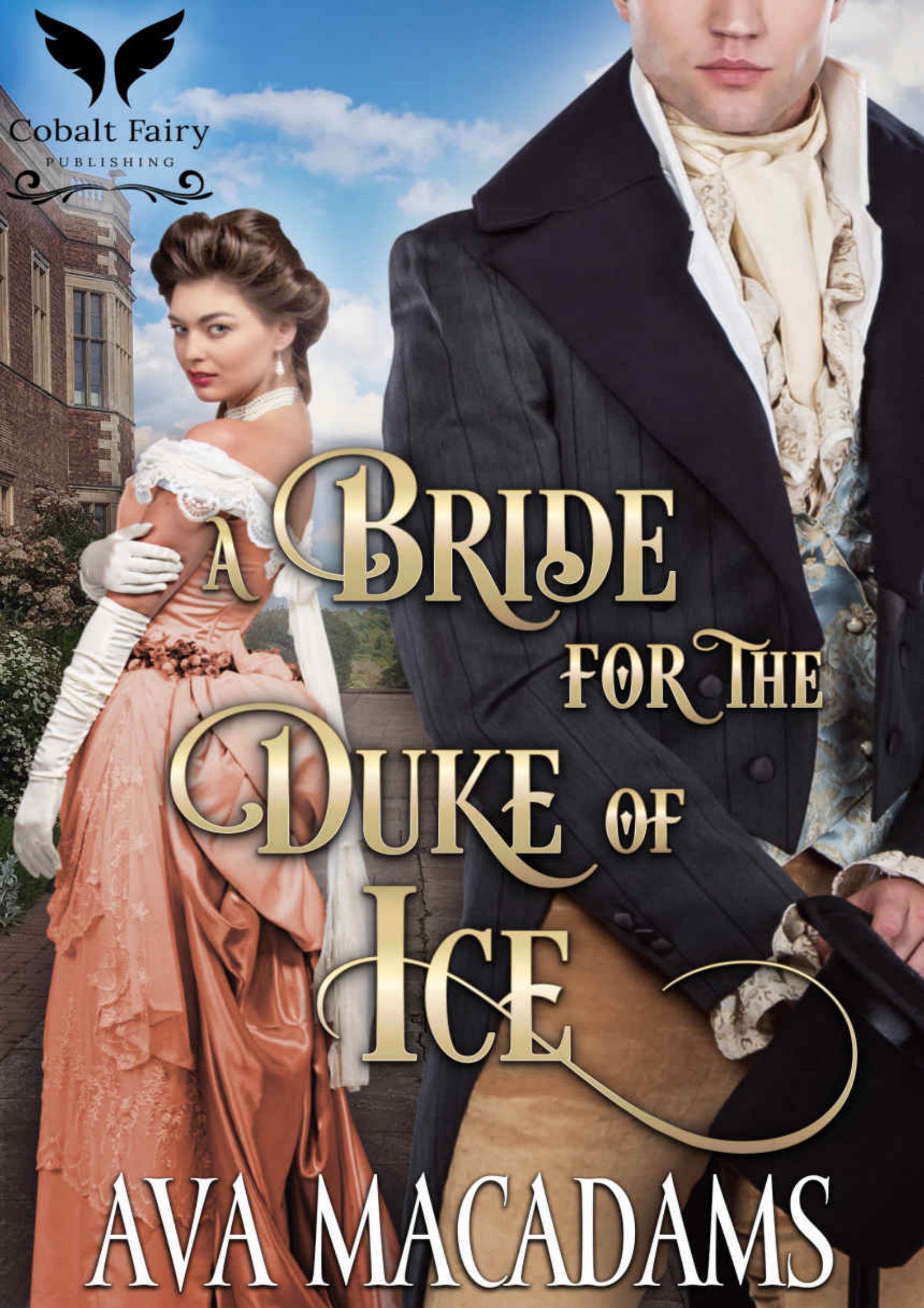




Cobalt Fairy

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A BRIDE
FOR THE
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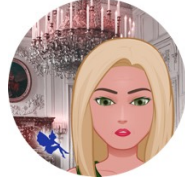
AVA MACADAMS

A BRIDE FOR THE DUKE OF ICE

A Steamy Historical Regency Romance Novel



AVA MACADAMS



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About the Book

“You wanted romance, Ivy? Two months. You shall fall in love with me, I vow it.”

Having been reduced to nothing more than a maid in her own home, Ivy knows that her horrible stepmother will do anything to keep her from marrying. So working with the matchmaker seems like her only way out.

Proclaimed an abomination by his own father, Duke Ethan has efficiently frozen his heart to love or kindness. So when he has to find a proper wife to claim part of his inheritance, he is furious at the matchmaker for her choice.

Only... when Ivy is paid to attend a ball at the side of the Icy Duke, she never expected that she would end up trapped in a loveless marriage to him. Or that he would fall on his knees for just one taste of her...

Before You Start Reading...

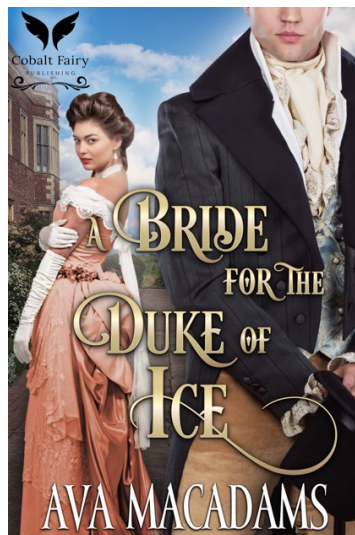
Before you start reading...

Here is **Ivy and Ethan's Prequel Chapter** which will help you understand and visualize the story inside my book better.

Many of my readers requested it and that's why I am giving it away for free! I believe you will LOVE IT!

It's not mandatory to read it, but it will be really helpful if it's your first time with this book.

Read **the beginning of their story** [here](#).



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Chapter One



“Quick, Ivy,” Celia whispered, her voice tight with excitement. “A letter came for you. Hide it before our parents notice.”

Ivy Fester, the eldest daughter of Jacob Fester, the Baron of Hawkes, scrambled to stand from where she had been resting in a low-backed chair. She met the eyes of her stepsister, Celia, before relaxing, seeing that nobody had come with her.

Celia pushed an envelope into Ivy’s hands.

Giddy at the thought of mail for herself, Ivy grinned. “Thank you!”

Celia ran back out without another word.

Voices floated from a distant place in the manor, hinting that their parents would be around. Celia kept them away long enough for Ivy to open the first bit of mail she had received in the longest time.

Ivy half laughed. Her father likely would not have opened a lazy, drunken eye long enough to notice whose name was written on the back of the envelope, let alone ask about its contents.

Her stepmother, however...

Sandra Fester's palm would be open and demanding the letter before Ivy could finish reading her full name. Despite Celia's kindness, her mother did not extend the same grace.

Ivy ran to the mantelpiece, grabbed the rag she had been using to dust in case anybody came in, and swiftly opened the letter. The music room was a mostly forgotten area, with damp black spots on the ceiling and layers of dust coating every surface. Ivy's mother had once been a musician and filled the manor with song and light.

Now, music was a dying thing in their home. Ivy's father had married Celia's mother some years ago, and life had changed for them ever since.

Blinking back the heartache at the memories this room held, Ivy focused on her letter.

Dear Miss Ivy Fester,

You have heard of me around the ton, I believe. My name is Marguerite Langford. Or, as you will likely know me, The Matchmaker. In this envelope, you will find a generous wage to accommodate a special request.

You are to be a companion to the Duke of Icebrooke at the annual winter ball. Please, use the reward provided to equip yourself with the required garments of a high society lady. However, as a Fester, I trust you will not need it. Should you need anything else, I can be reached at my business address. Otherwise, I shall send word of further instructions nearer the time.

Kindest Regards,

The Matchmaker.

Ivy read the letter several times over without even digging for the banknotes tucked into the back of the envelope.

She was to be considered a high society lady once more thanks to the matchmaker, and that was where she chose to focus.

Thinking of that, she turned her attention to the banknotes. Of course, Society trusted that Ivy would be equipped with fine gowns. Jacob Fester was a baron. If only they knew the truth that her father would rather squander his money on drink than buy her a dress for a ball to find a husband. Either that or any money he could offer, her stepmother would only snatch it up. And yet, they still commented on how she had not secured a husband yet.

Ivy slipped the banknotes and the letter into a music box and tucked the box into the space where a loose brick came free, next to the mantelpiece. As she began to dust once more, the door opened. She spun around, an excited grin on her face until she came face to face with Sandra Fester, her stepmother,

who was looming behind Celia. Her long, bony hands were on her daughter's shoulders.

Unlike Celia's soft heart-shaped face, her mother had a long, thin face that was perpetually pinched and scornful.

"Ivy."

Ivy hated the way the Baroness said her name, as if the very sound of it was filth on her tongue.

"I beg to know why you have been awake for such a long time, and yet..." Sandra looked around the music room with disgust. "Nothing is clean at all, and Celia's room remains untidy." She ran a finger across the large mirror above the mantelpiece and scoffed. "I give you a wage to help me keep our home tidy in the absence of many of our servants, so I do expect the work to be done."

Ivy bit her tongue and nodded. Her father had dismissed most of the staff when he realized the extra money saved could go toward his drinking habits. Ivy had heard him and her stepmother arguing about it one night—how Celia would need many dresses, a lady's maid, a personal horseman, and a driver. Her father had heard none of it. Instead, Ivy had been assigned the role of Celia's lady's maid, along with any extra duties Sandra found for her.

Ivy lifted her chin and faced her stepmother. "I am sorry, My Lady. I was..." She grasped at something, anything. "Preparing for a trip to town to purchase ribbons for Celia. You paid me generously last month, and I noticed her ribbons

were getting worn. I wanted to gift her new ones for her debut at the winter ball.”

Sandra sniffed. “Well, you should notice these things sooner, but I am surprised you are aware of the winter ball. Your prospects for a husband remain low, my dear, after not attending any events for quite some time.”

She spoke as if it was Ivy’s fault, the words said with so much malice and condescension. Ivy bit so hard on her tongue that she tasted blood.

“Remind me, how many years since your debut, hmm?”

“Two, My Lady.”

“Ah, *yes*. Two years since we spent money preparing your wardrobe, and yet you have nothing but a very clean rag to show for it. Get to work or leave for town, Ivy. I will not hear another word.”

Shame coursed through Ivy, but she remained silent, only nodding. The Baroness was right about her not securing a husband, but they had given her little to go out into Society with, let alone the right to act like a Society lady.

Ivy had been given one new dress with the most minimal design and was told to hope for the best. The many balls where her dance card had been filled only with pity dances weighed heavy on her heart, but she held onto hope.

Ivy snuck Celia's romance novels from the library at night and read them by candlelight. With the money from the matchmaker, she could purchase ribbons *and* fabric for herself to sew a new dress. She *would* be successful with this offer.

As her stepmother left, Ivy held onto Celia's hand. "What color ribbons would you like?" she asked, waiting until Sandra was out of earshot.

Once her stepmother was gone, Ivy dug the letter back out and showed it to her sister. "I am to be a companion at the winter ball," she whispered excitedly. "Oh, Celia, isn't this wonderful? I am to dress properly and attend!"

"Ivy! This is wonderful news," Celia cooed. But then, her face pinched. "But what will you tell my mother?"

Ivy paused. That was a good question. What *would* she tell the Baroness? Celia did need a lady's maid for a ball, but Ivy could not show up wearing anything less than acceptable for a lady of the ton tonight! If she was to be wearing her own gown, then how did she explain any of it?

"Ah," Ivy said, pondering. "Well, my father likely won't notice I am gone. However, the Baroness... I could say I am thinking of attending the ball as your chaperone?" But then, she frowned, knowing that wouldn't work.

The Baroness herself would be there with Celia. A chaperone would not be required.

“We can’t smuggle you into the carriage,” Celia mused. “If you leave the ball before us, that would answer for the latter part of the night.”

“I could simply... ask?” Ivy suggested. “I could swear to complete my chores, help you prepare, and ask to go, too, and be back early to finish everything that needs to be done!”

She felt highly optimistic and would risk the Baroness refusing her. In which case, she would need another plan. There was the possibility of simply keeping her stepmother in the dark until it was time to leave and hoping the Baroness would not want to cause a scene when she tried to enter the carriage with them.

“Either way,” Ivy continued, changing the topic, “I shall be off. I have your ribbons to purchase and—”

“I do not *really* need new ribbons, Ivy. Please, do not spend that money on me! I am sure my mother can buy me some.”

“Not after I have told her I would purchase them. Do not worry, little sister.”

Ivy gave her sister a cheery smile to cover up her heartbreak. She loved her sister, but the thought of losing some of her money to help Celia secure a husband while she would have to watch her leave broke her heart. When that day came, and Celia had secured a husband, Ivy would be left with her parents in the empty, echoing manor.

When her smile faltered, Ivy turned away from Celia. “If I have enough to spare, I will bring with me those pastries that you love from Helena’s bakery.”

She left swiftly, letting Celia find her mother and receive all the doting she needed to prepare for her debut.

At the seamstress’s shop, Ivy found bolts of fabric for a considerable enough price to be used to make herself a dress. She would simply tailor an existing one to save on any costs.

Once upon a time, the Baron of Hawkes would not have hesitated to purchase anything for her. Once upon a time, her mother would have let her slip on a dress and dance around the shop, dreaming of the day she would make her grand debut and meet the husband of her dreams who would charm her and whisk her off her feet.

Ivy purchased the fabric and returned to the manor with a heavy heart. There would be nobody waiting to answer anyway. Nobody likely even noticed that she had left...

She would work with the matchmaker. If, one day, Celia would leave with a husband, Ivy could not be left here. While her optimism dwindled, this was a new lease of hope.

She might not have to stay here once Celia left. Her mother’s sister lived in Paris and had written to her after her mother’s passing to tell her she was welcome to visit anytime.

That was Ivy’s dream. Her stepmother did not pay her enough for the housework she completed, but with the matchmaker’s

payment, she could save up for a ferry ticket to France to find a new life out there.

She just had to get through the first evening with the Duke of Icebrooke.



The night of the winter ball fast approached. Ivy had stolen moments between chores to finish sewing her dress.

She and Celia giggled in front of Celia's bedroom mirror, and she found herself falling back into the role she had missed: being the daughter of the Baron of Hawkes, rather than someone who was little more than a maid. Whenever her stepmother drew near to Celia's bedroom, Ivy would duck out of sight, trying to get ready where she could.

"I cannot believe I am going to the ball," Ivy whispered, giggling behind her gloved hand. Celia had let her borrow some of her jewelry and accessories. "And behind our mother's back! I hope this works out, Celia. I *need* it to work out."

"Of course, Sister." Celia grinned, applying blush to her cheeks. "Your plan is good. Claiming to be hired as another lady's chaperone is quite an idea, Ivy. It would also allow you to ride in our carriage."

"Of course." Ivy giggled. "After all, it is so very sad that Miss Jackson cannot attend with a parent, what with her father on business and no mother or maid to chaperone her. There are those with harsher lives than mine."

Of course, there was no Miss Jackson, but the Baroness did not know every single lady of the ton, and Ivy had seen it as her only option to pretend she was chaperoning as a favor. If her stepmother questioned her, she could tell her that the payment for helping out could go right to her, and she would deal with the consequences later.

“You do know I dislike how Mother treats you, do you not? I do not agree with it and have tried to reason with her.”

Ivy placed her hand over her sister’s and smiled at her. “I know. Thank you for all your help, Sister.”

A floorboard creaked outside Celia’s bedroom, and Ivy froze. A shadow fell over the doorway—the silhouette of the Baroness. Ivy slipped off the gloves and pretended to be preparing them for Celia.

“Perhaps the white ones to go with your gown?” Ivy asked.

Celia’s frown almost gave them away, until Ivy glanced toward her stepmother, who was coming in. “Oh! The white ones would be most lovely. Do you have the ones with the ribbons at the wrist?”

“Let me check,” Ivy answered, smiling tightly.

She hated talking to her sister like this, as though they were lady and maid—not friends, not *sisters*. But it was just for another evening. Soon, Ivy would be on her way with Celia to the ball, and this would not matter.

“Ivy.” The Baroness’s voice was sharp. “Fetch flowers for Celia’s hair. The small white ones can be woven through her curls. This is her debut. I need everything to be absolutely perfect.”

Celia’s face fell at Ivy being sent away, and she opened her mouth, perhaps to protest, but Ivy only smiled and shook her head.

“Of course, My Lady.”

“*Fresh* flowers. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“From Madame Bloom’s.”

Ivy hesitated. “Madame Bloom’s? But that is almost half an hour away.”

“Then I suggest you hurry. Do you understand that my daughter deserves the best quality for her debut?”

Sandra lifted a perfectly thin, sharp eyebrow at Ivy, and Ivy withered under the weight of her scorn. Her shoulders slumped, and she bowed her head. “Yes, My Lady.”

Throughout the carriage ride, Ivy tried to think of a new plan. This trip would set her back over an hour. Then, with Celia to

tend to, she would have little time to dress herself and might miss the carriage leaving.

Hurrying to Madame Bloom's, she picked several bouquets of flowers with the coins her stepmother had given her and returned to the manor. Celia waited in her underskirt, with her long, dark hair curled. Her emerald eyes were bright and excited.

"My mother overheard us," Celia whispered.

That much Ivy had assumed correctly, then.

"She plans to delay you."

"Worry not, Sister," Ivy assured.

As long as Celia did not have to carry the burden of her mother's ill-treatment toward Ivy, everything would work out.

"Let me help you with your hair and powder."

Soon, Celia was ready. Ivy had just reached for her own dress, happy that she would just make it in time to join Celia in the carriage, when the Baroness appeared.

"Do you think me stupid, Ivy?"

Ivy's eyes widened as she shook her head quickly. "No, My Lady."

"There *is* no Miss Jackson. Your father may have dragged us into a difficult financial situation, but I am still a lady of the ton. I am still *quite* social and connected. I asked around while you were out fetching flowers. I do not know why a girl like you thinks she is entitled to sneak into a winter ball and assumes she has a place, but let me remind you, Ivy. You are a maid, nothing more. Maids do not belong in these establishments, whether in a nice dress or not." Sandra's eyes flicked to Ivy's dress, which slipped through her fingers in dismay.

"I—"

"Your insolence astounds me, Ivy. Truly. You shall stay here. You shall write me a letter detailing exactly why you think you have a right to be at that ball, and on top of this, the whole house must be spotless, and the laundry done, and Celia's bedroom prepared for her return." Sandra's nose twitched. "Come, Celia."

Ivy bit back an anguished gasp. She needed to be in that carriage. "Wait—"

"You have cost us precious time as it is, Ivy. You will not be attending. Perhaps if you had told me the truth, I would have considered it. Do not fool me again. Goodbye, Ivy."

Sandra Fester took hold of her daughter's wrist and pulled her along, shutting the door firmly behind them.



Ivy sank to the floor, clutching the skirt of her ball dress. The Baroness was wicked. She wiped her tears on the back of her hand and pulled herself up. She had been given money to attend tonight's ball, and she no longer had it to give back if she did not show up.

One way or another, Ivy needed to be there. There would be no letter detailing her insolence, and she would complete her chores upon returning. She *had* to be at that ball.

Running to the hallway window, she watched as her sister and stepmother left in the carriage. Celia cast one glance at the manor mournfully before she was ushered in. It was only then that Ivy noticed a carriage waiting outside the neighbors' house, with a footman at the steps, waiting to help ladies in.

Of course.

The daughters next door were also eligible to attend. There was no sign of people outside the front door, and she had already done most of her preparations before she was sent out earlier.

Ivy pinned up her hair, put the remaining flowers in it, and slipped into her gown. By the time she made it out the front door, the ladies were already there.

“Wait!”

“Ah, Miss Fester.” The two daughters who lived next door smiled warmly as their father greeted her. “We are just on our way to the winter ball. What can we do for you?”

“That is the ball I am going to attend as well, but I fear I took too long to get ready, and my sister had to leave hastily. Would you be so kind as to let me ride in your carriage with you?”

He seemed to ponder her request for a moment but then nodded. “If you do not mind the tight fit it may prove to be, you are very welcome to join us.”

Tears stung Ivy’s eyes once more. “*Thank* you so kindly, My Lord.”

“Say, how is your father faring?”

“He is well, thank you.” Ivy ducked her head, following his daughters into the carriage, lest anybody made her talk about her father. They would discover something was wrong immediately.

The ride to the mansion took a while, and Ivy was glad for the gloves she wore, as she would have been tempted to bite her nails from worry. But she was finally on her way to the ball!

As they pulled up to the mansion, Ivy felt envy toward these women, for they had their father, leading them out of the carriage, proud to display them for their debut. He took each by the hand and guided them out of the carriage.

But then, she looked up at the front steps of the mansion, where eligible ladies and bachelors were making their way inside, the gentlemen dressed in tailcoats and suits, and the ladies in shimmering gowns.

At the top of the stairs, looking annoyed, was the Duke of Icebrooke.

Every shred of confidence Ivy had vanished when she saw the notorious womanizer who frequented the gossip columns. This was not the soft-hearted, kindly-spoken gentleman Ivy had hoped to meet.

This was Ethan Williams, the Duke of Icebrooke, a man who was known to be cruel and cold-hearted, his tongue as sharp as his piercing gaze, and she knew she did not have a forgiving night ahead of her.

Her heart constricted as she made her way up the stairs and his heavy stare landed on her.

Anger simmered in his icy blue eyes.

Chapter Two



“This is the lady you would have me present to my uncle and aunt?” Ivy overheard the Duke hiss at the matchmaker.

Her heart gave a sad, anxious *thump, thump*. She was not the most desired lady, her reputation tarnished by years of neglect from her family, explaining her lack of a husband...

But was she really *so* bad? It had not been her fault.

Still, she smiled softly when she met them at the top of the stairs. She bowed her head. “Your Grace, I am honored—”

“You are *late*, is what you are.”

Ethan Williams would have been handsome, she thought, if not for the cruel sharpness etched in every inch of his face. His eyes were of the deepest sapphire, a bright glare in the darkening night. His jaw looked as though it might cut her if she touched it. His nose was strong, his thick eyebrows slightly darker than his hair, the peculiar white shock of it. The length curled around his ears, falling in straight lengths to his

jacket collar. The front was swept back handsomely. His skin was pale and flawless. He was beautiful in an icy, cold way.

He began to pace but quickly halted.

“No. I cannot do this. I cannot—” He let out a deep exhale and pinched his brow. “There must be another match.”

“By all means, Your Grace, do try to find another lady to attend with tonight. You would have a difficult time.”

Ivy watched the matchmaker, but her eyes flicked back to the Duke. “I agree with His Grace,” she spoke up. “I apologize, Madam, but I cannot attend with him. Thank you for the offer, but this is quite absurd. My reputation is sullied enough by faults that are not my own. I do not need—”

“Excuse me, Miss Fester, for I see you *are* the eldest daughter of the Baron of Hawkes, but it is not only your reputation at stake here. You cannot possibly expect me to enter with you. Your gown looks several years old, you look as though you dressed yourself without any assistance from your lady’s maid, and we have all heard rumors about the Festers in recent years. You are the eldest Fester daughter, are you not? The very woman who has attended countless balls several years ago, only to secure no match.”

“Me!” Ivy’s cheeks flushed with anger and humiliation. “I pardon you, Your Grace, but I am sure your name has been in the gossip columns far more than my own. You are cruel, stubborn, you turn friends away, and your prospects for a wife have been as little as mine for a husband, if I am not mistaken.”

“Ah, you have quite the tongue on you.” His smile was a twisted sneer. “Usually, that would make me think highly of you. I do like a challenge, but I am in need of a lady without a reputation like yours, Miss Fester. Please, be gone before anyone catches you with me.”

What *cruelty*.

Ivy turned to the matchmaker. “Apologies, Madam, but I cannot go through with this date, and I am not willing to return the payment, as I risked a lot to be here tonight.”

The matchmaker only gave them a knowing look. “I see that.” Relief flooded Ivy’s chest. “However, you are both in desperate situations and need each other more than you realize. So, what do you say? Will you make an effort to see if this works out for you?”

For a second, Ivy and Ethan both stopped and looked at each other.

His Grace, with his white hair and lavishly made suit. His Grace, with his riches. I was right to worry. What would he want with me? Nothing. He wants nothing to do with me.

And that only made Ivy lift her chin. She was Ivy Fester. Disgraced or not, she had been invited there. “I accept.”

After a second, the Duke’s shoulders dropped in defeat. “Madam, I fear you are right. I also accept.” He turned to Ivy,

his angry eyes boring into hers. “Miss Fester, I would remind you to be on your best behavior, and do not disgrace me.”

“Any more than you might disgrace yourself, Your Grace?”

Perhaps I am being too testy with him, but I will not allow him to belittle me when his reputation is hardly gleaming.

“It is agreed, then. I wish you both a happy winter ball,” the matchmaker said.



Ethan was desperate, but was he so desperate to have the eldest daughter of the disgraced Baron of Hawkes at his side? Yes, he was. He fought back every curse that came to mind. Ivy Fester had been late, and this was an important night for him.

“Do *not*,” he hissed, “mess this up for me.”

Smiling at those who milled around him, Ethan held his arm out for Ivy. She slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, but her grip was tight. His back was stiff, rigid, and he held himself away from her as much as possible as they went inside the grand mansion.

He was familiar with the mansion, having spent half his childhood and adolescence there. His aunt and uncle had candles lit along the entrance, down the hallway, and into the open room where the ball was being held. Glass doors were open to lead into the garden. Ladies and gentlemen danced, socialized, and watched the spectacle of the winter ball.

“This is beautiful.” Ivy kept her voice quiet, but her eyes were full of wonder as she gazed at the chandelier above them as if she had not been to a ball in a long time.

Ethan rolled his eyes. “Yes, well, welcome to Society. Get reacquainted hastily and take that pitiful doe-eyed look off your face.”

Ivy’s eyes sharpened again, and the soft awe faded from her face almost immediately, as if she was used to looking a certain way. “I shall, when you take that cruel, judgemental look off yours, Your Grace. We are equal in circumstance tonight, are we not? You can hardly judge me when my reputation apparently isn’t so far from mirroring yours.”

As they entered, the ballroom fell into silence, only the barest hush of whispers as the Duke of Icebrooke and Ivy Fester were announced. Eyes fell on them, judging, and whispers followed them as they walked past. Ethan was well-equipped to ignore them. Ivy, however, likely was not.

“Now you understand why I did not want to be seen with you,” he sneered as they entered the fray of debutantes and the gentlemen on the sides, watching for the lady they wanted to ask to dance. “The whispers are harsh enough, Miss Fester.”

“You are a duke,” Ivy shot back, her voice a harsh whisper. “A duke who holds much more power than me. I assume you can handle the whispers.” And yet, there was a quiver in her voice.

“My aunt and uncle are waiting to receive us,” Ethan said, ignoring her barb. “I beg you to be quiet at my side, Miss

Fester. I will pay you handsomely if you do as you are told.”

“Pay me!” she exclaimed in that hushed, angry voice of hers as they walked toward his aunt and uncle. “Your Grace, you offend me.”

“Oh, please, Miss Fester. Did you or did you not already accept payment to come tonight? Where do you think that money has come from?”

“Well,” Ivy snapped, “I am terribly grateful to have taken some of your fortune.” She smiled smugly at him, feeling like she may have won that particular round.

That had her falling quiet as they finally approached the older couple. The old man, so like Ethan’s cousin, and the old woman, a blonde-haired sweetheart in her own debut days.

The Duke cleared his throat and plastered a smile on his face. “Auntie, Uncle, may I present to you Miss Ivy Fester, the eldest daughter of the Baron of Hawkes. Miss Fester, this is Johannes Cruz, my uncle, and Loretta Cruz, my aunt. Uncle Johannes was my father’s brother and has raised me very well.”

“Ah, Miss Fester!” Johannes said. “Of course, yes, I know of Jacob Fester. He has two daughters, correct?”

“Yes, My Lord,” Ivy said, despite Ethan’s earlier warning. “My stepsister, Celia, is also attending tonight.”

“Excellent. It is wonderful to see such a refined young woman debut tonight. Ethan, I am glad you heeded my warning. It is not good for a young man like yourself to be all alone in that castle. I do hope Miss Fester will make a good wife.”

Before Ivy could protest, as Ethan watched the hesitance in her eyes, he tightened his grip on her arm. “Of course, Uncle. Thank you for inviting us both tonight.”

“Please, enjoy yourselves. Dance happily. The night remains young!”

Ethan pulled Ivy away from them hastily before they could recall where they may have known her name from, aside from her father’s status. It seemed they cared little for Ivy’s social status if it was known to them. He drew her toward the dance floor, knowing that his aunt and uncle would be expecting to see the happy couple dance together, but she pulled back.

“Excuse me, Your Grace, but I think I may get some fresh air instead.”

Ivy tried to immediately leave, but Ethan held her back, lowering his lips to her ear. “Do not forget that this is not a real prospect. We are to be seen as a couple tonight, and we must dance. But do not mistake a dance for being out of desire. It shall be due to obligation. Eyes are on us tonight, Miss Fester, expecting to see us dance. Do not do anything to bring me shame. I will find you very soon.”

Before Ethan could ask anything else of her, she pulled away and lost herself in the fray of dancers.



Ivy stepped onto the terrace only for a moment before her stepsister caught up to her.

“Ivy! Oh, Ivy, I was so worried when Mother left without you. I tried to ask her to turn us back, but—Sister, I must tell you about her plans to marry you off to—”

Celia was interrupted by a dark-haired man who approached Ivy. He smiled almost nervously. “Miss Fester.” They both turned, and he cleared his throat. “I am Duncan Hadley, the Earl of Westside. May I have the honor of a dance, Miss Fester?”

Ivy could hardly refuse. It had been a long time since she had been asked to dance, and while she did not know the Earl, he was handsome, and she found herself wanting to dance with someone who wished to dance with her. She had fallen far from good graces due to her long-standing lack of success at balls and not securing a husband.

She nodded. “It would please me greatly, Lord Westside.”

Before she could hear Celia out about her stepmother’s plans, she let herself be led onto the dance floor by Duncan, elated at being asked to dance again.

She was spun around in a delicate dance, passed from man to man, all of them perfectly eligible bachelors. And yet, none of them held a conversation with her. Her eyes sought out the

Duke, who lingered on the sidelines with a glass of champagne as he watched her with a cold stare.

She smiled demurely at her next suitor, knowing the Duke was looking. All the while, Celia attempted to intervene, to discuss the Baroness's plans, but every time Ivy was open to talk, another man stepped in to ask her to dance. She accepted, letting herself be spun around the dance floor, thriving on the thrill of being back at a ball again.

Each time she saw the Baroness, who was standing behind the crowds and thankfully hadn't spotted her yet, Ivy let another gentleman spin her around, getting lost between outstretched hands. For now, she did not have to face those consequences and still remained hopeful that she would leave before the Baroness caught her.

The night wore on, full of polite exchanges and smiles hidden behind champagne glasses. Even Ivy let herself indulge in a glass or two but not enough to be improper and get drunk. She had not forgotten the rules of Society.

Soon, she was spun into the arms of the Duke, who, true to his word, had found her to perform their mandatory single dance. She almost pulled away, but his tightening grip on her waist made her realize that he was letting her go nowhere.

The music picked back up, and Ivy was at a loss for words as the Duke mirrored her through the motions of a slow dance. It was awfully intimate, and Ivy felt herself blush, trying to imagine if this was a genuine suitor and how giddy she might feel.

His hand on hers was a pleasant, grounding warmth. She was aware of the eyes on them at all times and tried to tune them out. Ethan, with his intense gaze on her, seemed to have little problem doing the same. Whenever he came close, she both stiffened and wanted him closer. The Duke of Icebrooke *was* handsome, if not for his cold exterior and perpetual sneer.

“Miss Fester,” he asked as the music came to a close and they parted, “will you let me escort you home?”

With no chaperone, Ivy was forced to accept his offer to take her back to Hawkes Estate. He might not have been a gentleman, but he was a peer of the realm. He had offered out of obligation, and he would no doubt spend the ride back seething at her.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” She hesitated. “I would thank you for the whole night, too, but...” she trailed off. “It has not been the most pleasant, has it?”

“No, I quite agree, it has not. However, it is done. I have gotten my aunt and uncle off my back, for now. Let me see you home, Miss Fester.”

He held out his arm, and all Ivy could think of was that their performance must have been quite convincing. She smiled at him, forcing kindness into the upturn of her lips as if she was genuinely very thankful, and he guided her across the room as if he had not almost cursed at her not long ago.

Together, they walked as if they were not a falsity.

At this rate, Ivy had a chance to make it home before her stepmother did. They exited the ballroom and made their way out of the mansion to where many other guests waited for their carriages. The night air was balmy and cool against her skin, which was heated from the champagne and the stuffy ballroom. She could already hear the gossip as she walked past groups of women talking about who had worn what, and who had danced with who, and what that might mean for their future.

The Duke muttered to himself as if he had no time for the ton's gossip. "Come, Miss Fester. The sooner we set off, the sooner this charade can end and relieve us both for good."

"None will be more pleased than I, Your Grace," Ivy returned, her voice full of sweet poison, a barb hidden behind a rose.

The Duke stiffened and led her onward, down the front steps.

However, as she was halfway down the steps, her shoe got stuck in a grate that was well-hidden by foliage alongside the staircase. She stopped, her fingers gripping the rail, and tugged, but it was no use. The delicate heel of her shoe was truly stuck.

"Your Grace," she hissed. "I am *stuck*."

"Just pull it out," he grumbled.

But the shoe had cost too much money to simply risk ruining it. Any extra pressure and the heel would snap right off. Then,

she would have to ask the matchmaker for more money to attend other balls.

“I cannot,” she insisted.

“Then leave it behind.”

“Your Grace!” she snapped. After the evening she had, her patience was running thin. “Are you so high above us all that you would not help a lady in distress? Do you think of yourself so highly that a brute such as yourself would not stoop to help me? I will not leave my shoe behind. I *will* demand your help, Your Grace—oh, I *do* apologize for asking you to do something so lowly, but if we are to act as a courting couple, then I insist you do help me.”

Ethan looked so smug at that—her helplessness, her desperation to be helped. He cocked his head, the strands of white hair fluttering in the breeze. He considered her request for a moment but then nodded curtly.

“Of course, Miss Fester.”

He crouched down to free her shoe as she tried to avert her gaze from the scandalous position they were in, suddenly wishing she had not pulled them out of the ballroom amongst everyone else.

“Perhaps I should leave it,” she mused aloud, worrying.

“No, I have it under control. Just a little *tug* here and—”

As the Duke pulled on her shoe, he lost his balance and fell toward her. His weight knocked her off her feet. She cried out as he crashed into her, scrambling to hold onto the rail behind her.

In his embrace, Ivy stared up at him, shocked. His face was so close to hers, an inch away from a kiss. Her heart hammered in her chest, which was pressed against the Duke of Icebrooke's chest.

Her breath caught in her throat as he fought to pull away from her, his cheeks flushing a furious red, but it was no use. The other guests had already seen their embrace—their very intimate embrace.

Immediately, the stares and the whispers picked up, and Ivy stared in mortified horror at Ethan and what he had done in his carelessness.

Such a scandalous embrace could only mean one thing, she realized, as her heart sunk in her chest—marriage.

Chapter Three



Gasps and whispers picked up around them. Ethan froze, and his glare settled on Ivy. It was awful enough that he had been paired with her for the night, only to watch her dance with every other man but him until he had forced his way through the gentlemen lined up to dance with her. He refused to be humiliated by his own date not dancing with him.

However, Ivy was more outspoken than other women he'd ever met. She intrigued him and challenged him. She was not afraid to offend him, no matter what. Every other woman would have fallen over herself to bend to his whims, but not Ivy Fester. No, she would be a proven challenge that very much interested him, as much as she infuriated him.

Whether it was a ruse or not, he needed to keep up appearances. Ivy Fester was only making his life and situation more difficult.

And now, they were practically sprawled on top of one another, his hand precariously close to her corset-cinched chest, where he had accidentally tried to right himself. His hands settled around her waist, but everyone outside of his uncle's mansion had seen enough.

“Miss Fester,” he murmured.

What had he done? He knew more than anyone what this scandalous position appeared to be. Only husbands and wives were caught in such a manner. He would be forced to save her reputation by offering his hand. Ethan only needed a date for the winter ball. He had not intended to ruin Ivy Fester’s future prospects.

“Miss Fester, forgive me, I did not mean—”

Before he could get his full apology out, they were approached. A shock of black hair pinned up severely exposed a sharp face. He recognized the Baroness of Hawkes and moved away from Ivy as if she was the sun and he needed to remain untouched.

The Baroness was Jacob Fester’s second wife after the unfortunate passing of his first one many years ago. In the Baroness’s presence, Ethan noticed Ivy shrinking.

He found himself missing the squared shoulders, the jut of her chin as she had haughtily talked back to him. Now, Ivy almost seemed to cower, and he lifted an eyebrow in a silent question, but she refused to meet his gaze.

“Your Grace,” Lady Hawkes said, “you must forgive my clumsy daughter. Ivy has grown too comfortable since her debut.”

He had been around enough ladies of the ton to know when their words were barbed but wrapped in seemingly harmless

appearances.

“But I must beg, have you met my youngest daughter Celia? She has made her debut tonight, and I am sure you would want to be among the suitors calling on her tomorrow morning.”

“Forgive me, My Lady, but—”

“Your Grace, my Celia is well-read. She is fluent in French and can play the pianoforte splendidly.”

Clearly, the Baroness was not aware of Celia’s frown over her shoulder, as if she disagreed. Ethan coughed into his fist.

“Would you not consider a proposal to Celia?”

“Lady Hawkes, I have put Miss Fester in a questionable situation after she was kind enough to be my companion tonight. I have a duty to her to marry her to save her reputation. And yet, all you can say is that I should court your youngest daughter?”

“Oh, I am sure her reputation is sullied enough and—”

“Hers is just as important as any well-bred lady’s reputation. With Lord Hawkes’s blessing, I will secure a special marriage license that will allow us to be wed within the week.”

“You will *not*—”

But Ethan did not care for her protest. He ignored Ivy's wide, fearful gaze on him. He realized it was a fear *of* him—of what he had done.

His heart sank, his gaze hardening on Ivy. To spite her, he softened his voice and put on that charming smile that he knew would irk her due to not giving her the same, kinder treatment. “Honored guests of my uncle, you are all invited to the grandest wedding of the Season. Miss Ivy Fester shall become my wife.”

To the Baroness's shock, the Duke's declaration spread quickly, and more guests spilled out of the mansion, onto the steps, to join in the gossiping whispers. Their shock turned more refined and became a joyous thing. The ton loved a celebration, and Ethan had just invited them to one of the best celebrations of all: a surprise wedding.

But as Ethan turned around to face Ivy, her cheeks were flushed an angry red as she stared at him again. Gentlemen and ladies flocked forward to congratulate them. Women preened at Ivy. He knew her reputation. He had read in the gossip columns that she had not secured a husband in the years since her debut and had since watched her reputation dwindle away.

Had Ethan saved her or damned her even more?

He shook hands with the men who congratulated him, only to find himself facing his cousin, Robin, who watched the whole affair with a raised eyebrow.

“Very well done, Cousin. You have secured your future, it would appear.” Robin’s voice was low, only for them to hear. “And Miss Fester is a charming one, is she not?”

Ethan tried not to look too hard at Miss Fester, at how small she appeared among the flocking ladies in their colorful dresses and flapping gestures of excitement. Already, he could hear recommendations for the flowers, the wedding dress, the cake, and the location. He tuned it all out. That is, until his aunt and uncle approached, drawn outside by the commotion.

“What is the meaning of this, Ethan?” Johannes asked, looking at his son and nephew with a confused expression.

Robin clapped Ethan on the back, turning them away from the crowd and toward his father. “Ethan here has announced his engagement and very hasty wedding to Miss Fester!”

Johannes and Loretta’s faces turned from surprise, into shock, into hesitant relief.

“Well, when we told you to find a wife to introduce to us at the ball tonight, we did not think it would be Miss Fester!” Johannes exclaimed. He let out a hearty laugh. “But I am happy for you, my boy, if it is what makes you happy. Although, Ethan,” he said, lowering his voice, “why the sudden rush?”

Ethan tried to think fast, but Johannes started laughing again.

“You do not want to lose your home, is it? They were threats, my boy, but do not fear them now. However, if you’re eager to

wed Miss Fester, we shall do our best to secure that license.”

Ethan wished to protest, to say that he did not care for Ivy Fester becoming his wife. Not next week, not next year, not even the next decade. He wanted to keep his fortune and home, yes, but why, of all people, did it have to be the most infuriating woman to help him do that? He resented that he even needed her to help him at all.

“I must escort my-my *betroted* home. Excuse me.” The word was choked out, to Robin’s delight and Ethan’s annoyance. He would need to practice saying that.

Ethan made his way back to Miss Fester’s side. This was purely for appearances. An arrangement to save them both. He did not have to love her, nor she him. And how could she, anyway? He had done nothing but be awful and cold to her, so far.

Her shoulders slumped forward ever so slightly. She appeared so bewildered in the sea of congratulating guests. He took her hand in his and pulled her to his side.

“Why did you do this to me?” she whispered, her voice low and horrified at the reality of what he’d announced. “You do not care for me, and I do not care for you. So, why have you... *trapped* us like this?”

“To secure my future, Miss Fester, that is why,” he answered flatly. “My uncle threatened to take away my fortune if I did not secure a wife. You were merely intended to be my companion tonight to fool him and put off his threats for a while—”

“Oh, you are a *selfish*, cowardly brute who thinks of nobody but himself!” Ivy hissed. “You are truly so selfish to do this to me to save your own riches! I am glad you must depend on a woman to protect your future because it might force you to see how weak you truly are when you are alone.”

His jaw clenched, and he tried not to show that her words affected him. They did, but he refused to let her see that.

“Now, it is my duty to protect your reputation after our... incident on the stairs. I am sorry if I have taken away your *very* dwindling prospects for a love match, but you should not hope to find love in this marriage, Miss Fester,” he whispered, his lips brushing against her ear under the guise of brushing some of her loose curls back.

Without another word, he pulled away, plastering on a smile as he nodded to the men trying to shake his hand in congratulations.

Ethan cared little for it all. He knew that sarcastically commenting on her dwindling prospects would hurt. And that was exactly what he wanted to do.

He watched as her sister came forward to tug her free, her cheeks flushed and excited. At least he was relieved of the duty of escorting her home.

All he wanted to do was return home to Icebrooke Castle and think about what he had done. Ethan might have saved Miss Fester’s reputation, but he had damned the girl to a life with him.

However, when he looked at her, thinking of ways to possibly back out, he watched as the Baroness approached her. Her nails dug into Ivy's bare arm, denting her skin. Yet, her face was a picture of a smile as she swanned in the congratulations meant for Ivy.

He frowned, turning his back to them. All families had problems. Ethan knew that better than most, and it would do him no good to get involved in another family's business.

Especially not when his own future was still hanging by a thread.

But if Ivy Fester was to be his wife, then he needed to ensure that nothing about her would bring him down any further than he already was. His uncle had threatened to take away his whole fortune, home, and chance of a successful future. He did not need her impatient antics to ruin that for him.



“You insolent girl,” the Baroness hissed, pulling Ivy away from the crowd and toward their carriage. “You wanted to ride in the carriage with us. Fine. You shall have it.”

She all but pushed Ivy into the carriage, and Ivy stumbled, catching herself on the bench before she scrambled to sit properly. Celia climbed in after her, sitting next to her. She toyed with her hands nervously. The Baroness got in after them, closed the door, and sat opposite Ivy.

Silence descended upon the carriage as it took off. The second nobody could see them, the Baroness's hand whipped out and lashed Ivy across the cheek.

Ivy cried out, cupping her face, cringing. Tears stung her eyes, and humiliation flooded her now-burning cheek.

“How *dare* you,” the Baroness spat. “How dare you do this to us. To your sister. To *me*. I forbade you from attending that ball, Ivy. You disobeyed me. Not only that, but you have brought shame upon our family. You have hurt Celia's chances of securing a match, and I hope you're ashamed of yourself. To be caught in a scandal like that? Ivy, you are not even worth the breath it would take the ladies of the ton to gossip about you and the Duke of Icebrooke.”

She shook her head, a hand over her mouth as if she truly could not believe Ivy's insolence. “Your father will be hearing about this,” she snapped.

“My father will not be roused enough to even listen to you,” Ivy whispered, looking at her through glassy, tear-filled eyes.

The Baroness slapped her again. “Do not speak so ill of your father. He has done his best for you, Ivy.”

Again, those age-old friends, guilt and shame, that had accompanied Ivy through gloomy, dark nights, rose in her.

The Baroness shook herself off. “Do not let this get to your head, Ivy. I am sure the Duke has reasons for proposing to you, and they will not be because he finds you attractive. You

are plain, you wear rags, and you're not worth the money your father and I spent on you to find you a match years ago. When will you stop proving to us that all you remain is a burden?"

Ivy's tears fell heavily then. Her stepmother was right. The Duke had confirmed it himself. He was only marrying her out of duty. She was not beautiful, nor any sort of match for a man of his rank, as awful as he was.

"I'm sorry, My Lady," Ivy whispered, the fight leaving her in the looming intimidation of her stepmother.

For so many years, the Baroness had done this: peeled Ivy's confidence away, piece by piece, until there were mere scraps left of it, only held together by Ivy's optimism. Even that felt out of reach.

Ivy stared out the window as the scenery changed from forestry to the outskirts of the city, and onto the city toward her father's manor. She was positively miserable.

Celia chatted away as if she was trying to expel the tension from the carriage with energetic words alone, but Ivy could still feel her stepmother's hard glare on her, could still feel the stinging burn of the slap. It prickled her skin and sent ice skittering down her spine, terrified at her defiance, at the announcement of her marriage.

What consequences would this have for her? And how soon would the Duke of Icebrooke come to save her from it?

He was a cold, cruel man, but surely even a captive wife in his castle was better than a maid who was walked all over in her own home.

Or would he see her broken spirit that she tried so hard to keep high, and discard her swiftly? Perhaps he already regretted his decision to enlist the matchmaker's help.

Ivy had only planned to be his companion. She did not want to be his wife. The day of her wedding announcement—the whole process of her finding a husband—had been something she had dreamt about for years. Now, that seemed to be one more thing taken away from her.

“I also danced with the Marquess of Ashford!” Celia chattered.

It was almost annoying, the buzz of her stepsister's persistent voice, even if she was trying to protect her and distract her stepmother.

“The Marquess of Ashford is quite an admirable match, my dear,” the Baroness said. Where her nails had dug into the soft skin of Ivy's arm, it still stung. “However, he is no duke. *You* deserve a duke.”

The meaning was clear. Celia did, but Ivy did not. And yet, Ivy was the one who had left the ball tonight—a ball she was not supposed to attend—as the future wife of a duke.

“I am sure there will be other balls and galas, Mother,” Celia assured. “For now, I would like to celebrate the success of tonight.”

“There will be no celebrating.” The Baroness’s voice was sharp. She and the Duke shared that icy, cruel tone, and Ivy wondered if she truly would find herself in a better trade. “After all, what do we have to celebrate?”

Ivy’s shame weighed on her shoulders, tears stinging her eyes. She refused to cry. Not once in all the years since her mother’s passing and the Baroness’s arrival into her life had she ever let the woman see her cry.

Ivy tightened her jaw, clenched her hands in her lap, and focused on her future. At the very least, she would be leaving the manor. Better a duke’s maid than her stepmother’s maid.

Or so she hoped.



Ivy was on edge after they got out of the carriage and went into the manor. Only now that she looked at the manor did she notice the crumbling, unkept state of the walls, the overgrown foliage, and the general ruin of what was once a beautiful home.

Her heart clenched painfully as she followed her sister inside. The Baroness stalked off, her cruel words already having landed enough weight in the carriage. There was only a barked command to help Celia prepare for bed and then to see to her own chores.

Ivy would not get a lot of rest tonight.

This was her punishment: stay up late, help Celia, and then prepare the house for tomorrow's callers—Celia's suitors, that is. She would be required to serve everyone then, as well.

"Yes, My Lady," Ivy answered.

Celia led her upstairs. Her face was flushed, bright with the young promise of love and happiness. Ivy could not help a flash of resentment. She should have had that, too. Her prospects should have always been as wonderful.

"I cannot believe you are betrothed to the Duke of Icebrooke!" Celia gushed. "Oh, how your fortune has changed, Ivy."

"Has it?" Ivy asked distantly, not quite feeling real in her own skin. "The Duke is cruel, is he not? His reputation precedes him badly."

"Ivy, I do not truly believe he is as cruel as my mother has been to you. He *has* to be better."

As Ivy began to unweave the flowers from Celia's hair, she wondered how a girl so kind had come from such a monstrous woman. She was lucky, for Celia could have hated her. She could have added to her torment, and yet, due to both of them being only children, Celia had found comfort and a friend in Ivy. Her loneliness had outweighed her mother's resentment from the start, and their friendship and sistership had become genuine.

“Your wedding will be a grand affair, and I believe the Duke will take care of you,” Celia said softly as Ivy unfastened her corset, prepared her bedclothes, and readied her bed.

Some nights, when they were younger, Celia had let Ivy stay in her room and sleep next to her, tucked together for warmth. But that had long stopped as they grew from girls into young women.

“Your children will be beautiful, Ivy, and your future forever secured by the Duke’s fortune.”

Ivy nodded, not really listening. She was too busy thinking about the Duke’s warning—that she should not hope to find love married to him. The thought of bringing children into a loveless marriage carved her heart into pieces. But that was her fate now, was it not?

By the time Celia was in bed, her eyes closing, her hair wrapped in ribbons to refresh her curls for tomorrow’s callers, the early morning hours were dark.

Ivy set out to carry on the rest of her chores to the sound of birdsong.



Dawn had barely broken by the time Ivy had slept for an hour and was harshly awoken by her stepmother. Her eyes heavy with fatigue, she blinked awake slowly. Her chores had taken her long into the early morning, ensuring the parlor was suitable for Celia to receive guests.

But now, there was breakfast to be made, as Ivy often helped the cook prepare it before serving it, and Celia to dress for the day.

“I hope you will think about your life choices as you watch Celia’s suitors arrive,” the Baroness huffed. “I could have done all that for you, Ivy, had you not been so insolent and a product of your own downfall.”

“My Lady—”

“See that you do not defy me again, and do not think about embarrassing your sister today. Revenge is a petty thing, Ivy. It does nobody any good to seek it.”

But revenge was not the thing on Ivy’s mind. Since the Duke’s departure yesterday, she was left wondering about the next steps for her wedding.

The Baroness left with barked orders for breakfast. Ivy got back to work, fatigue weighing down every step she took.

When she served breakfast, it was a surprise to see her father sitting at the table. A surprise—and then a thorn of pain splintered her spirit.

“Father,” she greeted.

The Baron looked up at her, grumbling to himself, as his eyes fought to stay open. “Ivy, dearest, Sandra has told me of your engagement.”

“Yes, Father,” Ivy said, mustering a smile. “Are you proud of me for securing a match with the Duke of Icebrooke?”

But her father’s attention had already drifted elsewhere. He blinked, startling himself back into the present. “Yes. Ah, good work, my dear. Now, I believe some coffee might do me the world of good!”

Ivy bit her tongue as she poured her father a cup of coffee.

He had been a ghost in her life. Yet, for Celia’s potential suitors, he had finally cleaned himself up and made himself presentable. The coffee would fill in any messiness his inebriation caused.

Ivy served silently, wondering how her father could stand to see what the Baroness had made of her in his absence.

“Father, would you also speak to His Grace if he came to visit?” Ivy asked.

“He shall bring us some port, yes? A good bottle, I imagine, from his own stores!” Her father laughed deeply as if it was a joke.

“I imagine he might not, Father,” Ivy murmured. “But you shall meet him, regardless?”

“Port *is* a fine drink, is it not? Perhaps he could gift it to us for your wedding.”

“I believe it would be us who receives the gifts...” she trailed off, but her father was already preoccupied, drinking his coffee.

Every time she went to talk to him again, the Baroness’s glare was a threat, bearing down on her. The tea was poured, the bread was buttered, the eggs were cracked, and overall, Celia’s happy chatter filled the room so that nobody else had a chance to worry. Her nerves and excitement were almost infectious, if not for the gloom settling over the house.

Sometimes, the silence was only made louder by Celia’s endless stream of talk, a desperate attempt to cheer up those around her.

After breakfast, Ivy dressed Celia in her best day dress, unraveled the ribbons from her hair, and took her down to the parlor, where she had empty cups waiting to be filled. A pot of tea was brewing on the stove.

When the doorbell rang, Celia’s back straightened as she sat on the sofa in the parlor, and she arranged the cakes that had been set out.

“Ivy, the door,” the Baroness instructed as she sat opposite her daughter, a smug smile on her face.

Ivy bowed her head and left to answer the door. Only the man she opened it to was not one of Celia’s suitors.

It was her betrothed, the Duke of Icebrooke.

His white hair was styled back, like last night, and his chin was lifted. His icy blue eyes gazed down at her, bearing a weight she did not wish to feel. She had not expected him so soon, but she supposed it made sense. He wore a sapphire blue jacket with silver embroidery, looking every inch like a winter prince.

Ivy thought the world was cruel. How handsome a man compared to how rotten his insides were.

“Miss Fester,” he said, his voice cutting like the chill of a winter morning. All Ivy could do was be left to shiver without a blanket as she listened to him utter her name. “I have come to meet with your father.”

Chapter Four



Ethan had barely slept the night before. His thoughts were tormented with images of Ivy Fester's forlorn face when she had seen her fate sealed outside his uncle's mansion.

In his dreams, she got quieter and quieter every day, trapped in the castle, while he grew colder and more distant, unable to help the emotional curse his father's upbringing of him had instilled. That he would remain unloved, that no wife might ever want to take such an *abomination* as a husband.

And yet, he had called for his carriage first thing in the morning, figuring that he needed to beat her sister's suitors if he was going to be heard properly. Celia was a picture of grace and beauty. The gentlemen would line up for her, and the Baron of Hawkes would likely grow tired. Ethan wanted to discuss the wedding rather than ask permission. Still, he would confirm with the Baron that taking Ivy as a wife was something he condoned.

Ivy Fester, his wife.

Ethan shook his head. The thought was almost laughable. It was detestable in its entirety. However, he was the one who had aided in her downfall. His duty now was to see it through

and save her reputation as best he could. Even if that meant being around her and losing the peaceful isolation of his castle.

The scenery outside the carriage changed from the outskirts of the city, where his castle was situated, to the more clustered area of the city, where Lord and Lady Hawkes lived. Ethan found that he was nervous, alarmingly so.

He tamped down his nerves by the time his carriage pulled up outside the manor.

As he got out and looked at the state of ruin the manor was in, he signaled to his driver. "Halt. I believe I have the wrong place."

He thought this crumbling manor with its worn exterior and overgrown gardens could not be the once-glorious Hawkes Estate. He refused to believe it. Not a soul was on the grounds. Nobody rushed to greet him, nor any gardeners pruned the hedges, and no men were in the stables at the side gate, as far as he could see.

A carriage was stationary by the stables, worn and faded inside.

Ethan was alarmed.

Oh, how the Fensters had truly fallen from grace.

"This is the Baron's estate, Your Grace," his driver told him. "Shall I turn us back?"

Ethan cast an assessing eye over the manor. “No, that will be quite fine. You are dismissed.”

His driver bowed his head, leaving him to approach the building.

A shadow scurried past the fogged glass window to the right of the front door. He braced himself for the awkward small talk he would have to endure with their butler but suppressed his surprise when it was Miss Ivy Fester herself who opened the door.

His walls slammed up, higher than ever, erasing any nerves, as he was reminded why he was there. “Miss Fester, I have come to meet with your father.”

Something flashed in Ivy’s eyes the second he spoke, as if she had tasted something bad. As if the sound of his very voice displeased her.

“Shall we address him together?” Ethan asked.

“I—”

“Ivy, who is at the door?” a voice called from inside. “Do not have them loiter outside in the cold, for God’s sake!”

That was the Baroness. It was only then that Ethan noticed Ivy’s attire. She was dressed as his own maids would dress—a plain dress and an apron covering her front. Gone was the

highborn lady he had met last night. This was his future wife, so why was the impending Duchess of Icebrooke dressed like a maid?

Was that why Miss Fester's cheeks flushed so pink as she led him inside? Because she knew did not appear the way a lady of the ton should?

Ethan strolled past her, tucking his hat under his arm as Miss Fester, her head bowed, led him down a corridor that gleamed. But the manor itself was silent, with clean but faded curtains and furnishings. The hallways were quiet—a haunted house. Discreetly, Ethan glanced up the staircase as they passed, noting the closed doors. Everything just felt... bare. Lifeless, even as voices drifted from the parlor.

That was where Miss Fester led him.

“Your Grace.” The Baroness's face was a picture of surprise as she stood and curtsied to him. “I see you have changed your mind about my Celia. It is still quite early, so her other suitors have not arrived yet. You would be the first. Ivy, fetch His Grace a cup of tea.”

“Shouldn't one of your maids be doing that?” Ethan questioned. He met her gaze head-on. He outranked her, even in her own home.

“Ivy... Ivy agreed to help her sister out today by serving us.” The smile the Baroness gave was as brittle as a tree bark and fake. “It has been quite some time since she was able to experience a suitor visit, so we thought it helpful to let her sit in this way.”

Ethan knew a lie when he heard one.

“Well,” he said, turning away from the Baroness and regarding the Baron himself. “It is Miss Fester I have come for. I trust Lady Hawkes alerted you of yesterday’s events at my uncle’s winter ball.”

“She did, indeed. She said you have your eye on our beloved Celia.”

“Quite the opposite, Lord Hawkes,” Ethan said. “As yesterday evening, I declared Miss Fester to be my betrothed. I have come to arrange my wedding with her and ask for your blessing.”

Next to him, a cup smashed, fallen to the floor from a loose grip, and a disbelieving shocked face turned to him. “You cannot be serious, Your Grace. I mean no insult, but Ivy is hardly suited for a life as-as a *duchess*.” The Baroness’s voice was nasally and grated on his ears. “Ivy, clean this mess up.”

And to Ethan’s bewilderment, Ivy did. She swept up the broken pieces of her stepmother’s cup and kept her head down, her eyes on the floor at all times. Even her father did not intervene, but he watched with a loose look of anguish on his face.

The cup next to the Baron did not contain the dark tea that Ethan’s or Celia’s cup did, but a reddish color that Ethan knew to be expensive port.

Funny how a manor so run down could afford its master's drinking habits but not the proper raising of his daughter.

It sounded all too familiar to Ethan, and he fought against the throbbing in his head.

He slammed his walls up once more. “Nevertheless, Lord Hawkes, I *will* be marrying Miss Fester. She is to live with me in Icebrooke Castle as my wife.”

The sound of the shards being swept paused.

“We have not got all day, girl,” Lady Hawkes snapped.

Ethan turned his gaze back to her. “I would ask you to treat the future Duchess of Icebrooke with more respect.”

The Baroness let out a disbelieving laugh. “Well—Your Grace, I mean—*look* at her. She is little more than our maid, and she enjoys the life we have provided for her. We look after her, we feed her, we shelter her.”

“Miss Fester is not a dog. She is a lady of the ton, about to become a duchess. And I will provide for her,” Ethan declared, looking back at the Baron. “With your blessing, Lord Hawkes.”

The Baron and Baroness exchanged a glance.

“I must admit, we have been concerned for Ivy’s prospects. She has not secured a husband in quite some time. We are honored she caught your interest, Your Grace.”

Jacob Fester was a man who had probably been handsome back in his younger days. Now, he was worn thin, a man who perhaps valued his drink over his daughters, and the house and their lives were proof of it.

“Of course,” Ethan said. “Now, I can procure a special license that will see Miss Fester and I married by the week’s end.”

The Baron shook his head. “Your Grace, we would have to refuse. We cannot pay in that time, not for a wedding befitting of a duke.”

“A wedding befitting of a duke is not one befitting of Ivy,” the Baroness muttered.

Ivy’s cheeks were flushed, embarrassed, perhaps, as she swept the cup shards into her apron and scurried out of the room.

“Lady Hawkes, this *is* the last time I demand you grant her more respect.” Ethan’s voice was as sharp as the Baroness’s. His patience for this whole ordeal was thin already. He did not need this woman making matters worse. “If it pleases you both, and allows Miss Fester and I to marry as soon as possible, then I would like to assure you that every cost will be covered by myself.”

“Your Grace—” the Baroness began.

He waved her off. “That is my gift to her for ruining her reputation.”

“There is the small matter of replacing Ivy’s services,” the Baroness said delicately. “Without her, we are without a large portion of...”

“Staff?” Ethan filled in for her, spitting out the word as if the very idea insulted him.

Neither of them wanted to blatantly admit that that was Miss Fester’s purpose in the manor. Ethan did not have love nor care for the young woman, but she deserved better than to be treated like a servant in her own home.

“Ivy does not come with a dowry, you see,” the Baron said. He almost looked embarrassed, and Ethan wanted to ask him boldly where the money had gone.

“And Miss Celia’s?” he asked instead.

Lady Hawkes leaned forward proudly. “Celia’s dowry is secured, Your Grace. Does that change your mind?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Miss Fester back away from the room. She did not hear him say “no.” For he only wanted to confirm how differently the ladies were treated.

She returned moments later with more tea and cakes on small plates. She placed them on the table between Ethan’s chair and the sofa that the Baron and Baroness were sitting on. Then, she

excused herself to stand in the corner of the room, her hands clasped before her, her head bowed. Ethan could not help but wonder how often she had done that.

“Miss Fester will make a trip to the modiste,” Ethan continued, clearing his throat. “I shall see to that. I will marry my bride in a wedding gown befitting of her future station as my Duchess.” His eyes locked on hers for a minute, as she had lifted her head to silently gasp at the bold remark. “I will spare no expense for this wedding. Miss Fester is a member of her parish, I trust?”

“Yes,” the Baron replied. “She attends church with my wife every Sunday.”

“Excellent. Then we shall marry at her parish. A grand affair. Will you both be in attendance as Miss Fester’s witnesses?”

“We would not miss it, Your Grace,” the Baron assured. Even as he agreed, the Baroness’s lips curled into a barely suppressed snarl before she snapped for Miss Fester to come over.

“More tea, Ivy.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“After the wedding,” Ethan said in a low voice, his attention on the Baroness, “my wife will be treated with *respect*, as she will be *mine*. I trust she will come to me at the week’s end for the service well and whole. I will *not* receive a broken wife. Your downfall has been most unfortunate, I sympathize, but it

can fall further, believe me.” His threat was veiled enough that it was not disrespectful but obvious enough that it landed harshly. “You can have me on your side, or you can make an enemy of the Duke of Icebrooke, but I *will* see to it that those closest to me also see you as I do.”

He cast a glance at the Baron. “Your daughter is not your maid. Perhaps your wife needs to learn that she has two daughters, whether Miss Fester is her blood or not.”

As soon as Miss Fester came back into the room, Ethan had dispelled the tension with an easier smile as he thanked her for the tea. Her eyes were almost fearful of him. He could only imagine what she feared when she looked at him. Did she think he might treat her as awfully as this household had?

“We shall marry on Saturday, at eleven. My uncle and aunt shall be there, along with my cousin, the Marquess of Ashford.” He did not miss the way the Baroness’s eyes lit up, but he would not subject his cousin to her as a mother-in-law, so he did not elaborate. “There will be a party, of course. I will handle any cost. Following the wedding, Miss Fester will come home to live with me. You may write to her if you wish to see her.”

Silence descended on the room.

Ethan paused. “Have I made myself clear, Lord Hawkes?”

“Quite,” the Baron answered with a small, reassuring smile. “Thank you for your visit, Your Grace.”

“Of course.” Ethan’s eyes, once again, flicked to Ivy. “I shall write to you about your visit to the modiste. There, she will already be entrusted with your dress payment.”

“Rest assured, Your Grace, that we can handle the payments if you give her bursary to us,” the Baroness purred. And yet, Ethan did not trust her word.

He shook his head. “I must decline, as I trust the modiste to see to Miss Fester herself. I would not want the purse to go missing in such a grand manor like this one.”

It was a false, veneered lie, but it was enough. The Baroness’s smile turned sour once more, and Ethan barely suppressed his smugness. He would not have her take anything else from Ivy. He would see his betrothed fitted properly for their wedding. While she had been a lady of the ton last night, her dress had been outdated, and he wanted his bride befitting of his station.

It was bad enough he had to marry her. The least he could do was arrange for her to look her best.

“I will send you your own lady’s maid to help you get ready on our wedding day,” he told Ivy. Then, he addressed the Baron. “If you grant your permission.”

“I will see to it that she receives the support you provide,” the Baron said. “We are grateful, Your Grace, that Ivy has a place in your home, despite our... downfall.”

Ethan held back the retort that she would not if it not for his uncle and aunt’s threats, and the matchmaker. This was purely

a thing of convenience, and although he was being pleasant to the Baron's face, he would make sure Miss Fester did not forget their situation.

He was saving her, but he was not her hero.

"I will take my leave now," Ethan announced. "Thank you, Lord Hawkes. I wish you the best endeavors with your other daughter, too. May her prospects be deserving."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

Ethan nodded curtly and stood. Ivy brought his hat back to him, and he tucked it under his arm once again. Together, they walked out to the hallway.

Ivy's expression was tight with anger that she fought hard to not let show. "Thank you for your kindness, Your Grace."

"It is convenience, Miss Fester, not kindness. Keep up our act, and we will escape without further scandal, yes?"

"Yes, Your Grace," she said.

"Await my letter regarding the modiste, Miss Fester."

"I fear that I may not be able to escape beneath my stepmother's watch," Ivy confessed quietly as if the very notion of voicing that fear would make it come true.

Ethan hesitated before nodding. "I will find a way."

Ivy nodded, her lower lip caught between her teeth. He wanted to tug it free, and then silently chastised himself for the sudden, improper thought.

"Farewell, Miss Fester. I shall see you at the altar." The words tasted like ash on his tongue.

She looked as though she wanted to say something in response to that, but she held herself back and only closed the door.

Ethan got into his carriage and made his way back to his isolation in the castle.

Chapter Five



“Ivy, get this tidied away and rearranged,” was the Baroness’s barked order as she left the parlor. Even the Baron slunk away.

Ivy knew the Duke of Icebrooke had chastised them both, but she could not even feel happy that somebody had noticed the mistreatment when all she felt was shame that the Duke had witnessed it.

“Father—” Ivy tried, but her father only winced, as if the very sound of her voice pained him.

“It is a great shame for a father to be unable to secure his daughter’s dowry, Ivy. Please, bring us fortune and joy with your marriage to the Duke of Icebrooke.”

Was that all he would say?

No apology. No pride in securing this match. Nothing.

“Will you be sad to see me go, Father?”

He gave her a little pat on the shoulder, saving them both the truth. He might only notice her absence if the Baroness needed something, or if he had spilled some port on the floor. But Ivy would be replaceable.

A daughter should not be... but a maid was.

Buried in Ivy's heart was her anger, for she had heard the Duke asking about Celia's dowry after her father admitted that she had none. Of course, the renowned Ethan Williams would want the daughter with the dowry. This match with Ivy benefitted him in no way, except the honor of saving her reputation.

She began to tidy the parlor and had just finished when the doorbell rang again.

The Baroness appeared with Celia, who sat where Ivy should have sat to greet the Duke instead of serving him.

"Send in the first suitor, Ivy, and then leave us. I will send for you when we need you."

That was her stepmother's only instruction. And when she opened the door to a man with golden curls and warm, brown eyes, her heart yearned for something she would never have—*love*, in all its entirety and excitement.

She retreated to the forgotten music room down the hall to daydream the hours away.



A letter arrived for her the next day. Like when she had received the matchmaker's letter, Celia pushed it into her hands, and Ivy read it by the old fireplace. Only this time, Celia waited and tried to read it with her.

"I am to visit the modiste today," Ivy said, shocked.

Somehow, she did not think the Duke would follow through on his word to see her properly equipped with a beautiful wedding dress. Oh, could she possibly find *some* joy in these shambles?

"He has instructed me to ask you to accompany me."

"Me?" Celia squeaked in excitement.

After her success yesterday morning following the ball, it would be necessary to shop for a dress soon enough. By then, Ivy would not be living at Hawkes Estate, but she hoped she could still join her sister.

"Oh, Celia," Ivy said. "This will be a joyous day. Let us prepare immediately! His Grace has stated that he has left a generous sum with the modiste, and she will assist me."

"Let us depart at once!" Celia giggled.

But whether the Baroness was simply attuned to their laughter and happiness and sensed she must ruin it, or she had only walked past the room and happened to overhear them, the music room door swung open.

“Why are you still in here, Ivy? Celia, leave at once. I do not want you to get dust on your dress. We are to leave to have tea with Miss Atherton this afternoon.”

“Oh, but, Mother, I am instructed to accompany Ivy on her trip to the modiste today. His Grace has insisted.”

The Baroness’s face pinched in displeasure at the defiance. She seemed to consider the option, possibly wondering if she could defy the Duke’s orders. Would he find out? Would Ivy tell on her? Would he be waiting at the modiste’s to ensure his instructions were followed?

“Then I shall accompany you both as well,” she said. “As my daughter, I should escort you myself, Ivy. All unmarried ladies need a chaperone.”

Ivy stared in barely disguised shock at the words. *Now* her stepmother wanted to be respectful? Only because the Duke had warned her?

Ivy lifted her chin. She did not trust her stepmother, even if she wanted to find some more semblance of kindness in her heart. But she had run out of kindness and ever-forgiving grace a long time ago. “Thank you, My Lady, but as you have often reminded me, I am a maid. I do not require a chaperone.”

The look on her stepmother's face was worth the anxiety of speaking up.

But then, the Baroness's fingernails carved crescents into the soft skin of her upper arm, where she had already left small bruises the night of the winter ball.

"You are the future Duchess of Icebrooke," the Baroness hissed. "Word has now traveled, and you will be required to act as your new title entails."

"And yet, I was required to serve on His Grace yesterday." Ivy should never have dared to challenge her like this, but the marriage proposal had increased her confidence a notch. "Celia and I shall visit the modiste together."

"A deal, dear daughter," the Baroness said instead, her smile sly and cruel. "If you finish your chores by noon, then I shall not bother you with them any longer. Ever again. And I shall let you go to the modiste alone with Celia if you are so insistent. However, if you do not finish by noon, I *will* be accompanying you, and *I* will decide how much your wedding dress should be worth, and you *will* have this manor shining until the day you are wed. Am I clear?"

The threat was clear: the Baroness would let Ivy go short of money for a dress if she went with them, pocketing the money for herself, while Ivy would be forced to choose a less grand dress.

Noon was three hours away. Could Ivy do everything by then?

“I accept your deal, My Lady,” Ivy said.

Celia stepped up. “I shall be helping her.”

“That was not the deal, Celia. You have much to prepare for yourself.”

“You both already agreed. I am simply assisting Ivy. It is best to not displease the Duke and interfere with the plans he has so graciously set for Ivy, is it not?”

Ivy was torn. Of course, she wanted to accept the help, but Celia was a lady. She should not have to be forced to do this for her sake.

But a small voice in her head reminded her that perhaps she deserved some kindness.

“Fine. But I will not tolerate tardiness,” the Baroness finally conceded and then left them to work.



As she mopped the floors, made the beds—even the ones in her mother’s old bedroom that had been covered with sheets and forgotten, just like the music room—cleaned the windows, and polished every surface, vase, and ornament she came across, Ivy watched the hour grow late.

“We will never finish at this rate!”

Worried, she tried to ignore the ticking warning in her head. She could not be late for the modiste. The Duke already thought of her as tardy, had complained as much at the winter ball, and no doubt he would accuse her of being late for their impending wedding.

Perhaps he might understand now that it was due to her stepmother's steep requests. Of her deals and trickery to keep her preoccupied.

In her mother's old bedroom, Ivy found her first pair of shoes from her own debut. She snuck them into her chambers and hid them. Perhaps she could wear them for her wedding, in honor of her mother.

Look, Mama, she wanted to say. It is not quite how I envisioned it, but I am to be wed on Saturday. To a duke!

The grief from her mother's death was what triggered her father's drinking habits.

Ivy thought that she did not like her mother's memory being remembered only as the catalyst for pain and heartache. Her mother had been a songbird, filling the manor with light and music.

As she brushed and washed, ran and spun, wrung and folded, she imagined what Icebrooke Castle might be like. She imagined a world of cold black walls and floors that she would be forced to scrub. She pictured her future husband, a silent man who only required her presence when she needed to bear him children.

The thought had her freezing.

When Celia came into the music room, where Ivy always found herself when she was melancholy, she gaped. “You look as though you have seen a ghost!”

“Celia, has your mother told you of your...” Ivy twisted the rag she was holding nervously. “*Wifely* duties?”

“Ah, she has,” Celia said. “Did yours never...” she trailed off, as if slow to remember that Ivy would have been too young to learn before her mother passed away. “Right. I am sure I can tell you what Mother has told me while we visit the modiste.”

It was then that the clock in the grand hall struck noon.

“I still have the stables to muck out,” Ivy gasped. “We should be there by now.”

“Let us help each other once more,” Celia assured her. “We will see to it that you visit the modiste in peace today, Sister.”

Truly, Ivy would be lost without her sister in Icebrooke Castle. In a moment of affection, she wrapped her up in a tight hug.

Together, they dashed into the cold winter air to go to the very empty stables. The Festers now only kept two horses—two very unused horses—which meant the stables were in a state of ruin, but they had been on the list of the Baroness’s demands. With no stablehands to do the work, they were left

to Ivy, and she often neglected them. The Baroness rarely had a reason to check the stables.

While Ivy could not patch up the leaking roof or fix the wooden slats, the broken lock on the stalls, or the cracked floor, she could sweep and fork the dirty hay, lay down the fresh bales, and refill the troughs. Celia cooed at one of the horses while Ivy wiped the sweat from her brow as she mucked out the stalls. They worked in silence, as Celia did not feel the need to relieve any tension—as her mother was not there.

It was then that Ivy heard voices. A desperate but pushy tone, followed by one of fury. Then, the Duke of Icebrooke appeared in the open stable doors, his features tight with the same anger he had turned on her the night of the winter ball. A few steps behind him was Sandra Fester, holding her skirts as she rushed after him.

“Your Grace, I assure you—”

Ethan stormed up to Ivy, settling the weight of his fury on her. His white hair was windswept, but even pushed off his forehead, it was no less shocking. Ivy was overwhelmed by his appearance once again, left to wonder how such a handsome man could appear so *cold*.

“Why were you not at the modiste’s by noon? I specifically had your appointment arranged.”

“Your Grace, I-I tried to finish my chores before I could leave in time.”

He rounded on the Baroness. “Chores? Her tardiness is your doing?”

“As I told you, Ivy took a long time to finish her breakfast this morning,” the Baroness lied. “She had no chores today.”

“So, your daughters spend their mornings in the stables, mucking out regularly? Lady Hawkes, I beg you, do not insult my intelligence.”

Ivy stared wide-eyed at Ethan’s challenging of her stepmother. At her stepmother’s unraveling behavior.

Ethan’s gaze turned back to Ivy. He advanced on her until she took a step back, overwhelmed by his sudden nearness. “Take off that apron and wash up. You are the future Duchess of Icebrooke. It is time you start acting like it, no matter your current situation.”

How was Ivy to plead that she was helpless beneath the whims of her stepmother when she was the woman who ensured she had a roof over her head and some scraps of food throughout the day?

“I suppose it is your doing that Miss Fester was late to the ball as well?” Ethan asked, throwing a scowl over his shoulder at the Baroness. “Never mind. Release Miss Fester from her duties for the rest of the day.” He regarded Ivy. “I will visit the modiste with you, as is my obligation. Miss Celia, I would still like you to accompany us. Be at my carriage within the half hour.”

His shocking blue eyes cut into Ivy, a silent warning. He held her gaze for a moment longer—long enough for her breath to catch in her throat.

“We shall freshen up, shall we not, Sister?” Slipping her hand into Ivy’s, Celia tugged her away. Even the Baroness could not find any words.

As they left, Ivy heard him muttering under his breath about *not how he wanted to spend his afternoon.*

With Celia loaning her one of her more updated dresses, the sisters dressed swiftly and left to meet the Duke outside. The Baroness slunk back to her room, with the Baron, and did not bother Ivy anymore.

The Duke waited in the carriage for them, his face tight with impatience. His glorious horses that pulled his carriage—both white with glossy coats—stomped their hooves as if echoing their master’s irritation.

“What is your name?” Ivy murmured, daring to stroke the nose of the one nearest to her.

Ethan’s gaze rested on her through the carriage door. He leaned out of the window. “Catalani,” he answered. “That is her name.”

Ivy paused. “After the opera singer, Your Grace?”

Ethan looked surprised. “Yes. You are a fan?”

“My mother very much liked her. I know of her.” Ivy smiled at Catalani, mentally promising to feed her an apple on Saturday as a bribe to win the favor of at least one soul on the grounds of Icebrooke Castle.

As she climbed into the carriage, she struggled to accept that she was very much going to shop for her wedding dress. Celia chatted with the Duke, who seemed far less icy around her than he was with Ivy, while she stewed in her own heartache.

“And Celia’s?” she kept hearing over and over in her head.

She was a woman with no dowry, who had lived a maid’s life. She was plain. What could she offer this Duke, when her beautiful stepsister was an angel, with her dark curls and pretty smile and feminine ways?

Ivy gazed out the window, reminding herself to sit up straight, to be polite and respectful, and, most of all, not to panic.

Chapter Six



“The modiste has the allowance for your dress. Please, spare no expense for yourself. You are to be a lady of the ton once again, Miss Fester. I will not walk with you while you wear outdated, old dresses. Focus on your wedding gown, but consider that the Duchess of Icebrooke shall need new clothes, too.”

Ivy's cheeks colored. Ethan forced his gaze away, for the sight of that blush, the delicate pink spreading over her cheeks, did something strange and awful to his chest. He stepped away as if the physical distance could ease the tightness in his ribcage. He rubbed at it, hating the sensation.

“I will be at the bookshop,” he said. “How long might you need?”

“I do not know, Your Grace,” Ivy admitted.

Celia stepped in, however. “A couple of hours should be sufficient, Your Grace.”

“Then await my return,” he instructed and then turned on his heel.

As he headed toward the bookshop, he tried not to tune into the voices around him as the bell chimed, signaling Ivy stepping into the modiste's shop. The gossip was none of his concern. He needed to restock some of his library collection ever since his cousin had borrowed a few books on American Independence, and he wanted to replace them. Heavens knew he would not see his own copies again once they were in the possession of his very well-read cousin.

Robin hoarded books like nobody else he knew, and while Ethan was a fan of losing hours in the library, reading by the window, he was no scholar like his cousin.

But as he went just out of earshot, the modiste's door remained open to allow more ladies out. He heard their high giggles and whispering voices. People always listened more when words were uttered in a whisper. It meant there was something to be hidden.

"Oh, how the Festers *have* fallen," one woman hissed.

"I heard the rumors, but I did not expect to see it for myself!"

"Alas, the youngest Miss Fester had quite the success at the winter ball. I believe she had three suitors."

"Ah, but Miss Ivy Fester. Oh, her shame. What a burden for her stepmother and stepsister, to be associated with her and the Baron of Hawkes."

"Hush, we must not gossip!"

Ethan paused, seemingly unnoticed, for now. He had been on the receiving end of nasty gossip and taunts for things out of his control due to his strange appearance, and the gossip mentioned the brothels he was sometimes seen leaving.

He turned around, watching a gaggle of three women huddled together, with their wide, billowed skirts and their neat hair, and his lip curled.

“Did you hear of the Duke of Icebrooke’s announcement? Why would he choose Miss Fester, of all the eligible ladies? Does he not know that she has not attended a ball in two years ever since she suffered the shame of having no suitors after her debut? It’s a shame that the men could see how she lacked riches and does not come with a dowry!”

“A match made in a strange heaven, is it not?”

“Perhaps together they can keep each other company outside of polite society. Honestly, I do not know how the Marquess of Ashford associates himself with the Duke. He brings shame upon his family name, alone in that castle up there, with no wife.”

“Ah, well, he shall have a wife, and she is barely better than him.”

Ethan could withstand comments about his misfortune and reputation, but he would not let Ivy bear it. She did not deserve their cruel judgment.

He turned on his heel and walked back to the modiste's. The group of three women all went wide-eyed as he passed, knowing they had been overheard. He shot them a glare as he strode onwards, into the shop. There, he found Ivy looking like a bear caught in a trap, stricken and small, as the women's whispers surrounded her.



“Do you see her dress?”

“It is somehow better than that awful drape she wore to the winter ball. Honestly, have you ever seen such a sight?”

“Did you hear of her father's shame?”

“Her mother was very loved, it is a wonder Miss Fester can bear to drag her good spirit through the mud.”

Ivy's cheeks were ablaze with humiliation in the modiste's shop. Tears stung her eyes as she hung her head, feeling the ladies close in around her, judging, hungry wolves finding a wounded animal to prey on. Even Celia's nervous chatter could not distract her this time.

The modiste herself simply watched the spectacle and had laughed at her when she had presented herself at first, announcing she was there to shop for her wedding dress.

“The Duke of Icebrooke has chosen far beneath him,” someone whispered. “Have you seen her? Do they even own a horse?”

“Let’s not gossip about those... less fortunate than us. Paupers must have *somewhere* to go.”

Ivy’s face was hot with embarrassment as she let go of the bolt of fabric she had chosen. There were some dresses on the other side of the shop, but she did not dare wander over to them. Crossing the space and facing more gossip made her stomach knot.

The door burst open with a furious clang of the bell. The modiste stood up, ready to call out a warning, until she fell silent. Ivy stared wide-eyed at the man who had come into the shop, as stormy as the biting cold outside. His glare swept across the modiste’s.

“Do you think Miss Fester deaf to your judgment? Do you think *me* ignorant of it?” he demanded.

His eyes settled on the modiste. Ivy could not quite believe or understand why he would stand up for her again. The ladies were right, she was bringing him down. He was not supposed to marry somebody like her.

Even Celia was the better option, as her stepmother had insisted.

“You and I have a friendship, Madam,” Ethan said to the modiste, who was a picture of French beauty, with her rouged lips, beauty spot, and spiraled curls held in an updo. Yet another beautiful woman Ivy was forced to look up to. “I would remind you that that grants an element of kindness

toward both me and my soon-to-be wife, along with respect toward her.”

He spun around. “The rest of you ought to be ashamed of yourselves,” he snapped. “These are ladies of the ton, like yourselves. Daughters of a baron. They have just as much place here as you do.”

Ivy was stunned at his defending her. Truly, could he be as cold as she often thought? Or was he simply trying to look good in public? According to the gossip columns, the Duke of Icebrooke did not care about public appearance and staying in the good graces of those around him. Yet, he demanded it for her.

So, was it possible that he actually *wished* for these women and her stepmother to extend their kindness toward her? And why, if the only thing he had given her was cruel words and hope dashed upon rocks?

Ethan paused, his hands on his hips as if letting his words settle in the quiet shop. He gazed at Ivy as he walked toward the door. He paused, one hand on the handle. “Shop to your heart’s content, Miss Fester. I trust you will remain unbothered. If anything is said, I am to be alerted at once. I shall wait for you in the cake shop further down the street. We have much to prepare.”

With that, he walked out with a swish of his overcoat, leaving Ivy quite stricken. The conversation erupted once again, the ladies finally turning their backs and making space for her near the wedding dresses.

“Let us browse, Sister!” Celia exclaimed, pulling her over to the rail of dresses.

Ivy could see silk and other fabrics and went to touch them. She longed to feel the softness of these gowns.

The modiste approached her, a warm smile on her face. “Forgive me, Miss Fester, for not halting the comments. You are welcome here. Please, allow me to help you choose a selection of dresses for your wonderful day.”

“Thank you,” Ivy said gratefully.

Instead of touching the gowns, she pointed some out to the modiste, who brought them off the rail and took her to the back of the shop, where she could try them on.

Celia looked on enviously—not in a hatefully jealous way but more so knowing that this would be her soon.

Two women approached Ivy as she made her way to the stand, where she would try on her dresses. The modiste held up the first one as Ivy slipped off her borrowed dress.

“How about the pale blue one first?” the modiste asked.

It was a simple dress, not too expensive, but fine in smaller details. Ivy did not even feel entitled to wear such a beautiful, fine thing but allowed the modiste to help her.

At first, the ladies who watched made her skin prickle self-consciously, and she fretted over the look of the blue dress, wondering if she did not look much like a bride-to-be.

But one came over to help her tie up the back and offered her a kind smile. She was a lady who had merely looked on. No comments had been made by her, so Ivy found it in herself to soften toward the assistance.

When had she last been dressed by anyone or felt pampered?

“You are to marry the Duke of Icebrooke?” the lady asked, her voice hushed, as if they were sharing a secret. Or as if she was afraid the Duke would overhear from the cake shop.

“On Saturday,” Ivy answered.

“I heard that he announced that it will be a grand affair with little expenses spared. His aunt and uncle are providing much for the ceremony itself, while he is spending his personal fortune on you.”

Ivy was not sure what to do with that information, so she merely smiled. “Will you be attending?” she asked instead.

“Of course.” The lady preened. “My father is an earl. Our whole family has received an invitation. After all, your wedding is down to be the biggest news of the Season, perhaps even into next year!”

“I was not aware,” Ivy murmured.

“Oh, yes. After your display at his uncle’s winter ball, you are quite the talk of the town.” Ivy’s cheeks colored. “Although, it is not all bad, Miss Fester. However, the ladies of the ton have heard things about His Grace. We want to warn you that your match might not be the daydreaming picture you might have.”

Ivy was under little illusion that her marriage to the Duke would be beautiful. He had already warned her that she should not hope to find love.

“He is a rake,” the lady said simply. “And rakes do not change. I would hate for you to be forced to watch his unfaithfulness. My mother said that his... desires are strong, and a wife would not be able to appease him.”

A wife like Ivy, even less so.

Ivy was inexperienced and shy at times. Confident with others, but her stepmother had made her aware enough that she was not worth a great amount.

Still, she lifted her chin. “Thank you, but I assure you that I can handle myself.”

Could she, or was she simply being brave?

“Your family has been burdened with enough gossip. I hope the Duke’s scandalous reputation does not bring any further whispers to your ears. He is unkind. He is uncaring. And, you, Miss Fester, seem as fair as a dove.”

At that, Ivy smiled gracefully as she shook her head at the modiste to show that the blue gown was not for her. It reminded her too much of the Duke's eyes, and she did not want him to think she was lovesick and wanted to win him over with small details like that.

"I will be on my guard," Ivy said. "The Duke might make a fine husband, I am sure. I do not expect to change him, but I do hope married life will."

"Lower your hopes, Miss Fester," the modiste warned sharply as she offered her a yellow gown.

Truthfully, Ivy did not like it, but she did not like a whole lot about her impending wedding, so what was one more thing?

She smoothed down the yellow dress as soon as it was over her head. Celia clasped her hands together, looking on, giving her opinion, but to Ivy, the dress felt wrong. It felt too cheery, like she was trying to brighten up a very dull situation.

Ivy shook her head again.

"May I pick one for you, Sister?" Celia asked. "I have noticed your mother's wardrobe, and how you seemed quite fond of her dresses. I think I can choose well for you."

"You are certainly welcome to," Ivy said.

As her hair was toyed with and pinned up so she might see different styles, Ivy tried to ignore the warnings. How cruel and unkind could the Duke be behind closed doors? Even if he shut her in a bedroom and left her alone day in, day out, she might just be glad for a life without her stepmother's demands.

What cruelty would he inflict upon her?

Her smile grew more miserable until Celia returned, a pink gown draped over her arms. "What do you think, Ivy?"

The neckline had tiny, delicate flowers stitched into it, the sleeves wide and dainty. The dress was fitted to the upper body, and Ivy found the pink to be so similar to her mother's debutante shoes, from what she could recall.

It was beautiful. It was the softest pink, and the most delicate trim, and Ivy could not bear to look at it, knowing that the dress would be a pretty thing on an awful day. Tears welled up in her eyes as the modiste helped her slip the gown on. It fell to her ankles, and she felt lovelier than she had in years.

The mirror showed her a different woman from the one who woke up and was found covered in hay, mucking out stables. *This* was the woman Ivy had always meant to be. The lady that her mother would have seen, had she been alive and her father had not remarried and dragged the family into financial ruin.

"This one," Ivy whispered, running her fingers over the bodice. It was intricate lace woven in vine-like patterns, all pink. "This is the one."



Ivy and Celia carried their bags to the cake shop, where Ethan sat by the window, awaiting them.

Ivy, flushed, approached the Duke. “Your Grace, I have chosen my—”

“We must taste these desserts,” he interrupted, waving his hand toward the table. He pulled out a chair for her. “Our wedding cake must be grand. Seven tiers.”

“Seven tiers?” Ivy gasped. “We have a guest list to warrant a cake of that size?”

Ethan’s piercing look silenced her questions. “I said seven tiers.”

She nodded and picked up the fork to scoop a sample of each cake. Flavors exploded on her tongue, and she fought back a moan at the decadence. She had not quite tasted anything like it in a long, long time. Food had been sparse for her at Hawkes Estate. This was expensive and exquisite.

When she opened her eyes after sampling some sort of vanilla cake, she found Ethan’s eyes on her, an unreadable expression on his face. His head was cocked as he watched her.

“Miss Celia, would you care to try as well?” he asked as if blinking himself out of a trance.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Alongside her sister, Ivy sampled desserts and tried not to think too hard about how the puzzling man opposite her was to be her husband.

Chapter Seven



Ethan kept struggling to take his eyes off Ivy as she sampled cakes. Around her sister, she came alive, with a brightness to her that was not the sharp wit he had seen at the ball. This was genuine happiness. Whether shopping at the modiste had made her feel more like herself again, or if she was looking forward to Saturday, Ethan did not know.

He found her happiness infectious and found himself cracking a smile. Ivy blinked at it, as if surprised it might exist. He shrugged and lifted his fork to scoop the last slice of cake on one plate. They had several more to dig into.

He did not notice Ivy going for the same piece, and their forks clashed over the plate. Ivy blinked up at him, her lips curving into a smile as if she was not sure if she was allowed to smile at him. But he only let out a quiet huff of laughter and pushed the plate toward her.

“Please, help yourself, Miss Fester,” he said.

But rather than eat the whole piece like he had intended her to do, she cut it in half and offered him the last piece on the saucer.

“We should share, should we not?” she asked.

Ethan didn't really wish to share with her. Not out of greed but more what it might signify if they shared a dessert together. He did not want her to get the wrong idea and think he was warming up to her. He was quite resolute in his dislike of her and did not wish her to think otherwise. However, her smile was genuine as they did indeed halve the last piece.

He reluctantly thought she might look pretty if she wasn't so irksome to him. Ivy looked as though she tasted something divine as she turned to chatter with Celia, unaware of the turmoil he was in.

Ethan ate the rest of his cake in silence, joining in the conversation when prompted. Ivy was not a gossip, even if Celia tried to talk about some of the ladies they had seen. The two of them were kind, he noted. They complimented dresses, noticed if rings were worn, and if someone was with child.

“Your Grace, my sister shall be marrying soon,” Ivy said, startling him out of his daydream.

He wondered if she noticed the looks they received from passersby on the street outside.

Abomination, he thought, as he caught his own reflection, and then, Ivy's next to him. Soft-skinned and fair, he was too sharp-edged for her.

His walls went up at the reminder he gave himself. Lest he not get too close, and let her think they could be friendly together.

The closer she got, the sooner she would find the ugly truth beneath.

“I have heard.” His voice was detached once again.

Ivy frowned delicately at the change but composed her expression. “I believe one of her suitors was your cousin, the Marquess of Ashford.” She beamed. “Is not that right, Sister?”

“Quite! My mother was very pleased!”

“You would sentence my cousin to have that wretch as a mother-in-law?” Ethan huffed, not quite holding back without meaning to. “Forgive me, Miss Celia. I did not mean to offend ___”

“It is quite all right, Your Grace.” Celia’s voice had gone quieter. “But must I be forced to have a reduced chance at happiness purely because of my mother? I am not her.”

“No, you are not,” he agreed, softening his voice. “Although, I am very much aware of how it appears when we are linked to family members we are not proud of.”

“Oh?” Ivy murmured, her interest piqued once more. “How so?”

“Well, in school, Robin far outdid me. He was smarter, although he did not always use his brain. He wished to travel to Europe ever since I could remember, so he thought he did not need his education as severely as I did. I would inherit my

father's wealth and fortune. I felt like I remained in my cousin's shadow. After my father's passing, my aunt and uncle often compared us, not unkindly, but enough for me to know that I would always have to work quite a bit harder to be noticed. He was their son. I was the nephew they had been left to take care of."

He was surprised at himself for talking so freely about his family. To distract himself, he offered Ivy the first bite of the next cake.

Surrounded by her shopping bags, getting fuller with cake, Ivy felt quite content, if not for her dark thoughts of questioning if, once again, the Duke would prefer Celia over her.

He would have taken the offer when my stepmother made it.

But the Duke had said it himself. He was being dutiful, nothing more. Perhaps he might grow to love a woman like Celia.

She was shaking off the thoughts so they did not ruin her beautiful day when a footman dressed in a rich velvet jacket burst through the door to the cake shop, startling all of them.

"There you are, Your Grace," he said, a little out of breath. "An urgent letter came for you."

He handed the Duke a folded piece of paper, which the Duke read swiftly. He abruptly stood up. "Miss Fester, I must leave at once. See yourselves back to Hawkes Estate."

Ivy stared after him in disbelief.

Ethan walked out of the cake shop, his face tight with held-back emotions as he departed. Soon, his carriage disappeared down the street, taking away Ivy's and Celia's ride home.

Celia looked at the bags helplessly. "What are we to do now?"

"I have no idea," Ivy answered.

But they quickly finished up with the tasting, Ivy leaving a message with the owner that Ethan would return to pick the final choices alongside her own. With no other option, the two gathered their shopping bags and walked out into the street.

Apart from walking from the carriage to the shop, Ivy had not taken much notice of the winter air. But the day was growing darker, and she shivered now. Suddenly, her expensive dress did not seem quite so thick and warm.

"I could send word to Mother," Celia mused aloud.

Ivy feared that would be their only option, but they did not have a footman any longer. Who would deliver their message? And how long would they have to wait? It was a long walk back to the manor.

"We might arrive quicker if we walk," Ivy said.

She was too irritated by the Duke's sudden departure to worry about what could have caused it. She did not worry or care about that. She shivered, even with her cloak wrapped around her shoulders. Next to her, Celia was paling, her nose reddening from the cold. Still, they shared the load between themselves and began the walk back.

"You did not bring money for a carriage ride home?" Celia asked, her tone light, breathless with a laugh as if she thought it foolish that none of them had considered bringing money.

"With His Grace's carriage taking us, I did not think that he would leave us without a ride home. I did not think to bring any money. I am so sorry, Celia."

"We shall endure it together, Sister! Do not worry too much." Celia's positivity kept her going when her arms grew tired.

Despite the housework she was accustomed to each day, Ivy groaned. It had been a long time since she had had the freedom to just be herself with Celia without lowering her voice to a whisper. She complained and groaned, and, together, they giggled at their hardship like schoolgirls.

It reminded Ivy of that first week when the Baroness came into her life. Ivy and Celia had chased each other around the house, tagging each other, stealing ribbons from each other's ponytails, and riding their horses around the grounds. That was before Ivy's life changed. It had been such a long time since they had been able to simply be friends as well as sisters.

"I hope the Duke is all right," Celia said.

They were barely ten minutes away from the shops they had left behind, and she was already winded.

“Dear Celia, I cannot care about the Duke right now. I do fear my arm might drop off.”

“My mother once said that a delicate petal can only withstand the weight of so much rain,” Celia chirped, unaware of how her mother’s wisdom would affect Ivy.

In her stepmother’s eyes, Ivy was a thorn, made to face the hardship, not the flower unable to handle the weight of reality.

Ivy had weathered the weight of everything so Celia could remain unrumpled and perfect. She did not blame her sister one bit.

But now, just this once, at least, they could both be petals.

Ivy’s shoe caught on a cold patch of ice that was half hidden beneath sludge. She yelped and righted herself but dropped a box containing shoes. The box dropped to the floor, and she let out a frustrated noise.

“Are we not ladies of the ton?” she complained. “How can he leave us here like this?”

Celia scooped up the box and passed it back into her arms. “We can do it, Sister. Do you remember the time Mother made you carry all the new horseshoes from the blacksmiths? I

know she has made you carry heavier things back to the manor.”

At the encouragement, Ivy picked herself up again, and they trudged down the road, keeping to the side to clear the way for passing carriages.

Only one carriage stopped. When Ivy dared to peer up at the face in the window, she was surprised to see the modiste staring back at her.

“Miss Fester, we meet again,” the modiste said. “Do you and your sister require a ride home?”

“Oh, that would be most wonderful, Miss...” Ivy paused.

“My name is Alice Chesternut.”

“Well, thank you, Miss Chesternut, for your kind offer. We are on our way to our father’s estate.”

“I am making some home deliveries near there. Hop in, but mind the parcels.”

Indeed, a pile of long but thin boxes of varying sizes was stacked up next to Alice on the bench. The inside of her carriage was a deep red, and Ivy was in awe at the grandness as she and her sister climbed in. Alice fussed over them to put their bags down among her deliveries.

“I have a few amendments to make for Miss Abbott,” Alice added. “I believe that is your neighbor, correct?”

“Ah, yes,” Ivy answered, thinking of the winter ball and her neighbor’s father as her chaperone.

“Excellent. We shall head there first.”



“Miss Fester, the last stop is your father’s estate,” Alice said. “Miss Celia, might you take some of your bags inside? I wish to pass on some wisdom to a bride ahead of her wedding.”

Alice’s smile was secretive as Celia stepped down from the carriage when it finally pulled up outside Hawkes Estate. Her curls bounced down her back as she walked with a spring in her step, still so young and excited.

“Miss Fester, may I speak bluntly with you?” Alice asked, drawing Ivy’s attention away from her sister.

Ivy nodded. She trusted that the woman would, anyway.

“I fear for your future with the Duke,” Alice said plainly. “I overheard the other women warning you, but I do know Ethan quite personally.”

Ivy’s eyes widened at the hint of a scandal.

“Ah, no, nothing so scandalous!” Alice was quick to clarify. “He was right when he said we had a past friendship, but there is a reason that is not a *present* friendship. Do you understand? The Duke is charming when he wants to be, but he is spoiled. He has had too much handed to him in life. He has grown cruel and uncaring, as you may have gathered.”

Ivy said nothing, unsure if it was unwise to agree.

Alice did not need further prompting. “You might not think of happiness when you see him, but please prepare yourself. I do not know how he will treat you.”

“Do you think His Grace would hurt me?” Ivy asked worriedly.

“I am not sure. But he is bitter and lonely—a man who has not secured a wife for many reasons. His bed is often warmed temporarily. He might not be faithful.”

“As the lady warned me earlier,” Ivy murmured.

“A woman needs a faithful husband,” Alice continued sternly. “Especially when you bear him children. Miss Fester, you are good and kind. I do not wish you to resign yourself to a life of misery and standing by a man because you are ordered to do so.”

“I am to marry him,” Ivy insisted. “What more can I do?”

“I understand how it is. I truly do. I would like to say that I am here, should you ever need to talk to someone who will not judge. I apologize for not quelling the gossip in my shop earlier, but I was unsure of your character. But I see now. You are soft, Miss Fester. You are truly too good for him. He can be mean. The Duke is honorable, to a degree. He takes his duties seriously. However, he thinks of himself first. Never think that his decisions are selfless.”

“I understand,” Ivy whispered, more forlorn by the second.

These words would haunt her, she knew.

“Once you stop benefitting His Grace, I am worried his seeming kindness toward you would end. He exploits people, Miss Fester. He uses them and gets rid of them easily when they no longer interest him.”

Her heart constricted. She did not need to add more to her worries. She knew she was not entering this marriage for love or happiness. He had warned her of that himself.

So, instead, she plastered on a smile and lifted her chin. “Will you be at the ceremony? If you have not received an invitation, I would like to extend one. After all, you have made at least one dream come true today by helping me acquire a dress.”

Alice only gave her a smile. “I wish you the very best, Miss Fester. Please, take care of yourself, and do not forget, I can be reached at my shop. If not, send for me. The Duke’s footman knows my address.”

The door to the carriage was opened for Ivy before she could question why the footman would know that.

Perhaps she dressed one of his relatives?

Ivy shook her head at her naivety.

Is there a woman in London this man has not compromised?

Chapter Eight



W *here the hell is she?*

Ethan Williams loathed weddings. He had not the patience for the endless, slow streaming of guests, for the slow wedding march, the chatter, the drone of a religious figure making them both read vows.

But what he lacked patience for most of all was his bride's record of tardiness now extending into their own wedding.

He would not appear to be a husband humiliated at the altar, waiting for her. Ethan's jaw tightened as he looked around the chapel. There was his cousin, Robin, with his hair gloriously styled and his suit a cream color to offset Ethan's white high-collared coat that was inlaid with gold.

His cousin, best friend, and, now, best man, leaned in. "It appears you have truly scared the girl off, Cousin."

"Quiet," Ethan snapped. Then, he paused. "Really? You think?"

Robin only let out a hushed laugh.

In the congregation was Ethan's aunt and uncle, and then Ivy's stepmother and sister on the other side. It appeared neither of them had a lot of extended family to invite, and the most noticeable thing for both Ivy's side and Ethan's side was the lack of a father and a mother.

He caught some snatches of conversation that echoed around the chapel. Women hid their lips behind gloved hands but did not consider the acoustics of the room.

"I heard he chastised everyone at the modiste's for her!" one lady whispered to another.

Robin's eyes cut to Ethan as if he could also hear the gossip. Ethan just gave a discreet shrug.

"He pities her. It is clear."

"Perhaps Miss Fester finds herself... in a *unique* situation." The suggestion was made delicately, coded for *with child*. Ethan shuddered at the thought. "Why else would they have a very rushed wedding? Did you ever see them together before the ball? No! What rush could there possibly be now?"

"Perhaps she told His Grace, and that was why he left the cake shop so quickly."

Ethan fought not to roll his eyes at their awful gossiping. Honestly, he could not stand it, and it all served to remind him

why he secluded himself in his castle, far from the gossip and the drama.

Ivy was not with child, nor would she be forgiven for this. He had barely tolerated her late tendencies at the ball, and then again the day of her dress shopping. To do this to him was downright humiliating, and he would not stand for it.

Turning sharply, he faced the Baroness. “Well, Lady Hawkes? Where does Miss Fester find herself on the morning of her wedding day that is *clearly* more important than here?”

He tried to keep the snipe out of his tone, lest it be more gossip fuel for the ladies who looked on.

“I do not know the whereabouts of that peasant,” the Baroness said airily. “She is no longer mine to keep tabs on or have responsibility for.”

“Lady Hawkes, if I were you, I would be generous with information if you would like me to compensate the services you might lose with Ivy moving to Icebrooke Castle,” he hissed at her, with enough sense to keep the whispers off her back.

In a court of women, she would hold more sway, and he did not need more rumors circling about him.

“I believe my stepdaughter likely has cold feet, Your Grace,” the Baroness answered. “I do not believe she will show up. She was very distressed when we left the estate this morning.” Her smile turned smug as she gestured delicately with a hand

toward Celia. “My daughter, however, has received many offers, Your Grace. She is highly desired by the ton, and I would consider you first if you would only change your mind. Why should a beautiful wedding go to waste?”

Ethan’s eyes flicked to Celia. He was not considering it. But he wanted to see her reaction. Her eyes widened, a small shake of her head. At his side, Robin tensed.

Ah, it was indeed true that his cousin had his eye on the fair Celia Fester.

“Your Grace,” Celia spoke up, “perhaps you would consider checking up on my sister. Please, Your Grace, she has felt... deflated at your lack of correspondence this past week and has worried the wedding was off. If I do not speak out of turn, it has been quite rude of you to keep her wondering like this, especially after you left so abruptly at the cake shop. Ivy has felt a great deal of pressure to pick everything herself. She had hoped to do it with you.”

The honesty was something Ethan appreciated, and it sunk into him with a lot of clarity. He hesitated, unsure of what to do.

“She is at home,” Celia added. “She wanted our father here and was struggling to rouse him, Your Grace.”

Ethan had heard enough and suggested enough to the Baron about *why* he might be hard to rouse, but surely the man would have shown up for his daughter’s wedding day.

He glanced around the chapel. He should go to her. Asking his cousin to keep the guests distracted, he set off, sprinting down the aisle.

Ethan had not wanted a wife, and yet he found himself chasing after one once again.



“Father, *please*,” Ivy complained, tugging on the hand of her father, who laughed boisterously before slumping back in his armchair by the grand fireplace in the parlor. She stomped her foot impatiently, her heart pounding in panic. “Please!” She was exasperated. “I said, get *up*!”

“Ivy, dear,” her father slurred. “I am not one of the horses! You cannot giddy me up and make me go! I will not go! I will not!”

“It is my wedding day, Father. I would love for you to be there.”

“And I would love to never have to move again, dearest.”

She hauled his weight up once more, stumbling with him as he swayed. He leaned into her, stinking of alcohol, and looked at her with a vacant look in his eyes, but his goofy smile remained.

“Oh, my,” Ivy muttered to herself. She began to pace, but the minute she let go of her father, he fell back in his chair.

“Oh, good heavens,” he mumbled.

Ivy flapped her hands and paced, fretting. Their carriage’s wheels were not sturdy enough to move in the snow, and her father could not walk. She could shove him onto a horse, even if he had to lie sideways. He could empty his stomach on the side of the road for all she cared. She only wished for one of her parents to be there at her wedding.

“Father, you *must* move this instant,” she scolded, folding her arms over her chest. “I shall not leave you behind.”

“Go on without me!” her father shouted as if he were a war hero. “I must survive, Celia. I *shall*. Please, darling, just let me sleep.”

“I am not Celia!” she screeched. She sighed heavily. “How does the Baroness ever endure this, Father?”

“She endures me,” he slurred.

“Goodness knows how,” Ivy muttered under her breath. “Goodness knows how *you* endure *her*.”

“Oh, she can be a right lady at times, but the port does help.”

“Yes, well, it is not helping now, is it?” she said sternly.

Her father’s head lolled as he blinked drowsily up at her. She was irate, late for her own wedding, and her father could not

stand.

“Shall I put you on a boat and float you out on the river to the chapel?”

“What a marvelous idea, my dear. Oh, that rhymes!”

But Ivy had only meant it as a jibe to make her father feel foolish. Of all days she had wished he was sober. She fretted, pacing in front of the fireplace.

Tears of frustration pricked her eyes as she balled her hands into fists.

Why must he be so impossible?

She lunged forward, grabbed his nightshirt’s collar, and *yanked*. Her father was a great oaf, falling forward, and she just about shoved him onto his feet once more.

It was not until she had managed to get him halfway up the stairs, groaning her way up as she shouldered his weight, that the doorbell rang. Ivy straightened up and ran to the door out of instinct. There was a great crash behind her, a winded *oof*, and she cried out as her father slumped on a step but did not fall.

She hovered for a minute before leaving him there to open the door. She pulled it open and clasped a hand over her mouth.

Once again, she was late for the Duke of Icebrooke. And once again, he had stormed into the estate like a hero storming into a castle for his damsel in distress.

Except, he was the villain, and he stared her down with a furious gaze. “How *dare* you do this to me on our wedding day,” he snarled.

“I am sorry, Your Grace, but I have a situation with—”

“You could be ill, for all I care! You do not leave me at the altar, Miss Fester. It is disgraceful. Have you no shame for your tardy tendencies? Do you ever consider anyone but yourself?”

Ivy stood back, offended. “Your Grace, I—”

“No, I am done with your silly games, Miss Fester. This is both of our reputations I am trying to save. Have some care, for God’s sake. I could overlook the ball—just about—and the day we went to the modiste’s, I understood due to your horrid stepmother, but she is at the chapel, *where you should be*. So *what* possible excuse do you have now?”

“Perhaps the same excuse you had for abandoning my sister and me at the cake shop this past week! Really, Your Grace, it is bad enough what you have put me through already, but to leave two women out in the snow to walk home alone? It is downright *cruel*. But then again, you must be used to that word, are you not?”

“I had some family business,” he hissed. “My uncle arrived to start the preparations for the wedding. Financially. He arrived unannounced and demanded to see me so we could make sure that everything would go smoothly today. I appreciate that you have made many decisions, but the finances *needed* to be taken care of. Have more gratitude and less judgment.”

“Ivy, I think I may have hurt my... Ah, it is not appropriate to say, but I am in great pain!”

Ivy went rigid at her father’s drunken call from the stairs.

Ethan looked over her shoulder, to where the stairs disappeared behind the hall. “What is that?” he asked quietly.

Ivy inhaled deeply and felt the burning weight of humiliation in her chest. “That would be my father, Your Grace. It appears his breakfast was rather eventful and full of port.”

“This is why you are late?”

“It is why I am *here*, trying to get my father to simply stand up straight, never mind walk anywhere, while risking ruining my beautiful gown in the process. But this is a shame I must bear, Your Grace, because my father disgraces my family this way. So, if you would please excuse me while I attempt to—”

“Stop. Just stop, Miss Fester. Where is he?”

“It appears he collapsed on the stairs.”

“You shall leave with me. I will send for a footman to collect him once we arrive at the chapel. My uncle will walk you down the aisle.”

“I wished to be given away by my father,” Ivy pleaded.

“If your father manages to prove himself a worthy parent to you for what you have endured all these years and show up for you, then he can. But if he does not, is that not a message enough for you? Your family is selfish, Miss Fester, and they do not deserve how much you have sacrificed for them.” Ethan’s stare cut into her. “Come, now. We shall go on my horse. The snow persists, and we have just enough time to make it before noon. At the very least, desire to not give your stepmother the satisfaction of thinking you have cold feet.”

“The Baroness knows full well I do not have cold feet,” Ivy hissed.

She was astounded. It was not enough that her stepmother had been intent on ruining her life so far, now she was attempting to ruin her wedding!

“I would not be surprised if that wretched woman had taken the carriage earlier on purpose to delay my arrival! She knows my father is not always fit to walk anywhere. She was trying to have me make you wait until you potentially called off the wedding.”

“Well, we can blame your stepmother later, but right now, if you would humor me and *make haste*, Miss Fester, I would greatly appreciate it.” His eyes were cold. “The sooner this day is over, the better.”

Chapter Nine



The words stung deeply, and Ivy was rendered small and pliant beneath Ethan's harsh gaze. She gathered herself and wrapped her new cloak around her shoulders. He made a show of checking his pocket watch and sighing as she struggled to get on his high horse.

It was as he did that she noticed his jacket, embellished with gold trim and a sharp, high collar. His breeches hugged his legs, and his boots were polished and hard, reaching up to his knees. He looked... She hated to admit it, but he looked handsome. Dashing. A man prepared for the occasion. His white hair had been styled into a windswept look, and she wondered if it would be as soft as snow, like it appeared.

Then, she chided herself.

She hated this man. Any of those thoughts, she had to banish. Besides, she was a lady. She must not allow herself to have scandalous thoughts about the Duke.

Do you think I am beautiful, Your Grace? she wished to ask. She *would* have asked other men on her wedding day, had they come seeking her hand in marriage out of desire, not purely convenience or to save reputations.

She swallowed her words back, and soon, he *tsked* at her and hesitated before her. “May I, Miss Fester?”

Her cheeks flushing, she nodded.

The Duke of Icebrooke hoisted her up onto the horse—the one from the other day—and to distract herself, she petted the stallion’s nose. The Duke jumped up onto the horse behind her, and she froze.

His scent enveloped her, a deep masculine scent with a hint of roses and frost beneath it. Her head spun as she let out a shaky breath. His thighs around hers, as he got comfortable, felt quite obscene, and her chest rose and fell heavily as she tried to catch her breath. Her cheeks flushed.

He reached around her to grasp the reins, and she felt his muscled chest, hidden beneath layers of clothes, pressed against her back. Oh, Ivy felt quite heady with it. And only the moment when he pulled away and nudged his horse on did she breathe easier again.

“You could have responded to my letters, you know,” Ivy said, unable to help herself, as Ethan’s horse made its slow way through the snow. Every deep step of the horse had him pressing against her, and she could barely keep her focus straight. “I have sent you several this week. You have left them unanswered. I thought myself a forgotten bride.”

“Ah, and you left me at the altar for a long time this morning, so consider us even.”

“Are you always so...” she floundered, looking back at him. “*Arrogantly* self-assured?”

He looked at her as if he thought she was stupid. “Yes. It is a confidence I have learned to build, Miss Fester. I will not let you make me feel wretched for it.”

So she *was* almost getting under his skin. Not truly, but a little bit for him to reveal that bit of information.

Facing the road ahead, with the chapel in the near distance, Ivy felt a sliver of satisfaction. Nerves churned in her stomach at the day ahead. In a way, she did agree. The sooner the day was over the better.

But then, what would happen to her?



The chapel was bustling with voices echoing through the old, airy building. At the front were her stepmother and Celia, and as Ivy prepared herself in another room off the aisle, she saw her father stumbling in, leaning on a footman.

Her father had shown up, yes, but not of his own accord. Not without being forced to. He had not thought her wedding day important enough to stay off alcohol even for the morning. He was not dressed as dashing as the man she had hoped to give her away, but she was grateful he had made it.

She turned her back emotionally to the thorn in her heart and focused on her journey down the aisle, to greet the Duke.

His uncle patted her hand. "I hope you will prove yourself a fine wife to my nephew. He is a hard man, but he is good. He has his mother's soft heart buried beneath the ice his father heaped upon it."

The words startled her enough that she almost tripped. The Duke having a soft heart? She did not think him capable of any positive feeling whatsoever. He did everything out of obligation only.

As Ivy made her way down the aisle, she forced her gaze to remain on the Duke himself, not anybody else. *This* was her husband. He watched her get closer and closer to him, and his face could have been made of stone for all he showed.

This is it. The rest of your miserable life until you die. Married to a man who would not know what a kind heart is if it is thrown at his feet.

Where would she go? She did not care as long as it was away from the Duke, her stepmother, and her awful, drunk father. Perhaps she could take Celia with her, and they could find husbands somewhere else. Surely Celia had other family, and they might take Ivy in.

But then, a ring was slid onto her finger, and she did not quite realize she was doing the same thing to Ethan, and they were pronounced *husband and wife*.

And then, it was done. Ivy Williams was now the Duchess of Icebrooke.



The carriage ride to Icebrooke Castle was a quiet affair. Ivy was lost in the landscape around her, watching the snow thicken on the paths up to the monstrously large building.

“So, what do you think?” the Duke’s icy voice cut through her reverie.

She had envisioned a black stone castle, something as imposing as the man who roamed its empty halls, but Icebrooke Castle was anything but.

It was a stunning, white-faced palace, with pillars supporting a balcony on the upper floor, and a sprawling gravel driveway up to the front door. On either side of the castle were black iron gates that Ivy could imagine Ethan Williams asking for them to be built, to keep out unwanted guests.

Everything was like a dream. Trimmed grass coated in frost, snow globe lanterns covering the walkway up to the house, snow-covered paths leading around to the back. It was glistening, and Ivy had to shut her mouth from the awe of it all.

“Ivy?”

She was hit with an overwhelming sense that she did not belong somewhere so pristine and gleaming. The trip to the modiste’s had proved that. The ladies had been forced to be

nice to her after the Duke's outburst, but that did not change their opinions of her being Society's filth.

"Your Grace, I cannot—"

"You can, and you *are*. Do not back out on me now, Ivy."

"I do not wish to, but... Your Grace, I am not my sister. I am not pretty and graceful and delicate. I am not a doll that can be put inside such a beautiful palace and belong. I am awkward and unsure and..."

Tell me I am wrong.

She had felt something when they had ridden on his horse together. Her body had reacted in ways her thoughts did not match, and although she didn't understand the depths of desire, she knew enough that she *did* find the Duke handsome and attractive.

Even now, with the torn look he gave her, his chest heaving with exertion and incredulity at what she said, she wanted to press her hand to his chest, to feel his heartbeat and know that *something* was there, to feel how warm his skin might be beneath his jacket. Then, she immediately chastised herself for those thoughts.

This was the Duke!

"Whatever do you mean, thinking I would want your sister?"

“I overheard that my stepmother attempted to pair you two together again, at the wedding, before I arrived. Celia comes with a dowry. You practically got a maid.”

Ethan sighed, making her feel immature for worrying about such things. But she steeled herself as he got out of the carriage and hurried to the other side to help her out.

“Ivy, I do not want Celia.”

And yet, he was only marrying Ivy out of his rigid sense of duty.

“I do not want any woman,” he went on. “I do not understand why you are upset by this fact. This is not a love match.”

As they ascended the front steps, a butler opened the door.

Ethan looked at Ivy sharply as she stepped inside, an ice prince against his white palace. “We will sleep in separate rooms. The west wing of the castle has been prepared for you. We shall share some spaces—the library, dining room, and parlor—but our chambers are our own.” His blue eyes were shards of jewels, cutting into her. “We *will not* be romantically involved. Do you understand?”

Ivy lifted her chin, letting herself shed the worrisome girl she had been, and made a pact right there and then to begin stepping into the title of the Duchess that she now was.

“I understand perfectly, Your Grace,” she said. “And I will not forget nor desire anything else. For how could I ever love anyone who has ice for a heart?”

Chapter Ten



Ethan stood, watching Ivy Fester—Ivy *Williams* now, he reminded himself—walk away from him, and he was stunned.

He did not think he had ever been rejected before, and yet she had done it without a second thought. All this time, he thought he could be the one to keep pushing her away, and she would not think twice about it, only spurred on by gratitude to him and a desire to escape her home.

He stalked inside, after her, before pulling open the large door that would lead to his wing of the castle.

This place was a labyrinth of ghosts. Every mirror in his wing was covered. He was a ghost in his own home, haunting the halls mostly at night when there was not enough light for him to see his own reflection.

It irritated him to think of Ivy's bright energy flitting through every inch of the castle, taking down his white sheets that covered the mirrors and portraits, and trying to breathe some life into the gloomy, empty halls.

She would succeed. He knew she would. Despite being raised by the Festers, her spirit had not been truly broken.

He wondered what more she would find in these halls full of curtained rooms and dim lights.

He hoped not, lest his peace be disturbed. But then, he let himself think of the possibility that she did—

No.

No, she had rejected him, and that had turned him into something more insecure than he would have liked. He was the hard Duke of Icebrooke, known for the coldness of his heart. Ivy thought he had ice for a heart? Fine. He could show her that.



A week after her wedding, Ivy was enjoying Icebrooke Castle, so far, and she could not deny that while its master was an unforgiving, formidable man, the staff and the castle itself were far more welcoming.

Ivy kept finding new rooms to explore, including the waterlily pond that extended into a garden outside her bedroom. She had not had the courage to lose herself in it, fearful of the gate she could see, and where it might lead. If it would lead to Ethan's quarters.

Ethan was a ghost, and every time she heard him, and by the time she sought the location of his voice, he was gone.

Ivy wandered around the room, trailing her fingers over the keys of the piano in there. She hummed beneath her breath, elated at the thought of playing again.

Would the Duke stop her like her stepmother had?

Footsteps scuffed the floor behind her, and an apology came from the doorway. Ivy turned to find Marissa, the head maid, whom she had become friendly with.

The young girl was pretty, angelic-faced, and always smiled nervously at Ivy as if she hoped for friendship but was not sure if she was allowed.

“Sorry, Your Grace,” Marissa muttered.

“Please, call me Ivy,” Ivy said gently. “I would like to be your friend, not your Duchess.”

“Ah, but the Duke... His Grace, he—”

“He may keep his own rules, but I have my own, and I would like to be addressed as Ivy.” She softened the words with a smile of her own. “I was wondering, though. How come all of the mirrors are covered up?”

Marissa shifted, glancing left and right, down the hall, as if she was not sure if she could speak. Eventually, she scurried into the room and closed the door behind them but was soon

interrupted by the housekeeper, her mother, Eleanor. They were the two that Ivy had grown closest to.

Marissa glanced at her mother but continued talking to Ivy. “Well, you see, Ivy... the Duke... he bears the weight of his childhood enough without looking at it directly. It is not customary to take down family portraits, so he must keep them up, but he does not like to look at them. His... peculiar appearance has mostly kept him away from mirrors. He orders for them to remain covered.”

“His white hair is quite unusual, yes, but he really despises his appearance so much?” Ivy questioned.

Marissa glanced back at the door as if they might be overheard. “His father taught him a great deal of shame, Your Grace. He ruled Icebrooke Castle with an iron fist. He called the Duke some terrible things after the death of his mother. His Grace missed her, and his father ruined the memories he had by twisting his mother’s love into something to be hated. Aside from his father, His Grace was terrorized terribly because of his hair throughout his school days, and still is when he attends functions. It is why he barely leaves the castle. He much prefers his solitude, where no gossip would follow him. His father has made him believe he is unlovable because of how he looks.”

Ivy’s chest grew heavy, and she suddenly felt for the Duke, seeing him as a lonely, isolated man shaped by hate instead of love. No wonder he loved to be cruel. It would keep everybody at a distance.

But she imagined he would hate being pitied, so she lifted her chin and asked, “But he has had many women, has he not?”

“Oh, quite!” Marissa giggled.

“Marissa!” Eleanor berated. “You shall not gossip so brashly about His Grace!”

Marissa lowered her voice and continued, “But none have rejected him the way you did last week, Your Grace!”

Ivy’s cheeks flushed warmly. “Oh, I did not—”

“The Duke was seething!” Marissa cut in, giggling. “I have never seen him so out of sorts ever since.”

“Out of sorts?”

“He has not been himself this past week. He has been spending more time in that rose garden, for one,” Eleanor muttered.

“He is a quiet man, but it has felt like a different sort of silence. It is more... stunted. Like he is processing your rejection. Usually, he is the one sending women out the door.”

“Well, he needs to get used to rejection.” Ivy sniffed. “He is an unkind man more often than not. He has shown me generosity and *honor*—” The word tasted sour on her tongue, knowing she was not here for more than his honor to be upheld. “—but he has not shown me anything remotely human.”

“He is indeed a cold prince on his throne,” Eleanor agreed. “He always has been, but, Your Grace, if I may say, he has had a hard upbringing. It turned a very loving, kind boy into a man who keeps everyone at a distance in cruel ways. You might forgive him for his... social shortcomings.”

“I *would* if he talked to me about them,” Ivy insisted. “I am his wife now, and he cannot keep treating me so poorly based on information I do not have about him. I would hear him out. I lost my mother, I could sympathize, and I could try to understand. If he wants to be stubborn, then that is fine by me. He pushed us into this marriage, and he cannot rid himself of me so easily, so he must endure the consequences he created.”

Outside, the floorboard creaked, and Ivy glanced at the door, but it did not open.

Marissa’s eyes widened, and she rushed to cover up their conversation. “I prepared the books that you requested in the library. I came to find you to tell you.”

“Thank you,” Ivy said. “I shall go there now.”

“Dinner shall be ready in two hours,” Eleanor added. “The cook has prepared His Grace’s favorite dish and wishes to invite you to try it out. It is a duck dish.”

Ivy nodded her gratitude and opened the door to find nobody there. She made her short way down to the library, the only room not covered by dust and kept spotless. It was clearly one of the points of pride of the castle.

Around her, shelves loomed above, majestic and filled to the brim. Ethan Williams was a well-read man, by the state of some of the books. Some pages had ink stains on them or fingerprints, while others had worn spines as if they were broken time and time again.

By the time Ivy realized there was someone behind her, she was halfway through a poetry book by an Ancient Greek poet. She jumped when she saw Ethan.

After a week of not seeing him, she had not forgotten how handsome he was, but she was surprised how his proximity took her breath away.

“Your Grace,” she gasped.

He did not say anything for a moment, only wrapped his fingers around her bare forearm. Her shawl slipped off her shoulder, and she tried not to notice the way his eyes flicked to the exposed skin for a moment. Her dress that day was pale blue, with a square neckline and ruffles that brushed against her skin.

“That is not yours,” he murmured.

His hand slid down her arm to take hold of her wrist and squeeze ever so slightly. Not to hurt her, but to get her to release her hold on the book. She dropped it into his waiting palm.

Ethan kept his eyes on her as he leaned over her, pressing her against the bookcase as he slid the book back onto its shelf.

Ivy could not catch her breath for a moment, her chest rising and falling rapidly at his sudden proximity.

“Your-Your Grace,” she stammered.

He was pressed to her front, and he was ever so cold, an icy man burning against her hot skin.

He looked bored, as ever, by her, but there was something arrogantly charming about the way he dismissed her, even now. Even as she grew affected by his nearness.

Why?

They had been close—when he had yelled at her, when he had ordered her around—and yet, now, she was breathless and flushed.

She briefly thought of the women in the romance books she had read, their bodices ripped in the throes of passion, their skirts pushed up around their thighs, a man between them, and she felt scandalized.

She tried to push the Duke back, but he only pressed against her harder.

“Next time,” he said, his voice low in her ear, “you may *ask* to borrow some of my books.”

“We are married, are we not?” Goodness, was she really as breathless as she sounded? “We share everything in this castle.”

“Share, yes, but I still own everything.”

There was a slight roughness to his voice, and it sunk into her skin. She hated him, and yet she found herself desiring him at just that moment. His thigh shifted forward to wedge between her own.

“Your Grace,” she whispered, shocked.

“Do I trouble you, Ivy?” he asked. His mouth was so close to her skin that she could feel his breath fanning over her neck, and she shivered. “Do I cause you any discomfort?”

It was not said cruelly, for once. It was the teasing tone that hooked her in, as if he understood her reaction to him. Ivy tried to keep her eyes downcast, not looking at him, for if he looked at her so directly with those eyes full of so much depth, she would swoon.

In the romance books, women often used their bodies to get what they wanted, but when Ivy did not quite understand what she even wanted, how could she proceed? She did not understand her own tortured heart, let alone how to use her body to help herself.

“You do not, Your Grace,” she said, unable to find her voice to pitch it at the desired volume, the confidence it could help fake.

“You are blushing,” he commented. “Is it the flushed skin of a woman who hates me?”

How could she respond to that? His tongue curled around each letter, each teasing question.

“I-I am embarrassed,” she said. “For stealing your books. I have found comfort in them this last week.”

“What books do you like?” he asked, almost conversationally if not for that sultry dip in his voice. “What do you read, Ivy, when the candles are lit and the sky has darkened?”

And yes, she had forgone her romance books, but she had found far more heated ones to indulge in. Books where women knew how to touch not only a man’s body but their own, books where the scandalous acts on the pages turned Ivy’s entire body on fire, books that made it all too easy to imagine herself in the same places.

She let out a soft, pleased noise as he shifted closer to her.

Ethan only laughed quietly. “Are you quite the scandalous reader?”

Her thighs parted further, and she almost felt shame if not for how good he felt being this close to her. She had craved closeness, and this was not romance but heat. Surely Ethan did not want a plain girl like her. Surely he wanted someone far prettier.

Marissa and Eleanor had told her themselves. Plenty of women had roamed these halls before leaving when the sun rose. Perhaps the Duke missed his nightly tumbles, now that he was shackled to her.

She was a mere stand-in for that. He did not want *her*. He just wanted someone. And yet, she knew she was falling for it.

“Perhaps we might read one together someday,” Ethan suggested and then pulled away.

Ivy inhaled deeply, pressing a hand to her warm chest. The air felt cooler without his proximity, despite how cold he always seemed to be.

“I will not have you gossiping with my servants again. Not about me, nor my life, or anything that is not your business.”

“Your Grace—”

“I overheard you,” he interrupted. “And yes, it is true that I have not been rejected before, but, oh, Ivy, you do not know what challenges you have simply sparked within me. I reject your rejecting me.”

“I am sorry, Your Grace?”

“I will make you regret rejecting me,” Ethan said, looking all too smug. “I will make you rethink every last one of your words about me. You want romance, Ivy? I can give you that.

In fact, I do believe I can make you fall in love with me before my cousin's wedding."

"That is in two months, is it not?"

"You are reading up on our engagements as a couple, I am impressed."

"I am simply looking at what can fill my diary so I do not pass away from extreme boredom," she shot back.

"Two months, Ivy. You shall fall in love with me, I vow it."

"I accept, Your Grace."

For she had a secret smile of her own. Ivy was not pretty, but she was smart, and she knew she could read many books on how to seduce a man's heart. She was his wife now, and soon, she would learn how to maintain her confidence without her heart being affected.

She could learn how to make him fall for her, too, this ice-hearted Duke who was so against romance. She would play him at his own game. Most importantly, she knew he expected her not to agree, and to do so gave her much smug pleasure.

"And I will make you regret your threat that I will not find romance or love in this marriage."

“Seek what you please, Ivy. I will not help you find it easily. We shall play at our games, then.”

“And at the wedding, I suppose we shall see who has won.”

“Then I look forward to our challenge.” He gave her a dark smile. “If it is as easy as flustering you by coming close and not touching you, then I shall not have a difficult task.”

With that, he left the library, snatching up a book from a side table as he went.

Ivy was left staring after him, recalling his words. Something about hearing him say *touching you* had heat coursing through her that she struggled to shake off.

Frustrated, she took the first geography book that she set her sights on off the shelf and began to read to bore her mind into a neutral place again.

Chapter Eleven



The next morning, Ivy was stopped from attending her usual early breakfast. Thoughts of the Duke had kept her awake through the night—thoughts she had not had before yesterday, or not as deeply as they had occurred—and she woke up in a hot flush.

It was not until she imagined him lying in his own bed, laughing at her, thinking she was having that exact reaction, that she was able to calm down.

She dressed herself after sending away her lady's maid but was stopped at her bedroom door.

“Your Grace,” the butler, Edgar, said.

She had been introduced to him the night before at dinner, along with several of the other servants. The Duke had called Edgar a friend, as the man was older and, like Eleanor, likely knew him since he was a young boy.

“You will be joined by His Grace today for breakfast.”

“But I have dined alone every morning since my arrival,” Ivy countered, frowning.

“Today, His Grace has insisted you dine together.”

“Right.”

Ivy shifted uncomfortably. Usually, she dined in a nicer nightdress than her usual one, which was not quite for sleeping but not to go out in either. But she supposed she needed to change. She turned around to head back to her room.

The butler stopped her. “Ah, it will not be necessary to change. His Grace himself remains quite comfortable when he has his first meal.”

Ivy blinked, surprised. “Then I shall meet with him.”

When she made her way down to the dining room, she felt a flutter in her stomach and mentally chastised herself. Honestly! She experienced *one* sensual touch from him, his thigh pressed to hers, and now she blushed in his presence.

It was all a ploy, she knew that. He wanted her to fall in love with him, and physical desire was part of that.

She strode in. The dining room was lit by candles in the evening but flooded with the early sunlight at breakfast. The table was long, spacing them apart. He sat on one end, dressed casually in loose breeches and a shirt that was unbuttoned at

the top. After seeing him so smart and impeccably dressed, viewing this was a massive difference.

A dark red robe was draped over his shoulders, and she noticed hard muscles beneath. She averted her gaze before he could look up. But he did not, and it was only as she waited to be addressed that she noticed he was reading.

Before she announced her presence, Ethan cleared his throat.

“Her fingers wrapped around the strands of his cornsilk hair, while his fingers grazed higher and higher, heat encasing his skin as if to pull him closer. She let out a quiet moan as he moved higher up her smooth, soft thighs to reach her—”

“What are you doing!” Ivy cried, cutting him off at the most pivotal moment. She was *scandalized!* “To stand so close to me in the library is one thing, Your Grace, but to read such—such!—*audacious* material to me over breakfast! It is outrageous. It goes beyond acceptable!”

And yet, Ethan only gave her that cocky smile of his that said *I win* as he closed the book and propped his chin up on his fist.

“I found the book you had last taken from the library. *Quite* the steamy content, I must say. Is this what you think about all alone in your rooms, Ivy?”

The way he looked at her made her feel all too seen, as if he knew exactly what she had dreamed about. She felt exposed. So, this was what the breakfast offer had been about. To

humiliate her. To take away the simple pleasure she had found in books since her arrival.

She refused to let him win.

Ivy stormed over to the table and sat opposite him. But from here, she could see his perfect chest, visible above his loose shirt collar, and she swallowed.

The man in her book had chest hair, thick and dark, and the lady had tangled her fingers in it during the height of their... coupling.

Ethan, following her line of sight, smiled. "How do you like it?"

"What?" she cried.

"Your breakfast," he said. "How do you like it?"

He gestured to the eggs laid out in a basket on the table. Another plate had scrambled eggs, another had fried eggs, and the most popular was a plate of poached eggs.

She did not know. It had been a long time since she had had a proper breakfast that was not anything more than a cold, stale piece of toasted bread with a meager helping of butter that might go unnoticed.

Quietly, she confessed, “I do not have a preference, Your Grace. It has been quite some time since I have eaten eggs. In my home, there were... never any left for me. I used to go down for breakfast quite late, you see.”

It was more like she was purposefully left out, just like the rest of the staff, forced to find food wherever they could, as the Baron was too drunk to notice, and the Baroness did not care.

If Ethan heard the lie in her voice, he did not comment on it.

“Then you shall have a boiled egg, such as mine. Ed, dear friend, please remove the eggs that are not boiled.”

Ivy wished to say, “*No, please wait. I want to sample them all if they have already been prepared. I want to find my favorite.*” But the butler removed the rest of the plates before she could muster the courage.

“Please, help yourselves,” Ethan said, surprising her. “We should not let good food go to waste.”

“Indeed, Your Grace.”

Ivy felt forlorn at the choice taken away from her, but what else could she expect from her husband, who had already proven himself cruel and heartless? A man who played a game to trip her up from the start. A man whom she would follow in taste, décor, surroundings, and engagements, simply because she was exposed to only what he preferred.

“Actually,” Ivy called out. She would show him that she did not give up one choiceless life for another. “I would like to try the poached eggs.”

“Must you be contrary?” Ethan sighed.

“You offered me a choice, did you not, husband?”

He blinked at her, at the use of the word *husband*, used as sharply as if she had stabbed him with a knife. “Yes, *wife*, I did.” He waved a hand to the servants as if to allow them back in. “You prove to be as insufferable as ever, Ivy.”

“And you prove to be just as selfish as you were the day I met you.”

“Then we are even.”

“And we understand each other.”

“Exactly.”

“Precisely.”

Silence fell over the table as they scowled at each other, before Ethan stood up and regarded the butler. “On second thought, I shall dine *after* Her Grace has finished. Proceed.”

Then, he stalked out of the room. The housekeeper glanced in his direction to ensure he had truly gone before she ordered another servant to return with a plate consisting of scrambled eggs, fried eggs, *and* poached eggs.

“Here, Your Grace. Take your time, keep him waiting. He deserves it, for being such a spoiled—Well, I am sure you have your own words.”

Ivy grinned and then took up a fork and dug in.

It turned out that scrambled eggs were her favorite.

When she had finished, she wandered out to the pond outside her bedroom, carrying a book on the British Monarchy. If she was to ever meet with anyone above her in rank, she wanted to look educated, so she was using every resource she could find. Reading aloud, she wandered through the garden.

“In sixteen-twenty-five, the King of England, who was—”

Before she could finish, a voice called over the wall where a gate separated two gardens, “King Charles I.”

“I did not ask for your input!” Ivy called back to the insufferable Duke. “I am educating *myself*, thank you. I do not need you to teach me.”

Silence on the other side greeted her.

“Your Grace?” Ivy asked, worried that she offended him.

He could make her life much more difficult. He was still cold and withdrawn, but now, it seemed he was growing to enjoy teasing her more than being icy toward her.

She gritted her teeth as she walked through the snowy garden. The cold did not bother her a great deal, as she had always been forced to run errands for her stepmother in any weather.

“All right, here is another one, then, if you know so much!” Ivy called, hovering by the gate. “When did the great writer William Shakespeare die?”

Again, her question was met with cold silence. She heard the scuffle of shoes on gravel and pretended like it did not hurt to only receive the Duke’s silence after all his talking at breakfast.

“Ah, you are not so sure?” she teased. “It is fine to not know things, Your Grace. We can accept our shortcomings at times. You do not have to know everything constantly, nor will you always be appreciated for it.”

She had meant to tease him, but there was the sound of a door closing, and the silence felt more absolute this time.

Chapter Twelve



Celia arrived several days later. She had decided to give Ivy two weeks to get settled into her married life, which was not customary, but after so long with only the Duke for company, and the servants all on eggshells around him after supposedly being caught gossiping, Ivy was pleased to see her sister.

“Sister!” Celia exclaimed. “I would have come sooner, but the snow has quite blocked the roads up to the castle, and, well, the carriage wheels are unable to handle the thick snow. It is just as well that I was accompanied by the Marquess of Ashford in his carriage, which is far well suited. I do believe he is here to see His Grace.”

“Oh?” Ivy said. “I did not know he has visitors today.”

“I do not think he did either.” Celia giggled. “Alas, his cousin insisted that he visit.”

“Then you must come in, out of the cold! Here, let me call for tea in the library. I believe the men will meet in Ethan’s study.”

“That sounds wonderful, Ivy.”

Celia’s face was flushed with the cold, her curls voluminous, and, clearly, the money that the Duke had given the Festers for the loss of Ivy’s services was going toward Celia’s wardrobe, as she was wearing a gorgeous navy dress that cut across her shoulders and a fur-lined white shawl.

Robin Cruz fixed his cuffs as he strode in behind her. “Right, where might that cousin of mine be?”

Ivy shot him a glare. “Your *cousin* is a ghost in this castle on the best of days.”

“And the worst?” He grinned.

Ivy huffed, “I am sure you know enough.”

“I do, indeed. Good day, Your Grace.” He nodded at her once before stalking past, calling Ethan’s name through the castle.

It sounded odd to hear such a loud sound within the walls, such a light-hearted sound that spoke of years of familiarity and comfort between the two men.

Ivy ushered Celia inside the library, and Celia tipped her head back, in the same awe Ivy was in the first time she stepped into the room.

“Oh my goodness, are these all the Duke’s?”

“I believe it has been a library that has been curated over generations, but he has added most of the poetry and philosophy collections.”

“He must have traveled vastly! The Marquess has told me briefly of his visit to Europe a few years ago. I wonder if the Duke went with him.”

“He did not say?”

“Ah, he did not say a lot about it. He was quite secretive, indeed.”

“Speaking of the Marquess,” Ivy said as Marissa came into the library with a tray of tea and biscuits. She paused to thank her and watched as she left. “Are you two—”

“No,” Celia said sharply. “Mother thinks I can aim higher. She is searching for another duke to marry me off to. Some things are not meant to be, even though we have very much shown interest in each other. I do believe his is an advantageous match made for him by his father. I am not an advantageous option for him. Such things in life have to be accepted.”

“But enough about others,” she added, but her eyes were glassy with unshed tears.

Ivy wondered if Celia had truly fallen for the Marquess but had to say goodbye to the hope of a future together.

“How is life with the Duke, Ivy?” Celia asked, softening her voice as if preparing for the worst, but Ivy could not say the Duke had ever hurt her.

“Life with him is... better than I thought it would be. He is spoiled and arrogant and can be cold, but I am starting to see more sides of him.”

“Really?” Celia’s eyes widened.

Ivy had to remind herself that Celia loved to gossip as much as any lady in the ton. She had to be careful what she revealed about Ethan. He was a secretive man who held his life close to his chest, and as much as she trusted her sister, Ivy knew that adding more fodder for the gossip mill would further damage her and Ethan’s relationship.

“Being his wife is truly better than I thought,” she repeated more firmly.

“Are you happy?”

At that, Ivy paused. She had books at her fingertips, countless hours in the day to read and walk, explore and eat, play the piano, and loosen her vocal cords in the privacy of the music room. She had freedom. But was she *happy*?

“I think so,” she answered distantly. “I... I seek *more*. But I do not think the Duke wants that.”

She yearned to tell Celia about their challenge, but she did not want it turned into more gossip either, save her own embarrassment at whom she became married to. Her reputation alone was shameful enough. She did not need to add fuel to the fire of being the rake's wife.

“At least not with me.”

Celia reached over and clasped her hands. “Ivy, you are beautiful. Do not let a man—or anyone, for that matter—convince you otherwise.”

“Your mother—”

“My mother is hateful, trapped in a loveless marriage that turned out to be less beneficial than she had hoped. She schemed too much, and it landed her in hard times. Do not listen to anything she has ever said. She has told me countless lies.”

“Like what?” Ivy asked, dread weighing her heart down.

Celia paused, busied herself with sipping her tea, and then made a show of dropping sugar cubes into it—two, like she often enjoyed—and slowly stirred.

“Celia.”

Celia's cheeks colored. “It is that... She told me that the Duke had set his sights on me at the winter ball before your stumble and announcement.”

“How do you know that is not true?”

“Do men not ask to dance if they are interested? The Duke and I did not interact once at the winter ball. She has said that when he came to the house the day after, he came looking for me but felt obligated to talk about your marriage.”

Ivy’s chest grew heavy as her heart sank. She knew they were lies as well, but she was familiar with her stepmother’s persistence. Ethan had also told her he did not want Celia. He did not want any woman for longer than a night, preferring his solitude.

“May I speak... secretly?” Ivy asked, trying not to blush.

“Of course, Sister.”

“I feel like I am holding him back,” Ivy confessed, scared to keep on going, never knowing if the Duke could hear her or not. “He used to enjoy... being a rake. His bed was warmed most nights of the week, according to the servants here. We have... not... Ah, the marital duties I have read about, I mean.”

“Ivy!” Celia gasped.

“Sister, I do not mean to embarrass us both, but I have reason to worry that he is missing his previous habits, and I am not fulfilling anything. He has not forced me, nor approached me.”

Ivy did not talk about the teasing move he had made in the library only a week ago, right in that corner that she glanced at now. His thigh pressed against hers, the warmth of his skin sinking into hers through her dress skirt, his mouth next to her neck.

“And do you... desire him?”

“Is it truly desire that we feel? I know one day I might have to bear him children, but that is all it is.”

Except for in her books, where men and women lay together for their own enjoyment.

Ladies of the ton did not do those scandalous things. The lesser women did, as they were free to, as they were free from the burden of finding husbands and could provide for themselves. It could be both a curse and a blessing, Ivy thought.

“I would never ask my mother such a thing, but I could if you need advice.” Celia giggled.

“Oh, heavens, no! No, Celia, that is quite all right.”

They paused before erupting into fits of giggles. Male voices passed by the library, stopping at their laughter, before continuing.

But when their laughter died down, Celia’s face turned somber. “Ivy, I must warn you.”

“Whatever is the matter?”

“My mother... she cannot bear to see you happy, or succeeding. Most of all, she hates the fact that you have more money than her. That you were worthy of the Duke, no matter the circumstances. I believe she still has intentions to ruin your marriage. I do not know of her plans, but—”

“Dear sister,” Ivy interrupted. “I apologize for interrupting you, but I do not worry about the Baroness anymore. These past two weeks have proven to me that I could have always had a much freer life than the one she allowed me to live. The Baroness cannot get to me anymore. I do not live under her roof, and I refuse to let her dictate my happiness, marriage, or life.”

“But I worry about you. I worry about her cruelty, and how far she could go in order to ruin your happiness. I would not remain ignorant of it, Ivy.”

“It is not ignorance. It is merely living my life, Sister.” Ivy took Celia’s hands in her own and held them. “I am so grateful for your concern, Celia, but I do not believe that the Baroness can hurt me anymore. I am finally free.”

And as she said it, she did truly believe it.

“Shall we go to the dining room and see what the cook has prepared for us?”

“Indeed!” Celia grinned. “Wow, dining in a duke’s castle. I am impressed!”

“You must visit me more,” Ivy pleaded. “I could show you the whole grounds.”

“I would like that. Let’s not grow apart despite your new life, Ivy.”

“I agree.”

As they went into the dining room, Ivy caught sight of a hint of white hair that walked down the far end of the hallway, with another blonde, curly-haired man. Blue eyes met hers, and she refused to look away first. When the Duke did, she felt a burst of triumph.



Later that night, Ivy was waiting in the hallway, looking out the window where she had thought she had seen Ethan that first day in the rose garden. She had started to work out the layout of the castle and how the joined garden wrapped around itself so she could observe it from several angles.

Gripping the window ledge, she leaned out of the closed window and watched as Ethan walked deeper into the garden. It felt wrong to do this. The muscles in his back shifted as he walked, and the glow of the lantern highlighted the curve of his shoulders and toned arm muscles. His shirt was tucked into his breeches but unbuttoned to his waist.

Her breaths were heavy as she watched, enamored.

“Oh, the Duke has had his share of women! He is quite a charmer when he wants to be,” Marissa had said.

And Ivy was not one of those women that he wanted. She was little more than duty or a game to him. So, why did she feel like she could not look away? Perhaps it was the very mundane task he was doing.

Who would have thought the cold Duke was one to tend to his own rose garden? What did he find in it? Solace? Peace? Something to distract himself and keep his hands busy?

She had not meant to watch. She had been on her way to bed when she had seen the movement outside. Ethan went from rosebush to rosebush, pruning, trimming, and planting new soil. She did not see him from the front.

When he turned his head, she ducked behind the wall, just out of sight, and hurried to her bedroom. Her hands were on the door to her own part of the garden, hesitating. Ivy was gripped by the thought of the gate that separated them.

What if she *was* desired? What if he had read that scandalous book to her over breakfast to plant such thoughts in her head?

In the end, she was far too cowardly to go out there to him.



The next night, she did the same thing.

She got as far as opening the door to her garden, but the minute she heard distant footsteps, she got spooked and hurried back inside.

The following night, it was almost like a routine, seeing how far she might go each time.

Each night, she went further into the garden. She made it outside, then to the bench, then to the pond. Night by night, another step further, until a week later, she pressed her hand to the gate and did not scurry back when footsteps scuffed on the other side.

“You finally made it,” came the Duke’s low murmur from the other side. “I have been waiting for you, *wife*.”

Ethan had placed bets with himself every day the past week. Perhaps Ivy thought that he could not hear her slow progress across her garden as he walked around his own, waiting for her.

He heard her harsh exhale as he called her *wife* in a deep voice, possessive in a way he had read about in the books she had been reading more frequently.

He had overheard her talking to her stepsister, and he laughed at his similar conversation with Robin. Desire, love, women.

He *did* miss parts of his former lifestyle, and he did *not* desire Ivy. And yet... he had dreamt of her every night this week and

woken up aching. His teeth clenched, he had doused himself with cold water before dressing to calm his persistent erection.

The day he had teased her over breakfast, he had simply needed an excuse to leave, due to becoming affected by how easily a blush had crawled across her pale chest, and he had wondered how that red blush looked everywhere on her.

“Will you open the gate?” Ivy asked quietly.

“I will wait for you to.”

“It is locked,” she said.

“It has never been locked. Perhaps you wished it to be to validate your need for distance. But the truth is, I have never kept you away from me.”

“You are a ghost in these walls, husband.”

“Perhaps I am trying to haunt you.”

Ivy fell silent at that. No doubt she would understand his trickery to win their game.

“Open the gate, Ivy,” he rasped.

He leaned against the wall next to the gate, wondering if she would, or if she would hurry away on near-silent feet again.

He had spotted her looking at him through the window and had caught her many times these past two weeks.

“I am... not sure,” Ivy confessed.

“Then let me help you. What scares you?”

“You are... undressed.”

“Partially,” he answered with a smile. He could not help it. “Would you care to join me in this state?”

Silence greeted him—the silence of someone holding their breath. And then, the gate opened, and Ivy’s eyes were downcast as if she did not want to look at him.

Ethan smiled indulgently and stepped closer to her. He took care of his body and knew he looked chiseled, but he did not think it was anything particularly handsome.

“Do not look at me,” he wanted to say.

And yet, at the same time, he wanted to press her up against the stone wall and see what her gasps might sound like if he touched her, and if they would sound like they did in his dreams.

“Look at me,” he murmured.

“Is that an order?”

“I am looking at you. Do you not wish to return the scrutiny?”

“Scrutiny?” she repeated. “Is that what this is?”

“Do you know that these rose gardens were created for lovers to meet in secret?”

“We are not lovers,” Ivy said—almost a snap.

“Quite right. We are not.”

The silence that followed was weighed with unsaid words. “*We could be,*” he wanted to say. “*Would you want that?*” he wanted to ask.

In the end, his pride stopped him. “Goodnight, Ivy.”

He did not move, and she lifted her head, her eyes fluttering as she looked at him. Her throat moved around a swallow, and he tracked the movement. He did not want her. He *did not* want her.

His hands clenched into fists so he did not reach for her.

Her hand reached for him, though, and he held himself still as her palm hovered above his bare chest, her eyes not even

finding his own for a few moments. She was enamored by him, something capturing her attention so absolutely.

Touch me. Lower your hand, darling.

“Ethan,” Ivy murmured, her hand still not making contact with his flesh. “I have woken up sometimes feeling...” she trailed off, surprising him.

Her cheeks flushed pink, and he dared look at the neckline of her dress, where that flush spread. He swallowed.

“Warm and aching. In a way I have only read about. Do you know what it means?”

Ethan bit his tongue. But then, he might have to admit he was the cause of it, and he *could not*. He needed to remain cold, and defensive. Having her body without letting her in would cause more trouble.

His silence had dragged on for too long, and Ivy pulled away. “Forgive my boldness,” she mumbled. “I must retire. Goodnight, husband.”

She was almost out of sight, and Ethan wanted to pull her back, when he called for her. She paused.

“Ivy, next time you wake up feeling such a way, find where you feel it. Touch... where it is.”

Her eyes were wide as she listened to him, sparking something dark in him. “And then what?” she almost whispered.

“Then I would like you to tell me how it felt and what you thought of it.”

Chapter Thirteen



Ivy had not been sure what to do ever since the night of the rose garden. Some mornings, she had awoken with an ache between her legs, but every time she went to heed the Duke's advice and seek, she got flustered and pulled back.

Sometimes, in her dreams, the Duke sought that place she was not brave enough to seek. Other times, it was not only his hands that explored. The girl in her dreams would tip her head back, and her brown hair would tumble down her back, and the Duke would bury his fingers in it as he held her close. When Ivy woke up from those dreams, it would be with a gasp as shame flooded her body.

She despised the Duke, so why did she desire him?

She had visited the rose garden every night since he had suggested she seek that warm, aching place, and every night he asked her if she had done it yet, teasing her. Ivy would keep her eyes off the way the lantern light caught his silvery chest hair that he made sure to keep exposed.

Every other day, she was ordered to have breakfast with him.

On the days in between, Ivy sought him out in the parlor with a book, and they had tea in frosty silence. During those times, Ivy knew she would have given a lot up to know what he thought.

It was a late afternoon after Ivy had shared breakfast with the Duke that morning when the door creaked open. He hovered in the doorway, looking uneasy.

He cleared his throat. “May I join you?”

He shifted, and Ivy could not remember him looking quite so awkward, except for those first few days of knowing each other.

“We had breakfast together today.”

The implication was there. Their unspoken rule that they did not dine together and then read together on the same day.

Where was the flirtatious Ethan she had met in the garden? It was like the two of them became different people beneath the canopy of the stars. Simply Ethan and Ivy, a more casual version of him that Ivy found herself preferring to the uptight Duke.

Show me, Ethan. Show me the man you have buried beneath your skin.

“You may join me,” she offered. “But, please, respect my reading space.”

“Of course. We are both, after all, lovers of books.”

Ethan took up a spot on the twin armchair next to hers, a side table separating them. He picked up a book that had been left there. She felt his gaze settle on her for a moment.

“*Becoming His*,” he read aloud, and Ivy slammed her book shut with a yelp. “Intriguing. Is this another—”

“I got tired of it,” Ivy said quickly. “I felt like something more challenging.”

She looked at Ethan from the corner of her eye, irritated at how he tried to smother his smug smile. How versed he was in the ways of intimacy and lust, but the second romance and softness came into the picture, he closed up. Could she use that to her advantage somehow?

When she was sure that his attention was elsewhere, she put the book somewhere safe to return to later.

“How is your knowledge of French poets? If you like poetry, I can recommend some volumes.”

She thought of Celia’s conversation about the Marquess of Ashford’s travels in Europe.

“Did you become interested in that on your European trip?” Ivy asked, pretending to browse the shelves for something else. Ethan had quite the collection.

Eventually, she picked up a book on American history. The large mass of country across the sea awed her, and she wished to know more about it. She settled in her chair again.

“My European trip?” Ethan cocked his head. “That is purely gossip, I must tell you.”

“Did you not accompany the Marquess of Ashford on his trip?”

“I did not.” There was something guarded in the Duke’s tone now, and Ivy practically thought she watched him build walls around himself, stone by stone. “I-I was not equipped.”

“How do you mean?”

“It does not matter.”

“No, I wish to understand.”

He looked at her as if she tested his patience. “My cousin was promised funding for his trip to Europe by my aunt and uncle on the condition that he graduated from university with top marks. He did, but he cheated often. During my studies, my mother passed away, and a lot of my education slipped my notice. My aunt and uncle withheld my inheritance from me and told me I could not accompany him. However, everything I am interested in, I have taught myself in these walls or school.”

“Did you like school?”

“You are quite full of questions this morning. I thought you wished to read in peace.”

“I *wish* to know who my husband is,” Ivy insisted. “I shall tell you of my own education.”

“You had one?”

Ivy’s head snapped up to him, her face a picture of shock. Even Ethan looked embarrassed.

“Ivy, I apologize. I did not... I spoke out of turn.”

She wished to bolt out of the room. Of course, he would question it. But she needed to be courageous, more bold.

She lifted her chin. “My stepmother was not always my father’s wife. My mother ensured I had an education.”

“Ivy—”

“It is quite all right. It is an easy assumption to make. But I do believe you owe me an answer for it.” She smiled smugly. “Although, I think hearing you apologize is enough. I do not think you have done so.”

“What else do I need to apologize for?”

Ivy stared at him, appalled. “If you need me to answer that, then I shall not waste my breath on your lack of self-awareness.”

“Oh, I do like it when your sharp tongue comes out, dear wife.”

Dear wife.

She ignored the title and the way he looked at her from beneath his pale lashes. His eyes were so bright, so alert, and they flickered over her face. She wished to ask what he saw when he looked at her but found herself swallowing the words.

Indulging in such things would do her no good.

“Do you know a lot of French?” he asked.

“Enough,” she answered, sniffing.

“*Je souhaite vous connaître complètement,*” he murmured, fixing those eyes on her in a way that made her feel like he could see all of her, even beneath her dress.

“You want...” Ivy trailed off, trying to mentally translate.

“I wish to know you completely,” he told her. “That is what it means.”

Ivy took a second to let that declaration sink in, her face reddening. Oh, her treacherous heart. She would *not* fall for him. Even if he knew exactly what to say.

“Of course, that is the first line of *Paris in the Rain*,” Ethan continued, and the charming illusion shattered.

Of course!

She chided herself. He was so insistent on these silly games. Of course, he did not mean a thing he said. She almost missed the different sort of teasing he did at night, in the garden, when he was like this. It was a different sort of coldness now.

“Good day, husband,” Ivy said. But as she passed, he reached out to slip his fingers around her wrist and stop her.

“Do not leave.”

It was a command, but it was uttered softly, almost a plea. His fingertips pressed into the soft skin on the inside of her arm, sliding up. Her breath hitched as he pulled her closer, circling his thumb on the inside of her elbow.

“Stay,” he murmured. “Let us... spend time together.”

“You are playing with me.”

“And yet, I touch you because I wish to.”

Except, he said it as if he was not sure he believed himself.

Ivy looked at him, and his eyes searched her face. He leaned in closer, his face mere inches away as if he wished to kiss her. His gaze dropped to her lips, and she licked them nervously. He followed the movement of her tongue.

“I shall see you tonight,” Ivy said, her voice shaking, and pulled out of his grip.

“Ivy,” he called. She hesitated in the doorway. “Did you seek that place of warmth within yourself?”

He did not sound teasing. He sounded... *wanting*. She did not entirely know what that sounded like, but he sounded like he *needed* to know.

“I...” She paused and thought about her words. “I cannot.”

With that, she hurried out of the room.



That night, Ethan waited for Ivy with a tight chest. He had almost done it earlier that day. Kissed her. He had felt the urge to hold her face with one hand and support her with the other. To press his lips to hers and feel how she would react.

He had gone in to inform her that his uncle and aunt were visiting the following day and they must share a room tonight

to appear like a married couple but had promptly been distracted.

This was his forte. He knew how to please women, knew how to touch them to make their bodies arch and writhe beneath his, but venturing into emotionally intimate depths with Ivy as opposed to physically intimate ones...

He was not in control of himself.

He heard her leave her bedroom and walk down the length of her pond garden. As had become their routine, he waited against the wall of his own garden, and she would always pause before the gate, never opening it before he told her to. He kept waiting for her to *want* to first.

“Ethan?” she whispered.

He thought that under the protection and privacy of the night, when the dark sky kept their secrets in a way the daytime did not, Ivy was starting to come out of her shell. Did she desire him? When she woke up with heat in her body, was it because of him? Was it *for* him?

“I am here,” he answered. “Open the gate.”

“Why?” She asked this every night. He had started to become creative with his answers.

Tonight, just tonight, he let himself speak without vagueness. “*Je souhaite t’embrasser*. Just once. Just to see what it... is

like.”

Ivy’s responding silence said enough. She understood. *I wish to kiss you.*

“Ivy, open the gate,” he said quietly.

And she did, slowly. When she stood there, so unaware of how beautiful she was, looking stunned at his request, he could not help himself.

It was just a comfort, he reminded himself. A way to get back into the ground that he knew well enough to gain footing in making her fall in love with him. Yes, that was all. It was all part of the game.

He was alerted to his desire for her, and yet he gave in.

Ethan took a step toward her, and then another, until his bare chest pressed against hers, the silk fabric of her nightgown heavenly against his skin. His palms cupped her face. She did not push him away.

“Ivy...” he murmured, lowering his lips to hers.

Those pretty eyes blinked up at him, and she did not move. It was as he pressed his lips to hers that he realized this would likely be her first kiss. He stepped forward, turning so he could back her up against the wall.

The second his mouth was on hers, he groaned, having missed this with a woman. He told himself that it did not matter that it was Ivy. But deep down, he enjoyed that it *was* her. He captured her lips with his own and told himself that he did not grow weak at the small, pleased sound she made against his mouth.

He waited for the fireworks, and the *feelings* and the ice wall he had erected around his heart to crack and fracture at the kiss, but all he felt was an overwhelming heat. A desire for her. One kiss could not damage all the work he had done to protect his selfish heart.

A hungry desire sparked in him at the thought of coaxing more of those sounds from her. He wanted to see Ivy experience everything for the first time.

First touches, first coupling, first climax. And while the iciness kept his heart at a distance from her, it did not stop him from wanting to be the *one* to do that for her.

Ivy arched deliciously into him, and while she was a maiden, there was something about that that made the experience all the better. He guided her, one hand cupping her face and the other sliding to her hip to hold her in place.

He angled his hips away from her, so he did not spook her with his arousal. This was about *her*, and it surprised him that he was not thinking selfishly. He often had with women, quickly finding his own release and half-heartedly caring for their prolonged enjoyment.

But Ivy... Oh, he wanted to savor her.

His fingers slipped past her hip, sliding down to palm her thigh through her thin nightdress. Her nipples pebbled through the silk, brushing against his bare chest, and the mere thought of it had him groaning into her mouth again.

He wished to get down to his knees before her, to show her every delectable thing he could do for her, *to* her, but he had far more teasing plans.

He tugged the skirt of her nightdress up and bunched it in his palms, pushing it up so it exposed her mid-thigh. Ivy clung to him, gasping and whimpering into his mouth as if she were a woman on the precipice of climax already.

How he wished to dip into her to see if she was aroused. How he wished to know if she had yet dipped into herself.

He let her lean back against the wall, and he kissed the corner of her mouth, sparing a moment to look at her blissful expression, her lips parted and her eyes wide, on him. Her eyelids were heavy as she blinked hazily at him.

“Ethan,” she murmured, her fingers sliding into his hair.

“I know you are not so shy, are you, Ivy?” he whispered. “I know the books you read. Do you not ever see yourself as the heroine?” He traced his nose along the underside of her jaw. “Ravished in private, splayed out for the whim of your husband, seeking your own pleasure?” He dragged his mouth down the column of her thin, elegant neck and bit her collarbone.

Ivy's breath hitched as she held him closer. Ethan's fingertips grazed her thigh, brushing the inside, as high as he dared. Her hips lifted, seeking a sensation she had not felt before.

"I have been driven mad by the thought of you touching yourself," Ethan said into her skin. "The thought of you growing warm with need, aching for something you do not yet know. Your fingers, gliding up the inside of your thigh." He did the same thing that he encouraged her to do. "Getting higher and higher until, finally, you reach your heat."

Ivy's chest heaved as she gasped, but he did not go as high.

"Parting your legs to give yourself better access," Ethan continued.

He swore Ivy shifted to part her legs as he spoke. He wrapped her leg around his hip and pressed himself against her. She gave a pretty, little whine that he kissed right out of her mouth.

"And, then, finally, slipping one finger into where you are the most warm, the most *empty*."

He rolled the word over his tongue and felt it sink into her with all the weight he intended. Ivy's hips lifted, seeking him—seeking *something*—and he smiled into her neck.

"And then what, husband?" Ivy asked, breathless.

"Then you keep touching and touching."

“Until?” She sounded close already, and he had done nothing.

“Until your body takes you over the edge, and you feel unmatched pleasure.”

He toyed with the side of her thigh, almost cupping her backside, but he restrained himself. “You must relax when you do it, Ivy. Let yourself enjoy it. Let your body prepare.”

“What for?”

Ethan grinned darkly in the night. “You have read your books. You know well enough what I could do for you.”

He pressed against her once again, letting her know what he meant. He was fully erect in his breeches, aching to be free, to know how her heat felt, but he held himself back. He kissed her deeply once more. He had promised himself just this once.

Ethan pulled back, leaving his wife desperate and wanting, teased and enticed enough that she might try to touch herself the next time she woke up bothered.

He let her leg slide back, so she was on both feet again, and she fixed her dress, still as if she was in a trance as she gazed at him. Confusion flashed across her face as if she was just as conflicted as he was about what he wanted and what he did not.

“We are to sleep in the same bed tonight and tomorrow night,” he said. “Retire to my bedroom when you go to sleep tonight.”

Her eyes widened, and he realized how he sounded.

“My aunt and uncle are visiting the day after tomorrow. We must keep up the ruse that we are... happily married. We need to look like we are cohabiting.”

Ivy looked like she wished to refuse but only nodded. “As you wish, Ethan.”

He stood back, and he did not miss the way her eyes darted downward, to the prominent erection in his breeches.

“Goodnight, Ivy. I shall see you soon.”

“And you will keep your hands off me?” she asked.

“As long as that is what you wish, yes.”

“All right,” she relented. “But I shall hate every moment.”

“As will I.”

And he pretended not to be aroused, as she pretended not to be flushed by their kiss and his words. They walked back into the castle through their separate doors.

Not long had passed when his bedroom door creaked open and Ivy was there, hovering. She slipped in next to him and curled up on the furthest end of the bed, bidding him a short, cold goodnight.

Ethan spent most of the night staring at the ceiling, unable to stop his thoughts from racing.

Chapter Fourteen



Ivy woke up alone the next morning. Ethan's side of the bed was cold as if he had not been asleep for a long time.

She curled her hand into the empty space, telling herself it was just like waking up in her own bed, and not like he had purposefully left her.

Why should she care?

Spending the night all too aware of him after he had surprised her last night by kissing her had made her feel on edge. She felt distrustful of him but also of her treacherous feelings.

She was not falling for him, but he had planted seeds of lustful thoughts, and now she was fighting to tear them out. Her only card to play was to play him right back, to push back as much as he did.

Venturing out into the hallway, Ivy followed the smell of breakfast and found the dining table blessedly empty. She ate in peaceful silence and made her way to the music room afterward.

Very slowly, she had been building up her courage to sing again. It was a quiet progress, hiding her voice so nobody would hear her.

Her fingers found their familiar placements on the piano keys, and she lamented that she had lost years of practice because of her stepmother's emotional ruination.

Did Ethan Williams care if she could recreate a symphony with her fingers? Did he desire to know if she sang like a songbird, gentle and crystal-like?

Likely, he would not care. This was not a love marriage.

Ivy's fingers slipped on the piano, and she cursed.



Ethan was ghosting the halls again, purposefully moving about constantly so that Ivy would not find him. After a sleepless night next to her, he was exhausted.

He hid in a forgotten room, as she had put some of her belongings in his bedroom, as she breakfasted alone on a day they should have breakfasted together.

And then, he heard it. The tinkle of the piano, the rusted instrument coming alive beneath fingers that cared for it much more than he did. His mother had tried to encourage him to play the violin, but he had not the patience to take it up.

His mother loved the piano, though, and as the sound flowed through the castle, it stirred something in his chest.

Something beautiful, something *awful*.

Abomination.

That is what your mother thought of you, boy.

“You do not belong in my head anymore, Father,” Ethan said through gritted teeth.

He almost believed it as he left the room, adjusting his coat. He needed air. He needed space. He needed to not walk through somewhere and smell Ivy’s perfume or hear her talking to the servants.

But as soon as he burst through the doors of the music room, not able to wipe the anger off his face as quickly as he intended to tell Ivy that he was going out, wanting to be abrupt and distant, but not *angry*, he saw her spin around to face him, her hands landing on the keys in fright. A dull, deep noise came from the piano.

“I am sorry!” she cried, cringing back against the instrument.

Ethan composed himself too late. He took a step toward her, and she shrank away, putting more space between them, not meeting his eyes.

In him, she saw her stepmother. In her, he saw himself under the heavy weight of his father's anger, and he felt wretched for doing that to her.

Not knowing how to apologize for his anger, he shifted. "I am going to the market to purchase cakes and gifts for my uncle and aunt's arrival. Do you require anything?"

"No, thank you." Ivy's voice was sharp, defiant. As if she thought he was out of line for reacting the way he had. Ethan ached for causing that.

He nodded and went to leave.

"Ethan?"

"Yes?"

"Do you wish me not to play the piano?"

He looked at her for a long moment. He had wished to get away from the conflict she was causing in his mind, but now, looking at her, he only wished to remain in her presence and fix what he had done.

"Will you come with me to the market?"

"Our first time venturing out as a married couple?"

“Yes. Why not? I can tell you about...” He almost could not bear to look at the piano, lest he had to stave off the memories in front of her.

While the carriage was prepared, Ivy dressed to leave for the market. When they were ready, they left together, and Ivy’s hand slipped through Ethan’s.

She did not know if that was how married couples walked around, or if they *had* to do so, but she supposed it was good practice to pretend that they were happily married in front of anyone who looked at them for too long.

She practiced an easy smile that did not say she was unhappily married to the cold Duke of Icebrooke. She only hoped nobody stopped her to ask about their future plans, and if there would be children on the horizon.

Chapter Fifteen



Ivy Williams was a married woman now, but she could not help feeling judged. How many times had she scurried through the market in the snow as nothing more than a maid?

Now, she had a husband—a *duke*—who had her on his arm, a ring on her finger, and money in her purse. Ethan was quiet in the carriage ride to the market in the center of town, pursing his lips as if in thought.

The anger on his face reminded Ivy of the first cold winter after her mother's death, when she was just a child. She had plunked clumsily at the piano, and her stepmother had stormed into the room and slammed the lid down without letting her remove her hands in time.

Ivy had not known if it had been a warning or a purposeful deliverance of pain, but it had ensured that she was too fearful to play when she was not alone in the manor. Ivy had taught herself in stolen moments and evenings when the Baroness attended teas and balls.

What had Ivy reminded Ethan of? Anger was telling, and his behavior spoke of anger.

He remained quiet and distant as they shopped for delicacies for his aunt and uncle. A basket was on Ivy's arm, and she put in it items that she took a fancy to.

Ethan had to remind her she had a right to do it, so she let herself indulge. Everything she needed to ask the cook to bake her small cakes went into the basket, and they left with purchases for very different occasions.

As they left the market, the modiste walked past them, glancing at Ivy and smiling brightly. Her face darkened when she looked at Ethan but embraced Ivy.

“Married life suits you, Miss Fest—ah, Your Grace.”

“Oh, please, I am merely Ivy.”

“Surely His Grace sees that you are more than *merely Ivy*,” the modiste protested softly before going on her way, wishing them both the best.

“I do not fool myself,” Ivy admitted quietly, “that you see me as anything special.”

“Who said I do not?”

“It is what you have not said, dear husband,” Ivy said as they reached their carriage.

She took the first step in, but her shoe slipped on the icy step that hoisted her up into the carriage. She fumbled and reached for the side to grip onto. But Ethan's hands were already there, on her hips, steadying her, and she leaned into him.

Her breath came short as she slowly rose out of his grip. She found herself missing the heat of him immediately.

He looked up at her, his gaze unreadable, and she smiled shakily. "Thank you."

Both of them seated, the carriage pulled away from the snowy high street and made the slow trek back to the castle. Silence enveloped the space, with only the clop of the horses' hooves to fill it.

It stayed like that until Ivy couldn't bear it any longer.

"Talk to me," she demanded. "I cannot refrain from upsetting you again if you do not tell me what I did wrong in the first place, or what I caused."

Her voice was sharp and stern. She wouldn't take more icy silence as an answer.

"My mother died when I was fifteen," Ethan began. "And she loved the piano almost as much as she loved life. She was in love with the arts and dedicated herself to learning every craft she could. Music, paintings, books—anything she could put her mind to. My father indulged her—until her death. The day after her funeral, he had the piano fitted with a lock and key.

He disposed of her paintbrushes and burned her bound papers full of poetry and essays.

“He scrubbed the love she had poured into the castle through her art bit by bit when he couldn’t bear to think about how she would no longer be there to enjoy it. He loved her—truly, he did—but his grief turned his heart into stone. He began to turn on me when I expressed my love for the arts, as if he thought they should belong to her. He did not drink often, but when he did, he told me that I was an abomination, that my strange features must have come from another man. His grief made him wicked and delusional, and I suffered under his cruel words. So, I apologize for my anger. It caught me off guard to hear the piano again. For a moment, I could hear my father’s anger.”

“What else did he say?”

“That does not matter. I did not know that one of my servants had unlocked the instrument for you to use.”

“It was already unlocked when I found it. The lid was open.”

That had a frown creasing Ethan’s face, and Ivy did not press more. She had wounds from her own parents and mother’s death that she was not ready to talk about.

Even this small admittance was a lot. She had not seen Ethan laugh genuinely, but she was now aware of this trauma he harbored.

“Thank you,” she said. “For sharing that with me. I know... that things such as that are hard to discuss, but I am grateful. I thought I had angered you.”

“I think my memories angered me. I was already quite restless today.”

“Did you sleep badly, dear husband?” Ivy asked, lightening the mood. She caught his gaze and gave him a sly, secretive smile.

“Yes, I did,” he admitted.

“Was there any particular reason?”

In her mind, she replayed the moment when his mouth was on hers and her back was pressed against the wall. The moment when his fingers climbed up her thigh and made her ache more unbearably than she could imagine.

She shivered.

“It seems like you might know them already,” Ethan said, noting her behavior. “Tell me, *wife*, what plagued your dreams last night?”

“The winter ball,” she lied. “I danced with every man over and over. You kept watching me, the way you did on that night. Except, in my dream, I got to walk away from you.”

She blinked, and Ethan was leaning over her, his arm braced against the wall of the carriage beside her head, cornering her into the plush velvet seat.

“Is that what you wish now? That you could walk away from me?”

He was not angry. He looked alive with the game they were playing.

Ivy knew she had to play back.

She slid a hand over his shoulder, drawing a line up from his collar, up his neck, to press a finger over his mouth. “Sometimes, you talk too much, husband.”

Ethan’s eyes fluttered shut, and his lips parted beneath her finger. Ivy flushed hot, thinking of him taking it between his teeth, wondering if he had the same thought.

To tease her, to take her hand and guide her to the place between his legs where she had seen his arousal the night before.

But she pulled her hand away as he leaned into her, smiling sweetly. “We have arrived at the castle.”

Before he could say anything, she slipped out from beneath his arm and walked across the snow-coated courtyard and into the castle.

By the time she went to bed that night, Ivy thought she might test her husband's restraint very, very soon. Her confidence was growing every day, as distance from her past was helping her realize her true worth. She was starting to figure out exactly what she had and how she might use it to seduce her husband.



They did not go to the rose garden that night. Instead, Ivy climbed into bed beside Ethan and lay rigidly on her side. Until she let herself melt against his side and let out a soft moan of contentment as if she was merely getting comfortable.

Ethan froze beside her.

“Will you read to me, Ethan?” Ivy asked, her voice high and pretty, the way she heard other women tease.

“No,” he answered. And then, after a moment, he raised an eyebrow in her direction. “What book?”

“Something interesting,” she said, feigning a stretch of her arms.

She wore a thin nightdress, the neckline generously exposing her chest. It was made of silk, a material that, she had noticed, seemed to affect him.

She knew how the material would emphasize her shape, and she arched her back, letting out another moan.

“Ivy.” Ethan’s voice was sharp.

“Yes, husband?”

“Nothing.”

Ever so slightly, Ivy tucked herself into his side and waited for him to push her away. When he did not, she curled up and knew her nightdress rode up her thighs.

“On second thought, I am quite tired, and your relatives are visiting tomorrow. We must rest! Sleep well, and please remember that this was your request. To appear as if we are cohabiting and happily married, correct?”

“Ivy,” Ethan said again, but, this time, it was a question. “Has anybody told you that you are... quite wicked at times?”

“No,” she answered honestly. “Has anyone told you that you are a cold man?”

“Yes.”

“A cold-hearted man with warm hands,” she murmured, unsure of where the thought came from. As she did, she reached for his hand.

She placed her hand on his, waiting for him to snatch it back. When he did not, she met his gaze and slowly lowered his palm to just above the swell of her breasts. Not quite brave

enough to place his hand on her breast but so that his fingers splayed over her collarbone.

She breathed in deeply, feeling the warmth of his hands seep into her skin.

Ivy fell asleep like that, unaware of Ethan's turmoil as he lay awake once again, gazing at her with a broken look on his face.



Ethan would damn this woman to hell and back. He would damn himself first for ever visiting the matchmaker. For ever attending the ball. Perhaps even damn his uncle and aunt for weaponizing his inheritance, pushing him to find a wife.

Ivy was killing him slowly.

He did not want to admit that a crack had formed in the icy barrier around his heart as he lay there, with his hand on her chest. His pinky lay just on the beginning of the swell of her breast, and he did not dare move it downward.

Remember who you are. Cover up that fracture. She is a good woman, truly. She does not deserve a monster like you. Pull away from her again. Do not let her get too close.

Feeling the rise and fall of her chest as she slept was torture.

The sun could not rise soon enough as he felt the voices in his head get quieter.

What have you done to me, Ivy Williams?

Chapter Sixteen



Ivy woke up with heat in her veins and desire leaving her lips in a long exhale. In her dreams, she was once again held in the arms of a faceless man, but he had that same shock of white hair as Ethan.

She reached for him, surprised to find him already awake. The way he looked at her showed a conflicted man. He looked *agonized*.

“Ethan,” she said quietly, letting herself linger in that floating place between sleep and wakefulness. “I would like to follow your advice to... *seek*.”

“Seek what?” he asked, his voice rough.

He had not moved his hand all night. Had he even slept? She could not help but wonder. She bit her lip.

“Come on, Ivy. You were bolder last night, were you not?”

She nodded, casting her eyes downward. “My... heat, which you mentioned... I would like to seek it. I would like to touch

it.”

But she was so unsure. Ethan’s hand moved an inch downward, toward her breast. His fingertip was at the edge of her neckline. Her breath caught in her throat.

“May I touch you here?” Ethan asked.

“Yes,” Ivy breathed.

Ethan’s hand slipped into her dress, and she sighed in relief when he cupped her breast, her pebbled nipple rolling against the center of his palm. She arched into it, finding the friction blissful.

A small gasp fell from her lips. “Ethan...” Her voice was barely above a whisper as heat pooled between her legs. “I would like you to touch me. Please.”

She pressed her legs together, finding that it helped stave off the unbearable desire as Ethan devoured her with his gaze.

Perhaps she should not give herself like this to him—a man who took her first touch when he was toying with her. But she *yearned*. She wanted to know what intimate touch felt like, and dancing around each other was becoming agony.

She wished to break at least one barrier. So, she thought of her books, and how the women lifted their skirts sometimes to be enticing. Her dress already lifted from the evening before, she

continued tugging it up to expose more of her thighs, and, finally, the warm heat between her legs.

Ethan's eyes darkened as he looked upon her, letting his gaze travel up and down. He took his hand out from beneath the neckline of her dress and smoothed it down her stomach, bypassing where she let her skirt fall to expose herself.

“Do you remember what I said,” he asked quietly, “about parting your legs for easy access? Will you grant me that?”

With her breath held, Ivy did as he asked under his scrutiny, and thought she might ignite. The cold air was a chilling balm against the wet heat between her legs that she did not yet understand. Not until Ethan's touch was there, gliding up the inside of her thigh, light as a feather, barely a graze, but igniting her skin nonetheless.

The higher he got, the more labored his breathing was. She did not expect him to react in any way other than with uptight composure. But when she looked at him, she noticed him also reacting, and she wished to press her hand to the arousal between his legs.

She went to, but he shook his head. “This is about your pleasure, Ivy. I wish to show you before I do anything about my own reaction.”

She blinked, surprised. He was prioritizing her?

But then, his fingers brushed the warmth between her legs, sweeping upwards as if to gather what awaited him there. Ivy

cried out, her lips parting. On instinct, her legs snapped shut, trapping his hand there.

Ethan crooked a smile at her, not quite pitying but not quite genuine either. “Spread your legs for me again, Ivy.”

The words sent a shock of heat through her. As she slowly parted her legs again, Ethan shifted so he leaned over her, his legs pressed to hers. He braced himself on his forearm, his other keeping her in place as he took his time exploring her heat.

“There we go,” Ethan whispered as her hips canted up, seeking his touch. “This should be a pleasurable thing for you. I want to ensure that it is.”

Ivy could not imagine doing this for herself, not after him being so slow and attentive to her. Her mind tried to conjure up thoughts of him being fast and hot with other women—more experienced women—but she tried not to let them overshadow her pleasure.

He was *her* husband. And though she did not love him, nor he her, and it was merely a duty to him, she wondered where this particular thing fit into his honor and duty categories.

But then, his finger slipped into her heat, and her mind went blank.

“Oh, heavens,” she whispered, her eyes wide, shocked at the intrusion.

Was she even ready? Prepared? Was it good? It hurt, but the ache in her core that had been growing with each day she spent in the castle—almost a month now—enjoyed that *something* was happening.

She closed her eyes as Ethan's finger pushed into her further, and she could not stop the moan that tumbled out of her lips. She gasped, not knowing what to do with her body, her hands, or her legs. She did not know how to react, or what to do, but Ethan's voice was there, grounding her.

“Does it feel good, Ivy?”

“Please, do not stop,” she gasped out.

“I can give you more if you would like. You are very wet, Ivy.”

“Is that good?” she asked, panicking for a moment.

Humiliation flooded her face with heat before she saw the dark hungry look in Ethan's eyes.

“It is what every man hopes for when he lies with a woman to know that she feels good,” he told her.

Ivy found herself keening as he began to slide his finger out of her and push it back in—a rocking rhythm. She could not control the spasms of her body as she was overwhelmed with this new desire.

It bloomed deep and hot inside her.

“Do not stop,” she begged. “Oh—please, *please*, Ethan, never stop.”

“I would not dream of it, wife,” Ethan whispered, kissing the spot below her ear.

He swiped his tongue over her skin, and he groaned in her ear. She ached to touch him, too, to feel more of him. When she finally adjusted to his finger, she gripped his wrist.

“Is there... more I can experience?”

“Some women tend to enjoy another finger, but, Ivy, I do not want to cause you pain with this.”

“I will tell you,” she said.

Things were tentative between them, and this new game of intimacy was Ethan’s forte. Ivy was lost in this particular, desire-soaked maze. She did not want to find her way out, she realized. She wanted to get lost, deeper and deeper and—

She gave a loud shout when Ethan pulled out and slipped in a second finger. Oh, Ivy felt so *full*. She keened, arching her hips into his touch, finding that she could rock herself against him as much as he thrust into her.

What more could she even experience than this? It felt like Ethan was drilling into her in the most wonderful way, touching her more intimately than she would ever be touched, and she was surprised to find that she liked that it was him doing this. He was attentive.

“I can go faster,” Ethan murmured. “Or I can slow down. Whatever feels good for you. Talk to me, Ivy. Tell me what feels good.”

He kissed down the length of her throat, his teeth scraping against the thin skin of her shoulders, humming into her, as he sped up, and Ivy was seeing stars. She was sure her lower half was on fire in a way that did not hurt. It was intense, and she could barely stand it, but she did not dare wish it to stop.

“This,” she gasped. “This feels good. Please, do not stop.”

She pleaded and did not feel shame, for there was a building tension in her lower belly, growing with each thrust of Ethan’s fingers. She felt obscene and scandalous, her skirts rucked up, her thighs parted, her most intimate part dripping onto the bedsheets, with her husband’s fingers inside of her.

But Ivy had never felt more alive, and she wondered why it had taken her so long, and why she had been so coy.

“Ethan,” she gasped as the pressure grew. “Oh, Ethan—*Ethan*, I do not know what is—”

“Let it happen, Ivy. It is your climax.”

“It feels... strange.”

“Let me help make it happen, Ivy. You’ll feel the most wonderful pleasure.”

With that, he kissed her deeply, and she felt him curl his fingers inside of her. That pressure inside her burst, and she could not stop the garbled cry that escaped her throat, pouring into Ethan’s mouth, as her hips jerked and rolled through the sensation.

Ethan kept touching her intimately through it all until she felt like all her nerve endings were on fire and she began to tear up, jerking uncomfortably.

Ethan slowly pulled his fingers out. Ivy’s eyes widened at how they glistened, and she reddened.

“Do not grow bashful with me now, wife,” Ethan said.

A knock on the door broke them apart. Ivy squeaked and covered herself up to her chin with the sheets.

Ethan looked unbothered. “Yes?”

The door opened to reveal the butler. “Your Grace, your aunt and uncle have arrived.”

“Oh, grand. Take them to the parlor. Tell them they might wait a while, for we must get dressed.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

The butler left, and Ethan rose from the bed. Ivy was on the same level as his hips, where his arousal strained against his breeches. It was... big. Bigger than she thought. She swallowed.

Ethan untucked his shirt and let it cover his bulge. “Do not worry about that. I can take care of that myself.”

“But...”

He lifted an eyebrow at her, smirking. “Do you wish to?”

Did she?

Still catching her breath after her climax, Ivy wanted to be closer to him. Outside of their intimate bubble, she felt bereft suddenly. She knew he would change again once he was out of his comfort zone of charming her lustfully.

“Another time. I shall let you touch me if you wish.”

It was a dangerous promise, and she knew by the way he chuckled darkly.

He walked out of the room to the adjacent washroom. Ivy collapsed against the pillows of their shared bed and pressed a hand to her chest.

She did not quite know what to think or feel at that moment.



Ethan did not wait for Ivy no matter what farce he needed to uphold in front of his aunt and uncle. If he looked at her for one minute longer, lost in the haze of her pleasure, experiencing such touches for the first time, he feared he would bring the whole castle down in an inferno.

Ivy was a flame, he was the match, and he wanted to let them raze everything in their path.

But he could not. Not when he had duties to his family. Not when he was quite certain that he could not allow himself to want Ivy more than he already did. And not when, for her, he was the cold-hearted Duke who could not give her the love she wanted.

“You are ridiculous,” he muttered to himself, fixing his shirt before entering the parlor, where he would receive his relatives. “Put her out of your mind.”

And he tried—oh, he tried—but all he could see was the parting of her lips, the soft flutter of her eyelashes, and the beautiful arch of her back as she orgasmed. But he shook his head. He had washed her off his skin, doused himself in cold water to rid himself of his erection, and now, he was the Duke of Icebrooke once more.

He opened the doors to the parlor.

“Auntie, Uncle,” he greeted, approaching their visitors. He embraced his aunt with two kisses on the cheek and shook hands with his uncle. “Please, sit. Have they brought you tea?”

“The young maid is bringing it for us quite promptly—ah, here she is!” His uncle smiled at Marissa, letting her set the tray down before she scurried away. “Where is your wife, Ethan? We asked to see you both.”

“She needed more time to get ready to greet you both,” Ethan lied. Well, he supposed it was not wholly a lie. “She will join us soon.”

“I was glad to know you heeded our warning, Ethan,” Johannes Cruz said. “It does you no good to sit in this castle on your own. We wanted to see you happy. We wanted you to have a wife and children with whom to share your fortune.”

Ethan coughed at *children*, and winced. “Of course, Uncle. I understand you always have my best interests at heart.”

He sounded defensive, he knew, but it was hard to make his and Ivy’s marriage sound genuine when neither of them could barely get through one sitting together without bickering.

But now, he had touched her... and her eyes had sought his arousal, and she had hinted at wanting to touch him, too...

Where did that leave him?

The doors were thrown open, and Ethan smelled Ivy's delicate floral perfume before he saw her. He caught himself scowling until he smoothed his features. Ivy sat down next to him, facing his aunt and uncle.

"How kind of you to finally join us," he said, forcing a smile so his relatives would think it was in jest.

"I was... quite indisposed and wanted to make sure I looked presentable." Ivy smiled at his aunt and uncle. "I have been sleeping fitfully as of late. I do apologize for my late arrival."

"If I recall correctly, you were rather late to your own wedding, were you not?" Loretta Cruz asked, her eyes blinking at Ivy as if to coax out the answer, but her tone was light.

Ivy bit her lip. "I can see where there is a pattern," she confessed, giggling.

Ethan held his breath, wondering if she was making too light of the comment his aunt made, but Loretta simply laughed along with her.

"We do live with these men for the rest of our lives, what's a few moments of suspense? The altar is quite possibly the only time we get to make them wait!" Loretta whispered conspiratorially. Ivy's shoulders relaxed. "We did not want to intrude, Ethan, darling, but we were eager to see how you and your wife were doing."

“We never thought we would see him settle down,” Johannes added.

Johannes Cruz was a man Ethan never quite knew how to understand. Jovial one moment and scolding the next. Ethan wondered how Ivy, with her anxieties and worries, would handle him.

“It is a good job he has, or I feared he might live on and die rather lonely up here. It does a man no good to be so isolated.”

“Uncle,” Ethan interjected, forcing a laugh into his voice, “let’s not bore my wife with your concerns, which are no longer valid. Ivy and I are happily married now. We keep each other company and share many interests that have kept us rather busy in recent days.”

Ivy, who had been sipping on her tea, choked a little and forced a smile. Ethan smiled indulgently at her.

“Oh, you must tell us!” Loretta exclaimed. “It is so rare to see a well-suited match, and for one to find its way to my own nephew! Oh, it does make me happy.”

“Books, for one,” Ethan replied. “Ivy here has quite the taste in... deep literature.” Oh, how he loved watching the blush spread across her face. “The writing is rather rich and *very* intriguing.”

“I do love a good book,” Loretta said. “We must confer some time, Ivy.”

“I am sure Ethan can pass on some for you,” Ivy offered, countering his tease. “If he finds them adequate.”

Ethan frowned, played at his own game. “Ivy also has been reading some of my father’s poetry collection.”

He attempted to withhold the bitterness from his voice at the mention of his father. By Ivy’s questioning glance, he knew he had failed. He had already given something of his past away to her. His father’s particular cruelty could remain locked away. Revealing his father’s true nature only showed his weakness. It would strip him bareer than if he undressed in front of Ivy.

“Excellent! Your father was quite the intelligent man.”

Not so intelligent that he knew how to be a good man.

Ethan made a humming, non-committal noise and picked up his teacup.

“We also discovered that we have a similar love of opera and the theater,” Ivy said, suddenly excited, as if she had forgotten about that conversation over Ethan’s horse’s name.

Ethan had introduced her to his horse, Catalani, the day they had visited the modiste, and she had told him her mother liked the singer.

“You do?” Loretta asked. “Well, that is simply perfect! We have some vacant seats in our box at the theater. Would you

care to attend, Ivy? There are many showings, and the box has a marvelous view of the stage.”

Chapter Seventeen



Ivy's face lit up, and Ethan could not help but simply gaze at her for a moment. He wondered how he looked.

Lovestruck, maybe. A fool, most likely. He shook himself off and looked away before Ivy had a chance to catch him out.

Touching her had done idiotic things to his mind, he was sure. She had weaseled her way into his thoughts and refused to leave. Stubborn as ever. And yet, he realized, there, in front of his aunt and uncle, that he was not angry the way he had once been. No, he was more pleasantly annoyed by her persistence.

"I would love to go—" Ivy began, but Ethan cleared his throat.

"We are quite busy, Auntie. Please, forgive us. Perhaps we can attend a show another time."

Ivy's face fell, and Ethan reminded himself to remain distant and cold. He could not watch her attend a show she would love. He could not see anything else on her face and pretend like he did not enjoy it. Perhaps he should send her with her sister, instead, but his mouth remained shut.

“Of course, yes, how could I forget that we are busy?” Ivy murmured. Hurt was written on her face, but Ethan ignored it.

His aunt and uncle looked between them, reaching for the refreshments that Marissa had laid out for them.

“And the topic of children, Ethan?” Johannes prompted. “You must have an heir to the Icebrooke fortune. I fear your cousin might inherit everything instead.”

“Children,” Ivy murmured quietly, almost to herself. Ethan froze at the delicate longing in her voice. “We have not yet discussed children.”

Please, do not embarrass me.

“*Well,*” he said, “we have, but nothing is certain yet.”

The lie fell out of his tongue in a desperate attempt to not reveal their farce.

“Have you been examined to know for sure?” Loretta asked Ivy, her eyes wide and inquisitive. “I know an excellent doctor —”

“I am quite certain,” Ivy answered. She stood up quickly. “I apologize, please excuse me. I forgot I need to... tend to something.”

“Ivy!” Ethan called, but she was already fleeing the room. He gave a nervous laugh. “She is rather shy. Her stepmother raised her quite strictly and did not prepare her very well for married life or such questions.”

“But you *are* happily married, yes?” his aunt pressed.

“Of course, we are.”

Once again, all he knew were lies, and he hated it. His aunt and uncle had provided for him, would see him comfortable for the rest of his life, and all he had to repay them with were lies. With the ever-looming threat of his inheritance being taken away from him if they deemed his marriage a sham, Ethan felt like his hands were tied.

“Consider taking her to the theater, Ethan,” Loretta said gently. “She looked rather excited.”

And he wanted to. He *did*. But after that morning, and with the future so uncertain, he did not know how to handle the emotions that it might elicit.

He gave a weak smile.

“Well, we shall take our leave. It will be grand to see you both at Robin’s wedding in a couple of weeks.”

“Yes,” Ethan uttered, grateful for the reprieve *and* the heat being taken off him. “Yes, it will. Ivy and I look forward to it.

Thank you for visiting. Would you care to take a stroll around the castle? It has been quite some time.”

But they called for their coats and stood to leave.

“That is quite all right,” Loretta said. “We must return before the snow traps us. Heaven forbid that happens and you are stuck with two guests for the remainder of the week!”

Ethan laughed too hard at that. “Heaven forbid, yes!”

He shook his uncle’s hand and hugged his aunt goodbye. Once they had gone, Ethan walked down the hallways. Ivy was not in the rose garden, nor the library, or chatting with Marissa, as she sometimes did. But the door to his bedroom was open, and he heard sniffing. He followed it.

He found Ivy tearing at the clothes she had shed last night before dressing for bed, gathering all her trinkets and belongings in the swathe of fabric.

“Ivy,” he said quietly. “Ivy, what are you doing?”

“I am returning to my room immediately,” she said, her voice thick with tears but firm. “What good is it to sleep in a bed with a husband who does not want me and never wants children with me?”

Turning her face away from him, she went to leave. He caught her wrist on the way out, pulling her back to him. He closed

the door so she could not leave, and pushed her against it, lowering his face to hers.

But her eyes were angry, and she fixed him with a glare that would earn her the title of Duchess of Icebrooke, as hard and cold as him.

“What good is it to lie next to my husband, who is so sickened by touching me that he runs away from me as soon as I have felt pleasure like nothing before? A husband so *sickened* that he will not have me touch him because I am not someone he desires.”

“Ivy—”

“I shall retire to my bed tonight,” she repeated. “And every night beyond.”

“I do not want that.”

“I was awake, and I knew you were not able to sleep,” she scolded. “I know you cannot sleep with me there. Perhaps you are thinking of all the women you would rather have next to you. Perhaps you are thinking of how despicable your life is, now that you are stuck with me.”

Ethan did not blame her for the venom she spouted at him, but he wanted her to stop because she was *incorrect*. He slid his fingers through hers and pinned her arm above her head, stopping her tirade. She inhaled sharply as he loomed over her, pressing his weight against her.

“Do not misunderstand me, Ivy. Once, maybe, that would have been me.”

“And now?”

He could not deny nor accept it. He did not know what to say. She was wrong. He had wanted her to touch him more than anything. He had wanted to stay, to embrace her, but...

Ethan Williams had never wanted anyone to stay and warm his bed longer than necessary. Had never wanted that attachment and proximity, nor the commitment or expectation.

“Now, all I can think of is this...”

The look she fixed him with was defiant, stubborn, and he was enamored by it. So much so that he used his grip on her waist to pull her closer and kiss her. She reacted beautifully, pressing into him, her eyes sluttering shut, and her lips parting so he could slip his tongue between them.

Almost as if he tried hard enough, he might be able to coax those words out of her altogether, so she did not have to think or say them. He wanted to assure her, but the words would not come, so he settled for kissing her doubts away.

I would not kiss you if I did not desire you. I would not touch you if I wished for a different woman.

“It is not me you want,” Ivy gasped as he ran his hands up her waist, aching to touch the curve of her breasts.

“Is it truly not?” he teased, suckling the soft skin above her neckline, marveling at the flush that spread over her pale flesh.

“No,” she said. “Perhaps you could prove it.”

“Would you have me repeat this morning’s lesson?” he taunted, his fingers tracing patterns over her thigh through her dress. “Or perhaps you would ask for *more*?”

“What would more be, husband?” She was delightfully breathless, as if the mere thought of him had her unraveling.

“Exactly as I touched you this morning, but it would be my tongue,” he whispered, kissing up her neck, licking a hot path to her earlobe. “Or, Ivy, perhaps it would be my cock.”

Ivy’s breath caught at Ethan’s scandalous suggestion. The way he could brazenly suggest such a thing...

Her chest heaved with desire, desperate for his touch where her breasts strained against the confines of her dress. Between her legs, a world of heat and arousal washed through her, begging for him to douse the flames.

When did this happen? When had she begun to want him so wantonly that she would easily bend to his whim?

She could scarcely imagine his tongue being in that place within her. How... *intimate* it sounded. But she tried to imagine it. Him, lapping at her with desire, and she, at his

mercy, with nothing but the swipes of his tongue. She had read about it, men buried between plush thighs, feasting on their wives like a last meal. But faced with it *now*?

Oh, Ivy did not know what to do.

“You are thinking so much,” Ethan noted. “Does it not please you, the notion?”

“I am... overwhelmed. Perhaps that is the best word.”

“Then I shall leave.”

But then, there would be that unbearable emptiness where the cold of the castle rushed in from the absence of her husband, and the doubts would settle like snow on the ground in her mind, and she would start pacing around the room once again.

“No.”

Ivy reached for him, and, on a wave of bravery, let her hand settle on his length, which was tucked in his breeches. It was not quite as hard as it had been that morning but not completely soft either. Her eyes widened as she let her palm travel the whole length of it. She could not comprehend how it might... fit.

Ethan laughed quietly, a teasing edge to his voice that spoke of his suggestive intent. “I wish to please *you*. I do not care about my pleasure, for now.”

“How might you please me?” she asked, still toying with him through the material, marveling at how she coaxed a shaky breath from him, as if it had been quite some time since he had been touched in this way.

“I would be desperate to feast on you, Ivy. I thought perhaps I made that clear.”

Before she could move, he had fallen to his knees before her, his hands grasping her calves. She blinked down at him, unsure if this was acceptable. A duke, on his knees, for a woman like her! But desire burned in his eyes, and she wanted to chase it.

“Maybe I need to be *clearer*,” he murmured, leaning into her as his hands traveled up her legs, pushing her dress up as he went. “I wish to feast on you, Ivy. To taste you as if you were the most decadent dessert in the entire country.”

Ivy shuddered at the thought. “Then perhaps you should,” she whispered.

She had the notion to thread her fingers through his white hair, not quite sure if she should guide him or how she would, but Ethan leaned into her touch all the time.

Her dress bunched at her hips, and Ethan, keeping his gaze on her, kissed right over where she burned for him, through her undergarments.

“Ethan,” she said through a hitched breath. “That is...” *Obscene*, she thought, but Ethan just fixed her with a wicked

grin and did it again.

“Again, wife?” he asked.

“Please,” she murmured.

And so he did. He teased her that way until her arousal felt as though it pooled between her legs. Ivy felt scandalized, bare, and a flash of worry swept through her.

Please, do not leave me alone this time.

And while she could not make sense of the desperation with which she thought, Ethan soon took away all worries from her with a broad swipe of his tongue between her aroused folds.

Ivy cried out. Her fingers in his hair tightened, and he hummed into her, settling between her legs, his hands braced on the back of her thighs as if he did not want her to pull back even an inch. He held her to him, and Ivy could not contain her moans from the pleasure he ignited.

Slow and attentive, he tasted her, his eyes closing, so she saw his fine eyelashes brushing against his cheeks. She had the sudden thought that while he had always been handsome, he looked younger at that moment, and she found him to be quite truly devastating.

His tongue was hot as it ventured to where his fingers had touched her only hours ago, and Ivy gasped around it, her hips arching upwards of their own accord. As he did indeed taste

her, as he had promised, Ivy lost herself to the pleasure of it. The very strange, exquisite pleasure. Ethan explored her thoroughly as if making sure no part of her was left unworshipped.

“Ethan,” Ivy moaned, clamping her palm over her mouth, but he *tsked* at her and bit her thigh playfully.

“Do not cover your mouth,” he told her, his voice husky. “I wish to hear you, wife.”

And that warning only drove Ivy closer to her climax, the very thing she had only experienced that morning and still did not entirely know what she waited to feel until it was there, pushing her over the edge. Except, this time, it was Ethan’s face buried there to catch her arousal, and she felt her treacherous body ache to see the evidence of her pleasure. It was filthy, it was glorious. It was something she had not thought she could have.

When her climax came, it was overwhelming, and she balled her hand into a fist as she cried out loudly from the waves of pleasure that wracked her body. She arched against the door as Ethan held her close to him.

He ensured that she was truly done until he pulled back, his eyes heavy, his breaths coming in short pants as he lifted his gaze to hers. Then, Ivy let herself slide down the door and collapse into his arms. He held her. She came down from her high in his arms and wondered at the way he embraced her. They had now touched and kissed but never *embraced*.

“Ethan?” Ivy whispered.

“Do not say anything,” he said, his voice muffled by her shoulder. “Can we just... have this? Just this once?”

Softened suddenly by his sensitivity, she tried to learn quickly how to relax in his arms. It seemed that just as she had figured it out, he was ready to pull away.

“I shall see you for dinner,” Ethan murmured, his voice still rough.

When he stood up, Ivy found herself at eye level with his erection. She tried not to focus on it, not when he had not asked her to return any of their pleasurable favors. He cleared his throat and adjusted his breeches.

“I would—”

“I am quite fine,” he told her.

“Please, spend time with me,” she found herself asking. “I... It is disconcerting when we are so close and then you leave quite suddenly. What if we dined out tonight?”

“I leave for a reason,” he said but did not elaborate.

Ivy filled in the gaps.

I leave because I cannot bear to be around you any longer. I leave because I cannot love you. I leave because you were not

good at this. I leave because, because, because...

The thoughts swirled in her head, and perhaps Ethan could see the turmoil, because he paused.

“I enjoy watching your pleasure, and I wish not to get swept up in my own,” he said. “I leave because—because I am not a man that you wish to grow attached to, Ivy. My own father made that clear to me.”

With that, he opened the door and went to walk out, but Ivy cried out his name, making him halt. He turned around, anguish on his face at his own confessions.

“I would like to go to the theater with you,” she blurted out.

He was silent for a long moment, his eyes searching her face.

Listen to what I am saying, Ethan. Listen to what I do not have the courage to confess.

Ivy wanted to grow attached and closer to him. Let him stomp on her heart. Let him freeze it with his coldness. But she would want that. She would thaw through him—*alongside* him.

After what felt like an eternity, Ethan nodded. “I would like to go with you, too, Ivy.”

And then, he was gone, but Ivy felt as though she had won something.

Chapter Eighteen



Ivy had thought Ethan might end up bringing up her going to the theater with Celia once again—or worse, forgetting about it altogether. But that night, he smiled at her across the dinner table in a secretive way.

“I have requested seats in the box for next week,” he began. “I apologize for not making dinner reservations. Sometimes... the whispers are quite loud.” His eyes searched hers. “I am sure you understand.”

Ivy did not know what to do with all his admittances today. The touches, the truths, the confessions, and now the theater seats. She turned her face downward, hiding her smile.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “I shall alert Celia.”

His face was quite a picture of surprise and offense. Ivy had won *yet* another battle.

“That *is* who you said I should go with, did you not? After all, one might confuse it for courting.”

“We are married,” he said simply. “It is not courting.”

“No? Dare I ask, what it is?”

Ethan scoffed as if he knew she was playing him. “Fine. Take your sister. I do not care.” But his face betrayed him, that he did care quite a lot.

“Ethan.” Ivy giggled. “I will go with you.”

“You wicked, wicked woman.”

His smile was reluctant, but it sent a bloom of warmth through her heart that she wished to tamper down immediately. Together, they ate in companionable silence, until he began to talk again.

“Did you know that the French composer, Sovert, was from Italy originally?”

“I did not know that,” Ivy said. “But then again, I do not know who Sovert is, so it is unlikely I would know his origins.”

Ethan laughed around a mouthful of meat and shook his head. “Well, brush up on your Sovert knowledge, my dear Ivy. That is who we shall be seeing at the theater.”

“Sovert himself?”

“Well, no. He died several decades ago.”

“Oh.”

“A singer shall sing along to his compositions.”

“Oh!”

He gave her a grin that had her stomach turning. She despised it. She would not fall in love with him before his cousin’s wedding. She would *not* give in, but she needed to make *him* give in to *her*.

What was the key to getting into his heart? Ivy could not help wondering. He had told her that his father had told him that he was not a man people should grow close to. But she wished to do so, just to gain victory in their challenge. *He* had been the one to tell her there was no hope of love in their marriage. Ivy remembered that, and she would not feel bad for toying with Ethan Williams.



The following week went by swiftly. Ivy spent her time reading up on the composer and the singer who would perform and found herself incredibly excited for the impending outing.

She had not stayed in her room, as she had planned to do. The first night after their brief disagreement following Ethan’s uncle and aunt’s visit, she slept in her room stubbornly. To her dismay, she had missed the Duke, searched for him, and found him wandering in the rose garden.

What a travesty, she thought. He couldn't sleep when she was there and couldn't sleep when she was not.

At least she could relieve herself of the burden of it being her fault.

They spent the remainder of the week tentatively watching for each other's next move. Ethan did not ask to touch her again, but he watched her often. She found herself wishing he would. She found herself dreaming of touching him.

He sent her dress shopping with Marissa the day before the opera, and she used the time to talk to her new-found friend. They were back at the modiste, and, much to Ivy's relief, the ladies of the ton gossiped less. Ethan busied himself at the bookstore, as he often did.

"Tell me, was His Grace always like this?" Ivy asked, thumbing through various dresses.

"Oh, no," Marissa replied.

Ivy loved how the servants chatted about Ethan. They were not shy in their judgment nor harsh words when he was out of earshot.

"Edgar knew him as a young boy. He said he mourns the happy boy His Grace once was."

Ivy had seen her husband smile and had heard his reluctant laughter, but happy was never a word she thought would describe him. Those moments that appeared to be happy were simply a form of self-satisfaction, of teasing.

What *did* make Ethan truly happy?

“Is he kind to you? To the servants?” Ivy could not help but ask. She had not forgotten her days of being a maid in her father’s manor.

“He is, Ivy,” Marissa assured her. “He is a cold man, but his morals remain high. He pays us fairly and mostly pretends as though we are furniture. He is not overly friendly with us and upholds that boundary, as a man of his rank would tend to do, but he could treat us very badly if he wished to. We are lucky in that regard.”

Ivy mused, nodding. “I cannot imagine anything making His Grace happy.”

“Edgar believes his father was quite cruel to him after his mother’s passing. I believe it would take only a warm heart to help him remember what love feels like.”

That was a bold statement, and Ivy did not quite know what to do with it. She did not believe anybody had a warm enough heart that Ethan would *allow* himself to thaw for.

“I will not love him,” Ivy said. “If only because he cannot love me, and I do not think I could handle more heartache.”

It was better to goad one another. To make the other fall in love lest they themselves got hurt. Was it cruel to want to crack open that icy husk of a heart that he harbored? Was it wishful thinking to want to find a way into that icy fortress and make a home there?

Ivy shook her head. No, she did not love Ethan, nor could she. She had long accepted that.

“I like this one,” she said, changing the topic, as she picked out a deep red gown with shimmering panels of gossamer that came from a delicate band around the waist. It would trail on the floor, and she imagined she might feel quite like a princess in it.

A shame to be wasted on a man such as Ethan, but she would buy it for herself first and foremost.

“Then we shall buy it for you,” Marissa said cheerfully.

“What about you?” Ivy asked.

“I do not need fanciful dresses, Your Grace.”

But Ivy could not help but think of her own maid days when all she had dreamed about was a beautiful gown to wear, even if there was no occasion for it.

“I insist you pick one. All the women in the castle should. Perhaps we might even throw a ball one day and have you attend.”

Marissa looked at Ivy as though she had grown another head. She laughed her suggestion off, and Ivy's heart sank.

Ivy only wished to bring some joy to Marissa through beautiful clothes. The maid quite reminded her of Celia, and she yearned for the days when she tried on her sister's dresses, imagining herself at a ball.

"Ah, I do not think my husband would ever agree to a ball, anyway," Ivy said, defeated.

"We also did not think he would ever marry, and yet, he has." Marissa gave her a knowing look. "We also did not think he would fall in love..." she trailed off, as if not wanting to directly state her meaning.

But Ivy understood.

Something treacherous in her heart fluttered, but she promptly ignored it. Ethan had been clear from the start: there was no hope of love in their marriage. But that had been before he had kissed her and touched her, and dined with her. Before he had found out how easily laughter could bubble out of her lips, and how she had found that listening to his intelligence and knowledge of the world was fascinating.

Ivy shot Marissa a smile before they went to the modiste's counter to have her purchases wrapped up.

Alice Chesternut smiled at Ivy. "How does life treat you, Your Grace?" she asked.

“Very well, thank you,” Ivy answered, smiling.

They were interrupted by the sound of a bell, and Ivy turned around to find Ethan striding into the modiste’s shop, a look of pinched concern on his face.

“Ivy,” he said, sounding somewhat breathless. His face was flushed, as if he had run to the shop. “I—” His gaze landed on the modiste. “Never mind. There was a misunderstanding.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing.” He glared at Alice. “Let us depart if you are finished.”

“Oh, only a moment longer,” Ivy requested, turning back to the modiste. “Life at Icebrooke Castle is rather interesting. Did you know that Ethan has so many books and—”

“Let us depart,” Ethan said sharply.

That bitterness, so reminiscent of when they had first met, startled Ivy. She nodded and went with him, bidding farewell to the modiste. Her dress would be delivered ahead of their visit to the theater the following day.

Outside, Marissa departed, stating that she had more shopping to do at the market. Ethan ushered Ivy into their carriage.

“What happened, Ethan?” Ivy asked. “You looked quite upset entering the modiste’s, and now...”

Ethan’s hard gaze was fixed on the window, watching the snowy streets outside. “Nothing. A mere misunderstanding, as I said.” But then, his attention flicked to her, and his eyes softened. The blue in them was still so brilliantly bright. “A lady had been hurt by a horse and was knocked to the ground in the street. We were asked to help while I was shopping for new books. I wished to... surprise you with a gift. We were given her description, and it matches yours. I... thought you might have been hurt.”

Ivy blinked, surprised at the tenderness in his voice—at the care. So, she lifted her chin and said, “I would assume you would not care or be in any hurry to help me.”

“Ivy...”

“Am I incorrect?”

“You are,” he replied, yet another admittance that shocked her. “I *would* care, and I would have raced to find you if you were in need of aid.” He cocked his head at her. “Do not forget my kindnesses so easily.”

“Kindness is reduced when it is done only out of duty. You said so yourself. Duty is the only thing you have acted on with me.”

He fixed her with a curious look. “And touching you while we lay in bed together, do you think that was duty?”

“Was it not?”

He gave her a slow smile. “No. That was a choice.”

Ivy did not even realize that they had arrived at the castle until he promptly opened the door and got out, leaving her to be helped by the footman. By the time she had recovered from his admitting that he *chose* to touch her, he had disappeared into the library, and she did not think she could handle another conversation with him any time soon.

His small admittances unnerved her.

She did not know what to do with them. What it meant for them. If he was finally trusting her to reveal more about himself, or if they made her fall for him, proving him right.



The following day, Marissa dressed Ivy, decorating her hair with tiny pearls. They stood out against her brown curls that were half styled up prettily. Her deep red dress went on next, and then Marissa clasped a ruby necklace around her neck and helped her put on matching earrings. At the end of it, Ivy felt exquisite. She had always seen herself as plain, but the young woman who looked back at her was far from it.

Ivy felt beautiful quite possibly for the first time in her life. Her eyes were bright and excited, and the jewelry complimented her pale skin. Her dress was stunning, catching the light every time she turned. Jewels glimmered at her ears

and throat, and her wedding ring felt like the final touch to the all-round elegance of her look.

“Beautiful!” Marissa gushed. “You shall be the most beautiful lady there!”

“Yes, she shall be.”

Ivy turned to find Ethan in the doorway, one hand into his trouser pocket. He watched her from beneath his lashes. His hair had been styled back, exposing his forehead. There was something about seeing his thick eyebrows, the way they raised at her as if they said, “*Yes?*”

A flutter of desire went through her, and she hoped her blush merely looked like the rouge she applied.

Ethan held his arm out for her, and she slid her hand into the crook of his elbow. Together, they left the castle, and Ivy could barely contain her excitement.

The ride into town was quiet until Ethan spoke as they neared the theater.

“My father knew the nephew of the man who had this theater designed,” he told her.

Ivy’s brow rose, impressed. “Really?”

Ethan nodded. “A Frenchman. He was inspired by European architecture. The theater remains his only legacy.”

There again was the mention of his father. Ivy wondered if perhaps he might take off the dressing to the wound that was his father and one day confide in her about him. For now, she only let him help her out of the carriage, and they made their way inside.

The theater was a domed building, the glass ceiling looking right up into the sky. Conversation carried through the main seating area as Ivy and Ethan were shown to their box.

They practically overlooked the stage. Ethan handed Ivy a pair of binoculars, and their hands brushed as he pulled away. She was so acutely aware of him as the lights went down and a singer came on stage. A deep note swept over the theater, and the crowd was enraptured immediately.

By the end of the first act, Ivy had teared up multiple times, but she could not stop being so aware of her husband beside her. Any movement he made had her wanting to be closer to him, had her wishing they could talk. Her gloved hands remained in his, and his thumb caressed her knuckles. She was quite heated at just that simple stimulation and tried to catch his eye many times, but his gaze remained fixed on the stage.

Ivy tried to focus on the singing, but all she could think about was Ethan kissing her. The passionate music rose to a crescendo around them, and despite her thoughts being scandalous, she wished that, in the privacy of their box, he could embrace her.

Ivy turned her warm face away from Ethan and tried her best to focus on the performance.

During the brief interval between acts, Ivy found herself exploring the building, Ethan at her side. They nodded and smiled at other passing couples, and endured the whispers which seemed to make Ethan more and more uncomfortable.

Ivy tightened her grip on him as if to remind him that this was *their* outing together. That as long as they remained strong, side by side, then they could ignore the whispers. They still made a peculiar pair, and they had caused a scandal, but Ivy had hoped it would have died down by now.

Ethan's jaw was tight, especially when two ladies hid their mouths behind their gloved hands and giggled, pointing indiscreetly at Ivy. He went to pull away as if to confront them, but Ivy pulled him back to her.

"Let us return to our box," she said quietly. "It is... rather busy out here, is it not?"

"It is," he agreed, his glare fixed on the giggling women. "Although it appears they will let anyone into the theater these days."

That affronted them, and Ivy could barely bite back her peal of laughter as they hurried off before Ethan's quick tongue could get them into trouble. Her giggles and his satisfied smirk were something she indulged in, and she found that she enjoyed them being a team.

They had both endured the weight of gossip for years. They understood each other, at least in this one regard.

“I fear we might have some angry fathers on our hands come morning,” Ethan murmured.

“That is tomorrow’s problem.” Ivy smiled at him.

For a second, all she saw were those endless blue depths of his eyes, and she was entranced. He was beautiful, her husband, and she did not like to admit it when it made her vulnerable to his rejection. She wished to kiss him at that moment but knew it was improper to do it so publicly.

“Indeed, it is,” he said. He leaned in closer to her, dropping his voice to a whisper. “I am glad to be here with you, Ivy.”

Before she could answer, the lights went down once more, and the orchestra began to play an accompaniment to the returning singer. Ivy was elated and continued to feel Ethan’s presence beside her throughout the remainder of the night.

Chapter Nineteen



Back at the castle, Ivy steeled her nerves.

“Walk with me through the rose garden,” she said.

She did not wait for Ethan to refuse her, as she feared he would. Walking ahead of him to the garden’s entrance, she let him follow her. Alone in the garden, she waited.

And waited.

And waited.

When she had waited long enough and was ready to give up and return to their bedroom, she heard the soft scuff of footsteps. She was sitting on a marble bench surrounded by roses and overlooking a pond. She swung her feet just shy of the pond’s surface as she looked at her husband.

Ivy had read about gods in books, men with halos and brilliant lights around them. As Ethan walked toward her, lit by the

candlelight behind him from inside the castle, she thought that he looked like a god.

Her cheeks warmed, and she rose to greet him, but he shook his head and sat next to her. Silence hung heavily between them but not uncomfortably. Ivy let her hand wander closer to him, brushing the side of his thigh. She almost pulled back, embarrassed, but he placed his hand over hers.

Every word she had planned to say, the questions she had prepared about his father, and his upbringing, and what he saw his future looking like—if they would grow old together unhappily in this castle—flew out of her mind. His skin was soft against hers. Funny, how she once danced with this man and felt repulsed. Now, he touched her as carefully as he handled the roses in this garden, and she wondered if he knew that.

I am like a rose, soft to the touch and easy to wither and wilt. He is like the thorns surrounding the rose. Get too close, and he will be a threat.

And yet, that was all Ivy had been doing, had she not? Throwing herself at the thorns and not caring if they cut her.

They stayed like that, in silence, for quite some time.

“I should retire for the night,” Ethan said and went to pull away from her.

Ivy caught his face in her hands and kissed him. She had not yet been the first one to do so, so it took him off guard, but

soon, his arms wrapped around her waist and tugged her to him, flush against his body. Ethan pushed her back, and they stumbled their way through the garden, as if her kissing him like this broke the tension that had been building up.

They tumbled through the doors and into his bedroom, falling on his bed in a tangle of limbs and hurried hands.

“I do not love you,” Ethan groaned in her neck, sounding unconvincing.

“I know,” Ivy breathed as he palmed her breasts with one hand and pushed her skirts up with the other. “I do not love you either.”

“I know,” he said and then slid a finger into her arousal.

Except, this time, when he grew hard against her hip, Ivy reached for the fastening on his breeches. He stopped her with a hand on her wrist.

“We do not love each other,” Ivy reminded him bitterly, amid the passion. “What are you so afraid of, then, dear Duke?”

She ventured beyond the waistband of his breeches and found his hard length. It was too big to fit the size of her palm, and she shuddered at the length of it, wishing she knew the full feel of it. She moaned as Ethan curled a finger inside her, her voice mingling with his own as she touched him for the first time.

They kissed, passion swirling around the room, sweeping them up in a dance of lust and want. Ethan brought Ivy to her climax swiftly, curling his fingers inside her, but she took longer to find the rhythm and strokes that had him gasping out small groans of pleasure. Her palm curved around the girth of his length, and the very tip of it glistened with evidence of his arousal.

She wondered what might happen if she pressed her mouth to it.

How would her husband taste?

“Like this,” Ethan breathed, holding her wrist and guiding her hand up and down faster.

He braced himself against the cushions at the foot of his bed while she straddled his thighs. Her fingers wrapped around him, and she thumbed his tip, finding it a contrasting smoothness to the rest of his hard length.

“Ivy—Ivy, don’t stop,” he moaned softly.

His head tipped back as his hips arched into her hand until he was merely pushing himself through the gap that she made with her fingers. And when he neared the brink of his climax, Ivy finally dipped her head toward his length and licked the bead of moisture on the tip lightly.

Ethan groaned when her hand tightened. He reached for her again, and soon, their combined cries of passion broke through

the night, and she learned how her husband sounded when he, too, let himself follow her over that edge.



Ethan lay awake once again and found himself wanting Ivy to return to her bedroom after he let her touch him, if only so he could turn off his loud thoughts. But morning came, and, with it, the chirping birds pushed him to leave the bed. He was exhausted, but he found himself smiling at what they had done the night before.

He very rarely let a woman touch him like that. He would thrust into them and gain his pleasure through theirs, but he never wanted them to use their hands on him the way Ivy had wanted to. And he had let her—*wanted* her to. He found that perhaps he trusted her, and that was why he had let her continue.

So, where did that leave him?

He did *not* love her.

At least that was what he told himself. And kept telling himself throughout dressing for the day, rousing Ivy in the process, and then going down for breakfast. He made sure to get there before her so he could set up the surprise he had bought at the market.

When Ivy entered the dining room, he had wrapped a bow around a book on Sovert for her. He found himself admiring the way she went bashful every time they shared intimate moments.

“What is this?” she asked.

“It is a book,” he said, rather unhelpfully.

Ivy giggled. “I am quite aware of what a book looks like.”

“It is your surprise,” he explained. “I wanted to give it to you before we went to the theater yesterday, but now seems as good a time as any. Perhaps we could visit the theater again.”

“Perhaps,” she said with a coy smile.

“It seemed to... inspire a lot of feelings.”

Was he being too obvious? Did she know how long he had kept replaying that moment of her taking him in her palm, closing her fingers around his length?

“Indeed,” she answered, giving nothing away. Still, she gave him that alluring smile that had him weak in the knees.

“Read to me,” he requested quietly. “If it would please you. Let us eat together and read together.”

Ivy’s surprise was like a painting on canvas—always bold, always noticeable—and Ethan enjoyed witnessing it. He knew she had questions to ask him, for they swam in her eyes often enough, and he was avoiding them for as long as possible.

“All right,” Ivy conceded, picking up her book. “This one? Or would my husband prefer something more... intimate?”

He could not help his laughter. “I know you are attempting to rile me up, darling, but it will not work. I scarcely think your face could handle the blush. I fear it would go on fire. However, I would like to imagine you trying to say all those lewd words without stumbling over your tongue.”

He sipped his tea, eyeing her over the rim of his cup. *Darling*, he had called her. It sent a shiver down her spine that she did not bother to repress.

Wanting to prove him wrong, Ivy stood, intending to find one of her romance books from the library. But Ethan’s gaze was commanding and filled with heat as she stood up. She had done nothing, but perhaps he *was* trying to imagine that scenario.

“Read Sovert to me,” he demanded.

And so, over eggs and toast, Ivy read aloud to him. She could not pronounce every French word, but she enjoyed the way when she mentioned several compositions, Ethan’s fingers tapped on the table as if he was playing them from memory.

Another glimpse into his past—he had played alongside his mother. Or watched her play.

He closed his eyes as Ivy read to him, a small smile lingering on his face. The scowl slipped away, leaving a peaceful man

with smoother features. He looked far younger than his years. Ivy stopped reading, lost in simply admiring this man who so rarely let his defenses down.

He cracked open an eye. “You stopped?”

She blushed. “Ah, I thought you had fallen asleep.”

“While your voice is like a lullaby, Sovert could never bore me to sleep.”

Ivy ducked her head at the compliment. She disliked how well he rose to the challenge of making her fall in love with him. She refused to let him win.

“Have I ever told you that I can sing?” Ivy asked. Then, she was mildly ashamed at her declaration. “My mother told me I could sing.”

“Can you read sheet music?” Ethan asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Yes, I can.”

He paused for a minute. “Come with me. Bring your breakfast, if you wish.”

Quite unconventionally, Ethan hurried out of the room, a piece of toast between his teeth as he picked up Ivy’s book and his cup of tea. Hastily, Ivy rushed after him, carrying only her teacup and saucer. He led her to the music room, and she

nervously followed. The last time she had dared enter here, he had scolded her.

Ethan eyed the piano and then Ivy. “Play for me. Sing for me. Either. Both.”

“Play *with* me,” she countered.

“No.”

“I beseech you.”

“I wish to hear you and you alone.”

“That will put me off. I am merely a woman who enjoys singing. I am not a performer.”

Ethan stubbornly stayed just out of reach of the piano seat. Then, reluctantly, he took a step toward it. Slowly, he sat down and rested his hands on the keys.

“Fine,” he conceded. “But it has been.... many years.”

“An instrument always comes home to the one that took the time to learn it,” Ivy said, smiling softly as she leaned on the piano frame, looking at the sheet music Ethan shuffled out of the aged papers on the stand.

She did not know the composition but readied herself anyway.

Ethan's shoulders trembled. Then, he began to play. Ivy's voice joined the melody, and, together, they filled the music room with light and sound and song.

Ivy's vocals were rusty, as was Ethan's playing, but it did not matter. They found their way to each other, and to their old, painful, shared love of music that had become a sore point for them both. Ethan guided her through the song, and she followed. It was a dance they tentatively stepped through, and by the end of it, Ivy had tears in her eyes, and Ethan's expression was vacant.

When they finished, Ethan wrapped his arms around Ivy's waist and pulled her onto his lap, right there on the piano bench. Her back arched against the keys as he kissed her deeply, and she tasted the salty tang of tears. Perhaps her own, perhaps even his.

She drew away. "What hurts you about the music?" she asked, cupping his face. He had chosen to share a brief, vulnerable moment with her. "Confide in me, and I shall confide in you."

"I fear our stories might be similar," Ethan confessed. "I would sit next to my mother every day and listen to her play. She taught me how to become one with the piano. Had I not been the master of the castle after my father, I possibly could have been a conductor. I had originally planned right throughout my school years to go with my cousin to Europe and play on stages once we finished college."

He shook his head and held Ivy tighter. "My mother passed away when I was a teenager, as I mentioned. My father destroyed every sheet music in sight. The first time I played

after her death, he barged in here and called me many awful things. Things my mother had supposedly told him, things he thought.” He toyed with a curl of her hair as he talked. “He told me I was an abomination.”

Ivy’s shock must have been too clear. Ethan’s scowl remained, and he kissed her again as if to escape the conversation, but she pulled away.

“You are *not*,” she insisted. “You can be cold, especially when I met you, but you are *not* an abomination.”

“I fear he was right,” Ethan admitted. “At the very least, I am abnormal.”

“I do not care,” Ivy told him. “I like you how you are.”

Ethan blinked at her in surprise. “You like me?” He laughed as if his own question amused him.

Ivy thought of their nights together and their newfound desire. “No. I take it back.”

But a small smile crept across her lips, and his thumb caressed her lower lip, pressing gently against the plushness of it.

“My mother’s first dream was never for me to marry,” Ivy confessed. “She feared I would have a husband who would not allow me to sing, and she thought more people should have heard me. My father played for us while my mother and I sang duets. The first time I asked my stepmother to do the same

following my mother's death, she threw my sheet music into the fire and told me to clean the ashes up. The next day, I found my mother's most beloved instrument—the harp—destroyed. Nobody used the music room after that. I would only sing when my stepmother was out of the manor.”

So, this, performing with Ethan, had been healing for her. Her mother would never again sing with her, but maybe she now had a husband who would let her sing.

“Your voice is quite beautiful, Ivy,” Ethan said, his voice rough. “Your mother was right. Many people *should* hear you.”

She smiled. “I am happy just to express myself in song once again.”

“Please, forgive my anger last time you were here. I was... protective of my mother's passion for the arts. My memories in this room are tainted by my father's anger. But this room is yours, if you wish. I do not ever want to restrict you. Please, sing to your heart's content.”

Ivy did not know how to thank him or make it sound sincere, so she kissed him again. This time, Ethan scooped her up, placed her on the edge of the piano, and stepped between her legs as much as he could with her dress in the way. She tipped her head back as he kissed a burning path down her throat and lingered at her collarbones.

When his mouth ventured south, as it had once before, Ivy sang quite a different tune in the music room.



Ivy had invited her sister over to dine with them that night and had forgotten about the invitation when Edgar announced Celia's arrival.

Ivy, reclined on a chaise lounge, pleased and rather weakened by Ethan's attentive nature, got up to return to the dining room.

"Sister!" Celia cried, rushing to embrace her.

It felt like an eternity since they had last met. It had been in the days before the opera. Ivy had gone out for afternoon tea with Celia, inquiring about her marriage prospects. Celia had blushed and changed the topic, as if not wanting to share anything yet.

"I miss you each day," Ivy said, holding her sister tightly, breathing in her perfume, needing the comfort it brought, even with the memories of her former home.

"And I you," Celia replied.

"Ethan shall join us any moment," Ivy said, and she could not help the smile on her face.

Ethan had all but thrust himself into her hand earlier after he had pleased her, and she had returned the favor, only to find herself, once more, parting her legs for him on the chaise

lounge afterward. She feared she had quite exhausted her husband.

“How is your marriage now treating you?”

Ivy blushed deeply. “I still do not love him, nor does he love me, but we are... becoming friends, I think.”

Celia giggled. “*Friends*. I heard from one of the ladies that there was a lot to be seen between you two at the opera.”

“No!” Ivy cried, giggling.

“Oh, yes. Apparently, His Grace could not keep his eyes off you. Some say that you were quite the pair and that he spoke boldly to some of the ladies there! How outrageous!”

Ivy only laughed harder, wiping away amused tears at the memory of Ethan’s curled lip at the women that night at the theater. “He is a bold man.”

“Ah, this sounds like a conversation I should like to be part of,” Ethan announced, striding through the doors in a beautiful shimmering silver jacket that complimented his white hair.

Celia looked caught out.

Ethan paused as he passed her. “Do you not rise for a duke, Miss Celia?”

“Of course!” Celia sputtered, and even Ivy, from habit, scrambled to stand along with her.

Ethan glanced over at Ivy. “Oh, stop that, Ivy. Not you. You are my wife.”

Ivy giggled as she sat down. Soon, the first course—soup—was brought out, and Celia’s eyes widened. Ivy could only deduce that life at Hawkes Estate had not improved, even with the extra bursary Ethan had provided.

“Does our father still drink?” Ivy asked carefully.

Celia’s eyes flicked to Ethan, as if unsure whether to talk about it. But Ivy made an encouraging gesture with her hand.

“As much as ever. These days, he does not even bother to show up for breakfast. Or, if he does, he remains in his nightclothes. It is terribly improper and causing Mother quite a lot of distress.”

“Somebody ought to cause that woman a great deal of *something*,” Ethan muttered, drinking from his glass of port deeply.

Celia pointedly did not acknowledge that. “I fear there is an increasing resentment, and it only grows each day. My mother wished for glittering balls to be held at the manor, and beautiful new gowns to wear as a baroness. She did not... expect this.”

She was glum, daintily eating her soup, as Ivy did. Ethan, unphased, dug into his with the small pieces of bread provided.

“Ivy, my worries about her actions... they only grow the more she is enduring our father’s habits. Please, listen when I say that she might still try to ruin your marriage. She is trying to marry me off to another rich man but she... knows of His Grace’s fortune and is still persistent.”

Ivy could hardly believe the threat and waved it off. “Celia, I have told you gently. The Baroness can do very little to ruin my life from afar. She is far away from me, and I am glad for it. She is no longer a threat to me.”

“She is attending the Marquess of Ashford’s wedding in a couple of days,” Celia said. “As you both will be. It is the first time she will have seen you in more than two months. I truly fear her plans, Ivy.”

“Does she have any?” Ethan asked.

“Not that I know of for certain, Your Grace.”

“Then let her have her old bitterness. Ivy and I are married, that is the end. She cannot harm Ivy here, and I will protect her.”

Ivy’s heart softened at his declaration before she reminded herself that he was doing what a dutiful husband was supposed to do. But even Celia had a longing look in her eyes, as if she, too, enjoyed the declaration.

“I shall try not to worry,” Celia said. “Just be on your guard, Sister.”

“I shall.” Ivy nodded. However, she felt boldened by Ethan’s statement and knew she would let the Baroness continue to fade from her mind the minute Celia left.



Dinner was a quieter affair after that. Celia caught Ivy up on the latest gossip, and Ethan talked about his cousin’s wedding and how late he thought his cousin might be, as Robin had always been very whimsical when it came to time.

When Celia left, and Ivy and Ethan retired for the night, Ethan drew his wife close, closing the door to his bedroom behind her. His mouth at her ear, he reminded her of their challenge.

“Only two days left, my dear Ivy,” he whispered. “Are you ready to admit that you are in love with me?”

“Ethan, I have more love for my own reflection than for you,” Ivy countered.

And she knew that blow landed because he knew of her self-conscious worries over her appearance. She giggled and walked past him.

Ethan said nothing, grumpily dressing for bed.

Chapter Twenty



Those words haunted Ivy throughout the next day. Ethan grew quieter as if he was reminded of them every time he looked at her.

She was in the library the night before Robin's wedding, a book open in her lap. It was another romance novel, this time with a magical creature who tricked a beautiful maiden into marrying him so he could become human.

Ivy laughed at it. It was almost like her Duke marrying her to save his future. But she was no story maiden, and Ethan was not a monster she could transform so easily. Or had she?

Ethan was silent in the other chair, lost in his own book about politics. Ivy thought his book sounded terrifically boring.

"Ethan," she asked, "would you like to read my book with me?"

"No," he answered without glancing up. "I am reading about the creation of Parliament."

“Fascinating,” Ivy muttered. “I am reading about a magical creature who spends one fantastical night with his lady.”

Ethan’s head lifted at that. “Oh? Do go on.”

Ivy smiled at him, grateful for the return to their normal back-and-forth. The silence had been grating on her nerves for days now.

“The maiden’s fair hair tumbled down her back as the creature caressed her waist. His mouth left a trail of kisses down her breasts, and—” She paused, finding Ethan looming over her, gripping the arms of her chair.

This close, his eyes were icy shards that cut her very soul. She let herself be. Her heart fluttered, and she inhaled deeply.

“Tomorrow, we must appear to be in love,” he told her, his face close to hers.

She closed her eyes, tilting her head back, yearning for him to close the distance between them. He nuzzled her neck, his teeth nipping her skin. Ivy’s heart beat a traitorous rhythm. *Eth-an, Eth-an, Eth-an*. She willed it to stop, to know that this was all a ploy, and he did not feel the same.

But who was she trying to fool anymore? Herself?

Perhaps not at the start, but she knew that acting as though she loved him tomorrow would not be merely an act. She bit her lip, watching his attention turn to it.

“We must be airtight,” he said. “Nobody should be able to doubt us or question us. We must always remain one unit. My aunt and uncle have doubted our marriage since the... unfortunate conversation about children. They wonder what lady might not want children with a husband she loves. My inheritance would be further granted to me if I had an heir to pass it down to, and they know that I’m aware of that, so they would question why I would not wish to see it happen.”

Ivy blushed a deep crimson with shame.

“So, tomorrow, we shall play our roles. Husband and wife, deeply in love.”

She gazed at him.

What if it is not a role for me anymore?

She wished to ask that question but held her tongue.

Ethan smirked at her. “Now, about this creature and his penchant for his lady’s assets?”

Ivy forced a light laugh and picked up her book again. Together, they read it, and she did indeed stumble through the vulgar language until Ethan teased her, his lips at her ear, whispering the words in a sultry voice, making her squeal and giggle.

They remained awake until the candles burned out as if they did not want to break the spell they were willingly under.



The next morning, Ivy dressed for the wedding in a pale lilac gown, and when Ethan met her outside the castle, he wore a lilac cravat to match. She giggled, fixing it for him, smoothing the silk down. She let her fingers linger there, tracing the shape of his throat, up his strong, masculine jaw, and over his mouth.

Keeping her gaze, Ethan kissed the tip of her finger and smiled. “Shall we?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

Ethan had won the challenge. She could no longer deny it.

Her only question now was, had she *also* won it? Did he love her, too? The doubt broke her heart into pieces as they climbed into their carriage.

The snowy roads slowed their journey down, but the horses surged on, taking them to the chapel where Robin Cruz was due to be married within the hour.

Ethan fiddled with the sleeves of his jacket. As Robin’s best man, he wanted to be at his best for him. Ivy slipped her hand into his to comfort him. He squeezed her hand affectionately.

“Ethan,” Ivy murmured when the chapel was in sight. “I have something to tell you.”

“Yes, Ivy?”

He looked at her like he knew. He looked at her like he *wanted* to hear her confession. Desperation pinched his brows and tightened his mouth.

“What is it?”

“I...” Ivy inhaled deeply. “I wish to tell you that you have won our challenge.”

Tears sprung in her eyes. Why did it feel like she was having her heart broken? Ethan had told her there would be no love in their marriage. Yet, he had treated her fondly, with attention and affection, all these weeks. Did he truly not feel for her?

He was scared of being abandoned and unloved due to his father’s treatment, but if Ivy was offering her love to him on a silver platter, would he throw it away?

“I wish to tell you that I love you... This whole time, I was falling in love with you.”

The horses pulled up to the chapel. Ivy waited for Ethan’s response but was distracted by a streak of black curls. Ethan’s mouth closed as Celia rushed up to their carriage, practically tugging Ivy out. She shot him a panicked glance but was also relieved.

Had her sister just saved her from rejection or sabotaged a confession?

“Ivy!” Celia cried. “Oh, *Ivy*. It is terrible!” She held her sister’s hands in hers as Ethan exited the carriage and went about searching for his cousin.

Ivy’s heart fell to the ground beneath her.

“What is it, Sister?” Ivy asked, concerned. She forced herself to focus on Celia at that moment, unable to do anything about Ethan’s reaction just yet.

“It is my mother!” Celia exclaimed. “I have always feared she would try to sabotage your marriage, and she has!”

“What?” Ivy cried. “Whatever do you mean?”

“His Grace has always harbored a secret but never told you what it was—”

“Oh, but the other night—”

“And my mother has discovered it,” Celia interrupted.

“Then I shall seek her out and discuss this with her,” Ivy said. “Ethan and I shall go together.”

But when she looked for her husband, she could not spot him or the Baroness. All she saw were the guests outside being ushered into the chapel, and she had no choice but to enter with Celia. Inside, she was not allowed to sit with Ethan, as he remained at Robin's side.

As the guests sat down and Robin stood at the aisle, Ethan to his right, Ivy caught a hint of deep burgundy. She turned to find the Baroness stalking down the aisle, toward her in a rich, expensive gown of red velvet. The Baroness was holding a letter in her hands.

Ivy watched her approach, the dread closing up her throat.

"Here," the Baroness spat, dropping the letter into Ivy's lap. "You think you are better than me as the wife of a duke? See where that gets you. Read that and find out who your husband truly is, Ivy."

Ivy clutched the letter, but she did not open it—not yet.

But the Baroness was on her path of anger and vengeance. "Celia informed me that His Grace was once friends with the modiste. I fear it goes far deeper than that, Ivy. I will give you this one chance to read the letter and return home with me this afternoon. We will arrange for your belongings to be sold off, to keep you. You can come *home*."

The Baroness said it with such possessiveness and malice that Ivy flinched. For months, she had blissfully forgotten the wounds her stepmother could inflict. But now, they all reopened, and Ivy fell prey to her nastiness.

“The modiste’s sister, Lily, used to work for His Grace because he took pity on her. However, I fear that his employing her was not for pity’s sake only. It appears that His Grace was trying to win her affections.” The Baroness snatched up the letter.

“What do you mean?” Ivy asked, perplexed.

She ripped the letter from the Baroness’s hand and opened it. The seal had already been broken, but it was, indeed, the Duke’s handwriting. However, even worse, the date was *after* their wedding.

Dearest Lily,

I am writing to you to confess my truest feelings... My affections for you remain the same...

Please, do not forsake me, Lily. I am to marry, yes, but that does not mean I shall be taken away from you. I care about you greatly and will always want the best for you...

I have the deepest love for you...

Yours, Ethan.

Ivy read the letter, her chest heavy and her heart aching. She lifted her gaze to Ethan, who stood watching as if he had heard the whole exchange. His eyes were wide, falling on the letter as if he recognized his handwriting.

“Infidelity,” the Baroness hissed. “Are these not grounds to part from His Grace, Ivy? Return home.”

But Ivy could not hear anything aside from the whooshing in her ears. Oh, how foolish she was. Only minutes ago, she had confessed her love to Ethan after letting him play her like a fool. She was humiliated. All this time, she had been angry with him, knowing he wished for other women.

He had never wanted a wife, and he had warned her, had he not? She should not hope to find love in their marriage.

Now she knew why. Because he loved another woman already. He had said it himself. He had only married Ivy out of duty, nothing more. So much of his cruelty to her made sense now. Even that day at the modiste’s... Perhaps Alice had warned her off the Duke because *she* knew her sister had him and might risk losing him to his marriage with her.

Tears rolled down Ivy’s cheeks, and she felt quite ill suddenly. Abruptly, Ivy stood up, clutching the letter. Celia had been right. Her stepmother was still trying to sabotage her marriage.

“Why could you not just let me be happy?” Ivy cried to the Baroness, aware she was now making a scene, but she did not care. She sobbed, choking on her tears. “You ruined my childhood. Was it not enough? Did you need to ruin my marriage, too?”

She whirled around to face the Duke. “And *you!* You should be ashamed of yourself. How *dare* you.” Her voice lowered, and she pressed a hand to her mouth, holding the letter still.

Ethan's face had paled, wondering what exactly she read.

"Ivy," Celia whispered, reaching for her, but Ivy pulled away.

No. No, she would not let anyone comfort her at that moment. Her husband had played her like an instrument. Had shown her touches she had only dreamed of. Had talked to her like she mattered. Had given her a home and a life and showed her a version of love she had wished for.

Now, everything made sense with awful clarity. Why he would not touch her, why he had refused to go to the opera with her at first. Perhaps he wished to take Alice instead!

Ivy turned on her heel and pushed past the Baroness, running down the aisle, ignoring both Celia's and Ethan's cries. There was a mass of carriages waiting outside, but she spotted Catalani immediately and ran toward their carriage. She heard footsteps behind her, but she lifted the skirt of her gown and ran faster.

Ivy could not stop reading those lines in her mind, being reminded that not once had she ever been enough for Ethan Williams. Outside, as the driver prepared the carriage, to her dismay, she screamed and kicked at the wheel.

"Ivy, you will hurt yourself!" Ethan cried, but before he could get to her, she scooped up a ball of snow and hurled it at him. It flew past his shoulder, hitting the chapel wall.

Ethan looked at it, and Ivy yelled, "You *awful, awful* beast! I did not think of you as a monster, but you *are!* You stupidly

awful, *handsome* beast. Was I not enough? Were your breeches too loose, husband, that you could not *help* but seek the comfort of another woman while I wandered around your castle alone?"

Her voice rose with hysteria as she hurled another heap of snow at him. This time, it hit him, spraying over his white hair and shoulders. He was stunned, blinking at her.

"I told you I loved you! Well, perhaps I lied, too. Perhaps we *both did!*"

Ethan followed her as she marched back to their carriage. "Ivy, your hysterics are disrupting my cousin's wedding."

"Hysterics!" she snapped. "I am *so* sorry that my own husband's infidelity is ruining the Marquess's wedding! I hope *he* treats his wife better than you have treated me. Have a lonely, lonely life, Your Grace."

The footman opened the carriage door for her, and she rushed inside, tripping on the step as she did. Her shoe slipped, and she almost muttered a filthy curse that she had learned from her books. She left her shoe and let out a strangled cry as she collapsed in the carriage and let her tears come in a fit of wails.

Ethan, recovered from the snow attack, rushed up to the carriage, but Ivy had already ordered the driver to take off. She would pack her bags with Marissa's help. She would make a plan to leave on a nighttime ship to France. Her mother's sister lived there, and she would beg her for refuge while she figured out her next move.

What about her marriage to the Duke? What about *anything*?

The carriage thundered down the road, getting further away from the chapel. Ivy leaned out of the carriage window to see Ethan chasing after her in the snow.

“Ivy! Ivy, stop the carriage! I can explain!”

His voice barely carried with the blizzard around them. He kept shouting the same plea to her, even when his shoe slipped on the icy snow and he tumbled down, scraping his hands on the ground to catch himself. He swore and hastened.

The carriage rolled down a country lane toward the town center, and Ethan still sprinted after it, calling her name.

“Stop this instance!” he called.

Ivy took off her other shoe and threw it at Ethan through the window. She watched with great satisfaction as it smacked him in the chest and fell to the ground. She hoped it would be ruined, for she had purchased it with his money. Ethan stood panting, watching, as the carriage disappeared around the corner.

When Ivy could no longer see him, she slumped against the bench.

It was only minutes later, as Ivy sobbed her anguish into the carriage, broken only by the occasional question from the

driver if she was quite all right, that she felt the rumble and sway of the carriage. There was a great bump, and she was knocked out of her seat.

“Your Grace, it appears the carriage wheel has gotten stuck in the snow. Never fear, I have sent the footman to get help.”

Ivy got out of the carriage and collapsed on the side of the road in a heap of tears.

Chapter Twenty-One



Ivy did not know how long she sat shivering in the snow, covered only by the driver's jacket that she had not even wanted to take, when footsteps appeared in her vision.

Black boots crushed the snow beneath thick heels, and they tapped impatiently on the cobbled street.

"Apologies, but you are simply the saddest sight I have ever seen."

A voice that she recognized had her looking up.

The winter sun glared down on a woman who stood with her hands on her hips. It was the modiste. The very woman whose sister Ethan had been seeing behind Ivy's back.

"Sorry, I was near the chapel and saw you fleeing the Duke. I overheard snatches of the commotion and followed you out here. Your carriage didn't quite make it very far."

"I do not wish to talk to you or your family," Ivy muttered miserably. "I would like to be left alone."

“Out here in the snow, while your driver freezes to death because you must take his jacket? My shop is warmer and empty. Come, warm up, and tell me your troubles.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Ivy only shot the modiste a glare. As if she did not know!

But a shiver wracked through Ivy. Around them were only snowy white lanes, and there was no sign of her returning footman. Even the driver sat inside the carriage at her insistence, but she remained out in the cold, letting her dress become wet with the snow.

“Please, Ivy,” the modiste said. “I consider us friends, and your friend would like to help you. A woman crying should never be without someone to confide in.”

That only made Ivy cry harder until the modiste helped her up. Ivy returned the jacket to the driver, and he thanked her, putting it on immediately. The modiste led her on the short walk to town and into her shop. But Ivy’s feet were cold and wet, and she very much regretted throwing her shoes at Ethan in her fit of anger.

The warmth enveloped Ivy in an embrace immediately.

“This way,” Alice instructed, leading her to a back room where a tea set steamed away, and then sat by a small, stoked fire.

The room was small, smaller than the kitchen in Icebrooke Castle, but it was cozy and warm. Ivy fell into one of the armchairs by the fire.

“Let me find you something to change into,” Alice said. “Something warmer.”

She disappeared for several minutes and returned with a thick, woolen winter dress and a shawl. It was still a dressy garment but far warmer than the thin, beautiful gown Ivy was wearing, which was soaked along the hem and the back.

“Thank you,” Ivy murmured, grateful.

“I shall visit the cake shop across the road. Do you like lemon cake? I believe that is the remedy for tears, is it not?”

Ivy sniffled and nodded, feeling sorry for herself. As she took off her gown, she folded it over a wire across the fire and wondered if the modiste used it to dye fabric and let it dry.

Ivy hurriedly put on the warmer dress and waited for the modiste to return. When she did, it was with two big, boxed-up slabs of lemon cake. She let Ivy pour them a cup of tea each.

Together, they sat by the fire, and the redness eventually faded from Ivy's cheeks. Ivy shivered, but the shudders wracking her body were subsiding. They ate their lemon cake in silence.

Soon, when the first cup of tea was empty and it was refilled, Ivy murmured, "I found out that my husband has been seeing another woman behind my back."

Alice's face crumpled in sympathy. "Oh, Ivy."

"And I have reason to believe it is your sister."

At that, Alice's face became a picture of pure shock.

Ah, so, she did not know either.

"I am sure your sister is beautiful," Ivy muttered, feeling quite sorry for herself still. "But she has played a part in my heartache, so please excuse my earlier hostility."

"Ivy, I do not wish to call you a liar, but I do not understand how my sister can be having an affair with the Duke of Icebrooke when she is living in the countryside almost an hour away. Have you... noticed the Duke's carriage missing for long periods of time? I simply do not understand. I have not seen my sister in quite some time."

"I have the letter that he wrote to her," Ivy said, frustrated. "It is addressed to Lily. That is your sister, is it not? The one who was in his employ?"

“Yes, that is her, but... Ivy, there is no way he could be having an affair with her. She was a seamstress-in-training only. She took after me, but he employed her as a favor to my family, to help us earn a better living.”

“And they grew intimate during her employment?” Ivy pressed, not understanding why the modiste was rejecting her claims when she had the letter right in her hands.

“He sent Lily to live in the countryside with his great-aunt some months ago. We received a letter from him saying he had chosen to do it due to his relative needing a seamstress and company, and he found Lily to be perfect for the job. It would pay her well, and she could send money to us, too.

“I have always harbored much anger for the Duke over it. She was only thirteen when she left us. However, I was not angry with him for sending her away. I am endlessly proud of her—please, do not misunderstand me. I am angry at him because he did not give us time to bid her goodbye. Icebrooke Castle is a mere twenty-minute ride away, and he could not spare us that time to bid each other farewell.

“That simply breaks my heart, Ivy. But I do not believe, for one moment, that my sister would fall in love with His Grace and not tell me. Nor would she accept leaving him, if that was the case. And I have no reason to believe that he would visit her in the countryside.”

Alice inhaled deeply and reached for Ivy’s hand. “And I have seen the way he looks at you when you are not looking at him. He is protective of you, when he has cared little about people. He wishes to be liked, but his behavior can often see him receiving the complete opposite reaction. I feel for him, but I have seen what you inspire in his eyes. Love, Ivy. I suspect

that you may have finally taught the cold Duke of Icebrooke how to love.”

That idea was preposterous! Ivy felt quite sure of the situation and looked at the letter once again. Was it possible... that she was being misled?

“May I see that letter?” Alice asked.

“Of course.”

Ivy handed her the letter, and Alice disappeared but then returned moments later with another piece of paper.

“See, compare the two handwritings. It is stellar work to have imitated his handwriting, but this is the letter the Duke wrote to me regarding your wedding dress. Look at the curls of some of his letters. Look at how he signs his name. There is something quite different about it. At first glance, it is convincing, but, Ivy, I do not believe that the Duke wrote this.”

Ivy looked between the two letters, and she found Alice to have a very strong point.

“Do you know anyone who might be out to hurt you or the Duke?”

All this time, Celia had tried to warn Ivy of her mother’s attempts to sabotage her marriage. That she was relentless and

even Ivy's departure from Hawkes Estate proved not enough to keep her safe from the Baroness's clutches.

Was it possible that the Baroness had forged this letter, thus fabricating an affair?

"Let me show you my sister," Alice offered.

Together, they stood up, and Alice went to the desk in the corner of the room, where she kept ledgers and receipts. But on the wall was a portrait of two girls, both small and similar in height, one noticeably older than the other.

"That is Lily." Alice pointed to the girl on the left. "And that is me." She then gestured to the one on the right. "We are quite different, I suppose. There are eleven years between us, and we have two brothers. We grew up here, and while I got my love of seamstressing from my aunt, Lily got it from me. This was my aunt's shop, once upon a time. Lily and I used to spend hours in here as little girls, trying on dresses that were too big for us."

Ivy smiled as she looked at the picture of a young Lily and Alice. She felt quite unreasonable now if the Duke's letter truly turned out to be fake. Oh, how she had thrown snow at him—oh, her shoes! Both of them, forgotten somewhere in the snow. Selfishly, she hoped Ethan had picked them up.

"The Duke asked my sister to continue her training in Icebrooke Castle," Alice continued. "My sister was weary, of course, but she visited and told me of befriending the cook, and the maid, Marissa. She seemed happy there. I have received a few letters from her since arriving in the

countryside. She says that His Grace's great-aunt treats her very kindly and she gets to ride horses and eat scones for breakfast. She has a good life, but I do wish I had been able to say goodbye."

She was wistful, but they were suddenly interrupted by a voice in the doorway.

"And I do wish I had granted you that, and will forever regret it, my friend."

Ivy spun around at Ethan's voice. He arrived covered in snow, his shoulders and chest heaving with exertion. His nose and cheeks were flushed pink, and she almost felt quite wretched for leaving him behind.

"Ivy, my wife," he murmured, coming up to her. Alice bowed her head and excused herself quietly. "I would beg your patience to hear me out. Ivy, I would never be unfaithful to you. I am concerned about this letter. It confuses me, and I do not know who would forge something so awful to lie about my intentions. I do not love another woman."

It was then that Ivy noticed the pair of slippers in his hand. Her discarded shoes. He kneeled before her, took her ankles in his hands, and unlaced the boots Alice had let her borrow, slipping them off. Then, his fingertips, light as a feather, held her feet gently as he helped her slip into her shoes from the wedding. He looked up at her, devastatingly handsome as ever, and her heart ached.

It was with those beautiful eyes on her that he confessed, "I love you, Ivy." Slowly, he stood up and held her face between

his hands, keeping her gaze on him. “I believe we have both won our challenge. All these weeks—these *months*—I have been falling in love with you, even as I fought against it so desperately. I had a harsh upbringing, Ivy, and I have let my past consume a future I refused to even picture. But I am ready, my darling. I am ready for you and for this love. I have not written to another lady, nor have I seen anyone else, nor do I wish to. I want you and only you, Ivy.”

His speech tumbled out of his mouth, leaving him breathless as he held her face. Then, she kissed him, deep and aching, because she had truly thought her marriage was over. That all her fears were valid. But there he was, telling her he loved her, *kissing* her.

He pressed his forehead against hers. “Although you must stop having me chase you, Ivy. It is getting rather exhausting.”

She giggled and dried the remainder of her tears with the back of her hand. “I apologize for my accusations,” she said. “And for my... reaction.”

“Do you believe me, Ivy?”

Ivy did not trust easily, even if she loved to see the good side of people. But she found herself looking into his eyes and realized that, yes, she did believe him.

“Yes.”

“May I see the letter?”

She reached for the letter hurriedly, bringing both his letter to the modiste and the letter to Lily. He inspected the latter. “I can write out this letter to you to show you how my handwriting might look.”

Ivy shook her head. “There is no need.”

“I truly am sorry,” Ethan said mournfully. “I did not think the Baroness would be so... despicable to go to such lengths, but I should have known.”

“I should have suspected her foul play from the start,” Ivy admitted. “She has been fraudulent with this, and she must pay for her wrongdoings.”

“I agree.” Ethan nodded. “But first, wife, allow me to kiss the woman I love again.”

And he did, and she opened up for him with the tenderness of knowing that he loved her. He truly, truly did.

When Ivy pulled away, she could not contain her smile. “I love you, too, Ethan. Forgive me for everything I have ever said in moments of anger—accusing you or belittling you.”

“Let us start afresh, Ivy. Husband and wife, no more games.”

“I agree.” Ivy giggled, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and leaning into him.

Epilogue

With the carriage dug out of the snow, Ivy and Ethan climbed back inside and were driven back to the chapel. Together, they held hands, the forged letter in Ethan's hand and the portrait of the modiste and her sister in Ivy's hand.

Ethan's cousin looked confused and dismayed at the interruption to his wedding once again. Ivy marched right up to the Baroness, angry at her attempts to sabotage her marriage and happiness.

The priest halted his reading, and Ivy almost felt bad for doing this to the Marquess twice now, but Ethan clearly did not. They approached the Baroness, who remained seated, looking nonchalant at their arrival.

"I see you have forgiven your lying, treacherous husband," the Baroness scoffed.

Ivy, feeling bold, stood up to her. "He is nothing of what you just said, but even if he was, at least my husband is *here*."

The Baroness stood up, her face stony, angry at Ivy. "What did you say to me, girl? Do not forget that I raised you."

"You treated me no better than a maid! You diminished my worth to how fast I could cook your breakfast. I was no daughter to you." Ivy paused. "And you are no mother to me. You and my father deserve each other."

Although it hurt her to talk so badly about her father, Ivy tried not to take it back or feel ashamed.

“Cousin, I apologize for the interruption, but it appears that Lady Hawkes has tried to ruin my marriage by forging a letter to create discord between my wife and me.”

“Is this true, Lady Hawkes?” the Marquess of Ashford asked.

Ethan’s aunt and uncle rose to look at the commotion.

“What is this I hear about someone trying to ruin my nephew’s marriage?” Johannes snapped.

Ethan went over to him to hand him the letters and explain everything. “Lady Hawkes has forged a letter in my penmanship, making me out to be an adulterer. As if I would be disloyal to my wife with a thirteen-year-old seamstress!”

There were a few gasps and murmurs that went around the church.

Ivy held the portrait up for those closest to see. “This is Alice Chesternut, whom you all know rather well, as I am sure she has dressed all the lovely ladies here today. But this younger girl is her sister. They are eleven years apart, and Lily has not yet even reached her fourteenth birthday. The Baroness has attempted to smear my husband’s character and must face the consequences!”

“I agree!” Johannes boomed. “Lady Hawkes, what reason do you possibly have to attempt to spread such harmful and baseless allegations?”

The Baroness’s face was bone-white as the whole congregation turned to look at her. She edged into the aisle, spinning around to look at people, as if to assert her innocence.

Then, her eyes landed on Ivy, and her face turned furious. “You *horrible*, little girl!” she growled, charging down the aisle toward Ivy, who stepped back into Ethan’s embrace.

Ivy cringed as the Baroness raised her hand.

But it was Ethan who caught her wrist and held her away from Ivy. “Lady Hawkes, I would ask you to leave before you humiliate your youngest daughter and harm her prospects even more than you already have.”

“You *destroyed* my life, Ivy!” The Baroness seethed. “You destroyed Celia’s life, *drove* your father to drinking. He was not like this when I met him, but you caused him so much distress and damage! I hope you two are unhappy together, I truly do. You wretched girl. Ungrateful, after everything I did for you!”

“The only thing you ever did was take money to replace me,” Ivy snapped. “My father began drinking after my mother passed away, and because you only wanted him for the money he had at the time. He drank himself into such a stupor daily that he did not even notice the mistreatment of his own daughter! I am *done* with you, Lady Hawkes. You are causing more embarrassment to my dear sister with your tantrum, and we would like to see you leave *immediately*.”

Someone had already called the constables to escort the Baroness off the chapel grounds. However, Ethan was on the path to punishing her himself.

“Sandra Fester,” he called. “For your mistreatment, I will see that you are banished from every social gathering for the next two years. You shall not attend balls, galas, or outings. You shall see the life of a social recluse, for everything you have put your daughter through. What little fortune you have shall be taken away, and you will be forced to pay a fine. However, if you cannot afford it, we shall see to it that you have a job.”

The Baroness sneered at him. “I am a baroness and a lady of the ton. I do not *work*.”

“You shall if you are to have money,” Ethan answered smoothly. “It is your decision.”

“Your Grace, you cannot do—”

“For everything you put my wife through, for the shame and hurt you have tried to cause today, you shall find that I can and I very much *wish* to. And if I could bring more pain upon you, Lady Hawkes, believe that I would.”

The Baroness stared around the chapel, dumbstruck. The constables soon arrived to take her away, where she would

spend some time in the cells until she would likely await her trial to explain herself and receive a sentence.

Ethan watched her be taken away as he remained at Ivy's side protectively. His uncle approached him and chuckled. "Oh, my boy, you do have such an amusing way when you wish."

Ethan laughed, and half the chapel was stricken with the noise.

Robin clapped him on the back. "Bravo. Well done for you, Cousin! Now, do kindly escort yourself back to your seat. I *would* like to marry my betrothed, as you did. We do not all want weddings with drama."

Ethan laughed, and Ivy giggled along with them as he led them to their seats. Celia looked torn on whether to stay or follow her mother's screams as she was forcefully removed from the chapel.

In the end, Ivy looped her arm through her sister's. "You must come live with us," she whispered. "I should like to see you as far away from that hateful woman as you possibly can be. Ethan shall find you a good husband."

"Ethan shall do no such thing," Ethan countered, smiling. "Ethan shall make up the guest room, but that is his duty served."

"I seem to remember that your duty is not your only motivator. This is your sister-in-law, Ethan!"

"And she is entitled to a guest room when she chooses." Ethan glanced at Celia and grinned.

"I shall take my chances with the matchmaker, perhaps," Celia mused aloud. "If I do not meet a fine gentleman at the spring ball, then I shall ask her to set me up with someone. She chose rather well for you, Your Grace."

"Do you think so? I think it was a poor choice," Ethan teased. "My wife is ghastly. Do you know how she eats her eggs, Celia?"

Celia actually paused then, and Ivy found it quite sad that her sister did not know because she had never been permitted to dine with them.

“No, I do not,” Celia replied.

“She puts pepper on them. Pepper! Awful.”

Ivy only wished to kiss her husband, elated by the turn of events, and watched as the Marquess of Ashford married his betrothed and the two left the chapel while she, Ethan, and the rest of the guests tossed dried petals over them upon their exit.

After the wedding, they headed to Keele Estate for the wedding breakfast, and Ivy found herself once again mingling with Society and felt like she belonged.



That night, Ethan and Ivy returned to Icebrooke Castle, and Ivy intended to show her husband just how much she loved him. As they walked down the hallways, Ethan could not keep his hands off her.

She had flirted with him relentlessly through the carriage ride home, even going so far as to kiss him, and had riled him up enough that there was that dark look creeping into his eyes.

Ethan paused halfway down the hallway and scooped her up, her thighs draped over his arm, his other one supporting her back as he carried her to his bedroom, which was slowly becoming theirs

“You are a vision,” Ethan murmured, setting her down before the bed.

He stepped back from her and took off his coat. Ivy’s nerves rose in her stomach. This was it. This was the *night*. The very night she had feared and yearned for. Her eyes raked over him, this handsome Duke. The cold-hearted rake she had first met became her husband and helped her and saved her. A man who shared her love of the arts, music, and laughter. He had given her a life here that she had not expected.

Least of all, she had expected love with the Duke of Icebrooke. And now, she was being given the world, and she did not entirely know what to do with it.

“And you are handsome,” she answered, taking him in completely.

Her hands trailed up his chest, scratching her nails over his broad shoulders through his thin dress shirt. She shivered and wished to press closer against him, but he kept her at arm’s length.

“Ivy, I cannot go another night without making love to you,” Ethan murmured, cupping her face with one palm. With the other, he drew a pattern over the side of her waist.

He found the laces on the back of her dress and began undoing them, slowly.

Ivy shivered at the thought of them both baring themselves to each other fully. “Take me,” she whispered. “I was only ever yours.”

Ethan surged against her, claiming her mouth deeply with his. His hands could not stop tracing patterns up every new inch of skin he bared. “You are *enchanting*, Ivy. I have thought that since the day you turned up to the winter ball so late.”

She laughed into their kiss. “Liar. You wanted to send me away, did you not?”

“Perhaps.” He laughed with her. “But does that not prove me a changed man?”

He kissed her breathless then, halting every thought she had. His hands held her hips, and he wedged a leg between hers. Ivy let out a soft noise at the pressure, tipping her head back in pleasure. He caught the back of her head and brought his lips to her neck. He pressed gentle, attentive kisses down the column of her pale throat, humming into her skin while his hands tore her laces open and loosened her dress.

Ivy, barely even getting used to touch, to begin with, did not know what to do when her dress pooled around her feet. Ethan groaned when he stepped back, cupping her breasts, and kissing down the center of her chest, to her navel, and beyond. He fell to his knees, groaning into the plushness of her thighs. His eyes flicked up to hers, and he grinned as he lowered his face to her folds.

Ivy's knees weakened as he made contact, and she nearly crumpled into his arms. She held herself up by their bedframe, braced herself on it, and felt gloriously bare and confident in her skin as he tasted her as if she was as fine as the port at the wedding breakfast that day.

"Ivy," he groaned, his tongue exploring new depths of her that she did not know were possible.

Pleasure wracked through her body, and although she felt positively debauched, she knew she was now deserving of his attention. He lavished her with it, making sure no part of her remained untouched.

Ethan picked her up and laid her down gently on their bed, and she let herself fall prettily, her legs parting for him. Her chest rose and fell with deep, heavy breaths as he leaned back to take off his shirt and waistcoat, but she almost missed the fine look. He unlaced his breeches, and she swallowed at the sight of the length she had only held twice.

She did not understand how it might fit.

Ethan laughed when he saw her look. "I will take care of you, Ivy," he promised, planting kisses and gentle nips on her chest.

Her nipples stiffened, and he paid attention to them for a long while. It was only when he stopped and she came back to herself from the high of pleasure that she realized she had been rolling her hips against his thighs as if his previous touches these last weeks had awakened a terribly demanding need inside her.

"Touch me," she begged.

Ethan grinned as he licked around her breast. "I *am* touching you, darling."

A high-pitched whine escaped Ivy, a silent plea for *more*, for less, because she was overwhelmed and excited and nervous, and she did not know how to handle any of it. She giggled, and Ethan kissed the sound right out of her mouth, closing his eyes as if the mere sound could *taste* delicious.

His length was hard against her hip, and she reached for where his breeches hung open. "Can I touch you here again?"

Ethan chuckled darkly. “Ivy, you have permission to touch me *anywhere*.”

And so she did. She found herself on top of him, her thighs on either side of his hips. His length pressed against the material of his breeches, and she moved down his body to pull it free and wrap her fingers around it.

He was thick and long—*impressive*, if she could say it without knowing what others looked like. Ivy shivered as she held his hot length and imagined it pushing into her the way his fingers had.

“We do not have to do this,” Ethan whispered. “I can please you in other ways if you are concerned.”

“I would like to do it,” Ivy assured him. “I am merely... nervous. I do not think it shall fit.”

Ethan grinned. “Then we shall try to make it.”

Ivy’s eyelashes fluttered at the sure tone of his voice. She hooked one leg over his thigh, and when he pressed his hand between her legs, she let him prepare her the way he had that very first time. Even the first finger he slid into her with the utmost care felt like too much. He laughed as if knowing her thoughts.

“Breathe,” he whispered. “Here, let me...”

He flipped them over, so her back was pressed into the bedsheets. He ran his free hand through her hair, and with the other, he gently worked her open until she was gasping and aching for him, her hips rising to meet his palm as he slid his fingers in and out of her.

“Ethan,” she moaned.

“Yes, my love?”

And that term of endearment—that weight he put into calling her that—caused a wonderful, tightening sensation between her legs, and, where he lay next to her, she felt his length twitch. She jumped, giggling at the movement.

“I wish to touch you like the most delicate flower,” Ethan murmured between kisses. “I wish to feast on you daily like

the most decadent meal. You intoxicate me, Ivy, and I have been a fool to say otherwise and deny myself *this*. You. Like this, my beautiful wife.”

He leaned over her, and she had the brief knowledge that he was freeing his length from his breeches. He guided her hand to his length, so she could feel exactly when he came closer to where his other hand slipped out of her core.

“Are you sure?” he asked again. “We can wait—”

But Ivy was desperate now, pleasure building in her sternum, mounting between her legs, and she could scarcely have a clear thought, let alone walk away from this.

“Ethan, if you make me wait one moment longer, I fear I might cry.”

“Ivy, you are wonderful,” he told her, kissing her deeply.

As he distracted her with his rich kisses, the tip of his length brushed between her legs, against her slickness. Ivy gasped at the feel of it there, not even entering her yet. She held her breath, but Ethan rubbed comforting circles on her hip.

“Breathe, darling,” he reminded her.

She did. And as she exhaled, he finally entered her.

Ivy cried out at the intrusion, and it was far more intense than when he had first touched her that day, weeks ago. She clung to him, her arms wrapping around his shoulders, as he slowly pushed into her. She parted her legs further, guided by his knowing hands, and he pressed his forehead against hers.

“Breathe, Ivy,” he kept murmuring to her, drawing circles on her chest with one finger as a reminder.

He smoothed a palm down her navel and pressed there. She imagined that was where his length might stop if she could see, and that felt utterly impossible.

But when she looked down, his hips were slowly inching toward hers, and she was getting fuller by the second, her breaths coming in short, choppy gasps. He was hot and hard inside her, nothing like his touches had been, and she did not

know what to do except scratch his skin with her nails, desperate for something to ground herself with.

It was pleasure in the most intense of ways. Ivy's little *Oh, Ethan, ah* came out in gasps, and she let out a long moan, alongside his own as his hips were flush against hers. He dropped his head into the space between her shoulder and neck and breathed heavily.

"Heavens, Ivy," he moaned. "You are... This is—" He broke off, not able to finish his sentence, and she did not think she had ever seen him at a loss for words like this.

She was wet and heavy with him between her legs, and she felt her walls flutter around his length. He did not move—whether because he feared for her or he should find it too pleasurable, too, she did not know. But for a blissful second, he remained that way, just letting them enjoy being joined.

"Are you okay, darling?" Ethan murmured, kissing her shoulder, and moving across the slope of her neck.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, dampening the white hair that fell over his forehead. His broad, muscled back was tight beneath her hands.

"I am quite well," Ivy managed. "Are you?"

"I am perfect," he groaned. "Please, tell me when I can move."

"Move?"

"We do not stay joined like this forever, Ivy," he teased. "Surely you read that in your books."

She envisioned it then. The rough movements that she had indeed read about, speed and passion colliding to bring the couple to a quick, high finish. But did it have to be rushed?

"Are you able to go slow? I do not want this to be over quickly."

"Oh, Ivy. I do not ever wish anything with you to be over quickly. I want to take my time indulging in you."

Inside her, his length jerked, and she moaned in surprise. Then, Ethan was sliding out of her, and she cried out, reaching

for him, wanting to keep him inside her. Her legs were wrapped around his waist.

“I am merely providing more stimulation,” he assured her. “Like I did that first day.”

She thought of that day, the steady thrusting, and the completion he brought her to with just that rhythmic pattern. She nodded.

Ethan slid out a few more inches before pushing back in ever so slowly. Ivy’s chest heaved as she breathed. And he did it again, over and over, finding a pace that had them both moaning freely.

He kissed her, devouring her mouth with his own, as he thrust in and out of her. She was so wet, and his movements only made it messier, but she did not mind. Not when he held her breasts in one of his hands and caressed and fondled them as his hips rocked into hers. Not when he sped up and kissed away her sounds of pleasure.

And he did not mind when her pleasure seemed to rise to an unbearable high and she tangled her fingers in his white hair, tugging harshly.

“Ethan—Ethan, *Ethan*,” she chanted.

He kissed her jaw softly. “I know, my love. I know. Trust me, Ivy.”

And she did. She trusted him—this Duke who had bewitched her, who had told her not to hope for love—wholeheartedly. Because they had found love in this dutiful marriage, and now they were *choosing* each other. Not out of honor or obligation. Not as an escape or a way out.

Ethan chose Ivy.

Ivy chose Ethan.

How it had finally become so simple.

Her pleasure built between her legs, and she tightened her legs around his waist.

“More,” she gasped, arching into him.

So, Ethan hastened his pace, and his thrusts became more erratic, his lips parting as he groaned with the pleasure they shared, and all Ivy could think of was how glorious this was and how it had taken them so long to finally get to that place.

“Ivy, I—” Ethan bit out, but she nodded, holding him close to her.

She was already there, flying—*soaring*—over that edge, into her pleasure. And he followed soon after, his moans pouring into her mouth as his hips jerked and ground against her in smoother circles, wringing out the last of their pleasure.

Panting, Ethan slumped next to her, pulling out. He had... He had finished inside her. Ivy turned on her side, breathing heavily but smiling, half laughing, nonetheless. That was how children were made, she knew, and for him to have done that meant he acknowledged that choice.

She ran her palm over his thick bicep and wrapped her fingers around the muscle, admiring it. His length lay limp against his thigh now, but she found she already ached for more.

Ethan followed her gaze and laughed. “I fear I might not recover as quickly as you do, Ivy.”

“That day I left the parlor, after your aunt asked about children, it was not because I did not want any. It was because I could not bear the thought of wanting them and you not wanting *me*, or wanting children with me. It hurt me greatly to even consider it.”

Ethan threaded his fingers through hers. “I know.”

She smiled weakly, both thoroughly exhausted and spent.

Their future seemed bright, and their love finally felt secure.

Ivy giggled like a young girl having her dreams come true. And later, when Ethan pressed her into their bed once more and entered her swiftly, she let herself drown in the endless pleasure he gave her.

“I love you.”

The End?

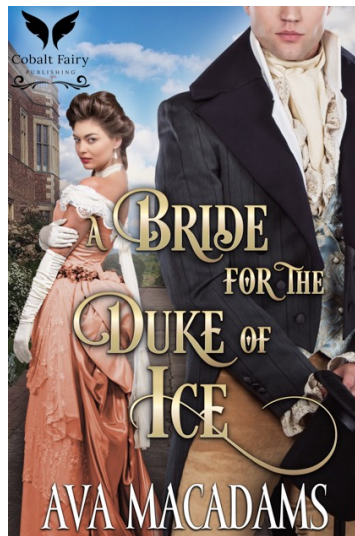
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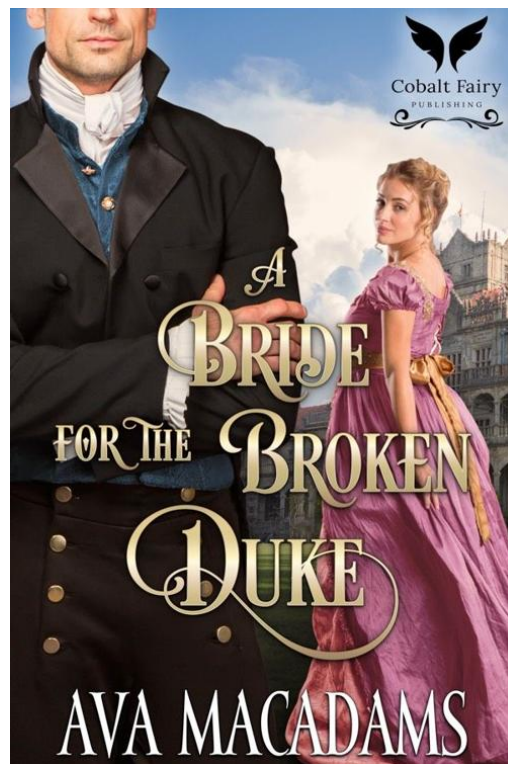
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PREVIEW: A BRIDE
FOR THE BROKEN
DUKE



Chapter One



“Well, he does appear to be fiercely... capable? So, I suppose the attraction is... to be expected,” Louisa Carter, the daughter of the Earl of Dunn, said, running her hand over her latest piece of embroidery.

“Fiercely capable?” her sister, Rose, repeated with an incredulous chuckle.

“Fiercely capable.” Louisa nodded. “It’s in his hands, I think. They look like they can build a house *and* write letters that can bring whole cities down. Not that I think he would want to build a house. God forbid that a member of the *ton* would engage in such—what did Lady Dunham call it at her last soiree?”

“Base ventures.”

“Base ventures, ahha.”

Rose chuckled. “You have been looking at my husband-to-be’s hands?”

“Only to make sure they are not murderous. Remember Lady Va—”

“Speak not of it. Speak not of her,” Rose said quickly.

“Speak not of her? What do you mean, speak not of her? She existed. She had dreams and aspirations. She had a favorite color and a favorite meal and things that she loved to do. And Lord Vale... ended that. Abbreviated her life.” Louisa looked up at her sister with a thoughtful frown.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Rose argued. “Lord Vale was never convicted.”

“He couldn’t have been convicted. Not in our society!” Louisa said spiritedly. And then, she exhaled and added, “I’m sorry, Rose. There should be no talk of uxoricide when we’re discussing your beloved Lord Arden. You will both live long and happy lives. And you shall give me several nieces and nephews to coddle, indeed!”

“Spoken like a true aspirer to old maidhood,” a third voice chimed in.

The sisters turned to Sapphira, their dearest friend. She was reclined on a chaise longue, cucumber slices on her eyes, a book on her bosom, her hands flung out, the very picture of relaxation.

“Welcome to the club, darling.”

“Refrain from encouraging her, Sapphira,” Rose chided.

Sapphira removed the cucumber slice from her left eye and said, “I have never refrained from anything that gives me joy, Rose. Nor shall I ever. You are well aware of this, my darling.”

“How does asking one’s sister for nephews and nieces to coddle qualify as... aspiration to old maidhood?” Louisa asked.

“Why, if you’re looking for nieces and nephews, you perhaps do not want children of your own. Any right-thinking person may think this logic a stretch, but we know you, Louisa. It is not a stretch. You want to tease the young men of the *ton* with that voluptuous body and those arresting eyes. You want to taunt them to damnation but never marry them.”

“I believe, Sapphira,” Louisa pointed out with a smile, “you have just described yourself.”

Sapphira sat up, put a finger to her chin, looked around dramatically, and said, “Well, yes, I do believe I may have been talking about myself. Except the eyes. Mine are a dull brown, the color of mud. Damnation and cauliflower.” She collapsed back onto the chaise longue as if dead.

Louisa laughed, but Rose sighed. “I am just very worried. Lord Arden has courted me for quite some time. I do believe he intends to propose at the ball tomorrow. Nothing must interfere with it. Every night, I wake up in a cold sweat because of the recurring dream I have—”

“The only dream I ever wake in a cold sweat from are of the forbidden variety—”

“Be quiet a moment, Sapphira,” Louisa interjected. “Rose means to express something close to her heart.”

Sapphira sighed. “Fine. Carry on, Rose. Tell us of this very *appropriate* dream that troubles you so.”

“I have a dream that some scandal envelopes us and we are unable to shake free of it and Lord Arden withdraws his affections and marries another,” Rose confessed.

Louisa dropped her embroidery, walked to her sister, sat beside her, and took both her hands. “It is but pre-wedding fears. Nothing can stop the wedding. Yours is the purest heart that I know. You are of unimpeachable character. There will be no scandal whatsoever. You will make a wonderful bride, a wonderful wife, and a wonderful mother.”

Rose smiled and squeezed her sister’s hands affectionately. “Thank you, Louisa.”

“Yes, thank you, Louisa,” Sapphira echoed. “I could not have put it better myself. I jest about a lot of things, but about your suitability for marriage, I have no doubt.”

“You make even compliments sound like insults, Sapphira,” Louisa scoffed.

“An aspersion on my person I will not take,” Sapphira returned, smiling and absently reached for the scone dish. “It is empty. Ring for more,” she said to Louisa.

“Actually, you’d best be going. This is about the time Mother comes to the garden for her afternoon siesta.”

Sapphira groaned—a most unladylike sound. “Would it be absolutely terrible if she set eyes on me? I shan’t be so

forthright, I promise. I shall be all peaches and sunshine and keep my opinions in my belly.”

Rose looked at Louisa, and Louisa looked at Rose. For that wasn't the only reason Lady Dunn did not like Sapphira.

Lady Dunn loathed her husband, and she did not hide it. If he wanted a room painted white, she would swear that no one would rest if it wasn't painted black. The very air he breathed irritated her, and she had accused him of several affairs, which, if one must be very honest, he was guilty of. The Earl of Dunn loved his daughters but not his wife, and several times, their hatred for one another had threatened to burst through in public.

“Why,” Lady Bainbridge had commented at a dinner with them, “to despise a spouse is no mortal sin. For if you do not hate the one with whom you have to live the rest of your life, who then can you hate? What is totally unacceptable is not being able to hide it in polite company.”

Lady Dunn had now somehow gotten it into her head that Lord Dunn had taken a liking to Sapphira. Sapphira was the daughter of the Duke of Wakefield, a very prominent duke, indeed. Her father was quite liberal, and she herself had grown to be so. She had no designs on marriage, and many of society's rules were relaxed for her. She spent her days painting, sculpting, reading books on science and philosophy, learning archery, and frequenting Dunn Manor. She and Louisa were both of like minds, but Louisa knew where her own privileges began and ended.

Last month, Lord Dunn had said that Sapphira's gown matched her eyes, and Lady Dunn had waited until after Sapphira had left to say, “A goat knows no standards, doesn't it? It rolls in everything, regardless how despicable, how absolutely deplorable. You descend so low as to flirt with your daughter's friend, and in your family's presence, no doubt. Have you no shame?”

He had ignored her as he was wont to do, and it had made her even madder, as it was wont to do. Lady Dunn had then

shouted at Louisa, “Take care that you do not put fire in your bosom and cause us all to be burnt!”

“That cannot really qualify as an order to stop being friends with Sapphira, can it?” Louisa had asked Rose that evening.

“Louisa—”

“I daresay it cannot. So, I shall do nothing. I shall just... reduce the possibility of Mother seeing her to near zero. Problem solved. Huzzah!”

Now, Louisa said to Sapphira, “I’m afraid keeping your opinions in your belly is the least of the things Mother would like you to do.”

Sapphira groaned and sat up. “Very well, then. You know where to find me.” She sat up, and just as quickly, her companion, Molly, who’d been sitting at the next table, stood up as well.

Louisa walked them to the door, and then she squeezed Sapphira’s hand and said, “Sapphira—”

“No, no, I do not want to hear it. You have done nothing wrong. And if you have, all will be made right by your taking the oath of singleness with me.”

Louisa smiled, and Sapphira chuckled.

Two footmen approached with a shade made of oiled silk and began to arrange it over Sapphira.

Sapphira rolled her eyes and stepped away. “Depravity and primroses, it’s a two-second walk.” She then walked to her carriage and waved at Louisa.

Louisa waved back and turned back to the house.

Truth be told, she too was worried about her sister’s wedding. She wished, above all things, that nothing would ruin it. Rose deserved to be happy. She was genuinely in love with Lord Arden. Lord Arden, on the other hand, had no feelings for Rose besides dutifulness and perhaps some affection.

It would suffice. Those were Rose’s exact words.

Tomorrow's ball would be the first one since their courtship had started. If Lord Arden proposed, the *ton* would congratulate them, celebrate with them, and assess their suitability for each other.

As rumors would have it, Lady Ravenclaw had long fancied a match between Lord Arden and her daughter, Elisabeth, the most foul-tempered young woman on this side of England. Elisabeth had taken no pains to hide her displeasure at Lord Arden and Rose's courtship. She would no doubt be at the ball to size Rose up, try to rattle her, even. Louisa would be there, by Rose's side, to make sure it did not happen. She would also have to be the middleman between their parents, to ensure that their malice did not ruin Rose's chances and, ultimately, her dreams.

She went to the garden to check on Rose and found her deep in thought. She patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Nothing will go wrong, Rose. I promise."

Just then, Lady Dunn appeared in the garden. She told them she meant to have her nap and asked, as she always did, for perfect silence.

Louisa went to her chambers and mulled over Sapphira's words. No, she had no intention of remaining single. Was she enamored of the concept of marriage? Hardly. Did she intend to marry one day? Yes, but only because she absolutely had to. She would rather be with someone who wanted to be with her because he was perfectly mad about her, not because they were bound by rings and the words said by some priest in a church. She wanted someone who would understand her completely, someone who would not see her independence as a threat but embrace it. Someone who was brilliant, witty, and adventurous, too.

"Ah, your long match list," their Aunt Georgina had once said. "You would be lucky to get a quarter of this fulfilled. People are seldom made happy by marriages, because that is not the purpose of marriage. Marriage is for continuity. Preservation. You try to get the best match and put up with him till you draw your last breath. It really is very simple, you see, Lou."

Very simple, indeed.



The next day, Louisa sat across from her mother as the carriage took them to Lord Arden's manor. Her parents never rode in the same carriage. When it was a family affair, each parent rode separately with one of the girls.

"Your father will at least try to be decorous today, do you think? This could be a most important night for his daughter. That should make any reasonable man behave himself."

"Yes, Mother," Louisa said absently.

"I am glad you took my advice concerning your ball gown. See? It brings out the spark in your eyes. They are positively glowing, my dear. Do you know, when you were born, people sneered and said, 'Blue eyes? How?' I was saved by the shape of your face, my dear. Exactly like your father's." Lady Dunn uttered the last part like it was a curse. She reached out and patted Louisa's hand, an awkward gesture, since she rarely touched anyone. "I know you are worried about your sister, Louisa. But I have a good feeling about this night. Lord Arden will propose. I feel it in my bones."

Louisa smiled dimly and looked out the window.

"Oh, good, we're here now."

The manor was lit up, and music strained from inside. It looked like quite the gathering. Louisa and Lady Dunn waited for Lord Dunn and Rose's carriage to come to a halt. They then walked in together. But not without a sneer from Lady Dunn at her husband.

Try as she might, Louisa could not relax. Her eyes were trained on Rose and Lord Arden, while they searched for Elisabeth and her mother. They were nowhere to be found.

Louisa knew she appealed to men; she'd received several propositions, both of the respectable and base sort. When she had been nine and ten, a gentleman of the *ton* had been besotted with her. He had called at Dunn Manor as often as he

could and had never ceased to praise her beauty. After his wife had died during childbirth, he had wasted no time in making his intentions known. Lord Dunn had not consented, for the man was five years older than him. Eventually, his new wife had borne him four children. Whenever Louisa saw them at events, she breathed an internal sigh of relief.

After Lord Dunn's rejection, the men of the *ton* had become somewhat cautious around her. She did not get a lot of requests for dances at social events like this, and none had expressed serious interest since. But they watched her. She could see the frank interest—and sometimes, unbridled lust—in their eyes.

It was getting a little hot, and with Elisabeth and her mother nowhere in sight, Louisa felt it was safe to steal away for some time. She made her way down the lit hallway and came, at once, to the library.

It was vast. She would never have taken Lord Arden for an avid reader. But then again, some gentlemen just kept big libraries for the fun of it. She walked down the rows and rows of books, her fingers trailing over them as she moved. The Dunn library was nothing near as grand as this. She could spend all her days here when Rose got married to Lord Arden!

She walked to the window and looked out of it. There was a whole world out there, a world she feared she might never experience. It seemed as though someone had cut out a slice of life, stuffed it in her mouth, and commanded her to be content with it. She was anything but content. She sighed and bowed her head.

“Don't move,” she suddenly heard.

She started.

Her eyes frantically searched the darkness, but otherwise, she was still. Her heart began to beat frantically in her chest. The only light in here was the light of the moon. Suppose it was a gruesome footpad? Or a murderer?

Perfect silence. She thought that perhaps she had imagined the voice. She began to back away from the window, slowly.

“Are you hard of hearing, young woman?”

Louisa stopped. The voice was less threatening this time, and it gave her the courage to say, “Show yourself.”

Was that... a chuckle?

“In due course. What are you doing here, alone?”

“I will answer no more questions until you have shown yourself.”

“Ah, a brave one. Brave and foolish. For I could have a weapon with me, waiting to strike.”

For some reason, Louisa did not feel so. He sounded in jest. But his voice was low, commanding, dangerous. She’d best be wary and leave.

“Doubtless you mean to use me to amuse yourself. I shan’t allow it. I must return to the ball.”

“Move an inch, and you’ll regret it.”

The mirth was gone. There was no trace of humor or teasing in his voice. Louisa refused to be cowed. “I do not take directions from voices in the shadows of libraries, good sir. I shall leave you now.”

She made to turn, but a figure appeared before her just then. It took her breath away.

Literally. The air left her lungs in a whoosh.

He was very tall. Because of the dim light, all she could make out was his attire. His face remained something of a blur. But he had an arresting presence, and were he not dressed like a perfect gentleman, she might have had cause to believe he really could hurt her.

But gentlemen *could* hurt ladies. Like Lord Vale.

“Have you no more words to say, brave, foolish lady?” he asked, his voice low.

“Uh, several,” Louisa answered. “But they are things I have said before. I shall withdraw myself now.”

“Oh, but you haven’t spoken those words. You said, and I quote, ‘I do not take directions from voices in the shadows of libraries, good sir. I shall leave you now.’”

“That is... surprisingly accurate.”

“You’ll find that there are many surprising things about me.”

“I have no wish to *find* anything, only to leave.”

“Very well. You may,” he said.

“Do not say ‘you may’ as though you were giving me permission!” Louisa scoffed. “I do not need your permission to leave. I can come and go as I please.”

He took one step towards her, and she resisted the urge to step back. “By all means, do what you want to do. But I know you have no intention to leave. Because then you would not be the brave little girl everyone thinks you to be.” He took one step closer, and again, Louisa fought to stand her ground.

He towered over her.

“You don’t know me,” she challenged.

“I know you well enough to have predicted your actions, little girl.”

One more step.

Louisa’s heart began to beat fast. “I am not a little girl.”

He took her right hand. His movement was so slow, the pressure so light, that when she looked down and saw her palm in his, she had no idea how it got there. “This is the palm of a child. An overgrown child, but a child, nonetheless.” He stepped back and gave her a frank appraisal that brought color to her cheeks. “But that is where the similarities with a child end. You are very much a woman.”

His words, almost a whisper, were a caress. Louisa was increasingly finding it difficult to remember why she was here, what she intended to do next, what the color of her ball gown was.

“Yes,” he murmured. “A woman.”

She snatched her hand back. "I... should return to the ball. My parents... may be worried."

He closed the gap between them. "Stay."

"I—"

"Stay."

In the dim moonlight, she saw him bend towards her. She felt a dull pressure on her neck, and she realized it was his palm. She should stop this. Any respectable young lady would stop this. She should pull away and run out of the library, back to the safety of—

"And what do we have here?"

Louisa gasped, pulled away and turned to the door. There stood Lady Ravenclaw, her daughter Elisabeth, and Sir Nigel Higglesworth. The smile on Lady Ravenclaw's face was illuminated by the candelabra she was holding up.

Immediately, Louisa felt herself being thrown behind. The man—whose name she did not even know!—had, in a way, shielded her, and it was he who faced them. Louisa's heart began to beat fast, the severity of the situation only now registering with her.

No! No!

"A scandal at a ball," Lady Ravenclaw drawled. "Isn't this a delight?"

"It is nothing like it appears, I assure you," Louisa said.

"Hush," the man hissed at her. He turned to their audience. "It is nothing like it appears, I assure you."

Louisa's mouth opened wide.

The—the mountain goat!

"The lady was lost, and I was merely assisting her—"

"Yes, of course, assisting her shed her buttons and her virtue?"

"Lady Ravenclaw!" Sir Nigel exclaimed.

"Lady Ravenclaw," the man said evenly, in that threatening voice that had rooted Louisa to the spot only minutes ago. "I'll

have you remember to whom you are speaking.”

“Apologies, Your Grace,” Lady Ravenclaw said, visibly fazed.
“But I cannot in good conscience ignore what I have just seen.”

“And what have you seen? What do you see?”

Sir Nigel cleared his throat. “Come away, Lady Ravenclaw. There’s no damage done.”

“Oh, but there is! Should even my own Elisabeth be caught in a dark library with a man she is not betrothed to, I would insist on marriage to preserve her honor! It is the way of it!”

“It *is* the way of it,” Elisabeth repeated with a smirk.

They were joined by more people.

“What has happened?” somebody asked.

“See for yourself,” Lady Ravenclaw said, then stepped away.

Now, there were even more people.

Louisa wanted to be swallowed by the ground. And then, she heard a familiar voice. It was shocked.

“Louisa?”

Rose. The proposal. A scandal.

Louisa slumped to the ground. It all went black.

Chapter Two



D *amnation!*

How could he have been so stupid?

Jacob Forbes, the Duke of Stanton, went over the events of yesterday. He had been bogged down by melancholia. He missed his father. He missed Hannah. He was very capable of running his dukedom, but sometimes, even the most capable people got overwhelmed.

He had not planned to attend the ball. He hated balls.

He hated every contrivance of the *ton* that did not bring forth wealth or inspire the mind. Which was practically all of them. Operas, he could manage. Public author readings, he loved. He met with the Guild of Gentlemen Agriculturists twice a month. Balls, soirees, and the like? They bored him to death. There were always flittering females vying for his attention. Using the same words, the same gestures, the same wiles. It got tiring. Save the ones he grew up with, he could hardly tell them apart.

But he did enjoy them in bed.

Yes. When it was offered, he took his pleasures and then bid the ladies goodbye. When they begged him for an encore, he sometimes obliged them. Once it became clear that they were trying to pitch marriage, he cut them off.

Until yesterday, marriage had not been in the cards for him, regardless of how much his older relatives advocated for it, regardless of the consistency with which the *Excelsior* Editorial, the local gossip piece, labeled him as an eligible

bachelor. He'd bedded several women, but it had all been discreet. No scandal whatsoever.

And now, what was he embroiled in a scandal for?

Attempting to kiss a woman the size of a big baby.

The thought irritated him. It infuriated him. He would not even have been at the ball if Levi hadn't convinced him to go. The moment he'd got there, he'd known it was a mistake. He'd found the library and stayed there, lost in thought. And then, the girl had arrived. She'd looked out of the window so wistfully, so sadly, that he'd felt something within him move. And that rarely ever happened.

Well, two things had moved. The second had been more... base.

But she was a sight to behold. Voluptuous, oozing appeal. A woman, through and through. He'd imagined himself taking her against that window. It would be no effort; he would just lift her up, go under her skirts, and...

The thought had nearly consumed him, and he'd begun to speak to her to ease it. But it was in no way eased. She had the sultriest voice he had ever heard. A voice that invited you to pleasure. A voice that promised ecstasy.

If she had shown a willingness, he would have locked the library door and taken her.

And now, look where he was. The center of a scandal.

He, the revered Duke of Stanton.

He laughed mirthlessly. How had the mighty fallen!

He knew the news had gone around by the way his servants served him his breakfast a couple of minutes ago. There were a lot of exchanged glances. It was there, hanging in the air. He should send for Levi.

He turned to John, his valet. "Send for Levi, John."

John looked out of the window. "I believe his carriage just arrived, Your Grace."

Of course. Levi was drawn to drama like a moth to a flame.

“Very well,” Jacob muttered, then took a bite out of an apple.

“So, you went to the ball and deflowered an innocent, then?” was the first thing that Levi said when he strode into the room. “I had no idea that you had it in you, Jacob.” He laughed. “Good show, good show.”

He sat next to Jacob and fished in his breakfast platter for a piece of toast.

“Bloody bastard,” Jacob huffed.

Levi burst into laughter. “Because I speak the truth? They say she cannot be more than seven and ten.”

“That cannot be. She is doubtless older than that. I have no business with infants. And I did nothing of the sort. I did not even kiss her!”

Levi arched a brow. “In truth?”

“In truth. I mean, I wanted to. If that horrid hag Lady Ravenclaw had waited for a few more seconds, I would have. But I did not. And now, they have branded it a scandal and insisted that I have stripped her of her virtue.”

“Yes, Lady Ravenclaw *does* hold a grudge against the family. Some say it has to do with the family patriarch, Lord Dunn’s rejection of her in their youth. Others say it is because of her daughter, Elisabeth—”

“I don’t even know who Lord Dunn is,” Jacob said. “I don’t even know who *she* is. The lady. Not so much as a name.” He sighed.

“If she is, indeed, Lord Dunn’s daughter, then you have little to fear. Their estate is considerable. Her sister is being courted by Lord Arden. It was almost everyone’s belief that Lord Arden would propose to her at the ball.”

“Did he?” Jacob asked.

“Propose to a lady whose sister is rumored to have been tainted only a few rooms away from polite company? Surely, you jest,” Levi said with a chuckle.

“Damnation.”

“A monumental heap of damnations, my friend. You have ruined a family. Their hopes, their aspirations. And all because you let your groin lead the way. A pity, indeed.”

“Perhaps we can have this conversation when you have had your fill of jesting,” Jacob hissed, his eyes hard.

The mirth disappeared from Levi’s face. “I have had my fill of jesting.”

“What can you tell me about the girl herself? What is her name, to begin with?”

“What do you think I am, an idle man who knows everyone on this side of England?”

“Well—”

“Do not answer the question, it is rhetorical,” Levi said. “Her name is Louisa. She appears to be a well-brought-up lady. Reserved but witty. Her father once rejected a suitor—very publicly, I must add—and other gentlemen have been wary of approaching her ever since. Oh, and, er, as you may have noticed, she is... very attractive.”

Jacob thought for a while. “I may have to marry her, Levi.”

“You are a duke, Jacob. You don’t have to do anything.”

“And she is a lady. One who will suffer great hardship because of one moment of weakness. It was I who approached her.”

“Why did she not flee?”

“Levi!”

“Very well. Yoke yourself with her if you so wish. But remember what a perpetual sorrow marriage is.” Levi’s tone descended to an almost whisper. “Remember what it did to your sister.”



Dunn Manor was, well, satisfactory. There was no great wealth on display, but it was much better than many manors

Jacob had visited. He sat in the drawing room, awaiting the advent of Lord Dunn, his future father-in-law.

The thought of it left a bitter taste in his mouth. He was a portly man, Lord Dunn, judging from the portraits all around. And Lady Dunn looked very austere, indeed. However, there were a few portraits of his wife-to-be. She was rather small. Her sister was almost a head taller.

He lingered over Louisa's portrait. Surely, she did not really have blue eyes, with such brown hair. Surely, they were not as arresting as the artist had made them seem. He had not really seen her eyes in the darkness of the library yesterday.

He had a seat, and tea was brought. Lord Dunn definitely took his time. When he arrived, Jacob dropped his cup and stood.

"Your Grace, a pleasure to have you in our home," Lord Dunn said stiffly.

"A pleasant afternoon to you, Lord Dunn." Jacob nodded once. "I have a request. Let us skip the pretense and go about this like business, as that is precisely what it is."

"You compromise my daughter's virtue, and you call an attempt for the resolution of it *business*. Like selling a foal or negotiating the lease of a coal mine."

Jacob sighed. "I apologize if my manner was rather... crisp."

"That is one way to put it."

"Lord Dunn—"

"But we may proceed. Please, have a seat, Your Grace."

Ah, now Lord Dunn remembered his manners and his place.

Jacob sat down. He cleared his throat. "It was an unfortunate incident, what transpired in Lord Arden's library yesterday. I fear it has been inflated far beyond its borders."

"As is the case with several unfortunate incidents," Lord Dunn said.

Jacob nodded. "I had no designs on your daughter's virtue. Not the barest hint of... lust was expressed. I am told Lady Ravenclaw has embroidered the story with lies to suit her own

interests. She has a personal vendetta against your family, I hear.”

“Quite.”

“But Society wants what Society wants, and if lying about an event will get an eligible bachelor married off, it will close its eyes to the facts and sanction it. On this note, I hereby request your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Lord Dunn snorted. “She will not marry you.”

“Pardon?”

“She will not marry you.”

Jacob smiled mirthlessly. “Perhaps you are not apprised of all the facts, Lord Dunn. I am a duke. Your daughter could do much worse. I am sacrificing myself to save her reputation.”

“And yours as well, mind. There were two people in that library yesterday,” Lord Dunn countered. “Yes, I know of your reputation. How industrious you are, how greatly respected. I state that my daughter will not marry you not because of some deficiency on your part, but strong will on hers. She will not marry whom she does not want to marry.”

That was absurd! Jacob was doing her a favor here!

“May I speak to her in private, Lord Dunn?”

“Avert your mind to what happened when last you did so.” Lord Dunn sighed. “She will be down to see you. You have ten minutes. Be sure not to besmirch her virtue any more than you already have, Your Grace.” He stood up and walked away.

In a couple of minutes, Louisa made her way to Jacob.

But she is beautiful!

She had the body of a siren, and the grace of Artemis herself. There was an assurance in her steps, a sensual haughtiness, that appealed to Jacob. She came to stand a good distance from him.

She curtsied slightly. “Your Grace.”

“Lady Louisa. Sit.”

She looked like she had a lot to say about being told to sit in her father's manor, but she kept her mouth shut and merely looked at Jacob. And then she sat.

The portraits had not been exaggerated. Her eyes really were blue. Her hair was brown and wispy, and she had a determined chin. As far as a matriarch for heirs went, Jacob could do a lot worse. He sighed in relief.

"You are Lady Louisa," he began.

"You are Jacob Forbes, the Duke of Stanton."

"Quite."

A small silence passed between them. And then he said, "You are aware of the situation that we now find ourselves in."

"No, Your Grace," Louisa answered. "Perhaps you wish to educate me."

"Do not be coy with me. It is a ground rule. I appreciate forthrightness. This is no time to feign ignorance."

She looked him straight in the eye. "To answer your question once again, Your Grace, no. I am not aware of the situation we now find ourselves in." She paused. "Perhaps you wish to educate me."

"I have compromised you, and now we must marry. That is the conclusion of the matter."

"If I did not wholly trust the education I am sure you underwent, Your Grace, I would say you did not know the meaning of the word *conclusion*."

Jacob's jaw worked. It appeared to faze Louisa for a second, but, in a thrice, her composure was back.

"If we do not marry, you will be viewed as a fallen woman."

Louisa lifted her chin. "I am not."

"But you will be perceived to be. And among the *ton*, perception is everything."

"I am willing to take that chance. I'll not yoke myself with a man incapable of any sort of... deep connection."

Jacob's nose flared. "You have asked about me."

"Correction, I have been *told* about you. You should have let me be! I went to the library for fresh air, and you should have let me have it. Not play your silly game of—of gentleman footpad. If you had resisted that urge, we would not be here! Rose would be betrothed, and we would be planning a wedding. It was you—you!" Her voice rose an octave. "You created a scandal, and now you tell me you must marry me, as if marriage were the best thing in the world."

"Isn't it to you? To all of you? Is your sole aspiration not to dig your talons into a poor gentleman and wring a proposal out of him?"

She scoffed. "By 'all of you,' you are referring to—"

"Women."

"You know nothing of us, then."

"Nor do I wish to." Jacob waved his hand dismissively. "I did not come here to banter, Lady Louisa. I came to inform you of our upcoming nuptials. You will marry me."

"Because you are a duke?"

"Because it is what I said you will do. It is for your own good."

"Your Grace, I would rather be the queen of fallen women. And that is that."

"Think about your sister."

Her eyes widened. "What about Rose?"

Inwardly, Jacob smiled. He had poked the right nerve. "You know that no suitor in his right mind will propose to a woman whose sister has been branded a woman of easy virtue. Corruption is perceived to spread, you see. From one room in a house to another. Your refusal to marry me will not only damage your reputation. It will damage your sister's."

By now, Louisa was in deep thought. There was a line of worry on her forehead. He could practically see the wheels turning in her head.

“Now, young Louisa, I do not know you. We have exchanged but a few words. But if there is one thing I am assured of, it is the fact that you are a decent human being, and you would want no harm to come to others because of you. Accept to marry me, and Lord Arden’s proposal will shortly follow. It is my word. Take me on it.”

Louisa pursed her lips. “You have done a lot of digging.”

Jacob smirked. “I did not have to dig. It was right there on the surface. You do not have a very complicated family.” He leaned towards her. “And you do not have very complicated wants.”

“Do you call me simple?” she spluttered, her eyes burning.

“Are you?” he asked.

She frowned. “You may leave, Your Grace. I shall send my answer across at my earliest convenience.”

He shook his head, a mocking smile on his face. “Lady Louisa, you will not tell me what I may or may not do. Perhaps you have not paid enough attention to all I have said. This matter is pressing. I shall obtain your answer now, and then proceed to get a special license so we can marry.”

“I have told you that I shall send my answer—”

“Yes, yes, you did. And I have told you that I will not leave here until I get it. Whose word do you think will stand, little girl?”

“I am three and twenty.”

“Practically an old maid. I am doing you a favor.”

“That is not even—”

“Please, tell your father that I would like to see him now.”

Louisa gave him a hard stare. She then got up and began to walk inside, but her father appeared just then. And so did her mother. They both approached the Duke.

Louisa sighed. This could not be good.

She followed behind them. She saw her mother curtsy before the Duke with a smile on her face, and she knew that there was trouble. She walked back and took another seat.

“Louisa, darling, you can leave now,” Lord Dunn said.

“I would love to stay, Father,” Louisa stated. “It is, after all, my future to be discussed.”

The Earl of Dunn looked at his daughter, at his wife, and then at Jacob. And then he said, “Very well.” He turned to Jacob. “Your Grace, I have informed you that my daughter will not marry you.”

“There might be a need to revise that assertion, Lord Dunn. I have alerted your daughter to a number of factors that may be able to change it.”

“Is that so?” Lord Dunn asked Louisa.

“Splendid,” Lady Dunn chimed in. “And so, Louisa? Talk to us now, my crumpet. Have you changed your mind?”

“Mother, before now, I had no intentions of marrying until at least a year after Rose. Having this thrust on me is... a responsibility of crushing proportions.”

“Perhaps you might have thought of that in the library last night?” Lady Dunn retorted.

That hit Louisa hard, and even Jacob felt it. His father had seldom faulted him before others.

Lord Dunn gave his wife a warning look. “Do not chide our daughter so in a stranger’s presence.”

“Oh, it’s always a *do not* with you. Have I said something out of the ordinary? A man, a duke, no less, has exposed your daughter to public scrutiny, and now, he is here to remedy the situation. Your daughter says ‘No, it is too much of a responsibility,’ and you do not want to tell her the truth, that she has little choice in the matter?”

“Madeline, enough,” Lord Dunn ordered.

“Your other daughter is crying her eyes out because of one silly mistake that this one made. There is a chance to remedy

it, and we're dragging our feet? Because that Sapphira girl has put deadly, destructive, newfangled ideas in your daughter's head—"

"I said enough, Madeline!" Lord Dunn roared.

Everywhere went silent.

Sapphira was one of Jacob's dearest friends—well, as dear as a lady could be to a gentleman without a romantic attachment. She truly had a mind of her own, and there had been talk of them getting married when they had been younger. They had both laughed about it. There was no way that would happen.

If Louisa was a friend to Sapphira, then he really could do worse in his choice of wife. This was another positive of going through with this marriage.

Lord Dunn turned to his daughter. "What say you, Louisa?"

Louisa let out a long breath. "Yes," she replied. "Yes, I will marry His Grace."



"I never thought I would ever enter a marriage of convenience," Louisa muttered.

"There are worse things."

"What is your middle name?" she asked.

"I haven't a middle name. What is yours?"

"Clementine."

"It is an ugly name," Jacob said.

"Indeed. I have hated it since I was little."

They were standing in the garden, under the watchful eye of Lady Dunn.

"I must tell you something. After we are married, we will be together for seven days only. And then, I shall have to leave to see to my affairs in London."

Louisa's blue eyes locked on his green ones. "When will you be back?" she asked.

Jacob looked away. "I do not know. It may please you to know that we need only meet for the production of an heir. Or heirs, as the case may be. I should like at least three children."

"Three children," Louisa repeated. "I am to see you only when we must perform our conjugal duties to each other?"

"That is the worst way to say it, but yes, Lady Louisa."

"How is it the worst way? Only a few moments ago, you called it 'meeting for the production of an heir.'"

"Oh. The second worst way to say it, then. I must leave to get the special license for our marriage. And small talk bores me. You would do well to remember it."

"This is not small talk, Your Grace. It is a talk about our future. We need to agree on some things and make compromises on others."

He chuckled. "Very well. We can do that on our wedding night. I have a negotiation table of colossal proportions. I have longed for an avenue to put it to good news since I inherited it. We shall use it."

"Your shoes aren't shined."

"My what?" Jacob stared down at his feet. "My valet, John, is a sluggard."

"Have you no kind word for anyone, Your Grace?" Louisa scoffed.

He chuckled and took her hand.

"Erm," came Lady Dunn's voice from some distance away, where she was reclining on the chaise longue. "You might want to remember, Your Grace, that it was a similar gesture that got us into this situation in the first place?"

"But we are betrothed, Lady Dunn," Jacob returned. "Or may I say, Mother?"

Lady Dunn beamed. "Very well, carry on."

Jacob turned back to Louisa. “You’re trembling,” he noted.

“I am not!” Louisa huffed.

“You are. I feel it in your hand.”

“I am not,” she insisted, and looked away.

“Very well, lie to yourself if you must.” Jacob paused. “Ahem. You asked if I had no kind word for anyone. I, no doubt, have kind words for my betrothed. You have eyes the colors of the sea. Your voice is a siren song. And I have the utmost confidence that I shall enjoy producing heirs with you more than a little bit.”

Louisa snatched her hand back. “The last bit was not a kind thing.”

“Pay attention. None of them were kind things, my young bride-to-be. I like your eyes and your voice for something that has nothing to do with kindness. And this is perhaps the best time to tell you this. Your role will be purely administrative. Bear my heirs, control the servants, attend events with me. If you have any romantic notions, perhaps from books that young ladies read these days, I advise you to bury them deep in the earth.”

Louisa struggled to keep her face neutral. “You speak like a man well advanced in years, Your Grace. The cantankerous type that dies alone, cradling a bottle of scotch on his lonely bed.”

“I should like to die alone, cradling a bottle of scotch on my lonely bed,” Jacob informed her, smirking. “Have you any more mean-spirited witticisms to throw at me, little girl? No? Then I shall take my leave. See you on our wedding day, and not a day earlier. *Adieu.*”

He bid Lady Dunn a good afternoon and then left.

Louisa stood there, in the garden, wondering what she had just agreed to.

Chapter Three



“C ondemnation and peaches! If anyone had told me that you would get married before Rose, I would have laughed them to scorn. But look at you, draped in silk, bejeweled in... jewels, ready to be led to the abattoir of male depravity. I couldn't be happier.”

Lady Dunn hissed, “Hush, Sapphira. Now is not the time for your jests.”

“I jest not!” Sapphira protested. She squinted at Louisa's wedding dress and gasped. “Do you mean to tell me, Lady Dunn, that this is not, in fact, silk?”

“Stop it!” Rose said with a laugh. “Leave my mother alone.”

She laughed easily, now that Lord Arden's ring was firmly on her finger. He had proposed a day after Jacob had obtained the special license to wed. She and Lord Arden were billed to be married in the next three weeks, and she could not be happier. She'd graciously agreed to Louisa getting married before her because of the situation at hand. She was not happy only because this wedding had saved hers, but also because it had put an end to a very potent fear of hers: that her sister would never settle down.

“Very well. I shall keep my comments to myself,” Sapphira said. “Do you know what I have realized? After the both of you are married, we will no longer move in the same circles. You will be too concerned with your husbands' wants and needs and pregnancy and the hygiene of your wet nurses to entertain an unrepentant old maid like me.”

“That will never happen!” Louisa protested.

“Never!” Rose declared.

“It will most definitely happen,” Lady Dunn confirmed. “Except for the part about the hygiene of their wet nurses. They will get only the best. Their husbands are peers, have you forgotten?”

“Husbands-to-be,” Sapphira corrected. “My dear Louisa might just decide that she does not in fact want to go through with this façade and say so at the altar. In which case I have a carriage ready to take her to the dock for onward travel to the colonies.” She paused. “I kid you not, there *is* a carriage waiting.”

Rose and Louisa burst into laughter, but their mother did not find it funny in the least. “One more comment like this, and I shall have to ask that you leave the dressing room, Sapphira,” she warned.

“Mother, you will do no such thing,” Louisa said. “Sapphira, what color is the carriage, so I can look out for it?”

The young women laughed, and Lady Dunn put a hand to her forehead and cursed under her breath.

Finally, Gertie, modiste and stylist, was done putting Louisa together.

“Oh, you look absolutely ravishing, Louisa!” Rose exclaimed.

“Absolutely *virginal*,” Lady Dunn corrected. “As she should. Come, now. Let us not keep the priest waiting.”

The wedding was brief and unceremonious. Several times, Louisa felt the urge to run away, but then she looked at Jacob, and her fears were assuaged.

“You could have done a lot worse,” her mother had said several times, and Louisa knew she was right.

Besides Jacob’s obvious... mean-spiritedness and hunger for control, he seemed a decent partner. He was handsome. The sight of him took Louisa’s breath away. He had the most curious green eyes, and he was more than a head taller than her.

His face was well-chiseled, and his build was appealing, indeed. If there would be problems in her marriage, attraction to her husband would not be one of them. Unlike the gentleman that had been besotted with her a couple of years ago. He smelt like onions and looked like he was at least one-quarter gargoyle. And he was well in his years.

Jacob could not be more than thirty, despite his insistence on calling her a little girl. And let's not forget his title. It did help, she had come to realize, in their world. Higher-ups had it better than those beneath, and wealth and a title made life considerably better. She'd never dreamed of being a duchess, and it wasn't exactly an incentive. But again, it did help.

After the wedding, they retired to Stanton Manor. They got into Jacob's carriage amid a cheering crowd.

Louisa moved and sat across from her husband.

Her husband.

She was married now.

Had a new family now.

"You do not wish to share the same space as your husband, dear wife?" Jacob asked with a chuckle.

"Do not address me in jest, *dearest*," Louisa said.

"Ah, you can do it, but I cannot? A man is never favored by the rules."

"A man is always favored by the rules," she countered.

He appeared to think about that for a moment, and then he shrugged. "Come and sit next to me, Louisa," he said.

"I'd rather sit here, husband."

Jacob raised an eyebrow. "Is this perhaps a taste of your plans for our marriage?"

Louisa sighed and returned to her place beside him.

"Imagine being trapped in a marriage with someone I have not even kissed," he mused out loud.

“Is that your underhanded way of asking my permission, Your Grace?”

He turned to stare at her. “Me, asking your permission to kiss you? A truly hilarious thought.”

“And why is it hilarious?”

“Because I shall never ask your permission to kiss you. Unless it is part of bed play.”

Lousia shot him a puzzled look. “Bed play.”

Jacob smirked. “Bed play. I think, my dear wife, that you have not fully grasped the idea of this contract that we have entered into. You are mine.”

“I am not a cushion.”

“I would be mad to mistake you for a cushion. You are so lovely.”

The compliment surprised them both. There was silence in the carriage for a while.

“You wish to do... bed play with me?”

“How else would we make my heirs, dearest wife?” he said with a grin.

“I would assume you wanted to do it contractually. Formally,” Louisa replied matter-of-factly.

Jacob looked at her, searching for mirth in her features. “How are heirs made contractually, formally?” he asked.

“I have not the vaguest idea.”

“Then we will do it my way.”

“Fine.”

“Do you know the way of it? I should hate to have you screaming and running out of my rooms.”

Louisa blushed and looked away. “I will not scream and run out of your rooms. I shall be very calm, indeed.”

“That you will not be,” Jacob murmured. “Calm. I promise you.”

She looked out of the window to hide another blush.

“Your friend, Levi,” she said, her attention still on the window, “he seems to be of... questionable character.”

“He is a rake and a highwayman.”

Her eyes widened.

“And a deflowerer of innocents. And a murderer. And the cause of all England’s problems.” She was looking at him with a scowl now. “Is that questionable enough for you, my young wife?”

She looked at him in what could be interpreted as disgust. “I was told you were austere. Taciturn. It turns out you are quite the—”

“Choose your next word carefully, wife. You’re speaking to a duke.”

“And I am a duchess,” Louisa retorted, meeting his eyes squarely. “You are quite the parrot, Your Grace.”

“I give you one chance of amendment.”

“Nothing needs to be amended that is true.”

Jacob grabbed her and pulled her closer. His words were strong and unequivocal, directly in her ear. “You will never disrespect me, wife.”

“I do *not* disrespect you.”

His grip tightened, and she gasped.

“You will never disrespect me,” he repeated.

“I will never disrespect you.”

“Good,” he uttered. He turned his face so that his eyes met hers. Their lips were so close.

“You have my permission to kiss me,” she whispered.

He pushed her away, and she chuckled.

Two could play this game.

They sat in silence for the rest of the ride.

Stanton Manor was a considerably better affair than Dunn Manor. There was absolutely no room for comparison. The fact that Louisa was the lady of all this now was overwhelming, to say the least. But she believed in her own abilities to make it work.

The servants were outside to welcome her there. They were more than a lot, and she wondered what amount of work there must be for them to be this many. She would have to have a look at what they all did, definitely. But that would have to wait. For the famous wedding night was upon them.

She had not the specifics of it—the books she'd read had said nothing about sexual activity with virgins, and they always stopped at a heated embrace and skipped to the next thing—but she knew there was pain, and sometimes a little blood, and if it went well, a baby followed.

She had no plans on getting pregnant just yet, and she had expressed her fears to Sapphira. Sapphira had asked when she'd last had her monthly flow, and Louisa had blushed and told her it had just passed.

“You're in luck, then. The chances of becoming with child are very, very slim,” Sapphira had said.

As Louisa walked into her new home, with her husband by her side, a jolt of fear hit her. What if she failed abysmally at this? She had been rushed into it and had no experience whatsoever. She knew several young ladies of the *ton* looked at her with awe and even envy. She'd seen it even at the wedding. The headline of Excelsior Editorial this morning was, “*The Duke of Stanton is Dunn with Bachelorship.*” But she had no idea what she was doing.

She calmed her nerves. Jacob had told her that he would not be an imposing husband. He would not be home most of the time, and she would be free to pursue her passions—in the way that married women were free to pursue their passions.

“Evangeline is your new maid. She will show you to your rooms,” Jacob said, leaving her side and walking in the other direction. “I need to rest. I shall not be disturbed.”

Louisa turned to Evangeline and then looked at the other servants. But they all had unreadable expressions on their faces, as if it was perfectly normal for a groom to abandon his bride a few steps away from the door.

“You are welcome, Your Grace,” Evangeline said to her now, a big smile brightening her face. “Please, follow me. The footmen will be bringing your luggage after us.”

Louisa’s room was more than twice the size of her old one. Everything was painted a distressing puce, but other than that, it was all perfectly marvelous.

“You’ll be wanting to take a bath now, Your Grace?” Evangeline asked.

Evangeline was a girl of perhaps six and ten. She had short brown hair and a cute mole under her right eye. She appeared honest enough. Louisa had been friends with Peggy, their maid, but since Peggy was for both Louisa and Rose, she’d gone to Rose, as the firstborn.

“No,” Louisa replied. “Maybe in a minute or two. Knock first. Always knock first,” she added.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Evangeline said with a curtsy, then briskly walked out of the room.

Louisa took her time to familiarize herself with aspects of the room. There were no major changes that she would like to make, save the color of the walls. She preferred a calming blue. This was her life now. Her world.

She didn’t even know she was crying until a teardrop fell on the inside of her elbow. She looked at it and then wiped her tears. She rang the bell just above her bed, and Evangeline was at the door. She knocked.

“Come in, Evangeline.”

But it appeared the maid didn’t hear. And it was no wonder. The distance from the bed to the door was not exactly short.

Louisa sighed, walked to the door, and opened it. Evangeline stood there, poised to knock again. “Pardon me, Your Grace, did you order me to come in?”

“Yes,” Louisa said. “We can forget about the knocking bit for now until some changes are made.” Her luggage was just outside the door, and the two servants were waiting next to them. “You can go. Evangeline and I will take it from here, thank you.”

“Are you sure, Your Grace?” one of the servants asked. There was no hair on his head, and he was missing a premolar. His clothes were extremely neat. Not a wrinkle in sight. “They are quite heavy.”

“I know.” Louisa smiled. “They are mine, after all. What are your names?”

“Rupert, Your Grace,” the cleanshaven one said with a deep bow.

“I am Roger, Your Grace,” the other added.

“Rupert and Roger,” Louisa said, “I shall keep that in mind. What are you?”

Roger’s brow creased, and his voice descended into a whisper. “I should like to think that I am a man, Your Grace.”

“No. I meant—”

“Her Grace is asking what your job at Stanton Manor is,” Evangeline explained. She turned to Louisa. “Pardon, Your Grace.”

“That’s quite fine. Try not to interrupt me again, mind.”

“Never again, Your Grace.”

“Very well.” Louisa turned back to Roger. “Evangeline is right. I was referring to your... position.”

“We’re both footmen, Your Grace,” Rupert replied.

“Well noted. Ah, where is the one they call John?”

“That’s His Grace’s valet. No doubt he is in His Grace’s room, assisting with his toilette,” Roger said.

Louisa nodded. “Naturally. Well, thank you. I shall address you all tomorrow. Evangeline, help me, please.”

The footmen bowed and went downstairs. Louisa and Evangeline pulled the luggage into the room.

“We shall sort everything out tomorrow,” Louisa said.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Now, I am in dire need of a bath.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Evangeline shuffled her feet. “His Grace set out... things for you. They are in here.”

Evangeline walked to the giant wardrobe in the corner and opened it. Inside, there were instruments of toilette, as well as the prettiest (and most scandalous) nightdress Louisa had ever seen. Luckily, there was a robe to go with it.

Louisa’s bath took about an hour. Afterward, Evangeline helped her brush her hair—a task that Peggy most times escaped on account of their close relationship—and Louisa asked her to show her to Jacob’s room.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Evangeline led Louisa to what seemed like the other side of the manor. It was so far! She stopped in front of a door that was no doubt the master’s. There was no mistaking it, with its ornate, hand-carved detail and the sheer quality of the wood.

“Should I knock, do you think?” Louisa asked. She regretted it immediately.

What sort of duchess asked her lady’s maid if she should knock on her own husband’s door?

“Well, Your Grace—”

“Never mind that. Good night, Evangeline. I shall ring for you in the morning.”

Evangeline curtsied. “Good night, Your Grace.” And then, she walked away.

Louisa grabbed the handle and pushed. The door moved. It was very heavy and quite loud.

“Damnation, John, I told you I have no more use for you tonight,” she heard from inside the room.

“It is not John,” Louisa whispered. And then, louder, she said, “It is not John, Your Grace.”

“Louisa?” Jacob uttered, his voice incredulous. “Well, come in.”

Louisa walked into the room. It was a study of opulence and high taste. Jacob was sitting at a table, books and ledgers before him. He looked different in nightclothes. Less menacing, but still very much in charge.

Louisa felt something within her weep. “This is... your activity of choice on your wedding night?”

“Work has no respect for wedding nights,” was Jacob’s bland reply. “Is there something in particular you want to see me about? Is your room not to your liking?”

“The room is exquisite, thank you,” she said, walking towards him. “I just... I just thought you might want—want to consummate the contract—our marriage,” she amended quickly.

“Of course, I want to consummate our marriage. For what is marriage without consummation? A contract inchoate, a ritual suspended.” He chuckled. “I’m sure I read that somewhere. Anyway, dear wife, yes, there will be consummation. It goes without saying. But not tonight. I am busy.”

“What am I to do, then?”

“Pardon?”

“What am I to do, then? Since you will not consummate our marriage on our wedding night, what am I to do?”

Jacob shrugged. “Read a book. Sleep. Take a stroll around the grounds with Evangelica.”

“Evangeline.”

“Right.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. I have no wish to do any of those things. I want to do what we’re meant to do.”

“And I have said no.”

Louisa let out a deep breath. “Why did you buy me the nightdress, then? When men buy their women a nightdress, it does appear that they mean to... consummate.”

“That was Sapphira’s idea, not mine.”

That gave Louisa pause. “Oh,” she murmured. “Oh.”

And then, she turned on her heel and began to walk to the door. She heard a sound behind her but did not turn around. She opened the door, but a hand reached out from behind her and shut it. She gasped. She felt Jacob’s heat behind her, and she wondered if she imagined him nudging her towards the shut door with his body until she was flat against it.

Her heart began to beat rapidly, and she could feel herself tremble. She could feel him bend, feel his breath against her neck, and then, his hands on her hips.

“My little bride is eager to consummate our marriage,” he whispered in her ear. “A dutiful, responsible woman.” His right hand trailed up ever so slowly until it cupped her breast. She gasped again.

“My hand cannot even cover all of it,” he said, his voice raspy, his nose nuzzling her ear. “What a wife I have married.”

His left hand followed. He squeezed. A gasp escaped her lips.

And then, he turned her around and pressed his mouth to hers. His lips were hot and insistent. They knocked, they probed, they conquered. Of its own volition, her body melted into his. She did not even notice when the door opened again. His lips were no longer on hers.

She opened her eyes. She was outside the door, and he was holding it.

“Good night, dear wife,” he said.

And then, he shut the door.

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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.

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