now, he wanted nothing more than to shove it all back into his best friend's face. It was much too early for Benedict to be gloating about the whole affair.

"Be prepared to lose, Burk," he muttered with gritted teeth.

"Oh, I most certainly look forward to it, my friend. In fact, you can start charming the lady right now. She seems otherwise unoccupied."

*That is precisely because she would castrate any man who dares to approach*

*her!*

He shot his best friend a glare before downing the rest of his glass and handing it off to a passing servant's tray. Perhaps the alcohol would give him the courage to survive this insanity.

Only insanity would have landed him in such a dilemma because, *really*, they should have left such antics back in their youth when they were all sillier.

With newfound resolve, he stalked across the ballroom to where Lady Amy was conversing quietly with her friend. As he walked, he could feel all eyes on him.

Although he did attend such balls regularly, it was unprecedented for him to ever approach an unmarried young lady.

But now, he was going to do it—all for a stupid challenge.

*I must have gone mad to have allowed myself to fall prey to Benedict's cheap tricks!*

Finally, he reached both ladies. He was close enough to stand directly behind Lady Amy and pluck out the jeweled pins on her deep brown hair. Close enough to get a whiff of that surprisingly nice, clean fragrance that hung about her like a soft cloud. Close enough to see the soft swells of her breast above her supposedly sensible neckline.

*Just where the hell have these bloody thoughts sprung up from?*

Lady Amy was hardly the person one would consider... *attractive*.

But this close, he could point out several of her attributes that called out to him in a physical sense.

Except that he was not supposed to seduce her or get her into his bed.

A *pity*, he thought and found himself quite surprised at the direction of his thoughts.

"Lady Amy," he said in a low voice.

The young lady let out a surprised sound as she turned around to face him. Immediately, he found himself staring into vivid green eyes the color of

emeralds. She looked quite surprised for a moment before her eyes narrowed at him as if his mere presence offended her.

"Would you do me the honor of this dance?"

Evan gave her his most dashing, debonair smile—the kind that ensnared young widows into his bed.

Lady Amy regarded him with something akin to suspicion at first, and Evan was prepared to be soundly refused. In fact, he was already rehearsing in his head the lines that would get her onto the *bloody dance floor*.

But to his immense surprise, she smiled up at him tentatively, and he noticed for the first time just how *luscious* her lips looked.

Absolutely delectable.

"It would be my *pleasure*, Your Grace."

*Wait... did she just purr at me?* Evan thought wildly. *There is no way in hell that she would sound so inviting!*

But there was no time to dwell on that thought for the musicians had struck up the chord for the next dance, and his body immediately fell into the familiarity of dancing.

Except that when his hand grasped hers, and they began to move together to the music, there was *nothing* familiar about it all.

*What in bloody hell is going on? There is no way that a woman like Lady Amy Clarke could elicit such reactions in me...*

Evan felt like he was sailing right into uncharted waters with her, and to his shock, he did not find it as dismal as he initially thought he would.

In fact, he actually found it all *exhilarating*.

## CHAPTER 3



*A*my was cursing her ill fortune the moment the Duke of Leonbridge asked her for a dance. Did he not know her reputation?

Or was he trying to make fun of her by leading her out onto the dance floor?

But how could she refuse him? To do so would be to renege on the promise she made to her father earlier in the carriage, and if she did that, she might as well kiss her freedom goodbye for another year or so. The Marquess of Irington was quite determined to see his only child married.

Was she going to lose out to her father's sheer determination? Absolutely not!

"You looks absolutely radiant tonight, my lady," the Duke beamed at her. To his credit, he *did* manage to look at her as if she was not some creature that had climbed out of the bog.

"Why, thank you, Your Grace," she responded simply. "I think I look rather splendid myself. Was it perhaps these outdated pins I am wearing that ensnared your gaze?"

Her words were quite sharp, but she wore a brilliant smile—just in case her father was looking. Under the stipulations of their agreement, she might not have been allowed to refuse him outright, but she could still *subtly* dissuade him from pursuing her further.

If such a thing was *indeed* possible.

"You far outshine those jewels, Lady Amy," he smiled at her. "How could

they diminish you?"

Amy looked up at the Duke as if he had lost his mind. He had to have gone insane—it was the only viable explanation! Not only did he miss the dripping sarcasm in her retort, but he even went so far as to heap another compliment on her miserable head!

"Your Grace is possessed of a silver tongue," she remarked. "Is this how you charm the ladies into your bed?"

Oh, that was rather vulgar of her! What gently bred young lady would speak of such matters? No doubt, he would be appalled—no, *horrified* by her words! He would—

"Of course not," he returned smoothly. "I would not waste my breath pandering to others. Only to *you*."

That was true to a certain extent, of course. The status of the Duke of Leonbridge was well above most of the *ton*. He would have no need to utter such niceties for women to flock over to him. The mere prospect of becoming his duchess was a good enough motivation.

The fact that he was also devastatingly, *wickedly* handsome already had young widows beating down his bedroom door.

Not that Amy had any desire to join their ranks.

"Then you must be ill," she muttered. "Why else should you torment me so?"

"I am of quite good health, I am told," he replied with some amusement. "Perhaps a demonstration would suit you?"

Amy screamed inwardly. What demonstration was he going on about?

"Did someone put you up to it, then?"

Yes, that must be it. His Grace must have lost some bet with his friends, and now, he had to go through the immense torture of dancing with someone like her.

She narrowed her eyes up at him but continued to smile brilliantly as if she was surprisingly enjoying dancing with him—never mind that she had never

held the slightest fondness for dancing before. She would not want her father to catch a whiff of what she was doing, or she would forfeit her freedom!

As she continued to look up to the Duke with a sickeningly sweet smile, she felt her neck begin to ache. Why did he have to be so tall?

However, in spite of her best intentions to scare off His Grace with her words, he still smiled down at her as if she was the most fascinating creature he had ever met. His blue eyes shone with the light of the chandelier above them, and for a moment, it felt as if they were sucking her in.

"Lady Amy," he said softly. "Is it so unfathomable that I find myself drawn to you?"

*Dear God, no!* Amy wanted to screech in horror.

How could he say such a thing? How could he utter such a blatant lie with such a charming smile?

She truly ought to call him out on that, to fling it back in his face as she always did. Such saccharine falsehoods had always made her skin crawl, but his words were like a sweet, seductive spell on her.

Fortunately, the music ended, and as she bowed to the Duke, she found herself still mildly stunned at the effect he had on her.

She shook her head inwardly at that.

Was the Duke of Leonbridge truly as charming as they all claimed him to be?

She was supposed to make him regret asking her to dance—why did she want him to ask her all over again?

As he returned her back to Esther's side, bowing so gallantly before the both of them before slinking off to his friends, she placed her hand over her chest and found her heart beating rapidly in her chest.

*This simply would not do!* Amy thought to herself. *I must find some other way to ward him off without refusing him outright!*

In the meantime, she had to find some way to calm her heart down...



*How could a woman speak in such a manner?*

Lady Amy was not only quite vicious with her words, but she also dared to talk about something unmarried ladies never did.

Initially, he was quite appalled at the way their conversation was going. He had meant to charm her by praising her physical attributes, but he found himself rebuffed over and over again.

Did women not like it when he called them beautiful and all sorts of things pertaining to the same thing?

Evan had thought that if he could somehow appeal to her vanity, she might consider him more favorably. Unfortunately, Lady Amy was of sharper wit than any other woman he had ever encountered, and she had no qualms in wielding her even sharper tongue to draw first blood.

Did that mean he was going to give up? Of course not!

On the contrary, he found her blunt nature quite refreshing.

He was so used to sycophants trying to get in his good graces, but Lady Amy was nothing like them at all.

And when she asked him if somebody had put him up to the task of asking her to dance, he had floundered around for a way to successfully parry her words when she had come so close to the truth.

Somebody had *indeed* put him up to it.

For two whole weeks at that.

"So... how did it go?" Benedict asked him with a curious smile. "Frankly, I am surprised that the young lady did not refuse you outright as I heard she had done in the past."

Charles nodded at this. "Quite. I've heard that it is in her nature to cut a man down before he had a chance to lead her to the dance floor."

*With her nature, it is more likely that she would lead a man to the dance floor*



*for a verbal castration.*

"Well, she dared not cut *me*," Evan smirked. "In fact, you would notice that she quite enjoyed talking to me."

*If you could call what she did talking...She was hostile the moment she opened her mouth!*

And yet, what a lovely, delectable mouth she possessed—with vivid lips made for hot kisses...

Benedict looked rather dubious, however.

"But remember—you have to be with her for two weeks. And you are not supposed to be seducing her!"

"I do not think that woman can be seduced," Charles muttered. "If she is still a woman at that."

Somehow, Evan managed to feel affronted at his words on behalf of Lady Amy. She might not be an excellent conversationalist, but she was definitely a woman... with rather desirable attributes.

And yet, he also felt a strange relief that none of his companions had noticed this.

"What the hell are you smiling about, Evan? Our agreement does not end tonight. You still have two more weeks to prove yourself!"

"How could I forget?" the Duke retorted, taking another glass of wine from a passing servant. He would need much more alcohol to fortify himself against Lady Amy's barbs as loath as he was to admit that sorry fact.

*She might put up quite the show of enjoying my company, but she was most definitely pushing me away!*

But not if Evan had anything to say about it. He was going to prove his best friend wrong, dammit!

Benedict, however, did not look quite convinced of his abilities and looked at him with some worry. "You are not about to drink yourself into oblivion, are you? The ladies do not appreciate the fumes of spirits—"

"Maybe he needs all the help he can get to face Lady Amy."

"Lock, it would be in your best interests to shut the hell up," Evan warned the Marquess.

Charles looked quite affronted, his eyes turning icy for a split second, but then he recovered quickly, almost as if that flash of anger had never been there at all.

With a dramatic sigh and a mocking smile, he straightened his jacket. "As pleasurable as it is to remain in your company, the hour is late and I have a prior engagement," he countered smoothly. He nodded towards Benedict and Evan, before stalking out of the ballroom.

"How characteristic of him to walk away just like that," Benedict scoffed. "

"Why are you still surprised? Charles always does whatever pleases him."

The viscount arched his brow at that. "I could say the same for you, my friend." He took a sip of wine and looked across the ballroom to where Lady Amy was still talking to Lady Esther. "In any case, I do not think you made quite an impression on the lady."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, for one thing, I do not see her casting longing glances our way."

Evan fought the urge to smile at that. Judging from the barbs the lady had thrown his way, Lady Amy Clarke would rather gouge those expressive eyes of hers before she would cast them longingly in *anybody's* way.

Still, he felt a distinctly unpleasant emotion at the thought of the lady in question casting her glance on another gentleman.

"It would seem that you have lost your touch," Benedict chuckled.

*Lost my touch?* Evan bristled at the thought.

"Why don't you make yourself useful and hold this for a moment?" he snapped.

Benedict looked in confusion at the wineglass that had been shoved into his hands. Before he could say anything, Evan was already stalking away.

"Whatever was that for?" he called after his somewhat...irrational friend.

"Perhaps, the Lady Amy Clarke needs a little more...*persuasion*."

Oh, he knew that a woman like Lady Amy Clarke would need more than just a little persuasion. From their first dance, he could gather that she was nothing like all the other ladies of the *ton* in the sense that she didn't fall at his feet, eager for the chance to become a duchess. Nor did she resort to servile flattery or the many tricks all the ladies in Society employed to catch themselves in the husband.

In fact, it would seem that Lady Amy herself was bent on *not* attracting a suitable match for herself. And yet, she had not refused him outright.

It was most intriguing, indeed, and His Grace, the Duke of Leonbridge had always held a penchant for intriguing things.

**Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story!**

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**Thank you very much!**

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**Your support means the world to me!**

**Thank you for being my reason to smile today,**

*Sally Vixen*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Pennsylvania by a mother of British ancestry, it is no wonder Sally developed a love for British culture. An avid reader since she was a child, it wasn't long until she stumbled onto the Regency classics, and the rest is history.

A couple of years and a Creative Writing degree later, Sally has truly found her calling. She is rarely found without a book in her hand, but when she isn't reading or writing, she likes taking walks in nature, traveling and spending quality time with her very own happily-ever-after, her wonderful family of four.

So, allow Sally to take you on a majestic trip, full of passion, boundless romance and glamorous balls, and let your heart be stolen by the dashing Lords and seductive Ladies of an era where fairytales came to life...

