

A STEAMY REGENCY NOVEL BY

CLAUDE DEVON

Romancing
A
Rake

HER

Devil

OF A

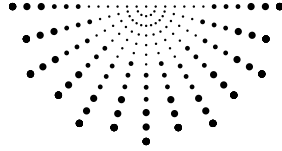
DUKE

——
TRAPPED FOR SEVEN DAYS
WITH A DEVILISH RAKE

HER DEVIL OF A DUKE

ROMANCING A RAKE

BOOK ONE



CLAIRE DEVON



FOREWORD

There is no greater agony than keeping an untold story inside you. - Maya Angelou

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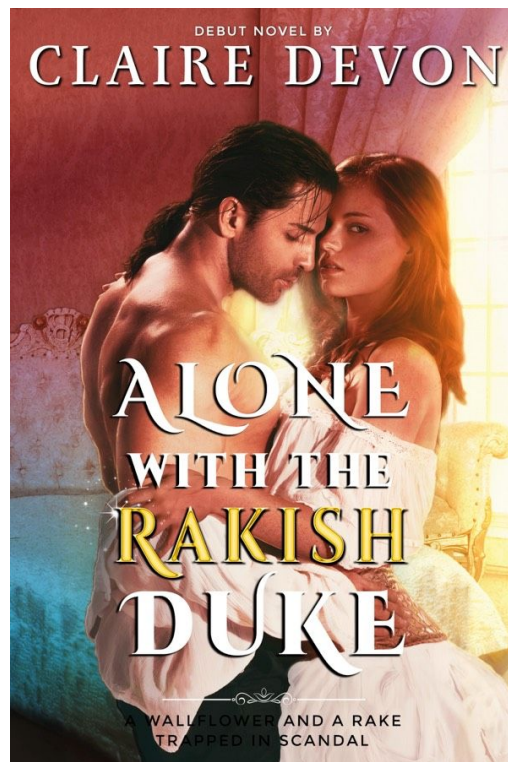
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ABOUT THE BOOK

A rakehell reforming his ways. A lady seeking his former self. A snowstorm that traps them together...

Miss Evelyn Voss is a wallflower leading a dull life, until she kisses a mysterious man during a masquerade ball. Wanting to experience more of that thrill, she seeks out the most infamous Rake to teach her...

Duke Rafe is on a quest to reform his reputation of being the most notorious Rake in all of England. So when a lady arrives at his house asking for 'lessons in seduction', he's almost pained to be throwing her out...

Until a snowstorm traps her under his roof for seven days, and she makes it clear she will not give up quite so easily...

CHAPTER ONE



London, England

“*H*e is the most notorious rake there is, Bridget. Pray, do not set your cap at him!”

Laughter filled the chamber, as it so often did, but it was laughter that Evelyn was not encouraged to be a part of. She sat up straighter in the window seat, pausing with her embroidery of the fine gown in her lap.

Today was the first day in many years that she had dared to pull the gown out of its hiding place in her closet. Her mother’s dress was a beautiful thing, if perhaps a little old-fashioned, with capped sleeves and a heavy amount of embroidery on the brocade of the bodice. Still, it was beautiful, and far finer than anything else Evelyn owned.

It is right that I wear it tonight. If Mr. Windham is to propose to me, what other gown should I wear?

She was taking down the hem, determined that everything should be just right for the proposal. As she attempted to return her concentration to the hem of the dress to accommodate for her tall height, her cousin’s laughter disturbed her once more.

Evelyn's chin jerked up a little, the loose red curls of her hair falling past her cheeks as she looked at her cousins.

Hester, the eldest, and by far the most beautiful and fashionable of her cousins, was waving a scandal sheet in the air. Despite her propensity for gossip, Evelyn was fond of Hester. She was the kindest of her cousins.

Bridget, the middle of the three sisters, was the most proper. Upon learning the man Hester had been speaking of, and the one she herself had been daydreaming over was a rake, she held a hand over her lips and gasped.

"Ha! I am surprised you did not know," Katherine, the third and youngest sister declared as she sauntered into the room. With bright blonde hair, she was petite and pretty, and she shared this bedchamber with Evelyn, something Evelyn was secretly glad for, though she would tell no one why. "He is indeed a notorious rake, though it is hardly surprising Hester knows so much about him."

"I beg your pardon." Hester tossed down the scandal sheet and stood with her hands on her hips, her outrage imminent.

Evelyn held back her smile of amusement, raising the sewing closer to her face to mask her expression. She often felt left out from her three cousins when they took part in such scandalous conversations. After all, she was not one of the sisters, and it was emphasized in the difference of her looks, with her rich red hair when they were all blonde.

“I merely meant that you are interested in the Duke of Ravensworth’s friend, are you not? How often have we seen Lord Linfield by your side recently?” Kitty asked with mischief, dancing around her sister teasingly.

“Kitty, one should not talk about another’s suitor,” Bridget reprimanded. Despite her concern for propriety, as she sat down on the edge of Evelyn’s bed, she snatched up the scandal sheet and continued to read. “What do you know about the Duke of Ravensworth then, Hester?”

“Oh, you’re still interested, are you?” Hester looped her arm around the bedpost and moved closer to her sister. “I know that his name has been in the scandal sheets for the last eight years at least. Lord Linfield is dear friends with him, and they have been ever since they were children. From what I understand, the Duke has no other close acquaintances.”

How lonely.

Evelyn felt a twinge of sympathy for this mysterious Duke, for she knew loneliness in a crowded room all too well. Ever since she had been brought to this house after her parents’ deaths, she’d felt it. She could be surrounded by her cousins, but so different to them, the quiet one in the corner, she was unable to take part in their exciting lives.

No, the Duke must be very different. After all, if he is a rake, he certainly knows how to charm and seek out the company he wishes for, does he not?

Evelyn felt a little envy fill her up now as she wondered what it would be like to have such power of flirtation and charm.

“Enough of the Duke of Ravensworth.” Kitty waved a hand in the air. “He is unlikely ever to have much to do with us. Now, who we *should* be speaking about, is Lord Linfield.” She took Hester’s shoulders and steered her to sit down on the edge of Evelyn’s bed too.

Evelyn looked at her bed, recognizing the usual problem. Soon enough, her bed would be scruffy from them sitting on it like a common chair. Hester was the only one who ever really noticed they made a mess of Evelyn’s things. She jumped up at once, trying to straighten the covers, but to little avail as Kitty just plopped herself back down on the sheets.

“Do you think he will ever ask for your hand?” Kitty asked excitedly, leaning toward her sister. “Lady Hester Linfield, a countess! Imagine that.”

The three sisters giggled together before Bridget seemed to catch herself and shake her head, realizing she should not be giggling in such a fashion. She stood and hurried out of the room, mumbling something about being immature and returning soon.

“Oh, I don’t know, Kitty...” Hester sighed, waving away her question. “Lord Linfield is kind indeed. And there is something incredibly endearing about him.” The way her voice had softened captured Evelyn’s attention.

She looked up from her needlework, staring at her cousin. Hester spoke of Lord Linfield in a way that Evelyn never spoke of her own suitor. Hester had turned almost wistful, running a handkerchief back and forth through her hands as she wandered the room, a dreamy smile on her thin lips. She

was classically beautiful, with stunning dark eyes and a sharp nose.

“Yet I cannot speak of his heart. I do not yet know how he feels about me,” Hester shrugged, noncommittally. She turned and when her eyes fell on Evelyn, she smiled warmly. “Who we *should* be asking about proposals is, of course, Evelyn.”

“Me? Ow.” Evelyn accidentally pricked herself with the needle. She muttered under her breath as she shook out the pain in her finger, praying she would not get blood on the gown.

“Evelyn?” The humored smile slipped from Kitty’s lips. “Surely her suitor does not mean to propose.”

“You think not?” Hester laughed at her sister. “Then, in my humble opinion, Kitty, you still have some growing up to do. You need more experience of the ton and courtship.” Hester crossed the room and sat down beside Evelyn, nudging her with her elbow. “Has your suitor not done everything a suitor should do?”

“Yes, I suppose,” Evelyn muttered, her eyes only fixed on her needlework. “He has sent flowers and gifts. We dance twice at every event.” Yet she noticed there was something missing in her tone. She had not talked in that wistful way that Hester had done, nor did her cheeks blush as Hester’s had.

Marrying for love, eh? It had once seemed like the perfect idea.

Evelyn had a stash of books under her bed that told romantic tales of women marrying for love. She knew her parents had been one such love match, though the older she got, the more she saw that it was not always possible.

“Mr. Windham is so *boring* though.” Kitty knelt on Evelyn’s bed and puffed out her cheeks in emphasis. “Trust you, Evelyn, to find the dullest man in the ton.”

“Kitty!” Hester said sharply in reprimand, but Kitty gave no sign of having heard her.

“He is dull. Dull, dull, dull! A breeze has more to it than Mr. Windham does.”

“But he has been very attentive to our Evelyn.” Hester smiled as she sat forward on the edge of the window seat, nudging Evelyn once again, though in a softer manner this time. “Ignore Kitty. She is simply envious that you have attention and she does not.”

“I am not!” Kitty complained, the youth in her coming through in her voice. “I just do not understand why Evelyn would wish to marry a man like him.”

Well, neither do I...

Evelyn kept the thought to herself as she returned her focus to the hem of the gown. Mr. Windham was indeed attentive and kind. Over recent months, she had decided that would be enough. She could not have her head in the clouds all the time

and expect love when it was not always possible. No, Mr. Windham would suit her well enough.

At the very least, if he did propose, it would be a way out of this life, far from being the one left in the corners of every room alone. Rather than being the wallflower in her own home, as a wife, she would have more independence.

That is what I long for these days.

“Will you say yes if he asks you to marry him tonight?” Hester said excitedly, leaning toward her.

“We are leaping to conclusions, are we not?” Evelyn glanced up briefly from the needle and thread.

“Oh come on, Evelyn. He has as good as asked for our father’s blessing.”

Shame he could not ask my own father for his blessing.

Evelyn pushed away the simmering feelings of grief. It had been so long ago now that she lost her parents, it was a feeling easier to contend with, even if sometimes it snuck up on her and crashed into her like a great wave.

“We shall see,” Evelyn said, brushing off the matter. Finishing with the hem, she cut the thread and held it up in front of her, examining it in the light from the midday sun.

“Quite beautiful.” Hester ran a finger down the material. “Your mother’s, was it not?”

“Yes,” Evelyn whispered.

“It is not very fashionable,” Kitty grimaced from her place on the bed.

“Perhaps not, but it has sentimental value, Kitty. You would do well to remember that,” Hester said sharply.

Evelyn smiled at her eldest cousin, comforted at least that even when she felt so alone, Hester would not turn her back completely.

“It suits me,” Evelyn said softly. “I wish to wear something special this evening.”

“Of course, you do.” Hester clasped her hands together. “For after this evening at the ball... you might come home betrothed!”

Kitty sighed dramatically and flung herself back on the bed.

“Imagine being betrothed to a man like him.”

“Katherine!” Hester hissed again.

Evelyn glared at Kitty but said nothing. She was used to the jibes, and over the years had come to ignore them. In the past, she used to have her own sharp retorts prepared, but that had only ever earned her harsher reprimands from her uncle. It was easier these days to just stay quiet.

“Let me see that gown.” Kitty was suddenly on her feet, crossing the room toward Evelyn.

“It’s delicate.” Evelyn held tightly onto the shoulders, not wishing to give up the material. Yet Kitty took it from her all too easily and held it up.

“Well, it’s certainly too tall for me.” She had to hold it above her shoulders for the hem to brush the floor.

It is to fit me, not you.

Evelyn kept the words to herself, holding out her arms expectantly to have the dress back.

“Hester! Kitty! Good news!” Bridget suddenly called from the doorway.

Hester stood and walked to her sister. Kitty tossed the gown back into Evelyn’s hold, but in the fumble, she stood on the hem and twisted it at an unnatural angle.

The sound of silk ripping was unmistakable.

All three sisters recoiled in unison.

Evelyn sat numb, her lips parting as she stared down at the gown. The hem she had worked so hard on was now torn, so badly that it would be difficult to correct, especially in the time that she had left.

“Oops.” Kitty froze, her hands loose at her sides. “Oh dear, I’m truly sorry, Evelyn. I did not mean to do it.”

For one awful second, Evelyn wasn’t sure what to think. Was it possible that Kitty had indeed torn it on purpose?

“It doesn’t matter.” Evelyn tried for a smile, pushing down her true feelings, refusing to give way to them. Slowly, she lowered the gown on her lap, then lifted the tear closer to her face to better examine its condition.

This will be no easy fix. Can I even do it in time for the ball?

“...Those necklaces Mother promised us have arrived,” Bridget declared slowly to her sisters, but with a hint of subdued excitement. It didn’t take long before the rest of the words toppled from her lips with more enthusiasm. “The golden chokers with the pearls. They are here, oh and they are so gorgeous! Come, come see, quickly!”

Hester was out of the room first, with Kitty chasing behind her. Slowly, Evelyn put down the gown on the window seat, deciding she’d return to it in a few minutes. As she approached the doorway, she found Bridget waiting for her.

She was wringing her hands together, the rather plump fingers never once sitting still.

“Oh, Evelyn! There... there are only *three* necklaces.” She offered a sympathetic smile.

Evelyn tried to keep her face as impassive as possible. This shouldn't have surprised her. Over the years, her aunt, Mrs. Mavis Gulliver, had made no secret of who her favorites were. After all, it must have been burdensome to have to raise her niece as well as her own three daughters. There had been comments, infrequent jibes, no hatred, but a little resentment that occasionally was made plain.

She spoke of the necklaces when I was in the room...

Evelyn swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat. The week before, Mavis had offered to buy them all new necklaces for the ball. Evelyn had secretly been excited at the idea, touched that at last Mavis was including her in things she'd prepared for her daughters.

That was a foolish dream. That is all.

“You do not mind, do you?” Bridget asked, her grimace falling away very quickly. “I mean, you hardly have love for such jewelry after all, right?”

I do. It's just that I have so little of it.

“Yes, you’re quite right.” Evelyn forced a smile. “Go find your necklace, Bridget. I need to return to my work on the gown.”

The moment Bridget was gone, Evelyn’s smile dropped. She reached for the door and slowly closed it, feeling a heavy sigh escape her lips.

“Not for much longer. Soon enough, I can be free of here,” she whispered as she returned to the window seat. Lifting the gown once more, she set about trying to repair it as much as she could. “Once I am married, I will never have to feel like an outcast in this house again.”

There was a part of her that wondered if she’d be more confident away from this house, perhaps recover a little more of who she was. As a child, before she had come here, she had been witty and not afraid to say her thoughts. That was a long time ago though, and these days she was shy and kept to herself.

“Come on, Mr. Windham,” she whispered as she picked up the needle. “Get me out of here.”

CHAPTER TWO



The air was like ice, wrapping around Rafe's body. He couldn't escape it as he backed out of the castle. It consumed him, drowning the air from his lungs.

"No, no, no." He kept muttering the word repeatedly, but it didn't change anything. He couldn't escape what had happened before him.

He had to get away from the castle. Even dashing into the waist-high snow was preferable to being in that place. He turned on his heel, struggling as his boots were consumed by the thick snow. The icy depths reached just below his waist, making it impossible to run anywhere at all. He stumbled to his knees, with his hands outstretched in the snow. The ice dug in beneath his fingernails and scraped his palms. He gasped at the sheer extent of the cold that seemed to reach inside of him to his core, making him tremble.

"This... this cannot be happening. No." He kept repeating the words as he managed to get to his feet again.

He hurried away, this time somehow managing a lumbering lope through the snow. He looked back at the castle over his shoulder every few seconds, as if it were a great beast that

would follow him. The silhouette against the stars of the night was all too plain, the crenellations and the towers reaching high into the sky. It was foreboding with its motte and bailey structure, the great curtain wall domineering and surrounding him.

He ran for that wall, determined to find an escape. Perhaps if he kept running, he could escape this ice, and flee what he had just seen inside the west wing. Maybe if he ran far enough it would not be real. It would be some sort of mad dream.

He pushed through the giant gate at the side of the wall, pushing out onto a bridge that stretched out over the moat. The water was frozen solid, the ice like glass. He glanced at it with fear before he ran on, his boots slipping and sliding on the bridge.

“She can’t be gone. No. Please. Not again.”

When he reached the other side of the bridge, his boots skidded to a stop.

He hadn’t escaped her at all. The memory of her in that room had followed him, as if she were a ghost, now sent to torment him.

Stretched out in the snow in front of him was her figure. Her body clad in the thin gown didn’t move. The only thing that twitched at all was the white skirt as it was picked up by the wind. Her dark hair lay eerily flat on the ice, her eyes staring up at the sky above them. Her skin was as pale as the snow around her, unnaturally so.

She should have been full of life, laughter, joy, but as Rafe dared to near her, dared to get a better look, he saw, with horror, the tormented expression plastered across her face...

“Leave me alone!” The words roared from Rafe’s lips as he jerked up from his bed. He scrambled to be free of the sheets, falling to his knees beside the bed with a heavy thud.

“Rafe! Rafe?” a voice called from a distant doorway. There was heavy pounding on that door. “You are shouting in your sleep again.”

“...Simon?” Rafe Fitzroy blinked, trying to make sense of his surroundings. Slowly, he caught his bearings.

It was the same dream, the same one as always. He left the castle as he had done the night that his betrothed had died. He ran through the snow, but the dreams always tormented him further by recreating her deadly image in the snow somewhere on the outer lands of the castle. No matter where he ran or what path he took through the grounds, she continued to appear to torment him.

“I command the audience of the Duke of Ravensworth!” Simon shouted from a distance, banging on a door once again.

“I’m coming, man, hold your horse,” Rafe said weakly as he rubbed his sore head. The pounding had begun as he got up from the floor in the small apartments he rented and crossed into the nearest corridor.

There were but a few rooms in these apartments in Covent Garden. Expensive to rent for a space so small, but it suited him well enough, and the derelict exterior kept people and their prying eyes away.

Well, for the most part. Simon will always come.

“—well, it is hardly early morning, sir.” Rafe caught the last bit of Simon trying to assuage another tenant he’d awakened with his loud knocking.

He picked up a dressing gown from a nearby faulty pianoforte, and pulled it over his shirt and loose trousers on his way to the door, before opening it wide. He regretted it a moment later, for standing at the top of the staircase was Simon, backlit by the bright sun that filtered through the windows behind him.

“Argh,” Rafe complained, shielding his eyes.

“And a merry morning to you too,” Simon Linfield charmed with his usual buoyant tone as he stepped inside. “Let me take a guess. You have *not* become a vampire overnight and this is in fact another headache, brought on to you by liquor, yes?”

“You do not need me to answer that.” Rafe backed up into the main sitting room of his accommodations as Simon followed him inside. Simon opened two vast sets of curtains, letting in the draught, as Rafe dropped down into the nearest chair, kicking away an empty bottle he’d discarded the night before.

“You’ve got to find a new way to live, old boy. You carry on at this rate and you’ll drink yourself into an early grave. And I

—”

Rafe winced as Simon opened the last set of curtains.

“—have no wish to stand being a mourner at your graveside just yet. That should be saved for when we’re old and gray,” Simon added simply, turning his back to the sun. “Just how many spirits did you consume last night?” He nudged the empty bottle with his boot and set it rolling back to Rafe’s feet.

Rafe slowly picked it up along with a few others and returned them to a table nearby. In his obsessively neat way, he lined them up perfectly, so not a single one was out of place or at a jaunty angle.

“*Too many*. Strangely enough though,” he wheezed, “today, I find myself in agreement with you.”

“On what? That we’re not yet old and gray? You’ll get there before I.”

“Ha! I suppose I will.” Rafe laughed at his friend’s good humor. “No, I have been thinking something else. First, allow me a moment to get dressed, then let’s go for a walk.” He stood and hurried out of the room, heading back to his bedchamber.

“I am not sure you’re in a fit state to walk anywhere, old boy. You should take a look in the mirror. If you can still see your reflection, that is.” Simon’s words echoed down the corridor.

Rafe pushed back the curtains in his bedchamber, revealing a room that was decked in dark mahogany wood, with a single shoddy mattress at its corner. He squinted at the bright sun and did as his friend asked, moving to the nearest looking glass to see his reflection.

The dark blond hair that reached his shoulders was heavily mussed and tangled. The oval face with the long and strong jawline was something he'd been greeted with every day of his adult life. But something that was becoming more and more noticeable was the tiredness in his expression, with bloodshot eyes and shadows too.

“God, I look like death warmed up.” Rafe shuddered at his own appearance and turned away, hurrying to change.

“What was that?” Simon called from the other room.

“Nothing! Let's get out of here.” Rafe didn't bother keeping a valet in these apartments, for what was the point? He could dress himself well enough on his own, and he did not require an audience for all the ladies he brought here. He changed into a dark green suit, hurrying to flatten his hair. So eager he was to escape the apartments that he hadn't even finished tying his cravat when he beckoned Simon to join him in leaving.

“And where are we off to today?”

“Hyde Park,” Rafe called from below, practically leaping down the stairs.

“You're like a skittish horse when you have a hangover.”

“Only one way to be rid of this headache, chap.” Rafe burst out of the door at the bottom of the stairs and stretched his arms and back until they clicked. Sighing with relief to have the fresh air on his face, even if the weather was turning chillier now that they were in the depths of autumn, he pushed ahead and walked toward the park. “A walk is the panacea to feel like myself again.”

“To feel human at all, I’d imagine,” Simon muttered in humor.

Rafe glanced back, grinning at his friend.

They had known each other for as long as they could remember, and Simon was the only one Rafe trusted with his secrets. The bonds that tied them together lasted many years and he could never see them being torn asunder.

Where Rafe was tall and strong in build, with sharp features and dark blond hair, Simon was the opposite. He was slightly shorter, lither in build, though just as athletic. His dark brown hair curled wildly around his ears and his bright green eyes were always full of spark or some sort of humor.

They were a contrast, and Rafe had overheard more than one set of gossipers over the years wondering why the two of them got along so well.

Perhaps it is because Simon has always managed to make me laugh, even when all seems quite lost.

* * *

“And lo’ and behold.” Rafe reached the park and strode through the gate, eager to be in and amongst Mother Nature. “Ah.” His jaw slowly shut when he saw how busy it was. “What is it with people promenading so much these days? It’s autumn, hardly the height of the summer season.”

“People need to marry no matter the weather, old boy,” Simon whispered in his ear, tapping his arm and urging him down a different path, away from the main throng of ladies clad in spencer jackets and fur pelisses, with bold bonnets on their head and feathers that shivered in the bitter wind. “Soon enough, the winter balls will begin, and the marriage market will be open again. Be warned, my friend. Ladies will set their caps at you.”

“They’ll steer clear, they always do,” Rafe hissed under his breath.

“Yet their parents do not, do they?” Simon said with a knowing smile. “It seems parents want a duke for a son-in-law, even if he does have your... shall we say, chinked reputation.”

“Ha! Chinked!?” Rafe roared a laugh at his friend. They both knew that Rafe had as good as destroyed it over the last eight years. It was a wonder the parents of fine young ladies looked at him at all. “It’s in tatters around my feet, my reputation. And that is what I wished to talk to you about.”

“Oh? Go on,” Simon urged as they turned to walk alongside the river. A group of three ladies came the other way. They

offered charming smiles to Simon, and the elder of the three smiled shyly at Rafe, clearly well aware of his reputation.

As they walked past, they tittered behind their fans, not realizing that Rafe could hear every single word they uttered.

“Yes, that’s him. The Duke of Ravensworth,” one of them said hurriedly. *“A wonder he was ever betrothed at all with his reputation. Poor woman, she must have been mad to marry a rake!”*

Rafe turned on his heel. He didn’t care if people disparaged his own name, but he could not have anyone talking ill of Juliet.

“Halt.” Simon caught him under the arm, stopping him from going anywhere.

“What are you doing? Release me,” Rafe hissed as he watched the three ladies scuttle down a path between the trees.

“You expect me to release you and watch you go hound some three women who are merely gossiping?” Simon quirked a brow. “I may not be the smartest man in the world, but even I’m not as great a fool as that. What good would it serve, Rafe?”

Rafe was forced to stand still, glaring at the retreating ladies as he acknowledged Simon’s words with a single nod. At last, Simon released him, and he spun back to face their path again.

“They insulted Juliet,” Rafe murmured under his breath.

“Everyone insults everyone.” Simon brushed it off. “You’ve heard of the ton, right? All women and men are like cats in a street fight. They’ll lash out at anything if they think it makes them look like the top cat in town.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose, it’s just...” Rafe cursed and walked on down the river, forcing Simon to hurry to chase after him. “The same thing happened the other night with my father.”

“What? Your father?” Simon muttered in shock.

“I was at a gambling hall when I overheard three gentlemen saying that I must have gotten my wild ways from my father, Marcus Fitzroy. My father was a good man.”

“I know that.”

“No. You don’t, Simon. He was the greatest of men and had always been respected as such, up until then. No matter what I’ve done with my life, I do not want him disparaged. His reputation should stay intact. The Fitzroy family name should stay intact.” Rafe sighed heavily, realizing what the last eight years had done when it came to gossip. “My intention to drive myself into oblivion these last few years is now damaging all of those around me. I expect you have been dragged into the gossip too, though you have never openly complained about it.”

“Nor would I,” Simon said simply.

They reached a bridge over the river, and both stopped there, halting to look out at the red and yellow leaves that were falling from the trees.

“Rafe, are you hinting at something here?”

“Perhaps.” Rafe leaned on the side of the bridge. “Maybe it’s time I changed, a little. If I cleaned up my reputation, then people would not disparage my father, or Juliet, or you, so much.”

“Do not change on my account, old boy.” Simon put his back to the railing and folded his arms.

“The fact you would never ask me to do so is even more testament as to why I should.” Rafe shrugged a hand at his friend. “I do not want you damaged by association to me.”

Simon smiled rather ruefully, turning and looking out to the river once more.

“I find it rather hard to believe it is possible for a man to turn over a new leaf just like that.” He caught one of the leaves that had fallen from a nearby tree and had been taken by the wind. He turned it over, resting it on the railing across the bridge. “No man is that simple. Besides, you were three sheets to the wind just last night!” With that, he crunched the leaf flat beneath his palm.

“I know, I know,” Rafe sighed, “it was a sort of farewell to my past life this time though. Besides, I did not say it would be easy, but it’s time, Simon. As you said, I can’t drink myself

into an early grave. What would my father say if he greeted me on the other side so soon?"

"Knowing your father, he'd clip you around the ear," Simon said with a chuckle.

"And send me hurling back to earth," Rafe replied with his own little laugh. He'd had the best of fathers in the former Duke of Ravensworth. A good, stern man, who was not afraid to point out the foolishness of Rafe's actions when everyone else flattered him for his title.

And he was one of the few people who supported my courtship with Juliet at the time. I owe the old man this much.

"It's time, Simon," Rafe said in a more somber tone, firmer this time. "I need to change."

"Well, we shall see what happens." Simon gave a small smile. Then, a thought seemed to light up his features and he pushed himself off the bridge's railing. "Actually, there *is* a masked ball tonight if you are truly serious. Come, and dress up in a mask so great no one will see your face. You can attempt to improve your life for a short while, what do you say?"

"Tonight? Hmm. Yes, I suppose that could work." Rafe nodded and leaned on the railing beside Simon, his mind working quickly. It could be a good chance to act the perfect gentleman all evening, then surprise the company he had been in by taking his mask off at the end of the night. Yes, something like Vindice from *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

Though I may have taken the wrong message from that.

“Don’t look now, but someone wants you.” Simon pointed down the riverbank which they had just walked up.

A young errand boy was running toward the pair of them, waving a letter in the air.

“How do you know he’s for me?” Rafe asked, keeping his eyes fixed on Simon.

“Because my correspondences wait at home for me on a card tray. Only you are so difficult to find that message boys have to chase after you.”

“Thanks, Simon,” Rafe said wryly, turning as the message boy reached him.

“The Duke of Ravensworth?” the boy asked, bowing once.

“In the flesh.”

“Message for you, Your Grace.” The boy thrust the message into Rafe’s hands and bowed once more. Rafe tossed him a few coins that he caught easily in the air before he ran off again.

“Well? Who is it from?”

Rafe leaned on the railing once more, recognizing the handwriting at once. It was from his steward, Mr. Jarvis Garfield. He tore open the seal to confirm his suspicions.

“It is from my steward.” His eyes darted over the note, taking in the information as quickly as possible. “Well, he pleads my presence. It seems, and I quote, ‘the castle in Sussex has fallen into disrepair this last year’ and I am needed.”

Suddenly, the tone of his voice softened. “The...west wing in particular... it is deteriorating.” Rafe tried to keep his voice level. The west wing was where Juliet had stayed before she died.

“Then you must see to it,” Simon said with ease. “After all, if you’re turning over a new leaf and trying to be the responsible duke again, where better to start?”

“Yes...quite,” Rafe mused as he folded up the letter and put it in his pocket, though he now fidgeted constantly. He adjusted his cravat and straightened his jacket, trying to make everything sit perfectly.

“You’re fine. There are no creases on you.”

“Thanks, old man.” Rafe smiled at his friend. Simon was just about the only person who understood his need for perfection and gave him no judgment for it. More than one valet in his time had been frightened away by his need for such high expectations to be met.

“Now, let us talk of tonight,” Simon said, taking his shoulder and urging him to walk on through the park once more. “Perhaps you will meet a genteel lady, so disguised tonight?”

“Simon, you know that is not why I am doing this.”

I need to stay away from women from now on if I'm to no longer haul around the reputation of a rake.

CHAPTER THREE



“*M*r. and Mrs. Gulliver, and their daughters, Miss Hester, Miss Bridget, and Miss Katherine.”

The family were introduced at the top of the stairs. Evelyn looked sharply at the manservant who had made the announcement. Upon seeing her glaring so openly at him, he looked down at the rest of the paper, clearly searching out her name, but he found none and shrugged.

She sighed.

Again. It is always the same.

Evelyn shook her head, showing it didn't really matter as she followed her family down the stairs. This last year, she had a feeling that her aunt did this on purpose. Whenever they went to a ball or assembly of some kind where they had to be announced, Evelyn's name was mysteriously left off the list. She'd tried to make a fuss the first few times, but when she'd been called difficult by her aunt, she gave up.

“This is ridiculous,” Evelyn muttered as she followed her cousins down the steps and reached the main body of the

ballroom.

The entire room was draped in beautiful clothes, with cascading white flowers that were either pinned to pillars or overflowing from tall silver vases. The combination of silver and white everywhere gave the impression that winter was fast approaching, with elegant ice sculptures of swans and geese atop the tables.

As her cousins admired these sculptures, her cousins themselves were the focus of such observation. Gentlemen wandered nearer to them, some eagerly pressing for dance cards.

Evelyn backed up, increasing the distance between her and her cousins. With their beautiful blonde hair and their gowns that were all so similar, in different shades of blue, Evelyn was by far the odd one out in her white gown with the green embroidery. Somehow, she had managed to fix the tear in her mother's gown, though she feared it would not last if Kitty stepped on it again.

Turning her back on her cousins, she wrung her gloved hands together and wandered between the crowds of people, searching out one face in particular.

He must be here. Mr. Windham said he would be here.

She had dressed specially for the occasion, with a mask adorning her face that did little to conceal her identity, to make it easier for him to seek her out. It was a perfect compliment to her gown, ivory white with small green leaves around the eyes.

Where are you?

If she could just find her gentleman, then perhaps he would eventually propose, and she wouldn't have to worry about standing in her cousins' shadows anymore.

The room was so crowded that she struggled to step between the groups. She squeezed her tall frame between two rather large gentlemen, only to bump into a server who carried a broad silver tray with tall wine glasses. One of the glasses toppled over and the white wine spilled over her gown.

“Oh dear. My apologies, ma'am.” The server bowed to her and made to escape, running off long before she even had the chance to utter a word.

“But...” She closed her mouth when she found he'd managed to disappear into the throngs of crowds.

I suppose it was my own fault. I should look where I am going more.

She brushed at the wine stain, knowing she would have to get it out fast. She certainly wanted it mended before Mr. Windham found her, lest she tarnish the rest of the evening.

Darting to the nearest door, she left the ballroom in search of a privy. The ensuing corridor was darker than she had expected, the only light pouring from an open doorway that looked out onto a balcony above the gardens. The moon was bright tonight, that silvery light basked everything it touched in an

eerie glow. She used that light to navigate down the corridor, but before she could find a privy, a familiar voice reached her ears.

“I told you! No one will see us here. We are quite safe.”

“...Well, if you are so sure, I suppose it wouldn't be the worst thing...”

Is... is that? That is not possible.

Evelyn followed the sound of a voice she felt belonged to Mr. Windham. She had been mistaken, for there was indeed another source of light from a crack in a door further along the corridor, that flickered as if being interrupted by people within its confines.

Treading softly the closer she approached, she moved to the open doorway where she peered inside. The room was flanked with two bright candles and in the middle of the space was Mr. Windham, with a woman beside him.

They are alone!

Yet such thoughts were quickly drowned out by others as Mr. Windham slipped his hand around the woman's waist and drew her forward. She was beautiful, and a complete contrast to Evelyn, with dark eyes and rich black hair. She tilted her head to the side and moved to Mr. Windham. The two kissed, with such a passionate embrace that Evelyn knew at once it couldn't be the first time that they had shared such a kiss.

No. No!

Mr. Windham was supposed to be her ticket out of her home, and yet what was he doing now? Kissing another when he had acted the part of being her suitor all year long! Something ached in Evelyn's chest, and she backed up, her hand moving on the open door in such a way that it shifted, the wood creaking.

Mr. Windham and the woman darted back from each other, their eyes shooting to the doorway.

Evelyn glared at Mr. Windham, with such exasperation emanating from her, she felt she needed no words.

“Evelyn—?”

“Don't,” she muttered sharply, shaking her head once. “Just don't.” She backed up as quickly as she could, hearing muffled words from behind her. The woman was begging Mr. Windham to go after her in case she spoke of what she had just seen to others.

Evelyn didn't care about that, all she cared about was that her every hope was dashed. She pushed past someone in the corridor, barely aware of their presence at all as she burst out onto the balcony she had seen earlier, gripping to the railings as she took a deep breath of cool air to calm her trembling figure. The pain in her chest was so strong that the tears started before she could even think to stop them.

He has ruined everything. And I've let him.

* * *

“If not that, then how about a dance, Miss Gulliver?” Simon grinned as he offered his hand to the eldest of the Gulliver sisters, Hester.

Rafe rolled his eyes, largely uninterested in the conversation and rather glad for the privacy his present mask afforded him. Watching Simon flirt with Miss Gulliver was hardly that entertaining. What amused Rafe more than anything else was to see that Simon was interested in a young woman at last, rather than proffering each one in their vicinity to Rafe.

And what amused him more than that was the subtle glare he had been receiving all night from the middle sister, one Miss Bridget.

I suppose it is not too far-fetched for the keen eye to notice there is only one man ever around Linfield this much. Hopefully, the others do not catch on.

As Simon and Miss Gulliver took to the dance floor, Rafe angled his body away from the crowds slightly, adjusting the mask on his face a little until it sat just right. When he was certain it was perfect, he lifted his glass to his lips and looked around the room again.

Immediately, a distant figure captured his eye. Someone was cascading through the crowds. It was a young woman, dressed in a classical white and green gown – quite tall compared to other ladies, with her dark red hair swept up gracefully in a demi-chignon and a few tempting curls hanging down about her cheeks. The sight of and the way she glanced innocently

around the room, desperately searching for someone, caught Rafe's interest.

Well, well, well. Now, who are you, I wonder?

A server knocked into her and spilled a glass of wine against her gown, and Rafe smirked. The server was arrogant enough not to proffer a napkin or anything to help mop up the spill. Instead, he walked off fast, leaving the poor woman to stare down at the stain blankly. She gripped the skirt of her gown hard, with such passion that Rafe felt a curiosity to know what she was thinking.

Rather than finding someone in the room to complain to, she left the ballroom hurriedly, heading for the nearest door. Unable to explain the pull of his curiosity, Rafe felt a need to follow her. Smoothly, he replaced his glass on the silver tray of a nearby server and headed out of the room, keeping his distance.

For a moment she seemed to disappear, enveloped by a corridor aglow from the moonlight streaming through an open window.

Soon enough though, he heard some muffled words and a gasp of horror, and just as he caught her at the corner of his eye, she swiveled in his direction and darted past him this time, their bodies colliding in the process. She escaped down the corridor and judging from the way the doors were flung wider, she took refuge on the balcony.

Rafe overheard more words, hurriedly spoken between two people.

“If she tells anyone, what of my reputation!” a young woman was saying wildly.

Rafe stepped toward the nearest open door, peering around the doorframe to see Mr. Windham with a young woman beside him. He was trying to calm her down, the two locked in a tight embrace, completely alone.

Well, it takes no great stretch of the imagination to wonder what is going on here.

“You said you were courting her?” the woman asked, pushing her hands firmly into Mr. Windham’s chest, breaking their embrace. He didn’t answer, his silence enough of an answer in itself. Rafe arched a brow.

Laurence Windham, you were the last person I’d expect to find in such a situation.

Rafe slipped away from the open door and hastened back down the corridor, following the fiery-tempered woman he had seen before. He stalled when he found her. She stood on the balcony, gripping to it hard and breathing deeply, her white gown shuddering in the breeze. When she released a muffled gasp, something in Rafe’s chest pained him.

“Such a man is not worth...” Rafe began as he walked forward and closed the balcony door behind him, approaching her on the balcony with sudden eagerness. She turned, backing up a step in shock. She had removed her mask, revealing her full face to him. The sight of her face rather stunned him into silence. “...the tears.”

She was a beauty, but an unusual beauty, which made her all the more captivating. The high cheekbones were incredibly prominent, the freckles on her nose showing where she had been sun-kissed. These same marks stretched across her bare arms. Her lips were rather full, her blue eyes practically silver in the moonlight.

Rafe instinctively delved a hand inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, proffering it to her silently.

“Thank you,” she stammered through her tears and dried her cheeks, turning her back to the door and looking out over the grand garden once more. “... You saw what I saw?”

“Hard to avoid. They could have at least closed the door. Imagine that; a cad and one that is so bold, he leaves a door open. It’s almost as if he wished to be caught,” he teased, hoping to lighten the air a little. “Windham. Not the cleverest of men, is he?”

“Perhaps not, no,” she muffled from behind the handkerchief. She shook her head, drying another escaped tear.

“Allow me to guess.” He leaned on the railing beside her, inching closer. He couldn’t explain this pull toward her.

He’d seduced many women over the last eight years of his life, all for a chance to be distracted from the true pain in his heart. Every woman had come to him willingly, but for some strange reason, with this woman, he found he was not intending to seduce her at all. He merely wished to talk, to have those bright blue eyes turn to gaze at him again.

“You were courting Mr. Windham?” Rafe asked.

“Were the tears the clue?” she asked with an amused smirk. He smiled softly.

“You have wit.”

“You have boldness.” She gestured to their lonesomeness and the handkerchief he had given her. “Yet if you are hoping to persuade me into the same scandalous behavior, you are sorely wrong, stranger. I am not that kind of woman.”

“Scandalous indeed.” He sighed dramatically, rather imbued by the fact she did not know who he was because of the mask he was wearing. “Yet I am not a man who goes out of his way to destroy ladies’ reputations, ma’am. Believe me, any kisses I have shared have been to make the woman smile. That is all.”

She looked sharply at him, those full lips parting.

“Well, that got your attention.” He turned to face her.

She seemed to be thinking much, blinking more than once, her gaze darting between his eyes and his lips.

“You choose your words carefully, do you not?” he asked with interest, leaning a little closer toward her. “And sometimes you decide that saying nothing is best.”

She raised her eyebrows in a sort of challenge, and said nothing, buying into his idea. To his relief, she didn't move away, even when he came so near that her skirts brushed against his breeches.

"I think I'd give a lot to find out what that little head of yours is thinking at this moment," he whispered.

"My thoughts are not treasures to be unearthed, sir."

"Are they not?" Rafe's curiosity certainly found them to be a treasure. He tilted his head to the side, watching her intensely as her eyes darted down to his lips again. "Well, *I guess...* after that little incident, you are wondering how it feels to be kissed."

Her eyes snapped up to meet his gaze.

"Ah, so I'm correct." He smiled indulgently. This was more than just a little fun. The rather innocent way this lady was staring at him was intoxicating. "Have you ever been kissed, ma'am? Did that bastard of a suitor now wrapped in the arms of another woman ever kiss you?"

She shook her head.

"Well, I'd say it is a good job you escaped his kisses," Rafe whispered, arching his head a little toward her. "Who would want to be kissed by such a man, eh?"

“You talk a lot,” she breathed. He could feel it nestle into his embrace.

“Perhaps I’m trying to fill the silence as I stand here wondering what you are thinking,” he whispered again. Her hands had tightened over the railing beside him, but he noted she still didn’t walk away. She could have easily backed up from him and returned to the ballroom. Yet she did not.

She is curious too. Does she feel this strange heat?

It had been a long time since he last felt it. The last time he had known this curious feeling was with Juliet, a long, long time ago.

Do not think about her now.

“So. Was I right in my guess, ma’am?” he asked softly, reaching for her delicate hand on the railing. He gently took it in his fingers, lifting it high, giving her every opportunity to pull back from him. “Were you wondering what a kiss could feel like?”

“I...” She paused. That hesitation made him bold. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles through her glove, wishing he could kiss her skin instead. Her chest rose a little, suggesting she had taken a rather deep breath at that touch. “*I should not be thinking such things,*” she whispered as he lowered her hand an inch between the pair of them.

“Is there any harm in it?” Rafe asked, raising his brows. Then he realized she could not see owing to his dark mask. He

smiled a little instead, for she had made it quite clear she could see his lips. “You owe him nothing, certainly no loyalty.” He followed her gaze in the direction of the doorway.

“...No. I suppose I do not.” She stepped into him a little.

“If you are curious, ma’am, I’d be honored to be your test subject,” he whispered to her, longing for the kiss now.

“I shouldn’t...” she said softly again but still didn’t pull back.

“Might I grace your hand with another kiss instead then?” He reached for the edge of her glove and drew it down from her elbow. The silk slipped over her pale skin delicately, teasing her with the touch. When he reached her hand, he drew the glove off her fingers, one at a time, holding her gaze the entire time that he did it. As he revealed her wrist, he turned her hand over and kissed the inside of her wrist, an intimate touch. His eyes never left hers as he made that kiss.

Her breath most certainly hitched this time at that touch. She stepped forward, her eyes flitting down to his lips.

Now...

Rafe lowered her hand and angled his head, waiting for her to come and meet him. For one so seemingly shy and quiet with her thoughts, she clearly had some boldness in her, for she was the one to press their lips together. She was nervous, her lips merely brushing his. He captured her lips a little more firmly, wishing to show her how thrilling a kiss could really be.

Why am I doing this? To make her smile after what she just saw? Or for my own thrill?

Rafe couldn't answer his own question. All he knew was that this kiss was a surprise. He was supposed to be behaving tonight, and this was far from behaving, but he had been drawn into it by this mysterious lady's presence.

He angled their heads together and bit her bottom lip, playfully, urging her to part her lips for him. When their tongues brushed for the first time, her hand took hold of the lapels of his tailcoat, anchoring her body to him. One of his hands brushed her waist, pulling her body into his so they were nestled together.

Scandalous indeed...

Out here on the balcony, they could be seen at any moment, even by Windham if he intended to chase after the woman he had just betrayed. Despite that knowledge, Rafe couldn't pull back. The kiss had the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, the fingers of one hand on her waist eagerly drifting to her hips as he angled them together, deepening that kiss.

Then, it was suddenly over. She pressed a hand firmly into his chest and pushed him back. They both stood there, catching their breaths as they stared at one another.

"Oh, God's wounds," she muttered with a perfectly flushed face as her fingers drifted to her lips. She released him fully, backing up fast.

“I’ve never had that reaction before,” he chuckled as she escaped to the door. “Wait, I do not know your name!” he called after her, but she was gone all too soon.

She flung the door open, her cheeks almost as red as her hair. As he went to follow her, she shut the door on him, her face briefly visible through the glass. She disappeared fast, running down the corridor back in the direction of the ballroom.

Rafe stared after her, uncertain of what to think or feel. A small, confused laugh escaped him. He was curious, yes, very curious about her, and more than a little entranced by that captivating kiss.

“Ah, this is not the way to improve your reputation though, is it?” he chastised himself.

CHAPTER FOUR



“*H*ere, eat up, Evelyn. You’ve barely eaten in the last few days.” Mavis’ words shocked her. It was incredible to think her aunt had even noticed how much or how little she had been eating.

She took the proffered pork pie from their picnic basket and looked around the blanket where her other cousins sat. In her opinion, it was the wrong time of year for a picnic, but Mavis had insisted they come to Hyde Park to be *seen*.

“It’s cold,” Kitty complained, wrapping a shawl tighter around her mother.

“Now, now, no complaining,” Mavis said, sitting tall and pushing back the blonde hair that her children had inherited from her. “Out here, you shall be seen by all the gentlemen of the ton. It is important to be seen, you know.”

“Yes, yes, we know,” Kitty said dismissively. “Hester and Evelyn hardly need to be seen though. They are on their way to being married already.”

“Yes, indeed.” Mavis laid a hand on Hester’s cheek and squeezed it lovingly, not acknowledging Evelyn’s part in the conversation.

Oh dear. They do not know.

Evelyn opened the diary she had bought with her and absent-mindedly started sketching as she thought of what Mr. Windham had done. She hadn’t seen him since the ball and in truth, had no wish to see him ever again. Why would she want to marry a man who would kiss another woman before they were even wed? No, she could not stand for it. If Mr. Windham did ask her to marry him, she would turn him down.

Distracted, she stared at the figure she had recreated on the page. It was the tall, masked man she had met out on the balcony. Shocked to see him recreated so well on the page, she stared at him in wonder.

She had barely seen any of his face that night. For all she knew, he could not be handsome at all, but that was not what had mattered to her, nor was it why she had kissed him. There was something in those hazel eyes that had entranced her, but most of all, it was his words. He had been humorous, and captivating, to the extent that when he spoke about kissing, her curiosity to know what it was like had gotten the better of her.

I cannot believe I kissed him! What sort of woman am I now?

“Have you seen this?” Hester waved another scandal sheet in the air. “It has just been published this morning. They say the Duke of Ravensworth was seen at the ball the other night. The one we went to.”

“I presumed as much,” Bridget chimed in.

“He was? Then he must have been disguised well,” Mavis observed. “I did not see him there.”

“Yet he was there.” Hester waved the scandal sheet once more. It was snatched away by Kitty who pored over the article with eagerness.

“His Grace, the Duke of Ravensworth, was seen in the company of his friend, Lord Linfield. Rumors say that he once more was trying to conquer a woman’s heart at the ball.” Kitty giggled outrageously loudly, much to the annoyance of Bridget and Mavis who both shushed her.

“What do you think of such a man, Evelyn?” Bridget asked.

Startled to be drawn into the conversation, Evelyn closed up the diary in her lap, blocking out the view of the masked man from the ball. She had been admiring how his dark blond hair had been swept back past his ears, into the smallest of ponytails at the back of his head.

“The Duke of Ravensworth?” Evelyn said in a small voice. “I have never met him.”

“Yes, but what do you think of his reputation, child,” Mavis said with an exasperated sigh. “Honestly, you do need to start paying attention in conversations, Evelyn.”

“I think what reputations are and what people say are not one and the same thing.” She took the scandal sheet out of Kitty’s hands and read the words about the Duke of Ravensworth. “It speaks here of this rake trying to capture women’s hearts. Surely, he does not go that far if he moves on between women so fast. Any man wishing to seduce a woman...” She paused, thinking of the way she had seen Mr. Windham locked in an embrace with the young woman. “They are not after her heart.”

“Oh, Evelyn.” Hester giggled with a hand over her lips, as if she knew she should not. Bridget bristled, sitting taller and snatching the scandal sheet out of Evelyn’s grasp.

“Well, you have never met him, have you?” Bridget said with something of a sharp tone as she looked down at the scandal sheet. “I suppose such men do not concern themselves with quieter women of the ton. You know, wallflowers. They’ll go for other sorts of women. You are more suited to Mr. Windham.”

“I suppose so, dear,” Mavis said and suddenly gestured away with her gloved hand.

“The dull cloud,” Kitty added in a low tone. Hester struck her around the hand, trying to quiet her. Before any more could be said, Mavis looked away, her attention caught by a group of gentlemen walking down the path.

“Good lord, is that Lord Merriweather? Smile girls, smile.”

Yet Evelyn didn’t bother to smile at all. She was looking at Bridget, thinking how expertly her cousin had managed to

manufacture the insult and slide it into conversation as if it was nothing.

Evelyn didn't want to be appealing to a man like the Duke of Ravensworth, so she knew she shouldn't be insulted by the words, but the feeling was there all the same. Her hands gripped to the diary in her lap as she no longer felt good enough for anyone. Even the 'dull' Mr. Windham didn't really want her.

"Oh, Evelyn dear, that reminds me." Mavis turned to face her as Lord Merriweather and his friends walked on. "Mr. Windham is coming for dinner tonight."

"Dinner? Whatever for?"

"To see you of course." Mavis laughed as if Evelyn was a dumb child. "He says he has some big news to share with us all."

"Oh, will this be the proposal, Mother?" Kitty asked, kneeling up with her jaw slackening. "I never thought Evelyn would be the first of us all to get married."

"That's it." Hester took the scandal sheet from Bridget and rolled it up in her hands, before tapping Kitty around the arm in reprimand.

"Ow, what was that for?"

"You honestly do not know?"

Any other time, Evelyn would have appreciated Hester's actions to defend her, but she felt too wounded to acknowledge it presently.

Mr. Windham cannot come. He cannot propose now. Would he seriously expect me to say yes? Why would he bother proposing to me at all?

The truth hit Evelyn like a brick. She was the daughter of a baron after all, a baron who had left a substantial sum in her name as a dowry. The only reason why Mr. Windham may still want to marry her after being seen with another woman had to be because of that dowry.

"If you would excuse me." Evelyn moved to her feet, her hands feeling rather shaky.

"Is something wrong, child?" Mavis asked, looking up from the bread she was picking at.

"I just need to stretch my legs. I shall be back soon." Evelyn was not asked to stay again.

She walked away with her diary clutched to her chest. She put as much distance between herself and her family as possible as she considered her options. She may not wish to marry Mr. Windham anymore, but it struck her that she had few options left. No other man had ever shown an interest in her.

Apart from the masked man at the ball...

Angered that she thought so much of him, indulging in a fancy that could never be satisfied, she strode deeper into the park and across a bridge, onto the other side of the river. Here, the leaves fell faster than before. Great russet and bronze leaves floated down, caught in the wind, some getting in her face and masking her path for a few seconds at a time. She swiped them away, trying to think of a route out of the awful mess she had found herself in.

Could I really marry a man that would not love me? He'd be unfaithful! Constantly!

Unable to see clearly because of those leaves, she walked straight into someone.

“Oh, my apologies.” She backed up, hurrying to curtsy, for all she caught sight of was the ridiculously fine green suit. It was well made, the cravat perfectly in place.

“It is no matter.” The voice was deep.

Evelyn looked up to see a face so handsome that she rather forgot her previous thoughts. He had a long face with an aquiline nose and a heavy jaw. Clean-shaven, with dark blond hair loose around his jaw, he was a sight to behold. As he looked at her, a slow smile appeared on his lips.

There was something familiar about him, but she reasoned she must have seen him at a ball.

“Forgive me.” She curtsied once more and tried to step around him. He moved in the way, blocking her path.

“I should apologize,” he said hurriedly. “Ma’am, is everything well? You seem...” His eyes darted over her. The thought he could read the inner turmoil she was feeling on her face made matters worse. “Something is wrong,” he said firmly before she could say anymore. He took a step toward her. “What is it, ma’am?”

“Your Grace! Your Grace!” a lady squealed behind him. He looked up to the sky, as if pleading for help, then his eyes found Evelyn’s again.

“Ever wished to disappear into the ground?”

“More often than you think,” she whispered.

Those lips smiled briefly, before they flattened out as a group of ladies, like a gaggle of geese surrounded them.

“Your Grace.” One lady curtsied. “I told you it was him. The Duke of Ravensworth.”

As the ladies all gushed and curtsied, Evelyn backed up, staring in horror at the handsome face as she realized who she had walked straight into.

It is the man they all gossip about. Oh... no wonder he is a rake.

With a face so handsome, she imagined a smile from him was enough to make a woman leap to his bed.

She curtsied once more, intent on escaping him, and walked around him and the ladies together. He angled his head, as if intending to follow her, but was blocked off. Evelyn glanced back in his direction once, comparing him to the masked gentleman she had met the other night at the ball.

It struck her that the Duke of Ravensworth was attractive because he had a nice face, whereas the man she had met attracted her because of his words.

I think I'd rather have the masked man's company.

* * *

Evelyn reached for the carafe of port one more time and topped up her glass. The room was full of candles this evening, for Evelyn couldn't bear the darkness. It made her ill at ease, so she had set about many candles in order to brighten the space. It made pouring the port a little easier too, for her hand slipped more than once as she'd already had a little too much.

"Perhaps that is a good thing," she whispered to herself. "Maybe when Mr. Windham comes, he will not like me like this and change his mind." She lifted the glass to her lips, indulging in the sweet red wine as she considered all that was to happen that night.

They were waiting below for Mr. Windham to arrive for that dinner he had promised, yet she was hiding in her chamber, having no wish to see him at all.

I will not marry him. I cannot do it.

In her drunken state, these words came startlingly into focus. If his big news was indeed a wish to marry her, she feared she might throw her glass at him.

Would I really marry a man that would be so unfaithful just to escape this house?

She was not sure. Stretching out on the bed, her hand collided with her diary that she had left open on the covers beside her. She reached for the book and dragged it forward, the better to look at the drawing she had made on the page.

She was good at art, one of the few talents she had that clearly her cousins Katherine and Bridget were envious of. She'd drawn the masked man very well indeed, and even remembered the details of his dark blue waistcoat in the picture, as well as the embroidery on his mask.

"I should not think about him. It was nothing." She tapped the picture, knowing it was foolish to obsess about that one kiss so much. Not only was it scandalous but fleeting. For all she knew, if he was a rake like the Duke of Ravensworth, then he had probably forgotten about that kiss already.

Drawing the book into her lap as she sipped her port, the image of the masked man drew another thought to her mind.

Perhaps it is not so bad to seek out another to marry.

Yet her cousins' words returned to her. How a wallflower couldn't ensnare a man. If she couldn't even hold the interest of a 'dull' man like Mr. Windham, what other chances did she have of finding another man to marry her?

"I need help. That is all." There was a strange sense of purpose in her tone as she stood off the bed and placed the glass down on the table beside her, swaying a little with the power of the liquor taking over her. Resting the book on the table, she closed it up, blocking out the face of the masked man.

Another man entered her mind. It was the Duke of Ravensworth and how she had quite literally bumped into him that day in Hyde Park. He knew how to charm, and he also knew what men liked in women.

"I need a teacher." She tapped the diary in thought. It was a wild idea, mad, spirit-induced, perhaps even the stupidest idea she had ever had. "Desperate times and desperate measures. Isn't that what my father used to say?"

She crossed the chamber toward Kitty's side of the room and reached for a small table where Kitty kept so many scandal sheets. On the top one, she found a scandal sheet that mentioned the Duke of Ravensworth's name. She scoured the article, looking for any hint as to where he might live.

"If he could teach me how to be more desirable, maybe then I could marry a man I wished to." She tapped the words as she found his rough address on the page. It was a castle in Sussex. "I wouldn't have to marry Mr. Windham after all." She smiled and picked up the scandal sheet, her wild plan falling into place.

CHAPTER FIVE



“No, no. You are wrong. You must be wrong.”

“I wish I was wrong.” The doctor stepped forward, reaching out to Rafe, trying to calm him down. “I am so sorry for your loss. Yet there is nothing I can do for her now. God has taken her as one of his children. She is in a better place.”

“No. No!” Rafe practically bellowed the last word. He backed out of the house as quickly as he could, bursting through the door of the castle.

He couldn't bear it. This was just not possible. Juliet couldn't be dead. She was too young to die, far too young to be taken to heaven. She had been so full of life just days ago, how could she now be lying so still on a bed? It didn't make sense.

It maddened him even more to hear the doctor talking of God. How could it be God's will to cut off a life so young? It was cruel, pure cruelty!

“No!” Rafe shouted again as he left the keep of the castle. His boots dropped into the snow. Once more, he was back in his usual dream. He was ensnared by the ice, and it was

impossible to escape. Everywhere he looked, fresh snow fell, but in a blizzard. The great storm battered him with wind and ice. He raised his hands over his face, trying to shield himself from the sharp and bitter pain of that cold, though it did little use. "Juliet!"

He shouted into the blizzard as if it would somehow bring her back to him. He backed up further, but now, his boots slipped deeper and deeper into the snow. It no longer reached his knees, but his thighs. He struggled to take another step back, and now it came up to his hips.

With his hands madly outstretched, his bare fingers clawed at the ice, trying to pull himself free, but he could not. That cold feeling stretched deep into his gut as he sank into the snow, as if it was a marsh sent to consume him. He wondered briefly if he'd suffocate in the snow first, or if it would be the cold that would get him.

He was subsumed. Deep within the white ice, it was a white monster that had eaten him. He could no longer scream or shout, he could only wave one lonely hand above the ice, then that too slipped down into the snow, and he was lost for good.

"Argh!" Rafe jolted up.

He was not in a bed but at his desk. His head jerked back and forth as he took in his surroundings.

Little wonder the nightmare had been more powerful this evening. He had returned home to his castle on the edge of Sussex, to oversee the work that was requested by his steward. Just being in the castle had reconjured all the bad memories.

“A dream, just a dream,” he muttered to himself, rubbing his temples as he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk. He’d lost his tailcoat at some point. Sat in his waistcoat with his shirt sleeves neatly folded up to his elbows, he was only warm thanks to the roaring fire in the room. “Just a dream,” he repeated, sitting tall and stretching his neck as he looked about the space.

This study had been his father’s room before his and was the one place in the castle where Rafe usually found solace. The great mahogany desk and damask chairs were flanked by old settle benches, betraying just how old this castle truly was. The walls made of old gray stone were covered in tapestries, some dating back to the fifteen hundreds. Between them was the great gray-stone hearth, inlaid with a marble plinth above the flames that bore the emblem of the Duke of Ravensworth. Two ravens were bent together, their beaks practically kissing.

“I can’t keep doing this.” Even as Rafe spoke, he reached for the brandy carafe beside him on the desk, pouring out a second glass. If he was to improve his reputation and be a better duke, then he would have to stop drinking so much for starters.

Deciding the second glass would be his last for the night, he drew forward the paper he had been writing on before he fell asleep, using the light of the fire to check his words.

‘Dear Simon,

Sussex is as cold and as bitter as I remember it. The servants do their best to take care of me, as always, and I can see that what my steward says is true – there is much to be done here to reclaim the castle’s former glory, or at the very least, make

it habitable again. I intend to oversee all the plans before I return. I shall also have to return many times this next year to ensure the building work is completed to schedule.

In the meantime, would you be able to assist me in finding more suitable lodgings in London? I have been thinking a lot on what you have said about me struggling perhaps to turn my reputation around. Those small rooms in the darkest parts of Covent Garden are perhaps not so wise.'

He broke off reading as there was a sound deep within the castle. It sounded like the front door closing of the keep, but he knew that had to be impossible. Who would come to see him out here in Sussex? He turned to look at the window, marking that as it was late afternoon, the light was slipping from the sky already. It wouldn't be long until it was dark.

Turning back to face his desk, he caught sight of a small miniature portrait he kept at the corner of it. It was of Juliet when she was alive, smiling at the painter with those thin lips.

Rafe jerked his head away, not wishing to think of her at this moment. Thoughts of her would only make it harder to stay here in the meantime.

Instead, his thoughts drifted to another. He saw the red-haired woman from the ball a few nights before. He saw their kiss and the way she had held onto him as he had indulged in such a kiss.

He also saw how they had bumped into one another at Hyde Park. She hadn't recognized him, that was plain in the way she seemed to look through him rather than at him. He could

hardly blame her for not realizing he was the man she had kissed, for he had put together his disguise very well that night of the ball, choosing a mask that covered most of his face and tying back his hair in a way that he never normally did.

Still, Rafe couldn't help being disappointed a little that she had not recognized him despite it all.

Who are you, I wonder?

His curiosity about her he had expected to fade after the ball that night, but he was wrong. If anything, he wanted to know her all the more, and often found her creeping into his thoughts when he least expected it to be the case.

A light tap at the door drew his attention.

“Yes?” Rafe called.

The door opened and his butler, Stede, stepped through the gap with his usual formal smile in place. Stede always bore a stiff upper lip and barely talked to Rafe at all these days. He preferred a cool formality to be between them and Rafe had given up long ago attempting any sort of friendship with the butler.

“A guest has arrived to see you, Your Grace.” Stede bowed, clearly thinking his task was done as he returned to the door.

“Wait.” Rafe stood. “Who is it?” It couldn't have been Simon, for his friend surely would have written ahead to forewarn

Rafe of his coming.

“I did not ask her name. She is in the drawing room.”

“She?” Rafe repeated, startled, for he had not been expecting a woman.

“Yes.”

“I see. Thank you.” Rafe tightened his hands at his side but kept his thoughts to himself. He supposed Stede resented him for not being more of a present duke at this castle over the last few years. It wasn't something he could be angry at the butler for.

As Stede left, Rafe turned and looked back at the weather through the lead-lined window. It wasn't just gray and growing dark with the early nights of late autumn, but it was raining heavily too. The russet trees in the distance swayed from side to side, battered by the wind.

Who would come calling through this weather?

Rafe left the study and took a candle with him, hurrying to the drawing room. The castle was so vast and empty that his footsteps echoed on the stone floors. When he eventually reached the drawing room and stepped inside, he realized he had expected his visitor to be Simon after all, so the sight of a young woman drenched to the bone standing in the middle of the chamber was a shock.

You again?

CHAPTER SIX



*A*t Rafe's entrance, she turned to face him, removing her wet bonnet. The blue eyes of the woman from the ball greeted him, that red hair dampened and stuck to her neck in the most tantalizing of ways.

The memory of their kiss flashed in his mind, and he was suddenly so aroused, he didn't know what to do.

What is she doing here?

He said nothing at first and walked around her, placing his candle down on the mantelpiece above another roaring fire. He kept his face half turned toward those flames, hoping that if he flushed from his arousal to her, she would just think it was the heat of the fire.

"Well, this is unusual," he said, nodding toward her. "A lady visiting me here of all places."

"From what I understand of your reputation, Your Grace, such things are not that unusual." She didn't look at him but dropped a curtsy.

She has wit. I noticed that at the ball.

“Good God, is that why you are here?” he asked in a sudden panic, stepping away from the fire.

“What? No! No.” She said the word the second time with more determination and carefully placed her bonnet down on the table beside him. “I have come to speak with you, Your Grace. I’d like to emphasize the word *speak*.”

“Noted.” He nodded at her, fully aware of the way her eyes darted over him. He stood taller, realizing he was not completely dressed. He wore his trousers and his boots, but his waistcoat was half undone, the neck of his shirt loose too. He hated a messy cravat, so he had left that discarded in his study completely, and now the skin of his chest was on show. “Well, if you are going to come and visit a man like me in my own home at this hour, did you expect me to be dressed in any other way?”

She said nothing, returning to that silence he had noticed so much at the ball. She fidgeted with a reticule in her hands, then placed it down with her bonnet.

“Let us start again, ma’am. You clearly know my identity, yet I do not know yours.” He bowed to her, though he never once took his eyes off her. “Come, tell me your name at least.”

“I am Miss Evelyn Voss.”

His eyes widened as he stood straight, realizing he had heard her name from Simon.

“You are Miss Hester Gulliver’s cousin?”

“Yes, I am.” She looked down, breaking the connection of their gazes.

Should I not have mentioned her cousin?

He was just glad to have a name for her at last. As she continued to fidget, now adjusting her wet gown, Rafe had to back further up, closer to the fire. There was something in the way that she touched the wet skirt which was driving him mad. He had errant ideas in his head of helping her out of that gown, tossing the wet cloth to the side, and warming her up so she no longer shivered in the chill.

“Curious, indeed,” he whispered, raising his eyebrows as he stared at her. “We bump into each other once in Hyde Park, yet you seek me out here in Sussex. How come?”

“I wish to make a deal. As I understand it, you are a man who assists many women with obtaining what they...”

“Desire?” He offered up a word to her.

She frowned at once.

“Perhaps that is the wrong word,” he chuckled, wishing she would smile at him again, or press her lips to his.

Oh, for another of those kisses, Miss Voss. I would go a long way.

“What they *want*,” she corrected.

“Let us face facts, I help them with their desires.” He kicked one of the logs into the fire, watching as it spat and shot flames higher. “Yet, that is a thing of the past.”

No matter what urges he had for the soaking Miss Voss in this room, the images she was conjuring in his mind, he had vowed to be on his best behavior from now on. He was not permitted to think of throwing her over the chaise longue in the corner of the room and entering her from behind, listening to her moan as she dug her nails into the chair out of pleasure.

Stop it, you fool!

“What is it you want of me?” he asked. “From the way you glare at me, you are not here for what most women want.”

She reached for her reticule and took out a slim slip of paper, advancing toward him near the fire. When she came close, he rested his elbow on the mantelpiece, trying to stand tall and keep as far away from her as possible.

“I hear you know many in the ton,” she said quietly, pushing the piece of paper toward him. “I wish you to help me find someone.”

“You wish for an investigator?” He laughed as he took the paper, well aware of the way she leaped back from him when she jolted at his touch.

Does she fear me?

The mere thought made him angry. He wished her to be as intoxicated as he was, imagining more of those kisses.

“I am not such a man.” He fiddled with the paper, not quite opening it.

“Yet you have other expertise that I require much more.” She looked him in the eye now. “You know what men desire, Your Grace. You know what charms women need to captivate a man.”

“Where are you going with this, Miss Voss?” He stepped toward her, drawing near out of his temptation. To his relief, she didn’t back away again but met his gaze, rather challengingly.

“I wish you to be a teacher,” she said plainly as if they were talking about the weather. “I wish you to show me how to... captivate a man.”

His brows shot up as his lips grew into a small smile.

“No. You wish me to teach you how to *seduce* a man, am I correct?”

She didn't answer but turned away, placing a hand on the mantelpiece as she looked into the flames.

Oh God. She wishes to be a seductress? Look in the mirror, Miss Voss!

He was entranced already, and he didn't doubt many other men would be after a short conversation with her. Her quietness was enigmatic, those looks baffling, and her beauty a great distraction. He would have happily kissed her neck now, whispered in her ear that she could seduce him within seconds.

Stop it, you fool.

"I am no charmer." Her voice was surprisingly firm. "Yet I am tired of sitting in corners and putting up with being in the shadows. I do not believe there is anything so wrong with going after what I want, and I know well enough what we want in life will never be handed to us on a platter. We have to seek it for ourselves." She glanced back at him over her shoulder, her face half-lit by the firelight.

It made her red hair seem as if it were on fire. Rafe considered trailing his fingers through those locks, imagining how soft they would be.

"I will give you anything you want in return for your lessons," she asked, her voice soft. "Anything."

Rafe took a step back.

“Are you offering yourself to me—”

“No!” she snapped quickly. “I simply mean that I would give a lot, except *that*, in return for this favor.”

“Hmm, tempting.” He toyed with her, smiling and watching as her face flushed red. If that had been her offer, it would have been more tempting than he ever would have admitted to aloud, but it was not to be.

I know what she wants.

He remembered what he had seen the other night at the ball, her tears when she saw Mr. Windham kissing another woman. On the paper in his hands had to be Mr. Windham’s name, and she was doing all of this in order to recapture Mr. Windham’s heart. A surprising jolt of jealousy shot through Rafe, and he crumpled the paper in his hand, stuffing it into his pocket with no intention of reading it.

“You have come to the wrong place.”

“I beg your pardon?” She turned fully to face him now.

“Maybe I do have the knowledge you need, Miss Voss, but it is not up for sale.” He shook his head and stepped toward her, coming so near that he was reminded of that kiss. It would be surprisingly easy to tell her of it now and to ask for another kiss, but he could not do it, not when she was doing all this to seek out Mr. Windham again. “I cannot do as you ask.”

He walked away, startled to find she followed him across the room.

“I—I have money. I can offer to pay you.”

“Look around. Does it look like I need money?”

“But—”

“There is nothing you can do to change my mind.” He was sharp, refusing her for two reasons. The first was to keep his reputation intact. If she was discovered in his castle when he was trying to better his own name, what then? Hell, even Simon would want his head for being caught with the cousin of his beau. The other reason was that he knew it would be no good to be her seductress teacher. He’d be too lured in by her. All to hand her on a silver platter for that Windham fool. “Time to leave, Miss Voss.”

“Your Grace!”

He took hold of her wrist.

CHAPTER SEVEN



“Please, Your Grace.” Evelyn couldn’t understand why he was refusing her as he dragged her into the hallway, his grip on her wrist firm but not painful. She scarcely managed to snatch up her bonnet and reticule before he managed to get her out of the room. “I am asking for your help. Is there anything so wrong in that?”

“You do not understand. There is much you do not understand.” He shook his head as he towed her away from the drawing room and through a dark stone corridor, heading toward the front hall of this vast castle. She shivered at the cold air that bounced off the stones, shocked that this was a home at all. There were glimpses of beauty within it, but as far as she could see, it was cold and in need of much work. It wasn’t much of a home at all, in fact.

“You cannot stay. That is the end of the story, Miss Voss. I am sorry you have had a wasted journey.” He released her as he reached the door and flung it open, then he froze completely, blocking her exit and staring out at the rain with his arms on either side of the doorframe.

Evelyn watched him intently, moving more to the side so she could see his face.

Something she hadn't been expecting when seeking him out was to feel that same stirring she had experienced the other day in Hyde Park when she had seen his face. She'd been certain that was simply the attraction of first seeing such a handsome face. To her annoyance, she found that stirring had been there ever since he had come to find her in his drawing room.

The feeling was even stronger now as she watched a muscle in his jaw tick.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, peering past him.

"The rain." He took a step back from the doorway and gestured outside. Evelyn stepped forward, peering out at the drive. There was flash flooding, with great rivulets of water running down the driveway, making it impossible to cross. "You came on horse, did you not?"

"I did."

"Then even I am not so much a monster to send you out in that." The Duke of Ravensworth raised his hand and pinched the bridge of his nose as if blocking out the sight of her.

Entranced, Evelyn's eyes darted down his form, feeling as if she had the freedom to do so now that he was not staring at her so intently. His disheveled state was more endearing than she had allowed herself to think of before. The flash of skin that was visible at his neck was something hard to look away from. She caught the brief sight of dark golden hair curling, then a glimmer of a muscled chest, nothing more.

As he lowered his hand from his face, she snatched her eyes up to meet his, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much she had been staring at him.

“Fine. You can stay the night and I shall have the housekeeper prepare a chamber for you. In the morning, you shall be on your way. Yes?” He stepped toward her, apparently keen on having her answer, those eyes unrelenting in their stare.

“You have given me no choice in the matter,” she murmured simply.

He turned away and walked off so fast that she was left reeling, with her bonnet and reticule in her hand. When he was gone, she leaned against the stone wall, feeling weak and awful that her plan had failed.

She had known it was mad, but what other choice did she have? The Duke of Ravensworth’s reputation had suggested he was a man indeed that could assist her in learning the art of seduction.

I am shocked he turned me down.

“This is ridiculous,” Evelyn murmured as she reached toward the bed. She had not been expecting to stay here for very long, a few hours at most, so she had only brought with her a reticule and her diary.

She closed up the diary now, blocking out the sketch of the masked man on those pages. Tucking it away, she turned her attention to the nightgown that had been provided to her. The

kindly housekeeper, a Mrs. Rivers, had provided the dress with a smile on her face. When Evelyn had asked where the nightgown came from though, she had no answer. All that Mrs. Rivers said was it had not been worn in a long time.

Well, I can hardly sleep in these wet clothes, can I?

Huffing in irritation, Evelyn took off her wet gown and hung it up by the fire in the guest chamber, so it could dry. She tied up her woolen stockings and her pelisse next, keeping them just far enough from the flames that they wouldn't catch light.

She washed herself in a basin of water Mrs. Rivers had provided and slipped her body into the nightgown, pulling it on over her shoulders. It was perhaps a little short for her, revealing a glimmer of her calves, but the material was well made and nothing like what Evelyn had ever worn before. The degree of soft lace caressed her body, feeling as if someone was touching her. She shivered, startled when an image shot into her mind of the Duke of Ravensworth's hands touching her, rather than the nightgown at all.

Looking around the room, Evelyn rubbed her hands over her arms, many thoughts and worries crossing her mind.

By now, her family would have noticed she was missing. Kitty would be inventing some scandal in her head as Hester tried to urge her to be quiet. Mavis would no doubt be up in arms about the trouble her niece was causing the family, and her uncle, Peter, would barely look up from the newspaper he was reading. His attention might only be snatched away when Mavis warned her disappearance could affect the whole family.

“I shall have to lie,” she muttered to herself, planning the lie in her head. When she returned home the following morning, she would say that she had become lost on her ride in the night and was unable to find her way back until morning. She would have to simply pray that they would believe her foolish tale, for, to them, the alternative of her sneaking out to visit a rake would be more far-fetched.

Nervously, she sat on the edge of the bed and looked to the empty side of the chamber. The shadows were long and deep here, so dark that she looked at every corner of the room with concern.

I despair of rooms that are this dark.

It was one of the reasons she had secretly always liked sharing a chamber with her cousin, Kitty. Even if Kitty was the cousin that perhaps irritated her the most, Evelyn would rather have some company in her bedchamber than none at all.

“It was many years ago,” she whispered aloud, somehow hoping that by talking to herself, she could make her own mind see some degree of sense. “I am not that young girl anymore.”

She closed her eyes and fell back on the bed, keeping two candles and the fire lit, for she did not want the room to go wholly dark. With her eyes so fixedly closed, she saw the last time she had been left alone in a bedchamber.

Tucked away in her chamber as a small girl, she had repeatedly clambered out of bed that night, moving to the window in expectation of her parents’ return from their outing.

It was the small hours of the morning the last time she had gotten up, but no one had come home.

The next day, she'd heard the staff around the house. Everyone seemed in uproar about something, and a maid had come to the chamber. Rushing in, she'd pushed some food and water into Evelyn's hands and urged her to stay inside the chamber, not to come out for any reason.

Evelyn had cried, scared by the maid's behavior, and begged to know what was happening.

"Where are Ma and Pa?" she had cried as the maid closed the door behind her and refused to tell her.

It was only later that day Evelyn had discovered the door had been locked. She couldn't get out.

That evening, she saw some of the servants leaving the house through the door. Some were even forced out against their will, and she remembered seeing the maid who had put her in the room clawing to get back into the house, but she was dragged away.

That night, no one had come to tuck Evelyn in bed, and no one had come to light the candles. Evelyn found a tinder box, struggling to light it as she had seen so many adults do. It was difficult, and she had burned her palm attempting it but failed anyway.

The whole night she had spent in complete darkness, crying in corners, fearing what would come at her through that

blackness. No one heard her tears and her cries, no one came, not even her parents. She had not slept a wink and by the time the sun rose, she was a quivering mess, darting her head back and forth like a spooked animal.

Two people had run toward the house as the sun tore through the horizon. It was her aunt and uncle, and Peter had burst through the chamber door with Mavis following him inside.

“How could you forget her?” he hissed at his wife. *“She’s a child!”*

“My sister has just died. Do you truly believe I am thinking straight?” Mavis had barked, hurrying toward Evelyn who cowered in the corner of the room.

Died... she said died.

At no point did anyone tell Evelyn categorically that her parents had died. She was left to infer it from everyone else’s conversations. She’d discovered later that after her parents had died in a carriage accident, the house had been locked up. Peter had swept in to remove the staff, fearful that one of them might try to steal the baron’s things and therefore damage any inheritance that could come their way.

In the midst of all the commotion and fear, both Mavis and Peter hadn’t thought about Evelyn, who had just been four years old at the time. She was remembered later.

Evelyn’s eyes shot open. There was no way she could sleep. Each time she looked around the chamber, she thought of that

night alone again, the fear, the shouting and crying she did for her mother and father, who of course, had never been able to come and answer her desperate pleas.

She sometimes wondered if there had been something there with her in the darkness that night. If ghosts exist, was it mad to think her mother and father had been present the entire time? Merely the thought of a ghostly presence in the room had Evelyn bursting out of the bed now.

“I cannot stay in this darkness.”

She needed another room. Any chamber was better than a bedchamber, and as long as she could flood it with candles, then that would be ideal. At least she would be able to find a few hours of sleep then, even if it was not much.

Leaving her auburn hair loose around her shoulders, she reached for a dressing gown that Mrs. Rivers had left hung on the back of a door for her. She wrapped the dressing gown haphazardly around her night rail and slipped her feet into some slippers, hurrying out of the room as quickly as she could, taking one of the candles with her.

Evelyn clung to the brass candle holder as she walked the castle corridors. Soon enough, she was beginning to regret her decision to leave the bedchamber. The castle was so vast with towering, tall ceilings and large corridors, she felt rather like an ant scurrying around it, looking for some refuge.

When certain she was lost and that she had simply padded around in a circle in the middle of a hallway, she caught sight

of yellow light at the end of the corridor. Hurrying toward it, she peered inside to find a room flooded with light.

This is what I have been searching for the entire time.

She stepped inside, gawking at the sheer number of candles that had been lit in this room. There were brass and silver candleholders practically on every surface and table, a mismatch of designs and candle heights, but each one bright and alight. The yellow light they emitted was warm and buttery, enshrouding her in a warm feeling.

Evelyn walked deeper into the room, recognizing it was a library. The shelves of books hid the cold stone walls a little, and the fire was larger than some of the others in the house, practically taking up one wall entirely. She reached for an armchair close to that fire and sat down, finally feeling comfortable enough to release the candle she held so tightly onto and place it down beside her on a table.

Here, I am safe. At least, there are no shadows or dark corners.

She stayed very still for a few minutes, wishing to be certain she wasn't imposing on anyone in this grand room. When many minutes passed and no one came, her body started to relax and she drifted off to sleep, her eyes falling closed.

Evelyn wasn't sure how long she was asleep for, but it was long enough for her mind to dream. She saw many things, different memories colliding together, setting off sparks and stirrings in her mind, some that frightened her, and others that excited her.

At first, she saw the child she had been in that darkened room, left there alone for so long. Then she saw Kitty and Bridget, both looking down at her, and the disparaging way that Kitty had curled her nose, astonished that Evelyn might get a proposal from a man at all.

The image shifted, and Evelyn saw herself on that balcony at the ball. She saw the masked man coming toward her, the way he had kissed her, and how she had been the one to initiate that kiss, yet he didn't pull back. The image changed and she was no longer kissing the masked man at all.

She was in the drawing room of this castle, with the Duke of Ravensworth before her, his shirt open and his waistcoat discarded. He was the one kissing her as she clung to what remained of his shirt. He was a similar height to the masked man and had dark blond hair too, though worn completely differently.

Just the thought of that kiss made Evelyn warm in her sleep, heated.

A sound woke her. Evelyn's eyes shot open as she turned her head in the chair, her usual anxieties making her nervous. Fortunately, the room was so bright, she did not need to fear the dark.

Someone moved around the library.

Evelyn held her breath, terrified of discovery when she saw who it was.

On the opposite side of the room was the Duke of Ravensworth. He stood on a short step of ladders, reaching up to a shelf where he pulled down a book. His hair was tangled, as if he too had been attempting to sleep. With his back to her, he clearly had no idea she was there.

He jumped down from off the ladder, the athletic display making her lips part in wonder as she caught a glimpse of what he was wearing. He stood in a pair of trousers, a loose sleep shirt, and a dressing gown that hung off his shoulders. He hadn't bothered to tie it closed around his waist, revealing the glimmer of his open shirt and the flash of bare skin.

Flicking through the book in his hands, he walked out of the room, heading through the door.

Evelyn released a breath she hadn't noticed she was holding.

That was close.

She didn't doubt if the Duke of Ravensworth had discovered her there, he would have been upset. She could remember all too easily the sight of his anger earlier that evening when he had dragged her to the door, clearly intent on throwing her out. Now that she had already fallen asleep once, perhaps sleep in the guest chamber would find her quick.

Slowly, she stood from her place in the chair and reached for her candle. As much as she wished to stay here in this safe place, she couldn't do it. She had to leave before being discovered.

Tiptoeing through the library, she headed for the door, determined to escape before he could possibly come back. Why else leave the room so full of candles that were lit? He must have intended to come back.

She stepped through the door, only to find herself walking into something.

No. Someone.

She backed up hurriedly, realizing with her heart in her mouth exactly what she had done as a book dropped to the floor between the pair of them.

The Duke of Ravensworth stood before her—his heavy jawline slackened as he stared at her and those light brown eyes gawked wide.

“What in God’s name are you doing up at this time of night?” Then his eyes darted down to what she was wearing, or lack of, and Evelyn found her tongue was tied.

CHAPTER EIGHT



*R*afe couldn't form words. This was not what he was expecting. Having Miss Voss wander his house late at night? An unlikely event indeed! Having her so little dressed at the same time? Surely that should have been impossible.

Rafe's eyes darted over her. She'd pulled on a dressing gown over the sheer night gown she wore, but it must have fallen open, for Rafe could see every way in which the nightgown was molded to her figure. It pulled tightly over her slim breasts and the thin curves of her body. Yet the glimpse of her legs under the short hem drove him madder still.

The heat was so sudden in his body that he could not possibly stop his length from awakening. He felt it within seconds, hardening beneath his trousers.

"Miss Voss..." His initial anger had now transformed. There was desire in his voice, deepening his tone as he stared at her.

With her red hair wild about her ears, hanging loosely, it would be so easy to indulge in his fantasy of running his fingers through it, perhaps playfully tugging on it just a little to see how she would react. Would she moan? Gasp in

pleasure? Regardless, the sounds she would make would surely be *exquisite*.

“I am so sorry.” She spoke in a sudden rush, her plump lips parting as she talked. “I-I could not sleep in my room. I am not good sleeping somewhere so dark, so I went in search of another place and found the candles here. I did not know you were here too. My apologies, I should go.”

She's afraid of the dark?

It was something he could sympathize with. When it was dark, he slept, and in that sleep, he had nightmares. It was all too familiar to him now.

She looked ready to walk around him, but he was standing in the way so she couldn't move at all.

“Your Grace.” She pointed to the doorway, clearly trying to get him to move out of the way.

Move, you buffoon.

Yet he couldn't move at all. His desire was overpowering him. His eyes drifted down her at her movement, for it made her dressing gown fall open even more, revealing more of her night rail and how it was stuck to her body. He couldn't look away, and a small sound escaped his throat, one that must have betrayed completely what he was feeling, as her lips parted as she stared at him.

Hurriedly, she crossed her arms in front of her chest. Perhaps she intended to hide herself from him, but all she did instead was press that sheer lace onto her breasts. Molded so completely to her shape, he could even see her nipples standing to attention through that lace. An image filled his mind of nipping at her breasts through the fabric, taking her areolas in his mouth with that lace between them.

“...Your Grace?”

“No more.” He stepped toward her, knowing he couldn’t hold back.

Besides, she had kissed him first at that ball. Was it not his turn to initiate something? Even if she was not aware that they had kissed before.

He moved to her and kissed her. He didn’t put his hands on her first, but only his lips, needing to gauge if she would pull sharply away from him in horror. At first, the two of them stumbled together, back a bit further into the library, their lips colliding. Then she started to kiss him back.

As her lips parted, offering to deepen the kiss, Rafe lost control completely. He snatched the dressing gown off his own shoulders and dropped it down his arms before reaching for her. He backed her up to the nearest stack of shelves and wrapped his arm around her waist, keeping her safe so the collision didn’t hurt her but his forearm.

He deepened that kiss as much as he could, pressing their lips together and tangling his tongue with her own. Unlike their

kiss at the ball, this one was instantly passionate, whereas that first one had been nervous on her part.

She could have pushed him off her and he wouldn't have been offended. After all, he had shouted at her earlier that night and threatened to throw her out, now he was kissing her with such wild abandon?

When her hands reached up his chest, her fingers brushing the open part, reaching for his skin, he growled for her in the back of his throat, wanting more of that touch.

Ah, Evelyn...

Rafe could not think of her as Miss Voss now, not after such a kiss as this.

He angled their heads, trying to make the kiss as deep as possible. Reaching up with his other hand, he tangled it in her hair, pulling playfully just as he had wanted to do. To his amazement, she responded to that tug, pressing her body further into his.

He could feel every part of her. Thanks to her height, her hips were not far off brushing his own, and she must have been very aware of the hardened length in his trousers. Her breasts were flattened against his chest, thrilling him with the thought of kissing them once again.

One taste... would that be so bad?

With his arm around her waist, he pulled her off the shelves and directed her further into the room.

“Tell me to stop, and I will,” he murmured, parting from her lips and looking her in the eye. He needed her to know that. He wasn’t some monster that would push her. He wanted this to be a completely mutual pleasure in every way.

She nodded beneath long lashes but said nothing. Her silence once more somehow aroused him further. It was the temptation and longing to know what she was really thinking at that moment.

When they reached the hearth rug, he dropped himself down onto the rug and pulled her with him. She ended up with her knees falling on either side of his hips, straddling him perfectly. Her reddened cheeks thrilled him to new heights.

A little more of this... I will not be able to hold back.

He reached for her dressing gown and took it off her shoulders, the whole time keeping their eyes connected, waiting for her to stop him. Yet, she never did.

When she was exposed completely in that nightgown, his length felt even harder than before. It twitched in his trousers, and thanks to her hips straddling his, she could clearly feel that movement, for a small, surprised gasp escaped her lips.

He sat up completely, his body moving to hers.

“You can explore,” he whispered in her ear, needing her to know that she was safe here to indulge. He’d seen once before at the ball her curiosity, her want to know more of pleasure, and when she came to him this night looking for lessons, was this not also what she wanted to know? Asking for seduction lessons ultimately amounted to one thing – she wished to know pleasure herself.

He kissed down her neck, teasing her with light nips and the temptation of licking her on a soft spot under her ear. When she mewled, rocking her hips into his naturally, his hand reached up and grabbed her hip, urging her to continue with that movement. The light friction she created between them merely made him impossibly harder.

He continued kissing down her neck and the open neckline of the nightgown. Where he kissed, his right hand moved first. His fingers trailed down her lace-covered breast. He hovered over her peaking nipples for a second with the lightest of touches, feeling her as she trembled above him. Slipping his fingers down to her waist where he splayed his hand, touching as much of her as he could, he moved his lips to her areola and did as he fantasized, lathing her there through the night gown.

Such a moan escaped her lips that his other hand had to grip her hip to hold her still. He feared that if he kept kissing her in such a way and she ground onto him with those moans, it might all bring him to his end prematurely.

That is not the aim of this. The aim is to see her pleased.

He continued to lath her through the lace, wanting more and more of her. She tipped back her head, her moans filling the air above them.

Now, his fantasies were changing. One thing led to another, and he had to satisfy something more.

Shifting his left hand from her hip to around her waist, he spun her off him and onto the floor, moving his body over hers. She gasped once more, laying still. Where her hands before had been on his shoulders, they now gripped to the rug beneath her, as if she needed that rug to keep herself breathing.

Lifting himself up a few inches, he hooked his fingers around the edge of her nightgown, watching her expression to see if she would refuse him. Still, she said nothing, nor did she shake her head. If anything, she watched him with wider eyes still. It was the permission he had been hunting for.

He pulled the nightgown down with that finger, just enough to reveal one of her breasts and stretch the lace. Her areola was already pink and hardened thanks to his previous attentions. He started slowly first, soft kisses, before he took more of her breast in his mouth, grinding his hips against her own as he sought out her pleasure.

One of her hands shifted from the rug. Her fingers toyed in his long hair, holding him to her.

She's a natural considering she has not done this before.

His mind filled with pictures of taking her completely. He could do so now. He could shift that nightgown up around her hips and pull her legs wide, releasing his length before he buried himself in her. She would be warm and wet, ready for

him, he knew it. He longed to hear Evelyn's moans filling the air, as her hips bucked against him.

I cannot do it.

She had no idea this was not the first time they had kissed, and he could not take her without her knowing that.

Yet there was something more he could do for her. Something to give her the pleasure and the moans he so wanted her to experience. Slowly, he reached for the hem of her nightgown and drew it up, so that the lace teased her skin. Her moans seemed to grow all the more at his ministrations.

He shifted his body, climbing up over her and pressing his kisses to her neck. One of her hands came up around him, loosening his shirt from his trousers and disappearing beneath that cloth. She ran her fingers down his bare back, her touch free as she clung to him.

He liked this new exploratory nature in her. It gave him hope that maybe things didn't have to end just yet.

With her gown now around her hips, he reached down to her, but didn't look. Instead, he raised himself up and kept his eyes on her, wanting her to feel the intensity of his gaze as he did this. Shifting one of her knees to be raised around his hip, he slid his fingers into her core.

Her moan sounded suddenly, her chest rising as she breathed deeply. The smile that curled her lips he mirrored with his own expression.

Her body was indeed ready for him, wet and warm. He slid his fingers in and out of her, wanting to simulate what they could completely do together, just to hear her moan.

Her eyes became half-lidded as her head tipped back, indulging in that feeling. The sight of her pleasure nearly undid him as he moved his hand faster, needing to feel every part of her. Shifting entirely, he moved his left hand to raise her knee higher, then he hooked his elbow under her knee and planted his hand to the floor, keeping her exposed as he pleased her.

It must have reached a new angle inside of her, as her moans suddenly grew breathier, her chest fluttering up and down in such a way that her breasts shook in the most tantalizing of fashions.

When she reached her climax, it was overpowering for Rafe. He could never remember watching a woman's face quite in that way before, marking every line as she moaned that teasing sound. The sheer feeling of her tightening around his hand was everything, so he didn't let up once. He just kept pleasuring her, riding out her high and watching as her body was wracked with pleasure.

Slowly, she came down from that high. One of her hands was still on his shoulder, the other tied in the rug beneath him. He slowly loosened his hand from her and moved down, kissing her.

After being so consumed by the desire, he knew now he had to shake himself free of it. He would love to take her completely, but he couldn't do that to her. She'd come to him for help, not

for him to take her virtue. He pulled back sharply and turned away, sitting up on the rug and facing the fire.

He heard Evelyn sit up behind him, slowly pulling her body straight and presumably straightening her gown too.

“I should not have allowed that,” Evelyn whispered after a few moments of silence, where nothing but the sound of the fire crackling could be heard beside them.

“You regret it?” He angled his head to the side, trying to see something of her. She had her head in her hands. That picture broke him, and he moved to his knees, turning back to face her. Slowly, he pulled her hands down from her face. “I should not have let my desire run away with me.”

“Desire?” she repeated, as if the word baffled her. He released her hands, not wanting to hold onto her for too long and outstay his welcome. Once more, he sank back, putting a bit of distance between them as he neared the fire.

“No other way to describe it, is there?” he asked, knowing exactly what had consumed him.

It was need. A pure need for her!

He breathed deeply, trying to get a hold of his attraction now and make his length soften. It would not though and continued to stand to attention.

“I... I should go.” She moved to stand, with her face blushing as red as her hair.

I have embarrassed her now.

“Wait, no.” He stood hurriedly, adjusting his trousers in the hope of masking his length a little. “You need this room more than I do. You stay here, and I shall go to my chamber.”

“You would do that?” She stared at him, her brows knitting together.

“I would not have you afraid to sleep.” He shook his head and walked past her. He longed to reach out and touch her, but the awkwardness that hung in the air between them now defied him.

Cursing at his own weakness to her, he left the room, not bothering to pick up the book from the floor where it had been dropped when he ran into her. He hastened through the castle, heading to the east wing and his own chamber within it. The moment he was inside, he lit a candle to keep him company and sat on the bed.

He hung his head back on the pillows, his mind filling with the pictures of having Evelyn above and beneath him as she writhed with her pleasure. For a woman who claimed to need lessons in seducing, she had done it brilliantly. Less than a full day in her company and he had pleased her on his library floor, longing to see her face and body contorted in ways he had never seen in any other woman.

Just remembering the way that her back had arched with her pleasure, the lace nightgown completely stuck to her body with their joint sweat was enough to make his length hard once again. Knowing he could not get rid of it any other way, he reached down and released himself, having to finish himself off.

With his eyes closed, he pictured he was back in that library with her. He saw himself spreading her legs wide and instead of entering her with his fingers, slipping into her with his member. He saw her face, with her lips parted in pleasure, that red hair wild and her cheeks pinkening. He focused too on her breasts that strained against the lace nightgown, begging to be released as he rocked into her, driving their bodies toward an oblivion of pleasure.

When his body finished, emptying himself onto the sheets, he sat up, frustrated that he hadn't managed to sate his thirst for her. If anything, he just wanted her all the more.

“Well done, Rafe,” he muttered angrily to himself and thumped the pillow beside him. “My first week of turning over a new leaf and I have a woman in my house, one I have pleased, and one I want to pleasure again.”

He tossed aside the sheets and flung himself over on the bedcovers, so frustrated that he made a resolution in his mind.

Come morning, he'd have to get Evelyn out of the house as soon as possible before he could be weak around her again. He worried now if he met her at the breakfast table, how he could possibly control himself when he saw her there. Would he kiss her again? Would he reach for her gown wanting more of what they had tasted this night?

There is no way I can find out. When the sun rises, she will have to leave. From now on, it's best I keep Miss Evelyn Voss out of my life.

He closed his eyes and for the first time, he didn't dream of snow or death. He dreamt of the library and Evelyn instead.

CHAPTER NINE



“Oh God.” Evelyn sat up on the chaise longue in the library, feeling refreshed after a deep night’s sleep. The candles had burned themselves out around her and sunlight streamed into the room.

She was covered, not only in her own dressing gown, but also in the Duke of Ravensworth’s dressing gown that he had left in this room the night before. She pushed the heavy cloth off her body, feeling the weight of it drift over her skin. It reminded her of the press of the duke’s body to her own the night before.

What have I done?

The shame swept in. It was a hard feeling to understand when it was mixed so much with the thrill as well. Her eyes darted to the hearth rug where she had writhed in pleasure at the duke’s attentions, wanting more and more of his touches. She’d been loving every moment of them, intoxicated and baffled by what pleasure truly was. It had been more encompassing than she ever could have possibly imagined.

I had not wanted it to stop...

When the duke had pulled away, her good sense had come back to her, and she realized what she had done. She had risked her virtue with a known rake, and the worst thing was, it had felt wonderful. Nothing had felt wrong about it. Nothing at all!

Hurrying off the chaise longue, she pulled the dressing gown around her body and darted toward the fireplace, avoiding stepping on the rug for it reminded her so much of what she had done with the duke. Just thinking about the way that she had rocked her hips against his own, out of instinct, made her face blush red now.

What must he think of me? He kissed me first, yet I hardly stopped it, did I?

Her gaze landed on the clock and her eyes widened in surprise.

“Two o’clock?” She had slept through the morning and into the afternoon. By now, her family would undoubtedly know she was missing. Her disappearance would be talked of, perhaps cause fear, though she thought more likely her uncle and aunt would fear some scandal.

I have to get home.

Evelyn reached for the doorway, leaving the duke’s dressing gown behind her, though she glanced back at it more than once, thinking of how she had cuddled under that material in the night, wrapping herself in the warmth and the scent that lingered. It was earthy, full of must, and with a hint of bergamot.

“Stop it,” she mumbled to herself and pushed the door open a crack, peering out.

Terrified about being seen by some of the servants at this time, Evelyn crept through the corridors, constantly looking back and forth for the slightest hint of movement. When she caught a glimpse of a maid moving between rooms further down the corridor, she hid in the nearest alcove, behind a tall white marble Grecian statue, and waited for the maid to pass. Once she was certain all was clear, she darted for the main staircase and took the steps two at a time.

The duke’s estate was more of a castle than a manor at all, so large and sprawling that she got lost more than once on her way back to her chamber. When she reached the room, she flung herself inside and searched around for her clothes, determined she had to change and be on her way fast.

As wonderful a memory as the night before was, she could hardly face looking the duke in the eye again. She had been weak, succumbed to lust and temptation, one of the many sins a person was supposed to avoid.

“It didn’t feel like a sin,” Evelyn muttered as she grabbed her gown and chemise off a nearby coffer.

A knock at the door captured her attention and she froze. Evelyn looked at the wood, imagining for some wild moment that it was the duke. Had he come to visit her in this bedchamber? Did he wish to repeat what they had done the night before? A wild idea entered her head of being on the bed with the duke above her, the two of them moving together. Would he enter her with his fingers as he had done before? She had no idea that was even a possible thing to cause pleasure, but the moment he had done it, she had been lost in bliss.

The knock sounded again.

Evelyn cleared her throat, hoping to clear her mind with it.

“Who is it?” she called.

“My name is Petra, my Lady. I am a maid in the household,” a voice sounded from the other side of the door. “May I be permitted to enter to speak with you?”

“Yes, of course. Come in.” Evelyn adjusted the tight cord around the waist of her dressing gown, doing her best to look decent as she waited for the maid to enter.

She stepped inside and curtsied deeply. She had a sweet face and had to be a couple of years younger than Evelyn, with fair hair tucked tightly under a white coif so only her fringe could be seen.

“Good day, my Lady.” Petra stood. “I wished you to know that the master has arranged for a late breakfast for you. It’s ready for you in the dining room.”

“Ah, thank you, but that will not be necessary.” To Evelyn’s mind, the fact that Petra hadn’t even blinked at the idea of an unattached woman staying the night in her master’s house, was a worrying thing indeed.

He is a rake. I knew that already.

“Once I am dressed, I shall be leaving the house,” Evelyn explained, gesturing to the screen nearby and showing she was going to dress right away. “I will be on my way as soon as I am able to.”

“Oh, my Lady.” Petra stepped forward, just as Evelyn moved toward the screen, her hand outstretched. “I am sorry, but I do not believe that will be possible.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Have you not seen?” Petra grimaced, clearly feeling for her. “I see you have not.” She moved toward the curtains that were currently open a slither and swept them to the side, revealing the full view through the window beyond.

Evelyn followed her toward the window, abruptly realizing why the light had been so bright in the library when she had woken. It wasn't so much a bright sunny day, but what light there was bounced off the thick snow that now enveloped the estate.

Trees appeared to be dusted with icing sugar, the green grass completely masked by a blanket of snow, and in the distance, where Evelyn was sure she had seen a lake as she entered the estate, there was now glacial ice.

“No,” Evelyn murmured, her gown in danger of slipping from her fingers as she stared at the estate. There was no chance anyone could pass through this deep snow.

The driveway was currently trying to be dug out by two men, with snow reaching up to their knees. Behind them, a horse stood whining, refusing to walk through the snow, but skittishly driving its nose up and down, making the stable boy beside him grapple to control him with the reins.

“Oh, goodness.” Evelyn sighed deeply. “...It seems I am trapped here.”

There are worse places to be trapped.

The traitorous thought made her angry at herself. She should not be longing to spend more time in the Duke of Ravensworth’s company, yet that was exactly what a part of her had hoped for. Her good sense took over and told her she’d have to find a way out of this house as soon as possible. In the meantime, she’d have to stay as far away from the Duke as she could. If she did not, she feared just how weak she would be when it came to giving him something more of her body.

“Is there anything I can do for you, my Lady?” Petra asked, her voice strained with concern. “You look as if you have seen a ghost.”

“Oh, erm... yes, please.” Her mind worked quickly. She nodded, deciding it was time to be practical. “Could you have some paper, ink, and a quill brought up here for me, please? I’d like to write to my uncle and aunt to assure them I am well. As soon as it’s safe to pass through the snow, I shall have it sent.”

“Yes, of course. Anything else?”

“Yes. Rather than eating in the dining room, may I eat with you in the servants’ quarters?” Her question made the maid’s jaw slack.

“Oh. Yes, if you wish.” Her hands fidgeted together. “Do you not wish to eat with the master, my Lady?”

“No, I do not.” She shook her head. “I think it best he and I avoid one another’s company in my remaining time here.”

“If you wish it, of course, my Lady.” Petra smiled. “Here, I shall have a bath brought for you too.”

“Thank you. That would be a good idea.” Evelyn sighed with relief. She thought at least with a bath, she could wash away the lingering feelings of the Duke’s fingers pressed upon her body from the night before.

CHAPTER TEN



*R*afe stood in the doorway to the castle, refusing to step out into the snow. He was heavily clothed against the chill, with a thick frock coat around his shoulders and the collar turned up that he kept breathing into. His breath clouded the air around him regardless, the cold penetrating every part of him.

Cursed snow.

He hated the very sight of it. With a blink, he could be back there the night that his betrothed had died, where he had scrambled to be away from the news, falling into that snow. The cold, the ice, all of it reminded him of what could have been and what he had lost.

“Your Grace?” one of the gardeners called from the driveway.

Rafe lifted his head, showing he was listening, though he did not step out into the snow. He feared he looked arrogant by refusing to come to the gardener, but that was not the reason he would not step onto the ice. It was fear.

The gardener loped toward him, struggling in the snow and nearly slipping more than once. He tried to dust the fresh flecks of snow from his hat and where they clung to his dark beard. When he slipped on the icy step, Rafe reached for him and caught his arm, stopping him before he could fall.

“Come, step inside. Shelter from this snow for a few minutes at least,” Rafe pleaded.

The gardener looked shocked, his brows raising at Rafe’s kindness, but he made no comment.

“It’s not clearing, is it?” Rafe asked, knowing what the gardener would say before he could.

“No.” The gardener shook his head. “As fast as we’re clearing it, more snow is falling.” He gestured out to the clouded skies that were rimmed with a golden light. It was the sort of snowy day where one cloud was indistinct from another, the sun murky behind the vapors. “We can keep trying, but...”

“No.” Rafe tried not to reveal his disappointment as he rubbed his hands together, trying to ward off the snow. More than anything did he want to get out of this castle and return to London. With his ordered repairs on the west wing now begun and underway, he had no need to stay, but clearly, there was no way he could escape now.

Did Evelyn leave?

He hadn’t seen her all day. He’d peered into the library in the last few minutes, but it was empty. The only sign of what had

passed between them the night before at all was his discarded dressing gown, coiled up on the chaise longue.

“Take a rest,” Rafe pleaded with the gardener. “All of you, please. It’s too dangerous to be working in this for so long, it’s better to wait for the snow to slow. Go to the kitchens, warm up, and get something to eat.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. Many thanks.” The gardener bowed to him and hurried out to tell the others.

Rafe watched him go, folding his arms across his chest as his gaze narrowed on the snow. He hated it so much that his eyes focused on the dimples left by the gardener’s footprints. He prayed to see some sign of the snow melting and the grass beneath it, but all he saw was more ice.

“Ahem.” The clearing of a throat startled Rafe and he spun around.

Stede approached from the shadows, his gaze repeatedly flitting between Rafe and the gardeners beyond the door. Rafe wondered briefly if Stede had overheard their conversation, and if it could at all improve the butler’s opinion of him.

Probably not.

“I have some bad news, Your Grace.” Stede stood calmly beside him, looking out at the snow. “The workmen that were due to arrive today for the west wing have not arrived.”

Rafe sighed heavily, his body growing taut. “I feared as much.”

“This weather looks rather set in.” Stede wrinkled his nose as he looked at the skies. “With the air so cold, even if the snow was to stop, it would take a long time for what has settled to thaw. Perhaps days, even weeks.”

“Weeks!?” Rafe repeated in fear. Would it take that long to return to London now? “We could clear the drive if it stopped snowing.”

“What of the roads beyond?” Stede reminded him calmly.

Rafe lost all hope. He leaned on the doorframe, cursing inwardly as he stared at the ice.

Once again, this cursed weather has left me isolated and alone, somewhere that I do not wish to be.

“I am afraid it is quite set in, Your Grace.” Stede shrugged, clearly feeling there was nothing left to be done. “May I advise we seal the west wing off in the meantime? If it’s in danger of collapsing, it could be a potential hazard if anyone were to stray that far.”

“Agreed. Would you ask the steward to handle the matter please?”

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Stede nodded his head. “Now, onto other matters...” He stared into the distance, toward the

trees that lined the very edge of the estate. “What are you going to do about your... *guest?*”

Rafe felt a jolt in his chest as he stared at the impudent butler. The tone of his voice showed he had no qualms about thinking ill of Rafe for having a lone female visitor in the night. An odd sort of smile reached Rafe’s lips as he realized that Stede would have despaired about the number of women he had entertained over the last few years at his home in London.

“I did not invite her,” Rafe said, the words escaping his lips suddenly. Stede gave no sign of having heard him or caring about the words. “She has not been seen all day?”

“No.”

“Then I shall see to the matter. If you would excuse me.” Rafe retreated from the butler, as Stede bowed deeply, refusing to look him in the eye.

My butler is not a subtle man.

Rafe walked away and crossed the corridors. He headed to the dining room, where he had requested a plate of food be left out for Evelyn under a cloche, so she could eat when she did rise. Stepping into the dining room, he saw the cloche still by a chair, with the cutlery laid out formerly beside it. He crossed to the table and lifted the cloche, finding the breakfast untouched and growing cold.

“Perhaps she has already left,” Rafe mused aloud.

It was possible. After their shared night, she had been awkward, clearly regretful of what they had done. The mere thought that she could have risen in the middle of the night or the early hours of the morning, riding out into a blizzard just to escape him, made him pinch his nose and curse. She may have risked her life in this snow, just to be away from him.

“Ah, Evelyn,” he murmured, lowering his hand from his face. He had half a mind to send a man out into the snow to track the route she would have taken home, just to be sure she had met no injury. Yet such a thing would be risking the man’s life too. First, he had to be certain where Evelyn had gone.

Images entered his mind of what they had shared the night before. There was passion and pure attraction. When he had kissed her, she had kissed him back, and hadn’t once pulled back as they’d rolled on the floor together, giving in to that lust and need. It had been animalistic, and a pull toward a woman that he had not ever known before.

She intrigued him. She was not only beautiful, but her words had fascinated him, and her boldness to come all this way despite her quiet nature showed there was more to her than first met the eye, just as he had discovered that night at the ball.

Reaching into his pocket, he took out the slip of paper she had handed him. He turned it back and forth in his hands. He could open it and discover inside what man she was so desperate to track down. Then fulfill this one promise for her.

I know what is written there.

He didn't need to answer his curiosity. He knew what she had written there regardless and seeing Mr. Windham's name there on the paper would only make Rafe feel awful. Folding up the paper again, he stuffed it down into his pocket, as deeply as he possibly could.

“I do not want to think of her trying to seduce him to come back to her.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



“*T*omorrow. First thing, I shall leave.” Evelyn turned the letter over repeatedly in her hand.

“What was that?” Petra asked, following behind her as they hurried through the corridor of the servants’ quarters.

“Nothing,” Evelyn lied.

She stayed by Petra’s side for the rest of the day, eating her food with the staff and also just loitering about in the kitchen, much to the amusement of most of the staff who had worked hard to make her feel welcome. The maids came up and asked her questions and the cook kept making her sweetmeats that he put in front of her whenever she finished with the last batch.

She decided that the Duke had a friendly cohort of servants, all except one. The butler, Stede, had clearly not been pleased to find she was still in the house when he came to the kitchen that evening to eat. He’d glared at her for some time and avoided looking or talking to her.

“That butler,” Evelyn murmured as Petra pointed the way to the staircase that led back to the main house. “He is not the

most... hospitable of men, is he?"

"No, indeed," Petra giggled conspiratorially. "He has high expectations. The housekeeper once said he had the manner of a duke himself!" She latched her hand over her mouth. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Ha! Fear not, no one shall hear it from me." Evelyn laughed with her, deciding she rather liked the manner of the maid. "It will be our secret. Now, which way do I go?"

"Up this staircase here." Petra opened a small door that led to a tiny spiral staircase. "It will lead you to the main floor and in front of you will be the master's study. Are you sure you do not wish me to deliver it?"

"I can do it." Evelyn nodded, quite determined. "You have done enough for me today as it is. Once I have delivered the letter, I shall retire for the night."

"Very well. Goodnight, my Lady."

"Goodnight, Petra." Evelyn took the candle Petra offered and held it aloft as she stepped onto the staircase. She was relieved when Petra closed the door behind her, so no one was witness to the way Evelyn stared at the candle, praying the flame would stay alight in the darkness.

Do not go out, do not go out...

Trapped in the darkness of this staircase without a candle would be one of her nightmares come true.

When she reached a door at the top of the staircase, she opened it wide, relieved to see she had come out in the hallway exactly as Petra had claimed. This hallway was flooded with lanterns. The new light made her shoulders soften as she crept toward the door of the Duke's study.

Pressing her ear against the wood, she listened in, checking no one was inside. So far, she had managed to avoid him, but didn't have the slightest intention of bumping into him now.

What would he say? What would he... do?

She felt her body betrayed her in answer, by shuddering with a sort of excitement.

When she heard no sounds from the other side of the door, she tapped lightly. Still, no answer. Reaching for the handle, she turned it and stepped through the door.

Inside, she found his escritoire was covered in letters, all neatly arranged into piles. On one side was a stack clearly labeled, '*To be sent.*' She was about to add her letter to the pile when another stack caught her eye.

They were unopened letters, all written in cursive and flamboyant handwriting that clearly belonged to women. Evelyn glanced at the open door, checking neither the Duke nor any of the servants had appeared in the doorway, before

she reached for the letter on top and lifted it, reading it in the candlelight.

The letter was indeed from a woman and judging by the less-than-subtle contents, she was a former lover of the Duke of Ravensworth. She was asking for another night together, her language straight to the point and almost pleading for his attentions.

A coil of jealousy curdled in Evelyn's stomach.

“What is wrong with me?” She put down the letter as hurriedly as she could, dropping it on the pile with the rest. Placing her own letter on the to-be-sent pile, she left the room, shutting the door softly behind her.

She hesitated there for a moment, thinking of the height of the pile of unopened letters. Had they all been from former lovers? She blushed at the mere thought that what he had done with her the night before, he had done with so many other women—no, perhaps he had done even more.

Now, she felt a new sort of jealousy. She was envious of the women in those letters, for they had experienced something that she hadn't, something that she longed to know more about.

Turning her back on the study door, she left, tiptoeing through the house and up the stairs, watching constantly for any appearance of the Duke. She saw no sign of him, but when she reached the upstairs landing, there weren't so many candles lit. She held her one candle higher in the air, hoping its soft light would fill the shadows in the hallway.

When she reached her chamber, she stepped in hurriedly and closed the door behind her, deciding that tonight, she would fill this room with light. Drawing the curtains closed, she blocked out the darkness, and lit every candle she could find. A line of them started on the mantelpiece, and more were placed beside the bed on small tables. Only when she was certain there was enough light to last until morning did she smile.

Come morning, I shall have to hope the snow has cleared and I can return home.

In her letter, she had explained her absence to her aunt and uncle by claiming that a friend of hers was in need. Her parents had fallen ill, and unable to deliver them food herself in the bad weather, she had asked Evelyn to go in her place. Evelyn had happily accepted and was now trapped by the snow. She had to pray that if and when her uncle and aunt retrieved the letter, they would believe it.

* * *

“I cannot do this...” Rafe swayed and put the glass down beside him on the table, struggling to get it to stay up straight. “How much...?” He couldn’t even finish asking himself how much he had drunk because he’d had that many.

That evening, he’d known sooner or later he’d have to go to bed, and he feared in that darkness the nightmares would return. He’d see the past before him, perhaps even more vividly than before because of all the snow.

“Dull...” Rafe murmured drunkenly as he shrugged off his tailcoat. Leaning against one of the posters of the bed, he reached for his cravat next, tossing that to the side too, and unbuttoning his waistcoat. Before he slipped the material down his shoulders, he halted, staring into the distance across the room.

He tried to focus on the flame over the candle, to stop the edges of his vision from spinning a little in the attempt to sober up.

Last night, I didn't dream.

For a second, he hoped wildly it would be the same tonight. It had been the first night in years where he hadn't seen the past play out before him, or some maniacal and devious version of it, sent to torment him at night by demons.

He saw Evelyn before him once again in the library. He saw her standing with the night rail gripping to her body, emphasizing all of those beautiful curves. He saw her demure smile, then the way she bit her lip as he moved toward her. Lastly, he saw her face contorted in pleasure as he'd entered her with his fingers, thrilling her with his thrusts.

He needed a way to comfort himself.

He stepped toward the door, snatching up the candle. Now, with such purpose in his step, he walked a little more soberly and didn't sway so much. Moving out into the corridor, he closed the door behind him and crept through the hallways.

He halted when he reached the entrance to the west wing.

Move on.

He walked past the cord the steward had laid in front of the doorway to the west wing, closing it off, and chose a different corridor instead. Rafe's pace didn't slow as he walked on, hunting out the one chamber he prayed would give him at least some comfort.

Perhaps it was mad to come to this chamber. After all, Evelyn had spent most of the night in the library. It would be logical to go there to hunt out some semblance of her. Yet he knew the library always smelled like musty books, and she was in this chamber long enough that she had to at least have left her mark on it a little.

I shall sleep here tonight. Perhaps her scent, the knowledge that she was there at all, will make me dream of her and not the past instead.

He reached for the door handle, turned it, and opened the door, striding into the room with a purpose.

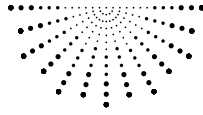
“God's wounds! Your Grace, what the hell do you think you are doing?” the sudden voice froze him to the spot.

Rafe nearly dropped the candle as he stared at Evelyn in the bright room before him.

Evelyn was half undressed, wearing her chemise and corset. She now flattened her gown over her body, in an effort to hide herself from him. Her red hair was loose about her shoulders, and her stockings were kicked off nearby.

“Your Grace!” she snapped again.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Evelyn couldn't form words as she stared at the Duke. He was different tonight. His clothes were wild and unkempt, as if he had tugged at them many times. Even his fair hair was mussed, and she imagined he had been pulling at the tendrils in stress, making them into an unruly mess.

With his long lashes, his eyes blinked madly, staring at her as if he thought she would disappear.

"Your Grace!" she snapped, releasing one arm from her gown and waving it madly in front of him, trying to stir him from his stupor. "What are you doing in here?"

"I... I thought you'd left," he managed to murmur.

"Left? In this!" She waved a hand at the window. She was angry. This was outrageous! Coming into a lady's chamber in the middle of the night? Unheard of and scandalous in the extreme.

As she moved her arm around, one of the edges of her gown fell forward, and she realized it must have revealed part of her

body in the corset and chemise, for the Duke's eyes darted down her instantly.

The outrage that made her body tight, now coiled into something else entirely. At his look alone, a curl of pleasure started in her gut, then it shot somewhere much further south. Self-consciously, Evelyn shifted her weight from side to side, between her feet.

“What is going on?” she demanded to know again.

The Duke stepped further into the room, closing the door behind him.

“Oh,” she murmured, unsure what else to say when he crossed toward her.

He wasn't quite completely steady on his feet. She stepped forward too, her eyes dancing over him.

“You're in your cups.”

“I am.” He marched toward her. There was no firmness in his tone, just softness.

Evelyn couldn't explain the reason behind her feelings at that moment. All she felt was sympathy as she stared at him.

Why is he drunk? Why get in such a state and come to this room when he thought I was gone?

“Your Grace?” She tried to get his attention again and backed up as he ambled toward her. She didn’t look where she was going. Each of his forward steps was mirrored by one of her own reverse steps. She stumbled on the edge of a rug and held her gown up over her body much higher than before. Eventually, she collided with the wall beside the window, heavily draped in curtains.

The Duke stopped in front of her, but only when he had planted his hands on either side of her on the wall. He didn’t touch her, but she could feel his presence. His scent wafted around him, that heady mixture of earth, must, and now brandy. There was something strangely alluring about it.

She’d never thought a drunkard was attractive before, but the Duke was no drunkard. He was just a man in his cups, unsteady, his eyes roving over her as his arms stabilized himself.

“Forgive me,” he murmured.

“Forgive you?” she spluttered in disbelief. “You have marched into my chamber and now have me pinned to a wall.”

“You could escape,” he reminded her, a small smile on his lips. He purposely lifted his arms up the wall, so they were on either side of her shoulders, showing that she could simply slip down and out under the curve of his arm. When she didn’t go anywhere, but just continued to glare up at him, that smile grew. “I thought you’d left this morning.”

“I’ve been hiding.”

“Have you?” His brows shot up, that smile still in place.
“From me? I hope not.”

“Last night... what we did...”

“Was bloody amazing.” His simple acknowledgment had her dumbstruck. She stared at him, her lips parted, as she couldn’t help wondering how his few minutes of pleasure with her had compared to all the other women who he had letters from in his study.

Surely, she could not have been bad at it for him to say such a thing now?

He cocked his head to the side, moving an inch closer to her. All the hairs seemed to stand on end on Evelyn’s body. Her hands gripped the gown tighter across her waist, but she made no effort to lift the shoulders and cover any more of the corset with it. She was too distracted, watching his movements.

One of his arms slid down the wall beside her, coming to rest near her waist. His elbow was tantalizingly close to touching her, within a hair’s breadth of her. If she sighed or fully exhaled, her corseted waist would touch his arm.

He tutted quietly, “you have been hiding.” Then, after a short silence, he abruptly laughed, a soft and quiet sound. “I never even considered that.”

“Arrogant,” she muttered, though there was a smile too on her lips.

He laughed once more, shaking his head at himself.

“I’m always arrogant, Evelyn. You might have to teach me not to be so.”

“Evelyn?” she repeated her own name back to him. “You called me Evelyn, Your Grace. My name is Miss Voss.”

“Do you think I can call you that after last night?” His laughter faded and he edged toward her again, closing a little more of the distance between them.

Her breath hitched in her throat. With one of his arms lifted, she still had the perfect opportunity to escape if she wanted to take it. There was only one issue though. She had no desire to escape. Instead, she stayed exactly where she was, as he moved to her, his hips brushing hers. That sudden intimate touch made him inhale sharply too. They stared at one another, neither of them moving away.

“Your Grace...”

“No more of that,” he whispered. “When I think of what we shared last night, what I went on to dream about, you didn’t moan such words.”

“Moan?” She laughed lightly. “You have been imagining things.”

“Oh, great things.”

Evelyn was intoxicated at his deep voice and sultry words. She began to think it was little wonder he had managed to seduce so many women into his bed. If he was this seductive with them all, then how could they possibly refuse? He had quite expertly made her believe that it was *her* that he wanted. And no one else.

“Still, I must call you ‘Your Grace’,” she reminded him. “It is proper.”

“And what we did was proper, was it?” he teased her.

She smiled, her breath gasping once more when he shifted his hips against hers. That subtle amount of friction made her settle fully against the wall, her grip on the gown loosening more and more around her waist.

“Call me Rafe,” he pleaded, lifting a hand and peeling a finger around the edge of that gown.

“I cannot call you that,” she shook her head. “You are a duke!”

“I am a duke, yes, who commands great reverence and does not enjoy being disobeyed. And I am asking you to call me by my name, *Evelyn*,” he said simply. Taking hold of a corner of her gown, he started to pull it through her grasp, slipping it from in between her fingers.

Evelyn could have clambered to hold onto it. He gave her every opportunity to claw it back. Still, she did not. Instead, the feeling of the silk brushing through her arms teased her

even more. She felt her breasts pressing tightly against her corset, as if they begged to be released, and that wet sensation just grew and grew between her legs.

When he had hold of the gown, he dropped it to the floor beside them.

“That’s better,” he whispered with a smile, replacing his hand on the wall as his intense gaze caressed her figure.

Evelyn held her breath. Never had she felt this way before.

Not in all the years she had been out during the season had any man looked at her with such desire, such... *admiration*? Was that what was in his eyes? Even Mr. Windham, as he had charmed her, had been rather plain in his advances. Suddenly, she understood what Kitty had meant when she had described Mr. Windham’s attentions. They were dull, as dull as dishwater.

It was a stark contrast to the Duke’s attentions. They were like fire. Glorious, smokeless fire.

“This...” he whispered and stuffed a hand in his trouser pocket, pulling out a balled-up piece of paper. Evelyn’s eyes darted to it, recognizing the color and the way it was folded at once. It was the note she had handed him the night before, when she had asked for his help in tracking someone down, someone she wished to seduce.

He hadn’t opened it yet.

“I do not want to see what’s on this.” He tossed the paper over his shoulder. It landed somewhere under a chair, though she didn’t strain to look exactly where, for he bent his arms a little on either side of her, his body moving to hers.

The temptation inside her suddenly grew. Her breathing became labored as she thought of kissing him again, pressing her lips to his and indulging in the pleasure they had known.

Would it be as good tonight? Would it be clumsy and awkward because he was in his cups? Or would it be just more passionate because he had let go of any inhibitions now and even asked her to call him Rafe?

Rafe...

The thought of his name made that wetness grow.

“Why do you not want to know?”

“That doesn’t matter.” He shook his head. She put it down to him being drunk, for what other explanation was there for it?

“Is something wrong, Your Grace?”

“Rafe,” he corrected her, moving his hips against hers another time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Evelyn's hands lifted from her side. She rested them on Rafe's chest, suddenly aware of just how undressed he was. The tailcoat was absent, as was the cravat, revealing a flash of skin beneath and the hint of chest hair that curled temptingly. She placed her hands on his shirt, one palm just slipping beneath the edge of the open waistcoat.

He practically growled at that touch, looking down at her hand upon him.

Oh... is this the power I can have over him? Surely not! He knows what pleasure is like with so many women.

"What is wrong?" she murmured again, longing to know why he was in his cups, and why he had stumbled into her chamber if he had believed she wasn't there.

"Nothing." He refused to answer, holding her gaze. "I'll make you a deal, Evelyn."

"What sort of deal?" she mumbled quickly. One of her hands drifted down his chest and he inhaled. She could feel the

lifting of his muscular pectorals beneath her delicate palm. It was as if she was attempting to tame a wild beast.

“I will help you as you asked of me last night,” he whispered, moving his head close to hers. “I will help you seduce any man you wish to.”

Any man...

A brief image of the masked man from the ball entered her mind, but then it was replaced with the man before her.

“On one condition though.”

She thought he was going to kiss her. His lips hovered over hers and she reached up a little, her eyelids half fluttering closed as she waited for the contact, but he didn't quite close his lips to hers.

“I get to have you for seven nights.”

Her eyes shot fully open, and she moved back down again to her flat feet.

“Seven nights?” she repeated in amazement.

It was a long time. To be away from home for so long was surely scandalous. What would her aunt and uncle say if they ever found out where she had been? As fast as these thoughts

entered her head, something else happened to make them shoot out.

His hands on the wall slid toward her. His elbow brushed her waist.

They need never know.

“Seven nights,” she whispered, “to teach me what I need to know? To teach me to seduce a man?”

“Yes, and to give me your company in return. Do you agree?” He angled his head the other way, mirroring her movements, not allowing her to escape his intense gaze. “Evelyn, do you agree?”

“I...” She thought fast. She could say no, but with the way the snow was beyond the windows, it was impossible to get away now regardless, and did she even want to?

I am not sure I do wish to leave.

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Then here comes our first lesson.” His eyes closed. “How to kiss.”

When he pressed his lips to hers, Evelyn quite lost track of where she was. She could have been in the library again, drunk on his kisses.

He pressed her against the wall, his body enveloping her own. Her hands clenched to his shirt, wanting him closer and closer as his kisses grew deeper. He bit her bottom lip, urging her to part her lips. When she did, he dominated the kiss, taking her tongue with his own and exploring her completely.

When his hands shifted from the wall to her waist, his fingers splaying across her corset, her own hand went to rest against his cheek.

“You’re a natural,” he whispered, pulling back from the kiss momentarily. “Now, you take control,” he breathed.

“Me?” Her eyes opened in surprise. He winked at her.

“Trust me. You take the lead.”

She did as he asked, rising on her toes and kissing him. As he had done with her, she playfully bit his lip, but not too hard. It made him open his lips, and this time, she was the one to explore. Their tongues met in a clash, and their hands grappled with one another.

One of his hands slid down to her hip, pulling her off the wall in such a way so that her hips brushed against his own. While her own hands slipped through the open flap of his shirt, desperate for a touch of his bare skin. It was warm, hard with muscle beneath. All she wanted was for that shirt to be gone.

“Kisses don’t end on lips, Evie.” His new nickname for her startled her, but she didn’t have a chance to question it. He’d

moved his lips to her neck and started kissing her there. “No part of the body is off limits.”

He kissed his way up her neck and found a sweet spot beneath her ear. She tilted her head back, breathing heavily at the attention.

“Let me show you.” He suddenly moved downward.

Unprepared for what he was doing, she was sorry to lose the touch she had on his skin and was forced to hold onto his shoulders instead as he kissed down her open neckline, then across her cresting breasts above the corset. Gradually, he dropped to his knees as he worked his way down with his kisses.

Evelyn braced herself against the wall behind her, with one hand clambering to cling to the paneling to hold herself up. She was so certain he was going to repeat what they had done the night before with his fingers, and she watched him in awe.

When he finally reached his knees, one of his hands gripped to her pale thighs. His fingers danced teasingly up her thigh, near her hip, then he swept the hand down behind her knee and thrust her leg over his shoulder.

“Lean on me,” he urged. “I will not let you fall.”

Evelyn was in a strange position of half leaning on the wall, half leaning on him, and still having one foot on the floor. She held her breath, waiting for the touch of his fingers, but it didn't come.

The second touch Evelyn ever knew on her core was from Rafe's lips. He kissed her center, and Evelyn was so shocked that a gasp fell from her lips as stray locks of hair fell across her face. Where shock first was, pleasure soon followed. He was attentive with those kisses, starting small with gentle laps of his tongue, then he grew bolder. He struck such buds of nerves with his attention that Evelyn could not stand still. Her hand scrambled on the paneling behind her, and she halted herself, stopping her body from rocking into his lips and wanting more of it.

"I didn't... know..." She panted through her gasps. "This was even a thing!"

"That's what I'm here for." He lifted his lips off her momentarily, and for a short second, she regretted speaking at all! "As I said, every part of the body can be kissed, Evie. It can be adored."

He returned his attentions to her, only this time, it wasn't just his lips and tongue. As he kissed a bud of nerves outside of her, he shifted his hand from her hip and entered her with his fingers. The dual pleasure had her overcome.

Within seconds, she tilted her head back against the paneling, as the overwhelming pleasure she had known the night before struck her hard. If anything, it was stronger this time. She closed her eyes, stars dancing in that darkness and lighting it up in the most beautiful way, while her body tightened with a pleasurable coil. The release was unbelievable. Her nails dug into his shoulders as he scarcely stopped his attentions to her but rode out her wave.

When her body was weak and she struggled to stand, his hands released her and gripped her waist, pulling her down from the wall and down with him. They ended up on the floor together, with her body straddling his. Breathlessly, she stared at him, looking at the smile on his face.

He seemed much happier now, more at ease and at peace than when he had first stumbled into her chamber all pent up.

“Let me stay the night here?” he whispered. “I can give you a few more lessons in kissing if you’d like,” he teased, hovering his lips over hers. “We can also sleep.”

He was giving her the opportunity to turn him down again. Yet Evelyn couldn’t imagine sending Rafe out of the room.

“Stay.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*R*afe had woken that morning without any dreams. Stunned at the transformation, he'd stared at Evelyn curled up against his side beneath the covers, her red hair wild.

He blinked and the memory vanished as he sat at the head of the dining table, waiting for her to arrive for their dinner. The day had not gone as he had hoped. He'd planned to spend every minute of it with Evie, to distract himself some more by indulging in her company, but it was not to be.

There had been signs of beginnings of cracks on the roof of the west wing, worsened by the present weather conditions. Under the summons of his steward, Rafe had gone to investigate the problem, with Stede hanging at his shoulder, making some impertinent comment about how it's a duke's business to keep a watchful eye over his own estate.

Now, at least, Rafe was free of Stede and the west wing. He sat at the head of the table, awaiting Evelyn and shifting his grasp on his glass of claret. Tonight, he wouldn't drink so much. Though last night, the liquor had made him even freer with her, he had a wish to be in control this time, so that he could remember every perfect second.

For one awful minute, he feared that Evelyn would not come. Was it possible she had crept out in the snow that morning? Had he just not been told by his servants?

That's impossible. The snow is too thick.

For a change, he had a reason to be thankful for the snow, not that it made him like it any more than before.

The door opened and he sighed with relief as Evelyn walked in, with a maid behind her.

“Thank you, Petra,” she said softly to the maid. “You have been most kind.”

Petra blushed and shrugged under her attention. There was something about the simple exchange that made Rafe smile. He'd seen many ladies over the years be so assured of their great station that they knew not how to be kind to servants. Evelyn was a sensible woman though, humble, and with this exchange, had revealed kindness in her too.

“Ring the bell if you need anything, my Lady,” Petra said with a curtsy.

“Thank you.” Evelyn stepped further into the room as the door closed behind Petra.

Rafe smiled at Evelyn and lifted the decanter of claret, pouring some into a glass for her. He saw the way she looked around

the room in bemusement, then walked toward him, taking the chair that was at a right angle to his own.

“No servants?” she whispered.

“No. For our next lesson, I wished us to be alone,” he assured her, gesturing for her to sit. She did as he asked and took the claret, smiling in a way that reminded him of when they had awoken together that morning.

He’d kissed along her bare shoulder and her neck, then she’d grown bold and asked if she was permitted to act on his lesson earlier that night in kissing him everywhere. He’d laid back, thrilled as she took off his shirt and explored him, kissing along his pectorals and abdominals. He longed for her kisses to go further south, but he wouldn’t ask it of her. He would not push her in that way.

“You seem distracted,” Evelyn whispered. “Is all well?”

“Perfectly.” He leaned toward her. “Now, first, tell me what you have been up to today in the castle?”

She told him of how she had been reading various books, in particular the Shakespeare plays. He took part eagerly in the conversation, struck by just how well-read Evie was. Something reassuring was that her tastes seemed to align exactly with his own, having more of a love for the comedies and the romances, and less time for the tragedies.

“There is however one tragedy I do like,” she said, lacing her fingers together.

“What is that?”

“*Macbeth.*”

“The Scottish play? What for?” he asked with interest.

“There’s something about the isolation in that play, the degradation of humanity, perhaps what anyone is capable of when temptation stands before them. It’s a study of human nature that I find fascinating.” She cocked her head to the side.

Something in what she said captivated him. He nodded, finding he couldn’t disagree with her.

“We don’t always know ourselves completely, nor what we’re capable of,” he whispered, staring at her as she smiled a little.

“Take me,” she murmured. “I hardly thought I’d be the sort of woman to come visit you late in the evening and beg for your assistance.”

He laughed warmly at her words.

“I am very glad you did.” He lifted his claret glass to his lips, taking a sip, watching as she did the same. They held one another’s gazes throughout, the tension in the air palpable.

He was tempted to sweep to the side their dinner plates and what food remained. He could urge her onto the table, make a

feast of her, and kiss her core again until she writhed and called his name out with pleasure. The night before, she had moaned his name with such desire that it had almost been his undoing. He'd scarcely managed to hold himself back from reaching for his own length and finding his release.

“Are you ready for your next lesson?”

“I am.” She leaned forward. “What is it you will be teaching me?” she whispered scandalously with a grin that met her eyes.

“Flirtation.” He leaned toward her too. “Now, contrary to what many women think, it is not purely lean forward and hope a man stares at your breasts.” She cocked a single eyebrow.

“You have looked at mine a lot, I seem to recall.”

He broke into a fit of laughter, stunned at her humor. For someone he had first thought so quiet in manner, she had wit to her. It was intoxicating really, as if he had to peel back the layers with Evie to discover who she really was.

“Well, it helps,” he whispered playfully. “You have more charms than a great many women I’ve had the pleasure of knowing, Evelyn, and when it comes to your physical attributes...” He pointedly glanced down her body, loving the way she blushed. “Yet, what many a man desire for just as much, is softness, tenderness. Even a gentle touch can drive a man as wild as a woman dropping her gown.”

“How so?” she whispered, her brow furrowing. “Let me see.” Rather than waiting for his answer, she reached down experimentally. His hand rested on the table with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbow. She gently laid her fingers on his exposed forearm and wrist, tracing a soft path with the ends of her fingertips.

A contented sigh escaped him.

“Something like this?” she whispered.

“That is perfect.” He chuckled softly. “Are you sure you need lessons, Evie? You seem remarkably good at this already.”

“I need instruction,” she said simply.

“Say those words to any man and you’ll have them eating out of the palm of your hand.”

“Really? How so?” She drifted her delicate fingertips higher up his forearm, moving closer and closer to his elbow. The raising of those fingers made his chest heave up and down, his breathing growing labored.

“Men like to be in control. Of course, they like it when women take control too. But if you make the offer of a man to... *dominate*.” His choice of words made her brows shoot up. To his relief, she didn’t look afraid and continued to smile. “It makes men’s minds wander.”

His eyes drifted down her as he thought of dominating Evie now. He thought of making her plant her hands to the table, flipping up the skirt of her gown and entering her from behind. He wanted her to gasp in shock at the suddenness, then for her back to arch in pleasure as he drove into her, riding her body.

“Oh.” She sighed heavily, the movement making her breasts lift and fall. “It’s so much to learn,” she whispered. “Seduction... it is no easy path.”

“You make it *look* easy.”

“You seem more attentive than most, Rafe.”

Any happiness he received from her calling him Rafe was quickly dampened when he realized another connotation of her words.

She’s thinking of another man.

The idea that she was considering using this flirtatious touch with Mr. Windham drove him mad. Jealousy coiled in his stomach; the anger suddenly so strong that he had to stop things.

He laid a hand over hers on his arm, halting her movements.

“I think you should have better taste in men, Evie.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Laurence Windham?” He scoffed at the name. “You make me wonder what else you like in this world, to think you desired him at all.”

She immediately withdrew her hand from his, pulling back in her chair.

“You do not know me.” She shook her head. “Do not presume to know my mind just because we...” She struggled for the words, her lips opening and closing.

“Because I pleased you?” he said simply. “I know something of you, believe me.”

“You were right in what you said before.” She abruptly stood up, so in danger of knocking her wine glass over that he had to reach out and grab it to stop it from falling. “You *are* arrogant.” With these simple words, she swept away from the table, heading for the door.

“Wait. Evie!” He hurried to stand, but she had already left, the door slamming behind her. For a moment, he thought about going after her, but he couldn’t get the image of her attempting everything he was showing her on another man. With a heavy sigh, Rafe dropped to his seat and downed what was left in his wine glass. “Well done, Rafe. Why did I have to insult her?”

The jealousy still curdled in his gut though. He pushed away the decanter, a sick feeling twisting his stomach.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



*S*he said she couldn't sleep in the darkness.

These words halted Rafe. He stood in his chamber with night thickly fallen, wearing nothing but his trousers. He was about to climb into bed, writing today off as a lost cause in anger, when this memory came sharply back to him.

The memory of how Evie had mumbled in the library about hating the darkness and sleeping alone was a sharp and sudden thing. He didn't want her alone in his house, afraid, and then he remembered just how easily she had slept beside him the night before.

They'd blown out the candles, yet she had been peaceful, just as he had been.

She cannot sleep alone in the darkness.

Without thinking much of his actions, he left the chamber abruptly, carrying a candle with him. He walked all the way to her chamber, not even hesitating this evening beside the west wing as he passed it. When he reached her door, he knocked.

“Come in, Petra,” she called from within.

Rafe hardly cared if she had mistaken him for the maid. He walked in regardless, closing the door behind him.

“Thank you for this bath,” Evie called to Petra, still mistaking him for another. “It helps after this evening.”

Rafe walked forward. He circled the screen that separated him from her and saw Evie sitting back in a copper tub. Her hair was wet and plastered on one of her shoulders. The content smile on her face faded completely and she sat up abruptly, making the water splash around her. She covered her breasts under the water, making him smile a little.

“I’ve seen them already, Evie.” He grew aroused, just thinking about how bare she was under the bathwater.

“I thought you were—”

“I know.”

“You are not welcome here.”

“Ah, still angry at me then.” He walked toward the bath.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” she said in challenge. In her effort to move in the bath and cover herself up a little more, she made the water splash again. He hovered beside the bath, gripping

the side of the copper that was warm. “You were rude and arrogant. Talk about seduction, do you think any woman wishes to be seduced in such a manner?”

“I was angry.”

“Yes! I could tell that, though I do not know why.” She looked past him, clearly in search of something. “Please pass me that towel. I wish to cover myself up.”

“To get out of the bath and use it, you’d have to stand before me,” he reminded her, a satisfied smile playing on his lips.

“Rafe—”

“Evie.”

“Don’t tease me now.”

“You’re not happy with me.”

“Not remotely!” she said sharply. She now crossed her legs beneath the water. His eyes shot down to the creamy long legs. He pictured them wrapped around his hips as he entered her.

How could he explain to her that he had been rude because the thought of her seducing Mr. Windham drove him to the edge of insanity? He couldn’t say it. To put it into words was mad! She was here for lessons in seduction and no more. He was the only one who had a personal attachment here.

She brings me peace. God knows why or how, but she does.

He bent forward and placed his other hand on the opposite side of the bathtub, so he could lean down toward her.

“Rafe...” she whispered warningly, yet the way she continued to say his first name rather than ‘Your Grace’ gave him hope. “I’m still angry.”

“Then give me a chance to soothe that anger.” He kissed her. It was sudden, yes, and he wouldn’t have been surprised if she had pushed him off her, or even splashed him with water just to get him away. Yet she did neither. Instead, she angled her head at once, as if his kiss was the very thing she had been waiting for.

He dominated the kiss, pushing her more and more, until he had hold of her mouth completely and they were both gasping for air when they pulled away. His length was rock hard, thinking of her bare wet body beneath the water. As he pulled back, she looked up at him, her cheeks blushing pink.

“And what’s this lesson for?” she whispered.

“A way a man should apologize for his mistakes.” Rather than taking her hand, he plunged his arm into the bath and wrapped it around her waist, using his grasp to pull her out of the water. She gasped but didn’t pull back or try to hide from him again.

As he carried her out of the bath, her body wet and glistening, he had no words left. He laid her on the chaise longue nearby,

moving his body over her, ready to pleasure her once more.

He started with what he had introduced her to the night before, hooking her legs over his shoulders as he knelt on the floor beside the chaise longue and kissed her core. She was ready for him, that wetness between her legs different to the rest of her body.

Clinging to the cushions beneath her, she moaned repeatedly, saying his name as he drove her toward an oblivion of pleasure. He wanted to show her more though tonight, something else, do more than just repeat what had happened the night before.

Slowly, he moved up her body. He concentrated on her core with just a single finger, entering her so he could reach her pleasure spot, then he kissed up her bare hip and waist. She had the perfect curves, for they were slim, matching her tall body and long legs.

When he reached her breasts, he kissed them, first concentrating on the valley between them, then moving his attentions to one. He kissed her areola and took it in his mouth as he had done the first night. Now, she indulged in the pleasure even more, arching her back up so she was pressed into him.

Her legs quivered, raising higher and higher. He moved his hips against her own as he circled his finger inside of her, showing what their bodies could be doing if he released himself from his trousers.

Her breathing grew faster, even more labored than before, her nipples peaking and begging for his attention. Releasing them, he moved to meet her lips and kissed her again, so she could taste herself on him. With their bodies attached together, he moved his chest over hers, loving the feeling of her breasts pressed against his bare skin.

He slipped a second finger inside of her and began to pump. Into their kiss, he could feel her breathing grow faster, with her legs quivering more and more around his hips. It was a sure sign of her nearing her end, and he didn't let up. He just kept pumping her, then curling his fingers upward, knowing there was a sweet spot there that would bring her new pleasure.

She hit her release. Rafe broke their kiss and raised himself up on one hand, watching her as she found that end. She blushed a rich shade of red, her breasts bouncing between them as her legs shook. Her body tightened around his hand, the rush of warmth and wetness making him want to plunge his length inside of her.

I cannot. Not tonight. This was about saying sorry for my behavior earlier.

Slowly, she came down, panting, with one hand on the cushions beneath him and the other planted into the center of his chest. He didn't release her body but kept teasing her with slow movements of his fingers, showing that if she wanted it, he would happily do that for her again.

“Well? Am I forgiven?” he murmured softly.

“I haven’t been given such an apology before, but...” She opened her eyes, looking up at him with a sultry smile. “I’d say on this occasion, you’re forgiven. Is this how you always apologize? Is it how you intend to keep apologizing when you say the wrong thing?”

“With you? Believe me,” he lowered himself down to her, hovering his lips over hers, “I have many ways I can apologize.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“*Y*ou wish to dress me up? Like I am some doll?” Evelyn asked in amazement, following Rafe through the corridors of the house.

“Pah! Hardly.” He indulged in his laughter, tipping his head back. Evelyn raced to keep up with him, admiring him as he laughed. It was something over the last couple of days she realized she endeared an awful lot, seeing him this open.

The night she had first arrived at the castle, the idea of hearing a laugh from him, one so joyous, seemed mad, but apparently, a few days could make a huge difference. He smiled now as he walked through the corridor, pausing when he reached a window. Only now did that smile fade as he looked out at the snow.

“Does it anger you?” She flattened her palms against the cold windowpane, looking out over the icy expanse with him.

Strangely, after his passionate apology the previous night, Evelyn felt she could ask Rafe anything. It was as if the night before, a barrier had been taken down between them. As physical and as passionate as their connection was, there was something deeper to it. He’d come to her when he could have

easily just sent her out of the house in anger at their argument. Instead, he'd apologized in his own passionate way.

The Duke of Ravensworth... I find myself liking him. Could that be so wrong?

"The snow?" Rafe's voice had deepened. "I just don't like it."

"Why not?" Evelyn thought there was something really rather beautiful about this castle in the snow. The trees were covered in their light dusting, and the lake beyond at the edge of the estate glistened with ice. "It's beautiful."

"Deadly too."

"What?" Evelyn looked sharply at Rafe beside her. He shrugged, as if unnerved to answer the question.

"Let's just say this. You know how you are not fond of the dark?" he asked softly, lowering his voice to a quiet whisper. He glanced over his shoulder, clearly checking that no one was around to hear them.

"Yes?"

"I am not fond of the snow." He jerked his head toward the glass that barricaded them from the ice. "It... unnerves me." He raised his arms and folded them across his chest.

Evelyn moved toward him. There was something odd about picturing the great tall and strong man beside her being afraid of anything, but she knew better than most that not all fears were perfectly reasonable. Oftentimes, they stemmed from haunting memories of life's most dreadful moments.

It's why I cannot stand the dark. It reminds me of that night alone with my parents gone...

"I won't press you on why it unnerves you," she whispered, laying a hand on his arm. "But let me ask you this." He looked down at the touch she had given him, his expression softening greatly. "If you do not like it, why are we going out into it?"

"I don't particularly want to go, but presently, in its current state, there is no safer way to reach the other side of the west wing." He inhaled fully. "If I am to teach you properly, Evelyn, then a large part of it is to show you how to dress in a way that catches a man's eye. There are some exquisite gowns in that part of the building. In an old coffer, there are gowns that once belonged to my mother, Theodosia Fitzroy. Beautiful gowns, fitting of a duchess, which would aid in our lessons. I can't get there by going through the castle as the entrance to the west wing is on the verge of collapsing. So this looks to be the only way."

He took the handle on the French door, turning it. He moved it so slowly, with such nervousness that Evelyn placed her hand over his.

I cannot let him do this.

"What if I were to go instead?"

“What?” He looked up at her.

“You have kept me company in the dark the last few nights now,” she reminded him gently. “Let me go to the west wing and get these gowns for you. Please? That way, you do not have to face what unnerves you too.”

Rafe looked ready to argue. He looked at the snow and shook his head.

“I couldn’t let you do that.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, it’s bloody freezing outside. For another, the west wing is dangerous – the structure is practically on the verge of collapsing.”

“You said yourself that its damage is isolated to this end of the wing, not the other where you wish to go, yes?”

“Yes, but–”

“Then it’s settled.” She took his hand off the door handle and turned it herself, preparing to step out. “I shall retrieve the gowns, and you shall wait here, *Your Grace*.”

Rafe still didn’t look comfortable with the idea and hovered in the doorway.

“Please?” She moved toward him. “Let me be of use to you.”

Something in his expression soothed and he smiled. With a tender look in his eyes, he slowly tilted his head, drawing her into a soft kiss. It was chaste, gentle, and it surprised her more than any of their previous kisses. Every other kiss had not only been passionate, but hidden in the confines of the night when they were completely alone. Now, it was day, and they stood in a vast drawing room, where any of the servants could pass by and see them together.

That kiss...

It meant more to her, somehow, as if he had kissed her for a different reason than the usual one.

“Very well,” he conceded with a sigh. “Just shout if you need help or anything. I’ll come running, even with the snow.”

“You have my word.” She stepped out through the door and into the snow-shrouded garden, pulling her Spencer tightly about her shoulders to ward off the chill. Before she left, Rafe gave her quick instructions of where to find the room in the west wing, then she set off, hurrying down the path that circled the castle, though she tried her best not to run, fearful of slipping in the ice.

When she reached the door that he had described, she turned the handle, surprised to find it was indeed unlocked. Stepping inside, she hoped it would be warm, but it wasn’t. It was as cold as the chill outside.

Halting in this narrow hallway, she looked about the space.

She supposed once, it had been beautiful, with a grand crystal chandelier overhead, and stark golden paintings on the walls on either side of her. The floor was tiled in ebony and alabaster, with the occasional pink marble accent. At the bottom of the staircase before her, there were two marble lions, welcoming the arrival into the west wing.

Yet what had once been beautiful was now caked in dust and cobwebs, showing just how much this place had been neglected over the last few years. Hurrying to her task, for she didn't want to be in the cold for too long, she climbed the stairs and headed to the chamber Rafe had described.

On the landing, the floorboards gave an ominous creak, and she halted, waiting to see if the building was as dangerous as Rafe and his servants feared. Nothing gave way though, and she was completely safe. Sighing in relief, she turned to enter the bedchamber beside her, when her attention was caught by a painting on the wall of the landing.

It was a stunning portrait. The lady, whose pale face was murky because of the dust, was beautiful indeed, with great arching dark brows and full lips. She smiled temptingly out from the picture. Judging by the fashion and the gown she wore, it couldn't have been that old a painting. Perhaps eight years old, or at the most, fifteen years.

Who could she be?

As Evelyn took a step forward, the floorboards creaked once more beneath her, and something seemed to snap somewhere. Not wishing to push her luck, she hurried to her task, leaving the fine portrait behind.

She entered the chamber and found the coffer, collecting a bundle of gowns and robes, though she didn't pay much heed to which dresses she took, for she was still distracted, thinking of the lady in the portrait.

Such a fine portrait. Why does he leave it in this wing? Why not have it restored and brought into the rest of the house?

Exiting the bedchamber and turning her back on the painting, she struggled to carry the pile of dresses down the stairs and out through the hallway. By the time she stepped back out into the garden, the weather had taken a turn for the worse. Blinking madly against the snow that shrouded her vision now in an effort to see, she trundled forward, heading back toward the main aspect of the house.

The door was opened for her, and Rafe swept her inside, taking the gowns from her grasp and dropping them on a chair nearby. Turning to face her, he brushed the snow from her reddened cheeks before leaning in to kiss her. He lingered this time, the brief chasteness turning into something heated.

“Warmed up yet?” he murmured against her lips.

“Mostly,” she teased.

He chuckled and took her hand, then gathered the gowns under his other arm.

“Follow me, I know just the way to warm you up.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“*T*hat one.” Rafe pointed at the gown Evie was wearing as she spun in a circle.

“Truly?” She paused and stood by the floor-length mirror, gazing at herself in clear bemusement. When she wrinkled her nose and glanced back at him, he chuckled.

“You don’t think much of yourself, do you? Lord knows why.” He stood up from the chair where he had been sitting and walked toward her, approaching her from behind. He stopped with his chin resting on her shoulder, gazing at her in the mirror. “Surely the past few days have shown you that you possess more than enough to seduce a man, Evie.”

“Do not tease me now,” she whispered with a light smile and fidgeted with the fabric of her dress. “I cannot pull off a gown like this.”

“I’d be more than happy to pull it off for you.” He playfully reached for one of the sleeves and knocked it down her shoulder. She laughed and righted it once more.

“You know what I mean. It’s rich in color, deeply so. My cousins... What they would say if they were to see me in something like this.”

Rafe believed she suited the gown perfectly. Unlike the current pastel fashion, this dress had been made at a time when gowns were bolder. The daring deep rose silk hugged her figure, its material tenderly tracing the contours of her slim curves. The way the hem brushed the floor accentuated her height too and had him thinking of those long legs that were hidden beneath. The slim bodice, tucked just under her breasts, offered a hint of bosom, but no more.

It was a scandalous gown, one that could make any man who saw her drop to his knees. Rafe was certainly tempted to do as much.

“Your cousins?” Rafe suddenly realized what she had said. “What would they have to say about what you wear?”

“They like to comment on what I wear.” She adjusted the sleeves self-consciously once more.

Over the last couple of days, Rafe had come to learn more about Evelyn’s circumstances. She was the daughter of a baron, but after the death of her parents, she had been raised in the household of her aunt and uncle, alongside her three cousins. One of the cousins was a name he had heard often, from his friend, Simon. Miss Hester Gulliver. She was the eldest of the three.

“What are they like, your cousins?” Rafe asked. He tried to keep the concern out of his voice as Evelyn shrugged.

“They are as they are,” she murmured, her fingers playing with the gown’s fabric once more. “Hester and I get along the most. I am not sure Kitty likes me very much at times, but perhaps she doesn’t like having to share her chamber with me. They...” she started but broke off, shaking her head.

“What is it?” Rafe urged, longing to know what she was going to say.

“I shouldn’t speak ill of them. I should be grateful that they took me into their house at all. They didn’t need to take me in,” she muttered, lost in her own reflection.

Rafe’s hand settled on her waist. At once, her fidgeting ceased. He captured her attention in the reflection with a soft smile.

“You can tell me anything, Evie. I will not repeat it to a soul.”

“You will not?” Her eyes glistened with a touch of hope.

“You have my word,” he assured her. “Now, what is it that bothers you?”

“It’s just the way they are,” she sighed heavily. “I know my aunt and uncle often resent my presence in the house, but sometimes, they go out of their way to make it plain that I am not one of them. I’ve seen other families,” she whispered, as if it was a great secret, “ones where they have wards, and from what I’ve seen, the wards are often treated as if they are a part of the family. They are cared for and loved.”

“And are you not part of the family?” Rafe asked, his hand tightening involuntarily around Evie’s waist.

Something tugged in his chest, a feeling that there was another kindred lonely spirit beside him.

She does not deserve to be lonely.

“Sometimes I am. Hester makes more effort than anyone else. My aunt seems to go out of her way to repeatedly make the opposite point, however. For instance, this is childish, so forgive me for what I am about to say.”

She hesitated for a moment but seemed to relax when he ran his fingers up and down her arm.

“Recently, my aunt discussed buying matching necklaces for a masquerade ball. She had spoken of it while I was in the room, and I naively and foolishly thought she intended to include me.”

“That’s not selfish. If you were in the room and she didn’t dismiss you from the conversation, surely that is a natural assumption?”

“It was a foolish assumption,” Evelyn corrected him, shaking her head. “I was not purchased a necklace as my cousins were, and it was made quite plain to me by Bridget that they just didn’t think I’d desire one.” She shrugged, clearly angry at herself. “I should not care. Why do I care? I shouldn’t.” She fidgeted with the gown another time.

“You do not need to fidget. You look beautiful.” He pressed a gentle kiss to the delicate curve of her shoulder, which was bared by the shoulder cap sleeves. She inhaled sharply, shivering under his touch. “I know why you cared, and it was a natural reaction. You wished to be a part of the family. There is nothing wrong in that.”

“Then why do I feel awful? Guilty? As if I am wrong to want such a thing!”

“Perhaps because they have cast you aside for so long. Put it like this, Evie.” He adjusted himself, his hand sliding across her waist and her stomach, pulling her back an inch so she was resting against his chest. “I have met Miss Hester before, and I have met your uncle and aunt. In all that time, when seeing them at soirées and balls, I never knew they had a niece who lived with them. You were not mentioned.”

Her brow furrowed deeply. “I wasn’t?”

“If you ask me, they do not deserve your admiration or your longing. Save it for someone who will give you a real family, Evie. Save it for the man you will... seduce.” It hurt him to think of her seducing anyone else but him, yet he also wished her to know the truth. She deserved something better, a family infinitely more precious than the one she’d been given.

“Thank you,” she whispered and looked down at the gown with a small smile on her lips at last. “So, if I made a gown like this, you think I could wear it at a ball?”

“You could, but why would you have to *make* the gown? Surely you can just commission a modiste?”

“I do not have the pin money my cousins have. My dowry and inheritance will not be released until I marry.”

His hand tightened protectively around her. Her aunt and uncle should be providing for her, she was their responsibility, theirs to shower with affection, theirs to love, and yet they were doing none of it.

“You need not make the gown, Evie. You can have this one.”

“This one?” she spluttered and turned around in his arms to face him. “I cannot do that. It is your mother’s!”

“Well, she hardly has use of it anymore. She died many years ago, and knowing my mother, she would just be glad to see the gown had a new lease of life. Take it, use it, it is my gift to you,” he assured her.

“But...” She shook her head, stepping toward him a little more. Rafe now wrapped both arms around her, just wanting her that inch closer, so he could touch more of her again. “You are not at all as I was expecting when I first arrived here.”

“What do you mean? I distinctly recall raising my voice at you,” he reminded her with a low chuckle.

“That was anger, shock, perhaps.”

“Certainly that.”

“Yet there is much kindness in you. A lot more kindness than I have faced from anyone else, ever. Is it all right to confess such a thing?”

“Yes.” Rafe blinked, stunned at the warm feeling that grew inside him at her words.

No one had ever called him kind before. Never. Not even the many women he had spent nights with had ever done so.

I was supposed to have left my rakish ways behind, but with Evie, how can I resist?

“I’m beginning to think you’re the one who is too kind to me, Evie.” No more words passed between them as she raised herself on her toes and kissed him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



“*W*hat’s the game tonight?” Evelyn asked as she sat on the edge of Rafe’s bed, wearing nothing but her night rail. Strangely, she didn’t feel embarrassed to be so unclothed before him these days. It felt natural instead, as if there was no better way for them to be together.

Rafe climbed out of the bath and draped a towel across his body. He faced the other way, so Evelyn only caught a glimpse of his rear and his shapely legs. It was clear that Rafe looked after himself from the carving of the muscle that stretched down those legs and then up across his rear and into his back. So distracted, she stared at him with her head cocked to the side, imagining what it could be like to trail her fingers across that toned skin.

“Evie?” He wrapped a towel around his waist and the pleasant image abruptly disappeared. “Did you listen to what I said?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry. I was a little...”

“Distracted?” He had a mischievous smile in place as he turned to face her, his length hidden beneath the towel. She couldn’t hold back her sigh. He had seen so much of her, yet

there was still a part of him she had yet to see, and her curiosity was getting the better of her.

Surely to seduce any man, it was an area she had to know about? Though Evelyn was beginning to question her endeavors completely now that she had been here a few days.

She may have initially come to Rafe with the plan of finding the masked man from the ball, but now, all her thoughts were only ever of Rafe. When she went to sleep at night, she pictured him. When she woke beside him, she trailed a hand down his chest, thinking of how she wanted each moment with him to last forever. She was even starting to dread the day she would have to leave his side.

Is this what it feels like? To start... falling in love? To be so attached to someone?

“You really are caught up with your thoughts.” Rafe laughed and stalked toward her from the other end of the room. Her gaze snapped to his face, away from his body as she chewed her lip, thinking of how she had been ogling him. “What are you pondering so intently?” he whispered as he stopped in front of her beside the bed and laid his hands on the mattress on either side of her, closing the distance between them.

“Nothing,” she lied, her voice squeaking. He laughed once more and peppered kisses down her neck. She loved the sensation so much, she reached for him, but her hands slid off his wet shoulders all too easily when he took a step back and released the mattress.

“Now, would you like to know my answer to your question? What lesson, or *game*, as you put it, we are playing tonight?”

“Yes.” She adjusted on the mattress, sitting tall and primly. “You have your pupil’s full attention.”

“Excellent.” That mischievous smile only grew wider. “I’d like to play a game of commands.”

“Commands?” She wrinkled her nose in confusion. “What is that?”

“We each take it in turn to command something from one another. We must do so, or we face a forfeit.” He gestured between the pair of them.

“What sort of forfeit?”

“What kind do you think?” He leaned over the bed again. Her eyes shot to the towel where she could clearly see the bulge of his length beneath.

“Maybe I’d enjoy the forfeit...”

“Don’t tempt me.” He chuckled and kissed her once more. He clearly intended it to be a chaste kiss, but she lingered, her hands sliding up his chest, and he stayed with her, angling his head and parting her lips, an expert at it by now. Their tongues tangled together, making the tremors of excitement pass up Evelyn’s body. When Rafe pulled back, she whimpered in disappointment, her eyelids fluttering.

“It will not be for long,” he promised her. “Right, I shall go first.” He gestured to himself. “I command you to...” He seemed to debate his decision, his brows furrowing. “Tell me a secret.”

“A secret? What sort of secret?”

“Any secret.” He waved toward her once more. “Something that no one else in the world knows.”

“As you wish.” She nodded and shifted on the bed, deciding what to tell him. She had one great secret. It was the reason she was so afraid of the dark, and she had never told it to anyone before. Oddly, it didn’t seem wrong to tell Rafe. He already knew so much about her, things that no one else knew. “When my parents died, I was locked in my chamber.”

Her opening words clearly caught his attention. His expression shifted to one of sincerity and he knelt before her, in front of the bed.

“They told me to wait there, and then I watched from the window as the servants were taken away. I was left in the house, forgotten about.” She shrugged her shoulders, as if it was something that didn’t matter, yet it did. “I was locked in my chamber all night, so young that I couldn’t light a candle. I screamed into the darkness, terrified of it.”

Rafe raised a hand over his face, covering his mouth in shock.

“I was just five years old,” she whispered.

A curse escaped Rafe's lips, muffled by his hand.

"When my uncle and aunt realized they'd forgotten me the next day, they burst into the house. By which time I was shaking like a leaf and terrified of every dark corner. That is why I cannot stand the darkness." She leaned forward to the edge of the bed. "Please, Rafe. Do not tell anyone that. I have never spoken those words to anyone before."

He reached up and took her hands.

"Believe me, Evie, I will keep that secret for you. God, to think what you went through." He cursed, shaking his head. "No wonder you're afraid of the dark. Anyone would be after what you had to go through." His hand tightened through hers.

"Is it my turn now? To make a command of you?" She smiled, trying to dispel the tense air between them.

"Any command, you may have," he assured her.

She looked down, tempted to ask him to remove his towel, but she chose something else first.

"Come and sit with me on the bed, instead of being so far down there."

He chuckled and did as she asked, coming to sit on the bed beside her. He wrapped one arm easily around her waist and

pulled her to his side. They fitted together perfectly, with her long legs curled up beside his own.

“My turn,” he said playfully. “Remove the gown, Evie. I intend to distract you from any bad thoughts tonight.”

Smiling, she moved to her knees and held her arms in the air, showing she was happy for him to do the removing part. He promptly did so, taking the hem of her night rail and lifting it over her head, revealing her body completely.

There was no chill in the air tonight, for the fire in the grate nearby roared, the flames licking the stones around them. Even without that heat, she wouldn't have been cold when sat so near to Rafe.

“My turn,” she said, sitting close to him once more. “Remove the towel.”

He smiled broadly, his head tilting toward hers.

“Why did you ever need lessons in seduction, Evie?”

“I am inexperienced,” she whispered, reaching toward his towel. He lifted his hand from the covering, giving her free reign to remove it.

“You know precisely what to do, in my eyes.”

She pulled at the edge of the towel, revealing his length. He was hard, and certainly bigger than she had been expecting. Gasping, she looked down at him, wondering how it was even supposed to fit inside a woman.

“How the...”

“Ha! You should see your face.” He reached for her and kissed her suddenly. Caught up in the kiss, she moved her lips against his own, angling her head, with her hands reaching for his shoulders, yet she had to soon pull away and look down again. “Evie,” he whispered, his voice deep. “My turn, look at me.”

“I am looking at you,” she pointed out. He laughed even more now.

“I meant, look at my face.”

She did as he asked, looking him in the eye.

“Trust me,” he murmured. “There may come a time when you’re glad I am hardly the smallest of men in that regard.”

“Oh, I see.” Evelyn understood the connotation. It was supposed to be more pleasurable.

An image entered her head. She pictured him laying her back down on the covers now, spreading her legs, and entering her with that length. Would she feel full? Would the pleasure be like it had been before? Or would it somehow be more intense?

“My turn.” She considered asking him to show her everything, to make love to her completely, yet her body shook with nerves just at the thought of it. For now, she wanted to learn more. “You said there were other things you could show me. Other ways... other places to kiss.”

“Ah, there are.” His hand slid across her bare back and her waist, pulling her in close so that her torso was flush against his. Her breasts curved against him, flattening.

“Show me,” she whispered.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice more tentative. “It is rather... different, what I have in mind.”

“Please, show me.”

He held her gaze, then his eyes darted over her. There was that usual hunger mixed with something else, though she wasn't sure what it was this time. Curiosity, perhaps? Longing? She didn't know.

“We can stop at any point, just tell me if you wish,” he murmured.

“Very well. Now, it is your turn to make a command.” She placed a hand on the center of his chest. “Tell me what to do.”

“God, Evie.” He kissed her briefly, his lips capturing hers in a searing kiss before he leaned back. “Start by kissing down my

chest, explore, as you wish to, as you did the other night.”

She moved herself, kneeling between his legs as she began to explore down him, kissing every part of his chest that she was curious about. Where she kissed, her fingers soon followed, mostly teasing him with soft trails. His breathing seemed to hitch, higher and higher, the closer she got to his abdomen and the pronounced v shape near his hips.

This area fascinated her. She trailed her fingers across it repeatedly, marveling at the sculpted shape, then kissed down him, coming so near his length that she had to move her head around him.

“Keep exploring,” he urged.

The command was deep now. She understood its silent meaning. He wished her to go lower. Any nervousness she might have felt evaporated when she saw the look in his eyes. They were hooded with desire, and he didn't even blink as he watched her. Feeling emboldened by that look, she moved to his hip, kissing him once there, nipping him playfully. As he inhaled, she moved to his length.

Her first exploration was tentative and slow. He clearly watched her, his breaths shallow. When she took him in her mouth, his commands grew. He told her exactly what to do, but never in a strong way, just slow and instructive. Aroused by the tone of his voice, she did everything he asked of her, drawing more of him in, and when she could get no further, exploring the rest with her hand.

Sometimes, it felt as if she gripped him too harshly, but he seemed to love that, tipping his head back and gasping at the canopy above the bed. She grew bolder still. When he could no longer make any more commands, his body gasping between breaths and moans, she did as she wished.

When she trailed a hand below his length, down to the soft skin beneath, his hips bucked toward her. Clearly, these touches sent him mad. She continued to pleasure him, as much as she could, watching as his body grew more and more pent up.

One of his hands creased the covers beneath him, clinging tightly to it, as another went for her hair. He tangled his fingers in her locks, not using it to direct her movements, but more clinging onto her with it, as if he needed that touch to anchor them together completely.

As his breath grew faster, he abruptly urged her up.

“What—” She was about to ask if she had done anything wrong, but before she could, she was flipped onto her back. Such a look of pleasure contorted the brief view she had of his face, before she lost sight of it. He swung her leg over his shoulder and went back to kissing her core.

The pleasure was so abrupt, Evelyn could not talk. She had hardly been aware how much her body had prepared itself for him as she’d pleased him, but she was wet and very ready for his ministrations.

Raising herself up on her elbows to watch him kiss her, she also saw his hand had gone to his length and he was pumping

it. Thrilling them both at the same time did something to her. She fell back on the covers, startled by the sheer speed with which she found her end this time. She saw stars, her body writhing and her legs lifting higher, not wanting the feeling to end as it encompassed her so completely.

He grunted and growled just a few seconds later. When he released her and sat up, she saw a thick sheen of sweat over his chest, glistening in the light from the candles and the fireplace. He couldn't stop smiling, and looking down, she saw that he had at last found his own release.

She reached for him.

“Rafe...” Her voice was but a whisper.

He moved over her and kissed her. No more words passed between them as she wrapped her arms around him and held him close. The kiss was slow and sensual, the two of them just holding onto one another, their bodies flattened, and their legs entwined. She could feel the wetness from both of them between them, yet she had no wish to clean herself up. It was too intimate a moment to possibly pull back from.

When he nuzzled her neck, kissing her in the arch at the base of her collarbone, Evelyn gazed at the canopy above the bed. She was so happy, so overwhelmed by the emotions of not just sharing such excitement with Rafe, but the freedom which they had together, the conversation too, that a familiar dread started to fill her stomach.

It was a dread she could not appease, for it was encompassed by a deeper fear.

What happens when the snow thaws and I have to return home?

CHAPTER NINETEEN



“*N*o more books.”

“What? I thought you were enjoying the discussion.”

“I was.” Rafe took the book out of Evie’s hand regardless.

So far, she had been at his house for a week, and to his relief, the snow showed no sign of disappearing or melting away. Four days before, it melted enough to let a lone rider through, who took some correspondence to London, but since then, the snow had returned with such vehemence, the rider hadn’t been able to make the journey back.

Deep down, Rafe was pleased about it. He didn’t want to think of Evie leaving this house. She made it light, whereas before, there had been only darkness.

“We can talk of Shakespeare another time.” He returned her book to the shelves in the library, not giving away the fact that he had actually loved their morning together.

They had talked non-stop about their favorite plays, and in detail had debated the virtues of the various Restoration comedies. There was something thrilling about arguing with her in such a spirited manner and seeing Evie come alive. She didn't resign herself to sitting quietly in the corner of his library, but she sat beside him, leaning forward and talking with spirit.

She seems free. As she should always be.

"It is time for another lesson," he said simply, turning back to face her and rubbing his hands together.

"What lesson?" She crossed her arms over the back of the settee and knelt on the cushion, turning to face him, with her attention riveted to him.

He reached a hand into the pocket of his trousers and slowly pulled out a thin strip of black material. He held it in the air for her to see.

"Are you going to blindfold me?" she asked with a sudden laugh. "What will that achieve?"

"All sorts." He winked at her. He had a sudden image of laying Evie down on his bed with the blindfold wrapped around her eyes. Without her knowing what he was going to do next, he could tease her, kiss her where she wasn't expecting to be kissed, and take the matter further.

That is not the aim though.

“Posture, mostly.” He urged her to stand straight.

“Are you saying I walk strange?”

“Far from it.” He laughed and went to meet her in the middle of the room. “You walk well and with complete propriety, but if you want to catch a man’s eye by walking into the room, there is a unique way to accomplish it.” He stopped behind her and wrapped the blindfold around her eyes, relieved when she didn’t pull back from him. He tied it softly at the back of her head, so she could get out of it if she wished to.

He moved his lips close to her ear.

“Are you ready?” he whispered, loving the way she flinched in surprise.

“Why do I have a feeling this lesson is just a way for you to be more mischievous?”

“Don’t put ideas in my head, or I’ll be pulling the curtains and showing you just how fun a blindfold can be.”

“Oh, you’re the one tempting me now!”

They laughed together as he placed his hands to her hips. Abruptly, the laughter died, and they both fell silent.

“What I want you to do is walk and accentuate these.”

“My hips?”

“Yes, but contrary to what you may think, I do not wish you to walk and purposefully sway your hips from side to side. What I desire... comes from here.” He slid his hands up to either side of her ribcage, holding onto her slim waist. She inhaled sharply but said nothing. “When you walk, project this forward.”

He urged her to take a step, pushing her waist a little so that she led in this way. Naturally, her chest was pushed forward, hardly pointedly, but just an inch more so that any man in the room would notice her slim curves. “Your hips will naturally follow.”

“Very well. But tell me this, what is the point of the blindfold?”

“To allow you to concentrate on your movements,” he said simply, moving his lips to whisper in her other ear. “Learning without sight can ingrain certain behaviors into you, make them come more naturally later. I also do not want you distracted by anything else in this room. Especially not me.”

“If you do not wish me to be distracted by you, then you should probably release me,” she whispered playfully.

“Very well.” He let go and stepped back. “There is nothing in front of you, nothing for you to trip on. Walk forward a little, as I have instructed, lead with your waist going forward. When I say halt, stop and turn. Then walk back to me.”

“As you wish.” She breathed slowly a few times, so near that Rafe just cocked his head to the side, inhaling her scent. Roses lingered in the air, making him lean toward her even more, not that she could possibly tell when she was blindfolded.

She stepped forward, away from him, and Rafe tried not to let his shoulders sink in disappointment. She walked forward a few steps before he gave her some advice.

“Too much, soften it a little,” he urged. She did as he asked, and suddenly, her walk became more natural.

Rafe smiled, for he had accomplished what he truly wished for. He’d seen Evie often walk around this house with her head bowed, demurely. Whilst it was endearing, he feared that she did it because of a lack of confidence. His simple instruction by leading with her waist forward urged her head upward, so she could not hang it low and hide her expression again.

She looks more at ease now, more comfortable and confident.

“Halt.” At his words, she stopped and turned. “There, walk back to me.”

She did so, walking straight to him, though she naturally had no idea how near she came to him. When she got close, he reached out a hand and took her waist, holding her still.

“Quite perfect, Evie. Perfect indeed.”

“Truly?” She smiled, with her lips visible beneath the blindfold. It reminded him a little of the night they met, how he had been the one masked that night and she had kissed him.

What would she say now? To know that I am the man she kissed that night.

“I think I rather like this blindfold after all.”

“Good. Then you have given me an idea of another use for it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



Evelyn looked down at the bed, stunned at the gown that Petra had laid out for her.

“It is a gift from the Duke,” Petra said excitedly, bouncing on her toes.

“A gift? This gown... it is like nothing I have ever seen before.” Evelyn laid a hand to the sheer material. She didn’t know such gowns existed, for it would hide little beneath the thin black silk and netting.

“It is beautiful.” Petra giggled and hurried to the door. “I shall leave you to your evening. Goodnight, my Lady.”

“Goodnight, Petra.” Evelyn waved in goodbye, still gazing open-mouthed at the girl’s excitability after she left.

Evelyn may have first feared that the servants would think ill of her for her unusual relationship with Rafe, but the only man who seemed to care was Stede. Every other member of the household had taken it in their stride, and most seemed happy to have a woman about the house. Evelyn was stunned when

two days before, the housekeeper came to her and asked what she would like for dinner.

Evelyn had struggled to know what to say. After all, she was not the mistress of the house, but the housekeeper had insisted it was right she chose a meal, so Evelyn had done so.

Petra in particular seemed happy to have another friend under the roof. They had never openly commented on the fact that Evelyn and Rafe often shared a chamber, though clearly, Petra knew of it.

Evelyn reached for the black silk, admiring it as she pressed it between her fingers. After some minutes of smiling at his gift, she changed out of her gown. There was a small note that was left with the black material that read, *'keep the corset, remove the chemise beneath.'*

She took off the chemise and then replaced the corset over her body, rather glad it was one that was tied at the front, so she didn't have to call Petra back to help her. Once wearing the corset, she reached for the black silk and pulled it on over her body. It wrapped around her, like a lounge dress, the silken ties fastening at the waist. The deep v-neckline revealed the tops of her breasts and the corset beneath. The sheer material also left the corset on show, before the black silk hid the skin on her hips and legs.

Crossing to the mirror, Evelyn looked at her reflection. As she stared at herself, her chin lifted high, she smiled. Maybe she'd never be completely satisfied with her face, but there was something about the outfit that made her feel empowered, even confident.

She had no qualms about reaching for the door of her rooms and stepping out into the corridor, hurrying to meet Rafe at his chamber.

In the corridor, she heard footsteps and darted into an alcove to hide. Stede walked past, mumbling something under his breath about lazy dukes, but he was soon gone, and Evelyn crept out again.

When she passed the west wing, she halted, looking at the cord that blocked off the entrance. A little way down in the shadows of the corridor, a brief glint of moonlight from the nearest window revealed a spot on the floorboards where they seemed crooked. There was also debris, as if something had fallen from the ceiling.

She stepped toward the cord, trying to have a better look, when there were more sounds behind her. Fearing that Stede would come by again and she risked being discovered in her outfit, she hastened to find Rafe's chamber, pushing all thoughts of the west wing away.

She knocked on his bedchamber door and waited impatiently, bobbing on her toes. The moment the door opened, all her movements stopped. He beckoned her inside fast, wearing only his breeches.

She followed him in, looking around in awe as she found the entire room had been lit by candles.

Something that had happily surprised her about Rafe was that he had never judged her for her fear of darkness. More than once when they had fallen asleep beside one another, he had

offered to keep a candle burning through the night, just to comfort her. Tonight, he seemed to have taken this wish to heart, and had flooded the room with candles.

Various candlesticks in a myriad of holders filled the room. Some on the mantelpiece over the burning fire, others on tables and surrounding a carafe of brandy he had brought up for the pair of them.

“Rafe,” she whispered, turning her head back and forth as she admired it all. “It is beautiful.”

“It’s for you,” he murmured, locking the door to make sure they could not be disturbed. He walked toward her, sliding a hand across her waist as he had done countless times before. So intoxicated by that touch, she angled her head to the side, giving him the space to kiss down her neck. He took the hint and did so, nipping playfully just beneath her ear. “Perfection. You do understand that I have nothing left to teach you.”

“Nothing?” Her stomach tightened. She didn’t want to think of their lessons coming to an end. Surely that would then mean when the snow thawed, he would send her home.

But... I do not want to leave.

She rested her hand over his on her waist, realizing something that seemed mad. If she had ever been told it was possible for a heart to attach itself to another so completely within such a short amount of time, she’d think the notion mad, but suddenly, it was not mad at all.

For it has happened, has it not?

Her fingers entwined with Rafe's and he was reluctant to release her.

"You have seduced me so expertly, many, many times, Evie," he continued to whisper in her ear between kisses, moving down her neck. "And you in this dress... ah." He sighed, his chest rumbling and vibrating behind her. "It is the most delectable thing."

Pray, do not send me away!

"I have a plan. Something that I think you might like tonight." He released her and moved to the table.

Evelyn held onto her hope as she followed him. He hadn't said 'for our last night' or anything that might have intimated it was their last one together. Instead, he beckoned her to follow him where he poured out two brandy glasses, presenting one to her. As they chinked glasses, she took a small sip, her gaze holding his the entire time. When he returned his glass to the table, he perched on the very edge.

"I have a surprise."

"What sort of surprise?" She moved toward him. He slid his legs apart, creating the perfect space for her to stand between.

A hint of jealousy coiled in her stomach, and she wondered how many other ladies he'd had in this room, surrounded by

candles, with brandy in fine crystal glasses as he talked of surprises.

Why is it that I wish to be the only one? How is it I can be falling in love with him after so short amount of time?

She couldn't answer her own questions as her thoughts ran wild. All she knew was that she was attached to Rafe, so completely, and it was not something she could pull herself back from.

“One we can have fun with.” He reached behind him and moved the decanter, lifting it to the side to reveal a strip of black silk that had been folded up and hidden beneath it. He took the edge of the strip in his hands and held it high, allowing the material to unfold.

“The blindfold?” she repeated with a giggle. “What did you have in mind for that?”

“Something mischievous indeed.” He smirked boyishly and held it between them. “It is your choice, which of us would you like to wear the blindfold first?”

The fact he put the power into her hands was thrilling. She downed what was in the brandy glass and then placed it on the table beside him. She took the strip from him and turned it over between her palms, thinking what she could do to him if he wore it first. Yet the possibility of her being the one to wear it was equally thrilling. She would not know what he was going to do to her – the focus would be on feeling alone.

“You wear it first,” she pleaded and held the blindfold up toward him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Rafe took the blindfold from her, finding it impossible to hold back his smile as he wrapped the material around his head, tying it behind his dark blonde hair.

“You have full control, Evie,” he said with a deep voice. “I’m yours to toy with.”

“Ah, Rafe,” she sighed with a happy moan.

Rafe didn’t know what he was going to do about Evie. He’d heard from his groundskeeper that evening that the snow was beginning to thaw. The next day, it was likely that a horse would be able to get through, maybe even a horse and cart, yet Rafe had no wish to lose Evie just yet. He tried to come up in his mind various ways he could keep her in the castle.

Since she had appeared, he’d been happy. Every day had been different, either full of their shared excitement, or just talking together, running on from one conversation to the next with ease.

When she slept beside him, he didn’t dream of the past, but looked to the future instead.

What am I going to do with you, Evie?

“First, drink.”

His thoughts were cut off as she pressed his brandy glass to his lips. He did as she asked, allowing her to tip the brandy into his mouth. He gulped it all, happy for the buzz to pass through his veins. She replaced the glass on the table with a soft thud, then her hand wandered down the center of his chest.

For some reason, not being able to see what she was going to do first, made him flinch in surprise and pleasure. He shuddered as her hand released him, wishing she would touch him again.

“Come with me,” she whispered, placing her hand in his.

He was drawn across the room, and he presumed they were heading toward the bed, before he became aware that the air grew hotter. They were not heading to the bed at all, but toward the fire.

“Now, stand very still,” she urged.

He felt the rug beneath his bare feet as he came to a stop. When her hands curled around the edge of his breeches, his breathing hitched, and his length hardened. It had already twitched when she entered the chamber wearing the black gown, but to think of her now so boldly taking off his trousers was too much.

Slowly, she shifted them down his hips, the material teasing him. He stepped out of the trousers, trying to think what she could look like as she tossed them away. He thought of her breasts against the sheer material, the way she would bite that full bottom lip, and the red hair teasing her shoulders.

“Don’t move.” Her lips were nearer to his ear than he had expected. Somehow, she’d ended up standing behind him.

He twitched, angling his head toward her as her fingers started a trail down his spine. They drifted from the base of his neck to the center of his back, then explored across his shoulder blades. He tipped his head back, indulging in her touch, as it began to travel. Her fingers moved around one side of his waist, coming to the very center of his chest.

They moved downward and he breathed in, his body holding onto the hope that she would explore his length again, then her hands abruptly rose across the middle of his chest, making tingles spread through him.

Her touch abruptly left. He tried not to whimper or growl aloud, but stayed very still, his impatience getting the better of him. He longed to know where she was, what she was going to do next.

The first touch he felt was to his length. He gasped at the suddenness of it.

Since her first exploration of him with her lips, she had grown more confident. The assured way she took hold of him,

pleasuring him, nearly knocked him over from the sheer delight of it.

He raised his hands behind his head, interlocking his fingers to stop himself from holding onto her hair and thrusting toward her. He would be gentle with her – he'd never want to hurt Evie. She was too precious for that.

The pleasure grew within him, that tingling and very familiar feeling starting within the bottom of his abdomen. Not being able to see her but picturing it in his mind sent him wild in the darkness. God, he wished to tear the blindfold off and devour the image of her, but he couldn't, not if he wished for her to keep the blindfold on when it came to her turn.

I know what will happen tonight.

Rafe made a decision as she pleased him. It was time she knew what the full intensity could be like. If she wanted it, he would make love to her completely, so that there wasn't a part of one another they did not know.

“Evie,” he whispered, his voice breathy. “You are going to have to stop, or I am going to be finished far before the time I wish to be done. This cannot end so soon.”

She still kissed him a few more times, laving him with her tongue. He had to hold himself back from his release, somewhat relieved and also disappointed when her lips lifted from him.

“God, Evie,” he moaned as her hands settled on his hips. Slowly, she stood, those hands rising up his abdomen and his chest before she wrapped them around his neck and pulled him in to kiss her.

His hands grabbed her waist, pulling her closer through that silken material, his fingers splaying across her, trying to touch as much of her as possible and grappling with her corset.

“Is it my turn now?” she whispered in his ear, releasing him from her kiss.

“Your turn indeed.” He reached up and undid the blindfold in one swift movement.

She appeared before him, her face flushed, either from the heat of the fire or her ministrations, he wasn't sure. With her hair wild about her shoulders too, the wisps tantalizing, he was in danger of pushing her down onto the rug and taking her there and then. He licked his lips and raised the blindfold toward her, wrapping it around her eyes. A small giggle escaped her delicate lips as he moved to stand behind her, tying it softly.

She stood perfectly still, clearly ready to bend to his will. The mere thought he could do what he liked as she waited patiently made that excitement all the greater. His hands began with her waist, tracing the curve. One hand slipped around her waist, then down across her hip, toying with the silk material of the black dress and drawing it up her body. His other hand went to the neckline of the gown, pulling it open, and releasing her breasts.

She tipped her head back and moaned as he touched her, exploring her breasts with the palms of his hands, sometimes firmly, other times so delicately that she strained into him, clearly wanting more of it.

He laid her down on the rug and moved over her, pulling up the gown so much that she writhed against it. The silk must have teased her as much as his fingers did, for she strained against it, as if indulging in the touch. He tossed the gown and her corset over her head, revealing her all completely to him. Now, the only thing she wore at all was that blindfold.

Rafe kissed his way down Evie's body, listening to her gasps of surprise as she didn't know where he was going to kiss next. He toyed with her, watching the way her fingers curled in the rug beneath her, as he kissed her stomach, her breasts, her lips, her neck, then down to her hip. Knowing what she loved so much, he spread her legs apart, but teased her a little more first, kissing her along her abdomen, as if he had no intention of going further down at all. When she moaned breathily, longing for that touch, he eagerly gave in and pressed his lips to her core.

The way she moaned his name, this time with no qualms about it, made him even harder than before. To see how different it had become between them now, with no nervousness, but pure sensual exhilaration, was everything. He kissed her, making her body quiver, her knees trembling across his shoulders. When her body was completely wet and ready for him, he moved up and rested his palms on either side of her body, nudging her entrance with his length.

Her lips fell apart in a moan of surprise.

I have to see her eyes for this.

He reached for the blindfold and pulled it off in one swift movement, gazing deep into her eyes as she smiled.

“Do you wish me to stop?” he whispered, waiting for her answer. He wanted her, but he wouldn’t take her if she didn’t want it.

“Please, Rafe,” she murmured through her gasping breaths as her hands found his shoulders, “do not stop.”

Smiling, Rafe moved down toward her. He found her lips with his own and kissed her. This kiss was far from their usual heated or fierce kisses. It was slower, much more sensual than usual. It made her nails dig into his shoulder blades before he slipped inside of her.

It must have hurt, for she winced in pain. He kissed around her cheeks and her forehead, then down across her neck. He didn’t dare move his hips as he just adored her with every kiss, wanting her to be as comfortable as possible before they continued on. When she rocked her hips against his own, as if with curiosity, he lost himself.

She felt perfect, wrapped around him.

Rafe drove his hands to the ground again, lifted himself up, and slowly slid in and out of Evie. The way she gazed at him, sometimes biting her lip, other times just letting her lips fall open as she moaned, sent him to new dizzying heights.

He couldn't get enough of Evie. He just concentrated on pleasuring her, trying to make her moan as much as possible. Sometimes he moved excruciatingly slowly, her gasps growing louder as she rocked against him. Other times, he thrust hard into her, loving the way she grappled at him, her body shaking as she raised her legs higher and higher, as if she couldn't get enough of this feeling.

He could feel her end coming. It was what he wanted, to see her so contorted in pleasure. Her eyes closed; her hands slid down from his shoulders to the center of his chest.

"God, Evie." He bent over her and kissed her neck, needing to be this close to her when they found their ends. She found hers first, her moans filling the air as her hands slid up around the nape of his neck, gripping tight. That touch sent him over his final edge too. He thrust inside of her one last time, overwhelmed by the sheer feeling of pleasure as well as the way she held onto him.

Panting heavily, trying his best to catch his breath, he leaned up just enough to capture her lips with his own again. She was smiling sweetly, her cheeks blushing richly pink.

"I..." She struggled for words, still breathless with desire.

"I know," he whispered. "God, that was amazing, Evie." She giggled a little before he kissed her once again.

Rafe couldn't imagine leaving this moment, so he indulged in it. He made no effort to leave her body just yet. Instead, they stayed entangled on the rug, holding onto one another, sometimes kissing and sometimes murmuring soft words for

only the other's ear. When he did eventually pull himself from her body, worried she may be sore, he collected her into his arms and carried her toward the bed.

He intended to keep her with him that night, so they could sleep together until morning like so many nights before. When morning came, Rafe knew he'd have to think of a way to keep Evie in his life.

I cannot let her go. Not after tonight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Evelyn awoke, warm beneath the bedcovers, though it had much to do with Rafe's body beside her own and his arm that was wrapped around her waist, holding her close. She smiled as she angled her head back, gazing at his peaceful face.

He didn't dream.

She'd noticed a couple of times when they slept side by side that his face twitched with nightmares, yet it had seemed increasingly to be the case that these nightmares faded. It struck her that she didn't think he had dreamed at all the night before.

But I dreamt so much!

A warm smile graced her lips as memories of her dreams, intertwined with moments of passionate encounters with Rafe, flitted through her mind. She had seen her and Rafe together again, making love.

She had no wish to leave him, none at all, but her body was sore, and she feared she had to wash up a little after what they

had done together. Sitting up in the bed, she looked around the room, trying her best not to wake Rafe as his arm slid off her.

Across the room, a door led to a garderobe. Inside, there would surely be a basin of water. Climbing out of the bed, she padded across the floor in her bare feet, heading toward it. And just as expected, a basin filled with cool water awaited there which she used to freshen up.

She thought back to sharing her first time with Rafe and found she hardly cared. Just as she hadn't minded the pain of the first time either. The pleasure, the excitement, the love that she had felt overpowered it.

Love... could it really be?

She practically giggled at the feeling, for it was what she felt, was it not? She had fallen in love with him.

Evelyn reached for a wardrobe behind her, hoping to find something to put on rather than the silky black gown. Inside, the armoire boasted a vast array of garments. There were rich hues of fine tailcoats and jackets. She searched between them, looking for his dressing gown, when something dropped down between two tailcoats.

Not wishing to create a mess, Evelyn reached for what had dropped and picked it up from the floor. In the morning light that shone through the curtains, she saw the thing she carried was a mask.

Not just any mask.

“It is *the* mask,” she mouthed as all her breath escaped her lungs at once.

At first, she didn’t dare believe her eyes. She walked out of the garderobe, holding the mask high in the air, so even more light fell upon it. It was a long dark blue and orange mask, the same elements of silk with the thick border that she had spied the night she stood beside the masked man at the ball, the man she had kissed.

No. This is not possible.

With trembling hands, Evelyn placed the mask on the table and reached for the black gown, not knowing what else to put on. She pulled the gown over her shoulders, struggling into it as she heard stirrings from the bed. Rafe had woken and rolled over.

Evelyn snatched up the mask and held it in the air, turning to look at him, her breathing so labored now that she felt like her nostrils were flaring. Rafe lifted his head from the pillow, his lips falling open as he stared at her.

“Evie...” he whispered her name, pausing for a long time. “It is not what you think.”

“Not what I think?” she repeated in disbelief. “You... you’re...” She put it together in her mind, closing her eyes as she saw that night again.

No wonder Rafe had so strongly reminded her of the masked man she had desperately sought after the ball. He *was* one and the same person.

“You were him. You were the masked man from the ball. The one I –”

“I am. I was.” He sat upright, the sheet laid temptingly across his body, revealing the hint of a sculpted torso. She looked away from his chiseled chest and his beauty, finding it unbearable to even glimpse in that moment.

“No. No,” she repeated, a coil of anger burning in her stomach.

All this time, she had wanted to find him, meanwhile he was always here, right before her eyes. Why not tell her who he was? Why not tell her, unless he never had any intention to?

“Oh, God’s wounds.” She backed up from him and ended up colliding with the table.

“Careful.” Rafe moved to the edge of the bed, about to get out of it, but she held up her hand. Suddenly, she didn’t want him anywhere near her.

“Do not come near me. You lied to me. You lied, Rafe.”

“Strictly speaking, I did not lie.”

“What?”

“You and I never talked about that night.”

“Oh, that makes it all right then, does it?” she spluttered. “Because you were *evasive*. I cannot believe this! You knew who I was the moment I stepped through your door, did you not?”

“Of course, I did.” He stepped out of the bed.

She couldn't look at him. She turned away and hid her face.

“Cover yourself, please.”

“Why? It's hardly as if you haven't seen this already.” He circled her and grasped her wrists, clearly trying to look her in the eye. “Yes, I knew who you were.”

“You knew, and yet you didn't tell me.” She jerked her hands away from him, not wanting him to touch her. “Oh my God. You were just trying to get this, were you not?” She gestured to the bed, thinking of what they had done. “I was like any other woman. I was one of many to you, weren't I?”

“Evie...” He didn't deny it.

“That's it, isn't it?” Her voice grew increasingly louder. “You just wanted to get me in your chamber. You seduced me. And oh, to my shame, I was seduced all so willingly.”

“Evie, that is not it.”

She took off, needing to be away from him. She put the table between them, but he followed her with a mark of desperation in his voice.

“That is not the case.”

“Then why else not tell me?” She waved the mask in the air. “Why keep this a secret at all?”

“Maybe I didn’t think you’d appreciate the way that we really did meet.” He folded his arms across his chest, his manner strangely calm compared to her own. “I thought you’d dislike me because of it. So, I wanted to start afresh.”

“Afresh!?” she repeated in amazement. “No, no. I cannot believe that.” She turned away and covered her face, seeing everything they had gone through all over again.

She saw the night she had first arrived, the way he had yelled at her, wanting her out. Was it all an act? A manipulation to arouse her and want the thing that was forbidden to her? The snow was a convenience, but one he had certainly worked to his advantage by keeping her here so long.

“It was all a ploy.”

“What? No!” He walked around to her again, taking her wrists and trying to make their gazes meet. She looked anywhere in

the room but at him. “Evie, listen to me—”

“How can I listen now?” She shook her head. “How many other lies have you told? Are you even afraid of the snow or was that also an act for pity?”

“That was no lie.” His voice grew firm. “I have never told anyone but you that secret.”

“See? If no one else knows of it, then how can I even know it is true? If you’re capable of lying to me about this,” she thrust the mask toward him, “then you’re capable of lying to me about anything. I cannot trust you.”

“Can’t trust me?”

As she tried to walk to the door, he cut in front of her, blocking her path.

“Surely by now, even you can see how much you and I can trust each other. This last week, it has been everything, Evie. Everything!” he hissed, his voice holding onto a sort of vehemence. “Are you really going to turn your back on all of that just because I wore *this* the night that we met?” He held the mask up.

Oh, how she wanted to believe his words. She wanted to hold onto them, to believe he did care for her, but as her lips parted to answer him, she realized something.

He has still not said he cares for me.

At no point had he declared any sort of affection. All of their closeness, their intimacy, it was physical, sexual, full of lust. Her heart was attached to him when he had made no declaration at all to her.

She took the mask from him and hung it in the air, so it swung like the pendulum of a clock from the ribbons she clutched to.

“Explain why you didn’t tell me about this, Rafe. Tell me why if you wish me to believe that any of what has passed between us this last week matters to you.”

“I don’t understand why you care about this so much!” He was suddenly furious, his words coming thick and fast. “Why should it make you so mad?”

“You lied!”

“I just didn’t reveal the whole truth. As if you did either,” he reminded her, waving a hand at her. “You came to me that first night with a name on a piece of paper. You couldn’t even tell me what name was on that paper. I have never looked at it, and you conveniently stopped trying to make me see it. You think I like making love to a woman knowing she’s thinking of another?”

She stumbled back, letting the mask drop between them on the floor.

He never opened that slip of paper.

She felt gutted, knowing that he had no idea what she had written there. She didn't know what was worse. The fact he hadn't dared look at the description there, or the fact he had just suggested he didn't enjoy making love to her at all.

“Well, fear not,” she said sharply. “I will not ask you to do such a thing again. It was clearly a mistake to be here with you in the first place.”

“A mistake? No. No!” Rafe tried to block the door again, but she moved toward it sharply, having every intention of leaving this house as soon as possible.

“The snow is melting. I shall be on my way home as soon as I am able.”

“We cannot let things end like this between us. I won't let that happen.” Rafe stood in front of the door, still refusing to move.

“No? Why not, when you already made love to me convinced that I was here to learn how to seduce another?”

He looked as if he had been kicked in the gut. He no longer waved his arms madly but let them fall to his sides.

“Clearly, I have been mistaken in many things.”

She wasn't sure what he meant by that, but he walked away. He let her reach the door as he went back to the bed and slowly sat down.

I cannot believe he lied. He did all of this to seduce me like any other woman, did he not? What other explanation is there?

When he made no further effort to explain himself but just sat on the edge of the bed, calmly staring at her, his face contorted in anger, she was even more furious at herself than before.

“Goodbye,” she whispered the word, her voice suddenly losing its venom as she hurried out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



“God’s blood,” Rafe muttered darkly as he pulled himself back out of the bath and wrapped a towel around his body. He’d barely dipped himself into the water to wash off before he reached for clothes and hurried to dress. Everything he did was sharp and angry, every movement he made was loud. He kicked the bath as he stepped away from it and threw the towel across the room.

She thought of Mr. Windham the whole time, did she not? She came here to seduce Laurence Windham. Remember that!

Her fury at him had seemed to make no sense, until they started talking about the reason she had come here. Abruptly, Rafe had seen it all for what it was. As his heart was falling for her, she had come to learn about seduction and pleasure so that she could use it on another man.

I despise that man.

He pictured seeking out Mr. Windham and decking him. Such a man who would cheat on her and kiss another woman at a ball did not deserve Evie. She had too good a heart to marry such a man as him. But she had too pure a heart that would forgive him for his transgressions too.

“How has it come to this?” he muttered darkly to himself as he pulled on his breeches. He’d had enough of this. He wished he could turn back the clock twelve hours and have Evie in his bed again, for the two of them to be content, but it was not to be.

One of the reasons she had to be so angry at the mask was because she had realized he had seen everything that night. He had seen her at her most vulnerable. He had seen Mr. Windham kissing another woman.

Did she fear I would think ill of her? For wanting to seduce a man that had kissed another woman?

Strangely, he didn’t think ill of her at all. All he felt was unbearable jealousy and rage.

There was a piercing knock at the door.

“What?” Rafe barked uncharacteristically at the door.

“It is I, Your Grace,” Stede’s voice came from the other side.

“It is open,” Rafe called.

Stede opened the door, his eyes going wide when he saw Rafe was only partly dressed. He turned away, blushing a deep shade of red.

“Oh, have at it, man. Let me guess. I am hardly acting like the duke you would have me be, Stede,” Rafe said with plain derision. He was in no mood to put up with Stede’s resentment today.

“I have come to tell you something, Your Grace. It’s the west wing.”

“What about it?” Rafe asked as he pulled on his shirt and went for his waistcoat.

“Did you not hear that sound?” Stede looked toward him, his brow furrowing.

“What sound?”

“About ten minutes ago.”

Rafe had had his head plunged under the water in the bath at the time as he tried his best to forget the feeling of making love to Evie.

“The west wing has imploded and collapsed.”

“Collapsed?” Rafe hurried to pull on his hessian boots. He barely glanced at Stede as he marched out of the room and ran through the corridor, though he heard the butler following him, chasing after him.

When he reached the cord that acted as a barrier to the other wing, Rafe skidded to a stop. From this position, he could only see part of the hallway and it had caved in. Half of the roof had torn open, the ceiling molds now just rubble on the floor.

“Christ. How bad is it?” Rafe asked, calling back to Stede who stopped beside him, panting to catch his breath. “How bad?” Stede looked sharply at him, clearly surprised to see him in such a state.

“Watkins saw it all happen from the outside. He ran in, claiming the entire other side of the wing had fallen in with the roof, Your Grace.”

The other side? The safe side? The side I had allowed Evie to visit?

“Other side? Did you not claim to me on my first day back that the other side was safe and had little work needed in the renovations?”

Stede dropped his gaze, and it must have been the first time Rafe saw a hint of humility in the butler. “Ah, yes, most apologies, Your Grace.”

A jolt of rage boiled through his veins and Rafe didn't wait to hear anymore. He raced to the staircase and hurried down, taking the steps two at a time. In his haste, he nearly slipped at the bottom of the staircase but narrowly managed to stay standing.

He reached for the front door and burst out.

His breath felt stolen from his lungs as he looked around, realizing there was still some snow on the ground. At least it had started to melt in places and the snow no longer fell from the sky. But traces of footsteps ingrained in the snow from Evie's previous excursion to that side of the wing conjured a pit in his stomach.

Breathing heavily, Rafe faced his fear. If he'd just lost another woman he loved from his life, he could damn well face the pain of walking through the snow again.

He sprinted around the building, deciding he would spend as little time here as possible. He stopped shortly before reaching the other door, for there was no door left.

It had fallen forward and was masked by rubble. Where there should have been an upper floor, there was now just open air. Dust still spiraled about the debris, showing how recently the cave-in had been.

Rafe raised his hands and covered his mouth, realizing with horror that the worst of the collapse had been exactly where Evie had gone inside the building when he had sent her for dresses. To think that she could have been in there when the building imploded made everything worse.

I am bad news for her. I always have been.

Rafe walked toward the rubble, hating himself more and more as he clambered over the fallen stones. He ended up on his knees amongst the wreckage, staring at the mess and demolition.

He'd ruined Evie's virtue, hurt her with his lies, and for what? For his own selfishness to be with her, when she clearly wished to be with another. *She wants Mr. Windham.* To think he could have been the cause of pain for her too, even... her death, made him nauseous.

He had stood by as one woman he loved had died, now he had brought another close to the same fate.

"She's better off without me," Rafe muttered. He scrambled to his feet and clambered across the rubble again. He reached around about the point where he knew his former lover's portrait should have been. He scrambled to find it, but his hands were frozen from the icy weather, and he struggled to move the rocks at all.

"Your Grace? Your Grace!" Stede's voice called out to him, but Rafe gave no sign of hearing the butler.

His search for the portrait slowly grew into a maniacal frenzy. He was growing desperate to find any sign that a glimmer of her was still here.

"If the rubble shifts, you could hurt yourself. Your Grace, please come out of there," Stede continued to shout from the edge of the garden. "I am begging you. Please!"

"Begging the duke, eh?" Rafe laughed at the notion. The mere idea that Stede could care whether he lived or died was laughable. "Worry not, Stede. If I fall and break my neck, you can rest assured you'll get a better duke than me next."

Stede said nothing. The momentary silence made Rafe lift his head. He saw Stede's expression. It was one of guilt as he fidgeted, his hands wringing together.

Rafe returned to the debris, pulling at the stones. His palms were grazed now, his fingers struggling to move more and more in the cold.

"Please, Your Grace," Stede called again, his voice quieter now. "It is dangerously cold out here. Come inside and warm yourself by the fire."

"You're a good butler, Stede. Never told you that, have I?" Rafe yelled out over the sounds of clattering debris. He tossed one of the bricks to the side, listening as it cracked loudly against another. "Yet I am not a decent duke. I shall stay here on my knees, defying your expectations, until I find what I am looking for!"

He had to find her portrait. He had to! She was still here somewhere, some semblance of her, he just had to look hard enough.

"Your Grace, whatever it is you are looking for, I fear it is gone." Stede began crawling carefully across the rubble. That shocked Rafe more than anything else, that his uptight butler would risk injuring himself by doing such a thing. "Anything under here could not survive such a crash. It is destroyed."

"No! Don't say that. It cannot be gone." Rafe raised a hand, urging Stede to stay back as he lifted another giant brick. This one was so heavy that he struggled, his arms straining, his

muscles twinging in pain. He dropped it to his side, and it rolled away.

His body gave up. He capitulated back down on his haunches to the rubble as Stede reached his side. Stede took his shoulder, holding him still.

“I am sorry, Your Grace. Truly, I am,” Stede said, his voice strangely quiet. “I can arrange to have workmen here to dig out this mess, but I beg you, do not risk your own skin anymore by searching for what is already lost.”

What is already lost...

The words had even more of an effect on Rafe than Stede could have possibly imagined. Rafe stared into that rubble, realizing with horror that as much as he tried to picture what the painting of his ex-betrothed was like, the memory was increasingly disappearing.

Instead, he saw another before him. He saw Evie as she turned away from him, with anger flashing in her eyes.

I've lost everything.

A guttural roar escaped Rafe's lips and he fell on his back, powerless, gazing into the clouds above.

The butler was quite taken aback by the sound. It felt an eternity had passed with soft speckles of rain falling over Rafe,

when Stede cautiously put a hand out to him to try to show him some comfort in his own way. But it was far too late now.

* * *

“My Lady, are you sure about this?” Petra whispered as she stood behind Evelyn in the corridor, shaking her head, her whole body dithering with fear. “The weather is still poor, I’ve heard from some of the servants even the west wing has collapsed.”

Evelyn froze for a moment, a chill running down her spine. Was that the noise she had heard? She had assumed it to be the rumblings of an oncoming thunder, but had largely ignored it for she would not have allowed the weather to keep her at the castle for any longer than necessary.

“...It is perfectly fine for travel.” Evelyn was determined as she pulled on her gloves and looked out of the window toward the snow. It had mostly melted now. There was a little sludge left at the sides of the road and on the lawn, but the drive had been completely cleared. Evelyn now had hope at least that on her horse alone, she could make it through the last of the sleet. “I shall be quite well.”

“But...” Petra looked ready to argue again. Then, her brows drew in worry, and she stepped forward. “Please, take care, my Lady. This weather... it bodes ill, I am sure of it.”

“You have a good heart, Petra.” Evelyn smiled sadly at Petra, realizing that when she returned home, there was more than one person from this house she was going to miss. She would miss Petra’s company. The young lady had been a good maid and a close confidante for Evelyn during her stay. “Thank you for all that you have done for me whilst I have been here.”

“Please, do not mention that,” Petra murmured as she tried for a smile that did not quite reach her eyes. “It has been so nice to have you here. I am sorry to see you go at all, in truth,” she whispered. “I... I apologize if I am being too forward in saying this, but...”

Evelyn turned to face Petra when she stuttered. “Don’t worry, you can never be too forward with me. Go on.”

“Well, it is just that some of the other maids and I wondered if you would be the lady the duke would marry at last.”

Something twisted inside of Evelyn at the words but she did her best not to show it. “Marry?” Evelyn could have laughed at the idea if she hadn’t been hoping for the exact thing just a night ago.

I would have said yes.

The truth hit her as if a wall of ice had enveloped her body. She inhaled sharply and shook her head.

“I am afraid your master is not the kind of gentleman who thinks of marriage.” Evelyn abruptly thought of all the gossip she’d ever heard of Rafe, all the rumors, all that her cousins had ever said of him. Evelyn had known all those whispers and yet had gone to his bed regardless, foolishly believing she could be more to him.

That mask proves he is exactly as Hester and Kitty said. He is full of wiles and deceptions.

“Oh dear, look at the time. I must be taking my leave if I intend to make it before nightfall. Goodbye, Petra.” Evelyn took the maid’s hand and Petra curtsied to her.

As Evelyn tied the ribbon of her bonnet, Petra moved to the nearby window.

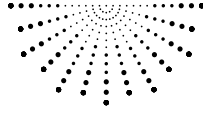
“Oh, how strange,” Petra said as she peered out the glass. “The master must have a visitor.”

Evelyn stiffened, fearing what visitor had arrived. If she was seen here, the damage done to her reputation would be irreversible. She moved to stand beside Petra as she looked out onto the driveway. A carriage had pulled up on the drive and the occupant didn’t wait for the footman to open the door for them. Instead, they flung the door open and strode down from the carriage. The tall body swung itself around toward the door, the top hat lifting as the face was revealed.

That’s not possible.

Evelyn felt nauseous as her eyes met Mr. Windham’s gaze.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“No,” Evelyn whispered as she stared at Mr. Windham’s face.

His expression was one she had never seen before, contorted, the lines around his mouth tightened, and his lips curled into a snarl, revealing clenched teeth. It made his face look longer than before, the cheeks hollowed with pure anger. He thrust his top hat at the footman who hurried behind him, then he marched toward the house.

Evelyn instinctively fell away from the window as she backed out of her room.

“What is it?” Petra asked at Evelyn’s side. “Is something wrong?”

“Evelyn!” Mr. Windham barked her name.

Both Evelyn and Petra flinched.

“So, this is where you have been hiding?” he yelled out into the entrance hall of the castle.

Evelyn shuffled through the hallway, not thinking about what she was doing. All she could focus on was the sight of his anger, with his eyes bulging so much she could see the whites around them.

“You have decidedly become a common lady of the night, have you?”

“Mr. Windham—” She tried to protest, but her voice was quiet, and he marched up the staircase all too easily, as if he owned the place. He reached for her wrist, gripping it tightly, before dragging her back toward the front door.

“My Lady,” Petra murmured, hurrying behind her. “Shall I tell the master?”

“What? No!” Evelyn said in sudden panic. She couldn’t imagine anything worse than Rafe and Mr. Windham coming face to face at this moment. “I... I was leaving anyway. Please, do not bother the duke with this.”

“You disgust me,” Mr. Windham carried on as if their conversation had not happened at all. He towed her out onto the step in front of the house, looking her up and down. “Your virtue is gone, is it not?”

She blushed bright red, feeling the heat raging in her cheeks as she stared at him.

I thought he was a man of propriety...

She saw at once how wrong she had been about such an assumption. Had he not kissed another woman at a ball? Was he not looking at her now as if she were some courtesan?

“Get in,” he ordered, dragging her down the rest of the steps.

Evelyn struggled to carry her bag and follow him at such a brisk pace. She was in danger of tripping over the hem of her gown as she was dragged after him. Behind her, Petra still followed, her eyes wide with her own fear, though she remained silent this time.

As they reached the carriage, Mr. Windham flung the door open.

“In!” he ordered again.

“How—how did you find me here?” Evelyn asked, desperate now. Mr. Windham showed no sign of having heard her. Instead, he released her hand and hooked his arm around her waist, forcing her into the carriage. “Mr. Windham! I am not some toy to manhandle around!”

“You are a woman. A fallen woman, from what I can tell,” he hissed in her ear. “Any right you had to be treated like a lady is gone. In, now, before I toss you in there!” Despite his words, he grappled her in any way.

“My Lady!” Petra called with panic again.

“It’s all right, Petra,” Evelyn called back to her, not sure what else to say. What could the maid possibly do to help her now? Nothing. She would only put herself in harm’s way if she tried.

Evelyn fell into the carriage as Mr. Windham shoved her harshly in the back. For a second, she fell on her knees, feeling the pain radiate up her thighs as she compared that harsh shove in her back to all the soft and passionate touches Rafe had ever given her. He had treated her like she was a delicacy to him, and she had begun to take it for granted.

Her breath caught in her throat as she realized that despite the fact Rafe had lied to her, her heart still cared for him. Perhaps it explained why she was so angry with the revelation. Because she cared for him so much.

“Sit. I won’t have you kneeling on the floor like a dog.” Mr. Windham took her shoulder and forced her onto the bench. “Though I shudder to think how much you have already been on your knees while you’ve been here.”

His suggestion had her cringing, wincing away from his touch as she cowered back on the bench.

The door was slammed shut with finality, and Mr. Windham banged his fist against the side of the carriage. Evelyn moved to the window of the coach, looking out to see Petra tearfully waving at her, still full of fear. Evelyn waved back, before her eyes darted to the house. Desperately, she longed for one last glance of Rafe, one thing to keep her heart beating for him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Remember the truth. She reminded herself. *I was one of many women to him. I was nothing more.*

“I cannot believe this,” Mr. Windham muttered repeatedly. “What kind of woman have you become? You? You of all people, Evelyn? The woman who is more like a mouse than a lady at all.”

“I beg your pardon?” She jerked her head toward him in disgust, her jaw hanging open. “If you think so ill of me, so little of me, why come to reclaim me from that house?”

She had so many questions, such as how he had known she was there in the first place, but this was the question that burned in her mind more than anything.

“Why take me out of there?”

“Pah! You think your uncle and I do not have an understanding?” He suddenly leaned forward. His superior height made her feel very small. She slunk back into the corner of the carriage, her spine slumping.

She found she unconsciously compared the two men again. Where Rafe’s greater height made her feel safe, protected, Mr. Windham’s made her feel terrified, small.

“An understanding?” she whispered in fear. He reached for her hand and bent it back, capturing her wrist and dragging her forward so that she was near him. “Ow. Mr. Windham, you are hurting me!”

“Good, then perhaps you will pay attention,” he hissed. “I am marrying you, Evelyn. And that is final.”

“Marrying me? Still?” she spluttered. She tore her wrist out of his grasp, hardly caring that his nails grazed her skin and even drew blood. She’d rather have his hand off her. “After you kissed another woman? After you despise me so much for being in another man’s house and could disparage me so? Why in God’s name would you wish to marry me still?”

“That dowry of yours.” He suddenly smiled, a wicked grin that made her stomach clench. “It’s no small amount, is it?”

“It was about that all this time? And you say that *I* disgust you?” She sneered at him, seeing Mr. Windham and his true colors for the first time. “Abhor me for being in that man’s house if you must—”

“Do not mention him. I will not hear him mentioned once we are married. Nor will you speak of this past week to anyone ever.”

“Why not?” She laughed at the idea. “It’s acceptable for you to have affairs, Mr. Windham, but apparently not for your wife?”

“Since when did you get such a loud voice?” He moved toward her again, but this time, she didn’t let her spine slump.

“It was always here. I merely chose to wait until the right time to use it.” Her voice was firm. “Wake up and see the hypocrisy of your words. Do not think ill of me for what you yourself have undoubtedly done.”

“When we are married, I will teach you to curb that sharp tongue of yours.” He sat back, looking strangely calm as he drummed his fingers on his knees. “You won’t make such noises again, and I will never, ever, find you in the company of *that* man again.”

Evelyn breathed deeply, feeling tears prick her eyes. All her anger at Rafe didn’t seem so important anymore. Yes, she was upset about his lie, but the mere thought of never seeing him again cut her open, as if her heart bled in her chest.

* * *

Evelyn didn’t know what was worse, her Uncle Peter’s judgmental glare or her Aunt Mavis’ refusal to face her at all.

Evelyn stood in the drawing room of the house with Mavis crying into a handkerchief, her hands shaking as she sat in a plush armchair. At her side was Peter, glowering at Evelyn as if she was muck beneath his feet.

“I cannot condone this,” Peter whispered, voice almost trembling. “To think that you... *you*, Evelyn, of all people.” He shuddered and looked away, leaning with his hands on the back of his wife’s chair. “You found her there then?” he appealed to Mr. Windham who sat calmly in a Chesterfield settee a short distance away.

“I did.” Mr. Windham seemed strangely in control of the room as he took his pipe out of his tailcoat pocket and lit it.

Evelyn shot a glare at him. It was traditional for men to smoke away from ladies, but apparently, he no longer cared for such propriety. He puffed the smoke into the air, his eyes never once looking at Evelyn again.

“It was as we all feared,” Mr. Windham said, insufferably calm. “She has been in that rake’s company for far too long. If anyone discovers it, her reputation, her name, *your* whole family’s name...” He paused for dramatic effect, looking to the skies, “It will be scandalized.”

Evelyn balled her hands into fists at her side, tempted to walk across the room and slap him. He was trying to manipulate her family against her and into accepting their match now. She would be rushed into a quick marriage, to ensure no one heard of her misdemeanors. While he would get away unscathed, with his reputation still intact.

“No one need ever know where I was,” Evelyn murmured, finding her voice finally as she looked at her aunt and uncle. “The family name is safe.”

“Safe? Safe!? Do not act even more the foolish child than you already have been!” her uncle’s voice boomed. She tried not to flinch at the sound, but her body acted involuntarily, jumping as his voice thundered off the ceiling. “The servants of that house know you were there in Sussex. There will be whispers, there probably already are.”

“Oh, this is too awful!” Mavis suddenly wailed into her handkerchief. “How could you do this to us, Evelyn? After all I have ever done for you? Raised you as my own, loved you.” She placed a hand over her heart.

“As your own?” Evelyn asked with derision, arching a single brow. “I was always the niece you didn’t want under your roof, Aunt. If we are to be open and honest about everything at this moment, then let us not begin by telling lies.”

Her words made Mavis squeal louder. She flung herself back into her chair, covering her face with her handkerchief as Peter reached down and took her shoulder.

“Ungrateful child,” he snapped in Evelyn’s direction. “You are fortunate Mr. Windham came to retrieve you at all. By the end of the week, the Duke of Ravensworth would have had enough of you. He would have deposited you somewhere far from London, a mere harlot in a coastal town probably, raising a bastard child—”

“Oh, Peter,” Mavis cried harder again.

Evelyn looked away, out of the window. Snow was falling lightly once more. Evelyn knew she would have done anything to be away from this conversation, even stride out in that snow. The mere thought of walking through the snow made her think of the day that Rafe had been so reluctant to walk in the snow himself.

I asked if he was lying about that. Strangely... no, I do not think he lied about that.

His expression had felt so genuine at that moment. And that is what made him such an enigma now.

“We must act fast,” Mr. Windham said, abruptly standing from his chair. He puffed on his pipe and walked to Evelyn’s side, not looking at her, but once again, taking control of the room. Evelyn pointedly coughed on the smoke he created, but he made no effort to move away from her. “The messenger we questioned will keep his silence. He has assured me of that. I paid him well for it.”

Evelyn balked as she stared at Mr. Windham.

“That is how you found out where I was?” she whispered in horror. “My letter...”

“Yes,” Peter answered first. “When your letter arrived, Mr. Windham was here. We read the letter, but I knew you were hiding something in it. Mr. Windham chased after the messenger. Had to threaten him to make him speak, did you not?”

Mr. Windham stood taller, puffing on the pipe another time. Evelyn took a small step away from him, wondering what he was capable of when he had to threaten a man.

“He spoke soon enough. I’ve paid him since to keep his silence, but I cannot do the same for the entirety of the Duke of Ravensworth’s staff. We shall still have to work fast,” Mr. Windham explained with emphasis, lowering the pipe from his lips. “My suggestion is we apply for a special license at once. Evelyn and I can marry within two weeks, and any whispers that then came out of the Duke’s house would be disparaged as the work of lies.”

“Yes, yes, it must be done,” Peter said, waving a hand in the air.

“What? No.” Evelyn stepped forward. “I have not agreed to marry Mr. Windham. I do not accept.” She couldn’t imagine anything worse than marrying Mr. Windham at that moment. To be beholden to a man who disliked her so much would be an awful way to live her life.

“I do not remember asking your opinion.” Peter didn’t even look at her as he said the words.

“You should be grateful!” Mavis lowered her handkerchief and snapped the words. “Grateful that Mr. Windham is willing to overlook your disgrace and scandal to save the name of this family. He is a good man.”

“A good man?” Evelyn repeated. “Yes, well, I suppose a good dowry brings out the best in all men.” Her caustic reply went unnoticed by her aunt and uncle, but Mr. Windham looked at her at last. His brow furrowed deep.

“That sharp tongue of yours,” he whispered, for her ears only. “It will be curbed.”

“We must think of where the wedding ceremony should take place,” Mavis said hurriedly, reaching up to take her husband’s arm. “We could take her to the country estate in Sussex. We’re holding a ball there in two days’ time, after all. She could be married away from all the gossip of the ton.”

“Sussex?” Mr. Windham was plainly uncomfortable with the idea. “But it is so close to where...”

To where I was.

Rafe’s castle was in Sussex.

“It must be done,” Peter nodded in agreement. “We can arrange a fast wedding at our local parish. In London, such a thing will be infinitely harder. Do we have your agreement, Mr. Windham?”

“Erm... Yes. Yes, of course.” Mr. Windham nodded and turned away, returning to his own seat in the chesterfield settee.

“Wait? No!” Evelyn looked around, her eyes darting between the three faces in the room. “I did not agree. I have said no. You push me to that altar, and I shall refuse to marry him.”

“Think on it, foolish child.” Peter stood straighter as his hands left the backrest of Mavis’ chair. “You refuse to marry him, and you ruin this whole family. Is that what you’d do to your cousins? To Hester? Don’t you think she wishes to get married too?”

He plainly knew how to push Evelyn just right as she faltered. Hester was the one person in this house who was truly kind to her. She could not betray her cousin now, or Hester’s name would be ruined along with her own.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Evelyn burst out of the room, pushing so hard on the door that it ricocheted off the adjoining wall, the sound echoing through the house.

“Oh!” a voice squeaked in surprise.

Evelyn looked around to see her three cousins all cowering by the wall. Hester waved a hand in front of her face as Bridget and Kitty held onto one another, their shock apparent.

“Shh,” Hester pleaded, holding a finger before her lips, clearly not wishing for Peter and Mavis to know they had been listening into the whole conversation.

Evelyn closed the door and hurried away across the hall, listening as her cousins followed after her. They had a hissing argument between the three of them.

“*You ask her,*” Bridget insisted.

“*You do it,*” Kitty pleaded. “*I am hardly in a position to ask. I was mean to her about Mr. Windham in the first place.*”

“Oh hush, both of you,” Hester ordered as Evelyn stepped into the music room.

She did not know why she had chosen this room as opposed to any of the others. All she knew was that she had to get away from Mr. Windham, to escape the smoke and those eyes, as well as the haughtiness of his manner. And this was the first vacant room she found.

He's won. That despicable man has won!

“This is absurd,” Evelyn muttered, marching up and down as her cousins entered the room too. Kitty shut the door and fell against it, clearly intending to act as their guard.

“Is it true?” Hester asked, crossing toward Evelyn. “You are to marry Mr. Windham?”

“Apparently,” Evelyn said with a firm tone. “The madness of it! That man will marry me now even with a fallen reputation, and you want to know why?” She looked around, seeing the eager gazes of all three of her cousins. They hung on her words, hungry to know more. “For my dowry!”

“Oh.” Hester flung her hands in front of her mouth as Kitty looked rather sick.

“Oh, indeed,” Kitty whispered. “So much for romance.”

“That’s awful.” Bridget fell down into the piano stool, the nearest chair she could find. Her arm landed on the piano keys and made an awful clinking sound that had them all jumping.

“Well, I’ll say this.” Kitty was the first to disturb the silence between them. “We never thought you had it in you to behave so...” she suddenly giggled.

Evelyn didn’t know what to do with this laughter. Her hands stayed planted on her hips as she glared at Kitty.

“In her own way,” Hester began, sending a quick glance at Kitty, “I think that was her way of giving you a compliment.”

“Then she needs to work on her compliments,” Evelyn answered.

“Oi.” Kitty folded her arms.

“Let me,” Hester held up her hand, stopping Kitty before she could say anymore. She crossed toward Evelyn and took her hand. “First, let me check a few things, for I am worried about you. Did you go to the Duke of Ravensworth’s house willingly? Assure me you were not forced there.”

“Oh, I was more than willing.” Evelyn’s words made her cousin smile.

“Then you have me intrigued indeed,” Hester whispered conspiratorially. “What was it like? Being with a man, I mean.”

“The gossip.” Bridget rubbed her hands together and laughed. “I think what you see before you, Evelyn, is three women who are quite impressed.”

“Impressed?” Evelyn repeated in shock, looking between her three cousins. It was true they were all looking at her with smiles, their gazes never wandering. “Whatever for? As Aunt Mavis has just reminded me, by being so selfish, I have risked all of your reputations.”

“Well, I think the whole construct of reputations is an odd thing quite frankly,” Hester appeared to shudder at the idea. “I like to think of a world where such nonsensical things do not affect us.”

“She’s too idealistic for her own good,” Bridget pointed out, then smiled a little. “Though I admit, I like the idea too.”

Kitty nodded eagerly, clearly also in agreement.

“You have done something the three of us would have loved to have done,” Hester pointed out in a whisper. “You defied our parents; you went and did something *you* wished to do... that sense of freedom. Oh, how I envy it!” Hester threw her hands in the air.

“You do?” Evelyn laughed at her cousin. “You shock me indeed.”

“I wish to hear all the details.” Hester took hold of Evelyn’s hands again. “All of them.”

“I cannot tell you all of them,” Evelyn shook her head. “Some of it should not be repeated.”

“You simply make it sound even better,” Hester replied with a giggle.

Sudden footsteps sounded in the hallway.

“Ah.” Kitty shifted her hold on the door. “Something tells me this conversation will not be private for much longer.” She had barely finished the words before the door was open and she was thrust to the side. “Oh, Pa. That hurt.”

Peter entered and looked around, clearly startled to have found Kitty standing there at all.

“What are you all talking about?” Peter’s eyes darted between them. “God’s wounds, I hope you are not seeking to make my daughters as depraved and as disgraced as you are.”

“Pa!” Hester said, stepping in front of Evelyn. “Language, please. Do not talk about my cousin in such a manner.”

“I shall talk about her in the manner that she deserves.” Peter walked forward. “Out of the way, Hester.” He didn’t wait for her to move but took Hester’s elbow and pulled her away. He reached for Evelyn’s wrist next and dragged her forward.

“Ow. That hurts,” Evelyn said, though he hardly seemed to care.

“Where are you taking her?” Hester followed behind, holding up the hem of her gown.

“To her chamber. Clearly, I cannot trust her walking free. God only knows what she does with freedom,” Peter muttered darkly.

Evelyn felt her breath catch in her throat as she realized what her uncle intended to do.

“Do not lock me in my chamber,” she pleaded, trying to wriggle out of her Uncle’s grasp. They came to an ungainly stop before the stairs. As Peter jerked her forward, Evelyn was in danger of falling down those steps. It was only because Hester was behind her and caught her waist that she was able to stay standing.

“You cannot keep her locked up like a prisoner,” Hester demanded, following them down as Evelyn was towed away again.

“She will do as she’s ordered to,” Peter said simply, reaching the landing. His fingers now gripped her wrist so tightly that they cut into the very spot where Mr. Windham had grazed her earlier that day when forcing her out of Rafe’s house.

As they reached the chamber Evelyn shared with Kitty, she tried to stop herself from being thrust in. She drove her foot against the doorframe, holding herself still.

“Inside, you insolent child.” Peter shoved hard in her back, forcing her into the room.

“Ah!” she screamed in surprise as she was forced onto her knees.

“You cannot treat her like this.” Hester pushed past her uncle, moving under his arm. She dropped to her knees with Evelyn and took her hands, helping her up again. “She’s our blood, our family, yet you disparage her as if she is an ornament under your roof, to do with as you wish.”

“She should be grateful we have taken care of her at all when I could have given her up for adoption after her parents died.”

Evelyn hung her head as she stood behind Hester, thinking of that awful day when her uncle had broken down the door of her locked chamber and found her as a crying and trembling child. He’d never cared for her, clearly not once. All he cared about now was the fact she had risked the family’s good name.

I am sorry for that.

It sounded awful, but it was truly something she had not intended. If her letter to her aunt and uncle had just been believed, none of this would have happened. No one needed to ever know about what passed between her and Rafe.

“I never intended to hurt you,” Evelyn found her voice. “It was not my intention. I just wanted some freedom from this house.”

“An understandable goal, is it not, Father?” Hester insisted.

Evelyn peered over her cousin’s shoulder to see Peter shaking his head.

“What sort of mad and idealistic world are you two living in?” He rounded on them both. “Let me make myself perfectly plain. Hester, if you continue to protect your cousin in this way, you will be confined in your own chamber too.”

“You cannot do that—!”

“And Evelyn,” he cut his own daughter off. “You shall stay in this chamber, completely alone, until we take you to Sussex. You shall not speak to anyone, you shall have no company, nothing at all. And if you behave, I might well consider extending some privileges when we arrive at Sussex.”

“I am no prisoner,” Evelyn’s voice grew louder. “You cannot make me one.”

Peter raised his eyebrows. He didn’t need to say anything to show the power he had.

He reached forward and took Hester’s wrist, dragging her away from Evelyn.

“No. No!” Hester kicked against him, but futilely. “You cannot do this to her. I won’t let you!” Yet Hester was as powerless as Evelyn.

She followed her cousin and uncle to the door, but as Hester was snatched through the gap, the door was slammed shut in Evelyn's face.

"Let me out of here!" She banged her fists on the door repeatedly. "Let me out. You cannot keep me in here. I am not your prisoner!"

It didn't seem to matter how long she knocked on the door, incessantly, until her knuckles were grazed. No one came to her call, nor were there even any sounds of footsteps passing the door. She yanked on the handle, yet her uncle had locked it from the other side. Kneeling down, she peered through the lock but could only see a blackness. He'd left the key in the lock.

"No, no." Her voice quieted to a murmur as she sat against the door and cradled her knees to her chest.

The night before seemed a great distance away now. The passion and excitement of being in Rafe's arms practically felt like a dream. Now, she was forced to face the fact that she would spend nights alone in this chamber, without even Kitty for company. She hated the dark and isolation, yet she would have to face it alone.

"I will not forgive my uncle for this," she whispered aloud, thinking both of the imprisonment and how he intended to marry her off to Mr. Windham. "Never. I shall not forgive him for any of it."

She rested her head on her knees as the first tears came and streaked her cheeks. She wracked her brain, trying to think of

a way out of this awful betrothal, for there was only one man she could ever imagine marrying.

It is not to be though, is it? Even if I want to marry Rafe, he is a rake. He would never consider marrying, let alone marrying me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“*Y*our Grace. You are not eating.” Stede’s words made Rafe shift in his seat at the head of the dining table.

“No. Thank the kitchen for the breakfast. They have gone to great trouble.” Rafe nodded at the display of food. “I am afraid I cannot stomach it presently.”

“As you wish.” Stede bowed but he didn’t walk away. Instead, he reached for the coffee pot and topped up Rafe’s cup for him. Rafe looked up at the butler, rather startled by the change in him. The old Stede would have taken the soonest opportunity to leave the room.

“Thank you,” Rafe said in surprise and reached for the coffee cup, taking a sip.

“I have requested the steward make arrangements with the workmen for the overhaul of the west wing, Your Grace.”

“That is good. Once we see the plans and have the quotes, I’ll make the necessary arrangements with Jarvis. I’ll see to the rest, Stede. You need not worry.” Rafe nestled the coffee in his

hands. “Is there anything else I have been neglecting here whilst I have been hiding in London?”

Stede shifted his weight between his feet, clearly surprised by the words.

“Well, some of the tenants claimed a month ago they needed work carried out on their cottages.”

“Very well. Jarvis has the details?”

“He does.”

“Then I shall discuss them with him later today. I’ll see all the necessary work is done before I take my leave this time,” Rafe assured him.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Stede smiled. It quite transformed his features, before it fell away once again. “I know I am just your butler, Your Grace, merely a servant to you, but may I be permitted to speak out of turn for a moment?”

“Please do.” Rafe gestured to him, urging him on.

“I have been glad to have you here in the house.” Stede practically whispered the words, he was plainly so worried to say them. “I am only sorry it has brought you this sadness.” He bowed hurriedly. “I shall leave you to your peace now.” He left the room as quickly as he could, darting out with the excuse that Rafe needed more coffee.

Rafe stared after him, his jaw slack, unsure which to be more shocked by—the sudden kindness that his butler had displayed, or the fact that his grief had been painted across his face the past days. Sighing, he rested his head against the backrest of his chair, thinking of how happy he had been for many weeks in the castle as of late. It was only in the last two days since Evelyn had gone that he had returned to his gloomy state.

She deserves better than me. I must come to terms with that.

He gulped heavily from his coffee as he replayed in his mind once again Evelyn's face when she had seen that mask. She was so convinced that she was just another woman to him, another lady in the long round of him being a rake. He'd turned his back on all of that. He wished he could tell her that she was more to him than that, but after all that had passed, he doubted she would believe him.

Sounds in the room disturbed him and Rafe opened his eyes to see one of his maids hurrying in, carrying a fresh coffee pot. It was Petra, the maid who had acted as lady's maid to Evelyn during her stay. Petra placed down the coffee pot and sniffed.

Rafe's eyes darted to look at Petra's own, realizing that they were red and sore.

"Petra? Is something wrong?" Rafe leaned forward. "You have been crying."

"Oh." She backed up from the table and looked down, trying to hide those reddened eyes. "I should not say, Your Grace."

“Petra, you are part of my staff. I do not want you upset. What has happened?”

“That is the issue, it does not concern me, Your Grace. It concerns Miss Evelyn Voss.”

“What about her?” Rafe’s stomach clenched at the words.

“It’s about when she left.” Words escaped Petra in a rush. “A gentleman arrived as she was leaving. He was furious, and lost his temper with her, dragging her into the carriage.”

Rafe gripped his coffee cup tighter, in danger of breaking it.

“Who was this man?”

“Mr. Windham. It didn’t look right, Your Grace. Not right at all, but when I asked if I should tell you, Miss Evelyn said I should not.”

“Ah, I see.” Rafe sat back once more, feeling as if he had been kicked in the gut by the words. Evelyn had not wanted him to know Mr. Windham had come for her. It was awful, to think of that man being here in this house, dragging her away.

At least she has what she has always wanted now. She has the man she wished to seduce all this time.

He thought of that scrap of paper she must have written Mr. Windham’s name on. He’d tossed it somewhere in the house,

he remembered that, but he couldn't recall for the life of him where it was now. He had intended to fulfill the promise of seeking Laurence Windham out for her as a sort of apology, but now, it seemed there was no need after all.

"Thank you for letting me know," Rafe found his voice and forced a smile for Petra's benefit. "Do not concern yourself, Petra. Evelyn is where she wishes to be if she is with him."

"Oh. Very well." Petra curtsied. "Is there anything else you need, Your Grace?"

"No. Thank you." Rafe waited until she left the room before he let his smile fall. He felt weak, ill at ease, and the food before him, as delicious as it smelled, couldn't tempt his appetite. He settled himself with his coffee, lost in his thoughts of Evelyn, when there was a distant knock against an outer door of the castle.

His mind filled with an imagining that it was Evelyn coming back to him. They could go to bed with one another again, sleep peacefully side by side, him without any nightmares, and she in the knowledge that she was not alone in that darkness. He imagined her coming through the door now and that he would run to her, embrace her tightly and kiss her, tell her between those kisses how much he cared for her, and that she never was just another woman to him. She was the one woman he cared so much about.

"You seem lost in thought." The sudden words broke the perfect picture in his mind.

Rafe looked around to see in the doorway stood Simon.

“Simon? What on earth are you doing here?”

Simon smiled and walked in, offering his hand to Rafe.

“I’ve been on quite the journey to get here in this weather, and this is how I’m received?” he tutted and laughed.

“Then come, sit. Eat, no point in allowing this fine breakfast to go to waste. I’ll pour you a coffee too.” Rafe reached for a second cup and topped it up for his friend. “No, truly, it is good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, though if you don’t mind me saying, you don’t seem like your usual self.” Simon sat down at the table beside Rafe.

“Oh...”

“Let me guess, it’s being here again, isn’t it?” Simon whispered. “Ah, I know how much you hate it here. I’m sorry you have had to be here for so long, trapped in by your worst enemy too, the snow. Alas, your savior has arrived.” His friendly smile comforted Rafe and told him what a good friend he had in Simon.

“Strangely, I’m well enough,” Rafe nodded. He couldn’t tell Simon the truth, that he had actually enjoyed living here for a time, and it was all because of one woman – one woman whose name he wouldn’t be allowed to repeat to anyone, for he would most certainly risk her reputation. “I’ll be glad to get back to London though.”

“Good, because I have news on that front. I have found you the perfect place to stay. Somewhere a little finer than your last apartments.” Simon reached into the pocket of his tailcoat and pulled out some papers that he proffered to Rafe.

Stretching them out on the table, Rafe looked down at the plans for a fine house near Covent Garden, just distant enough that it still had a small estate and gardens attached. They were respectable grounds, and the details suggested a fine place indeed. Rafe wondered if Evie would approve of them and if she would care to visit the place with him.

What is happening to me? I cannot ask her such a thing!

Rafe sipped from his coffee and looked at his friend, thanking him for his hard work.

“Still, I cannot believe that you have come all this way just to check on me and give me these.” He motioned at the papers. “Spit it out Linfield, what is the true reason for your visit?”

Simon held his hands up exaggeratedly in surrender. “Fine. You caught me, old boy. Mr. and Mrs. Gulliver are holding a ball at their country estate tomorrow night. It’s not far from here at all. Just a town over. Did you not know of it?”

“I do not imagine they would invite me to such a ball. I hardly boast the best of reputations to be invited by that fop Gulliver.” Rafe realized another impediment to such an invitation. If Mr. Windham had found Evelyn here, then no doubt her aunt and uncle would learn of where she had been

too. They would not want him anywhere near her. “You can rest here though before you attend it tomorrow night.”

“And that is an offer you are not taking back, *Your Grace*. I must confess I was worried where I would find any great lodgings here. Most places are still barricaded in by the recent snowfall.” Simon sat back with a smile as he lifted his coffee cup. “Besides, I should be at my best for when I arrive. Hester and I intend to make a little announcement tomorrow evening.”

“Hester?” Rafe smirked, noting the way his friend used her Christian name and no longer her more formal address, very unlike himself. “Wait... what have I missed, Simon?”

“Well, whilst you have been trapped here in Sussex, I have been trapped in London. I went on foot many times to see Hester, and while I was tumbling through that waist-high snow, a realization occurred to me that I could no longer deny. I am in love, Rafe. I have asked Hester to marry me, and I am delighted to say, between us, that she has accepted.”

“This is wonderful news man!” Rafe reached across the table and shook his friend’s hand, congratulating him heartily. “I couldn’t be happier for you. You intend to announce your betrothal tomorrow night?”

“Indeed, we do.” Simon laughed—he was so giddy with happiness. “Her father is delighted by the match too, of course, though that matters little to me. From what I understand talking to Hester, she will be very glad to be away from that man’s house.”

“Ah. Linfield estate, a fine refuge for ladies escaping their disgruntled families,” Rafe teased his friend.

“*You* can keep that privilege, old boy. My woman assures me she loves me too. Something I never thought I would be so blessed to hear.” He sighed happily and sat back. “So, yes. We are to make the announcement tomorrow night. I would be glad for you to come to the ball. I could persuade Mr. Gulliver to extend the invitation.”

I doubt you would be successful, my friend.

“Do not worry about that,” Rafe waved away the idea. “I’ll be busy making preparations to leave for London tomorrow anyway. I wished to return today, but...” he trailed off.

“There is still ice on the roads. Some less-traveled areas are even wracked with it,” Simon grimaced. “After just making that lengthy trip myself, my friend, I encourage you to wait at least another day.”

Rafe huffed into his palms. “I’ll prepare tomorrow evening, and with a little luck and some good warm sunshine, the snow will have melted enough to allow me to depart early the following morning. Perhaps that would be for the best.” He sipped from his cup, indulging in the taste of coffee as a thought came to him.

Simon would see Evelyn tomorrow evening. She had to be part of the events. Surely her aunt and uncle would not announce the betrothal of her cousin without having her there?

“Do you know if Miss Evelyn Voss is to be there tomorrow evening?” he asked.

Simon’s brow furrowed as he sipped from his coffee.

“I was not aware you were acquainted with Hester’s cousin.”

“A little,” Rafe lied.

“Truly? Just a little?” Simon said with plain suspicion. “Ah, Rafe. I thought you said you were going to behave from now on.”

“Believe me, I am holding onto that.” Rafe was firm on that point, sitting forward. “I will not tell you all the details but let me say this. Something has passed between Miss Evelyn and myself, and it did not happen because I was being wayward or indulgent. It happened for entirely different reasons.”

Simon tilted his head to the side, watching Rafe as if he was a hawk. Rafe decided to talk quickly before his friend could ask him any more questions.

“I’m just wondering if you know whether she’ll be there tomorrow evening at this ball or not.”

“I believe she will be,” Simon nodded slowly and sat forward. “Though, if what has passed between the two of you is what I suspect, then let me give you this warning now.”

“What warning?” Rafe’s chest tightened at the words.

“I understand from Hester that her parents do not just intend to announce our betrothal tomorrow night, but another’s. It is my understanding that they will be announcing a betrothal between Miss Evelyn and Laurence Windham.”

Rafe nearly dropped his coffee cup.

So soon?

The prickling feeling in his eyes shocked him. Was it tears threatening him now? Did he wish to cry at the mere thought of being separated from Evelyn forever?

“Ah, I see,” he forced himself to speak and snatched up the coffee cup, taking a large gulp in the hope the acrid taste would dispel that strange feeling. “Well, that is good news. She has had her sights on Mr. Windham for some time, I believe.”

“Oh? Is that the case?”

“Yes.” Rafe looked down at his plate, staring at the food he could not bring himself to eat. He tried to persuade himself to be happy, to see that Evelyn would now have everything she had ever wanted. Had she not wanted Mr. Windham even from the moment she saw him kissing another woman?

She doesn't want me. I was a distraction, that was all.

Yet something kicked in his gut against this idea. If that was the truth, he couldn't make sense of why she had been so upset when she had discovered that mask.

“Why do I feel as if there is more going on here than you are willing to disclose?” Simon asked, tilting his head to the side again as he examined Rafe. “You are keeping a secret.”

“And it is one I must keep,” he murmured quietly, even as it pained him to do so. “I hope you enjoy your ball tomorrow night, and I profusely apologize I won't be there to celebrate with you.”

“Yet you will not come?”

“I cannot.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“*Y*ou look simply beautiful,” Hester whispered, standing behind Evelyn as they looked in the mirror together.

“You are very kind.” Evelyn forced a smile for her cousin, as did she. They had both barely smiled at all that day. After the night Evelyn had spent alone in the darkness of her chamber, finding that there were no candles to offer a light to bring herself comfort, she’d made something of a mess of the room. Fortunately, the next day, the family had been transferred to the country estate, and Hester had made sure that in this chamber, Evelyn was given candles.

Hester had kept sneaking in to see her ever since. To Evelyn’s surprise, Kitty and Bridget came on occasion too, though Bridget looked more like a deer at the end of a shotgun, with wide eyes, as if she was afraid to disobey her father’s orders so much.

“Evelyn, you do not have to do this,” Hester murmured, her smile falling away. Evelyn turned to face her cousin. They had both dressed for the ball as per Peter’s orders. Yet where Hester stood tall, Evelyn’s shoulders were hunched.

“You know I must.” Evelyn stepped forward and took Hester’s hands.

“But... you do not love Mr. Windham,” Hester declared with sudden passion. “You cannot marry him just because my fool of a father orders it.”

“Yet he made a good point a few days ago. Because of what I did,” she paused, thinking of the nights she had spent with Rafe. A rush of heat passed through her, and she had to push it away, knowing she would never feel such heat again. “Once the whispers are out, my ill reputation would damage your chances of marrying well. How could I live with the knowledge that I had divided you from the man you love?”

Evelyn once more looked around the room, in some desperate hope that the diary she had lost would appear. She longed to seek comfort in her diary, but she hadn’t been able to find it since she had left Rafe’s estate.

“Oh, dear cousin,” Hester sighed deeply, with her hands clasping Evelyn’s tighter than before. “Simon would accept me no matter my reputation. I am sure of that.”

“Even if that should be the case, I need to think of Bridget and Kitty too. At least this way, we can all be certain.” Evelyn was no fool. She had come to accept that her uncle and aunt were right. If she refused to marry, then Hester and her other cousins could be damaged by association. For their sake, she was trapped.

“I cannot bear to live with the knowledge that you must marry a man you despise,” Hester whispered, drawing Evelyn toward

the door.

“You know me. I will be fine,” Evelyn insisted, trying to keep her voice level. “Do not worry about me.”

The way Hester clasped her hand showed very much how her cousin did worry and wasn't going to let the matter go.

They walked through the house and headed toward the front door where Peter was making urgent demands to the servants to have the house as ready as it could possibly be for the ball.

“Is it not something special?” Kitty said excitedly, standing in the doorway that led to the ballroom. Evelyn followed Hester and Bridget to peek through the door at the grand decorations.

Mavis hadn't spared on expenses for the ball. Each surface glittered with ice sculptures, and swathes of white and silver cloths that hung from the ceiling like ribbons. The tables were scattered with crystal glasses, all gathered in towering and delicate structures. The chairs where the violinists now sat, warming up their instruments, were wrapped in evergreens.

“It matches the weather, I'll say that.” Bridget huffed a little as she stepped into the room, apparently taking no pleasure in it. “Though I wonder if in this snow we'll have any guests at all.”

Evelyn stiffened at the words. She walked past Bridget and moved to a window in the ballroom, looking out at the world beyond. A light snow had begun to fall, as if cotton wool balls drifted down from the fluffy clouds above. With light falling,

and candles being lit around her in the room, the only brightness outside came from the whiteness of the snow.

He will not come for me in this, will he?

The thought cut Evelyn deeply. She had barely realized that a part of her had held onto some foolish hope that Rafe might come to the ball. It was an idiotic idea, even more so now, for he had made it quite clear he would never traverse through the snow.

“Evelyn? Evelyn!” Mavis hissed, appearing through the door of the ballroom.

Evelyn looked away from the first carriages that were arriving outside on the drive. Her aunt crossed toward her and grappled her wrist.

“You are to stay by our side until Mr. Windham arrives. Is that understood?” Mavis didn’t wait for her answer. She hooked their arms together and towed Evelyn away.

Evelyn glanced toward her cousins who all offered sympathetic looks. Hester reached for a glass of wine from a passing footman carrying a tray and downed a significant part of it without hesitation. Evelyn could hardly blame her for it. If she could have gotten near a tray, she would have done the same thing.

The opening hour of the ball passed by in a blur. Evelyn was either stuck to Mavis’s or Peter’s side. Whenever she tried to get a little distance, perhaps hide in the shadowy corner of the

ball, or go to her cousins, her uncle and aunt would intervene. They would subtly grip her wrist and drag her toward them again. Plainly, after her misdemeanors, they didn't even trust her to behave at a ball in their own house.

"Ah, here he is." Mavis turned to face the window as another carriage arrived. "Perhaps things can start looking up for this family once more."

Evelyn followed her aunt's gaze toward the window, looking away from the hustle and bustle of the ballroom and all the guests that had gathered. It may have been cold outside, but inside the room, the air was heated in part by the great fires, the press of bodies in this space, and the dancing. Cheeks were flushed and colored pink, and many ladies fluttered fans in front of their faces to hide more than their murmurings.

Stepping away from the crowd, Evelyn moved to the window to see what had caught her aunt's eye. The carriage that halted on the driveway was one that she recognized all too well. It belonged to Mr. Windham.

He stepped down from the carriage with ease, flicking the corners of his tailcoat as he leaped to the snow. He smoothed a hand across his fair hair and hurried toward the steps that led up to the front of the house.

Evelyn felt nauseous as she watched him. She wasn't sure what thought bothered her more. Was it the memory of seeing him kiss another woman that night at the masquerade ball? Or was it the possessive way he had taken her away from Rafe's house, insisting that she now belonged to him?

Marriage shouldn't be about possession. It should be about something else entirely.

Another image shot across her mind. It was of her and Rafe together, just laying side by side in bed, with his arm comfortingly wrapped around her waist. They would talk and whisper, sometimes all night, purely pleased by each other's company. It was such a happy memory that when Mavis took hold of her elbow, she felt jolted out of it as if shocked by lightning.

"Come," Mavis urged. "You must be seen by his side this evening."

"Aunt, please." Evelyn turned to Mavis, hoping to appeal to some humanity in her. "I know what I have done cannot be forgiven. Yet will you truly insist I spend all my evening with him now? I am already marrying him for the family's sake. At least give me an evening free of him."

"Why on earth?" Mavis frowned at her, as if the question completely baffled her to the core.

Evelyn didn't know what to say. She blinked, staring at her aunt, as she realized that her feelings mattered as much to Mavis as the inspirations of a passing fly. When she failed to reply to that, her aunt swatted away the suggestion.

"Come." Mavis took Evelyn's elbow again and drew her through the ballroom.

As Mr. Windham entered the room, he greeted Peter, before moving to her side.

“Ah, I am so glad you made it, Mr. Windham,” Mavis said with a great smile. She proffered Evelyn’s arm to him, and he snatched it up at once, curling it under his own in a possessive manner. Evelyn pulled against him, trying to soften his hold, but it simply made him tighten his grasp further.

“The honor is well and truly mine,” Mr. Windham smiled fully, though the glance he sent Evelyn’s way showed there was a lack of sincerity in his tone.

He is simply glad he might soon get his hands on my dowry.

“Come, dear Evelyn. Let us introduce you as my betrothed to the guests here tonight.” As Mr. Windham led her away, she glanced back to see Mavis sighing with relief, fluttering a fan before her face.

Evelyn was wooden as she was introduced around the room as Mr. Windham’s betrothed. The three couples they spoke to all raised their brows when they heard the news, clearly all finding it quite a surprise. This shook Evelyn at first. She and Mr. Windham had been courting before, so the news of the marriage should hardly have been a great surprise. It was only when she was introduced to the third couple that she realized why they were so shocked.

“How strange,” a young woman whom Evelyn knew through a few casual tea parties muttered. Her name was Lady Georgiana Farrow. She lifted her chin challengingly as she looked at Mr. Windham. “I had heard you were keeping

company with a lady by the name of Miss Marianne Thatcher.”

“Ha! What a notion.” Mr. Windham laughed off the idea. “Just rumors, I assure you, Lady Farrow.”

Lady Farrow looked at Evelyn with a single raised eyebrow. Evelyn smiled a little at the lady, appreciating what she was trying to do in her own subtle way – it was an attempt to warn Evelyn not to trust him.

The knowledge that others in the room knew he would be unfaithful to her made Evelyn’s hand quell within his grasp. As Lady Farrow and her husband walked off to dance, Evelyn retrieved her hand from Mr. Windham.

“If you would excuse me, Mr. Windham. I need some air to refresh myself. I will return momentarily.” She didn’t give him time to answer her, but walked toward the door of the ballroom, intent on escaping. The ballroom was so noisy that she didn’t hear his footsteps behind her at first.

When she reached the door of the ballroom, Mr. Windham caught up with her. He thrust his hand on the handle of the door that led out to the garden, holding it firm.

“Do you think I’m going to let you escape that easily?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



*R*afe knocked the glass of claret back to his lips as he walked through the house, heading toward the chamber that had belonged to Evelyn during her stay.

He'd only just said goodbye to Simon, seeing him off for the ball. Realizing how close it was to his own house, Rafe's stomach had knotted. It would have been all too easy to go with Simon to the ball, but he was not welcome, and Rafe certainly couldn't bear witnessing the announcement of Evelyn and Mr. Windham marrying.

Rafe downed what was left in the claret glass as he opened the door of the bedchamber and strode inside. The flowery fragrance of Evelyn still hung in the air. He inhaled it as he stepped deeper into the room, amazed at the effect that her scent could have on him, the capacity to quieten his tempestuous thoughts.

He sighed as he sat down on the bed, nestling his glass between the palms of his hands.

He missed her. It was strange to miss her when she had not been gone that long, but he did.

Shifting on the bed, Rafe leaned back, his hand resting on the covers when he felt something firm beneath the sheets. Tilting his body a little, he pulled back the blankets, reaching for a rectangular object. Before him, a book was revealed. He turned the cover to find it was a diary.

And on the front page was Evelyn's name.

Rafe couldn't explain why he did it. Perhaps it was the longing to still have a part of her here that made him flick through the pages.

The first few were filled with writing, ramblings of a lady with too much time on her hands that made his heart warm. But then as he continued through the pages, the words fell away. In their place were sketches, portraits, all of one man.

This seems oddly familiar.

Then, before his mind could process it, his hands froze. "Could this be—?" Rafe murmured as he looked at the drawings. On each page was a version of himself from the masked ball. He wore the same mask – it couldn't possibly be mistaken.

Unthawing his fingers, he flipped through the pages faster and faster, to find a variation of the same sketch, over and over.

He turned the final page to find there was an image of himself, without the mask this time. She'd recreated his visage perfectly on the page, with exquisite skill in pencil, the shading across his jaw and the long lines of his face flawless.

There was nothing at all about Mr. Windham in these pages. His name wasn't even mentioned, let alone a sketch of him.

Rafe tucked the book under his arm and stood, trying to remember what he had done with the scrap of paper she had handed him that first night bearing the name of the man she was looking for. He could remember throwing it across this very room, wanting nothing to do with it. Yet he had seen it again since. After the maid had tidied up this chamber, the scrap had been placed in his study.

Hurrying from the room, he held firmly onto the book, discarding his wine glass on a nearby ledge, though he barely registered where he had left it at all. He marched through the castle and found his study, throwing open the door as he hurried inside.

Turning on his heel, he looked back and forth, desperately trying to remember what he had done with the slip of paper. A white flash caught his eye by the hearth. He moved to the mantelpiece and snatched up the crumpled piece of paper, from where he had attempted to toss it into the fire the previous night during a drunken stupor. Unfurling the paper, he read the words Evelyn had written as quickly as he could.

'Masked man from the masquerade ball. He wore a long blue and orange mask and a rich blue suit. Something like this...'

She had recreated the motif from his blue mask perfectly within the corner of the paper.

“What the hell,” Rafe muttered aloud as everything aligned in his mind. All this time, he had mistakenly thought she wished to seduce Mr. Windham, but he was wrong. She had... been searching for *him*?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



“Stede? Stede!” Rafe roared through the castle as he burst out of his study, pacing down the corridors.

Suddenly, he saw everything clearly. If Evelyn had been searching for him all this time, it meant she did not wish to marry Laurence Windham. That egregious man had the audacity to drag Evelyn from Rafe’s own home against her will. And now he intended to force her into marriage.

Rafe saw red.

She doesn’t want to marry him. She was looking for me and I was too much of an insecure buffoon to realize it!

“Stede!” Rafe called again as he reached the main hallway. Stede appeared from the servants’ staircase, looking flustered as he straightened his uniform.

“What is it, Your Grace? Is something wrong?”

“I...” Rafe shot a quick glance at the grandfather clock in his hallway. He didn’t have long. The ball was already underway

and by now, Windham could have announced his betrothal to Evelyn before the ton already. He had to get to that ball, as soon as possible. “I need a carriage prepared at once, good man.”

“A carriage? But we have none to spare.”

“What?” Rafe flicked his head around in panic.

“We sent the last one this morning to London with your belongings, Your Grace,” Stede reminded him. “You asked me to make the arrangements did you not?”

“Christ, I forgot. Yes, yes, I did.” Rafe turned in a mad circle, thrusting his hands into his hair. “How about a horse?”

“A horse?” Stede grimaced. He moved to the window of the hallway and pointed out of the window. “I fear the stablemaster will not be happy about such an idea. Not in this weather.”

Rafe followed him to the window and looked out. His jaw fell slack when he saw how thickly the snow had fallen.

That damn snow!

He bent forward, his hands on his knees as the true magnitude of what he would have to traverse through struck him. If he was going to reach Evelyn this night, he'd have to make it through the snow.

“The stablemaster is downstairs now in the kitchens. The stables are snowed in, Your Grace,” Stede explained.

“God’s wounds.” Rafe stood and turned in a mad circle again. “Then there’s nothing for it. I shall have to go on foot.”

“On foot? Where? In this weather?!” Stede asked a series of wild questions as Rafe moved to the coat stand at the side of the hallway. He pulled on the thickest frock coat he owned, heaving it firmly across his body. “Your Grace, forgive me, but... where are you going? Why? It is dangerous out there! And I know—” He broke off sharply, looking down with the crests of his cheeks colored pink.

“Yes,” Rafe exhaled. “The snow and I do not go well together.” He was surprised it was something Stede had noticed in the time Rafe had been here. “Yet tonight I must face it. I am going to find Evelyn and bring her back.”

“Bring her back?” Stede lifted his chin in surprise, his eyes wide.

“What you must think of me now, eh?” Rafe laughed just once as he looked at the butler. “I’ve been quite the disgraceful duke, haven’t I? These last few years.”

“I would never, I mean, I—” He shook his head abruptly, his jowls trembling.

“Fear not,” Rafe assured him. “I have been, I know it. I’ve driven my own reputation into the ground, but rest assured

now that my intentions are honorable. I intend to ask Evelyn to marry me.”

He had to. He couldn't bear the thought now that Evelyn could marry another man, a man she did not care for, when she cared for him so deeply.

“Oh.” Stede abruptly moved past Rafe. He reached for the coat stand and snatched up a scarf and a top hat. “Then take these, Your Grace. You will need to wrap up well to face that snow.”

Rafe laughed at Stede's sudden eagerness.

Petra suddenly appeared from behind the butler. “Your Grace, let me fetch you some other boots too, you'll need something sturdier for this weather.”

Rafe felt a warm feeling in his chest as the servants at the castle, one by one, offered them his help and advice. It only further bolstered his conviction. How Evelyn had managed to leave such a lasting impression on all of them while only staying not much longer than a week was endearing.

Rafe pulled on the hat and scarf as Petra hurried off. She returned moments later with a thicker pair of walking boots, rather than the classic hessian boots Rafe wore most of the time. He pulled them over his trousers, tucking in the hems, then stood straight, wrapping the scarf tightly around his mouth.

“At least let a footman or a groundskeeper go with you, Your Grace. They could help to clear some of the snow,” Stede

added quickly.

“No, that will not be necessary.” Rafe reached for the front door and opened it wide. His body stilled as he looked at the frosty world beyond. He swallowed past a sudden lump in his throat. “Nothing changes the fact that this is dangerous weather, Stede. I will not ask my servants to traverse it.”

Silence descended between them as Rafe looked out at the ice. For the first time, he didn't think of Juliet. He didn't think of the past, and the way the cold world enshrouded him. The estate was no longer enveloped in this air of death, but something else entirely. The snow glistened with temptation, the knowledge that if he walked through it, he could get everything he had ever wanted.

I can bring Evelyn home again.

“Your Grace?” Stede's words caught his attention and Rafe looked back, meeting his eye. “We pray you be careful,” he pleaded. “I wouldn't want to hear you had been hurt.”

Rafe smiled at the butler, stunned at the transformation in him. Over the last couple of days, they had garnered a little more respect for one another. Rafe nodded at him in gratitude.

“I shall take care. Thank you. Lock this door after me, Stede. Look after the house and the people within until I return.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Stede smiled one more time.

Rafe turned to the snowy world beyond and stepped out. The first few steps on the frosted pavement had him holding his breath. When he reached the drive, the cold wind was so bitter, he was forced to breathe in sharply. He tucked his hands into his pockets, finding leather gloves and pulling them on over his wrists.

Glancing back, he watched Stede shut the door, hearing it bolt, the clunking sound competing against the wind that whistled in his ears. As Stede disappeared from view, Rafe turned forward.

For a second, his stomach quelled and his fingers felt like blocks of ice. It would be so simple to change his mind and retreat inside, to hide from this fear as he had always done, but that choice seemed impossible now.

“I have to go,” Rafe muttered as he strode forward with conviction. He walked down the drive, remembering the exact description that Simon had given to the Gullivers’ house in Sussex. It should have been a half an hour’s walk, at most, but in this weather, it was likely to take much longer.

As Rafe reached the main road, the snow seemed to pile on faster and faster.

“God damn it,” Rafe muttered as he waded through it all. It was like walking through thick water, the elements fighting against him. Ice flakes fell on his eyelashes, masking his view of the white world beyond. For one brief moment, Rafe was at least thankful for something in this weather. With such thick snow, it made the world light enough for him to see where he was going, despite the darkness.

“I’m coming, Evie,” he whispered aloud, his voice clear in his ears and drowning out the wind. “I’m coming.”

In the pocket of his frock coat, he felt Evelyn’s diary and where he had tucked it away. He tapped it a few times, holding onto the warm glow that had passed through him when he saw his face recreated on those pages.

She could love me. She could love me as I love her.

* * *

Evelyn pushed against the door.

“Let me pass,” she pleaded with Mr. Windham.

“No.” He moved to block the door. “Do you not realize what you are doing, Evelyn? You are drawing attention toward us.” He nodded at the room behind them.

Evelyn glanced away. As far as she could see, everyone was far too busy making merry. People were dancing and drinking, talking eagerly with those at their side. They were all far too distracted to care about or pay attention to the fact that Evelyn was trying to leave the room.

At a distance, she caught sight of Hester and Simon together as they took to the dance floor. Such a smile appeared on Hester’s lips that Evelyn felt a mixture of feelings warring within her. The first was happiness for her cousin – utter delight that Hester was to marry for love. Yet that feeling was mixed with ugly envy.

Hester had the good fortune to live with loving parents, have caring sisters, and marry a man she loved. Evelyn could never have any of those things.

“Let me have this one thing,” Evelyn pleaded again, now more determined than before. She stepped subtly on Mr. Windham’s foot, surprising him so much that he winced and released the door. It gave her the escape she needed, and she darted out of the ballroom.

Evelyn hurried down the snow-clad garden path, dashing past the high wall of yew bushes on one side, and heading toward the back of the house. The sounds of the ball became muted, and behind her, she heard the firm crunching footsteps on the patio of Mr. Windham, following her.

“Evelyn?” he demanded, with his voice shrill. “Come back here at once!”

“In case my mad run has not clued you in, allow me to explain. I have no intention of adhering to your orders. Contrary to your belief, I am not a mouse at your beck and call,” she cast the words over her shoulder as she rounded the house.

The yew bushes fell away, and the path turned into a stone terrace with a great balustrade, overlooking the formal garden borders like a balcony.

“Evelyn! You are my betrothed and you will be my wife. You will adhere to my orders.” He caught hold of the skirts of her dress and pulled her back sharply.

“Ah!” she yelped in shock, reaching out for the balustrade with two hands. Her fingers grazed the coarse stone as she scrambled to get away from him.

“Or have you forgotten something?” Mr. Windham now latched onto her elbow, pulling her sharply back against him. “When we marry, you will make the vow to obey.”

“I will not mean it. Not in my heart.” She tried to stamp down on his foot again, but he’d wised up to the tactic now and managed to move his foot away in time. The shifting of his body gave her enough wriggle room to pull herself away from him though.

She stumbled down the icy terrace, gripping to the wall beside her and using it to help her stay straight as she glared back at Mr. Windham.

“I have stood beside you for the last hour as you have introduced yourself as my betrothed. I ask for five minutes alone, and yet you will not give me that? After I am being pressured into giving you my entire life? Have you no honor? No humanity? No heart at all?” she hissed at him.

“Do you hear yourself?” He laughed just once, shaking his head. “You’re becoming hysterical, Evelyn. I won’t stand for this once we are wed. Continue in this vein, and I’ll have to consider that my house might not be the best place for you. I’ll have to consider Bedlam instead.”

Evelyn backed up further, feeling so sickened and nauseous that she feared she’d have to see the food she had eaten that

day all over again.

He would send me to Bedlam? He'd put me in an asylum just to escape me?

“You have no heart at all,” she muttered in a low tone. “You snake. You devil. You bast—”

She didn't get to finish the word as he veered pointedly for her and snatched up the wrist she had planted against the wall to steady herself, gripping it between them as he shook her whole body with that grasp.

“No more of this, Evelyn. No more,” he warned darkly. “You wish to stay out of Bedlam? Then you will come back into the ballroom now. You will follow my orders. Is that understood?”

“Mr. Wind—”

“The next word I hear out of your mouth will be a ‘yes.’ It will be nothing else.” He towered over her, his fingers tightening around her wrist in such a way that she was forced to bend forward with it as he pulled her down. He was making her smaller, forcing her to be weak before him. Her stomach knotted in such a way that her hand flexed, desperate to escape him as the pain shot up into her elbow. “Say ‘yes,’ Evelyn.”

“Or what?” she muttered darkly.

“Any other word that should escape your lips now will result in you seeing precisely how I will keep you in order as my

wife.” His other hand raised in the air, with the fingers stretched.

He’s going to strike me!

She wriggled against his hold, but he was too strong, and she could not pull back.

“Say ‘yes’,” he warned her.

“No!” the word erupted from her. “I will not do as you order me. Never.”

That hand raised higher in the air. He was about to strike her, square across the cheek.

“No,” she called again and bent her head down, closing her eyes. She braced for the impact, for the all too familiar stinging pain across the top of her cheek, but nothing came.

Instead, there was a grunt from Mr. Windham.

Evelyn’s eyes shot open. As she still looked at the ground, she saw that in the snow, there were not only Mr. Windham’s boots but the toes of a pair of thick and sturdy leather boots too.

Evelyn’s chin jerked up to see who they belonged to.

Beside Mr. Windham stood another man, his scarf-shielded face basking in the glow that reflected off the snow.

Is that... is that Rafe?

It *was* Rafe, his expression so full of anger that Evelyn's lips parted as she stared at him.

He's here. How is he here?

He didn't look at her, but glowered at Mr. Windham, his gloved hand gripping Mr. Windham's wrist and stopping it before it could fall on Evelyn.

"You would dare to strike a woman?" Rafe asked in such a dark tone that Evelyn stood tall, shocked at the power within it.

Mr. Windham continued to stare back, saying nothing at all. At the continued silence, he attempted to pull his arm out of Rafe's hold but failed just as Evelyn had done before.

"Release me!" he demanded.

"As you wish." Rafe released his wrist, just as he pulled back with his other hand. His gloved fist connected squarely with Mr. Windham's nose. The bone cracked audibly as Mr. Windham fell back against the stone balustrade. A bellow of pain erupted into the air.

“What have you done!?” Mr. Windham cried, clutching his nose.

CHAPTER THIRTY



“*Y*ou’d be wise to stay down, sir,” Rafe warned as he moved to stand in front of Evie. His eyes briefly shot to meet hers. He couldn’t make out which emotion was stronger in her face – the shock or the relief. But he winked, for her eyes only, before moving to block Mr. Windham’s access to her.

Mr. Windham lay semi-reclined with his back against the wall, his shaking hand covering his nose. Blood began to drip from the broken nose, running down his hand, staining the pristine snow beneath him.

“You... Y-you broke my nose!” he stammered, his voice muffled by his hand.

“Stating the obvious, perhaps, but yes, I did.” Rafe’s hands tightened at his side, showing he would be more than glad to strike again if the man attempted anything.

Moments earlier, the biting cold had been all-consuming as he braced against the fierce winds, his teeth chattering as he entered the Gullivers’ residence. Yet when he’d seen the argument on the terrace between Evelyn and Mr. Windham, it had banished all thought of the chill from his mind. He’d

sprinted up those steps to the terrace and caught Mr. Windham's wrist before he could lay one finger on Evelyn.

"You would dare to strike a woman?" Rafe hissed, advancing on him. "You would hurt Evie?"

The man scurried back like a frightened rat, with one hand pressed to his bloodied nose and the other clenched at his side. "Evie!?" he spluttered, clearly taken aback by the familiar name.

"You would strike the woman you were to marry?" Rafe seethed, towering over the man before him now. "You do not deserve to be in her company, much less have the honor of being her betrothed. Leave before I lose the rest of my good senses."

"But..." Mr. Windham's hand raised again.

"Would you like me to break something else?" Rafe cut him off, his body almost shaking with rage. "Consider this the end of your betrothal to her. And mark my words, if I see you anywhere near her again, I will bury you six feet beneath where you stand." Rafe took one step forward. The sound of the snow crunching beneath his boot was enough to frighten Mr. Windham.

He leaped back and scurried away, his boots slipping in the snow once. He fell to the ground, his bloodied hand leaving an imprint on the ice, before he found his feet again and ran away. The moment he had scrambled out of sight around the corner of the terrace, Rafe's hands unfurled at his sides. He turned back to look at Evelyn.

“Evie?” he whispered in panic, moving toward her, his hand going to stroke her cheek but hesitating.

She had both hands over her mouth and tears were glistening in her eyes.

“What is it?” Rafe placed his hands gently on her waist, needing to be close to her. “Did he hurt you? Did he lay a finger on you?” He delicately took one of her wrists, seeing the signs of bruising across her skin.

“That blasted devil! I’ll get him for this!” Just like that, a lever had been flipped, and rage boiled in his chest once more. He was intent on following Mr. Windham, on hurting him properly this time for daring to leave a mark upon her. But as he took a step forward, Evie’s delicate fingers clasped around the edges of his frock coat, grounding him in the moment.

“Rafe? Is it truly you?” she whispered in plain disbelief. “But I thought...” She blinked madly, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

Rafe pulled down his scarf and snatched off his gloves, yearning to feel her properly. He stuffed them in his pockets and raised his hands to her cheeks, wiping away her tears with his thumbs.

“God, I’m so sorry, Evie.” He bent his head toward her. “I’m sorry for everything. I was not forthright with you. I didn’t tell you I was the man behind that mask, because I feared I was not the man you wanted.”

“What?” Her hands tightened around his coat even more.
“What do you mean?”

He reached into his coat and pulled out her diary, opening the pages to her sketches of him.

“All this time, I was under the impression you wanted Mr. Windham,” he stuttered in the cold. “I thought you wanted to seduce him again. That’s why I didn’t tell you what I felt for you. I couldn’t.” He turned the pages frantically, captivated by what she had drawn of him. His confession came quickly now, his words desperately falling from his lips. “I thought you loved him. I thought I had lost the chance of ever earning your heart.”

“You fool,” she whispered, tears catching in her voice. “Why didn’t you look at that note I gave you? I told you on there who I was searching for. I was looking for you.” Her hands flattened against his chest.

He set her diary on the stone balustrade beside him, his hand enveloping hers on his coat.

“God, I’m so sorry,” he murmured, angling his head and resting his forehead against hers. “Let me speak now, Evie. For I fear Mr. Windham will be returning with an entire mob behind him anytime now,” he chuckled deeply.

“Speak quickly then,” she giggled through tears.

“I love you.” The words were simple but powerful. Her eyes widened and she lifted her head back an inch, as if she longed to examine his face, to be certain he was being honest. “I do,” he whispered with an exhale, as though a weight had been lifted from him. “Yes, I was a rake. Yes, I cannot deny I have been with more than one woman in my life, but I had turned my back on that life before you came into my house that night. *You* changed everything. Suddenly, I found myself bending all the rules I had put in place for myself, because it was *you*.”

She smiled suddenly, her tears running down her face. Once more, Rafe lifted his hands to her cheeks, wiping away those tears.

“I fell in love with you,” he confessed, his voice thick with emotion. “Even as I tried not to. I loved before, once, many years ago, but she died. She died on a night much like this.” He nodded his head to the ice around them.

“The snow,” she said softly, her hands moving tenderly across his chest. “Is that why you hate it so much?”

“It is, but tonight...” He paused, and suddenly, he smiled. “The snow didn’t seem to matter so much anymore. You have breathed life into me once more, Evie. And I’ll be damned if I am going to stand by and watch you marry a man like Mr. Windham when I think there’s a chance for us.” He glanced down at the diary beside them, thinking of all the drawings in those pages. “Tell me, Evie, I beg of you. Can you love me too?”

“You blind fool,” she said with a sudden giddy laugh through her tears. “I have loved you for a while now.”

“You have?” His voice was breathy with excitement.

“I have,” she nodded adorably. “I think it was why I was so hurt when I found your mask. To know you were one and the same person, that my heart wasn’t divided after all, but it was *you*. I cannot describe that feeling.”

“Oh, Evie.” He moved toward her and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her into his chest and off her feet, embracing her closely. She hugged him back, her arms wrapped around his shoulders.

This hug was as significant to him as their most intimate moments together. To have her safe in his arms meant everything. He kissed the top of her head, then moved his lips down to her ear.

“Marry me, Evie,” he whispered. “Please, set me free from my fear right now and say you’ll marry me.” He leaned back and put her on her feet again, looking her in the eye. “Live that life with me again where we were once practically inseparable.”

She laughed excitedly, her smile so radiant that he felt instantly lightened as if he hadn’t just braved two miles of snowy terrain.

“Yes,” she nodded, her voice a mere breath, eyes glistening. “That’s all I’ve longed to hear. Yes, I would love to be your wife, Rafe!”

“Thank God for that,” Rafe huffed, “I was beginning to think I had made the journey all this way for nothing, when I could

have been lying back in a warm bathtub right now...”

Evelyn frowned at him and lightly slapped his chest, before he snatched her arm, bent down toward her, and found her lips with his own.

Her hands tightened across his biceps as his palms found her waist, settling her against him. He angled their kiss, making it deeper, feeling the same fire burning within him that had always been there with Evie, despite the chill in the air.

“Oh.” She suddenly drew back, her eyes widening.

“Oh? That is not a good sound,” he laughed, but this time, she didn’t smile.

“My aunt and uncle.” She shook her head. “They are still insistent upon me marrying Mr. Windham.”

“Have no fear about that,” Rafe smirked subtly. “I think I have a way to change your uncle’s mind.”

“Good, because he’s coming this way.” She gestured behind him, her whole mannerism growing flustered.

Rafe immediately adjusted his hold upon her, turning to face the other side of the terrace as he looped her arm through his.

Mr. Gulliver was hurrying across the terrace, his boots struggling to find purchase in the snow, as behind him Mr.

Windham followed, his nose still bloodied.

“What is the meaning of this?” When Mr. Gulliver’s gaze met Rafe’s, he halted, his body stiffening and his spine going rigid. “Your Grace?” He looked at Evelyn, clear anger palpable in the air.

“Mr. Gulliver.” Rafe bowed his head in acknowledgment of his presence, not bothering to acknowledge that Mr. Windham was there as well. “I am here to offer my hand in marriage to your niece. She has accepted.”

“Marriage!?” Mr. Gulliver spluttered, looking between the pair of them.

“No. No.” Mr. Windham stepped forward with the words, moving to Mr. Gulliver’s side. “We had an agreement. She was to marry me—”

“An agreement that hardly matters now.” Rafe knew he could have pointed out that Mr. Windham was about to strike Evie, but he feared that wouldn’t make a difference to a man like Mr. Gulliver.

Instead, Rafe decided to pull rank. It might not have been a good way to achieve his aim, but he had a feeling it would matter to Mr. Gulliver more than anything else. “What connection do you wish for, sir? Do you wish to see your niece married to a man without a title? Or a duke?”

His question clearly connected to the heart of the matter, for Mr. Gulliver stood taller and straightened his tailcoat.

“I think we can all agree that if you want the best opportunity for good marriages for your other three daughters, having a duke for a nephew-in-law is a wiser way to go, is it not?” Rafe asked, keeping his voice calm.

“We had an agreement,” Mr. Windham said feebly again, his voice somewhat muffled by the bloodied handkerchief he held to his nose.

“Well, I...” Mr. Gulliver looked between the two men. Clearly, his mind was being swayed one way, for his eyes settled on Rafe for much longer than on Mr. Windham.

“Please, Uncle,” Evelyn whispered, sliding her hand further across Rafe’s arm. He held a hand over hers, relishing that touch. “Do this one thing for me. Allow me to marry the Duke.”

Rafe was touched by her words. She was speaking out, saying exactly what she wanted. The only sad thing for Rafe was that he believed her words didn’t sway Mr. Gulliver much at all. He’d already made his decision and it had little to do with his niece’s happiness, and everything to do with the connection his family could make.

Ignoring Mr. Windham, as if he wasn’t there, the older gentleman strode toward Rafe, offering his hand.

“Well, it is an unorthodox way to announce a betrothal, but so be it.” He smiled abruptly, his manner changing so fast, it was as if a candle had been lit outside in that cold. “You have my blessing, Your Grace. You may wed my niece.”

Evelyn sighed and leaned against Rafe in relief, as their fingers entwined, his hand enveloping hers.

Mr. Windham was outraged by the sight, but Rafe paid him no heed. All he cared about was having Evelyn beside him.

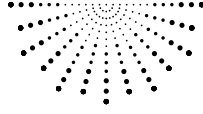
As Mr. Gulliver turned around and attempted to calm Mr. Windham down, Rafe shifted his focus completely to Evie. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back.

“So, are you going to be busy this following month?” he whispered.

“I do not believe so,” she frowned. “Why?”

“Perfect. That sets the date of our wedding.”

EPILOGUE



ONE MONTH LATER

“*W*hen do we leave?”

“Ha! We’ve only just arrived, Rafe. You wish to leave already? Not this time, sir,” Evelyn laughed as she stepped down from the carriage, her eyes taking in the newly restored west wing of the castle.

Rafe gracefully alighted from the carriage behind her, his fingers tracing a lingering touch around her slender waist, a gesture she had come to adore. They had been married for two days now, their first night together one filled with thrilling passion that had reminded her of the utter joy and excitement of the first night they had lain together in his chamber. She still could not quite believe she was now Evelyn *Fitzroy*, the Duchess of Ravensworth!

“I know we have only just got here,” Rafe whispered in her ear, his boots crunching in the light dusting of snow beneath them. “But can you fault me for wishing to have you to myself so soon again when you look at me that way?”

“What way?! So impatient,” she teased, towing him along by his coat as she ventured forward. “You know the plan. You

wished to check on the rebuild before we go on our honeymoon.”

“That I did,” Rafe sighed comically, as if it were some great task, then quickened his pace to join her.

They made their way to the grand west wing, now shrouded in intricate wooden scaffolding that hinted at the majestic transformation within. The building work had been delayed by the recent snowfall, but Evelyn was pleased to see the new vision she and Rafe had for this part of the castle was finally starting to take shape.

“Are you pleased with it?” she asked, turning to face Rafe and taking his hands in hers.

“Strangely, I am.” He smiled at the building before him.

Evelyn’s gaze lingered on his contented smile. The last few weeks, Rafe had changed much. It was as if the snow no longer bothered him too. The night after their wedding, she had asked him about it, and he’d said it was as if the night he had asked her to marry him, everything had flipped. Now, he found hope in the snow, where there was only darkness before.

Clearly, he was as eager to help her face her fears as she had been with him. The night before, they had slept in his chamber in their new home in London without a candle to keep them company. Remarkably, Evelyn hadn’t felt afraid at all in that darkness, not while she could reach out and feel Rafe beside her, his warm body cocooning her own.

“It has much improved,” Rafe said with a contented sigh as he looked at the new west wing. “It feels right, to have a new beginning, a new building. When I return home, it won’t unsettle me as before...”

Evelyn took hold of his hand, their gloved fingers entwining together. Since their betrothal, she had come to learn of his past and the first love of his life. Rafe had shared how dastardly visions of his past would come to haunt him, and how when Evelyn came into his life, she had quelled his nightmares and gave him hope for a better future again. Evelyn felt precious with that, deeply moved to think that she had been the one who had made Rafe realize he could love again.

“I’m so glad,” she whispered. “When we return from our honeymoon, Hester says she is eager to come and see the house.”

“She and Simon will be married by then,” Rafe said, turning to face her. “You should hear Simon talk of the marriage. You think I’m impatient?”

“Ha! Then he and Hester are in the same boat. She is desperate to escape her home and start a new life. I know that feeling all too well.” Her hand softened in Rafe’s grasp as she leaned against him. For the first time, Evelyn felt as if she was exactly where she should be. She was where she belonged, by Rafe’s side.

Since her marriage, she hadn’t seen Peter or Mavis, and she had a feeling that she would see very little of them in the future. In contrast, Bridget and Kitty were clawing at every opportunity to see her and Ravensworth Castle, and she and Hester had made plans to write to one another often. And as

Hester was to marry Rafe's dearest friend, it was clear the four of them would spend a lot of time together in the future.

"Well, before we welcome them to this house," Rafe whispered to her, "we still have our honeymoon awaiting us. Come, let's have some tea to break the journey before we go."

"You really *are* impatient to leave," Evelyn giggled as she let him tow her this time toward the main door of the house.

"Of course, I am. It has little to do with introducing you to Paris, though I am certain you shall adore it." He paused on the front step, turning back to face her with a wolfish grin. "I've secured us some secluded, soundproof accommodations overlooking the Seine. No one will hear us there." He winked at her, and she blushed and giggled, realizing that she had never felt so free in her life as when she was with Rafe.

As they rounded the castle again and entered through the front door, a pair of familiar faces greeted them.

"Ah, Your Grace," Stede bowed, a broad smile gracing his features. "Lovely to have you home. Petra has arranged tea for you both." He gestured to the maid beside him who beamed at Evelyn, excited to have her back, holding up a tray with a teapot and freshly baked biscuits. "Do you plan to stay long?"

"Well," Rafe sighed, then smiled. "We'll stay a short while I think. I wish to ensure the tenants are well-cared for, and the remaining cottages on the land are fixed up, then we'll be on our way."

The butler couldn't have looked happier. As Evelyn and Rafe walked into the sitting room, with Petra trailing behind them, Evelyn elbowed Rafe with a knowing grin. Over the last few weeks, it seemed Stede had approved more and more of Rafe.

"Perhaps I've finally become the duke he always hoped I'd be," Rafe whispered, as he gently lifted her hand and pressed a warm kiss upon it. "I know how he feels. I feel as if I'm where I should have always been at last." Yet his eyes on her showed her exactly what he meant. He wasn't just talking about the duchy; he was talking about the two of *them*.

And I, too, am where I belong.

The End?

BONUS ENDING

Do you want to read **Evelyn & Rafe's happy ending**? Then [click here](#) to read an enchanting, short story with the two of them!



ALSO BY CLAIRE DEVON

Thank you so much for reading *Her Devil of a Duke!*

If you enjoyed this book, I would greatly appreciate it if you would [click here to leave a review](#). Your feedback would mean the world to me and it will allow me to improve my future writing to better fit books to your taste :)

Most importantly, thank you for joining me on this amazing journey!

Some of my other best-sellers:

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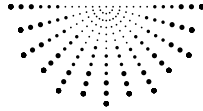
The Blind Duke's Ward

The Beastly Duke and his Wallflower

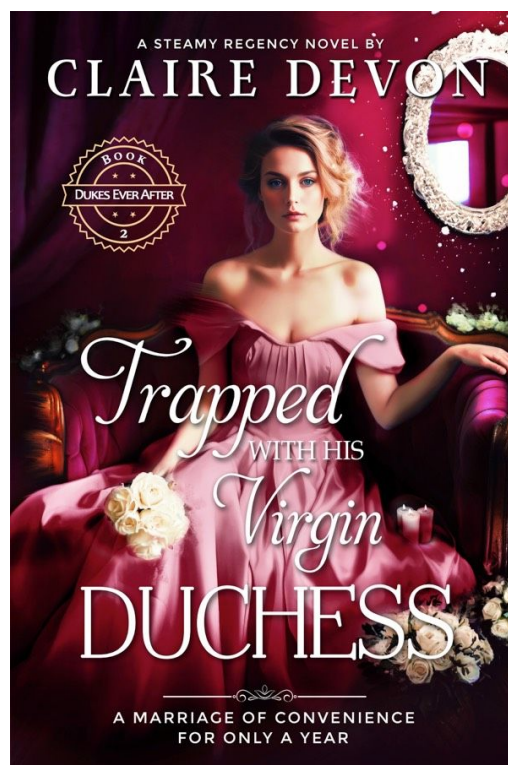
The Duke's Virgin Lady

Reforming the Icy Duke

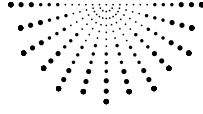
PREVIEW: TRAPPED WITH HIS VIRGIN DUCHESS



Turn the page to read the first chapters of my novel,
[Trapped with his Virgin Duchess!](#)



CHAPTER ONE



LOVELL ESTATE

“*I* must tell Uncle Albert how splendid peonies would look at my wedding, Edna,” Charlotte Lovell said as she alighted from the carriage in front of Lovell House, the setting sun casting long shadows over the walls.

“And white roses, Miss,” Edna, her lady’s maid, said from behind her.

“Yes!” Grinning, Charlotte hurried up the steps to the front door.

In three months’ time, at the start of spring, she would be marrying her third cousin, Timothy Lovell. Prior to the engagement, Charlotte had found the notion absurd—for she always wanted to marry someone of her own choosing, someone she *truly* loved. But things changed quickly after a conversation with her Uncle, the man she had the utmost respect for.

Her Uncle, Albert Lovell, had graced her with an abundance of kindness that surpassed all others since she became orphaned; and so, she could not bring herself to deny his wish. Timothy was a good man, too.

The door swung open before she could knock, and the butler, Hodges, appeared, his expression grim.

The joy that had been blossoming within her withered in an instant, because Charlotte had never seen him without a smile. “Hodges, is something wrong?” she whispered.

His face was ashen, and he would not look at her as he stepped away from the door. When Charlotte walked into the hall, an intense feeling of dread washed over her, and her stomach turned.

“Hodges?” she asked again, her voice wavering slightly.

Hodges’ lips parted, his mouth shaping and reshaping words that refused to form. He blinked rapidly, his eyes misting.

Charlotte’s eyes moved around the hall, her heart racing. The usually lively house now seemed to be filled with a deafening silence, and the tick of the grandfather clock echoed louder with each second.

“Where are my uncle and cousin?” Charlotte asked, taking a step toward the stairs. They had been out of the house when she left to have tea with Diana, but she expected them to return before her as it was almost dinner time.

“Miss, I...” the butler started, but snapped his mouth shut as if it pained him to continue.

Her chest tightening, she abandoned propriety and picked up her skirts, running up the stairs. She had to know where her uncle was, and what had happened.

The stairs seemed to stretch infinitely, each step she took increasing the pounding of her heart as her fear grew. The hallway on the second floor was quiet, and the heavy blue velvet curtains had been drawn. Her steps quickened, and she made, first, for her uncle's bedchamber.

She stumbled to a halt when the door of the bedchamber opened suddenly, and a man walked out. Charlotte saw his gray embroidered waistcoat first, but as her eyes ascended, her mouth fell open.

He was the one. The one she wished to marry and dreamed of, the one that gave her the courage to move on to her new life after the passing of her parents. It had been several years since that incident, but his face had remained etched in her memory, for she always wished to see him one more time to thank him for the kindness he showed that day. Although they were only children, alone in those dark woods that night she ran away from home, she could never forget him.

And now, never had Charlotte imagined she would see him in her home, at least not in the way that one typically would. His blue eyes were as sharp as she remembered. However, he stared at her as though he was seeing her for the first time.

He did not remember her.

Charlotte would have been disappointed if the dominant emotion within her was not fear, as she noticed how solemn

his demeanor was with the corners of his mouth turned downward.

“Sir,” she managed to stammer, because he was blocking her path, and her heart pounded with a terrible premonition. “Where is my uncle?”

“The correct title would be ‘Your Grace’ or ‘Duke Jeremy’.”

Your Grace? The young boy is now a Duke?

“Miss Lovell, perhaps you should sit.” He gestured at a seat against the wall, and time seemed to slow right then.

What? No! No no! This cannot be happening! Not again!

Before her thoughts could fully converge into coherence, Charlotte surged past him, propelled by a frantic energy. He reached out, his fingers barely brushing her arm in an attempt to halt her, but she was unyielding.

As she burst into the chamber, the sight that met her eyes made her heart freeze. Her beloved uncle, who had always been a beacon of warmth and security, lay still and quiet on the bed.

His face, usually so animated and full of life, was now hidden beneath a stark white cloth.

For a fleeting moment, Charlotte thought him merely asleep. But the silence was wrong, the stillness too profound. Jeremy, who had followed her into the room, moved to stand before her, creating a barricade between Charlotte and the harsh reality.

“Do not venture further, Miss, I implore you,” he said.

“I have to see him,” she whispered, her voice brittle and distant. She raised her eyes to Jeremy’s. “Is he...?” She choked on the rest of the words.

Jeremy looked away and nodded, barely. A strangled cry escaped her lips, and her legs gave way under her. He reached out in time to steady her, his hands surprisingly gentle as they held her shoulders.

Charlotte blinked, her eyes burning with unshed tears, her mind struggling to comprehend. Moments ago, she had been laughing and smiling, anticipating her impending nuptials to her cousin, Timothy, but her entire life was now a forgotten dream, replaced with a nightmare she had yet to comprehend.

She moved mechanically toward her uncle, wishing to say her farewells. However, her path was blocked again, this time by the housekeeper.

“Do not look at him, Miss,” she begged.

The Duke, seemingly understanding Charlotte’s need, guided her out of the room, his touch an odd comfort amid the despair. As she allowed herself to be led away, a thought

struck her—a horrifying possibility she had overlooked in her shock.

“Where is Timothy?” she asked, her voice barely audible. “Where is he?”

The deepening shadows in Jeremy’s eyes confirmed her fears. The edges of her vision darkened, and the finality of the situation sunk in. Charlotte had not only lost her uncle, her only guardian, but her betrothed, as well. She felt as though the world was crumbling around her. The sound of her heart pounding filled her ears, and she could no longer stand upright.

Strong arms held her, and then she was carried. Burying her face in Jeremy’s shoulder, she shut her eyes tightly, hoping that when she opened them, she would discover this to be a nightmare.

Jeremy set her down in a chair, and when she opened her eyes, she saw they were in a sitting room. He walked up to a table and poured some liquor into a tumbler before returning to her.

“I cannot see my cousin, too?” she asked as he placed the tumbler in her hand.

Jeremy shook his head. “I promised Lord Lovell that your memories of him and your cousin will remain uncorrupted.”

He squatted in front of her. “I must tell you of your uncle’s last wish, but you should drink first.”

Charlotte swallowed and shook her head. "I have no wish to drink."

"You should, Miss," he encouraged, gently taking her wrist and raising the tumbler to her lips. "I fear you will need it."

Her fingers instinctively tightened around the glass. "Is Uncle's final wish worse than what I am facing now?"

"Perhaps," Jeremy replied solemnly.

Charlotte took two large gulps of the liquor, wincing as she did, and several seconds of silence passed between them. When Jeremy did not speak, she sat straighter and said, "Tell me. Surely, nothing can be worse than losing the only family I have."

"He asked me to marry you," Jeremy declared impassively, and she blinked at him.

"Are you mocking me, Your Grace?" She shook her head, but Jeremy looked very serious. For the first time, she noticed how disheveled his black hair was and the dark lines under his eyes.

"Your uncle made me promise to marry you," he repeated clearly.

The words hung in the air, heavy and surreal. Charlotte stared at him, struggling to make sense of his words. "But...why? I

have another cousin...Nicholas...Surely Uncle Albert would have asked me to marry him?"

Jeremy nodded, and his voice sounded strained when he spoke. "Mr. Nicholas Lovell is not in England, and he is not likely to return soon. You have to be protected and taken care of, and I swore I would do just that."

Charlotte felt a lump forming in her throat, her mind spinning. Jeremy continued speaking, "We will marry as soon as possible, but we will live separately for a year, and then the marriage shall be annulled."

Her eyes widened, and her shock changed, carrying anger with it. "What did you just say?"

"We will have the marriage annulled after a year, Miss Lovell."

"My uncle would never instruct such a thing!"

"No, the notion of annulment is mine." The Duke—for she could no longer see him as Jeremy—rose.

"You accepted my uncle's final request to humiliate me?" Charlotte could not understand how her uncle could skip Nicholas, who was more than eligible, and hand her to this man. She might have once dreamed of marrying Jeremy but he could not even remember her, and he no longer was the cheerful youth who had stolen her thirteen-year-old heart.

“No, Miss Lovell, please do not misinterpret my intentions. Lord Lovell was kind to me, and it is only fair if I repaid him by carrying out his last request.”

“Why an annulment?” Charlotte asked, hating the way her voice sounded small.

The Duke did not respond, and he simply clasped his hands behind him and said, “You will be looked after, and when you are free, you will be a woman of independent means.”

But that is not what I want! Charlotte wanted to yell, but she could not speak. It was too much, too fast. She could hardly breathe. The room felt too small, the walls closing in on her.

Feeling as if she was tumbling down a hill, unable to stop or slow, she shut her eyes.

The trajectory of her life had changed in a very short moment, a promise made was now dictating her future, and she could do nothing but watch, horrified, as her life spiraled out of her control for the second time in her twenty-two years of existence.

CHAPTER TWO



WILLOWBROOK CASTLE

Jeremy Remming, the seventh Duke of Eldenham, crossed the threshold of Willowbrook Castle in York for the first time after a long year. Despite the months of absence, an uncanny sense of familiarity took hold of him, evidence of the stately castle's undying charm.

A childhood spent in the stone halls whispered in his ear, memories of laughter, tantrums, and whispered secrets clinging to the high stone walls and vaulted ceilings. The sorrow he had endured here flooded back, as well.

His heart immediately clenched, and images of long dark hair and soft blue eyes flashed through his mind. A peal of laughter rang in his ears. Jeremy shook his head and returned his focus to the foyer.

Upon entering, he was greeted by the sight of the castle's loyal keepers, the butler, Mr. Mayton, and his wife and housekeeper Mrs. Mayton. Their presence, just as much a part of Willowbrook as its stone and timber, added to the sensation of time standing still.

"Welcome, Your Grace," Mr. Mayton said with a warmth that belied his age. "It is good to finally have you back."

Jeremy managed a smile, wishing he was happy to be here. He looked at Mrs. Mayton, and unlike her husband, there was frost in her tone when she spoke. She curtsied, her face tight. “Welcome to Willowbrook, Your Grace.”

Her choice of words did not escape Jeremy’s notice, and he supposed he deserved such treatment from her after his long absence.

“It is a pleasure to see you, Mrs. Mayton,” he murmured.

“We thought we’d never live to see the day you would return, Your Grace,” she confessed, her words hanging in the air like the faint scent of peony in the front hall. She had never been adept at hiding her emotions, and Jeremy could see the discontent in her taut smile.

“Mrs. Mayton,” came the butler’s soft reprimand, their familiarity with one another evident in the understated exchange, and the housekeeper smiled brightly at Jeremy.

He wondered if his wife was the reason for Mrs. Mayton’s reception, for her affection had always been a consistent presence in his life following his mother’s untimely death when he was a mere child of three.

Jeremy looked up at the grand staircase to the landing that parted, leading up to the separate wings of the castle. Every inch of marble held tales of a past innocence, a time when he had been nothing more than a carefree boy darting about the vast hallways. He then looked around the foyer, the echoes of his laughter seeming to rebound off the high ceiling. A pang of

sorrow clenched his heart. The boy he once had been was replaced by a man touched by the harsh realities of life and time.

“Shall I prepare some tea for you, Your Grace?” Mrs. Mayton offered.

“Yes, please,” he murmured as his eyes narrowed on the painting hanging above the stairs landing. It was a little too dark for him to see anything, but he remembered that a different portrait of his mother used to hang there. It had been changed.

Jeremy, though greeted with warm nostalgia, found his return to the castle more of a bittersweet affair than a joyful homecoming. His residence here, however temporary it might be, felt like dredging up ghosts from a past he would rather leave untouched.

“Who changed the portrait?” he asked, glancing at Mr. Mayton.

“There was a storm one evening, and the old portrait fell. Her Grace ordered for a different one from the gallery to replace it,” the butler explained.

“Her Grace is quite fond of this portrait,” Mrs. Mayton said. “We all think the late Duchess looks better in this than the former.”

Jeremy’s mind circled back to the pressing matter at hand, the reason for his return. “Where is she?” he asked, his gaze

intently on the Maytons. His wife was conspicuously absent, a fact that puzzled him considering he had given ample notice of his arrival.

Mr. and Mrs. Mayton shared a glance, and it was the latter who replied, a hint of caution in her tone. “Oh, I am sure she is in the castle somewhere, Your Grace.”

“Direct her to my study,” he commanded, making his way past the stairs and toward the familiar retreat.

Yet, as he pushed open the heavy wooden door, his brows furrowed at the sight that met him. The room which once radiated an air of scholarly gravity now looked more like a middle-aged matron’s parlor than a Duke’s study. It was as though a whimsical breeze had blown through the room, replacing his somber possessions with an array of needlework wonders.

Handkerchiefs, embroidered with delicate precision, littered one sofa. Shelves overflowed with stuffed dolls, small cushions, and an assortment of porcelain curiosities. The wallpaper, once a dignified brown, had been replaced with a delicate shade of pink, tiny flowers blooming across it. The transformation was so stark, Jeremy wondered if he had walked into the wrong room.

Bewildered, he turned to Mrs. Mayton—who had followed him instead of getting that tea she offered—his eyes wide with shock. “What the devil happened here?”

The housekeeper cleared her throat. “I was going to mention that Her Grace—”

“My wife did this?” Jeremy interrupted, a note of disbelief weaving through his words. The sight of his study—or rather, what used to be his study—filled him with a sense of disbelief so profound he felt rooted to the spot.

“Would it not have been more fitting for the Duchess to have her own study?” he questioned.

“Indeed, Your Grace, but she desired a workroom as well, and ___”

“She chose my study to...redecorate.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, struggling to compose himself amidst the unexpected transformation. Clearly, his absence had left too wide a gap.

A small voice inside him, a whisper of pain, retorted with, ‘Never long enough to erase your sorrow.’

“Mrs. Mayton,” he began, forcing his tone to remain even, “I require the presence of my wife. *Immediately.*”

“Of course, Your Grace.” She offered a quick curtsy before bustling off, replaced swiftly by the butler.

However, Mayton was not bearing news of his wife, and with him was Jeremy’s old friend, Samuel Godwin, the Earl of Redmont. Jeremy had not seen him in over a year, not since he brought his wife to live in Willowbrook.

“Eldenham!” Samuel Godwin exclaimed the instant he saw Jeremy, not waiting for the butler to announce him. He walked into the flowery room and clapped him on the shoulder.

“It is great to see you, Redmont,” Jeremy smiled.

He had sent word about his arrival to Samuel because he wanted to know how the businesses he had left in his care were doing. They had been friends all their lives, and Samuel took care of their joint ventures in York while Jeremy lived in London—where he belonged.

“My word, have you turned to the teashop trade?” Samuel quipped as he sat, scanning the room with a look of bemused confusion. “I was under the impression that this was your study.”

“It is,” Jeremy responded tersely, sitting in the chair opposite Samuel’s and picking up the handkerchief that rested on the arm, tossing it to the pile on the sofa. “Or rather, it was.”

“A feeling of mutual bafflement engulfs us, my friend,” Samuel chuckled, his eyes still roving over the riot of needlework.

“Perhaps my wife found herself with time to spare,” Jeremy mused aloud. If the Duchess had indeed crafted all these items, her time had certainly been well-occupied.

“Your absence spanned an entire year, Eldenham,” Samuel reminded him, a smirk playing on his lips. “Plenty of time for things to change.”

“Quite homely, I daresay,” Samuel offered, with a nonchalant shrug.

“Homely?” Jeremy echoed, an eyebrow raised. “All I can see is...peony?” He sniffed at the sweet aroma pervading the air.

“I am not a botanist, nor do I see a peony,” Samuel retorted with a laugh.

“No, that is in the air,” Jeremy said, realizing that the scent had filled his nose since he first stepped into the castle.

“York has been very quiet without you, Eldenham,” Samuel said, his tone and demeanor serious.

“The sentiment is not mutual, I fear,” Jeremy replied wryly.

“Piercing words,” Samuel chuckled before Jeremy switched the conversation to matters more pressing.

“How is everything?”

His friend ran a hand down his jaw and sighed, shaking his head. “I have wronged you. Forgive me, dear friend.”

“What happened?”

“The last harvest was a loss, the livestock perished from an illness, and the tenants are quite restless.”

Jeremy tensed upon hearing that. “I beg your pardon?” His friend was about to repeat himself, but Jeremy held up a hand. “Why am I only hearing of this now?” he demanded, his annoyance hardly concealed. He had entrusted his friend to keep a watchful eye on their ventures.

“I had hoped to contain the issues when they arose,” Samuel admitted, the corners of his mouth turned down in regret. “But matters slipped out of my control. I had meant to discuss it with you in person, a matter too grave for mere letters. Your return saved me the trip.”

“Such information should not have been delayed,” Jeremy returned irritably, rising and striding toward what had once been his large mahogany desk, now draped with a frilly white cloth. Lifting the cloth, he pulled open a drawer, expecting the reassuring sight of familiar ledgers and account books. Instead, a medley of bright thread spools and thimbles in various sizes met his eyes, a blatant mockery of his once orderly study.

An irked sigh whistled past his clenched teeth, frustration making his chest tighten.

“Eldenhams, I am well aware of the profound aversion you harbor toward this place,” Samuel replied, his voice dolorous. “My intention was to manage matters and spare you the journey and a reminder of the past. An apology might seem hollow now, but I offer it sincerely.”

His friend's words brought Jeremy's fumbling hands to an abrupt halt. Samuel's loyalty had been unswerving, a beacon in the darkest storms of his life. He was thankful for his friend's protective instincts, but his properties and business ventures held priority. This estate might only be a fragment of his wealth, but Jeremy was not one to relinquish it, unchecked. Personal demons had their place, but business demanded a separate attention.

Pulling himself upright, he gathered his thoughts, "I had intended to journey back to London tomorrow, but I find it necessary to extend my stay for a further two days," he declared, straightening his shoulders. "We shall assess the extent of the damage and find solutions accordingly," he added, his mind already whirling with plans. Two days were enough for him to address the troubles, he convinced himself.

Yet, a quiet promise resonated within him. *No more than that.* Any longer would be too great a concession to his tormenting past.

CHAPTER THREE



Charlotte handed Edna the last chrysanthemum bloom and sighed, looking around the dull greenhouse, her throat tight. She loved this place, and she had grown her favorite flowers here since she made Willowbrook her home.

Her Lady's maid gently touched her shoulder. "Do not worry, Your Grace, spring shall be here soon with new blooms."

Charlotte gave her a wintry smile. Her poor companion thought she was sad because she had just cut the last blooms in the greenhouse, but Charlotte knew what she did not. This was her second winter in Willowbrook, but it would also be her last.

"Yes, Edna," she murmured. "We should return to the castle." She rubbed her gloved hands together and pulled her cloak tighter as Edna placed the flower in the basket. "I would love some tea."

Stepping out of the greenhouse, Charlotte's boots sank into the freshly fallen snow, causing a slight chill to rush up her leg. She lifted the hem of her dress just high enough to shield the delicate fabric from the dampness below, and Edna gave her an appreciative smile.

After all, she would be the one to rescue the dress from ruin should it be sullied.

As they moved along the path that led back to the castle, Charlotte's gaze wandered across the vast field, past the leafless trees, resting on the austere, yet compelling structure in the distance. A sense of longing tugged at her heart, pulling the corners of her mouth into a wistful smile.

The dark stone of Willowbrook contrasted against the soft blanket of white that stretched out before it, captivating. The vines covering the walls presented an enchanting tableau that was almost otherworldly.

It was in moments such as this that Charlotte was reminded of the ever-changing face of the castle, beautiful in every season. She allowed her gaze to linger a little longer, finding comfort in the familiarity of the scene before running the rest of the way to get out of the cold. They let themselves into the castle through the front.

As soon as she stepped in, she noticed that Mr. Mayton was wearing a rather peculiar expression. Her lips parted to question him, but an unusually flustered Mrs. Mayton appeared before Charlotte could say a word.

"Your Grace, I had not been informed of your gardening exploits today," the housekeeper chastised gently, glancing behind her.

"Oh, I found myself at the mercy of spontaneity, Mrs. Mayton," Charlotte chuckled. Mrs. Mayton's hands found

their way to her ample hips, adopting a posture that indicated maternal exasperation.

Since her ill-fated union to the Duke of Eldenham and his subsequent relocation of her to an isolated castle, Charlotte had developed a fond familiarity with Mr. and Mrs. Mayton.

Following the untimely deaths of her parents, Charlotte had been taken under the protective wing of her uncle, Baron Albert Lovell. He had acted as her guardian until he was lost in a tragic accident. This, compounded by the death of her betrothed, Timothy, in the same carriage crash, had left Charlotte bereft and numb. With the familial bonds of her childhood cruelly severed, she had found herself adrift in a sea of grief.

Her transition to Willowbrook after her wedding had been a daunting phase in her life, but Edna, her dearest friend Diana, and the Maytons had given her solace and companionship, especially in her lonely days.

“This morning seemed too splendid to be squandered indoors,” Charlotte said, pointing at the basket filled with colorful blossoms.

“These would bring much life and color to your chambers,” Mrs. Mayton observed as she appreciated the white and peach chrysanthemums.

“I intend them for the workroom, actually,” Charlotte said, removing her cloak and handing it to Edna before starting up the stairs.

The housekeeper's features shifted then, a subtle tightening of her mouth and a creasing of her blonde eyebrows. "His Grace has arrived."

Confusion drew Charlotte's brows together, "Who?"

"The Duke," Mrs. Mayton clarified, her voice dipping slightly.

"Today?" Charlotte halted in her tracks, her body tensing. The Duke's impending visit had slipped from her mind entirely even though she had been counting the days she had left in Willowbrook.

A year's worth of bitterness that resided in the recesses of Charlotte's heart rose, stinging like a fresh wound. She had endeavored not to think of the Duke, especially after he had made it unmistakably clear to her that she was nothing more than a wife in name, a contractual obligation he intended to fulfill and then promptly discard.

He had left her, lost in the depths of her grief, with the promise to return in a year's time and liberate her from the unwanted shackles of their matrimony with an annulment. Charlotte's hands clutched her dark blue skirt, and her teeth clenched.

Why was his arrival bringing up so many memories and unsavory emotions?

"You will live here until next winter," Eldenham had said upon their arrival at Willowbrook. They had married a week after her uncle and cousin's deaths in London, then traveled to York.

“Where will you be?” Charlotte asked, clutching the string of her reticule and standing rigidly in the drawing room.

“In London,” he replied impassively, leading Charlotte to conclude that she was an unwelcome encumbrance and a lingering responsibility left to him by her uncle.

She shook her head to dismiss the memory, taking a deep breath. She had adapted despite everything, and what weighed heavily upon her heart was not the annulment of their marriage—for it meant nothing to her—but the thought of leaving a familiar place; one she had slowly turned into her own.

“Yes, His Grace is within the castle walls,” Mrs. Mayton confirmed, pulling Charlotte from her musings. Then the housekeeper’s mouth opened and closed as though she had something more to say.

Whatever words she had intended to share seemed to retreat, leaving her lips pressed into a firm line. Her usual joviality was replaced with a mask of grim concern, the wrinkles on her face seeming more pronounced than ever.

“Is something wrong, Mrs. Mayton?” Charlotte asked.

“Not at all, Your Grace.”

Charlotte decided not to pursue the subject, and as she glanced at the basket in Edna’s grip, she found herself agreeing with Mrs. Mayton’s initial suggestion about the disposition of the flowers. “You are right, Mrs. Mayton. These flowers would indeed look far more captivating in my chambers.”

Avoiding the Duke was an enticing notion, and she would grasp at any reasonable excuse to delay their inevitable meeting.

“Should I arrange for some vases to be sent to your room, Your Grace?” Mrs. Mayton asked.

“Your thoughtfulness is much appreciated, Mrs. Mayton. I would be grateful for the vases,” Charlotte responded, an uneasy smile curving her lips as she spun on her heel, hurrying up the stairs.

Her heart beat faster as she walked down the hallway to her chambers, and she stopped in front of her door, pressing a hand against her belly where an uncontrollable flutter resided.

“No,” she whispered to herself, shaking her head. “I cannot see him now.”

Opening her door, she stepped into the sitting room adjoining her bedchamber. She walked to a chair and lowered herself onto it, but she rose quickly, her restlessness growing. Charlotte paced the room, her eyes on the intricate patterns of the Persian rug that decorated the floor. Her mind was a torrent, swirling with an onslaught of questions that demanded her attention.

One, however, was bold enough to force its presence, looming over the rest.

What was to become of her once the annulment was complete?

Eldenham had assured her that her well-being would not be compromised. She would want for naught, he had promised with an uncharacteristic gentleness. Yet these soothing words had done little to placate the growing apprehension that gnawed at her composure.

The sudden knock at her door punctuated her contemplation, and she stopped pacing. Relief washed over her as she hastened toward the door, eager to divert her thoughts.

It must be the vases that Mrs. Mayton had promised, she thought as she opened the door.

Then her breath caught.

Instead of the anticipated vases and the housekeeper, Charlotte found herself looking into eyes as blue as glaciers on a face so handsome it was unfair. She took a tiny step back, swallowing.

He was as she remembered him, intense and towering over her, his jaw set with authority. Her insides fluttered, and she remembered the first time she beheld him; his eyes had gleamed with joy, his voice had been soft, and his words sincere.

There was no trace of that man now, only the brooding shadow that had taken over his form. Eldenham raised one dark eyebrow and tilted his head. He was about to speak when panic gripped Charlotte, and she swung the door shut, eager to erase the unanticipated image before her.

A grunt followed a hand jutting out to halt the closing door, and the realization of what had occurred hit her like a wave. In her haste, she had slammed the door against the Duke's hand.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Claire Devon was born in rural England, to a large family of seven. Her siblings, all wild and untamed in nature, are the inspiration for her heroes and heroines, helping her create stories that you all

love.

As a lover of the Regency and Victorian era, she strives to make sure that her stories are not only historically accurate, but also passionate, enchanting, and addictive all the same.

