



Cobalt Fairy

PUBLISHING



Married
to a Wicked
Duke

HARRIET CAVES

MARRIED TO A WICKED DUKE

A Steamy Historical Regency Romance Novel



HARRIET CAVES



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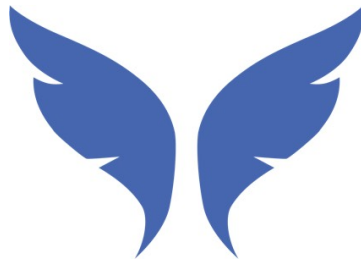
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About the Book

“What are you doing in my room, my lady?”

After her sister's scandal, Veronica has a really hard time finding a husband. And her father's constant drunken displays only make her all the more desperate.

Hounded by every single debutante, Duke Frederick would rather lock himself in his rooms than be a husband. Until...

Veronica's grandmother sneakily leads her into the Duke's room. And as she accidentally lies right on top of him in bed, there is little she can say to convince onlookers this was an accident. And now they have to marry...

Before You Start Reading...

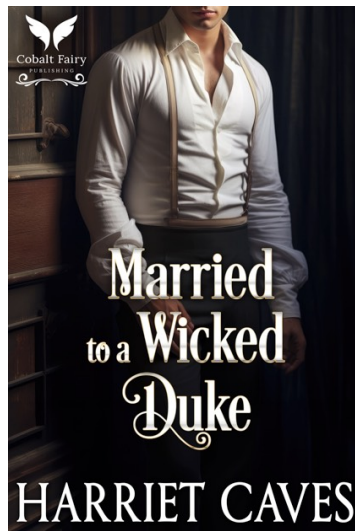
Before you start reading...

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

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

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

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



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Chapter One



“**G**ood afternoon, Your Grace! Do come and join me!”

Frederick Barnes, the Duke of Brownwood, could not even bring himself to look in the direction of the latest chirruping request. He could hardly believe he had let himself be persuaded into attending yet another of these mind-numbing events. It felt as though his grandmother was throwing these inane gatherings every second day. Soirees and garden parties and endless dinners—all for the thinly veiled purpose of finding her grandson a wife.

A pink-feathered figure fluttered in front of Frederick as he made his way toward the drinks table at the back of the marquee. She was tall and slender, with pale blonde hair and blue eyes that made him think of an arctic sea. Long fingers danced boldly up his arm. “I have saved you a seat beside me, Your Grace. I would very much like to continue our conversation about my father’s country house.”

Conversation about her father’s country house? Have I even met this lady before? All these mindless debutantes were running into one another.

“Another time, perhaps.” Frederick extricated himself from the long-fingered lady and hurried toward the drinks table. He snatched up a glass of champagne and downed it a little quicker than was wise. He took a deep breath of the clean country air to steady himself.

Usually, his family’s country house in Cambridge was one of his favorite places to escape to. But today, it provided no escape. His grandmother had invited what seemed to be the entire *ton* up to the house for a few days of festivities. And Frederick knew all too well what that meant: that when they finally returned to London, he was expected to do so with a wife-to-be in tow.

“Ah there you are, Your Grace!” Frederick gripped the stem of his champagne glass a little tighter and drew in another long breath, trying to find the will to turn around and face his latest admirer.

“Your Grace, I—”

“Do excuse me, ladies.” The booming voice belonged to the Dowager Duchess of Brownwood. Frederick turned to see his grandmother barreling past the young ladies with a look of determination in her gray eyes. “I apologize for interrupting, but I would like to spend a little time with my grandson.” And before Frederick knew what was happening, the Dowager Duchess had looped her arm through his and was hauling him out of the marquee, as though he were little more than a child.

Once outside the marquee, Frederick took a deep breath, as though he had broken through the surface of a raging ocean. “Thank you, Grandmother,” he said. “I am not sure I could have taken much more of that.”

“So I saw.” The Dowager Duchess clucked her tongue. “I thought I had best come and rescue you before you did something you would come to regret.”

Frederick smiled wryly. “Probably a wise decision.”

His grandmother sighed. “I do wish you would try a little harder, my dear. Must you truly be so grumpy all the time? These young ladies and their families have come all the way up from London to spend time with you.”

Frederick snorted. “How can I be anything but grumpy when I am surrounded by idiots?”

His grandmother shook her head in frustration. “Give them a chance, Frederick. You may be surprised. I have heard Lady Juliet Carfield has a lovely singing voice. Perhaps she will also have an interest in art, along with music. Why not try talking to her a little? Just—”

“Grandmother.” Frederick gritted his teeth. I am not interested. In any of this. Not in marrying, or in entertaining any of these foolish debutantes. I just want to be left alone.”

Instead of the anger he was expecting, a look of pity flitted across his grandmother’s eyes. She took Frederick’s arm again. “Why not come with me to welcome the new guests? I —”

“Not today, Grandmother.” Frederick strode off toward the house before the Dowager Duchess could speak again. Some

part of him vaguely regretted speaking to his grandmother in such a harsh manner, but he could not really find the energy to care. All he wanted was for these people to disappear, and to be able to lock himself away in his studio and paint.

When he was feeling slightly less bitter, Frederick would use these dreadful social events to further his plans for the gallery. London was full of talented painters—some that were still hidden in the woodwork. Finding them was like discovering a rare gem buried deep within the ground.

The art gallery had been his mother's idea. She had been a gifted painter—Frederick knew that was where his own talent came from. He had vivid memories of sitting in her studio as a young boy, cross-legged on the floor, watching her paintbrush flit across the canvas. Watching recognizable images emerge from the swirls of paint. Sometimes, his mother had painted simple still lifes, as was expected of her as a female painter. Flowers and candle sticks, and endless depictions of the family cat. But she was also a gifted landscape artist, often filling her canvases with flower-covered meadows and wild seas. It was his mother's landscapes that Frederick liked best; as a child, he would watch them come to life on the canvas and imagine himself being taken to faraway places.

Places he would very much like to escape to now.

His mother had talked about opening a gallery for as long as Frederick could remember. But her husband, Frederick's father, had not been supportive of her plans. Had claimed such pursuits were not suitable for a lady, particularly a duchess. She had continued to make her plans behind her husband's back but had died without seeing her dream come to fruition.

Frederick was determined to see her vision of the gallery come to life. Honor her memory through the thing she had loved the most. And so, yes, these dreadful parties his grandmother insisted on throwing could have some benefit, if they allowed him to find the right artists, the right contacts.

But not today. Today, all he wanted was to lose himself in his own painting and escape the real world for a time.

But before he had even made it to the front door of the house, two young ladies had caught up with him. Was the one on his left the feathered young thing who had wanted to talk about her father's country house? Hell, he did not even know anymore.

"Where are you going, Your Grace?" she said. "The party is just beginning."

"I'm afraid I am not quite in the mood for a party," Frederick said tautly, hoping his brusque tone would give enough of a hint for the ladies to leave.

It did not.

"That's a terrible shame," said the other. "But fear not, we shall keep you company, shan't we, Lady Juliet? And of course, you must feel as though you can tell us what is bothering you." She looked up at him with wide blue eyes. "Truly, Your Grace. You can tell me *anything*."

How long have you got? Frederick thought wryly.

He bit back the sharp retort that was on his lips and instead ground out, “If you do not mind, I would rather be left alone.”

“Oh, but—”

“I would rather be left alone,” he repeated, his voice louder this time.

The two young ladies exchanged glances, and then finally fell away. Just in time, the doorman opened the front door, letting Frederick slip inside without a word.

The library. Surely none of these mindless creatures will be in there.

He hurried down the passage and pushed open the door to the library at the back of the house, desperately hoping for a little reprieve. To his horror, a young woman was reclined on the chaise longue in the corner of the room, skimming through the book open in her lap. At the sight of him, her eyes lit up. “Good day, Your Grace!” She leaped to her feet, tossing the book aside. “What a lovely surprise to see you in here.”

Frederick almost laughed. He knew there was no part of him that could be described as *lovely*. At least beyond his title, that was. He had no illusions that all these so-called admirers were after anything other than the chance to become a Duchess. There was no part about his surly, sour self that would make even a fraction of a good husband.

And that is the way I like it.

Without even bothering to acknowledge the young lady, Frederick hurried out of the library and charged up the staircase to the sanctuary of his bedchamber, closing the door firmly behind him.

Chapter Two



Lady Veronica Caster pressed her hand to her mouth to stifle her yawn. She was not sure why she was bothering to hide her tiredness; it was not as though her father or grandmother were taking the slightest bit of notice of her.

“We are hideously late once *again*,” hissed Veronica’s grandmother, the Dowager Marchioness of Hilt. She jabbed a bony finger in the direction of her son-in-law, the Earl of Volk. “Do you think just once, we might manage to turn up to something on time? Tardiness is a *hideously* rude habit.”

Veronica’s father grunted in response, slumping back against the seat of the carriage. “I can hardly be blamed for this. How can we be expected to turn up on time when we’ve been summoned out to Cambridge all places?”

The Dowager Marchioness snorted. “You are lucky you wrangled an invitation to this fine gathering at all, Mark Caster. We would all be better for it if you had just stayed home.” She scratched the ears of her terrier, Patch, who was curled up on her lap.

Veronica winced at her grandmother's sharpness, but she could not deny the Dowager Marchioness had a point. Despite her father's protests, their lateness was entirely their own fault. As he had on so many occasions throughout Veronica's twenty years of life, he had failed to appear at the breakfast table that morning. When his valet had finally hauled him out of bed and tried to ready him for the long carriage journey up to Cambridge, he had still been giddy with last night's drink.

The Dowager Marchioness had insisted they leave without him, but Veronica had begged her to let her father come. She hated the thought of leaving him at home alone with his brandy bottle and his thoughts. Especially given they would be away at the Brownwoods' country house for several days and nights. But now, she had to admit, she was beginning to wonder if she ought to have let her grandmother have her way. They were going to make enough of a scene as it was, arriving at the Dowager Duchess of Brownwood's garden party so hideously late. At this rate, they would be lucky if they made it in time for dinner. And if they did, she was fairly certain her father would get up to his usual antics and cause a drunken scene at the dinner table that she and her family would never live down.

Yes, thought Veronica, I ought definitely have agreed to leave Father at home.

Patch perked up suddenly and scampered across the Dowager Marchioness's lap to look out the window. He let out a loud, high-pitched bark.

The Earl rubbed his eyes. "Did you really have to bring that runt of a thing along?"

The Dowager Marchioness glared at him as though he had suggested she leave her first-born babe in a basket in the woods. “Of *course* I did! Dear little Patch is family. And unlike *other* members of this family, he had the decency to be ready for this journey on time!”

The Earl rolled his eyes.

The Dowager Marchioness scooped Patch back onto her lap, somehow still managing to keep her finger pointed in the Earl’s direction. “Now you listen to me,” she was saying, “you had better be on your best behavior once we arrive. If I even see you even thinking about joining in a card game, I will tear you to pieces.” She narrowed her eyes. “Need I remind you that it is high time Veronica found a husband? I do not want you putting her chances in jeopardy like you did with poor Gemma.”

Veronica smiled wryly to herself. She was not sure she would describe her older sister as *poor Gemma*. Yes, it was true that their father’s drinking and gambling had caused difficulties for her sister during her Seasons, and even during the early days of her marriage. But these days, Gemma was blissfully happy with her husband, the Duke of Larsen.

When the Dowager Marchioness spoke of finding her second granddaughter a husband—as had become her favorite topic of conversation of late—Veronica found herself hoping she might one day find the kind of love that Gemma and her husband had. Hoping she might find a man who would appreciate her for who she was, and would not care a scrap about her father’s reputation. She knew it a near unreachable dream. So few people in the *ton* were ever lucky enough to find love. Indeed, she knew marrying for love was little more than an illusion; something not meant for ladies and gentlemen of their class.

Still, Veronica could not stop herself from wishing.

“I’ll have you know,” the Earl began brassily, “that I’ve not set foot in a gambling hall in two years.”

The Dowager Marchioness snorted. “Only because you have been banned from entering every gentlemen’s club in London.” The pointing finger made a triumphant return. “And don’t you pretend anything different.”

Veronica sighed, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. “Please Grandmother, Father. Perhaps you might stop arguing? I find it most upsetting. I do wish you would try and get along.”

The Dowager Marchioness gave her apologetic eyes. “I am sorry, my dear. I know I get carried away sometimes. It is just that I want the very best for you.” She speared the Earl with fierce eyes. “And it seems that is at the bottom of your father’s list of priorities.”

Her father grunted in response. “I’ll have you know...” he started again, then gave up and turned to look out the window.

Veronica was relieved when the gates of the Brownwoods’ country house appeared at the end of a long dirt road. The sight of the house brought a faint smile to her lips. Behind the large black iron gates stood a large stone house surrounded by acres of what looked to be dense woodland and gardens. Veronica knew well that her grandmother’s sole aim for this gathering was to find her a suitable match. But she hoped she might manage a little time to herself to appreciate the beautiful surroundings. Somewhat hopefully, she had even packed her

sketchbook and pencils in hope of drawing some of the plants and animals she encountered.

But she knew there would be an ocean of social niceties to navigate before she had such a luxury. At the thought, she stifled another yawn. She was exhausted after the long coach journey from London—and far too many hours of listening to her father and grandmother arguing—and they had not even arrived at the party yet.

The carriage rolled to a stop at the end of a long tree-lined driveway, and the coachman opened the door, offering his hand to Veronica and her grandmother. The Earl stumbled out behind them.

“Pull yourself together,” hissed the Dowager Marchioness.

Veronica drew in a long breath of the fragrant country air, enjoying the feel of the warm breeze against her cheeks. As they made their way toward the house, the Dowager Duchess of Brownwood emerged from within a large white marquee in the garden.

“Pippa, darling!” she hurried towards the Dowager Marchioness, her old childhood friend. The two older ladies embraced warmly.

“Your Grace, you remember my granddaughter, Lady Veronica Caster.” The Dowager Marchioness nudged Veronica forward. Her voice soured: “And my son-in-law, the Earl of Volk.”

“Of course, welcome, Lady Veronica, Lord Volk.” The Dowager Duchess ushered them towards the marquee.

“I do apologize for our tardiness,” the Dowager Marchioness said as they walked across the neatly manicured grass. “I know it’s terribly rude to be so late.”

The Dowager Duchess flapped a dismissive hand. “Nonsense. I know it is a long journey. I am just thrilled you could make it at all.”

Behind the Dowager Marchioness’s back, the Earl gave Veronica a self-satisfied smile. She found herself returning it. She looped her arm through her father’s. “Behave, Papa,” she murmured.

They stepped into the marquee. The Dowager Duchess had spared no expense, with white-clothed tables dotted around the tent, decorated with bright floral arrangements, and a large food and drinks table laid out with plates of now-half-eaten hors d’oeuvres. Each chair was draped with a matching blanket—embroidered with the Brownwood coat of arms, of course—and a string quartet was playing softly in one corner.

The tent was filled with people, some sitting around the tables with drinks in hand, others flitting around, chatting and laughing. Just the sight of so many people made Veronica weary, but she forced a smile and said, “Everything looks wonderful, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, my dear.” The Dowager Duchess took her arm. “This way. I would like to introduce you to some lovely young ladies I just know you will get along with swimmingly.”

Veronica kept her smile plastered to her face, though the muscles in her neck tightened with dread. Young ladies of her class were not usually pleased to see her. Not the daughter of the disgraced drunkard the Earl of Volk. Ever since she was a child, Veronica had been on the receiving end of jibes about her father and his reputation. Nonetheless, she pressed her shoulders back and approached the group of young ladies with something she hoped was bordering on confidence. She prayed they could not tell how fast her heart was thudding.

The Dowager Duchess rattled through a list of names Veronica knew she would never remember. “And this is Lady Juliet Carfield.”

Veronica murmured a greeting. She knew of Lady Juliet, of course. Everyone did. The diamond of the Season, they called her. A talented singer, and an impossible beauty.

Lady Juliet was dressed in a rose-pink silk gown, feathers tucked tastefully into her curled blonde hair, every bit as beautiful as Veronica had expected. Lady Juliet looked down at her with ice-blue eyes and gave her a syrupy smile. “I’m pleased you could make it, Lady Veronica. I do hope your father did not give you too much trouble today.”

A faint twitter of laughter rippled through the group. Veronica pressed her lips together, pushing down the hurt. She forced herself to return Lady Juliet’s smile. “Not at all, My Lady. My father is very pleased to be here.” A blatant lie of course—these days, her father was not pleased to be anywhere other than tucked away in his drawing room with a bottle of liquor clutched to his chest. But that was most definitely something Lady Juliet and the others did not need to know.

“So,” said one of the other ladies—Lady Arabella? Veronica guessed—once the Dowager Duchess had disappeared, “have you met him yet?”

Veronica frowned. “Met who?”

Lady Arabella looked at her as though she had two heads. “The *Duke*, of course. Her Grace’s grandson.” She exchanged glances with the other ladies and giggled. “Is he not the reason we are all here?”

The others joined in the laughter, though Veronica could see through to the truth of Lady Arabella’s statement.

Is that why Grandmother was so insistent on bringing me here too?

Veronica knew her grandmother wished to find her a match before the Season’s end. But she had seemed utterly adamant that they attend this particular gathering. Veronica had assumed it was because her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess were such close friends. Now she began to wonder if she had naively misread the situation.

Just what, she wondered, was so special about the Duke of Brownwood? Was it merely his title that had all the ladies—and possibly her own grandmother—so enamored with him? Veronica had never deemed such things important. She had little interest in titles. She did not care if her future husband was a Duke or a stable hand. She just wanted him to love her for who she was.

And for a young lady of the *ton*, Veronica knew, that was as outlandish a dream as marrying the King of Spain.

“Oh goodness, His Grace is simply divine,” sang another of the ladies. “Impossibly handsome. And such an imposing figure. He looks as though he could pick you up and throw you over his shoulder without a hint of effort.” The ladies giggled again.

“He can try that with me any time,” said one.

Lady Arabella sighed wistfully. “Not that any of us have a chance with him, I’m sure. They say he only has eyes for Lady Juliet.”

Lady Juliet put on a mock display of bashfulness. “Now, now.” She smiled coyly. “You know nothing has been decided yet. His Grace has not yet asked for my hand. So you are all in with as much of a chance as I am.” She ran long fingers down Veronica’s arm. “And that includes you, Lady Veronica, darling.”

Veronica’s stomach turned over at Lady Juliet’s blatant falsity. “Excuse me a moment,” she said. “I need something to drink.” She hurried away from the group and made a beeline towards the drinks table. Before she could get there, the Dowager Marchioness cut in front of her path and pushed a glass of lemonade into her hand.

“Here, my dear. I thought you might like something to drink.”

Veronica smiled. “How did you guess?” She gulped it down hurriedly, half wishing for something stronger. Maybe that would give her the courage to tell Lady Juliet Carfield what she truly thought of her thinly veiled barbs at her family.

She glanced around the marquee, realizing she was looking for this mysterious Duke of Brownwood. She had heard mention of him before, in passing, the eligible grandson of one of her grandmother’s dearest friends. But she had also heard that the Duke of Brownwood was something of a recluse. Rarely seen out in public. And, it seemed, he was not in attendance at his grandmother’s garden party either. Surely if he was, Lady Juliet Carfield and her band of accomplices would be clustered around him like flies to honey, vying for his attention. As it was, most of the other young men in attendance were chatting amongst themselves, shooting occasional glances at the gathered ladies. Possibly wondering why on earth they were being paid not the slightest scrap of attention.

Again, Veronica found herself wondering if her grandmother had brought her here with the specific aim of meeting the Duke of Brownwood.

The thought was so ludicrous she almost laughed. With her father’s reputation, she would be lucky to secure a penniless baron as a husband, let alone a Duke. True, her sister Gemma was now a Duchess, but she had become one through extenuating circumstances—and no small scandal. And if there was one thing the Volks could do without, it was another scandal.

“Veronica, dear.” She turned to her grandmother. “Are you all right? You did not seem to have much to say to those young ladies Her Grace introduced you to.”

Veronica gave her grandmother a faint smile. “They are not really my type, I’m afraid, Grandmother.” She tried to swallow another yawn. Impossibly, the lemonade seemed to have made her even sleepier.

“Oh goodness, my dear, you look exhausted,” the Dowager Marchioness said. “Perhaps you ought to go upstairs and rest a while. I am sure Her Grace will not mind if you use one of the guest rooms.”

“Are you sure, Grandmother?” Veronica could not deny that the thought of lying down and closing her eyes sounded utterly heavenly. But would it be too rude to disappear less than half an hour after they had arrived—and arrived painfully late, at that?

But the Dowager Marchioness herded her towards the open side of the marquee. “Of course, my dear. Of course. Have a quick lie down and refresh yourself before dinner. I shall send Sarah up after you,” she said, referring to her granddaughter’s lady’s maid.

Veronica shook her head. “There’s no need for that. I shall be quite all right on my own. I shall ring for Sarah to help me prepare for dinner once I’ve rested.”

“Very well, my dear.” The Dowager Marchioness patted her arm. “Take the stairs up to the second floor and be sure to turn left at the top.”

Veronica smiled gratefully. “Thank you, Grandmother. I’ll not be too long. I shall be down again soon.”

She made her way out of the marquee and towards the house.

The Brownwoods' country home was just as beautiful as Veronica had imagined when she had seen it from the carriage, striking just the right balance between cozy and luxurious. Rustic wooden floorboards stretched the length of the ground floor, dotted with colorful rugs, and as she passed the open door to the parlor, she glimpsed an enormous stone fireplace, unlit in the warmth of the late spring evening. A narrow wooden staircase led up to the second story, and the stone walls in the entrance hall hung with paintings. Veronica wondered who the artist was—she did not recognize the style. She made a mental note to examine them tomorrow when the light was better, and she felt a little more rested.

The Brownwoods' house and garden truly were beautiful. How she wished she was better able to enjoy it. Her conversation with Lady Juliet and her friends had reminded Veronica that this was no leisure jaunt, but rather, that this party, each and every event of the Season, was about finding her a suitable match.

Soon, she would be married. Veronica knew there was no escaping it. She knew how seriously her grandmother took the task of finding suitable husbands for her three granddaughters, particularly given her father's reputation. Soon, no doubt, she would be wed to a man she barely knew. The thought left her cold and she tried to push it aside.

“Can I help you, My Lady?” the butler asked.

Veronica smiled. “I am quite all right, thank you. I have already received directions to my guest room.”

“Very good, My Lady.”

She climbed the stairs and paused at the top. *Turn left? Was that what Grandmother said? Or was it right?*

It had been noisy inside the marquee, and her thoughts were sluggish with tiredness. Veronica stumbled down the passage and pushed open the door to one of the bedrooms. She could see no luggage inside; no coats and hats hung on the hook inside the door. Surely it was fine to take this room for an hour or so. Rubbing her eyes, she sank forward onto the bed. And let out a scream at the feel of another's body beneath her own.

Chapter Three



Veronica scrambled away from the bed, covering her mouth in horror. The figure who had been sleeping stood just as hurriedly. And not just any figure, Veronica realized sickly. But a young man. Tall, handsome... with a positively murderous look on his face.

“What in *hell* do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

“I am so sorry,” she gushed. “I did not think... My grandmother said...”

“Let me guess,” he hissed. “You thought you’d find a creative way of making yourself Duchess of Brownwood.”

“Duchess of...” Veronica faded out. And the realization swung at her. “You’re the Duke.”

“Oh yes.” He brought his hands together in mock applause. “Very good. Feigning ignorance. This little act of yours is most commendable.”

Veronica's eyebrows shot up at his sharpness. The Duke of Brownwood may have been as devastatingly handsome as Lady Juliet and the others had claimed. But it seemed he was also something of a bastard.

She straightened her shoulders. "Forgive me, Your Grace. I had no idea you were in here. My grandmother sent me upstairs to rest. I suppose I did not listen to her instructions properly."

The Duke snorted. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes!" Veronica said indignantly. "I do! Of course, I do!"

The Duke folded his arms across his broad chest. "I know how all you desperate debutantes operate. You will stoop to anything as long as it secures you the husband you want."

"You are mistaken," Veronica said, doing her best to keep the rattle from her voice. "I was seeking nothing more than a place to rest for a few minutes." She glared at him, emboldened by her newfound indignance. "And if you truly think I would seek to marry a man who speaks so rudely, you are mistaken on more than one count."

The Duke's lips parted and something close to surprise flitted across his features. Veronica wondered when the last time was that someone had stood up to him.

The Duke chuckled. "This is a fine act, Lady..."

“Veronica,” she told him. “Lady Veronica Caster.”

“Ah yes. The Earl of Volk’s daughter. And the sister of the Duchess of Larsen. I suppose I cannot be surprised that someone of your breeding would stoop to such an act.”

“That is enough!” Veronica cried. “I do not care who you are, Your Grace, but I will thank you not to speak of my family in such a way!” She strode toward the door. She had quite enough of this mysterious, sharp-tongued Duke. He and Juliet Carfield deserved each other.

Before she could make it to the door, the Duke reached out and snatched her wrist. “Where are you going, Lady Veronica?” he sneered. “We are just getting to know each other.”

He was playing with her now, she knew. Oh, how she wished the rest of the *ton* could see what a beast the Duke of Brownwood really was!

“Let go of me at once,” she hissed. “You dreadful man.”

The Duke let his hand fall. “Forgive me,” he said. But he did not sound particularly sorry. He took a step closer to Veronica, so close she could see the dark blue flecks in his storm-cloud gray eyes. She swallowed heavily. The path to the door was clear now. So why did she not take it? Why was the way the Duke’s eyes locked onto hers keeping her rooted so firmly in place?

“You are welcome to leave, Lady Veronica,” he said, as though reading her thoughts. “Unless there is something else you have come for.”

She did not—could not—look away. “I do not know what you are talking about.”

“No,” he said. “I’m rather sure you don’t. You do seem like an innocent little thing.”

Without warning, he dove forward and kissed her hard. Veronica stumbled backward in shock, her heart thundering and her body coming alive with something she could not quite identify. She glared at the Duke, hardly able to believe his arrogance. How dare he behave in such a way?

And why did it not feel anywhere near as awful as it ought to have?

In fact, as reluctant as she was to admit it, the kiss had not felt awful at all. Far from it. There was a part of her—some treacherous, unthinkable part—that had even enjoyed it.

But none of that excused the Duke of Brownwood’s dreadful behavior!

“How could you?” she demanded. “Do you have any idea what will happen if people find out about this? I will be ruined!”

The Duke rolled his eyes. “Calm yourself, Lady Veronica. No one is going to find out about this. Unless I’ve another bevy of admirers waiting out in the hallway.”

Veronica glared at him. “How you have even a single admirer is beyond me, Your Grace.”

The Duke sat back on the bed. “It is beyond me too,” he admitted. “But it seems most young ladies care only for a nobleman’s title. They care little about my personality.”

Veronica snorted. “Well, that is glaringly obvious.”

The faintest glimmer of a smile appeared on the Duke’s lips.

Veronica folded her arms. She knew it the most unladylike of poses, but could not bring herself to care. Right now, her only concern was self-preservation. Outside the doorway, the stairs creaked and footsteps sounded down the hallway. “Oh goodness,” she hissed. “The guests are being shown to their rooms! What are we going to do?” she asked. “No one can see us both leave this room. The scandal would be unthinkable.”

“I thought scandals were what your family thrives on,” said the Duke, without the scathing tone of his early remark about the Volks. “Two years on and everyone is still speaking of your sister and her outrageous marriage to the Duke of Larsen.”

“I am not my sister,” said Veronica. “And I have no intention of marrying under such circumstances.” She narrowed her eyes. “Especially to you.”

The Duke chuckled; a cold, derisive sound.

He was not going to help her out of this predicament—that much was painfully obvious. Veronica forced down a fresh rush of anger. Anger was not going to help her avoid a scandal. She bent down to peep through the keyhole. Several ladies and their maids were flitting up and down the hallway, along with the Brownwoods' butler.

“We’re going to be caught,” she hissed, the panic welling up inside her.

This cannot be happening! I cannot let my family become embroiled in another scandal! Especially when it would tie me to him of all people.

She did not care how much it would irk Juliet Carfield; there was no way in hell she was going to be forced to marry this dreadful man! Then again, even if someone did catch her in here with the Duke, he would likely flat-out refuse to marry her. He was a duke after all—he could do as he wished. And she would spend the rest of her life a ruined spinster. She shook the thought out of her head. It was too horrifying to dwell on.

“We are not going to be caught.” The Duke got to his feet. He reached into the drawer of the bedside table and produced a small brass key. He slid it into the lock and turned it. “There,” he said. “Now no one will ever find you.”

Veronica glared at him. “You could have saved us both a great deal of trouble if you had thought to lock the door in the first

place.”

He looked down, towering over her. “And you could have saved us both a great deal of trouble if you had followed the directions your grandmother gave you.” He raised a pale eyebrow. “How on earth did you not see me before you threw yourself onto the bed?”

Veronica’s cheeks reddened. “I was exhausted,” she said. “I thought the room was empty. And besides...” She nodded at his dark blue Spencer jacket. “Your coat is the exact same color as the bedclothes.”

The Duke glanced over his shoulder at the bed. A smirk appeared on his face as he realized she was right. “Well,” he said. “You can relax, My Lady. No one shall be getting in here. Your *good name* shall remain intact.”

Is that sarcasm in his voice?

Veronica clenched her hands into fists. Yes, she might be saved from the horror of being caught sneaking out of the Duke of Brownwood’s bedchamber, but now she had to spend heaven knew how long locked in here with him. And that, arguably, was worse.

She sighed, rubbing her eyes. She was angry. She was frustrated. And she was absolutely, positively exhausted.

The Duke stepped aside and nodded towards the bed. “Here. Sit down. You look tired.”

Veronica eyed him distrustfully.

“I am not going to try anything. I swear it.”

“Why should I believe that?” she hissed. “You already kissed me without my permission.” She could barely get the words out. As she spoke, she could feel her cheeks flaming.

The Duke smiled wryly. “I suppose you will just have to trust me.” He reached back into the drawer and produced a deck of cards. “Do you play?”

Veronica nodded warily. And she perched on the edge of the Duke of Brownwood’s bed, praying she was not making the biggest mistake of her life.

Chapter Four



Of all the ways Frederick had imagined spending his evening, this was not one of them. But if nothing else, this incarceration with Veronica Caster saved him from more mindless chatter with his flotilla of title-hunting admirers. So he supposed he ought to be somewhat grateful.

He shuffled the cards, eyeing Lady Veronica curiously. She was perched on the bed, her back pressed hard against the wooden foot, so as to keep as far away from him as possible. Her cheeks still held the lingering pinkness of her blush, and she had a faint dark smudge on her temple from where she had rubbed at her eye makeup in exhaustion. Her hands were folded tightly in her lap, and she had a closed-off expression on her face. Frederick found himself missing the look of happy surprise that had seized her when he had kissed her so impulsively.

He thought about her claim that she had not been seeking him out, but rather, had simply gotten lost in the maze of his grandmother's country house. To his surprise, Frederick realized he believed her.

And the kiss? What in hell was that?

Though he knew himself a right bastard, Frederick hardly ever behaved in such a crass and thoughtless manner. He could hardly make sense of why he acted in such a way. Had he intended to discredit her? To punish her for the interruption by making her fear another scandal in her family? Perhaps. But he could not deny the possibility that there was more to it than that.

Because Frederick had to admit, he had enjoyed it.

In fact, he had enjoyed it very much. And now he knew just how soft and tender those plump pink lips felt beneath his own, he was finding it exceedingly difficult not to think about kissing her again.

But he knew he could do no such thing. He had already crossed a line he ought never to have crossed. And now that he and Veronica Caster were trapped in here like wild animals in a cage, that line was so far behind him he could no longer even see it.

“Cribbage?” he asked. “I’ve no board, but I think there’s a pencil and paper in the drawer.”

Lady Veronica nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line. Frederick delved into the drawer for the promised writing implements, then began to deal. Veronica scooped up her cards and peered down at them, doing her best to avoid looking at him.

“You begin,” said Frederick.

She chose her cards to discard and tossed them onto the bed between them, not saying a word. Not even looking at him.

Was it going to be like this, then? Was she going to sit in silence until the hallways grew silent again and she could escape to the sanctuary of her guest room—her real guest room? Perhaps she was worried about the people in the hallways hearing her voice. Not that that was an issue through these thick stone walls and doors that would withstand a small army. Perhaps she simply wanted nothing to do with him. It certainly would not be the first time his brusqueness had caused such a reaction. But the kiss...

Stop! Frederick forced the memory away. The kiss meant nothing. Not a thing.

He reached beneath the bed to produce the bottle of brandy and a single glass he had stowed up here earlier. He uncorked the bottle and sat it on the side table. He filled the glass to the top, took a sip, and then handed it to Lady Veronica.

“Here. I only have one glass, I’m afraid. We’ll have to share.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And what makes you think I wish to drink with you, Your Grace?”

He shrugged. “Do as you wish. You look rather on edge, that is all. Might help to calm you.” He took another mouthful. Sat the glass on the side table within reach of Lady Veronica, in case she changed her mind.

Frederick chose his cards to discard and tossed them onto the pile between them.

“We are missing dinner,” said Veronica tersely.

“Yes. Don’t worry yourself over it. You can just tell your grandmother you slept through it. And no one will be surprised not to see me there.”

Veronica raised her eyebrows; the first hint of expression he had seen from her since they had sat down to play. “Why will no one be surprised? It seems half the *ton* has come here today to be in your company.”

Frederick smiled wryly. She was right, of course. But that still did not mean his absence would raise eyebrows. “I do not have a reputation as the most sociable of men,” he admitted, keeping his eyes on his cards.

“I cannot say I’m surprised at that.” Veronica looked up, and Frederick felt his eyes drawn toward hers. “They say you can be something of a recluse.”

Interesting. Frederick had never heard himself described in such a way. He supposed he had become something of a recluse over the past six years. As well as something of a bastard.

Why?” she asked. “Why must you be so closed off and bitter? Is it because you do not wish to marry?”

Frederick picked up the glass and took another large mouthful. He regretted raising the issue. Because the answer to that question was one he did not want to venture too close to. It was not so much an aversion to marriage, as an aversion to all these mindless traditions and games the *ton* liked to play. Sometimes it felt like an aversion to life itself. Like there was not a single point to any of it, least of all to this foolish contest of matchmaking. What point was there in finding someone to spend your life with when it would only end in loss and heartbreak?

The truth was, he despised the *ton* with every inch of his being. He despised their gossip, their lies, their inability to care about anything other than social climbing and lives filled with luxury. How he wished he were not a part of this foolish social construct. Frederick knew he would be far happier as a meager farmer or stable hand than as a Duke. At least then all these confounded debutantes would leave him the hell alone.

Sometimes, the depth of the despair and unhappiness inside him threatened to swallow him whole. He was not sure he could even put it into words if he tried. In any case, he had no intention of dragging bright and innocent Veronica Caster down into that hole.

He gave her a smile he knew did not reach his eyes. “Something like that,” he said. He held out the glass to her, and this time, Veronica took it. She took a delicate sip and passed the glass back to him.

Frederick found himself smiling—a genuine smile this time. “Take a little more than that. You hardly even wet your lips.”

And yes, he was looking at her lips again. Thinking of the feel of them beneath his own.

What is the matter with me?

Frederick shook his head, wrestling the thought away.

Veronica took another, larger mouthful, then set the glass back on the table. She examined her cards, a faint frown of concentration creasing the bridge of her nose.

Then she lifted her head. Listened for a moment. “The hallway is quiet,” she said. “I think everyone is downstairs.”

“It’s too late to go to dinner,” Frederick told her, leaning back against the bed head. “Turning up now will raise too many questions. And the maids will be up shortly to finish preparing the rooms. If you do not want them to see you, I suggest you stay put a little while longer.”

Veronica sighed, nodding. “You are right. Unfortunately.” After a moment, she said, “I’m famished. And utterly exhausted.”

Frederick felt an unexpected wave of empathy. “I can have something to eat brought up for you later,” he said. “And if you wish to sleep...” He gestured towards the bed they were sitting in.

Veronica’s eyes widened. “No!” she cried, horrified, as though he had just asked her to become his mistress and live chained up in his dungeon. “You already sought to scandalize me once today, Your Grace. I have no intention of closing my eyes in your presence.”

“I promise I will be a perfect gentleman.”

Veronica snorted. “I’m quite sure you have no idea how to do such a thing.”

Frederick chuckled. But then he met her eyes. “Please, Lady Veronica. You really do look exhausted. I am sure this is the last place you wish to be, but you are welcome to close your eyes for a few moments. Once dinner is over and everyone has gone to their rooms, I will fetch some food for us and get you safely back to your bedchamber.”

“You would do that for me?”

He snorted. “Of course. I may be ill-mannered, but I have no intention of letting you starve.”

Veronica hesitated. Frederick could practically see the thoughts whirring behind her weary eyes. He nodded to the armchair in the corner of the room. “I will stay all the way over there. I promise.”

Veronica let out a breath. “All right,” she agreed. “But just for a few moments.” She picked up the brandy glass and took another mouthful, as though steeling herself in the wake of her decision. She kicked off her shoes as Frederick stood up. Shuffled up towards the pillow and rolled onto her side, her back to him.

Frederick made his way to the window and pulled the curtains closed, blocking the last of the evening light. Then he sank

into the armchair. Found his eyes fixed on the intriguing figure in his bed. She lay atop the blankets, still fully dressed in her simple pale blue gown, dark hair fanning out beneath her head, and the discarded playing cards sprawled out beside her hip. There was something calming about the gentle rise and fall of her shoulder as she lay there, already close to sleep. Something about her that made it all too easy for his own eyes to close and sleep to fall over him.



Veronica opened her eyes to a bright spear of sunlight shafting through the gap in the curtains. Something was amiss. This was not her home in London. And how—and *why?*—had she fallen asleep still dressed in her gown and stays?

At once, the recollections swung at her. The Duke of Brownwood. The wrong room.

The kiss...

The memory made Veronica's cheeks heat and she sat bolt upright in bed. On the other side of the room, the Duke was slumped in an armchair, breathing deeply in sleep. His head lolled to the side, his fair hair slightly ruffled and hanging over one eye. In sleep, with none of those heartless words spewing from his lips, Veronica had to admit that Lady Arabella and the others were right. He was devastatingly handsome, with a chiseled jaw and sharp Grecian nose, his thick brows arched and just slightly darker than the hair on his head.

The Duke had promised Veronica he would wake her when it was safe for her to return to her room. No doubt he had fallen asleep himself before he had managed to do so. She looked

over at the half-empty brandy bottle on the side table beside the bed.

That explains a few things...

She rubbed her eyes, a sense of dread creeping up on her. Avoiding a scandal had just become even harder, now she had spent the whole damn night in the Duke of Brownwood's bedchamber.

Silently, she got to her feet, tiptoeing around the bed so as not to wake the Duke. She could only imagine how damn unpleasant he would be if woken from a deep sleep. Well. Once she got out of this cursed room, she could cut all ties with him. She had no intention of going near the Duke of Brownwood ever again.

She took the key out of the keyhole and peeked out into the passage. Empty. Veronica sent up a silent prayer of thanks. She slid the key back in the lock and opened the door. Slipped out into the hallway, letting out a breath she had not realized she was holding.

She stared down the passage at the row of identical polished wood doors. And she stopped in horror.

Which of these rooms is mine?

She churned through her thoughts, trying desperately to remember the directions her grandmother had given her. *Second door on the right, perhaps?* Well, she had mistakenly taken the second door on the left, so perhaps the right... She

knew there was every chance her confusion might lead her to barge into yet another stranger's bedchamber, but what other choice did she have? She could hardly stand about here in the hallway with her shoes in her hand, waiting for someone to appear and ask questions.

She hurried down the passage to the second door to the right of the stairs. Just as she bent to peek through the keyhole, the door swung open and her lady's maid Sarah appeared. Veronica almost threw her arms around her, she was so glad to see her.

She hurried into the room, pushing the door shut behind her. Sarah put down the water jug she had clearly just been on her way to refill. A knowing smile spread across her face.

"Well, good morning, My Lady." Sarah's brown eyes glittered.

Veronica cringed. "Please, Sarah," she begged, "you cannot tell anyone what you just saw. Nothing happened, I swear it. I just... I went to the wrong room. And then..." She faded out, aware that the more she talked, the deeper the hole she was digging herself into. "Please," she said again. "Not a word to anyone."

To her relief, an empathetic smile spread across her maid's young face. "I swear it, My Lady." She grinned. "I did not see a thing." She picked up the water jug again. "Now. I shall go and fetch you some fresh water. And then what say we get you dressed for breakfast? That gown is dreadfully crinkled..."

Veronica made her way down to breakfast, her heart thumping with dread. Did anyone know where she had been last night?

Had anyone besides Sarah seen her scurrying desperately down the hall this morning? The thought was unbearable.

She followed the smell of eggs and freshly baked bread down the passage towards the breakfast room. In spite of her unease, her stomach was groaning with hunger. She had barely eaten a thing since yesterday morning.

Drawing in her courage, she approached the wide double doors of the breakfast room, nodding in thanks to the doorman as he allowed her entrance. Bright sunlight flooded in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, which looked out on a wild garden. Blooming pink roses were dotted in a haphazard manner between great expansive oak trees, and thick ivy climbed over a small wooden shelter in the back of the garden. Veronica glimpsed a fox darting between the trees.

So many wonderful things to paint in there, she thought longingly. But before she could even think about lovely things like painting, there was this gauntlet of a meal to get through.

Her grandmother was already at the table, and she waved brightly at Veronica as she entered. Veronica hurried over to her. Unsurprisingly, there was no sign of her father. Mercifully, there was no sign of the Duke either. Hopefully, it would stay that way.

“Good morning, my dear,” the Dowager Marchioness sang as Veronica slipped into the chair beside her. “I do hope you slept well.”

Veronica looked down. “I am sorry for missing dinner last night, Grandmother. I know that was very rude of me.”

The Dowager Marchioness patted her forearm. "It's no matter, my dear. Everyone could see how exhausted you were. I knew Her Grace did not take offense." She lowered her voice. "And as for that grandson of his, can you believe he did not even bother to make an appearance?"

Veronica stared intently into her teacup as one of the footmen filled it to the brim. "Is that so?"

The Dowager Marchioness shook her head. "That young man. He certainly is... something. I am sure his grandmother will have stern words for him this morning." She sipped her tea. "Tell me, dear, did you find your room without difficulty?"

Veronica froze. *Does she know something? Or is she just inquiring about my well-being?* Her thoughts were racing so furiously she could not tell anymore.

Perhaps she ought to confess to her grandmother what had happened last night. If she were to find out from anyone else, the consequences would likely be far worse than if Veronica told her what had happened from her own lips. Perhaps she ought to calmly explain the misunderstanding, and that all steps had been taken to avoid a scandal.

The moment the thought came to her, she dismissed it. Because once, not so long ago, her sister Gemma had found herself in a similar situation, entangled with the Duke of Larsen at a gathering not too different to this one. Veronica had vivid memories of her sister making a similarly shameful appearance at the breakfast table. Back then, she had pried to no avail. It was not until months after she had married that Gemma had admitted to her sister that she had spent the night

in the Duke of Larsen's bedchamber. And their grandmother had meddled and pried until Gemma and the Duke were husband and wife.

The circumstances of her own misstep were already eerily similar. And there was no way Veronica could let the same thing happen to her. She could think of few things worse than spending her life by the side of the cold and unfeeling Duke of Brownwood.

"Yes, Grandmother," she said instead. "I found the room just fine, thank you. It's lovely," she added for good measure. "Very comfortable."

"Very good, my dear." Something about the Dowager Marchioness's smile made Veronica wary. It was too... *knowing*, somehow. Was there any way she could...

Veronica dismissed the thought. No one had seen her, surely. And this look in her grandmother's eyes, it was nothing more than her own racing imagination.

She looked up to see more people approaching the breakfast room. There was Lady Juliet Carfield, flanked by Lady Arabella, and two of the other young ladies Veronica had met in the marquee yesterday. She felt the muscles in her shoulders tighten in dread.

"Lady Veronica." Lady Juliet swanned up to the table, taking the seat opposite as the footman pulled it out for her. "Wherever did you disappear to last night?"

“Forgive my rudeness,” Veronica said unable to look Lady Juliet in the eye. “I was utterly exhausted after the long trip up from London. I am afraid I went up to rest and did not open my eyes until morning.”

“How unfortunate.” Lady Juliet gave her a syrupy smile. “You missed a very fine dinner. I am sure you would have found it quite a treat. Given... well, you know.” Veronica forced herself not to react at Lady Juliet’s dig at her family’s meagre finances. “I do hope you’re feeling refreshed.”

“Very refreshed,” said Veronica, through gritted teeth. “Thank you.”

“In any case,” said Lady Arabella, leaning forward conspiratorially, “you did not miss a great deal. His Grace did not even bother to show himself.”

At the mention of the Duke, Veronica felt her heartbeat quicken. She forced herself to keep her expression level. She nodded in the Dowager Marchioness’s direction. “So my grandmother tells me.”

“I told Lady Juliet I was sure he just wanted some time alone with her,” said Lady Arabella, sighing wistfully. “No doubt he just did not see the point in making small talk with all these other guests when he has already made up his mind about what he wishes to take as his wife.”

This time, Veronica’s smile was genuine. She thought back to what the Duke had said about his abhorrence for “desperate debutantes.” Lady Juliet was going to get quite a shock when she learned how His Grace truly felt about her. “Yes,” she said.

“I am quite sure that’s it.” She took a mouthful of tea to steady herself.

I am safe, surely. If anyone knew she had spent the night in the Duke’s bedchamber, no doubt the issue would have been raised by now. She would have been confronted and shamed, and her family would be at the center of yet another hideous scandal. But no such thing had happened.

Veronica took a deep breath. She scooped up a forkful of the eggs that had just been placed in front of her. She tried to enjoy the taste of them. But when she glanced sideways at her grandmother, she saw a sly smile that made her stomach knot. A smile that made her wonder if she really was as safe as she had hoped.

Chapter Five



When the breakfast dishes were cleared away, the Dowager Duchess stood up from the head of the table and looked out at all her guests. “To begin today’s festivities,” she announced, holding her arms out to the side in a grand gesture, “a painting competition!” She clapped her hands together, clearly pleased with herself.

In spite of her earlier unease, Veronica felt a frisson of joy in her chest. From the moment she had arrived at the Brownwoods’ country house, she had been eager to commit some of the images around her to the page. A few hours with her easel and paints would make the unease she carried a little lighter. Would stop her from wondering whether she had gotten away with her night spent with the Duke.

And it would also stop her from fixating on that cursed kiss.

Because as much as she tried to make it otherwise, her thoughts kept returning to the moment the Duke’s lips had found her own. Returning to the way her body had come alive at the feel of him. Returning to the nameless, and slightly frightening, sensations his fleeting touch had awoken in her body.

“I would like to dedicate this competition to my dear late husband,” the Dowager Duchess said with a warm smile. She held up a pair of tiny emerald earrings she had clasped in her hand. “The winner of the competition, as adjudged by me, will receive these divine earrings.”

A murmured rippled through the guests, still seated around the breakfast tables. “Goodness,” Veronica whispered to her grandmother. “They must be worth a fortune. They must be very important to her family.”

The Dowager Marchioness nodded. “And with your talent, you have a good chance of winning them, my dear.”

Veronica shook her head dismissively. “You know I have little interest in such things, Grandmother. I just paint for the joy of it.”

Strictly, that was not quite true. There was far more Veronica wished to do with art than merely paint for pleasure. Thanks to her father’s drinking and gambling, the family had never had much money, and Veronica had never had the good fortune of a painting tutor. Everything she knew, she had taught herself. She longed to impart her knowledge to others, particularly young ladies who were so often stifled by societal expectations. But she was yet to be taken seriously. Not only was she a young woman of barely twenty, she was also the daughter of the drunken Earl of Volk. Sponsors were more than a little difficult to come by.

“My butler, Hargraves, is now coming around with a note for each of you,” the Dowager Duchess continued. “The message will tell you where to go to meet your partner.”

Partner? Veronica looked quizzically at her grandmother. She had never painted in a partnership before. She was not even sure how such a thing would work. Her grandmother gestured to her to keep listening.

“In the location you are sent to, you will find a puzzle you must solve. Completing it will be the first step in the competition.”

Veronica nodded her thanks as the butler handed her a note with her name written on the outside. She unfolded it carefully.

Library, was all it said. She stood up and smiled at her grandmother. “Well,” she said, “wish me luck.”

And there was that strange look of knowing in the Dowager Marchioness’s eyes again. A look that suggested Veronica would need all the luck she could get.



Frederick paced back and forth across the library. He had had quite enough of this damn party. He had no idea how he had even managed to get wrangled into this cursed painting contest. He had been in the hallway making a reluctant apology to his grandmother for missing dinner—and breakfast—and before he knew it, she was shunting him off to the library.

A painting competition. How ridiculous. Art was not something that ought to be turned into a competition. Especially for the purpose of finding him a wife—because underneath all this fanfare and frippery, he knew that was

exactly what his grandmother was playing at. No doubt she assumed he would see the winning artwork and just magically fall in love with whichever dazzling debutante had painted it.

It was a heavy handed ploy on his grandmother's behalf, that was for sure. She knew, of course, how much Frederick loved painting. Knew he had been honing his craft his entire life; first under the guidance of his mother, then with a string of gifted tutors. Indeed, since his mother's death six years ago, painting was the only thing that had managed to bring him a scrap of joy.

But not under these ridiculous circumstances.

The door creaked open. "Just put that ridiculous note on the table, Hargraves," said Frederick, continuing to stare out the window. "And give my grandmother a message of my own, would you? Tell her that everyone here is an uncultured bore, and if anyone produces a painting worthy of anything other than being used as a doormat, it will be an utter miracle."

He heard a delicate cough and whirled around. Came face to face with Lady Veronica Caster, of all people. The look on her face suggested she was wildly disappointed at having stepped into the library and found him waiting for her.

"You." She spat the word out as though it were poison.

He smiled wryly. "I am afraid so."

Lady Veronica sighed. "And here I was looking forward to a relaxing morning of painting."

Frederick chuckled darkly. "I am terribly sorry to disappoint you. But you may get your wish after all," he said. "I am about to go back to my room. I have no intention of involving myself in such mindless frippery."

"You think art is mindless frippery?" Veronica sounded suddenly fiery, catching him by surprise.

"Only when it is turned into a petty competition for the sake of finding me a wife."

A tiny smile appeared in the corner of her lips. "Well. In that case, Your Grace, I have to say I agree. Wholeheartedly, in fact."

For a moment, he held her gaze. Frederick had to admit, there had been a tiny part of him that had been disappointed to wake this morning and find her gone. A tiny part of him was pleased to see her again. He suddenly remembered himself and strode towards the door. "I shall leave you to your artwork," he said. He pulled on the door. And found it locked. He whirled around to face Veronica. "What is this?"

"Don't ask me," she said defensively. "I stepped through those doors just minutes ago, and they were unlocked then. Someone must have locked us in."

Frederick sighed heavily. *Can this morning get any more frustrating?*

Veronica's eyes alighted on a folded note sitting on the table. It had both their names written on the front of it. Frederick was surprised he had not noticed it earlier. Veronica hurried towards it and unfolded the page. Frederick stood behind her, peering over her shoulder to read the words. He caught a waft of her scent—lavender, perhaps—and for a moment, he was back in his bedchamber with her lips against his own. He forced the thought away. Thinking of that kiss was most definitely not a good idea. Especially when they were locked together in a room.

Again.

“To find the key, you must follow the clues.”

Frederick groaned loudly. He was going to positively murder his grandmother after all this. “That’s it?” he demanded. “That’s all she has to say?” He rolled his eyes. “I have to say, a mere painting competition is beginning to sound rather appealing. I ought to have known it would not be that simple. My grandmother has a flare for the dramatic.”

“Yes,” said Veronica. “So does mine.”

They exchanged a tiny smile. “My grandmother thinks very highly of Lady Hilt,” said Frederick. “They have been friends for most of their lives.”

Veronica nodded in agreement. “I suppose we cannot find it surprising that have such similar traits.” Before Frederick could respond, she marched towards the bookshelf. “Come on. There is little point moping about and cursing at the world, Your Grace. The quicker we find the key, the quicker we can

get out of here.” She caught his eye for a brief moment. “Perhaps even manage to get in a bit of painting.”

She pulled out the first book on the shelf. “I assume since we are in the library, the clues are hidden within the books. It would make sense, would it not?”

Frederick grunted in agreement. Reluctantly, he followed her toward the bookshelf and began pulling out the volumes from the other end. “Lady Veronica,” he began tentatively, “I must apologize for—”

“There’s no need to apologize, Your Grace,” she said, too quickly. Clearly, she knew where his apology was going. And clearly, she had no interest in hearing it. But Frederick needed to say it. Strangely, he did want Lady Veronica thinking badly of him for reasons that were not true.

“There is a need to apologize,” he said firmly. “I promised you I would get you safely back to your bedchamber. And I failed to do so.” He kept his eyes on the books, unable to look her way. “That brandy we were drinking must have hit me harder than I anticipated. I had no intention of falling asleep. In any case, I can assure you that nothing untoward took place.”

Veronica looked his way and gave him a small smile. “I know,” she said. “And thank you. I appreciate your apology. Everything is all right. No one knows what happened. They all think I just overslept and you just... well, you just behaved in your usual manner and did not bother to show yourself.”

Frederick chuckled. “Good.”

A frown creased the bridge of Veronica's nose. "At least, I *think* that's what everyone thinks."

Frederick raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

She shook her head dismissively. "It's nothing, I'm sure. I was just a little on edge this morning, that's all. I wondered if perhaps me grandmother..." She faded out. "Let's just find these clues."

"Very well." They continued to search for several minutes in silence, pulling books from the shelves and rifling through the pages. "So you really are an artist?" Frederick found himself asking. "You've not just been wrangled into this competition by my grandmother?"

"Well, I *was* wrangled into it," Veronica admitted, flipping through the pages of a book, and then sliding it back into the shelf. "But I am an artist, yes. Or rather, I paint. I am not sure I really ought to call myself an artist."

Frederick frowned. "Why not?"

Veronica shrugged. "My work has never been on display. I have never had a commission. I have never even been properly trained. I just taught myself."

"That doesn't mean you are not an artist," Frederick said firmly. "Far from it."

Veronica did not answer at once. “Here!” She produced a scrap of paper from within one of the books. The letter ‘D’ was all that was written on it. She sat the page on the table, along with the book. Then she returned to the shelf and continued her search.

“What do you paint?” asked Frederick curiously. He had not realized he was in the presence of someone with an actual interest in the subject so close to his heart. He had assumed the only thing all these young ladies were interested in was becoming the Duchess of Brownwood.

“Landscapes, mostly,” said Veronica. “There is just something about the natural world that draws me to it. Makes me want to capture every piece of it on my canvas. I know it’s dreadfully bold of me. I know as a woman, I ought to just paint still lifes. Domestic scenes. Perhaps if I did, I would not struggle so much to find a sponsor. But those things just do not capture my attention. It is the world around me I wish to paint. I have always been inspired by the work of Lorrain. Do you know it?” Before Frederick could answer in the affirmative, she barreled on. “I love the way he expresses such perfection and beauty in the natural world. But that is not quite what I wish to paint. Because the world is not perfect, is it? Rather it is—” She stopped suddenly and looked up at him, her cheeks suddenly flushed. “Goodness. Do forgive me, Your Grace. My thoughts just ran away from me for a moment there. Sometimes when I begin speaking of such things, I find it difficult to stop.”

“Do not apologize, My Lady,” Frederick said hurriedly. “It is a pleasure to find someone with an interest in the subject.” He nodded for her to continue. “Tell me more about your work.”

Now, Veronica looked almost shy. Vulnerable, as though she were opening herself up for criticism, putting a part of herself

on display. Frederick understood that. Even now, at the age of seven-and-twenty, with two decades of training behind him, he still found it difficult to speak openly about his own work. But he realized that he wanted to hear about Veronica Caster's painting. Quite desperately in fact. He stepped away from the bookshelf and leaned up against the table, waiting patiently for her to speak.

She looked at him curiously, and Frederick could tell she was surprised at the shift in his cold demeanor. "Well," she said finally, cautiously, "as I said, I do not believe there is perfection in nature. It is messy and uncultivated. Imperfectly perfect."

Frederick felt a faint smile flicker on his lips. *Imperfectly perfect*. He liked that phrase.

"It is the small details I wish to capture in my art," Veronica continued. "Those imperfections. The wildness. The way we have so little control over it. It is what I most love about nature."

"I would like to see some of your work," Frederick found himself saying.

Veronica blushed. "I am afraid they are really nothing special, Your Grace."

Almost involuntarily, Frederick took a step towards her. "I am sure they are much better than you believe them to be. I can hear how passionate you are about your art just by hearing you speak of it."

Veronica smiled shyly. “The landscapes in the entrance hall are beautiful,” she said. “Do you know who the artist was?”

“My mother painted those,” said Frederick, feeling a tug in his chest. “She was very talented.”

Veronica’s smile widened. “Your mother painted them? Goodness. You are right, she was extremely talented.” She caught his eye. “Your mother passed several years ago, I believe?”

She spoke evenly, almost lightly, and Frederick could tell she did not know the horrifying details of his mother’s death. Not that he was surprised at such a thing; he had kept the truth hidden from as many people as possible. These days, most of the *ton* believed the late Duchess of Brownwood had simply died from an unfortunate illness. And that was how he intended to keep things.

“She passed six years ago,” Frederick told Veronica. “And my father not long after.” He kept his voice deliberately measured and level. Expressionless. Even after so long, it was the only way he could speak of his mother without being overwhelmed by grief.

“I am terribly sorry,” said Veronica. “That must have been awfully difficult.”

You have no idea, Frederick wanted to say. But instead, he just nodded towards the bookshelf. “Come on. Let’s continue searching. Otherwise, we shall miss lunch and we’ll be berated for missing yet another meal.”

Veronica nodded and returned to the bookshelf. She began pulling volumes from the shelf again and sifting through the pages. “Here’s another letter,” she announced, setting it on the table with the others. “There is a pattern here, you know,” she said. “Look. All the books with clues in them are about art.”

She was right, Frederick realized. He went back to the shelf and began to search through his grandmother’s collection for more books on the topic. Some of these, he felt certain, had belonged to his mother.

“What about yourself, Your Grace?” Veronica asked as she searched. “Did your mother ever teach you to paint?”

“Yes,” said Frederick. “A little.”

Veronica looked up at him with a smile. “How wonderful. What do you paint?”

“Portraits, mainly,” said Frederick. His voice was clipped, and he had to stop himself from speaking further. He knew that if he began to speak at length on the subject, his thoughts and his passion would run away with him, just like Lady Veronica’s had. He had no intention of being so open with anyone, least of all a young debutante he had only just met.

Never mind that there was a big part of him that wanted very much to do so. That part of him would just have to be ignored. He would tuck it away in the far reaches of his mind—along with the part of him that very much wanted to kiss Lady Veronica again.

Heaven and hell, if I do not get out of this room soon...

Frederick did not even dare finish the thought out of fear of where it might lead.

“Portraits,” Lady Veronica said brightly. “How wonderful.” Her smile made something warm in Frederick’s chest. “I have tried painting portraits in the past, but I am afraid they left much to be desired. I painted my younger sister Jane once, and even though I made sure every inch of her face was accurate and true to life, it still came out looking like someone else.”

Frederick nodded. “There is far more to painting portraits than merely capturing a person’s physical appearance. That is a big part of it, of course. But it is more about looking into their personality. Putting a piece of their soul upon the canvas.”

He only realized he had taken another step towards her when he caught another waft of her lavender scent. They were close now—dangerously close. Frederick could see the shards of green in her blue eyes, could see the faint sprinkle of freckles across her nose. As she spoke with passion, a strand of dark hair had fallen over her cheek, and it took all Frederick’s willpower not to reach out and touch it.

Veronica swallowed visibly. “Looking into their personality,” she repeated. “Yes. That makes sense. But very difficult to do, I imagine.”

“Yes.”

She looked up at him, meeting his eyes. Her chest was heaving, Frederick realized, the alluring swell of her breasts rising and falling rapidly beneath her plain yellow day dress. Her lips parted slightly, and suddenly all he could see in her face was a blatant look of desire.

Before he could stop himself, his lips found hers. This time, she did not pull away as she had done in the bedroom but rather pressed her body against his. Opened her mouth, letting his tongue slide over her lips. Frederick dug a hand into her hair to keep her close as he deepened the kiss. The faintest of moans escaped her lips and it shot a frisson of need down into his groin.

He broke the kiss and stepped back hurriedly. *What in hell are you doing?*

“Forgive me,” he mumbled. “That was... foolish.”

Veronica lowered her eyes and began to fumble with her hairpins in an attempt to fix her ruffled hair. Her cheeks were blazing, her lips reddened from his kiss. She hurried back towards the table and began shuffling through the pieces of paper they had unearthed from within the books.

“We are still missing a few letters,” she garbled, “but I think... perhaps... uh... I think this word could be ‘under.’ And then something starting with ‘C’ perhaps?”

Frederick blinked hard, forcing himself to focus. Finding the damn key and getting the hell out of this room had just become a thousand times more pressing.

“Curtains?” he suggested. “Carpet?”

Veronica hurried towards the rug that lay in front of the unlit fireplace. She pulled it back to reveal a large brass key.

Almost simultaneously, they both let out a sigh of relief. Veronica held it up with a look of such gratitude in her eyes it was as though she had just unearthed the fountain of youth. She hurried towards the door and shoved it in the lock.

“Wait.” Before she could turn the handle, Frederick reached out and grabbed her wrist. The contact sent a jolt through his body that he did his best to ignore. “My Lady, I think it best that...” He glanced down, feeling oddly tongue-tied. “What just happened here...”

“Will never be spoken of again,” Veronica finished. She looked up at him with intense blue eyes. “Do not worry, Your Grace. I know it was a mistake. On both our parts. It should not have happened the first time. And it should not have happened a second.” She speared him with a look that felt suddenly cold. “And there is no way it will happen a third.”

Chapter Six



Veronica could not get out of the library quickly enough. Her heart was still thundering against her ribs, and every inch of her felt jittery. Hot. Out of control.

What in heaven's name had she been thinking, kissing him like that? Because this time, she knew all too well, the kiss had not been one-sided like their encounter in the bedroom had been. No, this time, she had wanted it. Craved it. Had practically begged him with her eyes for it.

The feel of his lips against her own had been just as incredible as the first time. No, more so. This time... This time she had let it happen. Had let herself enjoy it. And enjoy it she had—far more than she knew she ought to. Her heart was racing, her breath was fast, and an indescribable ache was blooming between her legs. It was all so foreign and frightening. And yet somehow, it was also impossibly pleasant.

Pleasant, ha! If there was one thing that the Duke of Brownwood was not, it was pleasant. And yet she could not deny that she had seen a new side of him today in the library. A passion, a depth to him that she had not been aware of before. Something that drew her to him—however much she did not want it to.

She could hear his footsteps behind her as she made her way into the dining room to join the others. Slow and steady, deliberate in putting space between them. Her hand went back to her hair, feeling whether it was still out of place. No one could ever *ever* know what had just happened between her and the Duke. Again.

To Veronica's relief, there were few people in the dining room when she arrived. She guessed most of the young couples were still scattered about the property, solving the puzzles the Dowager Duchess had given them. When Veronica stepped through the door, her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess turned in unison. Patch the dog leaped off the Dowager Marchioness's lap and scurried towards Veronica. She bent to scratch his ears.

"You are finished already!" the Dowager Duchess said with a bright smile. She peered past Veronica into the hallway. "And where is my grandson? I hope he has not run off again."

"I am right here, Grandmother." Veronica took a step aside to allow the Duke to enter. "No need to send out the search party." He looked down in disinterest as Patch sniffed his shoes.

The Dowager Duchess clapped her hands together. "Goodness, it took the two of you no time at all! How wonderful. You do seem to work very well together."

Veronica glanced down, praying her cheeks did not look as red as they felt.

“I thought this was a painting competition,” the Duke said dryly.

“Yes, yes, all in good time, my dear,” said the Dowager Duchess, ignoring his saltiness. “Why not take your seats for morning tea? Although you may be waiting awhile, given you were the first pair to arrive.”

“Lady Veronica, dear,” said the Dowager Duchess gesturing to the top end of the table closest to the window, “perhaps you might like to sit here with His Grace and discuss—”

“Oh no, Your Grace, thank you,” Veronica blustered, painfully aware she had spoken too quickly. And probably too loudly. “I couldn’t. I shall sit with my grandmother and father.”

“If he bothers to show himself,” she heard her grandmother mutter. Veronica turned to give her a warning look.

The Dowager Duchess’s eyes darted between Veronica and the Duke, almost as though she was debating whether to insist on these ridiculous seating arrangements. What on earth was she thinking, offering the Earl of Volk’s daughter pride of place beside the Duke of Brownwood?

The racing of her heart went up another notch. But Veronica had to admit that these nerves were not entirely unpleasant. She could not deny there was something utterly intoxicating about these new feelings the Duke had stirred up within her. Could not deny there was a part of herself that very much wanted to explore them further.

But of course, those feelings, and those dizzying sensations, did not matter. Not one scrap. No matter how he made her body feel, the Duke of Brownwood was bitter and sharp-tongued. Sometimes even downright cruel. And those were the last traits she wished for in a husband.

Veronica hurried her grandmother into a seat towards the back of the room and sat beside her before anyone could protest. The Dowager Marchioness whistled for the dog and he scampered across the room and bounded into her lap.

A few other pairs were dribbling into the dining room now, each being greeted overenthusiastically by the Dowager Duchess. The Duke had taken his seat at the head of the table, no doubt deciding that his grandmother would tear him to pieces if he dared to miss another meal. Veronica watched out of the corner of her eye as he nodded his thanks to the footman who filled his teacup. He brought the cup to his lips and took a slow sip. He kept his eyes down, as though deliberately avoiding making eye contact with any of the guests.

Feeling secure in her ability to observe him—just for the briefest, *briefest*, second—without anyone noticing, Veronica turned his way. And as she watched him, with his head down and his broad shoulders hunching forward as though he were closing in on himself, she felt overcome with an emotion that was not anger, or frustration, but almost overwhelming empathy. Because she could practically see the weight of the Duke of Brownwood's sadness hanging on his shoulders. It seemed to hover over him like a storm cloud, dark and unyielding. What must it be like, she wondered, to live in such a state?

Veronica had had her share of unhappiness, certainly. Life with her drunken father had not been easy, especially after her

mother's passing. But she had always prided herself on being optimistic. Trying to find the positive in every situation.

Sunshine, a kind boy had called her once. And that was how her family still referred to her. The ray of sunshine in their difficult lives. Veronica knew it was her optimism that had allowed her to get through the challenges life threw at her. How awful it must feel to live without such a belief. How difficult it must be to live inside the Duke of Brownwood's head.

The Duke looked up suddenly and caught her staring. Veronica turned away in horror. Was very pleased to see the footman had filled her teacup. She picked up the cup and gulped down a large sip, burning her tongue in the process.

She set the cup back in its saucer and turned to the Dowager Marchioness. "Grandmother," she began, her voice low, "what do you know of the Duke of Brownwood? Why is he the way he is?"

A faint smile flickered on the Dowager Marchioness's face, as though she was pleased at Veronica's question. But that smile disappeared quickly when she said, "He is a troubled young man, I am afraid. He has had a very difficult few years."

"Losing his parents in such close succession?" asked Veronica.

The Dowager Marchioness did not answer at once, as though she was considering the question. Perhaps debating how much to reveal. "In part, yes," she said finally.

“In part? What do you mean?”

The Dowager Marchioness shook her head. “It is not my story to tell, my dear. It is none of my business. Suffice to say, he has had more than his share of troubles. But his grandmother is adamant that a loving wife will help bring him back to his old self.”

Veronica nodded slowly. “That is why Her Grace threw this party, is it not? Because she wished to find the lady that would make her grandson happy again?”

The Dowager Marchioness gave Veronica a knowing smile.

“Lady Juliet Carfield is convinced the Duke will choose her,” Veronica said.

The Dowager Marchioness raised a thin gray eyebrow. “Is she now?”

As if on cue, Lady Juliet swanned through the double doors into the dining room, her partner trailing a few yards behind her. She made a beeline for the Duke, completely ignoring the poor fellow she had arrived with.

“You’re back already, Your Grace,” she gushed, making the Duke look up.

The Dowager Duchess swooped in. “Oh yes. My grandson and his partner were the first ones back. They worked ever so well together.”

Lady Juliet's smile became forced. "Oh yes? And who was your partner, Your Grace?"

Though she had directed her question to the Duke, it was his grandmother who answered, "Why, the lovely Lady Veronica, of course."

Lady Juliet turned and speared Veronica with a cold glare. "I see," she said crisply. "How *lovely*." Before the Dowager Duchess could direct her to her place, and before the footman could even pull out her chair, Lady Juliet slipped into the seat beside the Duke. "Well," she said loudly, clearly for Veronica's benefit, "never mind, Your Grace. We shall have an entire morning tea to get to know each other better."



Carla, the Dowager Duchess of Brownwood, hurried to the front of the dining room and clapped her hands together. "Ladies and gentlemen," she began, "a slight change of plans. I have decided that, for the competition to progress smoothly, each pair must remain sitting together for the duration of our morning tea."

Murmurs rippled through the dining room. It was a heavy-handed little act, Carla knew. And probably more than a little overt. But when Lady Juliet had sat down beside Frederick, Carla had practically seen the fire of rage flare up behind her grandson's eyes. Forced to endure an entire morning tea by Lady Juliet's side, Carla felt quite certain Frederick would abscond to his bedchamber and not be seen again for days. Oh, how she hated those times when her grandson would disappear for days on end, lost in his own emotions.

Carla knew Frederick's mother's death had been impossibly hard for him. It had been almost unbearable for her too, burying her much-loved daughter-in-law under such horrible circumstances. But somehow, with the support of her friends, she had managed to find her feet again. Frederick had not been so lucky. Once, Frederick had been a sociable and bright young man, surrounded by friends whose company he enjoyed. After his mother's death, he had begun to lock himself away, and one by one, those friendships had dwindled. Then disappeared entirely.

Carla wished desperately that there was more she could do to help him. Someway to bring back the fun-loving young man Frederick had once been. She had to admit, she was a little surprised he had bothered to make an appearance at the morning tea table at all. Heaven knew it had been a trial and a half getting him to agree to the competition in the first place. She had hoped cultivating the festivities around his one great passion—art—would make him slightly more amenable to them. Convincing him to join in had still been like pulling teeth.

But when Frederick had appeared in the dining room, the pain in his eyes had not been quite as pronounced as usual. Perhaps his morning with Veronica Caster had had a positive effect on him. And if that was the case, Carla was going to do everything she could to make sure Lady Veronica did not leave his side.

Even if that does mean upending the seating arrangements like we are playing a game of musical chairs...

The guests were now shuffling around the dining room with their already-filled tea cups in hand, the footmen darting around like headless chickens to pull out chairs and re-set the napkins. A heavy-handed little act indeed. Carla didn't care.

She looked over at Pippa Marlow, Veronica's grandmother. She gave Carla a grateful smile. A tiny nod of agreement.

Lady Veronica made her way tentatively toward the front of the room to the chair beside Frederick. She passed Lady Juliet, who stepped close to Veronica and whispered something in her ear. Carla watched Veronica's expression harden. She hurried to her place without a word.

Finally, everyone was settled. Carla stood again and faced her guests. "Thank you," she said. "And I do apologize for the inconvenience. I ought to have thought things through more thoroughly. It seems my old brain is not quite what it used to be."

Lady Juliet gave her a murderous glare. Pippa chortled into her wine glass.

"My congratulations to you all on completing the first part of my challenge." *Well, to most of them.* Carla was fairly certain there were still one or two pairs missing. Perhaps she ought to send Hargraves around the house to unlock all the doors. Unless those pairs that were behind them were dallying on purpose... Carla realized she may not have thought this little endeavor through.

She plowed on. "However, I did promise you that this was to be a painting competition," she said, looking pointedly at Frederick. "And so you may consider this morning's exercise a mere warm-up. Tomorrow morning, each pair will begin work on a painting together. Your work will be a depiction of the answer to the following riddle."

An audible groan escaped Frederick. Carla did her best to ignore it. She cleared her throat and pulled a piece of paper from her pocket. She held it up and began to read:

“What is invisible but can be felt; can be broken but not held; given but never stolen?”

She paused for dramatic effect. After a moment, murmurs filled the room again. “May I suggest you use this opportunity to discuss the answer with your partner? Perhaps determine how you might depict the solution to the riddle in your work?” She gifted the room with her brightest smile. “And now, everyone, please enjoy your morning tea.”



“Grandmother,” the Duke hissed when the Dowager Duchess slid into the chair opposite him, “this is ridiculous. Art is supposed to come from the heart. Not the answer to some inane riddle.”

The Dowager Duchess gave him a self-satisfied smile. “Well, my dear, perhaps it would do you good to broaden your artistic horizons. And who knows, perhaps it may even allow you to paint from the heart after all.” She nodded towards Veronica, who was trying very hard to make herself as small and unimposing as possible. “Why not discuss the matter with Lady Veronica? I am sure the two of you will come up with something marvelous, given how much artistic talent is shared between the two of you.”

Her comment caught Veronica off guard. She had had no idea that the Dowager Duchess—or indeed, anyone outside of her family—was aware of her painting ability. As much as she longed to share her art with the world, she had never had the

opportunity. She supposed her grandmother had discussed it with the Dowager Duchess.

The Duke let out a half-murmured response that Veronica could not make out. Probably for the best. She was fairly certain she did not want to know what nasty remark had just come out of his mouth. She was already on edge from the vicious diatribe Lady Juliet had just murmured in her ear—a reminder that a drunkard's daughter like her would never be a duchess.

Veronica had wanted to tell her she had absolutely no intention of ever pursuing the Duke of Brownwood, but she had been far too rattled by the viciousness that had come from Lady Juliet's perfect pink lips. She had hurried to her seat beside the Duke without managing a word in response.

Not that this seat felt any safer. Because Veronica knew the answer to the Dowager Duchess's riddle. She knew what was invisible but could be felt. Knew what could be given but never stolen. She knew what she and the Duke of Brownwood would be forced to paint about tomorrow: love.

And she could not understand why the very thought of that had her far more unbalanced than any insult Lady Juliet Carfield could muster.

Chapter Seven



“Love?” Frederick spat out the word as though it were poison. “How ridiculous.”

He and Veronica were seated in the drawing room at the back of the house. An easel and a large selection of watercolors had already been set up for them, along with a number of brushes. Frederick wondered if his grandmother had provided each couple with such a vast choice of paints and brushes, or if she was giving special treatment to the two of them on account of their artistic tendencies.

Veronica gave him a wry smile. “Somehow, I knew you would have such a reaction.”

“Well,” said Frederick, “I’m just glad you figured out the answer to that riddle. I had no idea. I was just going to paint a cow or something.”

To his surprise, his comment drew a laugh from Veronica. “A cow?” She opened the sketchbook she had brought with her. Frederick found himself glancing at it, trying to catch a glimpse of the pages. He was unable to see more than a few gray smudges. “I actually knew the answer the moment your grandmother read out the riddle,” she told him. “But you

looked as if you were going to explode right there at the table. So I thought it best to keep my thoughts to myself for the time.”

He had been about to explode, yes. When Lady Juliet had slipped herself into the chair next to him, Frederick had been moments away from charging out of the dining room and never looking back. A single meal in the company of the Season’s diamond was a trial he just did not have the strength for. He had to admit, he had been more than a little relieved when his grandmother had reshuffled the seating arrangements and he had found himself sitting beside Lady Veronica.

And the reason for that relief... well that was something that Frederick had neither the will nor the inclination to look at too closely.

“So,” he said, in rather a hurry to change the subject, “how do you propose we go about painting ‘love’?”

“Well, I was thinking it would be best to combine our talents. Your portrait-painting skills, and my landscapes. So perhaps a couple enjoying their time together while exploring the natural world. Perhaps on a beach, or forest.”

“It need not be a couple,” said Frederick. “That would be the most accepted response, yes. But perhaps we could portray the theme a little more subtly. You spoke yesterday of your love for the natural world. Why not portray a single person within the natural setting, overcome with love for the world around them? After all, being one half of a couple is not all there is to life.” He smiled wryly. “In spite of what the *ton* seems to believe.”

Veronica's eyes lit up. "Yes! That's a wonderful idea, Your Grace. You are right, painting a couple is very heavy handed. This is much more meaningful. And the best part about this is we do not even need to work together."

Frederick blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Well." Veronica began to sketch lightly as she spoke. "As you are to paint the figure, you can do that first. Your grandmother has only given us watercolors to paint with, so they will be dry in no time. Once you are finished, I can add the landscape into the background. We need not have much to do with each other at all." She looked sidelong at him. "I am sure that would please you."

Was that disappointment in her voice? Anger? Happiness, perhaps? Frederick struggled to read her. Normally, he would naturally assume she was pleased not to have to spend the entire day in his company. Once they looked beyond his lofty title, most people were. But he knew she could not have forgotten all that had passed between them in the library yesterday. He certainly hadn't. Had not forgotten the way her eyes had lit up when she had spoken of her craft. Had not forgotten the way she had encouraged him to speak of his own work, something he rarely did these days. And he had certainly not forgotten their kiss.

I do not think I will ever forget that kiss...

Before his little dalliance with Lady Veronica in the bedchamber two days ago, it had been a long time since Frederick had kissed anyone. And at the feel of Veronica's lips on his, he had felt as though a part of him was thawing out from an eternal freeze. He had felt as though some long-forgotten part of him was slowly coming back to life.

Veronica was right, of course, they would not have to work side by side on the painting all day, as Frederick had initially believed. And he could not deny that there was something in his heart that felt almost close to disappointment.

Not that he had any intention of letting her see it. “Very well,” he said, “I shall begin work on the figure in the foreground. Come and check on my progress in a few hours.”

Veronica stood, gathering her sketchbook and pencil. “Very good, Your Grace. In the meantime, I shall go outside and explore the garden. Hopefully, I shall find some inspiration.”

She hurried towards the door and disappeared. Frederick stayed staring at the doorway until long after she had vanished.



Veronica made her way out of the drawing-room, her sketchbook and pencils clutched to her chest. She was excited at the opportunity to escape into the garden for a time and lose herself in her drawings. And more than a little relieved that the Duke had agreed to their working separately.

Of course, he did. Why would he not? He likes nothing more than to be alone...

But Veronica couldn't silence the thoughts that nudged at the back of her mind. There was no denying that, on some level, she and the Duke had connected during their time in the library yesterday.

Was it possible that the Duke enjoyed her company? And, perhaps even more surprising, was it possible that she actually enjoyed his?

No. Not possible at all.

Veronica shook her head at herself. She was being foolish. And she was not going to waste this sought-after time in the garden thinking about the surly Duke of Brownwood.

When she reached the entrance hall, she stopped walking, eyes drawn to the three large landscapes hung on the wall.

She stepped close to the late Duchess's painting, examining the finely detailed brush strokes, the unique use of color. It was true, the late Duchess of Brownwood had been exceptionally talented. And yet Veronica had never heard of her art. In fact, she had heard little talk of the late Duchess at all. On the few occasions that she had been mentioned by one of the guests at the gathering, the conversation had always been quickly diverted in another direction.

Veronica could not help but wonder about it. Was there some scandal there that people were now reluctant to speak of, out of respect for the Duke and his dead mother? Could there be any connection between the Duchess of Brownwood's death, and her son's morose demeanor?

Veronica shook her head in frustration. *Fine job you are doing not thinking about the Duke...*

“Veronica dear, what are you doing out here?”

She spun around at the sound of her grandmother’s voice. The Dowager Marchioness was making her way down the staircase with the dog tucked under her arm. “I thought you were supposed to be painting. With the Duke. Have you forgotten about the competition?”

Veronica laughed. “No, Grandmother, of course not.” Forgetting about the competition seemed like a distinct impossibility, given it was all anyone at the party was talking about. “But we have decided to work separately. His Grace will complete the portrait and then I shall complete the landscape in the background when he is finished.”

The Dowager Marchioness narrowed her eyes, looking extremely unimpressed. “I see. Well, in that case, go upstairs and rouse your father, will you? And find him something to do that does not involve his brandy bottle.”

Veronica nodded obediently. “Yes, Grandmother. Of course.”

Her heart sank as she made her way upstairs. She had so been looking forward to having a little time alone in the garden. But she knew she had not been as attentive to her father these past few days as she ought to have been. A pang of guilt struck her. Her mind had been so full of the Duke that she had neglected her own family. Since when was she that kind of person?

She knocked on the door to her father’s bedchamber. “Papa? Are you awake?”

She heard a grunt in response. She opened the door and stepped inside.

“I’m sleeping,” the Earl mumbled.

“No, you’re not. You have done enough sleeping.” Veronica made her way to his bed and perched on the edge. She put a soft hand on her father’s shoulder and shook gently.

Mark Caster opened one eye sleepily. It was bloodshot and underlined in shadow. Veronica could smell the faint hint of liquor on his breath. He closed his eyes again quickly.

“Come on, Father,” Veronica said, a little more sternly. “You cannot stay in here all day.” She pulled back the bedclothes, ignoring his grunt of protest. “I am going to the garden to draw,” she told him. “Perhaps you would like to join me? We could sit by ourselves and enjoy the peace and quiet. You need not need talk to anyone. You could just have a cup of tea and take in the lovely surroundings. What do you think?”

The Earl sighed heavily but opened his eyes. He reached out a hand to cup Veronica’s cheek. “My sunshine,” he said, his voice gravelly with sleep. “I don’t deserve a daughter as lovely as you.”

Veronica felt her throat tighten. “Nonsense, Papa. Of course, you do.” She met his eye pointedly. “But it is time to get up now. Out of bed and I shall fetch your valet. I will wait downstairs for you and then we can go to the garden.”

Her father nodded and swung his legs out of bed. “My sunshine,” he said again. “What would I do without you?”



Frederick was not happy with his work. This figure on the canvas was empty, soulless. The kind of portrait he despised with every inch of his being. Still, what else could be expected? After all, this had not been a portrait at all, just a depiction of some indistinct figure he had pulled from his imagination. There was a part of him that did not want Lady Veronica to see it. Did not want her to see his failures.

He heard footsteps sounding towards the drawing-room, and in spite of himself, he felt his heart skip a beat.

“Your Grace?”

He forced himself not to turn around at the sound of Lady Veronica’s voice.

“It’s rather rubbish, I’m afraid,” he said. “The portrait. I apologize.” He was infuriated with himself. Not because now it seemed unlikely that he and Lady Veronica would win his grandmother’s foolish competition. Oh, he cared little about such things. But there was a part of him that had wanted Veronica to see what he was capable of. Wanted to show her that there was some value to him—at least beyond his dukedom.

Veronica laughed lightly. “Rather rubbish?” Her footsteps clicked across the floorboards towards him and Frederick caught the aroma of something earthy and floral, as though she

had been out in the garden. “Oh, Your Grace, it is not rubbish at all. Far from it.”

Frederick snorted. “It’s empty. Soulless. It’s not a real person, you see. Just a figure I conjured up in my imagination. And it shows in the painting. Just look at the eyes. There is nothing behind them. Not a single thing.”

Veronica nodded along, listening patiently. “I see what you are saying,” she said finally, and Frederick was glad she had not just blindly tried to disregard his opinion. “But I do not agree. Those eyes—they allow the viewer to make their own interpretation. You are not simply telling your audience how they must feel, but rather allowing them to work that out on their own.” She smiled. “You know we are always our own worst critics. Especially us artists. We always seek perfection, do we not? And so rarely in life is anything perfect.”

Frederick swallowed heavily, overcome with a sudden, inexplicable rush of emotion. He cleared his throat. “You have been out in the garden?”

“Yes,” said Veronica. “With my father.” She lowered her eyes. “I thought the fresh air would do him good.” She looked back up at him, her bright smile returning. “The garden here is exquisite. Since the moment we arrived, I have been wanting to go out and draw what I saw.”

“It is beautiful,” Frederick agreed. “I enjoyed exploring out there when I was a child. I used to beg my mother and father to bring me up here. I loved it so much more than being in London.” How distant that memory seemed. He nodded towards Lady Veronica’s sketchbook. “May I?”

She hesitated for a fraction of a second, as though overcome with shyness. Then she held it out toward him.

Frederick opened the book, turning through page after page of finely detailed sketches. He recognized the oak tree and the fountain, even a sketch of her father.

“These are quite something,” he said. “You certainly have a talent.”

Veronica’s cheeks reddened. “Nothing like your mother’s talent,” she said. “I enjoyed looking at her landscapes this morning. They are so evocative. I do not think I will ever be able to paint like that.”

“Your style is rather different,” Frederick agreed. “But these are just as good. And look,” he tapped the page containing the image of her father, “this portrait is wonderful. Very lifelike.”

Veronica smiled shyly. “I took your advice to heart, Your Grace. About a portrait being a glimpse into a person’s soul, rather than just their likeness.”

Frederick nodded, looking again at the sketch of the Earl of Volk. Indeed, Veronica had captured a sense of heaviness about him, a sadness behind his eyes that reminded Frederick of himself. He closed the book uncomfortably and held it out to Veronica. “The watercolors ought to be dry now. Would you like to paint the background?”

Veronica nodded. “Of course. Where shall I find you when it is finished?”

“I shall be in the library,” said Frederick.

Veronica nodded. “Very well. I shall see you in a few hours.”

Frederick made his way towards the door, then stopped. He did not wish to go to the library, he realized. For once, he did not crave his own company. “Lady Veronica?”

She looked over her shoulder in surprise. “Yes, Your Grace?”

“Would you mind if I stayed here and watched you work?”
The question came out sounding tentative and boyish.

Veronica smiled, her blue eyes shining. “Of course, you may. I would welcome your thoughts.”

As Frederick pulled up a chair and settled in to watch Veronica work, he felt a sense of calmness wash over him that he had not felt in years.

Chapter Eight



Carla walked up and down the parlor, examining the row of completed paintings in front of her. Fair to say, she had overestimated the artistic talent of most of the guests at this party.

Optimistically, she had imagined that having the young pairs paint about love might stir up some passion and lead to a few masterpieces. But she was fairly certain an infant could have produced better work than most of these disasters.

One canvas displayed what she assumed was supposed to be a self-portrait, although she could not for the life of her determine which of the guests it was supposed to be. Another contained a rather lewd interpretation of love that she suspected its artists had completed on a dare, with the protection of the paintings' anonymity.

Only one piece stood out: a lone figure overlooking a wild, windblown seascape, a look of wonder in his eyes. She had no doubt who had painted it.

“Well,” said Pippa from the armchair behind her, “I do not imagine you will have any difficulty deciding on a winner.”

She smoothed the fur of her brown and white terrier who was curled up in her lap and chewing its own leg.

Carla laughed. “No. I do not suppose I shall. At least no one will accuse me of favoritism when I announce my own grandson as the winner. Even a blind man could see this is the best painting.”

Pippa stood, placing the dog on the floor at her feet. He scampered over to the easels with his nose to the ground. She stood close to Veronica and Frederick’s canvas, examining it closely.

“Veronica’s work is beautiful,” Carla said. “It reminds me a little of my daughter-in-law’s.”

Pippa put a soft hand out, squeezing her friend’s elbow. “She and Frederick work well together. Not that I ever thought it would be otherwise.”

Carla smiled to herself. She had to admit she had not shared Pippa’s unwavering optimism. Bright and sunny though Veronica Caster was, Carla had worried that even she would struggle to break through Frederick’s cold exterior. But perhaps her concerns had been unfounded.

Because it was not just the painting that suggested the compatibility between Veronica and Frederick. It was that light she had seen a glimmer of behind her grandson’s eyes. A light she had not caught sight of in far too many years.

Carla clapped her hands together. “Well. Shall we fetch all our young artists and tell them of my decision?”

Ten minutes later, the guests were all gathered in the parlor, milling about inspecting each other’s paintings. While the bawdy piece earned a few laughs, it was Veronica and Frederick’s work that garnered the most attention.

“Is this yours, Lady Juliet?” gushed Lady Arabella, waving a bejeweled hand at the painting. “It’s simply wonderful.”

Lady Juliet gave her a stiff smile. “No, my dear. That’s not mine.”

“Oh? I thought it must have been, given how lovely it is. And which one is yours?”

Lady Juliet sniffed and turned away. “That’s of no matter.”

Carla smiled to herself. She glanced around the room for the painting’s actual artists. Veronica was hanging back with her grandmother and father, who had miraculously roused himself—or been forcefully roused, she guessed—for the occasion, while Frederick was...

Carla glanced around the room searching for her grandson. No doubt he had decided not to show himself yet again. Just as she was thinking about the stern lecture she planned to give him later, she caught sight of him at the back of the room. He stood leaning up against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, looking less than pleased to be here. Carla did not care. She was just thrilled he had decided to show up, without

her having to hound him on the matter. These days, that was something of a miracle.

For the most part, Frederick kept his eyes down—a deliberate attempt, Carla was sure, to avoid catching the eye of any of his admirers who were flitting about the place like butterflies, trying to get his attention. But every now and then, he looked up and glanced in Lady Veronica’s direction.

Carla smiled to herself. *How interesting.* She looked across the room to catch Pippa’s eye.

Carla clapped her hands together to get everyone’s attention. After a moment, the chatter stopped, and all eyes turned toward her. “Thank you very much for coming, everyone,” she sang. “And thank you to all our young artists on these *fine* pieces.” She smiled a little too broadly, hoping the statement had not come out sounding sarcastic. “But of course, there can only be one winner,” she reached into her pocket to produce the emerald earrings, “who will of course be gifted these.”

A murmur rippled through the guests.

Carla smiled inwardly. The earrings had belonged to her daughter-in-law, Frederick’s mother. She was more than a little pleased they would be going to Veronica Caster. Not that she had had any doubt that they would. Pippa had raved about her granddaughter’s artistic talent on more than one occasion. And it turned out she had not been exaggerating.

“The winners,” Carla said grandly, “are the artists who painted *this* fine piece.” She swept a hand out, indicating Frederick

and Veronica's artwork. "Will the artists please come forward?"

The guests began to look around curiously, waiting to see who would step to the front of the room. For a moment, neither Frederick nor Veronica moved. Then finally, he took a step forward.

"The *Duke*," Carla heard Lady Arabella whisper. "Of *course* it was him. We should have *known*."

Frederick looked across the room to find Veronica and gestured wordlessly for her to join him at the front of the parlor. Shyly, Veronica made her way forward.

The whispers in the room increased in volume. "The *Earl's* daughter," Carla heard someone whisper. "Ugh." She reached out her hand, protectively tugging Lady Veronica to her side. "Congratulations to you both," she said. She held the earrings out to Veronica. "You have earned these, my dear."

Not just for the painting, but for making my grandson smile.

Veronica gave her a tiny smile. "Thank you, Your Grace." She looked small and fragile, her shoulders hunched as though she were trying to disappear.

A shame that such a lovely young lady might be so lacking in confidence.

No doubt it had much to do with her father's behavior and a lifetime of living in the shadow of the Earl of Volk's reputation. Surely, she too had heard the whispers as she had made her way to the front of the room.

"You are most welcome, Lady Veronica, my dear." Carla looked out over the gathering with a pointed look that dared anyone to challenge her decision. Lady Juliet had a sour look on her face but said nothing. Behind her, Lady Arabella continued to whisper with two of the other young ladies.

"Once again, I thank each and every one of you for making the long journey up to London," Carla told her guests. "Tonight, we will mark the end of festivities with a fireworks display in the garden. I look forward to seeing you all then."

The guests began to chatter amongst themselves again and slowly filtered toward the door. Carla reached out and grabbed the wrists of both Frederick and Veronica before they could escape. Frederick raised his eyebrows, clearly annoyed.

"What is it, Grandmother?"

Carla smiled, ignoring his terseness. "I just wished to congratulate you both again. It is a fine piece. I hope you will do me the honor of allowing me to hang it in the entrance hall with the late Duchess's pieces."

Veronica's cheeks reddened. "Of course, Your Grace." She faltered. "I mean..." She looked up at Frederick. "If that is all right with you, Your Grace."

Frederick nodded, not looking at her. "It's fine."

"Good," Carla said brightly, still keeping a firm grip on each of them. "I hope we will see you both tonight at the festivities." She looked pointedly at her grandson.

"Yes, Your Grace," Veronica stuttered. "Of course."

"Good," said Carla. "Your grandmother will be pleased to hear it, Lady Veronica. As I am sure you know, she is quite determined for you to come away from this celebration with a potential match."

The blush in Veronica's cheeks intensified. She kept her eyes down, painfully deliberate in not looking Frederick's way. "Yes, Your Grace."

Carla released her grip. "Thank you, Lady Veronica." She watched her dart off towards her father and grandmother like a rabbit released from a snare.

"The same goes for you." She looked up at Frederick, meeting his eyes. "I hope you will come away from this celebration with an inkling of who you would like to make your wife."

Frederick sighed. "Must we have this conversation again, Grandmother?"

"Yes, we must," she said firmly. "Because each time we have it, it goes nowhere. You end up storming off in a huff before anything is ever decided upon."

“That is because I do not wish to marry. I have no desire for a wife. I do not wish to share my life with anyone.”

Carla sighed. “Well. I am afraid you have little choice in the matter, Frederick. Like it or not, you are a duke, and you owe it to your ancestors to continue the family line.” She softened her voice. “Is the thought of finding a wife truly so terrible?”

Frederick rubbed his eyes. “Grandmother,” his voice softened, “you know how hard I find it to be around other people for any length of time. I feel as though all the energy has been sucked out of me.”

Carla felt an ache in her chest. “You have not always been like that. Once upon a time, you thrived in the company of others. Do you not remember?”

The pained look in Frederick’s eyes told her that he did remember. “That was a long time ago,” he said huskily. “I am different man these days.”

“So what?” asked Carla gently. “You wish to just let your life waste away?”

“No,” Frederick said, “I do not intend to do that at all. I intend to see the gallery my mother dreamed of come to fruition. *This* is what I wish to dedicate my life to, not the pursuit of a wife, just because the *ton* tells me I must.”

Carla smiled faintly. She knew how much her daughter-in-law had dreamed of opening her own gallery. But she hated the

thought of Frederick spending his life alone, even if it was spent realizing his mother's last wishes. "Perhaps this work will be made even more meaningful if you have a wife to share it with."

Frederick shook his head. "I very much doubt that."

Carla gave his wrist a gentle squeeze. "I know you will feel differently when you find the right person. And perhaps she is closer than you think."



The party was well underway by the time Frederick made it downstairs. He had deliberately missed dinner, having asked for his meal to be brought to his room, but he had promised his grandmother he would make an appearance for this cursed fireworks display.

It was almost dark—surely it couldn't be too long until the damn thing was over and done with. And tomorrow... Tomorrow all these infernal guests would disappear back to London, and he would have some time to himself. He would need to return to the capital soon, of course. There was plenty of work to do. Among the most pressing was a school for orphans he had invested in, and had requested to be kept abreast of all updates. Then of course there were the plans for his mother's gallery. There were a few artists he had his eye on, but was yet to find a suitable premises. Nonetheless, he would perform better when it came to these tasks if he was in the right frame of mind—or at least a better frame of mind than he was right now. It would be a good use of his time if he was to stay up here in Cambridge for an extra day or two.

After all, I'll need it to recover from all this socializing...

He stepped out of the house, following the lamplit path down towards the marquee. Music and laughter were floating out into the night, and as Frederick stepped inside, he saw the tent was filled with a wash of color and movement. All the young debutantes were dressed in their best gowns; pink and purple silk and lace everywhere he looked.

Unbidden, he felt his eyes pull towards Lady Veronica. She was dancing with a young gentleman, a warm smile on her face. She was dressed far more simply than most of the other young ladies, wearing an unadorned green gown with a simple pearl comb in her dark hair. Despite her modest attire, she was far more striking than the rest of the young ladies here put together.

Frederick thought of his grandmother's words: that Lady Hilt had brought Veronica here with the sole purpose of securing her a husband. He could not be surprised at that, of course. He knew that was why most of these young ladies were here. But somehow, the knowledge that the men on Veronica's dance card might be in with a chance to be her husband filled him with jealousy.

The realization caught him off guard. *I have no desire to be her husband—or anyone's husband for that matter.* He had made that clear to his grandmother more times than he could count. But it did nothing to quell the unexpected envy he felt towards the man with Veronica Caster in his arms.

Across the marquee, Frederick could see Lady Arabella and Lady Juliet whispering to one another, their eyes following Veronica around the room. Anger tightened the muscles in his neck. Who did these ladies think they were, gossiping about Veronica like this? If there was one thing he had learned these

past few days, it was that Veronica Caster did not have a cruel bone in her body. There was nothing she could possibly have done to warrant being the topic of gossip.

Frederick shook his head.

How petty these young ladies are. Not that I could expect any different. Daughters of the ton have been raised that way...

“Your Grace! I am so pleased you made it!”

“Your Grace! I know it’s ever so bold of me, but could I perhaps have a dance?”

Frederick groaned at the sight of the young ladies barreling towards him.

One more night and this will all be over. At least until next Season when Grandmother starts hounding me about finding a wife again.

“Your Grace! I—”

“Here, lad. You look as though you need this.” Frederick felt a glass of brandy being thrust into his hand. It was the Earl of Volk standing beside him, he realized in surprise.

Lord Volk clapped a hand to Frederick’s shoulder. “Drink up. These ladies can find another young fellow to annoy.”

Frederick chuckled and brought the glass to his lips. “Thank you.”

The Earl nodded. He took a sip from his own glass. “I liked the painting you did with my daughter,” he said. “I don’t know much about art, but I know it was much better than all the rubbish everyone else managed.” He snorted with laughter.

Frederick smiled slightly. “Your daughter is a very talented artist.”

“So I’m told.”

Lord Volk coughed loudly to clear his throat. He was swaying slightly on his feet, and his words were slightly slurred. Nonetheless, Frederick was grateful to have his company rather than that of Lady Juliet and her entourage.

“This might be out of place of me, Your Grace,” Lord Volk began, “and if so, I apologize. But you don’t look like the happy young lad I remember.”

Frederick raised his eyebrows. “You remember me as a child?”

“Of course. I knew both your mother and your father, and I remember you running about the place as a boy full of energy. And as a young man with a smile for everyone.” He met Frederick’s eye with a look of empathy. “And I can see the life has been sucked out of you.”

Frederick laughed humorlessly. The drunken Earl of Volk had just found the perfect words to describe the way he felt. He nodded. "It does feel like that at times," he admitted. He was surprised at himself for speaking of such things. Usually, he stayed as far away from speaking about his emotions as possible.

"Your mother's death?" asked Lord Volk.

Frederick nodded. "I suppose it's hard to find the joy in life when I'm condemned to be a part of the *ton*. How can I surround myself with these people after what they did to my mother?" The moment he had spoken the words, he regretted them. As far as Lord Volk and the rest of the *ton* knew, his mother had simply died of an illness. He knew he had said far too much.

His shoulders stiffened as he waited for the Earl to ask questions. But Lord Volk did not pry. Either the comment had merely passed him by, or he had sensed that the topic was not one Frederick wished to speak on. He patted Frederick's shoulder again, but he could not tell if it was an attempt at comforting him, or a desperate ploy to stay upright. "Life can be a real *bastard*, all right," said the Earl, spittle escaping as he emphasized the word. "And so can the *ton*. I'm sorry for whatever it is you went through."

Frederick nodded, grateful the man had not pressed the subject.

"I was close to my parents too," said Lord Volk. "I struggled when they died. I suppose that's when I first started... Well..." He gestured to his now-empty brandy glass. "I suppose that's when I first started making the wrong decisions."

Frederick felt a sudden rush of empathy. He knew Lord Volk had been on the receiving end of an endless torrent of gossip and cruelty, just as his mother had. But beneath the drunkenness, he could see a decency to the Earl of Volk. A decency that was severely lacking among the cold-blooded *ton*.

He swallowed heavily. “Thank you, My Lord. I—” Before he could finish the sentence, the Earl lost his balance and stumbled forward. He dropped his brandy glass, which shattered at his feet. Heads turned in their direction, the Dowager Duchess and Veronica’s among them.

“*Ugh*. What a *disgrace* that man is,” Frederick heard Lady Juliet say over the dance music.

“I know,” Lady Arabella echoed. “I cannot *believe* he was invited...”

The Dowager Duchess hurried towards the Earl and Frederick, the Dowager Marchioness behind her. “This is a sophisticated party, My Lord,” Frederick’s grandmother hissed. “If you cannot learn to control yourself, then—”

“Grandmother,” Frederick snapped, “the man just tripped, that’s all.” He lowered his voice, pinning the Dowager Duchess with hard eyes. “Hardly worth making a scene over, wouldn’t you agree?”

His grandmother exchanged glances with Lady Hilt.

“All right, Volk,” Frederick said before either lady could respond, “let’s get you outside.” He wrapped an arm around the man’s waist and turned him away from the barrage of critical eyes.

Behind him, Frederick heard his grandmother clear her throat. “Lady Juliet,” she said sweetly, “perhaps you might like to sing for us?”

Frederick guided the Earl towards the open side of the marquee. “I think you could use a bit of fresh air, My Lord.” He let him out into the garden and planted him on a bench under the oak tree. “Why don’t you have a little rest?”

Lord Volk closed his eyes, and for a moment Frederick was worried he was going to tip backward onto the lawn. But the Earl righted himself. He opened his eyes and reached up to pat Frederick on the cheek. “You’re a good lad, Brownwood. A damn good lad.”

Frederick heard a smattering of applause coming from inside the tent, followed by the opening strains of Lady Juliet’s performance. He couldn’t deny she had a fine voice, but it was soured somewhat by his knowledge of her character. He had exactly zero desire to return to the marquee and listen to her sing.

Satisfied the Earl was not about to end up faceplanting in the rose bushes, he made his way across the dark garden, seeking solitude. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Veronica emerging from the marquee and making her way towards her father.

Once he had reached the wild bottom end of the garden, Frederick released a long breath. He was utterly exhausted. In the past three days, he had endured more socializing than he had in months. He was more than ready to disappear upstairs.

I just have to get through this cursed fireworks display. And then I can disappear into my room and do my best to pretend this whole event never happened.

To think, his grandmother wished to see him married. Did she honestly imagine such a thing to be a good idea? He was not the kind of man to take his wife out to the theatre, or to dinner parties, or really anywhere at all. Given the choice, he would stay away from the eyes of society whenever possible. The only life he could offer his Duchess would be a lonely one, in which she would spend her days without her husband's company. He had no intention of putting anyone through that.

Frederick heard the crackling of twigs and groaned inwardly. He had not imagined that any of his admirers would want to come traipsing through the wilderness out here in their fine silk gowns. Besides, he could still hear Lady Juliet's warbling and had assumed her entourage would be too enthralled in the performance to seek him out. He had imagined—naively, he saw now—that he would be safe out here in the darkness. Frederick felt something turn over his stomach. Something far too close to dread.

The footsteps came closer and a face emerged from the dark. "Your Grace?"

And at the sight of Veronica Caster emerging from the shadows, Frederick realized it was not dread he was feeling, but something else entirely...

Chapter Nine



“F orgive the interruption,” said Veronica tentatively. There was a look of faint warmth on the Duke’s face right now, but she knew all too well how easily he could be set off into a rage. “May I join you for a moment?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

Half surprised by his acquiescence, Veronica perched daringly on the bench beside him. She knew it could be considered scandalous if they were caught alone together in the darkness. No, they were still in view of the marquee, she decided. Still in view of her father. Not that he was generally the most reliable of witnesses.

“I wished to thank you,” she said. “For standing up for my father back there. And for taking care of him.” She sighed. “I know he can be rather... a handful.”

The Duke shook his head dismissively. “It was nothing. Really.” He glanced down. “In fact, he rather helped me too.”

Veronica looked at him in surprise. “He did? How?”

The Duke was silent for a few moments. Just when Veronica thought he was not going to answer, he said, “He understood me. Sometimes it does not feel that there are many people in the world who do.”

Veronica’s lips parted, unsure what to say. Sometimes she felt the same way: that no one really understood her. Most ladies in her social circle wanted nothing more than a husband with a lofty title. To wish for a successful career as an artist, and a husband who loved her for who she was, made her something of an outlier. She could relate to the sense of loneliness she heard in the Duke’s words.

She gave him a tiny smile. “I’m glad Papa was able to help you.” She sighed. “He’s a good man, you know. Deep down. He has just... made some rather dreadful decisions. And he does not always have the strength to rectify them.”

The Duke nodded. “Yes. I can see that. He has far more decency in him than many others in the *ton*.”

Veronica gave him a smile of gratitude. It was not often she heard people speak highly of her father. The words left a warmth in her chest. She turned away but could still feel his eyes on her.

“You are wearing the earrings,” he said.

Veronica felt her cheeks color. “My grandmother insisted.” In truth, she had felt uncomfortable wearing such valuable jewelry to the party. She knew they just highlighted the plainness of her gown. Made her look like she was trying to be something she was not. She had even asked Sarah to style her

hair to cover her ears. She was surprised the Duke had noticed her wearing them.

“They were my mother’s,” he said.

“Oh.” Veronica brought a hand to her mouth. “I did not realize. Forgive me, that was terribly insensitive of me.” Her hand flew instinctively to her ears. “I—”

“Lady Veronica.” He reached out suddenly and touched her bare wrist, pulling her hand away from the earring. Veronica felt a jolt through her body at the contact. “It’s all right, really. I know Mother would be pleased you are wearing them, especially as you won them in a painting competition. I suspect that is why my grandmother chose them as the prize. To honor her daughter-in-law and her talents.”

Veronica swallowed hard, overcome with a sudden rush of emotion. “I shall treasure them, Your Grace.”

He nodded, his hand remaining lightly on her wrist, as though he had forgotten it was there. After a moment, he said, “I hope Lady Juliet and her friends are not... troubling you.”

Veronica felt the color in her cheeks intensify. She had been well aware of Lady Juliet and Lady Arabella whispering to one another on the edge of the dance floor. Well aware of the way their cold stares followed her around the room—probably whispering about the earrings. Veronica had done her best to ignore it. She shook her head. “It is nothing I cannot handle, Your Grace.” She gave him a wry smile. “I have had plenty of practice.”

His fingers tightened around her wrist. “I’m sorry to hear that. If there is anyone who does not deserve to put up with such things, it is you.”

Before Veronica could process the meaning behind his comment, a loud boom sounded overhead, making her jump. The Duke let go of her wrist as though he had suddenly become aware of it. They looked upwards at a shower of fireworks glittering in the night sky.

At the sound of the first explosion, guests began flooding out of the marquee into the garden. Veronica made to stand. “I ought to go.”

“Don’t.” The Duke’s hand found her wrist again. He pulled it away quickly this time. “I mean, rather...” He cleared his throat. “There’s no need to run away. People can see us here. It shan’t cause a scandal if we are seen together.”

Veronica hesitated. Then she nodded. Unable to look at the Duke, she turned her eyes back to the sky. Explosions of red, blue, and green erupted in the darkness. Closer to the ground, fountains of confetti shot into the sky. Pieces fluttered down from above, several landing in Veronica’s hair.

“Ugh.” She tried to swipe them away.

In the darkness, she saw a faint smile on the Duke’s lips. “Shall I help you?”

“No, no, it is all right.” Veronica wriggled irritably, trying to reach the piece of confetti that had wormed its way down the

back of her dress.

He chuckled. "Let me help you, My Lady. Please. You look as though you're about to get yourself in a dreadful tangle."

Reluctantly, Veronica got to her feet. "All right." She nodded towards the shadow of the two giant oak trees beside them. "Over here. I do not wish for anyone to see us and think... well... you know..." She was glad for the darkness. Glad the Duke could not see how fiercely her cheeks were blazing.

He got to his feet and followed her towards the trees. Gently, he lifted her dark curls and placed them over her shoulder. His warm hand touched the soft skin at the back of her neck, making Veronica gasp. He slid one finger beneath the collar of her gown, searching for the offending item. Veronica could feel her heart pounding. Could feel her breath racing. And given his closeness, she was sure the Duke could feel it too. His finger traced slowly and deliberately across the bare skin of her upper back, pausing for a moment at the base of her neck.

"There." He pulled the piece of confetti out and reached around her shoulder to hold it up in front of her eyes. Immediately, she felt the loss of his touch. "Got it."

She smiled nervously. "Thank you."

The Duke reached for her elbow and turned her to face him. "Are you all right?" he asked. "You look a little... flushed."

Veronica swallowed hard. “I’m fine.” As she whirled around to hurry back to the bench, another sudden firework exploded overhead, causing her to cry out in shock and stumble forward. The Duke caught her arm, clutching at the oak tree with his other hand in order to keep his balance—and pinning her against the trunk in the process.

Veronica gasped at his sudden nearness, at the feel of his warm body so close to her own. Her heart was thundering, and she could feel that strange tug of need in her belly. She tried to commit the moment to memory, sure it would be only seconds before the Duke hurried away, apologizing for his misstep and putting space back between them. But instead, he took a step closer to her, cupping her cheek with his broad hand.

“My Lady,” he murmured, his breath warm against her skin. His nose was inches from hers. And his hand slid down her neck, across her collarbone, pausing just above the swell of her breast. Veronica felt her body arching towards him. Found herself aching for his touch. Her lips parted, seeking his kiss.

“Your Grace!”

They blundered away from each other at the sound of an all too familiar voice. Veronica’s grandmother was charging across the garden towards them, a fiery look in her eyes. She was flanked by the Dowager Duchess, the dog scampering along behind them, yapping furiously.

The thundering in Veronica’s chest intensified—this time for a far less pleasant reason.

“What in heaven’s name is going on here?” her grandmother demanded.

“I fell,” Veronica said weakly. “And His Grace—”

“Yes, I could see *exactly* what His Grace was doing,” the Dowager Marchioness shot.

The Dowager Duchess shook her head, pinning her grandson with furious eyes. “How could you even think of taking advantage of her like this?”

“Oh no,” Veronica said, too quickly, “he was not taking advantage of me. I—”

“So you asked him to do what he did?” the Dowager Duchess shot.

Veronica swallowed heavily, her heart knocking hard against her ribs. “I fell,” she said again, short of anything else to say. Her cheeks were burning with shame.

“Well, Your Grace,” said the Dowager Marchioness, “now you have debased my granddaughter in such a way, I assume you will be marrying her?”

Veronica’s stomach dived. “No, Grandmother,” she said desperately, “there’s no need for that. Really. Nothing happened. What you saw was—”

“Quiet, Veronica.”

She fell to silence, her eyes on her feet and her heart thumping hard. She could not bring herself to look at the Duke.

Surely he will put this right. He will explain everything. Explain that we were... What? She had fallen, yes, but she knew that was no excuse for the compromising position their grandmothers had found them in. A compromising position she had been more than willing to entertain...

“Well, Your Grace?” the Dowager Marchioness pushed. “I am waiting for an answer. Are you going to be a decent man and preserve my granddaughter’s honor by becoming her husband?”

Veronica dared a tiny glance at him. He was standing a safe few feet away from her now, his hands folded tightly behind his back. His jaw was clenched and she could see the faint tremor there. He closed his eyes for a moment. But he said, “Yes, My Lady. Of course.”

“No,” Veronica gushed. “No. Please, Grandmother, this is all just a misunderstanding.” She could feel tears welling up behind her eyes. Could feel a sense of dread pressing down upon her.

I cannot marry the Duke. The only thing I have ever wanted is a husband who will love me for who I am...

And in spite of their *compromising situation*, she knew the Duke of Brownwood was not that man. He was cold and self-

centered, and far too rigid to ever love anyone.

“Please, Grandmother,” she begged, her voice low, “you and Her Grace are the only ones who saw this happen. No one else needs to know.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Grandmother, you know our family will not survive another scandal.” Her voice wavered. “We will be—”

“Calm yourself, My Lady,” the Dowager Duchess spoke up. “There will be no scandal.”

Veronica frowned. “What do you mean?”

The Dowager Duchess looked between Veronica and her grandson, a look of faint satisfaction on her face. “We shall announce your betrothal to the gathering this evening. His Grace will tell everyone that the fireworks were a surprise for you, to mark your engagement.” She looked pointedly at the Duke. “He will tell everyone how much he is looking forward to becoming your husband.” She smiled slyly. “Is that not right, my dear?”

The Duke swallowed visibly. “As you wish, Grandmother.” His eyes were down, deliberate in not looking Veronica’s way.

The Dowager Marchioness caught her friend’s eye and smiled. “Very good,” she said. “Then let us go back to the marquee and tell everyone the happy news.”



Frederick felt as though he were trapped in a dream he could not wake from.

No, not just a dream—a nightmare.

He had never wanted a wife, and now here he was being forced to the altar because of one foolish mistake.

He had to admit, it had not felt like a mistake at the time. Nor had he been able to stop himself from doing what he had. At the feel of Lady Veronica's body so close to his, he had felt himself drawn to her almost magnetically. The need to touch her again had been almost overwhelming.

But none of that meant he wished to make her his wife!

With a wife in tow, he would never again have the kind of solitude he relished. Or rather, needed. Sharing Brownwood Manor with his grandmother was trying enough; he could barely fathom the thought of trying to dodge yet another woman in his life asking after him, trying to coax him from his rooms, doing her best to fix him.

Even if that woman was Veronica Caster.

Frederick realized he and Veronica had not spoken a single word to each other since they had been so briskly wrangled into this betrothal. He glanced at her as her grandmother marched them up the garden towards the marquee like prisoners on their way to the scaffold. As for his own grandmother, she was herding all her guests back into the tent with a slightly deranged enthusiasm.

Frederick took a step towards Veronica. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

Veronica did not speak at once, did not even look at him. "I'm sorry too," she said finally. "It was as much my fault as yours." She wiped hurriedly at her tears.

Something tugged at Frederick's chest. He could not bear the thought of causing her pain. Though he supposed it was already far too late for that. "For what it is worth," he said carefully, "you shall want for nothing as my wife. I will see to it that you are well taken care of."

At his stiff and formal words, Veronica looked up and gave him a ghost of a smile. "Thank you, Your Grace. I know you would do no different." She blinked away a fresh rush of tears. "This just was not the way I wished to find myself a husband. This was not the kind of marriage I had hoped for."

Frederick did not respond. After all, what was there to say? He had no doubt that Veronica Caster had had dreams of great romance, of an elusive marriage for love. Now, thanks to him, she would be denied such a wish. This was not the life that either of them had hoped for. But it was now reality. And now, not only was he about to be shoehorned into marriage, but he would have to put on a show for all these guests and pretend he was happy about the situation.

He caught sight of the Earl of Volk, still sitting on the bench beneath the oak tree. "I ought to speak to your father," he told Veronica. "It is the decent thing to do."

What would Lord Volk say about all this, Frederick wondered distantly? Would he be angry at the way things had unfolded? Or pleased his daughter had secured a good match—albeit in less than typical circumstances?

As it turned out, Lord Volk had little to say on the topic at all. When Frederick mumbled out his plans to make Lady Veronica his wife, the Earl's vague nod made Frederick wonder if he had even been heard. He glanced at Veronica, who was hovering edgily at his shoulder.

“My Lord?” he pressed. “Did you understand what I just said?”

The Earl shook himself out of a daze. “Yes, yes,” he said. “Very good, Your Grace.” He reached up and patted Frederick on the arm. “My daughter will be lucky to have you.”

Frederick shook his head. Veronica was far from lucky, of course. But at least he had not been subjected to any hounding by his future father-in-law.

I am beginning to understand why Lady Hilt is taking charge of finding her granddaughters a husband...

“Thank you, Papa,” Veronica said in a tiny voice. She reached out a hand to help him to his feet. “You ought to come inside now. People will think something is wrong if you are not here for His Grace's announcement.” Her words were heavy with sadness and resignation. Frederick found himself wishing he could take her pain away.

But how could he do that when her sadness came from the thought of marrying him?

Lady Hilt took her son-in-law's elbow in a vise-like grip and steered him into the marquee. Frederick offered Veronica his arm. "We had best put on a show," he murmured. "The last thing we want is for anyone to think there is anything scandalous about this."

Veronica nodded, pressing her narrow fingers into the crook of his arm. "Thank you, Your Grace," she murmured. Her blue eyes were still glistening, though the tears had stopped falling. Together, they stepped into the marquee. The guests were all filtering in, murmuring to one another. Frederick saw a few heads turn his and Veronica's way.

"Ladies and gentlemen," boomed his grandmother. "Once again, I thank you for attending this lovely celebration. I do hope you have all enjoyed yourself." She was beaming, Frederick realized. Clearly, she had no qualms about sending him to the altar under duress; she was just pleased he would have himself a wife.

Almost as though she planned this... The thought swung at him suddenly. No, the notion was ridiculous. Wasn't it? She and Lady Hilt had leaped out of the shadows at lightning speed, the moment he had pressed his body to Veronica's.

Almost as though they were waiting for it to happen...

No. The thought is ludicrous. Isn't it?

“I have received some wonderful news from my dear grandson, the Duke of Brownwood,” his grandmother sang. “We would like to share the happy news with you all tonight.” She looked pointedly at Frederick. “Your Grace?”

Frederick swallowed heavily, shaking away his suspicions. Whether his and Veronica’s grandmothers had engineered the situation or not mattered little. They had been caught, and that was all that was important.

He drew in a long breath, looking out over the crowd. This was it, he realized. The moment he spoke these words, he would be tying himself to Lady Veronica forever.

Who am I kidding? I tied myself to Lady Veronica the moment our grandmothers caught us in such a compromising position...

Yes, he could have walked away. Refused to marry her and let the rumors that would likely spread about her take their course. But he did not want to be that kind of man. Especially not when it came to Veronica Caster.

All eyes were on him. Expectant and impatient. He ought to make some sort of speech, he supposed. Something that made this look as though it were something other than a hurried coupling designed to cover up a scandal. But this already felt far too difficult. Besides, he hated all this pomposity and parading. Best to just get it over with.

“It is my great honor to announce my engagement to Lady Veronica Caster,” he blurted.

Chapter Ten



The moment the Duke's words spilled out—without even a hint of ceremony, Veronica noted—the marquee filled with excited chatter.

Veronica felt her eyes pulling toward the floor, but her grandmother's elbow jabbing into her upper arm forced her to look up. Immediately, her gaze met Lady Juliet's. A look of horror was painted across her rival's face, and she glared at Veronica as though trying to turn her to stone. Beside Juliet, Lady Arabella glanced between them, wide-eyed. Veronica felt her grip on the Duke's arm tighten without her having any thought of it.

He turned to her. "It's all right," he mouthed, his words going some small way toward steadying her.

"Are you *certain* of this decision, Your Grace?" Lady Juliet spoke up boldly. Her words dripped with bitterness. Beside Veronica, the Dowager Marchioness shook her head, clearly appalled by Juliet's brazenness.

The Duke looked at Lady Juliet squarely. "Yes, My Lady. Quite certain." He held her gaze for a long second, and Juliet

seemed to cower beneath it. Her shoulders hunched slightly, and she took a step backward.

“Very well,” she said tautly. The shocked expression on her face morphed into a syrupy smile. She pinned the couple with hard eyes that made Veronica’s stomach roll. “Then I wish you both a whole *lifetime* of happiness. I am sure you will have nothing less.”



Veronica heard the crunch of carriage wheels rattling up the driveway to Volk House. They had been back from Cambridge for a day, and Veronica still felt as though she were lost in an unpleasant dream she could not wake from. Her embroidery sampler sat untouched in her lap. She had spent the better part of an hour—or was it two?—staring out the window, trying to make sense of the abrupt path her life had taken.

In two weeks’ time, she would be the Duke of Brownwood’s wife. It still did not feel real. Yes, she had known her grandmother had taken her to the Brownwoods’ country house in order to find her a match. But she had imagined she would at least be courted for a time before being thrust toward the altar.

And she had not for a second imagined it might be the Duke himself she would be marrying. True, they had shared more than one... encounter while in Cambridge, but Veronica knew well the Duke was not seeking a wife.

Because of one moment of weakness, he was about to get one anyway. How bitterly it stung to be unwanted.

Veronica heard the murmur of voices in the entrance hall, then the butler knocked on the door of the parlor. “Her Grace the Duchess of Larsen for you, My Lady.”

Veronica flung down her sampler and rushed to the door to meet her older sister. She threw her arms around Gemma’s neck.

Her sister held her tightly, and cocooned in the embrace, Veronica felt her tears return and spill. After a moment, Gemma stepped back, keeping a hold of her sister’s hands. “Oh Veronica, it is not that bad. Everything will be all right. You shall see.”

Veronica coughed down her tears, but before she could manage to speak, she found herself sobbing uncontrollably. Gemma took her sister’s arm and led her back towards the settle. She sat down, tugging Veronica down beside her and keeping hold of her hand. She reached into her reticule and handed her sister a handkerchief.

Veronica wiped her eyes. Though she felt as though she could continue crying for days if given the chance, she desperately needed to speak with her sister. After all, Gemma, too, had been forced into a marriage of convenience. And yet she had found a way to be happy—desperately so. Veronica needed to know how she had done so.

Before she could speak, Gemma said, “Was this Grandmother’s doing?”

Veronica sniffed. “However did you guess?”

Gemma gave a short laugh. “The moment I heard the news, I just knew she had something to do with it. It has her fingerprints all over it.”

Veronica sighed. “I know I cannot blame Grandmother. Not entirely. Yes, she was the one who pressed the Duke to marry me, but... well...” Her cheeks reddened. “We were behaving in a way we should not have been...” She frowned. “Although I do not know how Grandmother happened to be in the right place at the right time in order to witness it...”

“When it comes to marrying off her granddaughters, that woman has a sixth sense,” Gemma said wryly. “Believe me.” She nodded her thanks to the maid, who appeared with a tray of tea and biscuits. She waited until she had filled the teacups and left the room before saying, “You and His Grace were doing things you should not have been?” It was curiosity in her voice, not admonishment, Veronica knew, but that did not stop the color in her cheeks from intensifying. She nodded faintly.

Gemma raised her eyebrows. “So perhaps becoming his wife is not such a dreadful thing after all?”

Veronica didn’t answer at once. She brought her teacup to her lips, letting the warm liquid steady her somewhat. When she trusted herself to speak, she said, “His Grace and I shared a brief kiss, that’s all.” She was wildly underplaying it, she knew. The things that had passed between her and the Duke went far beyond a *brief kiss*. But best keep to the matter at hand. “He has no desire to take a wife. And I have no desire to be married to a man as cold and surly as him.”

Gemma raised a dark eyebrow. “You must have seen a little more in him than that if you shared a kiss with him.”

Veronica said nothing. Gemma reached over and took her hand. “Listen to me. When I was first forced to become Wyatt’s wife, I thought my life was over. I couldn’t have imagined ever being happy. And I certainly could not have imagined ever falling in love with him. But Wyatt is a wonderful husband. A wonderful father to James. And I love him more than anything.” She smiled. “Sometimes life has a way of surprising you.”

Veronica shook her head, her tears beginning to fall again at her sister’s mention of love. “That is not going to happen for me. I do not think the Duke of Brownwood is even capable of love.”

But as she spoke the words, a voice tugged at the back of her mind, reminding her of the passion with which the Duke had spoken of his portrait painting. Certainly, he loved his art, so perhaps Gemma was right. Perhaps in time, he could also learn to love a wife.

Veronica shook her head. No. It was impossible. She would never have what her sister had, because for that to happen, not only would the Duke need to fall in love with her, but she would also need to fall in love with him. And that was never going to happen. This *thing* between her and the Duke, was nothing more than a physical infatuation. An intoxicating, dizzying infatuation, yes, but an infatuation, nonetheless. Veronica knew the kind of man she would fall in love with was someone warm, kind and personable. The Duke of Brownwood was none of those things.

“Give him a chance, Veronica,” Gemma said gently. “I know you can do that. It’s in your nature. You are always so positive

and optimistic. Why not try being that way about your marriage as well?"

Veronica nodded faintly. She knew her sister was right. But optimism felt difficult to conjure up right now. She said, "I do not believe I have any choice in the matter."

Gemma smiled. "No, you don't. Grandmother has made it that way." She gave her sister's hand a squeeze before releasing it and taking hold of her teacup. "In any case, I have news that I think will cheer you somewhat."

Veronica's eyes lit up. "Are you with child again? Is James to have a little brother or sister?"

Gemma laughed. "No, that's not it. This is about you."

Veronica raised her eyebrows. "About me?"

"Yes. My husband and several other investors are reconstructing a school for orphans. They plan to open in a few weeks' time. He mentioned they are looking for someone to paint a mural on one of the walls of the classroom. Something colorful and bright that would inspire the children. I wondered if you would be interested."

Veronica gasped, sitting up straighter in her chair. "Oh, Gemma, yes! I would love to! Thank you!" She threw her arms around her sister, hardly caring that she managed to spill tea in both their laps.

Gemma pulled back, wiping at the wet splotch on her skirts. “I thought that would excite you. I shall let Wyatt know the good news.” Another loud knock at the door sounded through the entrance hall. “Ah,” said Gemma, “and that will be the other reason I’ve come today.”

“What do you mean?”

Gemma stood, pulling Veronica to her feet. “Grandmother asked me to be here this morning because she has sent for a seamstress to come to the house.” She gave Veronica an apologetic smile. “She thought you could use a second opinion when it comes to designing your wedding dress.”



Frederick looked out the carriage window and sighed impatiently. The traffic was crawling; they had barely moved an inch in the last ten minutes. No doubt there was yet another incident on Westminster Bridge. He tapped a long finger against his chin in thought. It could hardly be more than a mile to the school building in Lambeth. Faster on foot, surely.

He rapped his cane on the roof of the carriage, and when his coachman came to a stop, he climbed out into the street, instructing his driver to go on ahead and meet him at the school.

“Of course, Your Grace,” the driver nodded. “Wise choice if you ask me.”

“Indeed.” Frederick hurried off the road and began to stride down the footpath towards the bridge, head down to avoid making eye contact with anyone he passed. And, he supposed,

to avoid being recognized and having to answer any questions about his sudden betrothal that may arise.

Frederick had already glimpsed the headlines in the papers: *Scandal in the Volk Family Again? The Duke of Brownwood's Shock Wedding Announcement*, and *Duke of Brownwood to Marry Daughter of the Wayward Earl of Volk*. And these were in supposedly reputable publications like the *London Times*. He could only imagine what hurtful drivel the gossip pages were printing.

As if conjured up by his thoughts, he passed a newspaper seller on the corner, just before the bridge, hollering out to the passing crowd.

Just the sight of the boy—and the pile of papers at his feet—made Frederick's blood boil. If there was one class of people more immoral and scheming than the *ton*, it was the press, willing to print anything if it made them a penny or two.

He put his head down and began to walk quicker, striding over the bridge on foot—and passing the upturned milk cart that was responsible for the holdup. Coaches and wagons were clustered together on the bridge, with a large puddle of milk slowly making its way towards the river. A crowd was gathered at the scene, some helping free the horses from their tangled reins and harness, others collecting the fallen milk vats. Still others were hollering at the cart driver for his clumsiness.

Frederick hurried away from the scene, glad when he reached the relative quiet of the school building. He was relieved to escape the noise and smell of the London crowds, and the foul breath of the Thames. The city always felt this way when he

returned from time in Cambridge: stifling, overwhelming, as though it had the power to swallow him whole.

He was also glad for the distraction his visit to the school would bring. Something to take his mind off his upcoming wedding, and those infernal news reports. And yet, he regretted that the school had become a mere distraction. He had jumped at the chance to invest in a school for orphans. A worthy cause, if ever he had seen one.

Being able to assist projects like this was the one upside to his title. It reminded him that there was more to life than the frippery of the *ton*. Funding such projects gave a little meaning to his life. Allowed him to impact the world for good, at least in some small way.

The school building was close to completion. The three classrooms, once crumbling and gloomy, had been completely rebuilt, with large windows letting in plenty of light and a fireplace in each room to keep the children warm in winter. A fourth smaller room had been added to the back of the building; he assumed it was a space for the teachers to use.

Two workmen were hammering fresh paneling into place above the fireplace in the teachers' room. They looked up as he entered. "What do you think, Your Grace?" asked one.

Frederick nodded. "I'm impressed. Truly. It looks wonderful." It was the first time he had visited the site since its inception several months ago. Back then, it had been little more than a half-built structure, cluttered with rubble and alive with rats. But now he could imagine these classrooms full of children, learning to read and write. It would give them a real chance at life. A chance to get off the streets and move on from the tragic loss of their parents.

If only I could find the will to do the same.

He knew it was time he moved on from the loss of his mother. He knew she would not want him to spend the whole rest of his life moping about and secluding himself. But pulling himself out of the ocean of misery he had come to exist in sometimes felt utterly impossible.

Well, he thought, living a life of seclusion was about to get much harder. Because in a week's time, Veronica Caster would be his wife.

Frederick nodded his thanks to the workers and made his way out of the school.

Turns out it was not such a distraction after all...

In truth, his head had been full of Veronica since he had left Cambridge. No—in truth, his head had been full of her since the moment he had given her that illicit first kiss. And those thoughts had only intensified with the second. He had thought almost ceaselessly about the way her lips had felt against his, the way her chest had risen and fallen with desire, that soft moan that had escaped her.

Most of all, he had thought about her warmth, her kindness, her passion for her art. Frederick could not deny that the time he had spent with Veronica in Cambridge had made him feel far more alive than he had in a long time.

But none of that meant he wished to take her as his wife.

Because Veronica Caster deserved far more than him. She deserved a husband who was just as warm and loving as she was. A husband who would cherish her as she deserved. A husband who saw the positive side of life, just as she did.

And that will never be me.

But the thing was done. In a matter of days, he and Veronica were to be married, and that was all there was to it.

Perhaps, back in the garden, he could have protested against the marriage their grandmothers were insisting on. Could have tried to convince Lady Hilt that all she had seen was him catching Veronica as she had fallen. But he had not done so. Because Frederick knew the truth. He had been doing far more than just saving her from falling. He had been physically unable to keep away from her. Perhaps he had not debased her as Lady Hilt had suggested, but Frederick knew that if the Dowager Marchioness had arrived minutes later, there was every chance he would have done. That night, with Veronica's body pressed against his own, he had felt all semblance of control leave him.

And now she is to become my wife.

Frederick shook his head as he hurried towards his coach, now waiting on the corner. Heaven and hell, he had to forget the way Veronica made him feel. The way she made his body come alive. It was best that they keep their distance from each other. It was safer that way. For both of them. As his Duchess, Veronica would have everything she needed. She would have her own lavish quarters, and all the art supplies she desired. But she would not share his bed. Ever. Because somewhere

deep inside him, Frederick knew that if he allowed Veronica Caster into his bed, she would find his way into his heart.

And that was something he could absolutely not allow.

Chapter Eleven



So this was it. Veronica was about to step into the church. And when she stepped back out, she would be the Duchess of Brownwood. She tried to focus on what her sister had told her: “*Life has a way of surprising us.*” Perhaps Gemma was right. Perhaps she would find a way to be happy in this marriage. But today, Veronica’s characteristic optimism felt too hard to conjure up.

Because it felt too dangerous to hope she and the Duke might find a way to love each other. Surely hoping for such things would only lead to heartbreak and disappointment.

Veronica took a deep breath and smoothed the skirts of her cream-colored silk gown. Despite its simple style, the gown felt far more luxurious than anything she had ever worn, and she could not help feeling like a fraud.

Behind her, she could hear the excited chatter of the onlookers. She was not surprised so many people had turned up to witness the marriage of the mysterious Duke of Brownwood. And she knew his marriage to her had caused no small stir among the gossip pages. She could only imagine what the onlookers were whispering about. She tried to push the thought out of her mind.

“Are you ready, my dear?” asked the Earl. Veronica was proud of her father. He had been out of bed with the dawn today, determined not to make her late for the ceremony. And though she could smell a hint of liquor on his breath, his steps were steady and his speech was clear. Veronica pulled him into a tight embrace.

“Yes, Papa,” she murmured, clinging to him tightly. “I’m ready.” When she pulled away, her eyes were filled with tears. She hated the thought of no longer being at Volk House to care for her father. With herself and Gemma married, only their younger sister Jane would be at home to care for him—and at eight and ten, it would not be long before she too found herself a husband. As caring as the Dowager Marchioness was toward her granddaughters, Veronica knew her kindness did not extend to her drunken son-in-law. She did not dare to imagine how strained and bitter things would be between the two of them once she and her sisters were gone.

As though reading her thoughts, her father said, “Now you listen to me, Sunshine. You are not to worry yourself over me. I can take care of myself.” Veronica looked at him doubtfully. He squeezed her hands. “Trust me. I shall be just fine.”

“I shall visit you as often as I can,” Veronica said, “and I—”

“Veronica.” He cut her off. “It is time for you to stop worrying about me and live your own life. Do you understand?”

She nodded. “Yes Papa.”

“Good.” Her father nodded toward the monstrous double doors of the church. “Now. Shall we? I believe your husband-to-be is

waiting.”



The wedding passed by in a haze. Veronica heard herself speaking her vows almost distantly, as though she was watching herself from afar. She was only dimly aware of the Duke before her, pledging to become her husband in a low but clear voice. Only dimly aware of his freshly trimmed blonde hair and sharp, shaven jaw. The soft scent of rosewater emanating from him and the faint pull of attraction she felt toward him. And she was barely present when the priest announced them man and wife, minting her as the new Duchess of Brownwood. Not a single part of it felt real.

Veronica walked out of the church on her new husband’s arm, her legs feeling weak and unsteady beneath her. “It’s all right,” she heard him murmur. “Just keep walking.” He reached over and pressed his free hand over her own. Veronica felt her heart skip a beat. She could not tell if the gesture was for her benefit, or the benefit of the wedding guests.

As they stepped outside the church, the throng of well-wishers waiting in the street burst into cheers. Veronica felt the Duke’s arm tense beneath her fingers as she glanced around the large crowd. He hurried her towards the waiting carriage. The footman already had the door open and the step kicked down, almost as though he had been instructed to prepare for a hasty exit.

“Your Graces. My congratulations.” He offered his hand to Veronica, helping her climb inside. Her husband climbed in behind her. Veronica found herself hoping he would sit beside her, but he chose the seat opposite, his body a safe distance from her own. The door closed with a soft thud, muting the

noise outside. Veronica let out a breath she had not realized she was holding.

The Duke looked out the window for a moment, then drew the curtain, shutting out the rest of the world. He turned back to face Veronica. "I hope that was not too trying for you," he said. There was a stiff formality to his voice, far removed from the warmth in his words when they had last spoken in the garden at his country house.

Veronica gave him a tiny smile. "Nothing I shan't survive. What of you? I know you do not enjoy such social occasions."

The Duke looked slightly surprised at the question. His lips tilted up slightly. "Well. It appears I too have survived. Although I am sure the challenge is still ahead of us with this cursed wedding breakfast."

Veronica folded her hands in her lap. "It cannot be any worse than the last celebration we went to. After all, we are already married."

Her words brought a faint chuckle from the Duke. "Indeed." He caught her eyes for a moment and his gaze softened slightly, then he turned away quickly to look toward the window. When he remembered the closed curtains, he turned his eyes downward towards his clasped hands. When he spoke again, the formality was back in his voice. "The Duchess's quarters are ready for you at Brownwood Manor," he said stiffly. "But of course you will let me know if there is anything you would like changed. Or if there is anything else you need. You of course will be at liberty to order any new clothing you require." Veronica blinked. It sounded like he was reciting a speech he had been practicing for hours. Before she could get a word in, he rattled on: "While I do not venture out on many

occasions, I am currently involved in a charitable project that is quite dear to my heart, and when I make my appearances in support of it, I will expect you to join me as my wife. So of course, it is important you have a wardrobe befitting a Duchess.”

Veronica nodded obediently.

“And I will see to it that you have a generous sum each week, to be spent on whatever it is you wish.”

She swallowed hard. “Thank you, Your Grace,” she said stiffly. “That is most generous of you.” She was almost relieved when the black iron gates of Brownwood Manor came into sight.



Pippa Marlow, the Dowager Marchioness of Hilt, was more than a little pleased with herself. Two years ago, against all odds, she had made her eldest granddaughter into a Duchess. And now she had done the same for dear Veronica.

All right, yes, she had to admit that sometimes her methods could be a little underhanded, but that was only because she cared so much about her granddaughters’ security and happiness. Besides, she was only helping things along. Expediting the process, as it were. When she had caught Veronica and Frederick entangled up against the oak tree, he may not have yet besmirched her honor, but Pippa had the distinct feeling that he had been moments away from doing so. Those two clueless children could protest all they liked, but Pippa knew deep down, that there was a part of them that was happy to have married one another.

She raised her third glass of champagne—or was it her fourth? She had rather lost count—up towards Carla, the Dowager Duchess, one of her dearest friends in the world. “Well, my darling, I think you and I are to be congratulated.”

Carla looked around the ballroom of Brownwood Manor, today filled with white-clothed tables and elaborate floral displays for Veronica and Frederick’s wedding breakfast. Carla had truly outdone herself; it had been a lavish celebration, befitting the marriage of a duke and duchess. Pippa had probably had a *little* too much to drink. And she had definitely had too much to eat. She was glad she had instructed her maid to tie her stays loosely this morning, in anticipation of the Brownwoods’ banquet.

Most of the guests had left now, leaving only family in attendance. Servants were bustling around the room, collecting the endless array of empty plates and glasses, while Patch was snuffling around beneath the table in search of scraps. Veronica and her sisters were chatting together at the end of one of the tables, while Frederick and Gemma’s husband Wyatt seemed to be putting the world to rights over glasses of brandy. The Earl was chasing Gemma and Wyatt’s son James around the room. He grabbed hold of the boy before he teetered over on his unsteady little legs and flung him over his shoulder to howls of laughter from James.

Pippa sighed inwardly as she watched the two of them. She knew that somewhere deep inside, Mark Caster really did have the ability to be a good father and grandfather. He had shown as much today, turning up at the church this morning as close to sober as she had seen him in ages. If only that side of him weren’t so often hidden behind an ocean of liquor...

Carla took another large mouthful of champagne and hiccupped promptly. Pippa gave a snort of laughter. “You are right, my dear, we are to be congratulated,” said the Dowager Duchess. “I think our grandchildren will truly be happy together.”

Pippa smiled to herself. It would take some time, perhaps, for the Duke to warm to his new role as a husband. But she remembered Frederick Barnes as a young man, so warm and full of life. And if there was anyone in the world who could find that man again, it was her dear Sunshine.

She reached down and grabbed Patch from the floor, snuggling into his wiry fur for a moment. Her eyes widened. “We ought to dance,” she said suddenly. She leaped to her feet, suddenly full of energy, tucking the dog under her arm. She grabbed hurriedly at her chair when the floor seemed to tilt beneath her.

Dancing, yes! Why did I not think of that before?

With her free hand, she tugged Carla to her feet.

The Dowager Duchess cackled loudly. “Dancing! But there is no music!”

Pippa snorted. “Ha! Music is vastly overrated. Come on.” She pulled her friend into the open space behind the tables and began to twirl, enjoying the way her sky blue skirts spun out around her. She grinned broadly to herself. She had not danced like this since she was a child and there was something utterly liberating about it. She grabbed the Dowager Duchess hand and whirled her around, narrowly avoiding bumping into the table. Oh yes, she thought with a grin, today was most worthy

of a celebration. And she and Carla were certainly to be congratulated.



“Oh dear.” Jane turned toward the back of the room. Veronica and Gemma followed their sister’s gaze to find their grandmother waltzing between the tables with the Dowager Duchess, her dog tucked under one arm. “Perhaps we ought to have been keeping a closer eye on how many glasses of champagne those two had.”

“Well,” Gemma said wryly, “I’m sure Father will never let her live this down.”

Jane got to her feet. “I had best take her home.”

Veronica felt a pang of guilt as she watched the two Dowagers howling with laughter. She had always seen taking care of her family as her responsibility, especially since her older sister had married. She looked imploringly at Jane. “Will you be all right? I can help you if—”

“Veronica.” Her younger sister cut her off gently. “Don’t be foolish. It is your wedding day.” She put a hand on her sister’s wrist and squeezed gently. “I can handle Grandmother.” She smiled conspiratorially. “Besides, she will probably be asleep by the time we get home.”

Gemma grinned at Veronica. She nodded towards the Dowager Duchess, who had now relieved herself of her shoes and was prancing barefoot across the room. “And if you truly wish to take care of someone, it looks as though Her Grace might be feeling a little poorly tomorrow morning.”

Veronica hesitated. She knew Jane was right; this was her wedding day, and she did not need to be responsible for taking care of everyone today. But it felt like a difficult habit to break. She trusted her younger sister—of course, she did. But she could not shake the feeling that things would fall apart at home without her. “If you’re sure...” she said tentatively.

“Of course I am sure.” Jane pulled her into a firm embrace. “It’s time for you to go and enjoy your own life for once.”

At her sister’s words, Veronica felt her gaze pulled in her husband’s direction. Was it possible for her to enjoy her own life if she was to live it by his side? The sight of him, so impossibly handsome in his dark blue suit and silver cravat, made something flutter in her belly. But Veronica knew well that physical attraction was just one piece of the puzzle. Knew it was not enough on which to build a happy marriage.

As though feeling her gaze on him, the Duke got to his feet and began to stride towards her. He folded his arms across his chest and chuckled as he watched the Dowagers’ dancing display. “Quite a sight, wouldn’t you say?”

Veronica realized they were close to the first words he had spoken to her since the wedding breakfast had begun. She watched Jane gently extricating her grandmother from the Dowager Duchess’s grip and speaking to her in soothing tones Veronica could not quite make out.

The Duke met Veronica’s eyes. A faint smile was playing in the corner of his mouth. “I ought to take Grandmother upstairs. It seems she has had quite enough.”

“Of course. I will help you.” She spoke the last sentence softly, half expecting the Duke to protest.

But he nodded. “Will you bring up her reticule? I shall have her lady’s maid get her into bed in the meantime.” He chuckled. “I don’t expect we will be seeing her again until the morning.”

Unbidden, his words made something flutter in her chest. His words seemed weighted, somehow. A reminder that once their guests left and they disappeared upstairs, they would be alone in the vast expanse of Brownwood Manor. As husband and wife.

Neither of them had spoken a word about what was to take place on their wedding night. In truth, they had barely spoken a word about anything since their hasty betrothal. She knew the Duke had never intended to take a wife. But now he had one. Would he visit her bed tonight?

The thought made her heart kick into a wild and frantic rhythm. Made her body suddenly hot and her breath short with a heady mix of need and panic. She closed her eyes and tried to focus.

Her Grace’s reticule. Yes, of course.

Veronica collected the reticule from where the Dowager Duchess had discarded it in the middle of the table, then made her last goodbyes to her family. She followed her husband up into the entrance hall of the manor, as he walked with an arm around his grandmother’s waist. Once he had steered her into

the stern supervision of her lady's maid and they had disappeared—with some difficulty—up the staircase, he turned back to Veronica.

“Well,” he said, tugging on his cravat to loosen it, “I don't think I have ever seen ladies of that age put on quite a display before.”

Suddenly, Veronica found herself on the verge of uncontrollable giggling, that her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess waltzing with the dog really had been utterly hilarious. She laughed. “Nor have I. Although I have to admit, I am not all that surprised.”

The Duke laughed loudly. A real laugh, not a forced chuckle, or a snort of derision. His face lightened and his gray eyes shone with sudden warmth. For a moment, he looked an utterly different man. Boyish, almost. *Happy*. The sight of it made something swell in Veronica's chest. She dared to take a step closer to him.

The Duke held her gaze for a long second, his lips parting and his laughter falling silent. “I... You...” He swallowed visibly. “You are wearing the emerald earrings,” he said.

Veronica looked down shyly, feeling suddenly exposed and vulnerable beneath his gaze. “Yes. I thought it only fitting. I hope it was not too forward of me...”

“No, of course not,” he said in a half-voice. “You are part of the family now, after all.”

Veronica swallowed hard. “Yes, I... I suppose I am.”

The Duke raised his hand and brought it toward her face, only to pull away at the last second. He cleared his throat and took a step away from her. He hurried towards the bellpull to ring for his housekeeper. She appeared within seconds. “Mrs. Holloway, please show the Duchess to her quarters,” he said stiltedly. He gave Veronica a pointed look that she struggled to interpret. “I am sure she is ready for a rest.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” The housekeeper turned to Veronica and gave her a warm smile. “This way, Your Grace.”

Veronica glanced over her shoulder at her husband. The smile was gone from his face now. In its place was a look of bewilderment, as though he was trying to make sense of his own actions. What was going on inside his head, she wondered? Navigating this man felt like an impossible task. If only she could glimpse inside him, even if only for the briefest second.

Mrs. Holloway led her up the wide marble staircase and down a long passage, painted the color of eggshells. When she opened the door to the Duchess’s quarters, Veronica was unable to stifle a gasp. The room was at least three times the size of her bedchamber at Volk House, with oriel windows looking out onto the vast expanse of the garden, and a wide window seat beneath them. An enormous canopied bed held pride of place in the center of the room, hung with crisp white curtains, and tied back with silky yellow ribbons. The walls were painted the palest blue, and a large seascape hung on the wall opposite the bed.

“Oh,” Veronica murmured, “it is beautiful. Everything is just perfect.”

Veronica took a step toward the painting. She knew from a single glance that the late Duchess had painted it. The fact that her husband had left it in here for her to appreciate was not lost on her.

Mrs. Holloway smiled. "I am glad you like it, Your Grace. Take a moment to look around, and then I will show you to your workroom."

"My... workroom?" Veronica repeated.

"Yes, ma'am. The Duke had one of the guest suites turned into a studio for you. He said you would need it for your painting."

Veronica's heart skipped a beat. He had really done that for her? She felt a sudden swell of affection for the enigmatic man downstairs.

"I should like to see it now, please," she said.

"Of course, ma'am. This way."

The workroom was two doors down the passage, with the same expansive view of the manor grounds. A large easel was set up close to the window, and a wide set of shelves lined one wall. A quick glance told Veronica they were full of painting supplies. She turned back to the housekeeper. "Thank you, Mrs. Holloway. That will be all."

“Very well, Your Grace. Shall I have your maid sent up to help you change?”

“Not yet. I shall ring for her shortly. But I would like to explore the studio first.”

“Of course, ma’am.” Mrs. Holloway bobbed her head, then disappeared out of the room, her footsteps echoing down the long passage.

Veronica went to the shelf and began to examine the supplies. Pencils and charcoals, oil paints and watercolors lined the shelves, along with fresh sketch books and brushes of all sizes. Whoever had filled this room with supplies had thought of everything. And she had little doubt that that person had been the Duke himself. Only an artist would know to be so thorough.

“I hope you like it.”

Veronica whirled around at the sound of her husband’s voice. He was standing in the doorway with his hands folded behind his back, now in just his shirtsleeves and waistcoat, his cravat hanging loosely at his throat. The perplexed look was gone from his face, and he now looked calm and composed. Expectant, as though he were keen to hear her thoughts on the studio.

“Like it?” Veronica repeated, rushing towards him. “Oh, Your Grace, I love it. Truly.”

He smiled. “Good. The oil paints are of a very fine quality. They are the brand I use myself.”

“I cannot wait to try them,” said Veronica excitedly. “I have never had so many colors to choose from before.”

“Is the room large enough for you?” he asked. “There is a bigger space on the other side of the hallway, but I thought the view of the garden would inspire you.”

Suddenly overcome with affection for him, Veronica reached impulsively for his hand. His fingers felt warm between hers. At the feel of him, her pulse began to quicken. “This room is perfect,” she said. “I cannot thank you enough.” She met his eyes. “I do not think anyone has ever done anything quite so thoughtful for me before.”

His grip on her hand tightened almost imperceptibly. “Well,” he said, his voice husky, “a gifted artist like you should have the means to make the most of her talents.”

Affection swelled in Veronica’s chest.

What if Gemma was right? What if life is about to surprise me? What if I have chance to find love with my husband after all?

The thought was almost frightening, and it caught her off guard. But Veronica could not deny the warmth she was feeling for this man. Nor could she ignore the way her body had come to life at the feel of his skin against hers. She felt her

gaze pulling towards his lips. Felt a faint tug between her thighs.

The Duke reached out and cupped her cheek with his palm, his thumb tracing a path across her smooth skin. He stepped closer to her; so close she could feel the warmth of his body. So close his breath tickled her nose. Veronica felt a tightening in her belly. An ache in her breasts. Felt a sudden, desperate desire for him to kiss her again.

Veronica heard her own loud inhalation. She knew what was required of her as a wife, of course—her older sister had made sure she would not face any surprises on her wedding night. And while she was undoubtedly nervous at the prospect of sharing her bed—and her body—with a man, those nerves were almost overridden by excitement. Overridden by the need for him she could feel building in her core.

She could feel the way her husband's eyes were drinking her in. And some part of her knew that he was aching for her body as much as she was for his.

“Your Grace,” she said softly, her heart thundering, “my quarters are very beautiful, and I thank you for them. But I wondered if...” she swallowed, “if we are to share a bed as husband and wife?”

After a long second, she saw a look of hardness fall over his eyes. He stepped back, letting his hand fall from her face. “Ours is a marriage of convenience, madam,” he said stiffly. His voice was cold and expressionless. “A marriage in nothing more than name.”

Veronica's eyes widened. What had happened to the warm, considerate Duke she had been speaking to moments ago? "Your Grace?" she squeaked.

"I have neither the time nor the inclination to entertain a lady who wishes to play house." He began to stride towards the door, making it clear the conversation was over. And making it more than clear that they would not be sharing a bed—on their wedding night or any night. "I have seen to it that you have extremely comfortable quarters of your own," he told Veronica brusquely. "I suggest you make the most of them."

Chapter Twelve



Veronica woke with the dawn the next morning. After the Duke's terse words yesterday afternoon, he had disappeared into his own studio, leaving his new wife to her own devices. Unable to bear the sight of her husband, she had asked for her dinner to be brought to her room and had locked herself away in there for the rest of the night.

During the night, Veronica had alternated between tears and raw anger—both at the Duke and at herself. How could she have been so foolish to think even for a second that they might grow to love each other? Her husband had made it clear he would never let anyone through the walls of ice he had erected around himself.

“Ours is a marriage of convenience, madam.”

And that meant Veronica would never be a mother. And she would never have a chance to explore the depths of the desire the Duke had awoken within her. The thought brought a rush of fresh tears and she hurriedly wiped them away.

After requesting her breakfast to be brought to her room, Veronica sent word to her sister, asking her to come and collect her. Gemma had told her to notify her when she had

time to begin the mural on the wall of the orphans' school, and Veronica could not think of any better way to take her mind off her heartless new husband, and the life that now lay out before her.

“What happened?” asked Gemma, the moment Veronica climbed into the coach.

Veronica smiled wryly. “Is it that obvious?”

Gemma shuffled along the bench so her shoulder was pressed to Veronica's. She took her sister's hand in her own. “I can tell you have been crying,” she said gently.

Veronica took a deep breath, determined not to cry again. “I do not know how I am going to do it,” she admitted. “I do not how I am going to survive being his wife.”

Gemma frowned. “Surely it cannot be so bad? Was he...too forceful, perhaps? Did he not take your needs into consideration?”

Veronica shook her head. “Nothing like that. In fact, he made it abundantly clear that we are married in name only. He wants nothing to do with me. Last night, he...” She faded out, not wanting the repeat her husband's hurtful words, even in the company of her sister. “Well, after the wedding breakfast, I barely saw him. We did not even eat dinner together, let alone.... well... you know...” She closed her eyes. “And the things he said to me, Gemma. He just turned on me, like... Like this was all my fault.”

Gemma squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry.” She bent her head to catch Veronica’s eyes. “Give him time. I’m sure this wedding was as much of a shock to him as it was to you. And, well, I have heard what they say about him being a something of a recluse. Surely it cannot be easy for him to suddenly be sharing his life with another person.”

Veronica sniffed. “I did not imagine you would take his side,” she admitted.

“Oh I am not taking his side,” Gemma assured her. “Believe me. If I saw him, I’d have very strong words for him about treating my little sister so poorly. He would rue the day he was born.”

Her words brought a faint smile to Veronica’s lips. “I just wanted a husband who would love me,” she sighed. “And now I have a husband who cannot even bear to be in the same room as me.”

Gemma slid an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into a tight embrace. “Things will get better,” she said, “I promise. And right now, you can put all your energy into painting the orphans the most beautiful mural you possibly can.” She nodded at the bag of supplies Veronica had brought with her from her new studio. “I see you have come prepared.”

Veronica closed her eyes, her thoughts drawn involuntarily back to the moment she and the Duke had shared in her studio. The moment before he had shut down and everything had changed. She pushed the thought away. Gemma was right: painting the mural was an amazing opportunity. She was not going to taint it by thinking about her cold and capricious husband—not even for a second.



“Grandmother,” said Frederick, as the Dowager Duchess sat down at the breakfast table, “I was not expecting to see you this morning. I thought you would be tucked up in bed with a raging headache.”

His grandmother glided past his comment. In spite of yesterday’s drunken antics, she looked impossibly sprightly this morning. Frederick found himself faintly envious. A headache was already beginning to thump behind his eyes, though he suspected that he was more wrought by guilt over the way he had spoken to Veronica last night than by the excesses of the wedding breakfast.

“What did you do?” his grandmother asked pointedly.

Frederick raised his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

She raised her neat grey eyebrows as she spread her toast with marmalade. “I have been informed that the Duchess has left the house already. She has gone to be with her sister. I can only assume that means you did something to upset her.”

Frederick felt something sink inside him. He had hoped for the chance to apologize to his wife this morning. Not that he had any intention of changing his mind about the nature of their marriage—no, it was for the best that he and Veronica kept as far away from each other as possible.

Nonetheless, he was annoyed at his grandmother’s insinuation that Veronica’s leaving had been his fault.

Never mind that it is an entirely accurate guess.

“Why do you assume I did something to upset her?” he asked tautly. “Perhaps she just wished to spend time with her sister.”

The Dowager Duchess snorted. “Because I’m no fool, Frederick. And I know you.” Her tone softened. “What happened?”

Frederick stared into his teacup, not bringing it to his lips.

What did happen?

The truth was, he had been afraid. When he and Veronica had been dealing with their drunken grandmothers, and had ended up in fits of laughter, Frederick had felt lighter than he had in years. So close to happy that it had terrified him. And that bright smile of Veronica’s... It was a smile that reminded him of one he had seen before, many years ago. A smile he had brought to the face of a young girl who had been hurting. Frederick did not remember her name, nor the circumstances of their meeting. But he had never forgotten that smile.

“It’s as bright as the sun,” he remembered telling her—and that had only made her beam brighter.

At the sight of such warmth, on his own wife’s face, Frederick had felt his insides beginning to thaw. And when he had seen the joy on her face at the sight of her studio, he had been moments away from pulling her into his arms and whisking her off to his bedchamber to consummate their marriage.

But that could never be. Opening his damaged heart was far too dangerous. Because if it was dealt another blow, he was not sure he would survive it.

To his grandmother, he said, “I did not want a wife. And you thrust one upon me anyway. What did you imagine might happen? That I would suddenly change into a warm and affectionate man?”

His grandmother gave him a knowing smile that managed to infuriate him. She took another bite of her toast and chewed neatly. “That would not be a sudden change, my dear. Because I know full well that that is who you are deep inside.” She reached across the table and covered his wrist with her soft, wrinkled hand. “I know this is difficult for you, Frederick. But it is not easy for your wife either. Do not make it any harder for her than it needs to be.”

He closed his eyes. He knew his grandmother was right. As far as Veronica was concerned, he needed to do better. True, theirs would never be a real marriage. And she would never have the loving husband she longed for. But he could at least be civil. Perhaps even kind. He nodded acceptingly. “I shall try.”



After breakfast, Frederick made a hasty escape to his study. On his way, he collected a pile of old books he had put aside in the library, to be donated to the orphan’s school. He placed the stack of books on his desk and looked down at the silver tray containing the morning mail. He took the first letter from the pile with interest. It was from his family’s lawyer. After he himself had had no luck in finding an appropriate venue for the gallery, Frederick had asked the man to keep an eye and

ear out for any suitable premises. He tore the letter open impatiently. As he began to read, he felt his heart quicken slightly.

Your Grace,

You will be pleased to hear I have found a venue I believe will be most suitable for your project. It is a disused townhouse in Covent Garden, close to the theatres, and thus in the heart of the city's artistic district.

Frederick found himself smiling. Hosting the gallery in an old house had been his idea; it would give the project a unique and homely feel. But so far, he had been unable to find anything suitable. Each property he visited was either too big, or too small, or in an unsuitable location. But a townhouse in Covent Garden sounded perfect. He tossed down the letter and rang for his valet to prepare the coach, ignoring the rest of the mail.



The house was perfect. Intimate, yet with enough rooms to present a variety of different collections. Close to the city center in a bustling and artistic area. It was everything his mother would have wanted. Frederick turned in a slow circle, imagining the walls hung with paintings: both his mother's work and new artists' as well.

This gallery would launch the careers of London's talented new painters. He would provide opportunities for those talented artists who were otherwise unable to get a start in the industry. Artists like his mother, who had struggled under the weight of societal expectations.

Artists like my wife.

The thought caught him off guard. For the first time since they had met, Veronica had been momentarily at the back of his thoughts, but now she had returned to the forefront of his mind with a vengeance. What would she think of this space? Of his plans for the gallery? He found himself wanting to share his idea with her. His excitement over the discovery of the house.

The realization was an uncomfortable one. What was it his grandmother had said? "*Perhaps this work will be made even more meaningful if you have a wife to share it with.*" Heaven and hell, he did not want her to be right. That made things endlessly more complicated.

He was not supposed to want to *share* things with his wife. They were supposed to keep their own lives to themselves and live out their marriage in name only. Just last night, he had used those very same words. But now, the thought of such an arrangement left Frederick feeling cold. Hollow. He shook the thought away.

"My lawyer will be in touch shortly," he told the owner of the house, holding out a hand for the man to shake. "I look forward to doing business with you."

The man nodded. "Thank you, Your Grace. I'm glad the place was to your liking."

With a spring in his step—hampered only slightly by his uncomfortable realization about his need to share things with his wife—Frederick strode back to the carriage. "Take me to the school in Lambeth," he told the coachman. He nodded

towards the box of books he had collected from the library at Brownwood Manor. "I would like to deliver these to the school."



Turning down his footman's offer of assistance, Frederick made his way into the school with his arms full of books. There was little furniture in the place as yet, so he made his way to the small teachers' room at the back of the school and stacked them on the table. Then he pushed open the door to one of the classrooms, keen to inspect the progress.

Frederick stopped in his stride. Since last he had been here, a beautiful mural had begun to be painted on the side wall, flowers of all colors stretching from floor to ceiling. He let out his breath. Found himself taking a step closer to examine the painting. He could smell fresh oil paint; could tell the work had only recently been done.

He stood close to examine the fine brushstrokes. The flowers were larger than life, but impeccably detailed, with fine shadowing on the petals and delicate lines depicting the stems and stamens. The work was familiar, he realized, but he could not quite place it. Where had he seen such fine work before?

He took a few steps back, observing the mural from afar. With a sudden jolt, Frederick realized where he had seen this style before. Realized where he recognized these brushstrokes from. He brought a hand to his mouth.

"Your Grace?" He turned at the sound of the familiar voice. And when he turned, he could barely claim to be surprised.

Chapter Thirteen



Veronica took a step towards him. “What are you doing here?” she asked. Her voice was tiny, as though she were afraid he would fly into a rage or speak to her so heartlessly again. Frederick felt a violent pang of regret.

He swallowed. “I could ask the same of you.”

Veronica glanced downward. “My sister’s husband, the Duke of Larsen, is one of the investors in the school. He had the idea of painting the mural and Gemma suggested I do it...” She dared to look up at him. “You are also funding the school?”

He nodded. “I am. Yes. I...” He cleared his throat, unable to make sense of the thundering of his heart. “I did not realize your brother-in-law was also involved in the project. I know little of the other investors.”

Veronica nodded wordlessly.

Frederick found himself taking a step toward her. Up close, he could see her fingertips were stained in color, and there was a large streak of blue paint across one cheek. He fought the urge to reach out and touch it. “You painted the mural,” he said.

Veronica nodded. “Yes.”

“It’s beautiful.”

A tiny smile lit up her face. “It is not finished yet, as you can see. But I hope it will bring the children some joy.”

“I am sure it will,” said Frederick. “You are very talented.” For several moments, neither of them spoke. A carriage rattled noisily past the window, chased by a barking dog.

Footsteps sounded towards them. “Veronica, I—” His wife’s sister appeared in the doorway, then stopped abruptly at the sight of him. “Oh. Your Grace. I apologize. I did not realize...” She frowned. “Why are you here?”

Frederick cleared his throat. “It seems your husband and I are funding the same project, Your Grace.”

“I see.” The Duchess looked at him with slightly narrowed eyes, and Frederick wondered what Veronica had told her sister. Probably everything. That was what sisters did, wasn’t it? No doubt the Duchess of Larsen knew of every cold word he had spouted. Frederick knew he deserved the cold eyes his new sister-in-law was spearing him with.

“I hope you have not come here to upset your new wife again,” she snapped. “Because if you are, I—”

“Gemma.” Veronica’s cheeks flushed. “It’s all right,” she murmured. “There’s no need to make him rue the day he was born.”

A pointed look passed between the sisters. The Duchess of Larsen fell silent, but she kept her critical eyes glued to Frederick. He turned back to Veronica. “Have you finished your work for the day?” he asked.

She nodded. “I have.”

“Come back to Brownwood Manor with me. Please.”

Veronica hesitated. She glanced at her sister, then back to him.

“If you wish to stay here with me, Veronica, I can have you taken back to Brownwood Manor later,” the Duchess of Larsen said pointedly.

Frederick took a step towards his wife. “Please come home,” he said, his voice low. He needed to apologize, yes. But there was more he wished to speak with his wife about. Ideas that were forming, with increasing speed and clarity. Things he needed to speak about before he changed his mind. “I’ve something I would like to discuss with you. It is very important.”

Veronica drew in a breath. “All right,” she agreed.

“Are you certain?” asked her sister.

Veronica nodded. She made her way towards her and they exchanged murmured words that Frederick could not understand. Then the sisters held each other for a long second. “You can always come to me if you need anything,” he heard Veronica’s sister say. She looked over at Frederick and nodded curtly. “Your Grace.” Then she disappeared out of the room.

Frederick looked back at Veronica and gave her a half-smile. “Your sister is certainly not my biggest fan.”

Veronica looked out the open door to where the Duchess had disappeared. “She can be a little overprotective, that’s all.”

Frederick nodded. He knew well he deserved whatever coldness the Duchess of Larsen deigned to give him, after the way he had treated her sister yesterday. Hesitantly, he offered her his arm. “Shall we go? There is much I wish to speak to you about.”

Veronica took one last look at the mural, then nodded, pressing light fingers against his arm and walking with him out of the school.



“Well?” said Veronica, once the carriage was rattling back toward Brownwood Manor. “What is it you wished to speak about?” She kept her voice expressionless, in an attempt to keep her emotions at bay. The last thing she had expected was for her husband to appear at the orphans’ school. He had mentioned in passing the new charity project he was funding, but she had not for a moment considered it might be the same school her brother-in-law was involved in.

The knowledge was unsettling. The painting of the mural was supposed to be her escape. A part of her life that did not involve her callous husband. But she couldn't deny there was something softer in his eyes today. Something that reminded her of the kind man she had spoken with in the garden in Cambridge; not the rude and heartless bastard he had been last night.

The Duke shuffled on the bench seat and folded his hands in his lap. "First of all," he said stiltedly, "I wish to apologize for the way I spoke to you last night." He looked at her squarely. "You did not deserve to be treated in such a way. Rest assured that in future, I will do better."

Veronica did not speak for a moment. In his apology, there was no mention of his words having been a mistake. Perhaps in future, he would treat her with more kindness, but that did not change the fact that she would never know the love of a husband or child. Nonetheless, she knew it was not her place to argue or to question any of this. If a marriage in name only was what the Duke wanted, that was what they would have.

She nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate the apology."

He cleared his throat. "Secondly, I have something of a proposition for you."

She raised her eyebrows. "A proposition?"

"Yes. In addition to the school for orphans, I also plan to open a gallery. It was my mother's greatest dream, and I plan to open it to honor her memory. The gallery would showcase some of her work, but also pieces by up-and-coming artists,

particularly those who would otherwise struggle to make a name for themselves.”

Veronica felt a hint of a smile on her lips. That sudden shine in her husband’s eyes, she had seen that the day they had been locked in the library at his country house. Had seen it when he had spoken so passionately about his art... right before he had pulled her into his arms and kissed her like it would save him from drowning. She shook her head to try and clear her thoughts. Now was not the time to focus on such memories.

“The gallery sounds wonderful,” she said.

“I hope it will be. This morning I had the good fortune of finding the perfect venue. A former townhouse in Covent Garden.”

Veronica found herself shuffling to the edge of the bench seat, leaning forward with interest. “A townhouse. How interesting.”

“Yes. I hoped the unique venue would provide additional interest.”

She nodded. “And perhaps such a homely environment will also encourage discussion among visitors. As if they were speaking about art in a salon in their homes, or over cups of tea in their parlor. Debating which pieces they liked the most, and what they believed the meaning behind each work to be.” She could feel a shine in her eyes. “You could even furnish one room with armchairs, for that very purpose. A ‘discussion room’, as it were.”

A smile flickered on the Duke's lips. "Indeed. That's a fine idea."

"When do you plan to open?" Veronica asked.

"I should like to open in the autumn," he said. "Four months ought to give me the time I need." He paused. "Or rather, the time *we* need?"

Veronica raised her eyebrows. "Your Grace?"

He caught her gaze. "I was rather hoping you might help me." His words sounded almost shy.

"Help you?" Veronica repeated. "With what?"

"Well. You are clearly a very talented artist. If I did not know that after my grandmother's painting competition, I certainly do now after seeing that mural you painted at the school."

Veronica's cheeks flushed.

"I could use a second learned opinion when it comes to choosing the pieces for the gallery. And for collating collections and the like." He offered her a pale smile. "I know I did not get our marriage off to the best start," he said, "but I do hope you will give me a chance to make it up to you." He shook his head faintly, as though annoyed at himself. "Not that I am asking you to do this merely to make things up to you." He looked at her squarely. "I would very much like your input on this project, madam. If you see fit to offer it."

Veronica found herself smiling. Felt a fresh excitement beginning to bubble up inside her. One that went some way to dulling the pain the Duke had inflicted on her the previous night. “On one condition,” she said daringly.

He raised his fair eyebrows. “What is that?”

“That you also exhibit some of my work.”

The Duke gave her a broad smile that lit up his eyes and made him look suddenly boyish and young. “It would be my honor.”

“Then I would be most happy to—” The coach jolted forward and the Duke reached out a hand to stop Veronica from falling. He kept his firm grip on her wrist as he eased her back to the cushioned bench opposite him. Goosebumps flooded up her arm and she did her best to ignore them. She cleared her throat. “I would be most happy to assist you,” she finished.

“I am glad to hear it.” The Duke gave her wrist an almost imperceptible squeeze, then withdrew his hand and turned to look out the window. Veronica felt a smile on her lips as the coach trundled back towards Brownwood Manor. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined she might ever have the chance to exhibit her own work in a gallery. In Covent Garden of all places! Perhaps she would never be a mother or a beloved wife. But now she actually had the chance to become a renowned artist—and that was something to be more than a little grateful for.

Perhaps Gemma is right. Perhaps life does have a way of surprising us after all.



“Shall we begin?” the Duke asked, the moment they stepped through the front door of Brownwood Manor. He shook his head. “Forgive me. I am sure you wish to rest a while, have something to eat—”

“I have no need to rest,” Veronica cut in. “And we can eat later. Let’s begin.”

He grinned at her enthusiasm. “This way.” He led her past the staircase and toward the back of the manor. He pushed open a door beside the library. It opened into a narrow room, filled with the smell of paint. A half-finished portrait sat on the easel, depicting a beautiful fair-haired woman Veronica guessed was the Duke’s mother. She stepped inside curiously.

The Duke’s studio was much smaller than her own, with a view out onto a small stone courtyard, far less inspiring than the garden vista through her own studio window.

“Oh,” said Veronica, “your studio... Do you not wish for something... bigger?” she managed. “If you would like to use the workroom you gave me, of course you—”

“This room is all I need,” he said. “I’ve no need for anything bigger.” He rolled up his shirtsleeves, as though readying himself for work. “I have always used this room as my studio,” he told her. “You did not steal the room upstairs from me if that is what you think. I chose that room for you because of the view of the garden.” His voice was oddly expressionless, as though he was deliberately keeping his emotions at bay.

He retrieved several canvases that were leaning up against the side of the shelf. "I like the small room," he said. "It allows me to escape the rest of the world much more effectively. Lose myself in my paintings, as it were."

Veronica gave him a smile she knew did not reach her eyes. The thought of her husband holing himself up in here in a desperate need to escape the world made her chest ache. At least he had his paintings, she told herself. But paintings on their own were not enough to make a man happy.

She nodded towards the canvas on the easel. "Is this your mother?" she asked.

"Yes. I do not plan to exhibit much of my own work at the gallery. But I would like a picture of my mother on display, given that the place will be opened in her honor."

"You are painting her image from memory?" asked Veronica curiously.

"I am." He turned to look at his own painting, frowning slightly, as though examining it with a freshly critical eye. "Perhaps it will not be entirely physically accurate. But this way I can better capture her essence. Her spirit, as it were." Before Veronica could respond, he lined the canvases he was carrying up against the wall. "These are sample pieces from the artists I have been speaking with. I would like your opinion on which of these painters I ought to commission works from for the gallery. I have spent so long looking at them that they are ceasing to make sense to me. I can no longer tell what's good and what's bad."

“They are all good,” Veronica said. “But I’m sure you know that. If you didn’t you would not even be considering them.” She paced slowly across the room, examining each of the paintings. The works were a fascinating mix of styles and subjects, ranging from simple still lifes to family portraits and elaborate depictions of the night sky. “Each of these artists deserves to be exhibited,” she said. “But perhaps our first job is to select the artists whose work will best complement each other for the opening of the gallery. Those we do not choose, we can commission at a later date, for another exhibition.” Veronica could hear the sudden confidence in her voice—and it managed to surprise her. It was the first time, she realized, that she had ever felt completely comfortable in her husband’s presence.

The Duke gave her a half smile. “I agree.” He pointed to two of the paintings: the skyscape, and a painting depicting a young girl standing beneath vast storm clouds. “These are my favorites. I love the use of color here. And the choice of the night sky as a subject matter is very interesting. It has echoes of Lorrain, wouldn’t you say?”

Veronica nodded.

“I would very much like to see what else these artists can produce,” the Duke continued. “I suggest we choose three or four more whose work will best complement them.”

Veronica walked slowly back and forth across the room, examining the paintings. After some time, she had narrowed her selection down to her four favorites. “What do you think?” she asked.

The Duke nodded slowly. “I trust your judgment. I shall write to these artists tonight. Let them know we wish to commission new pieces for the grand opening.”

“We?” Veronica repeated, suddenly shy again. “You will tell them I am involved?”

“Of course.” He sounded surprised at the question.

Veronica smiled. “Thank you, Your Grace. That means a lot.” She held his gaze for a brief second—the moment interrupted when her stomach grumbled loudly. Her cheeks flushed scarlet. “Pardon me. Perhaps missing lunch was not the best idea.”

He chuckled. “I shall have some food brought up to you. Would you like it brought to your studio?”

Veronica felt something sink inside her. Her blindly optimistic side had hoped they might eat together in the dining room and continue to discuss their plans for the gallery. But it seemed there were limits to how much of her company her husband could endure. She forced a smile. “Yes, thank you. My studio will be just fine.” If nothing else, it would give her the chance to think about the pieces she would create for the gallery.

The Duke nodded and turned to leave. “Your Grace,” Veronica blurted, “there is something I need to ask.” At her words, she saw a look of hardness fall across her husband’s face, as though he was steeling himself against whatever was about to come out of her mouth. He raised his eyebrows expectantly. Veronica knew there was every chance her question would lead the Duke to close down and turn on her, as he had done

when she had asked if they were to share a bed. But she needed an answer. Needed to know a little of what was going on inside his head. Needed to understand.

She drew in a deep breath. “At your grandmother’s party,” she began carefully, “you had no qualms about kissing me. On more than one occasion.” Speaking the words made her cheeks hot, but she pushed on determinedly. “I was under the impression that you...” *desired me*. The statement felt too bold, and she could not bring herself to say it. “...found me somewhat appealing,” she managed. “And yet you wish for us to be husband and wife in no more than name.” She looked up at him, her heart knocking hard. “I am sorry to press the issue. But I feel I deserve an explanation.”

She held her breath, waiting for her husband to fly into a rage. But he just dropped his head and sighed. “Yes,” he said finally. “Of course you do.” He sank into the armchair in the corner of the room and rubbed his shaven jaw.

Veronica perched on the edge of the rickety chair beside the easel, waiting patiently for him to speak.

“I do find you appealing,” he said. “Very much so. I know there is no point in denying that. To you or to myself. But I...” He hesitated, as though choosing his words carefully. “I regret that I allowed myself to act upon those feelings in Cambridge. I did so thoughtlessly. And I would not have done so had I known you were to become my wife.”

“Why not?”

He sighed heavily. "Because I can never offer you more than physical attention," he said. "I am not..." He frowned in hesitation. "I am not a kind man."

"That is not true," said Veronica gently. "You have plenty of kindness inside you. I have seen that side of you on more than one occasion. You hide it well, but I know it is there." She smiled. "No man would have given his wife such a magnificent studio if he did not have kindness inside him."

He did not speak at once, just fixed his gaze on the row of paintings. His gray eyes were glazed, over as though he was looking beyond the canvases. "Please trust me on this," he said. "It is better this way. The last thing I want to do is hurt you. And I fear that if I allow myself to grow close to you, that is what I will end up doing." He sighed. "I'm sorry. I know this was not the life you wished for. I know I'm not the kind of husband you wished for. But I am afraid this is all I can offer."

Veronica nodded wordlessly. It was not the answer she had hoped for, that was true, but it was an answer, nonetheless. "Thank you, Your Grace," she murmured. "I appreciate your honesty."

He looked up to meet her eyes. His hands were tightly clasped in his lap, almost as though he were trying to prevent himself from reaching for her. "Frederick," he said. "I may be your husband in name only, but surely we have no need for such formality."

Veronica nodded.

“And I hope we can continue to work together on the gallery, and create something we can both be proud of.”

Veronica stood and smoothed her skirts. “I would like that very much,” she said, doing her best to ignore the voice inside her head that whispered that such a thing would never be enough.

Chapter Fourteen



Frederick rinsed his paintbrush in solvent and sank wearily into the armchair. He had been tucked away in his studio for hours, and he had barely anything to show for it. In truth, he had spent far more time staring out the window into the dark courtyard, than he had working on the portrait of his mother.

His head was full of Veronica, his mind a tangle of conflicting thoughts.

He had told her on more than one occasion that theirs would never be a marriage in more than name. And each time he had spoken those words, he had meant them wholeheartedly.

So why can I think of nothing beyond how it would feel to hold her in my arms?

It had been three days since he had invited her to work with him on the gallery. He and Veronica had begun taking their meals together—much to the relief of his grandmother—and their discussions about the gallery left him filled with inspiration.

Frederick had already heard back from several of the artists he had contacted, expressing their gratitude and excitement at the commissions he was offering. He knew he ought to feel excited. But he felt restless. On edge.

Perhaps I have lost the ability to feel excited. Perhaps that part of me died along with my mother.

The moment the thought came to him, he dismissed it as rubbish. What point was there in lying to himself? He knew exactly what was causing his restlessness, and it was nothing to do with an inability to feel excited. It was the thought of his beautiful wife upstairs, and his blinding need to kiss her again. To feel her.

He closed his eyes, imagining the feel of her soft curves beneath his hands. He would let himself explore her body, draw sensations from her she had never experienced before. Make her murmur in pleasure as she had done in the library at the country house—a sound that had stayed with him since the moment she had uttered it.

No. You are stronger than this.

Frederick had meant every word he'd said about the nature of their marriage. Allowing himself to fall for Veronica would only lead to him hurting her. Because while he could certainly feel desire for his wife, he knew he did not have the strength to love her. He could never allow himself to get so close to another person. Doing so would destroy him. It would destroy both of them.

Rising from the armchair, Frederick took the lamp from the mantel and carried it to the door. There was little point staring blankly at the canvas for any longer tonight. Inspiration was a fickle thing, and it was painfully obvious it was not going to show itself tonight. He pulled the door to his studio closed behind him and made his way quietly up the stairs.

When he reached the top of the staircase, he saw a soft bloom of light glowing beneath the door of Veronica's studio. No doubt his wife was squirreled away with her own paints and canvas, working on the pieces that would hang on the wall of the gallery.

Frederick hovered at the top of the staircase, caught in indecision. Half of him screamed to go and knock on her door. The other half firmly forbade it.

No. I can't.

He was the one who had insisted on them keeping their distance from one another. The one who had insisted they were husband and wife in name only.

But he had also been the one that had invited Veronica to work with him. And if she was hard at work in her studio, developing her paintings for the gallery, then surely this little visit could be classified as a business endeavor.

Frederick shook his head at himself.

Such foolish excuses! Who was he kidding?

He turned toward his own bedchamber, cursing himself inwardly. His empty, silent bedchamber, where he spent so many hours alone, bemoaning the state of the world. Right now, it felt like the last place on earth he wished to go. He stopped walking, caught in hesitation.

And then he turned and strode back down the passage toward Veronica's studio before he could change his mind.



The faint knock at the door caught Veronica by surprise. It was long past midnight; she had assumed the rest of the household was asleep. She stood up from the table in the corner of the room, her pencil still in hand.

“Come in,” she called tentatively. The door opened, and there stood her husband. He was still dressed in his dark breeches and simple blue waistcoat, though his shirtsleeves were rolled to his elbows and his shirt was open at the neck, revealing pale curls of hair. Veronica could see tiny splatters of paint on his hands—which right now were clasped at his sides in fists, as though he were angry at himself for finding himself in her doorway.

“Frederick,” she said.

His eyes lingered on her for a moment, and Veronica was suddenly, painfully aware of her state of undress. Inspiration had struck after Sarah had helped prepare her for bed, and she had hurried to the studio in her nightgown, with nothing more than a tatty blue shawl tossed over her shoulders. Her feet were bare, her dark hair hanging in a long plait down her back.

“May I come in?” asked her husband. His voice sounded husky, uncertain.

Veronica nodded. Instinctively, she tugged her shawl tighter around her shoulders.

He is your husband, a voice in the back of her mind whispered to her. *There is nothing scandalous about him seeing you in such a state.*

But that knowledge did nothing to lessen the thumping of her heart.

“Forgive the intrusion,” he said stiffly. “I saw the light beneath the door.”

Veronica gave him a faint smile. “It is quite all right. You have been working too?”

“Yes.” His clasped his hands, then released them again and folded them across his chest. “I always do my best work late at night.”

“As do I,” said Veronica. “There is something about the quietness after midnight that I find very inspiring.”

“Indeed.” Frederick took several tentative paces towards the table. He glanced down at her sketchbook. “Are you working on your pieces for the gallery?”

Veronica nodded. “Yes.”

“May I see?”

“Of course.”

Frederick closed the distance between them and peered over her shoulder at the sketches she had been making. She could smell his rosewater scent, mixed with the faint hint of oil paints and a musky, masculine aroma. His nearness made something inexplicable coil inside her belly. His shoulder brushed against hers, and she felt her nipples harden beneath her thin nightgown. She tugged her shawl tighter around her shoulders to cover herself.

Frederick tapped a long, paint-speckled finger against the page. “This tree. I recognize it from our country house in Cambridge.”

Veronica smiled. “Yes. I did a lot of sketching while I was there. At least, as much as I could between, well... other events.” She felt her cheeks color, but her husband gave her a faint, knowing smile. “The garden at the country house is so wild and beautiful, it seemed like a fitting subject for my collection for the gallery,” she told him. “I have been considering how best to combine the sketches I made into larger images.”

Frederick nodded, his eyes dark and serious. “That is a wonderful idea. My mother loved the garden, just as you do. And I am sure your depiction of the place will do it justice.” He nodded toward the pencil she had discarded on the table. “May I watch you work?”

Veronica's heart skipped a beat. It was a rare occasion that she allowed people to watch her while she was drawing or painting. Usually, she felt almost painfully self-conscious when she worked, as though the onlookers were criticizing every brushstroke or pencil line. The logical part of her mind knew this was foolishness, of course, but it was difficult to silence the self-deprecating thoughts. But the day of the Dowager Duchess's painting competition, she had allowed Frederick to watch her paint, and she had to admit there had been something immensely calming about it. Something steadying, as though she was sharing her passion with someone who truly understood it. Someone who was not criticizing or judging her work, but rather appreciating it on a deeper level, just as she did.

Tonight felt different.

Tonight, it was long past midnight, and the dark passages of the manor were still and silent around them. Tonight, she was dressed in nothing but her nightclothes, with her senses beginning to awaken to him. Tonight, he was her husband.

And her body was already aching for his.

But nothing would ever happen between them, she reminded herself.

A wife in name only.

Frederick had made that perfectly clear. Besides, he was her husband, the Duke. The man who had given her the chance to display her work in an art gallery—an opportunity of a

lifetime. If he wished to watch her work, who was she to protest?

She swallowed heavily. “Of course.” She picked up her pencil and sketchbook, and remained standing as she began to draw. She often sketched standing up when she was jittery with inspiration—or jittery with inexplicable nerves, as she was now. Her pencil darted across the page like lightning, fired by the bundle of nervousness inside her.

She could not bring herself to look at Frederick, who was leaning against the table, but she could feel his closeness; could feel the warmth of his body. His silent presence seemed to suck all the air from the room. He watched silently as she filled the page with soft gray lines. The pencil scratched noisily across the page, Veronica’s heart beating so loudly in her ears she was sure her husband could hear it.

When his hand came to rest of the back of her neck, Veronica heard herself gasp softly. She turned toward her husband, her eyes meeting his in question.

“Keep drawing,” he said huskily. His fingers moved almost imperceptibly, pushing her plait aside and tracing light circles over the warm skin on her neck.

Obediently, Veronica kept her pencil moving. She outlined the leaves of the enormous oak tree, each line becoming more careless and abandoned. Nothing she created from tonight from here on in would be useable—of that she was certain. But she kept drawing anyway.

Frederick's finger traced a slow line around the collar of her nightgown, from the back of her neck, across her collarbone, pausing just inches above her breasts.

Veronica felt her back arch, heat beginning to pulse between her legs. She felt herself pressing her body backward, seeking her husband's. He remained steady and unmoving, allowing her to push herself against him. She turned her head almost on instinct, craving his kiss. He could sense her desperation for him, surely. But Veronica did not care. There was barely any room in her head for anything other than the desire he was stoking inside her. And there was certainly no room for drawing.

Frederick turned his head away, out of her reach. He stood behind her, letting one broad hand slide down to press against her hip bone. Veronica heard herself murmur. Felt wetness beginning to gather between her thighs. She closed her eyes, drinking in the unfamiliar sensation, hearing her breath quicken and grow louder.

"Keep working," Frederick whispered, his lips close to her ear. His breath against her skin sent a violent pulse of desire through her entire body.

Veronica continued to drag the pencil mindlessly across the page. She had little thought of what she was even drawing now; all she could focus on was the way her husband was making her feel. That heat building in her belly. That blaze between her legs.

Somewhere distant, she knew they were breaking their own rules. *A wife in name only*. But Veronica could not bring herself to think too deeply on it right now.

Frederick's hand snaked beneath her arm and found the swell of her breast. He traced light circles around her peaked nipple, drawing more faint murmurs from her lips. When he pinched gently, through the thin fabric of her nightgown, Veronica heard herself cry out. She gripped her sketchbook hard to avoid dropping it.

She turned her head again, desperate for Frederick's lips, but again he again shifted away, preventing her access. He pulled her firmly against his body, and Veronica could feel his hardness straining against her backside.

The feel of it made her gasp. *Am I really doing that to him?*

He had told her he desired her, yes, but feeling such visceral proof of it was dizzying. Her legs wavered beneath her and she felt herself leaning back against him to prevent herself from falling.

Frederick reached down and gathered her nightgown in his fist, then slid one hand beneath the flimsy white fabric. His warm hand traced a slow path up the inside of her knee and up her inner thigh. Veronica closed her eyes, moaning softly.

"Please," she heard herself whisper. She was not even certain what it was she was begging for. She only knew she was desperate for her husband's touch. Needed it in ways she was only just beginning to make sense of.

Impossibly slowly, his hand slid higher. The moment he found the slickness between her legs, Veronica cried out, her pencil and sketchbook falling to the floor. She felt herself pushing her

hips back against his body, craving more friction, her palms pressing against the table to keep herself from falling.

Frederick moved a finger in slow circles, drawing sensations from Veronica that she could barely fathom. She heard herself crying out; could hear her moans getting louder but felt powerless to control them. She felt the pressure building up in a way that was simultaneously blissful and almost painful in its intensity. Felt herself careening towards something she could not quite make out.

All at once, pleasure erupted within her, and a loud cry escaped her lips. Her legs gave way beneath her as the dizzying sensations flooded her body, and she felt Frederick's arm wrapping around her waist, holding her to him as she sank into the sensations.

Veronica closed her eyes, feeling her breath coming hard and fast. When her legs felt strong enough to support her again, she turned around to face her husband.

"Frederick," she breathed. "That was..." She had no thought of how to finish the sentence. No thought of how to put into words what she had just experienced. She reached for her husband, but he took a step backward, holding her hand in his for a moment, before letting it fall. Though she could still his arousal straining against his breeches, a closed-off expression had fallen over his face.

He cleared his throat, toying edgily with the buttons on his waistcoat. "I..." he began. Veronica held her breath. Surely he was not about to apologize for the way he had just made her feel? He swallowed visibly. "I wish you a pleasant evening," he managed. And before Veronica could make sense of it, he was gone.

Chapter Fifteen



Despite her late night in the studio, Veronica was awake early the next morning. In truth, she had slept little, her mind constantly replaying the events of the previous night, and her body still humming from the pleasure her husband had awoken in her.

After Frederick had left her studio, Veronica had sat back at her table and tried to return to work, but had been completely unable to do so. All she could think about was the feeling of her husband's body pressed against hers, and those dizzying, blissful sensations he had drawn from her body.

All she could think about was how much she wanted to do it all again.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew how unlikely that was to happen. It had clearly been a moment of weakness on her husband's part, wrought by candlelight, and the late hour, and the sight of her engaged in the same passion for art that he shared. The fact that he had refused to kiss her left no doubt in Veronica's mind that it had not been a moment of marital intimacy they had shared, but rather a mistake that would not be repeated.

Bleary-eyed, she made her way toward the breakfast room, a faint flicker of nerves in her stomach. There was a part of her that was nervous about seeing her husband this morning. While last night had been impossibly blissful on her part, it was clear that Frederick had regretted his weakness.

When she stepped into the breakfast room, Veronica's heart skipped a beat at the sight of her husband alone at the table. He was sitting at the head of the table with a sketch book and pencil in front of him, drawing with one hand while eating a piece of toast with the other. He looked up at the sight of her and closed the sketchbook hurriedly.

"Good morning," he said. He too looked bleary-eyed, as though he had not managed much sleep either after their elicit encounter.

Elicit? How foolish. It had felt that way, yes. But Frederick was her husband. They had been husband and wife for four days now. In any normal union, they would have consummated the marriage long ago. In a very non-elicited manner.

The footman pulled out Veronica's chair and she took a seat at Frederick's left. "Good morning."

"Did you sleep well?" he asked stiltedly. He looked down at his plate, looked at the closed sketchbook. Looked everywhere other than in her eyes.

"Not particularly," she said, hoping vainly to nudge him into speaking of what had happened between them.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Frederick emptied his teacup and gestured to the footman to refill it. He took a long sip, not speaking further.

So it is going to be like this, is it? We are not even going to mention what passed between us last night?

Veronica supposed she could not be surprised that Frederick was doing his best to pretend it had never happened. After all, he had been the one to set the rules. And he had been the one to break them.

And even last night, he had been impossibly guarded; deliberate in refusing to kiss her, as though it might somehow draw them closer together. She shook her head slightly. Last night had been a mistake, that much was clear. A mistake on his part, yes, but a mistake on hers too. She ought to have kept her distance. Because she knew allowing herself to get close to her husband would only end up causing her pain. Somewhere, deep inside her, Veronica knew she had the ability to develop feelings for Frederick Barnes. And she knew all too well that they were feelings that would never be reciprocated. If he was going to keep his heart guarded, then she would have to do the same. As far as Veronica was concerned, the only thing worse than not loving her husband was for her love for him to be unrequited.

She nodded toward the sketchbook. “What are you working on?”

“Nothing of any importance,” he said shortly, biting into his toast.

Veronica gritted her teeth. Refusing to talk about their dalliance last night was one thing; refusing to talk to her about anything at all was quite another. Were they not supposed to be partners in this venture? Still, she was beginning to recognize that probing Frederick for answers was the best way to get him to close down completely.

“I would like to go to the school today,” she said. “I would like to continue work on the mural.”

Frederick nodded. “As you wish. I will have the coach prepared for you. I am afraid I have other tasks to attend to today, and will not be able to accompany you.”

Veronica smiled wryly. *Of course, you do.* But she just smiled thinly and said, “Thank you.”

When the door opened to reveal the Dowager Duchess, Veronica had never been more glad for her company.



Frederick knew he had escaped the breakfast table just a little too quickly. A big part of him had been hoping Veronica would be exhausted from her late night and would sleep through breakfast—and lunch too, if he was lucky.

But it seemed he was to have no such good fortune.

Last night had been a mistake. A sizeable one.

And yet it had been a mistake he had known he was going to make, from the moment he had started walking towards her studio. The sight of her in her nightgown, with her alluring curves on display, had made that mistake a certainty.

When he had initially asked to stay in her studio, it had been with the intention of merely watching her draw. A very naïve intention—yes, he had known that at the time, and he certainly knew it now. But there was something impossibly calming about watching Veronica work. Something that made the chaotic thoughts inside his head dissipate. He had discovered that on the day of his grandmother's painting competition at the Brownwood country house.

But last night, the sight of her working in her nightgown had been anything but calming.

Instead of watching her pencil move across the page, he had found himself watching the way her nightgown clung to her hips as she paced across the room. Watching the rapid rise and fall of her chest, revealing both her nerves and desire. At that moment, the fact that he had found a wife who shared a passion as he did had been too much to resist.

When he had rushed back to his bedchamber in the aftermath of his... error, Frederick had been so aroused he could barely breathe, his imagination running wild with thoughts of his wife's body moving beneath his own.

How close I was last night to breaking my every intention and taking Veronica to bed.

He was glad she was going to the school today. Glad she would be out of the house. He had correspondence from his tenants to attend to and would be holed up in his study for most of the day—work that would be nearly impossible with the knowledge that Veronica was floating around the house, tempting him with her mere presence.

On the way to his study, he made a quick detour to his bedchamber, splashing his face with cold water from the washstand and trying to shake his thoughts free of his wife.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?” asked his valet as he appeared in the doorway, watching his master’s odd behavior with a slightly bewildered expression.

“Fine.” Frederick reached for the cloth beside the basin and dried his face. “Have a strong pot of tea brought to my study.” Upon further consideration, he added, “And a glass of brandy.” It was far too early for the stuff, of course, and Frederick knew the request would raise eyebrows. But he knew his staff had better sense than to ask questions.



Carla’s eyes lingered on the door to the breakfast room her grandson had disappeared through with the urgency of a raging bull. She shook her head in frustration and turned back to Veronica. “He can be an odd lad at times. I do apologize.”

Veronica sipped her tea, keeping her eyes down. “It is quite all right.” There was a knowing look on her face; one that told Carla that the Duchess was entirely aware of why her new husband was behaving in such a strange manner this morning.

How interesting. Carla found herself peering at Veronica, trying to see behind her eyes. Much to her frustration, she had little thought of how things were progressing between the newlyweds when it came to... well, the process of securing an heir. After all, she certainly could not ask her grandson about it. Such a delicate question coming from his grandmother would cause him to clam up for days.

Before the wedding, Frederick had harped on and on to her about how Veronica Caster would be his wife in name only and blah, blah, blah... Carla had just nodded along, letting her grandson get his rant out of his system.

Frederick could blather away all he wanted, but he was human after all. And Veronica was a beauty. A gentle, understated beauty, with her long dark hair and soft curves, but a beauty, nonetheless. Carla knew there had been sparks between them in Cambridge. Was that not why she had Pippa had so carefully engineered their marriage in the first place? She would not have done so if she had not believed the two of them could be happy together.

Oh, she was just bursting to know if something had happened last night. She would never get anything out of Frederick, of course. Even if anything had taken place between them, Carla knew he would never admit to it. The stubborn mule would probably still claim he had a marriage in name only when they had six children in tow and his wife was heavy with the seventh.

But Veronica, well, that was a possibility. Perhaps she would not be averse to a little grandmotherly prying. Especially now they were alone...

Carla sipped her tea and peered at her granddaughter-in-law over the top of her teacup. Veronica was spreading marmalade on her toast with a level of concentration that really did not seem necessary. “I do hope he has been treating you well, my dear,” said Carla.

Veronica’s expression was unreadable. She set her knife back down on her plate. After a moment of silence that was slightly too long, she said, “Yes, Your Grace. He has been treating me well.”

She was not lying, Carla could tell. There was a warmth to her voice, a genuineness. But that faint frown creasing the bridge of her nose proved there was definitely something on her mind.

“I am glad to hear it,” she said. “I know the marriage was something of a shock to the both of you. And I am sure it will take some time to get used to each other. But I know you have the potential to be very happy together.”

Veronica smiled. “I do hope you’re right.”

Carla decided to dive into the conversation head first. “And have the two of you—”

“Frederick told me about his plans for the gallery,” Veronica cut in, clearly sensing the awkward turn in the conversation from a mile away. “He has asked me to assist him with his work.”

Carla raised her eyebrows. “Has he now?”

She smiled to herself. Even if the two of them had not yet consummated their marriage, this unexpected turn of events was possibly even more exciting. Stubborn, solitary Frederick sharing his plans for his precious gallery with his wife... Carla had not expected this.

“I have been assisting him in choosing which artists to commission,” Veronica continued. “And he has kindly invited me to exhibit some of my own work.” She smiled shyly at Carla. “I thought to create a collection inspired by the garden at your country house in Cambridge.”

Carla smiled warmly, reaching over to press a hand to Veronica’s wrist. “*Our* country house, my dear. You are part of the family now. It is much yours as it is mine.”

Veronica’s cheeks colored in an endearing manner. “Of course. I am afraid that will take some getting used to.” She fiddled with the handle of her teacup. “I know Frederick plans to honor his mother and her work through the gallery. I thought the paintings of the garden would be a good way to do that.”

Carla squeezed Veronica’s wrist. “My daughter-in-law would have loved to see them,” she said, suddenly overcome with emotion. She smiled warmly at Veronica. “I do wish she could have met you, my dear. How she would have loved you.” Carla stood suddenly, causing the footman to gambol across the room in an attempt to pull back her chair. “Have you finished eating?” she asked Veronica, though there was still a slice of toast on her plate.

“I...” Veronica looked taken aback at her sudden enthusiasm. She looked down at her plate. “Well...”

“Come with me, my dear,” Carla said, pulling her to her feet. “You can eat later. There is something I wish to show you.”



Veronica followed the Dowager Duchess out of the breakfast room and up the stairs towards the far wing of the house, slightly bewildered by her sudden need to share whatever it was she planned to show her. When they reached the end of the passage, the Dowager Duchess pushed open the door of a room that Veronica had not yet entered. It was dark inside, heavy curtains pulled closed over the windows. Several crates and packing cases were lined up along one wall, and a large easel stood neglected in one corner. The floorboards were bare, and a lone arm chair had been pushed up against one wall. The room smelled musty and disused, the lingering scent of oil paints hanging in the air.

“This room was my daughter-in-law’s studio,” the Dowager Duchess said, confirming Veronica’s suspicions. “After she died, Frederick moved all her things in here. He forbade anyone from coming in here or getting rid of any of her belongings.”

Veronica glanced edgily over her shoulder at the closed door, her heart quickening. Why had the Dowager Duchess brought her in here? This room was obviously very meaningful to her husband—she could not bear to think how he would react if he caught her here without his permission—even if she was accompanied by his grandmother.

“Perhaps we should...”

The Dowager Duchess waved away her unspoken concern. “Elizabeth was family,” she said firmly. “She was like a daughter to me. I have as much right to be in here as Frederick does.” She went to one of the crates and began to rifle through it. “Besides, I think it’s a dreadful shame that all these things are tucked away and neglected in here. It is not what Elizabeth would have wanted.” A small smile of reminiscence crossed her face. “She knew how lucky she was to come from such a privileged background, and she always wanted to give back to the world. She would have wanted her belongings to be used by those who need them, not locked away turning to dust.” She shook her head to herself. “I have told Frederick this time and time again, but he does not seem to want to listen.”

Veronica stood awkwardly in the center of the room, unable to shake the feeling that she was intruding. Her eyes drew toward an unfinished painting leaning up against one wall. The canvas was colored in different shades of blue, but Veronica could not make out what it was the Duchess had planned to paint. Her chest squeezed. Had Frederick’s mother been painting this just before she had died?

“Here!” The Dowager Duchess stood, brandishing what appeared to be a piece of white clothing. She held it up for Veronica could see. It was a smock of sorts, she realized, long enough to cover a person from shoulders to ankles, with a long row of buttons down the chest. “Elizabeth used to complain that she could never keep her clothing clean when she painted,” said the Dowager Duchess. “And the coveralls designed for men just did not cover ladies’ clothing adequately.” Even in the dim light, Veronica could see the fabric was of fine quality. Paint smears of all colors suggested it had had many years of use.

“I had this made for Elizabeth not long after she married my son,” said the Dowager Duchess. “She confessed to me once that her husband was not as supportive of her painting as she

had hoped, and she was considered giving it up. I begged her not to. I had the smock made in the hope it would prevent her from doing so.” She handed it to Veronica. “I know Elizabeth would like you to have it. And so would I.”

Veronica faltered. “Oh, Your Grace, I couldn’t, I—”

“Nonsense.” She flapped a dismissive hand. “Of course you can.” She took Veronica’s free hand and squeezed. “Elizabeth would be thrilled to know it was being used to create paintings for the gallery she always dreamed of opening. Especially when those paintings are of her beloved country house in Cambridge. And *especially* when they are being painted by a woman who makes her son happy.”

Veronica swallowed heavily, overcome with emotion. She traced a finger over the row of buttons on the smock. “I am not sure I am making him happy, Your Grace.”

The Dowager Duchess smiled. “My dear, the fact that Frederick was willing to involve you in his plans for the gallery tells me everything I need to know.” She squeezed Veronica’s fingers firmly. “You will take the apron. And you will put it to the good use it was intended for.”

Veronica gave her a shy smile. “What about Frederick? Will he mind me wearing it?”

The Dowager Duchess snorted. “Oh, don’t you worry about Frederick. He is all talk.” She put a hand to Veronica’s shoulder and walked her towards the door. “He cares for you very much.”

Veronica looked at her doubtfully. “Do you really think so?” She wished she felt the same confidence as the Dowager Duchess. Frederick was so capricious and changeable that when she was in his company, she could barely make sense of whether she was up or down.

Especially when he makes me feel the way he did last night...

“Oh, I do not just think so,” said the Dowager Duchess, closing the lid of the crate. “I *know* so. He is different around you. Lighter, somehow. You are good for him. Very good for him, in fact.”

“I am not sure he sees things that way.”

“Give him time, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess said gently. “He has been through a lot. And that has made him see the worst in the world around him. But I have faith that in time he will come to see the good in life again. Especially with a loving wife at his side.”

A loving wife. Was that what she was? In the first days of her marriage, Veronica had tried her very best to be an obedient, caring wife. She had not pushed back against Frederick’s cruelty—and had even prevented Gemma from flying in with her sharp tongue and tearing him to pieces. But even if she did wish to be a loving wife, it felt like an impossibility. How could she ever learn to love her husband when he seemed so determined to keep her at a distance? When he was warm and kind one minute, and turning on her like a rabid dog in the next?

For not the first time, Veronica was struck with the need to ask about Frederick's mother—clearly the root cause of his troubled behavior. Before her wedding, she had asked her grandmother outright if she knew the circumstances of the late Duchess's death. The Dowager Marchioness had given her nothing but vague, insubstantial answers. She had implied the Duchess had died from an illness, but Veronica was not convinced. There was something far too cagey about her response for that to be the case.

Veronica knew she could not ask her husband, as the subject was obviously the cause of much pain for him. But she could no more ask the Dowager Duchess. She had clearly cared for her daughter-in-law immensely; the Duchess's death was obviously just as heartbreaking for her as it was for Frederick.

So Veronica once again resigned herself to her lack of knowledge. She nodded obediently at the Dowager Duchess. Perhaps Frederick would come to see the best in the world with a loving wife at his side—but that was assuming she had the capacity to be one.

Chapter Sixteen



Frederick looked up from his desk as his footman appeared at the door. “Mrs. Mary Lane for you, Your Grace. Here about the gallery.”

Frederick set his quill back in the ink pot and hurriedly got to his feet. Mrs. Lane was one of the artists he and Veronica had commissioned to paint pieces for the gallery’s first exhibition. After he had written to her, offering the commission, she had written back immediately, thanking him profusely, but also asking to see him.

Frederick was intrigued by the unusual request. He made his way downstairs to the parlor to find the older woman waiting. His efficient maids had already filled the tea table with a pot and two cups. At the sight of him, Mrs. Lane got to her feet, wringing her hands together nervously. He noticed a small canvas leaning up against the side of the arm chair behind her, but it was covered with a cloth, preventing him from seeing its contents.

She bobbed a curtsy. “Your Grace. Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

“Of course.” Frederick gestured to the arm chair. “Please sit.” She perched on the edge, smoothing her skirts, though they were already creaseless, and squeezing her hands tightly in her lap. Frederick could tell she was on edge. He wondered if her nerves were to do with the reason for her visit, or if she was just uneasy being around a duke. He had met Mrs. Lane once before, at a salon held by the Baroness of Hanwell, when he had initially requested her work. He did not remember her being so on edge back then. He offered her a smile. “There is no need to be nervous.”

She returned the gesture, though her smile looked hollow and did not reach her eyes. She was thinner than he remembered, her gray hair pulled back in a severe bun that made her look old and worn. Frederick wondered if she had been struggling financially. He was glad he and Veronica had chosen to offer her the commission.

Frederick took a sip from his teacup, hoping it would encourage Mrs. Lane to do the same, and perhaps relax a little. “What is it I can help you with?” he began.

“I am honored to have been given this opportunity, sir,” Mrs. Lane gushed, ignoring her teacup and continuing to wring her hands together. “More than you could know. It is so difficult for a woman to succeed in this field.”

Frederick nodded. “Yes. My mother was also an artist.”

As is my wife—but something kept him from speaking of Veronica. Some part of him that knew that if he brought her into the forefront of his mind again, it would only lead to trouble. Or at least a repeat of their dalliance in the studio earlier that week... And that was a risk he was not willing to take.

Mrs. Lane raised her eyebrows. “Oh?”

“Yes,” said Frederick. “Mother was extremely talented, but she also struggled to make her way into the field.” He smiled wryly. “In no small part due to my father’s influence, I must say.”

His own words caught him by surprise. *What am I thinking sharing such personal information with this near stranger?* Usually people had to pry out even the smallest fragment of information from him. But there was something about Mrs. Lane that made him want to speak. There was something about her, Frederick realized, that he recognized in himself. A heaviness. A sense of loss.

“I am glad you understand, sir,” said the woman. “It gives me hope that you may be open to my proposal.”

Frederick raised his eyebrows. “And what proposal is that?”

Mrs. Lane squeezed her hands together so tightly her knuckles turned white. “I know you commission me to create a collection of domestic scenes,” she began, “but I wondered if you might consider allowing me to change the subject matter of my paintings.”

“To what?”

The woman took a long, deep breath and squeezed her eyes closed for a moment. When she looked back at Frederick, her brown eyes were glistening, but she kept her tears from

spilling. "I recently lost my son," she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

At once, Frederick understood the change in her demeanor. Understood her skittishness, her thin and frail appearance. And he understood exactly why Mrs. Lane felt like a kindred spirit. He knew all too well how much havoc grief could wreak on a person's life.

"Mrs. Lane," he gushed, "I am so dreadfully sorry."

She nodded. "Thank you, sir." A single tear slipped down her cheek, and she wiped it away hurriedly. "Since my Arthur's death, I have found it a challenge to paint in my usual style. But I have nonetheless found my art to be very soothing in this challenging time. A way of getting the grief out of my body, as it were." She shook her head. "I am sorry, that must sound very foolish to you."

"No," Frederick said quickly. "Not at all." He swallowed hard, feeling a lump in his throat. How many times had he sought refuge in his studio, attempting to paint away his grief and sadness? His sense of utter loss and self-loathing?

"What is it you have been painting?" he asked, his voice coming out softer than he had intended.

Mrs. Lane nodded towards the canvas resting against the chair. "May I show you?"

"Of course."

She lifted the canvas into her lap and pulled off the cloth covering it. The piece beneath made Frederick suddenly breathless. The painting was dark, and at first glance, the subject was almost indistinguishable. But as he peered closer, he realized Mrs. Lane had created a self-portrait; one expressing the depths of her despair through the painting's dark colors and blurred lines. It was a daring, experimental work—like nothing Frederick had ever seen before. He could barely pull his eyes from it.

“I have been painting my grief,” said Mrs. Lane. “I hoped getting it out on the canvas might allow me to make sense of it. Make sense, somehow, of the loss of my child.” She blinked away her tears. “Forgive me, Your Grace. I did not intend to get emotional.”

“It is quite all right. Good artwork should elicit emotion, should it not?” Frederick swallowed down his own emotions which, at the sight of Mrs. Lane's painting, threatened to overwhelm him. He had been painting as a means of coping with his own loss for years, but never before had he seen such a vivid and visceral depiction of grief. It felt almost as though Mrs. Lane could see inside him. He cleared his throat. “These are the kind of pieces you wish to exhibit at my gallery?”

Mrs. Lane lowered her eyes. “If you will allow it, Your Grace. I know it is very different from my earlier work. Very different from what you commissioned, but—”

“Please go ahead and complete the collection,” Frederick interrupted. He too had seen his own painting style change after the death of his mother. His portraits had become more intense, somehow, as though he was learning to see the darkness in people's souls. And this self-portrait... as bleak as it was, he could not deny it was magnificent. It would certainly

get people talking. There was no way he was going to miss the chance to display these works in his gallery.

His response brought a faint smile to Mrs. Lane's face. "Thank you, Your Grace. I am very pleased to hear it." She got to her feet, hugging the canvas to her chest. "I will see to it that you are not disappointed."

Frederick came towards her and covered her clasped hands with his for a second. "Take care, Mrs. Lane. I look forward to seeing your collection." He attempted a smile. "I hope to honor my mother through the opening of the gallery. And now you have a way to honor your son too."



Veronica stood in the middle of the empty classroom, admiring the completed mural. She was more than pleased with her work. With its bright, oversized flowers, the piece gave the classroom a warm and inviting feeling. Hopefully, it would inspire the students, especially when the dark, gray winter fell upon the city. The paints Frederick had gifted her had played a big part in helping her create such an eye-catching piece. As he had promised, they were of the highest quality, and the vast range of colors had allowed her to create something she was truly proud of.

She cleaned and dried her brushes, then wrapped them carefully in a cloth, setting them on top of her box of paints. Then she unbuttoned the apron the Dowager Duchess had given her and folded it carefully. As she did so, she remembered the old woman's words about her daughter-in-law:

“She knew how lucky she was to come from such a privileged background, and she always wanted to give back to the world...”

Veronica looked at the mural. She was thrilled with the finished product, yes, but she too felt a need to do more. True, she might have grown up in an impoverished home by the *ton*’s standards, but Veronica knew that was nothing compared to the hardships the orphans that would attend this school had faced.

Surely there is more I can do for them than paint a mere mural. Surely—

“Veronica?” She turned at the sound of her sister’s voice. Gemma was standing in the doorway, her eyes alight at the sight of the finished mural. “Oh, it’s wonderful. It makes the room look so warm and inviting. The children will simply love it.”

Veronica smiled. “I hope so.”

“Some more book donations have just arrived,” Gemma told her. “If you are finished in here, would you like to help me put them on the shelves?”

“Of course.” Veronica gathered up her things and followed her sister into the library at the back of the school. Crates and crates of books were dotted all across the floor, waiting to be lined up in the rows of empty shelves. She recognized a few of the titles as those Frederick had donated the last time he had been here.

“They need to be ordered, of course,” Gemma began, tapping her chin in thought as she moved around the room, examining the boxes. “I thought perhaps by subject matter, and then alphabetically...”

Veronica nodded along to her sister’s instructions. But her thoughts were circling around the orphans, and how she could give back a little more—just as her late mother-in-law had sought to do. She wanted to do more for these children than simply paint them a mural and put some books on the shelf. She wanted to really make a difference in their lives.

And what has made more of a difference in my own life than art?

For a long time, Veronica had dreamed of teaching painting, but when she had imagined herself doing so, it was always to young ladies of her own class. But she saw now that these children, many of whom had nothing and no one, these were the people she wanted to teach. She wanted to impart her knowledge to the people who would value it the most. And if she was not going to have children of her own, at least she could make a difference in these young lives.

“What are you smiling at?” asked Gemma.

Veronica shook her head. “Nothing. Just thinking about the mural.” In time, she would tell her sister everything, of course. But first, she had to speak to her husband. And pray he was in the mood to listen to what she had to say.



When she got back to Brownwood Manor later that afternoon, Veronica was still brimming with inspiration. She hurried upstairs to her studio, eager to continue working on her paintings for the gallery. She had finished the initial sketches on the first piece and was now working on the initial layers of paint.

Tonight, over dinner, she would share her thoughts about teaching at the school with Frederick. How would he react to her request, she wondered? It was improper for a woman of her class to work, of course—especially given she was a Duchess. But it was not as if she would be requesting payment for her time. If he saw it as a charitable mission, surely Frederick would be amenable to it. After all, he had been nothing but supportive of her art since the moment she had met him. Besides, he was an artist too—surely he would not begrudge her sharing her passion with the orphans at the school he himself was so zealously funding.

Buzzing with enthusiasm, Veronica slipped the apron back over her head and returned to her canvas. For several moments, she stood in front of it, examining it with a critical eye. Sunlight was flooding through the large windows along one wall of the studio, allowing her to examine her brushstrokes with careful detail. She was pleased with how the oak tree had turned out, but she had not yet managed to capture the wild essence of the garden.

As she was contemplating how to best capture the shadows between the trees, she heard a knock at the door. “Veronica? Are you in here?” Her husband stepped inside before she could respond. “I was wondering if you—” He fell suddenly silent, his eyes drawn to his mother’s painting smock she had buttoned over her clothes. The smile disappeared from his face, and Veronica froze. She watched a look of sudden coldness fall over her husband’s face.

“Where in hell did you get that?”

Chapter Seventeen



Veronica felt a wave of dread pressing down on her. As much as she loved the apron, she had not intended to let him see her wearing it. At least until she had had a chance to raise the issue with him. In a delicate and timely manner. She had not counted on him barging in here like a... well, like a *Duke*.

She swallowed heavily, but she lifted her chin and looked him square in the eyes.

“Your grandmother gave it to me,” she told him, forcing a steadiness into her voice. Frederick’s eyes were thunderous, and for a moment, there was a part of Veronica that feared him. She fought back the urge to retreat from him. Fought back the urge to apologize.

“Did she now?” Frederick’s voice was cold. Colder than she had ever heard it.

“Yes,” Veronica said evenly, calmly. “She said she wished it to be used. Not hiding away in the dark with the rest of her daughter-in-law’s things.”

Frederick clenched his jaw so hard it shook. “She had no right to go into that room.” He looked at her with flashing eyes. “Did you go in there too? Into Mother’s studio?”

Veronica swallowed heavily. “Yes,” she admitted. “Your grandmother invited me in. She wished to show me the apron.”

Frederick curled his hands into fists at his side. “How dare you?” he hissed. “How dare you trespass like that?”

“Trespass?” Veronica repeated incredulously. She felt her own anger beginning to flare up. “This is my home.”

Frederick jabbed a long finger under her nose. “No one goes in my mother’s studio. And no one uses her things. Do you understand? Take the apron off this instant.”

Veronica glared at him. She slipped the apron off over her head and folded it neatly, but she kept a firm hold on it.

“Give it to me,” Frederick hissed.

She shook her head. Her heart was thundering and she felt impossibly hot, but she refused to back down. She was not about to cower to her own husband, especially when he was being so unreasonable. So cold and cruel. “Your grandmother gave it to me as a gift. It would be ungrateful of me to return it.”

Frederick's eyes flashed, as though taken aback by her boldness. "It was not my grandmother's place to give it away," he snapped. "And it certainly was not yours to accept it. My mother's things are not to be touched. Especially not by outsiders."

Veronica's eyes widened. "Outsiders?" she repeated. She glared at him, rage welling up inside her. "How dare you call me such a thing! I am your *wife*."

Frederick snorted. "Not by choice."

Veronica clenched her hands into fists and stormed from the room, unable to bear the sight of her husband for another second. She charged down the passage into her bedchamber, throwing the door closed behind her. She tucked the apron beneath the window seat and closed her eyes, trying to steady her breathing. She was not sure she had ever felt anger quite as overwhelming as this. Nor could she remember ever having been on the receiving end of anything quite so hurtful. All the taunts she had received throughout her life about being the Earl of Volk's daughter paled in comparison to the cutting words that had just spilled from her husband's lips.

How could I have believed he was a kind and decent man? I knew from the start that this is how cruel he can be. I learned that the first moment I met him.

The door to her bedchamber flew open and Frederick marched in. Veronica glared at him.

"Get out," she demanded, surprising herself with her sharpness. "This is my room and I do not want you in it."

Frederick stayed planted in the doorway. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It was out of line for me to say such things. I—”

“I told you to get out!” Veronica hissed. “I am far too angry at you right now to even consider accepting an apology.” She began to pace furiously across the room, clenching her hands into fists. “An outsider?” she repeated. “Is that truly what you think of me?”

“Veronica, I—”

“And I may not be your wife by choice, but I can assure you I did not want this marriage either. Why would I ever wish to be married to such a cold and heartless man?” She felt her words tumbling out unbidden. She felt utterly powerless to stop them. It was as though all the years of obedience and acquiescing had finally caused something to break inside her. All at once, she had had enough of obedience. Enough of saying only what she thought people wished to hear. She may be just the daughter of a penniless drunk; her husband might be the illustrious Duke of Brownwood, but he still had no right to speak to her in such a way.

“You ought to have married Lady Juliet,” she hissed. “The two of you would have made each other happy—or made each other miserable, more like. Which is what you deserve. And by the way, you really need to learn to knock, and to not just come barging into someone’s room without being invited. Just because you are a Duke does not mean you can just—”

Frederick grabbed her arm and pulled her towards him, kissing her hard on the lips. Wild rage shot through her, but instead of

pulling away, she found herself digging her hands into his hair and returning the kiss with vigor.

Breathless, Frederick broke away. “I did not realize you were capable of such anger.” Something glimmered in his gray eyes.

“Of course I am angry! How dare you speak to me like that! Did you really think I would just—”

His mouth found hers again, his hand sliding down her body to squeeze her upper thigh. Veronica heard herself moan against his lips at the jolt of pleasurable pain. She felt her body come alive at his touch.

Oh, this cursed man! How could he make her feel so insanely infuriated and so impossibly good at the same time?

Without breaking the kiss, he eased her back towards the bed. She felt herself tumble onto the mattress and land softly on her back. In one swift movement, Frederick shoved her skirts to her waist. Veronica gasped at the feel of the cool air touching her most intimate of places. She felt impossibly vulnerable at being seen like this, with her skirts at her hips and daylight pouring through the window, her husband leaning close with his eyes raking over her. But she felt her body arching upwards towards him as though it had a mind of its own.

As though it had no single idea of just how angry she was at her husband right now.

She tried to find the words to protest. Words to tell him to leave—and to never come into her bedchamber again. But she

seemed physically incapable of uttering them. All she could make sense of was the fire beginning to burn between her legs and her desperate need for Frederick to touch her there again.

“Tell me to stop and I shall,” he murmured. But before she could even think about forming an objection, his lips were working their way up the inside of her thigh, and Veronica could barely remember what she had even been angry about.

His tongue slid up over her hot skin, before flicking against the place she craved him the most. “Veronica,” he said, “do you want me to stop?” She could hear the mischievous smile in his voice. “Are you too angry with me to continue?”

Yes, she tried to say. Yes, I am far too angry and I wish you to stop this instant.

But all she could manage was a desperate moan. She heard Frederick let out an infuriating chuckle—which she promised herself she would make him pay for later—then his lips found her center and she was instantly lost in a sea of desire.

She closed her eyes, reaching behind her to dig her hands into her pillow, letting the sensations he was drawing from her carry her away; away from her anger, and from the confusion she felt at the state of their relationship.

She felt utterly at the whim of her body, unable to keep from moaning loudly; unable to keep her hands from digging into Frederick’s hair, keeping him in place as his tongue worked against her, taking her quickly toward that elusive peak.

When her climax erupted inside her, she heard herself cry out her husband's name. She was distantly aware of him kissing his way gently up her body; over her hips, over her breasts, over her throat. He pressed his lips gently against the edge of her mouth, but when she reached for him, trying to pull him closer, he slipped away, widening the distance between them.

When her breath began to slow, Veronica sat up. Now her pleasure had begun to dissipate, she felt painfully exposed, and she tugged her skirts down hurriedly to cover herself. She half expected Frederick to be on his way out of the room already—no doubt preparing a speech on how this was all a mistake and meant nothing—but he stayed sitting on the bed beside her. As though it had a mind of its own, his hand reached out for her, tracing a soft line over her index finger.

Veronica pulled away. She had not forgotten those dreadful things he had said. Never mind that he had made her feel like *that*. He had called her an outsider, of all hurtful things. Had blatantly admitted he did not want her as his wife.

Veronica stood up from the bed and glared at him. Her cheeks were blazing with a heady mix of anger and embarrassment. It was hard to maintain her outrage, she knew well when she had just capitulated to him as she had. Could she really continue to berate him, when they had just been so impossibly intimate? Even in her wildest of thoughts, Veronica had never imagined a man kissing her *there*. And she had certainly never imagined it might feel so damn good.

“You are still angry,” said Frederick.

“Of course I am!” Veronica cried. “Did you think you could just... just, do *that*... and everything could be all right?” Impossibly, her cheeks reddened even further.

A faint smile flickered in the corner of Frederick's lips. "Well. I was rather hoping it might make it up to you a little. You did seem to rather enjoy it."

Veronica let out her breath, hardly able to believe his arrogance. "How dare you?" she spluttered, wide-eyed.

Frederick got to his feet and closed the distance between them. He reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. The gesture caught Veronica offguard and she felt her anger waver.

"I am sorry," he said, his voice soft and gentle. "I truly am. When I saw you in my mother's apron, it just... It made me angry. But I was angry at myself more than you. I should not have taken it out on you the way I did."

"Angry at yourself?" Veronica repeated. "Why?"

Frederick sighed. His thumb traced a faint line over her finger. "Because I was not able to protect my mother," he murmured. "I ought to have done more to help her. To save her." His voice wavered slightly.

Veronica frowned. "Save her? From what?"

Frederick shook his head, and that closed-off expression fell over his face again. "Never mind. I ought never to have raised it." He pulled his hand from hers, as though he had suddenly remembered it was there. "But my grandmother was right," he said. "Mother would have liked the apron to be used. I would like you to keep it."

Veronica gave him a slight smile. "Thank you."

"But I must ask you not to go into her studio again," he said. "I'm sorry. I just... prefer it that way. I am afraid I cannot explain more than that."

She nodded acceptingly. "As you wish."

"I am sorry for what I said," Frederick told her, clasping his hands together, as though to keep himself from reaching for her again. "I would hate for you to think of yourself as an outsider. That is not..." He cleared his throat. "That is not how I think of you at all. I should never have said something so thoughtless."

"But you still did not wish for me as your wife," Veronica said, unwilling to let the hurtful comment slide.

"No more than you wished to take me as your husband," said Frederick pointedly.

Veronica gave him a half-smile. "Yes, I suppose that is true."

He raised his eyebrows, a smile flickering in the corner of his lips. "You *suppose* that is true?"

Veronica tried to smooth her skirts, which were now impossibly creased. "Well, of course, I did not wish for such a grumpy husband."

Frederick took a step towards her, his gray eyes glittering mischievously. “Well, lucky for you, I may be grumpy, but I am also exceptionally good at pleasuring a woman.”

Veronica’s eyes widened, hardly daring to believe his boldness. His words caused a fresh tug of desire, but she kept her gaze level, refusing to let him see it. “I want to teach,” she blurted.

Frederick blinked, clearly caught off guard by the abrupt change of subject. “What?”

“At the orphan school,” said Veronica. “I want to teach art.” She began to pace, unable to look him in the eye now she had spoken of something so close to her heart. “Your grandmother told me how your mother always wanted to give back to the world,” she said. “She recognized how privileged she was, and she wished to help those less fortunate than her, just as you are doing with the school.” She dared a glance at Frederick, fearful her mention of his mother may send him into another wild rage, but he was just nodding along slowly.

“I was able to paint the mural at the school,” Veronica continued, “but I want to do more. If I teach these children art, they will have skills they can take with them and use throughout their lives. Perhaps they can one day teach art themselves or use it as an avenue to process their emotions. Perhaps one day their work will even be hanging in your gallery.”

“*Our* gallery,” Frederick corrected her.

Veronica stopped pacing. “Yes. Our gallery.” She took a step closer to him. “What do you think? Is it a foolish idea?”

“Far from it.” Frederick reached for her hands and gave them a firm squeeze. “I cannot imagine anyone better for such a job.”

Chapter Eighteen



It had been more than a week since Veronica had last seen her father, and that made her feel horribly guilty.

I promised him I would take care of him, even after I was married.

And yet, she had been so caught up in the gallery and the orphan school, and in... well, Frederick, that it had barely crossed her mind to visit Volk House.

She set off for her childhood home after breakfast, eager to see her father—and also eager not to spend the day around her husband, given all that had passed between them yesterday afternoon.

Just as he had after their dalliance in her studio, Frederick had spent the rest of yesterday pretending nothing had happened between them. At dinner last night, he had let his grandmother rattle on about her plans for her latest salon for most of the meal and had barely looked in Veronica's direction. He had been virtually silent at breakfast this morning—and painfully deliberate in avoiding her eyes.

Veronica could not deny his coldness stung. There was a small part of her that would have preferred Frederick to have kept his word when he had claimed they would be married in nothing more than name. Because of this changeability, this indecisiveness, this intense pleasure followed by icy silence, it was far too difficult to navigate.

But Veronica knew there was little point denying—either to him or herself—how much she had enjoyed her husband’s attentions. Nonetheless, she did not know if she had the strength to continue being on the receiving end of Frederick’s fickle affections. She had always wanted a husband who would love her, and while, in her most logical of minds, she knew that would never be Frederick, there were times when he was kissing her, holding her, bringing her pleasure, when such a thing seemed almost possible.

No, you cannot allow yourself to think such things, even for a second.

Frederick had made it more than clear that he did not want a wife, and that he had no intention of loving her.

She looked out the window, focusing on the familiar streets around Volk House as the carriage rattled onward. She was looking forward to visiting her old home. Looking forward to seeing her grandmother and younger sister again. Looking forward to dragging her father out into the daylight and telling him all about her new life.

As the coach rolled through the wrought iron gates of Volk House, Veronica could not help but think of how different the place was to her new home. Compared to the pristine white walls and polished marble of Brownwood Manor, Volk House was impossibly run down, with an overgrown garden and

peeling paint on the outside walls and front door. Just a handful of servants in her father's employ, compared to the small army running around at Brownwood Manor. Veronica had always known, of course, that her childhood home was no palace, but coming from such a fine house made the comparison that much starker.

But run down or not, Volk House was home, and Veronica felt a warmth in her chest as she stepped into the foyer. Before the butler could even announce her arrival, Jane rushed down the stairs and threw herself into Veronica's arms.

"Veronica! I am so pleased to see you." She stepped back, squeezing her older sister's hands. "Why did you not tell me you were coming?"

Veronica smiled. "I wished to surprise you."

Plus, the need to escape her capricious husband this morning had been too urgent to bother sending word of her arrival, but Jane did not need to know that.

"Is Grandmother here?" asked Veronica. "And Papa?"

"Grandmother is out with the dog," Jane told her. "I am sure she will be back soon. And Papa..." Something passed across her eyes that made the muscles in Veronica's neck tighten.

"Jane? What is it?"

Her sister sighed. “Perhaps we ought to sit down. So we can speak somewhere in private.”

Veronica’s dread intensified. She nodded silently and followed her sister into the parlor. Jane perched on the settle and tugged Veronica down to sit beside her.

“What has happened?” Veronica pressed. “Is Papa unwell?”

Jane looked down, a strand of dark hair falling over her eyes. “Not as such. But... I am afraid he has been gambling again.”

“Gambling?” Veronica repeated. “But how? Where? He has been banned from all the clubs in London. It was the best thing that ever happened to him.”

Jane nodded sadly. “I know. But it seems he has made some acquaintances. Unsavory acquaintances. Apparently, they have connections to underground clubs across the city. It seems Father has been frequenting them for some time.”

Veronica closed her eyes, overcome with disappointment. Foolishly, she had begun to believe her father was changing for the better.

“Last night,” Jane continued, “they tried to sneak Father into Whites. As you can imagine, they did not succeed. I could not get much of the story out of him, but he arrived back at the house mad with drink last night, raving about the unfairness of it all. I am sure he would have made some dreadful scene. No doubt the press has caught wind of it all by now.”

Veronica shook her head. It had been two years since her father had been at the gambling tables—at least, that was what she believed. Veronica saw now that she had been hopelessly naïve. How long had he had these *unsavory acquaintances*? How long had he been sneaking into underground clubs behind everybody’s back? The betrayal stung.

“I truly thought he was beginning to change,” she said.

Jane nodded sadly. “As did I.”

Veronica felt a sudden dread pressing down on her. “The opening of the school,” she murmured.

“What?”

She sighed. “The orphan school that Gemma and I have been helping with. The one our husbands are funding. There is a celebration to mark the opening in two days’ time.”

“And Father has caused a scene just in time for the opening.”

Veronica nodded. She knew how much the *ton* loved to gossip about the wayward Earl of Volk, and this particularly sordid piece of news was just bound to cause a stir. A big enough stir to take the focus off the opening off the school, and all the fine work Frederick and Wyatt had done.

Suddenly, Veronica found herself filled with the same hot rage she had been yesterday when Frederick had spoken so cruelly to her. How could her father do this to them? She had always

defended him against her grandmother; had always protested when the Dowager Marchioness claimed the Earl cared little for his daughters' wellbeing. But now Veronica began to wonder if her grandmother was right. It was beginning to seem as though her father would never change.

Where would we be if it weren't for Grandmother looking out for us? It was too horrible to think about.

"I assume Father is still upstairs in bed?" she asked Jane.

"Yes. You know how he is. He'll likely not show himself until noon at least."

Veronica stood. "I am going to see him."

"Are you sure?" Jane asked tentatively. "You know he hates being woken up after he has been out. He will be furious at you."

"I do not care. I need to speak with him. Right now."

A faint smile of surprise flickered on Jane's lips. "You are going to tell him off?"

"Yes," Veronica said firmly. "I am." Never in her life had she dared to do such a thing. She had always believed it was a daughter's place to never argue with her father—no matter what he did. But her argument with Frederick yesterday had awoken something within her. Yesterday, she had stood up to her husband, and she had gotten what she wanted—well, in

truth she had gotten far more than she had anticipated, but she was not going to focus on that right now. Her father had let his family down more times than Veronica could count—and she was not about to let him get away with it.

She marched out of the parlor and up the stairs before she could change her mind. She rapped loudly on her father's door but charged inside without waiting for a response. The Earl was sprawled out on his back, one leg out of the blankets and an arm splayed across the pillow. He reeked of old liquor and cigar smoke.

Veronica shook his arm roughly, shaking him from sleep. “Wake up, Father.”

“What...” The Earl squinted in the pale sunlight, clearly disoriented, then his eyes alighted on Veronica. “Sunshine... what in hell are you—”

“How could you?” Veronica demanded.

The Earl blinked, clearly taken aback by her uncharacteristic sharpness. He rubbed his eyes and tried to sit. “I...”

“You promised you were done with the gambling halls,” Veronica said, feeling herself growing hot and jittery with the conflict. She forced herself to plow on. “How could you do this to us?”

The Earl sighed, turning his head on the grimy pillow. “I’m sorry, Sunshine. I am a weak man.” He looked old and exhausted, the pale thread of sunlight shining through the gaps

in the curtains highlighting the deep wrinkles on his face. His overgrown gray hair looked limp and oily, his eyes red and sunken. He reached for the glass of water on his bedside table, his fingers not quite reaching it. Veronica handed it to him and he gulped the contents down hurriedly.

“You are a weak man,” Veronica agreed. “But I also believed you to be a good man. I thought that under all that weakness, you truly did care about us.”

Something passed across the Earl’s eyes and Veronica could tell her words had struck a nerve. She knew Mark Caster had heard such ranting from the Dowager Marchioness many times over, and even from Gemma on several occasions. But Veronica had never dared to speak a word out of place to him before. Her scolding was clearly making an impact.

The Earl set the cup clumsily back on the bedside table and reached for Veronica’s hand. She pulled away quickly.

“I do care about you, Sunshine,” he said huskily. “I care about you more than anything.”

Veronica shook her head. “I am sorry, Father. But you cannot claim that is the case when you continue to behave the way you do.” She felt tears welling behind her eyes. Determined not to let them spill, she turned and strode out of her father’s bedchamber, closing the door firmly behind her.

When she made her way down the stairs, Jane was waiting at the bottom, their grandmother at her side. The Dowager Marchioness had her dog tucked under one arm—and a look of proud surprise on her face.

“Veronica, my dear,” she said, “I never thought I would see the day. Did you actually just scold your own father?”

Veronica felt her cheeks flushing inexplicably. “I did. He deserved it.”

Her grandmother pulled her into a one-armed embrace. “That he most certainly did. And I daresay hearing such a thing from you will have had a far bigger impact than him hearing the same old diatribe from me.”

The Dowager Marchioness set Patch down on the floor and Veronica bent to scratch his ears, smiling slightly as he nuzzled against her hand.

“Was he terribly angry?” Jane asked, her eyes shining, as though the unexpectedness of Veronica’s boldness had momentarily erased the pain of their father’s behavior.

“No,” she said. “Not angry. Surprised, perhaps.”

The Dowager Marchioness took her hand and gave it gentle squeeze. “Well, well, Your Grace, it seems your new position suits you. Marriage to the Duke seems to have helped you find a little strength.”

Veronica gave her a small smile. “Indeed it has.”

And with Frederick Barnes as my husband, Heaven knows I will need it.

Chapter Nineteen



“Is there anything else you need, sir?” asked Frederick’s valet.

Frederick turned to look at himself in the mirror, straightening and then re-straightening a cravat that really did not need to be straightened. Usually, he despised social events with every inch of his being. Despised the small talk, the gossip, the whole unnecessary pageantry of it all. But tonight, the dread did not feel quite so overwhelming. Tonight, a small, intimate gathering was being held to celebrate the opening of the orphans’ school. The investors and their wives would be in attendance, along with a few peers and perhaps the teachers hired to instruct the children. A few curious onlookers, perhaps. But with luck, they would be spared the worst of the *ton*’s critical eye—and their gossiping tongues.

A voice in the back of Frederick’s mind whispered to him that that was not at all why the thought of the gathering felt less dreadful than usual.

Does it perhaps have something to do with your wife?

Irritating as it was, Frederick had to admit that voice was right. The thought of attending the celebration with Veronica on his

arm did make it a far less horrifying prospect.

Because I will not have to bat away the constant affections of Lady Juliet and her kind...

Even as the thought came to him, Frederick knew he was not being completely honest with himself. Yes, the fact that he was married now would put an end to his ridiculous bevy of admirers, but that had little to do with anything. There was something about being in Veronica's presence that made the world seem not quite so bleak. Something about her impossibly bright smile that made the weight on his shoulders a little lighter.

A smile that's as bright as the sun.

Surely not...

How he wished he could remember the name of that little girl he had spoken to in the garden so many years ago. All he really remembered was her smile, and the way he had made her promise to always shine brightly.

Frederick turned back to his valet. "Thank you, Marshall," he said. "I've everything I need."

The man bowed his head and gathered up the razor and shaving bowl. "Enjoy the night, sir."

Frederick straightened his cravat for the fourteenth time and made his way into the hallway.

“Ah, there you are, my dear,” said his grandmother, appearing at the top of the stairs. “You’re late. I was beginning to fear you had changed your mind about going tonight.”

Frederick shook his head. “Not tonight, Grandmother. I will be there. It is too important not to.”

The Dowager Duchess smiled, patting his cheek affectionately. “Good lad. The Duchess is waiting for you in the parlor.”

Her eyes twinkled and she gave him a smile that Frederick tried to read the meaning behind.

Ever since his and Veronica’s chaotic betrothal, Frederick had made it clear to his grandmother that his would be a marriage in name only. There would be no romance, no heirs. Certainly no love. His grandmother had been wise enough not to press the issue.

But there was something in that look, in that smile, that suggested she knew he had not been entirely able to keep to his own rules.

Surely Veronica had not said anything to him. She was so shy and innocent when it came to such matters, she could barely speak of them without her face flaming scarlet and her words disappearing into nothingness.

Perhaps it was his own behavior that had given him away. Perhaps that weight that Veronica lifted from his shoulders was visible to his grandmother as well.

“Thank you, Grandmother,” he managed. He put his head down and headed for the parlor.

Veronica stood up from the settle as he stepped inside. Frederick let out his breath at the sight of her, taken aback by her beauty. He had seen Veronica dressed up before, of course; at their wedding she had been a vision of loveliness in delicate and girlish pale pink silk. But tonight, dressed in an elegant dark blue gown, with her dark hair swept up high on her head and a thin line of pearls at her throat, she looked sophisticated, mature. She looked like a duchess.

His Duchess.

Frederick shook his head, trying to chase the troublesome thoughts away. He was going to have to learn to keep his attraction to Veronica under control, or else... Or else there was a high chance they would not make it anywhere tonight, other than straight upstairs to his bedchamber.

Nonetheless, he said, “You look lovely.” It was a ridiculous understatement. At his instruction, Veronica had paid a visit to the seamstress to acquire the new wardrobe befitting her title, but he had not expected the results to be quite so... dazzling.

“Thank you.” Veronica did not return his smile. She clasped her hands together and lowered her eyes. “But I have been thinking things over, Frederick. And I think perhaps it is best if I do not attend tonight.”

Frederick frowned. “Why on earth would you think that? You are my wife. Not to mention the artist of that wonderful

mural.”

Veronica sighed. “I take it you have not read the gossip pages lately?”

“Of course not. You know I never go near such things.”

She nodded faintly. “And I am glad. But I am afraid there are few others in our society that have your good sense.”

Frederick put a gentle hand to her shoulder, leading her back to the settle. She perched on the edge of the settle and he sat down beside her. “Veronica. Has something happened?”

“My father,” she said sadly. She knotted her hands together and began twisting her wedding ring around her finger. “He has been out gambling again. He was caught trying to sneak back into White’s, even though they have banned him from entering on account of his violent behavior.”

“I see.”

Veronica looked up at him, her eyes glistening. “I’m so sorry,” she gushed. “I know talk of it will be all over the city by now. It is going to take the focus away from the opening of the school tonight. And that will only be made worse if I am there. Everyone will see me, and they will think of my father and—”

“Veronica.” Frederick put a hand to her wrist. “Stop. It is all right.” He squeezed gently, feeling energy pulse through him at the feel of her skin against his. “I do not care about any of

that.” He felt an old anger rearing up inside him. Anger at the *ton*’s petty games. At the way they needed gossip like others needed air. He was disappointed at Veronica’s news, yes. But his disappointment came from the knowledge that the Earl of Volk had let himself slide back down this troublesome path again; and that he had hurt his daughter in the process. Whatever the rest of the *ton* had to say about it, he could not care less.

“Whatever those petty gossips think, it does not matter,” he told Veronica firmly. “I want you there.” He looked her squarely in the eyes. “You are my wife.”

Veronica drew in a long breath. “Yes. I am. And I know it is my duty to be there. I’m sorry. I should not have suggested otherwise.”

Frederick nodded stiffly. *Yes, a duty.*

And it was best he leave it at that.



The school building was already bustling with people by the time Veronica and Frederick arrived. The guests had gathered in the classroom in which Veronica had painted the mural, and as they stepped inside, she could see many people clustered around the colorful wall, admiring her handiwork. She allowed herself a faint smile. Perhaps the guests here tonight would be more interested in her painting ability than in her father’s drunken antics.

Or perhaps that is just wishful thinking.

“Ah, Your Graces. I am so glad you could make it.” Veronica recognized the man charging toward them as the Marquess of Bedford, another investor and the instigator of the project. He shook Frederick’s hand and placed a kiss on Veronica’s knuckles. He nodded towards the mural. “I have heard nothing but good things about your work, Your Grace. It has made such a difference to the place. I know the students will adore it.”

Veronica smiled shyly. “Thank you.” Her eyes darted around the room, inspecting the crowd. She was relieved to find the gathering was relatively small, with few peers in attendance, beyond those who had contributed financially to the school. Across the room, Veronica caught sight of her sister, standing beside her husband. Gemma caught her eye and gave her a pale smile.

Veronica had not had a chance to speak with her older sister since she had heard about their father’s latest transgression, but the stoic look on Gemma’s face left Veronica in no doubt that she knew all about it. There was a weariness there, a sense of frustrated resignation. Veronica knew this was far from the first time Gemma had had to face her duties in the shadows of their father’s misbehavior.

“Just do your best,” her eyes seemed to say. *“Just hold your head high and do as best you can.”*

Veronica gave Gemma a faint nod, to let her know her wordless message had been received.

Gemma is lucky. She has a husband who loves her, and supports her unconditionally, no matter what our father does.

The thought caught her off guard. Because was that not exactly what Frederick had done? When she had told him about her father, he had not flown into a rage as she had expected him to do. He had not insisted she stay at home. He had soothed her unease and assured her that her place was by his side. He had supported her unconditionally.

Almost instinctively, Veronica felt herself taking a step closer to him.

“This way, Your Graces,” said Lord Bedford. “I would like to introduce you to a few of the fine people we have engaged to teach the children.” He smiled at Veronica. “In addition to you, madam. We are most grateful to you for offering to share your talents with these children.”

Veronica felt herself growing a little more confident in the face of the Marquess’s kind words. Perhaps the people here really did care more about her artistic talents than her father’s misdeeds. “Thank you, My Lord. I am very thankful for the opportunity...” Her words trailed off as she caught sight of a familiar face on the other side of the classroom.

No. It cannot be...

Veronica felt her stomach tie itself into knots. Because standing beside a man Veronica guessed was her father, stood Lady Juliet Carfield.

Chapter Twenty



As though feeling Veronica's eyes on her, Lady Juliet looked her way and gave her a smooth smile.

Why on earth is she here? What does she want?

Veronica forced her attention back to the conversation at hand. She forced herself to greet each of the teachers the Marquess was introducing her to. She nodded along politely to the conversation, mumbling her thanks when the teachers praised the mural. But she could not stop her thoughts from racing.

Frederick eyed her. "Is something wrong?" he murmured.

But before Veronica could answer, Lady Juliet swept up to them, cutting in front of the young teacher in front of them and dropping into an overly dramatic curtsey. "Your Graces. How *wonderful* to see you."

Juliet's smile was broad and her movements graceful, yet every word from her lips seemed to drip with falseness. Veronica felt her grip on Frederick's arm grow a little tighter.

A look of faint confusion crossed Frederick's face, and Veronica could tell he was attempting to remember who on earth this grinning, pink-clad creature was. "Good evening, Lady... uh..."

Veronica hid a smile.

"Juliet," she finished, "Lady Juliet Carfield." She gave an airy laugh, fluttering her long fingers daringly against Frederick's arm. "Oh, Your Grace, you do have a terrible memory. How could you forget *me* after all we shared at your country house last month?"

Her eyes darted to Veronica, as though trying to gauge her response to the suggestive comment. Veronica forced herself to keep her face level. She knew with a deep certainty that Lady Juliet and her husband had not shared so much as a handshake in Cambridge.

"Forgive me, My Lady," Frederick said brusquely. "I am afraid it must have been rather unmemorable."

Veronica bit her lip to keep herself from smiling.

A look of annoyance flickered across Lady Juliet's face, but she gathered herself quickly.

"What brings you here, My Lady?" Veronica asked, with as much civility as she could muster. She had little doubt that Juliet was here with the sole intention of causing trouble—likely through publicly mocking the Earl of Volk—but she was sure there was no way she going to admit to such a thing.

“My father is close acquaintance of the Marquess of Bedford,” Lady Juliet twittered. “And when I heard about this *beautiful* mural you painted, Your Grace, I simply *had* to come and see it for myself.”

Veronica smiled thinly.

Lady Juliet made a show of looking around the room. “I must say, it is a dreadful shame your father could not be here tonight, *Your Grace*. I would have thought it a priority for him to come and celebrate his daughter’s achievement. No doubt you would have liked for him to come and see your work.”

Veronica stiffened. She could feel her smile beginning to falter.

“My wife is not one to needlessly seek out the praise of others,” Frederick said. “She is far too humble and selfless for such a thing. Besides, this is a small and intimate gathering. Few guests were invited that were not directly involved in the refurbishment of the school.” He looked at Juliet pointedly. “To be perfectly honest, My Lady, I’m rather surprised you were permitted entry.”

This time, Veronica’s rigid façade cracked, as she let out a sound that was half a giggle and half a murmur of shock. She was all too aware of Frederick’s sharp tongue, but there was something utterly thrilling about hearing it let loose in Lady Juliet’s direction.

Juliet blinked once, clearly taken aback.

“Have you had a chance to see the Duchess’s mural up close yet?” Frederick asked, before Lady Juliet could gather herself. “It’s extraordinarily beautiful. The students at this school will be very lucky to learn from her.”

Lady Juliet’s face soured. “You are teaching art?” she said to Veronica. “How *lovely*. I am sure the children will just love learning about your little hobby.”

“Indeed they will,” Frederick said firmly. “Perhaps you might also consider finding a way to give back to the world, My Lady. I am sure you will find it a much more meaningful endeavor than seeking to hurt others out of a petty need for self-validation.”



When they arrived back at Brownwood Manor several hours later, the house was quiet. A lamp flickered in the stairwell, but the rooms above were dark.

“Well,” said Frederick, nodding his thanks to the doorman as he took his coat and gloves, “that was quite an evening.”

Veronica was still buzzing from the events of the evening. She was filled with joy and how well her mural had been received and bursting with anticipation at the thought of teaching her first class in a week’s time. But she had to admit, all that excitement was almost overshadowed by the thrill of hearing her husband put Juliet Carfield in her place.

She smiled at him as they made their way up the staircase together. “Did you really not remember who Lady Juliet was?”

Frederick chuckled. “Of course I remembered who she was. How could I forget someone so vile? But I was not about to let her know that.”

Veronica laughed. “You are very mischievous.”

Frederick grinned. “She deserved it.”

“Yes. She did.” Much to Veronica’s relief, Lady Juliet had been the only one to make mention of her father tonight. And her jab in the Earl’s direction had almost been worth it to see Frederick berate her for it.

Veronica stopped as they reached the top of the stairs, his quarters to the left and hers to the right. She turned to face her husband, looking up to meet his eyes. In the faint lamplight, the sharp line of his jaw was shadowed and dark. A thick strand of hair hung over one eye, and it took all her willpower not to reach out and touch it. “Thank you,” she said. “For standing up for me tonight. It meant more to me than I can express.”

“Of course.” Frederick cleared his throat. “You are my wife —”

“And it is your duty to stand up for me,” Veronica finished.

He swallowed visibly, lowering his eyes for a moment. “Indeed.” He looked back up at her, his eyes meeting hers. He took a tiny step toward her. For a moment, Veronica felt rooted in place. She could feel the warmth of his body. Could feel his breath tickling her nose.

How easy it would be to lean forward and press her lips to his. Her body ached for it. For him. But how could she behave so boldly when she had no idea of how he would react? Perhaps he would return her kiss with the same hunger he had in her bedchamber earlier in the week. Perhaps he would throw her over his shoulder and carry her upstairs to his bedchamber and they would finally become husband and wife in every sense.

But just as likely, he would pull away, and close down. Remind her that this was a marriage in name only.

Except for when he chooses otherwise.

No. Veronica would not do it. Regardless of how good her husband had the ability to make her feel—and regardless of how well he had treated her tonight—she would not put herself through such torment. Allow herself to get too close to Frederick Barnes and he would break her heart.

She took a step back, pulling her eyes from his magnetic gaze. “Good night, Frederick. I shall see you in the morning.”



Veronica waited nervously as the children filed into the classroom. How was it possible, she wondered distantly, that such tiny humans could fill her with such overwhelming anxiety?

That morning, she had woken before dawn, reciting her first lesson in her head, reading and re-reading through the notes she had made until the words swam before her eyes. She had barely forced down a cup of tea at breakfast, so violently had her stomach been rolling. Amidst all her excitement at the thought of teaching art, she had failed to consider just how nerve-wracking such a thing could be.

“Goodness, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess had commented at breakfast, as Veronica has chased her eggs around her plate without eating, *“you look like someone who is on the way to the executioner, not to teach a classroom full of children.”*

And Veronica had to admit that right now, these noisy, chaotic children were eliciting much the same level of fear in her as a hangman with the noose in hand.

She counted ten — no, fifteen; twenty? — boys and girls, ranging in age from around five to ten. They wore colorless smocks and breeches, but their drab clothing belied their energy and enthusiasm. They were all giggling and chatting together, clearly long-time friends from the orphanage. Many of them had clustered around the mural and were tracing over the flowers with grimy fingers. Two boys were chasing each other around the desks.

“Please take your seats, everyone,” Veronica said, her voice coming out far softer than she had intended. She could barely hear herself over the clamor of the children. She tried again, louder. “Take your seats and be quiet at once!”

Twenty pairs of eyes widened and turned to her. Clearly stunned at her sudden outburst—marginally less than Veronica

herself was—the children obediently scurried to their desks. Veronica allowed herself a smile. “Very good. Thank you, children.”

She made her way to the pile of supplies Frederick had loaded her classroom with. There were enough sketchbooks, pencils and paints to see these children through their lifetime—and their children’s children as well. With her arms loaded, she made her way around the classroom, setting pencils and paper on each desk. The children began to murmur excitedly, opening the boxes of pencils and peering inside curiously. Veronica was quite certain most of them had never even seen colored pencils before—let alone used them. Their excitement began to whittle away her nerves.

“Art is a wonderful way to record the world around you,” she began. “I hope you will all love it just as much as I do.” She smiled down at the children. “Some of you might grow up to be painters for a living, maybe making portraits for people so they can always remember their loved ones. But for most of you, making art will just be a way of expressing yourself. It can help you make sense of the world around you, especially when things seem strange or scary. It can help you remember times when you felt so happy you never want to lose those memories. And when you are feeling sad, it can be a way of making things hurt a little bit less.” Unbidden, Veronica found herself thinking of her husband.

A little boy in the front row reached his hand to the sky. “Did you paint all them flowers on the wall, miss?”

Veronica smiled. “I did, yes”

An excited murmur began to ripple through the classroom.

“Can you teach us how to draw flowers like that?” asked a little girl with two long plaits hanging over her shoulders.

“Of course.” Veronica felt warmth spreading throughout her chest. “Please everyone, take out your colored pencils...”



Frederick walked slowly through the empty rooms of the gallery. The walls had all been painted in a simple cream-color, so as not to detract from the artwork, and the old townhouse was looking light and airy. It was a dramatic change from the near ruin it had been when he had purchased it.

Today he had brought along the first commissions, including Mrs. Lane’s self-portrait, and a second one of her pieces that was still in the crate it had been delivered in. He would need to think carefully about how and where to display Mrs. Lane’s pieces. When Veronica arrived, he would discuss the matter with her in detail.

Frederick felt his thoughts pulling towards his wife, as they so often did. Her first class at the school would be finishing up now. He smiled to himself, thinking of the bundle of nerves she had been at breakfast that morning. He had no doubt her anxiousness was unwarranted. Veronica was achingly talented, and would be a fine teacher, with her gentle and calming nature. The children would adore her. Of that, he had no doubt. He just wished Veronica had a little more self-confidence.

I am sure I have not been helping in that respect...

Frederick could not deny he had gotten closer to Veronica than he had ever intended. A wife in name only—wasn't that what he had said? Repeatedly?

And yet each time they had crossed that line, he had been the one to instigate it. Somehow, in the company of his wife, he was prone to impulsive behavior he had little chance of controlling. It had begun just minutes after he had first met her, when he had kissed her so thoughtlessly in his bedchamber at Cambridge. He had been making the same mistake ever since.

And all he could think of doing in the wake of his slip-ups was closing down and treating his wife but nothing with aloof coldness. He knew how confusing his behavior must be for Veronica. How much it must sting her, and how unwanted it must make her feel. Little wonder she was so unsure of herself at times.

But Frederick knew he did not have the strength to be open with her, to tell her of all the bleak and damaging thoughts that were roiling around inside his head. The day he had caught her in his mother's painting smock, he had come close to telling her everything. And there was a part of him that had wanted to. Desperately.

What would she think of me if she knew?

It was his fault his mother was no longer alive. He had let down the woman who had birthed him, raised him, cared for, and loved him unconditionally. It filled him with unfathomable shame. How could he admit such a thing to his wife?

He heard the front door creak open. Footsteps sounded up the staircase.

“Frederick? Are you here?” Veronica’s voice rang through the empty building like a bell.

“Up here,” he called back.

Veronica appeared at the top of the stairs, her bonnet swinging in her fist. She looked slightly disheveled, with strands of dark hair hanging over her face and a smear of blue on one cheek.

“How was your lesson?” he asked.

Her face broke into that impossibly sunny smile. “Oh Frederick, it was wonderful,” she gushed. “So wonderful. The children... they are such dears. And they were so enthusiastic. So excited. I just felt as though...” she hesitated, as though trying to find the right words, “as though I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I cannot wait until the next lesson.”

Frederick found himself returning her grin. She had that effect, he realized. When she gifted the world that dazzling smile, it was impossible not to reciprocate. “I am very glad to hear it,” he said. “Although I am not surprised at all. I knew you would do a fine job.”

“Thank you.” She took a step toward him, then seemed to change her mind. She set her bonnet down on the arm of the couch they had installed in the corner of the room; the area Veronica had termed the “discussion space.”

She nodded towards the canvases Frederick had leaned up against the wall. “Have you made any decisions about where to place each collection yet?” she asked.

“Not yet. I thought to wait for you. I would like your opinion. About one collection in particular.”

Veronica nodded. “Mrs. Lane’s?”

“Yes.” Frederick had mentioned Mrs. Lane’s change of subject matter to Veronica in passing, but she had not yet seen any of the older woman’s work. There was a part of him that had been reluctant to discuss the pieces with his wife; with her perceptive eye, Veronica would no doubt see how deeply they affected him. And if that happened, Frederick suspected he would wind up sharing far more with her than he wished to.

But now, well, if he wanted her opinion on how to exhibit the works, he would need to show them to her. Mrs. Lane’s new work was incredibly emotive, but also pushed the boundaries of what many might consider “good” art. There would certainly be much discussion around her pieces—and if the response to her work was positive, the exhibition could do wonders for her career. If, indeed, that was what she wanted.

Certainly, when he had first met Mrs. Lane at Lady Hanwell’s salon earlier in the year, she had been open about her aspirations of being a professional artist, despite her unenviable position of being a widowed woman. But now her son was gone... did she still value such things? Frederick knew all too well what grief and regret could do to a person. Knew they had a way of stealing someone’s goals and dreams, and making life seem pointless and devoid of color.

Mrs. Lane was an immensely talented artist. Her work more than deserved to be exhibited, but Frederick also hoped the exhibition would help keep her on the path to her goal of becoming a professional painter. The first step was working out exactly where and how to display her pieces.

And that meant discussing things with Veronica. He would keep things professional, Frederick told himself. After all, that was what they were here for. This gallery was a business venture.

Just like our marriage, he tried to tell himself. But the thought had become so ludicrous he almost laughed. There was nothing businesslike about what he had done to Veronica in her bedchamber last week. Or in her studio. And there was certainly nothing professional about the way he lay in bed each night imagining her body moving beneath his own.

Shaking the thought away—in the name of keeping things *professional*—he led her up a narrow, creaking staircase to a small attic room on the third floor. It had a steeply pitched roof and a small window that let just enough light into the room for the paintings to be properly appreciated. Mrs. Lane's self-portrait was leaning face-down against one wall, her second, unopened piece sitting beside it.

“I know this is quite an unusual suggestion,” Frederick began, “but I wondered if we might dedicate this room to Mrs. Lane's work. I believe they deserve to have a room all of their own, and by putting them in a confined and darker space like this, I think we can increase their emotiveness and power.”

Veronica nodded, the floorboards creaking beneath her feet as she walked slowly across the attic. “It is unusual,” she agreed, “but is that not why we decided to put the gallery in the townhouse in the first place? Because it would be something new and different?”

Frederick nodded. “Indeed.”

“May I see the paintings?”

Frederick turned the self-portrait around, pulling off the cloth that was protecting it. “This is the piece she showed me last week.”

He heard Veronica’s inhalation. “Oh,” she murmured. “It’s... beautiful. In a dark, haunting way. Don’t you think?”

Frederick nodded.

Veronica knelt down in front of the painting to examine it. “Look at this,” she said, pointing to a swirl in the background where an array of colors melted into blackness. “Her use of color here is magical. It is as though the darkness is swallowing the light.” She sat back on her heels and let out a deep sigh. “The poor woman. She is obviously in a lot of pain.”

“Yes,” Frederick agreed. “I hope we can ease it slightly by giving her this opportunity.”

“We ought to be thankful she has given *us* this opportunity,” said Veronica. “This work is exquisite.” She nodded towards the figure in the foreground of the painting. “Is this her?”

“Yes,” said Frederick. “A self-portrait.” He reached into the crate and pulled out the second canvas. “She brought a second piece to the house today,” he told Veronica. “I’ve not yet opened it. I wanted to wait for you.”

She smiled slightly. “Let’s see it.”

Frederick leaned the canvas up against the wall and began to slowly remove the paper it was wrapped in. With each piece of wrapping he removed, more of Mrs. Lane’s characteristic darkness emerged. And when the entire painting was revealed, Frederick heard his own murmur of surprise.

Just like the first piece, the painting was dominated by a figure, but this time, it was not Mrs. Lane. It was a younger man, his face distorted and barely recognizable. The darkness in the background seemed somehow to threaten him; seemed to be taking him over. For several moments, neither of them spoke. Frederick stared at the image for a long time, his gaze fixed on the haunted eyes of Mrs. Lane’s son.

“He killed himself,” he said suddenly.

Veronica turned to him in alarm. “What?”

Frederick stared at the painting. He was unsure where the words had come from. But somehow, instinctively, he knew he was right. “Mrs. Lane’s son. He killed himself.” That darkness

that was swallowing him, that look of despair... It was all painfully familiar. All at once, dread began to press down on him, that all-too-familiar weight returning to his shoulders, so constricting he could barely breathe.

“Did Mrs. Lane tell you that?” Veronica asked softly. “Or are you just guessing?”

“I don’t *need* to guess,” Frederick hissed. “It is all right there on the painting. Can’t you see it?”

“I...” Veronica frowned. “Perhaps, I...”

Frederick stumbled backwards, feeling dizzy and unmoored. All he could think of was escape. He pushed suddenly past Veronica and charged down the stairs, unable to bear the sight of the painting for a moment longer.

Chapter Twenty-One



Veronica stood motionless, listening to Frederick's frantic footsteps clatter down the staircase. She felt her eyes drawn back to the paintings in front of her. But this time, it was not Mrs. Lane's grief she saw expressed in them, but her husband's. She knew something in the image of Mrs. Lane's son had spoken to him deeply, had touched on the rawest of nerves. Knew it had unearthed a trauma he did his best to keep buried—one he had never been willing to share with her.

Slowly, quietly, she crept down the stairs. "Frederick?" There was no response, except her own voice, echoing back at her through the empty house.

She kept walking, past the empty rooms and down the long hallway. She found him in the room with the discussion area, his back to her and his head rested against his arm as he leaned up against the bare wall. The paintings they had commissioned were propped up against the wall around him, one now lying face-down on the floor. Veronica was not sure if it had fallen, or if he had kicked it over in a sudden burst of emotion.

"Frederick?" She approached him slowly, waiting for him to fly into a rage and storm away.

He stayed motionless, letting her approach. Veronica touched a tentative hand to his shoulder. When he did not pull away, she stayed there for several wordless moments, holding her hand against his body in an attempt to steady him.

“That is how she died, isn’t it,” she murmured. “Your mother. She killed herself.”

Frederick’s chest heaved, his head still buried against his arm. Veronica knew her guess was correct. She pulled her hand away and sat on the floor a few yards from his feet, a gesture to let him know she would not push him for answers.

After several moments, Frederick turned and looked down at her. His eyes were glassy and red-rimmed, his chest still heaving with emotion. After a moment, he nodded.

Veronica let out her breath. “Frederick. I am so sorry. I had no idea.” She let the silence linger for a few moments, then asked gently, “Will you tell me what happened?”

Frederick looked into her eyes for a long time, and Veronica could practically see the indecision whirring behind them. This was clearly something he never spoke of; something he never chose to share. Veronica did not speak. She would not push him. If he did not wish to tell her, then she would not pry.

After long, silent moments, he sat beside her, his back against the wall and his knees drawn upwards towards his chest. Veronica pressed a hand to his forearm and squeezed gently, silently encouraging him to speak.

“Mother was much younger than my father,” he began slowly. His voice was thin, trapped in his throat. It wavered with emotion. “And as Father grew older, he began to socialize less and less. Mother was very sociable and warm, and she was always out in the company of her friends.

“Then the rumors started. One after the other. Tall tales of the men she was having affairs with.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “At first, Mother tried to ignore them, but the rumors kept persisting. It seemed as though her name was appearing in the gossip pages every second day—and always in relation to a different man.”

Frederick sighed heavily. “She promised my father and me there was no truth to the rumors. And around me, she did her best to pretend they did not bother her. But I could tell they did. She started going out less and less. Started locking herself up in her studio for hours on end. Sometimes I don’t think she was even painting. She just went in there to escape the world.”

“One night, she left the house for the first time in weeks. She had been invited to attend the ball to celebrate the betrothal of her best friend’s daughter to the Marquess of Pinewood. Father refused to go with her.” Frederick lowered his head, hiding his eyes with his hands. “I accompanied her to the ball, but once I was there, I was so caught up in vying for the debutantes’ attention that I barely took notice of what Mother was doing, or how she was being treated.”

“The next morning, rumors were circulating that she had taken up with Lord Pinewood. The betrothal fell apart—as did my mother’s lifelong friendship with the mother of the Marquess’s wife-to-be.”

Veronica heard a murmur escape her. “That is dreadful,” she managed. She knew just how vicious the *ton* could be when it came to spreading rumors. And she knew just how hurtful they could be to those on the receiving end of such falsities.

“That final rumor was too much for her,” Frederick murmured. “I found her later that week in her studio. She had used my father’s revolver.”

Veronica let out her breath. Impulsively, she threw her arms around him, and held him tightly. “I am so sorry,” she gushed. Frederick wrapped his arms around her and buried his head in her shoulder. He stayed there for long moments, squeezing her tightly, as though she were a life raft that would keep him from drowning.

“I ought to have done more.” His words were muffled against Veronica’s shoulder. “I ought to have stood up for her. Defended her. Each time the rumors surfaced, I should have done all I could to see them quashed. But I just went on with my own life, thinking they would just blow over.” His voice wavered with emotion.

Veronica felt her own tears slipping down her cheeks. “You cannot blame yourself,” she said gently. “It was not your fault.” She knelt up, pressing her palm to his cheek and looking him in the eye. “Your mother would not want you to go through life blaming yourself. I know she wouldn’t.”

Frederick reached up and pressed his hand over hers. “I let her down, Veronica. I failed her.”

“No.” Veronica got to her feet suddenly, pulling him with her. “No, Frederick, you have done anything but that.” She began to walk through the gallery, her hand firmly intertwined with his. “Look at this place you are creating. You are bringing her dream to life. She would be so proud. And so grateful to you.” She smiled through her tears and turned to face him. “I hope you can see that.”

Frederick let out his breath and pulled Veronica into a firm embrace. Her head fit neatly beneath his chin, and she leaned against his chest, listening to the steady thump of his heart. For a long time, he held her without speaking. Veronica began to feel a little of the tension draining from his body.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said softly. “I am sure it was not easy.”

Frederick took a step back and looked down at her, his eyes locked with hers. He traced his thumb across her cheek, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Slowly, he lowered his lips to meet hers.

His kiss was nothing like she had experienced before. This time, it was gentle, tender. Loving, even. It made Veronica suddenly breathless. When he pulled away, she looked up at him, running her knuckles gently across his damp cheek. She felt overwhelmed with affection. With a need to take away his pain.

Before she could make sense of it, Frederick’s lips were on hers again. This time, the kiss was deeper, hungrier, filled with need. Veronica felt her mouth open beneath his, her body’s instincts taking over.

Without breaking the kiss, Frederick walked her backwards so she was pressed up against the wall, standing between two of the landscape paintings they had commissioned together. His hand trailed down her face, down her neck, pausing at the base of her throat. He looked into her face, his eyes blazing with need.

“Veronica,” he murmured. “I know what I said about our marriage. About it being in name only. But I...” He swallowed. “Perhaps I was wrong. I... Will you...”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes.” She pulled him into another kiss.

Frederick stepped away, and for one horrifying moment, Veronica was certain he had changed his mind. But he simply hurried down to the front door of the gallery and turned the key in the lock, closing the curtains on the way past the window to hide them from prying eyes.

Then he ran back up the stairs, closing the space between them. He reached for her hand, pulling her into him and kissing her slowly, deeply, until he drew a moan from deep within her.

He guided her to the couch they had set up in the discussion area and laid her down gently, his broad body covering hers. Supporting himself on his knees and forearms, Frederick leaned over her and kissed her hard. A heady mix of nerves and desire began to gather in her belly, heat pooling quickly between her legs. She could feel Frederick’s arousal pressing against her center, and she felt herself arch her back towards him.

Frederick slipped a hand beneath her skirts, sliding his rough palm up over her stockings, over her garter, finding the bare skin at the top of her thigh. His fingers moved in slow circles, causing murmurs of desire to escape Veronica's lips.

She found herself reaching for him, fumbling with the buttons of his breeches, desperate to feel him. Frederick moved her hand away gently. "Slow down," he murmured. "There's no rush."

Veronica could manage little more than a frustrated moan in response. Because now Frederick's fingers were digging hard into her flesh, her need for him was almost unbearable. "I want you," she whispered. "I want to feel you."

Frederick's slipped a finger inside her, causing her to cry out loudly at the unfamiliar sensation. He moved slowly in and out, causing her pleasure to build in a way that seemed to engulf her whole body. She felt herself rocking harder and harder against his palm, desperate for more. When he withdrew his hand, Veronica moaned loudly in frustration. Frederick pulled her into a deep kiss, swallowing the sound between his lips.

With one hand, he reached down to unbutton his breeches, and slowly positioned the tip of his manhood against her opening. Veronica looked down, breathless at the sight of his length pressing against her. Frederick reached for her hand and guided it to his shaft, showing her how to run her fingers lightly over the silky skin. Veronica found herself bucking her hips, desperate to feel him inside her.

Frederick lifted her hand away from his body and laced his fingers through hers. With his other hand, he cupped her cheek

in his broad palm. “It may hurt a little the first time,” he murmured. “Try to relax.”

Veronica nodded faintly. Obediently, she drew in a long breath, tried to relax, but the sense of anticipation, and the blatant desire that threatened to overwhelm her, made such a thing near impossible.

Slowly, Frederick eased inside her and she clung to his shoulders, her fingers digging in hard at a sudden flash of pain.

Frederick stilled and looked into her eyes. “All right?”

Veronica nodded. She tried for a long inhalation, but her breath was ragged with desire. Already, the pain was beginning to give way to something else; something far more indefinable. Something far more pleasant.

Slowly, carefully, Frederick began to move inside her, drawing a deep moan from Veronica’s lips. He gripped her hand, planting it above her head as he slid in and out, gradually increasing his speed.

Veronica clung hard to his shoulder with her other hand, closing her eyes as pleasure began to rise within her, deeper this time, and somehow, almost unplaceable. She heard herself crying out, moaning each time Frederick thrust into her. But her own voice sounded far away. She could barely make sense of where she was. Barely registered the creaks of the old building around them, or the clatter of cartwheels and horse hooves coming from the street outside the window. The pleasure felt all-engulfing, almost unbearable in its intensity.

Frederick reached down and touched the pearl between her legs, triggering a climax that made her cry out his name. Moments later, Frederick groaned out his own release and she clung hard to him, pulling him close as though trying to tether herself to him. He ran his fingers through her tangled hair and pulled her into a kiss.

For long moments, they lay entwined in each other's arms, allowing their breathing to slow, and the remnants of their pleasure to dissipate. Veronica closed her eyes, feeling his chest rise and fall beneath her head.

Where did they go from here, she wondered? After three weeks of games and mistakes and uncertainty, their marriage had been consummated. Husband and wife in every sense. Were they to finally stop denying the way they made each other feel? Perhaps now they could finally accept their desire for each other, rather than trying to pretend it did not exist.

Frederick pulled himself into sitting. He buttoned his breeches and tucked in his shirt, raking his fingers through his blond hair. He stood and looked down at Veronica. Under his gaze, she sat quickly and pulled her skirts down over her damp skin.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his voice oddly devoid of expression.

Veronica smiled slightly. It seemed an odd question. She was fairly certain her behavior had left no doubt as to how much she had enjoyed what they had just done. “Yes,” she said.

Are you? she wanted to ask. Because she knew how hard it had been for Frederick to open up to her the way he had today.

No doubt the emotion of all he had shared was still raw.

But Veronica said nothing. Because there was a look in her husband's eyes that she was coming to know all too well. A look that told her her questions would not be welcome. A look that said that everything they had just shared was nothing more than a mistake.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Frederick tucked in his shirt and raked a hand through his tousled hair, aware he was being painfully deliberate in not looking Veronica's way. His heart was still thundering hard from their coupling; every inch of his body pulsing with energy. He was afraid of what he might do, might think, might feel, if he looked at his wife right now.

He closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a breath to steady himself. Then finally, he turned back to face her. "Are you ready to make your way home? The carriage is outside waiting for you."

Veronica raised her eyebrows. The neat coif on the back of her head had come almost completely undone, and dark coils of hair were spilling over her shoulders. Her cheeks were still flushed in the aftermath of her pleasure, her lips pink and slightly swollen. "What of you?" she asked. "Are you not coming with me?"

Frederick lowered his gaze—both to save himself from the scrutiny he could see in her eyes, and to lessen the urge to pull her back onto the couch and do it all again. "I would like to spend a little more time here at the gallery. Put a little more consideration into how we will display the pieces. Perhaps see them in a different light now it has begun to get dark."

The excuse sounded like complete rubbish, even to his own ears.

Still, he was a little surprised when Veronica took a step towards him and looked at him squarely. “No,” she said, with a firmness in her voice he had not heard before. “If you are staying, so am I. I will not allow you to just cast me aside, after what we just did.”

Frederick raised his eyebrows. It seemed his wife was developing a little confidence after all.

I suppose if she can manage a room full of excited children, she can handle one grumpy husband...

But he said, “I am not casting you aside, Veronica. I simply wish to stay at the gallery a little longer. The light...” He trailed off.

Veronica’s eyes softened. “Frederick, please... Do not lie to me. I know why you are doing this.” Her voice was gentle. “I know you never intended to take things this far between us. And I suspect you never wished to tell me about your mother, either. But there is no need to close down like this. Believe me, I do not think any less of you after everything you told me. In fact, I am impressed by your courage. I know it cannot have been an easy thing to speak of.”

Frederick swallowed down a fresh wave of emotion.

Veronica looked at him pleadingly. “Please do not push me away.”

He closed his eyes. She was right of course, at least in part. He had never intended to share his mother’s story with Veronica, lest she find out how broken and useless he really was. But he could not deny that speaking the truth had made the weight on his shoulders a little easier to carry. And the fact that she did not think any less of him... He could not deny there was a part of him that had been fearful of that happening.

He nodded faintly. Bent to pick up her bonnet, which had fallen to the floor beside the couch. He handed it to her and offered her his arm. “Let’s go home. The carriage is waiting.”

Veronica gave him a soft smile. Her narrow fingers curled around his elbow, bringing Frederick an unexpected feeling of comfort. “Thank you,” she murmured.

Frederick locked up the gallery, then led her out into the street, and helped her into the waiting coach. It was not until they were halfway down The Strand that he realized he had done all of that without uttering a single word. Veronica was sitting opposite him, not prying, not prodding, but looking at him with a very expectant look in her eyes. Clearly, she had questions. Questions about where they were to go to now that he had broken every rule he had set out for himself when he had made her his wife.

They were questions that would not be easy to answer—largely because he could barely make sense of the chaos of emotions that were roiling around inside him right now. But Frederick knew this silence would only get more uncomfortable the longer he let it fester.

“Veronica,” he began carefully, folding, then unfolding his hands, “I’m sorry. I should not have let things go so far.” His voice came out strained and stilted.

Veronica tilted her head, as though trying to see behind his eyes. “Is that truly what you believe?” she asked.

Frederick blinked, caught off guard by her response. “I…”

“Can you truly regret what happened?” she asked. “When it felt so…” her cheeks flushed endearingly, “well, so *wonderful*?”

Her words brought a faint smile to Frederick’s lips. In spite of himself, and all he was trying to splutter out right now, the fact that Veronica had called their union *wonderful* made him feel more than a little pleased with himself. Then again, had he ever really doubted such a thing? Her uninhibited moans had left little doubt about how much she had enjoyed being with him.

Somehow, that made this situation even more impossible.

“I only regret it because I am afraid of hurting you,” he admitted. “I can never be the kind of husband you wish for, Veronica. I can never give you love. I am just not that kind of man.” He smiled wryly. “Truly, I do not think I am even capable of such things anymore.”

Something almost imperceptible passed across Veronica’s eyes, but she blinked it away quickly. “I understand,” she said.

“And I am grateful for your honesty.” She swallowed visibly and folded her hands neatly in her lap. “I hope what happened between us will not affect our working together on the gallery.”

“No,” Frederick said quickly. “Never.”

Veronica gave him a small smile. “Good.” She opened her mouth to speak again, then seemed to change her mind. He could tell she still had more questions for him. Questions over where they went from here, perhaps. Over whether he would visit her bedchamber. Whether he planned to try for an heir, now they had successfully—perhaps a little *too* successfully, Frederick had to admit—consummated their marriage.

Even if he wanted to, Frederick knew he could not discuss his feelings with Veronica, because he could barely make sense of them himself. *A marriage in name only*—how spectacularly he had failed in that. Then he had promised himself that these covert visits to Veronica’s bedchamber were nothing but meaningless dalliances. But now... well he could hardly claim it meant nothing when he had just made her his wife in far more than name. And all he could think about was how much he wanted to do it again.

Despite his every attempt to make it otherwise, Frederick knew Veronica had managed to get beneath his skin—and creep dangerously close to his heart.



Veronica shook her head with a smile as she surveyed the classroom. The students had all filed out of the school—or rather, charged out like a pack of hungry wildebeests—for the

end of the day, leaving evidence of their artistic enthusiasm in their wake.

The classroom was in a fresh kind of chaos, with paper strewn across the desks and floor, lids put haphazardly back on the pots of paint, and pencils still strewn out across the table. Jars of murky water sat on the desks, with paint brushes sticking out of them. One had been overturned in the children's charge out the door, and water was pooling steadily beneath a desk at the back of the room.

Mary, one of the young teachers at the school, poked her head inside the classroom. "Oh dear," she said with a smile, "it seems your little artists have left their mark on the place."

Veronica laughed, tucking stray strands of hair back into her bun. She felt almost as untidy and frazzled as the classroom looked. "They have indeed. They are fast learners when it comes to drawing, but I am afraid they still have much to learn about cleaning up."

Mary smiled. "Just have to be firm with them, Your Grace. Strict instructions, given one step at a time. And do not let them even think about lifting their backsides from their chairs until they have done everything you ask." She shook her head with a smile. "Sometimes it is the only way they will learn."

"I shall try that, Mary. Thank you." Veronica bent to collect a few sheets of paper from the floor. "I feel as though I am still learning, just as they are."

"You are doing a fine job, My Lady," Mary said. "Whenever they children come out of your art classes, they are always

filled with enthusiasm. All they can talk about is what they were painting today, and when they will get to see you again.” She laughed. “It is something of a challenge to get them to focus on arithmetic afterwards.”

Veronica smiled. “I am glad to hear that. At least, I glad they are enthusiastic.” She gave her apologetic eyes. “I am sorry they are a handful for you.”

Mary waved her concerns away. “Let me clean all this for you, Your Grace. You can hardly be expected to do such a thing. We could never ask that of you.”

“Oh no,” Veronica said quickly, a flush of embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “Not at all. I am more than happy to do it myself.”

Mary hesitated. “Are you certain?”

“Of course.” Veronica smiled. “Please, go home and rest. You deserve it.”

Mary bobbed a curtsey. “Very well, madam. I shall see you at your next lesson.”

Mary’s footsteps click-clacked down the passage and Veronica turned her attention back to the children’s mess. Far from what Mary had suggested, Veronica was more than happy to tidy the classroom herself—what point was there in wanting to make the most of her privilege and give back to the world if she then made others tidy up after her and her wayward students?

Besides, cleaning the classroom helped keep her mind off other things. Well, one other thing in particular.

It had been two days since she and Frederick had finally consummated their marriage. And while Veronica appreciated her husband's openness about where they now stood, she could not help but wonder if perhaps he was not being entirely honest—with himself.

"I can never give you love," he had said. "I am just not that kind of man. Truly, I do not think I am capable of such things anymore."

Since she had learned about his mother's terrible death, Veronica had come to understand a little more of what was going on inside her husband's head. Losing a mother was painful enough; she could barely fathom what it must be like for Frederick to have lost the former Duchess in that way. Now, she understood a little more of why he saw the world so bleakly—and perhaps why he saw himself as so underserving of love and happiness. She knew he held himself responsible for his mother's suicide, and that left a deep ache in her chest—one she longed to take away.

If only he would let me.

But she also felt certain that Frederick did have it in him to love again. He *was* that kind of man—at least he could be. She had seen his warm, caring side on more than one occasion. But whether he had it in him to love *her*... well, that remained to be seen.

A knock at the door pulled Veronica away from her dangerous thoughts. She hurried to open it, grateful she had been interrupted before her mind took her to places she knew she ought not go.

“Good day, Your Grace.” The man standing in the doorway of the classroom was a stranger. He looked to be perhaps thirty, with an overgrown mop of dark hair and intense blue eyes. Stubble darkened his sharp chin, and his simple, faded clothes suggested he was of a much lower class than herself. “I do hope I am not interrupting anything.”

Oh, just my own musings about whether my husband will ever love me...

Veronica smiled. “No, not at all.”

“My name is George Roland,” said the man. “I wondered if I might have a moment of your time?”

“Of course. Please come in.” Veronica waved him into the classroom, which was still overrun with half-finished paintings and puddles of dirty water. “I apologize for the mess. I am afraid my students went a little wild this afternoon.”

Mr. Roland shook his head. “Not at all.” He smiled at her. “I’ve five children at home; I am more than used to a little chaos.” As he stepped into the classroom, Veronica realized he was carrying a small canvas with him, wrapped in a simple brown cloth to protect it.

Veronica nodded towards it. “You are an artist?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I confess that is why I am here.” Mr. Roland shuffled his weight between his feet, his free hand tapping edgily against his upper thigh. “I have heard of the gallery you and your husband are opening. In particular, I have heard you are willing to take a chance on artists who have not yet made a name for themselves.”

“That is correct,” said Veronica. She nodded towards the wrapped canvas. “Is this your work?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” He lowered his eyes shyly.

“Would you like to show it to me?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Fumbling with the cord tied around the cloth to keep it in place, Mr. Roland slowly unwrapped the canvas. He hesitated for a moment before turning it to face Veronica.

“Oh,” she murmured, “goodness.”

Like her husband, Mr. Roland was a portrait painter, and the canvas before her depicted a young child of about four or five with her back to the viewer. She was dancing down a narrow cobbled alley, her vibrant yellow dress making her stand out against her bleak gray surroundings. The girl peeked over her shoulder, revealing a cheeky smile—and plenty of her personality. The painting was so lifelike the child seemed to leap from the canvas.

“Is this your daughter?” Veronica asked.

Mr. Roland smiled. “Yes. That’s Lucy. My children are a great source of inspiration for me.” He gave her a hopeful look. “I wonder if you might consider her portrait for your gallery?”

Veronica nodded. “Indeed. Have you other pieces?”

“Oh yes.” Mr. Roland nodded enthusiastically. “I have a number of them. Or I could create something new, or...” He wrung his hands together, then dug them into his pockets, as though to stop himself fidgeting.

“May I take this piece home?” asked Veronica. “I would like to discuss the matter with the Duke before I give you an answer.”

“Of course, yes, yes. Thank you, Your Grace.” He covered the canvas in the cloth again and tied the cord around it in a messy bow. “My card is on the back on the canvas,” he told her. “Or would you rather I call on you again to hear your decision? Or I could...”

Veronica held up a hand to stop his dithering and gave him a gentle smile. “We shall get word to you as soon as we have made our decision,” she said warmly.

Mr. Roland nodded. “Thank you, Your Grace. From the bottom of my heart. This means...” He shook his head. “Well, the opportunity would mean everything to me. And my family.”

Veronica leaned the canvas up against the leg of the desk at the front of the classroom, out of reach of the children's mess. "May I ask why you chose to come here to the school rather than calling on my husband at Brownwood Manor?"

Mr. Roland smiled sheepishly. "Well, I have heard my fellow artists speak of you both, Your Grace," he admitted. "And if you do not mind me speaking so openly... I felt I would have better chance of success with the kind and gentle Duchess who teaches art to orphans than with the Duke who they say can be a little..."

"Ill-tempered?" Veronica finished. "Surly?"

Mr. Roland lowered his eyes. "Well, yes."

She laughed slightly. "Indeed."

Mr. Roland lowered his eyes in shame. "Forgive me, Your Grace. I did not mean to speak badly of your husband. I am more than grateful for the opportunity the two of you are providing."

Veronica shook her head dismissively. "There is no need to apologize. I understand."

I understand more than you could ever know...

Chapter Twenty-Three



By the time Veronica returned to Brownwood Manor, dusk was beginning to fall over the city. Long shadows lay over the garden and the house was filled with the mouthwatering aroma of roasting meat. Her stomach grumbled noisily as she climbed the stairs to her bedchamber, sending up a silent thanks that no one was around to hear it.

She had Sarah help her into a fresh gown for dinner, then made her way down to the dining room with the canvas in hand, excited to show Mr. Roland's painting to her husband. But when she stepped into the dining room, she found the Dowager Duchess already seated—and just one other place set at the table.

Veronica's face fell. "Frederick will not be joining us tonight?" she asked the Dowager Duchess as the footman pulled out her chair for her. "Again?"

Because this was the second night in a row that her husband had decided not to grace the dinner table with his presence.

"I am afraid not, my dear," said the Dowager Duchess. "He has not yet returned from his meeting with his accountant."

Perhaps matters are taking longer to resolve than he had hoped.”

Veronica pursed her lips. “I see.” She knew well that the Duke’s absence had nothing to do with accounting matters and everything to do with how much they had shared in the gallery two days ago. She handed Mr. Roland’s canvas to the footman, instructing him to take it to the parlor.

She thanked the server as he filled her wine glass, then lifted it to her lips and took a sip that was entirely too large. It seared her throat on the way down and she narrowly avoided breaking into a coughing fit.

Veronica could feel the Dowager Duchess’s eyes on her. “Is everything all right, my dear?” she asked. “Are things well between you and the Duke?”

Veronica hesitated. Carla Barnes was a shrewd and observant woman, and she knew her grandson better than anybody. Veronica knew she had been keeping a close eye on how things were progressing in the marriage—after all, she and the Dowager Marchioness had been entirely responsible for the thing. But she had also been conscious of keeping her distance, and not asking too many questions.

No doubt that was a skill she had learned from years of navigating her grandson’s surliness.

Tonight, Veronica felt the need to share. Her thoughts were circling so ceaselessly that she felt she might explode if she did not let a few of them out. “Frederick told me what happened to his mother,” she said.

The Dowager Duchess's eyebrows rose. "He did?" The surprise was more than a little evident in her voice.

Veronica nodded, turning her wine glass around by the stem. "I think he regrets doing so."

The Dowager Duchess smiled gently. "It may seem that way," she said, choosing her words carefully. "And perhaps there is even a part of him that does think he regrets it. But Veronica, dear, he has kept that information to himself for so many years, it can only do him good to share it." Her eyes glistened in the lamplight. "And I am so glad he chose to share it with you."

"I am glad he did too," Veronica said softly. "Although I am not sure it has helped him at all." She sighed. "I know he blames himself for what happened to his mother. And I cannot fathom what it must be like to carry such a burden." Her voice wavered as a sudden wave of emotion swelled up inside her. "I wish I could ease it for him somewhat. I wish I could help him."

"You are, my dear," said the Dowager Duchess. "Believe me, you are helping him more than you could know." Bowls of soup landed in front of them, and she picked up her spoon. "I know you cannot see it like I can because you have only known him a short time, but believe me, he is changing. Before he married you, it was enough of a challenge to get him just to leave his studio, let alone to get him out of the house. Honestly, I was beginning to give up hope that I would ever see him married."

Veronica smiled crookedly. She blew on a spoonful of soup then brought it to her lips. “How did you get him to come to Cambridge in the first place?”

The Dowager Duchess chuckled. “Through a tirade of endless badgering, my dear. A skill I have perfected over many years. And I am ever so glad that badgering worked. I am so grateful he found you.”

“Really?” Veronica was unconvinced. “He might be out of the house more now, but I am beginning to worry he might be doing that just to avoid me.”

The Dowager Duchess snorted. “Oh, that stubborn fool. Is that how he has made you feel?” She shook her head. “He really does need a stern talking to.” She patted Veronica’s wrist. “You are better for him than you could possibly know,” she assured her. She dipped her spoon into her soup and let out a soft laugh. “Three months ago, if I had told him he would be asking for his wife’s assistance to open the gallery, he would have told me I was mad.” She smiled to herself. “Sometimes he is just too much of a fool to realize his grandmother knows best.”



Escaping the dinner table, for the second night in a row, was not his finest moment. Frederick was well aware of that.

Last night, in an attempt to avoid his wife, he had spent the evening at the gallery. Had spent hours walking mindlessly up and down the passages, attempting to convince himself he was there to contemplate the curation of the paintings. What a mistake that had been. Every room in that Covent Garden townhouse made him think of his wife. Here was the room in

which she had spoken about Mrs. Lane's use of color, her passion and knowledge for her art evident with every word. There was the room in which she had sat beside him and listened patiently as he had told her of his mother's death. And there on that couch... Well, as if he needed any reminder of the way it had felt to be inside her; of the way her body had writhed beneath his own; of the way she had cried out his name as she had reached her climax.

No, he did not need any reminder of that at all.

And so tonight, Frederick had avoided the gallery. Tonight, he was ensconced in an enormous leather armchair at a gentleman's club in Mayfair that he had not visited for at least six years. The club was dimly lit, with just a single lamp flickering above the bar, and candles on each table. Now night had fallen, it felt like the perfect place to hide himself away from the world. Frederick brought his brandy glass to his lips and drank slowly, savoring its rich and heady flavor.

"Well, well, if it isn't the elusive Duke of Brownwood."

Frederick smiled wryly at the sight of the man coming toward him. Thomas Clarke, the Earl of Harford, had once been Frederick's close friend. They had spent many nights tucked away in this very same club, sitting in these very same arm chairs, and drinking this very same brandy. Frederick had little doubt that Harford had been haunting this place without pause for the past six years.

The Earl held out a meaty hand out for Frederick to shake, which he did, somewhat reluctantly. "It's good to see you, old man," said Harford. "This place has missed you."

Frederick chuckled humorlessly. "I am sure they have gotten by just fine without me."

"Well. *I* have missed you." There was a sincerity in Harford's voice. "I'm glad to see you out and about. It's been far too long."

Without waiting for an invitation, Harford sank into the arm chair opposite Frederick, his round stomach straining against the buttons of his waistcoat. He waved to the barman for a brandy. "So tell me, Brownwood, how is married life treating you?" He gave Frederick a toothy grin. "I do hope it is not the need to avoid your wife that has finally got you out of the house."

Frederick laughed a little too loudly. "Of course not." His words were so forced he was certain Harford could see the lie beneath them. But there was no way he was going to go into the matter.

Besides, how would he even begin to put such a thing into words? *I am avoiding my wife because I am afraid I am coming to care for her too much? I am afraid of how much I want to share when I am in her presence. I am afraid of how she makes me feel...*

"Married life is fine," he said instead.

Harford hummed to himself, a sly smile on his lips. Frederick raised his eyebrows. "What is that supposed to mean?"

The Earl shrugged. “Nothing really.” He pulled a thin tin box from his pocket and pulled out a cigar. He leaned forward toward the candle to light it. “Just that she has clearly had an effect on you.”

Frederick chuckled uneasily. “I don’t think so,” he said, well aware of how forced and inauthentic his words sounded.

Harford held out the cigar box to Frederick in offering. Frederick shook his head. “I’ve not seen you in this place in years,” said the Earl. “And now all of a sudden, you’re showing your face out in public again. So either you are desperate to escape your wife, or she has reminded you that life is for living. Not for hiding yourself away.”

Frederick forced a laugh. He waved a hand around the shadowed corner of the club he had managed to install himself in. “Some might argue I am still hiding myself away.”

Harford brought his glass to his lips with barely concealed satisfaction. “You can try and deny it all you want, Brownwood. But your wife is changing you for the better.” He brought the cigar to his lips and blew a long line of smoke up toward the ceiling. “What I can’t figure out is what you are doing here, wasting your night in the company of a sweaty, loud-mouthed Earl when you could be spending the night with a woman who cares for you.”

With a jolt, Frederick realized Harford was right. Being at home with Veronica was what he wanted. So why was he forcing himself to avoid her? Was he punishing himself for not doing enough to stop his mother’s suicide? Was that what he had been doing for the past six years? He could hardly make sense of it. All he knew was that he was a fool to be sitting

here in this starched and gloomy club when he had a beautiful wife waiting for him at home.

“Goddammit, Harford” he said. “You are right.” He tossed back the last of his brandy and got abruptly to his feet. He held out a hand for the Earl to shake. “Thank you, Tom. You are a wise man.”

The Earl chuckled. “Not really. It just seems that way to you because you’ve been acting like such a damn fool.”



“Will you be going to your studio tonight, Your Grace?” asked Sarah as she undid the row of tiny buttons at the back of Veronica’s gown. “Would you like me to take a mint tea in there for you?”

“No, not tonight.” Veronica was not sure she could bring herself to look at her work tonight. Tonight, she needed a pause from thinking about the gallery and her paintings, and the garden at Cambridge she was committing to her canvas—all those things that reminded her of her husband. Everything felt far too confusing, and she felt utterly exhausted. Tonight, she just needed to try and sleep. “Will you have the tea brought up to my room instead?”

Sarah took Veronica’s nightgown from the chair and slipped it over her head. “Of course, madam.” She pulled the hairpins from Veronica’s hair, letting dark coils fall over her shoulders. She ran a brush through it lightly, then wound it into a thick plait. “I am sure those children are keeping you very busy at the school,” she said, a smile in her voice. “I’m not surprised you are in need of a good night’s rest.”

Veronica forced a smile. “Yes, something like that.”

Sarah set the brush on the nightstand. “Is there anything else you need, Your Grace?”

“No, thank you, Sarah. I shall see you in the morning.”

Her lady’s maid bobbed a curtsy and disappeared from the room, closing the door behind her.

Exhausted as Veronica was, her thoughts were racing, and she knew sleep was still far away. She took her shawl from the back of the chair and carried it to the window seat, collecting a book from her desk on the way past. She sat cross-legged on the window seat, but instead of opening the book, she pulled back the curtain to peer out into the dark garden. In spite of herself, she found herself thinking of Frederick. She knew all too well that he was rarely one to leave the house. Indeed, in the three and a half weeks of their marriage, he had never once suggested an outing beyond those were expected of them as part of their charity work. No evenings at the theater or dinners at restaurants, or even walks in the park.

Where has he disappeared to tonight? Was the thought of spending the evening with her truly so unbearable he would rather draw out a meeting with his accountant for as long as humanly possible?

There was a faint knock at the door. Veronica tugged her shawl around her shoulders, surprised at how quickly the cook had managed to rustle together a cup of mint tea. Perhaps she had just boiled the water for the Dowager Duchess.

“Come in,” she called.

The door clicked open and Veronica got hurriedly to her feet. Standing in the doorway, was not a maid with a teacup in her hands, but the Duke.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Veronica made her way toward him slowly toward her husband, half convinced he might flee if she approached him too suddenly. “Frederick?” It felt like something of a miracle that he had shown himself tonight. And even more of a miracle that he had chosen to do so in her bedchamber.

Without speaking, he closed the space between them and pulled her into a deep kiss. At once, Veronica’s body came alive, and she found herself pressing her body against his, digging her fingers into the wide bulk of his arms.

“Where have you been?” she asked breathlessly.

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I came home to see you.”

“You did?”

A smile flickered on his lips. “Is that not obvious?” He kissed her again, his tongue dueling hungrily with hers, before trailing his lips down her bare neck. “I am sorry I was not here for dinner. That was rude of me.”

Veronica met his lustful gaze. “I thought you were avoiding me.”

Something flickered across his eyes that told Veronica her guess was correct. But while he may have been avoiding her this evening, the urgency with which he yanked the shawl from her shoulders and tossed it onto the bed left her in no doubt as to how much he wanted her now. He tugged at the ribbon that held her nightgown closed. The neckline fell open, exposing the creamy swell of her breasts.

Frederick slipped a hand inside, skimming his hand over her warm skin. As he flicked his thumb against her nipple, Veronica murmured against his lips. Desire shot through her body, gathering between her legs.

Frederick took a step back. “I want to see you,” he said, his eyes raking over the soft curves of her hips. “All of you.”

Veronica’s heart began to thunder. For all her husband had seen of her; for all he had done to her, he was yet to see her body in its entirety. And the thought of standing them before him, with not a scrap of clothing to cover her, made her suddenly overwhelmed with nerves.

“You first,” she heard herself say, her voice coming out softer than she had intended.

A curious smile lit up Frederick’s face, as though he was trying to determine if she was being bold and forthright, or impossibly shy. “As you wish,” he said huskily.

He slipped his jacket from his broad shoulders and let it fall to the floor, then tugged off his cravat in one swift movement. His eyes not leaving Veronica's, he slowly began to undo the row of buttons on his embroidered waistcoat. Soon, it followed his jacket to the floor.

Frederick stepped out of his boots, then pulled his shirt over his head, taking a step closer to Veronica. She felt her eyes drawn to the smooth plane of his chest; to the sparse curls of hair that snaked down over his stomach. Her fingers itched to touch them, but she held herself back, instead clenching fistfuls of her nightgown and she kept her hands by her side.

Frederick's hand paused at the button of his breeches. Already, his arousal was straining against the fabric, and the sight of it sent a thrill through Veronica's body. The ache between her legs began to intensify. She heard her breathing grow louder and more rapid.

Slowly, Frederick unbuttoned his breeches and stepped out of them. He stood naked before Veronica, his body shadowed and bronze in the lamplight.

Veronica swallowed heavily. Her husband was impossibly beautiful, she realized. Some part of her had known that already, of course, but as he stood here before her, with every inch of his skin on display, she ached for him with every inch of her being. She reached a hand out towards his chest, suddenly desperate to touch him, but he caught her fingers in his own.

"Your turn," he said, his voice low.

Veronica could feel her chest heaving. Could hear her breath coming loud and fast. She felt a faint tremor go through her body as she gripped the hem of her nightgown. She paused there for a moment, trying to gather her courage. Catching the look of blatant lust in Frederick's eyes, she slipped the nightgown up over her head and let it fall to the floor beside the pile of his clothes.

For a moment, her husband stood motionless, as though drinking her in. "Veronica," he whispered. "You are beautiful. So beautiful." He took a step toward her; tentative, as though there was a part of him that was afraid she was not real. He reached for her and traced his fingers down her cheek, then continued down over her shoulder. Aching slowly, he traced the narrow path between her breasts, before circling her nipples and drawing a low moan from Veronica's throat.

He continued down towards her stomach, then glided his fingers lightly over the apex between her legs. Veronica gasped and took an instinctive step toward him. Frederick pulled her close, sliding his palm over her bare backside. Veronica felt his hardness pressing against her stomach. She dug her fingers into his upper thighs, desperate for more of him.

"My wife," he murmured against her lips. "I want to take you to bed."

He reached for her hand, then led her over to the canopied bed in the center of the room. That enormous, palatial bed Veronica had slept in alone every night since becoming the Duchess of Brownwood. She had resigned herself to sleeping alone in it every night for the rest of her life.

Perhaps I was wrong.

Before they reached the bed, Frederick scooped her up into her arms, her legs wrapping instinctively around his hips. She felt his manhood pressing against her center, and she felt herself gripping hard to his shoulders, trying to draw herself even nearer to him. Heat pulsed desperately between her legs.

Frederick walked her toward the bed and laid her down on the mattress. He leaned over her and kissed her so deeply that her thighs parted without the thought even entering her head. Frederick ran a broad palm up from her ankle, over her knee, moving up the inside of her thigh. Veronica felt her back arch. Felt herself writhe beneath him, desperate for more of him.

“Please,” she heard herself whisper.

Her nerves had dissipated, she realized. There was no longer a single part of her that felt too exposed beneath her gaze. Instead, there was something thrilling about feeling a man’s eyes on her like this. Something thrilling about the look in Frederick’s eyes that left her in no doubt as to how much he wanted her.

“Please, what?” Frederick whispered back at her. “I want to hear you tell me what you want. I want to hear you say it.”

Almost without thought, Veronica pushed against his shoulder to shove him onto his back. And she found herself straddling him, the needs of her body washing away any rational thought. She lowered herself slowly onto his hardness. The deep penetration was far more intense than last time, and she heard herself moaning loudly.

Frederick grinned. “You are growing in confidence, aren’t you, my Duchess.”

He reached for her breasts and squeezed them firmly, Veronica’s reply swallowed by her moan. She began to move her hips, faster and faster, her pleasure building to an intensity she could barely fathom. Frederick gripped her hips and matched her rhythm, his lips parting with desire as he watched her moving above him.

There was something thrilling about sitting astride such a strong and powerful man; feeling him inside her, impossibly deep. And there was something equally thrilling about the knowledge that, any time he chose, he could throw her onto her back and reassert control in an instant.

Veronica could hear herself gasping, moaning. They were not alone in the house as they had been at the gallery, and she was distantly aware that people could hear her. She tried to swallow down her cries.

Frederick sat up suddenly, and the change in angle caused a moan she could not stifle. He kissed her hard, pulling her chest hard against his own. “I want to hear you,” he whispered. “Let me hear you.”

In response, Veronica moaned out loudly and as her climax crashed over her, she heard herself cry out his name. Frederick pulled her into a deep kiss, his lips against her own as he reached his own peak. His body shuddered against hers and they held each other tightly for long, wordless moments.

Veronica felt his chest rising and falling against her own, their bodies slick and warm, arms and legs intertwined. Frederick ran gentle fingers through her hair, which had spilled out of its plait and now hung tangled over her shoulders. Veronica closed her eyes, losing herself in the comfort of her husband's embrace. Gradually, their breathing began to slow.

Frederick shuffled back on the mattress, easing himself out of her. He stood up from the bed and fumbled in the half-light for the shirt he had cast onto the floor.

Veronica tugged the blankets around her shoulders. "You are leaving?" she asked, feeling a tug of disappointment.

Frederick nodded. "Yes. I will give you back your own space." He did not look at her as he stepped into his breeches.

Veronica gritted her teeth, biting back an irritated response. She could expect no more than this, she reminded herself. After their dalliance in the gallery, Frederick had been painfully honest about what he was willing to give her—no love; he had made that abundantly clear. She had no right to be angry.

"Very well," she said, as evenly as she could manage. "I hope I will see you at breakfast. I have a painting from a new artist I would like to show you."

"Oh?" Frederick's eyes glimmered with interest. He stepped into his boots. "I look forward to seeing it." He gathered the rest of his clothes from the floor and bundled them into his arms. He stepped up to the bed and leaned toward Veronica as if to kiss her, before changing his mind and pulling away. He

straightened and cleared his throat. “Sleep well, Veronica. And yes, to answer your question, we shall see each other at breakfast.” He gave her that stilted, brusque nod she had come to know so well. And before she could make sense of it, he was gone.

Veronica lay back on the pillow, listening to his footsteps disappear down the passage. His bedchamber door clicked closed, and then there was silence on the top floor of the house. No doubt when the maid had arrived at the door with the tea, she had heard what was going on inside and had headed straight back to the kitchen. Now her pleasure had dissipated, the thought made Veronica’s cheeks hot with shame.

She closed her eyes, trying to calm her whirring thoughts. Her body was still buzzing with the remnants of her climax, and she could feel a dull but pleasurable ache between her legs. She found her fingers tracing across the warmth Frederick had left on the sheets.

“I can never give you love. I am just not that kind of man. Truly, I do not think I am capable of such things anymore.”

The feel of it left her with a sense of unfathomable emptiness.

Perhaps she had been right when she had imagined she would spend every night alone in this cursed bed.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Frederick had finished the portrait of his mother that would hang at the front of the gallery. He stood with his back to the door of his studio, taking in the finished piece, which sat on his easel. He felt a small smile on his lips.

Fine work, even if I do say so myself.

He had painted the former Duchess not at the age she had been when she had died, but rather as he remembered her during his childhood. How much simpler life had been back then. He had been so carefree and happy, spending his life either running around the garden or with a paintbrush in hand, with barely a thought of his impending dukedom and the responsibilities that came with it.

Responsibilities like taking a wife...

He found himself wondering what would his mother think of the way he was living his life. Uncomfortably, he realized he knew the answer to that question. No doubt she would be proud of the work he was doing to bring the gallery to life. But he was also sure she would be devastated to know of the reclusive and self-punishing manner he had been living in.

Strange that I am only thinking about these things now.

For years, his grandmother had told him his mother would wish for him to get on with his life and be happy. Frederick had merely brushed her words aside, convincing himself she was wrong. But now... something felt different.

Was it the fact that the opening of the gallery was nearly upon them?

Perhaps.

But deep inside, Frederick knew it was more than that.

I know it is my wife who is causing me to think in this way. To see a life that is filled with more than just grief and regret.

He turned at the sound of a knock at the door. He felt his heart skip a beat, expecting Veronica back from the school. He realized he was looking forward to hearing her latest stories about her students. But it was his grandmother who stood in the doorway.

“Oh.” She brought her hands to her heart at the sight of the portrait. “Oh, Frederick, it is wonderful.” She took a step closer to the easel, examining the painting closely. “You have captured her essence perfectly.”

“I am glad you think so. Painting from memory was something of a challenge, but I did not wish to use one of her earlier

portraits as guidance. It did not feel as though it would be my own work.”

A warm smile of reminiscence spread across the Dowager Duchess’s face. “You have done a fine job. Your mother would be so proud.” Her voice wavered slightly on the last words.

“It will hang in the entrance hall of the gallery,” Frederick told her. “So the moment people step inside, they will think of Mother and her work. Perhaps then people will come to remember her for art, and her dream of opening a gallery to support other artists, rather than the scandals she lived through, or the way she died.”

Frederick swallowed heavily, suddenly overcome with emotion. Though he knew his mother’s death—and apparently scandalous life—was rarely spoken of throughout the *ton* these days, he was certain there were many people who remembered. His mother deserved far more than that. And he would see to it that she got it.

The Dowager Duchess wrapped her bony fingers around his upper arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “It sounds wonderful,” she said. “Now. What do you think about a little afternoon tea in the garden with your old grandmother?”

Frederick eyed her warily. “What is it you wish to talk to me about?”

The Dowager Duchess gave a hearty, dismissive, as though his fears were not entirely warranted. “Nothing at all, my dear. I’ve just barely had a moment alone with you since you married. I would just like a little time to hear about your life.”

“Ah,” said Frederick, closing the door of the studio. “So you wish to pry.”

“Pry? Me?” His grandmother snorted. “Not at all. I would not dream of it.” She walked with Frederick down the passage towards the door to the terrace. “But if there is anything that *you* would like to discuss, then of course I am always here to listen.”

Frederick gave her a wry smile. “I see.”

Somewhat optimistically, his grandmother had already requested afternoon tea for two to be brought to the garden terrace at the back of Brownwood Manor. A large teapot stood at the center of the table, along with several plates of cakes and biscuits. The Dowager Duchess had clearly planned to lure a little gossip out of him with a sugar overload.

He looked at her with raised eyebrows. “Grandmother. You know I do not have much of a sweet tooth.”

“Yes, yes, I know, you grumpy old thing.” She waved a dismissive hand in his direction and sat neatly at the table as the footman pulled out her chair. “But you simply must try this gingerbread. The cook has truly outdone herself. I think even you might like it.”

Knowing there was little point protesting, Frederick sat opposite his grandmother and allowed the servers to fill his teacup. When they were both seated and the food had been served, the Dowager Duchess dismissed the staff, leaving the two of them alone in the garden. It was a warm afternoon; the

last one of the summer, Frederick guessed. Or at least, hoped. He had only been out here two minutes, and already the heat was making him irritable.

Or perhaps that is the fear of whatever it is my grandmother plans to interrogate me about...

“Well, Grandmother?” he pressed. “What is you wish to know?”

The Dowager Duchess took an enormous bite of a cream cake, then dusted powdered sugar from her lips. “Believe it or not, I really did wish to just have a little time alone with you, my dear. Find out how you were faring.” She sipped her tea and gave him a small smile over the top of her cup. “I hear you told Veronica what happened to your mother.”

Frederick brought his cup to his lips. “Yes. I did.”

His grandmother smiled gently. “I am glad of it, my dear. Sometimes it is good to speak of these things. However horrible they may be. It is not healthy to just let them fester inside us.”

For long moments, Frederick did not speak. He had not intended to tell Veronica anything about his mother. Ever. The shame and regret was far too great for him to ever wish to speak about it. The truth had just come out in a rush of emotion after he had seen the painting of Mrs. Lane’s son.

He nodded faintly. “I know, Grandmother. But it is not easy.”

He could not deny that speaking of his mother's death—for the first time in many years—had eased the weight on his shoulders. He no longer felt as though he had to hide things from his wife. She now knew of his greatest regret—how he had failed his mother—and still she had shown him warmth and affection.

But it was warmth and affection he felt unable to return. Even after he had raced home from the gentleman's club to be with Veronica—and after they had engaged in such passionate lovemaking—he had still felt himself drawn into his shell, even in the face of his best intentions. Speaking of the emotions roiling around inside him terrified him. Not least because to speak of them, he would have to examine them. And he was more than a little afraid of what he would find if he delved too deeply into his own mind. Self-loathing, certainly. A damaged, unfixable man.

“I know it is not easy, Frederick,” his grandmother said. “Nothing you have gone through has been. But that does not mean you cannot find a way to be happy.”

Impulsively, he reached for a piece of gingerbread, more for an excuse not to talk than out of any desire to actually taste the thing. His grandmother watched him closely as he took a bite.

“What do you think?” she said, the moment it passed his lips.

Frederick chewed and swallowed. He had to admit, the gingerbread was rather divine, with an intense yet delicate mix of spices that lingered on his tongue. “It's good,” he said.

His grandmother gave an airy life. “Oh Frederick, that is so like you. This gingerbread is a gift from Heaven. It is far more than just *good*.”

He raised his eyebrows. “A gift from Heaven?”

His grandmother chuckled. Then the look in her eyes intensified again. “You are different around her, you know. I can see it.”

Frederick nodded resignedly. He knew his grandmother was right. Since Veronica had come into his life, he *had* felt different. He had not woken up each morning with overwhelming dread pressing down on him, but rather with a sense of curiosity for what the day might bring.

And yes, mixed in with that curiosity was also a hint of fear at what being around Veronica might cause him to do, to say. At the way she might cause him to feel. Because somewhere at the back of his mind, in a place he was trying very hard not to look at, Frederick knew he had the capacity to fall in love with Veronica.

“You know your wife could make you happy, don’t you, my dear?” said the Dowager Duchess. “You just have to let her.”

Frederick used his fork to break off another piece of cake, but he did not bring it to his lips. Somewhere deep inside, he knew everything his grandmother had said was right. But his grief and sadness had been a part of him for so long that he was almost afraid to rid himself of it. A part of him was afraid of who he would be without it.

“I do not know if I can do that, Grandmother.”

“*Nonsense,*” he expected the Dowager Duchess to say, “*who would ever choose to be unhappy?*” But his grandmother just reached across the table and placed a hand on his wrist. “I know it is difficult, my dear. But if you can find the courage to let down those walls you have built around yourself, your life could be more wonderful than you ever imagined. A loving wife... children...”

She looked at him pointedly, and Frederick knew his grandmother’s comment was an attempt at finding out whether he and Veronica had yet consummated their marriage. He kept his face even, determined to give nothing away.

Frederick could not deny that since he had begun to visit Veronica’s bed, the thought of children had been playing on his mind. In the past, he had not for a moment believed he would ever be a father. The very thought had filled him with dread and terror. But now, somehow, it did not seem quite so horrifying. The idea of having a child with Veronica was almost... well... exciting.

“I know that kind of life is what your mother would want for you,” the Dowager Duchess said gently. “It is what I want for you too. Besides,” she met Frederick’s eyes, “do you not think your lovely wife deserves better than to have to put up with day after day of your grumpy old self?”

Frederick sighed. “She does,” he agreed.

“If you ask me,” his grandmother said, reaching for a large piece of gingerbread, “that young lady deserves a statue in

Hyde Park.”

And a smile came to Frederick’s lips. Because he could not create a statue of his wife to place in Hyde Park. But he could create something almost as good.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Veronica had had the distinct feeling that she was being watched. On more than one occasion.

As she had sat on the terrace reading her book last week, she had felt eyes on her, but when she had turned, there had been no one there. The same thing had happened when she had been sitting in the drawing room with an embroidery sampler a few days later. She had been fairly certain it was her husband she had caught a glimpse of when the figure had darted into the next room.

“Spying on me, are you?” she had asked him with a teasing smile when he had appeared at her bedchamber door that night. *“You know if you wish to come and see me, there is no need to hide.”*

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Frederick had said, in the world’s worst attempt at lying.

“Is that so?”

But then he had pulled her nightgown over her head and carried her to the bed, and Veronica had forgotten what she

had even asked him in the first place.

The third time, when she had felt him watching her while she was sitting down in the parlor for a cup of tea, she had sprung to her feet and raced down the passage to catch him. Had glimpsed him tucking his sketchbook inside his jacket, before he feigned surprise at seeing her and spluttered out some rubbish about looking for a lost pencil.

So he is painting a portrait of me. The realization brought a smile to Veronica's face. Made something swell in her chest. Something about the thought of Frederick creeping around the house to sketch her likeness—and doing a rather dreadful job of hiding it—was impossibly endearing. Perhaps the fact that he would go to such trouble for her meant he was beginning to truly care for her. As she was him.

Veronica knew there was no point in trying to deny it. In spite of her best intentions, she was beginning to grow feelings for her husband. How could she do otherwise when he had been so warm and affectionate of late? And when he came to her bedchamber each night and drew such pleasure from her body?

These feelings were dangerous, yes. But something had been set in motion, and Veronica had no thought of how to stop it.

“Straight to the studio again, Your Grace?” asked Sarah, when Veronica arrived home from visiting her sister later that week. Her nimble fingers began to work at the buttons down the back of her mistress's fine woolen dress.

“Yes, thank you, Sarah.”

Veronica's pieces for the gallery were coming together well. Two of the five were completed: a scene incorporating the Cambridge country house, and a close-up depiction of the butterflies in the garden. Tonight, she planned to work on her favorite painting: a scene that focused on the untamed greenery that grew at the back of the Cambridge garden.

The gallery was due to open in a month, and the thought of it filled Veronica with excitement. Frederick had agreed to show George Roland's paintings, and he, along with the other artists, were delivering new pieces to Brownwood Manor almost daily. Seeing the new pieces arrive, and discussing with Frederick how best to exhibit them was a great thrill. But not as thrilling as the thought of seeing her own work on display.

"Very good, Your Grace," said Sarah. "I'm looking forward to seeing your paintings, if you don't mind me saying." She helped Veronica into the old day dress she often wore for painting. Even when wearing the former Duchess's painting smock, Veronica was still something of a messy artist, and she lived in constant fear of damaging one of the fine—and ridiculously costly—gowns her husband had had made for her.

Veronica smiled at Sarah in the mirror. "The paintings are nearly done. I shall show you them all once they are finished."

"Very good, madam. Would you like your dinner brought up to the studio again?"



Several hours later, Veronica put down her brush and stretched her arms over her head. The night had flown by, as she had

stood at the easel, crafting delicate coils of ivy around the thick trunks of the oak trees that stood in the foreground of her painting. A half-touched plate of roast lamb and vegetables sat on the table beside her. Veronica picked up a piece of carrot with her fingers and took a mindless bite, her eyes not leaving the canvas.

The house was quiet now. In her enthusiasm to work on the paintings, Veronica had neglected to close the curtains, and the dark plain of the garden stretched out behind the glass. She made her way over to the window and tugged the curtains closed.

The fact that Frederick had not come to her tonight, as he had begun to do most nights, suggested he too was working on his latest piece.

Veronica was suddenly overcome with a need to see her husband. She slipped off the painting smock and pulled her shawl around her shoulders. She took the lamp from the mantel and stepped out into the dark passage.

The glow of light from under the door of her husband's studio told her he was indeed hard at work. She knocked softly.

“Frederick. It's me.”

In response, she heard a flurry of movement, and the legs of the easel squealing against the floorboards. When Veronica opened the door, she saw Frederick turning the easel—and the painting—towards the wall, to keep them out of her sight.

She came towards him with a smile. “Why so secretive?”

He grinned, moving to stand between her and the easel. “Well, if I told you that, it would not be a secret any longer.”

Frederick was wearing nothing but dark blue breeches and an open-necked shirt, his sleeves rolled to his elbows and his hands and forearms speckled with paint. His feet were bare, and his fair hair tousled. At the sight of him, dressed so casually, so lost in his work, Veronica felt a tug of desire.

Grinning, she attempted to dart past him, in hope of catching a glimpse of the easel. Frederick caught her tightly in his arms. “Now, now. Don’t you know it is rude to see an artist’s work before they are ready to show you?” His eyes glinted in the lamplight.

“I let you see my work,” she reminded him coyly. “Besides, I am your partner in this gallery. If this is a piece you are planning to exhibit, it is *most* important that I see what it is.”

Frederick’s gaze traveled from her eyes to linger on her lips. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” Veronica said with mock seriousness. “That is so.” The look of blatant desire in his eyes caused heat to bloom between her legs. She wanted him, yes, but more than that, she wanted to see that smile on his face again. Wanted to hear that laugh. Wanted a glimpse of that warm-hearted man she knew hid behind her husband’s rigid façade. The man she was beginning to fall in love with.

“Might I remind you,” he said, a smile playing on his lips, “that you have also forbidden me from seeing the paintings you are working on for the gallery?”

Veronica grinned. “Well. That is different.”

“Is it, now?”

“Very different.”

“Why, exactly?”

She shrugged. “Because I said so.” She tried to dart past him again. This time, before Frederick could catch her, she latched her hand around the paintbrush that was poking out from behind his easel. And before she could even think about what she was doing, she had painted a wide blue stripe across the front of his shirt.

Frederick looked down at the paint, then back at her, his lips parted and his eyebrows raised. “You did *not* just do that.”

Veronica began to giggle. She had managed to paint right across the open neck of his white shirt, leaving a wild blue streak across his chest.

Frederick wrestled the paintbrush from her hand. He dipped it back in the pallet, then ran it across Veronica’s cheek.

“Frederick!” she gasped. “What are you doing?!”

He grinned, his gray eyes glittering. “Perhaps you ought to have thought of that before you started this little game.” He painted another long streak down her neck.

Veronica tried to grab the paintbrush, but Frederick lifted it above his head to prevent her from reaching it. Impulsively, she lurched towards the pallet and smeared her hand across it, before planting her palm squarely against Frederick’s cheek.

“Oh... You...” He began to laugh. “You are going to pay for that.”

Veronica stood on her tiptoes so her nose grazed his. She giggled at the sight of the colorful swirl down the side of his jaw. “Make me.”

Frederick wrapped a firm arm around her waist to prevent her from escaping, then used his free hand to scoop up messy fingerfuls of paint from the palette. He ran his hand down Veronica’s neck, pausing at the top of her nightgown. In one movement, he pulled the offending item of clothing over her head, and continued to drag his hand down her body, leaving colorful smears of paint over her breasts, her stomach, all the way down her legs.

“Frederick,” she gasped.

He stood close to her, grinning against her lips. “I warned you,” he said, light in his voice. “But you didn’t listen.”

Veronica reached for his shirt and tugged it over his head. She pushed her body close to his, transferring some of the paint from her bare chest to his. With one hand, Frederick reached down to unbutton his breeches, then he pushed them down and kicked them aside.

With her paint-covered hand, Veronica reached down to touch his stiff manhood, drawing a groan from his lips that she felt deep inside her. She took a step backwards towards his easel, drawing him along with her, until he grabbed her hand and began to laugh.

“Are you *still* trying to see my painting?” he demanded.

Veronica shrugged. “Perhaps.”

He laughed long and low, the sound bringing her as much joy as the sound of his pleasure had. “*You* are trouble.” He kissed her hard. “No one suspects it because you are so quiet and sweet and unassuming. But I know the truth,” he teased. Then kissed her again. “I know who you really are.”

And I know who you really are. You are not the cold and unfeeling man you pretend to be. You are warm and loving and you allow your wife to cover you in paint...

Frederick kissed her hard, wrapping his hands around her thighs and lifting her into his arms. Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around his waist, her body aching for his. He planted her on the table in the corner of the room and pushed her thighs apart. He dropped to his knees in front of her and began lashing her with his tongue. Veronica gripped the edges of the table and tossed her head back, unable to hold back a loud

moan. Every inch of her body felt alight, blazing, in the most pleasurable and dizzying way. With Frederick's tongue moving against her—slow then fast, then achingly slow again—she could feel her climax careening up at a rapid speed. Her breathing grew ragged, and her cries of pleasure grew louder, unrestrained.

Moments before her climax hit, Frederick stood up.

“No,” Veronica gasped. “No, please. Don't stop.” He grinned, pulling her into a kiss. Veronica could taste herself on his tongue, and it only intensified her need for him.

“I think you deserve to wait a little longer,” Frederick said against her lips. “After the way you have behaved today.” He pulled her off the table and turned her around so her back was to him. Gently, he nudged her forward, so her paint-covered palms were planted against the table. Veronica could feel his member nudging against her opening from behind and she felt her hips bucking backwards, craving more of him. With a firm thrust, Frederick plunged inside her, making Veronica cry out in a burst of intensely pleasurable pain.

“I warned you,” he grunted, as he began to move in and out. “I told you it was rude to try and spy on another artist's work.”

Veronica gasped down her breath. “If this is my punishment...” she let out a low moan, “I shall be sure to do it again.”

Frederick chuckled and thrust into her harder, one hand reaching around her body to cup her breast. He pinched her

peaked nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and she gasped loudly.

The pleasure this time was deeper and more intense than she had ever experienced; seemed to come from somewhere utterly unplaceable. Veronica felt it engulfing every inch of her body. She closed her eyes as her climax erupted, making stars dance behind her eyes. She was dimly aware of Frederick's arm wrapped around her. Dimly aware of his own loud groans as her climax triggered his. And she was dimly aware of the deep, consuming kiss he pulled her into as her breathing began to slow.

Frederick pulled out of her and turned her back to face him. He lifted her onto the table and pulled her body close to his. Veronica opened her eyes and rested her forehead against his. His face and body were streaked in red, blues and greens, and she could see the fingerprints on his shoulder where she had clung to him so desperately. One glance down at her own body told her Frederick had left her in a similar state. Fresh giggles began to well up inside her.

Frederick's chest began to rise and fall with soft laughter. "Well," he said, "I never thought of doing *that* with this particular color palette."

Veronica grinned. "I hope Sarah does not mind me waking her up so she can fill me a bath."

Frederick chuckled. "You know these are oil paints. The color is likely to linger around for a while, even after a bath."

Veronica groaned through her laughter. “I have children to teach tomorrow. What am I going to tell them?”

Frederick reached onto the shelf and handed her a bottle of solvent. He grinned and kissed her lips again. “I’d strongly suggest anything other than the truth.”



Frederick lay up on his elbow, watching his wife curiously. She was reclined on her back, staring up at the canopy of her bed, a faint smile on her lips. Her cheeks were still flushed from the thorough ravaging he had just given her, and her dark hair lay tangled on the pillow. But she was not thinking of the passion they had just shared—not any more. Frederick could tell from the faraway expression in her eyes that her thoughts had moved elsewhere.

Absentmindedly, he traced a finger along her bare collarbone, smiling to himself at the hint of blue paint on her skin that she had not yet been able to scrub away. The morning after their little adventure in his studio, they had both turned up at the breakfast table with their faces still half-covered in paint. Frederick had been mightily impressed at his valet’s ability to pretend that nothing was out of the ordinary. His grandmother had not been quite so discreet.

“*What on earth has happened here?*” she had said, her tone—and self-satisfied smile—leaving no doubt in Frederick’s mind that she knew *exactly* what had happened. He had garbled out some rubbish about an accident with the easel, and quickly changed the subject.

“What are you thinking?” he asked Veronica now, his finger moving up to trace the curve of her jaw. How easy this had

become; these nights of bringing each other pleasure, and of curling up beneath the sheets together afterwards. Too easy, in fact. Though every grain in his body urged him to do so, Frederick had not yet found the will to spend the entire night with his wife. It felt too intimate, somehow. And yes, he could see the ridiculousness of that, given everything they had done. But it was a line he could not find the courage to cross. Veronica had never pushed him to stay, and for that, he was more than a little grateful.

She turned her head on the pillow to meet his eyes. “I’m thinking there is something I wish to show you,” she said.

“Oh?”

She sat up, letting the covers slide from her naked body. “I have finished my collection for the gallery. Would you like to see it?”

Frederick smiled. Beyond the initial sketches he had seen her working on the night they had first been together, he had not had a single glimpse of the paintings she was working on for the gallery collection. A part of him wondered if she was being deliberately cagey, on account of him refusing to show her his portrait. “I would love to see it,” he told her.

Veronica slipped out of bed. She reached for her robe, sliding it over her shoulders and knotting it at her narrow waist. Frederick stepped into his breeches and slid his shirt over his head, then followed her down the passage to her studio.

“Close your eyes,” said Veronica as she pushed on the door. Frederick obeyed, and she took his hand in hers, leading him

inside. “All right,” she said. “You can look now.”

Frederick opened his eyes and let out his breath. Five completed paintings were leaning up against the wall of her studio, each portraying a wild element of the garden at the country house in Cambridge. There was the house, almost dwarfed by the greenery surrounding it; there was the rose garden, depicted in an explosion of color; and there was the dark and shadowed back corner of the garden, where the trees and undergrowth grew the wildest. The collection had an otherworldly essence to it, almost as though the images came from a fairy tale. The garden at Cambridge had always felt like that to him as a child: as though it might be imbued with magic. After just a single visit to the place, Veronica had managed to capture the feeling of the place perfectly.

“Do you recognize this tree?” she asked him, pointing to the fourth painting with a cheeky smile on her lips.

Frederick frowned, then chuckled as the realization came to him. His eyes shone. “I believe that is the offending tree where our grandmothers conspired to have us married.”

Veronica raised her eyebrows. “Offending tree?”

“Indeed. If the two of us had not been so hidden by the damn thing, I would never have had to ravish you so thoroughly that only marriage could save you.”

Veronica laughed. “I see.” She took a step closer to him, then wrapped her arms around his waist. She looked up to meet his eyes. “The official title of the piece is ‘Wilderness’. But I like to call it ‘Avoiding a Scandal.’”

Frederick could not hold back a hearty laugh. He tossed his head back, feeling laughter well up from deep inside him. How he had missed laughing like this. And how grateful he was to his wife for reminding him he had the ability to do so. Affection for her flooded him, and suddenly he could not tear his eyes away from her. “Oh goodness, Veronica, I—” He stopped abruptly. Stepped away from her, his heart suddenly pounding.

I love you. How easily those words had risen to his lips. And how hard he had had to fight to keep them silent.

No. I cannot love her. Because if I love her, there is a chance I could lose her, like I lost my mother, and my heart would never survive such a thing.

Veronica was looking up at him expectantly, her blue eyes wide and her lips parted slightly. At once, Frederick wanted to both throw himself into her arms, and tear from the room and never look back.

She raised her eyebrows. “You, what, Frederick? Is everything all right?”

He swallowed, taking a moment to gather himself. “I think the pieces are wonderful,” he finished lamely. “I will have them taken to the gallery tomorrow.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven



“**G**oodness, this is so exciting,” the Dowager Duchess said as they rode in the carriage towards Covent Garden. Either she was oblivious to the tension between Frederick and Veronica, or—far more likely—determined to ignore it. “I cannot wait to see the place.”

After three months of planning, painting—and stumbling through a sometimes painfully awkward marriage, the opening of the gallery was upon them. Veronica was more than a little grateful that her husband’s grandmother was making the journey to the gallery with them. Frederick had been deliberate in taking the seat in the carriage opposite Veronica, rather than sitting beside her, and he was staring out the window with the intensity of a country-dweller who had never before seen London. But Veronica was determined not to let his coldness ruin the day.

Veronica gave the Dowager Duchess a strained smile. “I do hope you will like it. The artists we have chosen to exhibit are wonderfully talented.”

“I am sure I will simply love it, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess gushed. “And I am sure everyone else will too.”

“People are not supposed to *love* it, Grandmother,” Frederick said tautly. “We have chosen a number of pieces that push the boundaries of modern art. They are bound to elicit a number of different reactions. We want to encourage discussion, not blind love for the place.”

The Dowager Duchess snorted, shaking her head in frustration at her grandson’s saltiness. “Fine,” she huffed. “Then I am sure everyone will be *encouraged into discussion*.” She patted Veronica’s wrist, her bright smile returning. “I happen to know that Frederick has a surprise for you today, Veronica.” She looked pointedly at her grandson. “Is that not right, my dear?”

Frederick turned their way, managing to make eye contact with his wife for an entire tenth of a second. “Yes. That’s correct.”

“How lovely. I do like surprises.” But Veronica could hear the strain in her words. She felt quite certain that the surprise the Dowager Duchess was hinting at was the portrait of her she had tried to catch Frederick painting. Thoughts of it took her mind back to that dizzying night when they had ended up painting each other instead. How was it possible that the warmth and laughter they had shared that night had turned into this cold and awkward carriage ride?

At the back of her mind, Veronica knew the answer.

A week ago, when she had shown Frederick her paintings, he had been about to tell her he loved her.

She knew that knowledge ought to bring her joy. Never in her wildest of dreams had she ever dared to imagine Frederick

might actually fall in love with her. But right now, she felt anything but joy. Love was supposed to be a blissful, happy thing. It was not supposed to be feared.

Loving his wife should not turn a man into this closed-up and silent creature.

Veronica was glad when the carriage ground to a halt in front of the gallery. She would have to spend the entire day in Frederick's company, yes—and make it look to their guests as though nothing was wrong—but at least she would have an entire art gallery to do it in, rather than being squashed into a carriage and forced to look at the pinched expression on his face.

The gallery was already bustling with activity. Mrs. Holloway and several of the maids and footmen had been sent on ahead to prepare the drinks and buffet tables for the guests. Veronica could hear the housekeeper barking out orders to her staff in her firm but friendly manner.

Her eyes alighted on an easel that stood in the middle of the main gallery, where the presentation and speeches would take place later that afternoon. It contained what appeared to be a large framed painting, hidden behind a cloth.

Was it Frederick's portrait, Veronica wondered?

She hated that the thought of it did not fill her with as much joy as it had a few weeks ago.

“I am going to do a final walk through the gallery,” Frederick said, appearing at her side. His hands were folded behind his back, and his eyes were down, neatly avoiding hers. “Perhaps you could stay here by the entrance to welcome any guests who arrive early.”

Veronica forced a smile. “Of course. As you wish.”

Frederick gave her a brusque nod, then disappeared up the stairs. Veronica watched after him with gritted teeth.

She was determined not to let her surly husband ruin this day, yes. But she had the distinct feeling that that was going to be much harder than she had initially anticipated.



“Oh Veronica, this place looks wonderful,” Jane sang. She was walking arm in arm with her sister, lingering in front of Veronica’s five paintings with a broad smile on her face. She looked over her shoulder at their father. “Papa, aren’t Veronica’s paintings beautiful?”

“Stunning,” said the Earl, enunciating the word carefully. “Simply *stunning*. In fact, this whole place is simply *stunning*.”

“All right, Father,” Veronica heard Gemma murmur from behind them.

She looked back at the Earl. “Thank you, Papa. I’m pleased you like them.”

“I am just so proud of you,” Jane gushed. She tilted her head, taking in Veronica’s depictions of the wild garden at the Brownwood country house. “Look at all this fine detail. How do you even *do* that?” She shook her head with a smile. “Whoever would have thought it? My big sister’s work on display in an actual gallery.”

“And not just any gallery,” Gemma put in. “A gallery that she owns and runs.”

Veronica smiled at her. “Well. Not on my own, of course.”

The Dowager Marchioness appeared on Veronica’s other side and gave her hand a squeeze. “And that, my dear, is possibly what you ought to be most proud of. The fact that you brought your husband out of his shell enough to want to share such a thing with you.” She smiled. “I know Frederick well. And I know he is not an easy man to share your life with.”

Veronica looked at her pointedly. “And yet you saw fit to marry me to him anyway?”

The Dowager Marchioness chuckled. “Would you rather I had not done so, my dear?”

Veronica’s cheeks flushed, taken aback by her grandmother’s blatant admission—and her question. It was a complicated question if ever she had heard one. She could not deny that being Frederick’s wife had brought her a sizeable amount of pain; never more so than the way he had closed down on her moments before he had declared his love. But in spite of his coldness, his distance, Frederick Barnes had brought so much

to her life. He had brought to life her long-held dreams—and even those she had not known she had had. For that, she would always be grateful.

“No, Grandmother,” she decided. “I am very glad you decided to do so.”

“Good,” said the Dowager Marchioness firmly. “In any case, it was hardly as if I had a choice in the matter. You and Frederick were all over each other in that garden.” She nodded towards the painting of the oak tree. “Right there, if I am not mistaken.”

“Grandmother!” Veronica hissed, her cheeks turning scarlet. She whirled around to see if her father had heard, but much to Veronica’s relief, he had drifted off into another room of the gallery. “We are in *public*.”

“So were you,” the Dowager Marchioness chuckled. “And that was rather the issue.”

Jane giggled.

“I would not laugh if I were you, Jane,” said Gemma with a smile. “You know Grandmother will be coming for you next.”

“Oh no,” Jane said, shaking her head firmly. “Not me. I have learned well enough from the both of you.” She looked at the Dowager Duchess. “You do not need to worry about me, Grandmother. When my Season begins, I shan’t be making the same mistakes as my sisters. You’ll not need to interfere in anything.”

Gemma looked at Veronica and shared a private smile. “It is sweet that she thinks she has a choice in the matter.”



Frederick took a deep breath and tried to focus. The main gallery was full of guests with champagne glasses in hand, talking amongst themselves as they waited for the presentations to begin. The sound of their chattering and laughter rang in Frederick’s ears.

This gallery was all he had dreamed of and worked towards in the six years since his mother’s death. Today, it had finally come into fruition.

And he could barely concentrate.

His mind was so full of his wife, there was barely room for any other coherent thought. Over and over, he had been circling through the night she had shown him her paintings.

The night he had almost told her he loved her. And then fled like the biggest of cowards.

Frederick cursed himself for his weakness, his cowardice. And for the fact that he had let the opening of the gallery be overshadowed by his tangled feelings for his wife. Still, he hoped that the presentation he was about to make would go some way to showing Veronica how he truly felt about her.

Frederick stepped up in front of the crowd. “Good evening,” he began. “Thank you all for coming.” His gaze traveled around the gathering. He was pleased to see the event had drawn a sizeable crowd. He recognized several friends of his grandmother’s, and young ladies he assumed were friends of his wife, along with peers he had barely exchanged a word with in years—the Earl of Harford among them. He was slightly less pleased to glimpse Lady Juliet Carfield hidden at the back of the crowd beside a man he guessed was her father. Frederick hurriedly turned his attention away from her.

George Roland and the other artists they had commissioned were spread throughout the crowd. Mrs. Lane stood alone on the edge of the group, but there was a shine in her eyes that Frederick recognized as pride. Earlier in the afternoon, she had come to Frederick and thanked him for the tasteful way he had chosen to present her work. Already, several people had commented on the impact of her pieces.

Frederick turned away from Mrs. Lane to glance at Veronica. She was standing close by, with her eyes pulled downwards.

No doubt doing her best not to look at me... The realization filled him with regret.

“This gallery was opened to honor my dear mother, the late Duchess of Brownwood,” he continued. “Art was her passion, and it was her dream to build a place like this; a place that would give up-and-coming artists a chance to build their careers and share their work with the people of London.” He nodded towards the portrait of his mother hanging on the wall close to the entrance. “I hope she would be proud of this place, just as I am.”

He felt a sudden swell of emotion and found himself glancing at Veronica. As though feeling her eyes on him, she looked up, her face lightening. The sight of her smile made Frederick realize just how much he had missed it.

“But there is another very important lady in my life who I wish to honor through this gallery,” he said, forcing himself to keep his voice level. “A lady I could not have done this without. And so, without further ado, I would like to present the final piece in tonight’s collection.” With a flourish, he whipped the cover off the canvas—to reveal a portrait of Lady Juliet Carfield.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Several patrons gasped, and a stunned murmur rippled through the crowd.

“Stunning,” Veronica heard her father mumble. “Simply stunning.”

Gemma whacked him loudly in the arm.

Veronica stared in horror at the painting. Her entire body began to tremble, and she felt hot tears of rage burning behind her eyes. She stared openly at Frederick, swamped in disbelief. He stood wide-eyed, lips parted, as though waiting for her response.

She looked back at that horrible, hurtful painting. There was Lady Juliet, with her perfect blonde ringlets cascading over her perfect shoulders, an angelic smile on her face and a soft pink gown pooling at her feet. The style was every bit Frederick’s. Veronica recognized the fine brush strokes, the darker color palette of the background, the positioning of the subject. She had no doubt that Frederick had painted the portrait. But she could hardly make sense of why.

Because he is a cruel and hurtful man, whispered the voice inside her head. *You knew that the day you met him. The very first moment you heard him speak, he showed you the kind of man he was.*

And yet, she had chosen to ignore all those warnings. She had allowed herself to believe there was a good man hiding beneath his cold façade. And yes, there was no point denying it: she had let herself fall in love.

Now, just as she had once feared he would, he had torn her heart to pieces.

Veronica whirled around and raced out of the room. She could hear Gemma and her grandmother calling after her, but she did not look back. Of all people, she could not face them: not Gemma with her blissful, loving marriage; and certainly not her grandmother, who had deigned to marry her to this cruel and heartless man.

She charged down the passageway, past the collections she and Frederick had so carefully collated. Footsteps thundered behind her, but she did not turn around. She raced out the back door into the narrow alleyway behind the house. The door had barely closed behind her before it flew open again and her husband charged out into the lane.

Veronica was wrong. It was not Gemma or her grandmother she least wanted to face. It was this man. She glared at him, tears streaming down her face.

“How could you?” she managed. “After all we have been through? And after all the work I have done for this place. Is

this how you choose to repay me? I have never been more humiliated in my entire life!”

“Veronica—” Frederick reached for her, but she pulled away sharply.

“Was this your plan all along?” she demanded. “To lure me into thinking you cared for me, and that you wished me to be a part of your gallery? Was this how you planned to get back at me for becoming your wife against your will?”

“Veronica—”

“And to do such a thing with *her* of all people! How long were the two of you planning this? Was she in our house, Frederick? Was she in your studio?” Her eyes widened with horror. “Was this what you were painting that night you hid your work from me? Is that why you did not wish for me to see it? Were you painting a portrait of *her* right before you made love to me?” Her cheeks burned. “Or whatever in hell it was that you did? Because it certainly does not seem as though it was I—”

“Veronica.” Frederick gripped her shoulders and looked her squarely in the eye. “Listen to me. That is not my painting. I knew nothing about that. I swear it.”

Veronica shrugged out of his grip and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “You expect me to believe that? I know your style, Frederick. I know what your work looks like. And *that* is your painting.”

“No,” he said firmly. “No, it’s not.” He scrubbed a hand across his jaw. “Do you really think me capable of something so cruel and hurtful?”

Veronica was silent.

Frederick let out his breath. “So you do, then. I see.” He shook his head. “I suppose I cannot be surprised you would think such things of me. I know I have treated you badly in the past. But I was trying to change, Veronica. I really was.” He lowered his eyes. “I know I have not been so successful at it.”

Veronica sniffed. “I thought you were changing too. I thought you were truly coming to care for me. And yet...” She faded out, because the tiniest hint of doubt was beginning to creep into her mind. How she wanted to believe Frederick was innocent.

No. She would not do it. She was not a foolish, naïve young child anymore. And she was also an accomplished artist. She recognized a painter’s style when she saw it. Especially when that painter was her husband.

Frederick’s jaw tightened. “If you are not going to trust me, then I suppose I will just have to prove to you that I did not paint that portrait,” he said tautly.

Veronica folded her arms across her chest in a gesture of self-preservation. “And how exactly do you plan to do that?”

“I don’t know,” Frederick admitted. “But I shall. Somehow. It is too important not to.”



Frederick marched back into the gallery, anger and frustration burning under his skin. He had no thought of how that horrible portrait had found its way onto his easel—or what had happened to the portrait of his wife he had spent so many hours crafting. All he knew was that he had to find a way to fix this. And fast.

Back in the main gallery, the crowd was buzzing with chatter. *Gossip*, Frederick thought sickly. *About me, and Veronica, and damn Lady Juliet...*

He turned to face the gathering. He felt old shame beginning to resurface. The shame he remembered from those terrible days when rumors about his mother had circled endlessly through the *ton*. Of all things, this was not the way he wanted to honor his mother; with yet another truthless scandal. Back then, he had not done enough to silence the rumors. Had not done enough to protect his mother. To save her.

But now he had the chance to see that the same thing did not happen to his wife. He would not let Veronica be harmed by such hurtful rumors. He was going to do everything he could to see that this mess was fixed as quickly as possible. And that not a single word of it made it outside the walls of this gallery.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “it seems there has been a small mix-up. I apologize.” Frederick forced himself to meet the eyes of the people in the crowd. The artists he had commissioned, whose finely crafted work had just been so cruelly upstaged. Veronica’s sister, the Duchess of Larsen, who seemed to perpetually want to tear his eyes out—and never more so than right now. And he forced himself to meet

the gaze of Lady Juliet Carfield, who was standing at the back of the group with a tiny smile on her lips.

“I am doing my best to rectify the mistake,” Frederick continued, “and I hope the presentation will continue shortly. In the meantime, please make your way through the gallery and enjoy the collections collated by the Duchess and me.”

The crowd broke into fresh murmurs, and Frederick made a beeline for Lady Juliet. “We need to speak,” he hissed.

She fluttered her lashes. “Are you certain that is a good idea, Your Grace? In light of this... mix-up, as you say, I suspect it may reflect poorly on you if we were seen speaking together.” She looked past him at the portrait of herself, a smile flickering on her lips. “Whyever would you paint such a thing? And whyever would you present it here of all places?” She twittered with laughter. “You must not think much of your wife, Your Grace.”

“I had *nothing* to do with that cursed painting,” Frederick hissed. “As you well know. Where is the portrait of the Duchess?”

Lady Juliet looked up at him with doe eyes. “I am afraid I have no idea what you mean.”

Frederick gritted his teeth. Short of hauling Lady Juliet outside by the arm and threatening her for answers—which was the kind of gossip that would most certainly make it outside these gallery walls—there was little else he could do. With this little stunt, Lady Juliet had made it clear just how heartless and deluded she really was. Frederick knew there was no way he

would ever get a straight answer from her. He narrowed his eyes.

“What exactly were you hoping to achieve?” he asked, his voice low and dark. “Veronica is my wife. And nothing is going to change that.”

“That is true,” she said airily. “Nothing is going to change that.” She took a step closer to him. “But you ought to have chosen me, Your Grace. I would have made a far better duchess than a woman who spends her time covered in paint and chasing children around a classroom. I may not be able to change the fact that the two of you are married, but I will see to it that your gallery is surrounded in scandal. Just as your marriage will be.” She smiled slyly. “And who would expect anything less? After all, her family has a history of such things. And so does yours.”

Frederick felt rage burning up from his toes. He clenched his hands into fists and ground his teeth together so firmly that pain shot through his jaw. “Get out,” he hissed. “This second. And if you ever come near me or my wife again, I will see that you live to regret it.”

Lady Juliet gave him a sweet smile. “As you wish.” She dropped into a deep curtsy. “I wish you all the success in the world with the gallery, Your Grace.”

Frederick stared after her as she gestured to her father with a wave of her hand, then fluttered out the open front door, the false smile still plastered to her face. Ignoring the curious stares of onlookers, he charged up to the easel and snatched the portrait of Juliet. He marched out into the alley where Veronica was still huddled up against the wall.

“Why are you bringing that out here?” she hissed. “Have you not hurt me enough?”

Frederick drew in a breath, forcing himself not to react to his wife’s accusations. He could not deny her distrust in him stung. But there was a part of him that knew he could not blame her. He had shown her coldness again and again. Each time they had taken a step closer to each other, he had been all too quick to pull away.

If Veronica was going to trust him implicitly, he would have to be the kind of man that deserved blind trust. And for the first three months of their marriage, he had been anything but. He had been hot and cold; impossibly changeable. Desperate for her one minute, and then pushing her away the next.

That changes now.

Provided he could restore Veronica’s trust in him at all. And judging by the murderous look in her eyes, that was not going to be easy.

“I am bringing this portrait out here because this is where it belongs,” he told her firmly. He tossed it carelessly up against the wall of the alley. Hopefully it would not be long before a stray dog lifted its leg on the damn thing, or a downpour came and turned it to mush. “Lady Juliet is gone,” he told Veronica. “And I have made it clear that she is never to come near either of us again. Now I am going to go and find the painting that I actually intended to present today.” He swallowed heavily. “And I hope you will come with me. Help me find it.”

Full of blind—and slightly desperate—hope, he reached his hand out toward her. Veronica looked down at it for several moments, without speaking. She nodded faintly. “Very well. I will help you find it for no other reason but because others’ works depend on this exhibition.” Her voice was thin and expressionless. She did not take his hand.

But at least, Frederick thought, she was coming with him. And right now, he would take all the small wins he could get.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Frederick charged back inside the gallery and flew from room to room, searching desperately. He was all too aware of how foolish he must look, peering under tables and couches, and even behind paintings as his desperation grew. He went outside and circled the townhouse, in case someone had taken the portrait outside. Veronica followed him at a distance, a closed-off expression on her face that made it impossible to read her.

As they stepped back through the front door, George Roland burst into the foyer. “Have you tried the cellar, Your Grace?” he asked, his voice low.

Frederick frowned. “What are you talking about? This place doesn’t have a cellar.”

“It does. In the room that used to be the kitchen. It’s hidden inside the old pantry. Easy to miss. I saw it when it came to deliver my last paintings yesterday.” He lowered his eyes. “Two of your staff were here making preparations and they allowed me to look around the place. I hope you don’t mind.”

Frederick gave him a brisk nod, then hurried away, not bothering to reply. Behind him, he could hear Veronica

thanking Roland, then her footsteps click-clacked up behind him.

The room that had once been the kitchen was tucked away at the very back of the house. It still contained an old range and the pantry, which Frederick had quickly searched earlier. But he stepped inside and looked again at the room.

“A cellar?” he repeated. “How could we have missed that?” He shook his head. “I think Roland is imagining things.”

“Here. Look.” Veronica pointed to a small square of floorboards inside the pantry. She stepped down on it lightly, and the boards groaned beneath her weight. “It’s a door. Looks as though the handle was removed some time ago. But it’s possible someone could have forced it open,” she looked sideways at Frederick, “and hidden your painting down there.” *If that is what really happened...* She did not need to say it. Frederick could hear the doubt in her words. And it made him more determined than ever to find the portrait.

He snatched the fire poker from beside the range and prized up the floorboards. A small, square trapdoor opened to reveal a narrow staircase reaching down into a dark cellar.

He gave Veronica a crooked smile. “Well. Would you look at that...” He glanced around hurriedly, snatching a lamp and tinderbox from atop the range. He lit the flame and held the lamp out in front of him. Stepped carefully onto the staircase. He held out a hand for Veronica, but she gathered her skirts in her fists and made her way down into the cellar without assistance.

The smell of earth and stale air gathered in Frederick's throat as he panned the lamp around the small space. The cellar was barely tall enough for him to stand, with an earthen floor and bare stone walls. The room was empty—except for a covered picture frame leaning against one corner.

Frederick hurried toward it. "This must be it."

He peeked beneath the cloth, holding his breath in hope. And there was his wife's face, beaming back at him with that impossibly bright smile. A smile he very much hoped he would see again soon.

Relief flooded him at the sight of the portrait. He let the cloth cover it again and stepped back. He gestured to Veronica. "*This* is the painting I intended to unveil today."

Veronica looked at him hesitantly. "Are you not going to take it upstairs?"

"Not yet," he told her. "I want you to see it first."

Veronica took a tentative step forward, as though wary about what she might find beneath the cloth. She tugged at it gently and it slid off the frame, revealing the portrait to her.

She let out her breath. Brought a hand to her mouth as she stared into her own eyes.

"Oh..." she managed. "Frederick..." Tears began to well in her eyes and she turned to him, looking up into his face. "I am

so sorry. I... I ought to have trusted you.” Her tears spilled and she let them fall unhindered onto her collar. “Can you ever forgive me?”

Frederick took a step towards her, cupping her cheek in his hand. “Of course I can,” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. He swallowed. “I know I have not made it so easy for you to trust me.”

Veronica shook her head. “That is not true. You have always been honest with me. Upfront. You never pretended this marriage was anything more than it is. You were very clear about how you felt and what you wanted.” She shook her head, as though scolding herself. “I should not have allowed myself to become upset when you did not give me more.”

Frederick took her hands in his and lowered his gaze. “I know I said all those things,” he began slowly, his thumbs tracing slow circles across the backs of her hands. “But...” He drew in a deep breath. “I think I may have been wrong.” He closed his eyes, feeling his heart thump hard against his ribs. The words were hard to get out; frightening almost, but he also knew that if he did not say them, he would come to regret it for the rest of his life. “I was afraid of getting close to you, Veronica, because I did not want to open my heart up to anyone. I could not bear to carry any more pain. I was afraid of losing you. Of failing you, like I failed my mother.” He swallowed heavily. “But I can see now that denying the way I feel about you is foolish. It is unfair to you, and to myself.”

Veronica looked up, her eyes glistening.

“I love you, said Frederick. “More than anything.” Now the words were out, he could hardly believe he had tied himself in knots over saying them. With Veronica’s eyes on his, with her

hands intertwined with his, and that bright smile on her face, *I love you* suddenly felt like the most natural thing in the world.

Veronica flew into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his waist and holding his tightly. “I love you too,” she said. She took a step back, meeting his eyes again. “And I swear that from now on, I will always trust you.”

Frederick smiled, his heart suddenly overflowing with happiness. “And I will always give you every reason to.” He bent to kiss her lips, holding her close for long moments. Then he stepped back, looking into the shining eyes of his wife. “Now,” he said, “we have a painting to unveil.”



Frederick picked up the portrait with one hand and held his other out to Veronica. This time, she slipped her fingers between his and squeezed. She never wanted to let go again.

As they climbed back up the cellar stairs and stepped back out into the old kitchen, she wiped away the last of her tears with her free hand. Her finger came back smeared with dark makeup. “Goodness,” she laughed, “I must look a right mess.”

Frederick glanced at her, smiling gently. “Would you like to take a moment to tidy yourself? I can ask Sarah to come and help you.”

Veronica shook her head. “No. I don’t care.” She laughed a little. “Everyone will just think of me as an emotional artist. I shall fit my role perfectly.” She dusted her skirts free of the earth she had collected from the floor of the cellar.

Impulsively, she kissed her husband again. “The portrait is beautiful, Frederick,” she said. “I cannot thank you enough.”

He smiled. “The portrait is beautiful because you are beautiful.” A faint frown creased his forehead.

“What is it?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I just wish I knew who had painted that other awful piece. I know Lady Juliet was behind it, but surely she did not paint it herself.”

Veronica giggled. “I think that is a fair assumption, given her efforts at your grandmother’s painting competition.” Her laughter died away. Though her anger at Lady Juliet had been lessened by her husband’s declaration of love, Veronica knew it had not disappeared completely. She knew Juliet had done what she had to shame them and destroy their chances at happiness—and on both counts, she had nearly succeeded. “I’m so sorry, Frederick,” she said. “Truly. I ought never have doubted you.”

“I know you are sorry,” he said lightly. “And I accept your apology. So please think no more of it.” He shook his head. “To be honest, I cannot blame you. Whoever Juliet found to create the work has a strikingly similar style to my own. Or at least, they are a master at copying another’s style.”

“Wait.” Veronica stopped walking. “Look.” Pinned to the back of the frame was a folded piece of paper. She pulled it off with a firm tug. Unfolded it and began to read aloud:

“Your Graces,

All I can do is offer my profuse apologies and perhaps attempt to explain myself.

I was approached by Lady Juliet Carfield outside your gallery a week ago and offered a substantial sum to paint her portrait in the Duke’s style. While I would like to say I had the strength to turn down such an offer, I am a weak man, and my family’s precarious financial situation did not allow me to behave as I might otherwise have liked.

It is my deepest regret that I have caused the two of you pain, after the generosity you have shown me in commissioning my work. More than anything, I regret that this farce had to mar the opening of your gallery.

If you see fit to remove my work from your collections, and request the return of the commission paid, I will of course understand.

Again, I offer my profound apologies and humbly request your forgiveness.

Sincerely,

George Roland.”

Veronica looked up from the page with wide eyes. “George Roland did this? I cannot believe it.”

Frederick chuckled. "I ought to have known, given he was the one who sent us down to the cellar to find the painting."

"What will you do to him?" asked Veronica.

Frederick took her hand and brought it to his lips. "What do you think we ought to do, my love? This is as much your gallery as it is mine."

Veronica smiled. "Well. He did help you find the painting." Her smile widened cheekily. "And if he is in enough financial hardship to take this offer from Lady Juliet, perhaps you did not pay him enough."

Frederick chuckled, raising an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting I increase his commission?"

Veronica laughed. "I do not think he quite deserves that. But perhaps we can give him a second chance. Allow him to keep his pieces in the gallery. After all, he did confess to everything. And his work is ever so beautiful." She grinned. "Well. The paintings of his children are beautiful. I don't think much of his portrait of Lady Juliet."

Frederick pulled her into a kiss. "Then that is what we shall do."

"And Lady Juliet?" Veronica asked. "Will you tell our guests that she was behind all this?"

Frederick hesitated, rubbing a hand across his jaw in thought. “No,” he decided finally. “Doing so would only create gossip. And I do not wish for our gallery to be associated with anything like that. Besides, if such a thing got out about Lady Juliet, she would never find a husband. She would spend her life alone and bitter—and probably causing more pain to other innocent people. I do not wish that for her, regardless of whatever else she has done.”

Veronica felt her eyes shining. She looked up at her husband, feeling her heart swell in her chest.

“What?” asked Frederick.

She took his free hand and pulled him close. “You told me once that you could never be a good husband because you were not a kind man. But you could not be more wrong, Frederick. You are the kindest man I know.” She grinned. “And the very best husband.” She kissed him again, stroking his cheek with her thumb. “I love you with all of my heart.”

“And I you,” said Frederick. “Now, shall we—”

The door flew open suddenly and George Roland thundered through it. “Oh, Your Graces. You found it.” He glanced down at the note in Veronica’s hand, a look of faint horror passing across his face. “I am so terribly sorry. I will leave at once. I just wanted to make sure you found the real thing.”

“There is no need to leave, Mr. Roland,” said Frederick.

Roland’s brow creased. “What?”

“Please stay,” said Veronica. “We understand why you did what you did. And there is no harm done. In fact, there was plenty of good done. She glanced at Frederick and gave him a private smile. “Now,” she said, “shall we go and show our guests the *real* painting?”

Epilogue

Veronica walked hand in hand with Frederick through the garden at the Cambridge country house.

“Poor Juliet,” she said with a smile. “I cannot help but feel the *tiniest* bit sorry for her.”

Despite what she and Frederick had agreed upon after they had uncovered Juliet’s plan at the gallery, word of her plan had made its way into the *ton*, and its dedicated gossipers. The public scrutiny over her cruel plan had been swift and unrelenting—to the point that Juliet’s father had carted her off to the family’s country estate in the wilds of Yorkshire to hide away for a while.

“Poor Juliet?” Frederick repeated with a smile. “Need I remind you that she tried to destroy our marriage? And our gallery?” He shook his head. “Veronica, my darling, sometimes you really are too kind for your own good.”

She laughed lightly. “In this case, you may be right.” She caught her husband’s eye and grinned. “Whoever knew the *ton* would be so furious over the betrayal of the Earl of Volk’s daughter and...”

“And the grumpy Duke of Brownwood?” Frederick finished, his eyes sparkling. He gave her a teasing poke in the side. “Was that what you were about to say?”

Veronica laughed. “Something like that.”

He grinned. “Well. I suppose that would be somewhat fair. Although I suspect everyone was so angry about Juliet’s betrayal because they can see just how happy you make me.”

Veronica smiled and took a step closer to her husband, reveling in the warmth of his arm reaching around her body.

All in all, the opening of the gallery had been a huge success. Even Lady Juliet's trickery had not been able to dampen the occasion. The paintings of Mrs. Lane and George Roland—and of course, Veronica herself—had garnered so much attention that they had largely taken the attention off the switched portraits. Then again, it was possible that the switched portraits had not been overshadowed by the other paintings, but by the Duke of Brownwood's very public declaration of love for his wife—and the very public kiss they had shared afterward. Word of Juliet's deceit had emerged the next morning—courtesy of George Roland, Veronica assumed.

Two weeks later, visitors were still flocking to the gallery in great numbers.

Veronica looked upwards as a pair of sparrows darted through the thick canopy of trees. The leaves were beginning to turn now, flooding the garden with vibrant reds and golds. "This place truly is magical," she sighed happily. She tried to commit the image to memory. It would make a fine piece to add to her collection.

"It is magical." Frederick brought her gloved fingers to his lips and kissed them gently. "Your paintings have immortalized it. Now everyone will have the chance to experience and enjoy the place." He smiled crookedly. "Without *actually* visiting, of course. Because I cannot tell you how much more pleasant this place is when we have it all to ourselves." He stopped walking and pulled her close. Drew her into a deep kiss.

Veronica laughed, lacing her fingers through his again. "So much more pleasant," she agreed. "And I think we both deserve a little peace and quiet after all our hard work. I, for one, could certainly use a rest."

"A rest, hmm?" Frederick's lips worked their way along Veronica's neck. "That's a damn shame. I had a few other things in mind."

"Oh yes?" Veronica's hand slipped beneath his greatcoat, feeling her way up his chest. "And what might that be?"

Frederick found her lips again. “Better if I show you, rather than just tell you.” He grinned. “Much more effective that way.” He took her hand and led her toward the house. “Now,” he said as they walked hand in hand up the staircase, “for future reference, my bedchamber is the door on the *left* of the staircase.” His eyes shone teasingly. “I know you sometimes struggle to remember.”

“Oh, I did not struggle to remember anything,” said Veronica airily. “I went in the door on the left because that is exactly where my grandmother told me to go. At first, I thought I had made a mistake. But I know now that I ended up in your bedchamber because Grandmother led me straight to it.”

Frederick began to laugh, slow and deep, his gray eyes alight with warmth. “That sly old thing.” He scooped Veronica into his arms and carried her into the room. “Remind me to thank her profusely next time I see her.”

He set her down gently at the foot of the bed. One of the maids had already lit the fire, and there was a fragrant warmth to the room. Late afternoon light was pouring through the window, and as the sun slid toward the horizon, it set to life a wild chorus of birdsong. Veronica closed her eyes for a moment, drinking in the perfection of the moment.

Slowly, tenderly, Frederick began to unbutton her dress, unlace her corset. “Veronica,” he murmured, “you make me so happy. Happier than I ever imagined I could be.”

Her heart swelled as she pulled his shirt over his head, letting it fall to the floor with the rest of their clothing. “You make me so happy too. You have given me everything I ever wanted.”

Frederick ran his finger across her cheek. “There was a young girl I met once,” he said, “who smiled like this. Bright like the sun. I cannot remember her name. But I will never forget her smile.”

Veronica stepped close to look deep into her husband’s eyes. “And she will never forget his. Nor will she forget his kindness.”

Frederick let out his breath, shaking his head in disbelief as the realization hit him. “There was a part of me that wondered...” he admitted. “From the moment I first saw your smile, I thought of that little girl... But it seemed too impossible.”

Veronica kissed him gently. She slid her shift up over her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. “Unlikely, perhaps. But not impossible.”

Frederick traced light fingers over the curve of her shoulder. “Have you always known?” he asked. He bent to kiss the soft skin at the base of her neck.

Veronica shook her head. “It’s true that I have never forgotten the boy who came to me in the garden that day, and the kindness he showed me. But it was not until we were alone in the cellar at the gallery that I really began to wonder.” She stroked the fine stubble on his cheek. “That day, you showed me just how kind and loving you really were. And it made me think of that boy who was so kind to me that day. The boy who made me smile when no one else could.”

“I will show you that kindness until the end of your days,” Frederick said huskily. “If you will let me.”

Veronica pressed a gentle hand to her husband’s chest, easing him toward the bed. He pulled her down onto the mattress with him and kissed her deeply. Veronica crawled over him, straddling his hips and looking down to admire him in the golden threads of sunlight. In his face, he saw that young boy he had once been. That tall, thin boy with the white-blond hair and the kind gray eyes.

Strangely, the realization that she had married that boy had not come as a surprise. Instead, it had felt like a piece of a puzzle falling into place. She had felt as though a part of her had always known who Frederick was—and had always known they were destined to be together.

“That day when we were children,” said Veronica, “you told me never to stop smiling. How could I do otherwise when I am to spend the rest of my life with you?”

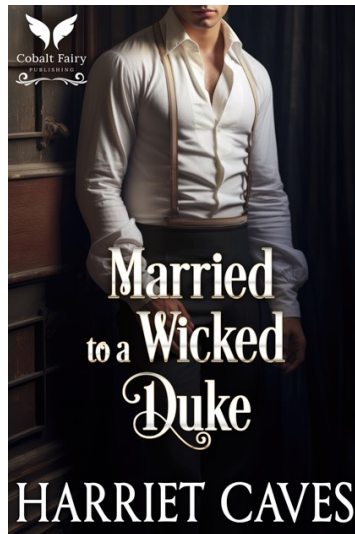
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Extended Epilogue



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PREVIEW: THE
SCARRED DUKE'S
BRIDE



Chapter One



“Oh, but this one is even more delicious. Listen, Freya,” Isabella said as she read the latest gossip sheet from London, “A prominent *married* lord has been caught *in flagrante* at a molly house.”

She looked up at Freya, her brow furrowed with confusion, “What’s a molly house, Freya?”

Freya cleared her throat, giving her sister a sidelong glance as she continued to remove the weeds sprouting between her roses. “Nothing you need to know about. I don’t know why you insist on reading that drivel when there are perfectly good books in the library. Your governess will have my head.”

Isabella laughed, “And who do you think I steal them from?”

Freya sighed in mock resignation, shaking her head. “Stealing now? What *would* Father say?”

Isabella’s mouth turned down, derisively, “Father would say nothing. No, no, he’d probably say, ‘Eh wot? Who’s that you mean? Isabella? Never heard of her’.”

Freya snorted, almost cutting off a rose’s head in her amusement. “You mustn’t say things like that. Someone might hear you.” She looked around the garden for good measure, ascertaining that there was nobody within earshot. A few of the gardeners were hard at work, keeping the grass at the right length, trimming the hedges, and watering the plants, but none were close by.

The rose garden belonged to Freya, and she loved to tend to her plants herself. It gave her peace to nurture them and watch

as they bloomed every year.

“Oh!” Isabella cried out loud, her head buried in the newsprint, and Freya straightened up.

“What now?”

“Papa is mentioned.”

Freya’s eyebrow rose. “And what has the Duke been up to? One might have thought he’d be too sick to be mentioned in the on dits.”

“He *is* sick. It says he’s taken a turn for the worse.”

Freya frowned. “Read it to me.”

“On a sadder note, we have news that Victor Stark, Duke of Riverhead has taken a turn for the worse. His physicians seem to be preparing for the end and it has been rumored that his heir, Alexander Campbell, is making his way to the city as we speak in order to be on hand should the inevitable happen. The Duke is survived by two daughters and no sons, and so the title will pass to the son of a distant cousin.”

Freya sat back with a sigh, her shoulders hunched. Isabella looked at her. “Will you have to marry him now?”

Freya looked up and pinned a smile on her face, covering her trepidation. “Well, he cannot possibly be worse than Papa, now, can he?”

Isabella snorted, “Not unless he likes to bellow like a bull and swing his whip about in a temper. Not to mention ignoring us as if we hardly existed and making us live in the attic in the dead of winter even though there’s no fireplace up there.”

Freya shuffled over to put her hand around her sister’s shoulders. “Well, we did survive it, did we not? Huddling together for warmth...” She pulled Isabella closer, tickling her as they both giggled.

“Yes, and Mrs. Beecham bringing us hot water bottles and hot stones for our feet.”

“Yes, those were very helpful.”

“And all the blankets she could find.”

Freya chuckled as she nodded. “That too.”

“You think that was bad? Ha! Before I came to you, I used to work for the Viscount Haversham.” They both turned to see Mrs. Beecham approaching, holding a tray. “That man was the very definition of cruel. Why there were some days his family did not eat because he would not allow it.”

Freya stood up and took the tray from the old lady. “Thank you. What is this?”

“Well, there’s a chill in the air and a bit of a drizzle, so I thought I would bring you some hot chocolate.”

“That’s so kind of you, Mrs. Beecham. And unnecessary. We are well covered. After all, since Father left, we haven’t been terrorized by the shouting that made us dare not defy him or dress only the way he deemed appropriate,” Isabella said. “We have the woolen shawls that Aunt Helen brought us from Scotland. They don’t let the rain in.” She illustrated that by tucking the tartan stole more firmly around her, the newspaper she’d been reading placed on the stone she was sitting on.

“Indeed, and lovely warm things they are, much as your father would disapprove, but the chocolate will warm you from the inside.”

Freya took a sip of her chocolate, relishing the relative peace of late morning at Stark Manor. Ever since their father had decamped to the city where he had access to the best physicians for his tuberculosis, the manor had taken on a tranquil air never before seen within its halls. Life had taken on a simplicity not disturbed by rigid imperatives such as dressing for dinner or eating in the dining room.

Freya and Isabelle were just as likely to take their dinner in the kitchens as to curl in front of the fire in the parlor with a tray of soup and bread instead of dining on lavish five-course dinners eaten amid stilted conversation and wearing too-tight stays.

Freya did not miss it at all. She felt a tad guilty seeing as it was illness that took their father away and thus changed their lives but not enough to wish him back. The Duke of Riverhead

had never liked his children. He treated both daughters like nuisance appendages he'd been saddled with that he now had no clue what to do with.

“What is the use of a woman if she is not producing heirs?” he'd been heard to wonder out loud. “Simply pests, eating one out of house and home.”

Freya tried not to take it to heart and did her best to shield Isabella from it all, but she had to admit that was much easier to do now that her father was not in residence.

“You know, I knew of this family as I was growing up in Somerton. The father was a Marquis — a short bad-tempered fellow. He was known to whip people with his horsewhip should they displease him. He had no care whether it was in public or not or whether she was a wife or a daughter or a servant. His whip was indiscriminate,” Mrs. Beecham was saying as she sipped her own cup of chocolate, sitting companionably on the stone next to Isabella. “I always made sure to be out of range when he was about. One never knew what would set him off.”

Mrs. Beecham had so many stories of the same ilk though she always declined to name names.

“You both have got it quite good. You should be grateful,” she concluded, taking another sip of tea.

Isabella snorted. “Yes, we're grateful we only got oodles of tongue lashings. Those were much better.” She rolled her eyes.

Freya gave her a sidelong glance. “The problem is men. They are all animals. I do not know why anyone would want to be married to one.”

“Well, you'll find out soon enough, won't you?” Mrs. Beecham said.

Freya glared at her. “We shall see. Perhaps this Campbell fellow will take one look at me and run screaming in the other direction. I am not exactly a model of decorum nor a prime article. I am just a simple country bumpkin with mud under her fingernails.”

Mrs. Beecham rolled her eyes. “And I keep telling you to wear gloves.”

Isabella giggled.

Freya glared at them both before getting to her feet, ready to stomp off. Suddenly a footman came running towards them. He was waving a piece of paper in his hand. “Lady Freya, I have just been given this note to give you. They say it’s urgent that you read it.”

Freya frowned, thrusting out her hand. “Give it to me,” she demanded imperiously.

The footman put the note in her hand and backed away. Breaking the seal, she began to read it out loud.

Dear Lady Freya,

Your father has taken a turn for the worse. It would behoove you and your sister to make haste to London if you want to see him again. I have sent a carriage with this missive that you can use to make your way to the city.

Yours sincerely,

Herbert Mansfield

She raised her eyes, looking from her sister to the governess, seeing the same type of surprise on their faces as was on her own. She could not imagine why her father would want to see them now. He had never shown any interest in them before. But Herbert Mansfield was their father’s right hand, his long-time steward. He would not have written the letter or sent a carriage if their father hadn’t asked him to.

“What should we do?” she asked Isabella.

Her sister quirked an eyebrow. “We go, of course. What else is there to do?”

Freya shook her head slowly. She could not imagine doing anything other than obey either, but she had a bad feeling about it all.

She looked up at the footman. “Very well, tell the coachman we shall be ready to go soon.”

The footman nodded and turned away. Freya turned to Isabella and Mrs. Beecham. “We will need gowns; much of what we have is threadbare. Can we do anything about that?”

Mrs. Beecham nodded. “The seamstress will be able to put together two gowns each I’m sure by day’s end tomorrow. We can be on the road by Friday.”

Freya nodded. “I hope that’s soon enough.”

“It will have to be,” Isabella said.

Chapter Two



Eric's feet wobbled as he stepped off the ship as he had not yet gotten his land legs. He stood for a moment, trying to reorient himself. After so many months at sea, it was jarring to be once again on land. London smelled just about the same as he remembered, and there were far too many urchins darting about the place for his liking. Further down the dock, he could hear a woman hawking her wares. "Pigeon pies! Pigeon Pies! Come get them while they're hot."

His mouth watered.

He had not managed to eat a single thing since land had been spotted last night. He was in London to bury his elder brother, a man he had looked up to his whole life. He lifted his hand, slowly calling to the woman, and she hurried over, already holding out a pigeon pie. "Just tuppence sir, and I'll throw in a second one for 'e."

"Thank you," Eric said, accepting the pies gratefully. He dug in his pocket for coin before demolishing the first pie in two bites. He ate the second one more slowly as he walked along the street in search of a hansom cab. It had been six months since he'd been on dry land, and that was in Marseille where they'd gone to pick up some cargo that was certainly not sanctioned by Napoleon and his war machine.

He looked around, trying to see how London had changed and how much it was the same. Aside from the smell, and the delicious street food, he was glad to note that he could still negotiate the streets quite effortlessly.

Arriving at St. Peter's church in his family's neighborhood of St. John's Wood, he found that it was already quite occupied with mourners. His brother's coffin had not yet arrived, but William, his younger brother, and his mother were both standing in front of the church, waiting.

As soon as William caught sight of him, he broke free of his mother's hold and came running to Eric. He had no qualms about embracing his brother whether or not it would be seen as mawkish by onlookers. Thankfully, nobody paid them any mind.

"You're here," William said, and a single tear escaped his eye. "I cannot believe Alex is dead."

"Neither can I, dear brother. Neither can I." He took William's hand and led him back to their mother, who was clad all in black bombazine with a black veil. She let out a wail as soon as Eric touched her hand before collapsing into his arms.

"'Twas the typhoid that took him. So fast — one day he was well; the next, he was dead."

All Eric could do was pat her back in attempted consolation. "There, there," he murmured helplessly, not knowing what to do. He was saved from having to do anything by the arrival of the hearse.

They all filed into the chapel behind the coffin as they prepared to say goodbye to Alexander.



"You are aware that you are the new heir now of the Duchy of Riverhead?"

Eric looked up as the lawyer dropped this bombshell in his lap. He had been aware in a vague sort of way that Alexander stood to inherit the ducal title from a distant cousin should he not produce a male heir.

"Is that so?" he asked noncommittally.

“Indeed, sir. However, you should know that the current Duke has imposed certain conditions on the succession. For one thing, he is adamant that the heir marries his daughter.”

Eric’s breath hitched. “I beg your pardon?”

The lawyer drew in a deep breath. “The current Duke —”

Eric put up a hand to stop him from talking. “Surely such a proviso cannot have any *locus standi*.”

Mr. Freeman, the lawyer, smiled. “I see you know a bit of the law lingo.”

“Just a few words. But tell me, is it —”

“I am afraid it’s perfectly legal, yes. Furthermore, the current Dukes ailing, and so you should expect to wed soon. In fact, I would recommend you call upon him soon and notify him of your brother’s death. I believe he was expecting a marriage to take place between Alexander and his daughter very soon.”

Eric took a deep and steadying breath. “I see.”

Mr. Freeman smiled sympathetically. “Do not fret too much about it, Mr. Campbell. The rewards outweigh the sacrifice. And you will need someone who knows the lay of the land to assist you. Who better than a wife who grew up on the land?”

“I suppose you are right, Mr. Freeman.”

“Mmm,” he agreed but simply waited for Eric to make a decision. Eric did not see any other recourse than to follow in his brother’s footsteps.

He looked up at the lawyer. “I shall do it.”

Mr. Freeman smiled. “Very good. I shall set up an appointment with the man’s steward for tomorrow together with furnishing you with the appropriate documentation to show Alexander’s death and your replacement of him as heir.”

Eric sighed. “Thank you, Mr. Freeman.”

“You’re very welcome, Mr. Campbell. And congratulations on your upcoming nuptials.”



Eric straightened his cravat as he stepped into his carriage that would transport him to Mayfair where he hoped to meet with the Duke of Riverhead. Victor Stark was a very distant cousin, and he knew little about the man. What he did know for sure was that this was a tremendous opportunity for his branch of the family to elevate their legacy to new heights.

He looked out of the window, watching the streets roll past, remembering his father, Richard Campbell. As a member of the gentry, but untitled, he had forged respect for the family by building a fortune worthy of the name. As the first-born son, Alexander was his heir, his right hand. As the second son, Eric had decided to buy his commission and join the navy.

Sitting back in the seat, he endured the endless bumps and sways brought about by driving on the potholed road. It was difficult to believe that he was here although that had always been a possibility. Certainly, when his father had taken them around to learn what businesses they owned, he took both sons and made sure they both had the knowledge and skill to continue his legacy.

Eric knew he would have done the same for William had he not been ailing by the time his third son was born. By then, Alexander had pretty much been running the day-to-day operations and doing a marvelous job of it.

Eric felt a pang of loss at the thought of his brother. He would miss him always. Alexander had been a good brother and a great friend.

I will do you proud, my brother. I promise you.

The hansom came to an abrupt halt, and he peered out in surprise, wondering what might have caused this unscheduled stop. He saw that there was a line of carriages in front of him that also seemed to have stalled.

How strange...

Climbing carefully down, he decided to go and see what might be causing this hold-up. “Wait here for me; I shall be back,” he told his coachman before walking determinedly down between the carriages.

Chapter Three



They had left Stark Manor before sunrise, barely managing to gulp down some tea before they were on the road. Mrs. Beecham wanted to arrive in the city while it was still daylight.

“We don’t want to be set upon by brigands, now do we?” she asked.

Freya rolled her eyes. She found Mrs. Beecham to be a tad dramatic which was fine ordinarily, but Freya was nervous about this meeting with her father. What would he say to them? How were they to act? It had been a while since they’d been in his presence, and she was afraid she’d forgotten how to be so as not to set him off.

Isabella was singing softly by her side, swaying gently from side to side with the movement of the carriage as she read her book. It was some French tale of love and longing — Isabella had offered to read it aloud, but Freya’s French wasn’t as good as Isabella’s, so she had declined.

In any case, she was too nervous to pay attention to trivial things. She envied Isabella’s ability to just disappear into her book as if there was nothing to fear. Freya hoped one day to be like her.

Much to Mrs. Beecham’s relief, they did arrive in London by late afternoon. There were an awful lot of carriages on the road, and Freya stuck her head out of the window, overwhelmed by the smells and noise.

Suddenly, she spotted a small rabbit on the side of the road, hunched in on itself, clearly terrified. “Stop!” she shouted, startling Mrs. Beecham and causing Isabella to actually jump in her seat. Picking up the umbrella, she banged on the roof a few times until the coachman came to a halt. She opened the door and stepped out.

“What’s the matter, ma’am?” he called but she ignored him, walking back to where she saw the rabbit. “We’re blocking the road, ma’am!” the coachman continued, but she waved a dismissive hand. No doubt, he could sort it out without her input.

She bent down, far enough away from the rabbit not to seem like a threat. “Hail little fellow.” She looked around for some plants she could feed it, wondering if grass might do. She reached out to pluck a piece of grass and froze.

Hidden beneath the foliage by the roadside was a ghost orchid. Freya had only ever seen pictures of the plant. While she was distracted staring at the plant, the rabbit hopped away, disappearing in the blink of an eye. She looked around, biting her lip but couldn’t help but be drawn back to the plant.

She stared at it, wondering how it had managed to thrive by a busy thoroughfare. She looked up, noting the small wood bordering the road, probably a part of Hyde Park. She leaned closer, examining it.

She had read that the plant did not rely on sunlight to produce food for itself. Instead, it relied on a kind of sponge to feed itself and only ventured out of the soil to produce seeds and flowers sometimes after thirty years.

That’s why it was so rare to see one, and Freya could not believe there was one just growing on the roadside.

She was strongly tempted to uproot it and take it home with her, but she wasn’t sure it would survive.

Someone cleared their throat loudly behind her, but she paid them no mind, assuming it was the coachman again.

“Excuse me madam; would you care to explain what you think you are doing?”

The voice was most definitely not that of the coachman. It was much deeper, and the coachman's voice didn't make her want to shiver. She stood up and turned around and jerked, letting out a startled yell as her eyes fell on the tall man's face. He was dressed in a black suit, a hat pulled low over his head, long black hair blowing gently in the breeze beneath it. Her eyes had fallen immediately on the menacing scar on his face, his intense blue eyes gleaming with annoyance at her.

Pirate!

The word jumped to the forefront of her mind, and she jumped back, almost falling on the precious orchid. She stumbled, twisting her body away from it and falling into an undignified lump beside it. Aside from the incredible sting on her bottom, she was quite all right if extremely mortified.

She looked up at the man who had scared her and saw that he looked amused. That was the last straw for her, and she screamed. "What the *devil* is the matter with you?"

He looked nonplussed. "I beg your pardon?"

"What business could you possibly have accosting people and scaring them half to death? Are you some sort of degenerate? You enjoy terrifying people?"

To her further annoyance, the man laughed some more — though he sounded bitter. He turned away so that his scar was no longer visible. "I did nothing but ask you a question."

Freya's bosom was heaving, her breath coming fast as she tried to think of something to say. It's possible she was hasty in her assessment of the situation.

"It's entirely *your* fault that you ended up on your arse." He continued smirking, and that was *it*.

She scrambled to her feet while he watched her, *still* smirking and fueling her rage. As soon as she was back on her feet, she stepped towards him and lifted her hand to slap his face. She was startled by how fast he caught her hand, his eyes narrowing, making him look even more intimidating. She gasped, trying to jerk her hand away, but he tightened his grip.

“Listen, brat. I have no time for your spoiled tantrums. If your mother did not teach you how to behave, I’d be glad to have you over my lap and spank the rudeness out of you.”

She gasped and kicked his shin without even thinking about it. That made him let go of her wrist, and she stepped back out of his reach as he winced, reaching down to rub his ankle.

“Are all the ladies in London as savage as you? Someone should notify the red coats so they can recruit from the gentry.”

“You...you...” Freya growled, fisting her hands, too angry to come up with anything that could articulate her feelings.

“What? Cat got your tongue?” He quirked an eyebrow impishly.

“Oooh! Devil take you, you ugly...pirate!” she yelled.

People began to pop their heads out of their carriages, pedestrians stopping to stare. This should have bothered Freya, but she was still too angry to care. If she thought she could get away with it, she would have hit him in the chest repeatedly with her fists.

He flinched at her words, and she was viciously gratified to know she’d made a hit. “Well, well, well...that’s it, go for the most obvious dig. That’s the spirit. Well done Miss. I’m sure your husband would be very impressed if he saw you.”

The man began to clap sarcastically. Freya did not understand why she was letting this stranger rile her up so much, but she could not seem to help herself.

“Much better than some...pirate troubling a lady who has *done nothing* to him! You are nothing but a rakehell with no manners and no regard for nature. You should go and crawl back into the hole from which you came.”

“Freya!”

She turned to see that Mrs. Beecham had come to find out what the commotion was about.

Freya blushed as the governess glared at her. Then Mrs. Beecham was turning to the man and apologizing profusely for

her behavior.

“Excuse me!” Freya protested, “He’s the one-!”

Mrs. Beecham rounded on her, “Freya hush!”

The man touched Mrs. Beecham’s arm. “Never mind, ma’am. It’s quite all right. I do understand that your charge has a few more lessons to learn when it comes to manners. I’m sure you do your best to teach her.”

Freya growled at him. He gave her a crooked smile, tipped his hat, and walked away. Freya took a step to follow him, ready to give him a piece of her mind, but Mrs. Beecham grabbed her hand and pulled. “Oh no you do not, young lady. You might have left the school room, but at the moment, you are behaving very childish. Come with me right now.” She pulled Freya towards their carriage.

Freya dragged her feet, too busy glaring after the man, but then she noticed all the other carriages, all the people watching her with amusement or disgust, and she straightened up, hastening her footsteps to reach the carriage.

Her face heated with mortification. She had no idea why she behaved in such a way — in public to boot. If her father ever heard of this, she dreaded what he might do.

She let Mrs. Beecham pull her up into the carriage and harangue her the rest of the way until they arrived at the Stark townhouse.

Nobody was at the door to greet them, and the governess had to ring the bell several times before the butler answered.

“Apologies,” he said sounding harried. “We’ve had a bit of an upheaval today what with the Duke...” he trailed off, spotting Freya and Isabella, before stepping back. “Do come in. A footman will fetch your luggage in just a moment. You must be tired. Why don’t you wait in the parlor while I have some refreshments brought?”

Mrs. Beecham nodded, “That will be satisfactory although we should like to freshen up first.”

“Oh! Of course. Well...wait here while I find a maid to direct you to your chambers.” He bowed and hurried off, leaving them milling about in the corridor. Freya avoided everyone’s eyes, still feeling out of sorts by her uncharacteristic outburst.

God, what was I thinking?

She rubbed her hands anxiously together, trying to decide whether she should tell her father about what happened or wait until he heard about it through the grapevine. She was rather inclined towards the latter because she could not *begin* to imagine how the words would come out of her mouth.

Making a scene in public was certainly *not* on the approved list of lady-like activities. Finally, a maid came hurrying down the hall dressed in black with a white apron and cap. She curtsied carelessly before asking them to follow her.

She led them up a flight of stairs before showing them to their assigned chambers, which were side by side much to Freya’s relief. “There’s hot water and soap in the basin as well as your luggage should you wish to change. Ring the bell if you require further help,” the maid said as she came to a stop in the corridor after pointing out their rooms.

“Yes, thank you...er?” Mrs. Beecham said.

“Sarah. My name is Sarah.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” Mrs. Beecham said. “That will be all.”

Sarah trotted away, and Freya retreated to her chambers and shut the door. She was glad of the few moments’ reprieve before she had to face anyone, especially her father. She was happy to also be able to change out of her mud-streaked gown, wash her face, hands, and feet, and take advantage of the chamber pot before changing into a simple muslin gown that required no help to put on.

She liked how light it was and the way it brought out the green of her eyes. She brushed her thick mane of chestnut hair until it shone and let it fall in curling cascades down her back.

Then with a deep breath, she marched to the door, ready to contend with her fate.

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Harriet Caves

About the Author

Born in sunny California, all Harriet Caves ever wanted was to become a doctor and save lives. During her sleepless nights working at the hospital, the Regency classics were her only solace. To no one's surprise, her British descent led her back to England to discover her roots and where her hidden passion lay: the Regency streets of London.

After obtaining a degree in Creative Writing there, Harriet decided to never leave this magnificent place. A daydreamer and an avid reader herself, she loves spending her days exploring the British countryside or seeking stories under the pebbles of the historical London alleys.

Though she abandoned the hospital wards, Harriet now mends hearts by transporting people back to an era of passionate love. Allow her skilled pen to take you to a special place where souls sing of love and dreams come to life!

