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A
BRIDE
FOR THE
BLIND
DUKE

AVA MACADAMS

A BRIDE FOR THE BLIND DUKE

A Steamy Historical Regency Romance Novel



AVA MACADAMS



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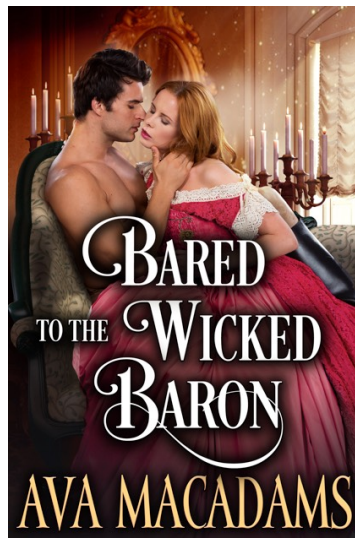
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About the Book

“I will protect you, but in exchange, you will marry me....”

After her parents' death, Victoria is left helpless at the clutches of her cousins. And when she overhears of their plan to be rid of her and claim her inheritance, she has no choice but to flee and knock on the first door for help...

Blind and crippled, the Duke of Sherrington has no contact with the Ton and an even worse relationship with his daughter. But in a desperate attempt to find a mother for her, he agrees to a marriage of convenience.

Only... when Victoria bursts into his castle posing as his new bride, the Duke seizes the opportunity to get married to her under one condition: she will help him with his daughter and keep away from him. But her kiss has left him craving for more...

Chapter One



“I am looking forward to our dance soon, Miss Manger,”
Lord Browin grinned charmingly.

Victoria’s dimpled smile remained as Lord Browin, Earl of Browin, finished writing his name on her dance card, his fingers loosely grasping her hand and lifting it to his lips. She pretended not to notice his gaze drop to her bosom, lingering for a breath before rising to meet her eyes.

Victoria curtsied slightly, raising her head to meet his gaze.

“As am I, my lord.”

He nodded curtly, sparing her companion a glance before walking toward the punch. Lord Hugo stepped closer into her line of sight, bowing slightly with his hand extended to her.

“I believe it’s my turn to dance, Miss Manger.”

She slipped her hand into his and let him lead her onto the dance floor, loving how her lilac dress swayed from side to

side as she circled around to face him, curtsying low before moving closer to him as the dance began.

“Let me just say,” he started, his hand braced lightly against her waist. “You look absolutely ravishing, Miss Manger.”

It was a kind compliment, one that soothed some of her nerves and increased her excitement for what the night might bring to her. Victoria had felt almost reluctant to attend tonight’s ball, feeling a little too tired after catering to her cousins’ request for the whole day, but now that she was here, her mood had improved greatly – especially thanks to the attention she had received.

“Thank you, my lord.” She smiled softly, working to keep up with the pace of the dance.

“Motherhood would suit you quite well, I imagine.”

She blinked, unsure if she had heard right.

“My lord?”

He grinned, his eyes shining with excitement that slightly confused her.

“You have... excellent features, Miss Manger. A lovely smile, beautiful eyes, and wonderful posture. A child of ours would be quite a beauty, don’t you agree?”

No, I do not, she nearly said. She had never really spoken to Lord Hugo before, only knowing the Viscount as a casual acquaintance of her eldest cousin George, but she had assumed from his disarming smile that he would make a reasonable conversationalist. An assumption she could now see was quite farfetched.

“We have only just officially met, my lord,” she mused lightly. “Should we not wait until we have begun to court before the talk of our children should arise?”

“Why wait to voice something so important? I have the means to care for you for as long as you shall live, and I believe you have just what I require to bring a suitable heir into existence.”

She wished he had only intended to jest and was disappointed when the conversation remained about children and his wealth as though nothing else mattered. Truthfully, she dreamt of having children of her own someday – as many as she could – but she would not have a conversation about that with a man who only felt it necessary to regale her with tales of his wealth.

No matter, she consoled herself. *My dance card is almost full, and he is simply the second dance partner of the evening. There will be many more chances later to meet someone much more suited to my tastes.*

Lord Hugo seemed disappointed when the dance ended, and she fought to hide a sigh of relief as she quickly curtsied and fled. She had made it only about four steps before a group of beaming gentlemen crowded her.

“Miss Manger, when shall it be my turn?”

“Miss Manger, I am greatly looking forward to our dance together!”

“Miss Manger, have I said how lovely you look tonight?”

A little flustered, she held her hands out in front of her, urging them to settle, smiling sweetly as she said, “Gentlemen, I, too, cannot wait to spend some time with you on the dance floor. But I am afraid I am a bit parched right now, and I would like to fetch myself a glass of punch.”

One of them whirled around immediately after her words hit the air.

“I shall –”

“Oh – *oh no*. Thank you for the kind gesture, but I am afraid I need a moment to myself if you do not mind?”

The group nodded and stepped aside to let her through, watching her walk away. She could not help but feel charmed by their interest, knowing that some of them would come calling soon, regardless of whether they could dance with her.

The notion eased away her nervousness and filled her with hope over the prospect of finding a possible love match soon – just like her parents had wanted for her. A new beginning she desperately needed.

As she arrived at the refreshment table, her attention was captured by the array of pastries and drinks. She did not notice someone approach her until a voice coolly asked.

“Quite the belle of the ball, are you not, *Cousin?*”

Victoria felt her spine stiffen, then she put on a placating expression as she faced Sandra, who was staring innocently.

“I hardly think so. I just seem to have piqued the interest of a few gentlemen.”

Her youngest cousin sniffed, glancing at the men watching Victoria’s every move, and shifted closer to her with a look of thinly veiled contempt.

“Yes, I noticed,” she murmured lowly. “Can I see your dance card, dear Victoria? I’d like to appraise the men vying for your hand to... ensure they are worthy of you.”

It was a nice sentiment but foreign coming from Sandra, as Victoria was well aware she did not care about anyone but herself. Still, she understood by now that refusing Sandra never ended well. Slowly, she slipped her dance card off her wrist and handed it over, watching as Sandra grinned and opened it under the guise of studying the names written on it.

Then she moved slightly, as though she was looking for better lighting to view the scrawls written on it... and Victoria watched in horror as the card slipped between her fingers, landing in the punch bowl.

There was a chorus of gasps, followed by hushed mumbling from behind them, and all Victoria could do was stare at the white card floating atop the bowl of red punch, the color rapidly tainting it before it sank below the liquid.

“Oh, dear.” Sandra gasped, pressing her hands to her chest, looking aghast. “I am very sorry, Victoria. I swear, it was an accident - I thought I was holding it carefully –”

Victoria sighed, now more weary than anything else, as she regarded her cousin with a frown of disappointment.

“Honestly, Sandra, I have no idea why I thought I could expect better from you now. Perhaps you will try not to embarrass yourself next time by allowing your jealousy to show so evidently.”

The other girl gaped at her, cheeks flushed in anger, but Victoria did not waste another moment on her as she picked up a glass of lemonade and walked away. She thought about her ruined dance card and how it had robbed her of the chance to get to know potential gentlemen callers before they possibly arrived at her home, wishing not for the first time that night that she had her parents with her.

Ever since their passing two years ago, she had tried to be as independent as she possibly could, but it was a rather difficult task not to feel lonely or lost without them. It was not as though she was alone though— Sandra and her older brothers had moved into her home and were now legally her guardians, but they were hardly any help, rather making her serve as a staff member in her own home.

As much as she hoped George would take charge of the situation regarding meetings and courting dates before her potential marriage, she would not wager a large sum as she was most likely to be disappointed.

“Victoria!”

She turned at the sound of her name, relief flooding her veins at the sight of her friends – Anne, Grace, and Isabelle – beckoning her over.

“Sandra is absolutely awful,” Anne said in lieu of greeting once Victoria had arrived at where they were gathered. “It was clear that she deliberately dropped your card into the punch.”

“She would be more likable if she was not so set in her horrible ways,” Grace rubbed her hands up and down Victoria’s arms in an effort to soothe her.

“It is fine,” Victoria declared, trying to forget the matter. “I cannot change what has happened, and speaking badly about her will not make me feel better. I would much rather attempt to enjoy the rest of the evening – as much as I can before it ends.”

Isabelle smiled, tugging Victoria over to her side and linking arms with her.

“That sounds like a splendid idea. Have you seen any gentlemen that piqued your interest, Victoria?”

Victoria gave it some thought and shook her head.

“Not exactly. Most of the men who approached me had only asked to dance, and we were not able to have a long enough conversation to leave me wanting to spend more time with them or any other thing of the sort. However, I was able to deduce that Lord Hugo might not be a suitable choice for me.”

Anne groaned. “Did he tell you that your form would be suitable for rearing children?”

Victoria grinned, “Something to that effect. He spoke of how our children would be spectacular with our combined looks.”

“I do not know if I should be impressed or disappointed.” Isabelle wondered. “He says that to nearly every lady he meets.”

“It certainly made for an interesting conversation. These men are quite something, aren’t they?” Victoria giggled, lifting her glass up to her lips.

“None more than the Duke of Sherrington – who I hear is to make an appearance at tonight’s ball,” Grace whispered, her eyes going wide as they did when sharing a juicy tale.

“Really? But I heard he was not one for public events such as these,” Anne said skeptically.

“I know! That is why it is so strange. I heard he has not been out much since his wife’s passing.” Grace informed them.

“Was that not due to the loss of his sight? Or are those two events connected?” Victoria mused in confusion.

Isabelle raised a hand slightly, and when they all turned to her, she lowered her voice to whisper calmly.

“Some of the rumors say his wife was driven insane by his unbearable attitude, and she tried to kill him. He somehow survived but was left partially blind.”

“I heard he was struck with grief after the loss of his wife, and he fell ill afterward, and even though he recovered eventually, his sight was lost. A tragedy, truly.” Anne added, the corner of her lips turning down slightly.

“Does he not have a daughter?” Grace queried, glancing around wide-eyed.

“Oh, the poor thing. I can only imagine how she feels without a mother and a father who does not know what she looks like,” Isabelle sighed deeply, then added in question. “But why would he come here?”

“Why are any of us here, Izzy? Many of us are trying to find our match, to meet potential spouses and life partners. Perhaps he is searching for a new Duchess.” Anne reasoned.

The conversation tugged at Victoria’s heart. She, better than most people, understood the devastating weight of loss. She knew how difficult it was to cope with the notion of never seeing a loved one again.

And she felt it was really sad that the Duke had to shoulder all that, along with a child to care for and his loss of sight while being scrutinized and judged by people who didn't know him at all. She could not help but hope for his well-being, as well as for him to find whatever brought him over to the ball tonight –

“Victoria!”

She whirled around, her stomach dropping at the sight of George standing next to Sandra, who looked upset. Anne grabbed ahold of her hand as she stared at Victoria's cousins with disdain. Gently, she pulled her hand out of her friend's, smiling softly at Anne and the others.

“It appears George needs my attention. Perhaps I will see you sometime before the night ends, ladies. Enjoy yourselves, all right?”

The girls allowed her to go reluctantly, and with every step she took toward her cousins, her nerves curled tighter and tighter beneath her skin. She knew enough to suspect that Sandra had gone to her eldest brother to tattle, and she understood the look on George's face to spell out trouble for her.

She was so fixated on steeling her nerves in preparation for what was to come she did not notice the gentleman in her path until her body collided against his. Quickly, she lowered herself into a curtsy, apologies rapidly falling from her lips.

“I am sorry, sir – I did not see you –”

“It is fine,” he said gruffly, already on his way before she could further apologize.

For a moment, she stared after him, but it could not have been longer than it had taken her to exhale because the next moment, a hand was clasp around her wrist.

“Come with me,” George said, practically dragging her out of the ballroom.

She knew better than to fight his grip, waiting until he stopped walking to pull her hand away and rub her tender skin.

“What did you say to Sandra? How dare you try to cause a public spectacle? Why must you insist on besmirching the family name so?”

“Me?” she asked, bewildered. “I do not know what she told you, but I do not believe I am the one making attempts to ruin another’s honor. I simply pointed out the truth – that she was behaving unbecomingly, and I advised her to think and do better next time. If she felt my observations were incorrect, she merely had to speak to me about it.” Victoria exhaled, glaring at Sandra, who stood strong behind her brother.

“Do not speak about my sister like that.” George dropped his voice dangerously low, stepping closer to Victoria. “Careful, cousin. It would be unwise to bite the hand that feeds you. You owe us your life, and you would do well to act like it.”

A chill ran down Victoria's spine, and her mouth clamped shut, feeling it would be best if she did not refute the last comment. George seemed satisfied by her decision, turning to his sister.

"Fetch Matthew, we are leaving."

Sandra looked reluctant, voicing grimly. "I saw him fawning over Lady Samantha earlier. I think we should let him enjoy this. You know how he gets –"

"Now, Sandra."

Sandra straightened and nodded quickly before returning to the ballroom. George gave Victoria one last look, his tone heavy with hidden implications as he spoke before following his sister, leaving her feeling cold and alone as his words reverberated through her mind.

"You are in our care, for as long as we deem it so. It would serve you greatly not to forget that."

Chapter Two



Simon worked at the buttons of his shirt with quick fingers, absentmindedly wondering how he let time get away from him to this extent. He had thought that he had organized his affairs to afford him enough of a preparation period for tonight's ball, yet here he was, battling with his clothes and an unreachable itch at the thought of being late.

He had not made a public appearance in so long, preferring not to unless it was absolutely necessary. But his close friend, Lord Tenford, had suggested he accept the invitation to tonight's ball in order to familiarize himself with the ton and its prominent members, as Simon's daughter – now at the wonderful age of ten and two – was only a few years away from her debut. As the Duke of Sherrington, it was only right to identify and facilitate potentially beneficial relationships as early as possible to provide his daughter with a stable assimilation into society.

And so, he had agreed to make an appearance, seeing the importance of making solid connections to protect his daughter's future. However, he could not seem to shake off the thought that this outing was needless, not finding the excursion out of his castle ideal.

The floorboards creaked, and he turned, blinking at the doorway, straightening when he saw the familiar form of his valet walking toward him.

“Patrick, my glasses are on my bed. Fetch them for me.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Simon waited, picking up his jacket from the back of a chair, slipping it on, letting the feel of the warm fabric calm his mind. He heard awkward shuffling and the rustling of sheets, pausing momentarily before speaking.

“Patrick?”

He was met with a breath of silence, then –

“I-I... Your Grace, they are not here.”

Simon frowned.

“What?”

“*Your glasses*, Your Grace – they are not here.”

“But...” Simon stopped, thinking carefully. He certainly remembered placing them on his bed before changing out of his usual house wears into his formal clothes. He always

carried them in his pockets, only using them to address people who did not dwell within his household.

With a tired sigh, he ran his hand through his hair and instructed, "I have a spare pair of glasses in my study. While I retrieve that, get my cane and meet me there afterward."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Simon walked out briskly, counting his steps in his head, the numbers running out when he arrived at his study. He opened the door, made his way to his desk, and sat down before reaching for the handle of the first drawer on his right.

He pulled it back and placed his hand within, his brows furrowing when his fingers met the space's solid, sturdy wooden bottom. He patted around for a moment, his irritation slowly building as his search for his glasses came up short.

"Patrick!" he called as he stood.

There was a knock at the door before he heard it open, the tell-tale sound of anxious, hurried footfalls announcing the presence of his valet.

"Your Grace, I have searched your chambers, but I cannot seem to find your glasses nor your cane."

The Duke sighed in annoyance, gesturing to the desk by his side.

“My spare glasses aren’t here either, so where could they have gotten to? These things do not *simply spout wings on their own and flee*, Patrick. I always leave them by my side, and they have never managed to stray this far away. Find them; I am already running late for tonight’s ball.”

The rustle of fabric told him Patrick was no doubt issuing a bow of apology.

“I will find them as soon as I can, Your Grace,” he promised before practically running out.

The disappearance of Simon’s aids unnerved him deeply. He had tried to make do without them in an effort not to seem too dependent, but the truth was they made his life much easier.

Even though he knew how to maneuver around his castle and had committed the vague, blurry shapes of his household to memory, outside the great walls of CloveshireCastle, he was nothing more than a pitiful, blind man, garnering sympathy and speculative gossip over his past. This was precisely why he preferred to keep to himself, focused on living a quiet life with his daughter, out of the public’s view and their needless opinion.

But his daughter was precisely why he accepted the invitation to this ball, and he would go to greater lengths for her.

Speaking of his child...

Patrick returned, short of breath as he started to speak.

“Your Grace, I could not –”

“Cyrus!” Simon snapped, walking past Patrick out of the office in measured, calm strides.

His butler was by his side in a moment, answering quickly.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“Fetch my daughter for me.”

“Right away, Your Grace.”

She must not have been far because Cyrus returned quicker than Simon had expected, announcing that he had the young lady with him. Her skirts rustled as she stood before him, and his heart clenched when he tried to imagine the expression she was currently wearing on her face, coming up with nothing but a blurry, dim shape.

“Katherine.” He said.

“Father,” she greeted back in the same civil tone.

“I cannot seem to find my glasses or my cane, and I am quite late for an important event. Where might you have hidden them?” he questioned as patiently as he could.

Katherine sighed deeply, and he wondered whether it was one of disappointment or frustration.

“I do not know what you mean, Father. I have not seen your things, much less taken them to hide away. Why on earth would I do that?”

Her voice was light, and her tone had a gentle drawl to it, a tell he had learned signified that her words were quite far from the truth.

“Katherine, I will only ask you once more. Where have you hidden my things?” Simon queried, feeling his patience run out over her audacious disregard for his predicament.

“Lady Katie, the Duke has to make an appearance tonight at a ball, and His Grace is already running quite late. I have spoken to you a handful of times about the dangers of tardiness and how it is never a good look on anyone of high social standing. His Grace requires his tools to ensure he is able to socialize properly and safely at the ball. We do not want him to get hurt, do we?” Cyrus tried, his tone patient and gentle in ways Simon could never seem to get his to bend.

The silence he heard after told him that his daughter was pondering over the words the butler had said to her, then quick whispering came next, too fast and hushed for him to pick up the exact words being said. Cyrus cleared his throat and beckoned Patrick closer, muttering quietly.

“Check behind the flowerpot in the drawing room,” He then raised his voice so the Duke could hear him properly. “Patrick

has left to retrieve the items, Your Grace. We will have you at the ball in no time.”

Simon gritted his teeth, unable to fight against feeling disrespected and disregarded by his daughter.

“Katherine, do not touch my things again. What is the purpose of buying you the finest toys if you will simply desert them to tamper with objects that do not concern you? I do not have time for such pointless childishness, and it will not be entertained next time. If you are bored, play with the dolls I purchased for you last week.”

Patrick returned, panting as he held out the Duke’s glasses and cane in outstretched hands. As Cyrus gently placed the spectacles into Simon’s hands, he heard Katie mutter in an annoyed manner as she walked away, “I do not like dolls. I have told you countless times, but you never listen – just like *always*.”

Her words remained with him until he arrived at the ball, bouncing along the walls of his heart and causing his heart to clench in guilt. Simon was really trying his best – going above and beyond his limits to care for his daughter, but he always seemed to fall short, his actions never enough, his words never the right ones she wanted to hear.

The older she got, the more difficult it became to gauge her thoughts, to understand her feelings, and he was quickly reaching his limit and running out of ideas on how exactly to remedy the situation.

He was so caught up in his thoughts he lost his focus on his environment, his body colliding with another. The gasp he heard told him it was a woman, and he blinked from behind his glasses, noticing the brown hair and swaying light-colored dress. She curtsied and apologized, and all Simon could think of was how much he wished to return to his home – even though he had only just arrived.

He waved away her apology and walked away, trying to locate the gentleman's room, desperate to get away from the stares and whispers trying to cut him up and unveil his secrets. Thankfully, he found it, only breathing a little calmer when he was within the space, taking in the familiar smell of cigars and the sound of full-bellied chortles.

“Sherrington! You made it!”

His friend's voice further eased the tension around his shoulders, and he turned to the side just as a hand came down on his shoulder.

“My apologies for being late, Tenford.” He mumbled, grimacing as the hand slipped to his elbow, reluctantly allowing himself to be guided somewhere to sit.

It was not as though he did not appreciate the help – it was merely that he could do without it. He never liked succumbing to feeling helpless, which was why he had devoted himself to managing his condition as best as he could, training himself to rely on the rest of his senses to make up for his lack of proper sight.

Still, Hanvey Harrison – the Earl of Tenford – was his friend – his oldest companion, and he understood that it was never his intention to make the Duke feel incapable. Tenford’s big heart only sought to help, and although it might not have provided Simon’s ego with the warmest of feelings, in his heart, he appreciated the gesture.

“It’s quite all right. I am just thankful that you came at all. I was starting to feel weary with all the boring conversations I had been engaged in since I arrived.” Hanvey paused, studying Simon’s pinched expression. “You seem troubled. Do you feel uncomfortable – being here?”

Simon shook his head, letting himself relax against the comfortable cushions of his seat as he thought of the best way to broach the matter.

“No, it’s just...It’s my daughter... she is becoming quite a handful these days.”

“Ah,” Hanvey laughed. “The lovely Lady Katie. What has she done now?”

“She hid my glasses and cane before I left, causing me to arrive late.” Simon sighed, feeling a lot more weary than he expected to. “I haven’t the slightest clue how she ended up so mischievous. I was never like that at her age – neither was her...”

Simon pursed his lips together, his heart clenching at the thought of the person he had intended to speak about.

“It has become quite unsettling – being unable to deal with her. I have tried to be patient – to provide for her so she will not feel neglected, to show her that I care and love her. But all my efforts seem to be for naught. She refuses to respect me or even hold me in any form of regard. And...” he inhaled sharply, his voice lowering as he admitted. “I do not know what more I can do, especially given my condition. It is not her fault I ended up this way, burdened by this affliction, and so she does not have to feel as affected by it, but I cannot pretend that it is not causing me to fall short of expectations.”

It had taken him quite long to recover from that night that had claimed his sight. By the time he was ready to associate with the members of his household, he had missed his daughter’s first steps. Things only got worse, with him not knowing how to properly care for her, missing out on more notable moments of her life, and seemingly disappointing her despite his efforts.

Hanvey nodded, moving to place a glass on the table before them. Simon took it as soon as Hanvey’s hands released it, downing the liquid in one gulp.

“I cannot begin to fathom what you are going through, my friend. I wish I could do more for you, and although I might not be able to intervene to ease your worries, allow me to give my thoughts on the matter.” He waited until Simon nodded before speaking. “It seems to me that you are struggling so much because you are attempting to take on a role that is not meant for you. You are her father, and you have done more than necessary in that forte. But she needs a mother, Simon. Compromises cannot be made for such a crucial figure in a young girl’s life, so your efforts never seem adequate. She is at the age where she has questions and requires lessons and beads of wisdom that can only be provided by maternal intuition. My advice would be for you to remarry.”

The mere thought of it caused a fog of discomfort to settle in Simon's gut. It was so disconcerting that he immediately refused.

"No. I will not do that again."

"Simon," Hanvey sighed patiently. "It does not have to be the sort that many aim for. You might not *need* a wife, but it cannot be denied that Katie *needs* a mother. It is within your ability to provide one for her, and so you should. Think of it this way; you do not need to love the woman or form deep attachments. You just need her to raise your daughter and nothing else – which is where a beneficial marriage comes into play. I will help you even further and offer my daughter to take on the role your daughter needs."

Hanvey's words caught Simon's attention quickly.

"Your daughter? Lady Martha? Why would you want your daughter in such a marriage, raising a child she did not birth?"

Hanvey shrugged, his voice and posture casual as he leaned back in his seat. "Martha might have only just debuted, but I do not believe she will find a more honorable husband than you. She does not appear interested in a love match, so she will not lose anything. In addition, she adores your daughter – she has for years. I am sure she would be overjoyed at the idea of raising her."

His friend's words were quite reasonable. When she was younger, Lady Martha accompanied her father when he visited Cloveshire Castle, and she was always kind and attentive to

Katherine. Maybe allowing her to take on the role would play out in his favor.

The idea was a good one, saving him the trouble of searching for a potential wife himself, and in a marriage like this, he would not need to fulfill any husbandly duties or partake in moments of intimacy. His daughter's needs were all that should be met. As long as she was disciplined and cared for, he would want nothing more.

"I think that is a fine idea. I accept your offer, Tenford."

Hanvey grinned, proud and wide.

"Excellent. I will bring her over for dinner tomorrow night to sort out the rest of the arrangement."

Simon nodded, grimacing at the discomfort in his stomach that had refused to dispel, hoping that it would eventually settle and that this plan would not bring him any regrets. "I look forward to it."

Chapter Three



Victoria peeked outside her window, a smile forming across her lips as she saw a handful of gentlemen walking up to her house. Some carried flowers, while the others carried gifts wrapped in colorful papers and topped with satin bows. Excited, she quickly finished preparing herself and hurried to the drawing room.

She could barely stay still with the eagerness running through her body, her mind wandering as she pondered what sort of man might pique her fancy. She knew of a few of them from the ball last night, had noted a handful of traits she thought were good ideals, and showed some promise of the makings of a good husband.

“That’s not all that matters, Vicky,” her mother once told her. “A man’s nobility, title, and good behavior are important, but more than anything else, you should seek a man who will make you feel loved, protected, and cherished. A man who will love you with all his heart, and who you will love with all yours. Never marry for the person, but for their heart.”

At the time, Victoria had believed she would come to understand what her mother had meant, and eventually, she did. Her memories of her parents together were filled with moments of unbridled affection and love, both of them so

committed to one another that the only thing they cared about outside themselves was her. And she grew up desiring that, a connection with someone who would value her and long to stand by her and for her, just as she would for him.

Whichever man she chose would be her future. She owed it to herself and her parents to ensure that the marriage between herself and her husband would be a happy one.

She continued to wait for the men, anticipating the arrival of a footman to announce her first caller by name or title. But soon, she grew weary of waiting, her foot tapping against the rug as she wondered what the issue could be.

They are already here. Why have they not come to meet me?

Dread pooled around in her midsection, and she stood abruptly.

“I shall just take a look,” she muttered, walking to the door. “Just to find out what the problem might be — if there’s any.”

She opened the door and glanced around the corridor, her heart sinking at how empty it was. Confused, she stepped out of the room, deciding to check the drawing room in case the men had decided to convene there for a moment before meeting with her, one at a time. On her way down the corridor, she passed by a window and spotted movement from her peripheral view. Quickly, she stopped and took a look, her jaw dropping in confusion.

They were leaving! The men were walking away from her house, with some staring dejectedly at their gifts and flowers as their feet took them further and further away from Victoria.

A maid rounded a corner, and Victoria rushed to her, questioning with wide eyes.

“Why are they leaving?”

The girl looked up at her, flustered.

“M-Miss?”

“My callers. Why are they leaving?”

“Ah,” the maid lowered her gaze. “It would seem that Lord Kent sent them away.”

Victoria was even more confused. *Why would George do that?*

She had noted a few of the men when she saw them upon their arrival and was aware that quite a number of them were very eligible. Lord Ramsey came from a good family, and Sir Isaac had an impressive repertoire, known for his fast-growing business that he had started independently. They were good men and, ideally, prospective husbands. What was George thinking?

“Miss?” the maid called out, looking worried.

Victoria put on a small smile and shook her head.

“It is nothing. I was just... it is fine. Do not worry.”

The maid curtsied and continued on her way while Victoria sought the resolve to find her cousin and question him. It wasn't just some trivial matter — her future was at stake. The least he could do was offer her a suitable explanation for why he had done what he did.

Inhaling deeply to settle her nerves and find some courage, she turned around and began walking in the opposite direction toward George's study. She found herself before the door in no time, raising her fist to knock.

She heard voices first before she noticed the door was slightly ajar, and she paused, her heart skipping when she heard her name.

Are they talking about me?

Eavesdropping was rude and bad manners, but something about this affair struck her with suspicion and unease. So, she leaned closer to the door, trying to listen as best as she could.

“... think you should have done a better job of putting them off the idea of calling on her last night at the ball.” Victoria recognized the shrill tone of Sandra's voice, her skin itching with irritation at the sound of it.

“It would have been much quicker if Matthew had been more committed to his duties in the first place,” George huffed impatiently, “... was able to dissuade them, eventually. Most of them had their heart set on her for some reason, so it was a challenge, but I managed to turn them away. We are running out of time and excuses. Something needs to be done soon.”

“If she can’t part with it willingly, we could take more drastic measures and force her,” Matthew suggested, his voice sounding garbled as though he was eating as he spoke.

Their tones sounded serious and grave, as though the matter at hand was far too important, leaving no room for a casual air.

“How? She is already of age to marry, and with how resilient most of the men who visited were today, it is only a matter of time before someone who cannot be refused gets his hands on her, and all our hard work would be for nothing.” George pointed out stiffly.

“Your minds are far too weak. We should stick to the original plan and finish what was started. We should eliminate her completely, eliminating the possibility of opposition or a struggle over the inheritance. If she is allowed to find a husband, we will lose any opportunity to claim her inheritance, as it will serve as her dowry.”

Victoria froze at Sandra’s words, the underlying implications striking her with fright.

Was she... surely not –

“Are you suggesting that we *kill her*, sister?” Matthew enquired, his voice light and teasing as though he were conveying a joke.

“We might as well. She is of no use to us alive, only serving as a hindrance to our goals. With her out of the way, we will be easily granted sole ownership of her properties and assets.” Sandra reasoned.

“I suppose you are right,” George agreed.

Victoria pressed a hand to her mouth as she stumbled back in shock.

They... They were really planning to kill her in order to gain her inheritance!

Her heart began to beat wildly as her mind supplied her with multiple reasons as to why the notion – as farfetched as it sounded – seemed plausible. After the attack on her parents two years ago – of which she was the sole survivor – her cousins had moved into Pembly Estate under the guise of ‘*taking care of their poor cousin*’. But Victoria had never felt cared for by them, forced to do their bidding like a maid in their own home.

She had been ridiculed, mocked, and bullied frequently, and she had accepted that her only way out would be to marry and move as far away from them as possible. It was clear that even though George had inherited her late father’s title and some of his properties, the bulk of which had been left to Victoria, he was still greedy.

And now, they planned to kill her for it.

I cannot be here any longer, she thought suddenly, filled with urgency.

Carefully, she backed away from the door, waiting until she was at a safe distance that they could not hear her, before hurrying off to her room. There was nothing to think about, no plans to make.

She must leave immediately, go away as far as she possibly could, right this instance.

Victoria went to her wardrobe, pulling out a small bag and setting it on the floor. She had no idea where she would go or how long she would have to flee, so she could only afford to take a handful of necessities. Into the bag went a few clothes, a book that had belonged to her father that he had treasured greatly, her mother's embroidery kit, and a music box with a crystal ballerina within it that they had given her when she debuted into society.

Then, as stealthily as she could, she made her way downstairs and out of the house, doing her best to stay out of sight as she ran to the stables. The stable hand – John – raised his head just as she walked in, his brows drawn together in confusion as he took in the sight of her in her cloak, carrying a bag. He dropped the shovel he had been using to clean out the stalls and asked.

“Is everything all right, Miss?”

Victoria nodded, her mouth running dry as she tried to think of a good enough excuse to lure him away.

“Yes... I – Matthew! Matthew – my cousin – needs your attention. He’s attempting to impress many of the ton’s eligible young ladies by boasting of his horse racing skills, of which he has none. He wanted me to call for you, so you can teach him a thing or two.”

Matthew was well known for his flirtatious nature, as well as spinning multiple webs of lies to enhance said nature, so her words seemed plausible. John nodded quickly, wiping his hands on his dirt-covered trousers and adjusting his hat as he hurriedly left the stable. Victoria sighed in relief and walked to the stall she intended to visit.

Peaches – the horse that had been a gift from her father, which she had raised – grunted as he saw her, and she spared a moment to pat his flank, drawing courage and strength from the way he nuzzled at her arm.

“We have to go,” she whispered, strapping his saddle into place.

He seemed to understand her urgency and stayed on his best behavior as she finished preparing him for travel and led him out of his stall. She hoisted her bag onto him first, then mounted him, sitting on his back with practiced ease. He huffed and pawed at the ground as she tightened her grip on his reins, inhaling deeply to still her rapidly beating heart.

She nudged him to trot out of the stable, and once they had put some distance between them and the stable, she whipped his

reins and set him off into a run. Peaches went off quickly, and soon, she could no longer spot her estate behind them. Her heart clenched at the fact that she had left her home behind, practically abandoning the walls within which her parents had nurtured and raised her, and blinked back tears.

They would not want her to come to any harm – especially if there was something she could have done to keep herself out of harm's way. This plan might not be much of one, but at least it was a start, and it bought her some time until she could think up some other course of action.

She kept riding and riding, only slowing down when she knew she was far enough from Pembly Estate, just enough to keep Peaches from tiring out too soon. Eventually, she took a break to let Peaches rest and give herself some time to assess her situation.

She had been rendered utterly alone. Despite her hopes and the relief that she still had some family members to depend, it was now apparent that she had lost every familial tie she had two years ago. Now, she had to think of some way to survive – without any relative or husband.

Victoria groaned and crouched on the grass, feeling utterly lost as her mind seemingly could not conjure up any plot to aid in her survival.

After resting for a while, she continued her journey, this time letting Peaches keep to a medium pace – fast enough to cover enough ground quickly and still slow enough to prevent her horse from using up all his energy. It seemed as though it was a good thing she reduced the pace because up ahead, a little off to the side, was a castle.

She glanced around the area, frowning when she noticed no other homes or buildings. After a moment of consideration, she steered her horse toward the castle, fervently hoping that whoever dwelled within it was sympathetic enough to her plight.

In almost no time, she arrived at the entrance, caught a little off guard as the doors opened while she was dismounting. She turned immediately, dropping into a hasty, flustered curtsy and blushing beneath the butler's gaze.

“Good evening, my lady. You are a little early, so I hope you do not mind waiting a little bit for dinner.”

She frowned, slightly confused. Why did he sound as though he had been expecting her?

The butler stepped back and ushered her in, and her feet complied, taking her into the grand castle. It was even more magnificent on the inside than on the outside; the walls were painted a pale green, somehow making the red carpet that covered the floors even more grand. A chandelier hung from the ceiling; warm rays of sunlight shone on it, making it sparkle beautifully.

“My lady?” she jumped, looking to her right to see a maid standing beside her. “Might I take your cloak and bag?”

Victoria nodded and handed her bag to the maid, slipping her cloak off and holding it out with shaky hands. The maid took them and smiled, bowing slightly before wandering off. Victoria rubbed her hands together and glanced around,

suddenly a lot more nervous than she had been when she was waiting to meet her gentlemen callers.

The butler reappeared and spoke kindly.

“The Duke will be with you shortly. If you could follow me to the drawing room.”

Victoria paled. *The Duke? Who?*

As she walked behind the butler, she tried to think of who this Duke might be, trying to remember if she had heard of a Duke who stayed in this part of the countryside, frustrated when the notion rang no bells.

The butler left her in the drawing room after offering her some refreshments, which she politely declined, assuring her that the Duke would soon be with her.

“Perhaps... if I come clean and tell him of my plight, he might feel gracious enough to assist me.” She whispered to herself, dredging up whatever was left of the courage she had used a lot of that day. “Once he walks in, I will politely enlist his help.”

She nodded, feeling oddly motivated. The plan was simple, and she should have no trouble –

The door opened, and she whirled around, the words she had intended to speak dying in her throat as she got a proper look at the man standing before her.

He had a pair of glasses sitting comfortably on his face, the gold frames gleaming beneath the light, his pale blue eyes squinting at her from behind the frames. His lips parted to address her, and all the pieces clicked into place at the sound of his voice.

“Are you Lady Martha?”

He did not have a cane with him, but she knew who he was without a doubt.

The Duke of Sherrington. The blind Duke.

The same man she had bumped into last night at the ball.

She had thought he seemed familiar when she saw him the night before, but she could not place how because George had dragged her away. And now she was being questioned by him in his home.

She blinked, remembering that he had asked her a question.

“Yes. Yes, I am. Your Grace.”

He tilted his head to the side slightly, confusion etched onto his handsome features.

“I did not expect you to come without your father, as he was the one I had spoken to about this matter.”

Something was definitely going on, but for now, the best course of action seemed to be for her to play along, and so she did.

“He had some urgent business to attend to and requested that I come without him.”

The Duke nodded, folding his hands behind his back.

“You will be joining me for dinner, then?”

She considered coming clean right there and then. But seeing how this would play out might not be so bad. So she curtsied and said softly.

“I would be delighted to, Your Grace.”

Chapter Four



Simon had thought he was imagining things at first.

Upon meeting the lady his butler had informed him had arrived, he could not help but sense there was something much different about her. She seemed smaller, her voice a little higher than he remembered. But then he reasoned that it had been years since Hanvey had brought her along for a visit, and it was likely that he had simply forgotten what she was like.

But then, they settled down for dinner, and during their conversation, he discovered without a doubt that this woman, *whoever she was*, was not Lady Martha. He enquired about her well-being and family, attempting to make small talk to help make her comfortable, as he understood that as common as their situation was, it was still unorthodox, and no young woman would partake of such if they had another option.

However, this woman appeared unable to provide him with coherent and concise answers, fumbling over her words and saying things that were just impossible to be true. For instance, Simon had queried her about her arrival without a chaperone, and she had told him that it was simply faster and more convenient for her to come on her own on horseback. This was

strange because he definitely remembered that Lady Martha had an abhorrent dislike for horses and was scared of them.

He considered dismissing her immediately, yet he could not help but feel curious about who the mysterious woman was, wondering how far she was willing to stretch the truth before him. An idea came to him, and he set his fork down and reached for his wine carefully, feeling her stare against his skin as he took a sip and cleared his throat.

“I believe this meeting has gone quite well, Lady Martha, don’t you agree? I feel it is only reasonable for us to proceed with our initial agreement and wed tomorrow.”

Victoria felt her heart drop in horror.

“*T-Tomorrow?*” she queried, unable to keep her voice from quivering.

Simon easily picked up on her distress and smiled.

“Yes. Your father and I had discussed it earlier, and he had no qualms about a quick ceremony to tie the knot. I merely suggested meeting with you first to ensure that you had no problems with the situation, and if your conversation over dinner has told me anything, it is that you are fine with our arrangement. Am I wrong?”

If she told him otherwise, he would sense something was afoot. However, Victoria felt powerless against the panic bubbling within her, suddenly aware that she had entered a strange predicament.

Suppose she agreed to his offer, and the real Lady Martha showed up later; what would she do then? It had been a real stroke of luck that the actual woman he was expecting had not turned up during their meal, but Victoria could only push her fortune so far before it shattered into a thousand pieces, leaving her alone and still in danger.

“Lady Martha?”

His voice shook her out of her thoughts, and she looked back at him, swallowing nervously as she parted her lips with a silent prayer not to get into trouble for this.

“No, Your Grace. You are not wrong. But... might I have some time? To think it over a little bit?”

Simon pursed his lips to keep himself from chuckling, intrigued by this woman and her desire to keep up pretenses. Whoever she was, it was remarkable how far she seemed willing to go to protect her lies. He gave into his gracious nature only because he was curious about how much longer she intended to keep the game up.

“Of course. Please decide tonight so we might send for a vicar first thing in the morning and proceed with the marriage.” He said.

As she responded, Victoria hung her head, feeling as though her world was gradually falling apart.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Dinner ended shortly after that, and the Duke rose, announcing that he would be retiring to his study for the rest of the evening. Victoria watched as he took calm strides out of the dining hall. Despite the brewing dread in her gut, she could not help but feel impressed by how he conducted himself. Rumors had made him seem pathetic and helpless, but Victoria had witnessed how he methodically conducted his affairs within his home.

The butler had announced the meals served to them, and the Duke had peered down at his plate, picked up his cutlery, and helped himself to the food with practiced ease. She knew it could not have been easy to have learned to manage his condition as effectively as he had come to do, and she admired the effort he seemed to have put in.

She shook her head, patting her cheeks to call herself back to her senses. The Duke was not the one in trouble – she was. She should make some attempt to get herself out of the hot water she had managed to land herself in before things got to the point of no return.

But how? What on earth could she do to keep from dealing with the fallout of all she had somehow encountered the whole day? Between her cousins and what sounded like a marriage of convenience to the Duke as an imposter, she was trapped between a rock and a hard place with no way out.

Someone cleared their throat, and she jumped, startled, looking up to find the butler standing beside her with an apologetic expression.

“Excuse me, My Lady,” he spoke in the kindly manner he had retained since her arrival. “I did not mean to startle you, but three people are at the door, searching for their cousin. They claim that she went missing, and they have been inquiring from houses within the area. I wondered if you might have seen a woman on your way here. Perhaps we could give them some insight on which direction she might have gone.”

Terror, hot and quick, filled Victoria’s veins, and she immediately rose out of her seat, craning her neck to see if they had made their way to the dining hall. She was barely relieved when the only people she saw were servants of the household. She shifted her attention back to the butler and hurriedly said,

“I do not believe I saw anyone. Please, excuse me.”

Without waiting for him to speak, she rushed out of the dining hall, glancing down the corridors, her heart skipping a beat when she heard George’s voice and spotted shadows approaching from her right. Quickly, she went in the left direction, opening the first door she saw and walking into the room. She shut the door behind her and rested her back against it, squeezing her eyes shut and praying that she wasn’t seen.

On the other side of the room, Simon sat, confused and surprised that someone within his household would enter his study without knocking. He spoke up as soon as the sound of deep breathing reached his ears.

“Who is there? How dare you come in without knocking?”

Victoria's heart jumped within her chest upon hearing the Duke's stern voice, belatedly realizing that she had walked into a room that was not only occupied but served as a private space for the master of the house.

"I-I am sorry – I did not know that –" her voice shook as he stepped closer and closer to her, nervous and afraid. "I did not mean to intrude, Your Grace. I just needed –"

Her jaw snapped shut as he reached her, resting a hand against the door right next to her head as he leaned closely to peer down at her. He had taken off his glasses, and now, his eyes gleamed as they studied her face, and she could not help but wonder what or how much of her he could see. Demanding voices came through the door, and she stiffened, knowing that if she could hear them, he undoubtedly did as well.

"I will only ask this once. You would do well to be honest and forthcoming with your answers," he spoke lowly. "Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?"

Victoria swallowed, clenching her hands into fists to stop them from shaking as she spoke up.

"Victoria, Your Grace. Victoria Manger. I apologize for the intrusion – I never intended to fool you. I did not know what else to do."

"Do not think so highly of yourself, Miss Manger. Your ruse was not as strong as you believed it was, and I found out that something was amiss the moment dinner began." He stated coolly, making her cheeks burn. "Why are you here?"

“I had to flee for my life. My... my parents passed two years ago. We were ambushed by bandits on our way to Bath, and they were killed, while I barely managed to escape with my life. My cousins – they came to stay with me, as my father’s title of Baron fell to George, the oldest of them, and I inherited a majority of his assets and properties. This morning, I heard them plotting to end my life to collect my properties, as they worried I might get married and put the wealth even further out of their reach. And so I ran. I just... took my horse and rode away as fast as I could. I never intended to trick you. I found your castle and thought to ask for help – but then you thought I was someone else, and I could not... I could not find it in me to deny it. I was scared that you would turn me away.”

Simon sighed, feeling frustrated that this stranger had brought unwanted trouble along with her. He already had enough problems of his own and was in no position to interfere in the lives of others, having done all he could to ensure that his matters were kept out of other people’s reach, expecting that vice versa would be a courtesy offered to him.

But this woman...

“What do you expect me to do? I am hardly in a position to meddle in your affairs, Miss – nor do I want to.”

Desperate, Victoria began to beg.

“Please, help me. You do not have to confront them, but you could at least vouch for my words to the constables. Please – that’s all I ask.”

“You are asking for a lot from a stranger, Miss Manger,” he smirked, leaning even closer toward her. “How do you know I can be trusted? Surely, you know who I am – you must have heard the rumors. I am the man who drove his wife to madness and killed her. And then, fate dealt out its punishment and took my sight from me. The only thing I have left is a daughter who despises me. Are you certain you wish to rely on me?”

Victoria stiffened, taken aback by his words as fear started to crawl up her spine. She spoke, doing her best to keep her voice steady.

“I would not be so cocky if I were you, Your Grace. I am perfectly capable of defending myself.”

He chuckled lightly and then replied, his voice pitched low and deep.

“I highly doubt that, Miss Manger. I am not completely blind, you know. I have just enough sight to note how easily startled you can get, like a little baby deer. That is very much what you are right now – weak, helpless, and prey in the eyes of the world. You would not stand a chance against anyone.”

Although his words were cruel, Victoria could not deny that they had some truth to them. As it stood, she could not protect or defend herself from her own family members, much less a man with a past as unclear to her as she likely was to him. Without any assistance, she would not survive. Still, his response made her frustrated and angry, struck by how unfeeling and selfish a person could be.

“I should never have asked for your help,” she spat quietly, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes.

“Mm,” he hummed softly in agreement. “Perhaps you should not have indeed.”

They were so close now, the space between their bodies so small, she could feel the heat radiating from his body as his breath fanned against her skin, unable to keep herself from noticing his broad shoulders and strong form. The way he towered over her made her feel like a cornered animal, but there was something else – something foreign and unexplored that swirled in her stomach, spreading like fire across the rest of her body.

Her breathing was the only thing Simon could hear now, his senses tuned to every part of her that existed before him. She smelled sweet, like ripe fruits, and he could not help but wonder if she would taste the same, feeling an ache he had not quite felt in a while at the back of his throat. His body seemed to pick up on the sensation, itching to inhale deeper, to check and confirm his theory about the taste of her.

The air between them hung heavy, quiet, and pulsing, willing and pushing their resolve to the breaking point. Simon was the one who cracked first, lowering the hand he used to brace himself against the wall to her jaw, tilting her head up slightly, and claiming her lips in a searing kiss. Her lips were soft against his, unresponsive at first but slowly moving, parting when he nibbled at them.

She *did* taste sweet, the mere realization of it pushing him to chase the sensation, his other hand resting on her waist and pulling her flush against him. Her knees weakened as his tongue teased and stroked her, setting her insides aflame with

every feeling and smell she was experiencing. She ached for more, to reach forward and hold him until –

She gasped and pulled back, her heartbeat thundering in her ears as she caught her breath, dizzy and weak from the kiss. She tried to say something, but her mind was still fixated on how his hands held onto her, how his lips moved against hers, how his tongue explored her mouth.

She pressed her hands to her cheeks, willing herself to come back to her senses, almost giving in to the whispers nudging her to move closer to him, to hold onto him until she was completely lost. He was standing still, blinking slowly as his eyes down at her, and for an instant, she almost wished she was pressed against him again.

Her lips parted to speak, feeling the urge to say something, perhaps make light of the situation to not make him feel burdened, as she was also a participant. However, when she spoke, the words that came out were not what she intended.

“We should not have done that.”

Chapter Five



Simon took a step back, attempting to put some distance between them before another mistake was made. From where he now stood, he no longer had a hazy view of her expression, could no longer smell her intoxicating sweet scent, and his heart tugged at the loss.

“That...” she began again, sounding beautifully rendered breathless. “That should not have happened. I – I must leave if you do not wish to help me.”

Victoria turned around to face the door and tugged at the handle, frowning when the door did not open. She pulled at it again, dismayed when it still remained stuck despite her attempts. Simon guessed from her fumbling what the problem might be, recalling that the issue had been around for quite some time, and he had forgotten to bring Cyrus’s attention to it.

Grimly, he said, “It seems we are stuck together for a little while longer. Try to bear with it – someone should come looking for us soon.”

Victoria sighed with irritation, speaking up without any thought.

“Splendid. As if this day could not possibly get any worse.”

Simon flinched at her words, and she seemed to have noticed because she stepped closer, her waving hands a blur before his impaired vision.

“I did not mean it that way. I am sorry —”

“It is fine,” Simon shrugged, retreating to lean against his desk. “I have grown used to hearing such opinions about me. How else should one feel about a blind man whose wife succumbed to madness and then died?”

Victoria shook her head defensively. “I do not agree with every rumor circulating amongst the ton.”

Simon paused, an idea forming in his mind.

“Perhaps you should. Maybe there is some truth to their sayings, and it would serve you well to keep them in mind, as I have a proposition to offer you. I will protect you from your lecherous cousins, but in exchange, you will marry me.”

“Marry you?” she gasped in disbelief, staring at him wide-eyed.

“Yes. As you might have surmised from our conversation over dinner, I am in need of a wife. The woman you impersonated is the daughter of my friend, and while the reasonable thing to do would be to wait for the arrival of the real Lady Martha, I

cannot help but feel fortunate that she did not show up tonight and you did. I had already been having second thoughts about getting married to my friend's child for my own reasons, and you are a much preferable candidate. If you agree to marry me, we will wed tomorrow, and you will have my title, along with the protection it affords. And I have no desire to obtain any more wealth, so your fortune can remain with you, serving as a trust, rather than a dowry."

He was offering more than she expected to get. Not only would her life be placed far from the reach of her cousins, but her properties would also be safe. *But...* the thought of marrying a man she had only just met, with no information about him outside the details spewed from the lips of gossip, made her stomach churn nervously.

"Would you like some time to think about it?" he offered, extending his graciousness.

Victoria knew that taking a moment to ponder the proposal further would not change her helplessness or lessen her desperation. Fortune aside, her life was at stake, and she knew without a doubt which of those her parents would have protected with their last breath – as they had that day.

Still, it was rather odd that most of the Duke's terms catered more to her needs than his.

So she inhaled deeply and moved closer to stand before him, raising her chin in a show of confidence to herself, asking softly.

“And you, Your Grace? What is it you want in exchange for my hand?”

His lips quirked in slight amusement and he said, “Just that – your hand. Having a wife will solve quite a number of my issues and that is all I need. So? Will you marry me, Miss Manger?”

There is no point pondering over it anymore, is there?

“All right. I shall marry you.”

He pushed himself off and away from the desk, eliminating the distance between them, drunk on her scent all over again and barely holding himself together.

“Very well, then. Tomorrow, we shall wed,” he murmured, leaning forward.

Victoria sensed what would follow and stayed still, readily accepting the gentle press of his lips against hers, this kiss chaste and softer than the first, sealing their deal.

As they broke apart, there was a knock at the door, and at Simon’s orders, the door opened, and Cyrus walked in, sighing in relief.

“There you are, my lady. What are you doing in this room? It is the Duke’s private study!”

“It is quite all right, Cyrus. She got lost and wound up here by accident. The door got stuck, so she could not leave after she realized her mistake. Please send for a locksmith tomorrow morning to come and take a look at it.” He tilted his head in Victoria’s direction and added calmly. “And for a vicar as well. I am to marry Miss Manger tomorrow.”

Cyrus nodded. “Yes, Your –” he faltered, eyes wide as he turned to the woman by the Duke’s side. “Miss... *who...*”

Simon waved his hand dismissively. “Do not concern yourself with the details. All you need to know is that this is Miss Victoria Manger, and she is to become the Duchess of Sherrington. Arrange for a room to be prepared for her.”

Cyrus gave her one more look and said, “Right away, Your Grace.”

He left shortly after, leaving the door open. Victoria glanced at it and then faced the Duke, suddenly overcome with mild embarrassment and shyness. Still, as strange as it might seem, she had to tell him she was grateful for his generosity and kindness.

“Thank you, Your Grace. It might not seem like much to you, but you have just saved my life. I will never forget that.”

Simon felt his heart warm up at the sincerity in her voice, unable to resist the urge to respond in kind.

“You are welcome. Get some rest; we will have much to do tomorrow.”

She curtsied, her cheeks warm as she said,

“Good night, Your Grace.”

His lips curled at the corners, and he held up a hand.

“Good night, Miss Manger.”

She walked out, and Simon sighed at the silence that followed her departure, suddenly overcome by restlessness. Tonight had certainly come with several unexpected twists, and he was still determining if he had made the right decision.

All he could do was hope that this marriage would be different as he resolved not to make the same mistakes he had made the first time.



Despite the Duke’s words, a part of Victoria somehow thought that the Duke was not being too serious about getting married the next day after they met. Needless to say, she was extremely surprised when a maid showed up in the room provided for her and introduced herself as Linda, saying she was to be the lady’s maid of the Duchess-to-be and had been instructed to prepare her for the wedding ceremony.

“It is to take place in the gardens. But fret not; CloveshireCastle’s gardens are simply magnificent. It will be a beautiful ceremony.” Linda promised while Victoria recovered from her initial shock.

“I suppose I will really do this,” she whispered, suddenly feeling a little scared. “I am going to marry a Duke I just met.”

“Miss? I mean – Your Grace? It is not official yet, but it will be soon, so I see no reason not to treat you as a Duchess now.” Linda smiled kindly, and Victoria felt herself calm down at the bubbly nature of the maid.

“Thank you. But... I would really prefer it if you waited until after the ceremony.”

“As you wish, Miss.”

Victoria took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders back, correcting her posture to make her look strong, just as her mother taught her, and putting on a little smile.

“All right then, let us get ready.”

Linda was quite the talker, apparently, chatting away eagerly at how she had been staying at Cloveshire Castle for five years now and was starting to lose hope in the Duke ever remarrying again. She claimed that she prayed for his life to be made easier by someone who would give him company and care for his daughter.

“That’s right,” Victoria said suddenly. “He has a daughter.”

Somehow, it had slipped her mind that the late Duchess had borne a daughter before she passed – a child that would now

be in her care. Belatedly, she wondered why she had not seen the girl at dinner, then assumed it was because the event was intended to be a marriage meeting.

“Lady Katie, sweet little thing. She’s... a little troubled, but weren’t we all at that age?”

Something in Linda’s voice told her there was more to it than she let on, and she wanted to push further. But then, she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror, struck silent by how ethereal she looked. She seemed like an entirely different person, and in a way, she supposed she was. The Victoria, which existed two days ago, would have never imagined herself in such a situation, much less found herself in it.

But this was much better than the alternative, which, at worst, would leave her dead and forgotten.

“You look absolutely lovely, Miss,” Linda assured, grinning so brightly Victoria felt it would drive her to tears.

“Thank you... I just wish my parents could have witnessed it.”

“I am sure they would have thought you were incredibly beautiful and shared in your joy.” Linda nodded with conviction.

Victoria nearly laughed at her last statement. Her mother might have been devastated to find out she was getting married to a man she barely knew, much less love. The thought stayed with her as she descended to the garden, haunting her as she stepped onto the gorgeous lawn, the space

littered with bushels and branches of brightly colored flowers and petals.

She had tried to distract herself from her anxiety by studying the different flowers but somehow caught the tail end of a conversation.

“– of a sudden? Without speaking to me first?”

“Katherine,” Victoria heard the Duke sigh tiredly. “It is not a matter that you needed to be concerned with, much less consulted on. We are adults, and as such, we are allowed to do whatever we wish. Me taking a wife has no bearing on you whatsoever –”

“That is not true!” a child – Katie, Victoria assumed – cried. “Do you think I do not see what you are planning? You have never once mentioned anyone, and now, you are getting married. Of all the ridiculous –”

“Katherine,” Simon snapped sternly, entirely fed up with her behavior. “Do not think for a second that you clearly understand my intentions. It is not in your place to scold me on my decisions, whatever they might be, and with your petulant attitude, I highly doubt that day will come. You are to sit in at the ceremony, and afterward, you will greet the new Duchess and treat her with respect. Do you understand?”

Victoria, feeling horrible for listening in on their conversation, moved away before she could hear Katie’s response, guilt and anxiety swirling within her.



The ceremony went by faster than Victoria had expected it to. The special license the Duke had acquired allowed him to have a vicar present at his home to conduct the wedding, and after all the vows had been said and the vicar had deemed it so, Victoria became a Duchess and a wife.

She had expected that the Duke would stay by her side or offer some assurance, but once the vicar took his leave, Simon also went inside, leaving her alone in the gardens. She had barely formed a coherent thought about his odd attitude and the fact that she had been completely ignored when Katie came up to her and said with dark, angry eyes.

“You will never be my mother.”

Aghast, Victoria tried to explain.

“That was never my intention, Katie. I just –” Victoria stopped as the girl walked away, cheeks burning with embarrassment.

She had hoped things would have simmered down by dinner time, but they only seemed to escalate. When she arrived at the dining hall, she found the Duke already seated, but Katie was nowhere in sight.

“Good evening, Your Grace.” She said, slipping into the empty chair at the end of the table, silently wishing she could sit closer to her husband.

The Duke nodded in acknowledgment, and a rush of worry flooded Victoria's heart. Had she done something wrong? Why was he acting so cold to her? Was he perhaps still upset about his argument with Katie?

She had not meant to hear that conversation, so she could not bring it up, but maybe she could try another approach.

“Is... Lady Katie not joining us for dinner?”

Simon raised his head with a frown.

“She is being unreasonably difficult. Throwing a tantrum will not change what has happened, and the sooner she understands that the sooner she can adapt to things.”

His words sounded far too harsh regarding a child. Victoria could not imagine acting any differently if her own father had gotten married out of the blue to a woman she was never introduced to, and her heart hurt for the little girl.

“She is merely upset that she was not made aware beforehand. I do not believe that she is trying to upset you or make things difficult. She is a child and needs as much care as she does stern words – perhaps even more.”

The Duke was momentarily silent, then cleared his throat, sitting up straighter.

“We need to discuss the terms of our arrangement.”

Victoria's heart dropped.

Had he changed his mind? Could he? They were already married. Did he perhaps wish to hand her over to her cousins and collect her inheritance –

“I might have given you misconceived notions about why I wished to wed. I am, in fact, not in need of a wife. My daughter, however, needs a mother, and I could not obtain one for her without remarrying. You are not here for my sake or to fulfill any needs of mine. Our marriage will exist in name only. We will not need to spend any time together or consummate our marriage. All I require of you is for your attention and care to be focused on my daughter. In return, I will hold up my end of the bargain; you have my title and the protection it comes with.”

This... felt a lot worse than what she had imagined.

When the Duke expressed his desire for a wife, she assumed he sought some form of companionship and perhaps – hopefully even love, later in their shared future. And now, he had practically denounced any connection to their marriage. The gracious kindness from the night before seemed to have melted away, leaving behind a chilling coldness that left her disappointed.

“That... that is hardly fair, Your Grace.”

“Is it?” he mused calmly. “I think I have been more than fair with you. You are benefitting a lot more than I am – as all I truly need is for my daughter to be raised with the warmth and

tenderness only mothers can provide. If you can do so well enough, we should encounter no problems at all.”

His words caused a whirlwind of emotions, including disappointment and resignation burning hotly within her. In the past, she had envisioned a life full of love and comfort with her husband, longing for the days she could talk endlessly with a person and never tire, countless hours spent in each other’s embrace, declarations of love made with words and silent gazes.

And now, thanks to the untamable greed of her cousins, she was forced to endure a sham of a marriage. Her life appeared to be in a steady downward spiral, and in her helpless state, all she could do was nod and accept her fate.

“If that is what you wish, then so be it, Your Grace.”

Chapter Six



It took Simon longer than he had expected to reach his limit.

When he had offered Victoria the proposal, he had almost wished she would say no. But she had accepted, and he was given no choice but to go along till the very end.

Obtaining a special license had been the easiest part of the day. The hard part came from relaying the news about his marriage, and he was not entirely surprised when she responded with hostility and anger. Harder still were his attempts to forget the kiss he and Victoria had shared. In some moments, if he closed his eyes, he could feel her lips against his, once more drunk on her intoxicating sweetness, enthralled by the softness of her skin.

Their kiss had unlocked something within him, a feeling he had never quite experienced and instinctively knew would only spell trouble for him.

“Would you like to have the Duchess’s things moved to your room, Your Grace?”

Simon had bristled at Cyrus' question and fought to remain composed.

"That will not be necessary. We are wed by name only, nothing else.

The surprise in his butler's tone was evident when he queried.

"I beg your pardon, Your Grace?"

"She is not here to be my wife but to serve as Katherine's mother. That is why I married her. That is who she is meant to be. Our marriage came about as a deal, my protection in exchange for her care over Katherine. Nothing more, nothing less."

Cyrus stared at his master in confusion, struggling to string together a coherent and proper response to what he had just heard.

"I see."

Simon frowned. "You do not approve."

"My approval is not necessary, Your Grace. It is a noble idea – to attempt to provide Lady Katie with a maternal figure, but it might also benefit you to enjoy the Duchess's company."

Simon understood his butler's concern, but it was a sentiment he could not agree with.

“I do not need her company. What I need is for my daughter to not grow up hating me, to not spend her days angry and alone.”

Cyrus relented, knowing whatever arguments he might bring up would not make any difference. “As you wish, Your Grace.

He had taken a wife for the sake of his relationship with his daughter. He loved her beyond words could explain, desired her happiness and safety above everything else, and was willing to do whatever it took to uphold his commitment.

Getting too close to Victoria could disrupt that, pushing him further into a tighter corner than he has had to dwell in for the last few years. Putting restrictions on their marriage would ensure that no lines were crossed and keep him from making any mistakes he was sure to regret.

Still, he could not help but feel a little apologetic at how she responded after he presented the terms of their marriage to her. Moments before that, she had given him the impression that it had been a wise choice to marry her after she had defended Katherine and given reasons for her reaction. And for the first time in what felt like forever, he felt fortunate. Fortunate to have met her, fortunate to have listened to her plight, fortunate to have been able to offer his assistance – albeit a little reluctantly.

Fortunate she had agreed to wed him.

And so, it had been difficult to shatter whatever impressions she might have held of their lives moving forward, but it had

been necessary.

But no matter how much he told himself that, a part of him still ached to seek her out, to reach for her, to press her against him.

Dangerous thoughts with deadly consequences. He had barely survived the last time he let his heart lead him, and this time, he was not keen on making the same mistake.



Victoria knew there was no way to keep her marriage to the Duke a secret.

She had anticipated the spread of the word, had practically expected the news to reach as far as London, and knew that the further it got, the more likely it was to bring along with it vermin.

And so, one week after she had become the Duchess of Sherrington, she was completely unsurprised when Cyrus informed her that her cousins had arrived at the castle to visit her.

She had known this was coming... For days, she dreamt of her relatives showing up, tightly gripping her wrists and ankles as they dragged her back home to do away with her. Every night, she would wake up in a cold sweat and remind herself that she had become untouchable and Cloveshire Castle was now her home.

It had helped settle her nerves slightly, but she knew she would have to face them before she could truly be free. So she smiled and told Cyrus that she would be there shortly. After he left, she inhaled deeply and exhaled. Repeated it once, twice, thrice – until her hands stopped shaking.

She nodded at her reflection and walked to the door, shocked when she opened the door and found the Duke standing on the other side, his hand raised as though he was about to knock. She stared up at him, lost on what to do for a moment, blinking out of her daze when he lowered his hand and asked.

“Did I startle you?”

She started to nod, then verbally replied. “Only a little bit. How can I help you, Your Grace?”

“I heard your cousins had arrived, and I thought... It is fine if you can't face them. No one would blame you for being afraid.”

“I am afraid.” She admitted softly, wringing her hands together. “But I have realized that if I am ever to properly move on, I must face them. At least I am not as powerless as I was when I was with them.”

He nodded, his blue eyes sparkling prettily from behind his glasses.

“You are not. You are a Duchess now, and you can crush them beneath your heel if you wish. Do not forget that.”

It felt... strange for him to be in front of her, offering words of encouragement so casually, as though she had not seen him in days. True to his word, they had not spent any time together and had not shared any more meals since the dinner on the night of their wedding. Katie still refused to acknowledge Victoria's presence, pointedly ignoring or avoiding her whenever the Duchess strived to get close to the young girl.

She had felt lonely and sad during that time, and being able to talk with him like this felt like a dream.

"I will not," she said amicably, wearily scolding her hopeful heart.

He nodded. "Good. Let us go. It is better to go together – play the happy couple in their eyes. It will give them fewer things to talk about."

He held his arm out for her to hold, and her body moved before her mind could think up an acceptable course of action, wanting to be as close to him as she could be. He led them to the drawing room, and she marveled at how he confidently walked.

She had noticed that the staff were vigilant around the house, keeping the pathways clear and void of obstructions. The furniture was also placed strategically so he would not accidentally collide with any of them. But from what Linda told her, the Duke had done most of the work himself and had spent countless days mapping out the layout of the castle, and he knew every room by the feel of the wallpaper, how hot or cold it was, and the sound of footfalls against the carpet.

He also knew all the members of his staff according to their heights and breathing patterns, and Victoria thought that was nothing short of incredible. She longed to tell him as much but felt it might not be words he would be pleased to hear.

When they entered the drawing room, Sandra sprang to her feet and rushed toward her cousin.

“Victoria! We were so worried about you!”

Simon tugged Victoria to stand behind him, smiling sweetly at the loud blur with an obnoxious tone that had approached them.

“I apologize,” he said gently. “I am very possessive of my wife, and only *I* get to call her by her name. While you’re in my home, please address the Duchess by her formal title.”

His voice had an edge, sending a shiver down Victoria’s spine, and she clutched tighter to his sleeve. Sandra nodded, glancing back at her brothers nervously before dropping into a curtsy.

“I...I apologize, Your Grace.”

George stepped closer to them, pulling his sister back as he smiled at the Duke, the edge of it mocking as he regarded them coolly.

“I am sorry about my sister, Your Grace. She was merely relieved to see our dear cousin again. We were all quite worried after she disappeared. We never imagined that we

would have to hear of her marriage to the Duke of Sherrington from the townspeople. But we could not be more thankful that she found a husband of such high standing – erm... good character and background. It makes me quite proud to be able to welcome you to our family.”

Then he held his hand out to the Duke, raising an eyebrow in thinly veiled mockery. Victoria could no longer stand the disrespect, quickly moving to put herself between the men. She stared up at her cousin defiantly, lips parting to speak.

“It was improper for you to drop in unannounced, George.”

His nostrils flared, and he lowered his hand, his smile dropping as well, even though he maintained the cheerful lightness of his voice.

“Dear cousin, Victoria –” Simon cleared his throat, and George amended. “Your Grace, we merely wanted to see with our own eyes if what we had heard was true. You seemed excited to meet gentlemen at Lord Thompson’s ball mere days before your disappearance. We had also come here, searching for you, but we were informed that they had seen no such woman matching your description. Isn’t that strange?”

Victoria clenched her hands into fists by her side and kept her expression gentle and open.

“The Duke –” she paused, inhaling deeply. “*Simon* and I had been corresponding for a while. We fell in love after a few months and decided to elope because we felt there was no need to involve anyone else. We just... we wanted to be together. I am sorry I did not inform you beforehand, but that

would have defeated the entire purpose of eloping, wouldn't it, George?"

George stiffened, glaring down at her. She stood her ground, blinking innocently. Her cousin relented shortly, exhaling with a laugh.

"I suppose it would."

"Precisely. Members of the staff were instructed to deny that they knew who I was because we planned on enjoying our time together for as long as we could. And you are currently interrupting our honeymoon so that in and of itself should serve as a marker for what we were attempting to avoid."

George's cheeks turned red, and Simon snorted, hiding the little laugh behind a slight cough, as he cleared his throat before saying,

"Still, it was thoughtful of you to visit to ensure her well-being. Will you be staying for dinner?"

Victoria saw the slight indecision in George's eyes and hoped he would decline, but not entirely surprised when he accepted. Simon's arm wrapped around her side and pulled her flush against his body, the mere act filling her with molten heat.

"Excellent." He said, his deep voice sending waves of shivers across her body. "Right this way, please."



Simon listened to cutlery scraping and clinking against plates, battling the urge to fling the Kent siblings out of his home. He was being complacent, trying to get a proper feel for their characters. It was not as though he doubted Victoria – he believed the severity of her plight completely but merely wished to understand if he had to take extra measures to ensure they would not be too troublesome for him to deal with.

And for the most part, they seemed harmless – if not a tad foolish.

They had only been around for a little over two hours, and the Duke could already tell that their blood was the only thing they shared – exhausted by their seemingly incessant bickering whenever there was a difference in opinion, which apparently occurred every other moment.

They were also condescending to a group of nobodies, but that was hardly a threat to his person or his family, so there was nothing for him to fuss about.

“This... steak is quite delicious,” Matthew panted, swallowing hard. “But didn’t the cook... perhaps go a little overboard with the spices?”

Victoria frowned, glancing down at her plate.

“I do not think so.”

Simon continued with his meal in silence, acting as though he had not met the cook before he spoke to the Kents, instructing that their dishes be spicy as possible. At the very least, he

hoped to offer them a discomfoting experience to dissuade them from ever coming back.

“Simon? Is your meal all right?”

He raised his head at the sound of her voice, the sweetness of it twisting his guts into tight knots and setting his heart ablaze. It had been his idea to play the perfect couple to keep her cousins from suspecting their marriage was not legitimate.

His mind felt hazy whenever he inhaled her scent, and all he wanted was for her to be forever beneath his hands, her soft and pliant body accepting of their exploration, to tease her apart.

“Simon?” she called him back from the dangerous throes of his mind. “Darling?”

It was slight, but he still heard it – a sharp inhale at the sound of the endearment. And suddenly, he could not help but wonder what other ways he could weaken her, biting his lip to keep anything else from slipping out.

“How is your food?” she queried softly.

“Perfect.” He smiled in her direction, making a whole show of putting a bite of meat in his mouth and chewing exaggeratedly.

She sighed with a little laugh, and the knots twisted even tighter.

“Thank goodness, then.” To her cousins, she reasoned, “It seems fine. Perhaps you are not feeling well?”

“Do not worry, Your Grace. It is not too bad,” George waved her concern away with a wince.

As if on cue, Sandra fell into a coughing fit, slapping her chest and trying to drink some wine to push down the burn of pepper but inevitably choking on the liquid. Simon merely wondered what was for dessert while they fussed over her, hoping this wretched dinner would end soon.

Eventually, the girl settled down, and Simon noted the hazy form of George turning his head to face the Duke and prepared himself for a potentially ridiculous and shameless subject matter to be brought up, “Your Grace, I hope you do not think me too forward, but while my siblings and I are quite happy about your union between our cousin and you, we must point out that she is our only living family left. We worry for her well-being and hope she will be adequately cared for.”

Simon nodded. “I intend to do much more beyond settling for mere adequacy. She will never lack anything – not as long as I breathe and even after that.”

His words sounded far too honest in response to a remark he felt was a setup for a bigger ploy, but he found that he had meant every word and was intent on keeping it.

“That is wonderful to hear, Your Grace. Still... as I said, we are her family. We hope your generosity will extend to us, as well. It would be an honor for your graciousness to also befall us.”

It took Simon a lot of willpower not to burst into laughter. *Of all the –*

The doors burst open suddenly, and a flurry of voices filled the room. Before Simon could question what was going on, a familiar hand gripped his shoulder as a voice he could recognize anywhere asked in rage.

“Where is she? Where is my daughter, Sherrington?”

Chapter Seven



Simon blinked in surprise, his hands reaching out to rest on Hanvey's shoulders, stunned when he was shoved back.

"Simon!"

Small hands braced themselves against his side as he found his balance, and he lightly patted them, wordlessly letting her know he was all right. She slowly pulled away, her gaze falling on the man who had just stormed in, preparing to demand what his business was when her husband spoke up first.

"Tenford, what is the meaning of this?"

Hanvey glared at Simon as he said,

"Martha is missing. I demand to know what you have done with her."

Simon gawked, confused.

“Done with — I haven’t done anything with your daughter. I did not even meet her because neither of you showed up the day you were supposed to. I assumed you merely changed your mind. How long has she been missing?”

Hanvey folded his arms, his gaze straying to the woman standing close to Simon as he responded. “A few days. She was meant to come with her chaperone — as I had some business to attend to, and you and I had already resolved most of the important facets of the discussion. But then I received no word from her at that time. And then I hear that you have married someone else? What is the meaning of this?”

Simon held his hands out before him, trying to appeal to his friend. “I can explain, Hanvey.”

Simon felt sympathetic toward his friend’s plight, knowing that if he was ever unable to find his own daughter, he would very well teeter off the brink of sanity. He wondered why Lady Martha would lie to her father like that, feeling guilty over her disappearance, because it seemed as though Hanvey had assumed that she might be with the Duke and probably did not begin his search for her until it was too late.

Hanvey shook his head. “I do not have the time to listen to your excuses. You clearly do not care about my plight — as you have found a means to obtain what you want. But my only daughter is missing, and I do not have time to waste chattering away with someone who could never understand what it means to truly care for those you love.”

His words were cold and harsh, and Simon felt taken aback by their brashness, barely forming a sentence to comfort his

friend before the man resumed talking.

“I am going to organize a search party on her behalf. The more people out there looking for her, the sooner she can be found. There will also be a large reward for whoever is able to find her first and return her home safely.”

“A reward?” George jumped to his feet immediately, followed by the rest of his siblings. “*I mean* — it is paramount that the poor lady is found as soon as possible. Who knows what sort of danger she could be in? We would like to help, Lord Tenford, in any way we can.”

Victoria nearly scoffed at the obvious pretense in George’s motives, but the Earl either did not notice or did not care.

“Excellent. I will assemble the search party as soon as possible.” Hanvey declared and left without another word to Simon.

The Kents were silent for a moment, and then George clapped suddenly.

“This was wonderful, Your Graces. We are truly glad that you are happy together. We will take our leave now and visit again as soon possible.”

The usual response would have informed him that he — they were always welcome. But Victoria — emboldened by Simon’s presence — smiled sweetly and shook her head.

“Oh, not *too soon*, I hope. That is not necessary. I am doing quite well, so you can rest assured I will be fine.”

George’s smile twitched on his face, and he nodded slowly.

“Respectfully, Your Grace, your parents left you in our custody when they passed — God rest their souls. It would be completely negligent for us to simply abandon you because you have taken a husband.”

He bowed quickly, his gaze mocking as he glanced at the Duke.

“Even though he is... Certainly remarkable in special ways, we are still family, cousin.”

We will still linger to haunt you, he was practically saying.

Victoria clenched her jaw, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her look sad or terrified. He merely walked together to stand by his siblings, all of them shifting into a position of respect before Sandra said.

“Take care now, cousin!”

Her eyes were jealous, and her lips were pulled into a sneer, and she turned away, walking after her brothers out of the room. The door clicked shut, and Simon and Victoria were left by themselves, the air between them growing frosty so quickly Victoria thought she imagined it.

But when she reached for the Duke, he pulled back quickly.

“Do not forget our terms, Your Grace. We are not companions or friends. We are merely married for my daughter’s sake.”

She could not help herself, too tired and disheartened to keep herself from complaining.

“Could we not try? To be companions and friends? There is no reason why you — we cannot also benefit from our marriage. Simon, please —”

“Your Grace,” the Duke cut in stiffly. “I have said it before, and I will say it again. I am in no need of such relationships. I would much rather be alone — I prefer it that way. You will do well to remember that in the future.”

Gone was the husband who had stood by her side, the one who had spoken up for her and ensured that she was fine during the exchange with her cousins. The person who remained was simply a cold, unfeeling Duke with no regard for her or her feelings.

Unlike the evening after their wedding when he had told her what he expected from her, Victoria could not simply nod and commit to doing as she was told, too exhausted to pretend it was not asking too much of her, picking apart her hope and strength and stripping her of everything until she felt as though she were back to being a mere nobody.

“I understand you are not obligated to consider my feelings when you say such things, but I really wish you would. More

than anything, I hope to be able to give you what you have requested but please... Understand that it is quite difficult for me to pretend that the idea of my husband being no more than a stranger to me — possibly for the entirety of our shared lives together — is an easy pill for me to swallow. I know you have done so much for me, and I am still grateful and unsure if I can repay you, but I wish you would just be a little less unkind about this. About us.”

Without waiting for him to speak, she curtsied and said, “Good night, Your Grace,” and then left the dining hall.

She made it to her chambers before the tears began to fall, and she dropped onto her bed as a sob wracked through her body.

Victoria had only wanted a simple and good life. She had hoped for such ever since she was a young girl, and it seemed as though things had just been going downhill ever since her parents passed.

She had to put up with serving her cousins, catering to their childish, snarky, and mocking requests, and now, her marriage was making her incredibly lonely and heartbroken. She could not help but wonder if this was all life had in store for her and if this was the very best she could get.

The very thought of living the rest of her days out like this frightened her as much as it devastated her as well. But she was unsure if it would be smart to hope for things to improve and unsure if her heart could take the pain of disappointment.



Simon listened to his wife walk away, blinking as her unclear form got farther away from him, and his heart clenched. He had almost called her back, nearly reaching out to hold her in place. But he could not, rooted in place by his fears and worries.

She would just have to get used to things being this way.

It was hard to separate himself from the part of him that had played the role of the loving husband, his heart unwilling to relinquish its hold on that ideal just yet. With a weary sigh, Simon left the dining room, frowning when he noticed Cyrus standing outside it, his shoulders slumped with anxiety.

Momentarily, the Duke wondered if the butler had witnessed his conversation with the Duchess. He quickly dismissed the thought as insignificant because Cyrus knew better than to eavesdrop, picking up on the nervous way he fiddled with his watch.

“Is something the matter?”

Cyrus exhaled deeply, straightening his posture as he prepared to relay what he had discovered.

“Your Grace, the maids noticed that some artifacts are missing from the gallery and around the house following the departure of the Kents. I do not wish to be presumptuous, but –”

“It was definitely them.” Simon gritted out angrily, greatly irritated. “Do not let any of those bloody cads into this house ever again. They have no morals and will not hesitate to do

whatever it takes to get whatever they want. Keep them away from Her Grace and Katherine.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Simon retired to his room, his mind replaying his interaction with the eldest Kent and his voice’s smugness and mockery. It was nothing that he had not experienced, nothing he could not handle. He found no delight in his condition and still felt weighed down by how his lack of sight had rendered him incapable of doing many things, but he was long past the point where an insignificant stranger could make him feel worthless because of it.

Victoria had not known that, though. She had put herself between her husband and her cousin when George held a hand out, sensing that his goal was to mock the Duke and check just how blind he was. She had tried to protect him, and he condemned her to a life of loneliness.

And no matter how much he claimed it was for the best, his heart would not stop twisting and clenching apologetically, the gentle undercurrent of longing teasing his resolve.

He could only hope it stayed strong until the end.



It had taken Victoria only a day to recover from the events that had transpired during and after her cousins’ visit to Cloveshire Castle.

She had cried and moped for hours, and somewhere along the line, she decided that she could not live this way. She might be condemned to a loveless, lonely marriage, but it did not have to be so for her. For better or worse, this was her home now. Simon... the Duke, was her husband, and Katie was her child. She had become a Duchess – a position many would give anything to fill.

She would make the most of this situation.

And so she set out to learn all she could about the affairs of the castle, speaking with the housekeeper and Cyrus about how things usually run and how effective their methods were, sourcing additional information from Linda whenever she needed to.

The housekeeper had been quite pleased to tell her how the castle's expenses were utilized.

“We get quite a bit of our groceries from about four different local farmers. That way, we can get the best they have to offer, with a steady supply of resources.” Mrs. Bedford – the housekeeper explained.

“Would it not be better to allow a single farmer to supply the castle? With so many sources, it could be tricky to pick up on any moves to take advantage of the staff. We could rotate it each year – offer the role of supplying groceries to the castle to a single farmer, watching and noting the quality and quantity of produce we receive. If it does not suit our needs, we know then not to patronize them any further. Choosing a single farmer also cuts down on the transportation fees we would offer four different farmers to bring their produce all the way here,” Victoria countered while studying the accounts of the castle.

Mrs. Bedford seemed impressed by her idea, immediately offering up some more tidbits on how other areas of the castle were managed. Eventually, she knew enough to think up some changes to help the household run smoothly.

She made no changes to the décor or furniture placements in the house, recalling that they had been arranged to ensure that the Duke was granted the ease of movement within whatever room he might find himself in, but she altered other aspects such as the garden – meeting with the gardener and discussing a few plants that could be added to make the area more attractive.

She also spoke with the cook about the menu for meals during the week, asking for his opinion on dishes that he would have liked to have prepared but were not on the official menu, making suggestions on how purchasing and preserving groceries could be carried out more effectively.

“The Duke really likes apples, so I make sure to bake apple pies as often as possible. The little Lady Katie does not like carrots, so I often exercise care to exclude that from her dishes.” The cook had mentioned as Victoria took down notes on the state of the kitchen.

“Perhaps we should include a wider variety of treats for him. An apple crumble every week would be wonderful, don’t you think? Or even some fresh apple juice in the mornings, to accompany his breakfast.” Victoria suggested, eyeing some jars containing spices in them. “Lady Katie might be exempted from eating carrots from now, but it is quite important that other vegetables are included in her meals. They are quite crucial to the healthy growth of a young child.”

Her mother had brought her up while running their home, Victoria's hand in hers as she instructed the staff on what to do; Victoria clutching her skirts while her mother sampled meals before gatherings she was set to host; Victoria handing her flower after flower whenever she organized bouquets to brighten up their home.

She had been made for this, raised to be a homemaker, and assuming the role within the castle felt almost natural, fitting as naturally as a glove. Her affinity for numbers and planning shone through easily, and her focused mind afforded rest from the thoughts of the Duke.

“That is an excellent idea, Your Grace,” the cook nodded, making Victoria smile bashfully.

“I was a picky eater as a child too. My mother worked hard to create dishes to get me used to the ingredients I didn't like. And my father loved berries. Every summer, we would take a trip to his friend's orchard and pick the juiciest, ripest berries and my mother would bake them into pies and desserts and other meals and my father would eat each one with the most content expression on his face.” Her smile dimmed a little as a slight ache flashed through her chest. “We ate each meal together, like a family. There was always laughter at the table. I... I have not seen the Duke eat with Lady Katie once. Do they not do that?”

“Ah,” the cook sighed. “Not particularly, Your Grace. The Duke prefers to take most of his meals in his chambers and Lady Katie is a lot like him in that way and many others. Whenever they eat together, the room is either full of cold silence or heated arguments.”

“It’s quite sad. How will they ever get along if they cannot peacefully share a single meal?”

She had scarcely finished asking the question when Lady Katie walked in, speaking around a yawn.

“I’m a little hungry. Might I have a cookie?”

She blinked blearily, her easy-going expression melting into cold indifference when she noticed Victoria. The Duchess attempted to initiate a conversation as the cook fetched the lady a cookie.

“Katie, hello. Are you on your way to a lesson? Would you like me to accompany you?”

Lady Katie shook her head, accepting her cookie and turning away silently. Victoria blinked, trying to reach the child again.

“I really do not mind –”

“I do. I’m not a child, I do not need an escort.” Katie snapped coldly, leaving the kitchen, unaware of the disappointment brewing within Victoria.

Victoria was also doing what she could to learn about Katie, deciding to hear what the members of the household thought about the young lady before attempting to interact with her. Linda was generously forthcoming with information, talking

about how Katie put on a stubborn front but, in actuality, was nothing but a sweet, hurt child.

She often liked to run errands with the maids, but her father had put a stop to it when she returned home in tears on more than one occasion. When Victoria had enquired about it, Linda had explained that the townspeople had rather loose tongues that had lashed unkindly whenever Katie walked past them, making unsolicited comments about her dead mother and handicapped father, who they believed was responsible for her death.

Although it hurt her to hear those things, she had not wanted to give up her trips off the property and had been devastated when her father restricted her movements, spitefully assuming that he intended to control her. And as Victoria had guessed, the Duke had never given the impression that he knew about the things she had heard about her family, had not felt the need to explain the reasons behind his decisions, and so the child just resented him without understanding that he had done it for her own good.

They barely had meals together, and their conversations often ended in arguments; the Duke was fed up with his daughter's rebellious nature and pranks, scolding her at every opportunity he got in an attempt to get her to obey him and behave, not realizing that Lady Katie had inherited his stubborn streak. The only one Katie listened to easily was Cyrus, who oversaw most of her care and knew her more than anyone else, it would seem.

Cyrus had told Victoria that the girl cared for her father but felt as though he did not return her affection and even hated her. She felt unseen by him, as though he did not wish to associate with her at all due to his condition – even though he seemingly did not have that problem with anyone else.

At the end of their conversations, Victoria realized that to get Katie to behave just like the Duke had wanted, she would have to repair the relationship between the father and daughter completely, which would take a herculean effort and practically a miracle, with how messy it all seemed to be currently.

But they were now her family, too. And she was determined to ensure they could all dwell together peacefully and happily.

Chapter Eight



“**S**he still has not been found?”

Cyrus sifted through the documents on the Duke’s desk, ensuring that the ones that required his signatures had obtained them as he replied.

“No, Your Grace. There is quite a fuss over her disappearance – thanks to the reward Lord Tenford had offered upon her safe and quick return. I hear it is quite a sum.”

“His child – his only daughter is involved. It is only expected that he would give anything to have her safe return. I would, too, if anything were to happen to Katherine.”

The butler smiled at his master and nodded.

“I know, Your Grace. But rest assured, no such thing will ever happen to Lady Katie.”

Simon sat back and clasped his hands together.

“How is she? How are her lessons coming along? Is she... is she getting along with the new Duchess?”

“She is quite well, Your Grace. Her teachers are all impressed with her skills, especially her love for mathematics and literature. She is still not showing much interest in pianoforte, but she is excelling at embroidery.” Cyrus paused, raising his eyes to the ceiling for a moment before he continued. “I am afraid she has still not warmed up to the Duchess. She has been avoiding her and refusing to speak of her at all. But the Duchess has expressed nothing but patient understanding, saying that it is quite all right that the child requires some time to adjust to her presence and is prepared to give her as much space as she possibly needs to do so.”

Simon was pleased to hear that, glad that, at the very least, Victoria seemed to be interested in Katie’s wellbeing. She was still displaying the patient understanding he clearly lacked, and he felt even more sure that she was truly possibly the best person for the job.

“And... she? The Duchess. How is she doing?”

“Remarkably well, Your Grace. Her Grace has proven herself to be an invaluable addition to the household. She is graceful and kind in all her dealings with staff members and has made many positive changes in the household affairs and – needless to say, she is quite impressive. Ever ready to learn and be taught the preferences of His Grace and Lady Katie and is earnestly cultivating more ways in which we can all be more comfortable and happier.”

The Duke was amazed to hear his butler praise his wife. It was not as though he had expected her to fail completely, but he had thought she might refuse to take on any extra duties

alongside watching after Katie. But she seemed to have invested herself into running his home, even getting along with the staff. He, too, was impressed.

“Thank you, Cyrus. That will be all.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

After Cyrus had taken his leave, Simon sat in his study for a moment and then decided to go on a walk around his house for a little bit. He made his way out of the study, forgoing his glasses as he turned down the corridor, letting his mind wander for a little bit. The air within the castle felt lighter, the servants going about their day energetically, stopping to greet him with cheery voices, and Simon felt their carefree mannerisms could be attributed to the Duchess in some way.

He was glad she had at least found a way to occupy herself without him. She had sounded so hurt the last time they had spoken, and he had felt as though he owed her an apology but could not bring himself to offer one, worried he might be unable to resist the pull to her. And so he kept to himself and his affairs, but she was still on his mind no matter what he did.

He turned right toward the gardens, his feet stopping as his nose caught a whiff of sweetness in the air. And then, her voice reached him, soft and calm like a gentle rain on a hot day.

“... we should get some more apples next time. I would like to make some syrups and pies, if possible.”

He stayed where he was, his hands in his pockets as he waited for her to notice, feeling like a schoolboy waiting to be seen by his first love. Victoria peered down at her list at the next item, momentarily glancing up to keep herself from stumbling along the way, her heart skipping a beat as she spotted the Duke just... standing in the way, facing her direction.

“Your Grace,” she stammered, quickly dropping into a curtsy.

“Your Grace,” he echoed with a little bow. “You seem busy. I hear you have been working quite hard lately.”

She blushed, unsure of how to respond for a moment, before tentatively saying, “I am doing my best, Your Grace. You were kind enough to trust me with your home – I am merely ensuring it is conducted to your liking.”

“Well, you are doing a splendid job so far. The changes around here have been... good. I am quite impressed.”

Victoria’s cheeks felt as though they were on the verge of bursting into flame, and she curtsied once more.

“Your Grace, I – thank you. It makes me happy to know that you feel this way about my work.” She replied, her weak heart doing dances of joy within her chest.

He nodded, blurting out. “Good. I am glad.”

Then, he proceeded to walk away in the direction of the garden. Victoria watched him leave, belatedly wondering if

she had just imagined the entire interaction. But when she turned to Linda and saw the younger girl's sparkling eyes, she received conviction that the Duke had, in fact, just complimented her work.

It happened again on multiple occasions after that, the Duke stopping by on his way to a different part of the house to tell her she was doing well or that he was happy with a certain thing she had implemented. She had hoped that this meant he was warming up to her, but the Duke had turned her down when she proposed that he have a meal with her. She had attempted to help him find his watch when he could not remember where he had dropped it and he refused her assistance.

He appeared willing to recognize her efforts but was still committed to upholding the wall that separated them. It frustrated her to no end because she was tempted to corner him, sit with him, hold his hands, and spend time with him, but he was insistent on having nothing to do with her.

Victoria was not having better luck with Katie. The little girl was just as determined to avoid the Duchess as her father was, ignoring all her invitations to eat or spend time together. It had been a little over a month since she had married the Duke, and in all that time, all Victoria's efforts to interact with the child had been thwarted, one way or another.

Victoria understood that Katie required time to get used to having another parental figure around. But with the young lady, Victoria could not simply allow the misunderstanding between them to continue to fester, intercepting her one morning on her way to the room where she received her lessons.

Katie had tried to turn around when she saw Victoria, but the Duchess had stepped in her path, holding her hands out.

“I just need a moment of your time. You do not have to speak to me if you do not wish to, but it would be really nice if you listen to what I have to say.”

The girl seemed reluctant but stayed still, and Victoria took that as a sign that she was willing to listen and smiled.

“I am really sorry you were not given time to prepare yourself before your father and I married. He did not intend to exclude you from the matter completely – we simply did not have the time to involve you. I cannot tell you all about it just yet, but I need you to know that I am not here to replace your mother. I understand loss; I know what is left behind when it claims the people you love. Maybe you might have been told it does not matter because you were too young when she passed, but that does not change the fact that you missed the opportunity to get to know her and be loved and cherished by her. I lost my parents a little while ago, and I miss them all the time.”

“And maybe I would be expected to forget about them because I have a husband and a child now as well, but that is not how life works. You do not have to replace the people you no longer have by your side. But it would be a great disservice to yourself if you let that stop you from welcoming the possibility of being loved and cherished by another. I do not want to merely fill your mother’s shoes, to rewrite your impressions of her within your mind and heart. I wish to care for you and bring you up as a mother would. That is all.”

Katie stared up at her, eyes glistening as her lips dropped into a frown. Victoria waited calmly for some sort of reaction from the girl, not expecting her to speak up.

“I never asked for a mother. I do not need one. You are simply wasting your time.”

Victoria gently shook her head. “I do not think so. It is my time, and if this is how I choose to spend it, then that is just fine with me. All I ask is that you keep an open mind before you completely cast me out.”

Katie stepped back, dropping her gaze to the floor.

“I will be late for my embroidery lesson.”

“Would you mind if I join you?”

She looked up sharply.

“Why? Do you not have other affairs to attend to?”

Victoria shrugged with a small smile. “They can wait. I would really like to sit in on your class. Perhaps we can make something together.”

Katie rolled her eyes and walked away, grumbling loudly.

“I do not wish to make anything with you.”

But Victoria had noticed that the girl had not turned down her request outright, smiling to herself as she followed her.

Katie's teacher was honored by the Duchess's presence, telling her of the child's progress with the craft and her weaknesses and strengths. Victoria politely informed the woman that she had not come to judge Katie's efforts, but rather, she wished to watch the girl work and perhaps craft by her side.

Katie's cheeks had turned pleasantly pink, and she had got the tools, situating herself on a settee and beginning to work silently. The teacher offered Victoria a kit, and she sat down opposite the child, admiring the look of concentration on her face. For all of Katie's troublesome nature, she seemed so calm while her fingers worked against the fabric, her brows drawn as she focused on her piece, her teeth pulling at her lower lip.

Her assumptions were correct – Katie was a complicated child with different layers to her personality, but she wasn't all bad.

At the end of the lesson, Katie proudly showed off her work, flashing the handkerchief with sunflowers along the edges excitedly. She was beautifully talented, and her needlework was much neater than when Victoria was her age. When the Duchess had said as much, Katie turned her nose up in the air and asked.

“Has it gotten any better since then?”

Victoria looked down at the piece she had begun to do while she sat with Katie for a moment and held it out to her.

“You tell me.”

Katie glanced curiously at it, her eyes widening and her fingers snatching it from Victoria’s grip.

“H-How... these colors,” she stammered, her eyes shining at the bird Victoria had started.

She had wanted to use beautiful spring colors, making the creature’s outline a lovely pastel blue and creating feather patterns with a mix of lilac, pink, and yellow. She was also quite happy with how it turned out, as she had hoped it would look good enough as a gift.

“Do you like it?”

Katie seemed to come to her senses, handing it back to the Duchess almost immediately after the question was asked.

“It’s so-so.”

Victoria beamed. “I’ll give it to you when it’s completed.”

“I do not want it. Do not act charitable to get on my good side.”

“Lady Katie!” the teacher gasped in horror at the girl’s rudeness.

But Victoria refused to be upset, unwilling to give up after coming this far. “Then I will hold onto it for you in case you want it some other time.”

Katie gaped at her, clearly not used to anyone being so complacent with her bad attitude. Victoria said her goodbyes to the teacher and then faced the child.

“I had a good time with you. I hope we can have more moments like this in the future.”

It was not too great a win, but it was enough to motivate her to keep trying, and that was all she wished for.

Chapter Nine



“Come and try it out, Katie. It is pretty fun, even if you do not get the shapes right.” She said with a gentle smile.

Katie had wearily approached her, nodding attentively as Victoria explained how to roll out the dough to a preferred level of thickness before it could be cut, promising to be careful with the small knife she had been allowed to use.

Victoria often paused to observe how the girl was working, smitten by the endearing look of concentration as she focused on each task the Duchess had instructed her on. It felt... special to share this moment with her, as Victoria had with her own mother. Her mother had loved to cook and bake, and committed to spending hours in the kitchen so she could feed her family a hearty meal every day.

Victoria had gone from watching her mix ingredients to helping her prepare the food, happy to indulge in an activity that her mother enjoyed. Between her duties as Duchess, she tried to make a few treats – cookies and pies – whenever she felt too lonely. The staff were not too comfortable at first, but it seemed they had developed a soft spot for the new Duchess, eventually letting her do as she pleased.

Handling dough and slicing vegetables kept her mind off her elusive husband and his troubled daughter for a little while. Besides, there was often something delicious at the end of each session.

In the end, Katie's flowers looked like misshapen clouds after the pies had been baked, and Victoria assured her that regardless of what the surface looked like, they would still taste delicious and cut up a generous slice for her.

Katie had stared at the plate Victoria set down before her for a bit, then looked up with an uncertain gaze.

“Papa doesn't let me have dessert before meals.”

Victoria pressed a finger lightly to her lips and winked. “It will be our little secret.”

The child's lower lip wobbled, and she grabbed the plate and exited the kitchen without another word.

For three days after that, Katie scarcely looked in her direction, but Victoria had continued to push through, determined to get through to her somehow.

The next time they spoke, Katie had been reading outside in the garden, laying on a blanket with her feet in the air as Victoria gathered herbs and flowers. Her movements had apparently bothered the child because she eventually snapped.

“Of all the times to pick flowers for yet another old and boring vase – must it be when I wish to read in peace?” she demanded, looking up at Victoria, her fingers wedged between the pages to keep her from losing her place.

“These aren’t for a flower arrangement. I’m trying to brew a special blend of oils and scents. My mother taught me how to do so when I was your age. See?” Victoria held up the handful of herbs she had picked as well. “I’m using herbs too.”

Katie stared at her laden arm and outstretched handful and quietly said. “Oh.”

“Would you like to watch me do it? It is pretty interesting once you have gotten the know-how down and gathered everything you need.”

The girl looked down at her book, her lips pulling into a thoughtful pout, and Victoria patiently waited for her to come to a decision. Soon enough, Katie rose off the blanket and patted her skirt down.

“I suppose so, since you have graciously offered.”

Victoria couldn’t resist the urge to grin, managing to cast it aside long enough to tell Katie just what she wanted to do and how they would go about achieving it, her eyes glittering with interest as she watched the Duchess grind each type of plant and herb separately so she could obtain their oils without letting one taint the other.

The whole process had taken about a day, and she had asked about it the following evening, shifting her weight from one foot to the other in thinly veiled anticipation as Victoria asked Linda to fetch her the oils they had extracted. When the lady's maid returned with a small box of little vials, Victoria picked one and uncapped it, coating the tip of her finger with the oil as she asked Katie to hold her hand out, palm facing up.

Katie had been pleasantly obedient, her cheeks flushing pink when Victoria gently rubbed the oil on her wrist, right over her pulse point.

“Well?” she inquired gently as Katie brought her wrist up to her nose to sniff.

“It's... nice. It really smells like roses. Pretty.” She mumbled, staring at the oil-stained spot on her skin transfixed.

“You can have this one, then. I heard you like roses. You can mix it in with your hair oils, pour some into your bath water – whatever you'd like.” Victoria said, holding out the vial after putting the cap back on it.

The girl had hesitated momentarily, then collected the vial slowly, her eyes shining brightly.

“I hope it makes you happy whenever you use it,” Victoria said softly, wanting to reach out and pat Katie's hair but stopping herself, knowing they hadn't quite gotten to that stage yet.

Katie seemed satisfied as she walked away, which was enough for Victoria then.

But lately, it seemed she had used up whatever stroke of luck had graced her back then, as nearly all her other attempts had failed to catch Katie's interest or attention.

She had gifted the little lady a box of marbles, and the girl had turned her nose up at them, stating with a sneer, "Marbles are for little children. I'm far too old to be playing with such." And then, she had attempted to invite the girl to accompany her on a trip to the modiste's, and her response to her request basically said that there were more pressing matters that took precedence over the desire for a new dress.

Victoria had even offered to give her some piano lessons, as the child's governess had informed her that she had been struggling with her pianoforte classes, but the Duchess had been awarded an annoyed snap to "Mind your business, you cow," and a door slammed in her face for all her troubles.

Linda and Cyrus had caught Katie's outburst and gracefully did not bring up the flush of embarrassment across Victoria's cheeks. The butler apologized on the girl's behalf and offered to speak to her later.

"Don't worry, I must have overstepped somehow. I should learn that she might not want me hovering over her and offering to assist her with every little thing." Victoria shook her head, stepping away from the door.

"But, Your Grace, she was very disrespectful. I think we should at least inform the Duke –"

“That will not be necessary.” Victoria cut in quickly. “I’m sure he has other affairs to attend to than listen to complaints stemming from my inadequacies. It is fine. I’ll... I shall allow her some space, and then we’ll try again.”

Linda bowed. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“You are incredibly patient with her, Your Grace,” Cyrus remarked kindly, drawing a look of surprise from Victoria. “How do you manage to remain so, even when she seems to be purposefully attempting to get a rise out of you?”

Victoria paused, glancing between them before she answered.

“I do not think I’m doing anything truly noteworthy because it cannot compare to how amazing my mother was. She was the very definition of patient and kind. When I was younger, my cousins used to visit during vacations and they often made a mess of our home. She never once raised her voice or spoke unkindly to them. Even when she was upset, she only sounded stern, often fussing over their well-being rather than complaining about the vase they broke or the dirt they brought in from the garden.

“I learned a lot from her on how to properly run a household. Everything I do here is according to all she has taught me. I know from how she’s acted that no child is born with malice or wishes to be cruel of their own volition. Katie is still a child and I will continue to treat her as such and hope that I can one day get through to her.”

Although she had said that with a brave face, the incident remained on the Duchess's mind for the rest of the day, haunted by the thought of failing at the singular task she was asked to do when she married into the family.

She did not want to help Katie simply because her father had asked Victoria to do so. She wished to aid the child however she could; she yearned to give her back the years of joy she might have missed out on for whatever reason. She wanted to raise Katie how she deserved to be raised – with love, patience, and understanding.

Unfortunately, it appeared to be a thankless job – as the Duke had not acknowledged her efforts to bond with his daughter at all. Either he was unaware or refused to care, but she was still hurt by his lack of support. She had known he was leaving the task entirely up to her, but she had not realized that he was not even going to make any moves to ask that Katie make some attempt to get along with the Duchess.

It felt like she was fighting a losing battle for someone who refused to contribute to the cause. She had considered confronting him about it, but she doubted a difference would be made – seeing as they had not gotten around to reaching some form of middle ground over their own matters, not that he would believe they had anything to resolve.

She... she missed him. It felt strange to miss someone she barely knew, but she couldn't help thinking about him, replaying the moments when her cousins had visited, and she felt like she had someone on her side for the first time in years. He had been the very picture of a perfect husband that she had imagined herself having: thoughtful, kind, and devoted to her.

Then the night ended, and the illusion shattered, reminding her that everything about them was merely a ruse. Her days without him by her side felt hollow, and her nights were cold, missing the heat of the kiss they had shared the night they met.

Memories of that swirled around her head almost consistently, and it frustrated her that she couldn't help but want more from her marriage to the Duke – even after he had expressly told her not to. It was hardly her fault she had gotten a taste of what they could have and was restricted from desiring more. It was simply unfair.

Maybe if she tried talking to him... she could clear whatever doubts lingering in his mind, keeping him from fulfilling his role as her husband. Besides his nonchalant and dismissive attitude towards her, nothing stopped her from approaching him and trying to work things out between them somehow.

“Perhaps...” she muttered to herself as she returned to her room, a plan slowly forming within the confines of her mind.



Simon fiddled with the case that held his glasses, his fingers tracing the cracks over the worn leather, absent-mindedly wondering if it was about time he replaced it. He'd had it for nearly four years now, and changing it would ensure that his glasses remained safe and usable. However, one thing stopped him from instructing for its replacement.

New things tended to fill him with a certain discomfort he could never seem to shake off – like an itch he could not reach. New routines and patterns often threw him off his own well-timed and guided way of life, almost setting him back years to

when he opened his eyes and found the world before them had turned into an unfamiliar haze of shapes and shades.

He had trained himself to get used to so many things: the voices of his family and staff, the castle's layout, and the feel of his clothes on his skin. He had gone above and beyond to ensure that he would not be entirely helpless if a time came when he was forced to take some sort of active stance.

Still, a voice in his head told him it was not enough – *it would never be enough*. He was still greatly impaired, nothing but a large target to whoever would want to do him harm. And that unsettled him greatly – not because he feared for his own safety, but because he wondered what would become of his daughter if he was ever rendered completely useless.

She's not the only one who needs you now, a voice whispered in his mind.

“Your Grace?”

“Hmm?” Simon raised his head, dropping the object and the thoughts he had been fighting against along with it.

“Her Grace is still keeping up her good work. The castle has never looked better. Even the staff seem quite satisfied with everything she has been doing. I have received no complaints concerning how she conducts her affairs or herself. She is doing really well.”

Oh. *Oh, that's* –

“That’s nice,” Simon cleared his throat and sat straighter. “And my daughter? How is she getting on with Katherine?”

Cyrus inhaled sharply, trying to devise the best way to relay his thoughts to the Duke.

“They have a... tumultuous relationship. The Duchess has been trying all that she can to get on Lady Katie’s good side. She’s given her gifts, comes up with activities they can do together, and invited her on trips outside the castle.”

Simon did not like the idea of his daughter leaving the castle – especially not with someone who had yet to fully step into her role as Katherine’s mother and protector, but he chose to imagine Victoria had a reason for issuing that invitation.

“So it is going well? Between them?”

“Not exactly, Your Grace. The Duchess is trying her very best, but Lady Katie intends to keep her at arm’s length – at least for now. There have been moments of success, times when she has accepted the Duchess’s offers and company, but there have been twice as many rejections. Lady Katie can be quite... rude about her rejections. She’s very strong-willed and does not respond kindly to attempts to get in her way or disruptions in her routine in a way, the Duchess is very new in her life and is, therefore, something of a disruption.

“It’s slow work, but I do believe they will both get to where they need to be soon. The Duchess is patient and gentle – in all the ways Lady Katie needs. I believe they just need some more time; the little lady to adjust to the change her household and

life are undergoing and the Duchess to get used to her role as a mother and all it entails.”

It was good to hear that some progress was being made – although the same could not be said for the relationship between him and his child. They could not be in a room together without filling it with chilling silence or heated arguments.

At this point, Victoria felt like his only hope – in as much as she seemed to be his undoing.

Hardly a day went by without his mind filling with thoughts of her. The hallways of his home carried around her scent, always beckoning him closer and closer to the brink of insanity. There was hardly a corner he could turn without hearing her voice, pretty and calming like the patter of raindrops against glass windows. It followed him around, almost hauntingly, echoing in the darkness of his room, urging him to find her, to hold her even closer than he had the night they had met until they were sharing body heat.

He dreamt about her too, her mouth against his, his fingers and tongue exploring the expanse of her skin, her soft voice calling for him over and over again.

These were dangerous waters to tread upon, and he already had enough problems on his plate without adding this... *attraction* to Victoria to the pile. He did not have anything else to give up, nothing more he was willing to lose after his previous marriage had taken nearly all he had.

He would not give in and would not permit any chances of his destruction to exist. Not if he could help it.

Chapter Ten



It took Victoria about two days after she had decided to approach her husband to craft a plan on how to do so.

Well, it wasn't so much *a plan* as it was *an idea and words of encouragement* to herself to march on with her head held high and to keep it up, even if she was sent away. Regardless, she was determined not to go down without a fight.

I can do this...

It had not been easy to gather the courage to do this. She paced around her room, her nightdress fluttering around gently as she carefully cited every reason why she was going to do this. The Duke would have to be a participating father if he wished for his daughter's life to improve, just as Katie needed to remember that she was someone's daughter and deserved to be coddled, scolded, spoiled, and lectured in ways that helped her grow into a wonderful young woman.

And Victoria needed the Duke's support to properly hold any sort of relevance to his child. He was still her only rightful parent; therefore, a part of her had to value him and his opinions. Victoria imagined that if she and the Duke appeared more like a married couple and if he were to acknowledge her in front of his child, she might come to trust Victoria some more.

With all that in mind, she drew a deep breath and marched out of her room, willing herself not to turn around with each step that brought her closer to her husband's room. Luckily, no staff was in sight, and she felt nervous like a criminal as she snuck around. When she spotted his door, she moved quickly, elated when she turned the doorknob and found it unlocked before hurrying inside.

"I did not ring for anyone," Simon frowned, sitting up in irritation. "Who are you, and why did you enter my private chambers without knocking?"

"Do not fret, Your Grace. It's only me." Victoria said, moving closer to the bed in which he was seated. "Forgive me once again for trespassing, but you've left me no choice but to corner you as one would a debtor. I must speak with you; it is important."

Simon groaned, feeling uneasy about her presence, torn between wanting her closer and sending her away.

"What is it? And could it not have waited till morning? Is Katherine all right?"

His concern for his daughter only further motivated her to carry out her intentions, as his query proved that he indeed loved his child but was merely struggling to get along with her.

"She's just fine; she's getting ready to sleep. But I do want to speak about her. About us and your desire to avoid us both as

though we are plagues. It is hardly a fair way to treat anyone, much less your family members.”

A wave of guilt washed over Simon at the light petulance in her tone, and he tried to explain, “Katherine does not want to see me. I’ve long since come to terms with the fact that she does not like me very much, and I suggest that you come to terms with that – I have. We fight every time we are in the same room; she goes out of her way to discomfort and bother me with her pranks and –”

He exhaled calmly, slowing down his train of thought. “I would only get in the way of her happiness if I attempted to join her in doing the things she likes. I thought it would be better to just leave her be. At least she has you looking out for her.”

“That’s – Your Grace, allow me to be a little blunt here. With all due respect, you are being preposterous. I am flattered that you trust me so much with her, and I am – and *will* continue to do everything in my power to care for and raise your daughter. But it won’t mean much without you being present and contributing to her growth. She is *a child*, Your Grace. She is at that age where it feels as though the world is against her, and she’s doing all that she can to stand on her own. She desperately needs you and consistently seeks your attention, so she pranks and *bothers* you.

“She simply desires to spend time with her father. Is that so wrong? As adults, we understand the gravity and consequences of desperation and the things it leads us to do. She’s much too young to understand anything beyond what she wants and doing whatever she can to get it. I hardly think it is fair for you to make harsh judgments of her character without trying to spend time with her.”

“You do not know what you are talking about,” Simon shook his head, the irritation from earlier fading away to make room for a rush of frustration. “I do not expect you to understand because you do not have children of your own.”

Victoria thought that was a fair point to make and shifted closer, sitting at the foot of his bed.

“All right. Make me understand. I want to – I *need* to if I am to help you and Katie properly.” She implored softly. “I really do want to help. It has been a dream of mine for quite a while – to have a baby. I wanted a family, to birth and raise children of my own, so do not think I am underestimating the importance of your child to you.”

Simon stiffened, his head in her direction as he pointed out lowly, “That was not a part of our deal. I already told you we will not be having any of such relations in our marriage.”

“You stated your terms without any reason to them, and I have tried my hardest not to fight you on it, but I fear I cannot do that anymore. Please, Your Grace, I urge you to reconsider.”

He balked at her, horrified at the implications of her words.

“You do not know what you ask of me.”

“Perhaps it is you who does not know what I am asking for. I don’t need the world of you. I do not need the stars or whatever other treasures many might deem valuable. More than anything else, I need you. I need to not feel isolated and

lonely in my marriage. I need a partner, a friend, and a husband. I don't want to pressure you with demands, but I ask that you at least try."

The guilt Simon had ignored for days resurfaced and filled him with discomfort – especially as it was her first marriage and she would not be granted any form of warmth and companionship from it. But he had underestimated how lonely she would be, his heart clenching at the sadness in her voice.

He wished things were different for them. He wished he could be the husband she undoubtedly deserved. He wished he could give himself to their marriage wholly. But –

"I can't, Victoria." Her name felt easy on his tongue, rolling off smoothly and hiding the unease and regret in his heart. "I cannot love you how you want – how you deserve. I cannot afford to give my heart – to let it be vulnerable again, not after what happened last time. I ... I had thought that we could be happy, that we could be something great together – my late wife and I. But it unraveled so fast, and I lost so much so quickly. I can't risk my heart again by loving you."

Victoria was momentarily silent, then she shifted closer to him, softly urging.

"Don't, then."

Simon blinked, confused. "What?"

"Don't love me. I won't make you do that. All I ask right now is that you perform your duty at night. Don't you think it's a

shame that we have been married for weeks and are yet to consummate our marriage?”

Simon swallowed with difficulty at the prospect of being with her, dazed by her scent as she drew closer, feeling the bed dip as she situated herself on his sheets by his side. Her hands felt warm as she took his, slowly guiding them to her until one rested against her hip and the other cupped her cheek.

“Please, Simon.”

He shook his head slightly, maintaining the little distance between them without taking his hands off of her – unable to give up her addictive warmth, not just yet.

“You do not want me. We really should not do this,” he said quietly.

“Why not?” she nearly whined, pressing even closer to him. “We are married, Simon. We’re not breaking any laws by being together. It is only fair for a husband and a wife to know each other in every sense.”

“But –”

“And I wish to know you. All of you, dear husband. Won’t you let me?”

And that seemed to be the final push he needed as he dipped his head and captured her lips in a kiss. His mouth moved against hers hotly, his embrace sure and strong as he pulled her

even closer as the kiss deepened. She sighed against his lips, practically melting against him when he nibbled her lower lip. He held nothing back, setting her soul ablaze as his tongue met hers, the kiss becoming a wet and desperate dance to explore and learn.

She tasted as sweet as she had during their first kiss, and he was determined to never forget that, licking into her mouth eagerly, feeling proud as he could feel her coming apart beneath his hands. Their clothes could barely hide the heat growing between them, spurred as they pressed together, desperate and desiring.

His hand on her hip began to move, running down her thigh as he left light kisses trailing down to her neck, finding a spot to tease with his teeth, pulling breathy little moans from her. She clutched at his nightshirt as he continued to caress her curves, her breath stuttering in her throat when he grabbed at her behind, his touch setting her skin ablaze.

“S-Simon –”

“I can’t stop thinking about you.” He muttered against her skin, pushing her dressing gown aside and tugging the thin strap of her nightdress off her shoulder, pressing feather-light kisses to the bare skin. “My waking hours are filled with your presence. I can smell you – hear you everywhere. Even in my dreams, you haunt me.”

The roaming hand grabbed the light fabric of her nightdress and pulled it up, exposing more of her to his touch. Her body responded eagerly to the warmth of his skin against her, arching into him and aching for more.

“You are,” he whispered softly, running his tongue over a bite mark he had made on her neck. “Absolutely divine.”

She whined, writhing as desire curled in her belly, so heavy and thick it left her trembling. He pushed the top of her nightdress lower, freeing her breasts, immediately taking a nipple into the warmth of his mouth. Scarcely had she gotten used to the sensation when she felt his fingers stroke her most private part.

“Simon -!” she gasped, dizzy and stunned.

The Duke continued his ministrations with small, short motions, teasing and working her folds as she gasped beneath him. His mouth came up to her neck again, biting and sucking at her sensitive skin as his fingers explored her wetness, dipping a finger deeper and smirking when she moaned his name. Victoria could not hold onto a single thought in her mind, lost to the throes of pleasure, grinding against his hand unabashedly, pressing the palm of her hand against her mouth to stifle a scream as a second finger slipped into her.

He was spreading her open gradually, picking her apart slowly and reducing her to nothing, and she was obsessed with every sensation, intoxicated by the shared heat between their bodies, wishing she could feel more of his bare skin against her. Simon’s other hand groped at her breast, kneading and massaging the soft, full mounds as the fingers between her legs began to work at a harder, more intentional pace.

Each stroke sent her panting as shivers of ecstasy ravaged her body, drawing small sounds past her lips, noises she could no longer hide because her hands were pulling at him, clutching to as much of him as she could hold, desperate for some sort of anchor to keep her senses from taking leave of her

completely. Just as her hands had found solace holding onto his broad shoulder tightly, he found her throbbing, slippery nub and began to work at it.

Victoria was instantly reduced into a babbling mess of pleas and moans, the heat in her stomach curling tighter and tighter. He took a breast into his mouth again, his tongue swirling around the tip, humming when one of her hands made its way into his messy hair. The edge was closer now; she could feel it, the anticipation similar to watching an aria performing at the opera raise a note to the highest peak.

He curled his fingers in her, and the tension snapped, sending her hurling over the cliff. She arched into him, the force causing her to rise off the bed slightly as she clutched him tightly with a moan. He lifted his head to kiss her, swallowing the rest of her sounds and holding her tightly as the waves of pleasure crashed into her.

“What a sweet little thing you are, Petal” He whispered against her lips, pressing a kiss against her cheek and chin, smiling when she nuzzled closer.

“That... that was incredible. I cannot believe we did not do this sooner.”

He chuckled, sighing as her hand made its way beneath his dress shirt, his stomach tensing as she rested her palm against his defined torso.

“We’ve only just begun, Petal. You’ve barely scratched the surface of what we could feel together.”

Although still fuzzy, her mind picked up on the gentle nickname, and she couldn't stop herself from echoing. "Petal?"

He grinned, "Without my sight, I've had to rely heavily on all my other senses – touch, smell, hearing. And from the very first night, I could not help but notice how... soft you felt beneath my fingertips. Every part of you is so incredibly soft to touch and you smell divine – refreshing and sweet, just like a beautiful spring flower. Sometimes, your scent is so prevalent in the hallways, that it feels like you're right there beside me. You think it was easy to avoid you when you seemed to be everywhere?"

His explanation showed her that rather charming side she had seen for a very short time before, creating a warmth in her chest she couldn't explain.

"I think it is a precious pet name. I suppose henceforth, I'm your Petal." She mumbled, leaning in to kiss him.

And then a scream pierced the quiet night air.

Chapter Eleven



The Duke and Duchess sat up immediately, Simon swiftly getting out of bed and asking with a stressed tone.

“Is – was – that sounded like it came from Katherine’s room. I must –”

“I’ll go,” Victoria said, noticing how his confusion clouded his mind. “I’ll check on her.”

She quickly adjusted her clothes and left his room, only needing to walk a few steps before she arrived at Katie’s room. The door was open, and the nanny was worriedly fussing over the child. Katie’s eyes lit up with relief when she saw Victoria, and she pointed at her window, explaining before the Duchess even asked.

“There was a monster trying to climb in through my window! I was sleeping, and then I heard a sound. When I looked over, there was a dark scary shape fiddling with my window!”

Victoria and the nanny exchanged a glance, and Victoria held a hand out in front of her, motioning for Katie to relax as she checked the window. She peered closely at the lock, noting

that it was still in place, before she unlocked it to look outside. There was nothing odd or suspicious, just the still, calm night.

“I don’t see anything, Katie. Perhaps you were having a nightmare.” Victoria said softly, shutting the window and ensuring that it was locked up properly again.

She moved closer to the bed to reassure the child, surprised when Katie took her hand, clutching onto her with wide, frightened eyes.

“B-But I saw something! It was very scary.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Victoria frowned, sitting on her bed and gently patting Katie’s hair. “I’m really sorry you were scared. But I promise you, it was only a nightmare. You’re safe, all right?”

Katie nodded slowly, staring down at her hands, Victoria’s nestled warmly between them.

“Can you stay? Please?”

Victoria smiled softly at her and nodded, “Of course, sweetheart. In fact, why don’t we sleep in my room? Perhaps you might find it easier to go back to sleep there.”

“Really?” Katie asked, her eyes wide and hopeful.

“Absolutely.”

Victoria stood and helped the little girl rise out of bed, only letting go of her hand so she could wear the dressing gown provided by her nanny. As they left Katie's room, Victoria had an idea and wasted no time putting it into motion.

“We should stop by your father's room and let him know you are all right, so he won't worry.”

Katie seemed reluctant for a moment, then she nodded slowly, allowing Victoria to lead her to Simon's room. This time, she knocked, her heart skipping a beat as his voice addressed them from the other side.

“Yes?”

She opened the door but did not enter, not surprised to see him standing close, looking very concerned.

“Katie is fine. She had a nightmare, and that is what scared her. She'll be sleeping in my room tonight. I just... I thought I should let you know.”

“Oh.” He tilted his head slightly to the side, his gaze shifting to the smaller shadow by Victoria's side. “That's good, then.”

Silence fell upon them, and it was all Victoria could do not to sigh at the awkwardness between them, gently urging Katie with a warm squeeze of her hand.

“Say good night to your father, Katie.”

She pursed her lips for a second and then softly called out. "Good night."

Simon nodded curtly, his motions jerky and quick and laced with nervousness. "Good night. I hope you can rest without nightmares this time."

"Thank you."

My God, they sound as stiff as a matched couple meeting for the first time to discuss courtship details, Victoria said to herself, in awe of how shy and reluctant to speak Katie had become. She looked back at Simon, who wasn't fairing much better than his daughter, finding them both as adorable as they were troublesome.

"Good night," she said softly.

"Good night," Simon echoed in the same tone, adding gently. "And... thank you."

Victoria nodded and led Katie away. When they arrived at her room, she draped their dressing gowns on a chair and then tucked Katie in. Once she was sure the child was comfortable, she lay beside her. The girl lay still for a moment, staring up at the ceiling thoughtfully, and then gradually, she rolled onto her side to face the Duchess. Victoria wordlessly held her arms open, cooing when Katie quickly fell into her embrace, pressing a gentle kiss to the crown of the child's head.

“It’s all right. You’re safe. Nothing is going to happen to you,” Victoria said softly, patting Katie’s back lightly in an effort to soothe her nerves.

“It... it felt so real,” Katie whispered to her. “I really thought – I was really frightened.”

“Nightmares are like that, sometimes. They can feel as clear as reality, making it difficult to distinguish between dreams and real life. But trust me, sweetheart, you’re here. You are safe and sound; whatever you might have seen is gone.”

Katie nodded, muttering so quietly Victoria almost did not hear her.

“Thank you. For coming to see me. For letting me sleep here with you.”

“Oh darling, you don’t have to thank me for any of that. I told you that I wanted to care for you, and that is what I did. It is what I will do for as long as I can.”

“But... are you not upset with me? You are always so kind, and I – Cyrus says I have been rude to you. He always scolds me about how I speak to you, and I know he merely wishes for me to give you a chance. But I’ve been naughty, and you should be angry with me. Why aren’t you?”

Victoria sighed, carefully pushing back a lock of the child’s black hair – a lovely feature she undoubtedly got from her father – calmly explaining.

“I’m not upset or angry with you. Truthfully, your words and actions do hurt my feelings sometimes, but I do not hold it against you because, as tough as my duties and responsibilities might seem, you are undoubtedly having a much harder time adapting to me and my presence around you. I understand that you wish to be cautious and you cannot trust someone you barely know, and I respect your desire to sort through your feelings as you wish.

“That is why I harbor no negative feelings against you or hold a grudge. I know this can’t be easy, and you feel alone and scared, and all I’m doing is to let you know that you are not alone. You have me, your father, Cyrus, and every other member of this household. We all care deeply for you and want what’s best for you.”

Katie burrowed closer, one of her arms curling around Victoria’s side.

“Cyrus says that all the time. That everything everyone does is for my good. I want to be good; I don’t mean to make trouble for anyone or be unkind to you, but...” her lower lip began to wobble. “I do not remember my mother. No one will tell me anything about her, and all I know I’ve heard from people who point at me and whisper about her outside the castle. I wish I had known her. I wish I knew who she wanted me to be and what she prayed for me to have as I grew up. Even – even my father does not care for me. He refuses to spend time with me, no matter how often I ask. He’s always quick to scold me and tell me not to do things I find enjoyable, and he doesn’t know what I like. He does not love me, not like Cyrus does.”

Tears had begun to stream down her face, and Victoria was quick to console her, gently wiping away Katie’s tears before softly cradling her face in the palm of her hand.

“That is not true. Your father might not show it, but you are his whole world. He lives only for you, Katie. He was really worried when he heard you scream – which was why I suggested we visit him before retiring for the night. He seems closed off from you because he does not know how to approach you. He doesn’t mean to make you feel unwanted or unloved – that really is not true. He’s... he thinks about you first and foremost and has dedicated all that he has to ensure you are happy. He only scolds you because he fears some of your less-than-proper actions might lead you to trouble.

“He only stopped you from going out because he had heard of what the townspeople said about you. I understand that he is hard to approach, and sometimes it feels as though he does not like you very much, but that is only because he is unsure of how to behave. I promise you, no one loves you quite like your father does. He simply has a hard time of showing it. Remember, he has had to fill the role of a mother for some time, and he probably felt as though he was not doing a good job –”

“Is that why he married you? So you could take care of me the way he couldn’t?”

Victoria blinked in surprise, impressed by how quickly she had caught on to that detail.

“In a way, yes. But I am not merely taking care of you because he asked. Maybe at first, I just wanted to help him, but you both are my family now. I have a chance to live a new life and find love here, with you both, and that is more than I imagined I would get. This stopped being about doing what he needed me to do and became what I wanted to do. As I told you, I do not want to replace your mother. I do not want to fill her

position and claim you as mine in a way that erases her completely. I just want to do what she, unfortunately, could not do, what I'm sure she wished she could have been around longer to do."

"You're too kind." Katie sniffed, smiling a little as Victoria wiped away another teardrop.

"Am I?" Victoria questioned in a teasing manner. "I have my parents to thank for that. They did their absolute best to raise me as a person who values and cares for others while also teaching me to be strong enough not to feel threatened by bad people or turn away at the sight of injustice. Every day, when I wake up, I resolve to make them proud of me by living the way they taught me to. It's still a little hard living without them. I think it is impossible not to miss the people you have loved and lost, but I believe things will get better with time, and eventually, we'll be able to live in a way that honors their memory."

"That sounds nice. I wish I could do that for my mother. But I do not know enough about her to know how she would have wanted me to live." Katie frowned, looking sad again.

"That doesn't matter, sweetheart. As long as you are good and happy, I'm sure she will be very proud of you. That's all any parent wants, to see their child thriving well, wherever they might be."

The girl nodded, and Victoria felt her heart swell with fondness, thankful they could have such a good conversation. She had hoped for this but still left enough room for disappointment, especially with how Katie had lashed out at her during her last attempt to speak with her.

But here she was, gradually opening up to the Duchess, revealing her thoughts and fears, not caring about the vulnerability practically pouring out of her.

She is brave, Victoria thought proudly. As long as she continues to approach life like this, she will be just fine.

“I’m sorry,” Katie said softly, tilting her head back to look up at Victoria, her gaze earnest and open. “I’m really sorry for how I’ve been acting. You were only trying to help me feel better, and I was cruel and childish. Even when you offered to teach me the piano, I – I called you a vile name instead of accepting your graciousness. I really, I’m sorry.”

Victoria smiled and leaned forward, kissing the girl’s forehead, her fingers caressing the nape of Katie’s neck in soft motions.

“It is all right. I never harbored any grudges for you. You were always forgiven right after. I also felt as though I might have overstepped that day. I am perfectly content to wait until you feel comfortable enough to request my help and –” she stopped, noticing how Katie shook her head as if Victoria had said something wrong. “What is it, darling?”

“You did not overstep. I felt upset because... I do not want anyone but my father to teach me the pianoforte. He plays beautifully well. And when I told him I would like to learn to play, he instructed that a teacher be found for me. But I want – I have always wanted him to teach me. He still plays sometimes. On cold days, when nothing else in the castle can be heard apart from the howling of the wind, he will step into the tearoom and play for hours, and no one else is allowed to

come in at that time. The music always makes me feel warm. I want to learn how to play like that. I want him to teach me.”

Oh, Victoria sighed to herself, holding the child closer. The poor girl had been shouldering far more than she had thought, her wonderful, wounded heart shouldering far more hurt and dreams than anyone could fathom. What many saw as a motherless, cold child prone to fits of childishness was actually a lost child in need of love, with no desire to be bad in any way, only to be wanted and adored.

“Thank you for sharing this with me. I think it is beautiful you would like to learn an art your father is good at, and it is only normal to want him as your teacher. You are amazing, Katie. You have done so well, holding onto your dreams and desires by yourself. But you no longer have to bear the weight of it alone. I am with you. If you need anything – if you have anything at all that you might want, just come to me, and I will help you obtain it. I promise I will live the rest of my life ensuring that your happiness and joy are my goals.”

Katie laughed, pressing her face closer against the crook of Victoria’s neck, her body lax with exhaustion and peace. Victoria could feel her drifting off and began to pat her back again, alternating between light taps and rubbing around in circles.

“Thank you... for listening...” were the words Katie whispered before she drifted into a peaceful sleep.

Victoria kissed her forehead lightly, ensuring that the girl was covered up and resting comfortably in her arms before she closed her own eyes and allowed sleep to claim her as well, muttering quietly.

“Thank you, as well. For trusting me enough to tell me.”

Chapter Twelve



“How are the efforts to find Lady Martha coming along?”

Cyrus exhaled deeply as if preparing himself to deliver bad news.

“The search for her has not turned up anything noteworthy. Despite the high reward being offered by Lord Tenford, no one has brought forth any information on her whereabouts.”

Simon’s fingers began to drum on the oak surface of his desk absentmindedly as he considered the odd situation. It was rather strange that Lady Martha had not been safely returned to her home after all this time. Kidnappings were not uncommon among prestigious members of the ton, much less with titled families as a target. It was, however, strange that no ransom demands had been made, and as far as anyone had heard, no attempts to communicate with her family had been made.

“Organize a group of fine men to aid in the search for her. Tell them I will pay handsomely for her to be found and returned to her family without harm.”

Cyrus nodded. “Very well, Your Grace.”

“Is that all? Everything on the agenda?”

“That is all, Your Grace.”

Simon hummed, suddenly nervous to ask what his heart wished to know. He adjusted himself in his seat and cleared his throat.

“Katherine? How is she today?”

Cyrus smiled warmly at the Duke, happy to bring nothing but good news.

“She is doing quite well. She has been attached to the Duchess’s side all morning, much like she has for days now. They seem to be getting along even better than they were before. Lady Katie seems... *happy* to have someone to talk with. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her chatter away so much. Her lessons are still going well, but...”

Simon heard the hesitation in the butler’s voice and pressed anxiously. “But what?”

“She still refuses to attend her pianoforte lessons. And to that effect, the Duchess dismissed the teacher yesterday.”

The information filled Simon with an uncertain emotion he could barely grasp. He was not upset that Victoria had sent

away an instructor he had hired to educate his daughter – a very strange thing indeed because somewhere in his head, bells were ringing, alerting him that this was an act of overstepping the bounds of her rights without speaking to him first. However, he was mostly confused about why the Duchess had done so.

He was well aware of every change she had made within the castle and among the household, but she had never interfered with the positions of the staff. It wasn't a serious matter to him, yet he felt bothered by her actions.

“It is all right. Katherine was not making use of that tutor anyway, so it made no sense to still have her employed.” He paused, willing his heart to be still as he asked. “And the Duchess? Is she well?”

“She is quite well. She seems to be greatly enjoying Lady Katie's presence as much as the young lady is enamored with hers. I believe they are currently having tea in the garden and discussing some... embroidering techniques.”

Relief flooded through Simon's veins at further proof that his decision to marry Victoria seemed right. To be honest, when Simon had made his offer to her, he was waging his hopes on her desperation. It might not have been the kindest approach. Still, he was just as desperate to see that his daughter would be properly cared for. Now, seeing that things were getting better as a result of his choice, he couldn't help but feel thankful.

“Good. That's... good.” Simon waved Cyrus away, and the man bowed and left the Duke alone to his thoughts.

It had been four days since Victoria was in his bed. Four days since he had gotten a proper taste of what they could have, and now, his mind was even more wrought with thoughts of her. He craved to have her against him again, to feel her body tremor with pleasure, and to kiss every inch of her smooth, soft skin. He feared that by giving in that night, he had opened some sort of Pandora's Box, and the consequences could spell out his doom.

But the more he let himself replay the events of that night in his head, the more he found out that he might care less about anything that did not involve taking her over and over again until all she knew was his name. Her wonderful scent still lingered on his sheets, the smell of it soothing his heart every night, lulling him to sleep peacefully.

It was worrisome how much his body craved her, how badly his heart ached to hear her voice. And try as he might, he was not sure if he had it in him to stay away any longer.



Sometime in the afternoon, Cyrus came to inform Simon that he had a visitor.

“It is Lord Tenford, Your Grace.”

Hanvey? Simon's brows furrowed in confusion as he rose to his feet, a little surprised that his friend would come to visit him, not only because of how angry he had been the last time they had spoken but also because his daughter was still missing and the Duke had assumed he would be far too busy for anything else.

The Earl was waiting for him in the drawing room, seated and nursing a glass of port. Simon wished he could decipher the expression on his friend's face, blinking in frustration behind his glasses as he stepped further into the room.

"Tenford. This is an unexpected surprise." Simon commented in lieu of a greeting.

Hanvey rose and reached out for a handshake, his hand feeling strangely clammy against Simon's.

"I know. I felt bad over how we left things, and I came to apologize."

Simon shook his head lightly as he sat down. "You have nothing to apologize for. I should have sent word to you as soon as it became apparent that both of you would not be making an appearance. Perhaps if I had contacted you sooner, she might –"

"No," Hanvey interrupted him swiftly. "It is not your fault. I doubt things would have gone differently if you had informed me that she had not arrived. She seems to have vanished without a trace, so something tells me this situation could not have been avoided."

His friend sounded so forlorn and distressed, and Simon's heart ached for him. They had known each other practically all their lives and had grown up side by side, their childhoods consisting of friendly competition and fierce comradeship. They had gone to college together, each challenging and urging the other toward success.

Hanvey was the first one Simon had told of his marriage to his late wife as they had begun preparing for it. Hanvey was practically an uncle to Katherine, his penchant and desire to spoil the child ever apparent in how he never failed to bring gifts for her whenever he was visiting Cloveshire Castle. Hanvey had been the first to visit the Duke after the passing of his wife.

Simon could not think of a single moment when Hanvey was not by his side, supporting him through thick and thin and encouraging him not to give up. And so, it hurt him deeply to witness his closest friend going through such a difficult time – even more so that he could not actively help. He felt useless, sitting here and relying on words to do what required action.

“Still, I feel somewhat responsible. If she had not been coming to meet me, perhaps... I am sorry, friend. If there is anything I can do, please do not hesitate to let me know.”

Hanvey smiled a little. “How gracious of you, Your Grace. Thank you. You are doing more than enough like this. I will admit it has been rather difficult without her. I can’t help but imagine the worst, wondering if all my efforts to find her are for naught because it is too late. She is my only girl, my princess. What good is a father if he can’t protect his child?”

“Your role as a father should not be in question, Tenford. You have only ever cared for your children, loved them, and provided for them earnestly. You have treasured them consistently and ensured that they would never have a thing to worry about. If there ever was anyone that came to my mind as an ideally good father, it would be you. It is not your fault, friend. I am sure that she will be found soon. Do not lose hope.”

The Earl nodded, readjusting himself so his posture appeared less burdened. “I have already enlisted the help of many eligible forces. The Kents, too, have greatly assisted – for that, I am thankful. How are you? I could not properly congratulate you last time I was here; forgive me. How is your new wife?”

The questions asked were ones he felt he could not answer carelessly for some reason. He did not believe the Earl intended to use his words against him or make any assumptions based on his response, yet, an odd feeling in his gut told him to think carefully before speaking.

“I am well, thank you. I am still greatly apologetic for being unable to tell you that I had gotten married when I did. The matter was... of a *complicated* sort, and it happened quickly due to my desire to provide my daughter with the support she needed. My wife is quite ...” Simon trailed off, searching for the perfect word to relay just how great Victoria was without sounding like a lovelorn schoolboy.

Hanvey mistook his sudden silence and smiled pitifully.

“Dear God, Sherrington, what have you done? Please tell me you have not hitched yourself to an incompetent woman. Or worse, one who thinks and has opinions over how society should be more favorable to women.” The Earl laughed.

Simon thought he was joking. He had wanted to believe it was a harmless jab, birthed by obvious misunderstanding. But his blood began to run hot at the mere thought of Victoria being slandered and judged by someone who did not know her at all.

“No, that is not –”

The door to the drawing room opened, and the sound of giggles floated in, stopping as soon as the visitor realized the room was not empty.

“Oh. Oh no, I am so sorry,” Victoria apologized, her eyes wide as she took in the men seated in the drawing room. “I did not realize we had a guest. Good afternoon, Lord Tenford.”

Hanvey stood, bowing slightly. “Good afternoon, Your Grace. It is fine; we do not mind the interruption.”

Victoria smiled a little, looking down at Katie and tapping the underside of her chin fondly. “Greet them, sweetheart.”

Katie curtsied obediently. “Good afternoon, Lord Tenford. Good afternoon, Papa.”

Simon smiled at the sweet sound of his daughter’s voice, his lips stretching even wider when Victoria gently scolded the little girl.

“This is why it is important to knock before entering a room, pet. We’ve interrupted their conversation, and that is not right.”

The child nodded, faced the men once more, and said, without any prompt.

“I’m sorry for coming in without knocking. I’ll be more careful next time.”

“Oh, it’s fine, love. No harm done.” Hanvey assured, turning to face Simon as though he expected the Duke to be the one with a problem over the interruption.

Simon merely asked, “Was there something you needed?”

Victoria explained softly, “Katie lost her book, and we’re –”

“I did not lose it! I just... don’t know where it is right now.” Katie pouted, folding her arms.

“Right. I’m sorry. The book seems to have wandered off on its own, and we’re searching for it.” Victoria amended graciously.

“Ah,” Simon couldn’t keep himself from smiling.

Victoria’s cheeks filled with warmth, and she cleared her throat, quickly resting a hand on Katie’s shoulder as she said.

“We can come back to this room later. After all, there are so many other places we are yet to search.”

Katie agreed instantly, turning around and leaving the doorway they had been standing in. Victoria laughed at how eager Katie was, shifting her attention back to them.

“I apologize again for the interruption.”

“It is quite all right,” Simon said softly. “Do not fret over it.”

Victoria smiled sweetly and nodded to them, “Lord Tenford. Your Grace.” And then she took her leave.

Hanvey shifted his attention back to Simon. “She seems to have already gotten very close with Lady Katie.”

“You asked me about her earlier. I faltered because I wasn’t sure what the right word to describe her would be. In short, she has been phenomenal. She is an excellent Duchess, steadfast and hardworking. She’s barely been here for more than two months, and she has already wormed her way into the hearts of my staff and transformed how my household operates – every change she has made has been for the better. With Katherine, she has been relentless. I know the child did not make it easy for her – I likely did not offer much help either, but she kept up her efforts and tried to get Katherine to trust and warm up to her. She’s... *unique*, unlike anyone I’ve ever met before. She simply has a way with all of us.”

Simon had wondered what would have happened if Lady Martha had shown up that night. If Victoria had never made it to his castle. He wondered if he would feel as shackled to his desires as he does when Victoria is nearby.

He wondered if he would feel persuaded to let his heart wander out as he wished he could afford to for her. Perhaps Martha would have made a good wife and mother – Hanvey did raise her well, after all – but Simon had his doubts about whether she would have the same hold on him as Victoria.

“I am very glad things are looking up for you and your daughter. She certainly appears calmer and happier with her new motherly figure.” Hanvey moved closer suddenly, dropping his voice low to whisper. “Still, you must be careful, Sherrington. Do not open your heart so easily with this new woman. Things also seemed perfect with Elena, remember? She, too, was ideally right – *practically made for this life*, we said. And look how that turned out. I do not mean to plant doubt in your mind. I just want you to be careful. You lost your sight and most of your reputation last time. It would be horrible if you were to lose more than that this time around.”

Simon wished the man’s words did not affect him, but he had never been lucky enough in life. His warnings cut open old wounds and fanned the flames of terror that had been secretly burning ever since he had kissed Victoria in his study.

What if she turned out to be just like his first wife? What if he ended up right where he had been at the end of that marriage, barely alive and utterly destroyed?

“Do not worry. She is only here to care for my daughter and nothing else. My heart is not in any danger.”

The lie felt heavy as it fell from his mouth, and he only felt worse when Hanvey patted his shoulder comfortingly.

“As it should be.”

After his friend left, Simon was dismayed to realize he seemed to have only two options. Either remain alone, entertaining a life of solitude and the loneliness that came along with it, or

open his heart and risk orchestrating his own downfall once more.

Somehow, he felt that it did not matter either way because when it came down to it, he was still utterly unlovable. And it was only a matter of time before Victoria found out as much.

Chapter Thirteen



As much as Victoria appeared to be excelling at her role as Duchess, she had quickly become rather... *bored* with her duties, desiring more out of her new life. This mostly came as a result of the curiosity that had spawned from nights spent wondering what it would feel like to be with her husband.

Now that she had gotten a taste, she barely wanted anything more than Simon pressed against her, his wonderful hands grabbing at her, his delicious lips moving on hers, his spicy scent of bergamot and lavender clinging to her skin. She wanted him with such ferociousness it was almost shameful.

Unfortunately, they had barely spoken since that night. He was still keeping to himself, but he offered polite words of greeting whenever their paths crossed and entertained short conversations if she wished to ask him anything.

Most of her time had been taken up by Katie, who had refused to leave her side ever since the night they had spoken. Victoria was prepared for the girl to be weary of her the morning after, but she had been rather complacent and much gentler, insisting on following Victoria around whenever she did not have any lessons.

Although she seemed to have forgotten most of her nightmare, she expressed her wish to continue to sleep in Victoria's room. Feeling smitten with the adorable request, Victoria could not find it in herself to refuse, thankful that things had gotten better between them.

This girl was a little shy sometimes, very thoughtful and sweet, ever eager to learn, and had a penchant for generosity and helpfulness. She offered to help the maids carry groceries, snuck some fish out of the kitchen to feed a stray cat that had wandered into the garden, and shared every discovery from her books with Victoria.

It was as though she had been desperately aching to have someone who would give her the time of day, and now that she had a person who was willing to listen and answer whatever questions she might have, she refused to let the opportunity go. Victoria felt she needed to assure the precious child that she was not going anywhere and she did not have to cling so closely, but she understood that Katie's instincts only wanted to make up for lost time, and she was happy to indulge the girl as much as she could.

She had also begun to plan some ways to get Katie's father to spend some time with her – one of which was to find an activity he could join her in. When she had brought up the idea to the little lady, Katie had been reluctant to agree.

“What if he feels bothered by it? He's never played with me before, and whenever I ask, he simply buys me toys I do not care for.”

Victoria smiled gently and explained, “I do not want to sound assuming, but I feel as though he did not join you because he feared he might actually bother you. You're a bright young

lady; surely, you must understand that life for him isn't as easy as life is for most people. He has to endure so much, put in a lot of work to live without his sight, and maybe he just does not want to impose his burdens on you."

"Oh," Katie had frowned, dismayed. "I had never thought of it that way."

"I know, and that's all right. I'm sure he did not want you to let yourself be plagued by such thoughts. A father must protect and provide for his child, Katie. He does not want to seem like he needs to be protected and provided, so he keeps to himself and always tries to do things his way. This is why we need to make him feel we do not think less of him because of his disability. We should also find something you will enjoy, which he can partake of without too much fuss."

Katie had agreed immediately and began to list a variety of her interests. It had quickly become apparent that the activities she favored the most had to do with handcraft – which was somewhat rare because while most young ladies were raised to be proficient in skills such as embroidery and art, quite a number of them did not ideally spend their time on it if they could do anything else.

Katie, however, could go on and on about the techniques she had learned, the colors of the thread she felt matched the best, and the projects she would like to undertake in the future. Unfortunately – a sentiment Victoria used loosely because she was actually relieved about it, a person could only embroider so much before being overcome by the sudden desire to rip one's eyes out – it was far too difficult for someone who could barely see.

And so, they settled on jewelry-making instead, reasoning that the different beads would make beautiful pieces and it might not be too hard a quest for the Duke.

“Of course, we’ll need some supplies. Would you like to come with me to the shops to get some?”

“Oh, can I?” Katie perked up instantly, only for her cheerful mood to deflate the next. “But Father doesn’t like it when I go out.”

Victoria gently curled her fingers around Katie’s chin, slowly tilting her head back so their eyes could meet.

“That is because there was no one to defend you when people found no fault in spewing vile words at you. I’m here now, and I will not stand for anyone who wishes to let their mouths run away with them.”

Katie’s eyes glistened with unshed tears, and she hugged the Duchess, her heart beating warmly inside her chest.

“I’d love to go with you, then. How soon can we leave?”

“Right now? The sooner we can get the materials we need, the sooner we can plan how to convince the Duke to join us.”

“All right. Let me go and get my cloak!” Katie giggled excitedly before running off, her steps slowing when Victoria cautioned her, saying it was dangerous to run in the house.

“Oh my,” Linda gasped, watching the little lady wander off. “It’s like she’s a different person. What exactly did you do, Your Grace? Because it seems you have managed to work something of a miracle.”

A miracle, hmm? It was almost ironic because that was exactly what Victoria believed she would need to successfully get the child to open up to her. In reality, it had taken something much less than that.

“I just listened to her,” Victoria explained simply.

Her lady’s maid blinked at her. “You... you *listened?*”

“I listened. As it turns out, all she needed was a willing ear to not just hear her words and take them as they were but to listen to her loneliness, pain, and sadness. And I promised to look out for her as much as she would let me.”

“Oh,” Linda nodded in understanding. “I see. You really are perfect, Your Grace.”

Victoria laughed, taken aback. “Whatever do you mean?”

“I do not think anyone else would have been able to do what you have done. None of us would have thought to take the same approach you did, and I do not believe she would have allowed us to. You were perfect – are perfect for her. And you have done really well with her so far.”

The compliments gave her some validation she did not realize she desperately needed. As much as she was proud of her progress with Katie, she wished someone would notice as much and commend her on her relentless efforts. She had not done it merely to be rewarded, but with every passing moment as she grew closer to Katie, she yearned to truly be the girl's mother, desperate to shield her from all the pain she had spent years fending off on her own.

And she could not help but wonder if this – what they currently had – might be the limit of her abilities if this was all she could be to the child. So far, she was a friend Katie had come to trust and rely on, and she wished for more – almost in the same sense as she wished for more with her husband. These people – this family made her feel greedy, desperately aching to fit in, to belong, hoping that in as much as she had been a puzzle piece that had been randomly included into the vacant spot, she would one day grow into the space as if it was meant just for her.

“You're not ready yet.”

Victoria blinked, overcome by a rush of warmth at the sight of Katie donning her cloak and a small pout.

“I'm sorry, darling,” Victoria apologized earnestly, holding her arms out, nearly crying when the girl stepped into them immediately. “I got a little distracted. I'll be ready in five minutes.”

Katie looked up at her with the brightest smile she had ever seen, and there and then, Victoria swore to have this child as hers, no matter what.

“All right. But hurry!”

Victoria laughed and returned to her room with Linda to prepare, her heart beating warmly inside her chest.



A carriage took them to town, and right from the moment they stepped in, Katie’s excitement had risen to the surface, evident in the way she spoke about the types of jewelry she wished to make, the colors of beads she hoped they would be able to find and of course, whether her father would really like to join them.

“Truthfully, I think the activity hardly matters. He would love to spend time with you, regardless. This will just ensure that things flow naturally between you two. And do not worry, I will be by your side every step of the way,” Victoria assured her, smiling when Katie squeezed her hand in appreciation.

There were a handful of shops to choose from to procure the materials they needed, but Katie had all but dragged Victoria to a specific one, claiming they had the best to offer. The owner was a kind older woman who appeared to know Katie, immediately beaming at the sight of her.

“Lady Katie! It has been quite some time. I was beginning to think that you had lost your love for handcrafts.” She teased lightly.

“I would never!” Katie gasped, seemingly horrified at the mere thought of it. “No, I was... I could not make any trips myself for a while. But I’ve come today to get some beads and strings! We’re going to make some jewelry!”

“Oh, how wonderful. Well, help yourself to whatever you would like, dearest.” The woman said, gesturing to the shelves containing various colorful items.

Katie clapped excitedly and started to leave, then she turned back and held Victoria’s hand, saying,

“This is the new Duchess of Sherrington. Victoria, this is Mrs. Bloom, my friend.”

The woman’s eyes widened, and she tried to curtsy, which sent Victoria into a flurry of panic, and she immediately tried to dissuade her.

“Oh, no. Please don’t; it is quite all right.” She said with a smile. “It is lovely to meet you.”

Mrs. Bloom nodded, her eyes twinkling with delight. “The honor is mine, Your Grace.”

“I shall go and find us some pretty beads.” Katie declared with a salute.

“Do you need some help, pet?” Victoria queried, unable to keep a smile off her face at the sight of the child’s eagerness.

“No, that’s all right. I know where everything is.” She said and wandered off.

“I do not think I’ve ever seen her look so excited. She must be really looking forward to making some jewelry.” Mrs. Bloom commented with a fond smile.

“Yes, I suppose she is,” Victoria replied, fondly watching her.

The whole affair took nearly an hour, with Katie darting around the shop, *oohing* and *aahing* at beads of different types, colors, and designs, wandering back to Victoria to present her with some options and ask which ones she preferred. They picked a few that were easy to handle and slightly on the larger side, with a few smaller ones Katie said she wanted because they had very pretty colors, and she wanted to make a few rings from them.

Eventually, they had procured all they needed and left the shop, promising Mrs. Bloom to visit again sometime soon, Linda carrying what they had bought. They did not return to the castle just yet because Katie had expressed a desire to visit more shops, and Victoria had learned that her adoration for the girl made it quite impossible to deny her anything she wanted.

They explored the shops for a while, Victoria easily purchasing the books Katie had said she wanted to read and the pens she thought were very nice as she had lost some of hers. Their last stop was a quaint bakery the girl swore sold the best cream puffs.

On their way out, Victoria bumped into someone and started apologizing, startled when her eyes fell on a familiar face.

“Victoria! Goodness, we were starting to think we’d never see you again!” the person said, immediately throwing her arms

around the Duchess.

“Grace! She’s a Duchess now; you should address her by her title.” Anne scolded, smiling apologetically at Victoria.

That was when she remembered that, of course, people knew she had gotten married to the Duke, and there was no doubt that her friends would as well. She felt bad that she had been unable to relay the news herself.

“That is not necessary, please. I did not expect to see you all.” Victoria smiled a little, worried that they might be cross with her.

Something tugged at her cloak, and she looked down at Katie, the little girl pressing herself so closely to her that she was almost completely hidden from sight.

“Is that –” Grace asked, eyes wide.

“Yes, this is Lady Katie Marlow, the Duke’s daughter. Katie, love, these are my friends: Miss Anne, Miss Grace, and Miss Isabelle.”

Katie detached herself long enough to greet them, blushing when the ladies cooed at her, immediately commenting on her adorable appearance.

“We were worried about you when you disappeared, and then we heard about you getting married. Congratulations.” Anne said genuinely.

“Thank you. I’m sorry I did not tell you about it; the circumstances were a bit... *unorthodox*. How are you all?” Victoria asked.

“Fine. Bored without you, but ultimately fine.” Isabelle grinned, reaching out for a hug.

Victoria held her and let herself be held, relishing in the familiar warmth she did not know she had been missing until now.

“We were not bored for too long, though. What with all this business about Lady Martha.” Anne stated with a smirk.

“Poor thing. Her father must be truly devastated with her missing.” Victoria frowned sadly.

“Oh, you haven’t heard? We would have thought your cousins would have told you the good news as they were the ones who found her.” Isabelle pointed out.

“My cousins?” Victoria’s jaw dropped in surprise. “They found her? When?”

“She was found yesterday and returned home – safe, sound, and quite unhappy,” Grace said with the usual glint in her eyes that appeared whenever she got the chance to share juicy gossip.

“Really? That’s good news.” Victoria sighed in relief.

“For everyone else but *her*. Apparently, she had run away with her lover! And she had done all she could to ensure that her disappearance was seamless and left no trails behind. She was only caught because your cousin Matthew had asked around and discovered she had been seeing someone who had also turned up missing. It was all quite strange, and they were able to put two and two together – which was rather surprising, considering how difficult it is for all of them to be in the same room long enough without fighting – and they tracked her down to a small town up north.” Anne shrugged.

Victoria’s mind had barely wrapped around the words she had heard when the ladies announced that they had to leave, giving the Duchess some firm hugs and wishing her luck before they went on their way. She and Katie returned to the carriage, the little lady apparently tired after all the wandering around.

She leaned against Victoria almost as soon as they had gotten comfortable in the carriage and fell asleep moments later, giving Victoria time to think.

It was quite interesting to hear that her cousins had been the ones to find Lady Martha. She knew they had only done so because Lord Tenford had offered a large reward for her return, but the fact that they had succeeded left her quite surprised. She hoped their earnings would satisfy and encourage them to take their eyes off her own life.

Her mind wandered to Lady Martha, and she could not help but feel an odd sense of pity for the lady. It was odd that she had disappeared right around the time she was meant to meet and marry the Duke, and it was sad that her plans to be with her true beloved had been foiled.

It all left a strange sense of unease upon Victoria's shoulders, one she could not shake off until they had arrived back at the castle.

Chapter Fourteen



“Lady Martha is safe, Your Grace. She is now at home with her family, all of whom are relieved to have her back.” Cyrus said, noting the deep exhale that left the Duke’s lips as his shoulders sagged.

“That is good. I am glad. Did she say what happened? Perhaps any information on her kidnappers?”

“Your Grace, she was not kidnapped. She ran away.”

The Duke went still with confusion.

No, that can't be right. She was Lord Tenford’s only daughter. Whatever she wanted, she received. If she let out so much as a sigh of displeasure, the Earl was ready and willing to burn the world down in order to see joy return to his daughter once again. Why on earth would she have run away?

“The details are still unclear,” Cyrus continued. “But the rumors say that she absconded with a lover and hoped not to be found.”

A lover. She had a lover.

Suddenly, some things began to make sense about the issue. If she had a lover, her father obviously had not known about it, considering that he had offered her hand to Simon. It did not matter if Simon's title might be greater than that of the man she cared for if her heart belonged to him.

To be fair, he would not even pick himself over anyone else, so it was not surprising that she felt her only option was to flee. Not only was he not upset by her decision, he felt apologetic and somehow responsible for driving her away from her home.

"Shall we send word to Lord Tenford? Congratulating him on his daughter's safe return?" Cyrus questioned.

"No," Simon decided. "Leave them be. I think that is for the best, at least for now. She was found and has returned home. That is more than enough."

Cyrus bowed. "Yes, Your Grace."

The butler began sorting through some documents that required the Duke's signature, faltering when a soft knock was heard at the door. He turned to the Duke, who nodded, and then he faced the door, calling out, "Yes?"

The knob turned, and the Duchess walked in. Cyrus stood straighter and faced her properly before bowing.

“Your Grace, good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon, Cyrus.” Her gaze shifted to her husband.
“Good afternoon, Your Grace.”

For some reason, hearing her address him formally made Simon’s skin itch with discomfort, and he felt compelled to correct that, nodding in her direction.

“Good afternoon, Victoria. What brings you here?”

The sound of her name from his lips filled her cheeks with heat, and pleasure thrummed in her veins.

“Well, I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you.”

The Duke paused momentarily and then turned his head in Cyrus’s direction.

“We can handle those later.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Cyrus bowed one last time and exited the room, leaving Simon and his Duchess alone.

“I was not aware we had gotten close enough to offer favors.”
He said, his tone light and almost teasing.

“We would be closer if you had not insisted on putting up walls between us. But that is a discussion for another day.” The hidden implications of her words knocked the breath out of his lungs, and he had scarcely regained his senses when she added. “The favor is not actually for me, but for Katie.”

“My daughter? Is she all right?”

“She is perfectly fine. She would like to spend some time with you today if you will allow it.”

Simon faltered a bit. “I do not think -”

“Stop thinking so much,” Victoria groaned in mild exasperation. “I swear, the both of you appear more alike with each passing day. That is your weakness, so you both struggle to get along. You base your relationship off too many pointless thoughts, which breed fears and insecurity.”

Simon noticed that her voice sounded closer and closer as she spoke, as did her hazy form, and he jumped when her hand rested on his.

“Don’t think. It is quite simple. Your daughter misses you. Your daughter has quite a love for handcrafts, and she is really good at it. Your daughter and I spent the better part of the morning purchasing materials to make beaded jewelry. Your daughter would like to show you her abilities and hopes that you would be willing to join her in the activity. I would like that as well.”

Her voice was so soft, yet it somehow pried off every restraint that would have urged him to resist and refuse, letting him stand on his own and decide just how to respond. He did want to spend time with his daughter; he did want her to share anything and everything she loved with him. But he did not wish to be a burden on her. On either of them.

“Victoria, I –”

“Simon, please.”

And that was unfair. It was cheating, the way she said his name, how her voice sounded like honey to his ears, sweet, smooth, and slippery, sliding him away from every part of himself that wished to deny her request.

“All right,” he sighed in resignation. “I suppose I could give it a try.”

She smiled at him, leaning in to place a chaste kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you.”

He pretended his heart was not threatening to beat out of his chest as he stood, letting her hold his hand as they walked to the door, noticing that she let him lead the way. As he opened the door, a shape jumped in front of them.

“Did he – oh. Hello, papa.”

She hardly ever called him *papa*, always hurling stiff addresses of *father* whenever they argued, her voice nearly as loud as his, angry and hurt. She sounded gentle and unsure, almost as if she expected to be scolded for some reason.

He peered down at her silently for a moment, then fished his glasses from his pocket and put them on, blinking behind them until her form became a little sharper, and he could easily recognize the way her hair fell in a dark mass over her shoulders and the strong rise of her chin.

“Hello, Katherine.” He greeted gently. “I hear you would like me to join you and make some beaded jewelry.”

Katie glanced at Victoria, nodding at the smile of encouragement the Duchess sent her way.

“Yes. Please. If you would not mind.”

Her tone was so... *reluctant*, it made his chest heavy with sadness. How had he never noticed that she felt so uncomfortable with him?

“I should be asking you if you are sure you would like my company. You see... I’ve never really tried any craft of that sort before; I fear I might be horridly useless at it.”

His words seemed to soften her, and she reached for his free hand, her small fingers gripping his tightly, her smooth touch dislodging something rough and hard from his chest.

“That’s all right. Victoria is not very good at it, either. You can be bad together, and I’ll show you just what to do. If you’d like.”

Victoria gasped in mock outrage, and he could not help but smile widely, feeling warm in a way he wasn’t sure he’d ever felt.

“I would like that very much, Katherine.”



Simon learned a number of things within moments of sitting down in the garden, where they had set up a table for the activity.

The first was that Katherine loved handcrafts. She had talked endlessly about the things she wished to make and how she would share them among the staff, with the prettiest and most colorful item being designated to Cyrus as the lucky recipient. She addressed Victoria most of the time, and Simon had not minded one bit, content to simply listen and learn more about his daughter during the walk to the garden than he had in the last few years of her life – a discovery that made him deeply sad.

She – his beloved Katherine – was bright beyond her years, chatty when she was excited, worried about making mistakes, and intent on enjoying the day with him, and he felt honored that she had thought to extend an invitation to him.

The second thing he learned was that there were far too many colors in existence. When they settled down at the table, Katherine had begun to list off all the types of beads they had

available, as well as their shapes, sizes, and colors. She mentioned at least three different types of blue and four varying shades of red, and when Simon stared down at the table, all he could see was a mildly colorful, messy array.

“Don’t worry, Papa,” Katherine had said, sensing his distress. “If you need anything, just let me know, and Victoria or I will hand it over to you. Of course, you should not ask me for any of the sharp or dangerous objects – only she will be in charge of those.”

The third thing was that bead-work was bloody frustrating.

He wished he could say hearing Victoria mumble in annoyance under her breath was somewhat consoling, but the truth was, it only made him even more disturbed because she had made some progress – her creations summed up to two bracelets, three rings, and counting – whereas he had been unable to finish a single one.

Simon did not wish to bother his daughter or his wife, so he kept reaching for the beads himself, more often than not picking the wrong sizes and colors, stifling the urge to groan whenever Katherine innocently asked him if he truly intended to use those beads together – and those were for the beads he managed to string!

If that wasn’t the issue, it was the fact that his projects kept falling apart, the clip placed at the other end of the string to keep the beads from falling out as he added more, somehow slipping off when he was nearly done, causing him to start over again. And again. And again.

Finally, he had reached the end, somehow managing to put together a decent enough bracelet – at least he hoped so – and very carefully, he held both ends and attempted to tie them together to finish his hard work. Victoria lifted her gaze in time to see him begin the first knot and asked,

“Would you like some help with that?”

Simon shook his head, trying to concentrate. He had no idea how long he had been at this, but his fingers felt quite numb, and he was pretty sure the tablecloth had traces of his sweat and honest-to-God tears.

“Are you sure, Papa?” Katherine persisted gently.

“Yes, I’m quite –”

His fingers shook, and one end of the string slipped through. He heard the beads fall, crashing into one another as they dropped into the tray below that held the others until all he had left was a single, empty string. And he just stared, his vision blurry even in his anger.

Simon put the string down and stood. Victoria rose with him, reaching out.

“Simon –”

“No. I’ve had enough of this foolishness.”

“But –”

“Papa, wait –”

“No!” he snapped, breathing heavily. “I will not sit here for another moment and allow myself to look like an even bigger idiot.”

He turned around and walked away without another word. Katie watched him leave, her lower lip wobbling as she sank back into her seat. Victoria was by her side immediately, gently patting the girl’s hair to keep her from crying, but the tears never fell. Katie just stared at the table and said,

“I told you he did not want to spend time with me. He does not love me. I don’t think he ever will.”

“That is not true, sweetheart. I promise that is not the case.” Victoria objected firmly.

“It is fine. I will try not to bother him any longer.” Katie sniffed and rose from her chair. “Excuse me.”

Victoria let her leave, knowing that there was little she could do to make her feel better at this moment, instead choosing to go directly to the source of the problem. She gathered the skirts of her dress in her hands and marched back into the room with a singular destination in mind. When she arrived, she did not knock, did not announce herself; she simply opened the door, walked in, and slammed the door shut.

“I cannot believe you really think it is acceptable to act that way toward your daughter.”

Simon snorted. “What I cannot believe is how you can be so good at everything else except basic manners. Why must you insist on never knocking before you barge in?”

Victoria resisted the urge to scream at him, stepping closer as she said, “You have no idea how hard she worked on all that. How excited she was to have you finally sit by her and take an interest in something she liked. Would it have led to your demise to just bear with it for a little while longer? You barely even tried –”

“I barely even tried?!” he turned to her instantly. “I thought you were many things, Victoria, but I never thought you would be so wildly ignorant. All I do is try. Every day, every hour, every damn second of my life is filled with nothing but my efforts. You have no idea just how difficult, how hard my life has been since the day I lost my sight. How I have had to relearn the way to live – something you can do so naturally. I told you I did not think this was a good idea, but as usual, you simply had to have your way.”

“My way?” Victoria snapped, unable to restrain her anger. “You treat Katie like a child, and yet you are the childish one. It is evident in the way you speak, the way you act. This had nothing to do with me. I was merely doing what *you* requested, what *you* needed to be done, but did not have the guts to do it *yourself*. Would it have been so bad to just sit there and spend time with her? If you were having such a bad time with the beads, you could have asked for help. You could have requested a break or a change of activity. She – *we* would have done anything you wanted us to do.

“Yet you chose to throw a tantrum – you chose to run away and once again leave your mess to someone else to fix –”

“How dare you –” Simon roared, but Victoria continued to speak as though she had not heard him.

“– a behavior you desperately need to grow out of quickly if you really wish to have a relationship with your daughter at all. You cannot continue to act this way and then complain when she fails to listen. You do not have the right to – not if you carry on these motions. You must do better.”

“Do not tell me what I need to do. You are just a stranger in my home. You do not know what you are talking about.” He spat.

His words stung, and she bit her lower lip, momentarily thinking of retiring. Her feet wouldn't move because deep down, she knew these words needed to be said – for Katie's sake.

“I certainly know more about your daughter than you do. Do you know she does not like celery and carrots? Do you know that she loves to splash around in puddles after it rains? Do you know that she has begun to read Shakespeare, and her favorite of his works is *Hamlet*? Did you know that she made a bracelet for you moments before you abandoned her at that table? Do you know the reason why she refuses to learn the pianoforte?”

Simon was silent, facing her with flushed cheeks she knew probably matched her with how hot and upset she felt.

“It’s because she wants you to teach her. She told me you play beautifully and that when you play, she feels warm. And she wishes to play just like you. But when she told you of her desire to learn, you had gotten her a tutor instead of trying to teach her yourself. Simon, you cannot keep doing this to her. Letting her make all the necessary moves and efforts when you are the adult. You cannot blame it all on your handicap because surely you must know she would never want to see you struggle.

“That does not mean you must assume the image of someone immovable and unbothered. I mean, you should try and ask for some assistance. From me. From her. If you truly love her, you will try. You must. You will apologize to her, and henceforth, you will be more patient with her and yourself. You need to push aside all these notions and put in more of an effort if you want your daughter to continue to love you and –”

“I do not deserve to be loved!”

His words echoed in her head, thrumming around the walls of her mind and filling her veins with ice. He took a step back, shaking his head sullenly.

“I do not. It would be a waste to –”

Victoria did not remember moving, but she was aware that she had been overcome with the urge to approach him. Suddenly she was pressed against him, her lips moving along his slowly. Instinctively, his hands rested on her waist, and he kissed her back, eager to let her taste and scent put out the fire in his veins.

She pulled back moments later, breathless and desperate as she said, “Don’t. Do not say that ever again. Do you understand?”

Simon felt the dregs of his restraint slip away, and he lifted her into his arms, kissing her as he carried her to his bed, needing her lips on his as he mumbled,

“I understand.”

Chapter Fifteen



Victoria felt as though her skin were on fire.

There was barely any distance between them, their hands grabbing, pulling whatever they could to bring the other person impossibly closer as they kissed, needing to feel even more. These kisses differed from the ones they had shared the last time she had been in his bed. They felt slower, more deliberate this time, as though he was trying to pick her apart as carefully and meticulously as possible.

And by God, it was working.

“Simon –” she gasped into his mouth, moaning as his tongue met and tangled with hers.

Desire was swiftly overtaking her senses, and she was glad to see them go, longing to get lost in the feeling of ecstasy, to bask in the delicious heat he was offering. He tugged at her skirt and grunted, breaking apart to complain.

“Too many. Why do you have so many clothes on?”

Dazed, she could only blink up at him, speechless and confused.

He groaned and leaned down to kiss her again, long and deep, before trailing wet kisses down her neck, mumbling lowly, his breath ragged and hot against her skin.

“I want to touch you. I need to feel you with my hands.”

The mere thought of him having access to all of her made her whimper, and suddenly, she was aware that her dress was officially her enemy. What was worse was that the buttons were at the back of the dress, and she could not reach any of them, not like this.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, suddenly feeling frustrated.

He leaned back with a frown, noting the oddity of her tone.

“Why are you sorry? What’s wrong?”

She shook her head, feeling a tad ridiculous.

“Just – I hate this dress all of a sudden.”

She sounded so petulant and upset, and some part of the clarity he had gained told him that he should probably get to the bottom of the matter, but he chuckled. Victoria looked up at him in disbelief.

“Are you laughing at me?”

He grinned, raising a hand to cup her cheek and kiss her so gently it stole her breath away.

“Yes, I am. Forgive me; you sounded so adorable; I could not help myself.”

Victoria sighed at the ridiculousness of the man above her, deep down knowing she liked this side of him. He sat back and took her hands, pulling her to sit up as well, leaning in to peck her lips once, twice, and then her cheeks.

“You know, for someone who was so adamant about making me ask for help, you are not much better when it comes to asking for it. And I’ll have you know, I am very good with buttons and stays.”

“Are you now?” she grinned, laughing slightly when he nodded seriously.

“I am. So – would you like me to help you get this awful dress off?”

“Awful?” she gasped, pretending to be scandalized as she moved onto her hands and knees, crawling forward to settle on his thighs.

“Yes, Petal. It is currently a hindrance to us and, therefore – awful.”

His hands felt good as they rested on her hips, and she couldn't stop herself from wondering what they would feel like resting against her bare skin, eager to find out.

“You have a point. It is awful. I hate it. Please, help me get it off?”

He smiled and nodded, a curt dip of his chin. “Of course, darling.”

His lips found hers again, ravishing and searching as his hands made their way from her hips to her back, their warmth seeping through the fabric and touching the deepest corners of her soul. His fingers located the neat row of buttons, and he began to undo them one by one, inching her closer and closer to freedom while never breaking the kiss.

Her hands had been clutching onto the sides of his shirt, desperate for some sort of anchor to keep her grounded, and suddenly they began to itch, curious and wondering what he would feel like, bare beneath her fingertips. So she let them wander, feeling the tense and well-defined muscles ripple beneath her touch, crawling up, up, over his torso to his chest, one resting on a shoulder and the other finding a home in the dip of his neck, relishing the feeling of his pulse right below her palm.

Simon finally reached the last button on the dress, and once it had been undone, he tugged at the fabric, reaching up to free her upper body. She sighed in relief and pulled her arms from the sleeves, returning her hands back where they were, the one on his neck sinking lower and slipping in through the collar of his shirt. He groaned at her soft touch, his sense of urgency to have her bare returning with full force, and he grew impatient, ripping her corset open.

He tossed it aside and littered feather-light kisses from her chest down to her bosom, licking and sucking the stiff peaks of her breasts. She arched into him with a moan, running her fingers through his hair, gripping at the soft locks as a shiver ran down her spine.

“S-Simon, please,” she gasped.

Simon guided her to lay on her back and tugged the rest of her clothes, followed by his shirt; his hands quickly returned to her body, tracing each curve, every contour, and dip, learning the feel of her over and over again. His touch was like a brand on her skin, searing hot and promising, leaving her wanting more with every passing moment.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her stomach, then another on her hip, muttering as he left chaste kisses, going lower and lower.

“Beautiful. You are... absolutely beautiful.”

Victoria gasped as he gripped her thighs and slowly pulled them apart, leaving every inch of her exposed and ready to be explored. With the same careful pace, he sank to the bed, raising one of her legs to rest on his shoulder. She stared at him in disbelief as he nuzzled the inside of her thigh, her head falling back as he stroked her without warning.

She grew embarrassingly damp at his sure touch, every stroke slow and deep, teasing and pulling her apart as he consistently worked her folds. Then he lowered his head and licked at her

wet center, drawing a half scream from her lips, only muffled by the hand she had pressed to her mouth a second too late.

He reached up and grabbed the hand, intertwining their fingers.

“Don’t. I want to hear every sound you make, every single sound I pull from you. Do not hide anything from me.”

She barely got to nod when his mouth returned between her legs, kissing and sucking the seemingly endless warmth, craving every single drop of her juices. She moaned and writhed beneath him, begging as his tongue tantalized her, gradually working her open and driving her past the brink of insanity.

The familiar knot in her stomach had returned, growing bigger and heavier as his fingers returned, slipping in her easily and ruining her with the insistent petting. It had not taken long for him to discover her trigger, and soon she was sent spiraling, struck by the wild roar of pleasure that left her shaking, clutching onto the sheets to keep herself from screaming.

As the haze of ecstasy wore off, she noticed he had done away with his breeches and now knelt before her, as bare as she was. The sight of him was a magnificent one to behold, his body as perfectly defined as a sculpture that had been carved painstakingly, his skin glistening with sweat beneath the dim lights. Even from where she lay, she could see scars, burns that had healed, and her heart hurt for him and all he had suffered.

He crawled over to her, bracing his arms on either side of her to hold up his weight as he kissed her, and she relished in the

way his body heat seeped into hers, pressing herself even closer to him in an attempt to melt against him. He broke the kiss and asked softly.

“Are you sure? This is –”

“I will kill you if you stop now. We’ve gone too far to turn back.” She muttered, kissing his chin, then his jaw, then putting her lips back on his to say, “I know you want this too. I can feel just how much you want me. So... please. Give me all of you.”

He swallowed shakily and nodded, kissing her again before settling back, giving her a good look at his member, and the sheer size was mildly alarming. He aligned himself with her entrance, teasing her folds and coating his shaft in her wetness, and she nervously blurted.

“Will it hurt?”

He lifted his head immediately and blinked at her as though he was contemplating the most ideal response to provide her with. Eventually, it seemed as if he had settled for the plain truth, his voice soft within the bubble of intimacy they were wrapped up in.

“A little, at first. Then it will get better.”

She inhaled deeply and settled back on the bed, willing herself to relax. Her heart skipped a beat when his hand found hers, and he squeezed lightly, his touch reassuring.

“Do not worry, I’ll be gentle,” he promised earnestly, and somehow, she felt as though she would trust him with her life if he asked her to.

“All right.” She sighed, giving his hand one last squeeze.

He waited until she was calmer before pushing in, the invading thickness causing her to wince and whimper, gasping as he continued to push the rest of his length until she had sheath him completely. The pain was quickly fading, leaving with her innocence, and she grew eager for the pleasure to return, urging him softly.

“Simon – love, please.”

Just as carefully as he had eased into her, he eased back out and thrust in, taking her moan as approval and repeating the motions again, gradually increasing the pace. She gasped as the consistent intrusion stroked the flames of pleasure simmering within her, moaning as a particularly hard thrust hit a point that sent shock waves through her body. Simon’s hands gripped her waist, and he began to move quicker, hungry groans falling from his lips as his hips snapped back and forth.

Whatever remaining shreds of Victoria’s mind quickly turned to ash, and she lost all reason, taken over completely by her desire, gasping, moaning, and writhing wildly as her husband continued to claim her, his hands holding her just so, ensuring he met his mark with each thrust. She begged for more, her nails clawing at his back as she tried to find some form of stability, arching her hip to meet his with every thrust.

The pressure in her stomach had begun to build again, hot and tight, as his girth stretched her further than his fingers, claiming her body as his. He leaned into nibble at her neck, breathy and hot between kisses, their pleasure-drenched bodies moving in sync.

When the release came, it claimed both of them, and they fell off the edge, gasping and groaning together. The room that had been filled with the sounds of skin against skin held only their deep pants now. Simon pulled out of her slowly, dropping onto his side with a groan. Victoria stared up at the ceiling, her heart thundering so loudly in her chest that she could practically hear it.

“That... that was incredible.” She sighed, pushing her hair away from her face, grimacing when she noticed it had gotten damp with sweat and was sticking to her face.

“Really? I’m pleased to have met your standards, then.” He chuckled, grunting in surprise when she lifted one of his arms, pressed herself close to him, and dropped it back so it draped over her side.

“There were no standards to meet. You literally are the standard now.”

She kissed him lightly, then rested her head against his shoulder, feeling spent due to the physical exertion of her body, falling asleep to the rise and fall of her chest. Simon remained away for a little while longer, thinking about how he felt, how this night with Victoria was much different from all the others he had spent with his wife, her words replaying in his mind over and over again.

He pulled her closer, resting his chin atop her head, and her last words echoed in his mind until he fell asleep, his own remark to it simple and curt as he whispered it into the air.

“I suppose I am.”

Chapter Sixteen



Victoria felt as though she had really taken leave of her senses.

After spending the night with the Duke, all she could seem to think about was him. All she wished to do was reminisce over every sensation that had been born from their bodies. But as it turns out, the second night had ignited a hunger in her for which there would be no satisfactory relief unless she went straight to the source.

And to her credit, she did try to distract herself. Quite a number of affairs around the castle needed her attention, and she committed herself to silence the thoughts of the Duke during the time she handled the issues. Why would she want to hear about the gardener's concern over a rabbit infestation in the summer when she could replay every kiss, each stroke she had experienced the night before?

The only thing that took her mind off the Duke was his daughter, who seemed to have gotten over her father's disappointing actions, showing up to breakfast looking as though nothing had happened. Victoria, embarrassingly remembering that she had been in his room to scold him and had somehow ended up in bed with him, reached out to pat Katie's hair fondly.

It was held back with a blue ribbon tied into a lovely bow, and she looked absolutely precious like this, wholly undeserving of the hurt she had endured.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” Victoria queried, her eyes alight with concern.

“I am. I should not have asked him at all. It is fine.” Katie nodded, her expression stern, which would have been funny if Victoria had not noticed that she was trying to scold herself into believing her words.

“Oh, darling, no. You did nothing wrong. It’s... It’s not simple to explain, but please believe me when I tell you that it is not your fault what happened yesterday. Things will get better; we just have to keep trying.”

“Would it not be better to simply give up?” Katie sighed, peering down at her toast and jam.

“That’s not fair. I did not give up on you, did I?”

Katie shook her head slowly, and Victoria rewarded her with a soft smile.

“You can’t give up on your family, darling. It is hard – they are always hard to deal with. But they are also all we have. He is all you have, as well. Of course, you have me too, but he also needs you – just as much as you need him. It will take some hard work, but we will sort it out somehow. Don’t give up on him, all right? He would never give up on you.”

Her words seemed to reach the child, and she nodded, holding her arms open for a hug, and was immediately given one. Eventually, she had to leave for her lessons, and Victoria found herself right where she started: bored, alone, and thinking of her husband.

For some reason, she felt as though it would not be a good idea to seek him out and instead tried to wait it out, hoping that as the day progressed, her mind would eventually grow tired and stop torturing her with these thoughts. By nightfall, she practically vibrated with nervous energy, aching for him.

It was made worse by the fact she had not seen him at all that day, had not crossed paths with him even once. She was not too surprised by the occurrence, feeling like he might have wanted to avoid his daughter, but it also felt as though she was being punished. Eventually, the household retired to bed, and she lay in hers alone, staring blankly at the ceiling.

Katie had spent the previous night in her own room and seemed to prefer that tonight as well, so she had no one to distract or dissuade her from getting out of bed, donning her dressing gown, and leaving her room. The castle was eerily silent as she wandered through the hallways, each step bringing her closer to her goal and making her increasingly nervous as moments passed.

Soon, she came to a stop at his door, contemplating whether to knock or not. Feeling utterly ridiculous, she opened the door and stepped into the room, going still when she saw him awake, seated on the edge of the bed and facing the door. Almost... almost as though he had been waiting for her. She quietly closed the door and leaned against it, the solid force behind her the only thing holding her up.

“Hello,” she greeted softly, swallowing as he stood and walked toward her.

“Hello,” he echoed, reaching out and caressing her face with the back of his hands.

“I missed you today.” She confessed, cheeks burning in shame.

He stepped closer, bracing his hands on the door and trapping her with his frame, chuckling as he nuzzled her cheek, brushing his lips against her chin and jaw, dipping his head to leave a barely there kiss over her pulse.

“Really?”

“Um-hmm.” She sighed, twisting her fingers in the fabric of his nightshirt.

“You could have come to see me,” he muttered on her skin, his breath a hot caress that sent shivers racing over her body.

“I could... have.” She said, dazed and aching as desire swirled within her, making her incredibly sensitive to his touch.

He pulled her to him, his hands sneaking into her dressing gown, roaming over her body, tracing her form, grabbing and squeezing her generous backside, moaning his desire for her right into her ear.

“You could have. Yet you did not. Why?”

She bit her lower lip, drunk on his clean, masculine scent, leaning into his touch as she pouted.

“I... I thought you might not have wanted to see me.”

“Ridiculous,” he tusked right before his lips claimed hers.

It became messy almost immediately, the wet, hot slide of their mouths fueling her arousal, and she whined, clinging to him. He lifted her against the door, and she quickly wrapped her legs around his waist, panting as he trailed kisses down her neck, marking her skin and claiming her repeatedly.

His touch was as fiery as it had been the night before, reigniting the embers she had carried the whole day when she had been away from him. His voice husked her name as he kneaded her flesh, playfully nibbling at her earlobe and relishing how quickly she came undone.

“Simon –” she gasped as her fingers weaved through his hair.
“Simon, the bed. Now. Please.”

He listened well, carrying her back to the bed, settling her gently on the sheets, and leaning down to keep kissing her as he undid his breeches. He had taken her dressing gown at some point without her realization, and it now lay in a heap by the door, leaving her with nothing but her night dress on.

Simon didn't take it off, simply pushing it up to her hips and parting her thighs, his movements gentle and careful as if he were unwrapping a present. Victoria was already so wet and ready for him, eager to be filled by him and very nearly begging for it. Luckily, he heard her without her having to utter a single word, pushing into his silky head in one fluid motion. A shudder wracked her body, and she moaned deeply, scrambling to find something to hold onto as he set a brutal pace, thrusting in her hard and deep.

“My God,” he groaned, deep and low. “You feel... incredible.”

Every stroke ripped little sounds from her mouth until she was on the verge of ruin, spouting absolute nonsense, aware of nothing but the closeness between them. Suddenly he pulled himself out, flipping her onto her stomach, pulling her up by her hips with his knees inside her thighs, spreading her open. When he thrust back in, Victoria could swear she saw stars, this new position offering him a deeper reach than he had before.

“S-Simon –” she gasped, fingers gripping tightly onto the sheets. “Simon – wait – please –”

His hands wandered down her back, over the delicious curve of her hip and thigh, then skimmed along her torso, moving up to her breasts, his grip turning a little rough as his hand remained there, using it to bring her back onto his shaft. Her hands were too weak to hold her up, so she leaned on her elbows, panting with her face pressed into the bed as he fondled her breasts, tweaking the sensitive tips, relentlessly ramming into her.

“Beautiful.” He whispered in awe. “You take me so well, Petal.” Her undoing had begun, paired with his praises, the

feel of him inside her and his burning grip on her skin. “You sound perfect, begging for me, asking for more. And I can never say no to you.”

It did not take her too long to teeter off the brink and fall into the abyss of pleasure, the sensation ripping through her so hard she gasped. Victoria was aware of a few things besides her reeling mind, pounding heart, quivering body, and Simon, still chasing his own release. She felt too weak to keep up with his strokes and just let him use her to sate his desire, whining when he clasped her hips and pulled her hard into his final thrust.

She felt him pulse inside her, sighing when he rested his forehead on the back of her neck, inhaling deeply. Eventually, he rolled off her, laying on his side the way he had the night before. Victoria crawled a little to lay closer by his side, kissing him lazily. He smiled against her lips, and she could not help but smile back, dropping onto the bed with a content sigh, letting her body melt into the sheets.

“I have a question.” She said after a little while.

“That does not surprise me in the slightest,” he teased, nuzzling the side of her face.

She poked at his chin in retaliation, then proceeded to ask anyway because he had not denied her.

“Is it strange that this is all I want to do now? Just... be with you like this. All the time, if I could.”

“You truly are something else,” he chuckled, taking her hand and pressing kisses along her knuckles.

“Simon,” she frowned. “I’m quite serious.”

“I know. I did not say it was a bad thing. And to answer your question... no. I do not think it is strange at all. I feel the very same way. You would not leave my mind at all today. All my thoughts were consistently turning in your direction. I wanted to see you, to feel you.” He kissed her sweetly, whispering. “To taste you. I missed you as well.”

“Oh,” Victoria said eloquently, blushing deeply. “That’s – good. I’m glad to know we are on the same page.”

He snorted. “You are truly ridiculous.”

“And you are mean. Yet you do not hear me complain about it every other moment, do you?” she mumbled, feeling sleepy.

“I meant it in a positive light, Petal.” He assured her, scooping her into his arms, pressing a kiss to her temple, and smiling as she positively preened.

“How so?”

He faltered, uncertain and a little scared all of a sudden. She must have sensed something was amiss because she raised her head to look at him, concern quickly beginning to erase all the warmth of being with him.

“Simon?”

“I... I never really enjoyed this. Being with someone this intimately. The only person I’ve ever known was my wife and Elena... she made me feel like I had done something wrong after we had bedded. She was always... eager before the act. And then afterward, she would treat me as though I had offended her. It often left me weary and confused, and I came to... dislike the whole thing. Because I felt... insufficient.”

“Goodness, Simon, that is far from the truth,” Victoria said, aghast, rising slightly.

“I did not think so. What matters is being able to make the experience pleasurable for your significant other, no?”

“That is not all there is! Yes, you want to make the other person feel good, but you should also desire a release for yourself, for your enjoyment. Take you and me, for instance – but forget about me for a moment. I have already made my stance on the matter clear repeatedly. Focus on yourself. Did you enjoy being with me?”

The question was absurd because it asked him to bare his mind so plainly, and if he did not choose his words carefully, he might clue her in on the state of his heart. But still... he wished to be honest with her, just as she had been with him.

“I did. Very much so.” He paused. “Did you enjoy being with me?”

“Simon, I am beginning to get the sense that you do not listen to me. I quite literally told you moments ago that if I could, this is all I would want to do. Just you and I and this wonderful bed.”

She was so... *brazen* that it amused him greatly, as much as it soothed his frayed nerves.

“I do not know why your late wife behaved that way, but I assure you, I like this. I enjoy this. And I would like us to do it as many times as possible. Just so you know.”

He laughed lightly as he cupped her cheek, his thumb stroking the soft underside of her jaw.

“You are truly so ridiculous.”

He felt her face work out a grin, and could nearly feel the glare as she stared at his lips.

“I’m starting to think you enjoy that about me.”

“I think I just might.”

Chapter Seventeen



Simon's life had taken quite a turn recently.

It was strange how he had lived in the darkness for so long, days and nights blending in a mundane flow of nothingness, and all of a sudden, his world was brighter, far more vibrant than ever.

All because of Victoria.

She was a flame, gradually consuming every part of him, down to the very core of his soul, and remaking him into something else – a different being he felt he could accept as himself. She was there when he awoke, pressing soft kisses to his face and lips, whispering words of encouragement that kept him together throughout most of the day.

At night, she called his name as he claimed her over and over again, welcoming each stroke and grind, as eager to receive his imprint as he was to give it, to make her his own. He constantly longed to feel her against him, swallow her moans and pretty sounds of pleasure, share his body's warmth with her, and craved to run his fingers through her hair and feel her smile on his skin.

Still, the danger of his current feelings growing into more continued to loom overhead, threatening him with imminent destruction if he did not distance them. But Simon could not muster the strength to pull away, could not bear to go one day without hearing her voice, without feeling her ever sure and gentle touch, without drowning in her soft, sweet scent.

He only hoped he had not yet crossed the path of no return.

Her presence alone strengthened him, quietly encouraging him to take her advice and attempt to reconnect with his daughter on his own accord. Not wanting to involve Victoria in a bid to be as independent with his plan as possible, he asked Cyrus to fetch him the things he would need.

“Beads, Your Grace?” Cyrus frowned, a little confused by the request.

Simon shifted in his seat slightly, trying to pretend he was not feeling unsure about this idea.

“Yes. Katherine should have some kept somewhere, and if she is not using them at the moment, I would like to have them. Just for a bit.”

“Would you like me to ask her –”

“No!” Simon cleared his throat, feeling stressed. “That – That will not be necessary. It’s... It’s meant to be a surprise. A gift. Can you procure them without letting either her or the Duchess know?”

Cyrus smiled, finally understanding the Duke's intention.

"Of course, Your Grace. I'll instruct a maid to fetch them immediately – within discretion."

Simon nodded, relieved as Cyrus took his leave immediately, muttering a prayer for strength and patience, hoping that this time would be different from the last.

In less than twenty minutes, his butler returned with two maids in tow, bearing what he had requested. Cyrus quickly made some room on the Duke's desk and arranged the beads and wires, waiting for the maids to take their leave before inquiring,

"Would that be all, Your Grace?"

"Hmm..." Simon stared down at the array, blinking rapidly behind his glasses. "Actually, could you point out which colors of beads are where?"

"Certainly, Your Grace." Cyrus nodded and moved forward.

He indicated the positions of the beads according to their colors and sizes, and then he offered to just pass along whatever Simon needed when he required it.

"No," Simon shook his head, reaching into the container his memory recalled contained the blue medium-sized beads, according to Cyrus' information. "I'd like to do this myself."

Thank you. But – I might need some help tying the string later.”

“All right, Your Grace. I’ll be right outside if you need me.”
Cyrus bowed.

“Feel free to take a walk,” Simon mumbled, focused on stringing his first bead. “I am fairly certain I’ll be here a while.”

He heard Cyrus leave, but his attention never strayed from the small, smooth objects between the fingers of his right hand and the thin string clutched in his left hand. Having Cyrus help might have been faster and less likely to yield errors, but he wished to do this himself because he simply wanted to give his own efforts to win the affection of his daughter.

Victoria had been right; he had been consistently taking the easy way out, relying on others to do the job he should have taken on from the start. His disability might serve as a handicap, but he did not need to cling to it as one in an attempt to evade his duties. He had not done so deliberately, but he might as well have, with how often it served as an excuse to stay away from his daughter, feeling as though he would not be half the parent she needed because he could not see.

Simon had never realized how selfish he had been, how he had utterly abandoned his only child to face the world on her own because he was too afraid that he would not measure up to her standards. And if what Victoria had said was indeed true, then all Katherine wanted was her father by her side, regardless of his flaws. And rather than being there for her, he had disregarded her efforts.

No more, he told himself as he managed to string the second bead after seven excruciating minutes of hard work. I won't make her wait anymore. I will have to step forward, for once, and reach out to her.

He was not completely confident in his plan, but he hoped it would work out nonetheless and was determined to see it through till the end.

Simon had quickly lost track of time – the only sign of how long he had been there being the ache in his neck, the numbness of his fingertips, and the fact that Cyrus had been in his study twice to ask if he wanted anything to eat or drink – but after what felt like hours of grueling, hard labor, he could tell he had achieved his goal.

Cyrus came in as soon as his name was called, and Simon clenched the ends of the string as tightly as he could – he had lost his progress about five times earlier when he accidentally let go of an end of a string, and the last time that happened, he had contemplated jumping off the balcony – speaking tiredly.

“I need you to tie the ends for me. Be careful – if you drop it and ruin all my labor, I will kill you and then myself. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Cyrus assured grimly, his fingers carefully plucking the proof of Simon’s efforts from his hands.

Cyrus seemed experienced because not up to a minute afterward, Simon heard the snip of scissors, and the butler said,

“It is done, Your Grace. Knotted securely, and might I say, what splendid work this is.”

Simon perked up at the praise. “Really?”

“*Eh...*” Cyrus stared at the bracelet in his hands, taking in the mismatched colors, designs, and sizes of the beads, smiling a little as he said. “Ultimately, it is a sign of your intention, and that alone is very impressive.”

The Duke frowned at the change in tone. “What do you mean? Does it look bad? Tell me, honestly.”

Cyrus sighed. “It is... certainly a creative-looking project.”

“Cyrus.”

“I mean – I *personally* would not wear it, even if I was *threatened* to do so –”

Simon let out a laugh that sounded suspiciously as though he were about to burst into tears, and Cyrus quickly added.

“– but this is not for me. It is for Lady Katie, who loves you with her whole heart. I’m sure she would brandish this proudly the moment after you give it to her.”

Cyrus’ words seemed to come from a place of last-minute desperation, an afterthought, but as it stood, Simon was too tired to think about it too much, asking instead,

“Is it dinner time yet?”

The butler let out a sigh of relief. “In about half an hour, Your Grace.”

“Request that a place be set for me. I will be joining my wife and daughter for dinner.” Simon said, holding his hand out for his creation, closing his fist around the bracelet when Cyrus lowered it into his palm.

“Excellent idea, Your Grace.”

Simon waved him away and leaned back, closing his eyes in a bid to rest before what might be the most tense dinner he had had in a while.



Victoria was pleasantly surprised to find Katie standing outside the door to her room as she stepped out to head to the dining room for dinner.

“Hello, darling. To what do I owe this beautiful surprise?” she beamed at the child.

Katie shrugged, looking shy as she clutched the skirts of her dress and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“I... I just wanted to walk to dinner with you. All my lessons kept me quite busy, and I just... I wanted to ask about your

day.”

Victoria’s heart warmed up, and she could not resist the urge to reach for the girl, cupping her cheeks gently and pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“You,” she breathed, utterly in love with the child. “Are absolutely precious.”

Katie giggled, blushing brightly, and Victoria knew then and there that she would fight an army for the little angel.

The girl had been rather attached to her lately, spending any and all of her free time with the Duchess, eager to hear stories of her own childhood, content to place her head in Victoria’s lap, and often fell asleep after minutes of her fingers combing through her dark locks. Victoria could tell all their moments were a sign of Katie’s full acceptance of the Duchess and her desire to have an elder she could relate to.

As honored and thankful as she was, Victoria felt disappointed in her inability to convince the Duke to step forward and give spending time with his daughter another chance. She had wanted to believe that he merely needed some time to think and figure out just how to approach the matter, encouraged by the quiet questions he asked about Katie during their nights together, but he had not brought up any intention or asked Victoria for her assistance.

So, she was stuck hoping and praying that this little girl would eventually get her father returned to her the way she deserved.

Katie had begun telling her about her latest embroidery adventures as they approached the dining room, her eyes shining with excitement as she relayed what had transpired during her lesson earlier.

“– and she said I was a quick learner! She seemed very impressed by the way the colors blended together, and I told her I simply did it the way you suggested I do it, and she said – Papa?”

Victoria blinked at her in confusion, then let her gaze follow the direction Katie was looking in, surprised to find the Duke standing next to the dining table. For a moment, no one moved, just staring at each other silently. Victoria could not help but sigh, speaking up before accidentally laughing at how awkward Simon looked standing there.

“Good evening, Your Grace.”

The Duke jerked like he had been poked and nodded.

“Good evening,” he slightly turned his head toward his daughter. “Good evening, Katherine. I thought – is it all right if I join you for dinner?”

Katie frowned, glancing up at Victoria briefly before saying,

“I hardly think I can deny you. This is – after all – your house, Father.”

These two will drive me to an early grave, Victoria bemoaned silently, resting a hand on Katie's shoulder and leaning down to whisper quickly.

“He wasn't asking for permission to have dinner here. He wanted to know if you would not mind if he had dinner with us – in our company.”

“Oh,” Katie's eyes widened, and she looked back at her father. “Oh. Yes, you can. I... I'd like it if you joined us.”

Simon, who had begun to look like a wilting flower at Katie's initial response, brightened instantly, smiling gently at them.

“Thank you. And –” he stuck his hand into his pocket to retrieve something, slowly stepping closer, “I wanted to apologize for my behavior last week. I didn't – it was not as though I did not enjoy spending time with you. I was just frustrated with my lack of progress and how abhorrently atrocious my skills at beadwork were –”

“You did not have to feel bad about that,” Katie interrupted softly. “Aunty Victoria was also *really* bad at first, but she eventually worked up to decent. You would have gotten there at some point.

“Decent? I'm *just* decent? That's hardly fair – wait, this is not about me. Please, Simon, go on.” Victoria urged, silently bemoaning her own apparent lack of skills.

Simon chuckled lightly and continued. “Still, I should have spoken to you and asked for your assistance rather than

storming off. I seem... to keep doing that – making mistakes and missteps when it comes to you. You are so important to me, Katherine. I love you and only want to care and provide for you, but saying that hardly makes a difference if I have not been forthcoming in my actions. And I am very sorry for being absent and making you doubt your importance to me.”

He held a closed fist to her, and when she held her hands under it, he dropped the bracelet he made into her palms.

“It... it very likely does not make up for my years of neglectful behavior, and it certainly won’t erase all the hurt I’ve caused, but I hope it proves that I am willing to try and do better for you. With you. If you’ll have me.”

Katie stared at the bracelet momentarily and then looked at her father with teary eyes.

“Oh, Papa –”

“Why does it sound like she’s on the verge of tears?” Simon asked Victoria, alarmed. “Is it that atrocious? I’m sorry, I’ll have Cyrus help me next time – *oof*.”

Simon blinked, slowly dropping his gaze down to where his daughter was pressed against him, her face buried in his torso as her arms tightened around him.

“You made this? For me?” Katie asked, her voice muffled by his clothes.

His heart squeezed as he rested his hand atop her hair, patting gently as he said, “Yes, I did.”

Katie nodded against him, sniffing a little as she pulled back, slipping the bracelet onto her wrist.

“Thank you, Papa. It is absolutely perfect, and I love it. I will never take it off.”

Simon laughed, reaching out to caress her cheek lightly.

“You might outgrow it, though. I’ll make you another when that happens.”

Katie stared up at him hopefully.

“Do you promise?”

“I promise,” he nodded with a smile.

Katie grinned and hugged him again, practically melting in his embrace. She lifted her head moments later to ask softly,

“Can I sit with you? By your side, for dinner?”

Simon paused and said, “We should sit together. All three of us.”

Victoria took a step back, suddenly feeling as though she was intruding.

“Oh, that’s not necessary. You both should –”

“Please?” Katie pouted, blinking up at the Duchess.

“Please?” Simon echoed, holding out a hand to her.

Victoria hesitated for a moment, then relented, slipping her hand into Simon’s and allowing herself to be gently tugged closer to him, not expecting him to kiss her cheek, chaste and sweet.

“Thank you. For taking care of her. And for encouraging me to do the same.”

Victoria smiled and leaned against him, basking in the beauty of the warmth that surrounded all three of them.

“You are absolutely welcome.”

Dinner was a cheerful affair, filled with Katie’s laughter and Simon’s pleased remarks as he got to know his daughter, finally close enough to assess her well-being for himself. He looked proud of how learned she was, impressed by the knowledge she shared, and in awe of how she acted.

Victoria watched them, content to observe rather than engage, touched each time they included her in the conversation. It felt

as though... they were becoming a family, just as she had hoped they would.

And for the first time since she wound up at Cloveshire Castle, she could not wait to see what the future held for them.

Chapter Eighteen



The days that followed felt like a dream to Victoria.

Every sunrise greeted her with the promise of laughter and warmth, with so many lovely, good feelings interwoven into the hours she would spend up and about.

Simon and Katie spent a lot of time together, getting comfortable with each other's company in ways that left Victoria feeling so thankful that neither gave up on the other. Most of the time, they wanted her there with them, and at first, she declined, insisting that they would bond much better without her in the picture.

"We would not have gotten to this point without you," Simon pointed out softly, reaching for her hand. "Please, don't leave us."

She had blinked up at him, a little stunned by the serious edge his voice had taken.

"Simon... you know I'm not going anywhere, right? I'll see you both at dinner. I just thought you should have tea with her,

just the two of you.”

“Y-Yes. I knew that,” Simon coughed awkwardly, stomping down on the mild panic that had taken over his heart. “I just – things are still a little odd. We’re getting along better, but it all feels better with you there. I feel better with you there.”

His words had felt so comforting and reassuring, as she had begun to feel as though she would no longer be needed now that she had fulfilled the task she had been brought into the household to do. Stifling her relief, she grinned and reached for his hand.

“Is this because she wanted to try paper crafts with you soon?”

Simon groaned and said playfully, “I have no clue how I ended up with a daughter so artistically gifted when I can barely get a good enough grip on my cutlery.”

It was precious watching them together. Simon doted on Katie endlessly, fussing over her well-being in the softest way, always asking if she was doing all right if she wanted anything, and if she was fine spending her free time with him.

Katie flourished under her father’s attention. It was as though now that she finally had it, she was doing all she could to make up for lost time, telling him everything she could not, regaling him with her feelings about the books she was reading, and sharing her thoughts on matters she had heard about, still a little on the shy side whenever he made it so blatantly clear that he adored her.

It was rewarding for Victoria to experience how much they'd grown past the animosity and assumptions to finally relate and get to know one another. It was adorable to see how alike they were when they were side by side, both of them apparently sharing the same distaste for carrot, both of them bearing a stubborn lock of hair that fell against their forehead – which Victoria had witnessed them flick back with their pointer finger simultaneously as if they had planned it.

They also expressed disappointment the same way, with droopy shoulders and pitiful pouts – something she had received the full brunt of when she told them it was not a good idea to have dinner outside without prior planning or notice.

“Let’s have a picnic in the garden instead,” she suggested placatingly, nearly laughing at how their faces lit up. “We can do it tomorrow. I’ll have the cook prepare your favorite foods, and we can do whatever activity you want. How does that sound?”

Katie had clapped her hands excitedly and launched into a rant about how much fun it was going to be, but Simon had only given her a sweet smile, soft around the edges in a way that made her heart hurt in a strangely good way – a sensation that was becoming more and more frequent these days.

It was all she could think about during dinner and afterward, as they tangled in his sheets, breathless and hot as he pulled her off the edge, over and over again, until her skin tingled and his name echoed in her ears.

The next day’s weather was perfect, bright, and warm as if the universe could feel how desperate she was for this to go well. She had already met with the cook to plan the foods he was to make, so after breakfast, she wanted to check in on him and

ensure everything was coming along well. Having taken the day off from her lessons, Katie made to follow her, but Victoria dissuaded her gently.

“It’s meant to be a surprise. I know the plan is not – given that I had brought it up to you and your father yesterday, but I want the preparations to be so. Just – go and keep your father company? I shall find you both in a bit.”

Katie pouted at first, then agreed when she remembered that she had wanted to ask him for permission to venture further into the library to read some of the more advanced copies of literature. After she wandered away, Victoria let out a breath of relief and turned to Linda.

“Is it all set?”

Linda nodded. “Yes, Your Grace. We were able to find the perfect spot in the shade. As soon as the cook finishes the food, we will arrange it on the blanket, along with the supplies for painting and paper crafts.”

“Excellent. I really want them both to enjoy this.” Victoria sighed.

“They will,” Linda assured kindly. “Of course, they will. Everything you’ve done since you arrived here has been for their good. And you do it so well, making it nearly impossible to miss your good intentions or even not appreciate your hard work. We – the other members of the staff and I – are not blind not to notice just how much better things have been since your arrival. You tried everything you could to make Lady Katie happier. You understood her better than anyone else would

have hoped to. Even the Duke – he looks much more at peace these days. He also seems happier, and that’s because you have brought him and his daughter together. You truly are phenomenal, Your Grace.”

Her words were awfully kind, especially since Victoria had begun to wonder if her presence would still be required now that she had done the job she was asked to. She could feel the Duke and his daughter carving out space in her heart and settling comfortably into it, and for the first time in such a long time, she felt as though she had finally found a place to call home.

She wanted Simon and his daughter, to be in their lives forever, a part of this family, through and through – every bit the Duke’s wife and the Lady’s mother.

Victoria hoped her greed would not undo things. Not when they had finally gotten so good. Not when they were also going to get better really soon.

She smiled at Linda gratefully and said, “Thank you. For helping me do so much, for looking out for me since I arrived. I’ll keep working for their happiness and caring for them. I hope you will still be caring for me all the while.”

Linda’s eyes softened, and she curtsied. “Of course, Your Grace. You shall have my company and care for as long as you need it.”



Katie’s excitement was contagious.

Simon could feel his eagerness increasing every second as he listened to his daughter tell him she could not wait for their picnic.

“I wonder what Aunty Victoria has prepared for us. She said it was a surprise. I can’t wait to see it; her surprises are always really nice.”

“Is that so?” he mused with a smile, discerning that she had nodded from how her blurry figure had jerked.

“Mm-hmm! She’s really thoughtful and perceptive.”

“Perceptive. That’s a very sophisticated word. I’m impressed.” He teased lightly.

“I know a lot of big words. I am, after all, always reading.” She raised her head, sounding proud one moment and unsure the next. “O-Or... do you not want me to? Is it... too unladylike?”

Simon quickly shook his head. “I do not care for such standards, Princess. You are free to do whatever your heart desires, Katherine. As long as you are happy, I am satisfied.”

Katie paused, then shifted closer to him. “May I ask you something, Papa?”

“You may.”

“Why is it... Why do you always call my name like that? Everyone else calls me *Katie*, but you never use that nickname. Do you not like it?”

“Kath – no! That is not why. It’s –” Simon exhaled forcefully, trying not to panic. “Do you know you were named after Queen Catherine of Aragon?”

Katie’s eyes widened. “N-No. I did not.”

“Your mother and I had talked about it briefly before you were born. I felt you would be special, and I would want to live my life for you, catering to everything you would want, as one would for a royal being. So, we wanted to give you a name that would define just how regal and important you were meant to be. It is not that I do not like that you are also called Katie. I simply want it to be known that you are as important as royalty to me. You might not be the nation’s queen, but you will always be my princess. Calling you Katherine was my way of reminding myself that – showing you that. I’m sorry it didn’t come across as clearly as I’d hoped.”

Katie frowned and moved even closer, wrapping her arms around her father’s side.

“I’m sorry I did not ask sooner. I’m sorry for doubting that you cared for me deeply.”

Simon dropped a kiss on her head, relishing the feeling of love that threatened to drown him.

“I’m sorry I was not more forthcoming about that and made you doubt me. I am also sorry for doubting you as well.”

“I love you, Papa.”

At that moment, the Duke nearly died of joy, pulling back a little to hold her properly, pouring years’ worth of missed affection and adoration into his embrace.

“I love you, Princess.”

A knock sounded at the door, and when Simon called at whoever was on the other side to enter, the door opened, and Victoria poked her head through the opening.

“We’re all set. Are you ready?” she smiled at them.

“She’s been ready all day, it seems.” Simon grinned, instantly putting on a blank expression when his daughter whined in complaint.

“You have been excited since you woke up, dearest,” Victoria agreed, laughing a little when Katie pouted. “All right, I’m sorry. Let’s go see it, shall we?”

With a cheer, Katie stood and rushed out of the door, slowing down slightly when Victoria called after her not to run. She faced her husband and held out a hand.

“Shall we?”

Simon paused, his heart reacting the way it had begun frequently these days, ever yearning and aching for her. Victoria noticed his hesitation and faltered, suddenly worried.

But before she could voice her concerns, he took her hand, his fingers intertwining with her in a perfect, seamless fit that left her slightly breathless, as his touch always did.

He smiled at her, warm and handsome.

“We shall.”



The moment Katie saw the basket, she let out a scream of delight.

“Oh, the cookies! There’s also cake, cucumber sandwiches, and – paper?” she stopped, confused.

“I thought we could try making some paper animals using origami techniques,” Victoria explained, then pointed at the set of water paints. “I also wanted to give this to you as a gift for doing exceedingly well in your embroidery lessons.”

Katie dropped her gaze to the watercolors, stared momentarily, and then screamed again, running forward to hug Victoria.

“Oh, thank you, Aunty Victoria! Thank you so much!” she gushed happily before wandering back to the blanket, settling

down on it daintily with an awestruck expression.

“Please warn me if she is going to scream again,” Simon requested with a wince.

“I’m not sure if I’ll be able to do that, dear husband, as I am also taken by surprise whenever she does it,” Victoria laughed, leading him to the blanket.

The afternoon turned out to be quite a fun affair. Katie talked almost nonstop, happily listing off the things she could not wait to paint – one of which was her father, a statement she had made when he had apologized for being unable to properly witness and appreciate her paintings.

“That’s all right, Papa. I can just paint you, so you’ll be involved either way.”

It was so incredibly sweet that Victoria nearly burst into tears.

The origamis were also exciting, especially when Simon complained about having to do yet another handcraft when he had barely gotten over the mental scars the last one had left him with.

“I cannot believe you,” he said under his breath as he attempted to fold a piece of paper diagonally, then undid it to fold it across in the opposite direction. “I thought you cared for me. Why would you make me do this again when we have established that my carrot-like fingers cannot handle such delicate work?”

Victoria giggled and gingerly shifted closer to him, gently taking the paper from him, softly saying. "Here, let me."

She began to fold it for him, breath stuttering when he moved to press his chest against her back, his chin hooked over her shoulder as a hand came up to her waist.

"Thank you."

It sounded like it was for more than just helping him make a paper bunny, and she smiled, whispering quietly.

"You are welcome, Simon."

Eventually, they took a break to eat, feeding each other from the generous spread of delicious food, Simon graciously remarking about how much he liked the apple crumble and Katie enjoying the sandwiches, even though they contained carrots. After their meal, they lay on the blanket and talked about everything and anything.

Katie expressed her desire to go out more, and Simon offered to accompany her.

"There's a really pretty lake not too far from the castle. I can teach you to swim in it."

"Really?" Katie gasped. "Well... could you also teach me the pianoforte? I really want to be able to play like you someday."

Simon beamed at her. “Of course, Princess. In fact, we can start now.”

They were both on their way inside before Victoria could realize what was happening. She shrugged and dropped back to the blanket, staring up at the sky as she basked in the feeling of contentment and peace. A few minutes later, she thought to check on them and headed back inside, soon lured to the drawing room by the sound of beautiful music.

When she arrived, she found them sitting side by side on the piano stool, with both of their hands hovering delicately above the piano keys. She didn’t move further, just lingering in the doorway and listening to Simon’s gentle coaching, watching Katie eagerly attempt to follow his instructions. They were doing so well together, finally closing off the gaps the past and misunderstandings had created, and she couldn’t be prouder.

She smiled softly, allowing the gentle tinkering music to wash over her as she wished,

“I hope this lasts forever.”



The joy did not fade, even as she walked over to Simon’s room, as she had become accustomed to doing a lot lately. In fact, she felt happier as she knocked once and then walked in, the happiness practically dripping out of her skin as she fell into his arms and kissed him deeply.

He responded as he always did, easily giving in to her, desiring to yield and satisfy her however he could, groaning as their tongues mingled and warmth leaked into his groin.

She broke the kiss but stayed close, whispering against his chin.

“I’m happy, Simon. I’m really, really happy.”

He nuzzled along her cheek and hummed. “Really?”

“Really,” she sighed, leaning back to tell him, “I am with child. And it is a little terrifying and exciting – more exciting than anything else because I love you. I... I love you so much, Simon. And I cannot wait to raise this child with you.”

Simon stiffened beneath her touch and stepped back, putting some distance between them with a grim expression. Confused, she tried to reach for him.

“Simon –”

“That was not what we agreed upon. I-I knew that laying with you meant giving you a child, but love–love was never an option for us. You cannot – should not love me. It won’t end well for you.”

Fear twisted around within her, quickly morphing into anger, and she snapped.

“Why do you say such? It is not as though you do not love me, too! I’ve seen the way you –”

“Just because we share a bed every night does not mean I am in love with you. You should know better than to come to that sort of conclusion.” He stated coldly, the lies making him nauseous.

Victoria gaped at him, feeling insulted and hurt.

How could he? After everything –

“You are despicable. How can you just – stand there and speak to me as though I am a child? As though I have not done everything I could to make you happy? It’s no wonder your late wife went mad! I can imagine how hard it must have been if she loved you, but you ran from her affections like the *coward* you are.” She spat.

“Don’t you *dare* speak about her! You have no idea what –”

The knocking at his door cut off Simon’s words. He tried to ignore it, but the insistent knocks quickly transcended into banging, and he grew irritated, brushing past her as he marched to the door and swung it open.

“What?”

The nanny glanced between them nervously, urged to speak by Cyrus.

“I-It’s Lady Katie, Your Grace. She is missing.”

Chapter Nineteen



Simon felt his heart drop, fast and alarming.

The nanny stared at him, wondering if he had heard her when he stood stock still for a moment. Finally, he croaked out a question.

“... What? What do you mean Katherine is missing?”

“We can’t seem to find her anywhere, Your Grace. She – she was supposed to be getting ready for bed. I only stepped out of her room for a few minutes to retrieve some of the leftover papers from the picnic earlier – she had requested them, and I –”

Simon cut the nanny off, shooing her from the doorway impatiently. When she stepped out of his way, he hurried down to Katherine’s room, flinging the door open.

“Katherine? If you’re hiding somewhere, it is not amusing.” He called out, panic rising in his chest.

He heard footsteps behind him but didn't turn, knowing only one other person would share his urgency. Turning around, he spoke quickly, unable to hide the alarm in his voice.

“Victoria – i-is she – please tell me she’s in a corner, and I just don’t know because I *can’t* see. Please...”

Warm hands braced against his arms, rubbing up and down, not exactly calming him down, but granting him some stability with the knowledge that he was not alone.

“Simon... she’s not in here. The nanny said she was only gone for a moment, and when she returned, Katie was gone. They’d been searching for her for the better part of half an hour – because they thought she was still in the castle. They only came to us when... when it became clear she was not on the castle grounds.”

It felt like the floor was falling apart from under him. He stepped back, stumbling and nearly falling over – would have if not for Victoria’s grip on him, steadying and holding him up.

Half... half an hour? She had been missing for that long, and he had not known it? *What if* –

“Simon – *Simon, don’t*. Do not crumble. She needs you – us – now more than ever. We need to think, plan, and search for her, and we cannot do any of that if we let ourselves get lost in our fright.” She pressed a hand against his chest, right over his heart, and added. “I am scared too. I, too, am lost. I do not know how this happened, but we will find out together and bring our daughter back home. Do you hear me?”

Simon inhaled shakily, nodding and holding onto her words, letting his body mold over hers as she gently embraced him, patting his back.

“I’ll look around her room,” Victoria muttered softly. “Perhaps there is some clue on what happened.”

He let her go and moved aside so she could come in, hoping to God she would see something that could give them some clarity – something he would not be able to. Her idea was proven right when she glanced around the room and noticed something out of place almost immediately.

“Her window is open,” Victoria muttered, stepping further into the room.

Victoria turned to the doorway, catching the nanny’s eye.

“Was this open earlier? Before you left the room – do you remember?”

The nanny shook her head. “It was a little cold earlier in the evening, so I shut it during dinner time so the room would be warmer for her when she was ready to sleep.”

The Duchess pondered for a moment and faced the window, gasping a little.

“What? What is it?” Simon questioned, moving towards her.

“Katie... about two weeks ago, that night we heard her scream – she told me she saw something by her window. I-I thought she had a nightmare, and I dismissed it. What if there was actually someone there?”

Simon’s brows furrowed, and he held a hand out to her.

“No, wait – what exactly happened that night?”

Victoria inhaled deeply. “I came in to check on her, and she told me she had seen something by her window. She said it looked like it was trying to come in, but I didn’t find anyone or anything when I checked. So, I told her it was probably a nightmare.”

As she spoke, she felt worse over dismissing the child’s claims. *What if someone had really been there that night?* What if the same person had taken her?

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Simon hissed, worried.

“I didn’t – I really thought it was nothing. There was no one there, I checked!” Victoria pressed her hands together, trying to calm herself. “I-I’m sorry.”

Simon reached for her and pulled her to his chest, mumbling against her temple. “It’s not your fault. It is not.”

Turning his head to look over his shoulder, he said to Cyrus.

“Form a search party. We need to find our daughter.”



Addressing the men had been extremely difficult for Simon.

It was hard for him to rely on others for the simplest things, which is why he had trained himself to be able to cope with his weakness within the walls of his home. Not only was he unaware of when it happened, he was also unable to go out and look for her.

Victoria had stayed close to him the whole time, holding his hand and making quiet suggestions about what the search party should be informed of when they arrived. She stayed close when he spoke to the men, squeezing his hand when he fought against the lump in his throat as he begged their help.

“She is my... *our* only child. And she means the world to us. She was taken from her home – the one place she should be the safest. And I will always be sorry for being unable to protect her. But I want a chance to make up for it. I want to be able to work towards ensuring that it never happens again. So please... *please* help me find my Katherine. She’s frighteningly intelligent, kind, talented at crafts, and she – she’s always patient with me when I make mistakes. She is my life. Please bring her back to me.”

Mr. Grey – the head of the search party – stepped forward and held out his hand to Simon, promising when the Duke took it.

“We will do everything we can, Your Grace. Trust us, we will leave no stone unturned.”

“Thank you,” Simon said earnestly.

The constables had also been summoned and it had been a whole other draining affair to endure their questioning – because while they were routine inquiries on when they had noticed Katie was missing and their whereabouts around that time, there was an underlying tone that seemed to point the blame at her parents who had not noticed she was gone, until it was too late.

When all parties had taken their leave, Simon went to sit in Katherine’s room, suddenly needing to be around her effects. Victoria joined him wordlessly, sitting by his side on her bed, hurt and torn at how to help him. The air that surrounded them hung heavy with fear and tension, stemming from their conversation and the horrifying discovery that had come up afterward.

Victoria felt regretful over her words, still sore over his rejection but not wanting to push him if he decided he was not ready to admit that he felt the same way. It was just difficult when she committed to loving someone who would rather lie and hurt her than face the fact that he cared for her deeply.

Still, she did not want this to haunt them, desperate to focus all her energy on Katie’s predicament.

“I hate this. I should be out there, searching for her too. But I can’t because there’s only so much a cripple can do.” he stated suddenly with a bitter laugh.

“Simon –”

“She deserves better. A better father... Just as you deserve a better husband. Someone whole and capable. Someone who can stand a chance against the odds of fate and life. This... this is precisely why I am better off alone. I can’t – can’t protect or defend anyone the way they should be. All I’ll inevitably be able to do is let the people I care about – the way I’ve let Katie down... The way I let Elena down too, all those years ago.”

Victoria’s heart dropped hard and fast, ashamed to face a claim she had flung in his face without tact – an unacceptable and underserved behavior by anyone, least of all him.

“No, Simon. That was not your fault.”

“Who else could have been responsible? It was always about me from the start. I was in such haste to provide my father with an heir to prevent him from worrying, so I married the first person he suggested to me. I cared for her, even – even if it wasn’t love. I tried to do my best to make sure we had a good, amicable relationship – even though there was no desire or love for her on my part. After she had birthed Katherine, she began to change. I thought... I thought she might be stressed, as any new mother would be. But as time passed, she became violent, prone to fits of hysteria, and it only worsened along the line.”

“By the time the physicians came by for an evaluation, she had gone completely mad. She was too dangerous to be around Katherine, so she was locked up. One night... she escaped somehow and started a fire in the nursery. I could not lose my daughter – the thought of losing them both was something I could not bear. I was able to save Katherine, but –” he waved his hand before his eyes vaguely. “It wasn’t without a price – one I would gladly pay five times over if it meant I could save

her again. If I could have noticed Elena's behavior sooner – if I could have gotten her help on time, she might be alive today. Katherine would probably be here, safe and sound, as well. I can't help but think that every bad thing that has happened to my family is my fault.”

It was really disheartening to see the man she loved so brokenhearted and devastated, especially knowing she was part of the cause of his pain, with the memories she had dredged up and flung in his face. Slowly, she reached for his hand, blinking back tears as he let her fingers intertwine with his.

“I'm sorry... for what I said earlier. Regardless of what you said, I should have known better than to respond that way. It was pointlessly cruel,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Simon tensed and then sighed, dropping his shoulders.

“I deserved it.”

“No, Simon, you really did not. It was unfair and unkind of me to accuse you without knowing the full story. Even without an explanation, I should not have brought up such a painful memory for you like it was nothing. I am truly sorry. But I want you to know that none of this is your fault – not Katie's disappearance or her mother's death. There was no way you could have known things would become that dire. There was no way to know if she could have been saved. You did more than most would. You got her help and kept her close and safe. Even when she tried to kill you and Katie, you protected Katie as best as you could.

“I’m no expert, but I would like to believe that your actions up to this moment make you an exceptional father. I scolded you for not being more upfront about your love for Katie, but that does not mean I could not see that you were dedicated to her. I could tell she was your world, and even when her attitude and responses hurt you, you still only wanted her to be happy. You took me in and gave me a home. You are a kind and good person, as well as a wonderful father and a lovely husband. This moment does not change that because Katie will return to us. We will find her, no matter what.”

Simon nodded a little and then dropped his head onto her shoulder.

“Do you really believe so? Do you think she will be okay?”

Victoria squeezed his hand a little and said softly, “I do. She is an exceptional child. Stubborn, just like you. She is also strong and smart. I am sure she is doing just fine, and it is only a matter of moments before she is back here with us – convincing you to make her more paper animals.”

Simon chuckled a little.

“I’d make her a hundred paper animals if she wants. I just want her to come back.”

The Duchess pressed a kiss to his head, slowly stroking his hair and hoping that her actions were as comforting for him as they were for her.

“She will. I’ll remind you of this promise when she does.”

“Please, do.”



Sunrise greeted them with stiff limbs and bleary eyes that had barely gotten any rest the entire night. They stayed for hours, pressed together on Katie’s bed, seeking comfort in each other’s warmth, praying for the best while they fought to keep thoughts of the worst away.

Simon still felt useless, confined to his house instead of being out and about, calling his daughter’s name at the top of his lungs and searching high and low. Victoria could tell he was still bothered by it and knew he did not want to be constantly reassured. Instead, she tried to get him to hold himself together as best as she could.

“You should take a bath and eat something, Simon. You’ll need your strength to care for her when she returns,” she mumbled against his cheek, nuzzling against him.

“I can’t –”

“Try. Please. I will also go and make myself look presentable. Whoever has done this might expect us to crumble and lose our heads. But you are still the Duke of Sherrington, and I am your Duchess. We will not allow them the satisfaction of thinking they have broken us.” She stated assertively, curling her fingers into his shirt.

He put his hand over hers and spoke. “All right. I’ll do as you ask. Just... stay with me. I do not want to be alone.”

She smiled a little and kissed his forehead gently.

“You will not if you do not wish to be.”

They continued to stay together, taking strength and encouragement from the other's presence, their gazes reassuring and strengthening. Neither had any appetite, but Simon let Victoria feed him a few bites of her plate on the condition that she would finish the rest.

“You are carrying our child. You should not neglect yourself,” Simon said softly, not facing her direction.

That was the first time he had addressed the news she had shared since last night, and his words set a trail of heat around her heart. She nodded silently and made herself finish the rest of her food.

Mr. Grey dropped by around noon to inform them of the search party's progress, unfortunately arriving without any good news.

“We've searched the surrounding area, along with part of town. So far, there has been no sign of her. We plan to divide into groups later on, with a part of that focused on searching the town while the others will comb through the woods for her. But... I feel it is necessary to warn you, Your Graces, that those woods are quite dense, and if she is in there – if she was taken or wandered off by herself into those trees, it might take us days to find her.”

Simon's grip on Victoria's hand tightened to a point where it was almost unbearably painful, but she remained calm.

"Thank you for all you have done. We are truly very grateful for all your hard work. Please, continue searching for our daughter as best as possible." The Duchess said kindly.

"Thank you, Your Grace. Do not worry; we will not stop until she is found and returned home safely."

It was hard to hold onto their hope after his departure. They couldn't help but wonder if there was more to this than just a simple kidnapping. Whoever it was that took, Katie had to have known that his disappearance had been discovered by now – with how hard the search party was striving to find her.

The whole town was very likely aware that she was missing. So, if the goal was to obtain a ransom, why had no demands been made yet?

And if... perhaps this was about something *more... who* could be behind it? And *why*?

Cyrus knocked briefly and was given permission to enter the study; one look at his Duke and Duchess devastated him all over again and made him wish the information he had come to pass was good news.

"Yes, Cyrus?" Victoria prompted, noticing the mild reluctance on the man's face.

She was even more alarmed when he gave her an apologetic look before announcing.

“Lord Pembly and his brother and sister are here to see you, Your Graces.”

Chapter Twenty



Victoria frowned. “My cousins?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Cyrus replied with a grim expression.

“We are not in the mood to entertain visitors,” Simon stated, annoyance and exhaustion evident in his tone.

“I understand that, Your Grace. However, they expressed wanting to ensure the wellness of the Duchess, having heard of Lady Katie’s disappearance. And – with all due respect, Your Grace – they do not seem like the sort of people that like being turned away.” Cyrus pointed out.

Victoria agreed, all too familiar with the persistent nature of her cousins. The last thing she needed was for them to return later and bother Simon.

“You’re right. I’ll attend to them.” She said, rising to her feet.

Scarcely had she taken a step when Simon grabbed her wrist, keeping her in place.

“We’ll go together.”

Victoria frowned, reaching to rest her hand atop his.

“No, you do not have to. I can –”

“No,” Simon shook his head. “When we got married, I said I would ensure that you never had to face them on your own again. That has not changed. I will still put myself between you and them and shield you from their greed and bad habits. Although it might not be worth much, you still have my protection. If you desire it.”

It was... such a sweet thing to say. She had wanted to go alone because she wished for him to rest, not wanting him to waste his strength or breath on them. But he was thinking about her – about her own safety and well-being. Not for the first time, she felt lucky to have married him despite all the hiccups along the way.

“All right,” she said softly, turning the hand he held onto so his grip could slip from her wrist to her fingers. “Let’s do it together.”

Simon rose, and once he was ready, Cyrus led them down to the drawing room where the Kents were waiting. When they walked in, Sandra was lifting a biscuit to her lips and panicked upon seeing them, stuffing the entire thing into her mouth and standing with her brothers. Mathew dropped his teaspoon to the ground and cursed, glaring at his sister, who had bumped into him in her haste to stand, earning a scornful look from George.

Victoria witnessed the whole thing and was immediately ready to leave their company.

“Your Graces,” the three of them chorused, bowing slightly.

“What a surprise this is,” Victoria spoke, shifting her gaze between them. “We didn’t expect you all to come calling at such a difficult time.”

George smiled sympathetically, the corners of his mouth trembling, leaving Victoria unsure whether he was trying hard to look cheerful or fighting the urge to laugh. Mathew spoke first, his eyes reflecting dismay and sorrow, emotions that looked strange on him.

“Dearest cousin, that is precisely why we have come. Difficult times are best spent with family, no? We had heard about the kidnapping of the little lady, and we felt that we had to visit and console you.”

Something in the way he had spoken nudged at Victoria, settling uncomfortably at the corner of her mind. She brushed aside the feeling and feigned a smile.

“That was very kind of you, but we are doing as well as possible. Simon and I are doing our best, holding onto hope and each other during this difficult time. We appreciate your concern, but you did not have to visit.”

Sandra coughed lightly, mumbling something under her breath that made Mathew snort, his eyes losing the pity they bore

instantly. George glared at both of them and spoke up quickly.

“I have no doubt that you both are doing... as well as one can expect with a missing child. But we are family, Your Grace. It is only normal to be concerned and visit you to ensure you are doing all right. We understand that this is a terrifying time for you. You do not know how she could have been taken, you have no idea if she is all right, and you do not know when you will see her again. We might not be able to relate to your fears, but we know what this situation means for you.

“And we felt it necessary to come and tell you in person that we are at your service. Whatever you need, you can rely on us to provide for you as long as it is well within our means.”

There was a sickly sweetness to what he had said to Victoria. She wished to believe that he was genuine, but simultaneously, she felt she was being forced to do so.

“Thank you, George. We appreciate that.” She nodded, pressing closer to Simon, who had not said a single word since they had walked in.

Sandra raised her hand, not waiting for Victoria’s attention to shift to her before asking,

“Is there a reward? For finding her?”

“Sandra!” George snapped in annoyance, looking quite irritated by his sister’s question.

Mathew stepped forward before things could get even messier.

“Truthfully, Your Graces, we have also come to offer you our services. As you probably heard, we were able to find Lady Martha after she had disappeared. We wanted to extend the courtesy of providing you with the opportunity of hiring us to do the same for Lady Katie.”

Is he joking? They found one girl and now believe they are some sort of bounty hunters?

Victoria had begun to dissuade them from interfering with the ongoing search, but Simon spoke up.

“Money is not an issue for me. I have more than I will ever need, and if you feel that I would prefer to have it all over my daughter, you are wrong. If you can find her – if you return her home, safe and unhurt- I will give you whatever you desire.”

“Of course, that is not all we’re after. We, too, want to see Lady Katie back home, where she rightfully belongs. A child’s place is with their parents, and it is *absolutely cruel* that she has been snatched from under *your* noses. Absolutely insulting.” George shook his head grimly, walking closer to the Duke and Duchess. “We give you our word; we will find her and bring her back to you. Just trust us.”

Trusting them was the last thing Victoria wanted to do – not after seeing their true colors when she still lived with them. It was obvious to her that this ploy was an attempt to obtain some money from Simon – as though they had not insulted him enough.

Simon nodded, and the cousins grinned, seemingly satisfied.

“We will take our leave now; best to begin our search as soon as possible. Take care of yourself, dear cousin.” George said, glancing at Simon and bowing. “Your Grace.”

The others followed George’s lead and bowed, then walked out of the drawing room with George at the front of the line. When Sandra walked past Victoria, the Duchess could have sworn that her cousin had smirked at her, but when she blinked, they were gone.

“I hope they can find her,” Simon sighed, moving to sit down.

Victoria bit her lower lip thoughtfully, still feeling uneasy about their visit.

“I do not wish to sound pessimistic, but I do not trust them. They are not the sort that would do anything without a reward, but even so, why come all the way here to express their intentions? The search party is already out there looking for her. They could have joined forces with them and found her by now. It is all so... strange.” She said, sitting next to him.

“Paying for her return is not a problem. I do not care who I must reward or how much – not if it brings Katherine back to us.”

“I understand that Simon, I do. I just... it does not sit right with me. They seemed a little too... sympathetic at first. And then they brought up a reward? It all just feels quite

suspicious.” Victoria pointed out, wishing she had more to prove what she was saying other than the way she felt.

Her feelings still reached Simon nonetheless because his hand found hers, squeezing it a little.

“I know that they are untrustworthy. I – probably more than anyone else – understand your concerns. But they were the ones who found Lady Martha, a feat that seemed almost impossible as no one had an inkling as to where she could have gone. I would not take them on their offer if I could search for them myself. As it stands, we will need all the help we can get. We can question their motives after Katherine is back home.” He told her gently.

She rested her head against his shoulder with a tired sigh.

“You are absolutely right. If Katie is returned in one piece, all will be well. I just hope she is found soon.”

“I hope so, too.”

They sat silently, minds wandering, dredging up possible scenarios they prayed would not come into reality, still clinging to each other. Barely five minutes had passed since the last word was spoken when Cyrus arrived in the drawing room.

“Lord Tenford is here, Your Graces.”

“Another guest?” Simon rubbed the palms of his hands over his face in mild frustration.

He knew that his oldest friend most likely wished to express his sympathy and offer his help, but Simon wished all these callers would refrain from showing up unannounced. He was in no mood to entertain any questions or conversations, and these people did not consider that a possibility.

“He said he needed to speak to you urgently about Lady Katie’s whereabouts.”

Simon was on his feet instantly. “What – why? Does he know something?” he asked, his heart beating in his throat.

“I’ll bring him over right away,” Cyrus replied, leaving the room quickly.

Moments later, Hanvey walked into the drawing room.

“I’m so sorry to drop in announced, but I needed to come over as soon as possible. I’ve been around for a little while, but I wanted to ensure they were not coming back before I met with you,” he said, sounding a little winded.

“*They?* Who?” Simon queried, confused.

Hanvey looked right at Victoria, then shifted his gaze back to Simon.

“The Duchess’s cousins – the Kents. I believe they are responsible for the kidnapping of Lady Katie.”

“What? How do you know?” Victoria spoke without thinking, feeling quite surprised.

It was not that she did not believe the Earl. Her cousins were on various counts untrustworthy – as she had expressed minutes ago – but for someone to show up moments after they had left and claim that they had kidnapped their daughter was just far too suspicious for her not to question it.

“I will explain in a moment. Please, let us sit. It is quite a story, and it might take a few minutes to bring all the details to light.” Lord Tenford stated, gesturing to the settees.

Reluctantly, Simon sat back down, feeling a little less hysterical when Victoria took her place by his side, her hand still in his. Hanvey also sat down, rubbing his hands together with a deep sigh.

“As you probably heard,” he began, eyes serious. “Those three were the ones that found my daughter. I rewarded them handsomely for their deeds when she was returned, and I expected that to be the end of the issue. Then, days later, I heard that they had begun to complain that they were not adequately compensated – rambling on about how the wealthy love to claim the importance of their families, and yet they would never attempt to put their money where their mouth is.

“My informant also told me that one of them – Mathew, I think – had suggested they try to wrangle some money from another wealthy household. I thought it was just talking –

conversations that happen over one too many glasses of brandy, especially when I didn't hear about anyone else going missing afterward. Then Lady Katie was taken..."

He trailed off, looking upset.

"I should have warned someone – gone to the constables, even. But I really thought they were merely making a fuss about nothing. They're nobodies, always clamoring to live a brighter, more attractive life than they can afford. I did not believe that they could execute such an idea. I was on my way to share this with you when I saw them arrive at the castle, so I hid in the garden and waited until they were gone and it was clear they would not be returning. They mustn't know we are onto them, for your daughter's sake." He finished, glancing between them.

"We should go to the constables. If they are the masterminds behind our daughter's disappearance, then it would be best to apprehend them as soon as possible. Once they are arrested, they can be coerced into telling us where they hid Katie." Victoria suggested, eyes wide in alarm.

"No, no," Hanvey shook his head quickly. "That is not a good idea, Your Grace. As it stands, they have the upper hand – the girl. If they were to receive word about the constables being onto them, they might run away with her, or worse. For Lady Katie's sake, the best thing to do would be to confront them."

"Confront them? Are you sure? I am not exactly a formidable opponent. I do not want to later become a liability. Victoria is right; it is best if we ask enforcers of the law instead – as they are already also searching for her." Simon replied uncertainly.

“Trust me, this is the best way to handle this issue. If the constables are put on the case, they might not be able to get to her in time. But I know where they are keeping her. If we go together, we can iron out this issue before it gets any more complicated. We would wrap it up quicker than they could, ensuring she does not get caught in the crossfire.” Hanvey urged.

Simon paused, trying to think. If there was a way to end all this as quickly as possible, then that would be the best course of action. He did not want Katherine away from his side for a moment later, and he would not be able to live with himself if something happened to her because he was indecisive or, worse – failed to make the right decision.

“All right. We will go and get her. It would be best to face them and come to a safer resolution,” Simon eventually relented.

“I’m coming with you,” Victoria stated.

“No!” Hanvey said quickly, then cleared his throat and repeated in a softer tone. “No, Your Grace. I do not believe that is a good idea. We would not want to put you in danger. It is best if you let the men handle this.”

“Absolutely not,” Victoria said firmly, then turned to Simon. “She is my daughter, too. You might not think so, but I have given her my life just as I gave it to you. Both of you are my world. I love her with all that I am, and I will not sit by idly while you go off to rescue her. I want to be there, too; I want to help you bring our daughter home. Please, Simon. Let me come with you.”

Simon had long since realized he could not refuse any requests Victoria made. If she had asked for the moon, he would have sold off his limbs to obtain it for her. Additionally, they had agreed to rely on each other in this difficult time, and he would certainly feel more at ease if she went with him.

“All right,” he murmured, stroking her hair. “We’ll go together. And bring her back.”

Victoria exhaled in relief, leaning into his touch slightly.

“All right, then.” She turned back to Hanvey. “We will be going together. When do we leave?”

The Earl looked as though he wanted to complain some more but, upon further thought, decided it would be pointless to argue.

“Now. Let us go now.”

Chapter Twenty-One



Lord Tenford insisted it would be best if they went on their own, without any servants.

“We do not want to scare them into harming Lady Katie. We can recover her, settle them, and send the constables after them once we have put enough distance between us and them.” He said to Simon while Victoria had gone to obtain a cloak.

Only she had been on her way to meet them at the castle entrance and overheard him, the uneasy feeling from earlier settling in her bones again.

She did not know Lord Tenford well enough to make any judgments, but she knew he was a close friend of Simon’s and had tried to stifle whatever reservations she had about him. But the way he had said some things had left her skin crawling with suspicion. Quickly, she stepped back so he would not see her, grabbing Linda, who had been standing behind her, and pulling her into a room.

“Listen to me carefully; I do not have enough time to explain.” She said quickly, continuing when her maid nodded immediately. “Simon and I are going to retrieve Katie. Lord Tenford says he knows where she is, and so we are following

him there. I want you to quietly and quickly tell a servant to follow us as discreetly as possible. Once he has seen our destination, he will return to the castle and fetch some footmen to return there. Have them organize themselves so they will be ready to go as soon as he arrives.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Linda bowed.

“Remember, be fast and quiet about it. I do not want to cause a stir or give Lord Tenford any ideas on what I am up to. Something about this does not feel right to me.”

Linda nodded, and Victoria exhaled, leaving the room and pulling the hood of her cloak over her head as she walked to meet the men. Once she arrived by her husband’s side, she asked.

“Is the carriage ready?”

“We will not be needing one. Where we’re going is not too far from here – and we do not want to alert them of our presence, so it would be best to just go on foot.” Lord Tenford stated, looking a little annoyed.

“I see,” Victoria hummed thoughtfully.

“You do not have to come along. I really do not want to risk you getting hurt,” Simon told her softly.

“Nonsense. I’m wearing my sensible shoes, perfect for walking to unknown destinations for God knows how long. It

will all be just fine.” She assured him with a smile, hoping he could hear the determination in her voice and realize that she was not, under any circumstance – going to let him face this hurdle alone.

It did the trick because he did not press further, just leaned forward and kissed her forehead. The tender action warmed Victoria all the way to her toes, and she blushed, her fingers finding his and curling around them. Simon turned his head to where Hanvey was standing, blinking behind his glasses at the bleary form of his friend.

“Lead the way, Tenford.”

Hanvey nodded and walked out of the castle, followed closely by the Duke and Duchess. It was still a little bright out, given that there were at least two hours left before sundown, but the idea of going to an unknown destination to resolve a situation they did not expect left them both nervous. Still, they kept their hands clasped together and followed their guide.

They walked in silence, mostly, save for Hanvey’s prompts to “turn right here,” “this way,” and with every step they took, the feeling of dread in Victoria grew. Hanvey guided them to the woods through a path with the thickest trees. His steps remained sure, maneuvering through the greenery expertly. Almost as if he had been down this path several times.

“Lord Tenford?” Victoria called, then clutched onto Simon’s arm as she tripped.

Simon held onto her tightly, pulling her close until she felt stable enough to regain her balance.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

Victoria realized they never asked him how he knew where her cousins held Katie. Regardless of whether he was telling the truth, their desperation had led them to follow him into the woods, far away enough to make it difficult to receive help if anything happened.

If... if this was indeed a setup of some sort, then it would be in her best interest not to give any indication of her suspicions, lest he sought out to harm either of them.

So she cleared her throat and nudged the question bubbling in her throat to the corner of her mind and asked instead, “Are we almost there yet?”

Lord Tenford paused and turned to them, his small smile doing everything except comforting her at that moment as he said,

“Almost. We just need to go up this little hill.”

He made it sound so simple, but the area his hand was waving at had a cluster of rocks that led to the top, making it difficult for anyone who could not clearly see where they were going. Victoria pressed her lips together to keep herself from asking what Lord Tenford had been thinking when he insisted that only Simon go with him to retrieve their daughter.

Surely, he knew of the path to their location if his directions from the moment they left the castle until this point were

anything to go by. So, he knew that it might be challenging for Simon. It was all just so... wrong.

But she did not want to say anything or complain because Simon still clearly valued his opinion, and he had been upset about being unable to look for Katie himself. She did not wish for her concerns to make it seem like she doubted his ability to handle himself.

“Oh. All right then,” she huffed, tightening her grip on Simon as they approached the bottom of the hill.

Something about the way Victoria had just spoken made Simon feel unsettled. He had gotten so used to her tones that he could tell what she felt with every breath she took and how she said some words. Right now, she sounded irritated and... *concerned?*

It confused and worried him because he really did not want to later become too much of a burden for her if things went south. He had gotten so lost in his thoughts that he almost didn't hear her softly caution, “Careful, darling.”

It took him a moment to understand why she had said that once he realized that this path was covered with rocks, making it difficult for him to make his way through quickly. Unease grew within him, and he almost asked if there was another way up but stifled the request thanks to this desire to not be a burden.

Even with his glasses on, it was still hard to maneuver around the terrain, but he pushed through, determined to scale through every hurdle for his daughter. It took a while, but eventually,

they made it to the top of the hill, immediately spotting a small group of people standing in front of them.

Victoria instantly found Katie in their midst, stepping closer and tugging Simon along with her as she cried,

“Katie! Sweetheart, are you all right?”

Katie nodded, looking terrified as a familiar face pulled her back towards them. Victoria’s eyes widened when she got a good look at the people holding their daughter captive.

“Is she here? Is she really here?” Simon questioned, peering ahead but still unable to see anything other than a cluster of vague shapes.

“Yes, she is,” Victoria said to him softly. “She... she appears to be unharmed, but –” the Duchess glared at the culprits. “I cannot believe it was really you. I had doubts about your sincerity when you came by earlier, but I thought you were working with whoever took our daughter. I did not think you all were really responsible.”

“Shows just how much you really know us, doesn’t it, cousin?” Sandra mocked with a grin. “You have always looked down on us. Ever since we were kids, and your father was the Baron. Even after Georgie got the title, you still walked around the house as though you owned it –”

“*Technically*, she did. It was in the will.” Mathew pointed out, earning a glare from his sister.

He raised his hands in surrender and pursed his lips, letting her go on.

“You always pranced around parties, acting like a princess, while I had to work three times as hard to get any man to look at me. You somehow managed to snag a duke – not that he is worth much, as *broken* and flawed as he is –”

“Don’t you dare speak about my husband like that,” Victoria snapped, taking a step further. “He is five times the person you all can only dream of being. Do not stand there and judge him as though you know what he’s like.”

“Careful, cousin,” George taunted with a smirk, resting a hand on Katie’s head. “Do not forget your place. You are the ones in need right now, not us. Don’t act like you have the upper hand when we can all see your cards.”

“Victoria, please, don’t,” Simon mumbled, tugging her back to his side.

George glanced at him and laughed.

“Sandra did not say anything untrue, did she? Of all the men you could shackle yourself to, you picked one whose worth lay in his wealth. I mean – he is inherently useless. He could not go out to search for his own daughter when she went missing. Is that not simply tragic?”

Victoria gritted her teeth and tightened her grip on Simon’s hand in a bid to quell her anger.

“What do you want? I highly doubt you kidnapped our daughter just so you could have an excuse to insult my husband. You’ve done enough of that the times you visited the castle.” She reasoned stiffly. “So, what exactly is this all about?”

George regarded her with a look of delight. “It is quite simple, dear cousin. You see, we simply want the money that we would have obtained from you.”

Victoria stared at them in disbelief.

“My inheritance? That is what this is about? That is the reason why you kidnapped an innocent child? Just so you could get what rightfully belongs to me when you already have your own properties?”

“Well, it would have been rightfully ours if our father had managed to kill you when he killed your parents – *ow!*” Mathew exclaimed in pain after his siblings smacked him.

“When will you learn to shut up? You just can’t help yourself, always chattering away like an insect.” Sandra eyed him in disgust.

Victoria watched them delve into another argument, not paying attention as her mind clung to what Mathew had said, sending her world crashing down.

They... they had killed her parents? Their family had really... planned to murder Victoria and her parents, all for their title and wealth?

“No – that’s... *no*. We were attacked by bandits. There’s – please tell me that is not true. Please.”

She could not breathe, and her vision had become unclear as she blinked back tears, trying to swallow a lump that would not dissolve. She could never forget that day, no matter how much time had passed. She remembered the way her parents had smiled at each other, still hopelessly in love after decades of marriage.

She remembered the carriage stopping. The horses moving around restlessly. The cries of pain from the coachman. Her mother’s scream of terror. Her father shouting at her to run and not to look back, just before she watched him being struck down, landing right next to her mother’s lifeless body. Running through the woods, not caring for the branches that scratched at her skin or the logs she tripped over, her desire to obey her father’s last instruction outweighed every ache and pain she felt as she kept going.

She was found a day later by a kind, passing gentleman who was alarmed to find a bruised and bloody young woman hiding in the woods, terrified out of her mind.

That day had haunted her for ages, and she had always believed it was merely an accident, that they had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now they – people she had lived with, had called her *family* – were saying it had been a ploy, just to obtain what they had.

“Oh, come now, cousin. We’re family. Family does not lie to one another, do they? I highly doubt there would be any use in

deluding you now.” Mathew shrugged as though he were talking about the weather.

George sighed and struck him at the back of his head, hissing, “If I have to tell you again to shut up, you will lose your tongue, brother.”

Mathew rubbed the back of his head in pain.

“All right, all right! Must you hit me every time –”

Katie lifted a foot and kicked back at Mathew’s leg, causing him to shout in pain and release her as he tended to his forming bruise.

“Why, you little – why must you all insist on hitting me?” he wailed, focused on his own situation as his brother and sister scrambled to catch Katie, too slow to realize what she had been planning until it was too late, and watching as she ran right into the arms of her parents.

“Oh God,” Simon gasped, bracing a hand on the nape of his daughter’s neck, patting her hair and back in relief. “Katherine, *Princess* – I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry. I should have – I should have done better to protect you. Are you hurt?”

She shook her head against his chest, clutching him tightly.

“I’m fine, Papa. I swear, I am all right. But we need to –”

“Isn’t this quite a sight?” Hanvey spoke up, slowly clapping as he turned to face the Kents. “I knew you would mess up your end of the job. Trained circus animals would be far better at handling their affairs than you stupid lot.”

He looked back at Simon, his expression darkening as he walked toward the Duke and his family.

“Believe it or not, those fools and their pathetic greed are not the reason why I have brought you here. No, Sherrington, our problems are much deeper, far graver than money – or even time, can hope to solve.”

Confused, Simon gently passed Katherine to Victoria and stepped closer to his friend.

“W-What do you mean? What problem do we have? Did I – have I done something to upset you? Did you have something to do with the kidnapping of my daughter?”

Hanvey scoffed, looking offended. “Please, do not insult me. That was their idea. We had different goals and different targets. They wanted to get back at their cousin, and I wanted to get back at you.”

Nothing Hanvey said made any sense to Simon. He could not tell if it was the relief of having his daughter back or something else, but his mind felt lax, as though it could not fathom a single coherent thought, and all he wished to do was return home with his wife and daughter and get some much-needed sleep.

“... get back at me? For what?” he questioned, unable to shake off the sudden feeling of dread that had settled upon his shoulders.

Hanvey’s voice was colder than Simon had ever heard it as he said, his tone menacing and cutting.

“Of course, you would not know. You don’t care – you never did. But that does not matter because I will enact my revenge come what may, and you will pay... for what you did to Elena.”

Chapter Twenty-Two



Simon went still at the mention of his late wife's name.

What? Why would he –

“I do not –”

“You always had to have everything. You were always so fortunate and spoiled when we were but young boys. You had the best toys, books, and better opportunities. Teachers and peers favored you at college, and wherever you went, people worshipped the ground you walked on. And I tried not to care or pity myself for always coming in second, next to you. I did my best every time, but it never mattered because Simon Marlow was better. Always. It never changed. Not until her.”

Hanvey's face took on a hateful expression.

“Elena was my world. I loved her with everything I was made of, with all that resided within me. All I ever wanted was for her to be happy. When I received word that you both were engaged to be married, it destroyed me. But I tried to be supportive because there was no denying the fact that you

would give her far more than I ever could. So, I relented; I let you take the one person I desired in hopes that she would get to live the life she deserved.

“And what did you do? You drove her mad. You stripped her of her joy and happiness and used her until she went insane.”

“No, I didn’t –”

“*Shut up!*” Hanvey shouted, walking closer to Simon. “You *do not* get to make any more watered-down, pointless excuses. I do not want to hear any more of your lies! Elena was the love of my life! Mine! You stole her from me, ruined her life, and then drove her mad. You might as well have lit the match that started the fire the night she died. It – all of it – was your fault.” He pointed in Victoria’s direction and said, “And now, you have got yourself a new wife. You have moved on, starting afresh with a pretty little thing who cannot see you for the monster that you are. You have a new woman, one that you look at in ways you never looked at Elena, one you display affection for when you could never be that way with Elena.

“You have completely erased her from your memories, as though she never existed – which proves that you never cared about Elena. Not when she was alive, and even less now that she is no more. You are just a shallow, self-centered, selfish bastard.”

Simon was greatly at a loss for words. He had never... he could have never imagined those words leaving the lips of a man he had referred to as his closest friend all his life. It was quite disheartening to realize that he never knew Hanvey had harbored such feelings for his late wife. He had never noticed that Hanvey cared for her so deeply, unable to deny that perhaps he was indeed self-centered.

And he least of all expected things to come to a head like this. Strangely enough, a part of him felt as though this attitude from Lord Tenford had not developed mere moments before his outburst began a few minutes ago. Because suddenly, he could recall certain moments in the last few years that Hanvey had sounded less than... friendly with him.

There had been moments he had sounded patronizing and mocking, even recently. Simon had believed it was normal concern that anyone would express if faced with a blind person, but Hanvey's words sometimes bore a condescending tone that always stood out, which he always dismissed as his own fault, a mishearing incident.

But now that he thought about it, there had been little clues scattered around, telling of his friend's true feelings.

"I-If that is how you really feel, why did you propose I wed your daughter? What was the point of suggesting that I take her as a wife if you abhorred me so much?" Simon asked, taking an uncertain step back.

"Obviously, it was not out of the goodness of my heart or desire to resolve your problems," Hanvey sneered. "My plan was to use her to orchestrate your downfall. Maybe poison you or push you down the stairs. Like everything else in your life since the fire, you never would have seen it coming."

Simon felt his stomach churn in disgust. "You were going to use your daughter for revenge? You were going to thrust her into a marriage with me simply for your own gain? It's no wonder she ran away."

“Don’t you dare talk about her like you know anything!” Hanvey barked angrily. “She was supposed to be on my side! But like everyone else, she chose her own selfish desires over me. But, you know what they say; if you wish to get something done, then you must do it yourself. As a matter of fact, I prefer it this way. I can look you in the eye as I send you to your undoing.”

The Kent siblings stood together a few feet away, watching the scene unfold. George and Mathew, particularly, were confused by what they were witnessing.

“What exactly is he trying to do? What is with all this talk of revenge? I thought he just wanted the Duke to suffer – that’s why it was such a good idea to grab his daughter instead of Victoria because he might not care about her that much.” George voiced, unable to look away as Hanvey continued moving closer to the Duke, who kept stepping back with every advancement towards the cliff’s edge.

“What do you mean – my God, must I do everything myself?” Sandra sighed in exasperation at the stupidity of her eldest brother. “He’s trying to kill the Duke! You know how men get when a woman is involved. He’s trying to seek out justice for her – a life for a life and all that other poppycock.”

George felt his heart drop at the thought of the implications of Lord Tenford’s intentions. If he managed to kill the Duke, they would not get their money, and this whole charade would be for naught. Feeling betrayed, he lunged at the Earl, intending to grab him.

At that very moment, Hanvey had made peace with his decision and shifted forward to make the last shove to push Simon off the cliff. But then George tripped against a rock and bumped into him, knocking him off balance and sending him falling forward. Victoria had just managed to grab Simon's arm, tugging with all her might and pulling him out of Hanvey's way, causing them both to land on the grass while the Earl, with nothing in his way, fell off the cliff.

His screams filled the air for a moment, and then... silence.

"Is he –" George began.

"Oh God. He's dead." Sandra covered her eyes with her hands, horrified.

"What does that mean for us, exactly?" Mathew wondered.

"My goodness, Mathew, when will you stop being so thick? It means we get nothing but trouble. We'll be arrested for this." Sandra snapped.

"Prison? I cannot be a prisoner. However, will I survive?" Mathew wailed in despair.

"We have more pressing issues than your survival. This is all your fault, after all. If only you had just held onto the girl –" George stated angrily.

"Me?! Why is it my fault? You both always leave me to do the hard work while you strut around pretentiously rather than

helping. This job would have ended seamlessly if you two didn't insist on ruling over me and objecting to every idea of mine at every turn!"

Victoria ran her hands over Simon's body, checking him for injuries as she asked in a hushed tone.

"Are you all right, Simon? Can you stand?"

Simon nodded, accepting her hand and allowing her to pull him to his feet. She glanced behind him at her cousins and whispered.

"They're distracted. Let's use the opportunity to get out of here while we still can."

She kept a firm grip on his hand and reached for Katie with her other one, leading them down the way they had come. Simon stumbled over the rocks a few times, but she made sure he did not fall, also checking on Katie during their descent to ensure she was doing all right.

As they reached the bottom of the hill, footsteps could be heard coming in their direction. Cyrus was the first to see them, shouting to the other servants that he had found them. Once they came closer, Victoria pointed in the direction they had come from, instructing calmly.

"My cousins are just at the top of the hill. They were the ones who abducted Katie and –"

“– and they have other crimes to answer for as well. Catch all three of them. They must be severely punished for every misdeed they have committed.” Simon finished, standing straight.

“Yes, Your Grace!” The footmen chorused and then rushed up the hill.

“We will handle things here, Your Graces. You should return home now. We brought a carriage along; it’s just up ahead,” Cyrus said, stepping back and gesturing to a clear path.

They followed his lead, staying close together as they walked to the carriage. Even inside, Katherine sat in Simon’s lap, the Duke unable to bear the thought of having her out of reach at that moment, with one of his hands between Victoria’s. When they got back to the castle, the nanny came to greet them, crying tears of relief at the sight of her charge. She gestured to Katie to come along with her to take a bath and get some rest, but Simon was reluctant to let her go.

“Simon,” Victoria spoke softly. “It’s all right. She’s all right. She’s here with us. Safe and unhurt. But she is covered in dirt, which is not good for her health. Let her go and clean up, and then you can hold her to your heart’s content.”

Simon nodded and released her, surprised when the girl hugged him tightly.

“I never doubted that you would come for me, Papa. Those people said such cruel things about you, but I never believed them. You are the strongest person I know, and I am in awe of

you every day. Do not listen to any of those idiots who call you weak. All right?"

Her stern voice made him laugh, and he kissed her forehead, ignoring the tears that clung to his eyelashes.

"All right, Princess. Thank you for believing in me."

She nodded and pulled back, patting his stomach in a placating manner that made him laugh again. She started to walk towards the nanny, then stopped, turned around, and ran back into Victoria's arms.

"Oh, darling –"

"Thank you for coming for me too. I-I kept telling myself that you had promised to look after me, to protect me, and that you would keep your promise. And you did. Thank you. I love you... *Mother.*"

Victoria felt her breath leave her lungs at the term Katie had just used to refer to her and pulled her closer, burying her face in her hair as tears escaped her eyes.

"Sweetheart, of course I came. I will always be here for you. I love you."

"I know," Katie let out a watery giggle.

“That’s good. I’m glad,” Victoria sniffed, pulling back and patting her daughter’s hair. “Now, off you go. You look like a stray cat.”

Katie laughed and ran to her nanny, turning back to wave at her parents. Victoria waved back until she turned down a corridor and was out of sight before turning to her husband.

“We did it. We brought her back home.”

Simon turned to her and nodded with a little smile. “That we did. I suppose this means we are good parents.”

She grinned. “I suppose it does... well, it’s been a long day, and it would be best to follow her lead and get some rest –”

“Wait,” he cut her off, feeling a little bad about how loud he was, and cleared his throat as she fell silent. “Sorry. Could – could you come with me? Just for a little bit?”

She smiled and took his hand. “All right.”

He led her to his room quietly, opening the door and letting her step inside first before walking in after her. He closed the door and leaned against it as he tried to string together his thoughts in a way that would best convey his feelings.

“You saved my life,” was how he began.

She tilted her head to the side, regarding him with mild amusement.

“Of course. Did you ever doubt that I would?”

He didn't answer, merely pushed himself off the door and closed the distance between them, pulling her tightly against himself.

“I love you. I love you so much, Victoria. I-I can't breathe when you are not by my side, and I would have not survived these last few days without you. But... It's more than that. Every waking hour of mine is filled with thoughts of you. There is nothing I want more right now – in this very moment than for you to forever remain in my life.

“Truthfully, I am still terrified of loving – of being loved. But you are worth it. It would be horrible, not just to you but to myself, if I did not try it honestly and deliberately. I won't be perfect, but please, be patient with me. I will do everything in my power to give you and our child –” he smiled and patted her lower back gently. “Children, the very best of myself. Will you let me?”

She pulled back slightly to say, “You ridiculous man. Of course, I will. I love you too.”

He smiled and leaned forward, cupping her face and kissing her lips. The kiss was so tender; it erased every doubt and fear that had taken root in the last few days, wordlessly telling her she was loved. His thumbs stroked her cheeks as he angled his head to deepen the kiss, slowly licking into her mouth, leisurely chasing her tongue.

“I want you,” he murmured against her lips, unable to break away from their sweetness. “Can I –”

“I am yours, Simon. I have been for quite some time now. You can have me... whenever... however you wish.” She gasped as his mouth moved down her throat, leaving little kisses and bites over the sensitive skin there.

“Good. Because I belong to you as well.”

His lips returned to hers, kissing her in a wet, slow, and coaxing way, his fingers nimbly working to rid her of her cloak and clothes. Her bones tingled as she roamed her hands over his body, just as determined as he was to have his warm skin on hers as quickly as possible.

They soon achieved their goal, pressed together with nothing between them but their desire and longing for each other, their kisses bruising, burning, and soothing all at once as they made their way to the bed. She moaned when his mouth left her, sighing at each soft kiss he dropped onto her bare skin, her fingers running through his hair as he moved lower and lower.

He brushed his lips over her hip, saying in a gravelly low tone that sent a shiver down her spine.

“I just want to worship you tonight... your pleasure is all I seek.”

Then he dipped his chin and licked at her wet center. She leaned her head back onto the pillows and moaned his name,

her fingers still tangled in his hair as he continued to lavish her with his tongue.

Her other hand came up to hold back her whimpers, unable to do much as his ministrations caused every thought in her mind to vanish until all she knew was his presence.

“S-Simon – Simon, please,” she whined, rolling her hips in time with every stroke of his tongue.

He raised his head to smile at her, sending her heart spiraling as far as her mind had at how devilishly handsome he looked, tucked between her legs, like a gift just for her.

“What is it, Petal? Tell me what you want,” he urged gently, his big hands braced on her thighs, still holding her legs apart.

“I-I –” she blushed furiously and let her hand slide from his hair to the nape of his neck, tugging him upward.

He followed her pull, leaning in to kiss her, groaning as he shared the taste of her, his hands leaving their place to roam her curves, groping at her breasts when they arrived at her chest.

“I want you. Please,” she whispered, wriggling around in embarrassment.

He chuckled under his breath and pressed chaste kisses to her cheeks.

“Don’t ever hesitate to tell me what you want. I can never say no to you,” he muttered, against her jaw, slipping a little lower to suck a mark onto her neck.

His words resonated within her, making her feel even hotter as an image popped into her mind.

“There’s... there is something I want. To try.”

“All right,” he hummed, still nuzzling against her neck.

She lightly pushed at his shoulders, and he leaned back, blinking down at her expectantly. She nudged him back some more, somehow managing to speak even though her face was on fire.

“Sit... sit back.”

He complied so easily, and she could not help but once more feel extremely blessed to have married this wonderful man, leaving behind her hesitation as she clambered into his lap.

“Oh,” he exhaled as her hands settled on his shoulders, and her body melted against his.

“Like this. I want to look at you properly.”

“You truly are exceptional,” he sighed, tilting his head back and accepting the press of her lips to his, his hands guiding her into a position that would provide easy access to her warmth.

It did not take too long for that to happen, and he swallowed the low moan that escaped her lips as she sank down on his shaft, feeling so deliciously filled. He groaned into her skin, rolling his hips languid and slow, panting as she squeezed down on him.

“My God –”

He sounded so wonderfully broken, and she delighted in the fact that he was enjoying this as much as she was, pulling herself up and sinking down on him so hard and fast she could swear she saw stars. She clasped her hands behind his neck and ground down, whining when he gripped her hips, lifting her up and thrusting back into her.

She gasped, pressing closely to him as he continued to jut his hip upward, thrusting into her hard and slow, the position allowing him to reach deeper and deeper with every stroke. He was ruining her and aiding in her rebirth, her entire body riddled with sparks every time he touched her, each time their hips connected with the wet sound of flesh on flesh.

She was teetering dangerously on the edge of the crescendo, eager for the final rise that would send her falling into the glorious waves of pleasure. Only, she had not expected it to arrive the way it did, with her husband’s face in her hands, his expression one of pure bliss as he told her,

“I love you, Petal.”

All she knew then was her climax, stunned as it came with the heat of the sun, brilliant and blinding, causing her to tense up

so tight, he followed her right into the burning heat of it. They stayed together, sweating and panting, sharing their breath and warmth. Victoria had never felt so complete in her whole life.

Eventually, Simon lifted her off him, gingerly setting her down on the bed and laying beside her.

“That was not fair,” she pouted, only half teasing. “You cheated.”

He laughed, light and beautiful, the very foundation of her dreams.

“I was unaware one could cheat in a situation like that.”

“But you did.”

He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her to his chest, murmuring gently.

“All I did was speak the truth, Petal. Whereas you did not say it back. So, which of us is the cheat?”

He had a valid point.

Relenting, she kissed his cheek and said, “I love you as well. I cannot wait to spend the rest of our lives together, loving you consistently and wholeheartedly.”

He kissed her forehead, letting his lips linger atop her skin as he thanked every star, every deity, and stroke of good fortune that brought this wonderful woman his way.

“Neither can I, petal. Neither can I.”

Epilogue

A Week Later

Victoria awoke feeling extremely warm.

She squinted against the harsh glare of sunlight that had seeped through the curtains, alerting her that a new day had risen, and she was running behind on experiencing all that it had to offer. With a yawn, she turned over onto her other side, blinking blearily until her vision cleared enough to allow her to gaze upon her wonderful husband.

His arms were securely wrapped around her waist – as they had been all night long – and his face was half buried into a pillow, his hair forming a cover over the other half, shielding him from the world outside his dreams. Carefully, she used a finger to push the hair away, tucking the gleaming dark locks behind his ear, momentarily wondering if she should suggest that he get a haircut, deciding almost immediately that she liked this look on him and would like it if he kept it for a little longer.

With most of his face now in view, she leaned back to admire his peaceful expression, thankful that he had been able to rest somewhat easy now. It had been about a week since Katie's safe return home, and ever since then, Simon had taken it upon himself to patrol the hallways and corridors at night, looking for any sign of an intruder.

Victoria had not realized he had been doing so until she woke up to an empty bed on the third night of his late walks. She had frightened them both when she went to look for him,

rounding a corner and walking right into him, screaming so loudly that she woke the entire household. He apologized for an hour after she dragged him back to bed – not before escorting their daughter back to bed and tucking her in, ignoring the way the ungrateful brat was laughing at them both – only falling silent after she had kissed him and sweetly asked that he shut up and sleep.

They had discussed it the day after that.

“I just... I want to be able to protect you all as much as I can. And I can't do that if I'm asleep. We did not know she had been taken, and we had been awake then. I do not want to let that happen again, unaware of who I'm missing until it's too late.”

She had taken his hand in hers, keeping her grip light and loose, knowing that her touch was all he needed to calm down before she spoke up.

“Darling, I understand your concerns, but you already do so much to protect us. It is not your job to patrol the castle in the dark. Imagine if it had been Cyrus you had run into and not me. You would've given him a heart attack and sent him straight to the grave.”

Cyrus had coughed from his place a few feet away, and Victoria had lifted her head in challenge.

“Am I wrong? I know you've still got a lot of life in you, but you did not see what I thought I did when I turned around that corner. My life flashed before my very eyes,” she sighed, resting a hand over her chest.

Simon had winced and apologized, pouting when Victoria shushed him.

“It is fine. You only managed to traumatize me slightly. I've been through worse. But I refuse to take on any more damage so you can prance around at night. You could have gotten really hurt as well. I know you are as familiar with the castle as you are with the back of your hand, but what if someone had left something out in the hall or at the bottom of the stairs. You wouldn't have noticed it until it was too late. I know you

are worried and restless, but we could always acquire more guards. You are a Duke, a father, and a husband – do not steal the jobs of others who have only that role to themselves.”

He had listened to her, and more guards were hired the next day. It had taken him about a day or two to finally settle down enough to be able to sleep through the entire night, and she was happy to see him resting so well.

Lightly, she traced a fingertip down the slope of his nose, over the curve of his lips, across the sharp lines of his jaw, smiling when he winced, tightening his arms around her as he leaned away from her teasing touch, pressing his face deeper into the pillow.

“Simon,” she sang, grinning as he groaned. “We have to get up, my love.”

“No.” His voice was muffled, but she understood the message anyway.

She raked her fingers through his hair and cooed sweetly at him.

“I know, darling, but we have an engagement – one we will undoubtedly be late for if we do not leave this bed soon.”

He raised his head and dropped it back onto the pillow, this time resting on his cheek, as opposed to the other position that no doubt suffocated him, mumbling sleepily.

“I do not wish to be the Duke today. Please just let me sleep.”

“Sweetheart, I would let you do as you desired any other day, but as I said, we have a promise to keep. Of course, you could always take it up with Lady Katherine herself.”

It was comical how quickly his eyes darted open, and he sat up.

“*Bloody hell* – breakfast. My God, she will have our heads –”

“No, no,” Victoria tsked in disagreement. “She will have *your* head. She adores me, and you have been warned twice already. You know the penance for a third strike would be an origami crane.”

“I would rather die,” Simon said, aghast.

“Excellent. That should motivate you to move quickly to not seal your fate of spending the afternoon risking multiple paper cuts.” She grinned at him, leaning forward to peck his lips. “Good morning, my dear.”

“Morning, Petal,” he smiled at her softly, and she felt her heart swell with affection in her chest. “What time is it? Am I late already?”

“It is early enough that we can still make it before she finishes the biscuit the cook always lets her have before breakfast that she thinks I do not know about. We should make haste.”

“Mmm,” he hummed, touching her cheek and pulling her in for another kiss. “Are you sure I should not risk an afternoon of paper cuts?”

“Don’t,” she laughed. “She wants us to have breakfast in the garden. And we said we’d use the opportunity to break the news to her.”

“Oh. Oh! Right.” Simon cleared his throat quickly. “We should probably get going then.”

“We should,” she agreed, pursing her lips to keep herself from laughing when neither of them moved.

He sat there for a few seconds and then turned to her with a pout.

“One more kiss?”

She could not stop laughing then, crawling forward to climb into his lap, kissing him long and deep.

“There,” she said after pulling away with a loud smack. “That should keep you happy until we meet again in about twenty minutes.” She beamed, clambering off of him and out of bed.

He tried to pull her back to him, but she niftily moved out of reach with a giggle.

“I shall be thinking of you every moment until then.” He sighed wistfully.

“Darling, you are always thinking about me,” she pointed out, rolling her eyes with fondness when he shrugged in agreement. “Go! Don’t be late.”

He waved at her, and she blew him a kiss before slipping through the door, turning around, and jumping at the sight of their daughter standing behind her.

“Good morning, Mother.”

“Christ, Katie,” Victoria gasped with a hand pressed to her chest. “Good morning, sweetheart. What are you doing, creeping up on me like a figment of my night terrors?”

To Katie’s credit, she appeared apologetic and offered a hug, which Victoria accepted with every piece of her soul, holding her precious girl near.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to make sure Papa was awake and intends to keep his word.”

Victoria laughed, stroking the girl’s hair gently.

“Do not fret; he is wake and getting ready – just as I am on my way to do now. We will see you in a little bit, don’t worry.”

Katie seemed to believe Victoria’s words, nodding enthusiastically.

“I cannot wait!” she clapped happily, giving Victoria another hug before going downstairs.

Victoria watched her go, wondering if she would ever get used to the way her heart melted each time Katie called her mother. The first time she had done it, the child had taken her breath away, and that feeling lingered still, encouraging Victoria to devote herself endlessly to loving and raising her children.

She rested a hand on her stomach with a little smile and continued her journey back to her room.

They all needed to make this breakfast because she and Simon had finally agreed to tell Katie she would be getting another sibling soon. They had decided to wait until they were sure that every bit of the incident involving her abduction had been properly handled, not wanting to burden her. And it had taken a few days to clear everything up.

The constables had visited them the day after Katie's return to question her about her abduction, asking her what she remembered and if she could identify all of her kidnappers. Then they moved on to Victoria, asking her what she knew about her cousins and if she was aware that they were capable of such criminal acts. During that time, she had revealed that it had come to light that they had orchestrated the death of her parents alongside their father, and the constables promised to investigate further.

Simon had been queried last about Lord Tenford, an exchange that had been quite difficult for him to relate. He had spent all those years truly believing that Hanvey was his friend, completely unaware that the other man loathed him deeply. Simon admitted to feeling guilty about being so blind in the face of it all – a remark that had made one of the law enforcers snort before apologizing in shame – not realizing how bad things were beneath the surface.

He wished to express his apologies to Lady Tenford, but she had shown up herself after the constables visited her, screaming obscenities at Simon and calling him a liar.

“You killed your first wife, and now you just had to kill my husband? How could you do that to my Hanvey? He was your friend –”

“No, he wasn't,” Simon had said, cutting her off calmly. “I thought he was because I was certainly his. But he hadn't been my friend in a long time. I did not want that to happen the way it did, either. He came at me, and my wife pulled me out of the way in time. Otherwise, she would be the one preparing for a funeral. I'm... I'm sorry I could not save him. I truly am.”

“I hope you burn in hell,” she spat in his face and walked out of the castle.

That day had been tainted with a somber mood, with both Victoria and Katie unsure if they should leave him be or console him. The answer presented itself to them when he walked into the garden and requested hugs, which they were more than happy to oblige.

With Victoria's cousins awaiting trial – “A prison sentence, really,” their lawyers had assured them – Simon thought they could use some good news and suggested telling Katie about the baby Victoria was carrying.

It was such a relief to see things finally getting back to normal. It obviously would not be right back to how it had been before all that had happened, but at least they were relying on each other and expressing themselves more. Katie had been too afraid to sleep in her room on her first night back home and had sought out Victoria – who was not in her room but in Simon's. Katie had connected the dots and still came looking for them, knocking politely and stating her need through the door.

Victoria had quickly slipped into one of Simon's nightshirts and tossed another to Simon, along with a pair of breeches, opening the door wide enough for her to slip through, suggesting that they all sleep in her bed, as her room was much cozier. Katie had fallen asleep by the time Simon made it to Victoria's room, finding no faults in taking up the empty spot behind his daughter, wanting her to feel as loved and protected as possible.

Whenever Simon began to worry about something, he would find Victoria, hold her hands, and speak up about it or spend some time with his daughter, allowing her contagious joy to drive his insignificant concerns aside.

And whenever Victoria felt sad about her family, she would find her husband or daughter and allow their all-consuming love to remind her that she was no longer alone.

When Victoria arrived at the table, she caught Katie swallowing quickly, seemingly unaware of the crumbs sitting proudly at the corner of her lips. She did not bring it up, merely slipping into the empty seat on her left with a smile.

“Hello, darling.”

Katie took a sip of her tea and smiled back easily.

“Hello, Mother. Has Father decided to take on the penalty today?”

“Not even if the world was about to end,” Simon announced dramatically, standing beside his daughter’s chair, leaning down to kiss her cheek, frowning as he rose.

Then he grabbed a napkin and gently tilted her face upward with his fingers curled lightly around her chin, wiping the crumbs away.

“If you are going to have biscuits before breakfast, at least be more discreet, Princess,” Simon said as he slipped into the only other seat at the table.

“Papa,” Katie whined.

“Don’t look at me; I’m not the one to blame here. You’ve always been a messy eater, but I love you nonetheless.” Simon stated, playfully puckering his lips in her direction, laughing like an evil villain when she let out a shriek of horror.

They continued back and forth through most of the meal, Kathrine retelling the parts of her latest read that he found interesting and Simon providing her with witty commentary that made her laugh. Victoria was more than content watching them, giving her own takes when they asked for her opinion. However, she was occupied thanks to the delicious marmalade that had accompanied their breakfast spread.

“Princess,” Simon cleared his throat, sitting up as soon as he was sure he had his daughter’s full attention. “Your mother and I have something to tell you.”

At the mention of *mother*, Victoria raised her head, her jaws pausing their work of chewing on the mouthful of toast she had just bitten. She glared at Simon, and he laughed, putting his hands together apologetically.

“Perhaps I should speak for the both of us. May I, Petal?”

Victoria nodded, gesturing at him to go on.

He smiled and turned back to his princess.

“Katherine... oh, this is more daunting than I expected it to be,” he laughed, a little nervous. “Well, simply put, you will have a little brother or sister soon.”

Katie blinked at her father, then turned to her mother with wide eyes.

“You’re –”

“Yes,” came Victoria’s garbled response as she took a sip of tea to wash down her toast. “Yes, sweetheart. I am with child.”

Katie clapped her hands excitedly, rushing out of her seat and towards the Duchess to throw her arms around her.

“Oh my goodness – I can’t believe it!” she gleefully cheered, pausing thoughtfully. “What exactly is the right expression to use in this situation? My etiquette lessons say it is customary to congratulate a woman who has been announced to be with a child. Is it all right if I congratulate you, or will it be odd to hear... coming from your daughter?”

Victoria stared at the girl, hopelessly endeared beyond comprehension.

“It would not be odd at all,” she said sweetly.

“In that case, congratulations!” Katie clapped a bit once again.

“And congratulations to you, Princess. Just think – in a few months, you will be blessed with your very own younger one to guide and influence as you wish.” Simon remarked, lifting his teacup in salutations.

The idea seemed to enchant Katie, who stared off at nothing, her eyes twinkling brightly as she imagined what that would be like, only snapping out of her daze to enquire.

“Do you think it will be a boy or a girl?”

Simon took the lead on that question, beckoning Katie over and holding out a piece of ham on a fork to feed her, smiling when she accepted his offering without question.

“We don’t know, Princess. But we are very excited to find out. Aren’t we, Petal?”

Victoria, finally at peace with where she was, who she had grown into, and the people who made up her wonderful family, beamed happily at them.

“We certainly are.”

The End?

Extended Epilogue



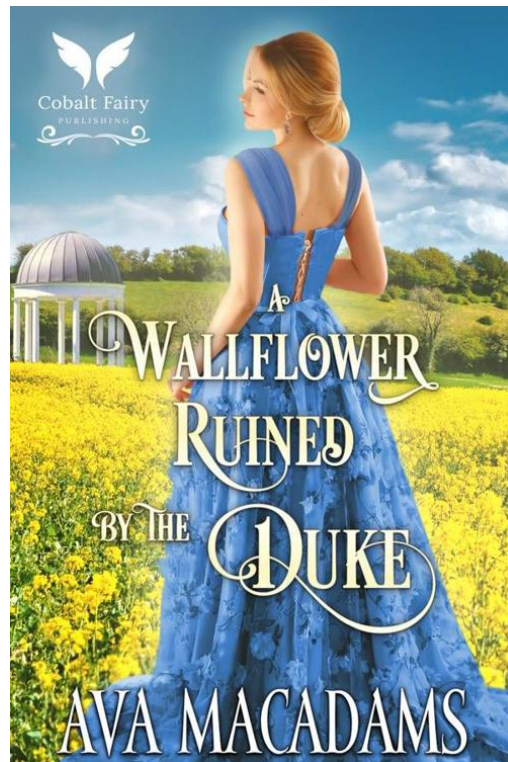
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PREVIEW: A
WALLFLOWER
RUINED BY THE DUKE



Chapter One



“**M**ay I have the pleasure of your company?”

It always started like this. Sally stood near the edge of the room, minding her own business and clearly wishing to be left to her own company. An entire room full of women who were desperate for a dance partner, and this gentleman had chosen the one lady who did not seem interested in the festivities.

Things were simpler when Sally had not been forced to endure all of this on her own. It was a far easier thing to decline offers when she had been standing with her friends, but they had gone off and gotten married.

Sally forced a thin smile, wishing yet again that any one of her friends might be here to field offers on her behalf. “Thank you for the offer, sir, but I’m afraid I’m not feeling particularly conversational tonight. Perhaps another time.”

She was firm but polite, because her mother would never permit her to be anything else.

Sally still wore her finest dresses at her father’s insistence. She still twirled and danced. She still smiled. Each one seemed to chip away another piece of herself. With each and every forced interaction, it became more and more difficult to perform in the way that she needed to.

Sally did not wish to admit that she was bitter... but she was. It would have been next to impossible to have prevented it. The small group of women whom she called her closest friends had all run off and gotten married on her! Where they

used to be an impossibly close-knit group of women who were wallflowers together... now it was only Sally.

Peggy, Natalie, and Anne—all happily married with families of their own to occupy their time. Peggy was the most recently wed of their group and presently just as heavy with child as Natalie—though Peggy tended to be less present at the balls of the Season, given that she now resided so far from them.

Sally was the final woman standing.

Well, leaning. As she presently was doing in a manner very reminiscent of a petulant child. She would have been more bothered by the comparison or the comment on her bratty attitude, were it not for the fact that the only gentleman who had so much as attempted to speak with her all evening had a horrible boil just on his upper lip and she could not look at him without feeling slightly queasy.

It wobbled when he spoke.

“Oh, come now, Lady Sally, do not be so coy. I am sure we could find something to talk about, or we could simply dance if you prefer?” The man held a hand out to her expectantly, but Sally did not take it.

“I appreciate your persistence, sir, but I must insist on my preference for solitude this evening. Please, excuse me.”

The man kept poking at the bulbous protrusion with his tongue, and it was truly all that she could do to keep her opinions and thoughts to herself. Sally folded her arms across her chest and hugged them tightly to her body. Anything to avoid appearing too present in the one-sided conversation.

Honestly, it was cruel of her friends to send him in her direction. They knew that she could not look beyond it. Perhaps that was the true reason that she was yet unmarried. Sally had no desire to look past their physical shortcomings because she knew that no man in the room would ever look at her and see anything other than her face.

Some might regard Sally as beautiful.

Petite and slightly curvy, Sally had been told she possessed an understated beauty that captivated those who take the time to

notice. Her black hair fell in soft waves, framing her face with an air of elegance. Her hazel eyes, like gems reflecting the warmth of sunlight, hold a sparkle of intelligence and mischief. Her rosy cheeks added a touch of youthful vitality, enhancing her overall charm. Though she may not conform to the conventional standards of the time, Sally exuded a magnetic confidence that drew people in. Her stature may be small, yet her presence filled the room.

Her friends certainly told her as much on a frequent enough basis. But no matter how much her friends attempted to lift her up... their reassurance was never going to be as loud as her mother's voice in the back of her head, constantly comparing her to her sister. In fact, Sally was half surprised that the older woman had not materialized at her side to tell her to fix her posture and stand up straighter.

In truth, she could not be bothered to even remember the gentleman's name.

It was time for a change.

After a while, the glamor of balls started to wear off.

This was all so very ordinary... and Sally craved excitement. She wanted something that would thrill her. Something to make her heart race... something that would make her feel half of the excitement that all of her friends had already enjoyed. She heard enough of their love stories. She knew what was happening in their lives... and she was jealous. Was it truly so terrible to want the same sort of passion? She did not even know *specifically* what it was that she was in search of, but she was absolutely certain that she would know it when she found it.

The irksome man beside her was growing restless. Every few words, he attempted to hedge closer to her, hoping to force her into a conversation that she did not wish to have.

“Oh, but I assure you, Lady Sally, I have the most fascinating tales to share. You would not want to miss out.” He grinned, but she could only see the boil as it covered his teeth when he spoke.

She could hear that he was speaking, but she did not care. Eventually, he huffed in frustration and left her alone.

Sally could practically count down the moments before her friends arrived.

“Three... two...” she muttered to herself, and sure enough, Natalie was the first to rush over.

“How did it go?” The woman grinned happily. Natalie was the second out of their group of four to get married, and she had been wrapped up in a whirlwind romance of her own.

“How did *what* go?” Sally answered with an arched brow.

“The conversation! It looked like you were hardly even trying, but I daresay he looked rather fascinated by you!” Natalie smiled encouragingly. “Did you not like him?”

Sally’s brow furrowed as she leveled Natalie with a pointed look. “Like him? I could hardly look at him! Please, do not tell me that he was your idea, because if so, then I shall be most cross with you.”

Natalie’s lips pressed into a thin line of disappointment. “We were only trying to help you...”

“I do not need your pity.”

“Well, no, of course not, we did not do it out of obligation, Sally, we are your friends, and we love you—”

“And yet you think that I am unable to find myself a husband? That I am so desperate to be wed just because the Season is rapidly coming to an end that I shall simply throw myself at any bottom barrel man that you convince to speak to me?” Sally said a touch more harshly than she meant to.

It was hardly her friends’ fault that she was so unhappy. It was not right of her to take it out on them.

“I am sorry,” Sally apologized to Natalie, but she could not meet her friend’s gaze directly. “I do not mean to snap... my mother is putting a lot of pressure on me, and I simply have not yet decided what it is that I want.”

“Well, confide in me. Perhaps I can help you?” Natalie offered kindly.

Sally shook her head. The rapport that she used to have with the women did not feel the same any longer. They were approaching life from another direction. Natalie was heavily pregnant, as it was, and due to have her child any day now. She was no longer a single woman in the marriage mart, so there was no way for her to feel the same as Sally did.

Even if she were to tell Natalie what was happening and how she felt about the bleak outlook of the future facing her, what would be the point?

So, Sally did the thing that she was quickly becoming best at: she deflected.

“He was simply not what I am looking for in a husband.” Sally forced an uncomfortable smile.

Natalie clearly did not understand. “Well then, what are you looking for?”

Sally shook her head. “I shall know it when I find it... *if* I ever find it.”

“I know that things have been very hard for you this Season, my dear friend, but you should not be so harsh on your prospects.” Natalie tried to infuse some optimism into their conversations. “We are here to help you. Any man in this room—we can get you introduced to him. I promise. We all just wish to help you find your own happiness.”

“Happiness is not something that I am bound for,” Sally muttered.

“Surely you cannot have given up already?”

“I am very likely bound for spinsterhood, Natalie. You know this as well as I do.”

“After one failed Season?”

Sally’s brow furrowed. “It has not been *one* failed Season. It has been *four*; and this nonsense is becoming too much for me! My mother reminds me each and every day of my advanced age and how difficult it is going to be for me to attract a

husband *half* as enchanting as my sister's husband. As if being Lord Pratton's wife is some grand accomplishment, in the first place. Every single day, I am reminded from the moment that I wake up what a disappointment to my family that I am—how I am not Anastasia and that I should try harder... do more... be better..."

Natalie's face fell. "I am sorry... I did not mean to upset you. Truly, I am only here for your happiness. No matter what form it might take. If I had known that the nudging that Anne and I have done over the Season was making you this uncomfortable, then we never would have—"

"I know that," Sally interrupted her before she could continue. "Again, I am simply in a sour disposition this evening."

Beside her, Natalie fell silent. Guilt panged in Sally's gut. It was not her friend's fault that she was feeling this way. How could she begrudge the woman for falling in love?

Sally sighed and shook her head. "I am sorry, I am not being very fair to you." She glanced down at Natalie's rounded belly. "I am surprised to see you here, in truth. Did the physician not say that you ought to be taking it easy?"

Natalie seemed to light up from the inside at the mention of her child, and she nodded happily. "Yes. I am due any day now, but I think that the movement does me good." She let her hand pass over her swollen belly reverently.

Sally laughed softly. "I am surprised your husband allowed it then, as he is so very watchful over you."

Natalie smirked and winked at Sally. "He does not dictate what I do."

"Have you seen the others?"

Natalie nodded. "Peggy and John are still in the countryside, and Anne is bound to be around here somewhere. I do not know where she has gotten off to."

Sally turned her attention to the dance floor. Her eyes glossed over the couples moving in time with one another, most of them smiling and laughing as they enjoyed their evening. Across the hall where the orchestra played, some others

lingered and indulged in conversation. She could remember feeling that same thrill when her first Season had come about. She could remember how happy she had been to see and be seen by the *ton*... and now she was simply old news.

“Besides, I think that I have other plans to attend to,” Sally concluded.

The scheme that she was hatching was still in its infancy... more of a fleeting fancy that she refused to let go of. She did not wish to surrender the fantasy that was slowly growing inside of her. It was *naughty*, and she could no longer bring herself to care.

If she were to be an unmarried, unwanted woman for the rest of her life, then what was so wrong with being a thoroughly *ruined* spinster? She was still young. Her friends told her how pretty she was all of the time. Certainly if she could not convince an interesting man to put a ring on her finger, she would be able to talk him into bed with her. That was all that men truly desired anyway, was it not? There was no reason to deprive herself of the thing that all of her friends now knew about intimately just because she was not as fortunate as them.

“I do not think that I care much for that look in your eyes, Sally.” Natalie giggled. There was an undercurrent of genuine worry in her tone. One that Sally chose to ignore.

“My eyes?” Sally batted her lashes dramatically. “Why, whatever can you mean?”

“I mean it!” Natalie reached forward to place a gloved hand on top of Sally’s arm. “Whatever you are plotting, you should turn back now before you take things too far!”

“Me? Too far? I would never!” Sally giggled.

Ah, there he was, the perfect target for her new plan.

It was always best to act first and seek forgiveness later with these sorts of reckless plans.

Natalie was going to ask her what she meant when her husband came to join them with a happy smile. He touched Natalie’s shoulder as he approached, and she happily hummed

and shrugged into his side. He kissed her temple as a form of greeting.

“Hello, my dear,” he said to Natalie. “You are just the two ladies that I was most hoping to see this evening!”

“Is that right?” Natalie grinned. She always seemed to glow a little bit brighter whenever she was close to her husband.

Seeing the union between the pair of them, Sally could not help but think that one did not need to be titled or high-ranking to be in love. Natalie’s husband was neither of those things, and she was blissfully happy.

“Yes! In fact, I was just telling my dear friend over there—” He pointed over to the person in question. “All about your friend, Lady Sally, and he was most interested to make her acquaintance. I wished to ensure that an introduction was welcome before springing them on one another.”

Sally could not help but laugh. “See, at least he asks permission.”

Natalie stuck her tongue out at her obstinately at the comment.

“Would you consent to meet him?”

Sally turned her focus to the man in question with a scrutinous eye. He was tall and built lean. He had sloped shoulders and a sharply tapered waist. His features were chiseled and seemed attractive enough from this distance. She nodded curtly, and Natalie seemed to bounce in place with happiness.

“I suppose I could...” Sally trailed off. She was not particularly in the mood to encounter new gentlemen, but it was as good of an opportunity as any to rest her newfound resolve. If she was going to *seduce* a man, she would need to start somewhere.

“Oh! I knew that you had not yet given up on finding love!” Natalie exclaimed happily. “There will be time to find you the perfect match, after all!”

Sally nearly chuckled to herself. If only her friend could hear her own private thoughts. What Sally might wish from any

gentleman that she meets going forward would have absolutely nothing to do with love.

Sally's head tilted to the side, inspecting the gentleman and the sharp angles of his jawline as they moved closer to him.

Yes. Perhaps this man would suit my newfound resolve nicely.

Chapter Two



“**L**ucas! My dear friend, have I not come through for you?” Natalie’s husband spoke happily, the wine that he had already drank thus far today colored his cheeks a merry shade of red.

In Sally’s experience, drinking tended to bring out the very best in Natalie’s husband. Which was a very rare trait to behold, indeed, as it was far more common for wine or other spirits to make a man bitter or cruel.

Instead, even Sally felt the effects of his joy seeping through her cynical exterior as the man gestured widely for her to come closer and be introduced to his friend. She was also quite impressed by the familiarity between the two men.

“What a rare jewel that I have the fortune of introducing you to this fine evening, Lord Brooke. This is one of my darling wife’s nearest and dearest friends, Lady Sally Winston.”

Natalie practically beamed with pride as she looped her arm through her husband’s.

Sally dipped into a modest bow and flicked her eyes up at Lord Brooke from under her lashes demurely. She smiled softly, just like she had always been trained to do. There was no denying that the man who stood in front of her was handsome. He had very sculpted features, emerald-green eyes, and sandy brown hair. He had thick brows, and something about his expression seemed to imply that he was unimpressed by those around him. Yet, somehow, his greeting was no less warm because of it.

Lord Brooke took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “What a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Sally.”

“Not yet, My Lord, but it could be,” Sally said boldly. She spoke in such a syrupy sweet voice that it took Lord Brooke a moment longer than it should have to realize the implications of her words.

His jaw dropped fractionally, and he glanced at the couple standing beside them to see if they had heard her speaking... but if they had, they made no note of it.

“Lord Brooke has only just arrived back in town,” Natalie supplied helpfully. “He has spent a good deal of time in the countryside with his ailing mother and his cousin. Is that not right?”

Lord Brooke nodded curtly. “Yes, that is quite correct. There is nothing quite so important as caring for one’s family.”

Natalie nodded. “It is a grand thing that you do, as well, given that your cousin has such a colorful reputation, in the first place.”

“I think that my cousin is simply misunderstood. The Duke has endured quite a lot of strife in his years. His experiences would be bound to cause anyone difficulty in a normal society,” Lord Brooke supplied conversationally.

Sally could not see what Lucas’s true feelings were toward his family. His face gave nothing away.

“But he does not even seem to try, Lord Brooke. The only way to be included in polite society is to put forth the effort. I daresay that the only thing I even know about him is his sordid history, which I understand can be intimidating to some, but that does not mean that he should not integrate himself. Perhaps... perhaps if he were to be around people, we could forget the bad and have those memories replaced with new, happier ones. He just needs to find a good lady to marry,” Natalie finished speaking and let her hand rest on her rounded belly. She nodded matter-of-factly as if it were the most obvious solution there could be.

Sally was shocked. She had never heard Natalie speak at such length before. She must be well acquainted with Lord Brooke, indeed. Which made Sally wonder why it was that she had been forced to endure the man with the boil when this might have been an option the whole time.

Lord Brooke tried to answer her, a kind and placating smile playing over his lips, and he shrugged noncommittally.

He did not seem to wish to talk about his family, and Sally had no purpose in listening to Natalie lecture him.

“Ask me to dance?” Sally interjected, her hazel eyes lifting to his. She held out her hand between the pair of them for Lord Brooke to add his name to her dance card. Of course, he might say no, but she had a feeling that he would not.

“Of—Of course.” Lord Brooke smiled.

It was the first expression that Sally had witnessed all day that felt genuine to her. He hastily wrote his name without commenting that his was the only name on the dance card and took her hand in his to guide her toward the dance floor.

“Thank you for that,” Lord Brooke muttered as they moved into position.

Sally beamed. “Of course. You looked as if you needed a touch of rescue.”

“Is that not meant to be my job? I do not think that the damsel is supposed to be the one saving the gentleman,” Lord Brooke teased softly.

“I think the first thing that you need to learn about me is that I am no damsel, My Lord.”

Sally laughed as they started to move into step with one another. She did miss dancing. When she had first been presented to Society, she had loved balls the best because she would dance until her feet felt as if they were simply going to fall from her legs. In truth, until Lord Brooke started to spin her around the dance floor, she had not realized just how much she had missed it. It was liberating.

“Oh, I would not make the mistake of presuming to pigeonhole you into anything.” Lord Brooke laughed.

For the span of the dance, Sally allowed herself to pretend that her mother was not watching her every move. That the older woman’s eyes was not glued to her every move from across the room. For a moment, Sally was not the perpetual disappointment nor the only one in her friends unwed. None of it mattered. She closed her eyes to let the music speak to her, Lord Brooke’s hand on her back and in her hand—even the softer touches as she spun through the moves by feel and memory alone thrilled her.

“You surprise me.” Lord Brooke chuckled softly as they moved into the slower section of the song. “And I confess that is not something that I feel very often anymore.”

“I shall take that as a compliment.” Sally grinned.

“As you should. It was intended as a compliment of the highest order.” Lord Brooke seemed to ooze charm. Sally could only surmise that he had decided he was fond of her.

“So, Lord Brooke, am I to assume that you are also the sort of man who is easily bored? Do you tire of things fleetingly? Because I am not so certain that I can entertain a flighty sort of man,” Sally asked. She did not know if the expressions that she was making were alluring or flirty, she could only hope that she was not making a total fool of herself. Somehow, she had simply expected him to take the lead.

“I do not think that is an accurate assessment of me, Lady Sally, for I am a man of vast and varied interests.”

“That only seems to further prove my point. What are the criteria for you to find something interesting? Beauty? Personal benefit?” Sally grinned. “Sparkly?”

Lord Brooke gave her a look at the latter of her listings. “I cannot list qualities that I look for. I simply know what I am looking for. I shall not apologize for that.”

“Very well.”

“Do you claim to be any different? Did you not make a vaguely suggestive comment to me on the premise that you

found my handsome face appealing in some fashion?”

“And if I do?” Sally asked in a softer voice. “Will you condemn me for it?”

“How could I ever fault you for something that I am often guilty of myself?” Lord Brooke chuckled.

“Ah! So, you admit it!” Sally laughed with him.

Lord Brooke nodded. “I shall! I admit to it! Is that not the issue in our society? Shallowness and the desire to judge people only on their list of qualifications?”

“Oh, I suppose you make a fair point.” Sally paused for a moment to pretend to deliberate. “Speaking of your qualifications, what is it that you do, Lord Brooke?”

“I shall only answer if you prattle off your accomplishments so that we can compare our standing.”

“Of course, that is the only way,” Sally agreed with a flourish.

“Well, my current business is not something that I often share with many of the opposite sex, as it tends to have a particular sort of reaction,” Lord Brooke started.

Sally was nearly about to protest when Lord Brooke continued.

“But I can see that you are not just an ordinary lady.” Lord Brooke winked.

Their dance came to a close, and the pair of them left the dance floor. Lord Brooke collected goblets of wine for the pair of them and tipped his glass to her slightly before indulging in a drink.

“For some time now, I have been assisting my beloved cousin in managing his gaming hall. I know that it sounds sordid. Believe me, I have heard all of the opinions, good and bad. But, at the end of the day, it is a business.”

“You really appear to love your family a great deal, Lord Brooke.” Sally grinned.

“I owe everything to my family.” He shrugged modestly.

How was she supposed to transition from walking around the ballroom to seeking what she actually wanted? Surely, women did such things all the time. It seemed that every day that passed, Sally heard another rumor about a “good woman” being caught up in the middle of a scandal. Perhaps she ought to ask one of them? What came next?

They were interested in one another... but he was behaving much as any other gentleman ought to. Their conversation was light, and fun, and he was attractive *enough*. Certainly, it did not much matter if she did not get that rush in her belly like her friends described.

Was she supposed to make a move?

Perhaps she should stop speaking with him and only focus her attention on known rakes? Would that be more efficient?

Lucas’s hand touched her elbow softly, and she was brought back to the present.

“I am so sorry, I am loath to leave your side in the middle of a conversation but—” Lord Brooke nodded his head toward his footman, who was standing on the other side of the room, beckoning for him subtly. “It appears that I have a duty to attend to.”

“Of course. Thank you for the dance, My Lord.”

“I should like to find you again, later this evening. Would you find that wholly abhorrent?”

Sally smiled and crinkled her nose when she answered in a teasing voice, “Repugnant, yes.”

Lord Brooke left her with a smile on his face—she supposed that was the best possible outcome. Besides, it would give her more than enough time to formulate some sort of plan of action, going forward. Banter, she felt, she could do moderately well. It was just the rest of it that she needed to figure out.

Sally spun to take in the rest of the ballroom. There her mother was, like always, watching her like a hawk. Nothing unusual there. If she were to return to her mother’s side, or Natalie’s side, they would grill her for information that she was not

certain that she wished to give. It certainly was not as if she wanted to actually *court* Lord Brooke.

Well, she supposed that there was no true harm in following her curiosity a little bit further this evening. If she was going to compromise herself, she might as well figure out what it is that is interesting enough to pull Lord Brooke away from a ball in the swing of things.

Yes. That was the better option.

She held her mother's gaze for a long moment, knowing full well what that particular stare indicated. She should return at once, and stop drinking from the wine cup in her hand.

Yet, Sally turned on her heel and headed for the gardens.

Resplendent was the only word that she could use to describe the sheer beauty of the rolling gardens. Topiaries and flowers as far as the eye could see in every direction. It was almost *too* much if she were being perfectly honest. Though, it did leave such a lovely scent in the air.

Sally walked slowly, plucking a small flower from one of the planters and twirling the stem of it in her hands as she went. Lord Brooke could be anywhere.

Gardens were the sort of places that people had trysts in, right? She could claim to have simply been getting a breath of fresh air if he was not truly interested in her. It was exactly what her friend Anne had done a couple of Seasons ago.

Sally smiled to herself, beginning to feel the tendrils of excitement curling in her belly.

Was she truly doing this?

Sally tucked the flower behind her ear and hedged closer to the sound of voices. She could just "stumble" upon their conversation and feign ignorance of their presence.

Though, the closer she got, the angrier the voices seemed to be. They were speaking to one another in angry whispers far too quickly for her to understand what they were saying. She got only a glimpse of the man he spoke to before flattening herself against the closest wall.

But just that glimpse was more than enough for her heart to thump painfully in her chest. Whoever it was Lord Brooke was speaking to... that should be her true target.

Chapter Three



“Presenting His Grace, the Duke of Swanage.”

The steward’s voice announced Thomas to all of the guests of the ball, despite the fact that Thomas had explicitly told him not to. He detested the sweep of shocked stares and instant flurry of whispers that always greeted him the moment that he was announced into a room. His reputation always preceded him—in all of the worst possible ways.

The very act of standing in this ballroom is to break a vow that Thomas had made to himself many years ago.

The Duke of Swanage had been but a child when the *ton* had turned their backs on him. He had been only a youth who had made mistakes as any child would... and he had been left to shoulder the burden of his magnificent failings all on his own. There was no love lost between him and those in higher society. They, as a collective, did not wish to have a known murderer among their ranks any more than he was interested in being a part of them.

If he could have spent the rest of his life avoiding them, he would have been only too happy to do so.

“—I cannot believe anyone would dare associate with him. Who knows what dark secrets lie beneath that stoic facade.”

“—It is a shame, really. Such a waste of noble blood. No wonder he is always seen as an outcast.”

Sometimes, Thomas wondered if they wished to be overheard. If the scathing and snide comments that people made about

him were said only partially behind their fans with the distinct purpose of making him more uncomfortable.

In fact, the only reason that Thomas ever set foot in London was to tend to the gaming hall that he had been strong-armed into buying. An overly large purchase made by his cousin in a drunken stupor that Thomas had been forced to buy into in order to bail the younger man out of it.

Being the co-owner of a gaming hall would not have suited Lucas's otherwise bright reputation. As Thomas was so very well acquainted with the scorn of others and how their sour opinion of him could sting, that was the very last thing that he would have ever wished for his cousin. If he could spare his cousin from that in any way, then he would.

He had not made the sacrifices that he had made in order for the negative implications of the said hall to be attributed to anyone other than him. However, there was a downside there as well, for when something went wrong... people did not tend to approve of him handling the turbulence on his own. More often than not, he was better suited as a silent partner, a man behind the curtains as it was. He could run the affairs and manage the books, but he was not received well out and about on the floor itself. His reputation served him well for intimidating or barring patrons from the establishment... but Lucas had a far softer touch for the more delicate matters.

Matters such as attending to Lucas's mother.

Or attending to drunken fools, in general.

Thomas mentally kicked himself for daring to loop his aunt into the same classification as those who frequented the hall. He had an abundance of care for the older woman, and it was not simply because she and her son were the only family that he had left. It helped, certainly, but his aunt was the only person in his life who had stood by him no matter the circumstances. She had been at his side as he navigated the rocky waters left for him in the wake of his parents' murder. Their deaths had forced him to grow up entirely too fast—a duke at such a very young age, indeed.

If it were not for her, the weight of such a title would have crushed him.

In fact, she was likely to show up at his side any moment now. She begged and pleaded with him regularly to attend functions like this with her. If the matters to be discussed with Lucas were not so time sensitive, he would still be denying her.

“There he is! Did you hear about that Duke? They say he is cursed, responsible for the tragic fire that claimed his family.”

“I would not want to be anywhere near him. Who knows if the rumors are true? Best to keep our distance.”

“His presence here only tarnishes the elegance of this event. It is quite unsettling if you ask me.”

Thomas told himself that he would not stay long.

He claimed that the sheer mass of people moving in strange patterns around him did not bother him. The way that the pairs of judgmental eyes glossed over him made his skin crawl. It mattered not how high he held his head or that he wore a carefully crafted mask of indifference... he could still feel it. Like acid in the back of his throat.

He carried his tall frame well, his hands clasped calmly behind his back as he moved stoically through the crowd.

Before him, people parted like water to give him a path through without having to gravitate too close to his person. He understood that his features could be intimidating, regardless of what his aunt liked to say. From what he had seen of this event thus far, he was not missing much. All of the gowns and conversations had a certain appeal to them... but he was better suited to be on his own.

He doubted very much that any of these women would turn his head, anyway.

No, Thomas had a very particular type. He could not claim to prefer one physical feature over another, but there was a certain *presence* that he preferred his women to have. A spark of attraction could not be faked. It could be overcome, were that spark to be absent, but he certainly did not prefer it.

“Do my eyes deceive me, or is that my reclusive nephew come to town?”

His aunt Matilde always tended to sound a bit Shakespearian whenever she was deep in her cups. She was overly theatrical, by nature. As a woman, she tended to feel things very deeply to a level that Thomas was not certain he had ever properly related to. The dramatics could wear on him, but for her, he would endure it.

Matilde slipped her arm into the crook of his elbow so that he was forced to accommodate her.

“I will not bother asking you what it is that has finally changed your mind about mingling with the *ton* and visiting with us this evening, but I am so very grateful that you have. I have been speaking about you all evening!” Matilde gestured broadly with the glass of wine in her hand. Her cheeks were reddened with wine, and the laugh lines in the corners of her eyes were in full display. “There are so many wonderful people that I wish to introduce you to! Come! Come!”

Thomas sighed and shook his head. When he spoke, it was in a low tone, and only meant for his aunt’s ears. “You know very well that I have not come for that, Aunt Matilde. I am looking for your son, and once my business with him is concluded, I shall be on my way once more.”

“Nonsense! You have come all this way just for him? No. I shall not hear of it! Not when there are so very many pretty young women that would love to dance with a duke!” Matilde beamed.

Yes, Thomas figured that they would be very happy to dance with a duke, indeed. However, they would *not* be overly pleased to dance with *him*.

“Have you seen Lucas or not?” Thomas cut to the chase and asked his question again. Matilde had good intentions, he knew that in his heart, but that did not mean that he would indulge her. Not for this.

Matilde frowned in a way that shifted her whole face and took her body with it. Her shoulders slumped downward as she

pouted. She appeared only moments away from stomping her foot at him in frustration. “I am certain that he is off somewhere. He arrived with me but did not stay by my side. He is a terrible, wicked excuse for a son!”

Thomas almost grinned. He denied the urge only because that would make her faux tantrum larger.

“All the more reason for me to speak with him, is it not? Give him a good what for?” Thomas continued, knowing that this particular tactic would get more information out of his aunt than otherwise.

Matilde rolled her eyes and pulled her arm from his. “Between the two of you, it is a wonder that I have not a head of gray hair!”

“Gray hair would look marvelous with your complexion, Auntie.”

“Do not flatter me, boy!”

He did grin then, just a flash of emotion that he quickly stifled. “But flattery works so very well on you.”

Matilde hit his bicep with her closed fan in reprimand for being correct. She had a harder time arguing with him whenever he spoke nothing but the truth to her. Something that he personally found endless amusement in but that angered her to no end.

“Our footman is over there somewhere. Perhaps he will know more about where my rotten son has gotten off to.” Matilde waved him away, and Thomas kissed her cheek affectionately as a goodbye before turning to find their footman.

The man was a small thing. Young but very efficient. He squared his shoulders and stood taller when he saw Thomas walking toward him.

“Fetch Lord Brooke for me. Have him meet me outside, at once,” Thomas commanded.

“Yes, Your Grace, right away.” The boy bowed deeply and wove off through the crowd... but not before the proclamation

of Thomas's title had the undesired effect of drawing attention to him.

The wallflowers nearest him instantly started whispering behind their hands. Thomas would not have long before the speculation about who he was started to overwhelmingly fill the room.

Thomas took a curt glance over his shoulder and noticed that a couple of mothers were already looking in his direction with curious eyes. He could not have that. He wished to be nothing more than a ghost here. Frowning, Thomas knew that he could not wait any longer. He could not stay in this ballroom until Lucas was found and they could go outside together. As much as he hated to leave any modicum of faith in other people, the footman would simply have to find him after Lucas had been located.

Thomas left the ballroom swiftly. His steps were careful and measured, as he was in all things.

He did not slow his pace until the voices of the ballroom started to fade away behind him. He continued until he located one of the garden exits. Only once he was enveloped in the cool night air did he allow himself to breathe. The pressure that had been building in his chest since the moment he had arrived in that ballroom started to slowly abate. In through the nose, out through the mouth. He counted the measured breaths that he filled his lungs with until he felt calm enough to unclench his fists.

The footman needed to locate Lucas *quickly*.

Then Thomas could return to work. Only then would he feel better.

It was a mercy that he did not have to wait longer than a handful of moments. The footman was blessedly efficient, and before long, Lucas showed up on the balcony with his arms outstretched as if they were the sort of cousins who would ever embrace one another.

“Cousin! Are you not a sight for sore eyes!” Lucas greeted, his charm dialed up high as he flashed all of his perfect teeth at

Thomas.

“Ah, so you are already aware that we are having issues, then?” Thomas’s brow flattened as he folded his arms across his chest.

Lucas still pretended to not know what the matter was. “This is a ball, Cousin. This is a time for celebration, dancing, enjoyment. I know that it is very difficult for you with that stick lodged so firmly up your rear.”

Thomas was not in the mood. “What excuse do you have for leaving the hall in such a state? Are you truly that desperate for company that you would leave me, leave the hall, in such a moment of crisis that I had to come all the way here and drag you back to your senses?”

“What are you even talking about? Nothing was wrong when I left.” Lucas shrugged as if the matters that Thomas spoke about had nothing to do with him whatsoever.

“Nothing?” Thomas echoed, unable to keep his temper at bay. “Nothing was wrong? Are you blind, or do you truly believe me to think that you are that stupid?”

Finally, the joy seemed to leech off of Lucas’s face. It was for the best. While Thomas did not like being the cause of his cousin’s sour mood, he was not going to constantly clean up after his mistakes either.

“Very well. If you have come here to lecture me, then you had best get it over with so that I can return to my celebration. I, unlike you, am capable of having a little fun from time to time,” Lucas argued.

He, like his mother, tended to lash out when they had drunk too much.

Thomas scrubbed his hands down his face, ready to give him an earful when the sound of footsteps caught his attention. “Shh—” He placed a finger to his lips.

Had he been followed out here? As unlikely as it seemed, he certainly did not need to have anyone overhearing the conversation that they were about to have.

“I do not think that we are alone...”

“Whatever you think that you heard, I assure you that we are very much alone,” Lucas said as he rolled his eyes. “I do know what I am doing, after all.”

As bad as it was to not believe Lucas when he spoke, Thomas could not stop from taking steps in the direction of the noise. There was a corner so near them, there was no telling if there was a person standing behind there or not. He just wanted to take a quick look to ensure that their conversation was private. Before he could even take two steps, Lucas’s hand was on his elbow, pulling him back.

“What does it matter anyway?” Lucas laughed.

It was a blatant attempt to appear like he did not care about anything at all. He could pretend that this was a normal conversation all that they wanted, but he knew the depth of bad that things had to be in order to have Thomas come all the way here and track him down.

“You cannot simply shirk your responsibilities just because you wish to get your wick wet,” Thomas hissed. Irritation bled into his words, and he could not stop it.

“Perhaps if you would get your wick wet a touch more often, then you would not be so uptight. I know a handful of women in there at this exact moment, if you are in need? I would be more than happy to introduce you to some of them if you are incapable of finding your own women.” Lucas laughed, but Thomas was not amused.

“I think that you ought to concern yourself less with my *wick* and more with the business that we share and its present complications. Your priorities are out of order,” Thomas insisted, hoping to reason with him.

“Is there a finger priority? You truly ought to see the woman that I have met this evening. I think she might be perfect for whetting particular interests.” Lucas winked dramatically.

Thomas wished to shake him. “Lucas! Focus.”

Lucas heaved a long-suffering sigh and scrubbed his hands over his face. “Fine, but speak quickly, please. Unlike you, I

do so enjoy a good party, and I was having a lovely time inside.”

“Would you care to tell me what happened with the Johnson account?” Thomas cut directly to the point. It was nearly impossible to get Lucas to focus while he was this level of drunk, and so, the faster this conversation went, the better.

“Is there something wrong with the account? Or are you implying that I am not watching my ledgers as I am supposed to?” Lucas frowned.

“I think that you are ignoring them entirely, yes,” Thomas said plainly.

“What are you accusing me of, exactly?” Lucas asked in a low tone, which to somebody else might have been perceived as threatening.

“I think that you are too focused on the wrong aspects of running a business, Cousin. I think that you have become so wrapped up in your public image and ensuring the *good time* of your patrons that you are not ensuring that their tabs are paid, that they are not making foul messes in the damned corridors! Just last week, you gave out so many free drinks that our ledgers were red for two days!” Thomas stated with clear irritation. “And then, you leave it all for me to clean up simply because you cannot be asked to bother with it!”

Lucas rolled his eyes.

It was Thomas’s final straw.

“God’s wounds! Cousin, you are not two and twenty any longer! You are an adult who ought to be concerned with the fact that this damned hall, which *you* wanted, is falling not only into a state of disrepair but that the entire establishment is nearly in debt!” Thomas huffed.

“You will handle it, Cousin. You always handle these sorts of things.” Lucas’s words slurred for a moment, and it made Thomas’s eye twitch.

“I should not have to handle it. It is not only your money that you have squandered. You know good and damned well that you could not have afforded this hall without my investment,

and I will not allow you to run it into the ground! If your mother had not begged for my help, I would have never—”

“What has happened to you, Cousin? You used to be so much fun. You never used to take things this seriously,” Lucas scoffed.

Thomas did not know what else he could possibly say in order to get the man in front of him to take things seriously. It was a gravely important matter, and yet he was choosing to act like it was nothing. If the gambling hall burned to the ground, would he care then? If they were unable to pour whiskey any longer because they were too destitute in order to get their shipments? What about then?

“I grew up, Lucas. Something that you desperately should try.”

“So that I can be pompous like you?”

Thomas could feel his irritation coming to a head. He knew that if he did not back down, he was bound to say or do something that he would quickly regret. Lucas did not have an *off* switch. Whenever he felt backed into a corner, he would only be able to lash out. Thomas knew from experience that if this were to stop escalating any further, he was going to have to be the one to put an end to it.

“I did not come here to fight with you. I came here for your seal and ledgers.” Thomas pinched the bridge of his nose for a long moment. He could already tell that this conversation was not going to end the way that he wanted it to.

Lucas needed to leave with him and return to the gambling hall where he was *supposed* to be spending this evening in the first place so that Thomas could attend to other affairs. But that was the other issue that he had yet to find a way to bring up. It felt as if with each passing month, they were less of a partnership in the fact that Lucas seemed happy to simply allow Thomas to do, well, everything.

Thomas was exhausted.

If only he had the same ability to turn off his mind and just shirk all thoughts of responsibility and duty whenever he felt like it. If he could just walk away from who he needed to be to

do... anything else at all. What a luxury that might be. One that Lucas had in abundance and did not have any gratitude about it whatsoever.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “You know, there is a very simple solution to all of this that you just refuse to take into consideration, no matter how many times I suggest it.”

“Do not—” Thomas warned.

“Why not? It is a perfectly good idea. It would bring in even more clients. It would shift the reputation that you are always so very worried about as well as fix all issues with our income.” Lucas rubbed his fingers together as if to indicate just how much money it would bring in.

“I will not do it.”

“If you would just put your damned morals aside for even a single moment, then you might be able to see that—”

“It has nothing to do with my morals,” Thomas protested.

“Yes, it does. Hell, even if you do not wish to bring women into the establishment, you could at least put in a small stage and perhaps hire a few whor—ah, *performers* or actresses to occupy the men. They will drink, get a little show... perhaps talk to beautiful women after the show for an hour or so. They will spend more money when they are nice and happy,” Lucas reasoned. He spoke in such a smooth tone of voice that he felt that his present idea was the very best thing that he had ever come up with.

“I will never allow it. Gambling gets us into trouble enough as it is. I would never allow prostitution in my establishment.”

Over the last handful of months, Lucas had been bringing up the idea of employing escorts into the gambling hall more and more often. At first, it had been an offhanded comment, but it seemed that the more that Lucas thought about the issue, the more that the idea took root in his mind and grew into something that was no longer easily controlled. No doubt he just wished to have a steady string of women that would be easily accessible for when the particular mood struck him. But Thomas was violently opposed to it.

As long as Thomas held half of the shares of the hall, he would never allow it.

Never mind the upstart costs or the measures that he would have to put into place in order to afford the women's wages, food, and lodging, but also just ensuring their safety would be a difficult enough task to accomplish. He did not have the time to attend to it personally, which would mean even more staff. Also, more things that he could not do because the gambling hall, while popular, did not bring in the money that it used to. Despite the steady business that Thomas saw every night, they just were not turning the same profits, and he had yet to find out exactly where the hemorrhage was so that he could cut it off.

Then, there was Lucas's far more important point—Thomas's moral compass.

While he did enjoy the company of a woman from time to time, he found it wholly objectionable that they would be bringing women in for the sole purpose of being used and sold.

Lucas shrugged and brushed the comments off. "What are a few fights between friends? You cannot blame a man for how he conducts himself when his temper flares."

Thomas's gaze narrowed, and he shook his head. "They are breaking things, Lucas. You act as if these are behaviors that are to be encourage."

Lucas took another deep gulp of his wine, handing the empty cup over to Thomas when it was finished. He patted Thomas's chest and took the liberty of adjusting the fit of Thomas's coat for him and smirked.

"I am finished with this conversation," Lucas declared. "Whatever other business that you wish to discuss can wait until tomorrow morning. I am going to go back to that party now and enjoy myself. There is a stunning creature that I wish to dance with at least one more time, and your sorry attitude is not going to stop me from doing that."

Thomas had more than a few choice words that he wished to hurl at his cousin, but he bit his tongue to keep from saying them out loud. After all, he owed his remaining family everything.

“You, my reclusive cousin, are more than welcome to come back in there with me so we can enjoy the evening together, or you can leave to the townhouse to spend your night alone... again.” Lucas shrugged dramatically. “Honestly, I do not care what you do. Just as you should concern yourself far less with my own affairs.”

If Thomas could have tethered Lucas to the very spot he stood out of spite and irritation alone, he would have done that. Instead, he was left to watch his cousin stagger his way back inside the building without even having the decency to look back at him a single time.

Thomas’s grip on the wine glass tightened until he felt the thing start to crack and fracture under the pressure. Things were not going the way that they were supposed to. He was supposed to be in better control of all of this. Until very recently, he had been able to control his cousin’s reckless nature and impulsive tendencies with far more ease than he presently did.

Irritation boiled under his skin until it had nowhere else to go. With an irritated huff, he strode over to the balcony and hurled the wine glass over it with as much force as he could muster. It was only mildly satisfying to hear it clink in the distance as it broke. Thomas’s knuckles pressed down into the railing of the balcony, and his head bowed.

What was he going to do?

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Much love,

Ava MacAdams

About the Author

Born and raised in rural Louisiana, Ava's rebellious nature would always find her riding her horse through vast farmlands or lying under a tree, getting lost in one of her favourite historical romances. Always itching for adventure, she was only nineteen when she decided to embark on her biggest adventure and travel through Europe.

She studied art and theater in London, where she met several people that filled her with valuable experiences. Taking part in a writing competition upon her professor's encouragement, she realised that this was what she always wanted to do. Married to that same professor a few years later, she decided to return to her roots to settle down and write about her favourite era.

Let yourselves be lured into an intense experience of desire and passion, alongside irresistible Lords and seductive Ladies of the Regency Era. Ava's skilled writing hand will throw you back in time, when tales were told and songs were sung...

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