



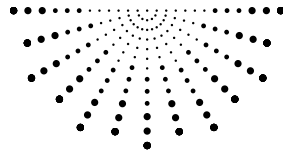
Cobalt Fairy  
PUBLISHING

*A  
Desperate  
Deal with  
the Duke*

VIOLET HAMERS

# A DESPERATE DEAL WITH THE DUKE

A STEAMY REGENCY ROMANCE



VIOLET HAMERS



# CONTENTS

A Thank You Gift

Before You Start Reading...

Love to Read?

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Epilogue

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Preview: The Viscount Takes a Bride](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Also by Violet Hamers](#)

[Loved the Book?](#)

[About the Author](#)

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With love and appreciation,

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*“I will sponsor your sister...if you will be my mistress for the season.”*

Veronica is ruined. After her brother's scandal that shook London and his disappearance, she and her younger sister are left penniless to fend for themselves. But the ton does not take well to outcasts...

Duke Kendrick cannot let the man who took advantage of his sister live to see another day. And the moment he steps on British soil, Maxwell will make sure that the scoundrel pays his dues.

When all her friends shut their doors in her face one after another, Veronica knows that it is time she put her dignity aside and ask for help. Only...the Duke's aid comes at a serious cost: her own honor...



## CHAPTER ONE



“Lady Veronica! What a surprise, my mistress was not expecting you, I believe,” the butler said who had let Veronica Wallace in, giving the maid an odd look.

Then, in the rudest fashion, he left Veronica standing alone in the foyer with the ill-mannered servant. The young woman in a dove-gray dress and a white apron looked terrified, and Veronica’s mood only worsened upon seeing her look of horror. Her hazel eyes darkened with impatience, and she glared back at her friend Lavinia Grisham’s maid.

“And why is that a problem?” Veronica demanded to know.

It was bad enough that she had to make this impromptu visit to the Grishams’ house after not getting invited to their ball, but now to be greeted in such a rude fashion only made her confirm her suspicions... her family was indeed being snubbed by the *ton*.

“Well... I—” the maid stammered.

“Enough of this,” Veronica snapped in exasperation.

Holding her head up high as she straightened her silk bonnet, she gathered the skirts of her matching lilac silk dress and walked around the maid with authority. With quick steps, she made her way to the drawing room and was greeted by another servant.

“Good evening, Lady Veronica,” the elderly woman greeted sweetly, bowing slightly as she reached for the door.

Veronica drew in a sharp breath through her small nose, a surge of relief going through her short but curvaceous frame. *This* was much more the norm of how she was normally greeted.

*Perhaps I am being too hotheaded.*

She followed the servant into the drawing room. Her optimistic thought vanished quickly though as she saw that the lavish space was not only occupied by Trinity Grisham, the Dowager Countess of Vervain, and her three daughters but also nearly half of the women in the *ton*.

Dread and shame filled Veronica’s heart as she realized the reality of the situation, but only for a split second. It was quickly replaced with dread, hurt, and disgust toward the women she had once called friends. As if sensing her rage, the hum of the gossip halted, and every woman’s head turned to look at her.

“Lady Veronica! What a surprise!”

Veronica looked in the direction of her friend's shrill and tense voice, and Lavinia rose from the crowd of seated women.

"Yes, your maid shared a verbatim sentiment when she met me in the foyer," Veronica replied dryly, raising her chin in arrogance.

Lavinia let out a nervous chuckle as some of the women behind her began to lean toward one another's ears, whispering as they watched. Veronica felt her cheeks redden, and she fought the urge to run out of the room.

"What is this, Vinnie?" Veronica demanded, using her friend's childhood nickname.

"Veronica, please do not make a scene," Lavinia hissed, her pleasant tone dropping quickly as she stared back with cynical blue eyes. She had never looked at her that way before, and it broke Veronica's heart.

"Please, just go. We will talk later," Lavinia urged.

Veronica shook her head slightly in defiance and crossed her arms.

"*No*. Not until you tell me what is going on."

Lady Vervain, Lavinia's mother, rose gracefully from her chair and rested her bejeweled fingers on her cane.

“Veronica, dear, do not play the fool. It does not look good on you. You know very well what is going on. You know what your brother did to Alice Clifford. The shame that’s been brought upon her and her poor family has driven her *and* the Dowager Duchess away! You know that Damian ran away like a coward from his responsibilities the moment her brother, the Duke of Kendrick, confronted him. But you should know all that quite well, since he ran off with what fortune your late father was able to leave you.”

Lady Vervain’s tone was the perfect icy combination of bitterness and condescension, and it sliced so deeply into Veronica’s heart that for a moment she was speechless.

“Go home, girl, while you still have one. Soon, it will not be the sharp eye of the *ton* that should worry you but the unfeeling bankers that will be coming to your door,” the Dowager Countess continued, shaking her head in disgust.

Veronica drew in a sharp inhale, barely managing to suppress her tears as she found her voice. Lady Vervain’s truthful words cut like a hot knife into her chest, and she took a step back at the force of them. She would not go down without a fight though, and whatever strength she had left, she used it to control her mounting pain.

“My brother is innocent of those charges!” Veronica shot back, uncrossing her arms and taking a step closer. “And you know nothing of our financial situation. I assure you, Lady Vervain, my sister and I are in good financial standing, and I *will* be presenting her to Society. Your poisonous words are nothing but gossip, and I will not abide them!”

Mocking laughter rumbled through the room of women as they all shook their heads, clearly not believing a single word she

said. Veronica felt the perspiration start to wet the hem of her bonnet as she watched them laugh at her, and her heartbeat began to race. But before she could catch her breath, Lady Olivia Finwood, whom she also once called a friend, rose to join in on the mockery.

“Darling Veronica,” Olivia said sweetly, “as we all know, there are two sides to every story. On the other side of your brother’s story is Lady Alice’s. Alice, who has fled to Scotland because of your brother’s lecherous behavior. Even her mama, the Dowager Duchess of Kendrick, has left London! Can you imagine what shame she must have felt to make her leave the *ton*, her friends, her home?” She shook her head in both pity and disgust. “You *must* accept, Veronica, that you and Poppy are now just as ruined as that poor woman. No gentleman will marry Alice now, any more than one would marry *you* or *your* sister.”

“Poppy?” Veronica quickly cut in upon hearing her younger sister’s name. She shook her head defiantly. “Poppy had nothing to do with this, nor did I! Alice was a friend, and I grieve for and miss her as you do. But if Damian truly is responsible for all of this, why are we being punished for his error?”

All of the ladies in the room either smirked or looked down their noses at Veronica, and she felt the guilt of the truth rise in her chest. It was true that Damian had done an awful thing, and she had been foolish to try to deny the accusations. But sweet Poppy, who was to come out this Season, was as pure as the driven snow. Of all the people who deserved a reprieve from the storm her brother’s actions had invoked, it was Poppy.

Realization began to set in as one former friend after another rose to their feet to give their opinions on her family’s scandal,

and Veronica finally accepted the truth of it all: her reputation was gone, and the Wallace name was ruined. There would be no more invitations to balls, to teas, to walks in the park. There would be no more friendships.

Having had enough, she turned on her heel and walked out of the drawing room without another word. If anyone said anything else, she could not hear it over her own thoughts. She did, however, notice the pitying looks the servants gave her on her way out and reminded herself that she had done nothing wrong. Slowing her pace and raising her chin, Veronica walked out of the house proudly, like the lady she truly was.

Once outside, she drew her parasol, set her delicate features into a stern look, and made her way back home. It was only a brisk walk away, and to her relief, she saw very few people on the street. Those whom she did, however, quickly averted their eyes and shied away from her as if she carried the plague. Word of her brother's behavior seemed to have reached everyone by now.

*Damn you, Damian!*

Veronica seethed silently as she reached the front walk of their estate. Her frustration only doubled when she had to unlatch the gate herself. The servants, upon hearing that her *darling* brother had run off with most of the Wallace fortune, had all fled to find paying work weeks ago.

The proof of her family's ruined reputation was all around her, and she could not deny it anymore. No matter what she went through though, Veronica vowed to shield Poppy from their harsh reality as much as possible. If she could just get them *one* invitation, perhaps she would have the chance to find a husband and be free from their family tragedy.

Once inside Chester Manor, Veronica took a minute to collect herself. Her former friends might have been unbearably unkind and may well have destroyed what little shred of self-pride she had left, but Poppy did not deserve to know that, and neither did their aunt Evanora Snyder, who was staying at their estate. Though if she were honest, Veronica knew her aunt was no fool, and she suspected that the woman knew much more than she ever let on.

Veronica found them both in the drawing room sitting at one of the tables with their heads bent over a mountain of fabric. Putting a smile on her face felt as difficult as carving stone with a butter knife, but she did so and approached them with a cheery disposition.

“Hello, my darlings,” she greeted warmly, bending down to kiss them both on the cheek.

“What is all this?” Veronica saw that the mounds of fabric were actually a collection of Poppy’s old dresses, and her heart sank. She already knew the answer.

“Aunty Eva had a lovely idea,” Poppy replied happily, turning her doe-like eyes away from her work and up to Veronica’s.

“It is just a little something I do for myself sometimes,” Evanora added, waving her hand over the full table. “With all of these layers of fabric, we could make a *lovely*, one-of-a-kind debut dress.”

“Just in case Damien does not return from his business travels in time,” Poppy piped up, her focus on her sewing.

Veronica felt her heart clench in despair as she and her elderly aunt met one another's gaze. Evanora subtly shook her head, and Veronica gave a quick nod in return.

"Well, that sounds wonderful," Veronica gushed, smiling serenely down at them. "May I help?"

Laughter erupted from Evanora and Poppy, and for the first time that day, she found herself smiling genuinely.

"I am *not* that poor with a needle, dear ladies," Veronica added in mock defense, and it only made them laugh harder.

"No, my darling, no," Evanora placated, still giggling. "Your talents simply lie elsewhere is all."

Veronica felt lighthearted and grateful as the three of them continued jesting for the next few minutes, but as soon she left them to their task, her heart sank once more.

Resting her back against the door, she took a moment to look around at her home. The stately mansion had once been so clean and bright that the very floors would glimmer. Now, they were dull, scuffed with shoe marks and scratches from furniture being moved and sold. The walls, which were once decorated with her father's art collection, now hung bare, and the grand chaises and rugs that once graced their sitting room were now in someone else's home.

They had sold it all. At first, the proceeds were used to pay the servants, but as she stepped into her brother's role as Lord



Chester, Veronica discovered that they were indebted to many other people. It was now all gone, and there was no money left for Poppy's dowry, let alone for a new dress.

As a lady, Veronica had not been raised to deal with or even understand finances. Learning how to care for their household had been difficult and daunting, but she had been determined to save her family's reputation. Now, however, she knew harsh realities that she wished she did not, and she longed for her old life.

Two years ago when it was her time to have her debut, Veronica had everyone in the *ton* convinced that she would be named the Season's Diamond. With her chocolate-brown curly hair, exotic hazel eyes, creamy complexion, and voluptuous frame, she had caught the eyes of several eligible bachelors and had been the envy of every other lady coming out that Season.

But when the rumors started to spread about Damian's tryst with Alice, things drastically changed. Another lady was named the Season's Diamond. The gentlemen once calling on her for tea suddenly disappeared, and the Season left her unwed and unhappy.

As the years passed by, Veronica thought the rumors would go away, but they only grew worse. She had begged her brother to take responsibility, to marry Alice, but he refused. Even when Maxwell Clifford, the Duke of Kendrick and Alice's older brother, appeared at Chester Manor and challenged Damian to a duel, he still refused.

Veronica squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her temples as the memory of that night came back to her. Though she had been forbidden to do so, she had snuck out of the house and

followed the two men to the dueling grounds. Well hidden, she had watched her brother lose in the most shameful fashion and then run away.

She had tried to return home before him, to stop him and talk to him, but by the time she had arrived, Damien had cleaned out the family's coffers and vanished. It was then she realized that Damien did not care for anyone in the world except for himself and that they were going to be on their own if they wanted to survive.

Shaking the awful memories and self-pity off, Veronica took in a long breath, raised her head, and headed toward the kitchens. Crying over the past was not going to get them anywhere, and there were responsibilities to carry out. For now, she was going to push her family's scandal out of her head and focus on preparing something for her sister and aunt to eat.

In the kitchens, she pulled down one of the pots and poured water into it. Boiled eggs and toast were all she knew how to make so far, and to be honest, they did not have enough money for much else. It was far from the glamorous meals that once came out of the Wallace kitchens, but it was better than nothing.

Veronica was stacking wood into the oven when Rory, the one footman who had refused to leave their family, appeared at the back door.

"Here, My Lady, please let me help you," the young man implored, moving quickly to take the flint from her.

Veronica smiled at him thankfully as she dropped the flint into his hands and moved out of his way.

“Surely you are not having eggs and toast again, My Lady?” Rory asked as he quickly set the wood inside the oven ablaze.

Veronica laughed, a blush coloring her cheeks. She sat down wearily at the small kitchen table, her eyes avoiding his.

“I am afraid so,” she replied meekly, feeling ashamed. “I have not a hand for much else.”

Rory turned from the oven and gave her a pitying look.

“There now, do not worry, My Lady. Things will get better soon.” He grabbed the basket he had carried in and held it out to her. “Here, me mum got a good bargain from the fishmonger. She fried you up a few pieces of trout. Made some nice beans too. It will all go nicely with your eggs and toast.”

After a day of holding in every ounce of her emotions, Veronica felt a few disgraceful tears trickle down her cheeks as she took the offered food.

“There now, My Lady, easy does it,” Rory comforted, looking at her in exasperation.

Veronica quickly dabbed her damp face with her tattered handkerchief and forced a thin smile.

“Of course, you are right. Things *will* get better,” she uttered, her voice tight with emotion. “Please tell your dear mother we send our thanks. For you and the vittles.”

Rory assured her he would. Then, with nothing more to say or do, he bid her goodbye and let himself out quietly. Once he was gone, Veronica put her head in her hands and sobbed.

*You better be dead, Damien. You better be dead, or I swear you will be the next time I see you.*

## CHAPTER TWO



*M*axwell Clifford, the Duke of Kendrick, awakened to the sensation of soft lips trailing over his abdomen. Instead of pleasure though, Maxwell felt a surge of annoyance at being touched. As if that was not enough, pain began to bloom behind his cobalt blue eyes as he was pulled from his sleep. Opening his eyes, he saw the two beauties he had brought to bed the night before hovering above him, kissing his chiseled body.

Only now they were not so beautiful, and the fun they had in his bed a scant few hours ago seemed dull and ordinary. He sat up abruptly, his sudden motion pushing the women backward and away from him. One gasped and pouted as he did so, while the other swallowed her disappointment and looked at him with seductive eyes.

“Will you not go for one more round with us, Your Grace?” the second woman pleaded, trying to make her voice as seductive as possible.

It made him cringe with regret and only darkened his already bad mood. His head was pounding from all the whiskey he had drunk the night before, his bladder was full, his thirst was great, and his body and his chamber reeked of a horrible odor.

He wanted privacy, a bath, and a good breakfast before having another drink.

“I am afraid that will not be possible, Ladies,” he replied, his tone curt and dismissive as he pulled his trousers up over his chiseled legs and backside. “If you do not know the way out, Andrew here will escort you.”

Without taking another look at them, Maxwell opened his chamber door and strode outside. As always, his valet, Andrew, was waiting for him with a tray of breakfast.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Andrew greeted, bowing his gray-wigged head to Maxwell as he offered the tray.

“Good morning, Andrew,” Maxwell returned curtly, plucking the tray from his valet’s hands. “Have one of the maids draw a bath for me in one of the guest rooms, will you? And have the laundress and chambermaid go into my chamber as soon as you get those doves out of here. The whole room needs a good airing out and cleaning.” Andrew’s bushy eyebrows shot up good-naturedly, and he grinned at the Duke.

“Of course. And I thought you might be requesting a bath, Your Grace, so there is a hot one already waiting for you down the hall with a fresh change of clothes.”

Maxwell sighed. “Andrew, you are the first good thing that has happened to me today,” he said wittily, taking a step toward the bath.

“Happy to be so, Your Grace. But if I may, you might not want to take too long. There is a lady for you in the drawing room. And, no, she is *not* like the ladies I will be removing from your room.”

Maxwell’s brow furrowed.

“What lady?” he demanded.

“She would not give me her name, Your Grace. But she also refused to leave. Whomever she is, she is quite adamant about seeing you.”

Maxwell growled as he let out a breath through his nose. “*Fine,*” he bit out at last, “tell her I will be down shortly.” He gestured toward his chamber with his head. “Now, get them out.” Andrew went to obey his master’s orders as Maxwell marched angrily down the hall and into the guest chamber where his bath was waiting. After setting the tray down, he downed a cup of black tea in one gulp and quickly refilled it from the teapot. The pounding in his temples began to lessen, and he shoved a thick slab of bacon into his mouth in one big, predatory bite. Once he swallowed it, he downed another cup of tea, put a sausage in his mouth like a cigar, and slid down into the bath. He bit down on the sausage one bite at a time as he scrubbed his body vigorously, washing away the debauchery of the night before. It was becoming a daily ritual for him, one he was beginning to detest.

Things had become so twisted when Alice’s scandal had broken loose. He did not regret defending her honor for a single moment, but it seemed that ever since he had, his life had spiraled. Now, Maxwell only felt himself grow angrier and more hedonistic by the day. He had become willing to try

anything to drown out the intense feelings he had been forced to keep bottled inside.

After all, it would not be proper for the Duke of Kendrick to show any emotion but competent authority. He had a family to look after, to protect, and he had done so quite vigilantly since his father had died. Being burdened with the mantle of Duke at the young age of four-and-ten, Maxwell had done everything in his power to look after his mother and sister. And yet, no matter how much he had tried, he had still led them all here. To this damned scandal.

He should have watched Alice closer. He should have bloodied Damian's face the moment he found out the wretch was playing with his sister's honor. Maxwell had not wanted to hurt him at first, as Damian had been his friend once. But now, he was the cause of all of their ruin, and all the Duke wanted to do was make him pay.

After nearly scrubbing off an entire layer of skin in agitation, Maxwell dried himself off and quickly dressed. He ran an agitated hand through his still-damp black hair and gave himself a look in the mirror. It had been too long since he had trimmed his hair or shaved his beard. His thick, wavy hair was now almost to his shoulders, and his beard covered up his hard jawline, but he did not look horrible.

Once ready, he made his way down the grand staircase and into the drawing room, eager to see who the mystery lady was. When he opened the door, his anger died away, and he was shocked and amused to find that of all people, he was looking at the one and only Lady Veronica Wallace.

“My, my, it seems you did not wait long to follow your brother's footsteps into impropriety,” Maxwell drawled, his



foul mood suddenly dissipating as he eyed up his enemy's younger sister.

Veronica was in a light-green satin dress from the last Season, the fabric hugging the curves of her body perfectly before fanning out in a wide skirt. At her bust, she wore a diamond brooch, which drew the eye to her corseted breasts. After quickly looking her over, he realized it was the only piece of jewelry she wore. That, along with the last Season's dress, told him what he already knew—her brother's actions had brought her ruin as well.

Maxwell felt his heart swell with sympathy for her. Veronica had been set to be the most eligible lady of her Season, but her brother had destroyed such prospects for her with his careless behavior.

Veronica attempted to give him an icy glare, but it made him smirk. In his opinion, her warm hazel eyes could never hold such frost. He did, however, appreciate her bravery and courage.

“And what do you mean by that, Your Grace?” she asked with venom in her tone.

Maxwell's eyebrows shot up in amusement, and he waved a hand around the room. “A Lady, unattended at that, visiting a bachelor's home,” he mused, still smirking, “a bachelor who, of all people, wants your brother hanged.” Veronica rolled her eyes and began to walk toward him.

“Are you telling me, Your Grace, that I did not just see two ladies of the night being led out by your valet only twenty or

so minutes ago?” Her voice was soft and sweet, and yet, he still felt the biting sting of the jab.

She looked up at him challengingly, and he tilted his head sideways as he looked back down at her with just as much fervor.

“Touché,” he said at last. “But, what of the *other* issue?”

The anger in Veronica’s gaze vanished and was replaced with shame. To his surprise, Maxwell felt a sliver of guilt slide chillingly down his spine.

Veronica’s tense frame seemed to grow inward, and her shoulders sagged as she sighed in exhaustion. “I know what my brother did was awful, and I am with you on finding him and making him pay,” she admitted sorrowfully, looking at him with pleading eyes.

For a moment, Maxwell’s breath caught as the pain in her gaze penetrated his armored heart, and he had to look away as she continued to speak.

“I cannot imagine how Alice is feeling. First to think you are going to wed, then to be carried off out of the country in shame... it truly is every woman’s nightmare. And I am so, so ashamed that it was my brother that made that nightmare come true for her.”

The Duke could hear the pain and truth in Veronica’s voice, and he knew that this woman, his sister’s friend, had nothing to do with her brother’s awful actions. She also didn’t know

about the other terrible things her brother was responsible for. Still, seeing her reminded him of how close their families used to be, how close he and Damian used to be, and that painful reminder had him walking over to the liquor cart.

He picked up a decanter of whiskey and uncorked it, the sound echoing through the room.

“Is it not a little early for a drink?” Veronica asked, looking at him in concern.

Maxwell shrugged. “I have found it is never too early when tragedy is involved,” he stated matter-of-factly. “You are twenty now, and thanks to your brother’s actions, you will probably end up a spinster like your aunt, and even penniless. That is quite the tragedy, Lady Veronica. I would say you should be having a drink with me.”

Veronica chuckled bitterly and, to his surprise, said, “Well, when you put it like that, I will have whatever you are having.”

Maxwell looked up at her, grinning deviously.

“As you wish, My Lady.”

He poured their drinks and waved Veronica over to the large couch in front of the fireplace.

“Now, tell me why you are here, Veronica.”

Veronica took the offered glass and took a seat on the edge of the couch, her posture tense.

“First, I want to say thank you for not punishing me for my brother’s actions. You are the first member of the *ton* that has deemed me worthy to speak to in weeks.” Her eyes dropped to the glass in her hand as a blush rose on her cheeks. “It seems that since my brother is not here to accept his punishment, they have decided that it is Poppy and I that will have to bear the brunt of it.”

Maxwell’s brow furrowed.

“You? You and Poppy had nothing to do with that,” he said flatly, shaking his head in disgust. “God, people can be so daft sometimes.”

Veronica appeared to laugh, but Maxwell was sure he had seen her wipe a tear from her eye.

“I have people looking for him, you know,” he added, leaning against the mantle as he swirled the whiskey in his glass.

Veronica looked at him quizzically as he turned the subject more toward Damian.

“Why? Is that not what you wanted, Your Grace? For him to be gone?”

Maxwell was silent as he finished his drink, his eyes not meeting Veronica’s as he let the alcohol swirl over his tongue

before swallowing it. In truth, he did not have just one answer, and now, another one was just added to the list.

Finally, he simply replied, "I have my reasons."

Another bitter laugh escaped Veronica's lips before she took a sip of her whiskey.

"Well, whatever the reason, can you at least let me at him first?" she requested ruefully. "There are quite a few things I would like to make him *really* pay for."

Maxwell smirked, leaned down, and clinked his glass against hers.

"Absolutely. A man cannot just turn his back on his family like that. We can take turns torturing him," he offered, his voice dipping into sarcasm.

They shared a wicked smile before the Duke strolled over to the liquor cart and poured himself another drink.

"So, you need my help. Aside from finding your worthless brother, I cannot honestly think of anything more I can do for you. What is it that you think I can do?"

Veronica cleared her throat, emptied her glass, and rose to join him by the liquor cart.

“My brother is ruined, and, as you so gently pointed out earlier, my prospects of becoming a spinster are higher than that of me becoming a wife.” Her eyes narrowed slightly as she looked at him, and Maxwell winced at his own brashness. He gave her an apologetic smile, and she continued, “But Poppy is untouched, innocent. She will be eight-and-ten, and it is still her right to be debuted into Society. She deserves her birthright and the ability to come out as a Lady of the *ton*. She still has a chance of finding a husband, of finding happiness.”

“Having a husband and having happiness rarely go hand in hand from what I am told,” Maxwell scoffed. “But you are right. Poppy is a lovely young lady, well brought up despite your brother’s scandal. She does, indeed, deserve a chance at a comfortable life. So what are you asking? For me to be her sponsor? A benefactor?”

Excitement illuminated Veronica’s eyes, and she nodded her head.

“Precisely. And I will do whatever is necessary to see that your investment is returned, I swear to you,” she promised, looking up at him eagerly. “I will even be a maid if you need me. I really should not be trusted with food, but other than that, I have learned to do just about everything.”

Maxwell chuckled as he shook his head. “I am afraid I am not in need of a new maid.” His eyes slowly roamed over her body.

He remembered two years ago when it was Veronica’s turn to debut. She had been so beautiful—and still was—and had caught everyone’s eye, including his own.

Then, word of Damian's relations with Alice got out, and the man the Duke had called a friend turned out to be the scoundrel that ruined everything. Both Alice and Veronica's chances of a good match had been dashed. Now, Alice was hiding, licking her wounds in Scotland, and Veronica was left to take charge of her failing household.

It was a shame, really. Unlike the other boring, chattering ladies of the *ton*, Veronica had spirit and humor. She was a woman of depth and character, and her charm, mixed with her beauty, would have made her an incredible wife.

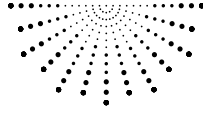
Marriage for Maxwell, however, was looking to be more like a noble obligation to the Crown, and he had decided to postpone it as long as possible. He detested the idea of being tied to a person he did not know or like and found the whole act of marriage more contractual than anything.

An idea began to form as Maxwell thought of his missed opportunities, Veronica's situation, and his growing boredom with the usual velvet ladies he was taking to his bed.

His eyes lit up as he took in her pouty lips, doe-like eyes, and rosy cheeks. She looked so soft, so delicate. Yet, he knew by her silver tongue that she was able to hold her own. There was a willful spirit behind those innocent eyes, and it called to him.

"I may have a better idea," he murmured, his deep voice laced with seduction.

## CHAPTER THREE



Heat spread through Veronica's veins as Maxwell's blue eyes seemed to glow as he looked at her. Out of her brother's friends, the Duke had always been one of her favorites, even with his somewhat abrasive demeanor. Even as a boy, Maxwell had been rough with everyone except her. In fact, she was most likely one of the very few people around to see his softer side.

Veronica suddenly remembered one particular day shortly after the late Duke of Kendrick's death. The boys had been playing some yard game while she, Alice, and Poppy were having tea on the flagstones at the Clifford country estate.

Everything had been going fine on that lazy summer day. Then, suddenly, a fight had broken loose, and Maxwell had seemed to throw blows at anyone foolish enough to come near him. Veronica never discovered the reason behind the fight but remembered running to Maxwell, ignoring all propriety and pulling him off of the other boys.

The Duke had rounded on her so angrily, his eyes burning with rage. But when he had seen her, he had stopped. She could see the sadness, the heartache... the pain of losing his father, and she nodded with silent understanding. He had let her lead him away, and they had spent the rest of that afternoon in the



meadow, his head resting on her lap as she stroked his hair. Neither of them had spoken, and they had only watched the clouds until they were called in for supper.

Now, as a woman, her mind and body began to feel a different type of connection to him. Hope, curiosity, excitement, and perhaps, a slight bit of intimidation filled her, as Maxwell's sudden change of demeanor had her wanting to know more.

"I am listening," she said, meeting his gaze coldly.

Maxwell's chiseled lips curled into a seductive smile as he moved around the liquor cart and slowly made his way toward her. Veronica felt a shiver move up her spine as his predatory gaze suddenly made her feel like a rabbit hunted by a wolf. Without realizing it, she began to step backward with each step he took forward.

Heat pooled in her abdomen when Maxwell's fingertips reached out and gave her a gentle push, and she gasped as her back came in contact with the wall. Suddenly, the air became incredibly warm, too warm, and her dress felt bothersome and constricting. Unwittingly, her gloved hand went to rest above her quickening heartbeat as she nodded.

"What are you willing to do?" he asked, his tone husky and thick as he moved a finger to brush a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"Anything to help Poppy," she replied earnestly, shivering deliciously at the small touch. A small voice begged her to remember propriety, but Veronica felt too close to securing her sister's future to stop now. "As long as she is wed to someone

of nobility by the end of the Season, I will give you whatever you want.”

Maxwell’s gaze had followed her hand to her chest, but his eyes rose to hers as she said this. A deep rumble of approval came from his throat. His fingers, which were still hovering over her face, reached out and softly began to stroke her jaw. Heat blazed over the little trails his fingertips left, and Veronica had to bite her lip to stop the small moan that wanted to erupt from her throat.

“What are you doing, Your Grace?” she asked in a whisper, looking at him imploringly.

Veronica’s heart was racing with a mixture of emotions as she felt heat spike through her abdomen. It was a new and strange reaction, the way her body was reacting to Maxwell’s attentions. His gaze was full of heat, concentration, like a predator stalking its prey. She could feel the danger swirling with seductive curiosity, and she suddenly wondered what exactly it was that she had gotten herself into.

“I will sponsor your sister,” Maxwell began.

His fingertips trailed down her jaw, over the sensitive flesh of her neck, and then laced around her throat snugly. Veronica’s eyelids fluttered shut as he squeezed ever so gently, not at all endangering her breathing, but still making her breathless all the same.

“I will make sure she is in the finest fabrics, that she receives an invitation to every social event, that she is properly supervised, and see that she is matched well by the end of the

Season... *if* you will be my mistress for the Season,” he finished.

Veronica’s eyes flew open as she snapped out of the euphoric spell Maxwell had weaved around her, and she looked at him in disbelief. It was true that she would probably never marry and that she would follow in her aunt’s footsteps, but up until that very moment, she had not thought about what that meant in terms of other relationships with men. Not only that, but if she were to be caught, all that she worked for to secure Poppy’s future would be for nothing. And this time, it would not be Damian’s actions that ruined them, but her own.

“I... I could not,” she stammered, shaking her head as she licked her lips, suddenly feeling very parched.

Veronica pressed her back further against the wall. But with nowhere to go, Maxwell only leaned in closer, his head dipping to the curve of her neck, right above where his hand rested.

“You could,” he murmured, his lips placing soft kisses on her neckline.

Veronica gasped, the new sensation sending waves of pleasure through her body. As if her body was moving on its own, she felt herself press against him, wanting more of his seductive touch.

“I could show you things, Veronica. Wonderful, incredible things that you could never find in a marriage bed,” Maxwell coaxed, his deep voice sending new, tiny shockwaves through her.

Suddenly, his lips stopped their tender kisses, and she felt his teeth nip at her neck, making her gasp once more.

“What if we are seen?” she asked anxiously, fighting through the fog of arousal to seek rationality. She looked up at him pleadingly. “My family cannot bear any more scandal, and yours would not handle it well either.”

A gentleness came over Maxwell’s heated gaze, and he shook his head.

“I assure you our agreement will be honored with the utmost discretion,” he promised her sincerely. “I will not allow any more scandal to fall upon you or myself. *But*, if you are already damned to your position and I am already damned to mine, why don’t we make the most of it?”

Veronica searched desperately for more logical reasons to refuse his proposal, but his seductive voice, gentle touch, and witty arguments were making it impossible. She was sure that it was only propriety and fear of further scandal that was making her pause.

In truth, she *wanted* to give in. Everything he said was true, and she knew in her heart of hearts that she did not want to end up alone like her aunt. She wanted to feel something, *anything*, other than her crushing responsibility. She wanted to know, even if it was just for a brief moment in time, what it was like to be wrapped up in love and passion.

“All right, yes,” she gasped at last as his kisses continued.

Her body felt weak and pliant as his arm slipped around her small waist while the other came up to cradle the back of her head. Suddenly, Maxwell's lips left her neck, and he pulled back, his eyes blazing with arousal as he looked at her.

"Say it," he commanded softly as he held her tightly against him.

Veronica's tongue darted out, moistening her lips. Then, she bit her bottom lip tensely. As she did so, Maxwell's burning gaze bore down on her, silently demanding her to obey.

"I will be yours," she whispered at last.

Maxwell's mouth was on hers before she could finish her words, his lips claiming her first kiss in a fervent and possessive manner. Veronica's eyes fluttered shut as arousal shot through her veins, making every single inch of her flesh come alive with excitement. Steadily, his kiss grew deeper and more demanding as he coaxed her lips to part so that his tongue could slide over hers, and she whimpered as he laid his claim.

Soon, everything but Maxwell's touch fell away, and all she felt, all she knew, was him. The fear, the worry about what the *ton* would say, the stress of her sister's debut, the woe of their financial state, it was all gone. Happiness—even a new feeling of satisfaction—filled her heart. When he stopped and pulled away, it was slow, guiding even.

For a moment, Veronica felt confused and dizzy as she took in a deep breath, and she looked up at him in astonishment.

“A wonderful decision,” Maxwell murmured, his breath shaky.

Gently, he let her go and took a step back. He ran a hand through his hair and fixed his jacket as he eyed her possessively.

“Now, let’s get you taken care of, shall we?”

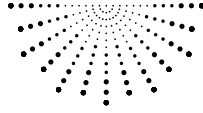
“Is that it?” Veronica asked, feeling a little confused and slightly disappointed.

Maxwell shot her a heated gaze, his eyes once more roaming over her figure.

“For now,” he replied with a coy smile on his face as Andrew walked into the room.

Turning his attention to his valet, Maxwell ordered a carriage to be readied to take Veronica home.

## CHAPTER FOUR



Less than an hour later, Veronica was sent home in one of the Duke's finest carriages. Not only that, but after speaking to his steward, Maxwell had ensured that a cart of food, linens, and other much-needed items were sent with her, along with a cleaning maid and a kitchen maid. He had also assured her that he would be hiring more staff for her and her house starting the next day.

Still in shock, Veronica sat in stunned silence on her way home. Her mind and body were still feeling the erotic ministrations of Maxwell's skilled hands and lips. Absentmindedly, she raised her fingertips to her neck, stroking the trail his kisses had made there as she stared out the carriage window, and she felt a swift surge of heat travel through her all over again.

Veronica was still slightly dazed when she arrived home, but she quickly put her thoughts away when she saw Evanora and Poppy come prancing excitedly down to the carriage. A big, genuine smile spread across her face as the driver opened the door for her and helped her down, and the moment her feet touched the ground, Poppy squeezed her in a tight embrace.

"What is all of this?" Poppy asked excitedly, beaming at Veronica with hopeful eyes.

“I have found us a benefactor for the Season,” Veronica announced triumphantly, squeezing her little sister’s hand.

Evanora’s eyes grew wide with astonishment, then narrowed in suspicion as she looked at the family crest on the carriage.

“This is one of the Duke of Kendrick’s carriages,” she pointed out, looking at the crest and then at Veronica.

“Yes, it is,” Veronica agreed briskly, turning slightly so that her aunt would not see the sudden blush on her cheeks.

“*The Duke of Kendrick* wants to sponsor Poppy’s debut?” Evanora asked skeptically, shaking her head in disbelief.

Veronica could see her aunt’s mind turning and looking for the logic as to why *he* of all people would help them. Soon, Evanora would be asking questions Veronica did not want to answer, and she would be damned if she would let anyone know what she had given up to accept the much-needed help.

Putting on a confident air, Veronica turned back to her aunt. “Unlike the other imbeciles of the *ton*, His Grace can see beyond the petty effects of gossip and see that Poppy and I are innocent in Damian’s schemes. In fact, he is determined to prove to the *ton* that Poppy and I had nothing to do with Damian’s actions.”

Veronica said the words confidently as she looked Evanora in the eye, but the older woman still looked at her suspiciously. Before her aunt could reply, Poppy squealed with delight, and



Veronica and Evanora turned to see what she was looking at. To her utter shock, Veronica saw a second carriage pulling up behind the one she had just stepped out of.

Maxwell stepped out of his carriage with a big smile and bowed low as he kissed Poppy's hand.

"Lovely to see you, Lady Poppy," he greeted jovially.

"Your Grace!" Veronica exclaimed, completely lost on what was happening. "What on *Earth* are you doing here?"

Maxwell winked at her wickedly before striding over to her aunt.

"Miss Snyder, you look as effervescent as possible," Maxwell praised, putting off answering Veronica's question. "My mother would be most displeased with me if she found that I did not extend her well wishes to you."

Maxwell kissed Evanora's hand, and upon seeing her aunt's expression, Veronica was able to quell her fears of impropriety. With a youthful blush, Evanora welcomed the Duke graciously to their home.

Seemingly satisfied with Evanora's response, Maxwell turned his attention to Veronica. "I wanted to see for myself what type of work needed to be done," he replied diplomatically once he was through with his greetings.

His quick, heated glance at Veronica told her to let him take command, but she struggled to do so.

“But Your Grace, surely you will find that you can take care of matters from your—”

Maxwell interrupted her, cutting not only her words but her sense of command over her house, “Do not worry, Lady Veronica, I know well what I am doing. I have taken the liberty of having an appointment scheduled for the three of you at the Modiste this afternoon to get you some stylish gowns for the Season. I have arranged for a cordwainer to meet you at the Modiste as well, along with a jeweler.”

Veronica, Poppy, and Evanora’s eyes grew bigger as he continued,

“Regarding engagements, I have already spoken to the Howards, the Greensleys, and the Broadwoods. They have extended invitations to your household for dinner and tea. Once certain members decide that you are to be graced with welcoming arms back into the *ton*, we will surely have you all up with the Season.”

Veronica stared at him in shock, her mouth agape as Poppy once more squealed in delight and thanked the Duke for his generosity. In the far-off distance, she heard her sister’s many thanks, but she felt out of touch with what had just happened. Veronica had assumed that he would pay for Poppy’s new dresses and assure her invites for the Season, but she had not assumed that his sponsorship would extend to her, or their aunt Evanora. It all seemed too good to be true.

“Your Grace, that is *most* generous, but not at all necessary,” Veronica spoke up in protest, lifting her hand to stop him. “Though I thank you kindly for the offer, I am quite content with my wardrobe and also perfectly capable of resuming responsibility for our house! Aunt Evanora will chaperone Poppy at the Modiste whilst I take care of returning things to order.”

Maxwell’s left eyebrow perked up at her defiant response, and he smiled in amusement as he calmly adjusted his black brocade jacket.

“My dear *lady*, when I agree to take care of an issue, I do so completely. I understand very well how to run a house, and since you are now my responsibility, I must see that everything gets back to where it needs to be.” He paused, his gaze softening only slightly. “Including you, Lady Veronica. You are a Lady of an esteemed station. It is time to return there and let someone else take care of these matters. Now go, the Modiste will be expecting you soon. And I am more than capable of finding my way around the accounts.”

Maxwell’s tone was gentle but also absolute, and Veronica realized that he would not be swayed. She struggled with the conflict of newly-earned independence and the urge to lay her burden down, but she finally acquiesced to his request.

“Very well,” she sighed.

At her side, Poppy, who had been watching the exchange tensely, also sighed and then giggled with delight. “Oh, is this not wonderful, Veronica?” she asked giddily, taking her sister’s hands into her own. “We shall be fitted in all of the fineries we deserve. Oh! There is nothing that can stop us now! All will be well now that we have a man to care for us.”

Veronica cast a quick, hard glance at Maxwell as he smirked in triumph, then turned her attention back to Poppy. Despite her insecurities, she smiled back at her little sister.

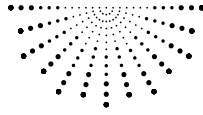
“An utter dream come true,” Veronica replied sweetly, hurrying toward the carriage. “Now come, let’s get you a new dress!”

Once they were all settled in the carriage and on their way to the Modiste, Poppy turned her attention to the view out of the carriage window as she chatted excitedly about the dresses she wanted to buy.

As her little sister rambled on, Veronica caught their aunt’s anxious look, and she put a comforting hand on the elderly woman’s leg. “There is no need to worry, Aunt Evanora,” she whispered so that Poppy could not hear, “I have everything under control.”

To Veronica’s surprise, Evanora let out a chortle and looked at her with knowing eyes. “Of course you do, Darling. Of course you do.”

## CHAPTER FIVE



*“Although it had seemed for quite some time that the Wallace Ladies would be forever banished from our polite Society due to Lord Chester’s unconscionable actions toward Lady Alice Clifford, it was discovered this week that the banished sisters have not only made a re-entrance into Society, but they are doing so with a most rather astounding benefactor. Of all the Lords and Ladies of the Court that could have lent a shielding hand to the outcast duo, it was none other than the elder brother of Lady Alice Clifford, The Duke of Kendrick, that came to their aid.*”

*“Though this author did not have the privilege of witnessing such patronage with their own eyes, several sources have confirmed hearing The Duke of Kendrick explain at a dinner party that he would not hold innocent ladies accountable for the poor actions of their irresponsible brother. It would also seem that the Duke of Kendrick’s timing is quite perfect, as this author has discovered that the young Lady Poppy Wallace is indeed set to come out this Season! However, it would seem that the Duke has no interest in throwing his card in for the young Lady Veronica’s hand, and will, in fact, be acting as a paternal figure to help her choose a good husband. That would mean, dear ladies of the ton, that the one seemingly passionate yet stoic Duke of Kendrick is still looking for a worthy bride—”*

Maxwell tapped the heel of his shiny black boot impatiently on the drawing room floor as his eyes continued to jump from the morning papers to the door. After perusing through the gossip sheet, he found that all was in their favor.

It was good news indeed, but it bored him, as he had never intended to be anything but successful in that endeavor. And as for being crowned the most eligible bachelor, it annoyed him, greatly. At one time, he would have thought it an honor, but now, combatting the rush of prim young ladies on top of all of his other responsibilities irritated him to his core. Marriage, he had long ago decided, was not going to be on his schedule anytime soon, despite Society's pressure.

Not that he found all ladies annoying. In fact, he had been surprised to find great amusement in Poppy's company, and he even enjoyed Evanora's too, despite her sometimes suspicious glances at him. As for Veronica, he found her presence both refreshing and addicting.

Everything about Veronica enthralled him. Aside from her beauty, which had him nearly bewitched, her strength and dedication to her family were remarkable, as was her ability to handle herself. Even her stubbornness, he realized, was very appealing.

Too often, he had found himself wondering where she was and what she was doing. It distracted him, slowed him down, and within days, he started spending more time at the Wallace house than at his own home. Even when he was there, he found his mind occupied with the Wallace's affairs and only committed half of himself to his own affairs.

This morning, he had meant to stay to finally deal with the pile of correspondence that had taken over his desk. But instead, he

found himself riding over to the Wallace Estate before it was time to make a proper house call. He told himself it was because Damian's books were such a mess—which they most indeed were.

It had taken a patient tone and guiding hand to assure Veronica that he knew very well what he was doing. Not that he blamed her after everything her brother had done to mess up their accounts.

Maxwell smiled to himself, remembering the first time she saw him in her brother's study.

“Your Grace, *please* allow me to show you the system I developed,” she had implored, her hands wringing together anxiously.

She had lunged to grab the papers he had just organized, but he had caught her by the waist to stop her.

“Lady Veronica, do try to remember our deal,” he had reminded her, shifting her in his arms so that they were face to face.

She had blushed instantly and had attempted to pull away from him as her eyes went to the open door. Outside, they could both hear the bustling of the new servants, who were getting the much-needed chores done.

“I understand, Your Grace,” Veronica had whispered, her tone tense, “but our deal is temporary, and I must be able to sort through the accounts myself once you are gone.” She had

looked back from the door to him and had pushed at his chest. “Now let me go,” she demanded, “before someone sees us. By all accounts, we must make everyone believe that you are doing this only out of the good grace of your high morals. It will not do for either of us to be caught in a precarious situation.”

With a challenging gaze, Maxwell had shot her a smile, and not only had kept his arm around her but had brought his hand up to caress her face.

“Did you know that my father was an excellent huntsman?” he asked, unperplexed.

Veronica had given him an odd look.

“What has *that* got to do with anything we are discussing at present, Your Grace? Now, unhand me before we get caught!”

“He was one of the best,” he had continued, ignoring her plea, “and before he died, he taught me how to become one as well. You see, hunting is not just about killing your prey and taking your prize. It is about feeling, tracking, using your senses to be more aware of what is going on around you.”

“That is all well and good, Your Grace, but—”

“As it turns out, it is a very useful trick to have in everyday life as well. For example, I know, even without looking out the door, where everyone is and how long it would take them to get here.”



He had released her then and had waved his hand toward the door.

“Tell me, is there a maid at the corner of the left hall carrying rags and slowly making her way downstairs? And to the right, about halfway between here and the end of the hall, is there a crew of laundry maids and livery boys putting up new curtains? I would say, approximately five servants in total.”

Veronica had shot the Duke a curious look but had gone to the door to investigate. It had been hard for him not to gloat when he had heard her gasp softly and then confirm his hypothesis.

“How did you know that?” she asked in awe.

Maxwell had given her an assuring smile.

“Because I am perceptive. Perhaps now more than ever after this little scandal disgraced both of our families. I need perception to protect my reputation, but I also need it to sort out this quagmire of accounts. You did admirably with untangling the mess Damien left, but the problem is way beyond what you have attempted. I need you to trust that I can do this, Lady Veronica. I gave you my word that I would restore your household, and now, you must let me take over the affairs fully.”

Veronica had relaxed a little, and when he had held his hand out to her, she had taken it. He pulled her to him once more and kissed the back of her hand as he looked into her eyes. Gently, he had moved his other hand to the back of her neck, caressing the fine hairs there softly, and kissed her. It was not

at all possessive or explosive like the first kiss they shared. Instead, this one had been soft, and comforting.

A sigh of contentment had left Veronica's lips as he kissed her, her entire weight leaning into his embrace. He had held steadily, protectively, until he finished proving his point.

“Our deal may have been spontaneous, but I assure you that every step I take moving forward will be deliberate and well thought out. I assure you, Veronica, I am moving forward with *all* of our plans with the utmost care.”

His display had seemed to calm Veronica's anxiety, and she had agreed to finally stop meddling. Within two days of handling the accounts himself and making a show of having them under his control, he had gained the curiosity of his fellow noblemen at the banks. Once he was able to spread the word that the Wallace sisters were now back in good financial graces, suitors had begun calling on the fair Poppy at tea time and showering her with their affections.

It had delighted the young woman to suddenly be graced with such gentlemanly attention, and she had already found herself smitten with quite a few of her prospects. Even the ladies her age, who had abandoned her not long ago, had returned to welcome her back. Poppy, seemingly with no ill will, had allowed them to take her in again blissfully and was happy to be spending her time once more strolling through the park, shopping, and gossiping about the new social scandals.

Despite her initial doubts, Veronica was soon beyond happy that her sister was being welcomed once more with open arms into the *ton* and that their plans had worked. However, Maxwell could see the tension in her eyes when she looked at him at times, as if she was nervous about holding up her end

of the deal. He had to admit, in some dark place in his mind, that he had pondered briefly if their bargain was his twisted way of getting back at Damian for what he had done to poor Alice.

It had taken him no time at all to realize that was not true, however, as he was reminded of how much he had enjoyed Veronica's company when they were young. She was stubborn, beautiful, funny, an avid reader, and an excellent conversationalist. He often found himself wondering who she would be married to if her brother hadn't ruined her chances. In a twisted way, though, he felt slightly thankful that no one had married her, for he found he very much enjoyed their agreement.

Even though it had been nearly six days since they had struck their deal, Maxwell decided to take his time with her. After all, Veronica was no well-seasoned tart or a flirty maid like his previous partners. She was a lady, and she deserved to be treated as such.

## CHAPTER SIX



Growing impatient, Maxwell pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time once more. Just as he read that it was five after six, he heard the familiar pattern of Veronica's footsteps, and he smiled in satisfaction as he snapped his watch shut. She walked in just as he rose from his chair, and he felt an instant stirring in his loins as he looked her up and down hungrily.

Her trip to the Modiste had gone well, and dressed in the newest fashion and fabrics, she practically glowed in her beauty. Today, she had chosen a white gown with an array of large, bright, and highly detailed embroidered flowers stitched on it and matching shoes. Her heavy, dark curls had been put up and arranged in a lovely chignon, thanks to her new lady's maid, and was bedecked with a delicate jeweled comb. To accompany it, she wore a matching necklace and earrings. It was a far cry from the tattered, faded dress she had visited him in, and it suited her greatly.

"You look quite lovely today, Veronica," Maxwell greeted, unable to keep the praise out of his voice.

Veronica's full lips turned up into a sensual smile as she saw him, and she curtsied in greeting. When she looked up at him again, her deep hazel eyes glowed with a bold satisfaction.

“Why, thank you, Your Grace.” She looked him up and down hungrily.

Her soft voice caressed his ears and echoed through him, making his arousal grow. Between his legs, he felt his hardened member throb achingly. Images of him taking her on the breakfast table suddenly flooded his mind, only making it worse.

“I do believe there is a chill in the air this summer morning, My Lady,” he said playfully, striding toward her. “Would you be so kind as to shut the door so we do not catch a cold?”

Veronica smiled coyly in return, her hand pushing the door closed.

“I suppose it would not do for us to get sick before our big outing this evening, Your Grace,” she quipped as he closed the space between them.

“It would be most heartbreaking, for sure,” he murmured before his lips greedily pressed down on hers.

A soft, breathy moan escaped Veronica’s lips as he kissed her, and her fingertips slid up the base of his neck and gripped his hair, pulling him closer to her. Due to her innocence, Veronica had no idea what this did to him, how this tortured him.

Since discovering sex at the age of six-and-ten, Maxwell had been obsessed with it. His yearning for it only grew as he got older, and he committed several years of his life to studying

the art of seduction. Many women had fallen prey to his charms, from ladies to entertainers to maids, but he had never stayed with them for more than a night or two. There were always new conquests, and new women.

And now here he was, knowing a woman for an *entire* week and still not bedding her and moving on. It was a strange twist from his ordinary life of one-night stands, but there was no doubt there was a thrill in the current situation he found himself in.

Begrudgingly, after getting swept up in their moment of passion, Maxwell brought their heated kiss to a slower, more sensual pace. His lips caressed hers softly once, twice, then he finally released her. Veronica looked at him aching as his lips left hers, and he had to fight the urge to give in and kiss her all over again. With trembling hands, he set her gently on her feet and backed away from her, adjusting himself.

“I must admit,” Veronica mused, her eyes glazed with pleasure as she watched him struggle with his passion, “I am enjoying this arrangement much more than I thought. It seems your reputation as a soulless rake is not quite accurate after all.”

Remembering the door, she reached over to unlatch it before taking a shaky step toward the breakfast table. Maxwell smirked as he finished adjusting his clothes. He combed his hand through his hair and then went to the table to pull out her chair for her.

“I am quite happy you have found satisfaction in it so far,” he said coyly. Delicately, he picked up her hand and placed a warm kiss on her knuckles as he looked heatedly into her eyes. “I must warn you though, Veronica, that the man you speak of

still lives inside of me, and when the time comes, I will be more than happy to let him out.”

For a moment, Maxwell wondered if his wordplay was too harsh, that he had let his need speak too much for him. But to his surprise, and pleasure, a wicked, almost challenging smile spread across Veronica’s face.

“Rest assured, Your Grace, that if that part of you ever were to come out, you would have a most difficult time controlling the woman I would become.”

Electricity seemed to snap between them as they shared the charged exchange, but before they could discuss it any further, the sound of heels on the floor heralded the arrival of the rest of the party. They shared a heated glance before Maxwell winked at her, and went to open the drawing-room door.

Poppy and Evanora came floating into the room, their smiles as radiant as their new dresses.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” they said in unison to Maxwell as they curtsied.

“Good morning, dear ladies. I trust you slept well?”

“Quite well, Your Grace,” Evanora replied politely as she took her seat. Her eyes darted between him and Veronica suspiciously. “However, I must admit, it is quite unnerving to have a man in the house once again, especially during such an early hour. Are you sure this is completely appropriate, Your Grace? After everything our families have been through?”

Maxwell's lips twitched as he fought a smile, and he resisted the urge to look at Veronica.

“You are quite right, Miss Snyder. But I am afraid my frequent presence is required. Your nephew, God save him, left your house in a rather ruined state well beyond the *ton*'s perception. If I am to have your family affairs in order before Lady Poppy is to wed, it is imperative that I stay my course of action. Otherwise, this will all be for naught.”

Evanora seemed to struggle with his answer but eventually nodded her head in agreement as she began to wring her hands together.

“Of course, Your Grace, of course. And, if I may say again, how thankful I am that you have seemingly come down on angels' wings to save us from the streets of London.”

“You are quite welcome, Miss—” Maxwell began to reply, but to everyone's surprise, Evanora held up a hand to halt his words. “*But*, as my nieces' guardian and their moral compass, I must urge that you no longer find yourself alone with either of my nieces, Your Grace. It is not good to make them comfortable in single men's company, and I don't want them learning otherwise.”

The matriarch's demand for propriety brought everyone's good mood to a stressful halt, and Veronica and Poppy looked from their aunt to the Duke with apprehension. Although Evanora was not wrong, she had chastised the Duke like she would have chastised a mere peasant boy after being caught. If they had been among other company, her condescending manner



would have been enough to send them into scandal all over again.

Veronica watched as Maxwell's smile faded, and his jaw began to tick in agitation. She had goaded him plenty of times since they made their deal and enjoyed their banter, but this was different. This was a warning. For a moment, Veronica began to envision her entire plan falling apart. If Maxwell was offended, which he had every right to be, he could leave at that very moment and take all of his work with him.

To her surprise, Veronica felt a tinge of disappointment at the idea of no longer having her deal with Maxwell. She had expected him to be hot-headed and demand her payment immediately, but he seemed to take things slow. Now, she found herself curious about him and wanting to know more about the man she found herself secretly indebted to.

Maxwell suddenly let out a long breath that snapped Veronica out of her thoughts and back to the present. She studied his face and felt anxious about not knowing which way his temper would fall.

“You are quite right, Miss Snyder,” Maxwell acquiesced, at last, in a curt and matter-of-fact tone. “In my quest to accomplish my ventures thoroughly, I have discarded propriety. Of course I do not want to teach them that it is all right to be alone with an unmarried man unchaperoned. Could you imagine the dangers?”

Evanora's tense expression eased, and she bowed her head to the Duke. “Thank you for your understanding, Your Grace. I did not mean to offend you or question your honor. I only want the best for both of our families.”

“As do I,” the Duke agreed, turning to look at Veronica. His eyes sparkled with mischief for the briefest of moments before he took on a more resentful expression. “Please do accept my apology, Lady Veronica. I was out of line for not making sure a servant was present when I arrived.”

Veronica bowed her head to him formally, happy that the tense exchange was coming to an end.

After that, the conversation around the table fell into a natural, almost familial rhythm as the four of them broke their fast together. The next topic of the morning, Poppy quickly decided, was the Crandall Ball. After a week of teas and dinners with other members of Society to get them back into good graces, it was time to make a grand show of rebirth at a ball.

At first, Poppy and Veronica had pouted when Maxwell had refused to take them to one immediately, but now they understood the deviousness of his plan. By making them wait, Maxwell had forced the other nobles to look forward to the Wallace sisters’ reentry into polite Society. Now, the talk of the *ton* was their impending arrival at the Crandall estate, and Society was practically begging the sisters to rejoin them.

“What will you be doing today while we get ready, Your Grace?” Poppy asked him curiously after they finished eating.

Maxwell looked at her in a paternal fashion and smiled. She really was a sweet girl, and now that he knew her, he understood why Veronica was so willing to do anything to help secure her sister’s future.

“I am afraid I have to spend most of the day at my estate,” he replied, giving her a pained look before breaking into a playful smile again. “Rest assured though, I will be back in plenty of time to escort you all to the Ball.” He winked at her playfully and added, “I cannot wait to see what beauty you will all unleash on the *ton* tonight. I have no doubt you will look extraordinary.”

After the ladies giggled and bid their goodbyes to him, Maxwell left his seat at the table and began to walk past them. As he did so, Veronica leaned slightly out of her chair, allowing her shoulder to graze his jacket.

“Apologies, Your Grace,” she said innocently, looking up at him with a heated glance.

Maxwell smiled down wolfishly at her as he shook his head.

“It was my mistake, Lady Veronica. I *beg* your forgiveness.”

“Of course,” Veronica practically purred, her eyes sparkling with passion.

Maxwell swallowed the seductive warning he so desperately wanted to give her and left the room without another word.

“Interesting morning, is it not, Veronica?” Evanora asked once they were alone.

Veronica was snapped out of her seductive thoughts and looked at her aging aunt innocently. “Whatever do you mean?” she demanded, feigning naivety.

Evanora chortled as she stirred her tea, then brought the cup up to her lips.

“My eyes may not be able to see as well as they used to, darling girl, but even a blind woman can see what is happening between you two.”

She looked at Veronica pointedly over the edge of her cup as she took a sip of her tea. Veronica tipped her head down in an attempt to hide the blush she felt rising in her cheeks. Then, she stood up and coolly smoothed her gloved hands down the front of her dress. “I assure you, I do not know what you mean, Aunt Evanora,” she said in a matter-of-fact manner as she strode confidently toward the door.

As she did so, her aunt suddenly reached out and snatched her wrist, stopping her. As if knowing she should leave, Poppy rose and silently left the room.

“Be careful, dear,” Evanora warned, looking knowingly up at Veronica once they were alone. “A man like that has a fragile ego. If you break it, he will make you pay.”

*He is already making me pay.*

Veronica felt a shred of guilt over her arrangement. But instead of speaking her mind, she simply smiled politely down at her aunt and patted her hand placatingly.

“I will heed your words carefully, Aunt Evanora. Thank you for your wisdom. But I assure you all is proper. I am a lady, and His Grace is an utmost gentleman. Now, I must go. Our dressmaker will be arriving within the coming hours, and there is much to do before we commit to readying for the ball.”

Free from her aunt’s grip, Veronica walked briskly out of the parlor and toward her chamber. A mixture of emotions swirled through her as she thought of her aunt’s warning: worry about the deal she had struck with Maxwell, guilt over the pleasure she had found in it, and fear that they would be caught.

If they were going to continue this deal, they most definitely would need to be more careful.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



“*L*ucas, when did I get this?”

Maxwell’s jovial mood suddenly darkened as he picked up a letter with his sister’s seal. It had been buried under an assortment of other letters, mostly bills that had been laid in a most unorganized fashion on his desk. It was the first time since he had struck his deal with Veronica that he had been home long enough to fully tend to his affairs, and he was disgusted by the disarray.

Lucas, his new steward, looked at him with terror-filled eyes as his already pale face somehow turned another shade of white. His mouth worked, but it made no sound, and Maxwell wondered if the man was going to give himself a stroke. Pinching the bridge of his nose and letting out a seething breath, the Duke let himself mourn momentarily for Edward, their longtime family steward, who had retired only last month.

“Relax, Man, it is just a question,” Maxwell growled, shaking his head as he tore the letter open. “Go. Fetch me some tea. And tell Andrew I require his presence.”

The steward scurried willingly out of the room, and Maxwell quickly forgot about his frustration with him as he ripped open Alice's letter and read it. Going through it, his mood darkened even further. He discovered that while in Scotland, their mother was trying to persuade Alice to get rid of the baby. She also wrote that now that she was alone without any friends and without any word from Damian, her health was failing rapidly. In her letter, she pleaded for his help, to talk to their mother, to get her to stop... and to find Damian if possible.

Enraged by this, Maxwell picked up a piece of firewood and hurled it violently into the cold, dark fireplace, causing a cacophony of angry sounds to erupt from the stone chamber. Feeling slightly better, he picked up another piece of firewood and had it halfway over his head when Andrew stepped into the room and cleared his throat. Maxwell let the log drop back into the metal bin, and he turned to see Andrew standing by his desk holding a tray of tea and pastries.

"You wished to see me, Your Grace?" Andrew asked, his tone neutral as he set the tray down on the tea table.

Maxwell ran a frustrated hand through his hair, then walked over to his desk and waved a hand over the mess.

"Yes. What is the meaning of all of this? I am gone for a week and this is what happens? Is this new steward still holding onto his mother's apron strings? I want someone else, someone who knows what they are doing. I do not have time for this type of dysfunction!"

Andrew, who was unfazed, simply nodded and joined him at his desk, immediately moving into action to take care of the mess.

“Straight away, Your Grace, straight away,” he said politely. “I will have this in tip-top shape in no time, and I will be sure this time to interview the new steward myself.”

Maxwell took a calming breath and poured himself some tea. He felt his anger begin to cool off as Andrew organized the letters, but the fear for his sister and the stress of running an extra house remained. The Duke had understood the logic of why Alice had left London for Scotland after Damian disappeared, but for many reasons, he wished she had not.

With her being so far away, it was almost impossible to protect her from their mother, whom Maxwell had thought had turned into an evil witch when she had discovered Alice’s predicament. Everything she had attempted to push Alice to do was wicked and self-serving, and it had only further hurt his sister in her delicate state.

Then, of course, there was Poppy, toward whom he was developing a very fraternal love. He did not want to push her, but he also wanted to marry her off soon before any more scandal broke loose. It was vital that tonight she be received well at the ball. However, the sooner his and Veronica’s plan worked, the sooner their little tryst would be over.

Maxwell’s member stirred at the thought of Veronica, but his face set into a hard frown. They had just begun, and the idea of no longer seeing or touching her aggravated him. He was not ready to let her go. Not yet.

“Andrew, I have got an idea,” the Duke announced, suddenly tired of feeling like things were out of his control.



“Yes, Your Grace?” Andrew quickly stopped whatever he was doing to look at His Grace.

Maxwell waved his hand around his study. “You be my new steward. I am juggling too much, and more important matters are demanding my attention. Take over the job here, will you? Pay the bills, send my personal correspondence to the Wallace Estate... all of that. You know how this house runs better than anyone.”

Andrew’s chest puffed out proudly as he nodded his head and strained to hide the smile that was taking over his face.

“Of course, Your Grace,” he said, his voice thick with emotion, “it would be an honor.”

“Very good.” Maxwell clapped the older man on the back. “Now, you take care of all of this, and I will continue to try to clean up this damned mess Damian Wallace made.”



Veronica looked at herself in her mirror, unable to believe the swift and intense change in their household since she had accepted Maxwell’s offer. Her hair, which had once been adorned with nothing more than tattered ribbons and wilted feathers, was now perfectly coiffed and glittered with well-placed, light-blue jewels and diamonds. At her neck hung a collar of silver and jewels artistically designed to look like a bough of magical flowers, and matching earrings that caught the candlelight dangled from her ears.

Her new lady's maid, Anita, was very skilled in mixing cosmetics and had created a smooth, shining shadow for her lids and a perfect rouge for her cheeks and lips which accentuated her natural features beautifully. To top everything up, she had had the Modiste make her dress a matching fan and bag out of ice-blue taffeta.

*If only it mattered.*

A tinge of sadness still clung to Veronica's thoughts, as her spinster status was stark in her mind. Too old to be married now, she knew better than to hope for a gentleman's attentions.

"If I may be so bold, My Lady, you look absolutely astonishing," Anita praised as she put the finishing touches on Veronica's hair.

Using the mirror, Veronica smiled appreciatively at her lady's maid. "Thank you, Anita, that is very kind."

Anita's eyebrows scrunched down as she picked up on Veronica's somber tone. "Is something the matter, My Lady?" she asked, looking over her mistress. "Would you like me to do something different with your hair?"

Veronica laughed softly and shook her head, feeling silly for her sudden urge of self-pity. "Not at all, Anita, it is perfect. No, I just was thinking about my Season. How it came... how it passed. It is a shame a woman only gets one Season to find a match, yet men get their entire lives to choose." She turned her eyes back to the mirror as she took in a long breath and caught the sadness and hint of tears in her reflection. However, she quickly blinked them away and turned to Anita. "Never the

matter though. There is nothing we can do about the past. Poppy will have her perfect Season and a perfect match, and I am *highly* content with that.”

Anita nodded her head obediently and lowered her eyes. “Yes, My Lady, of course.”

“His Grace should be arriving any moment to escort us to the Crandall Ball,” Veronica reminded, swiftly changing the subject and putting on a more regal air. “Please let me know the moment he arrives. I shan’t want to keep him waiting for us long.”

“Of course, My Lady.” Anita nodded, already moving toward the door.

The lady’s maid was only gone but a few seconds before Veronica heard a startled cry followed by an alarmed, “Your Grace! I had not known you had arrived!”

Excitement gathered in Veronica’s lower belly as she quickly stood up and looked at the door. Outside, she could hear Maxwell’s deep tone assuring the maid that all was well and to delay news of his arrival just a moment longer. She shivered in anticipation as she heard his footsteps grow closer, and she could not help the smile that spread across her face when he finally entered her chamber.

Although she had first balked at his offer, Veronica had quickly changed her mind. She had expected Maxwell to be rough, arrogant, and fast with drawing out the details of their bargain. But instead, he had created a deliciously torturous game, one that had made her start to daydream of him, to

yearn for him. At night in bed, she thought of his voice as he whispered in her ear, his lips as he kissed until she was breathless and dizzy, and she felt new, delightful sensations rush over *every* part of her body.

Maxwell's eyes scanned the chamber, and when they finally landed on her, his blue irises darkened lustfully. Slowly, his greedy gaze devoured every inch of her from the tip of her slippers to the top of her head. As he did so, Veronica's temperature spiked, and she felt every part of her body suddenly become sensitive and alive.

"Lady Veronica, you are a vision," Maxwell complimented, his deep voice brimming with approval.

With purposeful strides, he closed the distance between them and bowed as he took her hand. Veronica blushed as she curtsied. She could feel the moist heat of his lips through the silk of her gloves, and it made her tremble deliciously.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she breathed, her own eyes sweeping over him hungrily.

Unlike the disheveled look he had been recently sporting, the Duke had shaved his beard, revealing a strong, chiseled jaw, and had trimmed and styled his hair. As usual, he was dressed in his iconic dark colors. His black brocade jacket hugged his wide, muscular body, as did the matching vest.

Maxwell drew her to him with one hand while his other hand came up to softly stroke the delicate flesh beneath her chin. His eyes commanded her attention, and she looked back at him

willingly as his thumb continued its journey upward and caressed her bottom lip seductively.

“You look... most pleasing as well,” she managed to add.

A slow, seductive smile spread across his face as his eyes searched hers, reaching into the depths of her unspoken desires.

“I believe it is time that I took your payment to another level,” he whispered, his hand caressing her throat, then feathering over her earlobe and settling on the back of her neck. “In fact, I have decided to reside here until Poppy is married. It will make many, *many* things much more convenient.”

The warm, tingling sensation Veronica felt in her belly disappeared entirely, alarm shooting through her as the Duke declared his intentions. She took a step back, looking at him worriedly.

“But, what about the talk of the *ton*? Surely this will only further the ruin of our reputation!” She shook her head. “I will admit that this deal is much more enjoyable than I thought it would be, but you are pushing your luck too far, Your Grace. Just like Aunt Evanora said this morning.”

Maxwell, seemingly unperturbed by her worry, gave her a calming look as he placed his hands on her shoulders. “I understand your worry, Lady Veronica, but I was not lying this morning when I said that handling your affairs is a full hands-on job. I will not spend every night here if that makes you feel better, but I am afraid I will have to on occasion if you want me to continue work on restoring your accounts. As for the

*ton*, it is a simple tale that will do. Two young ladies and their elderly spinster aunt are in need of protection. It's no secret that your brother left a lot of debts. So, it would be very easy for the *ton* to believe that I have moved in simply to stave off any collectors who might take their financial frustrations out on three innocent, unchaperoned women.”

Maxwell's point was solid, and Veronica could not find a means to argue. Though she hadn't told him about it, or anyone for that matter, she had had to deal with a debt collector or two before she struck her deal with him. It had been a most unpleasant experience each time, and the thought of having someone there to deal with that on her behalf seemed most refreshing. Slowly, acceptance and excitement began to curl around her heart. “If that is what you have decided, Your Grace,” she murmured, her heart hammering. “And if you are most certainly going to stay, I look forward to these new lessons you speak of.”

Maxwell began to pull her into his arms, but Veronica took a quick step back and looked at him challengingly.

“But if you do bring ill repute to myself or my name, I swear upon God, the King, and the Queen that I will not let you run away like my brother did. I will come after you with every ounce of scorn I have, and you *will* pay.”

Maxwell groaned as he seized her and drew her in close.

“God! I love it when you threaten me like that. Do it again.”

Veronica let out a wicked chuckle before Maxwell kissed her so deeply that it made her knees weak and her head dizzy.

When he stopped, she was left panting and feeling empty. She swayed on her feet from the force of his lust, but he was quick to steady her, his arms like iron bars of support.

“Damn this ball,” Maxwell growled when he was sure Veronica could stand on her own.

Her took a few paces away from her and turned his back to adjust his trousers. Before he did so, though, Veronica caught a glimpse of the large bulge between his legs, and a wanton curiosity took over her. She took an unconscious step toward him, surprised herself at her boldness, but then quickly took a step back.

“Perhaps we should make haste, Your Grace,” she stammered, regaining her composure.

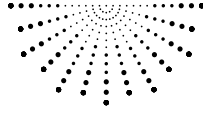
She turned to her mirror, hastily attempting to use her powder to cover the scarlet red blush that had colored her face and bosom. It was bad enough that Evanora suspected them already, and she didn’t want to prove her right.

“I shall wait for you and the other ladies in the foyer, Veronica,” Maxwell stated once he composed himself. He gave her one more heated glance before he opened her door. “I do look forward to our meeting later.”

Veronica’s eyebrow rose coyly as she smiled wickedly.

“As do I, Your Grace,” she said, her voice dripping with seduction.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



“Oh Veronica, you do look so lovely! Aunt Evanora, doesn’t she look lovely?”

Poppy was practically jumping with excitement as they all traveled to the Crandall Ball. They were all riding in the Duke’s largest, most elegant carriage with Maxwell seated inside with them, and her outburst had just broken an uncomfortable silence.

Maxwell had just informed Evanora and Poppy of his intentions of staying at the Wallace Estate until Poppy got married. While Poppy had found no issue with it, Evanora’s face had soured visibly, and the disapproval Veronica had felt from her stare was palpable.

As her aunt looked at her, Veronica suddenly felt exposed and bare.

“She does indeed seem to exude loveliness, my dear,” Evanora agreed sagely, finally taking her disapproving gaze off of Veronica, only to direct it at the Duke.



Poppy, deciding to move on from yet another tense exchange between her aunt and her benefactor, turned to look happily at the Duke.

“Your Grace, doesn’t Veronica look like the perfect diamond?”

Veronica’s eyes, which were locked on Evanora’s disapproving gaze, jumped to her sister in startled shock.

“Poppy, that is quite enough!” she exclaimed, her cheeks aflame with embarrassment. She caught Poppy’s hurt expression and quickly removed the edge from her tone. “I thank you for the compliment, dearest, but let’s remember that *you* are why we are here.”

Poppy pressed her lips together as her gaze jumped from her sister to the Duke.

“It is just not fair, Veronica, that you cannot marry this Season as I can. You are beautiful and accomplished. You deserve to be cared for, too.”

Veronica felt Maxwell look up from his feigned distraction and peer over at her. His gaze felt hot on her skin, boring into her. She wanted so badly to meet his gaze, but she could not. Too much shame was clouding her eyes.

She cleared her throat and put on a polite smile for Poppy. “I am quite content as I am, dear. Rest assured, what would make me happiest is to see you find your match. Now, enough about me. Tonight is about you. Let us talk about how lovely *you* look.”

The rest of the short carriage ride was filled with just that, except for Maxwell, who remained silent and turned back to the window. Only when the carriage stopped did he look at them with an encouraging smile.

“Well, Ladies, let us ensure Lady Poppy has a successful evening, shall we?”

The three of them nodded back, smiling, and as their door was opened, Veronica swallowed the butterflies and fresh hurt feelings and allowed herself to once more be presented to Society. In fact, in the driveway alone, several other families were stepping out of their carriages, all of them looking in their direction with openly curious eyes.

“Your Grace, what a pleasure to see you out in Society again.” The jovial welcome came from their left, and Veronica and her group turned to see Ethan Winsley, the Earl of Salisbury, approaching them with a friendly smile.

As if on cue, Maxwell stepped in front of the women and extended his hand to accept the friendly shake.

“It is a pleasure to be among Society again, Lord Salisbury,” the Duke returned in a pleasant but firm tone. “Might I reintroduce you to Lady Veronica Wallace and Lady Poppy Wallace, and their esteemed aunt Miss Evanora Snyder?” Maxwell gestured toward the three women as they curtsied.

“Lord Salisbury,” the three women said in unison.

“A pleasure.” Lord Salisbury bowed his gray-wigged head politely before turning and waving an arm at the two much younger men approaching him.

“Might I introduce my two sons, Jonathan and Peter?”

Over the next hour, Veronica was swept in how swimmingly hers and Maxwell’s plan was going. Almost immediately after the Earl introduced his sons, Poppy was besieged by interested young gentlemen before they even made it into the ballroom. In fact, the two sisters were barely able to take a step into the great hall before Poppy was being begged for a spot on her dance card.

After Poppy was swept away for her first dance, Evanora was greeted by the other elderly ladies of the *ton* who seemingly no longer cared about her spinster status, and soon, she too was spirited away. For a moment, that left Veronica and Maxwell standing alone, but they were only able to share one furtive glance before his attention was required by yet another nobleman who had missed his presence.

Despite being left to herself, Veronica was brimming with happiness. Poppy, ever the graceful dancer, was stepping merrily to the lively tune of the music as she smiled merrily at her dance partner. Even from where she was standing, Veronica could see that the pair were chatting excitedly and already bonding. It was clear that not only would Poppy be able to marry this Season, but she would also have the luxury of picking her future husband as well.

A familiar tinge of sadness touched Veronica’s heart as she thought once more of her missed chance, but she quickly brushed it aside. Needing a distraction, she pulled her fan from

her clutch and snapped it open with a flick of her wrist so she could cool herself.

“Might you be feeling warm, My Lady? Perhaps a glass of lemonade would refresh you.”

Veronica turned to the masculine voice coming from her left to see Lord Vervain approaching her. Her eyebrows rose in shock as Lavinia’s oldest brother Barnaby, made his way through the crowd with two crystal glasses of lemonade. Like his sister, Barnaby had ice-blue eyes, a straight nose, and full lips. His blond hair was combed back fashionably, and his athletic frame was dressed in the newest fashions.

“Lord Vervain, what a surprise to be acknowledged by your presence.” Veronica curtsied to him briefly as he bowed. She took the offered glass of lemonade and looked at him curiously. “I did not expect your mother and sisters would allow you to talk to me,” she ventured to say, taking a tentative sip of her drink.

Barnaby smirked, his eyes meeting hers respectfully, and he swirled his drink in his hand.

“I do not take commands from my sisters, Lady Veronica, and you should not take commands from them either.” His eyes filled with regret as he took a long sip from his glass. “I heard what they did to you the other week. Awful thing, gossip. It turns the most polite Society into an antagonistic battleground. I hope that you would be so kind as to not associate them with me the same way I do not associate you with the actions of your brother.”

Veronica was touched by Lord Vervain's words and smiled at him genuinely as she felt herself begin to relax.

"Of course, My Lord." She nodded slightly in agreement. "After all, that is only fair."

Lord Vervain smiled back at her widely, took both of their glasses, and handed them to a nearby waiter.

"I am very happy to hear that, Lady Veronica," he said, bowing, as he extended his hand to her, "for I am in the mood for dancing, and I would very much wish for my first dance of the evening to be with you."



Veronica had expected many things to come out of their first evening back into Society. She had expected the estranged stares, the side-mouthed gossip, and, of course, back-handed compliments. What she had not expected, however, was her own favor.

After Lord Vervain had approached her to dance, his pursuit was mimicked by several others. Soon, Veronica found herself twirling around the dance floor with a flock of suitors, giddy from the sudden twist of her fate. One by one, they came to her, extending both a hand and polite conversation. It was a societal embrace Veronica was not prepared to receive, but as she conversed with each gentleman and felt their respect for her shine through their actions, she wondered if perhaps her chance at finding a husband was not as far-fetched as she had once thought.

“Pray, Lady Veronica, I hope you are not intending to take a respite just yet?” Lord Ramsey asked as their quadrille just finished.

Veronica smiled at him graciously, curtsying as she steadily tried to catch her breath.

“I am afraid I must check in on my sister, My Lord,” she offered in apology, already backing away from him.

She looked at the table where her sister was seated chatting away happily with some of the other young ladies.

“Do not tarry long,” Lord Ramsey implored, bowing his head politely to her as she departed, “you have kept us from you way too long, Lady Veronica, and we have so missed your company.”

Poppy’s happy expression only brightened when she saw Veronica make her way toward her through the crowd, and she excitedly patted the cushioned seat next to her.

“This is incredible, Veronica, is it not?” Poppy whispered excitedly as soon as her sister approached.

She reached out to Veronica, taking her hands in her own and squeezing them tight.

Veronica nodded her head, looking at her younger sister warmly. “It truly is, dear. Tell me, are you having fun with

your evening? Is everyone being polite? What about the young gentlemen? For if they have done anything untoward—”

Poppy’s light laughter interrupted Veronica’s questions.

“Dear sister, please, look around!” Poppy implored, still squeezing Veronica’s hands in her own as she looked around the ballroom. “*Everything* is going perfect,” she continued, looking at Veronica with a begging glance. “I have met many wonderful suitors this evening, all of whom are respectable. The ladies I have conversed with have been polite enough to not address our scandal, and Aunt Evanora has found someone to talk to. Even *you*, Veronica, are having luck this evening.”

Poppy’s eyes suddenly lit up with more excitement as a sound similar to an erupting tea kettle exited her lips. “Could you imagine if we *both* were wed by the end of the Season, Veronica? You would not have to be a spinster at all. You could be the Lady of your own Manor! You could have children!”

“That would indeed be something,” Veronica muttered, her gaze wandering off toward the dance floor, the buffet, and finally the balcony.

Veronica couldn’t find Maxwell since Barnaby had asked for his dance. But with every new dance, she had spun herself around to look for him.

“Do you think His Grace will ask you to dance?” Poppy asked.

At the mention of his name, Veronica felt her heart jump, and she unconsciously sat up a little straighter. “Why ever would he?” she scoffed, trying not to blush as she looked back at her sister. “He is your benefactor, not mine. And it is quite obvious this evening that His Grace has more pressing business to attend to than dance. I suspect we will be on our own for the rest of the evening.”

“Never the matter,” Poppy said curtly, tapping the back of Veronica’s hand to get her to look up. “It seems Lord Salisbury’s sons are about to approach us both for a dance. Come, let us see if we can both secure a wedding match this Season.” She got up and allowed Peter to lead her to the dance floor.

Veronica’s mind began to churn as she absentmindedly rose, curtsied, and took Jonathan’s hand. Could it really be so? After settling into the idea of becoming a spinster, could it suddenly come to be that she could be married and cared for instead? As the gentleman moved her gracefully around the dance floor, she thought of a wedding day. *Her wedding day*. A dream she had once put to bed—

She saw her gown white and soft with gems and feathers. She saw a church covered in sprays of white lilies and vibrant purple lilacs... she saw Maxwell standing at the altar and smiling at her, his eyes full of love.

Veronica gasped aloud and stumbled as her vivid daydream made her forget her steps. Everyone turned to her then with a frightened look as Jonathan attempted to catch her but failed, and she continued stumbling backward, her arms flailing. Suddenly, it all stopped, and Veronica’s pounding heart quietened as she felt two strong, familiar arms wrap around her from behind.



She looked up and saw Maxwell's blue eyes brilliant with fury.

## CHAPTER NINE



*I*t had not been his plan to leave the ladies, especially Veronica, unattended on the dance floor, and it had annoyed him greatly when matters of state and propriety were suddenly forced on him. As the Duke of Kendrick, he had no right to neglect his noble duties. However, his annoyance changed into a hot rage when he was finally let free of gentlemanly affairs and was able to rejoin the ball.

It did not take him long to spot Veronica. From where he stood on the balcony, it was easy to see that she was indeed what everyone else was looking at, too. Her beauty far outshined any other lady at the ball, and it was clear that he was not the only one that had noticed. Jonathan Winsley, a prospect he had considered for Poppy, was dancing with her and twirling her in his arms.

Jealousy and possessiveness overtook the Duke swiftly, and before he knew it, he was hurrying down the stairs and making his way toward her. Then, just as he nearly reached them, Veronica, with a clearly pleased look on her face, missed her step. For a moment, his jealousy dissolved into concern for her safety, but once she was sure she was well, it came roaring back.

“Your Grace, I assure you I am quite well,” Veronica insisted, struggling to keep up with his much larger strides as he led her through the graveled pathway in the garden.

After Maxwell had caught her, Veronica went to step outside for some air. It was hellish for him to wait until he could follow her unnoticed, but he found her in no time at all and began to look for a secluded area in the dark garden.

“I was simply caught up in—”

Maxwell stopped abruptly and turned on his heel, forcing Veronica to suddenly bump into him.

“Caught up in what?” he snapped, his anger finally boiling to the surface. “Your dance with Jonathan Winsley? I must confess that from my perspective, he was a less than an adequate partner.”

Veronica looked up at the Duke, confusion and hurt written on her face.

“Why do you care, Your Grace? It was just a dance. One of many that I have enjoyed tonight.”

Maxwell’s nostrils flared as he felt a fresh wave of jealousy hit him.

“I beg your pardon?” he gritted out.

For a moment, Veronica looked frightened, but then she drew herself up, furrowed her brow, and put her fists on her hips as she glared back at him defiantly.

“I may not have expected to be pursued by other gentlemen this evening, Your Grace, but it has indeed certainly happened. I once thought I was doomed to be alone, but tonight has proven that I may still have a chance. An opportunity to be wed.” She shook her head as she looked at him. “I will not apologize for taking my chance. Some of us are not born with the liberties you have been born with. You would be fine if you did not marry. But if I do not, I will end up alone and penniless like Aunt Evanora. Do I deserve that life, Your Grace?”

Maxwell’s anger began to melt away at Veronica’s true but stinging words. He took a steadying breath as his gaze softened and took her hand again.

“Come,” he commanded, leading her further into the garden.

“I do not wish to see the flowers, Your Grace.” Veronica sighed, attempting to tug her hand away from his.

Maxwell’s hand wrapped tighter around hers, and he pulled her into the shadows of a weeping willow. Once alone and protected from prying eyes by the long branches, Maxwell pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply.

Veronica gasped as their lips parted. “Your Grace, let me—”

At first, Veronica struggled against him, beating and pushing at his chest with her fists as she tried to free herself from his embrace. Within moments, though, she stopped fighting, and she melted against him as her sounds of protest became breathy moans. Maxwell's hands roamed wildly down the back of her dress, her hips, her neck, his hot fingertips caressing possessively any bare inch of her skin he could find.

Arousal and possession coursed through the Duke as they kissed, causing every muscle in his body to tighten and swell. Suddenly, his lips left hers, and his hot, fervent kisses made a trail over the line of her jaw and down her throat. When he reached her collarbone, he pressed his tongue flatly over the raised flesh and licked from there all the way up to her ear.

Veronica gasped as he did so, pressing herself closer to him as she gripped his hair tightly. Soft, begging whimpers were spilling from her lips, teasing his senses. His member, swollen and hard, strained against the tight confines of his trousers, and he wished nothing more than to bury himself deep inside the maddening woman in his arms. Instead, he pulled the soft fabric of her gown down, revealing her bosom as his soft kisses continued. Then, in a sudden ferocity, he sank his teeth deeply into the tender tissue of her breast.

Veronica's soft moans became instantly louder, but Maxwell was quick to clamp his hand over her open mouth. With a feral growl, he pulled her to him tighter and finished making his mark. After a moment, Veronica's scream of discomfort turned into a heady moan of pleasure as he suckled on her flesh. When he finally released her from his bite, he pulled away to admire his work. His eyes darkened as he looked at the fresh, red mark still indented by his teeth, and he smiled in wicked satisfaction.

“What... what did... what did you do to me?” Veronica panted, her eyes shining with arousal and confusion as she looked up at him.

Maxwell kissed her soundly before loosening his grip on her. Gently, he brought his fingertips up to the red mark and traced the indents left by his teeth.

“You may indeed want a husband to secure your future. For that, I do not blame you at all. However, before you do that, I must remind you that you have already struck a deal with me. A deal in which I have already played my part and you have not. Therefore, this mark, *my bite*, is to remind you that until your debt to me is paid in full, no other man can have you. You’re *mine*.”

Veronica’s eyes grew wide as she looked at him, understanding dawning on her. Her blush of arousal quickly became one of shame, and she pushed herself away from his embrace.

“I am not a toy to be played with, Your Grace,” she hissed viciously. “I thank you for what you have done for my family, but the circumstances have obviously changed. If I give you my maidenhood now, and when I am suitably able to marry again, how will I be able to attend my marriage bed with such shame? Surely, once I am married, my husband will give you whatever financial restitution you ask for our previous deal.”

Maxwell’s jaw set in irritation, his back teeth grinding together viciously. Money was *not* what he was after. Their deal had been simply out of lust at first, but now, it was not so anymore. He wanted Veronica, *craved* her in a way he had never craved a woman before. Her sudden willingness to discard him as if he was no longer needed hurt him deeply. With his eyes boring

into hers, he took a dominating step toward her, coming so close that her breasts pressed up against the lapel of his jacket.

“Do not forget, Veronica, that your sister’s wedding weighs on my willingness to still pay her dowry. Being back in good graces with the *ton* is all well, but without a suitable payment, no man will marry her... or you. I am assuming you will need my purse for your dowry as well, yes? And you would expect me to pay it even after renegeing on our agreement? I am afraid you ask too much of me, Veronica—”

Veronica opened her mouth to interrupt, but Maxwell pushed forward.

“I will pay your sister’s dowry as promised, Veronica, and once she is married, our agreement will end. What you do after that is your business, but until then, I *refuse* to share you or be forced to see you flirt with other men. Am I clear?”

Maxwell’s growled words cut into her like thorns. But it was, indeed, a harsh truth he was telling her. Fury at her brother rose in her chest, and she fought the urge to scream and slap the Duke. But no words came to her lips, and her wrists hung limply at her sides. She only stood there glaring at him ruthlessly.

“You will get your payment, *Your Grace*,” she said, at last, her voice dripping with disdain. She looked him up and down before she met his gaze again, disgust shining brightly in her eyes. “Though why you want such things from a woman that now despises you is beyond me.”

Maxwell smirked, but the insult cut deep into his heart. He forced a chuckle as he lowered his eyes and took a step back. As his gaze swept across her bodice, his smirk grew into a wicked grin, and he looked up at her possessively once more.

“Careful, Veronica,” he purred, ignoring her jab. His fingers went to the hem of her bust, and with a quick, rough tug, he pulled the fabric over the dark red mark his teeth had left. “You do not want any more shame falling upon you.”

Veronica’s cheeks reddened with rage as she glanced down at her bosom, remembering his mark. There were many things she had wished to say, but she knew, at least for now, that she was bested. Instead, she glared up at him, waiting for his next move.

“It seems you have gotten enough air, Veronica,” Maxwell stated offhandedly. He took another step away from her, despite wanting to mark his claim all over again. “It is getting late, and I believe it is time we gather the very successful Lady Poppy and take our leave.”

Veronica nodded, looking relieved to be finished with their conversation. “Yes, quite right. We shall go, then. I am suddenly feeling dreadfully tired from this evening’s events, and the thought of retiring early sounds most pleasing.”

She picked up her skirts to leave, but Maxwell caught her arm, staying her. His eyes were once more filled with that predatory look, and despite her anger with him, she cursed her body for growing warm and excited again.



“Our lessons, as I mentioned earlier, are still on course for tonight, Veronica,” Maxwell whispered, his dark voice like velvet against her ear. “I am afraid you will be enduring a rather late evening, indeed.”

## CHAPTER TEN



“*V*eronica, are you well?”

Veronica felt Maxwell’s bite sizzle beneath her shift. Her hand immediately went to lay over the fabric that covered the mark, and she felt it throb. She looked down and realized that she had frozen while brushing Poppy’s hair, her thoughts carried back to the brash but exciting sensations Maxwell had made her experience in the garden.

*You’re mine.*

The Duke’s growled declaration had been intense, possessive even, and it was something her mind would not let go of. Veronica blinked rapidly and shook her head slightly before she looked up at her sister’s reflection in the mirror and smiled.

“Quite well, dear, yes. As I should be, given this successful evening.” Veronica looked at her sister proudly. “You did so well, Poppy. Mama and Papa would have been so proud.”

Poppy turned in her chair and smiled up at Veronica pleasingly. “You think so?” she asked, her tone hopeful.

Veronica nodded. “Most certainly, our little poppy seed,” she replied softly.

Poppy rushed forward and threw her arms around her sister. Dropping the brush, Veronica quickly returned the embrace, hugging her little sister tight.

“I cannot believe you did this for me, Veronica,” Poppy gushed, still squeezing her. “To think, if you had not thought to reach out to His Grace, how different this would all be.”

Veronica’s heart nearly skipped a beat.

*You have no idea.*

“Yes, it was quite fortuitous for us all,” she muttered coolly, pulling Poppy to her feet. “Now come, I have no doubt our parlor will be crawling with your suitors tomorrow, so you *must* get some sleep.”

The sisters bid one another goodnight, and Veronica closed her sister’s door gently before she left. Just as she turned around, she saw Evanora appear around the corner dressed in her night clothes and holding a candle.

“What are you doing still up, Veronica?” Evanora asked suspiciously. “It is far too late for you to be out of your chamber alone.”

“I was merely wishing Poppy goodnight,” Veronica replied defensively. “After all, she will be married soon, and the opportunity will rarely rise again.”

Evanora squinted her eyes in disapproval at Veronica’s tone.

“I am merely looking out for you, dear,” she argued, taking a step closer. “You saw for yourself tonight that your prospects for marriage are still open. And now, with His Grace residing in our home, you do not want any gossip about being seen doing anything untoward. The servants are loyal in many ways, Veronica, but salacious gossip trumps all. I know you deny His Grace’s interest in you, and you seem to deny to yourself that you reciprocate the same sentiment. But something is going on between you two. I know it, and I fear it will ruin you.”

Evanora spoke her words in a calm and matter-of-fact manner, and they seeped into Veronica’s mind and swirled together with the conversation she had with Maxwell earlier in the garden. She felt cornered, trapped. On one hand, she knew part of her *wanted* to see through the end of her deal with Maxwell. On the other hand, she was furious with him for refusing to release her from their agreement. And while her breath and heartbeat quickened at the very thought of Maxwell’s touch, she also dreaded giving that part of herself to him, knowing that it was key to marriage, which was now possible.

For a moment, Veronica struggled with her emotions as she stood in front of her aunt, but then, suddenly, an idea formed in her mind, one that would protect her honor, relieve Evanora, and even help her get back at the Duke.

“You are quite right, Auntie, and I thank you for your wisdom,” Veronica said kindly, smiling prettily. “Perhaps now

that His Grace is staying with us, it would be better if you and I spend some more time together, to be sure that I am chaperoned. Would you be so kind to join me in the library tomorrow after we finish chaperoning Poppy and her callers? It has been too long since you and I have had a proper visit like we used to. Perhaps I could read to you as I did when I was a child.”

Evanora’s eyes lit up with glee as she sighed in relief.

“Oh darling girl, that would be splendid. I am so happy to hear that you are taking my advice. Yes, I would love to hear some... hmm... perhaps poetry?”

Veronica and her aunt chatted gaily for the next few minutes as they discussed their plans, then finally bid one another goodnight. As Veronica walked away, she felt a sliver of triumph. She knew that there was no way to avoid the Duke’s visit this evening. A part of her did not want to avoid it, but she knew the longer she played this game, the more dangerous it was going to get, and it would be harder to force herself to stay away from him. With Evanora constantly around, it would protect her not just from the Duke’s advances, but also from herself.

Once in her room, Veronica was not surprised to see Maxwell lounging comfortably on her chaise by the fireplace waiting for her. He had explored the house and had thoroughly examined the rooms and hallways, so he no doubt discovered a way to move from room to room undetected. Despite the warm summer air, he had lit the logs inside the hearth, and they cast a soft orange glow across the chamber.

Veronica’s heart began to beat rapidly as he smiled at her seductively and rose slowly, moving like a lion stalking its

prey. The anger and jealousy he had displayed earlier were now long gone and were replaced by desire. Veronica tried to call on her own anger to make this moment more difficult for him, but it would not come forth.

*You're mine.*

His words rang loud in her mind, and she felt them deep into her core. There was a wicked pleasure that came with thinking of herself as his. She knew she should be disgusted by it, but right now, the idea of becoming such a possession made her womb clench and throb. She felt a wetness grow between her legs.

The Duke had also undressed for the evening. While Veronica had donned her simple nightgown and lavender silk robe, Maxwell had only dressed down to his white dress shirt, which he had unbuttoned down to his navel. The fabric was still tucked into his trousers, but as he stood, she was quick to notice that they had been loosened.

*He looks so different... when he is relaxed like this.*

Veronica's eyes unashamedly feasted on him as he slowly walked toward her. So much more feral, more bestial. He looked at her as if he was going to eat her up, and her body quivered at the thought of it.

"You look well, Veronica," he murmured, his tone soft.

He stopped only a mere few inches in front of her, and Veronica felt her temperature spike as she watched his eyes

devour her. He held a goblet of red wine in each hand, and he held one up to her.

“As do you, Maxwell.” She accepted the goblet as she met his gaze coolly.

Maxwell closed his eyes for a brief moment. He liked hearing her address him by his Christian name. With her eyes trained on him, Veronica brought the delicate silver goblet up to her lips and took a sip. The sweetness of the berry wine roused her senses, immediately sending a welcomed wash of ease and bravado through her veins.

“I have been thinking about our conversation in the garden,” Maxwell continued, his tone still gentle, “and I must apologize. I fear my reaction was too rash, and I should like to discuss some of the particulars of our arrangement again.”

Veronica’s eyebrows rose in surprise, and she nearly choked on her wine.

“You are letting me out of our deal?” she asked as soon as she caught her breath.

Maxwell gave her a thin smile, judging her surprise as relief.

“Oh no, I still require payment. Just in a different form. If you are to be wed, Veronica, then you are quite right in wanting to save your maidenhood for your husband. As a gentleman, I cannot hold that against you. However, the rest of the time I have you as my mistress, I will make it my goal to have you *begging* for me to be the one you give it to.”

A small whimper left Veronica's lips as a mix of emotions hit her: relief, disappointment, curiosity, and desire. They all raged inside of her, culminating in a storm that left her very skin tingling. As if sensing her ache, Maxwell stepped closer and wrapped his fingers delicately around her throat.

"I do not think you quite understand what you have gotten yourself into, little one," he whispered dangerously, bringing her closer until their noses touched. "The things I will do to you will have you never wanting to be with another man ever again."

If Veronica had any thought she meant to share, she lost it as Maxwell's lips finally kissed hers. A shiver of pleasure ran down her spine as she felt her body grow limp in his arms, and he pulled her closer to him. Giving in, she wrapped her arms around his waist, boldly slipping her hands beneath the fabric of his open shirt. Maxwell groaned in pleasure as her fingertips caressed his abdomen, his flesh hot to the touch. Beneath his scorching skin, Veronica could feel the ridges of his muscles rippling tightly.

As their kiss deepened, her touch grew bolder. She was becoming addicted to the way he felt against her, the rigidity of his muscles, the smoothness of his skin. His skin seemed to grow hotter the more she touched him, which only made her want to explore his body more.

Suddenly, the Duke broke their kiss. With a gentle but firm grip, he grabbed her wrists, and in one swift motion, he twirled her around so that her backside was pressed against him and her arms were crossed over her chest, held there by his strong hands. He freed one of his hands only to wrap it in her loosely braided hair, and with a gentle tug, he exposed her neck.



Veronica squirmed against him, impatiently waiting to feel his kisses on her sensitive flesh, and she felt his member throb and pulse against her backside. Pleasure erupted through her as she felt his thickness, and she bucked her hips against him again. A sound somewhere between a moan and a growl erupted from Maxwell's throat as she moved slowly, pressing herself even harder against him.

"You are an extremely intriguing and maddening woman, do you know that?" Maxwell moaned into her ear, his teeth nipping at her lobe.

"I could say the same about you, Maxwell, save for you being a man," Veronica whispered, ending with a soft, seductive laugh.

She pressed her backside harder against him as her hands gripped the wrists that kept her pinned to his chest. Maxwell groaned, and his lips fell to her neck to once more cover her with kisses.

Veronica sighed softly as his kisses traveled down her throat and over to her shoulder. When his lips reached the fabric of her nightgown, he nipped at it with his teeth playfully and then lifted her into his arms. She gasped, and he gave her a seductive smirk as her feet left the floor. He lifted her as if she were a mere infant barely weighing anything. With steady strides, he carried her to her bed and laid her down gently on the pillows.

"You keep speaking of lessons, Maxwell," Veronica breathed as she looked up at him in desire. "Perhaps it is time you give me some."

Maxwell's seductive smirk transformed into a grin, and he groaned as he bent down to claim her lips again.

"Yes, Veronica, I believe it is."

The Duke took off his dress shirt, revealing his well-muscled body before joining her on the bed. Lying on his side, he gathered her to him. He stroked his hand delicately over her face and under her jaw while looking into her eyes before kissing her. Veronica thought she saw something more than his desire, more than a carnal urge in his blue depths. There was care, concern, compassion.

He moved closer to her, bringing his lips a hairbreadth above hers. Veronica rose slightly to meet his lips, but he pulled back a scant distance. Maxwell continued his torture, moving just out of the reach of her kiss while his hand continued to caress down her neck, between her breasts, and down her body. Soon, Veronica was moving and writhing with the motion of his caresses, silently willing his hands to take her in a firmer grip.

Each time his hand caressed between her breasts, Veronica felt her taut nipples pulse with sensitivity. She had never once thought she would want to be touched there, but now, she found herself silently begging Maxwell to show her more. As if reading her thoughts, he shifted his body weight and nestled his hips between hers, his knee gently spreading her legs apart through the fabric of her nightgown. Through their clothing, she could feel the length of his hardness pressing into her sex and creating an explosion of delicious tingles.

Veronica gasped at the wickedly delicious sensation, and she automatically rocked her hips against him for more. Maxwell

groaned at her willingness as he captured her lips in another heated kiss, and they began to move against one another in a sensual rhythm.

“Maxwell, I... please,” she pleaded softly, the sensation building to torturous new heights as she bucked her hips.

“Do you want me to stop?” he whispered as if reading her thoughts.

His teeth grazed her ear, making the sensation inside of her grow more feverish.

“No,” she breathed, her tongue darting out quickly to moisten her parched lips.

“Close your eyes,” the Duke commanded gently, his lips moving to feather across her temple.

Veronica’s eyes fluttered shut, and she waited with growing anticipation for Maxwell to make his next move. Then, suddenly, the sweet pulsing between her legs stopped, the delicious weight of his body came off of her and a cold sensation rushed over her, making her feel bereft. She sat up, startled, only to see Maxwell looking flustered and agitated as he fastened his trousers.

A carnal ache mixed with irritation swept through her as she sat up and tried to think of what to say. For a moment, Veronica did not know what to do with her body, with her feelings, as she was left hanging so suddenly. She waited for Maxwell to say something, do something, to explain what his

actions meant. Instead, he only looked at her with a heated, almost furious gaze, and abruptly left the chamber.

Embarrassment, arousal, and shame coursed through her as she realized that Maxwell had just made his first move in his new game. Frustration was soon added to the mix, and in her growing aggravation, Veronica got up and downed the rest of the wine in her cup. Still not satisfied, she refilled the cup and drained it once again.

This deal, she realized while pouring herself another drink, was growing more twisted by the moment. Now that she was left alone, Veronica was not sure what to do with the erotic pressure that had bloomed between her legs. She tried to follow the trail that the Duke's hands and lips had left, but it was not the same. Her hands were not his, they did not know what to do, and her attempt only made her body grow heavier with painful yearning.

For a moment, wrapped in her need, Veronica found herself wanting to go to Maxwell's chamber. To beg or demand that he explain what he did to her. To demand why she felt so alive and sensitive but also so heavy and frustrated. But she knew, somehow, that was exactly what he wanted, and for that, she refused to give him the satisfaction.

In a feeble attempt at falling asleep, Veronica climbed back into her bed and pulled the covers over her.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



Maxwell had thought it would be devilishly fun to give Veronica a taste of what he could do to her body, but in doing so, he had damned himself to a night of sexual frustration. By morning, his mood was beyond foul, and he found himself in the most unsavory of dispositions as Poppy's suitors began to call.

He had hoped to greet Veronica with a smug, almost cocky look, but instead could only manage *not* to look at her accusingly, as if his state of consternation was brought on solely by her actions. When he finally did see her, he was surprised to find her disposition sunny and pleasant, almost *too* pleasant. He wanted her aching and miserable like himself, but instead, she was the direct opposite, appearing more cheerful than ever.

"Is all well with you, Your Grace?" Poppy asked after the first two suitors bid their farewells. "You look quite perplexed this morning."

Maxwell looked up from the book he was pretending to read, catching Veronica's eyes. He forced a small smile on his face and nodded.

“I am only contemplating each young man who has visited and trying to deduce whom I like best.” He gave Poppy a brotherly wink. “It is good that we get you matched, Lady Poppy, but I would prefer it if you were matched *well*.”

It was a lie and it was not, for although Poppy’s love interests could not be further from his mind at the moment, he realized that he did indeed want her matched with someone who would appreciate her for who she was. His answer seemed to be the correct one, for it brought out a large smile on Poppy’s face and even a slight, thin one from Veronica and Evanora.

“Tell me, Your Grace, who do you think is best for me thus far?” Poppy asked giddily.

Seeing an opportunity to make Veronica squirm, he smirked.

“Actually, I believe Jonathan Winsley would be well suited for you, Lady Poppy,” he replied snidely.

Veronica glared at the Duke silently at his mention of her most recent dance partner, and he cocked his eyebrow at her challengingly. A sliver of glee went through him when Veronica finally pressed her lips tightly together and swallowed her would-be venomous words.

“The eldest son?” Poppy hummed curiously, tapping her gloved finger on her chin. “I do not believe we have had a moment to talk yet, though I had a lovely dance with his younger brother Peter Winsley. Did you perhaps see something? A wanting glance? Or perhaps he talked to you last night?”

Veronica threw Maxwell a pleading look to stop his charades, and he cleared his throat as he felt a sliver of guilt shoot through his heart. After all, he did not want to mislead Poppy just to toy with Veronica. That was too low, even for him.

“Perhaps I am thinking of the wrong one,” he said, easing up on his game. “Either way, both of Lord Salisbury’s sons are quite esteemed prospects. I *do* think you should consider the eldest, however. After all, if you do marry him, you would be a countess.”

Poppy’s eyes lit up with excitement, and everyone could see her mind considering the possibility of marrying into such an esteemed position.

“Oh, could you imagine it, Veronica? Me, a countess? Oh, the finery that would envelop us! Surely we would no longer want for anything, if the eldest son of Lord Winsley were to take interest in my hand?”

Maxwell studied Veronica’s face closely, looking for any sign of jealousy or claim over the man. Instead, he only saw a sadness that was hidden quickly and replaced by false pride. He felt another piercing shred of guilt shoot through his heart, and he had to look away.

“My dear, that would be wonderful for certain,” Veronica replied, looking fondly at her younger sister. “But perhaps now that you have more choices, there may be a possibility of a love match. You can slow down, Poppy.”

Poppy let out an unusual laugh that had even Maxwell looking up from his book to look at her curiously.

“Come, dear sister,” Poppy pleaded, speaking in an almost condescending tone, “I am not so naive to hope for such things. And, if I may be honest, I am not even convinced that such an emotion even exists.”

“Poppy,” Evanora hissed, speaking up for the first time that morning. She looked at the young girl with a knowing sadness.

“Well, what love matches can you speak of, dear aunt?” Poppy asked, turning her sudden skepticism toward the older woman. “You have none to speak of. Our parents were not a love match. Damian, obviously, didn’t love Alice, and Veronica, well, she is following in your footsteps, isn’t she? And what about you, Your Grace? Do you have a lady whom you love and intend to propose to? Is that why you have not married yet?”

Before Maxwell could get over his astonishment at her out-of-character outburst, Veronica suddenly stood up, looking at her sister with both hurt and bewilderment. Like her, the Duke was most unsure of what had changed Poppy’s previously upbeat and sweet mood and secretly wondered if the girl had been touched with a bit of melancholia.

“Poppy, what on *Earth* has gotten into you?” Veronica snapped, her eyes narrowing suspiciously as she looked down at her younger sister. “To disrespect me and perhaps even Damian is one thing. But Aunt Evanora? His Grace? Our parents? That is too far! You were raised better than that!”

Poppy looked at her older sister defiantly as she stood up as well and faced her.



“I am *not* naive, Veronica, though it would seem that you continue to insist that I am. You do not think I see what has become of us? What *will* become of us if I do not marry? I know all too well the responsibility that rests on my shoulders. I am the only one left that has the best possible chance of saving our family. That is work, Veronica, not love.”

“Poppy—”

“So,” Poppy continued, cutting Veronica off, “I will not be looking for love. I will be looking for a husband who can take my work and make it easier. And for that, I will be thankful, and loyal, and kind. But I will not be in love.”



After her sister’s little outburst, Veronica found herself needing some air and decided to visit the greenhouse to gather some calming herbs and have a moment to herself. Her body still felt sensitive and heavy from the night before, the longing for Maxwell’s touch never wearing off. The way he looked at her when he suddenly pulled away, it was almost like hate, resentment.

Then, this morning when he attempted his little game, it made her feel belittled and angry. She had been careful to make sure that she was not the first to go down to the parlor for breakfast, and even when she walked into the room and saw him, she kept her gaze and tone cool and aloof. Despite what she was feeling, she would be damned if she would let Maxwell know the effect he was having on her.

If that was not enough to keep her thoughts occupied, Poppy's outburst had caused a whole new type of worry she did not even realize she could feel. Had she been wrong in trying to shield Poppy throughout Damian's scandal? Had she been too placating, too patronizing?

Poppy was no longer a child, that was apparent, but when had she become so cynical? So judgmental? Veronica had done her best to not show her feelings when Poppy spoke condescendingly, but her sister's words had wounded her deeply, for they were true. There was no romantic love in Veronica's life, just the Duke and the ever-twisting deal she had struck with him.

In truth, her stomach dropped when she had seen him in the parlor, and she felt at war as her heart welled with excitement and her mind raced with alarm. She wanted to run from him... and into his arms at the same time. It was a dilemma she did not quite know how to navigate.

A knock at the greenhouse door pulled Veronica out of her thoughts and brought her back to reality. She looked around, blinking, and realized that once she had gotten to the private space, she had not moved an inch to gather the herbs. Shaking her head to dispel her thoughts, she turned and opened the door.

"Anita, hello," she greeted, trying to sound her usual self when she saw her lady's maid at the door. "Might I have another moment to myself, please? I have not found the herbs I need yet."

Before Anita could respond, someone else from the other side began to push at the door, and as it opened, Veronica saw Maxwell standing beside her lady's maid. The anger and

resentment in his gaze from earlier were long gone, and now his eyes were filled with a tenderness that almost made her emotional.

“I only need a moment, Lady Veronica,” he said calmly, his husky voice almost imploring. He sighed as she said nothing, and he looked at her maid. “Anita, would you please bring us some tea? I believe we will take it out here since the weather is so nice.”

Warning bells began to go off in Veronica’s head as she imagined him wrapping her in his arms and kissing her. It was easy to think practically when she was away from him, but the moment they were alone, she seemed to suddenly give in to the carnal, almost primal urge to have his skin on hers. As much as she wanted to feel his kiss, she wanted to be able to think clearly even more.

“Actually, Anita, I am afraid I need you to stay,” Veronica countered, just as the maid was about to turn on her heel to leave them. “My head seems to be too filled with today’s unsettling happenings, and I cannot remember at all what I am looking for. Would you please be so kind as to find me something that could calm my nerves?”

Anita gave her mistress a furtive look of understanding. “Of course, My Lady,” she quickly replied, bowing her head.

Veronica opened the door further to allow the two of them inside. Anita quickly grabbed a basket and began to do as she was told, going into the rows of plants but not straying too far in case her mistress needed her.

“Lady Veronica, I was hoping for a private word,” Maxwell stated, throwing a pointed glance at the unexpected chaperone.

“Surely you can say whatever you have on your mind in front of Anita, Your Grace,” Veronica said tersely, refusing to back down. “After all, as Aunt Evanora has pointed out, it is not proper for you to be unchaperoned with me.”

Veronica watched Maxwell’s chiseled jaw tick in irritation as his blue eyes reflected an inner struggle. She felt for him but resisted the urge to speak to him more gently.

“What is it that you would like to discuss, Your Grace?” she asked politely, looking at him with an empty expression.

Maxwell breathed a sigh of resignation, then took a step forward. “I want to apologize, Lady Veronica,” he murmured, his husky voice dropping low so only she could hear, “for my untoward behavior last night.” The agitation had left his eyes, and he looked at her in genuine remorse. “I would very much like to share my thoughts about the situation and have a conversation regarding the matter. Perhaps you would allow me some time to do so.”

The urge to yes rose so strong in Veronica’s throat that the word nearly slipped out. She wanted to know what happened. Why he had left her. She also wanted more... much more. But the small bit of trust she had developed for him had been dashed last night, and though it was all she wanted, she found herself saying something entirely different.

“I am afraid that will not be possible, Your Grace.” She shook her head. “And it is I that should be apologizing to you.”

Maxwell looked at her, surprised, but before he could ask what she meant, Veronica continued,

“The tone and manner in which Poppy spoke to you in the parlor earlier were most disrespectful. It is a behavior I cannot abide by, and as her older sister, I must take steps to discipline her. Starting this evening, I shall be staying with her in her chamber to get to the bottom of her horrid outburst.”

Veronica watched, torn, as Maxwell silently struggled with her response for quite a few minutes. She felt anxious waiting to hear what he was going to say, and she was not sure how much silence from him she could take. She was used to their quick, witty banter. Part of her wanted him to try and change her mind, but the other part very much wanted him to accept her decision.

She had enough to worry about with Poppy, especially since their next outing was only a few days away. If her younger sister were to have such an outburst in front of the *ton*, the nails that had just been pulled from their coffin would be hammered in all over again. Responsibility to her family was Veronica’s priority.

“I see,” Maxwell said, at last, his tone resigned and the emotion in his eyes slowly fading away into an etched mask. “Well, of course, there are some matters of propriety that I cannot handle for your family, and as Lady Poppy’s sister, you surely know what is best for her. May I join you for an afternoon then? With a chaperone, of course.” He lowered his voice again before adding, “Though I very much want to speak to you *alone*, Lady Veronica.”

*Then you will just have to keep wanting.*

Instead of voicing out her thought, Veronica forced her lips into a smile and bowed her head.

“I believe I am available for that, Your Grace,” she acquiesced as politely as she could. “Shall I meet you in the parlor at four o’clock?”

Something similar to relief passed across Maxwell’s face for a moment before his stoic mask returned.

“Wonderful. I shall leave you and your maid to find your herbs. I hope by tea time you feel better, Lady Veronica.”

The Duke bowed his head to her, and without another word, left the greenhouse. The moment he was gone, Anita appeared by Veronica’s side. Though the maid had been out of sight for the conversation, Veronica knew she had heard almost everything. Veronica looked at her expectantly, wanting to know what the young woman had to say.

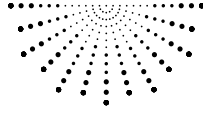
“Well, Anita, what do you think?” she asked, taking the basket of herbs and flowers from her hands.

Anita blushed and averted her eyes, but she cleared her throat and answered, “I think that His Grace is a good and powerful man, My Lady.” Her eyes left the floor and she looked up at Veronica with a womanly understanding. “But ladies must be careful, even around good and powerful men. Especially when they look at you the way he does.”

Veronica nodded as she picked up two stalks of lavender, crushed the flowers into her hand, and held them up to her nose. The strong, calming scent immediately invaded her olfactory glands, sending a soothing sensation down her body.

“You are quite correct, Anita,” she agreed passively, taking another long inhale from the flowers. “Perhaps I shall have to be a little more careful in this arrangement.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE



Maxwell had been alarmed, annoyed and a little taken aback by the news that Veronica was going to share a chamber with Poppy. It put a great damper on his plans to ask forgiveness for the previous evening's interaction and start from scratch. Jealousy was not an emotion he was used to feeling, but when he saw Veronica dancing with another man, the new sensation overwhelmed him. Now that it was gone, he wanted—*needed*—to make things right.

The Duke found himself the first to arrive for their tea time and walked into the parlor just as the table was being laid with fresh tea, biscuits, and cakes. When the servants were finished presenting the treats, they took their spots by the wall and waited to be summoned. A minute passed by, then two as an awkward silence stretched between the servants and the Duke.

For a moment, Maxwell doubted Veronica was going to attend, but relief spread through him when he finally heard the click of her heels on the marble floor. He smiled for a moment as he turned to the door, but his smile quickly disappeared when he heard a second set of footsteps.

Veronica walked into the room arm in arm with her aunt.



“Good evening, Your Grace,” Evanora greeted him as they walked toward the table.

“Good evening, Miss Snyder, Lady Veronica,” he returned, trying to keep the annoyance from his voice.

He went to Evanora’s chair and pulled it out for her. As he did so, he shot a look at Veronica, silently asking her what she was up to. She merely smiled at him pleasantly, and that only added to his frustration.

“I was so delighted to hear that you were joining us, Your Grace,” Evanora stated, oblivious to the silent conversation happening around her. “You see, Veronica had offered to read to me today, but when she told me that you would be joining us, I thought it would be a lovely opportunity to play some cards. It can get dreadfully boring when it is just two players, you know, and I haven’t played a game of whist in ages!”

Maxwell struggled for a moment with his emotions as the elderly woman chattered on, realizing that he was played. It was very clear to him now that Veronica was avoiding spending time alone with him at all costs and that she would not permit a moment of privacy between them again. Begrudgingly, he stifled his desires and put on a gentlemanly smile. To leave the room would be too telling, and whether he liked it or not, he was stuck. But if he was going to be so, he would at least have fun with it.

“I must warn you, Miss Snyder, that I have got quite the hand for whist,” Maxwell drawled as he took a seat at the table. His gaze shot over to Veronica, who sat between them at the small round table, and she looked back at him challengingly. “I know how to manipulate the cards quite well, and I have never lost a match to a lady.”

Veronica's eyes widened and narrowed at his response to her aunt, but she pressed her lips together and said nothing as the two of them remained in an eye lock.

“We shall see, Your Grace.” Evanora laughed, her focus completely on shuffling the deck of cards. “Perhaps for the first time, you will know what it feels like to be bested by a woman.” Her eyes moved to Veronica, and she winked at her as she started to distribute the cards. “Veronica has never lost a match either,” she continued, “so, this shall be most interesting indeed. Now, tell me, Your Grace, have I ever wooed you with the tales of the time when I was once engaged and swept off my feet by a handsome yet dastardly, and might add *wealthy*, Egyptian sea merchant?”

Despite his annoyance, Maxwell laughed heartily as he picked up his cards. He looked at the elder woman curiously, then at Veronica, whose smile was just as wide as his, showing off her naturally radiant beauty. She shrugged her shoulders at him almost helplessly, and his mood lifted.

“Why no, Miss Snyder,” he replied, trying to sound serious, “but I would be delighted to hear more.”

Evanora, happy to have an audience, squealed with glee and nodded excitedly before diving into her salacious tale.



Veronica clapped her hands in delight as she won yet another round, beating Maxwell and Evanora by a mile with the most winning hands. Although she had been nervous at first about carrying out her plan, Veronica soon found herself having

quite a bit of fun with their game. It felt genuinely good to no longer have Evanora's judgmental gaze on her, and as for playing cards with Maxwell, she actually found it entertaining.

Certainly, he had been grumpy at first. But as the game commenced and the three of them began to chat and play, his mood lifted, and Veronica once more got a small glimpse of the boy she used to call a friend. Maxwell was witty and had a good sense of humor, but he was also kind when he needed to be. And when he goaded them, it was with a familial banter that made her feel warm and comfortable, as if he had always been part of their lives in some way or another.

"What did I tell you?" Evanora gloated, beaming at Veronica. She patted her niece's hand affectionately and squeezed it. "She is a winner, this one. Through and through."

"Yes, I am starting to see that is quite certainly correct," Maxwell said musingly, smiling despite losing the game.

Veronica yearned to lift her gaze to him to read his face, but instead, she continued busying herself with organizing the cards.

"A good player must have good company to succeed," she uttered simply, refusing to thank him for his attempt at a compliment.

"Well, I most look forward to being in your company again, my darling girl." Evanora moved to stand from her chair.

Veronica noticed her aunt begin to tremble slightly as she rose, and when she tried to lift her hands from the armrests, she nearly fell back down. Veronica was up instantly and reached out her hand to help, but before she could get to her aunt, Maxwell was suddenly beside Evanora, steadying her so she would not stumble.

The old woman, seemingly unbothered by her sudden bout of dizziness, laughed like a young girl with a crush.

“My, my, aren’t you a solid fellow?” she complimented Maxwell, looking up at him and batting her eyelashes.

Despite her worry for her aunt, Veronica pressed her lips together to fight a smile, and for the first time since their card game started, she looked at Maxwell. He seemed neither bothered nor annoyed, but instead, he only looked at her aunt with a kind expression.

“Careful, Miss Snyder,” he warned teasingly, helping Evanora into a steadier stance, “I am not yet married, and compliments like that could have me knocking on your door. From the stories you just told us, I do believe we could have a most exciting time.”

He wagged his eyebrows for effect, and Evanora cackled wildly. At least, Veronica thought as she watched that scene unfold, that despite her sudden bout of weakness, the older woman was still in good spirits.

“Wicked man.” Evanora batted at the Duke’s chest flirtatiously.

She tried to take another step on her own but once again faltered. Maxwell and Veronica shared a concerned glance but kept their worries to themselves.

“But perhaps all of this fun has been a little more taxing than I had predicted,” Evanora continued, looking up at Veronica. “I think I shall go to bed early this evening, darling girl, if you will be so kind as to help me. And do tell the cook to send my supper up to my room when it is ready, will you? I shan’t be joining you this evening.”

“Of course, Aunt Evanora,” Veronica quickly nodded.

Veronica moved to her aunt’s side, and Maxwell gently helped the older woman lean her weight on her niece. As he did so, Maxwell’s hand trailed across the back of Veronica’s dress, his fingers running softly from shoulder to shoulder and making her shiver.

She lifted her head to glare at him, but she only found warmth and concern in Maxwell’s gaze. She felt herself soften and mouthed the words ‘Thank you’ above Evanora’s head. Maxwell nodded in understanding, and in a most gentlemanly fashion, moved to help her get her aunt back to her chamber.

Maxwell stayed a respectable distance away from Veronica as she and Mary, her aunt’s lady’s maid, helped the old woman to bed. Once Evanora was settled and Veronica was sure that Mary had everything well in hand, she returned to the parlor, where she found Maxwell still waiting for her.

“Is she all right?” he asked as soon as she walked in.

Veronica gave him a polite smile and nodded. “Perfectly well,” she replied politely. “Some rest will do her good, and by morning, she will be fit as a fiddle again.”

Maxwell nodded, appearing genuinely relieved. “I am happy to hear it,” he said truthfully, taking a step closer to her. “But now that this little charade is over, Lady Veronica, I *would* very much like to have a private moment with you. If you cannot bear to be alone in a room with me, would you please consider joining me for a walk in the park? Surely all of the eyes there will make you feel safely chaperoned.”

Veronica shook her head. “No, no, it is far too late,” she replied.

Maxwell looked out the window and saw the evening sun turning a beautiful deep orange.

“There are still a couple of hours left before sundown,” he insisted, his voice low, “and I assure you, you’ll be back well before dark.”

Before Veronica could reply, they both heard the click of heels on the marble halls, and a moment later, Poppy strode in looking alarmed.

“What happened to Aunt Evanora?” she asked, her eyes full of worry as she looked at her older sister. The anger from this morning seemed to be long gone, and she once more seemed her lovely, kind self.

“She will be just fine,” Veronica assured her, linking her arm through Poppy’s. “But she does need some quiet time I believe. His Grace has just invited me for a stroll through the park. Perhaps we should take a respite from being inside all day and stretch our legs.”

Poppy’s worried expression brightened, and she nodded her head eagerly.

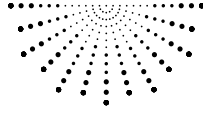
“Oh, that sounds lovely! Yes, let’s go. We can take Anita as our chaperone. Perhaps we could stop by the Modiste too? I would love a new pair of gloves, and perhaps a hat.”

Poppy turned to Maxwell and waited for him to answer her question. Veronica could see the confusion and anger swirl in his eyes as he looked at her briefly, but when he turned his gaze to Poppy, he sighed and gave her a placating look.

“I suppose all young ladies must be decked out in the latest finery.” He ran a frustrated hand through his hair as his gaze met Veronica’s once more before leaving to get ready.

Once he was gone, Veronica tried to ignore the feeling of emptiness that overtook her and focused on filling the rest of the evening with chaperoned activities.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Veronica studied the pair of baby-blue goatskin riding gloves that Maxwell had purchased for her. Her heart was an utter mess. She had known she had wanted them immediately but had decided well ahead of time that she would do no shopping for herself and would instead throw all of her focus on Poppy. When it came to Maxwell, she did not want anything from him.

But once they were home and the Duke had begrudgingly announced that he would be spending the night at his own estate, a delivery boy had shown up with a beautifully wrapped package. It had taken her by surprise and left her quiet and contemplative all evening.

“Sister, are you not happy with your gloves?” Poppy asked. She had her new hat in her hands and turned from inspecting its finery to studying Veronica. “If they are too small, I will happily take them.”

*No, they are perfect.*

Veronica stroked the delicate fabric softly with the pad of her thumb. She suppressed the urge to keep the gloves and held them out to her sister.



“Yes, I believe they are too small. I did try to warn His Grace, but he seemed most persistent today.” She tried to say the words offhandedly, but her voice came out with an edge that did not go unnoticed.

“Have you grown resentful of His Grace and his sponsorship?” Poppy demanded, taking the gloves as she looked at her sister skeptically. “If he has done anything untoward, I can choose a suitor this very moment and our arrangement with him will come to an end.”

Veronica silently chastised herself for her tone and took a deep breath to steady herself.

“Not at all, I just prefer that the focus be kept on you, Poppy. Now, let’s move on to other matters,” she said briskly, then looked around her sister’s room, which now had some of her personal belongings. “Tell me, Poppy, what got into you this morning? I thought... I thought you were more of a romantic than this?”

Poppy laughed in an almost self-derisive way, and for the first time, Veronica saw her sister as more of a woman than a little girl.

“I was, most definitely, even after Damian’s scandal, or at least at first... but then, when he ran away with our money and left us unprotected and uncared for... I think that illusion started to shatter.”

Veronica’s heart ached as Poppy spoke her truth, but she remained silent, and let her continue.

“Everything in our lives revolves around money, Veronica. It always has. Never love. Not that you and I do not love each other!” Poppy’s hard eyes turned soft for a moment as she looked at Veronica, and she smiled thinly. “And we love Aunt Evanora. But, is this not just a filial kind of love? Not at all what we would hope to receive or feel from a husband. I would not know how to identify romantic love even if I tried. But I can identify a man who knows how to handle his fortune. If I cannot have romantic love, then I will at least afford myself, and us, stability.”

The practicality of Poppy’s response made Veronica want to gather her little sister in her arms and hug her tightly. She was too young, too sweet to have such a jaded opinion on love. And yet, if Veronica was in her shoes, she wondered if she would share the same sentiment.

“If that is what you truly believe, Poppy, it saddens my heart greatly,”

Veronica said at last, “and I deeply apologize.”

Poppy looked at her sister, confused, and set down her new hat. “Whatever for?” she asked.

Veronica gave her a strained smile. “For not being a good example you could follow when it comes to marriage, or love. I am afraid I have left you with no one to help you through this minefield we call courting.”

Poppy immediately walked over to Veronica and threw her arms around her shoulders. Veronica blinked back the tears in her eyes as she tightly hugged her sister back.

“This is not your fault, Veronica,” Poppy whispered, her ear pressed against Veronica’s collar bone.

Veronica bit back a self-pitying sob, cleared her throat, and calmly said, “Well, regardless, we are here now. And do not forget, I may very well have a chance at securing a match now, and if I do, I will most certainly be looking more for a love match and not a financial one.” She pulled Poppy away from her and held her at arm’s length so she could look at her. “But that is a choice I am allowed to make, so I will allow you to make yours.”

Poppy nodded in understanding and gave a small smile.

However, Veronica’s soft gaze grew sterner. “Now that we have got that sorted, let’s talk about apologies, shall we? It was not just me you were snide toward this morning, but poor Aunt Evanora as well. What has she done but protect you and love you? And yet, you speak to her that way? And *His Grace*. Do you understand that he could have abandoned us because of the way you so disrespectfully talked to him? I had to promise him that I would stay in your chamber until you learn your manners!”

Veronica felt a tinge of guilt as she threw in the little white lie, knowing well in fact that Maxwell was most annoyed by her move into Poppy’s chamber. However, the fable could very well allow her to kill two birds with one stone, and with everything going on, aiming for individual targets was becoming tiresome.

Poppy’s eyes shone with remorse as she looked at Veronica, finally seeing what her temper tantrum could have cost them.

“I am so sorry, Veronica.” She shook her head. “Of course I will. I truly do not know what got into me. I will make my apologies to both of them first thing in the morning, I promise.” She paused, blushing, then added, “I... I am also sorry that you have been forced to stay in my chamber and keep watch on me. I know you are working so hard to keep our family afloat. This must be a huge annoyance.”

Veronica felt her heart rip in half for her sister, suddenly realizing just how little time she had devoted to being with her. Taking her hand, she led her little sister to the vanity and sat her down in front of the mirror.

“You are most certainly *not* an annoyance,” Veronica asserted, removing the pins from Poppy’s hair to help her ready for bed. In the mirror, she could see Poppy’s frown turn into a relieved smile. “And I need to apologize to you too,” she continued. “You and I have not spent much time together since Damian fled the country. There was just too much to do. I was so worried about keeping a roof over our heads that I did not stop to pay attention to what was going on in our home. I am your older sister, you are supposed to be able to tell me everything.”

“But it’s not your fault!” Poppy quickly argued.

Veronica smiled at her gently and nodded as she returned to her hair.

“Perhaps not, but it is true nonetheless. However, we can remedy that now. I want to know everything you are thinking and feeling, especially when you are about to make a scene. I would very much like to be able to get ahead of you the next time you do that, Poppy.”

They both laughed after she said the last part in a jesting tone, and Veronica pushed at Poppy's shoulder in mock chastisement.

"Oh God, I truly did mortify us all this morning, didn't I?" Poppy groaned, shaking her head as she rubbed her eyes. "I swear I do not know what took over me, but I assure you it will not happen again."

Veronica picked up her sister's brush and began combing out her curls. She was very happy with the way the conversation was going and felt as if she was getting the old relationship she had with Poppy back.

"Well, that is most happy news," she quipped, beaming at her sister's reflection in the mirror.

"May we move on to other topics now?" Poppy asked after a brief silence.

"Please do." Veronica laughed, nodding. "I am happy to be done with this conversation."

"Would you marry His Grace?"

Poppy's question stunned Veronica so much that the brush nearly fell out of her hands, and she had to ignore her suddenly hammering heart.

"What do you mean?" Veronica asked, feigning innocence.

She walked to her little sister's armoire and produced a fresh nightgown for her to change into. Poppy took it and disappeared behind her silk privacy wall.

"I have seen him look at you, Veronica. He does it quite a lot. Sometimes, it almost seems as if he stalks you like a predator does his prey. He seems so... focused. And other times, it seems like he is watching a flower bloom as if he is in awe."

Veronica's heart skipped a beat as she felt herself blush, and she busied herself with pulling her own pins out of her hair.

"Does he?" she uttered, trying to sound as uninterested as possible. "I haven't noticed. If he does, it is probably just out of pure annoyance. We were friends, of some sort anyway, when we were younger. But that was long before our brother played his dirty trick."

Poppy shook her head as she came out from behind her changing screen wearing her nightgown and robe.

"It does seem rather odd, Veronica, doesn't it? That His Grace of all people is helping us."

Veronica, sorely wanting to avoid the conversation, finished brushing out her long hair and simply said, "Odd or not, we must be thankful for his patronage," before changing the subject. "Honestly, I am utterly exhausted from the day's events. It truly felt as if it took forever to end," she deflected, taking her own nightgown and robe to go change.

Their conversation switched to Poppy's opinion of the young gentlemen who called on her earlier that day, and Veronica listened intently to her sister rattle off the characteristics of the gentlemen she liked most as they slid under the covers. Veronica noted that, so far, Poppy seemed most amused with Lord Greensley, who would be the next viscount in his line. Not as glamorous as a duke or an earl, but certainly a position that could keep them comfortable.

After an hour of Poppy chatting away, the younger sister seemed to have finally talked herself to sleep. Veronica tried to follow, keeping her eyes pressed tight and her arms under the covers, but soon, she found herself looking wide-eyed at the ceiling. She had barely gotten any sleep the night before thanks to the state the Duke had left her in, and she had been hoping that sleep would be much kinder this evening. Instead, she spent the rest of the night once more tossing and turning, thinking of the Duke.

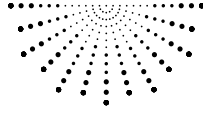
Eventually, she would have to talk with him in private again. And yet, despite her all-day efforts to not be alone with him, she felt herself looking forward to it. He had managed the day well, despite her success at sabotaging his every move, and that only intrigued her more.

Veronica's fingers fluttered over Maxwell's bite mark as she thought of him and gently massaged the small bruise.

*You're mine, you're mine, you're mine—*

The words whispered in her mind softly, and at that moment, of all things, she felt a tinge of longing. Veronica found herself wondering where Maxwell was, what he was doing, and if he was putting such a mark on another woman's breast at this very moment.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*M*axwell felt the silken hands of the courtesan slide down the lapels of his jacket as he felt her lips press against his ear.

“You look as if you are simply *aching*, Your Grace,” the woman whispered, her tone dripping with seduction.

Her hands traveled further down his chest, to his abdomen, then lower. Immune to such affections, Maxwell rolled his eyes and took another sip of his whiskey.

“Allow me to ease your torment. I have been trained by the finest, and I assure you that you will not leave my boudoir unsatisfied.” The courtesan pressed her chest against his back.

The woman’s lips moved from his ear and traced sensual kisses down his jawline. Wanting no more, Maxwell turned in his chair and grasped her hands to pull her off him. Normally, he would accept such a bold advance, but since he had had a taste of Veronica’s flesh, he only yearned for her, and it was driving him mad.



“I appreciate your sentiment, Miss,” he said coolly, not even bothering to look at the woman as he grabbed the bottle of whiskey, “but I am not good company tonight. You should find another wick for your honey pot elsewhere. This evening, the only thing I will be taking to bed is this whiskey.”

He poured himself another glass, then downed it. The liquor burned his stomach and lungs as it went down, but he relished the pain. Tonight was not for bedding. It was for forgetting.

“But you look so lonely. Are you sure, Your Grace?” the courtesan asked, pouting.

Again, Maxwell kept his eyes on his drink, refusing to look in her direction. He popped off the cork of the bottle once more and refilled his glass.

“Most positive, Miss. Now please, allow me to drink in peace. There are many other purses here tonight. They may not be as heavy as mine, but I am sure their compensation will be more than satisfactory—No, *please*. Leave. Me. Be.”

The courtesan made a whimper of discontent but accepted his request and made her way to another table. Maxwell sighed, thankful that the conversation was over, and glared at the bottle in front of him as if it were the source of all of his problems.

*Damn her.*

The Duke’s vision began to swirl yet again. He drank much that night. Too much, probably. But his rage had kept his

rational mind from making decisions for him. It had been two weeks since he had made his move in Veronica's chamber, and what was supposed to be a victory now haunted him.

"Your Grace."

Maxwell looked up with glazed eyes as he heard the familiar voice, and he smiled bitterly as he saw his old friend, Captain James Taller of the British Navy, take a seat opposite him.

"Ah, finally, a face I can trust," Maxwell greeted, smiling at his old school friend. "Tell me, James, what have you found, hmm?"

James sighed as he eyed the almost empty bottle sitting between them. "How much have you had, Your Grace?" he asked, his eyebrow cocked in concern.

Maxwell waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Enough to guide me through my sorrows, old friend."

The Duke turned to the bar and shouted for a fresh bottle and a clean glass. Immediately, a server appeared with both and poured both men a fresh drink before he hurried away. Maxwell waited until the server was gone before he turned back to James.

"Now, tell me you've found the scoundrel that has ruined my sister. Was he washed up on some island? Taken by pirates? Killed by the unforgiving sea? You must have something on Damian by now."

James' dark brown eyes filled with regret as he looked at his old friend and somberly shook his head.

“A crew of an associate of mine had him for a brief time, Your Grace, but he seemed to be able to escape. However, the sea is unforgiving and untrustworthy, no matter how beautiful it is. It is entirely likely that he lost his life in a storm and is now fodder for the beasts below the waves.”

The final barrier that was keeping Maxwell's rage and angst in place finally shattered into a million pieces, and he slammed his fist down on the table so hard that it caused the new bottle to fall off and crash on the floor. The tables around them emptied as the patrons quietly moved to find other seats farther away. The Duke's temper was well known among the men of the *ton*, and there wasn't a single one of them who could best him in a fight, especially when he was like this.

“I want that vile piece of garbage brought to me, no matter if he's dead or alive,” Maxwell gritted out with pure distaste as his blue eyes glittered wildly with rage.

James picked up his glass and shook his head. “And I want to do that for you, old friend,” he said emphatically. “But you *must* accept that there is a very real possibility that he could never be found.” He looked at Maxwell almost pityingly as the man silently seethed with rage, and he shook his head. “I only say this because we have been old friends, Your Grace, so I pray that you will hear me. This is consuming you. It's becoming the only thing that you are.”

“I am the Duke and Lord of my family,” Maxwell snapped. “It is my responsibility to eliminate anyone and anything that would do my charges wrong. Damian didn't just destroy my sister's reputation, but he has left ruin in his wake. He has

forsaken all of his responsibilities, even to Veron—” He stopped as he realized what he was about to say, and he shook his head and sighed before continuing in a much calmer voice, “I *need* him found, James. Do you understand?”

James studied the Duke for a moment, then leaned forward. “I have heard that you have become a benefactor to the Wallace ladies,” he admitted, his voice low. “What are you doing with them? How are they involved in this?”

“That is none of your concern,” Maxwell growled, standing up. The room spun as he got to his feet, and he felt the urge to sit back down. He fought it, however, and leaned on the back of his chair for support. “I believe our business is over for now, old friend,” he added gruffly, throwing an envelope on the table. “You know what you must do. Everything else is my business and mine alone.”

Finished with the conversation, Maxwell turned, almost stumbling, and headed toward the door. When he stepped out on the street, his stomach convulsed wildly, and he retched. Much of his anger seemed to be ejected out of him along with the contents of his gut, and when he took in a deep breath of fresh air, he felt his head finally starting to become clear.

From behind him, the doors of the gentleman’s club opened, and James walked calmly toward him as he lit himself a cigar.

“You really must step back from this, Your Grace,” the Captain warned calmly, puffing on his cigar, “or what little you have left will be ruined by your own hand. I do not wish that for you, old friend. I implore you, let it go for now and focus on what you have in front of you. The unjust are always punished for their crimes, but it must be on God’s terms, not ours.”



Veronica was awakened by a loud thump, and she bolted up in bed. She looked at her sister as her heart raced and found her sleeping peacefully at her side. For a moment, Veronica wondered if it had been a dream, and she looked around the room suspiciously. However, a moment later, she heard another distant thump, followed by a small scuffle.

Careful not to wake Poppy, she left the bed and threw on her robe as she stepped into her slippers. As she approached the door, she looked over at the mantle and picked up one of the heavy silver candelabras. With utter silence, she slipped from the room and made her way toward the commotion with the weapon raised above her head.

“Do not move again,” a familiar voice commanded as she approached the corner of the hallway, “or I will use you as target practice.”

Veronica lowered the candelabra as she rounded the corner and felt relief rush through her when she saw Maxwell attempting to balance a rather large vase back on its table. She watched him with a mix of concern and amusement as he continued to talk to the inanimate object for a moment longer, then she cleared her throat.

Maxwell whirled around as if startled by the sound, and swayed.

“You! What... what are you doing in my house? You’re not talking to me, remember? Shut me out of our little deal and all. It was very clever of you, what you did. Very clever, indeed.”

Veronica had seen this type of behavior from her brother before and knew very well what it meant. The Duke was good and drunk, and it would do no good to argue with him. And yet, she felt herself wanting to anyway. She sighed and placed her weapon on the side table closest to her.

“I am not in your house, Maxwell. You are in my house. And I do talk to you often when we are chaperoned. Now come, let’s get you to bed before you wake the house or break something. We have very few family valuables left, and I would appreciate it greatly if you would leave them all intact.”

Maxwell chuckled as Veronica placed his arm around her shoulders and began to walk him toward his chamber.

“Ah, yes, with a chaperone,” he slurred, allowing her to guide him. “But that wasn’t part of our deal, was it, Veronica? That’s not what you promised me.” He stopped walking and leaned against the wall so Veronica couldn’t move him.

She looked up at him, annoyed, and crossed her arms. “And you have not delivered your promise to me,” she countered matter-of-factly.

Maxwell tried to speak, but she cut him off, her hurt too deep to ignore any further.

“Aside from your sponsorship, you assured another line item. You promised pleasure, Maxwell,” she whispered harshly, “and you haven’t delivered a single ounce of it. You’ve only brought me longing, aching, and a sense of shame. It is not I who broke our deal, Maxwell, but you.”

“Because you won’t give me a chance!” he hissed.

His hands shot out from his sides, capturing Veronica’s waist and pulling her to him. She whispered for him to release her, but instead, he pressed her against the wall in a surprisingly agile fashion despite his drunkenness. He traced the tip of his nose down her neck as he held her hands above her head, letting his lips barely graze her flesh. Veronica trembled at his touch, cursing her body for responding. It was no use, however, and the waves of longing she felt whenever he touched her began to unfurl and course through her veins.

“I can give you all the pleasure you could stand if you would just give me a chance.” He groaned before capturing her lips in a deep kiss.

Veronica could taste the whiskey on his tongue, but it only seemed to add to her excitement as she kissed him back. Beneath her nightgown, she felt her nipples harden to taut peaks as her body came alive with arousal.

Instead of resisting, Veronica writhed her body against his, giving in to her own need, and boldly pushed away from the wall so that he would free her wrists. When he did so, she pushed him against the wall, and her hand went to his trousers. She stroked her fingers over his already-hardened member boldly, and a deep moan escaped from Maxwell’s throat.

“Veronica, what are you—”

“Isn’t this what you wanted, Maxwell?” she purred, stroking the length of his member through his trousers harder.

The Duke's eyes, which were glazed with alcohol and pleasure, glowed as she looked into them. Ecstasy shot through him as he felt the mounting pleasure grow inside of him. Finally, the games were over. The mask was off. Veronica was going to give him what he needed.

"Yes," he rasped, capturing her cheeks in his hands so he could kiss her again. "Oh, God, yes."

They both moaned as they kissed one another deeply, neither of them sure of who wanted whom more. Pleasure pulsed through his member as she continued to stroke him, bringing him closer to release.

Suddenly, Veronica was gone, and her pliant, beautiful body was no longer in his arms but instead standing several feet away from him. His eyes shot open as he breathed raggedly, and he looked at her in dazed confusion. Veronica looked back at him in torment, her breasts heaving as she tried to catch her breath.

"It feels awful to be left aching, doesn't it?" she mocked, her voice full of hurt, and Maxwell's eyes widened as he realized he was getting a taste of his own medicine. "I promised to match your actions, Maxwell. To take your lead in learning how to satisfy your so-called pleasure. So, if you don't like the way this feels or how this deal we struck is turning out, I suggest you look at your actions for blame." Still trembling from her gusto and arousal, she wrapped her robe tighter around herself and took another step back. "You should go to bed, Maxwell. It is clear you are in need of rest."



“Veronica, wait,” he implored, but Veronica was already walking away, leaving him alone with his ache.

Confusion and annoyance roared inside him. He felt his body begin to protest against the state he was left in, but as he made his way toward his chamber, the levity of Veronica’s words sunk in, and he wondered if he really was about to be the master of his own ruin.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



*M*axwell stared up at the vaulted ceiling of his chambers at the Wallace house, his bed linens and night clothes tossed begrudgingly on the floor. Despite the cool air coming in from his open windows, his room was sweltering, only adding to the odd daze that had come over him.

His mind was spinning with the events of the last few weeks, and he wanted desperately to catch and organize them. Since his run-in with Veronica in the hallway, he had felt like a different man. He had not forgotten James' words either, and the combination of their opinions had followed him around like a dark cloud.

Just as before, Veronica had once more gone back to her trick of being constantly chaperoned, robbing him of any chance of having her to himself. Yet, as the weeks passed and he loosened his grip on the situation, his feelings of annoyance began to change into curiosity and satisfaction. Having a constant chaperone around may have been annoying, but not being able to give in to the carnal need that took over him whenever Veronica was around had allowed him to learn much more about her. Now, he found her more fascinating than ever.

He had learned that when Damien's scandal had hit them the hardest, it was Veronica who stepped up to handle everything. Not just the finances, but everything. Things no other ladies he knew would accept to do simply because of their stations, but *she* did.

He had also discovered that before her brother's fall from grace, Veronica had become quite the experienced equestrian. Although she had blushed and begged them not to, Poppy and Evanora were all too willing to share her adeptness on the saddle.

"It was like she became one with the beast," Poppy had bragged. "Once she had the reins, they would simply fly across the fields!"

The look on Veronica's face when they had explained that her three beloved horses were the first to be sold to make ends meet had made his heart ache. Maxwell himself had an affinity for riding, it had been his way of letting out all of the world's frustrations. But when Alice brought scandal to his family, he traded his horses for whores and whiskey. Now, it had been months since he had ridden a horse.

That was not all though. Veronica had basically become Poppy's mother long before Damian left them. And when he was still around, she had taken time to cover up her brother's little messes when they had arisen. And then, of course, there was the way she had faced the *ton* on her own and still held her head high. She was a remarkable woman, one who deserved so much more than what life had dealt her.

During those conversations, Veronica herself had never spoken on such matters but had often attempted to change the subject to praise someone else at the table. Poppy was an excellent

seamstress and a voracious reader who had an affinity for all animals, small and fluffy. Evanora, in her younger days, had traveled wide and far and at one time was the center of attention of the *ton* with colorful rumors involving romance and wild adventures. She also spoke Italian, French, and German fluently.

Veronica had recounted wonderful, beautiful tales of the two women at her side. But not once did she ever speak of her own accomplishments. That in itself spoke volumes.

Uncomfortable and aggravated with his thoughts, Maxwell got out of bed and went to the washstand. He poured water into the basin and splashed it on his face and neck. Maxwell groaned as the refreshing liquid cooled his hot skin, and he repeated the process. Then, he stood dripping by the washstand, his thoughts continuing to swirl. His mind went over the series of events from the details of the family interaction to the ball they had come back from that very night.

Veronica had been a vision, this time opting out of the soft pastel colors of the Season that everyone else was wearing. The taffeta gown she had donned was brilliant sapphire blue that brought out the gold flecks in her eyes. She matched her dress with diamond and sapphire jewelry that hung almost artistically from her ears and neck. She had stunned not just him, but everyone.

Like the Crandall Ball and the few others they had attended since then, she had attracted many gentlemen. This time, however, Maxwell had not let himself get dragged away by duty and had stayed near Veronica, Poppy, and Evanora the entire time. It was easy for him to see that Veronica had just as many suitors as Poppy. In fact, the eligible bachelors of the *ton*

had seemed to hover around the two young ladies like a swarm of bees just waiting to gather nectar.

Watching her accept the offers to dance started to drive him mad with jealousy. His attention had zeroed in on her suitor's hands, and he had found himself watching them like a hawk just waiting for one small misstep so he could strike.

“Perhaps, Your Grace, you would like to share a dance with my dear sister?” Poppy had asked at one point, noticing his discomfort.

He had torn his eyes from Veronica, and when he looked down at her little sister, he found her eyes glittering with mischief and understanding. For a moment, he debated whether he should disregard her opinion, but ultimately, he found himself standing to his feet as the song ended and making his way to Veronica.

She had looked at him with such surprise when he asked her to dance that he almost panicked, and for a moment, he wondered if taking advice from Poppy had been a good idea. But then, she had smiled, curtsied, and accepted his proffered hand.

“I had no idea you like to dance, Your Grace,” she had stated as she learned that his steps were quite proficient.

He had smirked as he twirled her around, feeling, perhaps for the first time, like he was enjoying one of the dull social events.

“I enjoy dancing about as much as I enjoy corresponding with my steward in Kendrick.” He chuckled. “But Alice loved it. Before Mother started to change, she used to play the harpsichord for us, and Alice would stand on my feet.”

That new information seemed to have pleased her because the smile that had spread across her face was unlike any she had given him before. The genuine happiness from her gaze had made his heart swell, and he had started to smile back at her the same way, uncaring of who was watching them.

“You look surprised, Lady Veronica,” he had finally noted.

Veronica’s smile had grown wider as her eyes shone with warmth. “Perhaps I am, Your Grace, but in the most delightful way possible.”

It had been the first kind words she had said to him since the night he had visited her chamber, and her gentle tone had soothed the anxiety that had been building inside him since their arrangement had gone sideways. But when their dance had ended and he had asked if she would join him on the terrace for some libations, her beautiful smile had faltered, and she had looked at him with untrusting eyes. Instead, she had accepted another invitation to dance, and he had been forced to leave the dance floor alone.

Needing a break from his intrusive thoughts and the staunchness of his chamber, the Duke grabbed his trousers from the floor and put them on. He donned his white dress shirt but did not bother to button it before he lit a candle and left his room. The house, as he suspected, was completely dark as he stepped out. Even the small sconces on the wall had already been extinguished by the servants.

Maxwell liked this time of the night when everything was at its stillest and quietest. It was as if it was impossible to disturb the darkness, and instead of fearing it, he embraced it. In the small, warm glow of his candle, he made his way toward Damian's study in the hopes of finding a distraction.

He stopped short in front of the door when he found it slightly ajar. From the crack, he could see a small beam of light illuminating the room and hear the sound of someone rustling about. Maxwell leaned closer as he snuffed out his candle and listened.

Whoever it was, they were quickly going through the desk looking for something. Maxwell had kept his ledger for the Wallace family on the desk, but he didn't leave money in there, and there were no Wallace family valuables to steal. As he listened, he heard a soft, feminine sob come from inside and immediately felt his heart squeeze in his chest. It was not a thief, after all.

He put his hand on the door and slowly pushed it open. Just as he had suspected, he found Veronica sitting at the desk. Pain rippled through him as he saw her sitting in the big leather chair holding her head in her hands and sobbing. She was wearing a pink shawl around her thin, white nightgown, and her long, dark curly hair was loose and hung around her shoulders like a shroud.

"What has happened?" Maxwell asked, stepping further into the room.

Veronica gasped at the sudden intrusion and jumped in her seat. Her eyes were wide as she lifted her head, and fear

colored her expression briefly. However, she looked quite relieved when she realized it was him. She stood up, using her shawl to wipe the tears from her eyes, and straightened her shoulders proudly.

“Nothing. All is well, I assure you, Your Grace,” she replied diplomatically. “I just cannot sleep.”

Maxwell grunted and took a step toward her.

“It seems insomnia is a malady we are both suffering from at the moment,” he mused, looking at her with gentle eyes.

Although she had been utterly breathtaking in her finery, Veronica was still beautiful even without the silk and jewels. In fact, seeing her now with her hair wild and the candle accentuating the curves beneath her nightgown, he had never found her more beautiful.

She let out a choked laugh as she dabbed her eyes with her shawl once more.

“Yes, it would seem so. I am sorry if my wandering awoke you, Your Grace,” she apologized, sitting back down at the desk.

“Yes, well, it would seem that we are to take turns disturbing one another.” He chuckled, shaking his head as he joined her at the desk.



Veronica did not laugh or smile at his small jest, and he quickly changed his angle.

“Veronica, you have not disturbed me at all. But, may I ask what it is you are looking for? I have rearranged some things, so perhaps I could be of some help?”

Veronica sighed, held her hand up to her forehead, and shook her head woefully.

“No. I know it is not here,” she replied in resignation. “I have looked around this room, this desk thousands of times. I never find what I’m looking for.”

Maxwell furrowed his brow as he leaned his hip against the desk and looked down at her.

“What is it?” he asked gently.

Veronica lifted her head to look at him, her eyes so full of sadness and heartache that he could not help but reach over and lay a comforting hand over hers. To his relief, Veronica did not shy away from his touch. Instead, her body seemed to relax a little, and her delicate fingers squeezed his much stronger hand.

“Last ditch hope, I suppose. To find any evidence of where Damian could have gone. A correspondence from someone. A banknote. Anything, any clue as to where we could find him.”

Understanding dawned on the Duke. He nodded and crouched down so that he was sitting at eye level with her.

“I assure you that if there were any clues to your brother’s whereabouts in this room, we would have found them by now. I am pretty thorough about such things, but you, my dear, could make a detective jealous with your capability of ferreting out information.”

Veronica laughed softly at his praise but still shook her head sadly as she stood up and put distance between them. Maxwell rose to his feet slowly but did not follow.

“What’s going to happen to us after our agreement is over, Maxwell?” she asked, her tone dipping once more into sadness. “What if Poppy’s new husband does not want to care for me or Aunt Evanora? What if I am never asked to wed? You know the *ton* better than I do. I could be nothing but a silly distraction for them. Another clown in their show to keep them amused. They dance with me, talk with me, but do they see me as a serious prospect?” She shook her head, looking weary and hurt. “This agreement between you and I is a quick fix, but it will not last. If things keep going well between Poppy and Lord Greensley, I suspect he will be ready to propose within the next few weeks.”

Maxwell shook his head as he took a step forward.

“You are *not* a silly distraction, Veronica. Not for anyone,” he said gravely, his voice thick with meaning.

Veronica’s breath caught in her throat as she looked up at him with yearning eyes. “I am not?” she asked in a whispered plea.

Maxwell swallowed hard as he shook his head once more, his eyes begging her to believe him. Unable to help himself, he reached out and stroked her cheek as he closed the space between them.

“You are not,” he whispered hoarsely.

He wanted to rush in, gather her in his arms and steal her breath with a kiss. His body had ached for her badly since they had last indulged in each other’s bodies, and he had spent many hours thinking of how much he wanted her. But instead, he moved slowly, giving her every opportunity to stop him.

Slowly, his gentle touch moved up to her hair, and he caressed the silky locks behind her ear and rubbed the knot of tension in the nape of her neck. Veronica’s eyes fluttered shut as she breathed a soft sigh of relief, and her body relaxed into his touch. For a moment, hope rose inside him. They were finally getting somewhere.

Then, as if snapping out of a trance, her eyebrows furrowed as if she were in pain, and she took several steps back. When she looked back up at him, her eyes were glazed with wanting, and hurt.

“If I am not, then why does no one call on me? Poppy has suitors every day bringing flowers and trinkets, and sitting and talking with her.” She shook her head and gave Maxwell a look of defeat that he had never seen on her face before. “Even for you, the only thing you want from me is my body. I am nothing more than an object for your pleasure.”

Guilt and hurt shot through Maxwell as he heard the raw pain in Veronica's voice, and he knew he alone was responsible for putting those feelings there. Even when it came to the other suitors, he had also noticed that there were never any who called on her. It had filled him with pleasure at first, knowing there was no active competition yet, but now he saw that it had been a telling and awful experience to feel played.

Fighting the urge to go to her, the Duke stilled himself against the desk and forced himself to give her space. He wanted to find a resolution, and he understood now more than ever that his dominance could easily shatter that hope.

"Veronica, I must apologize. I truly am remorseful that I cannot offer you marriage, but I assure you it is not just your body that has called to me. Your beauty easily outshines that of any lady of the *ton*, your sister, I am sorry to say, included. But I see so much more than that."

Veronica scowled as she shook her head. "There is no need for lies, Maxwell," she hissed spitefully.

"I do not lie," he persisted, his tone grave. He ran a frustrated hand through his hair and pushed forward with his point. "Your strength surpasses that of most noblemen in our Society. We are taught from a young age how to manage such affairs, but you were thrust into it all without any training or advice. You showed your face when everyone deemed you should not. And you protected your family, even Damian, when he had forsaken you."

The smallest of smiles touched Veronica's lips as her gaze softened. Slowly, Maxwell loosened his grip on the desk and stood up straight.

“I find you brave, intelligent, and incredibly witty,” he added with a chuckle.

Veronica nearly laughed with him, her eyes beginning to look at him with more amusement than distrust. He took another step toward her and felt hope rise in his chest when he watched her take a small step in his direction.

“Maxwell—” she trailed off, unable to find her words.

“And admittedly, I found these damned visits with your aunt annoying in the beginning, but now, my favorite part of my day is learning more about you. I like the stories they tell about you. I like it even more when you get embarrassed.” He chuckled again, shaking his head as he took another step forward.

Veronica stayed where she was, but her smile grew bigger, and in the dim candlelight, Maxwell saw her cheeks redden with a self-conscious blush. As she usually did when feeling unsure, she bit her bottom lip and chewed on the delicate flesh.

“But you see, when you do things like that, when you remind me how delicious it feels to have that bottom lip between *my* teeth, it drives me crazy. And yes, I yearn to show you the effect you have on me, Veronica.”

Lust rose in Veronica’s eyes as she looked at him, and she slowly released her bottom lip from her teeth. The rosy flesh glistened softly as her tongue darted out nervously to soothe the small indents, and Maxwell had to call on all of his strength to not ravage her. He wanted to taste that glittering

wetness. With his lips. His teeth. His tongue. And he wanted it badly.

Several moments passed between them in silence. He needed to hear what she was thinking before he made another move, even if it was causing him agony. He had forgotten just how tempting she was to touch, how erotically delicious her scent was when she responded to him. He felt his mouth begin to water, and he silently prayed for patience.

“Damn you, Maxwell!” Veronica hissed, finally breaking the silence as her beautiful face twisted in pain.

Maxwell felt a tear begin to form in his heart as he watched fresh tears roll down her cheeks.

“Veronica, I—”

“No,” she whispered emphatically, pointing an accusing finger at him. “No, you cannot say things like that, not after what you have put me through. You do not get to talk as if you know me... as if I am more than a prize for you. You do not get to give me hope like that when I... when I—”

Maxwell gripped the desk tightly, so much so he could feel the wood grain imprinting his fingers.

“When you what, Veronica?” he prompted, his tone almost pleading.

She glared at him through her tears, shaking her head. “When I already have these intense feelings for you!” she admitted as if disgusted with herself. “You will leave this arrangement looking like a prince among men! But what about me? I will be nothing but a ruined woman. Even if the *ton* never finds out, I will know.”

“Veronica, no. I already told you that that does not need to be our arrangement any longer if that is not what you want,” Maxwell insisted.

“But it *is* what I want, Maxwell,” she admitted, her tone rife with pain. “And I hate myself for it! Do you know how annoying it is, how *loathsome* it is to want something you *know* you should not have? Something that is constantly being dangled in front of you like bait?”

“*Yes.*” Maxwell bit out through gritted teeth, and it brought Veronica to a halt. She stared at him, tears glittering in her eyes, silently demanding an explanation.

“You enthrall me, Veronica, to the point where I often feel I am about to lose my damned mind. Do you know what responsibilities hang over my head? I am the Duke, an overseer of the general good of an entire population of people. My sister, who was once sweet and innocent, is now jaded and scarred and hundreds of miles away from our mother, who has her own twisted agenda. I have many things to think about, Veronica, *many* things that require my attention, but do you know where my mind goes instead? Where my every waking thought and dream go to?”

Veronica gasped, her eyes widening, and she shook her head in response.

“You make it sound like you are going through Hell, Veronica, but I assure you that I am right there with you. This torment we have created haunts both of us.”

“It does?” she rasped, her soft voice barely above a whisper.

Maxwell nodded once, his pain-filled gaze set on her.

“I *ache* for you, Veronica,” he confessed, his tone hoarse. “In a way that goes far deeper than some monetary deal.”

Veronica’s shoulders dropped as she looked at him as if she was not sure what to think. He watched, tortured, as several different emotions crossed her face. She looked so torn, so lost. All he wanted to do was to gather her in his arms and hold her until she felt warm and whole.

“Thank you,” Veronica whispered at last.

Maxwell’s eyebrows flew up in surprise, as he was not sure what to make of that.

“Whatever for?” he asked in genuine confusion.

“For telling me all of this,” Veronica replied, looking at him with raw emotion. She wiped her tears away with her shawl and straightened her posture. “I do not... I do not allow myself to feel self-pity often, but I must confess that this situation has me shaken and not at all like myself.”



“Please forgive me for anything I have done that may have caused that feeling,” Maxwell pleaded.

Veronica looked at him appreciatively, and he felt his heart stutter.

“Noted, Maxwell,” she said with a bitter laugh.

The tension filling the room began to dissipate as Maxwell pondered over their shared confessions. He was not sure where to go from there, but he knew he could not leave it like that. As he was trying to figure out what to say, how to proceed, Veronica broke the silence.

“So, you enjoy cards with Aunt Evanora after all, do you?” she asked, once more stepping into her usual playful manner.

She gave him a look that begged him to move on, and he felt relieved. Leaving the heavy subject, Maxwell laughed in his usual obnoxious fashion and rolled his eyes.

“Enjoy is a bit of a stretch but they are indeed always amusing,” he replied, happy that they were settling once more into their intimate banter. “But, for whatever reason you imposed such chaperoned times, I now appreciate the visits, *any* visit with you.”

They smiled warmly at each other, and Veronica took another step toward him.

“I must admit that I do miss our more private visits. On occasion,” she murmured.

A fresh wave of arousal shot through Maxwell, and he looked back at her, intrigued.

“Is that so?” he asked, his tone dropping an octave as he took another step toward her.

Veronica took another step toward him almost immediately, her eyes glazing over with want.

“Yes,” she whispered, her sweet voice almost too ashamed to admit it. “It is sinful of me, I know, but—” she trailed off as she looked up at him yearningly, and Maxwell’s very cells nearly shouted with triumph as they closed the space between them and went into one another’s arms.

Veronica moaned softly as their lips finally came together for a kiss, and Maxwell groaned in pleasure as he felt her soft curves melt into him. They kissed one another deeply, hungrily, as if they had both been starving.

Need shot through Maxwell’s groin as he pulled them both to the desk, and he drew her into his lap. Their lips broke apart only to find their way over one another’s necks and ears, their kisses leaving hot trails of need. Maxwell’s hands nearly trembled as they began to roam over the curves of Veronica’s breasts and waist through the thin fabric of her nightgown, and he could feel the dampness of her radiating skin.

He wanted nothing more than to free her beautiful body from the confines of the damned thing, but he had to admit that there was a twisted pleasure in only feeling her through the nightgown. There was more, so much more he wanted to do, but it could all wait.

For nearly an hour, they got lost in devouring one another, their lips never stopping their kisses for more than a second or two. Their hands roamed freely, exploring one another with fervency, but never going under the fabric of his trousers or her nightgown.

Maxwell relished the moment as long as he could, not wanting to let her go. But as his need grew hotter, so did the ache in his groin, and he had to force himself to pull away.

“I must stop,” he breathed heavily, the ache crystal clear in his voice, “or I will no longer be able to be the gentleman I am very much trying to be.”

Veronica nodded and shakily brought her fingers up to comb through her hair. He felt her tremble in his lap, and he knew she was struggling as he was. It only made him want to give in to his need more, and he groaned in pain as another shot of arousal made his member grow even harder.

“I agree,” she panted. “It seems perhaps we have lost ourselves.”

Veronica attempted to stand up, but her legs were shaking, and her struggle only made Maxwell want to pull her down into his lap once more. He gripped the armrests tightly instead, forcing

himself to resist. Once he was sure she was standing firmly, he rose, tipped her chin up, and kissed her deeply a final time.

“I look forward to our visit tomorrow, Veronica,” Maxwell murmured as he lifted her hand to his lips and looked at her hotly.

Veronica bowed her head slightly, her eyes shining with the same amount of need.

“As most certainly do I, Maxwell.”

Needing to leave at that moment or he would throw it all away, Maxwell turned abruptly on his heel and made his way back to his chamber. He did not dare look back, did not dare slow down. For if he did, he knew he would find himself back in the study with her giving in to his carnal desires.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Veronica chewed on her bottom lip absentmindedly, the taste and feel of Maxwell's kiss very much still vivid in her mind. Even her skin was still tingling with the pleasure of his touch. She felt sensitive and confined in her dress. The very feel of the fabric annoyed her.

Last night, Maxwell had been different. The way he listened to her, the way he spoke to her had left just as strong a mark on her as his kisses had. The anxiety over their agreement was waning, and now Veronica's mind was filled with curiosity about the future.

Maxwell's confession had been passionate, and she could tell by the tone in his voice that every word he had said was true, including, unfortunately, his non-commitment to marriage. But now she wondered if she too would have a similar life. And if she did, would it truly be terrible?

Her mind jumped back to their kiss. The feel of his warm, naked chest under her fingertips had been most addicting, and she yearned to know what it would be like to touch every inch of his skin.

“Pardon, My Lady, but would you like coffee or tea this morning?”

Veronica turned away from the window she was pretending to look out of and turned her attention back to the breakfast table. Poppy, Evanora, and the two servants waiting on them were all looking at her in concern. She ignored them and looked up at the servant closest to her.

“Coffee, Beth, please,” she responded, her tone cool.

Beth poured the coffee into her cup, careful not to make eye contact with Veronica, then backed away slowly. Veronica poured cream and sugar into her coffee and then took a sip. When she finished, she sat her cup back down and glanced around her. Poppy and Evanora were still staring at her.

“Whatever is the matter?” she asked, looking back at them curiously.

“Nothing, darling girl, nothing,” Evanora replied quickly, shaking her head as she picked up her egg spoon. She delved the tiny silver utensil into the top of her already cracked boiled egg and scooped up some of the velvety insides. “It is just... you look... well, a bit different. Are you feeling a touch ill?”

Veronica shook her head and hid her blush with her coffee cup as she took a long sip. “Not at all. Although, perhaps I am feeling a touch of nostalgia.” It was not the truth but not exactly a lie either.

“You do?” Poppy asked, leaning closer, her brow furrowed. “What could you possibly be longing for from the past, dear sister?”

Veronica smiled at her little sister almost forlornly. “Well, it is just that our plan with His Grace sponsoring you is going swimmingly, you know. It has not escaped my eye, or His Grace’s, that you seem to be enjoying the company of one particular gentleman and that he seems to feel quite the same. Soon, perhaps there will be a proposal, and I was just thinking how different our lives could be by the end of the Season.”

Before they could discuss the subject any further, Maxwell’s footsteps sounded on the hall’s marbled floor, and a moment later, he strode in. Veronica felt his eyes sweep hungrily over her before he greeted everyone in a most cordial fashion, and she felt a tendril of arousal rise in her loins.

“Good morning, Ladies,” he intoned, a smile wide on his face as he took his place at the head of the table.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” they all greeted in unison.

“Did you have a good evening at the Tindle Ball last night, Your Grace?” Poppy asked.

In the last few weeks, Veronica had noticed that the relationship between Poppy and the Duke had taken on an almost sibling-like nature, and she seemed to enjoy knowing how Maxwell felt about everything, especially his opinion of Poppy’s suitors.

“It was a most pleasant evening, yes,” Maxwell replied cordially, buttering his toast. “And I found out a few more details about your Lord Greensley.”

Poppy’s eyes lit up at this, and Veronica smiled warmly as she watched the exchange.

“Oh, do tell, Your Grace,” Poppy said eagerly.

Veronica felt a new type of bliss as she watched the interaction unfold. Maxwell was becoming the older brother Poppy needed to look up to. Poppy was happy but smart, and she was willing to take the Duke’s advice into account when it came to such matters.

As for Evanora, she had lost her edge when it came to Maxwell since they had first played cards and now seemed to enjoy conversing with him as much as Poppy did. Everyone seemed happy for the first time in a long time, and it made Veronica’s heart swell with joy.

“Lord and Lady Vervain are hosting a card game competition this evening,” Poppy announced, moving the subject matter to today’s events. “Perhaps we could attend?”

Maxwell smiled as he looked at her, but he shook his head. “Actually, I think today we should do something a little different. All of us. The affairs at my estate are running smoothly, and as for things here, they can stand to be left alone for a short time. Since it is a beautiful day, I thought perhaps we could go for a walk in the park. Partake in some outdoor games? A picnic on the green grass? I will send an invitation



to Lord Greensley if you would like, or any gentleman really, if the idea suits you all.”

“Oh, that sounds so much better! Yes, please, Your Grace!” Poppy squealed, obviously excited by the idea.

“I agree,” Evanora added a moment later. “We’ve spent far too much time inside during this beautiful Season.”

“Lady Veronica, how does that sound to you?” Maxwell asked, looking jovially at Veronica across the table.

She picked up her coffee cup and toasted it to him as she smiled.

“A most pleasant idea, Your Grace,” she replied happily, and his smile grew even bigger as he nodded his head.

“Excellent. Then, this evening, I thought we would take a break from parties and forced social interactions and go see a play. It has been quite some time since I have visited the theater, but I hear that the troupe’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is particularly extraordinary this Season. I should like it very much if you Ladies would attend with me.”

Veronica was not sure what caused the sudden shift in their plans, but she found herself very happy. In truth, she was growing tired of balls and forced friendly interactions with the ladies that had once shunned her. And even though Lord Vervain had asked her to dance multiple times and his sister and mother had returned to treating them somewhat

respectfully, Veronica did not want to be stuck in the very room that she was humiliated in only a few short weeks ago.

The chatter at the breakfast table quickly became about their plans for the park, and soon, they all left to get ready. Veronica was the last to leave the table, her mind still all over the place. As she got up, she felt her chair being pulled out for her, and she yelped in surprise.

“Your Grace!” she whispered in alarm, her hand flying to her heart as she laughed softly. “You frightened me, I thought you left.”

“I will in a moment,” Maxwell assured her, taking her hand to help her out of her seat.

The moment he touched her, Veronica felt the now familiar tingles of excitement travel up her arm and to her heart. He looked at her furtively, a touch of worry in his gaze.

“But quickly, I wanted to ask how you were, and if you are feeling better, Lady Veronica. Our subject matter last evening was quite... intense.”

Touched by his concern, Veronica smiled at him graciously. “Very much improved, Your Grace,” she assured him.

Relief poured through Maxwell’s eyes as he exhaled and smiled.

“I am so happy to hear it,” he said, his eyes beginning to glow with warmth as he looked at her, “for I have a surprise for you.”



“Your Grace, what is the meaning of this?” Veronica asked, happiness swelling inside of her as she looked down at the contents of the Modiste’s box.

As promised, Maxwell had escorted them to the park, where they were greeted cordially by the other members of the *ton* taking advantage of the beautiful day. However, once they had crossed the bridge, they had been met with a small open carriage and a liveryman holding the reins of two beautiful, sable horses.

From the carriage, Maxwell had taken the box and handed it to Veronica with a pleased look. At first, she looked confused and slightly embarrassed as she untied the velvet ribbon and lifted the lid. But that quickly dissolved into joy, and she gasped in shock when she found a new riding jacket and the beautiful riding gloves that she had given to Poppy weeks ago.

“I thought perhaps, Lady Veronica, since you and I have both not ridden a horse for too long, we might as well get our riding legs back,” he replied, gazing at her warmly for a moment before composing himself and waving an arm toward the small buggy. “And, so that Lady Poppy and Miss Snyder may join us, I have procured this.”

Veronica fought the urge to toss the box to the side and hug Maxwell in front of everyone. It had been long, *so* long since she had gone riding, and she missed it every day. Beside her, Poppy and Evanora were all smiles, apparently happy to see

her happy, and were giddily chatting as they allowed the liveryman to help them into their buggy.

“Goodness! This lovely thing does remind me of a moonlit carriage ride I took with the Prince of Spain once,” Evanora gushed as she took her seat.

“Oh, I do love that story, Auntie,” Poppy said joyfully, taking a seat opposite her. “Do tell it again! I love the part when you reach the weeping willow!”

Maxwell chuckled to himself as he turned from the two ladies and took the box from Veronica’s hands. He sat on the driver’s seat of the little carriage, pulled out the beautiful baby-blue riding jacket inside, and held it open for her.

“It seems your sister and aunt are quite happy with this day so far. Now it is your turn. Come, we must see that it fits.” He smiled and gave her a playful wink.

Feeling happy and grinning like a young girl with a crush, Veronica turned and allowed him to help her into the well-made jacket. It slipped snugly over her arms and shoulders, fitting her perfectly. Then, she fastened the buttons quickly and turned to show it off with a flourish.

“Oh, Veronica, it looks lovely!” Poppy cooed from her seat.

“Very fitting, darling girl,” Evanora piped up, then added, “Did you perhaps pack some sandwiches for our picnic that we may enjoy now? All the excitement is making me peckish.”

“Of course, Miss Snyder,” Maxwell replied, nodding at the servant who was holding the picnic basket.

Quickly, the young man scurried over to the carriage.

The Duke turned back to Veronica, who was beaming from ear to ear. “*You* most certainly do look lovely, Lady Veronica,” he murmured in agreement, bowing his head in such a way that only she would notice.

Next, he pulled the gloves out of the box and held them out to her. Their fingers touched as she took them, sending small sparks into her skin. And just as before, the gloves fit perfectly, and Veronica felt a rush of emotions well up inside of her. She had to admit that when Maxwell wanted to be sweet, he was exceedingly good at it.

She looked up at him as she pulled the other glove on, and their eyes met. Time seemed to stop as they held one another’s gaze, and she couldn’t identify the look in his eyes. It was warm and deep. There was longing, and yet, there was peace. For a moment, she wondered if Maxwell was feeling what she felt. Then, just as she thought he was about to say something, a deep, loud voice boomed.

“Kendrick!”

Immediately, they tore their eyes away from one another, and Veronica took a step back toward the carriage to join Poppy and Evanora. From the walkway, they could see Evan Withington, the Marquess of Greensley, and Poppy’s suitor,

approaching with his mother and his two younger sisters, Opal and Eugenia.

“Are you stealing my lady from me, Kendrick?” Evan asked jovially as he and his family approached.

They all exchanged pleasant salutations, something, Veronica noted, that felt normal and pleasing. It was as if they were stepping back into their old life—the one with no scandal—and it filled her with hope and happiness.

“Not at all,” Maxwell replied in a similar fashion, shaking his friend’s hand. “If the young ladies and Miss Snyder are comfortable with your presence, then you are most welcome.”

Poppy, upon hearing this from her seat, smiled bigger than ever as Lord Greensley turned his attention to her.

From her seat, Evanora smiled impishly. “My, my, how nice it is to be surrounded by such lovely young gentlemen,” she murmured, obviously happy with the new company.

“Might I indulge you with my company on your ride, Lady Poppy? Miss Snyder?” Lord Greensley asked, bowing low in a comedic fashion.

“Please do, Lord Greensley,” Poppy replied almost immediately, looking almost beside herself with happiness.

“I certainly would not oppose,” Evanora added, her tone wickedly sultry.

“Wonderful,” Lord Greensley boomed, grinning widely. “But before I do, I have brought something for you, Lady Poppy.”

Veronica, forgetting her own excitement, watched the scene of happiness unfold as one of the Marquess’ servants came around holding a small, white, fluffy puppy with a collar and leash. Happiness burst through her chest as Evan took the puppy from the servant and put it on Poppy’s lap.

Poppy practically dissolved into fits of joy as she cooed and petted the small animal, seemingly not able to get over the surprise of it all. It had been far too long since she had had a pet, and Veronica was overjoyed to see her younger sister glowing with happiness.

“Does it please you, My Lady?” Lord Greensley asked, looking at Poppy with eyes full of hope.

“My Lord,” Poppy said, looking at him with pure appreciation, “not only does this please me, but it brings me eternal joy!” She lifted the excited puppy in her arms, and the puppy leaned forward to lick her nose. Poppy laughed joyfully as she once more squeezed the animal to her chest and gushed, “I already love her so much, My Lord. Please, come join us so we may pick a suitable name for her.”

Evan was quick to accept Poppy’s invitation, and the moment the young man was comfortable, Evanora turned to him and said, “You know, I once was gifted a peacock from a lovely Albanian coin master.”

Evan looked at Evanora with wide eyes, then at Poppy, who giggled and shrugged her shoulders. He chuckled, too, as he leaned forward with his hands on his knees.

“A peacock you say?” he asked curiously. He looked quickly at Poppy and winked, then turned his attention back to Evanora. “I simply must hear this tale,” he insisted.

From where she was standing on the ground, Veronica watched Poppy’s shoulders relax as she observed Evan’s gentle way with Evanora and her wild stories, and Veronica knew then that her little sister was falling in love. She looked at them all fondly, silently giving thanks for their good fortune.

When the excitement of the moment died down and Evanora had the carriage passengers deeply invested in her former life, Maxwell once more turned to Veronica.

“It seems this day is full of surprises, Lady Veronica,” he noted with amusement as he gestured toward their patiently waiting horses.

Veronica walked over to the liveryman, who held out the reins of the sable mare on his left.

“What are their names?” she asked, lovingly caressing the long snout of her mare.

“Gypsy is yours, My Lady, and His Grace will be riding Daisy today,” the liveryman replied cheerfully.



“They are so beautiful,” she gushed, and the elderly man nodded as a proud smile swept across his wrinkled face.

“Right they are, My Lady. My horses are my pride and joy. It is my pleasure to leave them to you.”

He handed Maxwell his reins, bowed to them, and assured them that he would be patiently awaiting their safe return. Once he was gone, Maxwell turned to Veronica with a playful spark in his eye.

“Well? Shall we see what else the day has in store, Lady Veronica?”

“Most certainly, Your Grace,” Veronica replied.

Smiling, she slowly pulled herself up into the saddle and beamed at the Duke. She was overflowing with happiness. Feeling the sense of freedom that came with riding return to her, she settled herself, adjusted her reins, and set the horse at a brisk pace.

“Perhaps somewhere along our journey, I shall find a way to surprise you,” she threw out coyly.

Maxwell smirked as he quickly swung up into his saddle and joined her ahead of the now-moving buggy.

“You already have, Veronica,” he murmured loud enough only for them to hear, “in the most wonderful fashion.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“*N*ow, promise me, dear, that you, Lady Poppy, and your lovely aunt Miss Snyder will join us at our summer house next weekend, yes?” Lady Greensley implored as she held Veronica’s hands.

Veronica beamed at the Dowager Marchioness and bowed her head. “I promise, Lady Greensley, and thank you so much for the invitation! It has been too long since our family has enjoyed the summertime in the country,” she said earnestly.

Lady Greensley laughed, pulled away to place another cucumber sandwich on her plate, and went to sit beside the Duke. Veronica helped herself to a lemon cake, and as she nibbled on the sweet delicacy, she looked around at the party that made up their picnic. Maxwell and Lady Greensley launched into a discussion about some card game, and Evan and Poppy were chatting away about their shared love for the country with her new dog napping in her lap.

At first, Veronica and Maxwell had taken off at great speed, racing through the park with their bodies pressed close to their mares. It was an exhilarating rush that Veronica had missed for a very long time, and the euphoria that had rushed through her as she had beaten Maxwell in their little race surpassed any feelings of joy she had previously felt.

Maxwell had taken the loss well and praised her for her equestrian skills. Once their fun was over, they trotted back to the carriage and discovered that Poppy and Evan had decided on a name for the puppy. Even Maxwell had chuckled when they announced that the little dog would be named Princess Gibleet.

Veronica chuckled to herself as she thought of Maxwell's smile and how much more handsome it made him when he chose to show it. Her eyes moved from Poppy and Evan to Evanora, who was now asleep in her lounge with her mouth hanging open. To her left was little Opal, who was placing wildflowers in Evanora's hair, and to her right was her older sister Eugenia, whose young face was scrunched up in concentration as she attempted to sketch the sleeping old woman in her sketchbook.

It was all so... normal, Veronica realized. Suddenly, she felt uneasy with the idea that things were going so smoothly as if it meant something was wrong. She shook her head, trying to dispel the thought, and caught Maxwell's eye as he walked toward her.

"You look perplexed, Lady Veronica," he noted as he sat down next to her. "Is there something on your mind?"

"Your perception is very astute, Your Grace," Veronica said with a sigh, giving him a soft smile.

She continued to look at him, studying his face and taking in his eyes, cheekbones, and lips. He was a handsomely carved man. But behind the appealing features, there was something

more. Something behind the gruff exterior that he'd been hiding behind up until lately.

"I believe I have gotten used to a certain amount of chaos," she mused, still studying him. "With the things surrounding Damian, then you."

Maxwell's eyes darted away from hers for a moment, as if ashamed. But he brought himself to meet her eyes again, and she smiled ruefully.

"But now, today, everything is suddenly peaceful." She looked around the natural beauty of the park, at the sparkling lake, at the beautifully dressed members of the *ton*. "Too peaceful. It's almost as if I am expecting it all to disappear at any moment."

A sound of agreement came from Maxwell's chest, and he nodded. "I understand what you mean." He took a look around the park himself before he continued, "I believe, however, it is time for some much-deserved peace. I heard from Greensley that you've all been invited to their summer estate next weekend. Did you accept?"

Veronica nodded in response.

He smiled at her and said, "I am glad. I believe the country air would do me some good as well. If I were to have my servants prepare my own estate, would you be opposed to suffering my company as well?"

Veronica studied him once more.

“Something has changed in you, Your Grace,” she said bluntly, not yet answering his question.

The Duke looked at her, startled. “How do you mean?”

“This gentle, patient man next to me is not the man who struck a deal with me over a month ago,” Veronica replied, her voice low so only they could hear.

Understanding dawned on Maxwell as he picked up on what she meant. He had to admit that it was true. When they had first struck their deal, he was as gruff and angry as a bear. Now though, his perspective on life had shifted, and he was seeing things in a much brighter light.

“Perhaps the new company I have kept has improved my spirits,” he teased, looking at her with a small smile.

Veronica let out a soft chuckle and looked over at the rest of their group. They were all still preoccupied with one another as Veronica looked back at him.

“Flattery is a tool used to divert women from the original subject,” she jested.

Maxwell shook his head. “I mean it, Lady Veronica,” he said sincerely.

Realizing Maxwell was telling the truth, Veronica made her decision and answered his question, “Well then, Your Grace, it would be lovely to see you in the country next weekend.”

Maxwell beamed at her, looking almost like a young boy, and Veronica felt her affection for him grow.

“Excellent news, Lady Veronica. I most look forward to our time there.”



Later in the evening, Maxwell stepped out of the carriage and held out his hand. Evanora’s hand appeared, and she allowed the Duke to help her down. Poppy followed next—giddy with excitement that Evan was going to be joining them—and had her new pup tucked possessively in the crook of her free arm. Lastly, and in the Duke’s opinion most importantly, Veronica stepped out, glowing in her golden gown like the sun itself.

All of the ladies looked lovely in their dresses for the theater, but Veronica outshined them all. Her natural beauty mixed with a playful touch of rouge made her look as if she were one of the very fairies the play was all about. She took his hand lightly as she stepped down from the carriage, the touch of her gloved hand sending pulses of desire through his palm.

“This is an utter treat, Your Grace,” Evanora gushed, talking over Veronica’s faint murmur of thanks.

Maxwell forced his eyes away from Veronica and turned them on the old woman.

“I am so very happy you think so, Miss Snyder,” he said, his fingers hidden in the folds of Veronica’s dress and still touching hers. “Shall we go in?” he asked cordially. “I have

arranged for my family's private box on the balcony to be readied for us. We shall have some vittles and champagne to keep us company while we watch the play. Lady Poppy, I believe Lord Greensley is already there waiting for us."

He threw a wink at Poppy, and her face lit up with excitement, her once jaded opinion of love obviously long gone. Maxwell felt a swell of pride as he realized that he was making all of the ladies happy, and it brought him much joy to do so.

Inside, other members of the *ton* walked around the theater with equal excitement for the play, and they all exchanged polite greetings as they made their way to the Cliffords' private box.

As promised, Lord Greensley was waiting for Poppy, and she went to him, happy to take a seat at his side. Evanora was greeted by a surprise friend, the Dowager Marchioness, and the two women began to chat like old friends as they took their seats as well.

"No surprise guest for me?" Veronica whispered to Maxwell in a teasing fashion as she took her seat behind them all.

Maxwell chuckled as he joined her. As he did so, his hand brushed against hers softly and lingered there. With everyone else facing the stage, and with nothing but the curtain behind them, there were no wandering eyes for them to hide from.

"Perhaps you will have to wait and see," he murmured coyly as he caressed the back of her hand with his thumb.

Veronica, also noting that they were not being watched, returned the touch by lifting her fingertips and moving them softly over his own. Warmth and arousal spread through him as he looked at her, and he put a finger over his lips as the lights began to dim and the murmur of the crowd began to die down.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Maxwell bided his time, allowing the music from the orchestra to swell and rise and carry the audience away before he made his move. When he was sure everyone in their box was transfixed by the opening of the play, he intertwined his fingers with Veronica's and stood up. For a moment, Veronica looked at him in confusion, but she allowed him to help her to her feet and lead her out to the hallway.

Once outside, Maxwell took one quick look around to make sure the hallway was empty and then hastily began to lead Veronica toward the staircase.

"Your Grace," Veronica whispered urgently, increasing her pace to keep up with his longer strides, "where are we going? Should we not go back to the box before we are seen?"

Maxwell pulled a rather plain gray cloak out of seemingly nowhere and wrapped it around her shoulders and over her head.

"We will not be seen, Lady Veronica," he assured her, leading her to the commoner's entrance of the theater.

Unlike the entrance for nobles, the commoner's entrance lacked luster and finery, and no one bothered to even lift their heads when they stepped through the doors and out into the street. Just as he had planned, a second, unmarked carriage was waiting for them, and he quickly ushered Veronica inside.

Once seated inside the carriage, she looked at him with intrigue and annoyance as she pulled the hood off her face.

“Maxwell, I am not sure what you are doing, but this is most unbecoming. We should get back inside before—”

Maxwell cut off her words with a kiss, his arms going around her tightly. Veronica's complaint got lost in her throat, and her protest turned into a soft whimper as she relaxed in his arms.

“No one will see us,” he whispered as his lips traveled to her ear.

Veronica shivered as his deep voice caressed her insides, but she tried to resist the yearning growing inside of her once more.

“It is one thing to have these moments in an unseen corner of the house, Maxwell, but we are in public! I *must* maintain my reputation as a lady.”

She pushed at his chest lightly, and he gave her the space she wanted. Instead of taking her back inside, however, Maxwell tapped on the carriage roof, and it immediately began to move.

“You are not in public anymore, Veronica,” he said, looking at her calmly, “and tonight, I do not want you to be a lady and I do not want to be a duke. Instead, I simply want us to be us. Not as a master and mistress, not as nobles, but as simply man and woman.” He held his hand out to her. “If you truly insist, I will find a way to get you back inside right now without anyone seeing us. But if you will trust me, I would like to make time for what we both truly want. Each other.”

Maxwell tapped once more, stopping the carriage, and waited for her to decide. Then, when the sly smile graced her face, he knew Veronica had given in to her desire.

“Very well, Maxwell. If you say I am under your protection, then I will believe it to be so. But, we must not tarry long. I want to be back before the first scene ends.”

Heat spiked inside the Duke, making him sweat beneath his shirt, and he smiled at her darkly.

“My dear Veronica,” he whispered, rapping his knuckles on the carriage once more before he leaned in, “I promise you that you are not only under my protection but my care.”

His lips trailed over her chin, and she sighed softly as she nuzzled into him. The carriage began to move, and once more, he pulled her into his arms behind the dark curtains. This time, Veronica went to him willingly, her body melting into his embrace as he gathered her to him and kissed her. He took his time, letting his lips and tongue tease her until she brought herself closer to kiss him deeper.

In the privacy of the moving carriage, Veronica became bolder. As their kisses deepened, her hands found their way to Maxwell's shoulders, jacket, and hair. Her small touches immediately began to drive him mad, and he groaned as he felt his member stir and harden beneath his breeches.

"Veronica," he groaned, his voice raw with need.

She moaned softly as he said her name, and she brazenly pulled away from his lips to leave a trail of hot kisses down his neck, sending another pulse of arousal to his groin. Wanting more, the Duke shifted her body across his lap, giving him full access to her bosom. He leaned her back lightly as his mouth attacked her throat, nipping and kissing the tender flesh from the tip of her ear down to her ample cleavage.

Veronica sighed and pulled him closer as his hands tugged away the fabric there, and when his lips greedily suckled her free nipple, she let out a shriek of unexpected pleasure.

"Maxwell!" she exclaimed, her tone soft and high as she writhed in his lap and pressed further into him.

"Hush, love," he whispered, lapping his tongue over her turgid flesh.

As his mouth soothed the quick nip he gave her and his free hand began to massage her other breast, he felt her sag forward, and she held the back of his head to keep him at his feast.

Lost in finally getting what he wanted, Maxwell let the rest of the damned world fade away until it was nothing but him and Veronica. With surety that she was not going to get caught, Veronica had let her guard down, and was finally showing him what he had long hoped for: that she truly wanted him as much as he wanted her.

As the carriage drove them around aimlessly, their caresses and kisses grew bolder, needier. Soon, Veronica straddled Maxwell's lap, the heavy skirts of her dress pushed to the sides so that she could brace a knee on either side of his thighs. Maxwell, wanting to be as close to her as possible, loosened his trousers and freed his member.

They both moaned deeply as his hard length slid wickedly over the fabric of her undergarments, and though they were not touching skin to skin, they began to move as if they were deeply connected. Veronica's warm wetness soon seeped through the thin fabric, and when Maxwell felt it, he nearly lost his sanity.

It was not how he wanted the evening to go, however, and he begrudgingly stopped himself from exploding. Instead, he put all of his focus on her, picking up every moan, every movement so that he was sure he was giving her what she needed as they moved together.

"Maxwell," Veronica moaned, her breathing coming faster as their hips moved together more rapidly. "I... I think you need to stop. Oh, I... something is happening... I... I can't—"

"You *can*," the Duke groaned, gripping her hips and moving them faster. His excitement tripled as he felt her body wounding tighter and moving closer to release. "Give it to me,

little one,” he commanded, wanting to feel her climax atop him.

Veronica’s moans grew more urgent as his member continued to make steady, even motions over her swollen center, pushing her closer to ecstasy.

“That’s it, my darling,” he panted as he felt her grow close. “Come for me.”

Veronica’s grip on his shoulders tightened, and she suddenly threw her head back and let out a long, strangled, high-pitched moan as he felt her entire body shudder above him. Her liquid heat poured and soaked through her undergarments, wetting his member and driving him insane. He groaned in pleasure at seeing her so wild and needy, and with only a few more intense thrusts, he felt his orgasm barrel through him and shoot into the many layers of her dress.

Maxwell moaned in pleasure as his long-awaited release overtook him, and he held her tightly as she continued to tremble with her orgasm. For several long moments, they stayed locked in place, neither of them willing to let go of the other just yet. It was only their lips that kept moving, both of them hungry for one another’s taste.

It was only when the carriage stopped and they heard the rapping of the driver’s fist against the roof that they remembered that a world existed outside of the confines of their tiny oasis. Begrudgingly, Maxwell forced himself to part his lips from hers.

“As you requested, Veronica, we are back before the first act is to end,” he panted.

Veronica’s eyes were still hazy with lust, and she looked disappointed at the news but nodded her head. Slowly, the Duke untangled her from his lap and began to collect himself as she did the same.

“Are you sure I cannot interest you in staying here for just one more act?” he asked, his voice still thick with arousal.

Veronica grinned sultrily at him, still very much wrapped in the bliss of her own release, but shook her head.

“We really must get back, Maxwell,” she insisted, adjusting her dress back into place.

Though her words were neutral, her tone sounded forlorn, as if that was not what she truly wanted. Part of him wanted to push a little further, certain that he could convince her, but he chose not to.

“Very well.” Maxwell nodded. “But only if you agree to come to my house tomorrow.” Veronica looked at him as if he had lost his mind, so he continued, “I want more time with you, Veronica, more than just a few stolen moments here and there, and I believe you want that too.”

He looked at her imploringly and felt happiness surge through him when she asked him how that would work.

“Tell your aunt and Lady Poppy that you have been invited to tea with one of your friends. I will speak to my driver and make sure that he brings you directly to my estate.”

“What if they want to come along?”

“I will arrange for them to be occupied with their own visitors,” Maxwell replied quickly.

“And what if someone sees me?” Veronica persisted, seemingly still not sure of the idea.

“My driver can bring you directly to the kitchen door behind the house, and the back lawn is shielded by a row of trees. No one will see you if we do not want them to. My servants are loyal. They will not breathe a word to anyone. You are safe with me, my darling,” he promised.

Veronica considered his offer slowly as he anxiously waited for her answer. But when he saw a seductive smile slowly spread across her face, he felt elated beyond belief.

“Very well,” she agreed coyly. “I choose to trust your word.”

Maxwell felt his member stir to life again at the next day’s promise, and he let out a moan of approval as he leaned in and kissed her deeply once more. Finally, when he knew without a doubt that their time was running out, he released her and helped her pull her cloak once more over her shoulders and head.



“Come, Veronica,” he urged gently, taking her hand. “I believe I have a promise to fulfill. Shall we get you back inside?”

True to his word, Maxwell snuck her back into the theater without any issue, returning her to her seat at the back of the box just as Hermia confessed her love for Demetrius in the play. Only a few minutes ticked by before the stage went dark, and the audience erupted into applause as the actors got ready for the next act.

In front of them, Evanora turned in her seat to look back at Veronica with a beaming smile.

“Oh, isn’t this just so magical, Veronica?” Evanora gushed.

Maxwell bit back a smile and said nothing.

Veronica smiled widely, her cheeks flushed with excitement, and replied, “It most certainly is, Aunt Evanora. Quite magical indeed.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



Veronica could barely contain her excitement the next morning as she began to dress for the day. She was still trembling over the fear of getting caught, but something had changed between her and Maxwell. Something that filled her with happiness and a willingness to break the rules.

To avoid Poppy's observant gaze, she had arisen early and had gone back to her own chamber to get ready. Upon being back in her chamber, memories of the night Maxwell marked her breast had come flooding back. The intensity of his gaze and the pleasure she had felt as his body had come down sweetly on hers was all her mind could focus on, and she had finally given up on readying herself and called for Anita.

"Did you sleep well, My Lady?" Anita asked pointedly as she styled Veronica's hair.

Veronica looked at her lady's maid's reflection in the mirror and smiled innocently. "I did, Anita, thank you," she replied courteously. "Why do you ask?"

Anita gave her a genuine smile. "You are glowing, My Lady. Literally. Your skin is radiating with vitality. Have you

changed your nightly routine since moving in with Lady Poppy? Is it a cream? A sleep tonic?"

Veronica suppressed the smirk that was trying to form on her lips and averted her eyes, busying herself with the diamond and amethyst necklace she chose to wear for the day.

"Perhaps it is just the good fortune that has fallen upon us," she murmured, though her thoughts went somewhere much more salacious. "Poppy is seemingly besotted with Lord Greensley," she deflected, "and I truly feel a proposal is coming soon."

Anita looked genuinely happy to hear such news. "That is wonderful to hear, My Lady," she enthused. "Perhaps her luck will rub off on you and you will quickly follow!"

Anita gasped as her words left her mouth, and she froze, realizing the impropriety of her speech. She came around to face Veronica and looked at her with pleading eyes as she wrung her hands. "Please forgive me, My Lady, that was ill thought of me. You are... quite an accomplished lady and I did not mean—"

Veronica looked at the servant knowingly as she took her hand in hers and patted it gently, then said, "It is all right, Anita, I know what you meant. And I take no offense. But, I do believe I am all set to finish getting ready on my own. Would you please check in on breakfast? I shall like to have some strawberries this morning if there are any ready in the garden."

Anita quickly nodded and hurriedly left the room. When the maid was gone, Veronica returned to getting ready. What the

lady's maid had said was bold, but Veronica knew it was not meant with ill intent. It was, after all, what most women wanted. Now, though, she was not sure at all if that was where her wants lay.

In the parlor, Veronica found Evanora already dressed and sitting at the breakfast table with an embroidery hoop in her lap. The old woman looked up at Veronica as she walked in and smiled warmly.

“Good morrow, my darling girl,” Evanora greeted, looking her niece up and down. “My, don't you look lovely this morning! Did you do something different?”

“I think your failing eyes are being too kind to my looks.” Veronica chuckled, shrugging off the compliment as she took a seat at the table. “How are you, Aunt Evanora?” The older woman put her embroidery away and smiled at Veronica with excitement as she pointed at the pile of letters sitting on the table.

“I am beyond well, darling girl, thank you. It seems our return to Society has been smooth, indeed. I have been invited to go have tea with some old friends at the solarium today, and Poppy has received an invitation from Lady Greensley to come for a day of games with her family. Even *you* received an invitation, darling girl! Here, look!”

Evanora continued chatting about which maid should go with Poppy as a chaperone while Veronica reached for the letter her aunt held out to her and read through its contents. It was seemingly an invitation from Lady Finwood, but as her eyes landed on the bottom right corner of the letter, she saw a small letter ‘*M.*’ She had to squint to see it, but she knew immediately it was all part of Maxwell's ruse.

*Clever.*

Excitement filled her as she looked down at the forged letter.

“It seems we will all be busy today!” she exclaimed in fake surprise.

There was no doubt in Veronica’s mind that this was all coordinated by Maxwell, who had so gravely promised that his plan would work. Comfort and gratitude joined her excitement as she realized that he had truly meant his words.

“We should send word to His Grace that none of us will be home today,” Evanora declared as she began to eat her breakfast. “I do believe the poor man would worry if he arrived and found that we were not home.” She chuckled to herself, and Veronica watched her aunt in amusement. “I must admit, I rather did not like it when he moved himself in,” she continued, looking at the empty chair that the Duke normally sat in, “but now when he is not here in the mornings, it almost feels not right.” Veronica couldn’t hold back a small smile. She was certain that her eyes sparkled with a kind of fondness that she didn’t want her aunt to see.

“He is a rather odd gentleman, isn’t he?” Evanora, oblivious to her niece’s reaction, continued her musings. “Cranky. Demanding. A bit bullish at times. But also, his humor is rather spot-on! And at times, he can be rather soft and understanding, can he not?”

Veronica hid her blush behind her tea cup and nodded. “A most odd gentleman, indeed,” she murmured, her thoughts

already turning to what her day with Maxwell would have in store for her.



Excitement coursed through the Duke as he took another walk around his large Manor, inspecting it closely. He wanted everything to shine and be arranged in order for Veronica's visit. Once he returned home the previous evening, he had roused most of his cleaning staff from their beds and insisted that they make everything sparkle.

As he walked from room to room, he found they had done a remarkable job and was happy with his decision. Giddy with anticipation, he pulled his pocket watch out as he stepped into his study. It was nearly time, and at any moment, Veronica would arrive.

Wanting to be the first face she saw when she stepped inside his home, Maxwell headed toward the kitchen. However, he was brought up short when a sudden and loud commotion erupted at the front of his house. Thinking it odd that Veronica would use the front door after being so concerned about being seen, he turned immediately and walked briskly to the foyer.

Dread and happiness quickly filled his heart as he saw that it was not Veronica, but his mother and his little sister.

"Brother!" Alice exclaimed happily the moment she saw him.

Maxwell smiled as his younger sister ran into his arms, noting how much better she looked and sounded since the last time they had seen one another.

“Oh, it is so good to see you, Maxwell,” Alice squealed, stepping back from his arms so she could inspect him. “My, you have grown handsome,” she said proudly, looking him up and down. “Is there a young lady perhaps that has you looking so?”

Maxwell chuckled, hiding his anxiety, and looked down at his sister fondly.

“It is good to see you too, Alice,” he said calmly, throwing a cursory glance at their mother. “You seem much improved. Your last correspondence had me worried. Is all well with you? The child?”

He looked behind his sister, looking for any evidence of the baby, and dread filled him when he found none. The Dowager Duchess, deciding to make herself a part of their conversation, sighed heavily as she removed her gloves.

“Despite my urgings, your sister has decided to keep it,” she replied distastefully. “But she was at least willing to leave it behind with a wet nurse until we can get her reputation fully restored.”

Anastasia Clifford looked at her children disdainfully down her aristocratic nose, shaking her head in disappointment. Maxwell, in no mood for his mother’s twisted demeanor, looked at her spitefully before turning his attention back to Alice.

“Did the delivery go well?” he asked sincerely.

Alice nodded, assuring him that it went well. “You have a niece now, dear brother,” she added happily.

Despite the scandal of how the child came to be, Maxwell felt happiness and relief bloom through his chest as Alice continued to praise the child’s radiant health. Unlike his mother, he wished no ill will on an innocent baby.

Before he could ask more questions, they all heard a set of heeled footsteps approaching from the kitchen, and Maxwell turned with dread as he saw Veronica being escorted by his butler toward them. He looked at her with horror as Alice and the Dowager Duchess spotted her.

“*You!*” Anastasia shrieked, pointing a long, accusing finger at Veronica. “What are you doing here?”



## CHAPTER TWENTY



Pain and betrayal seeped into Veronica's veins as she found Maxwell standing in the foyer with his sister and mother. Had he planned this all along? Had it all been a grand trick to make her pay for her brother's sins? She wanted more than anything to demand answers from the Duke at that very moment, but she was given no chance once the Dowager Duchess realized who she was.

"How dare you set foot in my house!" Anastasia hissed, pure hatred burning in her blue eyes.

Veronica looked the woman up and down, trying to decide on the best course of action. Anastasia was intimidating, there was no doubt about that. The Dowager Duchess' reputation for her beauty had been long talked of among the *ton*. Many said it was her spite that kept her looking so youthful, and now that Veronica was standing in front of her, she could see that the rumors were true.

"Answer me, Girl," The Dowager Duchess barked, taking another step toward her.

From her side, Veronica saw Maxwell move away from his sister and take a protective step toward her.

“That is enough, Mother,” he snapped, stepping between them.

A tinge of relief went through Veronica as she contemplated his actual involvement in the scene, but she was not about to let him handle her battles for her.

Squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin, she looked at Anastasia and calmly said, “While you ran away from everything, His Grace and I have been working so hard to make this scandal that has befallen us go away.”

The Dowager Duchess rolled her eyes and sniffed. “You? You cannot fix a single thing, you silly child,” she spat venomously. “The only person that can make all of this right is your brother, and I suspect the coward has not yet returned to the *ton*, either.” She narrowed her eyes as she looked at Veronica hatefully and gritted her teeth. “Leave my house now, before I ruin your reputation the way your brother ruined my daughter’s. With my station, it would only take one word to have the *ton* cast you out again.”

Veronica felt her skin vibrate in anger, and she clenched her fists tightly lest she lunge at Anastasia.

Suddenly, Maxwell barked, “Enough, Mother!” He walked up to the Dowager Duchess angrily. “You will do no such thing,” he warned, his tone deadly as he stared ferociously into his mother’s eyes.

They all waited for the Dowager Duchess to respond, but she only stared back at Maxwell with the same type of ferocity.

“You are weary from your travels, *Mother*,” he hissed, his tone thick with disgust. “I suggest you have the maids ready your chamber and go rest before you say or do something that will only damage our family further.”

A long stretch of silence took over the foyer as Veronica and Alice watched the Duke and the Dowager Duchess staring hatefully at one another.

“Come, Alice,” Anastasia said at last, looking at Maxwell with disgust one more time before turning to her daughter. “Let us go get refreshed. Perhaps by the time we are ready to join your brother for supper, his mood will be much improved.”

The servants, who were frozen in fear, suddenly moved into action and began carrying the many pieces of luggage up the long staircase.

“Watch yourself, Boy,” the Dowager Duchess whispered as she moved away from her son. “You may be the Lord of this Manor, but I am the vessel you came from. My word comes before yours. *Always*.”

For a moment, Veronica worried that a new argument would start afresh, but to her relief, Maxwell let his mother have the last word and only stared at her in angry silence as she made her way up the staircase.

Veronica let out the breath she had been holding for several moments when Anastasia disappeared from view and turned to find Alice staring at her forlornly.

“Hello, dear,” Veronica greeted her affectionately.

Alice’s face crumbled, and at the same time, both women wrapped each other in a long embrace. Maxwell watched with a pained look on his face as Veronica gathered his little sister into her arms and held her tightly. As if sensing his gaze, she looked up and met his eyes with a look of raw emotion.

“This is all my fault.” Alice sobbed as she trembled in Veronica’s arms.

Veronica hushed her friend, stroking her hair gently.

“Everything is such a mess!” Alice continued.

“You hold your tongue,” Veronica chided gently, still holding Maxwell’s gaze. “This is no one’s fault but my brother’s, and not a single other person deserves the blame for it.”

“It’s true, Alice,” Maxwell added, drawing nearer to them. “Your only mistake is that you trusted the word of a man who was supposed to be honorable. I swear to you that I will not give up on finding him and making him pay for his crimes against your reputation.”

Alice stepped back from both of them as she looked resentfully at her brother. “This is your fault, Maxwell!” she accused, her heartache loud in her voice. “He just needed time, don’t you see that? If we wouldn’t have been caught by that awful Lady Vervain... if *you* wouldn’t have chased him away

with the threat of death, he would be here! With me. With our child. We would have all been together!”

Veronica’s eyes grew wide as the full truth hit her in the chest, and she looked worriedly at Alice. “You’re—you were with child?” she spluttered, blindsided by the new revelation.

“Alice nodded as she kept looking at Maxwell hatefully with tear-filled eyes. “A beautiful little girl. Rosemary. Damien knew, and he was going to make things right.” Her voice broke into a sob, and she cupped her hand over her mouth for a moment while she gathered herself. “And then *you* drove him away from us, Maxwell. *You* are the one who threatened to kill him for what he’d done. You left him no choice but to leave!”

“I tried to bring him back to you!” Maxwell argued, beginning to pace as his anger intensified. “It was of his own volition that he ran away like a coward, and I will not be blamed for his lack of spine!”

“Enough!” Veronica snapped, stepping between them.

She had enough yelling for the day, and she could not stand more, especially with the new revelation of Alice and Damian’s child spinning in her head. She grabbed Alice’s shoulders and turned her around.

“Alice, you have had an incredibly hard journey, and an even harder year. You are home now, and I am sure with common ground and guidance, we can bring some sort of order to this situation. But for now, please, go to your chamber and rest. You need it.”

Maxwell nodded in agreement, stepping back from them to cool his temper. He felt justified in every claim he made, but Veronica was right. Now was not the time.

“She is right, dear sister,” he agreed. “My deepest apologies, this is not at all how I hoped our reunion would go.”

Alice looked back and forth between him and Veronica several times before her eyes landed on the Duke with a hateful glare.

“Fine,” she hissed, wiping her tears. “But we *will* discuss this later, Brother.” She turned to look at Veronica one final time, her beautiful face still etched in sadness. “I do not know what you are doing here, Veronica, and I do not care to know at the moment, but I am glad you are here,” she said in an exhausted tone.

Veronica tried to smile at her friend, but she found her lips unable to form the expression, and she sighed.

“I will always be your friend, Alice, no matter what folly the men who rule us bring down on our heads. Please don’t ever forget that.”

Nodding her head as fresh tears sprang from her eyes, Alice accepted a final hug from Veronica, and without another word to Maxwell, she made her way toward the stairs. Once she was out of their sight, Veronica and Maxwell looked at each other tensely for a brief moment.

“May I walk you to your carriage, Lady Veronica?” the Duke asked, his tone hard and formal.

Veronica nodded. “Most certainly, Your Grace,” she replied coolly.

They said nothing more to one another as they walked side by side down the hall and toward the kitchen. Once Maxwell was sure they were alone, he turned to Veronica and gripped her arms.

“I beg of you to believe that I had no knowledge of their arrival today. I know that we have been playing a game of cat and mouse, but I assure you these events have nothing to do with what is happening between you and me.”

Maxwell’s words came out urgently, and Veronica knew that he was telling the truth. Despite what they had put each other through since their agreement, she knew this had nothing to do with them.

She looked into his eyes, she reached a hand, and gently cupped his cheek. He looked at her as if startled, but he did not move away from her touch.

“I know,” she whispered, her eyes full of emotions.

“You do?” he asked, his body flooded with relief.

He pressed his cheek further into her hand and pressed his lips against her palm. Warmth shot through her at the small kiss, and she took a step closer.

“Why didn’t you tell me? About the baby? About your mother? I knew she was a bit spiteful at times, but I had no idea she was this full of venom. And poor Alice... trapped for months alone with her. No wonder she seems unsteady.”

Maxwell shook his head as he averted her gaze.

“They are not your burdens to bear,” he replied emphatically. “A man must stand on his own when it comes to such battles. You have been struggling enough with your own, and I was not going to trouble you with trivial matters.”

“None of this is trivial.” Veronica shook her head as she stroked his cheek. “I have told you about every burden my brother has laid on me, about every slight that I have received from the *ton*. You are allowed to do the same in turn. In fact, I insist on it.”

“It is not your responsibility,” Maxwell repeated, his eyes weary.

Veronica took a final step toward him and rose on her toes to kiss his lips softly.

“It was not your responsibility to save my family from ruin, nor was it your responsibility to defend me from your mother just now. But you did. If you are willing to rise to the occasion, Maxwell, then so am I.”

A new, calming emotion broke through the bundle of seething rage Maxwell felt inside of him, and he felt his shoulders slump as if a weight was finally being lifted off them.



“I will try my best to tell you more,” he conceded, his voice hoarse with emotion.

“That is all I ask for,” Veronica said sincerely.

She rose on her toes once more, and this time, Maxwell wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tightly as they kissed one another deeply.

“Word will soon spread that my mother and sister have returned home,” Maxwell stated once they untangled themselves from one another. “Most of my responsibilities will be called back here, but I assure you I will make it known that you and Lady Poppy are still under my protection.”

“Thank you,” Veronica whispered sincerely.

Maxwell brought her hand up to his lips and kissed her fingers, sending more delicious sensations down her arm.

“I will need to stay here for the time being, but I pray that your acceptance of my company in the country next weekend is still permitted.”

“It is.” She nodded quickly.

Suddenly, they could hear footsteps approaching, and they knew it was time for her to leave. Maxwell, unable to help himself, kissed her deeply a final time before he let her go.

“I will see you soon,” he murmured as she opened the back door and slipped out.

It was a promise, he quickly realized, he was making for himself just as much as he was for her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“Anita, be careful with that, it is extremely fragile!” Veronica exclaimed in annoyance as Anita fumbled with her hand mirror.

A week had passed since Alice and the Dowager Duchess came back, and with no one to speak to about her troubles, Veronica had grown very tense and irritable.

“My apologies, My Lady,” Anita stammered, cradling the small object to her chest protectively, “it will not happen again.”

“Do be sure that it does not,” Veronica snapped, snatching the mirror from her maid’s hands to wrap it herself. “It was my mother’s and one of the few items I kept for myself when we had to start selling everything.”

Shortly, they would be traveling with Lord Greensley and his family to their summer home in the country, which up until a day ago was a welcome retreat. But this morning, to Veronica’s chagrin, and to her sister’s and aunt’s surprise, they received an invitation to the Dowager Duchess’ estate to celebrate Alice’s reintroduction to Society.

Poppy had been thrilled to learn that her friend was finally back in town, and Evanora claimed it was a sign of goodwill that they were invited to the event. But for Veronica, the invitation had filled her with dread. She had been looking forward to once more being in Maxwell's company, alone. But now, with his mother and sister at the country estate, that would most assuredly not happen.

It all blackened her mood gravely, and she had been nothing but edgy and spiteful toward everyone since she found out the news. Every time she felt like she and Maxwell were getting close, something pulled them apart. First, it was Maxwell's ego, then it was her own. Now, it was the reality of her brother's dishonorable actions and Maxwell's mother.

As Veronica continued to pack her things and battle the intense emotions inside of her, Evanora walked into her rooms and cleared her throat to announce her presence.

"It is time for some tea, my dear," Evanora announced in a matter-of-fact manner.

Not bothering to look at her aunt, Veronica shook her head. "I do not want tea at the moment, Aunt Evanora," she said harshly. "As you can see, my travel cases are in much need of reorganization, and I must take care of it immediately."

"I am not asking if you want tea, Veronica," Evanora clarified, her tone absolute. "I am *telling* you that it is time for tea."

Veronica put down her things and turned to look at her aunt in bewilderment. The normal smile that usually rested on her face was gone, and in its place was a hard, thin line as the

woman scowled at her. Forgetting her packing, Veronica followed her aunt silently to the drawing room.

Evanora remained silent as she poured them each some tea, and it was only when she sat down and took her cup into her hands that she spoke.

“I am going to tell you a story, Veronica.”

Veronica sighed in exasperation. “Normally, I would love to hear about your life, Aunt Evanora, but we must be packed within the hour and my head is—”

“Not where it is supposed to be,” Evanora finished Veronica’s sentence.

Veronica pressed her lips together as she realized that she was not going to get out of this, and she held her tongue. Evanora glared at her for a moment, as if willing her to defy her, then settled into her chair and took a sip of her tea.

“I know I tell you girls the wild and fun stories of my youth, but that does not mean that I have not encountered hardship,” the old woman began. “Most of my stories revolve around me being the apple of someone or another’s eye, but before I became that, I too got swept away by a powerful man. Before I knew how to protect my heart, I gave it willingly and freely to someone, and it nearly destroyed me. I am not talking about just my reputation, either. The relationship nearly destroyed my *very* soul.”

Veronica let out a breath and felt her cheeks grow hot. Still, she said nothing and let her aunt speak.

“There were... complications in our relationship. He wanted me, and I wanted him, but the *ton* disapproved of our union. Especially his family. I am not sure what sort of arrangement you made with His Grace, Veronica, but in the last week or so, I have never seen you happier. Now, suddenly, the Dowager Duchess is back with Alice in tow, and you have been unbearable.”

Evanora took another sip of her tea and nibbled on a biscuit. Veronica remained silent, not interested at all in the cup of tea that sat before her. Inside, her stomach was churning madly, making her feel nauseous.

“The Dowager Duchess of Kendrick is a powerful woman. And an incredibly unhappy one,” Evanora continued. “And it is clear that whatever you and His Grace were scheming, her presence has put a hold on it. Tell me, dear, is that true?”

Veronica looked at her aunt, her face drawn, and nodded.

“Ah.” Evanora nodded her head once. “I see. Well, I do not need to know all of the details, dear, nor do I want to. But know two things.” She sat her cup down, leaned forward on her elbows in a very unladylike fashion, and held Veronica’s gaze. “Whatever you have started, you must end it immediately for all of our sakes. Our window of opportunity is closing, dear, and we must see that your sister is married before it does. Steel your heart from His Grace and his mother, and close this matter between our families once and for all. Do you understand?”

Veronica nodded as hurtful emotions welled up inside of her.

“Yes, Aunt Evanora,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper as she looked into her aunt’s persistent eyes.

Evanora nodded, straightened her posture, and finished her tea before she rose.

“Good girl. Now, it is nearly time for us to depart, and we must not keep Lord and Lady Greensley waiting. Let’s go get Poppy and take our leave. Anita will finish packing your clothes and will be sent along with the rest of ours.”



The cleaning staff of the Duke’s country home all averted their gaze as Maxwell stormed through the main hall of the large estate. It had been a few days since he, the Dowager Duchess, and Alice had arrived in the country along with the rest of *ton*, and it seemed with every day that came closer to the ball they were going to throw his mood had only darkened.

Maxwell had attempted several times to find a way to speak with Veronica, but news of his mother’s and sister’s return had had their estate in London crawling with members of the *ton*. Unlike Veronica and Poppy’s fall from grace, the Dowager Duchess and Alice were received with open arms and heavy layers of sympathy. It had been impossible for him to sneak away, even at night.

Twice, he had attempted to send letters to Veronica to explain his absence, but both times the letters were intercepted by one of his mother’s faithful servants. Not only was she keeping him from Veronica, but the Dowager Duchess was also driving

him insane. Every day, she wanted to know why he had failed at killing Damian, or finding him after he had escaped. She had insulted him and threatened him with ex-communication if he did not produce the scoundrel soon, and with her reach of power, Maxwell did not put it past her.

None of it really mattered to him, though. Her threats, though visceral, felt empty. As did his spirit. The mess he had made with Veronica was all he thought about. They had been so close to finally finding even ground. And then, with just her mere presence, his mother had ruined everything. Maxwell wanted desperately to drown his problems with a bottle of whiskey, but instead, he was determined to go to the stables and have a vigorous ride before the large Manor would be filled with guests.

Alice's voice rang out through the hall as the Duke was heading for the door, stopping him.

*At least Alice has forgiven me.*

He turned with a small smile. However, the small sliver of joy vanished when he saw his younger sister coming down the staircase with his mother. He sighed, highly agitated, and strode toward them.

“Sister, you look quite well,” he greeted Alice amicably. “I do believe that you will be the Belle of the Ball tonight once you have changed into your gown.”

Alice beamed at him and curtsied. “Thank you, Maxwell, I really am most excited about this evening,” she said eagerly.



“And where are you off to so late?” the Dowager Duchess asked, waiving pleasantries with her son. “Our guests will be arriving within the next two hours. Surely there are more pressing matters to attend to here than whatever it was you were about to do out there.”

With her piercing gaze, Anastasia looked Maxwell up and down in a repugnant way. Her thin mouth was set in a slight frown as her nostrils flared, and her eyebrow was raised so high it nearly reached her hairline.

Maxwell swallowed the ball of anger he wanted to spew out and called on all of his patience.

“I assure you, Mother, all affairs that I can take care of have been seen to. I will not be late. I will be dressed properly. And I will be ready to appear at both your sides when the night begins.”

Maxwell turned to leave, but his mother cleared her throat. He felt his shoulders rise almost to his ears as he stopped reaching for the door. He was not going anywhere, he realized. Not while *she* was around.

“I need to speak with you privately in your father’s study, Maxwell,” Anastasia stated. She turned to her daughter and smiled at her sweetly. “Why don’t you get your evening gown on, darling? Better to be ready for our guests ahead of time than to make them wait for us.”

Alice looked from her mother to Maxwell anxiously and nodded her head. “Yes, Mother, of course.”

She gave Maxwell one more anxious glance, and he called on his strength and gave her an assuring wink. Smiling weakly at him, Alice turned silently and went back up the stairs to do as she was told.

“Come with me,” the Dowager Duchess commanded.

With her head held high, Anastasia led the Duke to his father’s study, which is a place he had not gone to for quite a long time. When he entered, he could still smell the faint odor of his father’s cigars, and a sense of mourning hit him square in his gut. He quickly pushed it away, though, when his mother squared her shoulders and raised her chin.

“I believe we are on the verge of finding him,” she announced, picking up and studying the small globe on her late husband’s desk.

Maxwell studied his mother silently, trying to determine if this was a ruse or the truth. He knew exactly who she was referring to, of course. There was no doubt in his mind about that.

“Where?” he asked, taking her bait.

“Here,” his mother replied simply, placing the globe down haphazardly.

It rolled off of the little stand and onto the desk, and Maxwell quickly snatched it before it rolled off and shattered.

“There is no possible way,” Maxwell countered, carefully putting the globe back on its stand. “My sources have scoured the streets and the sea over and over again since he left. There has been no trace of him.”

The Dowager Duchess smirked at her son and tutted as she shook her.

“Apparently, your sources are more brawn than brain, my dear boy,” she drawled condescendingly.

Maxwell’s jaw ticked in irritation.

“So, you have him, then?” he pressed.

The Dowager Duchess’ look of accomplishment almost transformed into one of disappointment, but she caught herself and shrugged her shoulders as she bat her eyes.

“Not yet,” she answered, confidence still lacing her voice. “But I will. And when I do, I will achieve what you could not for our family. I will restore our name. I will punish Damian Wallace once and for all. Then, when that matter is settled and in the past, I will marry Alice off to an esteemed gentleman. And you, my dear son, will be married to the first young lady I choose for you. Perhaps one of the Vervain girls.”

Maxwell looked at her in shock as she continued to circle around him. He had witnessed his mother do and say vile things before, but never to this degree.

“Father would be disgusted with you,” he spat out, glaring at her.

The Dowager Duchess chuckled mockingly.

“Your father was a soft man.” She sighed, her eyes filled with disgust as she traced her fingertips across the desk. “He wanted you children to have a sense of freedom, of self-worth. I begged, pleaded with him to not be so tender with the both of you, and now look where it has led us to.”

Anastasia stopped walking as she came to the front of the desk, and she calmly placed her palms on the top as she came level with Maxwell’s hate-filled gaze. He was trembling with rage as he gripped the armrests of the chair tightly, his fingers nearly leaving indents on the wood.

“I will be taking control over our family’s affairs now,” she declared, grinning at him ruefully.

Seething, Maxwell stood up quickly and leaned in so that he was only an inch away from his mother’s face.

“You may have control over Alice’s life, Mother, but I will be damned if you think I will let you have control over mine.”

The Dowager Duchess threw her head back and laughed wickedly, the very sound sending a chill down Maxwell’s spine.

“We shall see, darling,” she said through broken laughter.  
“Unless you want me to ruin the barely rebuilt reputation of  
Veronica Wallace, you will do whatever I tell you to.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Veronica swallowed the bitter shot of liquor she had snuck into her chamber and made a sour face as the alcohol burned her stomach. She shuddered in disgust, but it did its job and calmed her trembling nerves. Everyone had been aflutter with excitement over the invitations that were delivered, but when she had seen that it was for the Kendrick Ball, she had been filled with dread ever since.

She had not spoken a word to anyone about what had happened at Maxwell's London estate, not that she could if she wanted to. The very admission of sneaking to the Duke's Manor would have caused a scandal all over again. But now, as the hour drew near for her, Poppy, and Evanora to be escorted to the ball by Lord and Lady Greensley, she wished that she could speak to someone, anyone about it.

With the way the Dowager Duchess had spoken to Veronica, it was clear to her that the woman still had a strong disdain for every member of the Wallace family. This was why it was so strange when Veronica and Poppy received an invitation to the Kendrick Ball. Veronica was sure that it was a trap.

"Darling girl, are you not ready yet?" Evanora asked, walking into Veronica's room.

“Lord Greensley and his family are all set to take leave. We must not make them tarry on our account.”

Veronica pushed the small glass away from her and rose from her vanity chair. For the evening, she had chosen a gown that Maxwell had bought her. It was made out of white tulle and gold and silver trim. She had chosen rubies to offset the startling brightness of the gown, and her ears, neck, and hair sparkled with the precious gems.

“I am ready, Aunt Evanora,” she announced, taking a final look in the mirror. When she was satisfied, she turned to her aunt, who was smiling at her fondly. “What is it?” she asked, immediately worried that she spilled a drop of the brown liquor on the pristine fabric.

Evanora shook her head as she reached for her niece’s hands.

“Nothing at all, dear. You just look... so grown up. So beautiful. Your mother would be so proud of the lady you have become, Veronica.”

Evanora squeezed Veronica’s hands tightly as tears welled up in her eyes, and Veronica needed to look away to stop her own tears from springing forth. She had no doubt that her mother was turning in her grave after everything she had done with Maxwell, and it brought her great shame to realize that. Instead of giving in to the emotion, however, she put on a big smile and linked her arm through her aunt’s, and together, they left her room.

“Thank you for saying so, Aunt Evanora,” Veronica said, trying to sound genuine. “I only hope it will be true.”

Evanora stopped walking, and Veronica turned to face her. She saw the love written all over her aunt's face, and once more, she almost faltered.

"You do not give yourself enough credit, dear," Evanora chided, tugging Veronica toward the rails of the staircase. "Come, look down over the edge. What do you see?"

As ordered, Veronica peered over the banister down to the first floor. Below them were Lady Greensley and her daughters, all of them circled around Poppy and Evan. The two of them were chatting intently as if there were no one else in the room, and the Dowager Marchioness was looking at them with great fondness. Even from Veronica's viewpoint, it was clear that love was radiating from all of them.

"Poppy looks incredibly happy," Veronica whispered, her eyes still on the scene below. "As does everyone."

"That is right," Evanora whispered back. "And it is all because of you, Veronica. I have spoken with Lord Greensley about his intentions. He is planning to propose at the end of our stay. You have done it, darling. You have saved our family."

Veronica wanted to feel the joy and pride her aunt was speaking of, but in truth, she only felt dread and worry.

"We do not know that for sure yet," Veronica breathed, looking away from the happy scene.



Evanora nodded knowingly. “When your world has been crashing down on you for so long, dear, it is hard to believe that peace can be felt again. But I promise you, the crash has finally stopped. All will be well now.”

Though jaded, Veronica felt hope in her aunt’s words as they once more made their way downstairs to join their hosts.

“I sincerely hope you are right, dear aunt,” she murmured, feeling the knots in her stomach double and triple. “I truly, *truly*, wish it so.”

Evanora gave her a look so strong that Veronica felt it reached into her very soul. “Do not wish, darling girl, command,” she said with absolute confidence, then smiled. “Now, here is your mask. We must not stick out like sore thumbs at this masquerade.” She handed her niece the black lace mask, and Veronica took it with delicate fingers. “You are *radiant*, Veronica. Now come, it is time to show everyone just how radiant you are.”



Maxwell looked over the sea of mask-covered people, detesting his station more than he had ever had in his entire life. Every member of the *ton* had responded to his mother’s invitation. All of them were anxious to see for themselves that Alice and the Dowager Duchess had returned to Society. They were nothing but driveling gossipmongers in his opinion, and he felt an intense feeling of loathing come over him as he looked down at all of them from the balcony.

“You should look more excited for our party, Brother,” Alice said, walking toward him with her cream-colored lace mask held up to her face.

Maxwell shot her a look and straightened his posture as he turned to face her.

“It is *your* party, dear sister,” he corrected, taking her hand. “And might I say, you absolutely look the part. Stunning, as usual.” He gave her a chaste kiss on the back of her hand and smirked at her.

Alice giggled at him, pulling her hand away, and shoved playfully at his shoulder.

“Do not be in such a foul mood, Maxwell, or you will spoil my surprise for you,” she teased.

Maxwell’s eyebrows shot up curiously. “I am not sure I am up for any more surprises, Alice. I have had more than my share of them over this Season.”

Alice chuckled as she linked her arm through his and pointed at a group of people at the far left side of the ballroom with her free hand.

“Trust me, Brother, I truly think you will appreciate this one.”

Maxwell turned his head in that direction, and his eyes landed on a group of masked people chatting by the fireplace. They all looked dressed to the nines, but one woman, in particular, stood out to him. Immediately, he recognized the chocolate-brown curls, the curves that perfectly filled out her dress, and the way she moved.

Maxwell's chest swelled with a mixture of anxiety and happiness as he realized that Veronica and her family made it past his mother's guarded guest list. He turned to Alice with a wild look, and she smiled at him smugly.

"Why do you think I wanted a masked ball for my new debut, Brother?" she asked playfully. Then, she leaned in close and whispered, "Do not worry, I sent out a separate delivery man with their invitation. If Mother's old friends keep her preoccupied like I think they will, she will never be the wiser." Maxwell's hardened expression softened as he looked down at his little sister, and she gave him a sympathetic smile. "I am not a little girl, Maxwell. And I am certainly not blind. Do not let the *ton* take away your happiness the way I let them take mine."

Maxwell stared at Alice in wonder, realizing that what she said was, in fact, true. She had grown so much since he had last seen her. Even more, he realized, than he had ever given her credit for. He turned his back to the view and took Alice's hands into his own.

"How are you, Alice? Truly. We have not spoken much about Damian since you returned. I am happy to hear the child is well, of course, but... how are you?"

Alice slowly lowered her cream silk mask, revealing a sadness that made Maxwell want to gather her in his arms and comfort her.

"Sometimes, I still wonder how I am still breathing," she confessed in a rushed breath, a small tear rolling down her cheek. "There are nights when I think I can feel him close.

Like he is about to walk right into my life again and have a perfectly good explanation for everything.”

She tried to laugh, but it came out as a sob, and she covered her mouth with the back of her hand. For a moment, she seemed to struggle with the sudden inflow of emotions. Maxwell felt helpless as she pulled herself up and fought back her tears.

“But despite what others may think, I am not a dolt. I know the difference between a dream and reality, and Damian was nothing more than a dream. It was not real.” She wiped her eyes quickly with her handkerchief and forced a smile. “But what you feel for Veronica? I know it is real. I knew it the moment you protected her from Mother the day we returned. And she has feelings for you too, Maxwell. Do not let it slip away, or let it be pulled away. Capture it, and do not ever let it be taken from you. I wish Damian had done the same for me every single day.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



*F*inery was draped over every free space in the Clifford's ballroom. If something was not glittering with gold or silver, it was decorated with massive plumes of exotic feathers and flowers. Around her, Veronica watched with amusement as everyone she knew swirled around in masks.

Masquerade balls were always an intrigue for her. Even when a person's mask was transparent, and it was clear that they could not hide who they were, she noticed that it still changed the person's behavior. It was as if the smallest opportunity to not be who they were was enough to bring out the side they had been hiding.

Veronica's eyes moved from the sea of people she was observing toward the dance floor. Unlike the last few balls they had attended, Poppy so far had danced only with Lord Greensley and politely refused anyone else's invitation. It was clear that Poppy's jaded opinion of love was long gone, for even through her mask, Veronica could see the happiness radiating from her sister.

As she watched the crowd of dancers, Veronica felt a shiver move up her spine and felt a warm, familiar presence approach her from behind.

“Lady Veronica, I have yet to see you take your turn on the dance floor,” a deep, familiar voice said.

Veronica felt her breath hitch as she slowly turned her head to the left, and happiness soared through her as she saw Maxwell standing at her side, looking as handsome as ever in his black barcode jacket, trousers, and matching mask.

“Perhaps I have not been presented with the proper opportunity yet,” she shot back coyly, snapping open her fan so she could hide the smile on her face.

Maxwell chuckled as he turned to her, bowed low, and offered his hand.

“Well then, My Lady, allow me to present you with the proper opportunity.”

Electricity shot through Veronica as her fingertips slid into Maxwell’s hand, and images of their time in the carriage flashed back to her. Behind his mask, Maxwell’s eyes blazed with a familiar heat, and she knew he was thinking the same thing. Around them, no one seemed to notice, and no heads turned as Maxwell took her hand and led her to the dance floor.

“I was worried about you terribly,” Maxwell whispered as they began their dance. “It has been impossible to send word. How are you?”

Veronica felt touched by his concern, and she felt the need to be alone with him grow stronger. She thought of all the times she had desperately wanted the exact opposite and thought herself a fool.

“All is well, Your Grace,” Veronica replied, her voice low so only he could hear. Using her muscle memory to go with the steps, Veronica looked deeply into his eyes. “I have been informed that Lord Greensley has received proof of Poppy’s dowry. I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for my family. You are indeed a gentleman of a rare kind.”

“I am happy to deliver on my promises,” the Duke said gently as he twirled her in his arms and pulled her back into his arms. “What I am more interested in, however, is *you*, specifically.”

Veronica let out a dry laugh as she let Maxwell lead her through her steps.

“I am afraid I do not have enough time in one dance to begin to describe that, Your Grace.” Veronica tried to sound sarcastic, but it came out ringing true, and Maxwell nodded in a subtle fashion.

“Then we should make the time,” he murmured, looking at her knowingly from behind his mask.

As he spun her around one final time for the dance, he pulled something from his sleeve and slipped it into her hand as they came back together.

“Come when you are ready,” he whispered, both of them bowing to one another as the dance ended. “I will be waiting for you.”



Veronica bid her time after Maxwell left the ballroom. She sipped steadily on her flute of champagne, laughed at Evanora’s stories at every cue, and made pleasant exchanges with the Dowager Lady Greensley as they all watched Evan take Poppy to the dance floor for the hundredth time. When she was sure that no one was watching her and that their attention was fully on the fun of the party, she slipped quietly from the room and found the servants’ staircase.

After memorizing the directions Maxwell had sketched on the small note he had given her, she followed them until she found a set of double doors with a piece of black lace wrapped around one of the handles on the fourth floor. Veronica’s heart beat wildly in her chest as she turned the knob. In truth, she was not sure what to expect. With everything that had happened with them so far, it was impossible to predict their encounters.

The moment she opened the door, Maxwell’s hand shot out, grabbing her wrist, and he pulled her inside the room. In a flurry of movement, Maxwell swept Veronica in his arms as he quickly closed the door, locked the door, and leaned her back against it.

Veronica let out a soft moan as her arms wrapped tightly around his waist, and she felt her arousal spike as she felt the hard, defined muscles beneath the fabric of his dress shirt radiating with heat. Maxwell was hot to the touch, but so was she. Already, she felt her skin damp with perspiration as his hands and mouth worshipped her body.



For a moment, they simply stayed that way, completely lost in their hunger for one another, as if they were starved. Maxwell's need burned hot, and he struggled to control it. There were so many things he wanted to do, to say, and it all felt as if it was coming forth all at the same time.

Eventually, though, he reined his primal need in, and his fervent kisses slowly began to turn into languid dips of his tongue. When he eventually pulled away from her lips, Veronica swayed on wobbly knees, and he gently caught her and hugged her tight. She looked up at with him lustful eyes, and he captured her lips once, twice before they both took in deep, ragged breaths.

"This is dangerous, Maxwell," Veronica whispered as she looked up at him.

Maxwell nodded, his eyes locked on hers. "It is, but if this is one of the few moments I can share with you now that my mother is back, I do not want to miss the opportunity."

The Duke's hands began exploring her body again, his gentle fingers massaging the knots in the back of her neck and tracing down her spine and over her waist. It was as if he could not stop himself, and Veronica realized she did not want him to.

"God, I have missed you," Maxwell groaned, pulling away just enough so that he could rest his forehead against hers.

Veronica felt a sense of relief and joy sweep through her as he said the words, and she reached up to cup his jaw.

“And I have missed you,” she echoed.

Her brain begged her not to say the words, but her heart had pushed them out anyway. At this moment, she did not care about logic or her reputation, only about what was true. And if there was anything for certain she knew, it was that she missed Maxwell’s presence terribly.

“I have even yearned for the days when I could argue with you,” she added teasingly.

Maxwell chuckled and kissed her forehead.

“You have been without a doubt the most riveting challenge I have ever come across.” He looked down into her eyes, and the mirth in his deep blue eyes slowly faded, a hint of sadness beginning to replace it. “I do not care about our deal anymore, Veronica,” he confessed, his breath ragged as he pressed kisses down her neck. “I do not want you for payment or amusement, I never really did. But damn it, I *do* want you. I *ache* for you.”

Happiness sparked through the dark heat that Veronica was buried under, and she moaned as Maxwell captured her mouth again.

“And I... I ache for you, Maxwell,” she gasped through their kisses.

Maxwell moaned in response and picked her up as if she weighed nothing, sweeping her skirts to the side so that he could cradle her to his chest.

“There has not been a moment that I have not thought about you,” he said, his voice raw with need. “I fear I have made a mess with this deal we have struck, but I swear to you that was never my intention.” He shook his head, suddenly looking pained. “If there is any way to make this right, please, tell me,” he begged, his eyes flashing with resentment.

Veronica felt her emotions begin to claw their way through her arousal, and she brought a hand up to delicately stroke his cheek.

“We have both made an awful mess trying to protect the people we love,” she murmured, caressing his stubble. As her thumb brushed over his lips, he pecked it gently, only making her heart squeeze even more. “Perhaps it is time that we finish what we started, Maxwell.”

Lust clouded Maxwell’s eyes as a groan escaped his throat, and she felt his grip on her tighten.

“Are you sure, Veronica?” he asked, searching her eyes.

She smiled at him softly as she leaned forward, and she kissed him sweetly on the lips.

“My entire life, I have let the *ton* take everything I have loved and wanted away. But I will not allow them to take this. If one night is all that we have, then I want it with everything I have.”

A primal growl rose from Maxwell's chest as she said those words, and he carried her to his bed as his lips devoured hers. Veronica felt her heart skip a beat as he sat on the edge of the bed and held her in his lap.

As they kissed, their hands roamed over one another wildly, hers tugging Maxwell's jacket off and his making quick work of the buttons on the back of her dress. With precise movement he unfastened the buttons one by one, slowly exposing her naked back to the warm air of the room.

Veronica felt a moment of shyness overtake her as Maxwell's fingertips slowly lowered the fabric from her shoulders, pulling her shift down along with it to reveal her white corset. When he finished and the top of her dress was gathered around her waist, he leaned back and looked at her in awe as his fingertips traced her shoulders and collarbone.

"You are so beautiful," he breathed, his lips lowering to kiss the mounds of her breasts.

In response, Veronica moaned, captured his hair in her hands, and brought his lips up to hers. Her hips began to move against Maxwell's lustfully, but her dress' many layers of fabric bunched annoyingly, creating a barrier between them.

"I need this damn thing off me," she panted, pushing herself off him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“*W*ith pleasure,” Maxwell breathed, his voice ragged as he stood up behind her.

In a matter of seconds, he had the annoying garment falling to the floor and pooling around her feet, followed by her chemise. Then, he lifted her up and out of the bundle of fabric and sat her on the bed.

Veronica swallowed hard as she watched the Duke untie his cravat and unbutton his shirt. His muscles rippled in the glow of the candlelight as he pulled the fabric away from his shoulders and down over his arms. She felt her mouth water as his hands moved to the ties of his trousers next and slowly undid them one by one to reveal his defined hips and pelvis.

When he completely took off his trousers, Veronica gasped as she finally saw his manhood in all of its glory. She had enjoyed the feel of his member in her hand and against her body very much so, and now she understood why. His hardened length stood at rigid attention as the vein snaking through its wide girth pulsed.

Before she could look any longer or pull herself out of her stunned silence, Maxwell joined her on the bed, pulled her

tight against him, and they began to kiss once more. All too quickly, she lost herself to the pleasure of his touch again, and she felt a burst of boldness as she ran her hands down his muscular back.

Suddenly, Maxwell pulled away, his breaths ragged as he looked at her with burning eyes.

“Wait” he groaned, his voice thick with need as their hips began to undulate together.

“What? What is it?” Veronica asked breathlessly, her head spinning with desire.

Maxwell looked at her as if pained. “If you want to stop, it must be now, Veronica, for if I take one step further I will not have the strength to stop.”

Veronica quickly shook her head as she pulled him back to her, her lips capturing his greedily.

“Don’t stop,” she pleaded between kisses, boldly nipping at his bottom lip.

Maxwell groaned as their lips met again, and Veronica felt herself completely give in to the growing need she had been denying herself for far too long. The Duke’s kisses sent fire streaking through her veins as his lips trailed down her neck and collarbone, and she gasped and bucked her hips when his teeth sank into the delicate flesh of her left breast.

Making quick work of the many strings, Maxwell flung her corset across the room, freeing her breasts from its strict confines. He was quick to pull her left nipple into his mouth, his teeth nipping and tugging at the turgid flesh just enough to make Veronica whimper and beg for more.

Despite her pleas, Maxwell took his time, slowly moving from one breast to the other as Veronica's body began to move in a rhythm of its own beneath him. Pleasure mounted steadily as she felt each suck and nip nudging her further into a sexual frenzy.

When she was sure she could not take much more, Maxwell abruptly stopped, and his kisses moved down her flat stomach.

"Maxwell, what are you doing?" Veronica gasped as his kisses continued south. "I do not think... oh!"

Her words caught in her throat as Maxwell's hands spread her thighs and his tongue flicked over her center once, twice, playfully prodding the sensitive nub before enveloping her fully with his mouth. Veronica's fingers twisted in Maxwell's hair as liquid heat gushed forth from her mons. The pleasure was so intense she couldn't help but close her eyes.

When his tongue slipped between her wet folds, she gasped again and involuntarily bucked her hips against Maxwell's skilled tongue. The Duke moaned in response and gripped her backside tightly so he could push her even further into his mouth. For several moments, Veronica could only breathe and moan as the pleasure inside her grew.

Maxwell's finger slipped between her folds, replacing his tongue, and began to move inside her with a steady rhythm. The dizzying, heightening sensations she had felt in the carriage with him returned as she began to move her hips to the rhythm of his finger, and her fingernails dug deep into his shoulders.

"That's it, Veronica," he groaned, his mouth once more moving to tease her sensitive nub.

"I... I do not know what is happening to me," she gasped, the pleasure growing stronger.

"Shh," he soothed, moving so that he could look up into her eyes. "I promise I will never hurt you, Veronica. Relax into me."

Veronica's eyes rolled to the back of her head, and she pushed against the pillow as the rhythm of his ministrations increased. She cried out his name as her orgasm finally ripped loose and tore through her loins. Immense ecstasy rushed through her as she came, making her tremble uncontrollably as she lay panting on the bed.

As she caught her breath, Maxwell rose to his knees and stared at her in greedy satisfaction as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He took her in, his eyes hungrily roaming over her supple curves, every feature.

"By God, you are beautiful," he whispered, dragging his body on top of hers until his hips were nestled between her parted legs.



Veronica only moaned in response as she heard his words and felt the head of his hard member press against her dripping center. All propriety had been stripped away along with her undergarments, and the only thing she was focused on was how incredible Maxwell was making her feel. She bucked her hips against his, wanting more, and she whimpered in protest when Maxwell suddenly stilled his movements.

“What is it?” she gasped, not understanding why he stopped.

Veronica looked at him pleadingly, silently begging him to continue, and Maxwell kissed her lips softly, only adding more to her torment.

“The first few minutes will be... unpleasant,” he warned her as he held her close. “But I promise to take the pain away.”

Veronica felt her burning need cool down a bit, and she nodded her head knowingly.

“I know you will,” she breathed, looking up longingly into his eyes.

With a groan, Maxwell captured her mouth with his once more, and as he shifted his hips, he slowly thrust his rigid member between her tight, wet folds, finally claiming her as his.

Veronica bit down hard on his shoulder as pain bloomed in her lower abdomen and made her quiver. For the briefest of moments, Maxwell stayed still, his hips pressed into hers as

his manhood pulsed inside of her. Then, he began to move gently.

As promised, the initial pain Veronica felt began to give way to pleasure, and a delicious pressure began to mount between her legs. Unconsciously, Veronica began to move her body with his, matching the rhythm of his hips with her own.

Maxwell cursed softly as Veronica's sweet grip on his member pulled him deeper inside her, the pleasure coursing through his body so intense that he shook. He had wanted, *needed* Veronica for so long that now that he had her, it was hard to contain himself. He wanted badly to give in to his need and ravage her and drive her into ecstasy. But his worry for her outweighed such need, and he called on all of his strength to take her gently.

Soon, Veronica's soft noises of discomfort turned into heady moans of pleasure, and Maxwell smiled wickedly as her expression became that of pure bliss. Her body relaxed once more, and as one, they began chasing their climax.



Veronica and Maxwell lay in one another's arms panting as they reveled in the explosion of their union. Time had lost all meaning in the safety of Maxwell's chamber, and they had lost count of how many times they had made love. Three? Four? Sixteen? When one orgasm had ended for them another had immediately begun, putting them in a cycle of erotic pleasure until their bodies were too spent to move.

"I never want to leave this chamber," Maxwell murmured as he played with her hair.

Veronica giggled softly as she moved her head and nipped playfully at his nipple, making him jump and pull her closer.

“Neither do I.” She sighed. She lifted her hand and began to trace the ridges of his muscles. “I suppose we do not have a choice, though, do we?”

Maxwell sighed, kissed the top of her head, and nodded.

“No, I suppose we do not,” he said. Instead of untangling themselves though, they only snuggled further into one another’s arms. “For now though, I just want one more moment with you. Here. Like this. With nothing to think or worry about.”

Veronica nodded her head, knowing that their time was reaching its end, and felt a tear drip down her cheek. Somehow, she knew that this was goodbye, even if neither of them was brave enough to admit it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



*P*ain bloomed in Veronica's heart as Lord Greensley opened the small leather box in his palm and presented Poppy with a betrothal ring. Veronica knew it was going to happen, they all did. Yet, somehow, it still gutted her all the same.

Veronica forced a thin smile on her pale face and clapped with the rest of the Withingtons and Evanora. The betrothal was a wonderful thing, and it was proof that her goal to see her sister happy and married was accomplished. But in truth, she wanted nothing more than to return to her home in London, shut herself in her chamber and never come back out.

"Oh, my Lord! It is absolutely perfect!" Poppy squealed, holding up her left hand toward the sun.

"It suits you most well, Lady Poppy," Evan praised, grinning from ear to ear as he watched his new betrothed move about in jubilation.

"It truly does, my child," the Dowager Marchioness gushed, moving to wrap her arms around her soon-to-be daughter-in-law.

Veronica did her best to push her own sadness away, and by the time it was her turn to offer congratulations, she managed to appear as excited and overjoyed as the rest of them.

“Congratulations, my dear sister!” Veronica exclaimed, holding Poppy tight. “You have chosen very well.”

Poppy beamed at her and took her elbow to lead her a few steps away from the rest of their little group.

“He really is wonderful, Veronica,” Poppy said when they were alone, holding up her ring so her older sister could see it better.

From the distance, Veronica had thought the stone was a regular diamond, but now that it was up close, she could see that it was a rare pink diamond, no doubt a precious family heirloom that was worth a fortune.

“It seems true that he is,” Veronica agreed, taking her sister’s hand and patting it. “I am so happy for you, Poppy, truly. I have no doubt that Lord Greensley will take care of you very well.”

“Not just me, Veronica,” Poppy whispered quickly, her excitement visibly growing, “Lord Greensley has relayed my wishes to his mother, and she is inviting us all to reside with them! Oh, think of it, Veronica! You will be there by my side to help me raise our children. You will be the very best aunt, of that there is no doubt—”

Although Veronica nodded her head in agreement, she felt her attention being pulled away from her sister's excited ramblings of the future and back to her last moment with Maxwell. It was one she cherished deeply, but one that also caused her great pain.

Before they had slipped back to the ball, Veronica had had a silent moment of revelation while lying in Maxwell's arms. She loved him. Perhaps, even, he loved her, too. But there could be no marriage. Especially now that the Dowager Duchess was back. It was clear the woman's hatred for Veronica's family stretched far, and there was no doubt in Veronica's mind that she would do whatever was necessary to get what she wanted.

So, there would be no wedding, no marriage, and no children with him. There would be no future home with Maxwell to invite Poppy and Evanora to visit. Nothing. And if she could not have it with Maxwell, she would not have it with anyone else.

"Of course, he chose to give me this ring because my favorite color is pink, and so for the wedding, I feel that we must use the same color palette," Poppy chattered on as they returned to the rejoicing families. "I want pink roses and pink ribbons in the church," she continued excitedly as the women all crowded around her

Poppy was so wrapped up in her own excitement that she did not notice when Veronica slipped away and back into the Withingtons' country home. The moment she was alone, Veronica pressed her back against the door and drew in a ragged breath. Heartache seared through her as she let out a strangled sob, and she felt the hot tears she had been holding back finally trail down her cheeks.

She stayed pressed against the door for several minutes, trying to control her emotions. It was all coming to an end, and although she was grateful for her sister's achievements, Veronica realized that she lost herself in order to make it happen. The only things she would have left were her memories with Maxwell, and half of them were clouded by her pride and penchant for arguing.

Knowing it would only be a matter of time before the others would come looking for her, Veronica pulled a kerchief from her sleeve and quickly wiped her face. As she did so, she noticed that all of their luggage had been brought down and now was stacked neatly in pile ready to be loaded by the footmen. By noon, they would all be returning to London to share the news with the rest of the *ton*, who, no doubt, would be in a flurry with word of the upcoming nuptials.

As Veronica dabbed her eyes, she studied the tower of cases and chests and spotted her carpet bag, which contained a load of books and her journal. Suddenly, an idea popped into her head, and she grabbed the case and quickly disappeared into the library.



“Good heavens!” the Dowager Duchess grumbled, looking down through her spectacles at the latest gossip sheet.

“What is it, Mother?” Alice asked, looking up from her breakfast of soft-boiled eggs and toast.

The Dowager Duchess' lips twisted in disgust as she looked up at her daughter and tossed the gossip sheet on the table

toward her. As Alice began to read, Anastasia turned her gaze to Maxwell and glared at him.

“Why do I have the sneaking suspicion you have something to do with this?” she hissed at him.

Maxwell simply shrugged and continued to eat his trout and toast.

“I do not know what you are referring to, Mother,” he responded off-handedly.

From her seat, Alice gasped and smiled wide. “Poppy is engaged to Lord Greensley! Oh, how wonderful!” she gushed, clearly excited about her friend’s good fortune.

The Dowager Duchess huffed as she picked up her cup of tea.

“Wonderful, my hat. After everything their family did to us, I had hoped God would ensure they received just punishment.”

Maxwell rolled his eyes and pushed his plate away, his appetite gone once again thanks to his mother’s monstrous presence.

“Tell me, Mother dearest, what is it that Lady Poppy and Lady Veronica did to us specifically? Do you really believe that they were in cahoots with their brother this whole time? That two of Alice’s very dear friends whom she has grown up with would somehow encourage Damian’s awful behavior?”



“That is not true,” Alice said, sounding hurt.

“No, dear sister, it is not true, and that is the point I am trying to make.” Maxwell sighed, shaking his head.

“No,” Alice insisted, rising from her chair. “It is not true that Damian is awful. I keep trying to tell you all that happened but you will not listen to me! He would not just leave me, he is not that type of person. And I know in my heart something awful must have happened to him!”

Alice’s voice quivered with raw emotion as she spoke, and Maxwell immediately softened his tone and apologized. While he did not share such high opinions of Damian Wallace, he still was not going to contribute to his sister’s heartbroken state. Even with his apology, though, it was clear Alice had enough, and after snatching up the gossip sheet, she stormed out of the parlor.

Maxwell, rose to join her, concerned for her mental state.

“Sit down,” the Dowager Duchess hissed.

Maxwell turned to look at his mother, his eyes burning bright with hate.

“And why should I listen to what you have to say, Mother?”

Anastasia rose proudly as she glared at him.

“Answer me, Maxwell. Did you have anything to do with this? I have heard stories of you gallivanting around with the Wallace sisters and their crazy aunt, buying them dresses, taking them for rides in the park, and escorting them to the theater.” She leaned in on her elbows as she stared into Maxwell’s eyes. “What have you been doing with our family’s money? Our reputation? You gamble too much, my boy, and you risk us losing everything.”

“The only thing this family has lost is its sanity,” Maxwell spit out, his anger finally bubbling to the surface. “Father would be proud of me for the protection I have provided to these two innocent ladies, who were hurt by Alice and Damian’s scandal. He would not question my morals or my actions, and that is enough reason for me.” He moved away from the table.

The Dowager Duchess cackled wildly.

“And you wish to be like him? That soft, elderly, plump lump of a man. Hmm, well, perhaps I have set my hopes far too high for you to reach. I thought you wanted more than that, Maxwell.”

“You mean you thought I wanted to be like you?” the Duke shot back quickly. “Angry, bitter at the world, only using your leverage for personal gain? Yes, Mother, I must admit that at times, I have stepped into such traits, but now I am *done*. I am through carrying on the hatred you seem to thrive on.”

“One little conversation with Lord Greensley will have that money back in our purse and the Wallace sisters back in destitution where they deserve to be!” the Dowager Duchess threatened, her face twisted with hatred.

Having had enough, Maxwell slammed his fists down on the table.

“You will do no such thing!” he roared, his anger taking over completely. “You may be the Dowager Duchess, but when it comes to finances, I have the final say. If you do not keep your mouth shut, if you keep trying to interfere with the Wallaces, I will make it so that you will be forced to move back to Scotland with an allowance just big enough to keep you fed. Do you understand me?”

Anastasia and Maxwell stayed locked in a bitter staring contest for what seemed like an eternity, their silence speaking a thousand words. Eventually, though, the Dowager Duchess let out an exhausted sigh and rose from her chair.

“I will not have my morning ruined by your stupidity,” she said harshly as she started to walk away. “I must go get your sister out to get some fresh air. Now that *you* have upset her so intensely, she will need a stroll to soothe her tender wounded heart.” The Dowager stopped as she placed her hand on the door and turned toward Maxwell a final time. “Tell me, Maxwell. You have seemed to be protecting the Wallace sisters from my wrath and the *ton*’s. But what have you done to protect your poor sister?”

Guilt roared up in Maxwell’s chest as his mother’s words metaphorically slapped him on the face. He glared at her hatefully in silence, but as she smiled at him smugly, he knew she had succeeded in getting the final word.

“Just think about that, would you?” she drawled as she opened the door.

With a haughty laugh, she walked out of the room, leaving Maxwell standing in stunned silence.



Maxwell was still sitting at the uncleared breakfast table lost in thought when Andrew walked in.

“Your Grace, a letter has arrived for you,” Andrew announced, bringing over the silver tray with an envelope on it.

“Thank you, Andrew,” Maxwell said offhandedly, not looking at his steward. “Put it with the others. I will attend to my correspondence in a few moments.”

Andrew cleared his throat uncomfortably and came closer.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but I believe that you might want to read this one now.”

Andrew cleared Maxwell’s plates away and set the letter down in front of him. Immediately, Maxwell recognized the stationary, and he snatched the envelope up quickly and opened it.

*“Our time together, though incredibly precious to me, has proven one thing: scandal touches all. If I am to continue making sure that my sister’s happiness and reputation stay intact, I must make the hardest decision I have ever made... My love rings true for you, but I cannot give in to my needs any longer... I will remain unwed and a spinster, and I will dedicate my life to making Poppy’s better—”*

The letter had been signed with ‘With All My Selfish Love.’ A statement that nearly made Maxwell nauseous with guilt. His hands shaking, he sat the letter back down on the table, leaned back, and stared at it.

The Duke and Veronica had not spoken since the night of Alice’s ball, but he had thought of Veronica every moment after. He had hoped that once he was once more away and Alice and Poppy were taken care of, he and Veronica would somehow be able to come together again. Her words, however, practically begged him to stay away.

“Shall I get your whiskey and glass prepared for you on your desk, Your Grace?” Andrew asked softly, looking at His Grace with sympathetic eyes.

Maxwell’s jaw ticked as he rubbed his hands together, and he shook his head. He wanted desperately to say yes, but being drunk to ease his sorrows no longer appealed to him, not since he had taken Veronica that day and she reminded him of how freeing riding could be.

“No, thank you, Andrew,” he said, standing. “But do alert the stable master that I will be going riding shortly. Have them saddle Admiral for me. I shall need a hard ride today.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“*T*ell me it is not true!”

Veronica and Anita looked away from the vanity and turned to look at Poppy in bewilderment. Tonight would be the first of the last string of balls for the summer season, and Veronica was reveling in the fact that it was almost over. She could not wait to have a valid excuse to not be forced to mingle with the ones who so quickly shunned her when Damian’s scandal broke loose.

“Poppy, what is the meaning of this?” Veronica asked, taken aback by her sister’s sudden entry and outburst. “Whatever you do you mean?”

Poppy gritted her teeth as tears formed in her eyes, and she stomped toward Veronica.

“I was at a party with Lady Vervain’s family,” Poppy explained, her voice laced with hurt, “and some of the ladies in attendance shared some new gossip.”

Veronica rolled her eyes and turned back to the mirror to finish getting ready.

“God! They really are like dogs with a bone. What is it this time? Aunt Evanora and I are in a wild love affair with some far-off wealthy merchant?”

“More like you are involved in a love affair with His Grace,” Poppy shot back accusingly.

Ice spread through Veronica’s veins, and she felt a fresh wave of heartache sweep through her as she struggled to keep her mask of indifference on.

“Well that is not very creative at all, Poppy,” she said nonchalantly, dabbing a bit more rouge on her lips. “I thought it was something that actually had teeth.”

“They said that the only reason that I am to be married is that you offered yourself to His Grace as payment,” Poppy continued, closing the distance between them. “I always wondered why he of all people sponsored us, but I had chalked it up to chivalry and kindness. But that is not true, is it?”

Veronica’s shocked face was all the confirmation Poppy needed, and she began to sob. Veronica pushed to her feet immediately and rushed to comfort her little sister. But Poppy pushed her away and looked at her with accusing eyes.

“Do not touch me, Veronica,” she hissed, moving away from Veronica as if she were poisonous. “Do you have any idea how this will affect my betrothal with Lord Greensley? His mother will never want him to marry me now!”

“She will,” Veronica insisted, fighting through her own pain to ease Poppy’s. “This is just another silly rumor that the *ton* churned out. His Grace took you under his wing because he felt partly responsible for the scandal Damian brought on both of our families. He will no doubt make that clear to anyone who questions his intentions!”

“But it is true, isn’t it?” Poppy pressed, hugging herself tightly. “I saw it. Many times. The looks he gave you. The looks *you* gave him. My God! How could I have been so blind?!”

Veronica cleared her throat and, despite her trembling nerves, she rose to her feet and lifted her chin proudly.

“There are many things you have to worry about, Poppy, but my reputation is not one of them. Lord Greensley is a smart, kind man, and he is a good friend to His Grace. If he has any doubts of your intentions or mine, I feel most assured in saying that His Grace will quell them.”

Poppy’s shoulders relaxed a little at Veronica’s words, and when her older sister stepped toward her, she did not try to back away again.

“This salacious rumor was no doubt a last-minute attempt to bury our family in more scandal,” Veronica continued in the same matter-of-fact tone. “The Dowager Marchioness and I have spoken in length about the gruesome nature of rumors, and I assure you, Lord Greensley’s family will not turn their back on you. You love him, Poppy, that much is clear, and it is easy to see that he loves you, too. Trust me when I say that myself and several others are here to make sure your life is not ruined by such lascivious narratives.”



Poppy let out a steadying breath and dried her eyes with a kerchief.

“You promise, Veronica?” she asked, sounding once more like the little girl Veronica used to look after instead of the young woman she had become.

A thin smile spread across Veronica’s face as she nodded, and she gripped Poppy’s hands with her own tightly.

“I promise you, Poppy. *Nothing* will keep you from the happiness you deserve. Not while I am alive.”

Poppy sighed and rushed into her older sister’s arms. Veronica let out a breath of relief as she enfolded Poppy in her embrace and rubbed her back.

“I just want this all to be over,” Poppy mumbled, sounding exhausted.

Tears pricked at Veronica’s eyes as she felt her heart shatter even further.

“Me too,” she said, forcing her voice to sound casual. “And it will. But the best way to combat any rumor is to act as if it does not faze you at all. So, go to your chamber, have Mary clean your face for you, and we shall take leave shortly for the ball and show them just how unbothered we are by their lies.”

After a few more minutes of hugging and talking, Poppy, seemingly soothed, left Veronica’s room to do as she was told.

Picking up on her mistress' need for privacy, Anita quietly assured Veronica that she would go check on Evanora and alert the carriage driver that they would be departing soon.



“Brother, please,” Alice implored, the sound of her desperation clear in her voice.

“My business with the social Season has concluded,” Maxwell said indifferently from behind his desk as he continued to stare down at the book he pretended to read.

After receiving Veronica's letter a few days ago, his already bad mood had worsened to an unbearable state. Even his mother, who usually enjoyed seeing him suffer, had begun to avoid him. The Duke tried not to let out his frustrations on Alice and Andrew, but even then he was grumpy at best.

“I no longer wish to have any part of what the *ton* has left to offer, Alice.”

Alice, having had more than enough of her brother's brooding, picked up his book and threw it across the room. She hoped it would get some sort of reaction out of him, but instead, he only looked up at her with a raised eyebrow.

“That was a bit excessive, don't you think?” he asked, leaning back in his chair.

“If you do not attend this ball with us, I will have to go alone with Mother,” Alice whined, ignoring his comment.

Maxwell looked at her with indifference.

“So? You lived with Mother alone for over a year in Scotland.”

“Yes, and it nearly drove me insane,” she shot back. “Please, Brother, the Season is nearly over. Do not make me go to this ball with her alone. She is more vicious than usual with her little attacks. If you are there, she will not feel so entitled to be so.”

Alice looked at her brother desperately, her eyes pleading with him to reconsider his decision. Maxwell looked at her, feeling the stress radiating off her, and sighed.

“Damn it to Hell,” he muttered, and Alice let out a laugh of relief and brought her hands together in prayer.

“Thank you, Maxwell! I promise I will make it up to you somehow.”

“You had better,” the Duke grumbled, getting up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Veronica's stomach sank as she watched the Dowager Duchess, Alice and Maxwell walk into the ballroom. Her breath hitched in her throat as her heart began to hammer, and she quickly looked away from them.

"What is the matter, Lady Veronica?" Lady Finwood asked, her tone far too sweet to be genuine. "You suddenly look very unwell." She lifted her glass of champagne to her lips, and Veronica saw malice flitter across the woman's eyes when she noticed Veronica's faltering appearance. "Perhaps it would do you good to take a step onto the patio?" she suggested, her gaze darting from Maxwell to Veronica and back again.

Veronica bit back the insult she wanted desperately to fling at the spiteful woman and smiled sweetly as she looked at her.

"Perhaps I should," she said loftily, taking a sip from her champagne. "I believe someone here has overdone it with their perfume, and the heaviness of it is making me feel absolutely nauseous."

Lady Finwood's eyes narrowed viciously at Veronica's barb, but instead of reacting to the insult, she announced, "Well, it

looks as if Lady Vervain and her daughters are looking for me.” She stood up to leave their table.

Veronica smirked behind her glass as the pompous woman walked away, but her feelings of glory soon faded as she looked at Maxwell.

Her body tingled with excitement and longing as she took him in, but those feelings were followed quickly by anguish as she studied his face. Maxwell was known for his brooding, and it was often said that such a demeanor was part of his devilish charm. But, tonight, it was not anger that lowered his brow. There was something more. Something new.

*His heart is aching too.*

Veronica shook her head, chasing the invasive thought away. There was no use giving in to hope at this point. Not after everything.



Maxwell looked around the ballroom as all members of the *ton* stared at either him or Veronica. He had spotted her the moment he had walked in, and as always, his eyes had been immediately drawn to her beauty. As he looked around the room, he caught her eye, and for a moment, their gazes locked. Though her face would never show it, he could feel her pain radiating from across the room.

Anger pierced through him as he ripped his eyes away from Veronica’s and glared down at the Dowager Duchess.

“What have you and your friends done, Mother?” he asked in a biting tone.

The Dowager Duchess lifted her nose in the air and sneered.

“You should be more careful when you take your carriage rides, dear boy.” She tutted and shook her head. “You never know who is going to sneak into one after leaving a certain theater.”

Maxwell watched, livid, as his mother’s gaze searched the room and landed on Lady Vervain. Both women met one another’s gaze, and smiled and winked conspiratorially at one another. Immediately, Maxwell’s mind traveled back to the night he had taken Veronica on their private carriage ride and how he had promised privacy. Realizing he had broken his promise filled him with shame, and he felt nauseous as he realized what he had just done to Veronica.

From behind them, Alice stepped forward and gripped his arm. He turned to her, eyes blazing, and she only looked at him with a pleading apology.

“Maxwell, I had no idea, truly.” She sounded on the verge of tears. “If I had known, I... I would have never asked you to come.”

Maxwell took a steadying breath, desperately trying to find his rationality through his anger. He gently untangled his arm from his sister’s and lifted her chin with his index finger.

“It is all right, I believe you,” he said gently.

Alice let out a sigh as a tear escaped her left eye, and she smiled at him weakly. “Come,” she urged, “we do not need to satisfy the *ton*’s need for drama this evening. Let’s return home.”

Maxwell shook his head as his hand dropped away from her face.

“Not yet, Alice. I must make things right.”

The Duke walked away from his sister as her brow furrowed in confusion, and he made a beeline for Veronica. The music and gossip stopped as he marched toward her, and she looked at him with wide eyes as he approached.

“What are you doing?” she hissed as he grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet.

“I am done with this, Veronica, and it is time we end it once and for all,” he whispered vehemently, tugging her toward the center of the ballroom. “Apologies, everyone, but might I get your attention?” he shouted.

“Maxwell, stop,” Veronica pleaded, her eyes filling with tears as her mask of bravery finally cracked.

“I am in love with Lady Veronica,” Maxwell shouted.

Veronica looked at him in stunned silence. Of all the things she thought he was going to say, that was not it.

“I want you as my wife, Lady Veronica,” the Duke continued, his voice thick with emotion. “Not for the sake of these rumors, not for possession, but for love.”

He grabbed her other hand and pulled her close, his tone dropping so only she could hear.

“I am sorry for any pain I have caused you, but I promise you that if you say yes, I will do everything in my power to see that it ends now.”

Veronica looked at him incredulously as the reality of the moment sank in, and she felt happiness and relief flood through her as she finally remembered to breathe again.

“Swear it,” she urged, her heart beginning to race.

Maxwell blinked at her in surprise.

“What?”

“Swear it is true,” she pressed. “Swear that you want this because you love me. Because I love you too, Maxwell, but I will not be married out of pity.”

Maxwell’s eyes darkened as a wicked smile spread across his face.



“I love you, Veronica, and I want to spend every night showing you all the ways I can give you that love.”

Heat sparked through Veronica’s body as she heard his words, and a wide smile spread across her face.

“Yes.” She laughed, her breath heavy as she felt Maxwell’s grip on her hands tighten. “Yes, I will marry you!”

Maxwell groaned in relief and pulled Veronica into his arms. The other members of *ton* gasped as he kissed her passionately, and they each smiled into one another’s lips as the roar of gossip picked up again. Suddenly, the sound of trays clattering to the floor filled the room, and Maxwell and Veronica abruptly parted to look in the direction of the cacophony of sounds.

Veronica’s jaw dropped as she saw a familiar face rise above the crowd. The man stood on a table and pointed an accusing finger at Maxwell.

“You!” Damian roared, his features ragged and uncleanly. “Get your damned hands off my sister!”



A primal urge to protect took over Maxwell as he realized that Damian Wallace had finally returned to serve his punishment. Without a word, he left Veronica’s side and marched toward the table, grabbed Damian by the ankles, and pulled him off his feet.

Damian roared as his back crashed into the table, and before he could react, Maxwell dragged him off once more. With one hand wrapped around the collar of Damian's bedraggled shirt, Maxwell drew the other hand back in a fist and punched him hard in the face. From behind him, he could hear Alice shouting at him to stop as she tried to make her way toward them, but he threw another punch, this time bloodying Damian's nose.

"I will kill you for you what you have done to Alice," the Duke growled, drawing his fist back to strike Damian again.

But in a surprising sweep of strength, Damian lunged forward, wrapped his arms around Maxwell's waist, and threw him to the floor.

"Damian, stop!" Veronica, Poppy, and Alice all shouted in unison as they hurried toward the two brawling men.

Damian froze as he heard Alice's voice and looked around for her wildly. He was so happy to see her that he did not notice the rage all over her face.

"Alice, thank God you are here, I—" Damian's words were cut off as Alice slapped him hard across the face.

His head swung to the side by the force of her slap, and as his eyes widened in shock, he saw Maxwell being held back by his sisters.

"That is for leaving me!" Alice screamed in rage.

Confusion, anger, and pain roared in Damian as he righted himself and attempted to speak again. But before he could get a word out, Alice slapped him across the face for the second time, then a third time as the crowd around him gasped in astonishment.

“And that is for not answering my letters and leaving your sisters penniless!” Alice stormed off, let out a roar, and stomped back to him. “Where have you been?” she hissed. “How could you do this to me? To us? To your sisters?!”

“Alice, please,” Damian pleaded, ignoring his aching jaw and ringing ears. “I beg of you to listen to me. I know I shouldn’t have run away, and it has haunted me every day. But I assure you, I have paid for it. I have been robbed, taken prisoner, chased, beaten, all the while trying to get back to you when I realized how much of a fool I was.”

Alice glared at him hatefully. “You lie,” she accused.

Damian shook his head and fell to his knees.

“No, I swear it,” he said desperately. “And I swear to you, I have never received any letters. But I sent you many. Hundreds. Begging for your forgiveness. Promising to make things right. But you never wrote back.”

Alice’s eyes grew wide as she looked from Damian to her brother.

“I have never received any letters with your name on them while you were in Scotland,” Maxwell insisted. “Do not listen

to him, Alice. He is a coward and a disgrace!”

“I was!” Damian confessed angrily, running a hand through his ragged hair. “But I swear to you, Alice, I have longed for you every day, and I wrote you letters and sent them to you whenever I could.”

Veronica looked between her brother and Alice, and then at the large crowd that had circled around them. Clearing her throat, she stepped between Damian and Alice.

“Perhaps this conversation is worthy of a more private setting,” she urged, gesturing toward the nearest hallway.

“She is not going anywhere with him alone,” Maxwell growled.

“Enough of this, Your Grace,” Veronica hissed, gripping Maxwell’s arm. “Come. You, Aunt Evanora, and I will be nearby if anything goes awry. Remember, your sister is not the only person he has harmed.” Veronica shot her brother a resentful look. “You and I *will* speak later as well, Damian,” she stated in a stern tone.

Damian only looked at her meekly and nodded.

Veronica turned to Alice and held out her hand. “Come, dear,” she implored gently, “let’s get this all sorted out, shall we?”

Alice agreed, and they all walked out of the ballroom, leaving the rest of the *ton* to feast on the newest gossip.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



“We will be right outside the door,” Veronica assured Alice before leaving her and Damian to their privacy.

Alice turned away from the door and let herself take a long look at the man who had so thoroughly broken her heart. In truth, he looked horrible, far from the clean, handsome gentleman that first wooed her. But his charismatic features were still there, buried under the grime and bruises that covered him. It was obvious that, at least as of late, he had had a rough journey.

“You look terrible,” Alice told him in a matter-of-fact manner, breaking the silence.

Damian winced as he took a seat on a footrest and leaned his elbows on his knees.

“Yes, I do,” he agreed, looking up at her with that familiar playful smile. “But you look beautiful. More so now than ever.” Alice blushed and felt the familiar pulse of excitement shoot through her. “I pray that you have been well,” he continued, his voice thick with emotion. “I truly did send you letters.”

“I never received any letters,” Alice whispered, her voice breaking as she finally allowed all of the emotions to hit her. “Not here, not in Scotland... not after I gave birth to our child.”

Damian’s breath caught in his throat, and his face twisted in shock and pain. For a moment, Alice wondered if he had forgotten how to breathe. Finally, after what seemed like an infinite amount of time, he let out a shaky breath and rose to his feet.

He walked over to Alice, took her hands, and looked beseechingly into her eyes.

“Alice, tell me everything that has happened.”



“Well, this has turned into a rather explosive evening, hasn’t it?” Evanora drawled, leaning rather unceremoniously against the wall. She suddenly perked up and smiled sweetly at Veronica and Maxwell. “Congratulations, you two,” she cooed happily, walking over to Veronica to cup her cheeks.

Veronica smiled warmly as her aunt embraced her, and as she looked up at Maxwell, she saw that the etched frown he had sported had begun to melt.

“Thank you, Aunt Evanora,” she said, hugging her aunt back.

Evanora pulled away and smiled at Maxwell as her eyes glittered with mischief. “And you, Your Grace, it was about time you finally admitted what we all knew.”

Evanora’s wickedly truthful tongue broke Maxwell out of his foul mood, and his face broke into a grin as he chuckled.

“My apologies for being daft, Miss Snyder.” He took the older woman’s hand. “I promise to work on that.”

“And I will help you work on that,” Veronica quipped.

Maxwell turned to her, his eyes full of love, and pulled her into his arms.

“You better,” he murmured before kissing her again.

“Oh dear,” Evanora muttered, breaking the moment. “Look alive, my dears, we have company coming.”

Veronica and Maxwell broke their kiss and looked up to see the Dowager Duchess, Poppy, and Evan walking toward them.

“We tried to stop her,” Poppy warned with a pained expression.

The Dowager Duchess threw her arm out and pushed Poppy away from her. “As if you could stop me,” she hissed, her anger written all over her face. “Where is my daughter?” She eyed the door Maxwell was standing near and lunged at it.

Maxwell blocked it with his body, glaring back at her.

“That’s enough, Mother! Let them talk.”

“This is all ridiculous!” the Dowager Duchess snarled, pointing a bony finger at her son. “Do you understand how many things have failed, Maxwell? Our family. Our legacy! How could you ask this woman to marry you after everything her family has done to ours!”

“Oh, calm down, Anastasia,” Evanora sighed, waving her gloved hand at the Dowager Duchess as if she were no more than a servant.

Anastasia glared at the older woman hatefully.

“Don’t you dare talk to me in such a disrespectful manner, you crazed spinster,” the Dowager Duchess hissed. “You know nothing about what it takes to keep a family together, nor the sacrifices you make for their better good.”

Something about the way Anastasia said her words made Maxwell curious, and still guarding the door, he crossed his arms and looked at his mother with morbid curiosity.

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” he asked. “What do you mean sacrifices for our benefit? What have you done?”

The Dowager Duchess’ face flushed as she glowered at him, and he knew he hit a nerve.



“You watch your tone with me, Boy,” she warned. “You may be a duke, but I am still your mother.”

Before Maxwell could reply, the door he was guarding opened, and Alice and Damian stepped out. Both of them looked as if they had been crying, and he decided to swallow the bitter words he had for Damian and waited for Alice to speak.

“Darling,” the Dowager Duchess gasped, looking for the first time like a concerned mother. “What has he done to you?” She reached out to grasp her daughter’s hands.

Alice recoiled from her mother’s touch, glaring at her.

“Where are my letters, Mother?”

The Dowager Duchess tutted and rolled her eyes.

“Stop this nonsense, Alice! It is time to leave this twisted drama behind and move on! We can find you a husband still, there is plenty of time. But we cannot do that if you entertain this scoundrel any longer.”

“I wrote those letters, Your Grace,” Damian persisted, resting a hand on Alice’s shoulder. “And she wrote to me. The only person that could have intercepted the letters was you.”

“You watched me like a hawk,” Alice continued, taking a step toward her mother. “You kept me at your side. *Always*. So you could make sure we stayed away from each other.”

“I would never allow my child to marry a Wallace after what that man did to you,” the Dowager Duchess snarled, looking from her each of her children to the Wallace siblings.

“So you admit it!” Alice yelled, looking on the verge of tears once again.

“I admit nothing!” Anastasia shot back.

“Oh, enough of this!” Evanora bellowed, surprising everyone.

Veronica’s aunt walked toward the center of the circle their families had formed and looked at the Dowager Duchess tiredly.

“You have always been a conceited woman, Anastasia. I remember all too well the wicked games you used to play on my dear sister when you were younger. You were vile then, and you are vile now.” The Dowager Duchess opened her mouth, but Evanora cut her off. “In fact, I remember when you dipped poor Emma Tinsley’s ringlet in a pot of ink and made her cry. You went a step further and cut off the lock that was painted black. I remember you showing it off like a prize. You did that many times to your victims. I would not be surprised if you did intercept their letters. Or if you still have them.”

The Dowager Duchess’ face blanched as she attempted to sputter out a defense, and that was all Alice needed to see to gather her skirts and head down the hallway.

“Where are you going?” Damian asked, catching up to her.

“Home,” Alice replied, still moving quickly. “To find out what has been going on, after all.”

## EPILOGUE

After the night Damian had reappeared, they had all traveled to the Kendrick Manor in London to find the truth behind the Dowager Duchess' deception. Just as Evanora had predicted, they had found all the letters that Damian and Alice had written to one another tucked in a hidden compartment of one of Anastasia's travel trunks. It was the proof Damian had needed to get a second chance.

At first, Veronica and Maxwell had doubted Damian's intentions, but time truly did heal all wounds, and with some patience, Damian had proved to them that he was, indeed, truthful in his repentance. Their family money was all but gone, of that there was no denying, but he had been truthful about his adventures while at sea, and with a handful of investors willing to trust his newly gained knowledge, he had been able to build his family's fortune back with a new import business.

Alice had needed time to take everything in, and rightfully so. For months, she had watched Damian with wariness after they had gone to Scotland to retrieve Rosemary, looking for any evidence that he would slide back into his old habits. But once she had seen how serious he was about making things right, something had begun to heal in her heart, and after a year of him begging, Alice finally agreed to marry him.

As for the Dowager Duchess, she had finally learned just how little power she had after Maxwell had exiled her to their estate in Scotland. She had fought tooth and nail at first as she denied her reality, but once she had accepted that it was time

to pay for her misdeeds, she had skulked away on her own and had not contacted Alice or Maxwell since.

The *ton*, of course, had been abuzz with the events of the night of Damian's return. Naturally, they had all feasted on the remnants of the drama throughout winter and spring. By the next summer, however, after Damian's business had begun turning a profit, the whispers about them had stopped, and the *ton* had moved on to the next salacious piece of gossip. Ironically enough, it had involved one of Lady Vervain's daughters, a stable boy, and a maid.

The budding love Veronica and Maxwell had felt during their messy ordeal had blossomed into something steadfast and unshakable once the gloom of their families' drama began to fade. With the Dowager Duchess gone, and Damian's disappearance solved, they soon had no one to worry about, at least in terms of protection, but themselves.

No longer caring about the *ton's* perception, Maxwell took Veronica back to his summer home. Between the nearly endless hours of making love, Veronica and Maxwell talked and bared their souls. Maxwell had finally, fully, let down his guard, and let Veronica in. The stories he told of his childhood and mother made her weep, but she was incredibly grateful to him for finally unloading his burdens.

In return, Veronica tried to do the same and eventually learned to remove the masculine mantle of responsibility that had been forced upon her when Damian had first left. It was more difficult than she realized it would be, becoming a Lady again. At first, she struggled with her determination to do everything herself, but with Maxwell's patience, she let it go piece by piece, until she felt her true self again.

Eventually, when she would enter the study of the summer estate, her motives changed. She wasn't there to secretly look over Maxwell's shoulder to check his work but to slide into his lap, or bring him food or drink. And in their bedchamber, she was no longer losing sleep or waking up anxious, but was giggling and kissing Maxwell as he wrapped his arms around her before bed.

Although there was still plenty of witty and sarcastic banter between them, the distrust had faded away, as did the jealousy, fear, and anxiety. With no place for it to grow, it withered and died, and in its place grew an even deeper love.

Almost a year after they were married and healed from their former lives, Veronica woke up vomiting and pale. Maxwell, upon seeing her so weak, wasted no time in calling on the doctor, and even refused to leave Veronica's side as the man began working on his diagnosis. Throughout the entire ordeal, he held her hand and assured her he was not going anywhere.

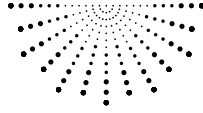
Almost eight months later, little Alistair was born.

If there was any doubt Maxwell had about being a good father, it vanished as soon as the baby came. His fears of being like his mother were soon unfounded, and another hurtful part of his past was laid to rest as he discovered that he had his father's nurturing side all along.

As for Veronica, her fears of being alone forever or a prisoner of a loveless marriage eventually felt like nothing more than childish nightmares. Maxwell's love, she realized, just needed the proper ministrations to be let out, and when it was, it flooded over their lives beautifully.

*The End?*

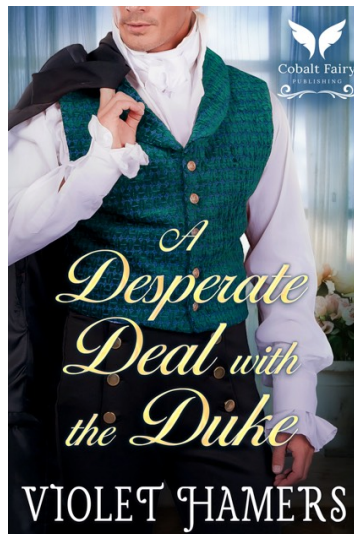
## EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Eager to know more on how **Veronica and Maxwell's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple.

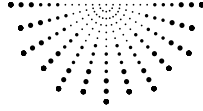
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PREVIEW: THE VISCOUNT  
TAKES A BRIDE





## CHAPTER ONE



“Who?” Lady Margaret Plymouth’s fork slipped from her fingers and clattered onto her plate while her mouth hung open in a rather ungraceful fashion.

Her father, Harvey Plymouth, the Duke of Woodport, repeated his pronouncement, “Margaret, you are to marry my good friend, the Duke of Dormer.”

“You cannot mean that, Father,” she whispered, too shocked to speak any louder.

He raised his graying eyebrows. “I have never been more earnest.”

Margaret glanced at her mother, Gloria, seeking her help, but the woman’s eyes remained on her plate. Next, she turned to her brother, Andrew, but he, too, avoided her gaze.

*Am I to face Father alone?* She could excuse her brother because he was only sixteen and was powerless against their tyrannical father. She swallowed her disappointment and took a fortifying breath.

Her older brother, Simon, died a year and ten months ago which caused Margaret to make her debut late. At nineteen and barely halfway through her first season, her father, for some inexplicable reason, wanted to throw the elderly Dormer, a man with an unsavory reputation in society, in her path. Margaret was as shocked by her father’s decision as she was wounded by it. To think that he would so willingly give her to such a man...

“Surely, Father, you can allow me to reach the end of my season before you make me marry.”

“And why should I do that? Why should I incur more unnecessary expenses?” Her father had always been careful with his fortune, but some unfortunate circumstances had caused him to hold onto every penny even more.

Desperate and knowing exactly how his decision would change her life—for the worse—Margaret tried, once more, to appeal to Harvey’s spirit. “Father, I implore you to reconsider. Give me until the end of the season, and I promise you that I will find a hus—”

Harvey pounded a fist onto the dining table and glared at her, the tips of his ears coloring. “Your manner offends me, Margaret!” he roared, and she winced. Why was he desperate to get her married without giving her the chance to find a husband? She opened her mouth to ask him that question, but he continued his tirade. “Your stubbornness is reprehensible, and no decent gentleman would tolerate it, much less offer you the privilege of marriage. Must you question everything?”

“But I did not quest—”

“Be quiet!” Margaret clenched her teeth and did as she was asked, afraid he would bring Dormer and a parson to the manor this instant and force her to wed him.

“Take what you are offered while it is still available. I refuse to tolerate a spinster for a daughter!” He was raising his voice again even though he had quite asserted his authority, and everyone understood their place. He jabbed a finger at Margaret. “Now, you will listen to me carefully, for I will not repeat myself. I shall be hosting a ball, and at said event, I will announce your engagement to the Duke of Dormer.”

Margaret stared at her father as a vision of her future played in her thoughts. She would become a duchess and be sent to live in one of her husband’s estates in the north without friends or family, forced to bed a gouty old man and bear his children. Margaret shut her eyes and ground her teeth, her stomach churning with dread.

Harvey stood then. "This conversation has robbed me of my appetite." He picked up his wine goblet. "Margaret, I hope you are quite pleased with yourself." As he walked out, he gestured for a footman to follow him with his food. This would have amused Margaret if she were in a better disposition.

Refusing to concede, she turned to her mother. Gloria must have been frightened by Harvey's anger as she usually was, but perhaps she could plead with him on Margaret's behalf later. "Mother," she began.

"I will not discuss this matter now, Margaret," Gloria said coolly, and Margaret's hands clenched underneath the table as something bitter tightened her chest.

Her father had always been a strict and unfeeling man, but her mother had not always been withdrawn. Simon's death had caused it, and although a lot of time had passed, they were still very much grieving, all of them. After finishing her main course, Gloria rose.

"You are not going to have dessert?" Margaret asked stiffly.

"No. I have no care for it." She smoothed her hands down her light blue satin dress before walking out of the dining room.

Margaret stared at her barely touched food, misery stinging her eyes. The hand that gently came down on her shoulder made her turn to her left to see Andrew. He had been sitting across from her, but he had moved beside her now.

"Father is difficult to argue with," he apologized. "Would that I could..."

Margaret shook her head. "I know, Andrew, and I thank you for commiserating with me now."

"You should find Mother and speak to her. Only she can plead with Father," he advised, and she nodded. Their mother might be as wary of their father as everyone else, but she still had some power to persuade him. "Now, let us have dessert."

The footmen brought some orange cake and cream which was Margaret's favorite, but it tasted different because she was distraught. After dinner, she left her brother to find her mother.

When she did not see her in either of the drawing rooms in the manor, she decided to go up to check her bedchamber.

Gloria's lady's maid was coming out of the bedchamber when Margaret arrived in the hallway. "Is my mother in?" she asked.

The lady's maid curtsied. "Yes, My Lady."

Margaret knocked lightly on the door, and once she heard her mother answer, she turned the handle and walked in. Gloria was sitting at her vanity, already dressed for bed. Her mother slept after dinner when she was not in a fair mood.

"Mother, will you help me beseech Father?" Margaret asked once she was close to her.

Gloria shook her head. "I fear I am powerless in this situation. Your father has already made up his mind, and it would be impossible to change it now."

"Did you know about his intentions before he announced them?" Margaret asked.

"Yes. He told me this morning." She raised deep blue eyes to regard her daughter.

Margaret pushed down the painful lump of desperation rising in her throat before crouching in front of Gloria. "I do not understand why he is doing this. Do you?" At the start of the season, Margaret thought she would find a good gentleman and marry him, but at her first ball, she realized how difficult that would be because most gentlemen wanted a quiet woman who would sit prettily and do their every bidding.

Gloria sighed. "Our fortunes are suffering, Margaret. I did not want to tell you this, but I have cause to believe it is why your father wishes for you to marry Dormer. He is a very wealthy man, and joining our families will help our financial situation."

Margaret stared at her mother in shock. It was worse than she thought. She could not speak for several seconds, but when she finally found her voice, she said, "He would rather sell his daughter than find a proper way to recover our fortunes?" She felt her shoulders stiffen, and the anger she had felt earlier returned.

“Our lost wealth is not his fault, Margaret. You know that,” Gloria defended, her eyes shimmering with tears.

“What are you saying, Mother?” Margaret questioned, despite having an inkling of what her mother was alluding to. This would not be the first time she was hearing it.

“You know that Simon...” Gloria began, but Margaret quickly interrupted her. Indignation on her late brother’s behalf joined her warring emotions right then.

“Allow the dead to rest, Mother—especially your son. How long will you continue to blame Simon for the littlest of things?”

Simon had been a wonderful brother, everything Margaret wanted one to be. He was a good son and heir, too—the force that united her family. Her father had little respect for people, but he respected Simon. Margaret had never admired anyone more, but he had flaws like everyone—one of which had been the love for gambling. Their fortunes had severely declined as a result, and her mother could not seem to forgive him for it.

If anyone should be angry, it should be Margaret because she was being sold, but she treasured his memory too much to allow his mistakes to influence her thus. The entire family still mourned Simon despite everything, and naturally, grief came to each person in different forms. Margaret had always felt as though a part of her father died along with his first heir, and Gloria mourned by blaming her son for leaving her behind to continue to suffer Harvey’s overbearing ways. It was painful for Margaret to see her like this.

Andrew was still a boy and one in want of guidance, too. She’d had to push her grief to the side to be the daughter and sister her family needed. Now that it was time for *her* needs to be heard, she was being pushed away. At least, that was how she felt.

Gloria’s chin began to quiver with emotion at Margaret’s words, and instinctively, Margaret pulled her mother into her arms, doing all she could to comfort her. “Simon was all I had,” her mother cried. “He was my strength, and he left me.” Margaret’s heart twisted at that.

*You had me, Mother*, she thought but could not say. *You still do. Andrew, too.* Margaret instead said the words she thought would soothe Gloria. “He loved all of us, and he still does, wherever he is. I know he would not want you to continue grieving like this.”

Margaret remained in her mother’s bedchamber for almost an hour, and when Gloria had fallen asleep, Margaret retired to her bedchamber, thinking the best thing for her to do was to sleep, too. However, she knew her thoughts were too restless to allow her to have a peaceful slumber. Margaret flopped onto her bed and sighed, thoroughly lost. Would she be doing the right thing by agreeing to marry Dormer to save her family’s crumbling finances? The more pertinent, yet disturbing question was whether she had a choice.

Her head ached thinking of the answer to the question, and she rose from her bed and walked to the door, imagining her mood brightening with either a good book or some embroidery which was one of her most enjoyable pastimes. Besides, anything that would distract her from her pathetic reality would be good

Andrew stumbled into the room as soon as she opened the door. He caught himself and balanced the laden plate he was holding, but a biscuit fell onto the carpeted floor and crumbled. When he straightened, she saw his mouth was full, and he was chewing.

“What are you doing, Andrew?” she asked, smiling.

“I had my ear to the door, wondering if you were awake.” He picked a slice of cake from the plate before handing it to her. “I brought this to cheer you up.”

“All for me?” she jested.

“You know you cannot eat all of it.”

“What if I could?” Margaret accepted the plate and sat on the sofa before the hearth.

“You could, but it would never show,” Andrew laughed, sitting beside her. She was very slim, and he never failed to tease her about it.

He started to reach for another cake, but she pulled the plate away from him. “I believe you have had enough.”

“Come now, Ret,” he groaned. He called her that sometimes because when he had been learning to speak, her name was too difficult for him to pronounce, and thus, he settled on calling her Ret. “I did not eat well because of Father. I believe he gave me quite the indigestion.”

“You should not be having all these if you are suffering from indigestion then,” Margaret pointed out, but she allowed him to have more of the contents of the plate—most of them to be exact. She was not hungry, but she needed the distraction that eating something sweet would provide her.

“Ret,” Andrew said after a while, his hazel eyes—that were the same color as hers—serious.

“Yes?”

“I would never marry you off to some old man if I were Duke. You know that, do you not?”

His care brought a smile to her face. “I know that, Andrew.” She fondly ruffled his blonde hair, more emotions turning inside her.

Andrew groaned in protest. “Why do you keep doing that?” He smoothed down his hair. “I am a man now, not a boy.”

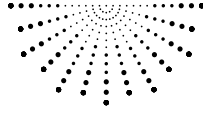
“No matter how old you grow, you will always be my little brother,” she chuckled.

“Little,” he scoffed, looking down his nose at her. “Observe yourself before you say that next time.”

They laughed and jested for a while longer before he rose to leave, taking the remainder of the cakes and biscuits with him. After bidding him goodnight and closing her door, Margaret rested her back against it.

Her mother should not blame Simon for their plight. No, she should blame that man who killed him—Viscount Saxton. If ever she was presented with the opportunity to exact revenge, Margaret would happily take it, for if Simon had not befriended the wretched man, he just might still be alive.

## CHAPTER TWO



The day that Margaret had been dreading the entire week arrived, and the manor bustled with the festivities of the ball that would seal her unfortunate fate.

On father's insistence, Margaret placed her hand on Duke Dormer's and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor for a waltz, the only dance he could manage at his age. He used to be tall, but he was now hunched, and his head was as bald as an egg and spotted. He might be her father's friend, but he was at least a decade older which should place him at around sixty.

When they reached the dance floor and assumed their positions, his dark bleary gaze moved over her body, and Margaret tried her best to remain composed even though she felt as if a hundred ants were crawling on her skin. They began to dance, and it was slow and torturous.

Dormer's lecherous gaze lingered on her bosom, and he said, "You lack the proper figure to bear children." Margaret stiffened on hearing that, and her eyes moved desperately across the ballroom in search of help—not that anyone could stop the waltz and rescue her from him. "Fortunately, I have an heir, thus, I am not in want of one," he continued, his eyes moving down to her hips. "But I do not mind more daughters."

*Lord help me*, she prayed, resisting the urge to run off the dance floor. Worse, her heart ached as if something was being smothered inside her. Perhaps she was already grieving the life she was going to lose.



“I shall not count upon children.” His oily voice drew her attention back to what he was saying. “You are far too small.” Then he laughed. “We would not want a tragedy which usually results from women with frames such as yours exerting themselves to birth—”

“Your Grace, you are being inappropriate,” she snapped, her teeth clenched.

He continued to laugh. “There is nothing inappropriate between a man and his wife.”

“I am not your wife!”

“You will be, and I am looking forward to the night.” He continued his licentious stares. “You have what is needed to please a man.” Margaret shut her eyes, thinking of what she could do to stop this dance.

Suddenly, she tripped, and her eyes flew open. Dormer continued to lead the dance despite her trying to catch herself. She tripped again, inadvertently stepping on his toes this time. He yelped and released her. Taking the moment as an opportunity, even though heads were turning in their direction, and the other dancers were becoming distracted, Margaret took hold of her ivory skirts and dashed out of the ballroom, disgust propelling her forward.

*I cannot do this. I will not marry this man even if it will kill me!*

She ran toward the rear of the manor, the music from the ballroom receding. Margaret did not stop until she reached the music room which had hardly seen any life since Simon’s death. He loved playing the harpsichord, and her father enjoyed it, too, but after Simon’s passing, no one played any music in the house. Occasionally, when they hosted an event, a guest would play the pianoforte in one of the drawing rooms, but that was it.

Opening the door, she walked in, but when she found the room dark with the hearth unlit, she took a candle and lit it in one of the sconces in the hallway before returning to light a few more

candles. She sat in a chair near a window that overlooked the garden and sighed. Again, this was all Viscount Saxton's fault.

Margaret did not know what exactly had happened, but she knew Simon traveled to England with the Viscount. They gambled and made merry together, and in his letters, he would mention what a grand jolly time he was having. She had met Saxton once, but that had been six years ago. She doubted she would recognize him if she saw him.

*No, I should be able to recognize the face of the man who took my brother from me.* She had never fancied vengeance, but she was positively in love with it now. She glanced out into the garden and saw a group of couples promenading and laughing. The gentlemen were likely courting the ladies, perhaps in love with them.

She had lost her chance of finding love because of one man's actions. She could find a way to get out of marrying Dormer, but what then? Would she find a suitable gentleman? What if her father brought another man for her to marry? Someone worse. After all, he had declared that he would not pay for her to reach the end of the season.

Margaret sighed again and swept a hand over her brow, pausing when she heard the door open. She looked up to see a tall gentleman walk in. She thought he might have lost his way, at first, but the authority with which he closed the door and walked toward her told Margaret that he was anything but lost.

She stood to challenge him for disrupting her solitude. When he stopped before her, he gave her a roguish smile, and she saw just how handsome he was. His hair was as dark as midnight, and his blue eyes could transfix a woman for hours if not days. His appearance did not matter. At least that was what Margaret told herself as she asked, "Is there a particular reason you are here, sir?"

"Yes, My Lady. I have business in this room." His voice was rich, dark, and deep. It sent a delightful shiver through her despite her efforts to disregard him.

“With whom?” Margaret asked dubiously, looking him over while he did the same. His blue gaze appreciated her face before descending. Every part of her tightened in response, and she swallowed. *Heavens! Why am I feeling this way?*

“With you, Lady Margaret,” he replied.

She stared at him incredulously. “You followed me?”

“Yes. You left the ballroom before I had the opportunity to be introduced to you. I was left without a choice but to find you.”

“Why?”

He laughed. “A beautiful lady caught my attention, and I wish to know her.”

Margaret’s cheeks warmed and no doubt gained color. “Spanish coin,” she chuckled, looking away from his intense gaze.

“I do not give Spanish coin, My Lady. I truly do think you are beautiful, and you took the light from the ballroom when you left.”

Margaret had never been complimented by a gentleman before, not like this. She admired his boldness, and something about him charmed her. She wondered if he saw her dance with Dormer. Of course, he had. “You have placed me at a disadvantage, sir. You know my name but I have yet to learn yours.”

“You may call me Seth, and if you are wondering why, it is because I dislike formalities—most ardently.” He offered her his hand. When she placed hers on his palm, he kissed her knuckles, sending a delicious wave of heat into her body. It curled sweetly at the base of her belly. “It is a pleasure to be acquainted with you.”

“Likewise. Seth.” When he released her hand, she held the protesting sigh that rose within her. “Now that you have introduced yourself to me, what do you intend to do with this acquaintance?”

He smiled, and her blush deepened. A man should not be this handsome. “First, will you do me the honor of taking a turn

about the room? I would have loved to dance, but we have no music here.”

She had never been alone with a gentleman before, and as he extended his arm, she contemplated the wisdom of remaining here with him. No one knew where she was, and her family would not think to look for her in a room that was rarely visited. Feeling quite confident, Margaret placed her hand in the crook of his elbow, and they began to walk around the room.

“You do not attend many balls, do you?” she asked. “I have never seen you in any of the ones I attended.”

“I travel frequently, and I was not in England when the season began.”

“You are an adventurer then?” Margaret was more curious about him now. He had not given her his title, and she suspected he was a mister. It did not matter. He was as handsome as he was charming.

He glanced down at her with another slanted smile. “Quite so.”

“Will you tell me about your travels?”

“If you will tell me why you fled the ballroom,” he returned.

“La! It is not polite to ask a lady to reveal her secrets.” They had stopped walking and were facing each other by an arrangement of string instruments.

“That is quite fair, my dear Lady Margaret, but I was hoping you would confide in a new friend.”

She gave him a look before she echoed, “*New friend.*”

Seth laughed. “I acknowledge your point.” He looked around the room. “Given your choice of room in which to retreat, I must ask if you play.”

“I play the violin fairly well but not much else. Do you?”

“I play both the violin and pianoforte, but I am especially fond of the violin.”

“Are you saying that to earn my favor?” she jested, placing her hand on his arm when he offered it again. He was very close, and his musky scent brushed her nose enticingly.

His eyes widened as he feigned innocence. “Heavens! Why would I do that?”

She laughed. “Now that I have answered your questions, will you answer mine?”

“Yes.” He smiled down at her. They were supposed to be walking, but they seemed unable to leave the spot, and Margaret could not remove her hand from his arm. It was a most enjoyable contact. “What would you like to know about my travels?”

“What is the most enchanting place you have ever visited?”

“China,” he answered without hesitation. “Everywhere you look is filled with every color you can imagine.”

“I always wanted to travel but...” she looked down at her hand that rested on his arm, “I am the only daughter of a duke, and my fate is to marry and become a proper society matron who would lead the next generation, either in fashion or diversion.”

Margaret was not sure why she said that. Mayhap she wanted someone to listen and commiserate with her. He placed a finger beneath her chin and tilted her face up. His gaze was warm, almost comforting.

“You do not have to follow that path,” he whispered.

“No, I do not, but an unseen hand seems to be pushing me upon it.”

Seth leaned in, and their bodies were practically touching. She swallowed at his sheer masculinity. Her heart began to race.

“Resist it. Damn the hand.” Margaret stopped breathing. She thought he was going to kiss her. She wanted him to kiss her. She opened her mouth to respond but she could not think of what to say.

“May I?” he asked, his eyes on her lips.

“Yes,” she permitted. *Yes, please!*

He lowered his head very slowly and brushed his lips against hers, his arm circling her waist and pulling her to him. His body was as hard as a sculpture, and the heat that emanated from him toyed with her senses such that she thought she would sway from desire.

Cupping her cheek with his other hand, he deepened the kiss, drawing a longing moan from her throat as her center throbbed and overflowed. Margaret did not know how a kiss could evoke such sensations in her, but she did not know any way to stop. In fact, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body to his, seeking more.

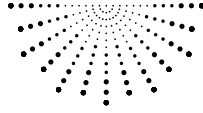
His mouth moved away from hers to feather kisses along her jaw. She threaded her fingers through his hair, causing him to groan. Triumph coursed through her veins that she could be desired thusly. She had never met anyone like Seth, and because of that, she did not think there were many gentlemen like him. His hands moved all over her body, searing her with want.

When he reached the breasts, she arched her back and pushed herself into his hands. Seth returned to kissing her lips while he found her nipples through her satin dress, brushing and waking them into stiff peaks that all but begged to be touched without the barrier of clothing. Just when she thought that she could not bear any more of his sweet torment, Seth gently pulled away and smiled down at her.

Margaret scrambled to gather her bereft senses. A sly smile curved his lips which puzzled her. "We should do this again, Lady Margaret." And with that, he released her and turned, walking toward the door.

Margaret blinked, unable to fathom what had just happened and why he was leaving her.

## CHAPTER THREE



Seth Hills, Viscount Saxton, grinned as he closed the door of the music room behind him and strode down the dim hallway. Margaret was more delightful than he imagined.

He had seen her on several occasions and thought he had to find her alone to see if she had what he wanted. She did. In fact, she had the ability to turn a man wild with desire. She had been a schoolgirl when he first met her. His dearest friend, Simon, had invited him to spend the hunting season with them.

Margaret was very small and very shy when they were introduced. She was still slight, but she had grown into a very beautiful woman. It was just as well that she did not remember him because she might not have allowed him to kiss her. The family blamed him for Simon's death.

Seth was still reeling with want. It had never been difficult for him to let go of a woman, to control his desire, but her passionate response had nearly undone him. Damn him if walking away from her did not take every ounce of willpower he possessed.

He returned to the ballroom and stood by the entrance, looking over the crowd to find the Duke of Woodport. The sooner he revealed his intentions and made Margaret his, the happier everyone would be. He had made Simon several promises before his death, and bringing Margaret under his protection was him fulfilling one of them.

Simon knew the sort of man his father was, and many times, he had expressed to Seth that he did not want his father to force Margaret to marry a man she did not want. His conversation with her this evening had confirmed that she did not want to marry Dormer. What woman would?

Simon had planned to ensure she found a good husband without Woodport's influence, and since he was not here, it had fallen upon Seth's shoulders to carry out that plan for him. His gaze landed on Woodport, who was conversing with five elaborately titled men, whom Seth suspected were invited to show that the Duke still had some power despite the lack of fortune to support it.

Wading through the crowd, he found Woodport and bowed in greeting, extending the gesture to the other men. His demeanor changed the moment he set eyes upon Seth.

"I do not recall inviting you to my ball, Saxton," he said distastefully. Every encounter with Woodport reminded Seth of the stark difference between Simon and his father. Where the former had been wonderfully charming, the latter was bitter and condescending.

"As an old friend of the family, I thought it proper to attend, Your Grace," Seth replied cordially. "I also wish to speak with you in private if you would be so kind as to allow it."

"Why would I want to—"

"Trust me, Your Grace," Seth interjected in a low voice, "you would want to hear what I have to say. It concerns someone we both treasure."

Woodport's eyes widened on hearing that, and he cleared his throat, turning to the other guests. "Please excuse me." He then led Seth out of the ballroom to his study. When he closed the door, he said, "I hope you did not come to fill my ears with more lies about how you did not kill my son."

Seth winced inwardly but strived to keep his expression impassive. When Woodport gestured for Seth to sit, he responded with, "I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but I would prefer to stand."



“As you wish.” The Duke sat behind his desk and rested his arms atop the surface, linking his hands. “What do you want?”

Seth wondered how such a coarse man could have good children. He had watched Margaret’s misery all evening, and it appalled him to think that her father chose the cowardly path by selling her off to Dormer to get out of his debts. It was not yet known to the public that Woodport wanted his daughter to marry Dormer, but Seth had his ways of discovering such information.

This engagement was something Seth must not let come to pass, and reaching into his coat pocket, he retrieved a folded sheet of paper and slid it across the desk to Woodport, who promptly unfolded it and began to read. Seth watched with great satisfaction as the Duke’s face contorted, first with shock, then anger, and finally grief.

“How is this possible?” Woodport whispered, his eyes fixed on the sheet. “Simon never made any mention of this.”

Simon had been embarrassed by the debt he had incurred, and hearing he never told his father what he owed Seth was not surprising. The document contained a list of the properties Simon had lost in wagers to both Seth and others. Shortly after the incident that took his friend’s life, Seth had settled what Simon owed other gentlemen, but the debt was monumental, especially the amount owed to Seth.

“This is a lie!” Woodport declared, slamming the sheet onto the desk and rising. “I will not be caught in your deceit, Saxton!”

“You may have your solicitors confirm the document’s verity if you wish,” Seth said calmly. “It was written in Simon’s hand, and that is his signature you are looking at.”

Woodport stared at the sheet again then his shoulders slumped in resignation. “Some names have been struck here.”

“I struck them off because Simon no longer owes them,” he replied.

“Simon paid them off?” Woodport asked.

“No, I did.”

“And now, you must be paid.” Woodport shook his head and sat back in his chair. “Will you listen to the appeal of an old man who lost his son and heir?”

Seth folded his hands in front of him. “Every debt in life must be paid, Your Grace.”

The Duke’s despondent look turned into a glare. “Do you possess a merciful heart?”

“Yes, I believe I do.”

“No, you do not, Saxton. You would not chase down the fortune owed to you if you did.” The Duke’s anger appeared to have returned. “You led my son down the dark path that cost him his life. You—”

“With all due respect, Your Grace, I did not come here to listen to you blame me for Simon’s death.” Seth did not need to be reminded of his failure to save Simon that fateful night. Maintaining a calm disposition was challenging, but out of respect for his late friend, he tried. “I have a different proposition.”

Woodport looked skeptical, but he said, “Do continue.”

“I will write off everything your family owes me for one thing in exchange.”

Before Seth continued, Woodport shook his head, saying, “If it is a duel you are seeking, I will not permit my only living son to accept.”

Seth frowned. “Andrew is a boy of sixteen. I cannot in good conscience duel him no matter what he did, and my business is not with him but with you.”

“Name your second, then,” the Duke declared.

“I have no wish to duel anyone.” Seth’s patience was waning.

“Then what do you want? I cannot imagine anything you would want.”

“I wish to marry your daughter,” Seth revealed.

Woodport blinked up at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Joining our families will settle all that is owed,” he explained. “Give me your daughter’s hand, and it will be as if Simon never gambled a day in his life.”

The Duke did not look pleased with the proposition. “Can you not accept something else?”

“You do not have anything to give me.” Seth’s shoulders grew rigid with anger. “You are willing to offer her to a decrepit man but not someone younger who would take better care of her?”

“I trust Dormer, but I cannot say the same about you.”

Seth knew why Woodport was reluctant to let him marry Margaret. He would gain financially if she married Dormer, whereas, with Seth, there would be nothing for him to gain besides Simon’s debts being written off. In Seth’s opinion, that should be a good enough reason for Woodport to consider him above everyone else.

Folding his arms across his chest, he said, “If you will not give me your daughter’s hand, then I fear I must demand everything on that document.” Seth glanced at the sheet in front of the Duke. He was not giving him the option to refuse.

At last, Woodport sighed. “Very well. You may marry my daughter, but know that I cannot force her to accept.”

“Oh?” Seth inclined his head while Woodport rose. “Am I mistaken in assuming that you planned this elaborately festive occasion to announce her engagement? Something she never agreed to.”

The Duke did not respond as he skirted his desk and walked to the door, summoning someone Seth thought was a footman, and he said, “Have the Duke of Dormer meet us here.”

Then he returned to his seat. Seth still refused to sit. He had more advantage standing even though it was not very respectful. A moment later, the door opened, and Dormer walked in. He looked Seth over before turning to Woodport.

“Is something the matter? I am surprised by your sudden wish to see me,” he glanced askance at Seth, “and our company.” The family’s low regard for Seth was no secret in society.

Woodport cleared his throat. "Well, there has been a new development, and..." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat which thoroughly amused Seth. Clearing his throat again, the Duke continued. "My family is in great debt...that is to say most of what we owe is to Viscount Saxton..." It was becoming increasingly difficult for Woodport to speak, but Seth did not pity him.

Dormer frowned. "Paying your debts was never in our agreement, Woodport."

"No, it was not which is why I am offering Margaret to Viscount Saxton instead."

Seth's jaw clenched as he parsed Woodport's words. Margaret was not chattel to be traded. *Is that not what I am doing?* He mentally shook the thought away. *No, I am saving her, and the only way to do so is to frame it as debt collection.*

"What?" Dormer's furious question snapped Seth's attention back to the dukes before him. "We had an arrangement. I will marry Margaret without a dowry and also provide you with funds to revive your business. You cannot renege now!"

"I fear that I must, dear friend."

"I am not your friend, Woodport!" Dormer appeared to be on the brink of apoplexy. "Friends do not betray each other."

*Yes, and that is why I am marrying Margaret,* Seth thought.

Dormer turned to Seth, jabbing a thick finger close to his face. "If you think for one minute that you will not pay for this, then you are dreaming!"

"Your Grace, I cannot understand your anger," Seth taunted. "You ought to be pleased that your fortune would remain untouched."

"This amuses you, does it not? You note my words, Saxton, I will make you suffer for stealing from me."

Seth inclined his head. "I look forward to that, Your Grace." He was certain that Dormer's words would not be supported by action. Once he found himself another woman to pass the night with, he would forget he lost Margaret. It was his way.

Woodport approached Dormer. “Surely, we can talk about this and—”

“There is nothing to discuss!” Dormer turned then and stormed out of the study while Woodport regarded Seth with hatred.

“I hope you are satisfied now. Not only have you taken my son from me, but you also made me lose a dear friend.”

“No, I believe that is your doing, Your Grace,” Seth returned calmly. “I will—”

“You!” cried the Duchess of Woodport. Dormer had left the study door open, and neither Seth nor the Duke heard her enter the room. “Why are you in this house?” she demanded, her eyes stricken with anger and grief. She turned to Woodport. “Why is he here?”

“He came to collect Simon’s debt,” the Duke replied.

“How awful!” She placed a hand on her chest. “Why now?” she asked Seth, her eyes pooling with tears. “Can you not forget it after everything you have done to this family?”

Woodport stepped toward his wife and handed her the document then he proceeded to explain all that had occurred in the last half hour, concluding with, “We cannot refuse. Either we allow him to marry Margaret or lose everything. Andrew will have no future.”

“But he killed our son!” she cried. “Your heir!” The Duchess clutched her chest in equal measures of hurt and disbelief.

“We do not have proof of that,” Woodport said, and Seth’s chest clenched. He had tried for nearly two years to convince the Duke and Duchess of the truth, but they had refused to believe anything he said.

“But we know the truth!”

“I understand that you want to avenge your son, Your Grace,” Seth said to the Duchess, “but I would appreciate it if you discontinued your false accusations. You have a very good offer before you, and I strongly advise you to take it.”

The Duchess looked away. “Does Margaret know about this?” she asked Woodport.

“No, she does not. Lord Saxton only approached me with the offer this evening.”

She rose, refusing to look at Seth. “I will find her and send her here. She deserves to know about the change that occurred.”

As the Duchess exited the study, Seth felt both thrill and apprehension at the prospect of seeing Margaret again.

**Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story!**

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**Thank you very much!**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Violet Hamers** knew from an early age that writing was something she always wanted to do. Growing up, her time was divided between writing stories and taking part in theatrical plays, that she used to perform exclusively for her family and friends.

As she loves reading and writing, she is rarely found without a book in her hands, or her fingers glued to a keyboard. Her love for reading led her to Jane Austen's world—the regency historical world that won her over in comparison to any other genre!

Even though being an author is not a simple task, her dream of becoming one has finally come true as she is currently writing Regency novels...romances her readers will love!

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