

The background of the cover is a romantic scene. A man in a white shirt and dark vest is embracing a woman in a long, ruffled pink gown. They are standing in front of a window with a view of trees. The scene is softly lit, creating a warm and intimate atmosphere.

The  
Cold  
Duke

BRIDES OF CONVENIENCE



SALLY VIXEN

# THE COLD DUKE

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE  
NOVEL

THE BRIDES OF CONVENIENCE

BOOK THREE



SALLY VIXEN



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# BEFORE YOU START READING...

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*“You need a wife, and I need a husband. I would like to propose a deal, Your Grace.”*

Lady Marina would do anything to break free from her mother’s grasp; even offer her hand to the coldest Duke of the ton.

Rumored to have killed his own sister, Duke Jasper can’t find the wife he needs to re-enter society. So when a bold minx proposes a marriage of convenience, he accepts.

But soon Marina’s warm touch sets his icy heart ablaze...And that wasn’t part of their deal.

## CHAPTER 1



“*M*y Lord, do not be shy!” Marina Wilkins watched as her mother, Eliza, tugged insistently at the hands of a startled gentleman: the Earl of Tiverton and the host of the evening’s ball. “Come and dance with me! Let us dance all night as if we are young again. Indeed, I shall ignore the creak of your old bones and that receding hair of yours if you can ignore a few gray hairs of mine!”

Everyone was staring. Ladies that were *actually* young were snickering behind their fans while their mothers tutted and pulled sour faces. Gentlemen pretended to ignore the outlandish scene, likely glad they were not associated with such an embarrassment. Yet, all Marina could do was stare as if the horrors were happening to someone else’s daughter.

“Wisdom is worth a few wrinkles,” Eliza continued loudly. “There are things I can do that no hapless ingenue can!” She flashed an awkward wink at the Earl, but the closing of one eye must have thrown her off balance. A moment later, she was on her back on the parquet floor of the ballroom with her skirts up around her thighs, howling with laughter.

Standing by the ballroom windows, wondering if she ought to step behind one of the drapes to hide herself, Marina wished



that the same parquet floor would open up and swallow them both whole—mother and daughter—leaving no trace behind.

“Lady Creassey, clearly you are unwell!” The Earl blushed furiously, beckoning for a few nearby footmen to come and assist the drunken wastrel. As they picked Eliza up off the floor, fielding her attempts to grab onto them, the Earl turned to the horrified crowd. “Is someone here responsible for this woman?”

Marina cringed, wishing she had accepted her cousin Nancy’s invitation to spend the winter at Stapleton Court, but her mother, Eliza, had wailed and complained, pouting that she would be left all by herself.

“You know how hard the winters are for me, my darling,” she had said when the invitation arrived, and Marina still had the hope of considering it. “I miss your father the most in the winter. We used to attend so many parties together in the winter. But no, you go to your cousin. Do not worry about little old me, wandering these halls... remembering how warm it used to be when he was here.”

It was a trick Eliza used often, knowing it would get Marina to do precisely what she wanted.

“Anyone?” the Earl urged, just as Eliza tried to kiss the cheek of one of the footmen. The poor man almost shoved her away in shock and disgust but seemed to remember his duties at the last moment, holding her at arm’s length instead.

Under the watchful, amused gaze of the crowd, the harsh laughter of the gossiping women ringing in her ears, Marina

took a breath and stepped forward from her hiding place.

“She is my mother,” Marina admitted, wishing at that moment that she could have been anyone else’s daughter. “I will ensure her safe departure.”

Stares, both judging and pitying, followed Marina as she undertook a walk of shame toward the red-faced Earl. To make matters worse, the Countess flounced in at that very moment, as bright scarlet as her husband.

“She has done it again, has she not?” the Countess roared, seemingly oblivious to the fact that there were a hundred eyes upon her. “Lady Creassey, you are despicable! I told my husband we should not invite you. I insisted upon it, yet here you are, crawling into places you are not welcome once more! It is... unbecoming. You are a lady of some fifty years—it is high time you behaved like one!”

Eliza cast a lazy look at Lady Tiverton. “Like you, you mean? A dried-up old husk who has not pleased her husband in years and scrapes her hair back so tightly in a vain attempt to pull her face into some semblance of youth?” She cackled. “Did no one tell you that beauty fades, and one must have decidedly more to their character in order to remain interesting? Not a shred of wit or intellect to be found anywhere in that empty head of yours.”

“How dare you!” the Countess screamed though Eliza was not entirely wrong. The Countess did have her hair pulled back so tightly that little sores had appeared at her hairline.

Eliza lazily waved a drunken, dismissive hand. “I do dare which is more than can be said for you.” She hiccupped between words. “But you, of all people, in all your bland glory, understand perfectly well why there is barely a ball or dinner party in all of England that I am not invited to. So, shall I continue? I feel like I might have a few things to say.”

The Countess blanched while Marina hesitated, wondering if today might be the day that her mother finally unleashed hell upon society. Indeed, it had always been fascinating to Marina how her mother could know so much about everyone and never say a word, no matter how inebriated she became. Eliza’s lips were solid medieval gates, locked tight with several drawbridges behind, and no siege of alcohol or revelry could get them to open. Insults, on the other hand...

“No,” the Countess squeaked. “No, do not say another word. You have said quite enough.”

Eliza giggled into her hand. “Have I, though?”

“Mama, you have,” Marina cut in, offering apologetic looks to the poor Earl and Countess of Tiverton.

From the crowd, someone shouted, “Go on, let her speak! We ought to have *some* entertainment this evening!”

“I shall take my mother home,” Marina assured, seizing Eliza by the arm as if she were a naughty schoolchild who had been caught in the midst of a brawl. “Please, accept my sincerest apologies. She does not ordinarily behave this way, but I think the punch must have been laced with something potent. A young lord playing a trick or something of that ilk.”

It was a barefaced lie, and everyone within hearing distance knew it. Eliza was infamous for her society antics. Indeed, Marina could not think of a single ball or gathering or dinner party where her mother had *not* been drunk and disorderly though Eliza always promised, every sobered morning afterward, that it would not happen again.

“Swiftly,” the Countess hissed while the Earl stood back and cooled his cheeks on the backs of his hands.

Marina nodded. “Of course.”

With all the strength she could muster, her skin burning with the mocking stares of the congregation, she dragged her mother out of the ballroom—and not by the main entrance either. Marina hauled her mother through the nearest door, that led out into the gardens, both women stumbling over one another’s feet as they went.

The raucous laughter was immediate and utterly crushing, the taunting sound pursuing mother and daughter out of Tiverton House like a mob with torches and pitchforks.

*It will be in the scandal sheets tomorrow. Another damning exposé on a woman who does well enough exposing herself,* Marina’s insides curdled with secondhand shame. Not that her mother ever felt any shame or embarrassment, not for long anyway.

“I laced the punch myself,” Eliza confessed in a loud whisper, cackling as Marina continued to wrangle the older woman, the

pair staggering and swaying and tripping as if they were both drunkards.

“Drinking from your secret flask is not the same as lacing the punch, Mama,” Marina muttered. “Why do you do this? Are you so determined to see me ridiculed? I might have friends of my own if it were not for your behavior! No one wants to be associated with me, and it is entirely your fault.”

Eliza was not listening; she was humming a song to herself and veering off the terrace that surrounded the manor. “Pardon, darling? You shall have to repeat yourself.” She dug a finger into her ear. “I think I have something stuck. It has made me quite deaf.”

“You heard me perfectly well,” Marina retorted, wishing for the millionth time that she had been brave enough to defy her mother’s onslaught of guilt and gone to Nancy’s residence for the winter. “Oh, damn and blast it!” she cursed, bringing her mother to a sharp halt. “I have forgotten our tippetts and pelisses!”

“We are returning to the revels?” Eliza’s eyes twinkled with mischief... or brandy, it was never easy to tell. “Excellent! I might have my dance with the Earl after all.”

Marina glanced back to where the bright lights spilled out onto the terrace and the inviting music had resumed, knowing she could not risk it. When cornered and inebriated, Eliza liked to run, and once she had it in her mind that she would not be removed from the entertainment, she was impossible to catch.

“And I so liked that fur tippet *and* the pretty purple pelisse.” Marina sighed and marched on, pulling her mother with her.

“I thought we were returning to my evening conquest?” Eliza complained, whining like a child while she resisted every tug of Marina’s arm.

Marina swallowed her rising temper, for anger never made a difference to her mother’s behavior either. “I shall write to the Earl and Countess and request the return of our belongings, but *you* are not venturing into this manor again. No matter what wicked tales you might have stored away about them in there.” She rapped on her mother’s skull. “Honestly, what am I to do with you?”

“Let me do as I please,” Eliza replied sulkily. “I have earned my amusements, I should think, considering what your father did to me.”

Marina shot her mother a warning glance. “And what, pray tell, did he do to you that you did not also do to him?”

“He abandoned me!” Eliza wailed. “He took off and left me without a word, breaking my poor heart into pieces!”

Annoyance bristled up the back of Marina’s neck, making the fine hairs stand on end. “He died, Mama. It was not as if he had a choice in the matter.”

“He bloody well did,” Eliza retorted, struggling to free herself from her daughter’s vise-like grip. “He did it to spite me, the coward. He did it because we were in the midst of an

argument, and he wanted to have the final word.” She shook her fist up at the sky. “Well, you got that, did you not? Are you happy now?”

“You were always in the midst of an argument,” Marina mumbled.

Eliza’s sudden anger faded just as quickly, a sly smile gracing her red-stained lips. “And then we would make peace, and my goodness, how I miss it.”

“Do not say another word,” Marina begged, for she had heard it all before: things that no daughter wanted or needed to know about her parents.

Eliza stifled a snort. “You will never find a husband if you behave like such a prude, my darling girl.”

“I shall never find a husband if you continue to ensure that I am shunned by society,” Marina shot back. “And a ‘prude’, as you call it, is precisely what is expected from polite society, so you are mistaken twice over. It might do *you* some good to be more... prudish.”

Eliza hiccupped. “Nonsense. I shall not wither and wilt, simply because my husband abandoned me, and I am no longer as young as I once was. I have no time to be delicate and vague.”

“But you *might* consider not pursuing other ladies’ husbands,” Marina reminded her, grateful that they had almost come back around to the front of Tiverton House. The distant sound of

music grew louder once more, drifting out from the open entrance doors as though Marina had stuffed her ears and had just removed the cloth balls.

Just then, Eliza broke loose, cackling as she sprinted away. Marina stared in abject horror, fearing that her mother might veer to the right and run straight back into the manor.

Instead, Eliza called back over her shoulder, “Last one to the carriage is a rotten egg!”

Marina had to smile, wondering how her mother could still have so much exuberance at six-and-fifty. She doubted she would have the same liveliness when *she* was that age, for her mother would surely have exhausted her by then. *It is as if I am the mother, and she is the child, sometimes.*

With a weary sigh, she set off in pursuit of her mother, who would at least lose some of her advantage when it came to actually finding their carriage.

As she hurried, a prick of fear jabbed at Marina’s chest, imagining the night ending with one final embarrassment: her mother, breaking into someone else’s carriage and refusing to leave. It had happened before, and it could certainly happen again.

“Mama? Mama, where are you?” Marina hissed into the darkness, passing the long line of waiting carriages and the dozing drivers who had not retreated to the servants’ quarters of the manor to refresh themselves.



No reply came, building the thudding panic in Marina's heart.

But as she stopped beside *their* carriage and tentatively opened the door, all of her worry gave way to relief. Eliza was inside, curled up on the squabs with a pile of blankets strewn messily over herself, somehow sound asleep. It was another trick of hers, the ability to fall asleep at a moment's notice through any sort of disturbance.

*At least you found your way*, Marina mused, expelling a sigh as she looked up at the driver, Mr. Links.

He smiled back, accustomed to the scene. "Excitin' night, Milady?"

"As always," Marina replied. "Homeward, if you please."

Mr. Links tipped his cloth cap. "Aye, Milady."

With that, Marina climbed into the carriage by herself, for they had been forced to dispense with their footmen several years ago, and she settled onto the squabs opposite her mother. She stole one of the blankets from the pile her mother had nestled under and wrapped it around herself, for the night was chilly and frost had begun to spiderweb across the carriage windows.

Before long, the carriage pulled away from the ranks, rattling down the long driveway of Tiverton House beneath the bright sliver of a full moon that made Marina feel colder somehow.

“This cannot continue, Mama,” she said, teeth chattering as she observed her slumbering mother. Yet, it was difficult to stay angry with the older woman when she looked so small and vulnerable, half hidden beneath so many blankets.

Sitting back, not tired at all, Marina reached for the newspaper that had been discarded on the floor of the carriage. She supposed she hoped that the country’s woes might make her own feel smaller, but as she picked up the newspaper, something fell out of the bottom.

Puzzled, Marina bent down to fetch the item, almost toppling onto her face as the carriage bounced over a ditch, but as she resumed her balance and drew her legs up onto the squabs, sitting cross-legged, her attention was fixed solely upon the rectangle of paper she held in her hands.

“I wonder how many times your name appears,” she said drily, shooting a glance at her sleeping mother.

Opening the scandal sheets with a vague curiosity, she skimmed the pages, nothing attracting her interest... until she reached the very last article. Indeed, it seemed like it had been written just for her, like a sign from the heavens. It was short and to the point, the title reading: *The Duke of Lymington is Ready to Claim a Bride! Could it be You?* And as she read on, her curiosity bloomed:

*The Duke of Lymington has returned to society after three years in the proverbial wilderness, and he is in search of a bride! A close acquaintance of the lonely Duke has insisted that all may apply, for His Grace is eager to make the right choice, not necessarily the wealthiest one. With a fortune like his, it must be nice not to worry about such things. So, do not*

*delay, make yourselves known to the dear Duke; it might just change your life.*

Marina glanced from the article to her mother and back again, seeing freedom beneath the lines of text. The possibility of it, at least. Whether or not the Duke of Lymington was serious about considering anyone remained to be seen, but there was no harm in trying. It was not as if it would worsen her reputation.

Indeed, noting the part about being in the ‘proverbial wilderness’ for three years, she had a feeling that she and the Duke might be in a similar boat, for why else would a seemingly wealthy gentleman of elevated station need to spread word through the scandal sheets that he was in want of a wife? The article was clearly his own doing; she could tell from the ‘close acquaintance’. In her mind, that either meant he had a terrible reputation too, or he was seeking a quick marriage of convenience. If it was a love match that he desired, he would search the *ton* the usual way until he found his beloved. And maybe, just maybe, that meant he really would accept anyone as long as they offered tempting enough terms.

Marina raised an eyebrow, whispering, “I wonder...” to no one at all.

## CHAPTER 2



“*R*emind me what I pay you a small fortune for when it has been months, and you have found me nothing?” Jasper Armitage, the Duke of Lymington, paced back and forth in front of the fireplace of his drawing room, frustration itching in his veins.

A short, slight, fair-haired man squirmed in the armchair opposite, pushing his spectacles back up to the bridge of his sweaty nose. “We haven’t been idle, Your Grace,” he assured, clutching tightly to several thick dossiers. “We really thought we had something with that Sir Bartholomew fellow, but—”

“Then go back and squeeze a confession out of him if you have to!” Jasper snapped, his hand tightening around the brandy glass in his hand though it was not yet eleven o’clock in the morning.

The private detective, Mr. Leon Parbold, held his precious dossiers a little tighter. “It isn’t him, Your Grace. I wish it were, but it isn’t.” He paused and paled. “I mean, of course, I wish you didn’t have any need for my services at all, but... it really isn’t him.”

“How can you be so sure when you seem like a man who is not even sure that he has tied his own shoelaces?” Jasper could not stand to be disappointed, yet again. Two—almost three—years of the same thing, just phrased in slightly different tones.

Leon nodded as if he deserved that. “Those witnesses sealed it, Your Grace. There’s no denying it; Sir Bart and your sister weren’t in the same place that night, not even close. They were almost a city’s breadth apart. You see, he was sampling the delights of a bawdy house in Camden Town, and she was... well, you know where she was. That’s why those... um... ladies were so slow to make themselves known, but once the reward was raised, they were more forthcoming.”

“Why did you suspect him in the first place, then? How could you have made such a mess of this?” Jasper’s patience was paper-thin and getting thinner by the second.

“It was the emblem on the side of the carriage, Your Grace.” Leon fumbled through his dossiers to find a sketch of it, brandishing it in the air like a notice of eviction. “It looked very similar to that of Sir Bart’s, but as it was seen from a distance, at night, by a boy with poor eyesight, we were... mistaken. I am sorry, Your Grace, I truly am.”

Jasper wanted to rant and rave at the man, to shake him until answers fell out, but as he turned and glared at Leon, he just felt... hollow. Scooped out.

“Do you know what it is like to not know?” Jasper asked instead. “Do you understand what that feels like to have no justice, no relief, no... closure?”

Leon lowered his gaze. "I do, Your Grace."

"They just left her there!" Jasper spat, turning to face the mantelpiece and the heat of the fire. "Left her there to die. She might have been saved if they had stopped, if they had taken responsibility, but they were cowards, and they left her to die, and I shall never look into the eyes of the wretch who did this and make them suffer as she suffered!"

Leon nodded. "I am sorry, Your Grace."

"You keep saying you are sorry, but what balm is that? It does not make it any better." Jasper downed what was left in his glass and went to pour another. "How long have we known one another, Mr. Parbold?"

"Three years or thereabouts."

"Your father made the same promises to me—do you remember?"

Leon's expression pinched. "I remember. I was often standing right beside him when he made those promises."

"He swore to me that he would find the cretin who took her from me then he vanished," Jasper said coldly. "Now, you are trying to vanish too. I hear it in your voice, Mr. Parbold; you are hoping I will tell you I am ready to give up, but that day will never come."

Leon expelled a strained breath. “That is your prerogative, Your Grace. I will continue to search and will continue to work on your behalf with my associates for as long as you need, but—”

“Do not say it. Your father said that to me, and I told him what I shall tell you—I will not rest until the culprit is found, even if it takes the rest of *my* life.” Jasper paused, swallowing his temper down with another mouthful of potent brandy. “You still have not heard from your father?”

Leon shook his head slowly. “Nothing since the letter from Glasgow.”

“And that was—?”

“A year ago.”

Jasper frowned down into the amber liquid in the glass. “You have done well in his absence,” he said stiffly, for Leon had fully taken over the investigation after his father had suddenly disappeared. There *had* been a note, but it had simply said: *I have something important to tend to. I do not know when I will return, but rest assured that it is important; I must do this for your sake.*

It was as much a mystery as the incident that plagued Jasper, day in and day out, and had done so for the past three years. But at least Leon’s father was still alive, still sending letters, still out there somewhere. For that reason alone, Jasper could not offer much sympathy.

“I have to say it, Your Grace,” Leon murmured apologetically. “We have run out of possibilities. I don’t want to cease, and I won’t, but it really might be time to put an end to this. There is no one left to speak to, no one left who saw what happened that night, no more witnesses with any information, no one who can help us solve this. We are beyond clutching at straws, at this juncture.”

Jasper glanced back, scowling at Leon. “You found those women after three years. They had information, did they not?”

“Yes, but—”

“Someone knows something. Someone saw something. Memories are not that short, particularly when it pertains to someone like her. She was known, she was well-respected—for goodness’ sake, she was society’s diamond!” Jasper was panting, his heart a blade in his chest, stabbing holes in his heaving lungs. “Begin again, if you have to, but I am not giving up.”

Leon shuffled forward on the armchair until he was practically off the edge of it. “We are... friends, are we not?”

“In a way, I suppose,” Jasper replied stiffly.

Before Priscilla died, he had been popular, always surrounded by friends and acquaintances, always hosting parties and gatherings—or, rather, Priscilla had arranged them, and he had shown up. He had forgotten what it meant to have a friend, but what was a friend if not someone who one spent a lot of time with?



“Then, as a friend, would you take some advice?” Leon asked.

Jasper shrugged. “I shall, at least, listen.”

“I’ve seen countless men and women like you over the years while working with my father, stuck in their grief, lost in their loss,” Leon said cautiously. “I’m not telling you to forget her, but you might... begin to move on. I didn’t know her, but if she was anything like you describe, it’s what she would have wanted.”

Jasper’s mood darkened to a pitch black. “You are quite right.”

“I am?”

“You did *not* know her. If it had been me who died that night, she would not have rested until justice had been served, and I would be no brother at all if I did not do the same for her,” Jasper shot back, anger bristling through him.

Leon shrugged. “Very well, then shall we reconvene next week? The same time?”

“I will be in London next week,” Jasper replied curtly. “Visit me at the townhouse. And yes, at the same time.”

Leon looked stunned but nodded his assent a moment later. “In London. Of course.” He put on a nervous smile. “It’ll be a shorter journey for me, at least.”

“We would not want to inconvenience you, now, would we?” Jasper grumbled.

Leon’s eyes widened. “That isn’t what I meant, Your Grace. Even if you resided in Northumberland, I’d make the journey.” He paused. “And I *will* persevere, for you and for her. I will begin the investigations again and see if there are some rocks I haven’t yet turned over. After all, it was my father who began this—perhaps I missed something, perhaps he missed something, perhaps he has notes that I didn’t find the first time I searched his office after he left.”

“Thank you.” Jasper finished off his second hefty pour of the morning. “I know I am not exactly a pleasant client, or... friend, but I do appreciate your tireless work. I just hope that one day, something comes to fruition.” It was not easy for him to apologize, but he attempted the closest thing: encouragement.

Leon mustered a smile. “As do I, Your Grace.”

“And I am, you know...”

Leon raised a puzzled eyebrow. “You are what, Your Grace?”

“I am... trying to concentrate on other things,” Jasper replied, not really knowing why he was saying such a thing to his private detective.

“Ah, of course!” Leon smiled more comfortably. “I did hear that your business ventures were doing very well though I don’t think I’ll ever be at ease with the notion of you fine

noblemen working for your income. It's a new world, I suppose."

Jasper shrugged. "I suppose it is." He hesitated. "Where did you hear of my business ventures?"

"I forget," Leon said, scratching the stubble that shadowed his jaw. "Lord Tiverton, perhaps. He visited me a few days ago over a small theft matter—kept insisting he didn't want the stolen item returned because he was poor but because it had sentimental value. Yes, that's where I heard it. He mentioned a venture with you."

Satisfied by the answer, Jasper poured a third glass of brandy, a slightly smaller measure. "Did you resolve it?"

"Hmm?" Leon tilted his head.

"Did you resolve his predicament—the theft?"

Leon grimaced. "It was simple enough. An unpleasant business, though. Turned out it was a revenge matter."

"Revenge?" Jasper sipped his fresh drink.

Leon nodded. "That's really all I can say about it, for privacy."

"I quite understand." Jasper shifted his weight onto his other foot, an awkward silence stretching between the two men. "Well, I imagine you have lots to do."

Leon shot to his feet as if he had been bitten on the behind. “Yes, I do. Lots of investigating to begin and continue.” He shook the dossiers pointedly, his eyes fixating on the glass in Jasper’s hand. “I shall leave you to your... um... business matters. Until next week, Your Grace.”

“Indeed.” Jasper watched the man run from the drawing room like the same thing that had bitten him on the armchair was now snapping at his ankles, chasing him out.

*Friends?* Jasper did not know whether to scoff or laugh, for what sort of friend could not bear to spend another moment with him? Not that he could blame Leon. If Jasper had been in Leon’s position, he would not have wanted to linger for very long either.

Swirling the brandy and taking slower sips, his empty stomach already burning with the sting of the harsh liquor, he wandered over to the writing desk by the window. It looked out on what had been Priscilla’s favorite garden— ‘The Meadow,’ as she had called it, though all the wildflowers she had adored had lost their blooms, awaiting spring.

“The robins are here again,” he said softly, the little, red-breasted birds hopping across the gravel pathways, searching the soil for something delicious. One of them turned and trilled as if in answer, pecking a new crack into his heart.

*I miss you...*

With a sigh, he turned his attention to the silver tray of letters that had been brought in earlier that morning. He had not had

the motivation to look at them sooner, not with the knowledge that Leon would be visiting and *might* have news, but with his hopes deflated once again, he had nothing better to do.

He opened the first letter: a plea from a Lady Middlewich, bluntly and urgently begging him to consider her youngest daughter, who *“though plain in beauty is an exceptional singer.”*

“Absolutely not,” he muttered, for the last thing he wanted in his house was loud singing. He had not even been able to tolerate Priscilla’s singing voice though he missed it sometimes now that it was gone.

There were five more letters containing similarly desperate pleas by similarly desperate mothers who wished to rid themselves of unmarried daughters. It had been the same for the past week, ever since he sent an anonymous note to the scandal sheets, informing them of his desire to find suitable candidates for the position of his wife as soon as possible.

“Heavens, no!” He pulled a face, seeing a letter from one of his second cousins.

The final three letters did not fill him with enthusiasm, either, for though he knew he would have to choose someone soon, there was still plenty of time for him to be discerning in his decision.

*You would know the perfect lady for me as soon as you saw her;* he mused, gazing back out at the robins and the dead wildflowers. His breath caught, thinking of all the things

Priscilla would miss, all the things he would miss, all the things he already missed.

There would be no first love for her, no awkward first meeting with a potential suitor, no permission to grant to the man who was worthy of her, no wedding, no nieces or nephews for Jasper, no visits to fill Lymington Manor with noise and cheer after long absences. It was just him, alone in a house that was much, much too big for him.

“London will be better,” he told himself, out loud. “The coming season will bring me a bride.” Indeed, he was certain he would not be able to move without ladies throwing their daughters into his path, and one of them would surely suffice.

After all, he was not looking for company. It was merely a matter of business, for married gentlemen succeeded where bachelors could not. Married gentlemen were invited to dinner parties that bachelors could not enter, were better respected by their equally married peers, and there was a lot to be said for the friendship and chatter of wives, who could forge alliances and arrange meetings that unwed gentlemen of business could only dream of.

*I must pick wisely*, he knew, already dreading the thought. After all, he had not been back to London in three years, not since that night: the night that ripped away the only true family he had left and rendered him a failure to the one person who had mattered.

“London will be better,” he repeated, but no amount of repetition could ever truly convince him.

## CHAPTER 3



“*H*as a foreign prince come to visit?” Marina whispered behind her fan to her cousin and dearest friend—her only friend, in truth—Nancy Robins, the Duchess of Stapleton. It had been a surprise when Nancy had sent word that she and her husband would be in London for a fortnight but a welcome one.

Nancy frowned at the crush of bodies on the far side of the Assembly Rooms’ ballroom. “Or there is an exceedingly long line for the powder rooms.” She raised up on tiptoe. “I cannot see, the doors are in the way.”

“It is not my mother, is it?” A sudden fear gripped Marina, for it would not have been the first time that her mother had fallen and refused to get up. Then again, it was still early in the evening; there was no possible way her mother could be so inebriated yet.

Nancy chuckled. “I do not believe so. Last I saw, she was gossiping with Edwin’s aunt. Sharing information, no doubt.”

“Do you think there is anything they do not know about society’s hidden scandals between them?” Marina allowed

herself to relax, for Peggy, the Dowager Countess of Rowley, would ensure that Eliza remained on her best behavior.

Nancy arched a knowing eyebrow. “Certainly not. They are a wealth of knowledge individually and a formidable force when paired together. Have you not seen people glancing anxiously in their direction since they arrived? Everyone *with* a secret must be petrified.”

“I assumed they were glancing at my mother because of her most recent misdemeanor with the Earl of Tiverton,” Marina muttered grimly. “I envy you, Nancy. You never have to know what it is like to read of your own mother in the scandal sheets.”

Nancy smiled. “No, but I know what it is like to *be* in the scandal sheets. How Aunt Eliza weathers it so well is a wonder to me. It is as though it does not bother her at all.”

“That is because it does not,” Marina replied. “It is like leaning on one’s foot and having it fall asleep—one cannot feel anything afterward for a while, even if pinched. And your brief appearance in the scandal sheets worked out rather well. The same cannot, and never will, be said about my mother.”

Nancy nodded bashfully, her gaze seeking out her handsome husband, Adam, who stood in a small circle of gentlemen, chatting amiably. “I have been extraordinarily lucky.”

In truth, when Nancy and Adam had first encountered one another a year prior, Marina had anticipated disaster. After all, when Nancy and Adam met, he had been a notorious rake, and their first meeting had involved him mistaking her for his



lover. Several times, it *had* almost turned into a nightmare for Nancy, thanks to the wicked scheme of Adam's former best friend, Harry. But all had turned out well in the end with Nancy and Adam becoming the darlings of society, so in love with one another that it was even too much for Marina to witness at times.

"How is Joanna?" Marina asked, thinking of her older cousin, Nancy's sister.

"Utterly content with her beloved Edwin," Nancy sighed, a flicker of sadness passing across her face. "She is the most wonderful mother, and my nephews are... so precious. I miss them terribly, but they are coming to visit us at Stapleton Court when we return."

Nancy and Adam had been hoping for a child of their own, but it had not yet happened for the beautiful, enviable pair. Still, Marina was certain that it would—good things always happened to good people; it was just a matter of time.

Marina nodded, struggling to hide her regret that she would not also be joining her cousin there for the winter. "How long did you say you would be in London?"

"Just two weeks," Nancy replied apologetically. "Do not ask me why, for I only know vague details. Something to do with ships and business ventures and lost cargo, but at least I get to see you. I thought it would be spring before I saw you again, my dearest Marina!"

Marina smiled, weaving her arm through her cousin's. "As did I, and though it may sound selfish and neither of us know the

details, I am pleased that some cargo has been lost or whatever has happened.” She paused. “But I really should see what the furor is about, just in case my mother *is* at the center of it.”

“Let us take a peek, and if it is nothing of interest, let us find the refreshments,” Nancy agreed. “I am parched.”

They made their way around the periphery of the ballroom, toward the gaggle of ladies who were blocking the main entryway. Marina took hold of Nancy’s hand and forced a path through the swarm, pleased that she did not have to drag a dead weight behind her. Nancy was more of an obliging participant.

“Well, it is not Aunt Eliza!” Nancy whispered close to Marina’s ear, for she stood a good head taller than her cousin.

Marina frowned back at Nancy. “Thank goodness. But who is it? Has someone fallen? Is someone hurt?”

“Only a hundred pounding hearts,” Nancy replied, grinning.

Intrigued, Marina cut a more direct path through the horde of excitable ladies and their mothers, igniting their wrath as she shouldered her way through the middle of the crowd.

“Excuse me! Wait for your turn!” one woman barked.

“Ouch! You stood on my foot, you oaf!” yelled another.

“As if you stand a chance!” raged a third which made little sense to Marina.

*Stand a chance at what?* Marina did not pause to ask, fearing they might actually be crushed or savaged by the frenzied cluster.

The moment Marina broke through the bodies and half-fell into a small, open circle of space, she understood. In the center of it all was a man. A man unlike any she had seen in real life before. He towered over her in an almost comical fashion, diminishing her petite stature even more, but this giant had the face and physique of a fairytale hero.

Long, chocolate brown hair had been tied back with a green ribbon, giving the gentleman a classical quality that made her wonder if he was a visitor from a more thrilling era. And despite being held back off his face, a few telltale waves gave away the texture of those lustrous locks, giving Marina a sudden and strange impulse to touch the tied-up tresses. She closed her free hand into a fist, just in case she had something of her mother’s impetuosity in her that had just been waiting for an opportunity to reveal itself.

He had moonlight-pale skin, so smooth and flawless that he seemed to glow. Flawless, that was, aside from a faint scar upon his right cheek that only made him more handsome, like a promise that his muscular arms and thighs, his broad chest, and his wide shoulders were not merely for show. He could protect a woman if called upon to do so.

Everything about him screamed strength and power, his face so defined that it deserved to be studied by sculptors from his square jaw to his high cheekbones to his straight nose to the hint of a dimple in his chin. But it was his eyes, the color of a

winter lake, iced over, that held Marina mesmerized for a moment. How could they not, when they were glaring right down at her?

“Apologies,” Marina managed to say. “I am just trying to get around the chaos, and you appear to be causing it, so if you do not mind, my cousin and I shall just squeeze by. We need tea, immediately.”

The gentleman frowned and stepped aside, bringing his proximity closer to a few of the nearby, drooling ladies. One instantly fainted into the arms of her mother who, suspiciously, was braced to catch her.

“Thank you,” Marina called back, shoving her way through the crowd that had gathered behind the gentlemen until, at last, they broke out into an open hallway. A relief after the feverish press of so many people, squashed together, jostling.

As she paused to catch her breath, Nancy stepped in front of her cousin, whispering, “Did you see him?”

“Of course. He was standing where I needed to go,” Marina replied, removing a handkerchief from her reticule to dab at her glistening brow. “Quite cold, was he not? Or, perhaps, that is because *I* was in the way of his flirtations.”

Nancy peered over Marina’s shoulder. “He is looking back at you!”

“He is not,” Marina replied though curiosity led her to follow her cousin’s line of sight. As expected, the gentleman was *not*

looking in her direction. “You should not tell fibs, Cousin. One day, I might believe you and get my feelings hurt.”

Nancy furrowed her brow. “But he *was* looking at you, I promise.”

“Likely to make note of the only woman in these Assembly Rooms who is *not* crowded around him as if he is a prize bull at the market.” With her breath restored, and her brow dried, Marina began to make her way toward the tea room. “Come, let us find a quiet corner, so you can tell me everything that I have missed since I saw you last. I know I do not have you for long; your husband will come and claim you for a dance soon, and you will end up dancing all evening.”

Nancy laughed. “I wish I could say you were mistaken, but we do so love to dance.”

“I am surprised I have been allowed back into society at all after this summer’s first Stapleton Gala,” Marina teased, feeling a funny twinge of regret. “Although, I think that is because my mother was asleep in the wine cellar by the time the waltzing started. There would not have been a single gentleman safe from her advances if she had been awake.”

Nancy put an arm around her cousin’s thin shoulders. “I still wish you had waltzed, but there shall be ample opportunity in the future, now that we know we will not be cast out for encouraging such dances.” She paused. “And that gentleman *was* looking at you. I would not jest about something like that.”

“Who was he, anyway?” Marina wondered, still not believing a word.

Nancy shrugged. “I have no notion whatsoever, but he seems to be rather famous.” She reached over and tapped one of the arms of a passing trio of ladies who appeared to be headed in the gentleman’s direction with the same air of giddiness as the rest of his admirers. “Excuse me, might you tell us who that fellow is?”

One of the ladies, a pretty, freckled redhead, stared at Nancy as if she had taken leave of her senses. “Are you quite serious?”

“I would not ask if I was not,” Nancy replied politely.

A different lady, a raven-haired beauty, clapped her hands together in excitement. “Do not mind my friend, she was born rude.” She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, her eyes gleaming as she added, “He is the Duke of Lymington, and he is about to make one of us poor unmarried damsels a duchess!”

“It was in the scandal sheets,” the third lady, a disinterested brunette, explained with a roll of her eyes. “It is embarrassing to see what courtship has become, but I suppose it will become the new fashion—the gentlemen advertise their intent in the scandal sheets, and the ladies come flocking in abject desperation.”

The raven-haired beauty chuckled. “Ignore her too. She was born with an aversion to men of every kind, other than her darling husband.”

But Marina barely heard what the last two women had said as the name they had given spooled through her mind like string dipped in glue and ground-up glass, making her thoughts jagged.

*Oh no... Oh, you silly, silly creature...* She had just pushed past the very gentleman she had intended to write to, to state her own case as to why she would be his ideal candidate. Worse still, she had pushed past him as if he was nothing at all—just a hulking lump, standing in her way.

Whoever the fortunate duchess was, she knew without doubt, staring back at the tied-up tail of his silky brown hair, that it would not be her. This time, she did not need her mother to ruin her chances, for she had ruined them all by herself.

## CHAPTER 4



Jasper was exhausted, sick to his stomach with the tireless flood of ladies and their ambitious mothers who crowded him wherever he went. If they could have followed him into the ‘gentlemen only’ rooms of the Assembly Rooms, he had no doubt they would have. Indeed, he was surprised that none of the eager mothers had donned men’s clothing and done so already, catching him unawares.

“Your Grace, what a pleasant surprise,” a gentleman said as Jasper sought refuge in the smoking room though he did not partake himself.

“Do they all belong to you?” another gentleman shouted from across the room, smirking as a pipe dangled from the corner of his mouth. “Chance would be a fine thing! All I have is my wife, who has had nothing interesting to say for a decade! Do not do it, Your Grace! Take it from a man who knows.”

Jasper struggled to concentrate on the gentleman who had approached him, his brain swimming with noise and stress. “Lord... Kinsale.” His memory kicked in at last. “Yes, it has... um... been a while.”



“Marvelous to see you back with us,” Lord Kinsale said, clapping Jasper lightly on the arm. “Are you well? You look pale.”

Jasper forced a smile, or the closest thing he could manage to one. “I am always pale, but quite well. I am... rusty, that is all.”

“Of course.” An understanding seemed to dawn across Lord Kinsale’s kindly, lined face. “It has been several years, has it not? The last time I saw you was...” He trailed off, clearing his throat. “Well, it is excellent to see you here. You ought to come for dinner at my townhouse if you are in London for the season?”

Jasper nodded. “I should like that. I hear you are becoming quite the businessman in your wiser years, and there are a few ventures I would not mind discussing.”

“Excellent, excellent!” Lord Kinsale patted Jasper’s shoulder more gently. “I shall send word soon, for it would be remiss of me not to discuss such matters with you—you are becoming rather reputable as an impresario. My wife might have a few intriguing possibilities for you, too, for I heard you are in want of a wife?”

“I am.” Jasper tugged on the strangling noose of his cravat, loosening it.

The fellow who had shouted earlier continued his performance. “Tell him not to do it, Lord Kinsale! Tell him to save himself while there is still hope!”

“Ignore him,” Lord Kinsale muttered. “He has imbibed too much, and if you could hear him sober, he does not stop talking about how dearly he loves his wife. There is nothing that completes a man more than a good woman.”

Jasper blinked away the blurry film that kept slicking his eyes. “So I am told.”

“Are you sure you are well?” Lord Kinsale looked worried.

Jasper nodded, his throat too dry to form words.

“Was there no lady who captured your attention out there?” Lord Kinsale asked, passing Jasper a glass of something dark and strong. “You appear to be the gentleman of the hour, and I imagine you could have your pick.”

Jasper took a hearty gulp of the liquor, letting it steady him. “Sadly, none of them are quite what I am searching for though I shall persevere.” He took another gulp. “And if your wife should think of anyone, please do let me know.”

*For I am beginning to think that this method will end me before I have found what I need,* he neglected to add, his nerves still raw after being among so many people—or, rather, ladies—at once. It had sent his body into something like panic after being so solitary for the past few years, his excursions away from the manor consisting of business meetings with gentlemen and nothing else.

“The mothers, I find, are somewhat repellent,” Jasper added, calmed by the potent drink. “They do not seem to realize that

they would have more hope of gaining my attention if they let their daughters speak.”

Lord Kinsale erupted into laughter. “How damning, and yet how right you are! It was the same when my eldest, Peter, decided to marry. I am certain some of those mothers would set their daughters’ gowns ablaze if they thought it could snare a fellow’s favor.” He shook his head, still chuckling. “But they are not all like that, and it is the beginning of the London season, so they are more fraught than they will be in a few weeks’ time when they have tired themselves out. You will see. Everything will calm and settle soon enough, and I am sure you will find the perfect lady.”

“I have to,” Jasper said bluntly.

Lord Kinsale nodded in understanding. “A duke’s legacy cannot perpetuate itself. As I say, I shall speak to my wife.” He tried to steer Jasper toward a nearby chair. “Now, come, sit, and consider this a sanctuary from all of the chaos out there.”

*Chaos...* Jasper’s mind conjured an image of that small, determined young lady who had forced her way past him without so much as an, “I would like you to consider me as a candidate.” He had mistaken her for one of the many young ladies who had tried to push others out of the way to get to him, so it had been something of a surprise when she had all but spurned his presence. Refreshing, almost... but refreshing was not what he required.

“Actually, I am about to depart,” Jasper insisted. “I only stepped in for a moment in the hopes of leaving without being mobbed. Is there a different doorway I could use?”

Lord Kinsale hesitated. “Are you certain?”

“I am. As you said, it is only the beginning of the London season. I must pace myself,” Jasper replied.

With a fond smile, Lord Kinsale gestured to a door on the far side of the smoking room. “Very well, then I wish you luck in your escape. If you go through there, you will find a passageway. The second door on the right will take you out onto the street.”

“My thanks to you,” Jasper said, already turning away. He was halfway to the door before he remembered his manners. “It was a pleasure, Lord Kinsale.”

The older man nodded his head, his expression a concerned one, like a father watching his son ride a horse alone for the first time. Irritation bristled through Jasper’s veins as he continued on toward his escape, for if there was one thing he did not want from his time in London, it was pity. Pity was for weaklings and cowards.

*So, why are you fleeing out of the rear exit?* a little, sniping voice in his mind whispered.

Following Lord Kinsale’s instructions, it was a matter of minutes before Jasper found himself in the cool night air, down a shadowed alley to the side of the Assembly Rooms. Rain had begun to spit from the heavens, but he did not mind; it soothed the heat in his cheeks as he trudged toward the main road ahead where his carriage would be waiting.

“It will not happen in one day,” he told himself as he walked. “I must be patient. I must choose wisely.” For he had very specific requirements, and not one of the chirping, giddy carousel of similarly pretty but equally inappropriate ladies had met them. For one thing, they had all wanted to talk at length and make jests and be asked to dance, dangling their dance cards in front of him like a carrot before a particularly stubborn donkey.

He had just reached his carriage, ready to surrender for the night, when a figure emerged from behind the landau. Fear lodged his heart in his throat, his fists curling in readiness for a fight... but as the figure stepped into the lantern light that spilled from the rear of the carriage, he unfurled his hands.

“You,” he said quietly. “It is you.”

The young lady frowned. “Is it that easy?”

“Pardon?”

“I thought there would be discussions and details and conversations to be had first before you decided if I was a suitable candidate,” the woman replied, fidgeting with a loose bit of lace that had come away from her capped sleeve. “Apparently not.”

Jasper stared at the woman, utterly confused. “I do not understand.”

“You said, ‘it is you’. Does that mean I am to be your bride? Have I been selected so swiftly?” There was a half-smile upon

her full, pink lips, but he could not tell if she was teasing or merely nervous. One would gain her a favorable mark, the other a black mark.

“Obviously not,” he replied, observing her closely.

She was unusual in appearance, her small stature making it easy to literally overlook her strange beauty. Indeed, she was not what he would have called pretty, but something more intangible, her big eyes, translucent skin, and rosebud lips making her seem otherworldly. Her chin was dainty, but her cheeks were plump, creating a sort of heart-shaped face that only drew more attention to her big, haunting eyes. In the low light, he could not make out their color, but they were brimming with determination, and though he suspected he should, he could not look away.

“So, you do not like jokes.” The woman nodded. “I can appreciate that.”

He frowned. “What do you want?”

“Now, I should have thought *that* would be obvious,” she replied, her tone frank.

He shrugged, letting the stilted silence speak for him.

“You are a gentleman in want of a wife, and I am a lady in want of a husband,” she continued with no hint of fear or anxiety in her words. “I know I do not have long to hold your attention, so hear me now—I have a deal to propose to you.”

He narrowed his eyes as if to say, “I am listening.”

“I am not looking for a husband who will love me and cherish me and all of that other nonsense,” she explained at a clip. “I am looking for a marriage of convenience, and I believe you are too, or you would not have heralded your situation in the scandal sheets for everyone to see. You wanted a selection to choose from carefully, likely considering the law of averages—essentially, that there would be at least one woman who wants what you want. I think I am that woman.”

He blinked in surprise, wondering how she could have come to such a conclusion. It was not as if anyone could have told her, for he had not spoken to anyone about his wishes for a marriage of convenience. He had not spoken to anyone about his plans for marriage at all. Indeed, that was why he had needed the assistance of the scandal sheets.

“You are making a lot of assumptions,” he said, testing her.

She shrugged. “Tell me I am wrong, and I shall leave you be.”

“You are not wrong,” he replied after a moment or two.

“Good. So, if you marry me, you will not have to worry about me meddling in your life or asking anything of you. All I would request is that you are not unkind,” she went on, speaking to him as if they were partners in a study somewhere, discussing business. “When I say unkind, that does not include ignoring me. We can pretend neither of us exists unless necessary if that is your wish. It makes no difference to me.”

If a fiercer wind had blown down the street at that moment, it might have knocked him over; he was so astonished by the peculiar woman standing in front of him. Other ladies had been bold, that was true, but not like this. There was no apparent subterfuge or deceit, just a direct request that was not unreasonable. A practical air that he had not encountered before in any of the ladies he had met.

“This could be very beneficial for us both,” she added with a nod. “You would not have to endure another ambush like that again for one thing. I am surprised you made it out alive.”

He flinched at that last word, recovering quickly. “Why should I believe you?”

“Pardon?”

“I am no fool,” he replied. “It is an interesting method of attack, and admittedly not one I have witnessed before, but I do not know you. I do not even know your name. Why would I believe that what you say is true and that demands would not be made just as soon as a wedding occurred?”

She tapped her plump lips with her forefinger. “An astute observation. Not one I had thought of.” Her lips pursed slightly. “You want to find out if I am as I present myself. I can appreciate that as I can appreciate your distaste for jokes.”

She *is very astute*, he reasoned, for she had caught on quickly. An unusually sharp mind to complement her unusual appearance.



“I can resolve one of your concerns right now,” she continued. “My name is Marina Wilkins. Lady Marina. Daughter to the Earl and Countess of Creassey. You need not give me your name; I know enough of it for the purpose of marriage. You need never give me your name if that is your preference. ‘Your Grace’ suits me just fine.”

Doubt pinched at his innards, but there was something about her candor that intrigued him, and as he had spent the evening meeting at least half of society’s eligible ladies and finding *none* of them interesting in the right way, she was exactly as he had first thought: refreshing.

“What of my other concerns?” he had to ask.

Marina tapped her lips again, prodding the lower one. “I suppose I shall have to prove to you that I am not speaking falsely.” She put on a determined smile. “Get to know me, and have your fears allayed. It should not take long. I am not so complicated.”

It was the first thing she had said that he knew to be an outright lie, for she was certainly no simpleton. She was clever, so clever that she had understood that her best chance of speaking with him was to watch and wait for him to depart, knowing she could conjure an ambush of her own, out in the shadow of the street. And *that* did nothing to allay his concerns that this was all part of a scheme to marry him and change the rules entirely once she was his wife.

*But I might be wrong*, his mind urged, remembering how she had pushed past him. Had that been part of the act, too, or had she truly been desperate for tea? He could not decide, and that indecision gave him just enough food for thought to not be hasty.

“Tomorrow,” he said gruffly.

“Is a Saturday,” she replied. “What of tomorrow?”

He expelled a weary sigh. “Meet me tomorrow at noon. Latham’s Tea Shop.” He paused. “We shall see if your mask slips or if there truly is no mask at all.”

“Tomorrow at noon.” She stuck out her hand, and he stared at it, not knowing what he was supposed to do. Kiss it? Shake it?

With a roll of her eyes, she reached forward and grabbed his hand, shaking it firmly with hers. “I believe that is how gentlemen seal a deal,” she said. “And that is what this will be, should you find me to be exactly what I am. This shall be a business exchange where we both win. A speculation, if you like, that will not disappoint.”

“We shall see,” he replied, glancing down at his now freed hand like it did not belong to him.

She smiled. “Yes, you will.”

With that, she pushed past him for a second time and headed back into the Assembly Rooms, leaving him to wonder if he had just had a very strange dream or if that peculiar woman really had just coaxed him into an agreement.

*Nothing binding, of course,* he told himself, trying to ignore the phantom grip of her hand in his as if they were still

shaking on a deal that had already been made.

## CHAPTER 5



“*W*here did you sneak away to?” Nancy asked as Marina returned, breathless and speckled with rain.

Marina took a moment, her heart racing, her stomach churning, her mind reeling, unable to answer immediately. In truth, she could not believe what she had just done, how bold and brazen she had been. She had seen the Duke enter the smoking room, and she did not know if it was the pale, fatigued expression upon his face or the slump of his shoulders, but some instinct in her had told her that he would try and escape the Assembly Rooms. A sort of madness had seized her, screaming that it was now or never, and off she had gone to hide behind the poor fellow’s carriage.

“I cannot decide if I terrified him or intrigued him,” she whispered, smiling.

Nancy frowned. “Who?”

“The Duke of Lymington.” Marina tilted her head back, dragging in deep breaths. “I... do not know what possessed me.”

Nancy's frown deepened. "What are you saying? You are speaking in riddles, dear Marina."

"I... have a meeting with him tomorrow." Marina paused, slowly rubbing the back of her neck. "My goodness, I have a meeting with him tomorrow. What should I do? What should I wear? I have nothing that is not threadbare."

Understanding dawned across Nancy's face, her eyes widening. "You have a meeting with the Duke of Lymington? How? He is in the smoking room, is he not? Oh, Marina, tell me you did not pursue him into the smoking room." She grasped her cousin's hand. "Explain everything, for my mind is swirling."

Marina did so, telling her cousin of everything that had just happened, and of the notice in the scandal sheets that she had seen and considered a fortnight ago after the Tiverton ball. "I had almost forgotten all about it. It is... like fate of the most twisted kind," she concluded. "But the strangest part is, it feels like someone else did it for me. It feels like a dream, and I cannot tell if it is the bad or good kind."

"You should have said something!" Nancy urged. "Adam could have helped you."

Marina frowned. "Does Adam know him?"

"Adam knows everyone."

Marina shrugged, feeling as if she had run a marathon. "Well, I suppose it does not matter now. What is done is done. I have

his attention, at least, which is more than can be said for half the ladies here.” She gestured over to the small crowd of determined young women and mothers who had not yet abandoned hope that the Duke would emerge from the smoking room again. They would be waiting all night. “I think... I offered what he is searching for.”

“And what might that be?” Nancy chewed her bottom lip, clearly anxious. “It is nothing... unseemly, is it?”

Marina pulled a face. “Heavens, no.”

“Then what?”

“I do not know if it is my place to say,” Marina replied, considering the environment they were in. Anyone could be listening. “Either way, I suppose I shall soon find out if I am what he has been searching for.”

Nancy seemed disappointed by the reply. “But what of your mother? Does she know you have any interest in being the Duke of Lymington’s wife?”

“She does not.” Marina’s heart soared suddenly, daring to hope that all of this would work out the way she dreamed it might.

Marriage to the Duke of Lymington meant one thing to her: freedom. She loved her mother dearly, despite the woman’s increasingly raucous behavior, but there was only so much she could bear as a daughter and only so much her reputation could take before it became utterly worthless. In truth, Marina was tired. She was tired of being the mother, she was tired of

the embarrassment, she was tired of being alone because no one would associate themselves with her, and she was tired of the guilt that her mother laid on thick whenever she wanted to escape for a while. She was bone tired, and the Duke represented rest, the means to reclaim her life before it was too late.

“Will you tell her?” Nancy whispered, giving Marina’s hand a squeeze.

Marina looked across the Assembly Rooms’ ballroom and spied her mother tracing delicate fingertips down the muscular upper arm of Nancy’s husband, who kept trying to put a polite distance between them. Edwin’s Aunt Peggy intervened a few moments later, putting herself between Eliza and Adam, and looping her arm through Eliza’s in order to restrain her misbehavior.

That one act settled it.

“No, I do not think I will,” Marina replied. “And you ought to go and rescue your husband before my mother throws herself at him.”

Nancy glanced over, puzzled. “Aunt Eliza would not.”

“She would, and she will. It is like a sickness; she cannot help it,” Marina urged, turning to her cousin. “But first, you must promise to help me, Nancy.”

“Help you? How? Do you want me to speak with Adam about the Duke? I could see what information Peggy has too,

perhaps?”

Marina shook her head. “My needs are much simpler... and far more difficult.” She drew in a breath. “You must lie for me. You are in London for just two weeks, and I must make the most of them for my own sake.”

“What would you have me do?” Nancy asked darkly, watching with pursed lips as Eliza broke away from Peggy, pretending to fetch her drink. On her way back to stand with Peggy, Eliza’s hand stroked the small of Adam’s back, startling him so hard that Marina could see his jump of fright, even at a distance.

*She understands*, Marina realized with a breath of relief.

“If there are more meetings after tomorrow’s, you must play along, pretending that you are the one I am meeting,” Marina replied. “You must insist, if asked, that I am taking tea with you tomorrow. And, if you can spare the time, I would invite you to be my chaperone. That way, the ruse will be easier to manage.”

Nancy’s eyes narrowed as she observed Eliza fluttering her eyelashes at Adam, who appeared mortified. “You can rely upon me, Marina, as I once relied upon you. I shall come for you at half-past-eleven, and I shall lie for you as I have never lied before.” She paused, smiling stiffly. “Now, may I go and save my husband?”

“Please do.” Marina smiled back. “Indeed, I think it is the hour for my and my mother’s departure, so she cannot destroy my plans before they have had the opportunity to begin.”



Nancy hesitated. “Do you think the Duke knows who you are?”

“I gave him my name, and he did not flinch or scoff, so perhaps it is a twist of fate after all—that I should make a proposal to the only gentleman in England who has not heard of my mother,” Marina replied wearily, her insides itchy with nerves.

Nancy swiftly embraced Marina, hugging her tightly. “Whatever you need, I shall be your lieutenant. And if you believe this duke will be a good husband to you, I shall not argue with the manner in which you have found one another.” She pulled back, grinning. “After all, I too believe in fate. Fate brought Adam to me, and I must have faith that it will bring someone just as wonderful to you.”

With that, Nancy hurried across the room, weaving in and out of other guests until she reached her husband. Eliza’s demeanor immediately changed, ignoring Adam as if she had not just been lusting after him, turning her attention fully to whatever Peggy was saying.

*You misunderstand, Nancy, Marina thought with a sad sigh. I do not want what you desired. I do not want romance and an enviable marriage. I do not want a chance meeting to become an all-consuming love. I just want peace. I just want my life and reputation back.*

To many, that might have seemed cold and strange, but not many people had someone like Eliza as a mother.



In the drawing room of his Mayfair townhouse, the furniture and air still laced with the bitter and musty scent of dust after years of disuse, Jasper stared into the flickering flames of a roaring fire as he swirled brandy in a glass, thinking of the strange young woman he had encountered that night. He had not yet sipped the calming liquor, using the motion to steady himself instead.

A knock came at the door, but he did not look back, transfixed by the fire.

“Your Grace?” the butler, Mr. Willacy, said, entering.

“Has she arrived?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Jasper nodded. “Very good. Send her in.”

“At once, Your Grace.” The butler left the door ajar, allowing some noise to drift into the drawing room from the entrance hall. He heard low voices, and the scrape of footsteps on the tiles outside before the door creaked wider again.

“I must say, this is a surprise,” came a husky, feminine voice. “Truly, I thought I had seen the last of the great Duke of Lymington.”

Jasper still did not turn. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Whatever you are partaking in,” the woman replied, approaching him with a rustle of silk. She bent down and kissed his cheek, smelling of lavender and something dark and spicy.

Jasper ignored the kiss and got up, wandering to the side table to pour his guest a decent measure of brandy. He passed it to her, barely noticing how her fingertips caressed his as she took it.

The lady sat in the opposite armchair, lounging as if it belonged to her. “Jasper, darling, what is the meaning of my summons here? Not that I am not delighted that you sent for me, but it is rather late, and I have several engagements to attend to before the sun rises.” She gazed down into her drink, smiling before sipping it. “Goodness, I do hope no one saw my arrival. What would people think?”

“I have a request to make, Genevieve,” Jasper replied, resuming his observation of the roaring fire, his thoughts flitting back to the lady by the carriage and her intriguing proposal.

“You know it is my pleasure to do anything I am asked, especially if you are the one asking,” the lady, Genevieve Fox, urged in a silky, seductive voice.

He cast her a sharp look. “I need you to investigate someone.”

“Oh.” Genevieve sat up straighter, sipping her brandy as if his request did not please her at all.

“Can you do it or not?”

Genevieve shrugged. “What is it worth?”

“Several pounds.”

She tilted her head from side to side, tapping her long fingernails lightly against the crystal brandy glass. “Who is it?” She paused. “I have told you, time and again, that I know nothing of what happened to your sister. If it pertains to that, I am afraid I cannot help you, unless you know something that I do not.”

“It is... a different matter.” Jasper could not look for too long at the woman, for it would only bring back memories of the night he lost his sister. This woman was the last person who had seen Priscilla alive.

Genevieve leaned forward, clearly intrigued. “Oh, how interesting. Does this mean you have finally—”

“Marina Wilkins,” Jasper interrupted, taking a necessary sip of his drink. “Find out everything you can about Marina Wilkins. I believe she is the only daughter of the Earl and Countess of Creassey. Return to me as soon as you can, with as much information as you can. You will be well rewarded.”

Genevieve finished off her own drink, setting the glass down with a pointed *clink* on the table beside her. “And that is all? You require no comfort this evening?” She laughed softly. “You look as if you need some.”

“That is all,” he replied flatly.

Genevieve got to her feet and crouched down in front of him, forcing him to take notice of her, the silk of her crimson skirts pooling around her. It looked too much like blood, Jasper’s heart clenching at the sight. Genevieve had always been beautiful, but the years had not been kind, rubbing the sheen of youth from her tired face. At a distance, she still had the illusion of youthful beauty, but up close, every line, every press of powder, every unkindness could be seen.

“But who is this woman to you?” Genevieve’s voice changed, shedding the conceit. “Tell me that, honestly, and I will do it. Does she know something of our Priscilla’s fate?”

Jasper met Genevieve’s dark brown eyes, so dark they appeared black. “She knows nothing. She might be the woman I mean to marry.”

“I beg your pardon?” Genevieve snorted. “You have fallen in love?”

Jasper cast her a withering look. “There is no love.”

“I know a thousand men who would say otherwise,” Genevieve teased, reaching forward to take Jasper’s hand in hers. “So, at long last, Jasper Armitage is to find himself a

companion. I must say, I approve. Perhaps, she will drag you out of this pit of despair you have tumbled into.”

He shook his head. “That is not the nature of this. Can you do it—that is all I need to know.”

“Of course, I can,” Genevieve replied, smiling.

Jasper exhaled slowly. “Then you may return to whatever it is I have distracted you from. I shall give payment when the work is done.”

“Usually, I am a ‘pay first’ sort of woman, but I shall make an exception for an old friend,” she said, her dark eyes twinkling as she bent her head and placed a gentle kiss upon his hand. But as she drew back, her eyes gleamed with something more like sadness as she added in a thick voice, “She would want this for you, darling. I know she would.”

Jasper withdrew his hand. “I do wish people would stop telling me what my sister would want. All I know is I need a bride, and that is all.”

“As charming and warm as ever, dear Jasper,” Genevieve remarked, getting to her feet. She walked to the drawing-room door, turning at the last moment. “You know, you are not the only one who misses her. You are not the only one who lost someone that day.”

“Yet, I am the only one who has not forgotten her,” Jasper replied coolly.

Genevieve groaned. “No one has forgotten her, Jasper. The rest of us have merely decided to live on as she really *would* have wanted.” She paused. “Perhaps, one day, you will wake up and realize the same thing, or even with some poor, unsuspecting wife at your side, you will find yourself a very lonely and miserable old man. And when you meet Priscilla again in the Kingdom of Heaven, she will smack you soundly for being so very, very stupid.”

She left without another word. A moment later, Jasper heard the front door slam, followed by the worried entrance of Mr. Willacy.

“Is all well, Your Grace?” he asked.

Jasper sighed and sat back in his armchair. “All is well.”

It would not be the first time that he and Genevieve had not seen eye-to-eye, but she would do what he asked, nevertheless, and find out everything there was to know about that mysterious, intriguing Marina Wilkins, who had ambushed him in more ways than one. The fact that she was in his thoughts was testament to that. Still, Genevieve owed him that much.

## CHAPTER 6



Marina had not slept, tossing and turning with the worry and possibility of what her meeting with the Duke might hold. The memory of his piercing eyes had not gone unthought of, either. That, and her mother had decided she wanted to sing as loudly as possible for several hours after they had returned from the Assembly Rooms as punishment for being dragged away before she was ready to leave.

But there was a small benefit to her mother's unruliness; because she had stayed up late singing and making a nuisance of herself, she would sleep late too. And as Marina headed up the hallway of their apartments to the front door, her eyes stinging with fatigue, not a creature stirred.

"Are you going somewhere, Lady Marina?" a voice asked, just as Marina had her hand on the door handle.

Marina cringed and turned, smiling as brightly as she could at the housekeeper, Mrs. Hampton. "Did I not tell you last night? I am to have tea with my cousin, Nancy. She is due to arrive at any moment."

Marina had left a note on the breakfast table for her mother, having hoped she would not meet anyone on her way out. The



note explained that she had gone for tea with Nancy. Nothing more, nothing less. No location, no details, just in case her mother decided to join them.

“Then, shouldn’t you await her in the parlor?” Mrs. Hampton arched an eyebrow.

Marina shook her head. “The bell is awfully loud, and I did not want it to wake Mama. I shall be quite content to wait for her on the porch.”

“You’ll look like a vagrant!” Mrs. Hampton protested, for though she was the housekeeper of an increasingly threadbare family, she was a stickler for propriety.

Marina shrugged. “I hardly think so, Mrs. Hampton. This is Kensington, not Poplar.” She put a finger to her lips. “And do be quieter, for my mother will not thank you if you disturb her from her slumber.”

She made her escape before Mrs. Hampton could say another word of protest, slipping out into the communal hallway and from there, to the front door and freedom.

The late autumn air nipped at her cheeks, and she hoped it might put some roses there to make her appear less deceased. She was not the sort of woman who presented well if she had not slept, and the mirror had confirmed it though she had done her best to powder the worst of her dark circles. Unfortunately, the pale color of it had only proceeded to make her look *more* drained, but she would have to make do. Besides, if the Duke decided to marry her, he would not be marrying her for her beauty; he just needed a wife.

“Good morning!” Nancy stuck her head out of her husband’s carriage as it rattled down the street. She waved vigorously, just as planned, for Mrs. Hampton would assuredly be watching from one of the windows, peeking from behind a curtain. And Mrs. Hampton *would* tell Eliza if there was anything unusual afoot.

Marina sucked in a breath of the fresh autumn air and ran to the edge of the pavement. “Good morning to you, dearest cousin! Is it not a fine day for scones and a blackberry tart or two?”

“I intend to eat so much that I shall have to be rolled homeward,” Nancy replied, laughing.

To any onlooker, it was an ordinary, cheerful greeting between friends, not at all an elaborate subterfuge to ensure that word of the truth did not reach Eliza’s ears. Not until Marina was ready to tell her, and if it came to naught with the Duke, there was no reason to trouble Eliza at all.

“Shall we?” Nancy opened the door for Marina, a footman appearing to help the latter into the carriage.

Marina clasped a hand to her chest, feeling the frantic beat of her anxious heart. “We shall.”

As she sat down upon the squabs, she wondered what the Duke was doing to prepare, and if he was feeling as nervous at all. Then again, he did not have nearly as much to lose if this did not go well.



“You are early,” Jasper said, looking up from the correspondence he had been reading, having assumed that, like most ladies, she would keep him waiting. Yet, the clock on the mantelpiece of the tea shop read five minutes to twelve.

Marina dipped into an elegant curtsy. “As are you. I shall take that as a promising sign.”

In the crisp light of day, she was not quite as he remembered. She did not look quite as short as she had the previous evening though he supposed he *was* sitting. And her beauty was even more... mysterious and interesting, her pale skin radiant, her big eyes stealing the voice from his throat as he tried to decide their color. They were a fascinating hue, somewhere between green and brown, like autumn leaves turning from their summer brightness. Hazel, he supposed, but it was too simple a word to describe the shade.

Her rosebud lips could not evade observation either, for they were the most perfect shape: round yet full with a dip in the upper lip that could perfectly fit the press of his forefinger. Alarmingly, he found his mind urging him to see if he was right, if his forefinger would fit there perfectly. For scientific reasons, of course.

*You should have imbibed more*, he scolded himself, for the more brandy he drank, the more likely it was that he would be able to sleep. Having had but one glass the previous night, he had slept no more than an hour or two, his mind too loud to allow restful slumber.

“Do not assume anything,” Jasper said curtly, disarmed. He did not like to feel that he was not the one in control.

She put up her hands. “My mistake. I forgot that you are not keen though that was something of an investigation to see if you allow jests of even the mildest kind.” She sat down opposite him, not waiting for him to stand. “It appears not. I shall remember that.”

*An investigation...* He thought of Genevieve’s visit last night, wondering what the worldly woman might discover about the seemingly innocuous creature before him. What secrets did Lady Marina have, just waiting to be dug up? What was she hiding behind her direct demeanor?

“I took the liberty of ordering tea and a selection of cakes,” Jasper said, feeling as if he ought to still stand and give her the respect she deserved as a nobleman’s daughter.

Marina smiled. “Blackberry tarts?”

“Excuse me?”

“I told my cousin over there that I had a fancy for some blackberry tarts. If you have not ordered any, I shall do so myself,” she replied, gesturing over her shoulder to a pretty young thing at a nearby table, observing.

Jasper frowned. “I cannot say I have ever had a blackberry tart. I do not favor sweet things.”

“So it would seem.” An amused half-smile curved one corner of Marina’s mouth for just a moment before she regained her composure. She waved to one of the passing staff. “Excuse me? Might I have a blackberry tart for the table?”

The young man glanced at Jasper, as if for permission. Jasper gave a slight nod, and the man hurried off again. Even though he had not been in London for several years, Jasper’s title and status preceded him.

*How can she be so calm?* Jasper returned his attention to the otherworldly beauty opposite, who sat there so unflustered that it made him twice as uncomfortable. He had already spent most of the morning pacing, wondering if he should postpone or rescind the meeting, yet Marina could have been enjoying tea with a dear friend; she was so... placid.

“I must apologize for my ghoulish appearance,” she said without preamble. “I did not sleep well, and I become almost deathly pale when I have not slept. And the less said about the darkness under my eyes, the better.”

A flicker of satisfaction moved through Jasper’s chest. “You were nervous about our meeting?”

“Goodness, no.” She plucked up a napkin and spread it across her lap, unnervingly composed. “My mother was singing until two o’clock in the morning. A glass smashed at around three o’clock. A few doors were slammed at about four o’clock, or it might have been our neighbors banging on the door, and nearer to five o’clock, she decided she wanted to have a bath drawn. Considering we reside in apartments during the winter season, the noise of everything she does is impossible to ignore.”

Jasper stared at her, dumbfounded. He had braced himself for niceties and idle chatter, but he had not expected blunt honesty, not from someone as dainty and sweet-faced as her.

“I suppose you have investigated me,” Marina continued, rendering him speechless. “I do not blame you. If I were you, I would have done the same. One must know one’s allies and one’s enemies. So, I expect you know everything there is to know about my mother, and as you are here and did not withdraw your invitation, I am pleased to discover it has not dissuaded you.”

Jasper found his voice, somewhere in the fog of shock. “Actually, I know nothing of you or your mother.”

“Ah...” Marina nodded slowly. “I have been too hasty. Well then, allow me to tell you. You wanted to know if I am what I say I am, and I cannot do that if there is not absolute honesty.”

Taking a deep breath that made her ample bosom lift, the emerald choker around her throat glinting as the movement caught the light, she began to tell her story. “Despite what anyone says, my mother struggles with the grief of losing her husband. She soothes that grief with liquor and that, in turn, leads her to make an unholy display of herself at every society gathering you can think of. She has been in the scandal sheets more times than I have had blackberry tarts, but her reputation is utterly untouchable because she knows *everything* about everyone else.” She paused. “I have not spoken to her about you, though, and will not for the sake of your privacy. Whatever you wish to tell me, you may tell me yourself; I shall not request information from another party. Anyway, where was I?”

Jasper cleared his throat. “Your mother’s... behavior.”

“Yes, exactly.” Marina shook a finger in the air. “You see, my mother and father had an... incendiary sort of love. They adored one another violently. Theirs was a passion of soaring highs and terrible lows, riddled with arguments and screaming tirades that shook the walls—and broke a few heirlooms, vases, and crockery—at Creassey House. Both were wretchedly jealous and possessive of one another. I do not suspect any foul play, but you would think they were always indulging in affairs, the way they would accuse one another.”

Jasper blinked, grateful that he had chosen a table at the rear of the tea shop that allowed for some privacy. Marina had deliberately lowered her voice, but he still worried that someone might overhear and cast judgment on the... unsavory nature of the conversation. It was certainly not the conversation that *he* had anticipated on the carriage ride over.

“Even now, my mother both despises and loves my father, God rest his soul, because he died without her. She firmly believes he did it on purpose, just to spite her,” Marina continued, shuddering. “So, she likes to seek vengeance by behaving outrageously with other gentlemen. Do you remember I said that her reputation is forever unscathed because of the secrets she knows?”

“I do.” Jasper recovered from his alarm. “How could I not? You said it but two minutes ago.”

“Indeed, but I have said a lot in those two minutes,” Marina replied, smiling. “Do not worry, I am not usually so verbose,

but I must say what I have to say, and it is better to get it out quickly.”

He could not deny that she was all the more charming when she smiled, for it lifted her plump cheeks and made her big eyes even larger, turning them into two autumn pools that anyone could drown in. It also widened her rosebud lips so that his thumb might have rested perfectly on that upper bow.

*Enough*, his mind growled, forcing him to fix his attention on the words rattling out of that enchanting mouth in a torrent.

“Well, the same cannot be said for *my* reputation,” Marina said, reminding him of the earlier question. “I have done nothing to deserve scorn, but I am guilty by association, and as no one can punish my mother, I am punished in her stead. Once more, do not worry, I am not reviled or outwardly spurned, but my mother is making it impossible for me to make friends, enjoy society, live my life, et cetera. And I cannot endure it any longer.”

Jasper sat back, absorbing everything that Marina had just said, but as he was about to open his mouth to tell her his thoughts, she leaped back in.

“Your Grace, I do not want what my mother and father had. I want nothing close to it, nothing similar, nothing that could ever have a hold over me.” She expelled a breath. “I have no desire to marry for love or to have a passionate marriage where my children might suffer the same fate.”

“Children?” He raised an eyebrow.



She hesitated. “Hypothetical children,” she corrected, showing the first hint of nerves since sitting down. “I am one-and-twenty. There is ample time for a discussion of that ilk, but I do not mind either way. If you want an heir, I shall do my best to provide it. If you do not, it is of little concern to me.”

She had spoken a little too quickly, and as Jasper observed her closely, he could not decide if it *was* anxiety or a trick to persuade him to choose her. There were not many ladies who would accept a childless marriage, and he was relatively certain of what he wanted in that regard.

At that moment, their tea and cakes arrived, offering Jasper a welcome reprieve to gather himself. From the second Marina had sat down, he had been on edge, and the more she spoke, the more bewildered and curious he became. Yet, one thing was for certain, he had never in his life encountered someone like her. But whether that was a fortuitous thing or an unfortunate thing, he could not decide.

“Your blackberry tart, Your Grace,” the servant said, bowing low to Marina as he placed a small plate, decorated with blue flowers, beside her.

Jasper was about to correct him, but he was already gone, returning to fetch more of the delicacies that had been ordered. And as Jasper looked over at Marina, he noticed her pleased smile, the delight making her eyes shine, her cheeks redden, her prettiness radiate.

*Is it you?* He frowned, wishing he had someone else to instruct him. There was Leon, of course, who had excellent judgment, but Jasper supposed it would be weird for him to invite his private detective to take tea with a prospective bride. Genevieve would be even worse.

“You see, I am already being mistaken for a duchess,” Marina said, picking a crimped curve of crust off the blackberry tart. She popped it into her mouth daintily—a good sign, for he could not abide bad table manners. “And in this old thing, too!” She gestured at her dress—a simple garment of jade green muslin—which looked proper enough to him.

“So, it is the money you care for?” he prodded, selecting a puff filled with a jam of some kind.

Marina swallowed hastily. “Pardon?”

“That is your main reason for approaching me.” He put the puff in his mouth, chewing slowly.

She poured a splash of tea straight into her cup, not waiting for anyone to pour it for her, and sipped with a desperation that might have been amusing. “Heavens, no! Am I the sort of woman who proclaims money is not important? Also no, but that is not my motivation.” She paused, sitting up straighter. “Indeed, you must not have been listening, for I have already told you my reasoning.”

“Repeat it for me in plain terms,” he insisted, his throat thick with the jam and pastry he had just swallowed down. Now, he understood her rush to drink some tea.

Marina leveled a stern gaze at him. “Freedom, Your Grace. My reputation spared. My life in my own hands once more.” She smiled, but it was colder than before, putting shards of ice into her eyes. “Is that plain enough?”

“We shall see after we have finished this... feast,” he replied, hoping she could not see how uneasy he was. And though he knew he did not have to make a decision there and then, he had a feeling that Marina Rusell, with her sharp mind and disarming smile, was not going to leave this business meeting without an answer.

## CHAPTER 7



Marina was surprised she could eat anything at all, for her stomach was determined to tie itself into knots every time she looked up and caught the Duke's eye. Indeed, from the way he was staring at her, she was convinced she had blackberry jam and flecks of cream all over her face, for if she was going to be rejected, she figured she might as well enjoy the scones, tarts, pastry puffs, and every other delicious treat he had ordered.

"Jasper Armitage," he said suddenly, dabbing at the corner of his mouth with a napkin: a welcome sight as Marina would have had to leave the table immediately if he possessed terrible table manners. He chewed quietly too: another promising sign of a peaceful future.

She almost coughed on a raspberry puff. "A friend of yours?"

"No." He cleared his throat. "That is my name. You said you did not care to know it, but... there it is."

Marina squinted at him, her mind beginning to spark with a thousand new and unwieldy thoughts. Why was he saying that to her? Did that mean he was considering her proposal? Had he warmed to her, despite the fact that his cold eyes chilled her

to the bone? Whatever his reason, it felt like an olive branch, reaching across the narrow divide of the tea shop table.

“Any relation?” she said, her heart sinking sharply.

He frowned. “To whom?”

“Harold Armitage. Wild Harry. Whatever you wish to call him.” Her tone came out sharper than she had intended, but when it came to that man, there was no tone bitter enough.

A flicker of recognition passed across Jasper’s face. “Ah, yes. I know the name, but I do not know the man.” He hesitated, took another apple puff, and took his time eating it before he continued, “He was rather prevalent in the scandal sheets a year or so ago, was he not? Is he a friend of yours?”

“Certainly not!” she muttered. “He tried to destroy the happiness of my beloved cousin.”

Jasper nodded thoughtfully. “I do not read the scandal sheets often, but I remember that particular article. Is it the same cousin who is sitting over there?” He hesitated again though his hand fell short of reaching for another puff. “Should I send her something to eat? Do you think she might be hungry? Thirsty, perhaps?”

It was the second unexpectedly kind gesture he had offered in as many minutes, and Marina did not have the faintest notion of how to respond. She had prepared herself for a frank and open conversation about a marriage of convenience, not subtle displays of concern or care.

*But I did say I was not interested in a man who was unkind,* she remembered, wondering if that had somehow stuck in his mind, wondering if this was all a fortuitous sign that her risk had paid off.

“I am sure she would appreciate it,” Marina replied, hurriedly adding, “though I can pay for whatever she eats and drinks. As I mentioned, my interest in you has nothing to do with money.”

She could have sworn he almost smiled, but if it had ever been there, upon his full lips, it vanished as quickly as it had appeared. “I will pay. I invited you here, and as your cousin is your chaperone, she is included in that.” He gestured to one of the servants. “Besides, you already clarified your reasoning.”

“Do you believe it?” she challenged.

He spoke quietly with the waiter and turned back, replying, “I am still deciding. I have no cause to doubt your story about your mother, for it would be a heinous thing if you had conjured such a tale, but if your mother did not remarry, you must be experiencing some difficulties in the financial sense. Indeed, you referred to “this old thing” and pointed to your dress.”

“We still have a passable income from my father’s estate and from my cousin,” Marina replied stiffly, fretting inwardly over whether or not he could see the places that had been darned and repaired. How closely was he looking at her?

“That cousin?” Jasper chinned toward Nancy.

Marina shook her head. “My cousin on my father’s side. He inherited the earldom when my father passed with just a meager girl to his name.” She offered a wry smile. “My mother, as you can imagine, hates him. He is quite strange, I suppose, but he has not cast us out despite my mother’s behavior, so I am grateful... or, perhaps, I should be concerned about what secrets she knows about him. Either way, I think my mother is secretly hoping that *that* cousin,” she pointed to Nancy, “will invite us to reside with her permanently, but I could not do that to my dear Nancy.”

“And she is married to...?”

“The Duke of Stapleton,” Marina replied, hoping that might help to persuade him. Adam was well-liked and well-respected, regardless of his sordid past, and the inaugural Stapleton Gala had been a roaring success. There was no possible way that Jasper had not heard of it.

Jasper nodded in approval. “She has married well.”

“She believes it was fate.” Marina smiled shyly. “Do you believe in fate?”

He sat back as if assessing her. “Is that what you think this might be?”

“If I must say “heavens, no” again, you will think I am incapable of saying anything else,” Marina replied, chuckling awkwardly. “But no, I do not. I think fate is a trick we convince ourselves is real to make ourselves feel better, for it is usually used as an explanation for something not altogether

good. Nancy, for example, was mistaken for another woman when she first encountered her husband. I think it makes her feel more content, believing it was “meant to be” instead of dwelling on the actual details which might not be as pleasant.”

She blinked down at the crumbs on her plate, regretting how honest her nerves had made her become. Of course, all of society knew the story of how Nancy and Adam had found one another, but that did not make it right to tell a stranger who might not have known.

“My mother and father believed in fate, and that did not serve them well at all,” she continued, blushing furiously. “If fate *is* a real thing, I think it might enjoy toying with us mere mortals. It certainly toyed with them. Goodness, I am still talking a lot, am I not? Apologies.”

Jasper brushed his hands on his napkin. For a crushing second, she thought he was about to make his excuses and leave, having decided that she was not what he was searching for after all. Instead, he folded his napkin neatly, set it on the table, and adjusted his position in his chair.

“Your voice does not annoy me,” he said.

Marina did not know whether to laugh or frown. “Do many people’s voices annoy you?”

“That depends on your meaning,” he replied. “A crowd of voices might be annoying, but I am not generally annoyed by people’s voices.”



*Was that a joke?* It was impossible for her to tell. His expression barely changed, displaying a concise spectrum of seriousness.

“Idle chatter is somewhat irksome,” he went on, “but nothing you have said to me has been unnecessary bluster. You are selling a business venture to me, so you must be detailed.”

Marina smirked. “And how am I faring?”

“I must be honest with you,” he answered, and Marina’s hopes immediately deflated, for it was like someone taking her to one side for a chiding. “You are interesting.”

She narrowed her eyes. “In a good way or a bad way?”

“You are interesting,” he repeated. “You seem intelligent, you have reasonable cause, you have stated your case well, you have excellent table manners, and you do not have fanciful notions like other ladies who have tried to attract my attention. But...”

Marina gripped her napkin. “But” rarely led to fortunate things.

“... I must ensure that you understand what you would be undertaking,” he said stiffly. “You have said several things that I have been keen to hear: that you desire a marriage of convenience, that you do not need love, and that you hope to gain your freedom from this match, to name but a few. However, I *must* be clear.”

Marina nodded, twisting the end of her napkin into a swan's neck. "I will listen. After all, you have listened to me well enough for the past half an hour."

"This will just be a marriage of convenience, as mentioned, but you must be prepared for the additional solitude that you will undoubtedly experience, and the role of my wife is not without *some* expectations," he explained.

Marina's cheeks flooded with heat, for she had heard her mother speak on such "expectations" enough to know exactly what he was talking about. *He is handsome, at least*, she reasoned, certain she would not be one of those poor souls who had to close their eyes and think of anything else. And she suspected it would not be a common occurrence, considering he had mentioned solitude. *That might not be so bad in exchange for my liberty.*

So, it surprised her when he carried on, saying, "You will be expected to befriend the wives of my business associates. You will be expected to attend the occasional party or ball with me." He touched the scar on his cheek, lightly stroking it as he spoke. "Aside from that, you might never see me. Our lives will be, for all intents and purposes, separate. I am too occupied to contend with the intricacies of a more... ordinary marriage, and my manor is somewhat isolated. I do not like to have too many guests, so there is that for you to consider."

"Would I be free to journey to see my friends and family?" she asked, her hopes rising once more, like bubbles in a champagne flute.

He shrugged. "It would be your life, to live as you see fit. If we have no prior engagements, you may do as you please. If all goes well, we could discuss the purchase of another

residence for you, closer to those who are dear to you. But that is not a conversation for today.”

*He is more amenable than I thought*, she realized, still reeling from the surprisingly innocuous “expectations” he would have of her. Indeed, it was like winning a prize without making any effort whatsoever.

“And that is all?” Marina needed to be sure. “Solitude, a few dinner parties, and a rationing of visitors?”

Jasper sipped his tea. “That is all.” He paused. “For many ladies, that would be too much. No... too little, I suppose. I must ensure you are certain you are up to the task, for the terms will not change once we are married. If you attempt to change them, making demands that have not been agreed upon, I will have to send you back to your mother.”

“I will do it!” Marina blurted out. “I will abide by the rules to the letter!”

Freedom was within her grasp, so close she could almost taste it on her lips, like the traces of blackberry jam. And though she desired it with all of her heart, along with the rescue of her fragile reputation, there was a slight pinch of guilt at the enthusiasm with which she accepted. Her mother was not a monster, just a wayward child that she could no longer take care of without it sapping her of everything she had left.

“You are sure?” he pressed.

Smiling as her stomach roiled, her hand shot across the table, nearly knocking over the stand of demolished cakes and treats. “I am quite sure. I am alone most of the time anyway. I have... one friend, who already approves. I would relish the opportunity to meet other women who might *become* friends, and I do enjoy the occasional party or ball. But I relish nature more than anything, so an isolated manor is the perfect place for me!”

“You relish nature?” He flinched as if she had struck him.

“Oh, I know all the names of plants and animals—Latin and otherwise. I have a mound of books filled with drawings and illustrations and descriptions; it would be a delight to continue my collection,” she babbled, wondering why he looked so hurt. “Is that... a problem for you?”

He blinked, and the pained expression vanished. “Not at all. We have very fine gardens.” Hesitantly, he reached for her hand but did not take it, their fingertips so close that Marina could feel a crackle jumping between her gloves and his skin. “So, we have an arrangement?”

“A deal,” she corrected, not wanting anyone nearby to think she was a lady of the night or a secret paramour. “Not a twist of fate but a contract to live separate lives, together.”

Floating on the giddy feeling that she had just won back her freedom and her reputation in one fell swoop, it would take a while for her to realize the enormity of what she had just done, what she had just given away to this handsome stranger, and what it really meant: the true price for her liberty. For in that tea shop, she did not have to think too much about what her mother might say or the storm of guilt that was heading straight for her.

At last, Jasper took her hand and shook it. “A deal.”

## CHAPTER 8



“**S**he is going to kill me,” Marina lamented, every bone in her body quivering in fear as the carriage rattled back toward Kensington, the wheels hitting cobblestones and jostling the tea and cakes in her stomach.

Nancy seized Marina’s hand, holding it tightly. “I will be right there beside you. If she becomes... unreasonable, I shall protect you.” She furrowed her brow. “Do you think we should go to my residence first and see if Adam will join us? He has no business to attend to until this evening.”

“I would not wish what is about to happen upon his eyes,” Marina replied. “But do tell him of my demise when my mother strangles me, will you not? Arrange a fine funeral for me.”

Nancy laughed. “You might be surprised. She might be delighted for you.”

“And my father might walk through the door this afternoon, shouting “A-ha! I fooled you all!” to divert her anger.” Marina had long lost the giddy feeling. It had evaporated the moment she had stepped out of the tea shop and back into the carriage where she had told Nancy everything.

Nancy patted her cousin's hand gently, making soothing sounds. "And you are certain this is what you want? I am not trying to dissuade you, but you are my dearest friend as well as my cousin, and I do not want you to make a mistake." She gulped loudly. "Only, I noticed, he is... quite severe. Stern. I worry that you shall never smile or make a jest again if you are trapped with him."

"But that is the beauty of it," Marina insisted. "It will not matter. I can visit you as often as I please, I can amuse myself in the gardens, I can resume my compendium of British flora and fauna. I can make friends, Nancy. I can do all the things that I have had to set aside for years."

Nancy chewed her lower lip. "He is exceedingly handsome. Serious and handsome is not the worst combination in the world."

"Is he handsome?" Marina allowed herself a smile. "I had not noticed."

"Oh, you fibber!" Nancy chuckled. "You shall be the envy of society, and I know there will be a horde of furious mothers cursing your good fortune which Aunt Eliza might appreciate. She would delight in fighting your battles among the *ton* for you. Indeed, you ought to use that to soothe her if she becomes angry."

Marina took a breath, realizing they were almost at the apartments. "I shall bear that in mind."

*What am I doing?* The doubts flooded in, clamoring for space in her overstuffed brain. *Is it worth upsetting her? Would it be so bad to be a lonely spinster, spending my days with my mother?* It was better if she did not answer that, for the answer was not very kind.

Closing her eyes and squeezing Nancy's hand in return, she thought of her future husband, pretending for a moment that her cousin's hand was his, shaking on their engagement. His grip had been warmer. Firmer. And his palms had been rougher than she had expected, callouses snagging slightly on the silk of her gloves. A protector's hands to match his warriorlike physique.

*Who would have thought that I would be married to a gentleman who looks like that?* Her heart swooned a little, for she was in her fantasy world where such fancies were allowed. Her cousins had both married exceptionally handsome gentlemen, and she had envied their good fortune, but now, she had joined their ranks, all because of a chance reading of the scandal sheets while her mother slept.

"Would you like to go around the park again?" Nancy asked.

Marina's eyes snapped open as she realized the carriage had come to a standstill outside her London home. "Yes, but I should not." She sighed. "I must conclude this quickly before my mind is so full of doubts that I forget the entire thing."

"Or they are warning you," Nancy offered with a slight shrug. "After all, you would be losing the opportunity to fall in love with a gentleman you actually like."



“I like him well enough. Our tea together was pleasant, and he has not asked for much more than that in our marriage,” Marina protested. “As for love, I shall leave that to you and Joanna. That is plenty for me.”

“If you are absolutely sure, I shall not argue.”

Marina steeled her resolve, opening the door before the footman could. “I will not change my mind. I have made my decision. I shook his hand and sealed it—no matter what happens in the next few minutes, I will not be a coward, or I shall be staring into a very deep, dark hole of a future. And I know, without doubt, that I do not want *that*.”

“I am here,” Nancy urged with a nod of encouragement, showing such faith in Marina’s choice that Marina herself did not yet have entirely.

Together, the two young women made their way up the porch steps and through the front door into the communal hallway. At the door to the apartments, Marina took one final, calming breath and entered with Nancy standing firm at her side.

“Where have you been?” a shrill voice shrieked from the chaise longue in the reception hall. Eliza lay there, draped in blankets, clutching a teacup as if her life depended on it. “I needed you, Marina. I have been terribly unwell, and I called for you, but you were not here!”

Marina and Nancy exchanged a look that bolstered the former’s decision all the more.

“Oh, Nancy. I did not see you there.” Eliza sat up, wrapping herself in the blankets. “Apologies for my current state of undress. I did not have my darling daughter to tend to my sickness. I thought I was dying; I really did. And Mrs. Hampton does not understand my ailments the way you do, Marina.”

Nancy gave Marina a slight nudge.

“We had tea, Mama,” Marina said, taking a step forward. “Or, rather, I had tea with someone, and Nancy... chaperoned.”

Eliza’s face transformed in an instant, her expression hardening into a mask of cold stone. “You had tea with “someone”? And who might this someone be?” Her voice was flat and unnerving. “Why was I not invited?”

“You were asleep,” Marina replied, digging her fingernails into her palms, so she would not lose her nerve. “And... I was having tea and some very excellent blackberry tarts and raspberry puffs with... um... with... oh goodness, with the Duke of Lymington.”

Nancy nodded. “An exemplary gentleman. Kind, courteous, extraordinarily handsome, and he seemed very fond of our Marina.” She held onto Marina’s elbow as if to comfort herself. “He sent tea and cakes to my table though he did not need to. Yes, very courteous.”

Perched on the edge of the chaise longue, a maelstrom brewed, dark clouds forming over Eliza’s pale, stern face. Her eyes were two glinting orbs, her chest rising and falling in harsh

breaths, her mouth set in a grim line as she steepled her fingers and rested her chin upon the peaks.

“You met a gentleman without me?” Eliza asked flatly.

“You were asleep,” Marina repeated. “I might have told you last night, but you were in the midst of your own opera and would not have heard me. Indeed, it is because of you that I... set my heart upon this fellow, for I discovered that he was searching for a bride while you were asleep in the back of the carriage on our return from the Tiverton ball.”

Eliza nodded slowly. “So, this is my fault?”

“Fault? There is no fault, Mama,” Marina urged, wishing she did not feel like a little girl again, desperate to appease her mother. “I am happy. I am delighted to have met him, and I think you would favor him too, if you were to meet him.”

Eliza smiled a cold, hard smile. “But I have not met him, have I? Because you had tea with him without me. I was asleep, not dead—though, perhaps you would prefer it if I was?”

“Aunt Eliza!” Nancy stepped in. “That is most unkind of you!”

Eliza glanced at her niece. “With respect, Nancy, this does not concern you.”

“Of course, I would not prefer it if you were... Goodness, I shall not even deign to say it!” Marina replied, panicking slightly. “You imbibed too much last night, you were unruly

when we returned here, so I had no opportunity to tell you of the plan to meet, nor did I feel very inclined to when you were banging doors and drawing baths at all hours of the morning.” Annoyance bloomed from the panic, pouring out words she would not normally dare to say. “I knew you would not be awake, I knew you would be furious with me if I woke you, so I went alone. Well, not alone, but with Nancy. I was, at least, chaperoned; I am not a fool, Mama.”

Eliza took a pointed sip from her teacup. “He is no good for you.”

“You do not know him, Mama,” Marina shot back. Although, she did not know him either.

“I do.” Eliza snorted. “I know everything about everyone—is that not what society says about me? Is that not my power, Marina? I could tell you countless things about that fellow that would make you wash your mouth out in case any of his depravity transferred to the tea you shared.”

Marina stared at her mother, searching the older woman’s face with an intent she did not fully understand, until she saw it: a slight twitch at the corner of Eliza’s left eye and the left side of her mouth. An involuntary pulse of muscle that extended down her swallowing throat and into her hands which held her teacup so tightly that Marina feared it might shatter. Eliza’s leg had begun to jig up and down, too.

*She is lying, Marina realized. She is lying to frighten me, to keep me shackled to her.* For she had read the scandal sheets religiously and thoroughly, and she had never seen his name there. Not once.

“I do not want to know, Mama,” she said with more confidence than she had expected. “No matter what you tell me, I have made my decision. If there is something I need to know, he will tell me himself when he is ready to.”

Eliza’s twitching lip curled. “And what decision is that?”

“He made an offer of marriage to me while we had tea,” Marina steadied herself, “and I accepted. The Duke of Lymington is my betrothed. We are to be married as soon as possible.”

It felt strangely pleasant to say so out loud, like hearing a lovely poem for the first time, but Marina did not have much time to enjoy the way it sounded as something flew past her right ear... and smashed into the wall behind her, ceramic shards splintering into a jagged rain that heralded a tantrum of epic proportions.

The teacup was just the beginning.

## CHAPTER 9



“Did you hurt yourself?” Jasper asked, strolling beside Marina through the leafy pathways of Hyde Park. Her cousin, the Duchess of Stapleton, followed at a polite distance.

Marina did not seem to hear him, staring ahead with a glassy-eyed expression. She had been that way since they had greeted one another at the gates, twenty minutes earlier. She looked paler, too, less fiery than she had been at the tea shop, two days ago.

“Marina?” He took her hand boldly, stepping in front of her.

She blinked at him. “Hmm? Did you say something?”

She glanced down at her hand in his, her breath hitching. The slight catch in her throat drew his eyes down to her ample bosom for a moment, ripe curves teasing him from beneath a gauzy veil of collar that crossed over her chest. He shook his head, averting his gaze to her rosebud lips instead. Not much safer, but his wayward thoughts settled quickly, even if he did still wish to know if his fingertip would fit perfectly in that deep bow.

“I asked if you were injured,” he replied, lifting his other hand to her cheek. He ran his fingertips across a small, healing cut that marred the rosy apple. “It does not look like it will scar.”

She gulped, a pink flush rising up from that gauzy shroud, coloring her throat. “An accident,” she replied, taking a half step back, showing a fear he had not seen in their previous encounters. “A teacup... fell from a shelf. A fragment flew upward and struck me in the cheek, but I am using plenty of ointment. Although, if it did scar, we would match.”

“What do you mean?”

Her gaze flitted to *his* cheek. “What caused that scar?”

“Ah.” He smiled. “A riding incident. A low-hanging branch. But a teacup? How did the shard fly so high? Did it fall from a great height? Did it smash upon a table as it toppled?”

He was not usually so talkative, but there was something about the fresh injury that made him uncomfortable, made him want to fill the quiet and hear her speak again. She had such a soft, sweet voice. Soothing, somehow. And her paleness, twinned with her silence and that cut upon her cheek, plucked at something inside him against his wishes. It made him concerned, wanting to reassure himself that she was well.

*But a husband should be concerned for his wife, should he not?* Jasper wracked his brain, concluding that friendly concern was not in conflict with the rules he had set out for their nuptial contract.

Marina shrugged, forcing a smile. “It happened so fast; I could not begin to tell you the details.”

They had just reached a path that was away from the main thoroughfares, curving behind the Ranger’s Lodge. Thick borders of trees and bushes hid the pair from the rolling lawns of the park and the beady eyes of fellow wanderers, and with Nancy distracted by a lone magpie, waving at it in a strange manner, Jasper seized his opportunity. He pulled Marina into a gap between the dense bushes, holding onto her shoulders as he gazed down at her.

“I am no fool,” he said, surprised by the urgency in his voice. “You told me that your mother is... a temperamental creature. Was this her doing?”

Marina could not look him in the eyes, saying everything without saying anything at all. She trembled in his grasp.

“You told her of our betrothal, I assume?” he pressed, moving his fingertips beneath her chin, guiding her head up gently, so she would have to meet his eyes.

She gave the faintest nod.

“And this was her response?” He could not help touching the healing cut once more as if he could somehow make it vanish.

Marina pushed him lightly. “She was upset. She threw a teacup. It shattered and a shard hit me.” She was breathless, chest heaving. “She could not have been more apologetic



when she saw what had happened. A temporary madness that has been quelled, I assure you.”

He retreated a pace, uncertain of what had prompted him to hide in the bushes with her like a common rake. “I do not want aggravation, Lady Marina. I thought we had established that.” His voice returned to a more comfortable temperature—cool and even. “If your mother is going to present a problem, perhaps we—”

“It has been quelled,” she repeated, more fervently. That fire flamed in her autumnal eyes, stoked afresh, holding back what he had meant to say—that he would visit with her mother and unruffle any feathers himself.

He took another step back and offered his arm. “Very well, but if there is further trouble, you should—” he tried again, but she cut him off.

“There will not be,” she promised, shaking as she took his proffered arm.

*You should send for me*, was what he was about to say, but maybe it was better left unsaid. He did not want Marina getting any foolish notions that he was a knight in shining armor. They had already agreed to be partners only when it was truly necessary, for society events and business requirements, and he could not convince himself that offering help fell into that jurisdiction.

“Will that cut on your cheek be healed three weeks from now?” he asked instead.

She cast him a sideways glance. “I am no doctor, Your Grace. I hope so, but I cannot promise.”

“Well, continue applying that ointment you spoke of,” he said flatly, “for that is when I intend for us to be wed.”

Her eyebrows flitted up and down in an unreadable display—was she gladdened, confused, horrified; it was impossible to know. “But... what about the banns?”

“Forget those,” he replied. “I will seek a special license.”

She seemed breathless once more, clasping her free hand to her chest, making him wonder absently if his hand there would cause her breaths to quicken or slow. A logical experiment, of course. If he startled her, he theorized that her breaths would still altogether in a gasp or a noise of shock. If it was a comfort, then he suspected her breathing would ease. And if it was neither or partway between or it caused some *other*, more pleasurable response... He readjusted his cravat to bring his thoughts back into line.

“That does not please you?” he said gruffly. “I thought you were in a hurry to marry?”

Her hand curved tighter around his forearm, like he was her ballast, holding her steady. The slight dig of her fingernails, through her kid gloves and his sleeve, sent a little pulse up to his shoulder. A pulse that made him want to take her in his arms until she had calmed, a protective reaction that he had not anticipated.

Gradually, her breathing *did* slow. “Three weeks.” She gave a subtle nod. “Three weeks is... perfection.”

“Would you like me to inform your mother?” Jasper asked, pausing to add, “By letter, of course. Or personally, if I can spare a moment, though I shall be rather busy until the wedding.”

Marina shook her head. “I am quite capable of telling her myself.” She managed a smile, a hint of mischief shining in her gaze. “I shall merely hide any crockery or anything that is throwable—if that is a word.”

“I believe it is,” he told her.

“I shall have to consult my dictionary.” She pulled a face. “Oh, but the one I have here in London is very old, so perhaps we shall never know, for it may be a new word.”

“It does not matter if it is a word,” he insisted, his tone impatient. “Prior to our wedding, I suppose we must be seen at one engagement so that society knows I am no longer in search of a bride.”

Marina stifled a chuckle. “Is this not our one engagement?”

“There are not too many people wandering today,” he replied. “It was drizzling earlier; I suppose that has dissuaded the usual crowds from promenading.”

She shook her head. “No, I meant us. Is this not our one engagement?”

“You know that is not what I meant,” he murmured, his chest sticky with discomfort. He had grown so unaccustomed to the art of humor that he had forgotten how to respond. “I thought Lord Hendricks’ ball might suffice. It is in three days’ time, and Lady Hendricks was always very discerning with her invitations, so the ball will neither be too big nor too small, and only the *right* people will see us.”

Marina raised an eyebrow. “Who are the right people?”

“People like... your cousin,” he answered hastily.

“So, not someone like my mother?”

“That shall be at your discretion,” he told her, wishing he could put his hand to his own chest to rub it and ease away the sticky sensation, but he did not want her to see his discomfort.

Marina nodded slowly. “I shall see how the news of my wedding day fares first. With any luck, she will hide herself away in her chambers in protest and will not want to come.”

“Very well, then I shall make the arrangements.” He cleared his throat, but it did nothing to help the tight feeling. “For the wedding and the ball.”

He observed her closely, searching for any flicker of her previous unease, but it did not come. Her nervous smile grew

in confidence, her grip slackening to a more ladylike hold, her breath returning to normal, the gleam in her eyes becoming something more defiant.

Inhaling the crisp autumn air and closing her eyes for a moment, Marina nodded. “Make the arrangements. In the church, do not forget...”

“Do not forget what?” He frowned when she did not continue.

She flashed him a disarming grin. “Do not forget who your bride is,” she said in an amused whisper. “I shall be the one standing beside you.”

“I thought you said you did not jest,” he murmured, refusing to smile.

She lifted her shoulders in a playful shrug. “Just a small one to mark my happiness.” With a soft sigh, she added, “You are about to change my life, Your Grace. Today is a blessed day.”

“Yes, well, remember your ointment.” He concentrated on the path ahead, leading her away from the hedges, and trying very hard not to think about the gentle pulse that still moved up his arm to his shoulder and down into his chest where his own lungs were having some difficulty settling his breaths.



Later that night, in the dusty heat of his townhouse study, Jasper flipped through the heavy dictionary that sat upon his writing desk. His fingertips hissed across every page of the Ts, but he could not find what he was looking for.

“Not a word,” he said to the emptiness, the left corner of his lip twitching strangely, like it wanted to smile.

## CHAPTER 10



“Mama?” Marina rapped tentatively on the door to her mother’s bedchamber. “Mama, I know you are not sleeping. I heard you knock something over five minutes ago.”

Deliberate silence echoed back. Marina could picture her mother standing frozen, halfway across the room, turning as rigid as a statue at the sound of the tap on the door. There was not so much as a rustle of bedlinens.

“Mama, we will be leaving in quarter of an hour,” Marina said. “I thought I ought to tell you, so you do not suddenly fret that I have been kidnapped when you cannot find me in any of the rooms.”

A more pointed silence answered, and Marina imagined her mother pulling childish faces.

“I was not the one who said I did not want you to accompany me!” Marina insisted, withdrawing. “Remember that! You were the one who said it, and I did not confirm it. You are only punishing yourself.”

It felt somewhat satisfying to repeat a sentiment that her mother used to shout at her and her father when he was still alive. *You are only punishing yourself.* Indeed, if Eliza wished to sulk and brood, believing it would manipulate Marina into staying, she would be sorely disappointed.

“Nothing?” Nancy asked when Marina returned to the parlor.

Marina nodded. “Nothing. She has chosen stubbornness.”

“I cannot fathom it.” Nancy tutted under her breath. “This may be the most important ball of your life, and she is going to miss it. *My mother* would be beside herself with joy, watching the clock and wondering how early is too early to arrive.”

Marina smiled sadly. “That is because your mother is not utterly mad and equally maddening.”

She would not admit, while her mother was just a few rooms away, that she was relieved. For once, her mother’s tantrums were working in her favor. For one night—the first since her debut—she would get to experience a ball without the abject terror of it ending in a screaming quarrel, a lewd display, or with her dragging Eliza out to spare what was left of both their reputations. Perhaps Marina would even get to dance.

“Might I ask something?” Nancy said, fidgeting.

“If you are about to tell me that I ought to search for a gentleman that I truly love, there is no need. I am perfectly content.”



Nancy laughed awkwardly. “No, I was... going to ask what happened with His Grace when he ushered you into the bushes at Hyde Park. You emerged so pale that I thought you might faint, but I did not feel I should intrude.” She hesitated. “Did he... kiss you?”

“You have waited three days to ask me that?” Marina had never understood her dear cousin’s shyness, for she had always assumed that exceptionally beautiful women were born with confidence, knowing their beauty could win them anything.

Nancy laughed again, more easily this time. “I was waiting for you to tell me, in truth, but you never did, and I cannot restrain myself any longer. If he kissed you, I must know.”

“He did not kiss me,” Marina assured. *But I, too, thought he was about to.*

In her experience as an unwilling observer of her mother and father’s embarrassing antics, there was no such thing as inhibition between a husband and wife. So, when Jasper had pushed her—albeit gently—into the gap between the hedges, she had braced for him to behave in a husbandly manner, even though they were not yet wed. It had happened, more or less, to Nancy too, though that had been an improper grab instead of a kiss.

*What would I have done if he had kissed me?* It was a question Marina had asked herself no fewer than a thousand times since she had parted ways with Jasper after their walk, three days prior. Stranger still, her mind gave a different answer every time—some that had kept her awake, stunned by the wildness of her own thoughts. But what else had she expected, considering who had raised her?

Lying in bed just the night before, she had closed her eyes and imagined Jasper standing in front of her, his hands grasping her arms, his breath ragged. And as that imaginary version of him had dipped his head, his mouth nearing hers, she had actually pursed her own lips, trying to conceive what it might feel like to kiss a gentleman like him. A gentleman so handsome that staring at him for too long was like staring at the sun.

Of course, she had quickly realized the ridiculousness of the situation and had turned over, jamming a pillow over her head as if that could somehow smother her wilder thoughts. She could still feel the burn of humiliation in her cheeks if she allowed herself to remember it.

But the pillow over her head had not been able to blot out the dreams that had followed. In those, she had still been hopelessly naïve—at first, at least—but Jasper had known exactly what to do, instructing her like the most tantalizingly strict tutor. She had woken up in a blazing sweat, fearing she had caught a fever, for that was the only explanation she had for her improper dreams. The trouble was, no other symptoms had followed.

“He asked about the cut,” Marina continued, cooling her remembering cheeks on the backs of her hands.

Nancy grimaced. “I do not know if it was very unfortunate or very fortunate that the shard hit you, considering her rage. I thought she might really, really hurt you, as if she was in some sort of... trance.” She shuddered in the armchair. “But the sight of blood seemed to drag her out of it.”

“I am stronger than I look,” Marina insisted. “I would have tackled her to the ground if she had attempted anything more than a few hurled items.”

Nancy pursed her lips. “Does she do that often—fly into a rage?”

“Not often, no.” Marina knew she should not try to defend her mother or excuse her behavior, but every time she tried to remain steadfast, she heard her father’s voice in her head, telling her to be kind to her mother, telling her to take care of her mother. And as a mother forgives her child for a kick delivered in anger, Marina had no choice but to forgive her mother, again and again, blaming the grief instead of the action.

Nancy exhaled. “Good, I am glad. I was so worried.” She glanced at the carriage clock on the mantelpiece. “Come, we ought to be leaving if your mother is not going to join us.”

“She will regret it,” Marina knew, smoothing nervous hands down the front of her gown. A borrowed gown of exquisite beauty and enormous expense offered by Nancy.

“You cannot be seen on this night, of all nights, by all of society’s elite if you do not look the part of Duchess. They must remember you and know that this is serious,” Nancy had told her when she had arrived two hours earlier. There had been a similar sort of outrage regarding Marina’s hair and maquillage which Nancy had hurriedly attempted to resolve. All in all, Marina thought she looked... presentable. Uncomfortable and terrified of accidentally making a single mark on the beautiful gown but presentable.

The two young ladies made their way to the reception hall where they put on the gloves that were waiting by the door like silky snakeskins.

“Aren’t you waiting for Lady Creassey?” Mrs. Hampton appeared out of nowhere, her expression distraught.

Marina smiled politely. “My mother has declined the invitation to join us.”

“But she has had me steaming and ironing her best gowns and polishing her pearls and jewels for days! I have been teasing feathers!”

Marina tried not to laugh. It was not the poor housekeeper’s fault that she had been employed by such a mercurial mistress. “Nevertheless, she has locked herself in her bedchamber, and we will be late if we wait any longer. If she emerges, tell her that she is a very silly goose.”

“I can’t do that, M’Lady.” Mrs. Hampton began to fan herself with her hand.

“A stubborn mule, then,” Marina suggested, opening the door to the apartments and heading out into the communal hallway. “Good night, Mrs. Hampton. I expect I shall return before any constables need to be sent for, so do not worry.”

With that, Marina closed the door and tried not to leap with excitement. That night was going to be the rarest of nights, and no mistake, the first foray into her new life, now tantalizingly within reach.



The townhouse belonging to Lord and Lady Hendricks was far grander than any Marina had ever seen, making her wonder if there was some sort of trickery at play, for it had not looked nearly so vast from the outside. Past the entrance hall, the lower floor had been transformed into one huge ballroom, the partitioning doors folded aside to allow the crowd to flow as if it had always been just one room. There was a makeshift tea room in what was, presumably, a library when a gathering was not being held, but no one was taking tea when they had the music of a full orchestra to enjoy.

“Oh goodness,” Marina whispered, choking on the nerves that refused to be swallowed.

Nancy patted her cousin’s hand encouragingly. “It was the same for me when I first attended events like this with Adam.”

“Yes, but I imagine you had him standing at your side, entering together,” Marina said, searching the crowd for Jasper, but given her small stature, all she could see was an ocean of bobbing heads and shivering feathers.

Yet, as she made her way further into the ballroom, it was as if a disgraced traitor had been thrown in, manacles clinking. The throng of guests halted in their chatter, sharp eyes boring into Marina, harsh whispers circulating as even the orchestra decided to cease their playing.

*Apologies, ladies and gentlemen, you have me mistaken—the circus performers will be arriving shortly,* she longed to say,

for if the heat in her face was any judge, she must have resembled a clown.

Just then, a hand slipped under her clenched and clammy palm, a shadow stretching across her. The silence in the room thickened with anticipation, the cold stares narrowing into something like envy while at least fifty noses turned up in disapproval, prompting Marina to peer up at whoever had taken up the spot beside her.

“You were supposed to wait in your carriage,” Jasper said out of the corner of his mouth. “I told you we would enter together.”

Marina frowned. “You did not.”

“Fine, I assumed it was obvious,” he replied, meeting her gaze. “You look... very presentable.”

She had to smile. “That is exactly what I said.”

“Pardon?”

“To Nancy. My cousin. That is exactly what I said,” she tried to explain. “Never mind, it is not important.”

His eyes pinched. “Another jest?”

“Only if I am the joke,” she said. “Indeed, if the response of these fine people is anything to go by, I should say they do not

find me remotely amusing.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, holding her gaze as he did so. “Ignore them,” he whispered against the silk of her glove as ladies throughout the ballroom swooned, and some wept into their mothers’ shoulders. “You will be a duchess soon. You will be free soon.”

*Free...* Marina’s heart soared and sank, all at once. But as Jasper pressed his lips to her glove in a true kiss, it soared again, startling her so hard that she almost pulled her hand away.

“We should dance,” he said, standing back up to his full, towering height. “You do dance, do you not?”

Marina gulped. “Yes.”

What she neglected to add was “in theory.”

## CHAPTER 11



Jasper stood stiffly on his side of the ballroom with the rest of a long line of gentlemen. His heart was beating out of rhythm, his brow already beading with perspiration though it was not entirely to be blamed on the heat of the ballroom. It had been years since he had danced, and not merely because of his sister's passing; he had been reluctant to dance, ever since he knew it would be expected of him as a young boy. His limbs and height were not made for grace.

*What did you bloody well ask her to dance for?* he cursed inwardly, aware that all eyes were upon him. Upon *them*. The newly betrothed couple.

He glanced across at her as they waited for the orchestra to begin. She looked the way he felt—nervous. Somehow, seeing her anxiety softened his, an unexpected variation upon the protective sensation he had experienced during their walk in Hyde Park. Her fear gave him the strength to overcome his but *for* her. He could not understand it, but he welcomed it, otherwise his legs would have been shaking by the time he took his first step toward her.

A lively Scottish reel began, Lord and Lady Hendricks clearly believing they ought to emulate Almack's Assembly Rooms if they wanted their guests to applaud the evening. Jasper



cringed. A slower dance was something he could have managed, but all the jumping, kicking, and bouncing around was not within his talents.

Following the lead of the gentlemen on either side of him, he leaped forward with one leg extended, quickly performing a triangle of smaller hops: backward, left, right, before returning to the center and repeating for what seemed like an eternity.

He almost made a terrible faux pas, moving to begin another hop, when Marina began her reply with the other ladies. He halted sharply, hoping no one had noticed, a sharp pain jarring up his leg where he had nearly rolled an ankle.

Breathing hard, he watched her closely, more to avoid the judgmental eyes of the gathered observers than anything else. At least, initially. But the more intently he watched, the more mesmerized he became. She was elegant and enthusiastic, her hands pinching her waist as she jumped back and forth, revealing the shape of her silhouette beneath the beautiful, dark green gown that she wore. He had never seen a more perfect hourglass. And just below the edge of his vision, he saw, for a fleeting moment, a flash of stockinged ankle. Such slender ankles, so narrow he feared for her safety as she continued to hop and leap with aplomb.

*Has she no decency?* he tried to scold in silence, but there was no true discipline in his inner voice. And his mind soon wandered back to her hands upon her waist, wondering how far his own hands, far larger than hers, would be able to circle that narrow middle. He had a suspicion he would be able to get his fingertips to meet. *I must have the cook feed her more*, he decided, convincing himself that his unseemly thoughts were just a result of casual concern. It being winter and all, it would not serve her well to be too slim.

All of a sudden, it was his turn to move again. He eyed the other gentlemen in his periphery and stepped forward to press his palm to hers, their respective legs skipping backward and forward in an odd swinging motion before beginning a jaunty orbit around one another, their palms still together.

“You dance well,” he said awkwardly, remembering that conversation was encouraged. Truly, he felt as if he were entering society for the first time again, for he had forgotten so much.

Marina snorted. “You are a wretched fibber, Your Grace.”

“Fibber?” He raised his eyebrows. “I am being quite serious.”

“Oh...” A flush of pink colored her cheeks, so pretty that even though he was looking right at her, he could not convince himself that she was real. She resembled a living doll. “Then, I thank you for your compliment. You also dance well.”

It was his turn to snort. “Now, who is the fibber?”

“You do!” she insisted. “I imagine you have had more practice than me.”

“I doubt it.”

“This is my first dance in... years,” she explained as they stopped for a second and circled one another in the opposite direction. “I was worried I would forget how, but it is rather

like a thespian recalling an old soliloquy from memory. It comes back once the prompt is given.”

Switching hands, standing side-by-side, the couple skipped through a tunnel of arching arms. At the head of the tunnel, they separated and continued the hopping steps alone down their respective sides of the other dancers before joining together once more at the bottom end of the tunnel. There, they made the arch with their own arms, their fingertips just touching.

“I never enjoyed dancing,” he admitted.

She did not seem surprised. “What *do* you enjoy? That is what we are supposed to do at this kind of moment, are we not—ask one another of our pursuits and pastimes?”

“I cannot remember,” he replied.

Mischief twinkled in her enchanting eyes. “You cannot remember what you enjoy or whether or not this is what we are supposed to do?”

“The latter. It has also been years for me,” he said stiffly. “I can see that *you* enjoy jests, however, for that must be the third or fourth since we met. Alas, that is not something we share.”

Marina hesitated. “Apologies. Once we are married, I promise, you will not have to hear them any longer.”

“I... do not mind them, for now,” he told her, bewildered by his generosity. He did not like to see anyone smiling or laughing in his vicinity, for it threatened the unyielding grief that he held like a precious jewel in the center of his chest. Yet, just three days ago, he had willed her to smile again, worried by the blank expression on her face.

*I am trying to be amenable, that is all,* he insisted. As she had just stated, once they were married, he would not have to witness her smiles and jests and laughter if he did not wish to. And if she grew too jovial in his company, he would simply purchase her a new residence, away from him, as they had already discussed.

To add insult to injury, Marina flashed him a glorious smile, a white-toothed, perfect smile that lit her up from within. “You must not give me such liberties, Your Grace, or I may run wild with them.”

“That is why I said I do not mind them *for now*,” he repeated gruffly, trying to make sense of his behavior. He had only had one glass of brandy before leaving his Mayfair townhouse, but he *had* been rather liberal with the pouring of it. Perhaps, that was it, for he had also not eaten since breakfast that morning. What he would not admit was that he felt as sober as a judge or that the fog in his head seemed to stem from her rather than something dark and liquid that could be glugged into a glass.

Marina’s smile refused to fade. “I shall restrain myself.”

“I should hope so.” He cleared his throat. “Did your mother decide against accompanying you? I did not see her with you.”

At that, her smile disappeared, like a flaming candle being pinched out by damp fingertips. “She is... otherwise engaged. A sickness.”

“Goodness, I hope it is not catching.” He searched the pink of her cheeks and the alabaster of her for any sign of illness, only to realize her true meaning. Apparently, her presence did not just make him generous but dimwitted too. “I... uh... hear that a sullen temperament can be rather contagious.”

Marina narrowed her eyes, pursing her red lips a little. “Was that a jest? Perhaps, that is the true contagion here—humor.”

Before he could respond, though he did not know what he would have said, the dancers lowered their arms and began to move again. A reprieve that was both welcome and not, for it meant hopping and jumping again.

Indeed, the rest of the orchestra’s lively song was something of a blur as Jasper did his best to keep pace with the other gentlemen and with Marina. They couple twirled and span, fluttering their feet, turning in dizzying circles around one another. He could have sworn the orchestra were deliberately increasing the tempo of the music, his limbs taking on a life of their own as if enchanted by the instruments in a cruel curse.

His palm brushed Marina’s then drew back. She moved around him in a square, intoxicating him with the scent of her sweet perfume as her shoulder *almost* touched his in passing. And the fine hairs stood up on the back of his neck as he felt her behind him, the way a storm can be felt long before it breaks. It was like... a seduction, the closeness of her teased and withdrawn in quick succession, making his head spin.

And as they whirled around again, all he saw was her. He had to concentrate on her or the dizziness would overwhelm him. Those eyes of hers were his anchor, his returned stare intense while they circled one another. The color rose higher in her cheeks, dusting up the curve of her throat, her brow glistening with exertion, her eyes bright with joy. He had never witnessed anything more beautiful; he was certain of it.

All of a sudden, the music ceased. He stood there, his palm still pressed to hers, panting ragged breaths as they gazed into one another's eyes. For a moment, she seemed surprised, but then that blasted smile spread across her face once more.

"See," she said, catching her breath in a manner that made his skin tingle with heat, her bosom heaving, "you *do* dance well. I told you."

Jasper curled his fingers around her hand, pulling it to his lips. He kissed it, needing a moment to gather his thoughts. "I believe it was a... satisfactory display," he managed to say, blaming his earlier nerves for the slight tremor in his chest.

"Everyone is staring," she murmured as he set her hand on top of his.

"Let them," he replied. "It is why we are here."

She glanced up at him. "Indeed, and it is of benefit to us to discover each other's dancing talents," she said, her voice quiet. "We shall have to dance again."

"Now?" He swallowed uncomfortably.

She stifled a chuckle. “No, not now. You said you would require a partner for balls and gatherings. If you wish to win the favor of your peers and their wives, you will be expected to dance.”

“Ah...” He needed fresh air and a glass of something strong. Lord and Lady Hendricks’ ball had been a bad choice. There were too many people, and though he was the one who had wanted to be seen with Marina in a united display, he suddenly felt shaky and cold. He had done too much, too soon.

Marina tapped him gently on the shoulder. “Are you well, Your Grace? You look pale.”

“I am quite well,” he replied. “But, if you will excuse me, I—”

The sharp chime of someone clinking something against their glass cut him off. In the brief pause of the orchestra’s playing, it rang out like a siren, attracting everyone’s attention. It chimed again and again until every head had turned, and every pair of eyes were settled upon a figure in black, standing in the middle of the ballroom.

*Oh, for pity’s sake...* Jasper braced himself for the worst, covering Marina’s hand with his free hand, for she had drained of all color entirely.

## CHAPTER 12



*H*alf an hour. That was all Marina's mother had granted her of what might have been the best night of her life. Half an hour, tasting freedom, glimpsing what it might be like to be Jasper's wife, reveling in the liberty of dancing a lively reel without worrying about anything but the music and the steps and the intense eyes of her partner.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Eliza bellowed, handing off the knife she had used to clink against the champagne glass, "I am not one to commandeer someone else's ball, but I wondered if you might grant me a moment of your time to announce some happy news."

Marina felt Jasper's hand squeeze hers in a surprising gesture of reassurance. He took a half step nearer to her, their arms pressed close. She peered up at him, noting the grim line of his mouth and the glower of his eyes—eyes that, not long ago, were gazing at her with such... power that it had rendered her breathless. So much so that, for a brief moment, she had forgotten the nature of their attendance at the ball, imagining him as an admirer who had asked her to dance in the usual fashion, at least, usual to other young ladies, for whom balls were an opportunity to seek good matches and to begin courtships.



“Oh, this ought to be memorable,” a gentleman scoffed nearby, snickering to his partner.

The lady covered her mouth with her hand, hiding a harsh laugh. “I hear that is why the Duke chose that... nobody, because her mother blackmailed him. She knows everything about everyone, you know.”

Marina flinched, wondering if that would be the story splashed across the scandal sheets and gossip pages. Would she never have any peace, even after her wedding, when it came to her reputation?

“As a widow myself,” Eliza continued, “I know the meaning of love. I possessed it, I treasured it, and I lost it. There are many in this ballroom who know the beauty of love—perhaps not with those they are married to, but nonetheless.”

Marina sucked in a sharp breath, biting down on her lower lip to stop her temper from rising. All around her, gasps rippled, stoking the furnace of her embarrassment.

“My daughter, the Lady Marina Wilkins, is to be married three weeks from now,” Eliza went on though her voice was clear and she stood firm, showing no signs that she had imbibed too much. “Why so soon, I hear you cry? It is nothing untoward—and I ought to warn you all that I will not tolerate a bad word against my daughter, who is an angel upon this Earth as pure of heart as she is of complexion—but when one encounters a love so... rare and powerful that it cannot be denied, there is no sense in waiting. It is so for my daughter and her beloved, the Duke of Lymington.”

Marina frowned, utterly bewildered. Her mother had even mustered tears, smiling through them as if she truly believed what she was saying.

“Several years ago, when my own beloved was still with me, the Duke rescued my darling girl during a summer storm. Her horse had bolted through the woodland, and she had fallen. Lost and terrified, her ankle injured, I imagine she was terrified of what might befall her.” Eliza clasped a hand to her heart, emotion pouring out of her. Had she not been a lady of society, she might have made an exceptional actress.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Eliza said with a trembling voice, her eyes lifted skyward, “it was the Duke that came to her aid, riding alone for his enjoyment, not expecting to find a lady in distress. He brought her home in the pouring rain, worried sick for her welfare. She took ill with a terrible fever, and he had to depart though it was clear he cared for her. I never thought they would encounter one another again, or if my daughter even remembered him, but then, just a week ago, fate intervened. It is love of the sweetest kind, and I would ask you all to raise your glasses in celebration of love itself and for my daughter and her betrothed: His Grace, the Duke of Lymington. A toast to finding what has been lost and to finding love where it is least expected!”

Out of the corner of his mouth, Jasper whispered, “What is she doing?”

“I believe she is... giving us her blessing,” Marina replied, astounded.

She was not the only one. Around the ballroom, the unkind whispers and snorts had transformed into soft sniffles, warm smiles, and nods of approval. Of course, there was still a

smattering of scowls from envious young ladies and their frustrated mothers, but they were the minority.

“Am I to toast alone?” Eliza asked, her hand shaking ever so slightly as she held her glass aloft.

Laughter moved through the room in a heartening wave.

“To His Grace, the Duke of Lymington and his bride, Lady Marina Wilkins!” an older gentleman said, coming to stand at Eliza’s side. Marina vaguely recognized him as Lord Hendricks.

He was joined, a moment later, by a lady of similar age—Lady Hendricks, presumably. “To love and to marriage!”

The ballroom chorused back, chuckling as a few fumbled the words. But the mood had shifted, and Marina hoped it would stay that way, even though she could hear the sour young woman from earlier whispering, “I bet there is not a jot of truth in any of that.”

The gentleman with her tutted under his breath. “The Dowager Countess of Creassey is many things,” he told his companion, “but a liar is not one of them. Is that not why she is so feared?”

“I wish the Duke had found *me* in the woods. I would have thrown myself off my horse if I had known he would rescue me,” the young woman grumbled. The gentleman tutted again, abandoning the woman all together, his pride likely wounded.

Eliza took a hearty sip of her drink and beckoned. “Where is my darling girl? Come forward so we can celebrate you and your handsome betrothed! I promise, I shall not embarrass you.”

More laughter eased around the ballroom, but a prick of nerves stung Marina’s heart. Her mind urged her not to go to her mother. Yet, she could not simply ignore the request.

Before she could decide what to do, Jasper was already leading her forward, the crowd parting for the “fated” couple. He wore a small smile that did not reach his eyes which still blazed with annoyance. But, perhaps, the guests would mistake it for passion, believing that he loved the woman at his side.

“Embrace me, my darling,” Eliza urged, reaching for Marina.

Hesitantly, Marina put her arms around her mother, holding her awkwardly. “So, you were not asleep?” she whispered.

“Make no mistake,” her mother whispered back, “this is not a kindness for your sake. This is a mother cleaning up the terrible mess that her daughter has made so that *my* reputation does not suffer.”

Marina swallowed down the angry bile that rose up. “You are not serious.”

“I assure you, I am.”

“You are ridiculous,” Marina hissed, hot tears scorching her eyes.

*I should have known. I thought that, for once, you had done something for me, but of course, you must ruin it,* she lamented, her heart breaking.

“And *you* do not understand the trouble you are in,” Eliza replied, laughing for the watching crowd as if Marina had just made an amusing joke. “He is dangerous.”

Marina forced a smile onto her own face, patting her mother on the back with a vengeance. “I know you are lying. You have learned nothing about him that could dissuade me, and that is why you are so upset. You cannot stop this, and it infuriates you.” She pulled back, pretending to tuck a strand of hair behind her mother’s ear. “Instead of being happy for me, you have thought only of yourself and how this might affect you. You should *actually* be celebrating, not breaking my heart.”

“This is not the place for this conversation,” Eliza said coolly, taking hold of Marina’s hand. “Come, let us find a quiet spot. There ought to be a garden somewhere in a house so enormous.”

Marina held her ground. “No.”

“Pardon?” Anger flared in her mother’s eyes.

“I am staying here to dance with my betrothed,” Marina replied. “If you cannot be pleased for me, if you cannot trust

yourself to behave at this ball, then... perhaps you should leave.”

A gasp slipped from Eliza’s lips, her expression hardening. “That is what you want?”

“If you cannot behave and will not be happy for me, then that is your only choice,” Marina replied, grateful that the crowd had begun to lose interest, returning to the evening’s entertainments. The orchestra struck up another jaunty reel, couples taking to the dance floor. Meanwhile, Jasper stood at a polite distance, allowing mother and daughter a moment.

Eliza nodded slowly. “I see.”

“I am not asking you to leave,” Marina reiterated. “It is your decision.”

Eliza stepped in again, embracing her daughter in a gentler fashion that was, somehow, more threatening. “I will go, but do not come crying to me when this unravels before your very eyes. I *do* know something of your betrothed that will change everything. I had hoped you would change your mind without needing to hear it, but I see that you inherited your stubbornness from your father.”

Marina bit back a retort, for in a battle of ripostes, her mother always won.

“Two things, in truth,” Eliza continued, murmuring close to Marina’s ear. “Firstly, that he is visited by a courtesan,

Genevieve Fox. Once a lady, now a common—or not so common—harlot.”

She waited for Marina to respond, likely anticipating a gasp or a cry of horror, but it did not come. After all, it was none of Marina’s concern.

*A courtesan? What does that matter to me? In a marriage of convenience, I imagine that will make certain things simpler,* Marina told herself, trying to forget the way her heart had fluttered when she danced with Jasper, how the passionate look in his eyes had stirred something in her stomach, how his kiss upon her hand had made her breathless for a moment or two. That was all just an illusion, conjured by the freedom and exhilaration of an evening alone. She did not want love, he did not want love, so if he found his comforts elsewhere, so be it.

Eliza made a strange noise, like a quiet growl. She was irritated that her words had elicited nothing from her daughter; that much was obvious. “And secondly,” she began in a low, hissing voice, “he killed his sister.”

“You are ridiculous,” Marina repeated, her heart in her throat. “I was not asking you to leave before, but I am now.”

Her mother smiled coldly, pulling away. “As you wish, but as I said, do not come crying to me when this falls apart.” She paused. “And do not forget what I have told you. I might be an embarrassment to you, but I am no liar. Remember that.”

Turning on her heel, putting on a performance of contented mother, she smiled and waved at those who met her eye, her

long, black skirts whispering across the floor as she made her dramatic exit.

Marina watched her go, feeling suddenly faint as she glanced across at Jasper. He stood silent, his eyes blank, his mouth set in a grim line. *Surely not...* Marina pondered, her hands trembling. *He is no killer. He cannot be.*

But her mother's words rang in her head, burrowing into her mind. Eliza Wilkins was not, and had never been, a liar.



## CHAPTER 13



Seated at a small, round table on the periphery of the ballroom, Jasper was exhausted. The barrage of congratulations had not ceased since Eliza's unexpected speech, forcing him to speak with a carousel of strangers, old acquaintances, and vaguely familiar faces. He kept waiting for someone to mention Priscilla, bracing for the pain her name brought him when spoken aloud, but no one did. They were entirely fixated upon his upcoming marriage to Marina, complimenting her and celebrating her until she was positively glowing with joy.

However, her joy and sunny disposition did not seem to reach him, casting him in a chilly shade. Whenever another well-wisher left the table where the couple sat with Marina's cousin, Nancy, Marina would begin another conversation with Nancy as if Jasper was not there at all. Nancy's husband was elsewhere in the ballroom, drifting back every so often to steal a secret kiss from his wife—a sight that made Jasper stare anywhere else, uncomfortable with such a public display of affection. He certainly was not envious, not even a little bit. No, not in the slightest.

Once or twice, Jasper had caught Marina's eye, but she had looked away sharply.

*Was it my dancing?* he wondered, but he did not think that could be right, for she had been eager to speak with him then. She had made jests, she had smiled, she had laughed, and now... nothing. *Her mother must have said something to her when they were whispering.* He had tried to eavesdrop, but Eliza Wilkins was particularly good at speaking in a voice so furtive that no one nearby could hear a single word. Marina had inherited it, too.

At that very moment, Marina and Nancy were chuckling at something the other had said, and Jasper found he could not bear it any longer. The disrespect of her ignoring him, of course, not the fact that she was no longer lavishing him with her smiles and jests. After all, he was the one who had told her was not keen on such things from a potential wife.

“Lady Marina,” he said, struggling with her frosty silence.

She turned, looking right through him. “Yes, Your Grace?”

“A conversation is necessary,” he replied, getting to his feet. “You will come with me to the gardens. Your cousin, of course, may act as chaperone, but I would ask her to keep a fair distance.”

Nancy smiled nervously, rising to her feet and offering her arm to Marina. “You will not even know I am there.” She paused. “I hear the gardens here are very beautiful. Was it an evening stroll you desired? It *is* rather warm in here.”

“I need not discuss it with you,” Jasper replied, cringing inwardly at the curt tone of his voice. It was not Nancy’s fault that she was more engaging company than him.

Nancy bowed her head. “Of course, Your Grace. I apologize for asking.”

He, in turn, offered his arm to Marina. “It will not take long.”

Marina’s gaze flitted between his arm and Nancy’s. With a subtle, shaky breath she got up and chose Jasper’s, offering Nancy a look of apology. Nancy just smiled and nodded, waiting for them to pass her before she followed behind though not at quite the distance Jasper had hoped for.

Finding the garden doors, already opened wide to allow some crisp, autumnal evening air to filter through the stifling ballroom, Jasper and Marina stepped out. The world smelled of frost and woodsmoke with a hint of that sweet perfume that Marina wore. It was akin to walking by a honeysuckle bush in summer, warm and comforting.

“Goodness, look!” Marina’s expression transformed from uneasy quietude to girlish glee, her fingertip jabbing up at the darkened sky. Moonlight bathed the long, manicured lawns and slumbering flowerbeds.

Jasper frowned. “What am I looking at?”

“Bats, Your Grace!” She grabbed his hand, squeezing it excitedly. “They ought to be sleeping for the winter, the naughty things!”

Jasper frowned, catching sight of small, dark things darting through the air above them. “That... pleases you?”

She ignored him, waxing curious. “I suppose it has been unseasonably warm of late. They must be so confused, poor creatures.” She watched them in awe, her hand still gripping his. “Pipistrelles, I think. They are too small to be anything else in this part of the country. Oh, I do wish it was not so dark, so we could see them properly.”

“So, you really *do* relish nature?” He shuddered slightly as something flew too close to his head. He neither liked nor disliked bats, but he preferred them to stay away from him.

Marina arched an eyebrow. “You thought it was a lie?”

“An extension of the truth,” he replied, “to make yourself more interesting.”

She sniffed. “I would never lie to make myself more interesting, for the lie would surely be discovered, or I would have to take great pains to research that false pursuit of mine, and I do not presently have the time for such a thing.”

He had offended her, that was evident, but at least she was not ignoring him anymore.

“Is it just... bats that entertain you?”

She tilted her head from side to side. “All creatures. Any creature, from ladybirds to badgers to elephants. Though, I tend to prefer the animals that I can find in the British Isles.” She paused. “What was it you wanted to speak to me about?”

“I wanted to ask what your mother said to you,” he replied though it was not quite what he had meant to say. He had meant to ask how she was faring in the aftermath of her mother’s speech, but the right words failed him.

Marina shook her head. “You do not want to know that.”

“Pardon?”

She sighed. “I could tell you, but you would not like it, and I would prefer it if we did not have any unpleasantness between us before our wedding.”

“Now, I *must* know.” He took her hands into his. “You became quiet again after she departed. It... troubles me.”

She frowned. “I thought quiet was your preference?”

“There are different kinds of quiet. Yours was peculiar and seemed to be directed solely at me.” He hesitated. “If you are reconsidering our agreement, you should inform me now, so I can proceed accordingly.” He kept his voice even, as cool as it was calm. He did not want her to know that her silence had bothered him. It had not, of course, it was merely a matter of knowing whether he would be getting married in two-and-a-half weeks or whether he needed to begin his search for a bride again. That was what he told himself, and he refused to convince himself otherwise.

She drew her hand away from his, folding her arms behind her back as she continued to gaze up at the fluttering bats. “Do not

change any arrangements,” she told him, after a short pause. “My mother said you were being visited by a courtesan, that is all. I was contemplating it; that is why I was quiet. Ruminating, not ignoring.”

“Excuse me?” That was not the reply he had anticipated.

*Goodness, Eliza really does know everything. Who is her informant, I wonder?* An idea flared in his mind. Whoever they were, perhaps they could be of use to him.

“It is no concern of mine,” she hastened to say though she could not look him in the eye. “I was just... surprised by it. Indeed, it is something you should have mentioned in your marriage rules, so I could have prepared myself.”

Jasper felt a sudden urge to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all, but the muscles required were sorely disused. And he did not want to scare her with whatever might come out instead. “She is an acquaintance,” he admitted. “I do not engage her services, however. I do not engage in any such services. Indeed, I knew Madame Fox when she was Lady Winthrop, ensnared in a terrible marriage. She is a friend of the family, not my paramour.”

“Oh...” Marina chewed her lower lip, suddenly shy.

“And she has visited me a handful of times in the past few years as an informant, not as a courtesan,” he continued. “I will be honest; I asked her to find information regarding you, so I could be certain you were the... most suitable choice. You would be shocked how many letters I received from the

mothers of young ladies with questionable histories. But you told me everything from your own lips anyway.”

Speaking of her lips drew his attention to them, his fingertips suddenly itching to brush the cherry red of that sweet mouth, to see if any color came away on his skin. Some ladies liked to rouge or stain them, yet hers were always the same color, no matter how she chewed her lip anxiously or how many blackberry tarts she ate.

She narrowed her eyes. “You were spying on me?”

“Only in the same way your mother spied on me, and I was far less intrusive,” he replied. “All I wanted to know was your history, your family, your reputation—all the things that are easily available in terms of discovery. And, as I said, you gave me all of that information yourself which was a welcome surprise. I value honesty.”

She pursed her lips, returning her attention to the bats above. “In future, might we agree to just tell one another anything the other wishes to know?”

“Certainly.”

“Absolutely anything?”

He furrowed his brow. “Within reason.”

“So, there are things I should *not* ask about?” Her voice strained slightly as though there was something she *did* wish

to ask about.

“We will be living mostly separate lives,” he told her, his chest uneasy. “We discussed the nature of this marriage, Lady Marina. You may ask me anything that might directly affect you, and I should be at liberty to do the same. If you were to find a lover, for example—we would have to discuss how to navigate that without alerting the gossip of society. Otherwise, let us be as ordinary acquaintances, knowing only what it is necessary to know. Unless that does not satisfy you? If so, you must say, so I can cease my petition for a special license.”

It was neither a threat nor an ultimatum; he simply did not want her entering into a contract of marriage with him if she could not accept the terms. He would end their betrothal, taking the blame onto himself, and he would wish her well in finding a gentleman who *could* be more lenient with the rules of their union. If that made him cold and unfeeling—well, she would not have been the first person to call him that.

“Do you have family?” she asked, turning to him.

He raised an eyebrow. “No.”

“All are gone?”

He nodded, his stomach tying itself into knots, his heart aching.

“At the same time or different?”



He swallowed thickly. “Different.”

“Do you miss them?” she pressed, squinting as if trying to see a certain freckle upon his face.

“What sort of question is that?” His words came out ragged, his throat tightening around each one in their struggle to be spoken.

She shrugged. “A simple one, I thought.”

“I miss them,” he replied, digging his fingernails into his palms to smooth the jagged edges of his temper. It *was* a simple question and yet the most complicated one of all. “Every day,” he added, coughing to hide the choke in his voice.

Her expression softened, her big eyes widening as though a realization had just dawned. “That is all I wanted to know.” She smiled, taking a step closer to him. “We shall only know what it is necessary to know about one another. I agree. I have not changed my mind, so proceed as planned.”

“You are certain?” he urged. “You must be certain, or this will not suffice.”

Her smile widened. “I am certain.”

He was not completely convinced, for a question still lingered in her eyes, and far more had crept into his head—namely, why she had suddenly wished to ask about his family—but he

had already decided that she would be his wife, and he could not bear the thought of striding back into the meat market as a bachelor once more. She *would* suffice, and if it became too difficult for her, they would live apart, estranged.

“That story your mother told was not how she met your father, was it?” he asked, eager to change the subject.

Marina chuckled, all of her frostiness thawed. “Goodness, no! I have no notion of where she plucked that tale, but I am glad it was not babbled with a drunken mouth while she swayed and made flirtatious remarks toward you.”

“That is a common occurrence—the flirtatious remarks, I mean?”

Marina grimaced. “Ask Nancy. My mother cannot stop touching my cousin’s husband though he is always painfully polite, trying not to hurt her feelings when he tells her to leave him be. I have informed him that, next time, he ought to smack her hand away, but I know he will not.”

“Your cousin and her husband seem to have a very... fond affection for one another,” he said stiffly, the notion foreign to him.

“They do.” Marina grinned. “It is sickening and adorable, all at once.”

Jasper nodded. “And that is definitely something you do not desire?”

“I am beginning to think that *you* are the one having second thoughts,” Marina replied, her grin fading into a more serious look. “Are you? Is that why you keep asking me if I am certain about marrying you? Do you want me to give you a reason to not proceed? If that is the case, I do not have one, so you shall have to conjure one of your own.”

He assessed her as they stood there in the dark, illuminated only by the glow that spilled out from the ballroom, seeking any deceit or uncertainty in her beautiful face. Her breaths were slow and even, her cheeks were not flushed with pink, her gaze was steady and defiant, their compelling fire restored. She resembled the very definition of certain. So, was she right, was he the one having doubts, secretly pleading for a reason to not proceed?

“I have no reason either,” he said, feeling the surety in his bones as the knots in his stomach unraveled and the stickiness in his chest melted.

She slipped her hand beneath his lapel, startling him. “Two-and-a-half weeks, then.”

“Pardon?” He stared down at her hand.

“Until our wedding. Two-and-a-half weeks.”

He continued to gaze at that bold hand, her thumb lightly stroking the triangular cut in the lapel. “Yes.”

“I ask only because I do not know how often we will be able to meet until then, considering my mother has decided to

regress to childhood,” she explained, taking an anxious breath that shivered in the air between them, her mouth so close that he could have dipped his head and kissed her in a moment. “But if you jilt me, Jasper Armitage,” she added softly, bringing her lips nearer until they were a hair’s breadth away from his cheek, “I shall not let it lie, for I will have nothing left to lose.”

## CHAPTER 14



Later that night, alone in his study with a glass of brandy, Jasper was doing his best to shake off the evening's events. He listened to the eerie creaks and groans from the rooms above, pretending the sounds belonged to the family he had lost, pretending they were up there, readying themselves for bed, though he knew it was just the autumn gale that blasted the townhouse, heralding in a storm.

A knock came at the study door.

"Come in," Jasper said, yawning.

The butler, Mr. Willacy, entered. "Madame Fox is here, Your Grace. I did not know if you had a prior engagement."

"She does as she pleases," Jasper replied. "Send her in and retire for the night. I shall be awake until rather late; there is no need for us both to suffer."

Mr. Willacy seemed shocked. "*She* will be staying?"

“Heavens, no.” Jasper nearly laughed, for after three years of solitude, he had not expected everyone to suddenly think of him as a rogue who enjoyed the attention of courtesans. “We will speak, she will leave, and I will remain awake.”

Mr. Willacy relaxed. “Very good, Your Grace.”

The butler disappeared, and Jasper took his first sip of the brandy. He had poured it an hour ago, yet not touched a drop; he had had too many other intoxicants thrumming through his mind, dizzying his thoughts. The breath of Marina’s warning against his cheek, for one, and the maddening impulse that had torn through him to seize hold of her, to kiss those whispering lips. Of course, he had restrained himself, but the memory lingered. It worried him, bringing to mind the same doubts that Marina had alluded to. Perhaps, it was a mistake, but not one that it was too late to remedy.

“Apologies for calling at such an hour, yet again,” Genevieve said, sweeping into the study in a magnificent gown of vivid scarlet. It appeared she only wore shades of red, these days, though that had not always been that way. “I am a very—”

“Busy woman,” Jasper interrupted. “I know.”

She raised a dark eyebrow. “Goodness, I did not realize I was so predictable. You would be the first gentleman to think so.” She smiled, sitting down. “I shall partake in a glass of whatever you are having whenever you feel the inclination to pour.”

He got up and poured a measure for her, passing it to her as he returned to his armchair. But he did not sit. Could not. The

blood in his veins rushed and churned, too agitated to stay seated once more.

“What did you learn of her?” he said abruptly.

Genevieve chuckled. “One day, you will dare to ask how I have been faring.”

“Pardon?”

Genevieve gazed into her drink. “There was a time when you cared about others, cared about my situation. You cared because *she* cared, yet I did not think I would be so abandoned when she left us.” She swallowed a mouthful. “What I am trying to say is, I only answered your summons because of her. I owe *you* very little, considering you all but pretended I did not exist in the months after we lost her. So, I would urge you to show some courtesy.”

“Courtesy toward a courtesan,” he murmured, shaking his head.

“Is that so obscene? Am I not a person now, simply because I have done all within my limited power to take care of my family and myself?” she shot back, revealing an anger he had not expected. He had assumed she had answered his summons because she knew he would pay her well.

Jasper took a breath. “I apologize.”

“Do you?” She glared at him across the dim light of the room.

He nodded. “I do. I am sorry. Of course, you deserve courtesy.” He paused. “And I am sorry I did not allow you an audience with me after...” He did not need to say the rest. “I was in no position to speak to anyone. I would have been no help to you, but still, I apologize. If I had known that... If I had... Had I known that you would become *this*, I would have opened the door. I wish that I had.”

“It is late, but I thank you for your apology,” she said, placated. “I suppose I should also apologize.”

He looked up. “You?”

“I know you blame me—or did, at least—for what happened, in some way,” she answered, smiling sadly as she drank. “But let me assure you, every question you have ever asked yourself about that night is a question *I* have asked myself: if she had not responded to my note, if I had sent for a different friend to help me, if I had waited until morning to send for her, if I had tended to the issue myself would she have lived? I have asked them all and more.”

Jasper pinched the inside of his cheek between his teeth, determined not to weep. “It was not your fault. She would have wanted you to summon her in your time of greatest need. Indeed, she would have been mortally offended if you had summoned someone else.” He allowed himself to smile. “That was who she was. She adored you, and I... *did* abandon you. I am sorry.”

“Mercy, I did not think I would hear such words if I lived to be ninety-nine,” Genevieve said, laughing softly. “Nevertheless, I am grateful for them.”



They sat in a comfortable sort of silence for a while, both of them lost in their own thoughts as they sipped the fine French brandy and allowed themselves to be warmed by the roaring fire.

At length, Genevieve spoke again. "I learned nothing nefarious about Marina Wilkins."

Jasper nodded. "I had a feeling you would not."

"Her mother is... I do not have enough paper in the world to write about that woman, but I could find nothing about Marina. She seems to be a pleasant, respectable, innocuous young lady. Her mother, I would say, is her only weakness, so if you can manage that, I see no reason why you should not be a happily married fellow." Genevieve paused. "In truth, I think you would be saving the poor girl from a life of humiliation and scorn if you married her. You know I am not one to champion the institution of marriage, but it would be a good deed if you still felt inclined to wed."

Genevieve herself had married young, forced into it by parents who desired wealth and fame for themselves, palming her off to a renowned Earl more than twice her age. He was a cruel and violent man with the meanest jealous streak, punishing Genevieve whenever a gentleman happened to look her way. After years of torment and suffering, Genevieve had finally fought back to save her life and the life of her young son. She had killed her husband by accident, defending herself. She had pushed him, and he had fallen down the stairs. That was when she had sent a note to Priscilla, her dearest friend, telling her to come quickly, to help her.

From what Jasper had heard, Priscilla had intended to lend her friend an alibi, but when she died, so did Genevieve's alibi. Genevieve faced the wrath of the courts, and though she was given clemency, no one able to prove that it had *not* been an accident, her reputation had lain in tatters. No one wanted to be associated with her and, to add insult to injury, when her husband's will was read, he had left everything to his first family, cutting Genevieve and her son out of the inheritance entirely.

So, Genevieve had taken her fortunes into her own hands, selling the only thing she had that could be relied upon: her beauty, her remaining youth, and her femininity. In three years, she had transformed into a famed courtesan, lavished by wealthy customers, but Jasper knew it was not what she would have chosen for herself had there been any other choice.

"The wedding is soon," he told her. "I am in the midst of acquiring a special license."

Genevieve smirked. "There is a child coming?"

"No, and there likely never will be," he replied. "It is important that we are married quickly for both our sakes."

Genevieve finished what was in her glass. "Because of the mother?"

"For her, I think so. For me, I see no use in waiting. I have business associates to make, and they will not even consider a meeting if I am not wed," he explained, wondering if it seemed as cold to Marina as it sounded. Then again, she had

not complained or asked for a kinder excuse; she had accepted the terms, just as they were.

Genevieve set her glass down. “Why no children? They are a blessing. I do not know how I would have survived without my sweet Arthur.” She sighed as if struck by sudden fatigue. “He will struggle because of me, of course, but... I would not be without him, and I hope that, one day, he will understand why I did what I had to.”

“If he should need assistance, you may rely upon me,” Jasper insisted. “I will ensure he receives the best education.”

Genevieve laughed. “I thank you, but I have had the same offer from countless gentlemen, so I believe we shall be quite all right.” She paused, casting him a pointed look. “I notice you are evading the question.”

“It is simple,” he told her, watching the flames dance in the grate. “I do not want to be responsible for another life, ever again.”

Genevieve made a thoughtful sound. “What of your wife? Will you not be responsible for her?”

“That is not our arrangement,” he replied, but even as he said it, doubts crept in. For if he intended to abide by the rules that he had laid out, why did he keep wanting to protect her? Why had the sight of that cut on her cheek incensed him? Why had he taken hold of her hand when her mother began her speech as if he could somehow shield her from it?

He drained his glass to the last drop in one mouthful, gulping it down in the hope that it would chase the more potent intoxicant that was Marina from his mind.

*Two and a half weeks*, he told himself. Two and a half weeks to change his mind.

## CHAPTER 15



“Oh, Marina.” Nancy stood in the doorway of Marina’s bedchamber, her face creasing like she was about to burst into tears.

Marina, seated in front of her vanity, had to laugh. “Am I so ghastly? Should I dispense with the entire thing?”

“You look... exquisite!” Nancy replied through barely swallowed sobs. “They ought to write poetry about you at this very moment!”

Marina smiled. “Alas, I do not think my future husband is the poetic sort. If I am fortunate, I might receive a “you look presentable,” but I shall not hold my breath.”

It had been three days since Marina, her mother, and Nancy had arrived at Creassey House to prepare for the wedding, with Joanna arriving from the north the night before. It was the fullest the house had been in an age, alongside Marina’s other cousin, Albert; he was the Earl of Creassey now, much to Eliza’s disdain.

“If he has any sense, he will learn how to write poetry about you.” Nancy rushed across the room and threw her arms around Marina, hugging her tightly. “Are you nervous? Are you excited? Are you having any second thoughts? How has your mother been this morning? She has not sabotaged anything, has she?”

Marina hugged her cousin in return. “All is as it should be.”

“What does that mean?” Nancy pulled back. “Are you *not* excited? Oh, you are dreading it, are you not? It is not too late for me to hide you away in the carriage and take you far from here. We could secrete you away at Stapleton Court; it is so vast that no one would know.”

Marina shook her head. “It means what it means, dear cousin—all is as it should be.” She smiled. “Indeed, Mama has been rather pleasant to me this morning.”

After the events at Lord and Lady Hendricks’ ball, Marina had endured several days of frosty disregard from her mother. Mrs. Hampton had been beside herself, for without Marina to run back and forth tending to Eliza, it had fallen to the housekeeper. But gradually, Eliza had begun to talk to her daughter again, likely out of sheer boredom, and those stiff first conversations had slowly evolved into a more civil existence. There had been no further mention of Jasper being a secret killer, leading Marina to believe it might have been a fabrication after all, and as she now knew the identity of the courtesan, everything had resolved itself.

As for Jasper himself, Marina had not seen him much since that night. They had taken one brief stroll together in Hyde Park and had enjoyed a fleeting cup of tea at Latham’s, but aside from that, she had only had his correspondence: short,

decidedly unpoetic letters to keep her abreast of the special license proceedings. Yet, every time one had appeared on the table beside the door of their Kensington apartments, her heart had fluttered just a little, seeing her name etched in his elegant handwriting.

“Besides,” Marina said, “I do not recall *your* wedding being a particularly jovial occasion, yet the two of you have fared rather well. It is not the wedding that makes a marriage, and I already know that ours—mine and Jasper’s—shall be rather unusual.”

Nancy dragged over a stool and sat down. “My wedding *was* a rather sad thing. I was terrified!” She paused. “Are you scared?”

“Not particularly,” Marina lied. “I pursued this. I have no reason to be afraid.”

Nancy began to laugh, clutching her cousin’s shoulder. “My sister and I both had such dismal weddings. I cannot recall there being a smile between us, and our mother sobbed as if we were being sentenced to hard labor.” Her eyes grew misty. “There is a part of me that wishes I could have my wedding again, but it is something Adam and I like to chuckle about sometimes. So, perhaps not. Perhaps, as you say, all was precisely as it should have been.”

“I am ready for this,” Marina promised.

Nancy glanced back over her shoulder, peering at the doorway before turning back. “But what about tonight?”

“What *about* tonight?”

Nancy wiggled her eyebrows. “You know... the *wedding* night. Are you prepared? Have you been informed? Do you have any burgeoning questions? I am at your disposal, dear cousin. Ask me anything, and I shall tell you.”

Marina would have been lying if she had said that she had not considered what might happen that night. Indeed, ever since the ball at Lord and Lady Hendricks, her dreams had made it impossible not to think of what might happen on her wedding night. She had not forgotten the intensity in Jasper’s eyes, nor the way he had whirled and twirled with her around the dance floor, showing a remarkably athletic constitution. Nor had she forgotten how her heart had raced, how her skin had tingled, or how her stomach had flipped when they had stood so close together in those townhouse gardens, her lips one more word away from kissing his skin.

*What if he does not heed my warning?* she worried, pressing a hand to her chest to feel the quick beat of her heart. *What if he does not appear? What if he has changed his mind?* The notes she had received suggested otherwise, but she would not be certain until she saw him waiting for her at the altar.

“I have no questions,” she said. “You cannot tell me anything that my mother has not already regaled me with, unwillingly I might add, on many an occasion. Nor do I think it shall matter.”

Nancy cocked her head. “Whatever do you mean? Of course, it matters!”



“Not for us,” Marina replied uncertainly. “I do not think that interests him.”

“In what respect?”

Marina toyed with the scalloped cuffs of her sleeves. “We are a means to an end for one another,” she explained, also glancing back at the door to ensure no one was eavesdropping. “I am a wife in name alone, and I rather think that encompasses the wedding night. When we discussed the rules of this arrangement, he mentioned nothing of... wifely duties. I mentioned children, and he turned so pale—I have seen snow less white than his face at that moment.”

“No!” Nancy protested, folding her arms across her chest. “I have said nothing of my concerns for this arrangement, I have supported you and will continue to do so, but... you will miss so much of life’s wonders, Marina! Are you simply not going to kiss anyone for the rest of your life or experience the greatest pleasures a mortal being can receive?”

Marina stifled a laugh. “He *did* suggest that I could take a lover, one day, so perhaps I shall experience those things. If I do not, then I cannot complain. Indeed, I cannot miss something I have never had.”

“A lover?” Nancy looked horrified. “I am beginning to wish I had not helped you in this scheme. How could he suggest such a thing?”

“Because, dear cousin, we are to be husband and wife in name alone,” Marina repeated, hoping it might, at last, sink into her cousin’s mind. “It is rather generous, in truth. I have seen

countless ladies in loveless marriages of convenience, and I doubt *their* husbands would allow them to have lovers.”

Nancy continued to shake her head, muttering the word “lover” as if it were an unpleasant thing upon her tongue.

With a sigh, Marina took hold of her cousin’s hands. “You dreamed of love since you were a little girl—you have told me as much. I dreamed that my mother and father would reside in separate residences for a few months so that I could have some peace.” She smiled. “Your dream is not mine. Not everyone sees love as the greatest prize life has to offer. I know you want that for me, but, even now, I do not want that for myself.”

Indeed, every time her dreams of Jasper had become too wayward, or she had begun to daydream about what her marriage to him might look like, all she had to do was remember her mother and father’s screaming fits to quell any fantasies of love. If they found companionship with one another, that would be a fine thing. If they lived separately, she would find a way to fill her life with joy, all by herself. And if she really, really thought about what it might be like to fall in love with him, the mere prospect terrified her. That told her everything she needed to know.

“Are we making this terrible mistake or not? You are supposed to be departing for the church in five minutes.” Eliza appeared in the doorway, dressed once more in a gown of black bombazine.

Marina gaped at her. “You cannot wear that!”

“Whyever not? I am a widow. It is fitting that I should wear black,” Eliza protested.

Marina shook her head slowly. “The mourning period ended years ago, Mama. I miss him too, but there might be a great many people there—please, put on something a little more cheerful, so no one thinks you are mourning *my* marriage.”

“My mourning period will never end,” Eliza retorted sharply. “I *will* wear this gown, and if you do not like it, then I shall not come.”

Marina’s eyebrow raised by half-an-inch, quite against her will. Her mother scoffed, huffing and puffing in the doorway.

“If you are going to behave like that, I shall put on sack-cloths and streak my face with ash instead!” Eliza snapped. “As your mother, I am expected to be there, even if I do not agree with the match. I assure you, there would be more gossip if I was absent than if I am wearing black to honor my husband.”

Marina gave up. “Very well, do what you will. We likely do not have time for you to change your attire anyway.” She got up, bringing Nancy with her. “To the church!”

*And let us all pray that Jasper is there, or this might prove to be the greatest mistake I have made in my life,* she considered, her legs shaky beneath the cascading skirts of marigold silk.



Waiting outside the closed doors of the church, grateful that it was a familiar place and not an unknown structure of dismal

gray with a stranger presiding over the wedding, Marina's nerves teetered on a knife edge. She knew she had to appear calm and demure, like a swan upon a lake: elegant on the surface, frantic beneath the water.

"This is it," she whispered to Nancy, who was about to go in and take her seat. "The beginning of the rest of my life."

Nancy embraced her cousin. "I hope it is everything you have vowed you do not want." She flashed a wink and hurried inside before Marina could protest.

With no father to walk her down the aisle or hand her to her new husband, Marina had chosen to walk alone. But as she stood there, listening to the blackbirds singing in the nearby bushes and a woodpecker boring a hole into a tree, her legs would not move forward. Fear had seized them.

"I wish you were here," she murmured, gazing up to find a dove perched on the spire of the church. She smiled. "Is that you, Papa?"

The dove cooed, ruffling its feathers. Marina knew it could not really be her father, but the sight of the charming bird raised her spirits, making her feel less alone.

Curving her arm, pretending her father was holding it, she closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. She imagined him smiling down at her, encouraging her, *"You will live a life of great happiness, my sweet girl. I am so very proud of you. I am proud of the woman you have become, and I thank you for taking care of your mother. Have no fear, she will manage perfectly well without you while you live a joyful life,*

*brimming with adventure. It is your time, my darling. Grasp it and do not let go."*

Opening her eyes, Marina tilted up her chin, gripped her bouquet of dried wildflowers more tightly, and put on a smile as she entered the church.

Once over the threshold, she almost faltered. The church was fuller than she had anticipated, every pew lined with strangers who smiled at her and gave nods of approval as the organist played. Who were all those people? She remembered her purpose and smiled back, gliding slowly toward the altar... where Jasper waited, his back to her.

He must have sensed her, for when she was no more than five paces away, he turned to face her. The moment their eyes met, a strange calm settled across her, her breaths coming more easily. It was like the reel they had danced together at Lord and Lady Hendricks' ball—all she had to do was concentrate upon him, and the rest of the world fell away.

*No matter what comes after, he is my salvation,* she reminded herself. He was the living embodiment of her freedom and the repairing of her reputation... and he had not jilted her. He was ready to keep his promise, and so was she. And she would have been lying if she had said it did not please her when she saw his eyes widen slightly, his full lips parting as if he had just sucked in a sharp breath: the good kind.

A moment later, he took a half step forward and held out his hand.

She took it, smiling. “You could have warned me,” she teased in a whisper. “I did not realize our wedding would be so popular.”

“Considering we are in the midst of the London season, it was a surprise to me too,” he replied flatly.

She frowned. “Did you not send the invitations?”

“I did, but one does not expect everyone to attend.” He glanced across the congregation. “I do hope there will be enough food at the wedding breakfast.”

Marina chuckled. “My mother has had enough prepared for an army. I think that means she is warming to the idea of this union, *or* she has put something in the soup as a last attempt to thwart me.”

“Has she caused any trouble?” Jasper asked, the guests rustling and growing impatient.

Marina shook her head, looking over her shoulder to the front pew. Nancy held a handkerchief to her eye, dabbing something away. Joanna was smiling, hands clasped with contentment. And Eliza seemed uncomfortable, shifting in her seat, wringing her hands, her eyes gleaming with tears she would not give her daughter the satisfaction of spilling. Maybe, in her own way, Eliza *was* happy for Marina; she was just too proud and too scared of her own future to show it.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to St. Michael’s and to invite you all to bear witness to the

love and union before God of this handsome couple,” the reverend began, opening his arms wide to greet the congregation. He was a man that Marina had known since she was a child, listening to sermons every Sunday in this very church. His voice immediately soothed her though she hoped it would not send her to sleep as it had done so often when she was young.

As the reverend began one of his favorite sermons, before the vows commenced, Marina took a moment to gaze up into the eyes of the man who would soon be her husband. In his blank expression, she did not see the burning passion or gleaming fondness that most ladies might have hoped for, but she *did* see the sturdiness and safety of him. It was there in the way he held her hands tightly and in the way he towered over her and in the fact that he did not turn his gaze away, not even for a second.

*Ice is cold, but ice is solid and reliable too, she told herself. Unless it cracks, of course, but... I do not think there is any risk of him thawing.*

“You look... very elegant,” he said awkwardly as though he thought that was why she was looking at him, waiting for him to say something.

She smiled. “As do you.”

“I have worn this twice before in your company.”

“That does not mean it does not become you well,” she insisted, suppressing the urge to laugh. Clearly, Jasper did not

know how to accept a compliment any more than he knew how to contend with a jest.

They were so lost in their own private conversation that neither realized the reverend had come to their part in the proceedings. The older man cleared his throat loudly, eliciting a few chuckles from the congregation.

“Apologies, Reverend, what did you say?” Marina asked, her cheeks ablaze with embarrassment.

The reverend smiled. “I asked His Grace if he would repeat after me.”

“Of course,” Jasper said, his own cheeks coloring slightly.

As he recited the vows, Marina listened, realizing how devoid of emotion his voice was. When it came to be her turn, she tried to put some feeling into her words, but even to her own ears, the vows sounded very much like a business transaction. Perhaps, that was fitting, considering the nature of her agreement. And as no one was weeping in misery, no one had interrupted to say it could not proceed, and no one was muttering unkind things from the pews, she could not complain.

*We will be happy in our own way, as companions or strangers—whatever may happen after this. We will not become a burden to one another. We will not be hateful or spiteful. We will not turn this into a mistake.* She made her own silent vows as the reverend came to the end of the proceedings.



“I now pronounce you man and wife,” the reverend said.

Marina did not know why, but she had expected to feel different. She had expected a sign or a sudden divine light or an innate feeling of change, but it did not come. Indeed, she was not even sure it was completed until the congregation began to applaud sedately, and Jasper started leading her up the aisle.

“It is done?” she whispered, blinking.

Jasper nodded, holding open the door to usher her into the gray afternoon light. “It is.”

Just like that, she was a duchess. It should have been a pleasing moment, allowing her to finally embrace her freedom, but as Jasper guided her into the waiting carriage that would take the newlyweds back to Creassey House for the wedding breakfast, she felt suddenly afraid. It was all she had wanted for a long time, but now, it left her unsettled and unanchored, for she would soon leave Creassey House, and it would never be her home again.

Indeed, in all her eagerness to be free, she had forgotten about that part. The leaving part. Maybe, for a moment, she understood how her mother felt, why she had raged so hard against being left by herself.

## CHAPTER 16



It seemed marriage was going to work out rather nicely for Jasper after all. The church had been crammed to the rafters with gentlemen of business and their wives: gentlemen that Jasper had been trying to convince to join with him in several endeavors and speculations to no avail. But as the guests mingled in the drawing room of Creassey House, the tide appeared to be turning.

“After your honeymoon, we must discuss that shipping venture you mentioned,” one gentleman said, clapping Jasper on the shoulder.

“My wife is eager for us all to dine together,” said another, interjecting. “We thought, perhaps, you might like to visit us in Mayfair. December, perhaps? Just before Christmastide. You could join us *for* Christmastide too, if that sounds agreeable?”

A third tried to steer Jasper away from the other two. “No, no, you must dine with my wife and I for Christmastide. Everyone knows our dinner parties are the grandest, and now that we know how many to seat, you shall always have an invitation, Your Grace. I have been meaning to write to you to begin a conversation about the silks and spices you mentioned in your last letter to me.”

Lord Kinsale appeared at Jasper's side, casting a stern eye toward the other three gentlemen. "Leave the poor fellow alone. He is supposed to be enjoying the happiest day of his life, not discussing business with you. At least Mr. Sollom had the right notion by suggesting a conversation *after* His Grace's honeymoon."

The gentlemen mumbled apologies, returning to their wives. Jasper longed to call them back and invite them into some quiet corner of the unfamiliar house to begin business negotiations at once, but he sensed that Lord Kinsale was right; it would not be appropriate.

"You shall be inundated from now on," Lord Kinsale said with a laugh. "It is quite remarkable how marriage can endorse a gentleman though nothing has actually changed in his character. Fortunately for you, your character has always been excellent."

Jasper offered an awkward smile. "You are too kind, Lord Kinsale."

"I have been around long enough to know the difference between truly good men and those who are only pretending," Lord Kinsale replied. "It appears you have yourself a truly good woman now, too. I am pleased for you. Marriage will change your life in ways you cannot even anticipate, but if you have a fine wife at your side, the world is your oyster."

Jasper looked across the drawing room to where Marina was in the midst of a similar flood of interest. Ladies of status and merit crowded around her, and though he could only hear some of what was being said, it appeared that his wife was receiving an abundance of invitations: tea, dinners, excursions

to purchase new gowns and bonnets, walks in the park, and some were even trying to garner invitations to Jasper's estate.

"I have heard the gardens are beautiful," one woman cried, clasping a dramatic hand to her chest.

Another woman nodded effusively. "I remember them well though it has been years since I attended any sort of gathering there. You *must* encourage him to host a ball—after the month of your honeymoon has ended, of course. We would all be delighted to attend, would we not?"

A chorus of agreement went up, bolstering Jasper's spirits. Everything was going better than he could have hoped, and the wedding itself had not been as painful as he had anticipated.

*She looks beautiful. So beautiful,* his mind whispered, his heart straining strangely as if it were sighing. He tapped lightly on his chest, and the sensation ceased, proving to him, beyond any doubt, that it was just some lingering anxiety. Nothing more.

Yet, he could not deny that his wife *did* look beautiful. She wore a gown of golden yellow silk with matching yellow flowers in her hair. Where she had found them in the autumn, he did not know, but they were grander and more befitting than any tiara or diadem. And her cheeks were a rosy pink, her eyes shining with good cheer, her lips... No, he could not think of her lips. Not when he had battled with himself for at least a week, trying to figure out what he was supposed to do about their wedding night.

*Will she have expectations?* He did not believe so, but then again, she *had* mentioned children once. *What is the right thing to do, under the circumstances?* He still had no clear answer. His sensible mind suspected that complete avoidance was the solution while the burn that she stoked in his loins whenever he thought of her lips, her narrow waist, her flushed skin, and the touch of her hand seemed to have another solution entirely. One that could not be trusted.

Just then, the household butler entered, ringing a bell. “Ladies and Gentlemen, the wedding breakfast is served. Please, follow me through to the dining room.”

*I have time*, Jasper told himself. *I have time to think of a way to avoid her.*

After all, they still had a full day of celebrations to endure. By the time everything wound down for the night, perhaps Marina would not even notice that her husband was not at her side in the bedchamber.



“Goodness, I could not eat another bite,” Jasper said, sitting back in his chair.

Marina nodded. “Twelve courses were rather too many. I told you my mother was trying to thwart me, one last time.” She smiled, her eyes glassy from the copious quantity of wine that the footmen kept pouring for everyone. “I think she wants my stomach to be so round that everyone will begin to suspect we married quickly for another reason.”

“*I did* think you were rather thin,” Jasper admitted.

She cast him a look of mock outrage. “I am not thin, I am small. There is a difference. Indeed, if you were to see the true shape of me, you would realize that—” She halted abruptly, blinking as though she could not believe what had just come out of her mouth. She was not alone in that, her words sparking that all-too-dangerous sensation in his loins.

*If I were to see the true shape of you, stripped of all your garments, I would certainly find myself with a fresh hunger,* a secret voice in the back of his mind whispered, his stomach tightening at the very thought of her standing naked before him, offering a taste.

“Is it warm in this room?” Marina asked, a note too loudly. “It is. I think it is too warm. We must open a window or a door.”

From the other side of Jasper, Lord Kinsale’s wife nodded her agreement. “It *is* exceptionally toasty, Your Grace, but then I always find that wine is like a furnace in me. It boils my blood until I am quite red in the face. You look somewhat pink, my dear.”

“Excuse me,” Marina called to one of the footman, “might we have a door or a window opened? We are all boiling alive, and last time I checked, we are not lobsters.”

Lady Kinsale chuckled, patting Jasper lightly on the arm. “Oh, she is charming, Your Grace. Utterly charming. I cannot wait to have you both to dine with us when you return to London or at our country estate. I leave the choice up to you, but you will be welcome whenever you please.”

*She is more charming than she was supposed to be,* Jasper cursed inwardly, wondering if his wayward thoughts were as obvious upon his burning face as it felt.

Across the table, Eliza offered a welcome reprieve as she stood up and clinked her knife against her glass, drawing everyone's attention. "I know you must all be exhausted by my speeches by now," she began, swaying slightly, "but I cannot let this occasion pass without saying something about my darling daughter and her new husband."

Marina stiffened at Jasper's side, whispering, "Oh no..."

Overcome with a need to protect her, his hand slipped under the table, catching hold of hers. Her hand curled up as if in fright, relaxing a moment later. And out of the corner of his eye, he saw her peering up at him, her expression both inebriated and curious.

"I do not think I can be alone in saying that the departure of a beloved daughter is one of the most... harrowing things a mother can endure," Eliza continued, her voice thick with sorrow. "I have fought against it. I have done... awful things to try and keep my daughter with me, but... I know that I have been... selfish for much too long. It is time for her to live her own life and start her own family, and... I just want... to say..." choking sobs fragmented her words, her hand shaking as she clutched her glass, "... that I shall miss you, my darling Marina. I love you, and... I shall miss you terribly."

Around the table, a few other mothers hid their faces behind napkins and fans, trying to suppress sniffles. A few fathers looked misty-eyed too, smiling bittersweetly.

“Is she not the most beautiful bride you have ever seen?” Eliza asked, managing a smile of her own.

“She is!” Lady Kinsale called back, wiping a tear from her cheek.

Eliza took a breath. “I have no doubt that these two will be very happy together. So, please, join me in charging your glasses to the bride and groom—to the Duke and Duchess of Lymington!”

The entire table chorused back, “To the Duke and Duchess of Lymington!”

And as Jasper glanced down at his wife, it finally hit him. He had a wife. He had a duchess. It was not just a simple business contract, no matter which way he looked at it. Somehow, without realizing the full impact of it, he *had* become responsible for another person: the beautiful, bewitching woman sitting beside him. Indeed, he had even promised to protect her; he had made the vow before God in a church though the gravity of the words was only just making itself known.

“To us, I suppose,” she said softly, turning her glass toward him.

He took up his own and clinked it against hers. “Indeed. To us.”

For the first time in his life, he had not read the contract to the letter, and he was beginning to see the huge flaws in what he



had just signed his name upon. He should not have chosen her. She had ambushed him, and he had allowed her to, drawn in by her honesty and her story. Now, he suspected he should have chosen someone plainer, someone more boring, someone without much character at all, for trying to avoid Marina and keep her at a distance was going to be like hiding from the sun in the middle of open moorland.

Impossible.

## CHAPTER 17



*I am a wife. I am someone's wife!* Marina turned the thought over and over in her slightly intoxicated mind as she sat in the drawing room with the remainder of the wedding guests. Most had retired or departed already, but there were twenty or so still in attendance, trying to keep the festivities going.

Her mother *had* been one such person, but she had succumbed to the wine about half an hour ago, falling fast asleep in an armchair at the back of the room. Every so often, Marina looked across at her slumbering face with fondness, beyond grateful that her mother had delivered such a tender speech, laying her fears bare for all to hear. *And I shall miss you too...* Marina knew though that was a woe for tomorrow.

At the side of the room, someone had taken up residence at the pianoforte, accompanying the conversation and games that different corners of the room were enjoying. Marina, meanwhile, sat beside Nancy, the two of them quite content in a companionable silence. As for Jasper, he was by the doors to the terrace, speaking with three gentlemen whose names Marina could not remember.

“A waltz!” a younger lady shouted, all of a sudden. “We must have a waltz between the Duke and Duchess!”

Marina sat bolt upright. “Oh, I do not know if that would be appropriate.”

“Whyever not? We are among friends,” the lady—Lady Fairbright, if Marina was not mistaken—insisted, calling out to the woman at the pianoforte. “Play something they can waltz to.”

Nancy flashed a mischievous grin. “You cannot say you do not know how, for you were taught at this year’s Stapleton Gala.”

“And immediately forgot,” Marina protested, but Lady Fairbright was already hurrying over, pulling her to her feet.

“It will be the perfect way to end the evening,” Lady Fairbright said while Jasper was jostled by his acquaintances and shoved toward the open square of parquet that would, apparently, serve as a dance floor.

The newlyweds faced one another awkwardly as a chant began to grow around them, “Waltz! Waltz! Waltz!” And as most of the older guests were no longer there, there was no one to rescue Marina in the name of propriety.

“Do you know how?” she asked Jasper.

He tilted his head from side to side. “More or less.”

“We do not have to,” Marina urged.

“You do not want to?”

Marina swallowed. “I did not say that, but—”

He stepped forward and took hold of her hand, startling her into silence. Her back straightened as he slipped his other arm around her, his hand curving just beneath her shoulder blade. She stared up at him, his closeness rendering her breathless. So breathless that she forgot what *she* was supposed to do with her free hand.

“Here,” he told her, lightly caressing her waist as he drew his hand back to the front and took hold of hers, settling her hand upon his shoulder.

*Oh goodness...* Her heart leaped into her throat, beating so fast she feared he must be able to hear it as her body tingled where he had brushed her waist. That tingle bloomed, the roots and stems of it sparking down into her stomach and across her chest, weaving into her limbs until they trembled.

“I apologize in advance, for I am awful at this,” she said, her voice catching as he once again caressed her waist on his way to the spot beneath her shoulder blade. It confirmed what she had been wondering: whether that first touch had been an accident or not.

*Does that mean... No, what does that mean?* Her mind swirled, her throat tight.

She looked up into his eyes, her heart racing faster. He had that expression again, that searing intensity in his gaze, yet it was hungrier than it had been the last time they danced. It was positively ravenous, and the sight of it thrilled her as much as it scared her, for she truly had no notion of what it meant for the night to come.

“Follow my lead,” he said thickly.

With all eyes upon them and the pianoforte chiming out a slower song, Jasper began the waltz, leaving out the initial promenade. He turned her in a circle, rising and falling upon the balls of his feet in a most elegant fashion. She did as he had asked, following his lead, her breath abandoning her as she tried not to press too close to him. Yet, his hand upon her back seemed to be urging her nearer, like he wanted her flush against him.

All at once, she could breathe again as he lifted both their hands in an arch and turned, performing a brief promenade side-by-side instead of face-to-face. Even then, she felt his side pressing against hers, her hip against his muscular thigh. Heat rose up from her bosom, tickling up her neck and into her face until her head throbbed with the fire of what was happening, her mind spinning.

He whirled her back to face him, his eyes dark with a passion that enthralled her. A moment later, he spun her around by the tips of her fingers, dizzying her into a frenzy, and deftly caught her around the waist while her hand barely managed to grasp the side of his chest. They turned and turned like that, their other arms raised above their heads in an arc, his eyes never leaving hers, flaring brighter with that disarming hunger with every passing second.

No one else was in the room as far as she was concerned. They had all melted away with all the spinning, transforming into a blur of little consequence. She saw only him, his gaze anchoring her while they turned through the rhythm of the music.

In a step that almost toppled her, for her legs were shaking, he cast her away from him in a twirl, catching hold of her hand before she could get too far from his side. It was a story played out upon the parquet: a star-crossed romance, the lovers torn away from one another only to return back into the arms of their beloved in desperation. A story that Marina had never expected to be part of; a story that she could not end, for every time the music quietened, it felt like someone closing the book on the tale they were telling together, and when it roused itself again, it was like the mysterious reader had decided to indulge in one more chapter. And she eagerly wanted to know the conclusion.

They whirled on and on, faster and faster, repeating the same thrilling steps without them ever feeling the same. It was fresh and new each time, Jasper's hand tighter around her waist, his eyes darker, their breaths more ragged, her fingers interlacing with his, their movements more harmonized with every repetition, like they were getting to know one another intimately, without words. The more they learned, the better the waltz became.

Far too soon, the music finally *did* fade to a conclusion, the book closed though Marina was no closer to finding out how the story ended. Jasper brought his feet together and bowed his head, breathing hard, his hand still resting beneath her shoulder blade, his fingers still interlaced with hers. She did her best to curtsy, but her legs trembled all the way from her ankles to her thighs... and further still to places she rarely considered, unless she was dreaming of him.

Indeed, it took Marina a moment to realize that the entire drawing room was silent. Deathly silent.

Then, to her relief, her remaining wedding guests exploded into rapturous applause, led by the hands of Nancy.

“Blow me down with a feather, that was the most astonishing thing I have ever seen!” one of the gentlemen bellowed, putting his fingers to his lips and blasting a jarring whistle.

“My darling,” another gentleman cried, “we must waltz immediately. We must waltz every day, for that will surely make you detest me less!”

Lady Fairbright grinned. “I told you a waltz was a fine idea.” She clasped her hands together and pretended to swoon. “I doubt I have ever seen such a pair as you. I confess, I did not believe that story your mother told at Lord and Lady Hendricks’ ball, but I see I was wrong. It is clear to me now that you *do* possess a rare and wondrous love, and I have to say, I am obscenely jealous!”

Lord Fairbright swept in, pulling his wife into a jaunty version of what had just taken place. “Do we not have a rare love, my darling? Come, let me waltz you.”

“Oh, you silly goose!” Lady Fairbright laughed delightedly, throwing her head back as her husband attempted to spin her as Jasper had done.

Marina watched her guests laugh and jest, feeling as if she had just been thrown out of an otherworldly realm and back into reality. She still had not caught her breath as though Jasper's hand upon her back, right where her spine curved, was preventing her from inhaling enough air to keep her mind clear.

"Our first dance as husband and wife," Jasper said, his expression reflecting her disorientation. He blinked slowly, like he was attempting to ground himself. "I... had not thought it would be so... um... interesting."

*Husband and wife...* She closed her eyes, letting the sentiment wash over her. How could three tiny words feel so wonderful and so unnerving, all at once? Why did it feel... special when there must have been countless people, all over the world, who used those words with one another? Why did it feel special when it was not supposed to be? They were meant to be business partners, nothing more.

A moment later, she felt him withdraw his hand. Her eyes opened to find him bowing his head to her as if they were strangers who had just danced for the first time. "I think I will retire to my chambers now," he said, pretending to stifle a yawn in a way that would not have convinced anyone. "The day has finally caught up with me."

"Am I... to join you?" She felt foolish for being the one to ask.

Jasper pretended to yawn again. "I think not. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. You ought to sleep where you are familiar."



“Tomorrow?”

“Indeed, tomorrow we will journey to Lymington Manor,” he told her. “I have heard that is what a honeymoon is for: to allow a bride to settle into her new residence. I thought it best that we did so sooner rather than later though I may have to journey back and forth from London in the coming weeks.”

Marina forced a smile onto her face. “Of course. I cannot promise I will be good company on the journey there, for I fear I have imbibed rather too much wine today, but I shall meet you in the morning.” Her throat felt like she was swallowing pebbles. “Perhaps, it was the wine that coerced us into waltzing.”

“Yes, perhaps,” he said, bowing his head once more. “Well... goodnight.”

She nodded. “Goodnight.”

With that, he turned and left the drawing room to the raucous boos of the guests. But they would soon forget his absence, for someone had found a bottle of port, and most of the couples were lost in their own spouses. Marina, however, was alone again, just as she had been after every party and ball and gathering she had attended with her mother. She had a husband now, yet her first night married was ending the same way it had when she was unwed. A spike of odd sadness pierced her chest, tears threatening to well in her eyes.

*Will nothing change, after all?* she worried, searching the room.

There, she met Nancy's gaze. Yet, upon Nancy's face, Marina saw a look that worried her far more than any wine-induced melancholy. Nancy looked... smug, her eyes glittering with an expression that said, "*I told you so.*" As if she knew something Marina did not or did not dare to consider.

## CHAPTER 18



For the first time in Jasper's life, he had dreamed of waltzing. He had dreamed of Marina's body pressed up against his, their hands entwined, their breaths hot and frantic as they whirled around a bedchamber instead of a ballroom. And as they had turned their circles, her gown had fallen away piece by gossamer piece until she danced naked in his embrace, revealing everything he had not allowed himself to think about in waking hours.

His own garments had vanished in the blink of a dreaming eye, and though he knew it was just a dream, there was no convincing a vivid dreamer that what lay before them was not the truth. The warmth of her bare skin on his had been too real, the whisper of her breath tricking his mind, the caress of her fingertips across his body igniting a fire that bridged the divide between awake and asleep. And when they had taken their waltz to their marital bed, their bodies moving as once, entwined as their hands had been, the sensations that pulsed through him, powerful in their pleasure, made it all the crueler when he had been jolted awake, moments before sinking into the heat of her.

After that, he had not slept at all, for fear of another dream claiming his sanity and sending him to Marina's bedchamber. Ever since the night of Lord and Lady Hendricks' ball, he had vowed to himself that he would not cross that threshold. He

had sworn to himself that he would not touch her beyond the realm of friendliness, but that blasted waltz had nudged him over a line, and he did not know if he could step back across it. Not if his dreams were going to plague him like that.

“Are you well, Jasper?” her sweet voice called to him across the breakfast room, as he walked in the next morning. It was early, not yet six o’clock, the sky outside still blanketed in autumn darkness, so he had hoped he might be the only one dining.

He balked, forgetting for a moment that he was awake and had been for hours. “Hmm?”

“You look pale,” Marina said, sipping from a cup.

He stared at her, his gaze following an exquisite map from the pink islands dotted upon her cheeks, down to the curve of her neck, and further to the pert slopes of her breasts, and the steep valley between—everywhere he had visited in his dream. He shook his head, wishing she was not there, so he could slap himself into sensibility.

“Are you sick?” She looked genuinely concerned, setting her cup down. Indeed, she was almost halfway out of her chair before Jasper responded.

He cleared his throat and hastily sat down. “I did not sleep well.”

“The bed was not comfortable?”

“It was... um... unfamiliar,” he said as a footman came forward to offer tea or coffee. Jasper chose the latter, hoping that the habitual aroma and taste would blow away the fog in his head.

Marina settled back down into her own chair. “I encountered some of our guests on my way to breakfast, so I do not imagine we shall be able to bid them farewell before we depart. My cousin, Albert, will see to it that they are well taken care of, though, in case you were concerned about seeming discourteous.”

“I am rarely concerned with what anyone else thinks of me,” he said, a note too harshly.

She pulled a face. “I suppose that must be a blessing.”

“Apologies,” he said gruffly. “I am in an awful temper this morning.”

“I can see that.” She smiled though he likely did not deserve it.

When the coffee came, he took a grateful sip, expelling a sigh that was all too loud. “Did you... uh... rest well?” he asked.

“I always sleep well in my own bed,” she replied. “It was kind of you to let me retire to my own chambers last night.”

He took another deep sip, feeling the heavy parts of him begin to lighten. “It was not kind, merely appropriate. It is how you we will be residing with one another when we reach

Lymington Manor, so there seemed little use in altering things for the sake of appearances. No one noticed us anyway, I daresay, for they were too busy trying to get their own spouses to fall back in love with them.”

“I think they noticed our waltz,” Marina insisted, a strange note in her voice. Like pain or discomfort though he could not decide which.

Jasper shrugged. “They will have forgotten it when they awaken.” He hesitated. “Are *you* well this morning?”

“Quite well, thank you,” she replied, too quickly and too brightly. It did not match the slight pinching at the corners of her eyes. “I barely feel the effects of the wine. Indeed, I doubt I would have danced with you at all if I had not imbibed so much. I am not in the habit of it, you see.”

*Have I... upset her?* It had been too long since he was in the company of women, and he had entirely forgotten their secret language. Nevertheless, he could hear that her “quite well, thank you” was near identical to, “I am livid, and you should know why.”

“It is good that you are not in the habit of imbibing too much,” he said cautiously.

She nodded. “Oh yes, I would not want to become too much like my mother.”

“She made a... pleasant speech yesterday, did she not?” He swallowed down another mouthful, ignoring the scorch of it

down his throat. “I confess, I have never considered how difficult it must be for a mother to let go of their daughter, much less their only daughter. Only child, I suppose.”

Marina smiled sadly. “It was the nicest thing she has said in a long time, and... I think it allowed me to understand why she has been so against this union of ours. It is not because she will not have anyone to rein her in or tend to her or complain to or wait on her hand and foot; she is just terrified of being alone. Truly alone. I doubt she would have batted an eyelid about this marriage if my father were still alive.”

“You did not realize that before?” He had thought it somewhat obvious.

“No, I did, but I thought it came from a more selfish place,” Marina explained. “Last night, during her speech, I understood that it was not selfish, it was self-preserving. She has never been alone. She went from her father’s house to her husband’s then she had me then she lost her husband. I have been so angry with her, but... as it turns out, loneliness is a daunting thing.”

Jasper furrowed his brow. “Are you trying to tell me that you no longer agree to the terms of our marriage? I did say that the rules could not be changed after the wedding.” He hesitated, wondering if he sounded too unfeeling. Perhaps, considering his dreams, that was for the best. “I did tell you that you might expect some degree of solitude.”

“I am not trying to change anything,” she replied tersely. “It seems that I am in a peculiar temper this morning, too.”

Jasper nodded slowly. “Then, perhaps, we ought to take our breakfast in silence.”

“If that is your preference, I shall not complain.” She reached for a folded newspaper, perched upon the edge of the table, and spread it out in front of her, shielding her entirely from his view.

If he could have been certain it would not disturb his stomach, he might have laughed at the gesture. Instead, he returned his attention to the soothing taste of the coffee and the smell of toast and buttery eggs and left her to her reading.

*This is not the morning I imagined*, he mused, grimacing as visions of his dreams flooded back into his mind. According to those, it was not the morning he had imagined at all. Certainly, not the morning he had dreamed of.



## CHAPTER 19



A few hours later, with frost still glittering on the grass and an overcast sky presiding over the moment, Marina descended the stairs of Creassey House with a carpet bag over her shoulder filled with her most precious belongings. The rest of her luggage had already been packed onto the waiting carriage by harried footmen, ready to take her to her husband's country estate, far away from the place she had known all her life.

"Mrs. Hampton," Marina called out, spotting the housekeeper coming out of a servants' passageway, holding a silver tea tray.

The housekeeper froze. "Yes, M'Lady—I mean, Your Grace?"

"Is my mother awake yet? I believe I am about to depart." Marina tried to keep the nerves out of her voice, but they rattled through anyway.

Mrs. Hampton pursed her lips. "She... is stirring. Shall I fetch her?"

“If you would,” Marina urged. “I cannot leave without saying farewell.”

A soft expression fell across the housekeeper’s face. “I shall tell her so. I won’t be a moment, Your Grace.”

The housekeeper hurried up the stairs while another figure descended, stifling a yawn. Even with dark circles beneath her eyes and a tired pallor to her skin, Nancy looked radiant.

“I thought I heard a commotion,” Nancy said, smiling. “Does this mean you are leaving? I do hope you were not going to depart without saying farewell to me though I suspect you are still cross with me.”

Marina shook her head, embracing Nancy as she walked into her arms. “I could never stay angry with you, and I was not angry.”

After Jasper had retired to his chambers alone the previous night, Nancy had not merely flashed her cousin a pleased look, she had pulled Marina to one side, whispering, “*I believe you are already falling hopelessly in love with him. I prayed that this might happen.*”

Marina, foolishly wounded by her husband’s dismissal, had not exactly replied with kindness. “You should not pray for me, nor should you push your silly fantasies upon me. I do not know how many more times I must tell you that all I want is peace, and if I must repeat myself again, I shall not be pleased.”

To her regret, Marina had stormed out shortly afterward, seeking the comfort of her own bedchamber. There, she had gone to the casement window, opened it wide, and cried as the cold wind nipped her cheeks. She wept because she *had* wanted Jasper to ask her to join him in his bedchamber, and she did not know what to do with that information. Everything was unraveling, just as her mother had warned, but not in the way her mother had suspected. It frightened her.

“No, you were angry,” Nancy insisted, “and I understand why. It was not my place to say what I said, nor is it my place to push my dreams upon you. I got what I desired, in the end, and I think you have too. It just... does not make sense to me, but that is my issue, not yours. I am sorry, cousin. Please, forgive me.”

Marina hugged her cousin. “There is nothing to forgive. It was the wine, making us do foolish things.”

*Like wanting to be asked to my husband’s bedchamber,* she neglected to add out loud, for in the sobering, cold light of day, she was somewhat grateful that the newlyweds had not done something they could not take back.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Jasper appeared in the doorway of the main entrance, looking less exhausted than he had at breakfast. Indeed, he looked infuriatingly dashing, his hair windswept, his cheeks pink from the cold, his hands braced on either side of the doorjamb, making him an imposing presence.

“We must depart, Marina,” he said.

*Marina*... Had her name always sounded that intimate, or was it just the way he said it, soft and inviting?

She nodded. "In a moment."

"I will await you in the carriage," he told her, ducking back out.

Nancy sighed, a smile lifting the corners of her lips. "Even if there is no love between you, I will still pray for companionship. It would be a shame not to at least be friends with a gentleman *that* absurdly handsome."

"That would be a better prayer," Marina confirmed, glancing anxiously up the stairs. Her mother had not appeared, nor had Mrs. Hampton returned. Yet, she could hear the distant hiss of quarreling voices, belonging to both women, growing steadily louder.

"I rarely say my piece," Mrs. Hampton's voice drifted down to the entrance hall, "but if you do this, My Lady, you are a fool. Now, if you will excuse me, I shall not miss saying farewell to her."

A moment or two later, Mrs. Hampton appeared at the top of the stairs, hurrying down without the tray in her hand. There were red blotches in her cheeks, a lingering hint of her anger, but she had transformed the rest of her face into a cheerful mask, smiling broadly as she approached Marina.

"Are you departing now?" Mrs. Hampton asked.

Marina nodded.

“Then, I wish you a safe journey,” Mrs. Hampton said, her voice catching. “Enjoy your honeymoon, my dear girl. I shall miss you, and I know that this house shall miss you. I always hoped this day would come, but... no, I shall not allow myself to become emotional. Be happy, dear child. Be so happy that you do not regret a single thing.”

Marina smiled. “I shall try.”

“Might I embrace you?” Mrs. Hampton seemed nervous, fidgeting.

Marina held out her arms. “Please do.”

The housekeeper swept forward, holding Marina tightly as if she was her daughter and not Eliza’s. “Don’t you worry about your mother,” the older woman whispered. “She will be perfectly well without you, and she will be the one who regrets not saying farewell. Don’t you fret over her anymore, dear girl. You go and live your life and be happy, yes?”

“Yes,” Marina replied, stung by the realization that her mother, despite her speech the previous day, was not coming down to say goodbye. “Tell her I will write. I will write to you too.”

Mrs. Hampton released her. “Go on with you, or you’ll be arriving at your new home after dark.” She brushed something from her cheek. “I am so very proud of you and the fine lady you have become. Now, everyone shall see how wonderful you are.”

Marina struggled to blink back tears, remembering the words she had pretended her father was saying to her. But hearing someone say such nice things out loud was almost more than she could bear, for she had waited years to be told she was worthy.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hampton,” she said thickly, pausing to embrace Nancy one last time. She had already said her farewells to the guests who had woken up and to her cousin, Albert, who had been on his way out to hunt for pheasants, forgetting entirely that Marina was leaving that day. He had always been somewhat scatterbrained, but he was a good man and a much better earl than her father had been, for he was far less distracted by arguments and fits of passion.

Indeed, she realized, standing there in the entrance hall, that there was nothing more to say, no one left to say goodbye to who wanted to say goodbye to her. So, with a shaky smile, she turned and headed out into the cold morning to her future, to whatever lay ahead.

“Are you ready?” Jasper asked, waiting for her by the carriage door though he could easily have waited inside the carriage where it was surely warmer.

Marina nodded, feeling a tear escape onto her cheek. “I am.”

“You are not a prisoner with me, Marina,” he said softly, lifting his hand to brush away that tear. His hand remained upon her cheek for a moment, cradling it. “Whenever you feel the desire to see your friends and family again, you are at liberty to do so. We are married, but you are not bound to me or my home. Whatever will make you happy, you must do.”

She gazed up into his eyes, her attention flitting to his lips for a second or two. His hand was warm and slightly rough upon her cheek, and she rather liked the way it felt. If she were to lift up on tiptoe, she could kiss him to see if that might make her happy. *But this I cannot do*, she told herself, wondering how long the effects of the wine would take to abandon her. After all, she could not possibly want to kiss him simply to kiss him, could she? That was not the agreement. That was breaking the rules.

“Come,” he said, his hand falling from her cheek to her shoulder, skimming all the way down her arm to her hand which he seized as he had done when they waltzed, his fingers intertwining with hers. “Let us go home.”

Too stunned by his caress, her heart pounding so hard that it pulsed in her throat preventing any words of protest from slipping out, she allowed him to guide her into the carriage. And though she had expected him to sit opposite her, he did not, placing himself right beside her.

He thumped on the side of the carriage, and just like that, they were pulling away from Creassey House. And she did not know when she might return; that would be entirely up to her mother.

## CHAPTER 20



The carriage had barely been upon the road west for more than half an hour when the driver pulled the horses to an unexpected halt. Marina frowned at Jasper, awaiting an explanation, but he seemed just as bemused as her.

“Stay here,” he said, his throat bobbing. “I imagine there is some fool upon the roads. It is not the first time I have encountered such a thing.”

A chill inched up Marina’s spine, imagining a hooded man in a mask holding two pistols and demanding their money or their life. She had heard of highwaymen, for there were always silly girls at every society gathering, who found the notion terribly thrilling and romantic, telling stories of “friends” who had been enchanted by those wretched robbers. Of course, the stories were made up, and Marina had no doubt that if any of those girls were to actually meet a highwayman, they would be so terrified they would faint. *She* certainly had no desire to meet one.

“Are you armed?” Marina asked as Jasper was about to leave the safety of the carriage.



His lips curved into something that might have been a smile. “Do not fear for me. I shall remedy this quickly if there is anything to be remedied.”

He stepped out and closed the door behind him, vanishing from sight as he made his way to the front of the carriage to where the driver and horses were. Not content to merely sit and wait, her nerves jangling for her husband’s safety, she yanked down the window and stuck her head out, turning her head this way and that to try and see the problem with her own eyes.

That was when she saw it—a horse and trap, moving at an alarming pace, coming right toward them. Either the horse had spooked and bolted, with the trap still attached, or the swift approach was purposeful. She did not know which unnerved her more.

To make matters worse for her frayed nerves, she watched in horror as Jasper strode out into the road and put up his hands, blasting a loud whistle from his lips. If the horse and trap did not slow, they would run him down.

The horse and trap could not have been more than thirty yards away when the driver finally seemed to get the beast under control, bringing the trap to a slow trundle. Yet, they did not stop entirely as Marina might have expected. The driver kept right on coming, halting only when they were right in front of Jasper.

Jasper grasped the lead rope of the horse, running a gentle hand down the creature’s nose as he spoke with the driver. It appeared to be an animated discussion, the driver flailing their hands and jabbing toward the carriage.

A minute later, Jasper turned and walked back to Marina, who did not bother to pretend she had not been watching, her head out of the window.

“Someone wishes to speak with you,” he said with a more obvious smile. Perhaps, the first she had seen from him. It made him look younger than his thirty years, brightening his eyes, giving him a liveliness that had not been there before.

She frowned. “With me?”

“They will not move from the road until you do, and while I do not appreciate threats, I think I can accept this one,” he told her, opening the door and helping her out.

With his hand in hers, they walked back to the horse and trap. The driver seemed peculiar, head bowed, shrouded in a thick blanket in place of a cloak, the top of it acting like a hood, concealing the individual’s face.

“Am I supposed to know this person?” Marina whispered to Jasper.

He smiled wider, the effect rather charming. He could have been a different gentleman entirely.

“How dare you leave without saying farewell!” The driver threw back their makeshift hood, revealing their face. “I was just preparing myself, that is all! I did not think you would actually depart without so much as a “see you soon, Mama.”

Now, I shall smell of horse all day, and it is entirely your fault.”

Marina blinked. “Mama?”

“Who else?” Eliza rolled her eyes and scrambled down from the driver’s bench, dusting off her hands. “And you,” she said, pointing at Jasper, “ought to speak with your own driver, for he has taken you the long way around. If anyone had bothered to pause to say farewell to me, I would have told you to take the lakeside road, for everyone here knows it is quicker.”

Marina’s astonishment transformed into annoyance. “Mrs. Hampton informed you that we were leaving. You did not want to say goodbye, so do not blame us.”

*Us...* Two letters, two people, side-by-side. It was such an innocuous little word, yet it did something strange to Marina’s heart, fluttering it.

“I will not argue with you,” she added, squeezing Jasper’s hand for encouragement.

Eliza’s entire demeanor slackened, her shoulders sagging. “You are right. I did not want to say goodbye because I thought it would be too painful. Yet, knowing you had gone, knowing you did not hear me say farewell—that was more painful.” She gulped. “I do not blame you at all. I am just a spiteful, silly old woman who does not know how to tell her daughter that she loves her, and that... she will miss her.”

“That is all you have to say,” Marina replied, letting go of Jasper’s hand. “It really is that simple.”

Eliza smiled, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Then, I love you, my darling girl, and I shall miss you terribly.” She tentatively opened her arms wide. “And I would not have forgiven myself if I had not bid you good luck and farewell.”

“I love you,” Marina murmured back, pulling her mother into a fierce hug. “You *are* silly, but you are not old, and you are not spiteful. And I shall miss you, too. That being said, you must promise me something.”

“What, my dear girl?”

Marina smiled into her mother’s shoulder. “You must promise to behave.”

“I will,” Eliza said. “When you next see me, you will hardly recognize me. Nor shall you read of my name in the scandal sheets again. I swear it to you. I am no longer going to cause you embarrassment. It is a promise I have made to myself as well as you.”

Marina held her tighter. “Thank you, Mama.”

“You will take care of her, will you not?” Eliza addressed Jasper, who stood awkwardly at a distance, watching everything unfold.

He bowed his head. "I will keep her safe. She will want for nothing."

There was something peculiar in his voice, a tightness that Marina could not explain, and it stretched from his throat to his face as though he were in pain. Was it because he knew he was not telling the truth? After all, if she began to want him, as she feared she might, that was something he could not give. Or was it something else?

"If you hurt her, you shall face my wrath," Eliza warned. "I do not make empty threats, Your Grace, and my daughter is my one remaining treasure. Hurt her, upset her, treat her unkindly, and you shall regret it."

Jasper did not lift his gaze. "I would never do any of those things, Lady Creassey. I have promised to take care of her, and that I will do." He finally raised his head, his eyes shining. "She is my responsibility now, and I do not take my responsibilities lightly."

"Well... I am pleased to hear it," Eliza said uncertainly as if she also found his demeanor peculiar. Indeed, for a moment, she seemed worried. "Farewell, my darling girl. I shall not delay you any longer, and I really must return the horse and trap before Chigwell discovers it is missing."

Marina laughed. "I cannot believe you drove that thing all the way here."

"I used to steal the horse and trap all the time when I was a younger woman, living at my father's residence," Eliza insisted, grinning. "I suppose I have always been badly

behaved in one way or another, but what is life without a little mischief?"

Marina cast a sideways glance at Jasper. *I suppose I shall find out.*

"Be well. Be good." Eliza pressed a kiss to her daughter's cheek. "I look forward to the day I shall become a terrible influence upon my grandchildren, but for now, I wish for you to enjoy this honeymoon with everything you possess. It might be the happiest and most carefree you shall ever be."

Marina's cheeks warmed at the mention of children as she hugged her mother one final time. "Farewell, Mama."

"And farewell to you too." Eliza marched over to Jasper and seized him in a ferocious hug that, surprisingly, held no hint of flirtation or sly caresses of places she should not caress. "I have a good feeling about you, despite earlier protestations. Do not disappoint me."

Jasper did not reply, his body as rigid as a statue as Eliza released him, cackling to herself as she made her way back to the horse and trap and climbed up onto the driver's bench. Evidently, he was not a man who was used to being embraced, his posture remaining straight and stiff as if an unseen potter had molded him that way, while Eliza urged the horse and trap on, squeezing past the carriage.

Once past the carriage and on the open road once more, Eliza turned around and waved. Marina waved back, clasping one hand to her heart. Neither woman ceased their waving until

Eliza was out of sight. Even then, Marina imagined her continuing to wave goodbye, just in case.

“We shall have to remedy that,” Marina said, gently touching Jasper’s arm. He still had not moved.

He shook his head, coming back to life. “Remedy what?”

“You need to be embraced more,” she replied, smiling. “I do not think that shall break any rules.”

Before she could stop herself, she slowly put her arms around her husband, pressing her body flush against his, settling her cheek against his chest. His heart beat wildly, widening her smile. According to that steady, frantic thud, she was not breaking any rules at all.

Yet, it was her heart that began to race as, to her surprise, he slipped his arms around her in return. One hand cradled the back of her neck, his fingers sliding into her hair, while his other arm encircled her waist entirely, his hand coming to rest on the side of her stomach.

“See?” she whispered, a gasp threatening to escape her throat. “Is that so bad?”

He dipped his head, bringing his mouth close to her ear. “Not too bad, no.”

She closed her eyes, an ember moving down her throat and into her chest, crumbling into a cascade of smaller sparks that

pulsed into her belly while a rippling sensation flickered up her thighs, colliding with the burning need in her stomach. Only, it was lower than her stomach, now that she thought about it, stoking a powerful desire somewhere she did not dare to think about. All from one embrace and one tingling whisper, next to her ear. Indeed, if he *were* to kiss her, she was quite certain she would combust.

“Shall we?” he murmured, his lips teasing her, never quite brushing her skin as she longed for them to.

She swallowed. “Shall we what?”

“Shall we venture homeward?” he said, pulling back.

With distance came clarity, the embers doused as he removed his arm from her waist and let his other hand fall away. Yet, the hot steam of her desire lingered for a while, leaving her feeling feverish as she nodded and allowed him to guide her back to the carriage.

This time, he sat opposite her on the squabs, making his position very clear: they had veered too close to something dangerous, and he would not allow it to happen again.

“She will want for nothing...” His words echoed in her head, her own thoughts completing the sentence, *except the one thing I fear I might want more than anything.*



## CHAPTER 21



Evening had fallen by the time the carriage passed through the gates of Lymington Manor and rattled down the gravel driveway to the pillared porch. Marina had fallen asleep hours ago, but fatigued though he was, Jasper had not been able to settle into slumber. Every time he closed his eyes, he thought of her in his arms, her body flush against him, her gaze lifted to his, imploring him to kiss her, to hold her, to make love to her. It was safer to stare blankly out of the window, watching the evening world clatter past.

“Marina?” he said, leaning over to prod her gently in the arm. “Marina?”

She cracked one eye open, peering at him as if she did not know him. “Hmm?”

“We have arrived.”

Her other eye opened, and she pushed herself into a sitting position. There, she stretched out like a cat, her arms above her head, her slender neck tilted, the most infuriating moan bubbling up from her throat as unfurled. And as she stretched her legs too, he had to look away, wishing he had something to

stuff into his ears, so he would not have to hear those tortuous sounds coming from her lips.

“Are you pleased to be home?” she asked, once all of her knots had been unraveled, unraveling *him* at the same time.

He concentrated on the gold hem of the carriage curtains. “I am pleased the journey is over.”

“You do not sound pleased.” She chuckled, rubbing her sleepy eyes.

“I am tired.”

She paused. “You did not sleep?”

“No, I did not.”

A look of sudden panic crossed her face. “You did not watch *me* sleep, did you? Goodness, I hope I do not snore. I do not think I do, but I have never had anyone to ask.”

“You do not snore,” he told her, neglecting to mention that she *did* mumble and sigh in her sleep, for he would prefer to forget that she made any noise at all.

She seemed relieved. “I am glad to hear it. Do you snore?”

“Certainly not.” He reached for the door and practically fell out, gathering himself before turning to offer his hand to her.

She took it gratefully, emerging with a wide-eyed anxiety, like a sweet creature edging out of a burrow, unsure of whether or not a predator might be lurking nearby. She stared up at the façade of Lymington Manor—a respectable house of yellow sandstone with three floors, crosshatched casement windows, and a porticoed roof, the edges adorned with sculptured vases and cherubs. It had once been beautiful to Jasper, but now, it merely reminded him of his loss.

*Perhaps we should have stayed in London,* he mused, too late. Even if they were to return to the Mayfair townhouse, they could not journey through the night; they would have to spend at least one night at the manor. Moreover, he suspected it would be much harder to keep his distance from his wife in the townhouse. At least here, there were places he could hide away, seeking sanctuary from the feelings that plagued him.

“I expect you are also tired,” he said, leading her up the marble steps to the front door. “I shall have the housekeeper show you to your chambers so that you may continue your slumber. Your luggage can be unpacked in the morning.”

Marina arched an eyebrow. “Do you not eat in this house? I have not had anything but cold cuts and a boiled egg since breakfast.”

“You wish to have dinner?” He floundered, for if they dined together, he might have to face her tormenting question once again—*Am I to join you?* And with his mind exhausted and his will weakening, he worried that he might just respond in agreement.

“If possible,” Marina replied, a note of amusement in her voice.

He nodded, thinking. “I shall instruct the housekeeper to have a tray sent to you. Meanwhile, I shall retire once I have introduced you to the staff. I have the beginnings of a terrible headache.”

“As you wish,” Marina said, her smile tight.

“Oh, and in the morning, I shall have the groundskeeper show you the gardens. He knows more about the flowers and the creatures than I do, so you will, I am sure, find his presence more useful,” he urged, pushing open the door.

The staff were all hurrying into the entrance hall, diving into position to greet their master. Someone must have raised the alarm when the carriage passed through the gates, and though he had sent word that he would be returning, he remembered that he had not exactly detailed when that might be. Indeed, he had not known himself until yesterday when he had decided that leaving Creassey House as soon as possible would be for the best.

Mr. Willacy, the butler, stepped forward. “Welcome home, Your Grace.” He bowed his head toward Marina. “And to you, Your Grace.”

Mr. Willacy had been the one to deliver the message of Jasper’s imminent return, having left London when Jasper did. Indeed, it was strange to think that the townhouse had been shut up again so soon after it had been aired for the first time

in three years. Jasper thought of the dust sheets creating eerie shapes, wondering how long it would be until he visited again.

“This is the butler, Mr. Willacy,” Jasper explained. “And this is the housekeeper, Ms. Dorset. If you require anything, ask her. As for a lady’s maid, you may take your pick—whichever suits you best. I do not know what a lady seeks in a maid, so that shall be at your discretion.”

The row of maids jittered with excitement, casting eager glances at one another.

“These are the footmen,” Jasper continued, gesturing to a similar row of young men, “and this is Anders, my valet.”

The stern, silent man bowed his head reverently. “It is our honor to welcome you, Your Grace.”

“The honor is mine,” Marina replied, putting on a smile that *almost* reached her eyes. Perhaps, she would find companionship among the maids, preferring their company to Jasper’s. She might even find a lover among the young footmen, he supposed, though the thought rankled him somewhat. The very idea of her in the arms of another man was like a hot iron in the center of his brain, rousing him into an anger he had no right to feel.

*I cannot keep her for myself and not be a proper husband. I cannot have my cake and eat it,* he scolded himself, remembering the terms of the arrangement. They had not hashed out the details of lovers and illegitimate children, but he decided that they ought to speak on the matter soon rather

than later. Once she had settled in, of course, and certainly not in front of the staff.

“Ms. Dorset, might you show Her Grace to her bedchamber, and would you fetch a dinner tray for her? I am going to retire for the evening,” Jasper announced, dismissing the staff. “Return to your duties.”

What he had not accounted for, as he made his way toward the sweeping staircase, was the fact that they were all going in the same direction: he, Marina, and Ms. Dorset. It made for an awkward ascent as he did not want it to look like he was running away from her, even though he was, in a sense. Marina kept pace with him, and he had to wonder if she might be disobedient once they reached the landing, following him to his chambers instead of her own.

“You have a beautiful residence,” Marina said.

Jasper nodded. “It serves its purpose.”

“Jasper, I wondered if *you* might show me the gardens tomorrow,” she ventured. “I shall discover all the species therein in my own time, so I need not trouble your groundskeeper. It would ruin the fun of it if I am simply told what everything is, but I do not want to get lost, so maybe it would be better for you to give me a tour.”

Jasper wanted to tell her that, of course, he would be delighted, but she had that shine in her eyes again, that imploring look like she desired more from him than he could give. “No, I do not think so,” he said stiffly. “The groundskeeper will ensure you do not get lost or Ms. Dorset if

you prefer. I have too much to do. I have letters to send, letters to reply to, and a multitude of... other endeavors to pursue. And as you said, what would be the fun in me simply telling you where everything is? You should explore it for yourself. This is your residence now.”

“Oh...” He heard the hurt in her voice and wished he could soothe it.

“I will summon you when I have need of you,” he continued, forcing a wedge between them. “We shall discuss your duties as a duchess then though it will be little more than we have already discussed. And as we will not be expected in society for a month, I doubt I shall require you until the month is through.”

Ms. Dorset pursed her lips, lowering her gaze. Yet, her disapproval radiated.

“Very well,” Marina said quietly. “I shall bid you a goodnight, then.”

Jasper dipped his chin to his chest. “Yes, you too.”

Hurriedly, but not too eagerly, he turned on his heel and marched off down the left-hand hallway, safe in the knowledge that he had insisted on the staff preparing a bedchamber for Marina on the opposite side of the manor. If he could not trust himself to keep his distance, then the distance itself would have to suffice, ensuring that the pair never had the opportunity to meet by accident.



“Here you are, Your Grace,” Ms. Dorset said, opening a door on the farthest end of the right-hand hallway. A deliberate choice, Marina assumed.

Marina peered into the bedchamber, astonished by the sight. It was enormous, the vaulted ceilings decorated with crown moldings had been painted white while the ceiling in between was an iridescent gold. The walls were covered in silk paper of forest green and gold with tiny butterflies and woodland creatures hidden among the surface. A huge four-poster bed, the frame draped in gauzy white fabric and heavier green velvet, looked like it could fit five people within it without a single one of them touching.

“You do not have a smaller chamber?” Marina asked, thinking of her quaint bedchamber back at Creassey House. It had never felt too large.

Ms. Dorset smiled. “His Grace insisted on this one.”

“Because it is the furthest away from him?” Marina could not hold her tongue any longer. After she had embraced Jasper by the carriage, she had thought something was changing between them, and the bump back into stark reality hurt a great deal.

Ms. Dorset offered an apologetic look. “Don’t mind him, Your Grace. He’ll warm to you in time, I’m certain.” She paused. “He has been something of a recluse for the past three years, and he’s suffered a lot, so I want to assure you that, however he speaks to you, it’s not you that’s at fault. He... struggles.”



“Might I ask why that is?” Marina grasped her opportunity.

Ms. Dorset frowned. “You don’t know?”

“I am afraid not.” Marina knew she should have asked her mother to investigate Jasper, but as they had not been on the best of terms, there had been no moment to enlist her mother’s services. Jasper killing his sister had obviously been a lie, considering it had never been repeated. Besides, her mother had said that she sensed Jasper was a good man. Surely, that meant there was nothing untoward in his history, but perhaps Ms. Dorset knew something that Eliza did not.

Ms. Dorset huffed out a sigh. “It began with his mother and father passing. His father died in a riding accident; his mother died of a broken heart. A weak heart, the doctors said, but I know better.” She paused. “It fell to His Grace to look after his sister, Lady Priscilla. He cherished that girl. Took his responsibility very seriously.”

“She died too, though, did she not?” Marina’s blood froze in her veins, wondering if, perhaps, her mother had not been lying.

Ms. Dorset nodded. “A tragic event, three years ago now. They were in London for the season. His Grace was attending a gathering of gentlemen, and Lady Priscilla was supposed to stay at the townhouse. I don’t know all the details, but I heard that a note arrived at the townhouse for Lady Priscilla. She took off without a word, sending the household into a frenzy because she wasn’t supposed to go out without her brother.” The housekeeper’s voice caught in her throat. “She never returned. There’d been an accident in the small hours of the

morning. She was on her way back to the townhouse, we assume, when a carriage collided with hers. Had she been riding in the landau, she might have lived, but she'd taken her brother's curricle, driving it herself so no one could stop her. She was thrown from it, and the carriage that hit her in the first place struck her again as she lay there on the ground. His Grace has never forgiven himself, nor those of us who were in the townhouse that night and didn't prevent Lady Priscilla's departure, though perhaps your being here is a sign of change, of him... moving on."

Marina stared at the housekeeper in disbelief, her heart aching for the man who had hidden himself away as far from her as it was possible to be in the manor. It should have been a relief to hear that he had not killed his sister, but the truth was still a bitter one.

"Where did Lady Priscilla go that night?" Marina whispered, finding her voice.

Ms. Dorset shrugged. "No one knows. I suspect His Grace does, but he hasn't told any of us."

"That poor man." Marina did not have siblings, but all she had to do was imagine something terrible befalling Nancy, and she had a sliver of an idea of what Jasper must have felt.

Ms. Dorset nodded. "So, have patience with him. He's not yet recovered, might never be, but... we're all glad that you're here, and we'll all keep hoping that your presence is a sign of change. I won't judge anyone for grieving a loss, but he's had his life paused for so long; it's time he had some joy again."

“Thank you for telling me,” Marina said, hesitating as she peered down the long, shadowed hallway. Part of her wanted to go to Jasper’s door at once and hold him until the pain eased; part of her knew that it would only hurt more for her if she was rejected.

Ms. Dorset bowed her head. “You refresh yourself. I’ll go and fetch that tray of dinner for you. Does pheasant sound suitable?”

“I will eat almost anything,” Marina replied.

“Oh, that pleases me even more! We were worried you might be one of those ladies who doesn’t like anything and just picks at her food.” Ms. Dorset smiled. “Once you’ve had your dinner, I’ll help ready you for bed while we’re still choosing a lady’s maid for you.”

Marina smiled back. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Your Grace.” The housekeeper headed off while Marina stepped into what would be her new bedchamber.

She walked toward the casement window and turned to look at her abode, chilled by the size and emptiness of it. And though she tried to maintain a brave face, noting all the things she could change to make it seem less vast, her strength dissolved into hot, panicked tears.

“I will not be left alone here,” she told the room in a harsh whisper. “I will not be kept at a hallway’s length until I am as lonely in my soul as he is.”

She knew what they had agreed, but he had not been honest, and if a business associate was not honest, the contract was void. He had not told her his story. And if a man, mired in his grief, could avoid society for three years, how long could he avoid her for? She had no intention of finding out. If it was a change the household wanted, it was a change they would get whether Jasper welcomed it or not.

## CHAPTER 22



In the cold dawn light that filtered in through the windows, Jasper sagged onto the edge of his bed, his face still dripping wet from the icy water he had splashed again and again onto his skin, hoping it would wake him up. He had slept terribly, his dreams of Marina transforming into nightmares of colliding carriages and a broken body in the street. Not Priscilla's but Marina's.

A sharp knock at the door jolted him, his heart lurching in fright. He was about to tell whoever it was to leave him be when the door opened, and a figure breezed in regardless.

“Good morning, husband!” Marina chirped, dressed for the day with a cloak pinned at her throat. “The birds are up, and so must we be. The gardens are calling to me, and I do not wish to waste a moment.”

He stared at her, realizing too late that *he* was not at all dressed for the day. He was just grateful he had put on his trousers before washing his face, but his shirt was wide open, exposing his bare skin.

Turning away from her, he held the two sides of his shirt together as best he could. “What is the meaning of this? I

thought I told you that I would summon you when I had need of you.”

“Did you?” Marina tilted her head to one side. “Apologies, I must have misremembered; I was so exhausted last night that you could have told me the moon had turned into a wheel of cheese, and I would have forgotten. Nevertheless, I am ready for my grand tour of the gardens, as promised!”

He frowned. “I did not promise that.”

“You did,” she insisted. “You said you were going to ask the groundskeeper to show me the gardens, but you had changed your mind, fearing I might get lost.”

His skull felt like it was about to explode, for though he was certain he had informed her that the groundskeeper would perform those duties, her confidence made him doubt himself. *He* had been exhausted too, and still was—perhaps, he was the one who had misremembered.

“Shall I leave you to finish dressing, or would you like some assistance?” she asked coyly, her eyes skimming over the unfastened buttons as if seeing what lay beneath.

His face flushed with warmth, his loins stirring. What if he did not finish dressing at all? What if he stripped away his clothing all together and invited her to do the same? They could see the gardens in the afternoon instead, once they had explored the secrets of one another, getting lost in something far more pleasant than the outside world on a cold and gray morning.

*Enough!* he roared inside his head, smacking away the indecent thoughts.

“I need no assistance,” he told her, hoping she could not see on his face what he had been thinking.

Marina pursed her lips. “Where is your valet? Should he not be here to tend to you?”

“I rarely need him. He is something of an under-butler these days, but he prefers to keep his title of valet.” He discreetly began to fasten his buttons, dipping his head so he would not have to look at her. Yet, he could feel her watching him, making him fumble the fiddly fastenings.

Marina appeared in front of him. “My fingers are daintier. Allow me.”

She kneeled down, reaching for his buttons before he could protest. Not that he would have been able to, for shock had closed up his throat. Seeing her like that overwhelmed him, forcing him to turn away and think of dull things—paint drying, old men playing billiards, a dust ball skittering across the floor, anything to distract his fevered mind.

As her fingertips touched upon his stomach, edging down to his navel, he could take it no more. He seized her hand more roughly than he had intended, shaking his head as he gazed down into her eyes. “I shall finish the rest,” he told her. “You should wait by the door, or outside of it, until I am ready.”

“Are you certain? You seem shaky this morning.”

He swallowed thickly. "I am quite certain. Please, step away."

"Of course." She smiled, mischief glittering in her eyes. "I was only trying to help."

She sauntered off to the window and perched upon the window-seat, sitting in such a way that the hem of her skirts had ridden up slightly, revealing stockinged ankles. He dipped his chin to his chest, concentrating on the fastening of his buttons instead. All the while thinking, *What is happening? What is she doing? Has she been replaced in the night by a changeling?*

In the end, he realized it might be revenge for the way he had treated her the previous night, denying her even the courtesy of showing her the manor grounds. He had not been mistaken; he *had* told her he would not guide her. It could not be anything else, definitely not an actual attraction to him. An embrace had been pushing the boundaries of their agreement, but what he kept thinking of, and the flirtation she had ambushed him with, were far beyond those agreed terms.

Padding over to his armoire, willing the fire in his loins to cool, he picked out a waistcoat, buttoning it quickly, and slipped his arms into a tailcoat. His great coat came next, concealing any lingering display of interest in his wife.

"I do not know why you had to knock upon my door so early," he grumbled. "It is still dark outside. You will not see anything."



Marina laughed. "I thought we could watch the sunrise together."

"Why?"

Her eyes pinched. "Because it is a nice thing to do, and because it is something I have always done at my own residence. Just because I am here now, that does not mean I will dispense with my habits and traditions."

"Well, neither will I," he shot back. "And you should know that I rarely awaken before eight o'clock in the morning."

She wagged a finger. "Not true. You came down to breakfast yesterday morning at six o'clock, and when I knocked, you were already awake."

"Two occasions do not a majority make," he insisted.

She shrugged. "So, I shall knock upon your door at eight o'clock tomorrow instead, *after* I have watched the sunrise by myself."

"Why are you knocking on my door at all?" He knew he sounded petulant, but her behavior had him utterly bewildered. Where was the sensible, practical, reasonably obedient young woman he had consented to marry?

"I am your wife. Not only that, but you mentioned my duties as a duchess yesterday, and as a duchess, is it not my purpose

to ensure that you are awake at a reasonable hour so that you may make the most of your day?”

He gawped at her, unable to argue back, for she made an excellent point.

“I do not want to wait a month before our life begins as it will continue,” she added with a sly smile. “So, I thought we ought to begin good customs immediately. That way, there is no chance that either one of us will become lazy.”

Jasper swept a hand through his still-wet hair. “And I suppose a morning turn around the gardens is part of those customs?”

“We shall see.” She slipped off the window-seat and made her way to the door, walking in a manner that rocked her hips from side to side in a mesmerizing display. He could not look away, admiring the shapely suggestion of round buttocks, and the narrow waist that he knew was hidden beneath her dress. She paused on the threshold, glancing back. “Are you coming to find out?”

He took a breath. “If I must.”

*The cold air, at least, will do me some good.* For he desperately needed something to douse the fires she kept stoking within him at the most inopportune moments.



Beneath her cloak, Marina was sweating, and it had nothing to do with the thick wool. She had not thought about what state of undress Jasper might be in when she had swept into his

bedchamber, and it had taken every shred of willpower she possessed not to show the shock on her face at the sight of his bare chest. Yet, walking in the chilly gardens, she savored the memory; it had been more thrilling than she could have imagined.

He did not have the physique of a recluse, that was for certain; his broad chest was sculpted with muscle and dusted with dark hair, his abdomen ridged in a manner befitting an ancient statue of a mythical hero. She had never considered herself to be a girlish sort of woman, but seeing that, she had very nearly swooned.

“This is the rose garden,” Jasper said, stifling a yawn. “As you can see, there are no roses at present.”

Marina chuckled. “Of course not, it is almost winter.”

“And that sound you can hear is from an owl,” he continued, “because it is still the dead of night, more or less.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Was that a joke, husband of mine? Is that the secret to your humor—you are only amusing when you are very tired? It is a dry sort of humor, but I do not mind that.”

“No, that was not a joke. I told you, that was an owl.”

She burst into laughter. “I *have* made a discovery this morning! This is a wondrous find, and no mistake—I did not think you capable of jesting, so this must be the rarest discovery of them all.”

“Once I am fully awakened, it will disappear,” he replied, the faintest smile lifting the corner of his lips. “I am migratory in that fashion.”

She clapped her hands together, delighted. “Oh, I do like this version of you, Jasper. Indeed, I was just deciding whether or not I should trouble you in the morning again, but you have confirmed it. I shall knock upon your door *every* morning if this is the husband I can expect.”

“And if I forbid it?” he asked, his half-smile still there, brightening his handsome face.

“I shall knock and run instead until I have annoyed you so much that you relent and join me on these morning walks anyway.”

A soft laugh escaped his lips, the most heartening sound she had ever heard. “I do not remember you being this tenacious when I agreed to marry you.”

“You think waiting behind a carriage for you in the darkness is not tenacious? Goodness, you must have encountered some terribly determined people if my actions do not even make the tenacity list,” she teased, convinced that her charm offensive had been the right choice. He was already softening toward her; she could feel it in the air between them.

A genuine grin spread across his face, disarming her. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever beheld. “You make an excellent point,” he said. “Ordinarily, one is supposed to chase away interlopers, and I am beginning to wonder why I did not

chase you away while I still had the chance. Now, I fear I shall never escape you.”

“Is that what you desire?” she asked, bringing him to a halt.  
“To escape me?”

He turned to face her. “Would I have put you in the farthest bedchamber from me if I did not?”

“Maybe, but you see, I think you lied,” she said boldly.

Anxiety flickered in his eyes for a moment. “About what?”

Her smile widened. “I think you lied about not snoring. I think you snore like a bull, and that is why you do not want me near to you. You are embarrassed to have your secret discovered.”

“Is that so?” His expression relaxed back into a grin, stiff laughter rumbling in his throat. “Would it appease you if that was the reason?”

“Enormously.”

He shrugged. “Very well, I am an atrocious snorer. I sound like a bulldog with a stuffed nose when I sleep. I was concerned you would not get a wink of sleep yourself, so I put you as far from me as possible.” He paused, his hand lifting as if he meant to touch her, but he lowered it again. “Does that satisfy you?”

“A little.” She took a breath. “Jasper, I know we agreed to live separate lives, but I no longer believe that is in your best interests. I am not asking for anything beyond what we discussed, but I think you need companionship at the very least. Please, do not try to escape me. Let me be a... companion to you.”

He frowned. “A companion? You mean, a friend?”

“Yes, a friend.”

His throat bobbed as he took hold of her hands, stepping closer until she had to crane her neck to look up at him. “And what if I cannot be your friend?”

“It is not difficult. I am a very amiable person,” she told him, uncertain of what he meant. “Already, you are enjoying this morning excursion though I have no doubt you thought you would hate every minute.”

He gazed down at her. “I *am* enjoying myself. I admit, I am as surprised as you.” He paused, bending his head slightly. “But friendships between ladies and gentlemen are... not appropriate.”

“Are you not friends with Genevieve Fox?”

His eyes narrowed. “Acquaintances.”

“Well, can you not be friends with your wife? I am no ordinary lady to you, now.” Her nerves bristled, her heart rising into her

throat as he dipped his head lower, like he might kiss her. “Let me be a part of your life, Jasper. I might be breaking the rules, but... I do not want to be alone.”

He searched her face, his expression pensive. She stayed perfectly still as though any sudden movements might spook him. However, a soft gasp escaped her throat as he lifted his hand to her face, cradling her cheek. His thumb, cold from the morning air, grazed her skin, sweeping over the plump apple of her cheek. He caressed lower, brushing the slight hollow below her cheek, and lower still, until the soft pad of his thumb moved across her lips like a kiss. A sad smile curved his mouth as he brushed her lips again, downward this time, resting his thumb for just a moment in the bow of her top lip, before tracing a line down to her chin and drawing his hand away entirely.

“I do not need a friend,” he told her. “If that is what you seek, I shall not argue if you wish to return to your cousin or your mother. Tell me when, and I shall arrange a carriage for you though you will have to be discreet; we are supposed to be enjoying our honeymoon.”

He turned and began to walk away through the gardens, his hands shoved into the pockets of his greatcoat as if he no longer trusted them. Marina narrowed her eyes at his retreating figure, steeling her resolve. *Oh no, my dear husband, you will not get rid of me that easily*, for she was more tenacious than he realized, and with his touch still tingling across her face, he had unwittingly given her the hope to proceed.

## CHAPTER 23



Later that night, having retreated to his study to dine in peace, Jasper froze at the sound of footsteps approaching the door. All day, after their early morning walk, he had not seen hide nor hair of Marina, but every time he heard footsteps coming close, he had been struck by the same bolt of nerves.

*It is my own fault*, he told himself, relaxing as the footsteps walked right past his study door. *I allowed my wayward thoughts to get the better of me*. He still did not know what had possessed him to caress her face like that, nor why he had settled his thumb in the indent of her top lip, but he could not undo it. And it *did* please him somewhat to know that his thumb fitted perfectly, answering that scientific question he had pondered before.

He froze again as the footsteps returned. The handle of the study door turned, and a face peered into the room.

“There you are!” Marina said brightly, stepping inside. “Ms. Dorset gave me the directions to your study, but this manor is a labyrinth. I must have walked back and forth in front of this door twenty times, not realizing it was the one I was looking for.”



Jasper's heart sank, noticing the tray in her hands. "I am exceptionally busy, Marina."

"You do not look busy," she said. "You look like you are eating and as it happens, I was about to have *my* dinner too. So, let us dine together. I have always hated taking a tray in my bedchamber, for it makes me feel like I am turning into my mother. She relishes it."

He relented, gesturing to the armchair opposite. "Very well, but once we are done, you must depart. I have letters to write."

"I promise."

He did not believe her, but perhaps it would not be so terrible to enjoy dinner with someone for once. For three years, he had dined alone in his study, aside from the odd occasion where he was meeting with business associates, and he was well aware that his solitude had become a habit.

"Why do you not eat in the dining room?" she asked, a few moments later. "I went down to dine, you see, but Ms. Dorset informed me that you would not be joining me. Indeed, that you rarely dine there."

Jasper's knife ceased cutting the glistening roast chicken upon his plate. "It is... too large for just me. I feel uneasy dining there alone."

*Too many empty chairs, too many memories...* He had tried now and again to dine in that room, but it had left him feeling pitiful, eating in lonely silence.

“Many of the rooms here are too large,” she agreed. “In truth, I was wondering if I might alter a few things to make some of the rooms feel less... cavernous.”

He flinched. “Nothing is to be changed. The manor is exactly right as it is.”

“Did you not say this residence was also mine now?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“And did you not just say that you find the dining room oppressive?”

He faltered. “I did not use those words, but—”

“So, I should like to make my mark upon it.” Marina sawed a piece from her chicken breast, and Jasper stared at it, wondering if that was what she intended to do to the house. “Nothing too drastic, but I thought some folding doors might be of benefit, like those at Lord and Lady Hendricks’ townhouse. Something to allow us to make the rooms smaller most of the time, but with the ability to enlarge them if we should have company or if we host a ball here.”

He set down his knife and fork altogether. “You have been here for a day, Marina. Soon enough, the rooms will feel less... cavernous as you said. We can speak of this again once you have grown accustomed to the manor. Until then, I will not hear of change.”

“You are thirty, are you not?” she asked pointedly.

He frowned. “Yes.”

“Yet, the rooms feel too large, even to you.”

He sighed, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin. “They did not always. It is my hope that they will feel more... populated again now that you are here.” He paused, realizing what he had said. “Of course, if it is still your wish to reside with your cousin or your mother, then I will not prevent you. You must not let your decisions be influenced by me unless they affect me.”

“And my absence would not?” She stared at him with the intensity of a governess who had caught him scratching his name into the desk.

He looked down at the gravy, beginning to congeal. “I did not say that.”

“So, my absence *would* affect you?”

“I did not say that, either.”

She heaved out an exasperated sigh. “There, you see, I am wedged in an impossible place, for if I do not know whether my absence would affect you, how can I proceed either way?” A smile crept onto her face. “That is why I have decided to

remain. I will, however, be revisiting this discussion about changing some of the rooms. I think it will be good for you.”

“Good for me?” He met her gaze and did not like what he saw there. Pity sparkled in her eyes, her lips pressed together in a “you poor thing” expression.

She nodded. “I only lost one parent,” she began hesitantly, “but I know, to some degree, what it is like to feel someone in rooms where they will never tread again. It took me a year to be able to set foot in my father’s study. It smells of him, even now, and there is a book that he was reading on his writing desk, the page marked with a fold at the top. I often open it and read the page, comforted that I am, possibly, reading the last thing he read. But it is not without pain. This entire house must be like that study is for me.”

Jasper took a moment to gather himself, his heart burning a hole in his chest as her words burrowed in, chipping past the walls of ice that surrounded it. He had been ready to chide her for thinking she knew anything of what he was feeling, but hearing that part about the book folded at the last page her father ever read—it struck him like a rock to the back of the head.

“My sister... had a book of music open at the pianoforte,” he replied quietly, his throat choked as if he had swallowed a piece of his chicken the wrong way. “The staff told me she had been playing the piece before... she left the house. She used to sing, and I would scold her for it because it disturbed my work. It is strange how when someone is gone, we would do anything to watch or hear them do the things that annoyed us most, just one more time. For months, I could not get anything done. I would be sitting at my desk, trying to write letters, and I could not do it. I did not understand why. Then, one morning, I realized the reason: it was too quiet. I had grown so

accustomed to the sound of her playing and singing that I could not concentrate without it.”

Marina tilted her head back, blinking furiously. She was trying not to cry in front of him. “I am so very sorry, Jasper.”

“It hurt to lose my mother and father, do not mistake me, but I had *her* to distract me. I had to be strong so that she could grieve as much as she needed, and that, in turn, made it easier to bear. We had one another,” he continued, compelled by a force he could not restrain. “Losing her... No, losing her the way I did, it still feels like a nightmare that I will surely awaken from one day. Had she been sick, I could have prepared for it. Had she married someone and died in childbirth, she would have left behind a part of herself that I could take care of. But... she was just... snatched away for no good reason at all.”

A familiar fury began to simmer in his veins, prompting him to set his tray upon the ground. He curled his hands into fists and sat back, breathing through the suffocating pain that squeezed his lungs in a vise of rage. In a way, he knew the anger had helped him to deal with his grief, but it was not a healthy medicine.

“They left her to die,” he whispered, closing his eyes. “She might have lived if those wretches had stopped to help her, but they did not. Instead, they hit her with their carriage wheel as they fled and left her to die. I believe that accidents can happen, but it ceased being an accident the moment they did nothing. They killed her.”

He started at the touch of a hand on the back of his neck, his eyes flying wide, his curled fists ready to fight. But it was Marina, perching upon the armrest, cradling the back of his

head as her other hand lightly brushed his cheek, hiding the evidence of the tears he had not known he was spilling.

“You have carried that burden for three years,” she said softly. “You retreated from society, you isolated yourself in this house, and you dreamed of doing to those people what they did to your sister. You have been living in a tomb, sweet Jasper. I had not realized to what extent.”

He caught hold of her hand. “How do you know that? Who have you been talking to?”

“It was a confident guess,” she replied, her voice thick. “I knew about your sister, and the rest—it is human nature, dear Jasper. An eye for an eye.”

He relaxed his grip. “I have not yet found the culprits,” he admitted bitterly. “All of my streams of information have run dry, and the thought of them not facing justice for what they did, it... it...”

“Boils your blood, drives you to the brink of madness, feels divinely unfair,” she suggested, stroking the soft hair at the nape of his neck.

“All of those things.”

She nodded, smiling sadly. “I can write to my mother if you would like? There are things she knows that no one else does, and she has ways of finding things out that no one else has. I do not know what they are, so do not ask me, but... perhaps she might be able to help.” She paused. “However, and this

may not be welcome, I have one piece of advice that I should like to give.”

“Go on...”

“Grief is an affliction that can be treated or left to fester,” she said haltingly. “Allow it to be treated with joy and change and living well in memory of those who have been lost, for if it is permitted to fester, it will eat you up until there is nothing left. Do not let it harden your heart, for then it becomes a loss twice over. Now, I cannot, and would not dare to, speak for the dead, but I like to believe that they want the best for us, that they do not want us to fester. My mother has festered for years, but I think she is beginning to heal now. I would relish the same for you.”

He sank into the soothing sensation of her fingertips running through his hair, considering her advice, though the sentiment was not new to him. Leon, Genevieve, Ms. Dorset, they had all said similar things, and he had ignored them. He wished he could tell Marina that her saying the words would make it different, but the thirst for revenge still left him parched. It would not be slaked until the culprits faced justice.

“Please, do write to your mother,” he said. “And I shall contemplate your advice... and your desire to change some of the rooms. Folding doors might be acceptable.”

Marina’s beautiful face brightened with excitement. “You really will consider my advice?”

“I will,” he lied, enjoying her smile too much to disappoint her.

She leaned down and kissed his brow. “Thank you,” she murmured against his skin. “You shall not regret it.”

Without thinking, he caught her around the waist, pulling her down into his lap. She yelped as she tumbled, kicking out her legs in a vain attempt to rock back up onto the armrest. But he kept his arm around her, reveling in the weight and warmth of her, amused by the redness in her cheeks and her hopeless flailing.

Gradually, she ceased her determination to get back onto the armrest, wiggling her backside slightly to find a more comfortable position. The friction of her soft buttocks was tortuous, nudging against his swollen loins like she knew exactly what she was doing, and her flailing had merely been a performance. To prove his suspicions, her hand slid up his chest and the side of his neck, running her fingers through his hair once more. Meanwhile, her other hand rested upon his stomach, stroking gingerly.

“What are you doing?” she asked, leaning into him.

“Holding you,” he replied.

“Whatever for?”

He licked his lips. “It is... for comfort.”

“Is it healing, perhaps?” She searched his face, smoothing her other hand up his chest until her fingertips reached his jaw



where she caressed slow lines like she was committing him to memory.

He laughed quietly as he felt her press her thumb against the bow of his lips.

“Do not laugh,” she scolded playfully. “I wanted to know what it felt like after you did the same to me. Why *did* you feel compelled to do that, by the way?”

He smiled. “Scientific reasons.”

“Ah, science, of course.” She beamed from ear to ear, so tempting and sweet that he no longer knew how to resist her. She had charmed him from the first moment they met, sneaking into his thoughts while he was not paying attention, and though he kept trying to avoid her, her absence was not really what he desired. How could it be when she made him forget everything else, however temporarily?

“Are you not also a woman of science?” he said. “A naturalist?”

She made a gleeful face. “Why, I suppose I am.” Laughter rippled from her lips. “Do you know, it is because of my fascination with nature that Nancy is married to her husband? I have always insisted that nature works in mysterious ways, and she used to mock me for my obsession, yet it garnered her the love she craved her entire life. Indeed, who needs fate when there is nature and the universe?”

“Now, this I *must* hear,” he urged, watching her lips as she talked, wondering if it would be rude to interrupt her with a kiss.

“Well, we were at a ball, and we had gone to the lakeshore for some fresh air when I spied a nest of cygnets. I had not seen any yet that summer, so of course, I hurried over to observe them,” she explained. “While I was studying the darling little creatures and avoiding getting my hand snapped at by the mother swan, the Duke of Stapleton crept up on Nancy, believing her to be his lover. Had I not gone to see those cygnets, Nancy would not have met Adam, would not have been coerced into marrying him to spare her reputation, and would not now be so blissfully happy that it makes all society ladies green with envy!”

Jasper tucked a loose lock of hair behind Marina’s ear. “Are you envious of them?”

“Heavens, no!” She grinned. “She suffered through a terrible ordeal before she got her heart’s desire, I simply had to ambush you, eat some delicious blackberry tarts, and then show up at the church.”

He moved his head closer to hers. “I have been wondering about the color of your lips. Do you think you might have eaten too many blackberry tarts, and the color has stained permanently?”

“First, I am told I am too thin, and now, you tell me I have eaten too many blackberry tarts?” She batted him lightly on the arm. “You are a conundrum, Jasper. And no, my lips have always been this color. When I was a baby, my mother was frantic with worry, thinking I had a fever, regardless of how

many doctors tended to me. There was no fever, just strange lips.”

He shook his head. “Not strange. Fascinating.”

“For scientific reasons?”

He smiled. “Of course.”

“I am beginning to grow accustomed to that,” she said cryptically, her gaze flitting to his mouth.

“To what?”

She stroked the tip of her forefinger across his lips. “Seeing you smile. I did not think you were capable, just as I did not think you were capable of humor. Yet, the gentleman I met this morning, for a brief while, was brimming with it.” She sighed. “I should like to meet him again.”

“I was never particularly amusing,” he told her. “My sister often called me a dullard, and even my father told me once that it would benefit me to learn how to be entertaining, otherwise I would never find myself a suitable wife. My mother then informed him that I would, one day, be a duke, and dukes did not need to be amusing to find a wife. ‘I would not have married you if I thought humor was important,’ she said to him, and he laughed so hard that he squirted wine from his nose. I always remember them that way—laughing.”

Marina’s expression softened. “Did they love one another?”

“Desperately, and though my mother always teased my father to the contrary, they were a love match. They had known one another since they were children, and I believe they were besotted with one another ever since,” he told her, his heart growing heavy again. So heavy, in fact, that he could no longer concentrate on the tempting fullness of Marina’s lips, nor the satisfying weight and shape of her in his lap. It was too weird. He adjusted his leg which had begun to fall asleep.

She seemed to notice, glancing down. “Am I hurting you? Goodness, here I am, as comfortable as can be, while I am bruising your leg with my... um...” She did not finish the sentence, climbing off him instead. But as she made her way back to the opposite armchair, he did take a moment to admire her backside before it became too strange again.

With the mood in the room tipping toward melancholy, the newlyweds ate their dinner in companionable silence, sharing stories of the family they had lost. And as the clock ticked on the mantelpiece, Jasper could not help but feel a little bit lighter, as though Marina had taken some of the burden from his shoulders simply by allowing him to share.

*“Do not let it harden your heart,”* he heard her say in the back of his mind. Maybe, for the first time, the advice to move on and begin to heal would stick. Maybe, the feeling was just temporary, for though Marina was proving to be quite magical in helping him forget, the desire for revenge always came back. It was only a matter of time.

## CHAPTER 24



The first week at Lymington Manor passed by in a blur of contentment. In the mornings, Marina knocked upon Jasper's door to invite him to join her in the gardens to watch the sun rise though he seemed to have learned his lesson from the first morning. Much to her disappointment, she had not managed to catch him in a state of undress again.

After their walk, they always broke their fast together then went their separate ways for the rest of the day. Now and then, they reconvened to have luncheon together, but Jasper was often too busy in his study, and Marina was often too immersed in the gardens, writing down and etching the species of flowers that bloomed there and sketching the wildlife she happened upon: ladybirds, spiders, frogs, toads, doves, magpies, birds of all kinds, and even a mouse or two that had been obliging enough to stay still for a few minutes.

In the evening, they dined together in the study though that was also not without its disappointments. Jasper had not pulled her into his lap again, nor had he sought to touch her in any capacity, other than offering his arm when they walked in the gardens. Indeed, part of her was beginning to think she had invented that first evening in the study, mixing up her dreams with reality.

However, it was not until the eighth day of her honeymoon that she was met with a setback that, in hindsight, she knew she should have seen coming.

“He gave no reason, Your Grace,” Ms. Dorset said, having just informed Marina that Jasper would not be dining in the manor at all that night. “I just heard it from the stablemaster that His Grace had ridden off an hour before sunset and gave no indication of when he might return.”

Marina fidgeted with the gauzy fabric of her collar. “And he left no note?”

“None, Your Grace. He didn’t inform the cook neither, so she’s in the kitchens raging that she’s cooked too much for one when she expected you both to be dining.” Ms. Dorset chewed her bottom lip. “I can’t fathom what he’s thinking, riding off without telling you.”

Marina looked toward the window, shivering at the sight of frost cobwebbing up the glass. In the distance through the distorted pane, the world had turned a peculiar color: a muted brownish hue that could mean only one thing—snow was on its way. And Jasper was out there somewhere.

*Could it be Genevieve?* A stab of jealousy slipped between her ribs, jarring her heart. Jasper had sworn that the courtesan was just an acquaintance, but what if that had been a lie to spare her feelings? He would not have been the first husband to seek pleasure elsewhere, and as he was not seeking it from Marina, perhaps he had thought to tread upon familiar territory.

“I thought he was changing,” Ms. Dorset said, more to herself than to Marina. “Everyone could feel it in the house.”

Marina swallowed uncomfortably. “Did he do this a lot before I arrived?”

“In the past year, particularly, there were stretches of time where he’d do this, and we’d never know where it was that he went,” Ms. Dorset admitted. “I’d ask, and I’d get put right in my place. I suppose I assumed it was a lady, but he wouldn’t do that to you. He’s not that sort of gentleman. He’s loyal to those who are... of importance to him.”

The housekeeper sounded too insistent, knocking Marina’s confidence. She, too, had thought she was making progress with Jasper, but what if her constant companionship had become too much for him. *He is distancing himself*, she realized, her heart sinking like a stone. She had noticed he was quieter than usual that morning, making none of his usual dawn jests, but she had blamed it on fatigue and the vicious nip in the air. Now, she understood that she had missed several important signs that all was not well.

Marina put on a brave smile. “No matter, I shall take a tray in my bedchamber this evening, and *I* shall ask him where he went when he returns. I imagine it is an innocent explanation.”

*News of his sister’s killers, perhaps?* She had not thought of that. It did not comfort her, exactly, but it was a better alternative to her husband meeting with a courtesan. *It may even be business*, she reasoned, calming herself. He had been overwhelmed with letters from potential investors and associates, and considering he had spent the last three years alone, perhaps he had simply forgotten that he should inform his wife that he was leaving the manor.

“You’re quite right,” Ms. Dorset agreed, relaxing slightly. “I’m certain it will be an innocent explanation. Shall I bring your tray to you?”

Marina nodded. “That would be wonderful. Thank you, Ms. Dorset.”

Pretending that everything was fine, she made her way up to her bedchamber, changed quickly into her nightly attire, and tucked herself into the window-seat, wrapping herself in thick blankets. If snow was coming, she did not want to miss it, even if Jasper was not there to share it with her.



Marina awoke to the crackle of the fireplace spitting sparks against the metal guard. The bedchamber was dark, and her neck ached from the position she must have fallen asleep in. She was still wrapped in blankets, and as she turned, her heart soared and sank all at once, realizing that it had begun to snow without her.

But it was not the spitting fire or the silent tumble of snowflakes that had awoken her, she realized. There was music coming from somewhere in the manor, drifting through the half-open door. A sweet, sad ballad.

Marina shook her head, convinced she was imagining things. Yet, the eerily beautiful music played on, pricking up the fine hairs on the back of her neck.



*Is it one of the servants?* She slipped off the edge of the window-seat, wincing as her bare feet touched the icy floorboards, and wrapped the blankets tighter around herself. Following the sweet music, she padded along the hallway beyond her bedchamber and halted at the top of the staircase down to the entrance hall. It was coming from down there somewhere.

Careful not to disturb the maestro, she descended the steps on tiptoes and paused again, trying to figure out where to go next. The music led her through a hallway opposite, to a part of the manor she rarely had cause to visit. At the very end, a door stood ajar, opening into a room she had not seen before. She peeked through the gap to find a vast hall that resembled choral chambers with an arched ceiling and a mezzanine floor that looked down upon the hall from three sides. A glittering chandelier hung down from the center of the ceiling, the candles all aglow, casting rainbow shards onto the marble floor below.

A grand pianoforte sat beneath the chandelier. A lone figure sat at the bench, fingertips dancing across the ivory keys. He wore only his shirt and trousers, the former unbuttoned at the collar, his sleeves rolled up. And his eyes were closed, tears glinting on his cheeks as he played, his body moving with the music, pouring everything into each note as if it might be his last.

Marina's breath caught in her throat. She had witnessed plenty of recitals, but none had contained the emotion she was seeing right before her eyes. Man and music had become one, feeding off each other until even the chandelier tinkled with sadness, its crystal teardrops suspended in the air.

Easing open the door, terrified of it creaking, she squeezed into the room and paused, but Jasper played on, oblivious to

her presence. She wondered if she ought to announce herself, but her feet continued to urge her forward before she could decide.

Soon enough, she was at the pianoforte bench, sitting down beside him. Her leg accidentally nudged his, and his hands stopped sharply, lifting away from the keys.

“No,” she whispered, bringing his hands back to the keys, “keep playing. I am only here to listen.”

With his eyes still closed, he obeyed, continuing where he had left off. But as Marina looked at the sheet music that lay open on the stand in front of him, she realized he was not playing what was written there. The notes etched on the sheet music were of a lively tune, not at all like the ballad that flowed from his fingertips. He was playing something from memory.

Understanding that he needed no one to turn the pages for him, she turned her body inwards, watching the pain and feeling wash across his handsome face as he created magic in the cold air of the hall, weaving a spell with his fingertips. Snow was a special thing, but this was far more precious.

By the time he played the final notes, touching the keys so delicately that they barely whispered their song into the hall, Marina was in tears, hastily wiping them away with the corner of her blanket.

“That was... exquisite,” she murmured.

Jasper turned to face her, his eyes finally open. But he did not say a word. Instead, he looked deeply into her eyes, offered a small, sad smile, and dipped his head, catching her mouth in a fierce kiss that nearly knocked her off the bench. Before she could fall, his arm slipped around her waist, steadying her.

At first, she did not know what to do, too shocked to move a muscle. But as his hand came up to cup her cheek, his thumb caressing the rosy apple, she let instinct and the press of his lips guide her. Her mouth responded hesitantly, her hands sliding up his chest to his collarbone, taking hold of the unbuttoned sides of his shirt to ground her.

Slowly, she began to understand the dance he had begun, just as she had remembered the steps of their first reel together though she had not performed such a dance in an age. Of course, she had *never* partaken in this particular dance, yet her body seemed to know what to do, her lips meeting his with an urgency that startled her.

He kissed her harder, pulling her closer to him. She kissed him back in kind, her blood roaring in her ears, her heart on fire as she melted into his embrace, every limb shivering with anticipation. A yelp of surprise escaped her as he suddenly scooped one arm under her legs and hoisted her up, bringing her down onto the solid muscle of his thighs. Her legs parted, kneeling astride him on the bench, her lungs robbed of breath as he urged his kisses down the curve of her neck, his tongue tasting her warm skin.

A moment later, his mouth was on hers once more, his lips slowing to a sensual tease that she echoed perfectly in harmony. It was the most exhilarating thing she had ever experienced, every sensation new and confusing and wonderful, for it made no sense that his tongue, brushing against hers, could feel so blissful, firing off sparks of pleasure

within her. Nor did it make sense that the crush of their mouths could make her tremble, yet it did, over and over, until she was shaking in his arms.

As their kiss deepened, his hands explored, smoothing seductively down the curve of her spine, caressing the dip of her waist, holding her there for a moment as he swayed his body against hers. His mouth seemed equally eager to discover more of Marina, his lips tracing searing lines of desire down her throat, his tongue rolling across the notch at its base, his kisses leaving her breathless as they danced across her chest.

“You are music to me,” he purred against her skin, pushing away the blankets that clung to her shoulders.

She did not even consider her state of undress, for all she wore was her thin nightdress, pearl buttons running down from her chest to her calves. Jasper’s fingertips made swift work of the upper buttons, tugging aside the flimsy fabric as his lips sought the pert pink of her nipple. She had no time to consider what he might do as his mouth closed over that sensitive spot... and sucked gently upon her.

An almighty gasp whispered from her throat, her head thrown back as a blast of ecstasy rippled through her abdomen, turning the shiver of her limbs into a powerful tremor. Meanwhile, between her thighs, she became aware of something hard and insistent, straining for a taste of her. She had noticed it earlier, but the overwhelming rush of Jasper’s kiss had distracted her. Now, it was all she could think of, wondering if it meant what she thought it meant. After all, thanks to her mother’s drunken speeches, there was very little she did not know, in theory, about coupling.

“You are driving me to madness,” Jasper whispered, freeing her nipple from the potent grip of pleasure. “I cannot stop thinking of you. I try, but it is impossible.”

She would have responded in kind, but bliss had her by the throat, her ragged breaths and desperate moans the only thing permitted to leave her mouth.

His hand gathered up the material of her nightdress’ skirt, hitching it up to her hips. With her bare skin smooth and gleaming in the candlelight, it seemed he could not resist the call of her silky flesh, his palms running up the front of her thighs as he lifted his head to catch her mouth with his once more.

She clung to him, the world spinning around her as she kissed him back with equal fervor, her instinctive body rocking back and forth to the rhythm of their mouths. It conjured a delicious friction against the swollen secrets that hid beneath his trousers, every stroke bringing a gasp to his lips, whispered against her mouth.

Slowly, his hand moved between her thighs, cupping the intimate heat of her. Even the lightest touch ignited a blaze within Marina, her fingernails digging into his shoulders as he moved his hand lower. Her body seized for a moment, feeling his thumb—the thumb that had stroked her cheek and pressed against the deep bow in her top lip—begin to circle a part of her that she had not known existed. Not really, anyway, for she had only heard of it in passing and had certainly been unaware that it was a powder keg of absolute pleasure.

“Oh, Jasper,” she gasped, her entire being responding to the strumming of his thumb, teasing out a feeling in her that she had never experienced. He played her the way he played the

pianoforte, pouring everything of himself into the music of her, turning the simple into the extraordinary. His kiss alone was testament to that.

His fingertips slid between the furrows of her, pausing at the entrance to her sex. And as his tongue flicked into her mouth, his fingertip pressed inside her. Her breath caught in her throat, her body freezing for a moment. The sensation was strange and wonderful, the strum of his thumb never ceasing, for it was building toward something—a crescendo.

“Why did you come into my life?” he whispered against her mouth, pushing a second finger inside her. “Why did you change... everything?”

She kissed him hard. “You needed... change,” she rasped, overcome as he began to move his fingers slowly, ebbing and flowing in the heat of her, “and so did I.”

“I was happy being miserable,” he said with a pained laugh, smoothing his palm over the swell of her breast.

She smiled against his lips. “I do not think you were.”

He kissed along her jaw and down her throat, nuzzling her neck as his fingers moved deftly, his thumb driving her bliss higher and higher until her whole body vibrated, and she could have sworn the crystal chandelier jingled with the thrum of it.

“Oh... oh, yes,” she breathed, wrapping herself around him as she soared. “Oh, Jasper!”

Pleasure hit like a summer storm, warm and fierce and refreshing, rushing through her veins. Her limbs trembled, her lungs ablaze, her stomach tightening as euphoria bolted through her like lightning. It was as if she had been asleep for all these years, and his touch, this bliss, had awoken her. Every fragment of her body was alive, glowing and pulsing, tiny fires searing from her throat to the tips of her toes. Her body could not bear so much feeling at once, yet it craved more and more, her head swirling as she closed her eyes and rode the storm of ecstasy.

She did not know how much time had passed—an eternity or a few minutes—but, slowly, the overwhelming pleasure began to ebb, like a squall passing. She had been in the eye of the storm for a blissful moment, and now, it was moving on though the rumbling thunder of what her body had experienced lingered for a while, pleasure growling and throbbing in her veins, her limbs, her muscles, her very soul.

“What... was that?” she murmured, sagging against him.

He withdrew his fingers, prompting her to gasp. “It was... It was... a mistake.”

She stilled, staring at the marble floor over his shoulder, wondering if she had heard him correctly. “Pardon?”

“It was a mistake,” he said, more certainly.

With great care, he lifted her up and set her down on her feet beside the pianoforte. There, he made an earnest show of adjusting the ruffled and disarrayed parts of her nightdress, his face a picture of pain and regret. That expression crushed

Marina in ways she could not describe, making her feel suddenly ashamed of something that, a moment ago, was the greatest thing she had ever experienced.

“I am sorry,” he whispered, his voice hitching. “I am so very sorry.”

He turned and walked away, taking the music of her heart with him, leaving her alone in the grand hall, wondering what on Earth she had done wrong.



## CHAPTER 25



*B*y morning, though Marina had not slept a wink, Jasper was gone again. She asked after his whereabouts, but Ms. Dorset did not seem to know what she meant.

“He was here last night,” Marina insisted. “I heard him playing the pianoforte.”

The housekeeper frowned. “I don’t think he was. I didn’t hear him return, and no one has seen him. Were you dreaming?” She put a sympathetic hand upon Marina’s shoulder. “You were fast asleep when I came to bring your dinner tray. I was going to wake you, but you looked so peaceful. I think, maybe, you *were* dreaming. His Grace has not played the pianoforte in years.”

And as the day wore on, and she asked more of the servants if they had seen Jasper return last night, she became increasingly confused. Everyone she encountered said the same thing, that they knew nothing of him coming back in the night, and that they had heard nothing. Apparently, she was the only one in the manor who had seen him and heard him play.

*There is no possible way I dreamed it*, she tried to convince herself, seeking solace in the gardens with her notebook. Her body felt different. Her body remembered, even if no one else was willing to admit that Jasper *had* come home and had vanished again.

With a weary sigh, she brushed a blanket of snow off an old tree stump and sat down. Sparrows hopped around up ahead, pecking at the seed and little pieces of lard that she had scattered for them. She opened her notebook and took out a long, thin piece of charcoal, and began to sketch, falling into something of a trance.

A short while later, she frowned at the picture she had created. It was not a detailed illustration of the sparrows at all, but a hazy recreation of what had occurred in the grand hall with the pianoforte. Two shadows entwined, one sitting astride the other, the man's head bent to draw the woman's nipple into his mouth, his hand disappearing beneath her ruffled nightdress. Nothing perverse that could get her into trouble if someone were to find it, but she knew what the sketch meant.

“What did I do?” she whispered miserably, tearing out the page. “Why did he run from me?” A greater question might have been, why did he kiss her at all if he was only going to break her heart and make her feel foolish? Why did he touch her the way that he had if he was going to regret it and punish *her* for his regret?

With furious tears in her eyes, she got up, startling the sparrows into the air, and crunched through the snow, back to the manor, passing the gardener's brazier on her way. She tossed the balled-up sketch into the fire, pausing to watch it burn and turn to ash before pressing on into the house.

From her bedchamber window, she looked to the skies. More snow threatened, carried by the bruised, heavy clouds that scudded slowly. The roads beyond the manor were thick with pristine white, beautiful to behold but treacherous for journeying.

“I cannot be here,” she told herself, thinking through her choices. “Once the snow eases, I will leave.”

Indeed, she began to think she should have done so when Jasper first suggested it, for it might have spared her from the pain that bloomed in her chest and the bite of loneliness that turned her world gray.



On the stretching lawns outside Lymington Manor, Jasper sat upon his horse in the darkness, gazing up at the light that glowed from one particular window. Night had fallen hours ago, and though he had tried to think of a reason not to return to his own residence, the falling snow had spurred him on toward the warmth of home. Yet, he appeared to be frozen in that spot, unable to press on though it would take him less than a minute to reach the front door.

“How can I explain it to you?” he whispered, watching Marina’s window, hoping to glimpse her. “How can I possibly explain how sorry I am?”

Indeed, he could not even explain it to himself though he had spent every hour since leaving her in the music hall trying to do just that. But something had happened while he was holding her in his arms, feeling the shiver of pleasure vibrate through her. He had not been the one reaching his conclusion, but a sensation so powerful and all-consuming had struck him

in the moment of hers, a detonation in his heart that had shattered the walls of ice that had remained. And with his heart exposed, the beat of it calling for her, an unwelcome vision had blasted through his mind: a body in the street, bent and broken. Hers.

He was not too proud to admit that he had panicked. In a blur, he had remembered everything that he had lost, *everyone* that he had lost, and the thought of adding her to those ghostly ranks, simply because he cared too much for her, had made it all feel like a terrible mistake.

*Those who are dear to me are doomed*, he had told himself, for he had the evidence to prove it.

But with time and distance from her, a day's worth, he had gradually realized the greater mistake—that he had abandoned her in the music hall instead of letting the panic and fear pass, taking comfort from the closeness of her. He was a man of science, after all. He did not believe in curses and fate. Coincidence, perhaps, and certainly misfortune, but feeling something for Marina did not immediately mean that she was doomed. Now, however, he suspected that *he* might be, for how could she ever look fondly upon him again after the way he had behaved—like a scoundrel?

Just then, Marina appeared at the window, climbing up onto the window seat. She sat sideways, staring out in the opposite direction to where Jasper was watching. Even from a distance, he could tell she was wearing the same nightdress. Her hair was long and loose, her face warmed by the candlelight within her chambers.

*What would happen?* he wondered, his heart racing. *If I were to knock on your door and claim you, what would you do?*

*Would you turn me away? Would you forgive me?*

He had to find out. He would not rest until he did.

Urging his horse into a lope, he rushed toward the stables, passing his gelding into the capable hands of the stablemaster before racing back to the manor. He blew through the side door, hurtled across the parquet, skidded to the left as he burst into the entrance hall, and took the steps two at a time on his way up the staircase. He veered left again, running as if his life depended on it toward the bedchamber at the farthest end.

Breathless, he halted beside her door and raised his knuckles to the wood. He hesitated for just a moment before knocking upon it.

From within, a pointed silence echoed.

He knocked again, softer this time. Perhaps, the ferocity of the first knock had startled her.

Once again, silence responded. Maybe she had guessed it might be him which meant she was either ignoring him or waiting for him to come in.

He knocked a third time. "Marina?"

Nothing.

“Marina, please let me in,” he said. “I could come in of my own accord, for I know the door is not locked, but I would prefer it if you were to grant me entry.”

The silence thickened. He could almost hear her holding her breath, sitting perfectly still in the window seat.

“I am sorry, Marina,” he continued. “I am sorry that I left you alone in such an uncouth manner. I am sorry that I left at all. I am sorry that I told you it was a mistake. It was not; it was... what I have wanted for some time though I have fought against it, for it is not what we agreed. You were not supposed to coax feelings out of me. I was not supposed to form an attachment to you. We were supposed to live separately, as strangers, but I think... I think I knew I what I was getting into the moment I met you. Later, I think I knew that I was fooling myself, believing I could resist you. So, please, let me in.”

He heard the creak of someone shifting, the faint rustle of material, but no footsteps made their way toward the door.

“I hurt you,” he admitted. “I know that I did, and I have tormented myself with that since I left you last night. I... suddenly realized that if I cared for you, I might lose you, and losing you would kill me. I panicked. I did not stop and think. But I have since, and not keeping you in my arms last night, not carrying you up to my bedchamber to let you know the full extent of how I feel about you, was a colossal mistake.”

More sounds of life reached him, raising his hopes.

“I do not know if you have noticed,” he said with a note of laughter in his voice, “but I am a troubled man. I have lived

alone, in solitude more or less, for the past three years. I have forgotten what it is like to take another person into consideration. I have been... selfish, thinking only of my own pains, and I promise you, that will cease. I will be a husband to you, and we shall throw away the rules we agreed upon, because... everything has changed, Marina. You have changed everything.”

His eyes widened as the door flew open, for he had not heard her approaching. She must have tiptoed, eager to startle him.

Silhouetted by the firelight and candlelight that pooled from her bedchamber, he took a moment to admire the exquisite shape of her, carved out in shadow by the light behind her. That perfect hourglass, those smooth legs, those ripe breasts, those firm buttocks and sweeping hips, and that sultry heat between her thighs—not something to be seen, but something to be appreciated by touch and taste alone.

“I am afraid I did not hear all of that,” she said, a soft smile upon her lips. “You might have to begin again.”

He smiled back, stepping forward. “I think *we* ought to begin again.”

“Is that so?”

He closed the gap between them, sweeping her into his arms as he kicked the door closed behind them. His lips found hers, pressing against them with all the love he did not fully dare to speak aloud. And she kissed him back with equal fervor as if she understood perfectly that some things were better said with actions, not words.

## CHAPTER 26



*M*arina forgot to breathe as Jasper embraced her, his lips fierce upon hers as he walked her backward, his arms tight around her waist, his hands exploring, running over the parts of her she had never expected would be touched again. He pulled her to him, locked in a tug-of-war of passion.

It was almost a waltz, echoing their first dance as newlyweds, as they whirled and turned around the bedchamber, melting into one another until she did not know where she ended, and he began. Indeed, emboldened by his apology and his encouraging words, she allowed herself to explore him in return. She smoothed her hands up the muscle of his chest and down his abdomen, feeling the satisfying ridges. She gripped his arms, admiring their strength and power, and lightly raked her fingernails down the rippling muscle of his back, smiling as he moaned.

“Am I forgiven?” he murmured, trailing his lips across her jaw, his teeth catching her earlobe in a gentle graze.

She gasped, arching her neck back. “Yes, my darling. I... had hoped it... was fear and not... displeasure, but... I could not be certain.”



“My darling,” he growled, “nothing about you could ever displease me.”

She grinned, closing her eyes as his kisses fluttered down her neck. “Not even my jests?”

“Not unless you plan to jest in this present moment,” he replied, smiling against her skin. “It might be quite distracting.”

“I would not want that,” she agreed, running her hands through his silky hair, pulling him back up to kiss her on the lips.

Their mouths moved together as he walked her back to the writing desk, nudging her legs with his. Her breath caught as her buttocks bumped against the wooden edge, relishing in the solidity of him as he leaned into her, prompting her to rest her backside on the desk. Fortunately, there were no letters that could accidentally be knocked off, the surface free for whatever he had in mind.

He paused in his kiss, gazing down into her eyes as his fingertips found the buttons of her nightdress. He did not even bother to unfasten them, tearing at the material until the pearls popped, scattering onto the floor with a pleasing clack. She tried to think of a reason to protest, but she had never liked the nightdress; the collar had always been too high, making her feel like she might suffocate in her sleep. And the way he had ripped it tantalized her, her breath growing ragged as she waited for what came next.

“I will buy you another,” he told her, smiling.

She grazed her teeth across her lower lip. “There is no need.”

“And why is that—because you will have no need of nightdresses anymore?” he purred, sliding his hand down the gap between the two sides of the garment, freeing it of any stubborn buttons. His fingertips skimmed the skin beneath, sending shivers of bliss through her.

“I might yet decide to turn the key in the lock,” she told him, teasing.

“A lock will do you no good if you are in *my* bedchamber,” he replied silkily, “for I also have a key.”

With a longing expression, his eyes shining with desire, he pushed the nightdress from her shoulders and watched it fall to where it pooled at her feet. As if inspired, he followed the material downward, kissing his way from her throat to her breasts to her stomach to her hips until he was on his knees in front of her. His strong, slightly rough hands gripped her thighs as his tongue cherished that sweet flesh, his kisses savoring every part of her.

She closed her eyes, anticipating the sensation of his thumb upon her hidden bud, his fingers inside her, so it came as something as a surprise when she felt the first stroke upon that secret spot of hers. It was not his thumb nor his fingers, but something warm and intoxicating.

She grasped the edge of the desk as he tasted her, her mind spiraling into a daze, her heart beating so hard she feared it

might burst out of her. It was unlike anything she could have imagined and better.

“Oh, Jasper... oh, my goodness, yes!” she urged, arching her back as he lavished her with his unusual talents. Each roll of his tongue sent her into a fresh frenzy, her veins carrying molten pleasure instead of blood, her soul singing gratitude to the heavens that had sent her this paradise on Earth.

And as his hand slipped lower, his fingers sinking into the warmth of her, it was almost too much. A furnace could only burn so hot, and she was coming close to the explosive point. The crescendo was building once more.

Indeed, she thought she knew what to expect from her conclusion, considering the trembling, shivering, shuddering deliciousness of her experience in the music hall. Yet, nothing could have prepared her for the thunderous waves that pummeled through her, a few minutes later, as his tongue, his fingers, his touch weaved together in perfect harmony, conjuring a finale for the ages. A seminal piece, never to be forgotten.

“Oh... oh... oh yes, Jasper! Yes!” she cried out, gripping the edge of the desk so hard she was certain she would snap it into splinters.

Her legs buckled, her thighs weak, her head dizzy with the power of the lightning within her as it ricocheted up and down her body. Indeed, if she had not had the desk behind her to steady her, she knew she might have collapsed under the delicious pressure.

But, once again, the feeling could not last. The intensity faded, the bursting fireworks fizzling into faintly pulsing sparks, and she leaned back against the desk to catch her breath. A smile spread across her face, so wide that her cheeks ached, and she doubted anything would be able to remove it.

“That was my true apology,” Jasper said, slowly withdrawing his fingers, his tongue abandoning that sweet spot as he kissed his way up her body, rising with each press of his lips. “I have never been very gifted with words.”

Marina sighed contentedly. “Well, you are certainly gifted in this. Indeed, I am quite furious.”

“You are?” His brow creased with worry.

“Furious that there was a time when I thought I could live without this,” she told him. “Furious that there was a moment where we agreed to live separate lives. Can you imagine what we might have missed had we been foolish enough to abide by those silly rules?”

He chuckled. “I do not want to imagine what we might have missed, but I am not done yet.”

“No?”

He shook his head and put his arms around her, kissing her softly on the mouth. She smiled against his lips as she felt his hands moving lower, cupping the swell of her buttocks. But her smile turned to a gasp of surprise as he hoisted her up into

his arms and carried her over to the huge four-poster bed that she had yet to feel comfortable sleeping in alone.

He lay her down upon the coverlets, her back sinking into the give of the feather-stuffed mattress, and as he scooped her up and lifted her further backwards, she could not help but marvel at his strength. He carried her and moved her as if she did not weigh a thing, igniting a feeling of protection within her.

For a moment, she feared he was going to tell her to go to sleep as he lay down next to her on his side. Then to her relief, he dipped his head and caught her mouth with his, his palm running along the curves and swells of her, pulling her closer to him.

“You are dear to me,” he whispered. “You have become someone I cannot lose.”

She smiled. “As have you.”

It was not a confession of love, but it was a promise of it, and as he kissed her more deeply, she lifted her hands to the buttons of his shirt and waistcoat, deciding it was high time that she freed him of his garments, too.

He sat up in order to help her, shuffling off his upper clothes as she watched in admiration. He was exquisite; there was no other way to describe him. His bare chest, carved with muscle, demanded to be touched, and she was not inclined to disobey. She caressed the warm skin, brushing her fingertips across the dark hair that enhanced the sheer masculinity that radiated from him before boldly moving her hand down the ridges of his abdomen to the waistline of his trousers.

Swallowing thickly, somewhat nervous about what she might see, she undid the fastenings and began to ease the material over his hips and down his thighs. Indeed, she did not allow herself to look until the trousers were thrown to the floor, both of them naked in front of one another.

Her eyes widened, a single word escaping her lips: “Goodness.”

“There is nothing to fear,” he told her, taking her hand. “I shall be gentle, my darling. I promise. Unless, of course, you do not wish to continue? I do not mind waiting.”

Marina shook her head, licking her lips. “I do not want to wait.”

“I confess, I had hoped you would say that,” he murmured, lying back down beside her.

He scooped her into him, kissing her slowly, sensually on the lips, his tongue dancing with hers. She kissed him back, letting the glorious familiarity calm her nerves, allowing the excitement to flood back into her veins. And as he brought her hand to his manhood, a throb of need rippled through her stomach, chasing away the last of her fear.

“If there is pain, tell me,” he said, bending his head to kiss her neck. “I shall cease at any moment, whenever you wish me to.”

She pulled his head closer, relishing the friction of his lips against her skin and the heat of his flesh in her hand. “I do not want you... to cease,” she panted.

“Then, guide me inside you,” he purred, eliciting a gasp from her lips. She had never heard more stirring words in all her life.

Obeying, she draped her thigh over his hip, opening herself up to him. And as she brought the hardness of him toward the heat of her sex, she held her breath, wondering how on Earth it would fit.

She moaned at the sudden pressure against her entrance, tilting her hips up slightly... and as she did so, she felt him pierce her for the first time. There was a pinch of pain, prompting her to dig her fingernails into his back, but it was not unbearable. And as he moved slowly, easing into her, she sensed a thrum of pleasure beneath that initial fizz of pain. Pleasure that demanded to be satisfied.

He exhaled shakily as he filled her, stilling for a moment to allow her to adjust to the new, strange, overwhelming sensation. In that considerate pause, the pinch of pain gradually receded, leaving behind a deliciously tortuous pulse of heat and desire.

“Have I hurt you?” he murmured, his voice thick.

She shook her head, gulping down a breath. “No, my darling. There is... only need. A need... for you.”

Evidently reassured by her words, he slowly drew his hips back, receding from her. She cried out at the blissful, slick friction, grabbing hold of his muscular backside to urge him back inside her. He obliged until he was buried in her to the hilt where he stilled again as if he needed a moment to gather himself.

He slipped his arm around her, his free hand cradling her face as he caught her mouth with his once more, kissing her breathlessly. And as she kissed him harder, he eased his hips backward before sinking deep into her again.

*So, this is what all the fuss is about...* She smiled, grateful that she had not allowed herself to be content with a life of solitude and celibacy. Now, she understood. Passion did not have to be violent, lovemaking did not have to be the conclusion to a searing argument; it could be a slow and beautiful paradise where only two people existed.

Their bodies entwined, the newlyweds moved as one upon the four-poster bed, Marina's instinct guiding her. Her hips rocked forward to meet his scorching thrusts, her lips kissing every speck of his warm skin she could reach, her hands exploring him as his explored hers.

And as he rolled her onto her back instead of her side, still buried deep within her, she gazed passionately into his eyes as he moved again. Lightning crackled between them, his hips rocking forward in such a way that his flesh teased her swollen bud, reawakening it until it was hungry for more.

Answering the silent call of her euphoria, Jasper slipped his hand between them, his fingertips seeking out her most sensitive spot. And he began to play a familiar tune of bliss, strumming that potent note with an expert touch while his hard



flesh ebbed and flowed inside her, following the sheet music of her body, giving her what she desired before she even knew she desired it.

All the while, their sounds of pleasure became a chorus, echoing through their very own chamber of music, his moans and gasps as thrilling to her as the touch of his fingertips or the press of his thrusts. It was the secret element, she realized, for the orchestra of their lovemaking would not have been complete without it.

“Oh, my love,” he groaned, his teeth grazing her earlobe.

Her breath hitched, hearing such sweet words. She moaned her reply, sliding her hands over the swell of his buttocks to urge him deeper, needing more of him, needing to feel every part of his love, urging them both toward a finale that would make the ground itself tremble.

It arrived sooner than she had anticipated, her pleasure leaping toward the crescendo before she knew it. “Oh, my love!” she screamed out, arching her back up from the mattress, her hips tilting to meet his while his fingertips played the final notes to her part of their sweet music. “Oh... oh, Jasper!” She writhed in absolute ecstasy as raw euphoria seized hold of her, more powerful and potent than any conclusion that had gone before. It was like being swept away on a warm tide, and all she could do was let it guide her to whichever shore of delight it wished to take her to.

And as the waves of pleasure crashed again and again, like cymbals, she heard Jasper call out. “Oh, Marina... my love. Marina...” he growled, his hips moving faster, his eyes closing.

A few moments later, just as her pleasure was fading, she felt a throb deep within her that sparked a fresh, albeit smaller, wavelet of bliss. Jasper stilled, breathing hard, murmuring something incoherent. He thrust twice more, slowly, and then, with a satisfied sigh, he collapsed against her. His arms snuck underneath her, embracing her as he nuzzled her neck, smiling.

“I... would have been furious... to have missed even a moment... of that,” he said softly. “To miss a moment of you, in truth.”

She hugged him to her, reveling in the weight of him and the feeling of being so irrevocably joined together. “Then, let us not miss another moment.”

“I swear it,” he replied, lifting his head to kiss her.

And though neither of them knew what the future might hold, Marina suspected that this was the perfect way to begin the rest of their lives, starting again with all the rules cast into the proverbial brazier, allowing something more glorious to rise from the ashes.

“Does this mean I can change some of the rooms?” she asked, holding his face in her hands.

A darkness flickered across his eyes for a moment. “We can discuss that another time.” He paused, the darkness vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. “For now, let us enjoy this room, together.”

He kissed her, but as her mouth moved with his, a little voice whispered in the back of her head, *He will not forget his revenge, no matter how dear you are to him.*

## CHAPTER 27



As dawn filtered in through the window illuminating the swaying goddess that sat astride him, drawing him in and out of her until he found himself teetering on the brink of the most exquisite madness, Jasper knew he had never been so happy. Marina was everything he had never known he wanted and everything he needed.

He held her hips as she rocked back and forth, moaning as she moved faster, grinding herself against him. She arched her back and took hold of his hand, guiding his palm up the flat of her stomach and over the swell of her breast. A cry slipped from her lips as he lightly pinched her nipple, caressing her sumptuous, soft flesh as she rode him harder and harder.

All of a sudden, her body seized, her hand gripping his as a tremor rippled through her. Her thighs quaked against his hips, her muscles tightening around him as her conclusion took hold. And as she squeezed, it tipped him over the edge into his own, his eyes closing as he murmured her name over and over.

“Oh, my love,” he gasped, grateful beyond belief that he had let his courage guide him to her bedchamber door two weeks ago.

With a smile stretching across her face, she folded herself into his arms, kissing his bare shoulder. He refused to withdraw, staying inside the delicious heat of her for as long as he could, holding her trembling body tightly.

“We shall miss the sunrise,” she whispered, smiling.

He sniffed. “There will be thousands more. I prefer to greet the morning like this with a curtain of your hair across my face.”

“Ah, is that why you always sneeze when I cuddle into you like this?” She laughed. “I had thought, perhaps, that it was part of your... finale.”

He swept her hair out of the way, lifting his head to kiss her. “We shall have to experiment further.”

“Indeed, we shall.” Marina raised herself off him, catching his breath in his throat, and lay down beside him. She cuddled in close, resting her head upon his chest. “Truthfully, I thought I already knew everything there was to know about the art of lovemaking through word of mouth. Yet, you continue to surprise me.”

He grinned. “*You* continue to surprise me, and long may it stay that way.”

It had been a fortnight of the most glorious exploration. Indeed, for the first week, they had barely left their marital bedchamber, emerging only for sustenance and to take their morning walks around the garden. The second week, they had promised to behave in a more ordinary fashion, parting ways

after their morning walk to undertake their respective errands. However, they continuously sought one another out even when they were supposed to be tending to their own endeavors, sneaking fiery, swift moments together whenever and wherever possible.

It was only when they reconvened in the evening that they took their time, reveling in one another, discovering new ways of pleasing each other, spending hours worshipping their newfound passion. And if the household heard anything, they did not say so though Jasper had seen a few pleased glances and heard a few whispers from the servants, particularly Ms. Dorset, who had long hoped that Jasper would find a wife who could make him blissfully happy.

“What do we do after this coming week is over?” Marina asked suddenly, peering up at him.

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“This is the last week of our honeymoon. I wondered whether we would be returning to London or if we would remain here,” she said.

He considered the possibilities for a moment or two. “I suppose we ought to return to London for the remainder of the season. We have been inundated with invitations, so it is only proper that we should attend.” He smiled down at her. “Would that please you?”

“I adore it here,” she replied, “but it would be nice to venture to a ball or a dinner party together. I know we have dispensed with many of the terms of our former agreement, but I rather

think I should fulfil the one about making friends with the wives of wealthy gentlemen. Truly, I feel it is my duty to help you become one of the greatest gentlemen of business to have graced England's shores."

He nodded. "London it is, then." He paused. "I have never liked the city much, but as you have already changed so much, perhaps your presence in the townhouse will change my perspective of the place."

"I would like that," Marina agreed, pulling the coverlets and blankets higher, covering both of them. "Besides, it is not the weather nor the season for country estates. Every morning I awaken feeling half frozen."

Jasper chuckled. "I am aware, for it is my bare skin that you press your icy little feet against."

"What is the use of a husband if a wife cannot warm herself against him?" she protested with a grin. "I am always warmer after we have lain together, though, so I cannot complain too much."

"What if you grow too hot at the townhouse? Does that mean you will no longer desire to lie with me?" There was laughter in his voice, now as much of a constant in his life as his wife's tender kisses.

She sniffed. "Certainly not. I am obsessed with you."

"It gladdens my heart to hear it," he murmured, kissing the top of her head, inhaling the sweet, lavender scent of her hair.

“Now, if we are not going to watch the sunrise this morning, perhaps we ought to steal a few more hours of sleep.”

Marina stifled a yawn. “That sounds wonderful.”

Nestled together beneath the blankets, with the dawn chorus filling the air beyond their bedchamber window, Jasper had never known peace like it. He had never thought of himself as a fortunate person, but Marina was a lucky charm that he was determined to hold onto. It was no lie to say that she had changed his world entirely, and he just hoped that, one day, he would be able to return the favor. If that meant venturing to London again, facing that awful place, then so be it.

He was just drifting off into a pleasant slumber, warmed by the clinging body of his wife, when a sharp knock came at the door. His eyes flew open, shooting a glare toward the sound of the intrusion.

“Your Grace?” Mr. Willacy’s voice called through the wood. “Your Grace, I apologize for the disturbance, but a letter has just arrived by express messenger. I was informed to alert you at once.”

“I think you ought to answer that,” Marina mumbled sleepily, rolling away from him.

Grumbling, Jasper climbed out of bed, throwing a blanket around himself as he padded toward the door. He opened it with a hard look, so Mr. Willacy would understand that now was not an appropriate time to intrude. “Did the messenger say who the letter was from?” he asked curtly.



Mr. Willacy handed over the letter, nodding. “Mr. Parbold, Your Grace.”

Jasper’s blood ran cold as he took the letter into his own hands, his heart a stone lodged in his chest. For an entire fortnight, he had not had a single thought about the private investigator nor the investigation itself. He had not thought about his sister’s killers nor his sister. Even the nightmares of colliding carriages and bodies in the street had been chased away by the warmth and comfort of Marina sharing his bed, like her very presence there meant the nightmares were not welcome.

“Thank you,” Jasper said. “Is the messenger awaiting a reply?”

Mr. Willacy nodded.

“Ensure he has been given something warm to eat and drink. I shall forge my reply as soon as possible,” Jasper assured, closing the bedchamber door.

He walked directly to his writing desk and sat down, the chair cold on his bare skin. But it was not the cold that made his hands shake as he cut open the wax seal and unfolded the letter. It was chillingly brief and to the point:

*Your Grace,*

*I know what happened to my father. It is connected to the death of your sister. I would have ridden to you with the news, but I am pursuing it as we speak. Meet me tonight at the London townhouse. I will wait there and explain everything. It*

*is vital that I tell you as soon as possible, for I think I know who is responsible.*

*Yours Urgently,*

*Mr. Leon Parbold.*

Jasper stared at the words until they became a blur, his heart hammering, pounding his thoughts against his skull. He had waited for so long for some kind of news about the culprits who had ended his sister's life. Three years, he had thought of nothing else, so it stuck in his throat that news would finally appear just as he was beginning to forget.

*It is because I allowed myself to be distracted,* he told himself, wondering how long Leon had been pursuing whatever—or whoever—it was that he was pursuing. Had there been news sooner? Might Jasper have heard of it quicker if he had stayed in London and not disappeared to the countryside with his wife?

“Is everything well?” Marina's sleepy voice drifted from the bed.

Jasper swallowed uncomfortably. “I must leave for London at once.”

“Pardon?” He heard her sit up.

“You may stay here if you please, or go to your mother's residence, for I do not know how long I will be away,” he said,

getting up from the chair. His legs were shaky, but he made it quickly to his armoire, dressing as fast as possible. There was not a moment to lose.

Marina threw back the blankets, diverting his attention with the sight of her naked beauty. “Of course, I am not staying here, and I am not going to my mother’s either. I shall accompany you.” She climbed out of bed. “What is the occasion?”

“There has been news,” he said uncertainly, for though they had planned to venture to London anyway, he did not know if he could risk her joining him. What if he became distracted again?

Marina frowned. “About your sister?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you staring at me like that?” She put on a nervous smile. “This is nothing new to me, is it? I have always known that you would continue your search for the men who did that to her. I shall not stand in your way, nor shall I bother you. But you will need someone to come home to, and I fully intend for that someone to be me.”

He could not deny that the prospect appealed to him. “I might have to leave for many hours at a time if the investigation requires it.”

“Very well, then I shall just amuse myself.” Marina shrugged. “Nancy and her husband have extended their stay in London,

so if I find myself becoming bored, I shall simply call upon them.”

Jasper rubbed his chin, thinking. “Are you certain? You do not have to accompany me.”

“I know, but I want to.” Marina smiled. “Besides, I would not set tongues wagging by you being in London before our honeymoon has officially ended without me. What would people think? They would consider our marriage doomed.”

He knew his wife well enough by now to understand that he was not going to dissuade her. She had her mother’s stubborn streak and knew when to utilize it. Besides, she would be perfectly safe in the townhouse with servants to tend to her. Yet, as he turned the notion over in his mind, he could not stop himself from thinking back to that awful night, three years ago. Almost to the day, in fact. He had thought that Priscilla would be safe in the townhouse, that she could not get into any sort of trouble, and that had not ended well for anyone.

“You must promise me something,” he said, realizing he was repeating similar words to those he had spoken three years ago.

Marina tilted her head to one side. “What, my love?”

“When I am tending to whatever awaits me, you must promise not to leave the townhouse for any reason,” he urged. “If you are to see your cousin, she must come to you. I cannot have you wandering the city without me knowing. I understand how that sounds, but for my sake, swear that you will not set foot outside the townhouse without me.”

She walked to him, looping her arms around his neck and pressing herself against him, holding him close. “I will do whatever you ask of me, my love. Whatever shall make this easier for you.” She peered up at him, smiling. “If that means I must be a temporary prisoner in a grand townhouse with everything I could ever need at my fingertips, I suppose I shall manage.”

“Thank you,” he said quietly, embracing her in return. “Thank you.”

Perhaps, she had been a distraction, but that did not prevent her from being a comfort too in a moment where he needed her the most. And as he held her, he wondered what in heaven’s name he would ever do if he lost her. He prayed, kissing her hair, that he would never have to find out.

## CHAPTER 28



There was a stranger waiting outside the Mayfair townhouse as the carriage drew up to the pavement. Across the city of London, the sun was setting, bringing with it a snowfall and the bitter chill of night.

“Is that him?” Marina asked, cocooning herself in blankets. Her back ached from the journey, for they had not stopped to rest along the way, other than to feed and water the horses.

Jasper nodded. “I shall go directly to my study. Might you oversee the staff while I tend to this?”

“Of course, my love.” Marina smiled though she had no idea how to oversee the staff. She had never had to truly *be* the Duchess of Lymington before, nor did she know how to run a household. Still, she did not want to worry her husband with such trifling matters when he had something vastly more important to deal with.

Opening the carriage door, Jasper got out first, and Marina waited as she always did for him to offer his hand and help her down to the ground. Her heart sank as she realized he had forgotten her, for he was already speaking with the stranger,

Mr. Parbold, and leading him up the porch steps to the townhouse.

*No matter. This is not forever,* she told herself, steeling her resolve to be Jasper's pillar of support throughout whatever may come.

Straightening up, she stepped down to the pavement of her own accord and waited for the second carriage, containing the staff who would be working in the townhouse, to pull to a halt. This was her moment to prove why Jasper had chosen her, why he had fallen for her, and she would not disappoint him.



“Tell me everything,” Jasper commanded, ripping off the dust cloths that covered the furniture in his study. He sat down, shifting in the wingback chair, knowing he would not be able to make himself comfortable until Leon's news had been shared.

Leon dropped a heavy dossier onto the desk and steepled his hands, drawing in a deep, nervous breath. “My father is dead.”

“Excuse me?” Jasper stared at the private investigator.

“My father is dead. It seems he didn't go to Glasgow to tend to something pressing. Instead, he came too close to figuring out the men—or, rather, man—responsible for your sister's death.” Leon paused, visibly struggling. “I searched my father's old office again after I last spoke with you. I found a note there, hidden in a hollow beneath the floorboards though it made no sense to me. It simply said “Fox” on it.”

Jasper's back straightened as though Leon had shoved a rod up his spine. "Fox?"

"It took me some time to figure it out. I might not have figured it out at all if I hadn't started from the very beginning as if this were a new case entirely. You see, I was sifting back through the investigation, when I saw her name. A friend of yours, I believe: Madame Genevieve Fox. She wasn't really important to the investigation, for she wasn't there when the carriage was struck," Leon explained. "I went to her, explained who I was and who my father was and showed her the little note.

"At first, she didn't seem to understand the connection. Then, she remembered that a box had been left upon her doorstep a year ago. She'd assumed it was from an... um... admirer of hers, but the box had been locked, left without a key, and the note that came with it merely said, *keep it safe*. So, she had set it aside, forgetting about it, likely thinking someone would return for it."

A cold sweat prickled down the back of Jasper's neck. "Genevieve is involved?"

"Only in the respect that, at some point, she was acquainted with my father, and he felt that he could entrust the contents of the box to her." Leon rattled in his chair, shivering uncontrollably. "She gave the box to me, and that's where I found this dossier. In it is everything my father discovered and the last vein of investigation he was following when he... vanished."

Jasper blinked down at the dossier. "The name of my sister's killer is in there?"



“It is.” Leon grasped the dossier, pulling it back toward him. “But I should warn you, the name will be of no help to you.”

Jasper frowned. “What do you mean? The name is everything I need, so I can find the man and make him face justice.”

“No, Your Grace.” Leon exhaled slowly. “They are untouchable. Believe me, I understand the desire to have my vengeance, for these are the same men who killed my father, but it’s of no use.”

“Just... tell me, man!” Jasper snapped, hastening to add, “I am sorry for your father, of course. He was a good man, but... if there is a name in there, I will know it, and I will do with the information what I will. Indeed, you have no reason to be hesitating, for this shall give us both our vengeance!”

He tried to grab for the dossier, but Leon quickly clasped it to his chest. “You’ll die, Your Grace. They’ll kill you like they killed my father. If anyone sniffs too close, they’re snuffed out. I don’t want that for you, Your Grace. You’re married, I heard from Madame Fox that you’re happy, and now you’ve got someone to take care of. Don’t risk all of that for this, I beg of you.”

“If you thought I would listen to you, you would not be here,” Jasper said coldly. “Give me that dossier or tell me the name. I do not mind which, but you will not leave here until you do one or the other.”

Leon heaved out a resigned sigh. “The man is called Damien Byers.”

Jasper's eyes widened, his hopes soaring. *This is it... This is what I have been waiting for. Whoever you are, I shall be coming for you soon enough.*

“He is the right-hand man to the leader of the Grove Street Gang,” Leon continued, hanging his head. “A band of miscreants from Shoreditch, who’ve been a thorn in the side of magistrates and Bow Street alike for years. They’re wily, they’re industrious, and they won’t let anyone get too close. I think that’s why no one would talk to me after my father disappeared. They’d been warned off. Indeed, I think the only reason those harlots spoke to me because I was offering them money that made it worth the risk. But Grove Street will have heard about it, I imagine, and if you pursue this, they won’t hesitate to strike against you.”

Jasper narrowed his eyes. “What makes you think Grove Street will have heard about those witnesses?”

“Because I couldn’t find them when I went searching for them again, and everyone I spoke to, even people who’d led me to them in the first place, behaved as if I was mad and no such women had ever existed,” Leon replied, exasperated. “I imagine they’ll wash up on the banks of the Thames some day soon if they haven’t already.”

Jasper sat back in his chair, sweeping an anxious hand through his hair. It could not be the end of his struggle for revenge, it simply could not be. He had given everything, even part of his sanity, to the search for this man, Damien Byers. He would not back down, merely because this Damien fellow had dastardly associates, for if no one did anything out of fear, then Damien and his ilk would simply continue to destroy innocent lives and get away with it.

*But Marina...* a soft, urgent voice whispered in his head. *Think of her.*

She had made it clear that she would not stand in his way, but he had to wonder if she might change her stance if she learned the truth. Then again, what she did not know could not hurt her.

“What can be done?” Jasper said firmly, making his choice. “How can I get to this fellow? Is there somewhere he frequents alone?”

Leon shook his head, defeated. “Don’t, Your Grace. I know we’re not exactly friends, but as someone who you know well, please listen.”

“I cannot stop now,” Jasper insisted. “So, you can either help me find a way to have my revenge upon this Damien fellow, or you can do nothing and increase the chance of something dire happening to me. You must know something of this man from your search. Is there anything in the dossier that might be of use?”

Grimacing, Leon took out a small slip of paper and pushed it across the desk to Jasper. “That’s where he lives. It’s the last thing my father discovered before they had him killed and had someone send that letter to me, pretending he was in Glasgow.” He paused. “I mean it when I say they’re clever, Your Grace. They knew enough about my father to write a convincing letter. I reckon they know a thing or two about me and you, too.”

“Is he still living here?” Jasper did not recognize the address, but then he rarely had any reason to visit London’s seedier underbelly.

Leon shrugged. “As far as I know.”

“Will you come with me?”

Leon looked up, meeting Jasper’s eye. “I’ve come this far. Might as well see it to the bitter end.” He hesitated, before adding pointedly, “It’s not as if *I* have anyone who’ll miss me if something happens. There’ll be no one left to receive a letter saying I’ve gone to this place or that place to “tend to something” when, really, I’m rotting in a shallow grave somewhere.”

“Nothing will happen to us,” Jasper shot back defiantly. “We are on the side of the righteous, and if they *are* as clever as you say they are, they will think twice before harming a duke. Why, they might even give Damien Byers to me on a silver platter if I can make a tempting enough offer. Money is powerful, Mr. Parbold. If there is one thing I have learned, that is it.”

Leon sighed, his shoulders sagging like he had the weight of the world upon them. “Just make sure you say farewell to your wife in case you don’t see her again. She’ll need the memory of that when she has to grieve you.” He tucked the dossier under his arm. “But if you won’t be dissuaded, so be it. We’ll finish this together.”

“Return here tomorrow evening,” Jasper said, taking a breath. “I do not believe anything bad will happen, but if it should, I

would have one last night and day with my wife, cherishing her and treasuring her as she deserves.”

Leon snorted. “You’re not going to tell her, are you?”

“No,” Jasper replied, getting up. “Good night, Mr. Parbold, and thank you, as always, for your diligent work. I truly am sorry about your father.”

Leon headed for the door, pausing on the threshold. “For what it’s worth, Your Grace, I think you’re making a fatal mistake.”

With that, he headed out, likely knowing that no amount of warning was powerful enough to change Jasper’s mind.

## CHAPTER 29



Marina had not intended to eavesdrop, but she had been passing by the study on her way to fetch something to drink when she had heard the words, “The name of my sister’s killer is in there?” She knew she should not have done it, but it was as though she had not been in control of herself, driven to the study doorway by a wretched curiosity. And though she should have pulled back, given her husband his privacy, that same impulse had kept her by the door until Mr. Parbold made to leave when she had darted away as fast as possible.

Standing alone in the hallway, she did not know what to do. Mr. Parbold had gone, but Jasper was still in the study. But the longer she stood there, the faster Mr. Parbold’s words swirled around and around in her mind: *“You’ll die, Your Grace. They’ll kill you like they killed my father... I heard from Madame Fox that you’re happy, and now, you’ve got someone to take care of. Don’t risk all of that for this, I beg of you.”* And Jasper’s dismissive response, as if Marina, and their marriage, did not matter.

Taking a breath, she marched toward the study door and burst in, not bothering to knock.

Jasper barely looked at her, a glass of brandy glinting in his hand. "I am busy, Marina."

"And I have something to say," Marina replied. "I am ashamed to say it, but I heard everything just now, and as your wife, I would like to offer you my opinion on the matter."

Jasper swirled his drink. "You were eavesdropping? Why would you do such a thing?" His voice was flat and eerie. "Have I given you reason not to trust me?"

"I did not mean to, but... I am not sorry that I overheard," Marina insisted. "I think you would be a fool to pursue this. I understand your pain, I understand how the loss of your sister has tormented you, but... this is not what she would have wanted. She would not have wanted you to risk your life and your happiness for her sake, not if it cannot change anything."

Jasper took a sip. "You did not know her. Do not attempt to speak *for* her." He took another, longer sip. "Indeed, you know nothing of the torment I have endured, nor what this means to me, for if you understood even a sliver of it, you would not ask me to stand down."

"I am asking you to stand down because you will be risking your life, and I will not lose you," she shot back, trembling. "If the risks were lesser, perhaps I would not quarrel, but this affects me as much as it affects you. More so, perhaps. Do not make a widow out of me, Jasper."

He smiled coldly, as if some other man had taken her husband's place. "You have been a distraction, Marina. Because of you, I forgot my purpose. Leon has reminded me

of it tonight.” He finished what was in his glass and poured another. “And considering you heard everything, you will know that nothing you say can dissuade me. I have remembered my purpose. I will not rest until I have gained justice for Priscilla. It is a promise I made, long before I made any promise to you. Why, you ought to be glad that I am so dedicated to my promises.”

“He said you would die,” Marina rasped, her throat tight. “He said these people are untouchable. Forget me for a moment, though it seems you already have—Do you honestly think any sister would want their brother to join them in the hereafter if it could be avoided?”

Jasper shook his head. “She is already resting in peace, but I am not and never will be, unless I take revenge for what was done. I am sorry, Marina, but you will not change my mind. You may rant and rave as much as you please, but you will only tire yourself.”

“I do not matter to you at all?” Her voice cracked, her heart splintering with it. “If you are killed, I will be left alone, grieving. And who is to say the cycle will not continue? What if I, then, must seek justice for you, and it goes on and on, the bodies piling up, and no one having any justice whatsoever?”

Jasper snorted. “Come now, we barely know one another. You would not do that for me.”

“Barely know one another?” Her stomach lurched, thinking of the intimate moments they had shared together, the nights they had spent entangled with one another, learning everything there was to know about each other.



*He is trying to push you away,* her mind whispered urgently, but her heart, sore and aching, was louder.

“It will all be over soon,” he told her coolly. “All you need do is pretend you have not heard anything, remain in this townhouse, do not interfere, and await my return. I will gain my justice tomorrow evening, and then we can carry on as we were.”

Tears stung in Marina’s eyes. “We certainly shall not carry on as we were. If you do this, if you show so little concern for our future together, then... perhaps we ought to reconsider the rules of our marriage.” She sucked in a shaky breath. “If you leave this townhouse tomorrow evening, against my wishes—if you put yourself in harm’s way though I have begged you not to, then I will not be here when you return. I might come back when I feel I can face you again though the rules will become what they were before we wed. If you stay, if you choose life and us, we can carry on as we were.”

Jasper gave a callous shrug. “If that is your preference, I will not argue, but there is little use in you waiting until tomorrow evening. I have made my choice; if you cannot understand or appreciate it, then... perhaps it *would* be best if our rules changed once more, for it means you are not the woman I thought you were.”

“You cannot mean that,” Marina croaked.

“I cannot say we should return to our old rules, but you can?” He arched an eyebrow. “Were you trying to manipulate me into staying? Did you think my resolve would crumble if you threatened me? I do not appreciate ultimatums, Marina, and if you cannot accept that this is something that *must* be done,

then... I will not stop you from behaving as you see fit, just as you will not stop me.”

Marina swallowed thickly. “Then, what was all of that nonsense about wanting to spend one more night and day with me? Where has that Jasper gone? Who is this... this... changeling sitting in front of me, who does not care at all?”

“I *did*, but if all we are going to do is argue, then what is the use?” he replied, so devoid of emotion that she wondered if she was dreaming. This was not the Jasper she cherished, and if this was his attempt to push her away, it was working. Indeed, she did not want to be in the same room as him.

She straightened up, brushing a tear from her cheek. “I am going to retire to our chambers. You can join me if you finally see sense. We can carry on as we were if you decide, after some time alone with your brandy, that you have made a mistake,” she said firmly as her heart shattered. “If you are not in our bed by morning, if you have not come to your senses, I will leave, and you can... do as you please without concern for me, for I shall not be here. I will not wait in this townhouse, suffocated by crushing panic, just to hear the news that you have been killed. I will hear that news, surrounded by people who care, and... I will grieve you though I will hate you eternally for making me.”

With that, she turned and left the room, praying with all her might that, before dawn rose, he would be there in their bed, his arms around her, telling her that he had not meant a word and that, in truth, he treasured her more than his thirst for revenge.



Marina stirred to complete darkness, stretching out like a cat upon the comfortable bed. Someone had tucked her beneath the blankets and coverlets, her body toasty warm though her breath fogged in the air. She propped herself up on her elbows, squinting through gritty eyes at the fireplace opposite. It had gone out, and no one had yet been in to stoke it.

It must be late... or early, she mused, yawning.

Her hand reached out for the other side of the bed, patting the mattress in search of her husband. But all she felt were bed linens, his side unslept in. All at once, their conversation in the study rushed back into her head, her chest aching with the pain of it. He *had* made his choice, and it was not her.

Throwing back the coverlets, hugging herself as a blast of cold air nipped at her bare flesh, she hurried from the bed and pulled on the previous night's clothes. If Jasper thought he could just dismiss her without further argument, he was sorely mistaken. Indeed, she would not stop trying to save him from himself, despite what she had said. Until evening came again, and he left the house to chase after this right-hand man of Grove Street's leader, she would not admit defeat. It was not too late.

Grabbing Jasper's housecoat from the back of the door, she put it on and cinched it tight around her before heading out in search of him. In some foolish way, she wanted to believe that he had just fallen asleep in his study and had intended to come to bed and ask forgiveness, admitting his mistake.

The townhouse was eerily silent as she made her way, barefoot, across the landing and down the stairs to the entrance hall. There, she pricked her ears for any sign of life, hoping she might hear a charming piece of music drifting from the

pianoforte in the drawing room. Deafening silence echoed back. An unnatural silence: the kind her mother used to enlist when she was pretending she was asleep in her bedchamber.

“Jasper?” she called, edging toward the study.

She pushed open the door, wincing at the squeal of old hinges, and peered around. The room beyond was dark and cold, the brandy carafe half as full as it had been when they had last spoken.

Disheartened, she retreated, moving onto the next room... and the next, and the next. All were empty, all were cold, all were devoid of Jasper, leading her to wonder if he had taken a nighttime stroll to clear his head and make his true decision. Mayfair was safe in the daylight, but even though they had argued, Marina did not like the thought of him alone out there in the dark.

She decided to make her way toward the kitchens, for there was always someone in the kitchens, preparing bread for the morning or cleaning up the pots and pans from dinner or checking the larder for the next day’s menu. And if there was no one there, the servants’ quarters adjoined it. She doubted Ms. Dorset would mind a brief intrusion if it pertained to Jasper.

Feeling her way down a shadowed hallway, all the candles blown out, she had made it no more than ten paces before a jarring sound startled the life out of her. A crash of something heavy, coming from the very place she wished to go.

*Thank goodness, someone is awake! They will know where Jasper is, and I will learn what choice he has made.* The thought soothed and unsettled Marina in equal measure, quickening her pace.

Up ahead, welcoming light bled through a crack at the bottom of the kitchen door, and she could hear the shuffle of footsteps across the flagstones. Gladdened, she pushed open the door.

Ms. Dorset was inside, pouring tea. She looked surprised to see Marina standing there. “You’re awake, Your Grace? Is all well?”

“Do... you know where Jasper is?” Marina asked quietly, her heart clenching in her chest. “I could not find him.”

Ms. Dorset frowned. “He left a while ago in the curricle. Said not to worry if he was not back by morning, for he had some business to attend to.”

“Not to worry if he was not back by morning?” Marina croaked.

Ms. Dorset paused. “I might have been mistaken. It was something to that effect, but... I can’t remember rightly.” She got up. “Is something the matter?”

“No, not anymore,” Marina replied. “Please, might you have the carriage prepared. I also have some business to attend to.”

“At this hour?”

Marina nodded, thinking of all the luggage they had, thankfully, not yet unpacked. “At once, if you please.”

## CHAPTER 30



Jasper's leg jiggled up and down as the curricle turned a shady corner onto the street where Damien Byers lived. It was way past midnight, frost glittering on the cobbled streets in a part of the city where nothing good came of being out after dark.

"Might I ask what we're doing here, Your Grace?" the anxious driver asked and with good reason, for even a simple curricle like theirs could identify them as a valuable target. Jasper would have driven himself, but he had not known what he would do when he reached the address that Leon had left for him. If he felt compelled to confront Damien, he would need someone to watch the curricle in case he needed to make a hasty escape.

"For now, nothing," Jasper replied, gazing up at the grim façade of the building on Leon's note.

A few candles flickered behind soot-stained windows, but he could not figure out which window belonged to Damien. So, he watched, and he waited, hoping for some kind of sign to guide his next move.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” the driver whispered, “but I don’t think it’s safe for you to be here.”

Jasper put a finger to his lips, his gaze trained upon the windows.

He had not intended to come to this address that night, content to do what he had said to Leon, spending a night and a day with his wife before coming here. But after their argument, after all the painful things she had said about returning to a marriage of convenience, he had not been able to sleep, his mind thrumming with guilt and conflict, and rather than tossing and turning alone in a guest bedchamber, he had decided to venture out. Just to look, not to do anything foolish, or so he kept telling himself.

The minutes ticked by, and as he sat there, watching the darkened windows of the dismal Shoreditch lodgings where Damien Byers lived, he felt... nothing. Nothing but the urge to return to his wife and apologize before begging her forgiveness for behaving so coldly. He had done it to put distance between them, to make his final pursuit of revenge easier, but it had achieved the opposite. Indeed, if he did not have Marina at the end of it, he was not sure that gaining any justice would matter.

He had expected to feel a surge of vengeance, a bloodthirsty need to jump from the curricula, barge through the front door, and knock on every door therein until he found the cretin. He had expected his heart to want action, to punish Damien by throwing him into the street and running over him, the way he had done to Priscilla. But nothing so grisly entered his thoughts. Instead, visions of his beautiful wife rippled like reflections on water, whispering a Siren call to summon him home.



*What is this?* He fidgeted, shifting awkwardly in his seat. *Why do I feel nothing? Where is the venom of the past three years?* His heart had been torn in two different directions, and it seemed that Marina had possession of the larger portion.

“Would you take me to this address?” he asked the driver, repeating the residence of Genevieve Fox. Her old address.

The driver seemed relieved. “At once, Your Grace.”

The curricle wheeled around, the pair of horses whinnying their gratitude as they took off at a clip, leaving the lodgings of Damien Byers in the frost.



The driver seemed utterly baffled as they arrived at the former townhouse of Genevieve Fox, only to move on immediately, following a course that Jasper directed. They trundled through a labyrinth of cobbled streets, cutting down a wide carriageway, squeezing along an alleyway that would not have allowed a larger carriage to pass, and came to a familiar road, just off Drury Lane, no more than twenty minutes from Mayfair.

“Here,” Jasper said, raising a hand. “Stop here.”

The driver did as commanded, pulling the curricle to the side of the road to allow others to pass.

Jasper got out, looking both ways before walking to the spot in the middle of the road where a cobblestone was missing. The spot where his sister had perished, alone, with no one to help her. They had followed the exact route she had taken on the night he lost her.

There, he crouched down, touching his fingertips to the hollow where a cobblestone should have been. “What do I do, Cilla?” His voice hitched. “I have been single-minded in my purpose for three years, and now that the opportunity is within my grasp, I... am lost. I just want to go home to my wife and forget it all. You would love her, by the way, and I am certain she would love you more than she loves me.”

A crow fluttered down from a nearby rooftop, tilting its head, staring at him with beady eyes.

“I have no crumbs,” he told the bird. “Shoo!”

The crow did not even flinch.

He stared at the creature. “If I am supposed to believe that is you, Cilla, you will be sorely disappointed. You always hated crows. You were terrified of them. I remember you running to Mother, crying inconsolably, telling her that you were going to die because a crow had landed on your shoulder.” He paused, considering. “No, that is ridiculous. You are not a crow, Cilla.”

The bird cawed loudly at him, hopping forward.

He frowned, realizing that any onlookers would think him quite mad. “Is this meant to be a sign from you? If so, I do not

know what it means. Am I to avenge you or return home to my wife and... try to make peace with what cannot be changed?" He shook his head sadly. "I do not know that I can ever really be at peace if you do not have justice, Cilla. For goodness' sake, I am talking to a crow as if it is you. How peaceful can my mind be?"

The crow hopped closer, tilting its head from side to side as though it was assessing him. Stretching out its head, it boldly tapped the ring upon his finger and leaped back.

"My ring?" He stared at the signet ring, a piece of jewelry he had only begun to wear again a couple of weeks ago, after Marina had found it in a box. Engraved on the gold surface was an 'M,' for the ring had once been his father's—Mark Armitage.

The crow dared to tap the ring again, likely drawn by the glint of it in the glow of the streetlamps.

All of a sudden, he burst out laughing, startling the bird up into the air. It fluttered off in a huff, landing back on the rooftop it had flown down from, cawing its displeasure. Jasper did not really believe that the crow was Priscilla incarnate, or Priscilla sending him a message from the hereafter, but he *did* believe in curious coincidences. Indeed, he had asked for a sign, and one had been delivered, whether it was by accident or not.

"Is she my peace?" He glanced up at the crow, smiling.

The crow cawed back, ruffling its feathers.

“So,” he said softly, touching that hollow in the cobblestones once more, “this *is* the end. Not justice, not vengeance, but... moving on, forgetting without forgiving.”

It would be a struggle, he knew that, but Leon and Marina had both been right; he had just been too blinded by the name of his sister’s killer to see it. If Jasper went ahead with his scheme of revenge, he would risk losing everything that had become precious to him. Worse still, Marina risked losing everything that had become precious to her. After all, he would not be the one left behind to pick up their pieces, desperately trying to stick the fragments back together into some semblance of what had existed before.

Before Marina, his future had not mattered. Now, he wanted a life with her more than he wanted to give everything of himself to punishing the man who ended Priscilla’s life. He had just needed time, as Marina had suggested, to figure that out.

He looked toward the sky, grateful that it was still dark. She had given him until dawn, and he would not be late. He would not disappoint her, and he would beg on his knees if that was what she desired, so she would know that he was not the wretch she had spoken with in his study. That he had made his decision, and his decision was she. She and their future.

He pressed a kiss to his fingertips and touched it to the spot where his sister had taken her last breath. “I shall never forget *you*,” he whispered. “I miss you, always.”

A breath of wind nipped his cheek, and he was quite content, just this once, to pretend that it was a kiss goodbye from Priscilla.

With that, he got up and made his way back to the curricule. The driver could not look him in the eyes, probably believing that his master was a madman.

“Where to, Your Grace?” he asked.

Jasper sighed. “Home. I have some groveling to do.”

## CHAPTER 31



“*M*arina?” Nancy rubbed her bleary eyes as she stepped into the drawing room where Marina sat, two valises at her feet. “I thought I was dreaming when the housekeeper told me you were here. Are you well? Is something the matter?”

Marina shook her head. “I... do not think I can return to that townhouse.”

“Which townhouse?” Nancy yawned, taking a seat on the opposite settee.

“The one I share with my husband. I do not think I can return to that place or to him,” Marina replied.

Nancy’s eyes widened, her sleepiness evaporating. “Whatever do you mean? What has happened, dear cousin? Has he hurt you? Has he been unfaithful? You were so happy when I last wrote to you. I was desperate to hear everything when we were supposed to meet later this week.”

“It is... hard to explain,” Marina whispered, her throat constricted. But she tried her best, telling her cousin

everything that had happened that night though it felt like an eternity ago that she had quarreled with Jasper in his study. “And now, *I* am sitting here, feeling sick with worry and guilt while he is out there somewhere, facing unknown dangers. I could not persuade him, Nancy, and... he would not listen. I do not even know if I will see him again, and... I just could not stay there and wait.”

Nancy rushed over to Marina’s settee, putting her arms around her cousin. “You have come to the right place, dearest cousin,” she assured. “I will wake Adam and see if we cannot rouse a search party to look for him before it is too late.”

“I cannot ask you to do that,” Marina said quietly, trembling as she held her head in her hands.

“You do not have to ask me. It is my honor and my duty as your cousin to help,” Nancy insisted. “Do you have any notion of where he might be?”

Marina shrugged. “Somewhere called Grove Street, I expect. It seems he decided to meet with this... wretched man earlier than agreed, perhaps to surprise him. I do not know.”

“That is an excellent start.” Nancy kissed Marina’s brow. “You wait here while I inform Adam of what has happened. Do not worry about anything. Jasper will be found before he can make a terrible mistake, and... if you decide that you really cannot return to him, then you shall have a place here for as long as you need. At our country estate, too. It is the least I can do, for... I fear I pushed too many of my hopes onto you. I am sorry for that, and I am sorry that... grief has eaten away at him so much that he cannot see the wonder that is right in front of him. I am sorry he was cruel. Please, warm yourself and do not fret. I shall return in a moment.”

Soon enough, the house was awake, and Adam was running hither and thither with the youngest and most capable members of the household. He fetched something from a box in the drawing room that looked alarmingly like a set of pistols and tucked them into the waist of his trousers.

“For safety,” he explained to Marina, who stared in alarm. “We shall find that pesky husband of yours and ensure he returns to you. If you wish to see him, that is. If not, we shall protect you in our household until you have made a decision. But...” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“But what?” Marina dared to ask.

Adam puffed out a breath. “I know this is not what you want to hear, but if someone were to hurt Nancy, if someone were to cause Nancy’s death, there is nothing upon this Earth that could prevent me from finding the wretch and taking justice. If I knew it would mean certain death, I would still do it.”

“But Nancy is your wife, not your sister,” Marina reminded him.

Adam smiled tightly. “There is that. But let us use the same notion—would you not do everything within your power to seek vengeance for Nancy? I know she would do the same for Joanna, even if it meant me losing her. She would not rest, and... I doubt she would listen to reason, either. Just consider that before you decide to sever ties with him for good. After all, if we cannot find him and something happens, you will have regrets that will haunt you as I am certain he will regret pursuing this if he lives. I do not say this to scare you but to prepare you.”



“Adam!” Nancy chided, stepping into the drawing room. “She does not need a lecture from you, my love. She is scared, she is upset, and this is going to be a very long night. I am sure everything you have said is nothing she has not already thought, and if she is here, then that is insurmountable for her.”

Adam shrugged. “Apologies, Marina. My intentions were good, I promise.”

“I know,” Marina said softly, feeling a little foolish. *Had* she reacted too intensely? Had she been too hasty, not waiting until morning as she had promised? Adam’s words had sent her mind into a spin, her certainty dwindling. It’s true, she would have done everything to get justice if something terrible had happened to one of her favorite cousins. Yet, she could not quite get over the fact that Jasper was willing to risk his life, put her through the potential Hell of grieving his loss, without so much as a reconsideration.

Nancy sat down beside her, hugging her close. “Pay no heed to him. I would be furious too if Adam did something like this.”

“But you would risk your life to get revenge for Joanna?” Marina had to ask.

Nancy frowned, pursing her lips. “No, I do not think I would. I would want to, but with my husband and children to consider, I would... resist. I would have to, for their sakes.”

“Truly?”

“Truly, but then, I am not a man,” Nancy replied. “They think differently than we do.”

Marina nodded, pondering. “Yes, I suppose they do.”

*What are you thinking right now, Jasper?* she wondered. *Are you thinking about me at all? Is it... changing your mind?* She did not dare to hope, but until the sun came up, she would not lose all faith that he might yet surprise her. And if he returned to an empty townhouse, he might finally realize what he stood to lose if he did not put his sister to rest, at long last, and his need for revenge with it.



A soft knocking sound awoke Marina from where she had fallen asleep on the settee. Nancy was asleep on the opposite settee, but there was no sign of Adam or the male servants he had taken out with him to search for Jasper. Marina frowned, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from.

She got up and made her way out into the hall where the knocking grew louder. There was someone at the door.

Glancing back to make sure Nancy was still asleep, Marina approached the main door, pausing again to see if any of the remaining servants would answer the knocking. When no one came, she puffed out a breath and pulled open the door, her heart half hoping she would find Jasper standing there, his expression remorseful.

Instead, she found herself looking at the butler, Mr. Willacy. “Yes?” she asked, noticing the carriage by the pavement outside. It was familiar, emblazoned with Jasper’s coat of arms.

“Apologies for the intrusion, Your Grace, but... His Grace has asked if he might see you for a moment,” the butler explained, his voice nervous. “He understands that you do not wish to talk to him, at present, but... he would just like a second of your time. I believe he hopes to give you an apology.”

Marina’s gaze flitted skyward. It was still dark with hours until dawn. She had promised Jasper to wait that long, and if she suddenly changed the rules, she realized it might make her something of a hypocrite. More to the point, part of her wanted to hear the apology. She wanted to hear that he had chosen her and that he was sorry for worrying her.

“Very well,” Marina said, edging out of the townhouse, leaving the door ajar behind her.

Icy air nipped her cheeks as she made her slow descent down the porch steps, and looking left and right to make sure no one was watching her approach a carriage in the middle of the night, she went to the carriage door. The butler hurried to open it for her, standing with his head bowed beside her as he pulled it wide.

There were no lanterns lit inside the carriage, the entire thing steeped in darkness. Yet, in the silence, she heard breathing. The breathing of more than one person.

“Jasper?” she said quietly, a cold sweat prickling down the back of her neck.

“Afraid not,” Mr. Willacy replied, shoving her hard into the darkness. More hands grappled for her, covering her mouth and holding her arms and legs as Mr. Willacy leaped into the carriage and banged hard on the side. A moment later, the carriage pulled away, and she knew that no one was taking her to Jasper.

She had been tricked, likely by the very gang that her husband was pursuing. He had not just put his own life at risk but hers too. And she had answered the door.



Jasper yawned, realizing the carriage had arrived back at the townhouse. In the distance, a church tolled four times, marking the late hour though it was still thankfully not dawn. He had time to make amends.

*I will have every day and night with you, my love,* he promised as he emerged from the carriage and bounded up the steps to the front door, eager to wake his wife and hold her in his arms. More than anything, he longed to tell her of the decision he had made, to choose her and put his sister to rest, once and for all. Her ghost had been kept alive by him for much too long.

He raced up the staircase with an anxious excitement and leaped into the bedchamber, expecting to see his wife lying there, perhaps only half covered by the linens.

“Marina?” He squinted into the gloom, approaching. “Marina, I—”

His brow furrowed as he patted the tousled sheets, finding no one tangled within them. Disappointed, he turned on his heel and marched back out, hurrying down to the entrance hall. Shoes clicking on the parquet, he stopped and turned around in slow circles, listening out for any wifely sounds. Hearing none, he hurried along the hallway to the kitchens, wondering if he might find his wife there, sipping hot tea and cursing his name with Ms. Dorset.

*She would not have departed already*, he told himself, his stomach churning. *She said I had until dawn*. But what if the empty bed had told her enough? What if he *had* waited too long to come to his senses? He prayed he was mistaken, but the fear lingered in the eerily silent house.

The moment he opened the kitchen door, he knew something was wrong. Ms. Dorset sat at the workbench, clutching a letter in her hand, tears streaming down her cheeks.

He ran to the housekeeper. “What is wrong? Where is Marina?”

“I... do not know,” Ms. Dorset wheezed, gulping down air. “I do not understand it. She... went to her cousin’s residence. I tried to convince her not to, but she would... not hear it. But she should have been... safe, Your Grace. I... do not think she is safe.”

Jasper frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I think someone... took her,” Ms. Dorset croaked. “I couldn’t sleep after Her Grace left, so I thought I’d... dust some things.

Then, not too long ago, I heard the door open and close. I thought it was you. I went... to see, but there was only... this letter on the floor. I... think something terrible has happened to Her Grace. And I think I know... at least one person who is responsible.”

Jasper reeled, taking a moment to gather his thoughts and ease the boil of his anger down to a simmer. “What letter?”

“This one.” Ms. Dorset handed him a half-crumpled rectangle of paper.

“And who do you think did it?” It took every shred of willpower Jasper possessed to keep his voice even.

“Mr. Willacy took the carriage a while ago. He didn’t see me watching. The carriage returned briefly, then this letter was put through the door, and then... the carriage went away again,” Ms. Dorset explained, tears shining in her eyes. “I wouldn’t have let her go, Your Grace, if I’d known something would happen to her. But why would anyone do this to her? Why? I cannot fathom it.”

“I think I know,” Jasper seethed, rage pulsing through his veins.

Mr. Willacy had been Jasper’s butler for many years, always diligent and trustworthy, but what if someone had offered him something tempting enough to betray his master? A small fortune, perhaps, in exchange for unlocking one little window.

Jasper felt sick as his own words came back to haunt him: “Money is powerful, Mr. Parbold. If there is one thing I have learned, that is it.”

With a shaky hand, he smoothed out the letter, written in a neat cursive, his heart in his mouth as he read by the dim light of the kitchen.

*Your Grace,*

*It is with great regret that I inform you that your bed will lie empty tonight. We have your wife in our custody though her fate shall rely entirely upon your good behavior. Come to the lodgings of Damien Byers tomorrow night at nine o'clock sharp—we are aware that you know where it is, so I shall not include an address. Do not even consider enlisting the help of Bow Street. If you do not come alone, she will suffer for your disobedience, and you will lose all hope of seeing her again. Alive, at least.*

*Yours Faithfully,*

*Grove Street, Esq.*

## CHAPTER 32



Jasper knew that the Grove Street Gang had chosen nine o'clock in the evening in order to torment him, playing tricks with his mind as well as his heart. He imagined them laughing at their ingenuity, mocking the frantic strain of having to wait so long just to find out what his wife's fate would be. Either that, or it was a cleverer tactic, designed to weaken him, to make him desperate, so that he would agree to anything they asked.

But time was ignorant to the struggles of one man, and though it had taken a strenuous age to arrive, nine o'clock chimed from the church bells at long last. Outside the familiar, miserable lodgings on a cramped and crowded row of broken-tooth buildings in Shoreditch, Jasper alighted from the curricle and walked solemnly to the front door. It hung half open on bent hinges, and he pushed on inside without knocking, for it seemed to be a communal building, occupied by more souls than it was supposed to hold.

Remembering that Damien Byers lived on the topmost floor, Jasper climbed, the rickety stairs groaning and wheezing beneath his weight. Several times, he thought he was about to fall through to a grisly demise, but the stairs clung on, and he continued toward the highest heights of the building.



On the topmost floor, practically in the rafters, there were two doors: one on either side. Uncertain of which one to choose, he decided to go with the mark of the devil, for it seemed appropriate. With a breath, he touched the spot above his tailbone, reassured by the jut of metal and wood, and knocked upon the left-hand door.

The door flew wide, and a hand shot out of the darkness, grabbing him by the front of his greatcoat, hauling him inside before he could even raise a fist to defend himself. There, that same, rough hand shoved him forward into a pool of moonlight that shone in from a gaping hole in the roof.

Opposite, a man in a hood, his face entirely shrouded, sat upon a three-legged chair. “Welcome, Your Grace,” he said in a voice that echoed the writing on the letter. A smooth, refined voice that seemed out of place in a room so grim and dilapidated. “I would invite you to sit, but I have only this chair, and even this one is missing a leg.”

“Where is she?” Jasper hissed, trying to catch some hint of the man’s features, but the hood made it impossible.

The man wagged a finger. “All in good time, Your Grace.” He sighed. “I had hoped you would relent, but you were always tenacious, like your father before you. A good friend of mine, once. It is for that reason, and that reason alone, that you are standing before me now, unharmed.”

“Do I... know you?”

The man chuckled. “Goodness, no. In passing, perhaps, but you would not know my face nor my name. Your father never

did like the way I executed my business matters, so our friendship faded away, but I have kept an interest in your family.” He bowed his head, the hood falling further across his shadowed face. “Indeed, I *was* sorry to hear about your sister. I mean that. I even punished the man who hit her curricule and left her to die, once I found out who had done it.”

“The man who lives here, you mean?” Jasper recognized the voice, but he could not put his finger on the name that belonged to it. It was on the tip of his tongue.

The hooded man shook his head. “He does not live here any longer. He died, three years ago.”

“What?”

“The man you have been searching for is already dead at my hand,” the man replied. “That is why I hoped you would cease your prying into our little band of merry men, for the wretched imp stole my own carriage and drove it, so inebriated he could not have *walked* in a straight line that night, much less managed a landau by himself. I knew you might eventually be led to me, if you continued your search, though I had no part in it. Over the last couple of years, I have considered writing to you, to tell you that particular story, but I feared it might only encourage you to keep pursuing your... vendetta.”

Jasper balled his hands into fists, shaking with rage. “Who are you?”

“Observe the hood, Your Grace. If I wanted you to know who I was, I would not be wearing it,” the man replied. “This gang of mine is of great use to me, and you are endangering the

efficacy of it. Now, you likely think me a brute, but I do not harm those who have not harmed me or my business. Pursuing me or any of my men, who might lead you to me, is something I consider harmful. But, as I mentioned, you are here, unharmed, as a courtesy to an old friend.”

“And Marina?” Her name was a painful barb in Jasper’s mouth.

The man nodded. “She will be returned to you as another courtesy that I do not usually offer, but there is a condition.” He sniffed. “You must cease. Forget what happened to your sister, forget the dossier created by Mr. Parbold Senior, forget the emblem on the side of the carriage that struck Lady Priscilla. Forget all of this unpleasantness. Only then will your wife be restored to you in the exact condition that she was taken from your house.”

“I had ceased,” Jasper said bitterly. “The night you took her, I *had* ceased. I had decided to give up on this painful endeavor, once and for all.”

The man clapped his hands together. “Well then, I suspect this shall be rather simple for you.”

“I had no quarrel with you,” Jasper continued, shifting his position, feeling the dig of a pistol’s muzzle in his flesh. “My only quarrel was with Damien Byers, but as you have “dealt with him,” I suppose there is nothing more between us. I cannot have justice, I cannot be without my wife, so there is no choice but to accept your conditions.”

“You will forget all of this?” the man pressed.

Jasper knew he could not act rashly, for he had not yet seen that Marina was safe. Yet, the muzzle of the pistol dug more insistently into his spine, urging him to make a very different decision than the one he had planned to make when he arrived. He had brought the pistol for protection only, but what if it could remove a repugnant pustule from society?

What would Marina do? He wracked his brain, the answer coming to him slowly. *She would choose peace. She would not see me make a killer out of myself, after all I have done in the name of justice. She did not believe in an eye for an eye, instead knowing that such a thing simply made everyone blind.*

“Did you kill those harlots who exonerated Sir Bartholomew?” Jasper had to ask.

The hooded man chuckled. “I did not. They were paid for their silence, a little too late, I admit, but they are not dead. They were merely hiding from that investigator of yours when he came searching again, for I warned them that there would be no leniency next time.”

“And what is your business exactly?”

“Underground gambling halls, boxing matches, brothels, opium dens—everything that makes an inordinate amount of money but is frowned upon by the world that *we* come from, Your Grace,” the man replied. “I might be considered an evil man by many, but I am a hero to many more.”

Jasper narrowed his eyes. “Show me your face, and I swear I will not pursue you or mention you or think of you again. I

would know, gentleman to gentleman, who I am speaking with.” He paused. “This is *my* condition, to forget that you stole my wife from my townhouse on the very night that I decided I would forgive and forget what happened to my sister.”

“You realize what will happen if I show you my face and Bow Street appear on my door tomorrow, do you not?” the man said. “I am the head of this organization, yes, but if you lop me off, the Grove Street Gang will not disappear; they will simply have no one of sense leading them, keeping order. They will run wild, and London will *truly* have chaos to contend with. Consider that.”

Jasper straightened up. “I am a gentleman of my word, like my father. Nor will I risk my wife being taken from me again.”

The hooded man stood up slowly, the chair rocking as he left it. As he brought his hands up to pull back the hood, Jasper noticed that his skin was more weathered than he had expected. Older.

Jasper held his breath as the man removed his hood, keeping his head bowed for a moment, before stepping into the pool of moonlight and raising his eyes to Jasper’s.

A gasp shattered the silence, escaping Jasper’s lips. “Why did you say I did not know you?”

Of all the people he might have guessed, the man standing in front of him would not have had a place on the list.

## CHAPTER 33



“*I* thought it would make matters easier,” Lord Kinsale said, adjusting his cravat. “I trust you are satisfied?”

Jasper blinked. “No, I am not satisfied. You were present at my wedding. You were a friend to me, yet you kept the secret of my sister’s demise? You robbed me of justice. You stole my wife from our home. How could I possibly be satisfied?”

“We had an agreement,” Lord Kinsale answered, a note of warning in his voice.

Jasper shook his head slowly, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. “Did you also kill Mr. Parbold Senior?”

“Mr. Parbold Senior is quite well, working for me in Glasgow,” Lord Kinsale replied.

“That is a lie. His son told me so.”

“His son made assumptions,” Lord Kinsale insisted, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “I can send for the father if that would appease you? He knew. He came to these very lodgings,

presumably for the same reason you are here. I made him an offer, he accepted. I am generous, Your Grace, and everyone has a price.”

Confusion fogged Jasper’s brain, fighting to figure out what was the truth and what was a lie. “I do not believe you,” he said, at last. “Damien Byers was your right-hand man. I do not believe you would kill him if he was of value to you. I do not believe that Mr. Parbold Senior is alive. I do not believe that those witnesses were left unharmed.”

Lord Kinsale rolled his eyes and put up his hands in a gesture of mock surrender. “Very well, you have caught me in a lie.” He paused. “Just one, though. I am telling the truth about everyone but Damien. You are right; he was of value to me, and I covered up what he did for the benefit of my businesses. No one knew them the way Damien did, no one had control of them the way he did.”

“Yet, you are still speaking of him in the past tense,” Jasper pointed out, not sure whether to feel vindicated or more confused.

Lord Kinsale shrugged. “He has ceased to be useful to me. I suspect what happened to your sister was the beginning of it, for he could not forget it. I did think about taking his life as justice for your sister’s, but he pleaded for clemency. I gave it. But he started drinking to excess and sampling the opium in the dens, hiding it well enough for a long time, but after those witnesses were found, and he realized you had not given up your search for him, his behavior worsened drastically.” He paused. “I was not lying when I said I am a fair and generous man who harms only those who would harm me, but if it is a pound of flesh you must have, then... I will give him to you. That is my exchange for stealing your wife and covering up

the incident with Lady Priscilla, and, of course, for your silence regarding my identity. I suspect that is a fair price.”

For reasons he could not quite explain, Jasper knew that Lord Kinsale was telling the truth this time. There was a defeated tone in his voice, a weariness in his wise eyes, like he was finished trying to hide another man’s wicked mistakes.

“Bring him here,” Jasper said, nodding.

Lord Kinsale put his fingers to his lips, blasting a loud whistle. The door opened, and two men entered, bowing their heads to their master. “Fetch Damien.”

“He’s not in any state to walk by himself,” one of the men said nervously.

“I did not ask for a description of his condition, I asked for you to fetch him here,” Lord Kinsale growled back.

The man bowed lower. “Of course, Your Lordship.”

He hurried from the room with his associate, leaving Jasper and Lord Kinsale alone once more. Footsteps echoed across the landing outside, and Jasper heard the shriek of hinges, suspecting that both rooms on the topmost floor belonged to the Grove Street Gang. Perhaps, the entire building.

*I am surrounded by the enemy, he realized with a jolt. I must be cautious.*



“I can have everyone else brought here too if that would appease you?” Lord Kinsale said drily. “On my beloved wife’s life, I have not lied about anything else. I am not a villain, Your Grace, just a gentleman trying to build a fortune to leave to my descendants. My own father frittered everything away. When I inherited, I was left destitute, sitting upon a mountain of my father’s debt. Everything I have, I have made with my own two hands, and one cannot do that without getting one’s hands somewhat dirty. Your friend, Genevieve, would understand.”

Jasper narrowed his eyes. “Is she associated with you?”

“No, but she is a free woman because of me,” Lord Kinsale replied. “I paid the judge to be lenient. I did so because her husband was a wretched creature who deserved his fate, and I intend to help her son with his education. She would be in jail if not for me.”

Jasper’s jaw dropped. “Are you trying to make me admire you?”

“That depends. Do you?” Lord Kinsale grinned. “All I am guilty of, at least in respect to you, is protecting an associate. You cannot blame a man for that, when the income of many relied upon his identity remaining a secret.”

“How many?”

Lord Kinsale shrugged. “A hundred souls, at least. Men and women who would have nothing if I had not taken them under my wing. If anyone finds out about us, if anyone informs Bow Street, many lives will suffer. The families of those in my

employ, who are not fortunate like us; they do not have other means.”

“And what of my butler—what price did he accept to open the cellar window and allow your men in?” Jasper had forgotten Mr. Willacy but no longer. He would have every answer he desired before Damien Byers came into the room.

Lord Kinsale chuckled. “He has been employed in my service for three years, Your Grace. I needed an informant, so I would know if you were getting too close to the truth, and he was more than willing.” He wafted a dismissive hand. “I could bring him here, if you like, to join Mr. Byers? It *is* a betrayal, I suppose, and most men would desire justice.”

“No, that will not be necessary,” Jasper replied, already planning to dismiss the fellow from his employment. To someone like Mr. Willacy, a lifelong butler serving diligently in but a handful of households, a dismissal would be a fate worse than death.

Just then, the door blew open and the two men from before carried another man between them. Jasper observed the limp figure, who groaned and scuffed his feet against the floorboards, trying to put weight on to legs that would not hold him. The fellow’s eyes were glassy and rolling, his skin ashen. For three years, Jasper had envisioned a monster, but the man before him was stick thin, wizened before his time, and... remarkably pitiful.

“Put him in the chair,” Lord Kinsale instructed, and the men obeyed. “Would you like an audience, Your Grace, or shall we leave to exact your punishment as you see fit?”

The two men who had brought Damien in exchanged a worried look. “What punishment, Your Lordship?” one asked Lord Kinsale. “You’re not... having him killed, are you? He’s got a wife and four babes. The fifth is coming soon.”

“That is His Grace’s decision,” Lord Kinsale replied. “Damien has had his freedom for three years when, by rights, he should have served a harsh sentence for his part in a young lady’s death. I am remedying a mistake.”

The two men bowed their heads, nodding their understanding, as if they, too, had expected this day to come eventually.

Lord Kinsale smiled like they were just signing an ordinary contract. “So, what shall it be? Would you like us to give you two a moment alone, so you can make your decision about his fate?”

“Yes,” Jasper said thickly. “And when I am done, I would like you to bring my wife to me. If there is even a scratch upon her, there will be consequences.”

Lord Kinsale chuckled. “She is unharmed and untouched.” He headed for the door, putting his hood back over his head. “I shall await you outside on the landing. Try not to make too much noise; we have neighbors to consider.”

His smug laughter followed him out, the door slamming shut on its rusty hinges. At last, Jasper was alone and face-to-face with the man who had caused Priscilla’s death. But similar to when he had sat in the curricule the previous night, staring up at darkened windows, he did not feel what he had expected to feel. He felt... sorry for the man draped over the three-legged

chair, mumbling incoherently, drooling out of the corner of his mouth.

“Damien Byers?” Jasper said, drawing out the pistol.

The man half lifted his weak head, squinting in Jasper’s direction. “Don’t... know you,” he slurred. “Do I... know you?”

“Were you the one who hit my sister’s curricle, three years ago, on a street by Drury Lane?” Jasper swallowed, surprised to find that his hand was shaking on the handle of the weapon.

The man made a strangled sound, his head lolling forward. “Should’ve... saved her,” he whimpered. “Didn’t see... her.”

“How would you feel if someone left your wife or your sister or your child in the street, wounded? How would you feel if someone did not stop to help but drove their carriage over them?” Jasper seethed, forcing the words past the lump that formed in his throat. “How would you feel if she lay there, dying and alone?”

The man raised his limp hands to his face, holding his head as great sobs shook his frail body. “I’d... kill the bastard... who did it,” he mumbled, drifting in and out of something like clarity. “His Lordship... should’ve killed me. I wish... I wish he had.”

Jasper stared at the man who had haunted his thoughts for three years, remembering the fleeting peace he had felt when he had gone to visit the spot where Priscilla died. He had

asked himself if he could ever really be at peace, knowing that the man who ended her life was still out there somewhere, living freely. But this man was not living; he was not even existing. He was a ghost made of flesh and bone, hollowed out to a husk. Indeed, it seemed that Damien Byers had tortured himself over that night just as much as Jasper had.

*If it is permitted to fester, it will eat you up until there is nothing left. Do not let it harden your heart,* Marina's voice whispered in Jasper's head, confirming the decision he had already made. Killing this man would be a mercy in many ways, but Jasper knew he would wear the mark of it for the rest of his days.

Jasper lowered the pistol. "You will be punished," he said, "but not by my hand, this day. You will face the law, and *they* shall decide your fate."

"No!" Damien barked. "Kill me! Do it! I can't... bear this anymore!"

Jasper mustered a sad smile. "You will have to." He walked to the door and opened it, looking out to find Lord Kinsale and his two associates waiting, an expression of intrigue etched upon the former's face. "Lord Kinsale, you will accompany me to Bow Street. I shall hold true to my promise, but Mr. Byers will face his judgment in a court of law. That is my price for holding my tongue."

"An interesting choice," Lord Kinsale said with a shrug. "Very well, but I must warn you that if you *do* break your promise, I will find you and your wife, and I will not be courteous the next time."

Jasper nodded. "I am under no illusions. I will heed your warning." He paused. "But do me one favor, would you?"

"More than I have already done?" Lord Kinsale arched an eyebrow.

"It is not for me, but for Leon Parbold. Have his father sent back to London. Give him peace," Jasper said. "If nothing else, it will be proof to me that you have not lied about anything else."

Lord Kinsale smiled. "That, I can manage." He looked to his associates. "Bring Mr. Byers down to the street, and have the Duchess brought to Bow Street. A debt has been settled today, so let us not delay in moving on with our respective lives."

The two gruff men went into the attic room and dragged Damien out, the feeble man weeping at the injustice of *not* being killed at the hand of the man who sought revenge. He wailed all the way down the rickety staircase, reassuring Jasper that the right decision had been made, and though he did not agree with Lord Kinsale's "business endeavors," nor the way he conducted said business, it was no business of his. Although, if Lord Kinsale thought that Jasper would *not* be keeping a discreet eye on him in the future, he was sorely mistaken.

*I shall decide what manner of man you are, once I have all the evidence,* Jasper vowed, nodding to Lord Kinsale as he made his own way down the stairs. For now, Jasper was just desperate to see his wife again, to hold her in his arms again, to know that she was safe. *That* would be the true price for his silence. If there was a single bruise upon her, all agreements were null and void.

## CHAPTER 34



A carriage jostled Marina from side to side as she sat wedged between two of her kidnappers. Kidnappers who seemed to have no problem talking about her as if she was not there. Then again, it was a refreshing change from the silence she had endured since they took her from Nancy's residence, for she had been held captive in a simple, relatively empty room in a house she did not recognize, all alone. She had been guarded at all hours, but no one had spoken to her until they bundled her back into the carriage twenty minutes earlier.

"What did His Lordship say, though?" one man growled, pricking up Marina's ears. "What are we doin' with her now?"

A hand of fear tightened around Marina's throat. *They are going to kill me, she knew. Jasper put me in harm's way because he would not listen to reason, and now... they are going to take my life.*

She still did not know if he had been captured too, or if he had proceeded as planned with Leon while believing she was at her cousin's residence: a problem, in his mind, for after he had gained his beloved justice. It was certainly after nine o'clock which meant he had either triumphed, or he had failed, and she could not think of that. It was too awful.

“His Lordship didn’t say anything, just told us to take her to the place,” another man replied tersely. “Stop yer whining. You’ve not got anywhere better to be.”

*Is that... the British Museum?* Marina saw it through a gap in the carriage curtains, conjuring a map in her mind of where they were. Her hands and legs were not bound, but if she tried to escape, they would surely catch her. She would have to be quick, choosing her moment carefully.

“He’ll want her in the Thames with the rest,” a third man growled. “Don’t know why you’re complaining. It’ll be over soon. His Lordship is nothing if not quick when there’s trouble.”

The first man laughed. “Bet that Duke wishes he’d stayed well out of it.”

“If he doesn’t now, he will,” the third man chimed in, laughing sourly.

*So, he is still alive?* Marina’s heart leaped with a strained sort of relief.

Steeling herself, she looked at the men opposite. “Whatever you are planning to do with me,” she said firmly, “do not do it. I can pay you. I have trinkets that are worth a great deal. If you take me to an address I can give you, or leave me somewhere safe, I shall not speak a word of what has happened. There is no need for you to hurt me. My husband does not even like me, so if you think I will be a useful bargaining tool, you are mistaken.”



“Begging won’t help you, Miss,” a gruff voice said.

“I am not begging, I am bargaining. Surely, there is something you want? I can give it if you but name it,” she urged, her stomach churning as the words left her mouth. What if they misunderstood? After all, there were some things she would not give.

A different, familiar voice cut in. “She’ll tell that mother of hers, and when she does, we’ll all be finding ourselves at the gallows, having our necks measured for nooses.” It was Mr. Willacy. “Whatever it is that His Lordship has instructed, we shouldn’t listen, for his sake and for ours. The Duchess can’t be allowed to walk free from this. When I tell you that her mother will find out who we are, every last one of us, I’m not jesting. I would not be surprised if she didn’t already know the identity of His Lordship.”

“We’re not disobeying orders,” the first man hissed. “*That* would cost us our necks.”

Mr. Willacy made a noise of protest. “Not if we explain. If *I* explain. He’ll reward us for our quick thinking.”

“It’ll make a mess,” said the first man. “If we kill her, we’ll have to kill the Duke, and that’s more bother than any of us needs. So, why don’t you stop trying to replace Damien as His Lordship’s right-hand man and just do as you’ve been told, eh?”

Marina blinked in confusion, jamming the clumsy pieces together in her mind. She had assumed that she had been

sentenced to death, and that was where she was being taken to, but that gruff man's words suggested that she was merely being held to make Jasper obey. Her heart swelled with hope while her blood simmered with a rolling rage toward Mr. Willacy. The butler had never shown any dislike toward her before, but, evidently, he had been harboring some secret resentment. Enough to want her dead.

“His Lordship will agree with me,” Mr. Willacy insisted. “Perhaps, it is for the best that the Duke dies too, for I know him; he will not cease his pursuit for anything. He'll find out who His Lordship is, and then he'll go to Bow Street, and we'll all be done for.”

A different man laughed. “Aren't you the Duke's butler? What did he do to you, eh? Did he make you fold his shirts one too many times?”

“He's fretting 'cause he was seen,” the gruff man replied. “He wants the Duke and Duchess dead 'cause he's going to lose his employment or face the magistrates from the wrong side of the dock.”

Suddenly, Mr. Willacy lurched forward, striking the man who had spoken, who happened to be on Marina's left. A muffled thump echoed in her ears, the carriage listing at the violent motion. Grunts and hissed breaths followed, the two men wrestling with each other in the cramped space, accompanied by the fleshy thud of pummeling fists and the scuff of shoes trying to hold their purchase on the floor.

Seizing her moment, Marina jumped up, throwing herself at the carriage door. In the chaos, the men did not notice. Her hand scrabbled for the handle, spilling her out into the road. She slammed the door behind her, staggering across the

cobbles, too dazed to realize that she had stepped out onto a main thoroughfare where carriages, curricles, hackney coaches, and lone riders paid no attention to foolish folks who might walk in their swift path.

Marina did not see the phaeton and four until it was a horse's breath away, angry steam blowing from the nostrils of a huge beast. The driver, seated upon the bench, cursed loudly, shaking his fist.

"What are you doing, woman?" he barked. "You could've been killed!"

She blinked up at the furious man, her heart thundering in fright. After all, those men would have noticed her absence by now.

"What are you swearing for, Lansing?" a feminine voice called out. "Did you hit someone? Oh, please say you did not. I have told you to be ever watchful so many times!"

"There's a woman, M'Lady," the driver replied. "Came out of nowhere. Reckon she's had too much drink."

The phaeton rocked slightly as someone got down and walked to the front of the four horses, stroking their noses as she passed. A devilish vision in scarlet silk, appearing before Marina as if she was about to make her an offer in exchange for her soul.

"Oh deary me," the woman said, gently taking hold of Marina's hand. "I think I ought to take you home."

Marina pulled her hand back. "I do not know you. You might be working for those men who took me."

"Someone took you?" The woman's eyes darkened. "Who?"

"The... butler, and some others. I did not know them, but I knew the butler," Marina floundered, her words coming out in a jumble. "They are in that carriage there. I escaped. They were... going to kill me. Throw me in the Thames. They worked for... His Lordship. I do not know which Lordship, but... I need help. I need to see my cousin."

The woman in red slipped the sable tippet off her shoulders and draped it around Marina's before putting an arm around her, steering her toward the phaeton. "Your Grace, I will take you home. Is Jasper waiting for you?"

"Jasper..." Marina murmured. "So you're a friend of his. I have no idea where he is, please take me to my cousin's, so we can come up with a plan. I cannot just sit here and wait. I shall give your driver the address if you would be so kind."

The woman nodded in understanding, but her eyes were worried. "We shall find him, wherever he may be. But before we visit your cousin, I think it wise that I return you to the townhouse and send for a physician immediately." Her voice tightened. "I do not think you are quite well, Your Grace. You have... clearly had a nasty shock."

"No, not the townhouse," Marina insisted, her legs shaking. "They might follow me back there. Take me to my cousin. I shall give you her address."

The woman shouted up to the driver. “A change of plan, Lansing.” She returned her attention to Marina. “We shall fetch your cousin, but I have a better idea of where to take you so that you will be safe. You can trust me, Your Grace. I am a friend of your husband though we have not yet been formally introduced.”

“Are you... Madame Fox?”

“Genevieve,” she replied, smiling. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance. Now, let us hurry. Lansing will lose them if they try to follow.”

“Thank you,” Marina whispered, allowing the stranger to help her into the phaeton.

And as the carriage pulled away, her thoughts drifted to Jasper. If he was not dead, then all was not lost. And though she still did not know if she could forgive him, she desperately wanted to see him again, alive and well. Even if it was the last time they saw one another.

“Actually,” she said, “let us go to the townhouse first. I must leave a message.”

## CHAPTER 35



“Thank you,” Jasper said to the pair of Runners who had come out to inform him that Damien Byers was securely on his way to the jail. “If it is not too much of an imposition, might you keep me informed of the trial?”

The older of the two men nodded. “He’ll stand trial in a few days, I’d imagine, considering the nature of it.” He stuck out his hand, and Jasper shook it. “I’d wager this has been a long time coming for you, eh?”

“Three years to the day,” Jasper replied with a sigh.

“I remember it,” the older man said. “Awful thing, it was. I’m only sorry we couldn’t do more, instead of leaving you to do our work for us. But we’ve only got so many resources, you know? We can only do what we can. One day, the people of this city might realize we’re worth having around, but until then... there’ll be plenty of cretins who slip through the net. I’m just glad you caught this one, Your Grace.”

Jasper hesitated. “Is there someone I might speak to about making a donation?”

“I’ll have someone at the Old Bailey write to you, Your Grace.” The man’s eyes brightened with gratitude. “We’d welcome your patronage. Is there anything more we can do for you?”

Jasper’s mind lay divided. On one hand, a gang like Grove Street was surely a menace to the city and ought to be dealt with. On the other, he had made a promise to Lord Kinsale to remain silent on penalty of severe punishment for him and his wife. Then again, if Lord Kinsale was removed from the head of the gang, he might be replaced with someone far worse. And what true harm could come from gambling halls, brothels, and opium dens?

“Have you ever heard of a group of people by the name of the Grove Street Gang?” he asked, hoping their reply would make his decision for him.

The older man laughed. “A bunch of rabblers, nuisances, and petty thieves. We halt a few of their boxing matches now and then, but they don’t trouble us too much. Why, have you had something stolen? If it’s a bet you’ve lost, there’s nothing we can do.”

“No, it is... just a name I heard mentioned a while ago. I was curious, that is all,” Jasper replied, putting on a smile. “That will be all, gentlemen. Good evening to you.”

The Runners bowed their heads, and Jasper turned, striding out into the chilly night. Lord Kinsale waited beside his carriage though he seemed anxious, glancing up and down the street as he checked his gold pocket watch.

“Where is my wife?” Jasper demanded to know. “Your men are bringing her here, are they not?”

Lord Kinsale furrowed his brow. “They should have been here by now.”

“What do you mean?” Jasper stepped closer to the man, gripping him by the lapels. “If this is some wicked trick, Lord Kinsale, I ought to remind you of where we are standing. I am not a gentleman who threatens lightly, but if you do not bring my wife to me immediately, I shall hoist you over my shoulder and carry you to the Bow Street Runners without hesitation.”

Lord Kinsale glared up at Jasper. “It is not a trick. I do not know where my men are. I am a gentleman of my word, Your Grace, and when I said your wife would be delivered here safely, I meant it.” He puffed out a strained breath. “Something must have happened. Return to your townhouse; I shall find out what has occurred and come to you directly.”

He turned to climb into his carriage, only to be pulled sharply back by Jasper’s rough hands. “You are not going anywhere without me. You might be a gentleman of your word, but I do not trust your men.” Nor was he entirely convinced that this was not a trick, despite his words.

“Very well, come with me if you must,” Lord Kinsale snapped. “I was merely trying to be courteous.”

Jasper had had enough of Lord Kinsale’s idea of courtesy, but he held his tongue as he entered the carriage behind the older man. Yet, as he sat down on the squabs, feeling the velvet



under his palm, a terrible thought came to Jasper. Was this the same carriage that had run his sister down?

“No, it is not,” Lord Kinsale said as if reading Jasper’s mind. “That carriage was destroyed by Damien’s actions and could not be repaired. Nor would I have kept it, knowing what it caused. I realize you are struggling to believe me, but I really am sorry for what happened. I held that girl when she was a baby as I held you. It... pained me to have to lie, knowing she could never be restored to you.”

Jasper sat back. “I do not wish to hear it, Lord Kinsale. My wife is waiting.”

Lord Kinsale thumped on the side of the carriage, and it pulled away from pavement, hopefully headed straight for Marina.



“What is the meaning of this?” Jasper hissed, realizing they were not venturing into the seedy underbelly of London at all. They were trundling through Mayfair, the white painted townhouses and private parks entirely familiar, even in the dark.

Lord Kinsale sighed. “I am doing what your father would have wanted me to do, and goodness knows, I was not the friend I should have been to him, but I will not put you in harm’s way by taking you to the places I intend to go.” He shook his head. “I have a warehouse. I believe that is where my men have taken your wife, misunderstanding my intentions. That is not somewhere you ought to be.”

“We will go there at once!” Jasper roared, watching as the carriage turned onto the street where his London residence could be found.

“No, Your Grace, *we* will not.” Lord Kinsale gazed out of the window. “I will find her, if it is the last thing I do, but I will not risk the safety of my organization. It must be kept secret, and I cannot allow you to accompany me. I am sorry, but you will have to wait for me.”

Jasper was about to knock Lord Kinsale’s head into the side of the carriage in order to jolt some sense into the man when he glimpsed something strange outside his townhouse. A phaeton and four with a recognizable emblem painted on the side: a bronze fox.

*Genevieve? What is she doing at my residence?* He opened the door before the carriage had come to a halt, stumbling as he landed. Recovering quickly, he ran the rest of the way to Genevieve’s carriage and peered in through the window, but she was not there. Turning, he bounded up the steps to the front door, bursting into the entrance hall.

“Genevieve? Are you here?” he shouted, hoping that she might help him search for his wife, for it was obvious that Lord Kinsale was not going to oblige. He was going to insist on Jasper waiting and likely would not move until he relented. That was something Jasper could not accept.

His sister’s dearest friend appeared at the door to the drawing room, her scarlet gown covered in what looked alarmingly like an apron, stained with something dark and unsettling. She was pale, her eyes glittering with tears as she wiped her hands upon a cloth.

“Genevieve?” Jasper croaked, bewildered.

She took a shaky breath. “I found Marina wandering the streets. My phaeton and four almost ran her down, in truth, but my driver halted in time.” She exhaled slowly. “She has had a nasty shock, being kidnapped and all. I was going to take her back to my residence, but... she was too weary.”

“Is she... well? Is she unharmed?” Jasper’s breath abandoned his lungs, his knees threatening to buckle.

“Come,” Genevieve urged. “I think you ought to talk to each other. And you certainly have some begging to do, Jasper.”

His hand shook as he pushed open the drawing room door. By the fireplace, a roaring heat blasted out onto the small, fragile figure who sat wrapped in blankets, sipping from a cup of tea.

Genevieve put her hand on his shoulder. “Lots of begging,” she whispered with a smile. “On your knees, if you can.”

“If Lord Kinsale is still out there,” Jasper said haltingly, “tell him that my wife has been found. Tell him that I will keep my promise, only as long as they never darken our door again.”

Genevieve frowned but did not try to argue, leaving the room. A moment later, Jasper heard the front door close.

“Marina?” he whispered, approaching. “My love?”

She did not turn to look at him though her cup paused halfway to her mouth.

“My love,” he repeated urgently, sinking to his knees beside her. There, he gathered her up into his arms, easing her into his lap as he shifted his legs, sitting cross-legged before the blazing heat of the fire. Gazing down at her beautiful face, he pushed a glossy tendril of hair behind her ear, her skin feverish to the touch. “Do not hate me, my love.”

She did not attempt to return his embrace, limp in his arms.

“I should have let it lie,” he croaked, bringing her head to rest against his shoulder as he held her tighter. “I should have listened sooner. I should have left it alone. If I had known... If I had known something would happen to you, I would have forgotten it all. I *had* forgotten it all, I *had* chosen you, but when I returned to this house, you were already gone. I am sorry, Marina. I am sorry I did not make my choice sooner and spared you from... what you have endured. But are you well, my love? Tell me you are well. Tell me they did not hurt you.”

“*You* hurt me,” she whispered.

“I know,” he gasped, cradling the back of her head. “I was cold and unfeeling and awful. I was wretched to you, but... I thought I had to make you loathe me, so that if something happened to me, it would not... hurt so much. I was an idiot, Marina. I should have told you, there and then, that the choice would always be you. I should not have sought that answer at my sister’s place of death. I should have... I should have... just stayed with you and wrapped you up in my arms, like this.

It was hearing the name of the one who killed her—it made me take leave of my senses, temporarily.”

She sniffed. “You truly came back?”

“I swear to you. Ms. Dorset can tell you if you cannot believe me,” he urged. “And I did nothing to the man who took Priscilla’s life, either. I had the opportunity to kill him, and all I could think was, what would Marina do? It stayed my hand. I delivered him to Bow Street instead, and he will stand trial for the crime. I *have* my justice, the way it should always have been, because of you. I have no blood on my hands because of you. Please, do not hate me. Please, say I have not lost you.”

“I... am not hurt,” she said quietly. “I am angry, but I am not hurt.”

He pressed a kiss to her neck, relief pouring out of him. “Do you still want us to return to our old rules? I will do anything you ask, live however *you* please, if you will just say that you forgive me.”

“Do you swear you came back before dawn?” she murmured.

He nodded, whispering the words against her skin, “I swear it. I made my choice, and it was you. If those bastards had not taken you, or if you had not gone to your cousin—though I do not blame you—you would have seen it for yourself.”

“Then, kiss me,” she said, pulling back. “Kiss me and see if we cannot fix these wounds within me, for they do say that a kiss is the best medicine for all aches.”

He dipped his head, catching her mouth with his, and kissed her as if they would never see one another again. Though, he hoped this was the beginning of something new and not the end of something he dearly wished to hold onto.



“Oh, my love!” Marina cried out, clinging to her husband as pleasure bombarded her senses, her body straining under the exquisite pressure of her conclusion as firelight tingled her skin.

Jasper kissed her hard upon the mouth, like he wanted to devour her cries of bliss. He moved with her, his fingertips slowing in their expert strum as her body shuddered and shivered with delight, for he had devoutly learned her language in the two weeks they had spent entangled. A few moments later, she felt him still, pulsing with his own euphoria, and as he collapsed on top of her, she heard the soft murmur of her name, whispering from his lips like a prayer.

*All is well, she thought with satisfaction, holding her husband to her. He chose me. If I had not fled, I would have known sooner.*

“Does this mean I am forgiven?” he said coyly, rolling them onto their sides as he gazed into her eyes. “If not, I can beg some more. I might just need a moment or two first.”

Marina draped her arm over his bare waist, relishing his heat. It was like having her own personal furnace. “You are forgiven though that does not mean I would not appreciate more “begging” in due course.”

“Marina?”

She peered up at him. “Hmm?”

“I love you.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“I love you,” he repeated, tucking a tendril of hair behind her ear. “It is something I have been meaning to say, but... I could not find the right moment. I still do not know if it is the right moment, but I do not want to waste another moment or leave you in any doubt. *You* are my heart, Marina. And I love you.”

She propped herself up on his chest, gazing into his eyes, searching his face for sincerity. It radiated back in abundance, his smile so nervous that she could have sworn she felt her heart swell at the beauty of it.

“I love you, too,” she told him, happy tears welling.

He made a sweet little sound. “You do?”

“Is it not obvious?” She chuckled, touching her fingertips to the small scar on his cheek. “I had thought it was, but perhaps I was too subtle.” She wriggled against him, pressing her bosom to his chest, draping her leg over his.

He laughed. “Is that less subtle? If so, I am in favor.”

“I thought you might be.” She traced that silvery scar, wondering if that was his only true flaw. “I have never been happier, my love. I do not know what I have done to deserve such happiness, either, which makes it all the more surprising and wonderful. Indeed, I... thought love was such a terrible, volatile thing; I had no notion that it could be like this. It is... like sitting in front of a fireplace on a snowy day. That is the only way I can describe it, and, yes, I have taken influence from this... enjoyment.”

He nodded. “I know precisely what you mean. Though, I must be the fireplace, and you must be the snowy day, for you are always cold, and I am always hot.”

“And that, my love, is why we are perfect together.” She dipped her head and kissed him. “Let us promise that this will never change, that our love will never become volatile or terrible. Let us promise that we will never stray from one another again.”

He hugged her to him. “I promise, my love. For as long as we both shall live, I swear that our love will be as pure and wonderful as it is now. I swear nothing shall stand in the way of it.”

“Then, kiss me again and keep your promise,” she urged.

“Always.”

He did as she asked, their mouths dancing a familiar dance, her arm looping around his neck, holding him close. And as the snow came down outside the drawing room windows, the



heat of their bodies warming each other, Marina had a feeling that everything was going to be all right. Better than all right, for they were back where they were supposed to be. Together, in love, wrapped up in one another's arms: the safest place in all the world.

## EPILOGUE

*Three Weeks Later...*

Jasper awoke to the sound of the door handle turning. He sat bolt upright, fumbling for the cricket bat that he had taken to keeping by his bedside. His hand had just gripped the handle when the door creaked open and soft footfalls tiptoed in, a figure illuminated by the hazy glow of the firelight and the candle that she carried, her hand cupped around the flame to stop it from blowing out.

“I do hope you were not going to hit me with that,” Marina teased. “It would scupper my intentions somewhat.”

Jasper lit the lantern by his bedside. “What are you doing?”

“A wife cannot sleep in her marital bedchamber?” She scoffed, grinning as she set her candle down and climbed up onto the bed. “I could not bear the frustration for another moment.”

He opened the coverlets to allow her in, chuckling as he pulled her into his arms. “Your mother will have me drawn and quartered for not sending you back to your sickbed.”

“My mother is fast asleep after too many sherries. I crept right past her, and she did not stir,” Marina promised. “And do not call it my sickbed. I was never sick. I was just shocked, that is all. Everything was great the moment you came to me. My mother just worries too much. I shall never trust another butler again, but I am quite well. However, there is one thing that you can do to aid in my recuperation: a medicine that only you can dispense.”

He arched an eyebrow. “And what might that be?”

She slipped her hand down his bare stomach and over the stirring flesh of his loins, for even in the winter, he preferred to sleep naked. He gently grabbed her wrist and brought her hand out from beneath the coverlets, tutting. His manhood responded immediately.

Marina pouted, propping herself up on his chest. "I need to feel loved."

It had been three weeks since she had fled her kidnappers, and fate had led her into the path of Genevieve. When the following day, Nancy and Adam had burst through the doors of their townhouse, looking for them and making sure they were all right with Joanna and Edwin on tow, Marina knew everyone in the ton had heard of their adventure. Or if not everyone, her mother surely must have.

Marina's mother had not been sent for. Indeed, Marina had insisted that her mother should not be informed about anything that had occurred, but Eliza had turned up on the doorstep anyway, having heard the news of the kidnapping from one of her informants. She had promptly taken over the household like a military General, confining Marina to her sickbed, the length of a hallway away from Jasper's bedchamber, and even in the daytime, he was only allowed to see her when her mother deemed it appropriate and "not too invigorating." Although Jasper suspected that Eliza was punishing him for letting something bad happen to her daughter. On that, at least, they were in agreement.

Of course, he couldn't really stay away for long; he had come to think of her as a fragile creature that might be snatched away if she was not being watched over. It was too easy to forget that this same woman had escaped a carriage in the midst of a fight and at least one man who wanted her dead.

Speaking of Mr. Willacy, he had disappeared though Lord Kinsale said after a few days that he had found him and punished him accordingly. What that entailed, Jasper did not know, nor did he care to ask.

"If you're not willing to help me," Marina said with a sigh. "I shall return to my chambers. Perhaps, I shall try again next

week when my mother has imbibed too much sherry again.”

She pushed back the coverlets and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, halfway to standing when Jasper grasped her around the waist and pulled her back into the warmth. His lips sought hers hungrily, his hands exploring the wife he had missed sorely, his passion igniting in an instant as if it had been waiting for permission.

She smiled triumphantly against his lips as she kissed him back just as ravenously, one mischievous hand smoothing over the firm muscle of his buttocks, urging his hips closer to hers.

“I have missed you,” he growled, hoisting up the flimsy fabric of her nightdress.

She sat up to free herself from the garment, flinging it to the floor before diving back into kiss him, sliding her bare leg over his. “I have missed you more, and do not protest. I have been half driven to madness, alone in that bedchamber with no one but my mother for company.” She paused. “She would not even allow Ms. Dorset to sit with me! Ms. Dorset! The only one she is afraid of is Genevieve.”

“Quite right, too,” he said with a laugh, caressing the soft skin of her thigh, his loins throbbing with the need to feel himself inside his wife, to hear her moans and sighs of bliss.

Genevieve and Marina had become firm friends since their fortuitous meeting, drinking tea and gossiping in Marina’s designated chambers, their laughter drifting through the house, raising the spirits of the household. And though Genevieve and Jasper had not always seen eye-to-eye, he could not deny how gladdened he was by the sight of his wife and his sister’s dearest friend becoming close. It was almost as if Priscilla was orchestrating it, pulling marionette strings from the hereafter to ensure that no one was left grieving or lonely.

Jasper rolled his wife onto her back, scooping his arms beneath her, his fingertips running through her silky hair as he kissed her deeply. His manhood strained for the heat of her, but he knew he needed to hold back. He could not rush this after three weeks of abstinence, forced upon him by her militant mother.

But Marina seemed to have more insistent ideas as she took him in hand and guided him into her. His breath caught in his throat as he eased into that silken well, filling her up. A gasp escaped her lips, her eyes closing in satisfaction as she tilted her hips up, drawing him deeper into her depths.

They stayed like that for a moment, neither of them moving, relishing in the intimate unity of being connected, body and soul and heart. But he could only resist for so long, withdrawing from that delicious, secret heat. And as he thrust back inside her, her hips rose to meet him once more, their bodies remembering the harmony though it had been too long since they had enjoyed one another.

She pulled his head down, kissing him hard on the mouth, their tongues dancing together with the rolling tide of his powerful strokes. Indeed, it seemed peculiar that, not so long ago, they had made a foolish vow to never fall in love, to never explore one another like this. It was the best contract he had ever broken.

Drawing away from her lips, he kissed down the curve of her neck and over the rise of her collarbone, seeking out the pert pink of her nipple. He closed his mouth over it and sucked gently, his stomach tightening as she bucked against him, crying out in pleasure. The sound of her was the most rousing music, every gasp and moan like a symphony to his ears.

“Oh,” she whimpered, clawing at his back. “Yes, my love!”

He had worried that he might lose the ability to understand the language of her body, but it all came back to him as he moved within her, listening to the subtle change in her breath, the shiver of her limbs, the way her voice cracked slightly when he did something she *really* liked.

With that in mind, he pulled back a little, scooping his arms underneath her legs and bringing them up onto his shoulders. Leaning into her, his heart on fire, he sat on his haunches and pushed himself deeper into the welcoming warmth of her. At the same moment, he touched his fingertips to her swollen bud, watching magic unfold before his very eyes as he began to circle that sensitive spot.

Her body responded immediately, bucking and writhing to the rhythm of his touch, her chest rising and falling at a frantic pace as her ragged breaths filled the air. It was a sight he would never tire of seeing for as long as he lived. Smiling, he turned his head and kissed the inside of her thigh, tasting that supple flesh with his tongue while his fingertips strummed his favorite instrument.

“Oh, yes. Yes!” she gasped, her hands grasping at the coverlets, twisting them up.

As he watched her, relishing the vision of her naked beauty before him, lost in the throes of passion, he could feel the swift stampede of his own conclusion. Steadying his breaths, he concentrated on her, listening to those guiding sounds as he continued to strum and circle, his hips moving to a different piece of music.

Then, just when he thought he could not endure the strain of holding back his own bliss any longer, a ripple trembled through Marina’s body from the tips of her toes to the rise of her eyebrows. Her eyes squeezed shut, her back arching up off the bed, her thighs quaking against his shoulders as the peak of her crescendo hit its last note.

“Jasper,” she cried out so loud that there was no possible way the household did not hear it. “Oh, my love!”

He let the sound of her bliss wash over him, her muscles tightening around him as she shivered and shuddered, tipping him over the edge into his own conclusion. He quickened his pace, reveling in every blissful second, spurred on by the second wave of ripples that coursed through her, and the moans that rumbled from her throat.

“Marina,” he growled as pleasure ripped through him at last. A moment he had dreamed of, now reality once more.

He stilled inside her, feeling the pulse of her body, matching the pulse of his. Overcome with contentment, he thrust twice more, slowly, and gently lowered her shaky legs back down to the bed. Only then did he allow himself to collapse into her, his body so relaxed he felt like he was floating.

She wrapped her arms around him, nuzzling kisses into his neck while he caught his breath.

“I missed you so much,” she whispered, smiling against his skin.

“I missed you more, and do not protest. Now, I know it is me who missed you more,” he told her, laughing softly. He lifted his head, gazing down into her eyes. “I love you.”

She touched her fingertips to the scar on his cheek. “I love you more.”

“Do not start a quarrel.” He grinned. “*I love you more.*”

She leaned up, catching his mouth in a slow, tender kiss that said more than words ever could. He kissed her back in kind, rolling them onto their sides, so he could be the one to hold her, and as they lay there entwined, he knew he was the luckiest man in the world.

*The End?*

# EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Would you like to know how **Marina & Jasper's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

Simply **TAP HERE to read it now for FREE!** or use this link: **<https://go.sallyvixen.com/VZTupvin>** directly in your browser.

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# PREVIEW:THE TRAUMATIZED DUKE



Before you go, please enjoy these first few chapters from my latest best-seller, *The Traumatized Duke*. It's also the previous book in this series. I'm sure you're curious about Nancy and Adam...

## CHAPTER 1



“Come out, come out, wherever you may be,” Adam Robins whispered into the thick silence of the shadowed gardens, stalking down the pathways like a beast on the prowl. “This fox is eager for a bite of something plump and juicy.”

Soft laughter rippled from the nearby hedge maze, stoking his appetite. He could think of nothing more delicious than a breathless chase through darkened avenues, ending in the capture of his prize. And he would reward them both until her gasps filled the night air.

“Where are you, my little vixen?” he purred, listening for her voice, her footfalls, to mark the beginning of the chase.

Stifled laughter stirred up the embers within him, fueling his desire. He had never encountered a young lady so daring, and though the thrill of her would not last—it never did—the excitement of his latest conquest was still ripe.

“You shall have to catch me,” she murmured from somewhere in the dark, close to the yawning mouth of the hedge maze entrance.

Her voice tugged on the muscles of his stomach, priming him for the very different race that would greet him when he found her. A race to the highest heights of pleasure.

“I hope you are surefooted,” he said, grinning as he crept toward the beginning of the hedge maze. “If you fall, I will show no mercy.”

“Perhaps I shall fall on purpose,” she cooed in reply, her words laced with the potent intoxicant of seduction. “But I do not think you will catch me, my fox. I fear you lack the stamina.”

He smirked. “Is that so? Well, we shall see who tires first.”

“Yes, let us see,” she mewled.

A second later, he heard his cue: the snap of a twig underfoot as his paramour began her race through the maze, her sultry giggles making him all the more ravenous as he took off after her.

In the daylight, the maze might have been simple enough. In the dark, Adam could not see a thing, not even the lights of Lord Bainton’s manor piercing through the high, dense hedges. Yet, somehow, it distorted sound, sucking the orchestra’s music into the long avenues and pathways, until it sounded like the orchestra was somewhere in the maze with Adam. It all but smothered the faint scuffle of his paramour’s footfalls, as did the rustle of nearby trees and the laughter that swept down from the terrace, making him feel crowded, though he was almost entirely alone.

“Where are you, my little vixen?” he called, rounding a left-hand corner and finding himself staring at a blocked path. A dead-end. His third, so far.

“Right here, my sweet,” came the honeyed reply as the hedge beside him rustled.

She was on the other side of it. How she had managed to get there, he did not know.

*I fear I shall tire of this before her.*

Although Adam relished games, he was not too fond of losing.

“Are you surrendering so soon?” his lover asked as her finger slipped through the tightly packed leaves, beckoning to him.

He dipped his head to kiss the proffered finger, but she drew it back quickly, taunting him.

“I do not surrender,” he told her, his eagerness restored. “But I might have to punish you when I catch you.”

“Oh, I do hope so,” she replied, her footsteps retreating.

Doubling back on himself, he decided that the mythical rule of only turning left was utter nonsense and went where his instincts took him. Like a true hunter, he followed his senses, feeling for the vibrations of his prey in the hedge and the earth, scenting her on the breeze—or rather he would have done, but the boxwoods were fragrant that night, drowning out her rich perfume.

*I should have insisted on meeting at my carriage instead.*

He felt grumpier with every wrong turn and dead-end he ran into. But Miss Eastleigh had enticed him to venture beyond his usual exploits, challenging him with a letter that had arrived that morning. He remembered every word, like the most divine poetry.

*Tonight shall be a night to remember, my sweet. The first ball of the Season requires a special celebration. I will wait for you in the gardens of Bainton Manor. Come and find me... if you can.*

How could he have possibly resisted?

“I am close, my little vixen,” Adam said, though he had no notion of where she was.

She could have been back at Bainton Manor, sipping from a cup of punch, laughing at his entrapment in the maze, for all he knew.

“Are you? Then why do you sound so far away?” Miss Eastleigh asked.

His head whipped around, a lull in the music and chatter giving him her location. Vaguely, at least. He smiled, pleased with himself, and broke into a sprint, hurtling in the direction of his lover, his excitement rising higher and higher with each step he took.

“I hear you,” he whispered, satisfied by the crunching sound of her footfalls somewhere up ahead.

“Yet, you have not caught me. How disappointing,” she teased.

He prowled on, halting sharply as he saw something on the ground. A flash of white. Puzzled, he bent to pick it up, his nose struck by a waft of Miss Eastleigh's potent perfume. It was a silk handkerchief, doused in her scent.

"Are you leaving gifts?" he called, drawing the silk across his upper lip, smiling against the cool stroke of the fabric.

"Breadcrumbs, my sweet," she replied, "or you shall never find me."

In truth, the entire chase was beginning to bore him, but to admit that would have been admitting defeat, and that was something he could not do. Not until he had received his prize. One last taste of Miss Eastleigh. After that, perhaps it would be better if they did not see one another again, for though she was daring and that thrilled him, he was not fond of being under her control, allowing her to take the reins. That was his territory.

So, he ran on, playing her little game, whispering sultry words to figure out where on earth she was. All the while, he wondered what delights he might be missing in the ballroom of Bainton Manor. What coquettish glances were being offered to another in his absence? Which ladies might fall for the temptation of another rogue like him, while he was haring around a ridiculous maze in the dark, half-blind and increasingly irritated?

At length, he reached the center of the maze. In the middle of the gravel circle, draped over the wall of the fountain that spouted there, was something that gave him pause, making his efforts seem more worthwhile. A pair of stockings, ribbons gleaming.

"Another breadcrumb?" he asked.

There were "entrances" at each point of the compass in which he stood, but the gravel hid any traces of the path Miss Eastleigh had taken. Unless her stockings were a clue.

A bare leg appeared from the western entrance, a slender hand pulling skirts and petticoats up to the thigh. Adam bit his lower lip, his temperamental furnace of passion fully burning

now. He might have been infuriated and doubted he would entertain Miss Eastleigh again, but he had to admit she knew how to keep him on his toes.

“I shall not grant you another,” Miss Eastleigh said from behind the hedge.

A moment later, her milky white leg disappeared, and Adam heard her running. He took off without hesitation, hungry once more for the challenge she had set before him, and certain that he would catch her within minutes.

But either she could somehow walk through hedges, she was hiding underneath the hedges as he passed by, or she was unnaturally quick, for she had vanished into thin air. Now and then, he could hear her footfalls hurrying this way and that, but as for a glimpse of her, there was nothing. She was like a specter that he had imagined, tricking him into this wild goose chase.

*Harry tried to stop me.*

Harry was his best friend. More of a brother, really. The moment Harry had heard about the letter, and what Adam had intended to do in Lord Bainton’s gardens, he had tried to talk Adam out of it, claiming it sounded like trouble. But Adam liked trouble. Relished it. Welcomed it.

Now, Adam wished he had listened, for he was just embarrassing himself.

“My little vixen, where are you?” he called, struggling to hide the vexation in his voice.

“Not much farther,” she crooned.

*You have said that ten times already.*

He grumbled inwardly, stuffing her stockings into his waistcoat pocket as he plowed on. After all, even if nothing came of the chase, he still had to find his way out of the maze.

Just then, his eyes fell upon yet another “breadcrumb.” A gossamer-thin petticoat, pooled on the ground. And right beside it, a narrow gap in the hedge. It appeared to be either a secret entrance or a secret exit, so overgrown that he might

have missed it had it not been for the petticoat drawing his attention to the area. Indeed, eyeing the gap, he was not certain if it was a mistake in the design, or if it was supposed to be there.

“I almost have you,” he said, convinced she had used the narrow passage to her advantage.

Perhaps she had been using them all along, and he had not seen these secret gaps in the hedges. It would certainly explain how she had gotten so far ahead of him and kept evading him.

She did not reply, making him even more certain that she had slipped out through the gap.

*You cannot play games with me and expect to win.*

He squeezed himself between the hedges and half stumbled into unknown territory. Only, it *was* known to him. He had escaped the maze, emerging onto the sloping lawn that led down to the lake... and his reward was waiting.

She stood at the water’s edge, gazing out with her back turned to him. He grinned and stretched his arm back through the hedge, swiping up her petticoat so he could return it—once they had enjoyed one another, of course.

With the petticoat draped over his arm like a waiter serving wine at one of the *beau monde* dinner parties he was often invited to, he approached his paramour with cat-footed stealth. She had made him chase her, so it was only fair that he should end their game with a surprise capture.

*Perhaps she thought I would not see the secret exit.*

His blood rushed in his ears as he edged closer. She did not turn to face him, did not give any indication that she knew he was there, and the realization pleased him greatly.

Half a step away from her, and she still had not moved. The wolf in him wanted to howl out his victory, for the soft grass had covered the sound of his advance; she had no idea that she had lost the chase already. Or, if she did, she was very good at pretending. He liked that about her.

*Maybe another fortnight or so in her company would not be so bad.*

He was curious as to what other challenges and bold encounters she might suggest.

At last, he lunged, wrapping his arms around her waist and pressing his lips to the curve of her neck, just the way she liked it. He waited for her to start writhing in his arms, relishing every moment, but instead of moans of pleasure and her acceptance of his victory, a very different sound erupted from her throat.

A scream, so bone-chilling and blood-curdling that he froze. His arms, locked around her waist, would not budge, and it only seemed to be making her scream pierce louder.

Miss Eastleigh twisted around in his startled embrace... but there was nothing familiar about the woman staring up at him. He blinked, baffled by the changeling in his arms. She should have had a somewhat round face and light blue eyes, so why were there two fierce, terrified hazel eyes burning into his soul?

“Fire!” the stranger shrieked at the top of her lungs. “Fire! There is a fire!”

Adam blinked again, idiotically gazing around for the fire she was wailing about. But there was nothing but the still night and the glittering lake, unless she was referring to the handful of torches that lit the path back up to the manor.

“I—” he stammered, preparing to explain that there had been a misunderstanding.

But before he could say a single word more, and before he could truly understand what was happening, the woman drew her arm back past the peak of her shoulder.

He stared at her curled fist as it grew larger and larger, too stunned by the scream still ringing in his ears to figure out why... and then, it hit him.



## CHAPTER 2



“*H*e is watching us again,” Nancy Swinton whispered, taking a seat at the edge of the ballroom.

Her cousin, Marina Wilkins, squinted at the crowd that ebbed and flowed throughout the majestic room, some dancing, some retiring, some trying to catch the attention of a potential prospect, some taking a pause as Marina and Nancy were doing.

“I do not see him,” Marina said, chewing on her lower lip. “Are you certain?”

Nancy nodded. “I felt my skin crawling, and then I saw him.” She lowered her voice further. “He is standing over there by the orchestra, next to the pillar with—I think it is supposed to be a cherub, but it is a rather ugly one. Whatever it is, he is there, watching us.”

“I see him!” Marina hissed, the color draining from her face. “What manner of wretch is he, to stare so openly at two young ladies? And where the devil is my mother?”

Nancy shuddered. “I do hope nothing has happened to her.”

“Oh, she is likely gossiping with some old acquaintances she has stumbled upon while fetching her tenth cup of punch, and has quite forgotten that you and I exist,” Marina grumbled. “What should we do? Do you see anyone we might claim sanctuary with?”

Nancy pursed her lips and shook her head. “The entirety of the ton must be here tonight, yet I do not recognize a soul. How

can that be?”

“You have grown too accustomed to northern gatherings,” Marina teased lightly. “The northern contingent of the ton rarely venture south unless it is to attend balls in London or Bath, and the southern contingent are forever making excuses not to venture north. Then, there is the matter of the debutantes to consider—a fresh batch to halve our chances of finding husbands.”

Nancy reached for the teapot in the center of the table and poured a cup for herself and her cousin, to steady their nerves. As she took a sip, she contemplated her cousin’s words. It was true that she had spent most of her time in the North over the past year or so visiting her beloved sister, Joanna, at Bruxton Hall. And her sweet nephew, Bernard.

Indeed, she was beginning to think she preferred the northern balls and gatherings, for no one had ever harassed her there, and if they did, the northern gentlemen were quick to defend her honor.

“If my sister were here, she would chase that beastly man away,” Nancy mumbled, wishing she was half as brave as her older sister. “Indeed, that fellow would not dare to approach me, if he knew who my brother-in-law was.”

Marina smiled. “How *is* your sister?”

“Very pregnant,” Nancy replied. While she was fast approaching her twenty-second birthday without so much as an offer of courtship from a charming gentleman, Joanna would soon give birth to her second child. “Apparently, she is furious with everyone for making her stay in bed, but it seems that her condition has improved.”

There had been some sort of complication in the pregnancy, though Nancy did not understand what, which had driven her mother and father to Bruxton Hall to take care of their eldest daughter. Nancy had been invited to join them, but not wanting to delay her own future happiness, she had chosen to stay in the South with her mother’s sister and cousin. She and her aunt were rather distantly acquainted, for they had fallen

out of touch some years prior and only recently resumed contact.

*My father's fault.*

Though, her father was making amends for it now, doing his best to be the father and husband that he should have been all along.

“Well, I am pleased you have not absconded to the North with your mother and father,” Marina said shyly. “It is nice to have company my own age.”

Nancy smiled. “You have been a revelation, Marina. I do not think I could endure this Season without you.”

Marina was no replacement for Joanna, but as they continued to get to know one another, Nancy was becoming exceptionally fond of the cousin she had only met a handful of times over the two decades of her existence.

“Neither could I,” Marina admitted, gesturing to the ballroom entrance. “For one thing, I would be sitting here entirely alone, absolutely burning with embarrassment at the disapproving looks. Although, I suppose they are preferable to the looks that come when my mother is in her cups, wailing inappropriately.”

Nancy stifled a laugh. “Well, we have one another now.”

“Indeed, we do.” Marina glowed with happiness, sipping her tea.

They might have enjoyed a pleasant hour or two, drinking tea and waiting for Nancy's aunt to return, had it not been for the thorn in their contentment: a wastrel who had set his gaze upon them ever since their arrival and had not stopped hounding them since. Every time they thought they had lost him, he reappeared like a bad penny.

At that moment, the bad penny showed up at the side of their table, having approached without either of them realizing it.

“Good evening, ladies,” he purred, running a hand across thinning hair that had been oiled to such an extent that the liquid oozed down the sides of his face. Either that or he perspired excessively.

Nancy shot him a glare. “As you can see, we are awaiting the return of our chaperone. Please, leave us be.”

“There is no need for a chaperone,” the man replied, almost vibrating with vile excitement. “I shall accompany you to the dance floor, Lady Nancy. Your... friend can be your chaperone.”

Nancy sucked in a sharp breath. “My *cousin* cannot be my chaperone. She is unmarried.”

“All the better,” the man said, licking his dry lips. “I will dance with you both, and you can pretend to be one another’s chaperones. I will not breathe a word.”

Nancy stood sharply, clutching her cup of tea as if she meant to hurl the hot contents at him. “Mr. Colby,” she warned, trying to emulate her sister’s strength, “if you do not leave us be, I shall summon Lord and Lady Bainton here and have you explain why you think it appropriate to approach two young ladies who have already—rather too politely, I should add—asked you not to.”

“Ah, so you are one of those, aren’t you?” Mr. Colby grinned, undeterred. “You reject a gentleman to stoke his interest. Makes it all the sweeter when you finally relent.”

Marina stood with her cousin. “No, Mr. Colby. Our rejection is *not* to stoke your interest, it is to douse it entirely. This is unseemly, sir.”

“Your opinion does not concern me,” Mr. Colby said, turning his nose up at Marina. “It is Lady Nancy I wish to entice.”

“And as her temporary chaperone, regardless of my lack of legitimacy in that realm, it is my duty to inform you that you must cease at once, or you will be marched from this ball,” Marina shot back, trying to catch the eye of the ladies and gentlemen at the neighboring tables. But they were too involved in their own conversations, or too unwilling to involve themselves in the plight of two unchaperoned ladies.

Mr. Colby took a step back. “There is no need for unkindness. I am merely revealing my pursuit.”

“You need not reveal anything, thank you,” Nancy retorted.

“Is that not what a ball is for?” Mr. Colby’s lip curled. “And neither of you are debutantes. You ought to be grateful for the attention, and at the first ball of the Season too!”

He had turned rather pale and waxy, with two livid blotches on his cheeks. The sign of a gentleman who did not like to be refused.

“Enough, Mr. Colby,” Nancy repeated as she took hold of Marina’s hand and led her around the table, putting it between them and the sour-face man. “If you follow us again, if you approach us again, I shall not hesitate to scream for help. Indeed, my dear Marina, I do believe I saw Monty heading out into the gardens. We must tell him, at once, what has occurred here, and see what he thinks of it.”

Mr. Colby blanched, losing what little color he had left in his face. Montague Harding was a decorated captain of the British cavalry and a renowned defender of helpless ladies. His name had appeared countless times in the newspapers and scandal sheets, having caused a great deal of harm to any gentleman who had so much as looked at a lady the wrong way. Yet, he was never punished, for those *he* punished were too afraid to try and prosecute a cavalry captain who glittered with medals.

“You know Mr. Harding?” Mr. Colby wheezed.

“Certainly, I do,” Nancy lied. “He is a friend of my brother-in-law.”

Before marrying Joanna, Nancy’s brother-in-law, Edwin, had been a known recluse among the ton, falsely suspected of murdering his brother and father, so it was fairly safe to make up friendships between him and others. Who would know any different?

“I see,” Mr. Colby muttered, retreating.

But Nancy was not content to remain in any room where he might suddenly muster up the desire to approach her and Marina again.

Nancy waited until she had seen Mr. Colby exit the ballroom and immediately guided Marina toward the doors that led into the gardens. It was likely the safest place for the pair until

Marina's mother returned from her attempt to drink as much punch as possible.

"I feel as if I need to bathe for a week," Marina said as the two women wandered across the terrace and down the shallow steps into the main body of the garden.

For a while, they walked at their leisure, enjoying the manicured lawns and neat flowerbeds and the torchlight that gave the gardens a mystical feel. They reminded Nancy of the gardens at Bruxton Hall, and her heart ached to be near to her family again.

*I should have waited until next Season.*

But who was to say that her sister would not be with child again by next year? Nancy could not keep delaying, for the only reason she was not trapped in a marriage she did not want was because of her sister's bravery.

Joanna had stepped forward when Nancy's hand would have been offered to Edwin, and though it had worked out well for the happy pair, the fear of what might have been still plagued Nancy. And the fear of what *could* be if she did not find someone herself—an arranged match. No, she could not waste the gift that Joanna had given her, to find the romance, the all-consuming, timeless love that she had always dreamed of.

"Nancy, look!" Marina squealed suddenly as they came to the edge of the lake.

Nancy frowned. "What is it, Cousin?"

"There are cygnets!" Marina said, breaking away from her.

Nancy watched, bemused, as her cousin hurried along the water's edge, toward a pagoda that partially tongued out into the lake.

Weary from the exceptionally infuriating evening she had already endured, Nancy saw no reason to follow; she could see Marina well enough from where she stood.

*She is peculiar, but I rather like the strangeness.*

Nancy turned her attention to the lake itself. Ever since she had been a little girl, she had been terrified by water like this

—rivers, lakes, ponds, the sea—though she could not understand why. She had never fallen in, nor could she recall any incident of almost drowning, but it scared her, nonetheless. It was, perhaps, the fear of not knowing what might be lurking beneath, out of sight.

However, the lake looked astonishingly beautiful in the moonlight, the tiny wavelets glittering as they caught the silvery glow. And the night world had come alive, filled with sights and sounds that were forbidden in the daylight—the hoot of owls calling to one another, the shriek of foxes, the cooing of doves that were trying to slumber through the noise of the ball, and the rustle of hedgehogs creeping out of their hideaways to sip from the lake.

Every now and again, the sparkling surface rippled at the jump of a fish, startling her.

“Marina?” Nancy whispered, catching a glimpse of something moving toward her in the water. “Marina, come here.”

Marina was fond of all creatures and knew the Latin names of almost everything, waxing enthusiastic about different species of birds and insects. And, at that moment, Nancy really wanted to know what was moving through the water, headed right for her. It did not resemble a fish, its body longer and slimmer, and it moved strangely, undulating sideways.

Immediately, Nancy’s mind conjured visions of terrible creatures—sharks and snakes and crocodiles—but she could not step away from the water’s edge. Her body had frozen stiff, her fear anchoring her to the grass. Of course, part of her knew it could not be a shark or a crocodile, for this was a boating lake in the south of England, but the darkness had a way of making the impossible seem plausible.

“Marina,” Nancy whispered again, her throat tight.

Where had her cousin disappeared to? Marina had mentioned cygnets, but Nancy could not see any. Nor could she see even a glimpse of Marina.

The creature rippled closer, barely stirring the surface of the water, though Nancy was convinced she could see two beady,

red eyes glinting at her. And ravenous fangs, ready to bite down.

All of a sudden, something grabbed her from behind, locking around her waist in a vice-like grip. At the same moment, she felt something tickle the curve of her neck, like a reptilian tongue flicking. For a fleeting, foolish second, she thought the creature had leaped from the water and wrapped itself around her, determined to squeeze the life out of her, but as she glanced back at the lake, the creature—a simple eel, as it turned out—had been startled by the sudden movement, diving down into the deep.

Panic seized her as she finally looked at the masculine arms around her. One thought flared in her mind like a warning beacon: *Mr. Colby*. He had followed her outside. He had seen her alone. He had leaped at the opportunity to take what he desired.

A scream erupted from her lips, pushed up her throat by terror itself. She writhed, twisting herself around to face Mr. Colby. In the dark, her eyes blurred by sudden tears of fright, she could not fully see who had grabbed her. Not that it mattered. No one should be grabbing her, scaring her out of her skin.

“Fire!” she yelled, remembering what her sister had told her years before, that she should always scream “fire” if she was in trouble, for people would always come running. “Fire! There is a fire!”

Without thinking, she drew her arm back, and with all the force she could muster, she drove her fist forward, into her attacker’s nose.

The man let go of her, staggering back as his hands flew up to protect his nose, two seconds too late. And as he groaned and winced, glaring down at her above his steepled fingers, she realized her mistake.

It was not Mr. Colby, but another gentleman entirely. An exceedingly handsome, thoroughly furious, blue-eyed treat of a man. Perhaps the most handsome gentleman she had ever seen.



## CHAPTER 3



Nancy supposed she should have guessed it was not Mr. Colby by the height of the person who had grabbed her from behind. The man muttering under his breath, in front of her, towered at well over six feet, while Mr. Colby and his unfortunate hunch made him resemble a squat sort of goblin. And this gentleman had broad shoulders and powerful arms that made his tailcoat sleeves strain, especially as he sought to see what damage she had done to his nose.

*Arms that held me.*

He had dark hair that fell to his shoulders in silky waves, reminding her of the fairytale princes she used to read about when she had been a child. Still read about, in truth, for she liked the comfort of those old books, using them to restore her faith in romance. Of course, she did not tell anyone she still adored those books, for they would have called her childish.

His entire face was a work of art, so sculpted and angular, that he did not seem real, particularly as the moonlight turned his pale skin silver. Had he not been grunting and groaning and saying all sorts of unpleasant things in hissed breaths, she might have thought she was daydreaming.

*He seized you against your will!*

With that thought, she snapped out of her momentary daze.

“What is the meaning of this?” she gasped, clasp ing a hand to her chest. “How dare you touch me!”

“I did not know it was you,” the man replied, gritting his teeth. “I thought you were someone else.”

“And you just wander around darkened gardens, grabbing innocent ladies, don’t you?” she retorted, outraged. “Goodness, I am glad I punched you, for if your nose is broken, other ladies like myself will be able to hear you coming whenever you breathe through it!”

His bright blue eyes watered as he gingerly prodded his nose. “You had best hope it is *not* broken, or you shall be receiving a request for a rather large payment from my physician.”

“Are you threatening me, when *you* have just grabbed me around the waist and... licked my neck?” She shuddered, trying to figure out if that *was* what she had felt against her skin when he had taken hold of her.

She thought it a very strange thing to do, licking someone, but he could not have been quite right in his mind if he prowled shadowed gardens in search of helpless women.

*Not so helpless.*

She shook out her sore fingers. The middle one throbbed with a dull sort of pain.

He scoffed, “*Licked* your neck? Do I look like a dog to you?”

“You have behaved like one,” she shot back.

“I did not lick your neck,” he insisted, scrunching and relaxing his nose. “It was... It does not matter what it was. It was not intended for you.”

At that moment, Nancy saw two peculiar things that prompted her to take a step back: a gauzy stocking sticking out of the man’s waistcoat, and what appeared to be a petticoat draped across his forearm.

“Where are they?” she gasped, jabbing an accusatory finger at the offending articles. “What have you done with the ladies they belong to? What manner of monster *are* you? Fire! There is a fire! Someone, please, there is a fire!”

He stalked toward her and clamped his hand over her mouth, glowering down into her eyes. “Would you cease yelling about a fire!” he growled. “This is a misunderstanding, nothing more, and these garments belong to someone who does not

mind that I have them. A lady who is alive and well and has come to no harm.”

“I do not believe you,” Nancy mumbled against his hand, wondering if she ought to bite into the fleshy part of his palm.

He rolled his eyes. “I have neither the patience nor the inclination to explain everything to you, particularly as you seem to be the sort of lady who would faint, or punch me again, if I did.” He loosened his grip slightly. “I apologize for grabbing you like that. As I said, I did not know it was you. I do not know you, so why would I think it was you? I thought you were a... friend of mine. She is dressed similarly, and she is wearing her hair in the same fashion.”

“A likely story,” she muttered, throwing his hand off her.

“Besides, what are *you* doing out here by yourself?” he asked, turning the blame on her. “Where is your chaperone, if you are so righteous? I do not see anyone.”

She puffed up her chest, so infuriated by the fellow that she could have easily punched him again. “Where my chaperone is or is not is none of your concern, nor are you in any position to lecture me. Perhaps I was waiting for my husband. Perhaps I *am* the chaperone and I was watching my charge from afar. Whatever my reason for being alone, it does not give you the right to-to... paw and lick me!”

“I did not lick you!” the man practically roared, his pale cheeks darkening slightly as he swept a hand through his silky hair. “Neither did I paw you. Goodness, you really are making me sound like a beast. Admittedly, I... put a mistaken arm around you, but you need not make such a fuss. I imagine it was the most thrilling part of your evening.”

“Excuse me!” She gawped at his audacity. “I shall have you know that I have had a very... diverting evening and was watching a rather interesting eel before you crept up on me like a thief in the night.”

He chuckled tightly. “Come to steal away your boredom?”

“You are quite wretched, do you know that?” Nancy said sharply.

“Apologies. Should I ask what manner of eel it was, out of politeness? Would that make this conversation more appealing to you? Or when you say *eel*, do you mean something else?” He wiggled his eyebrows in a way that made her insides squirm. “Are you only wailing at me like a banshee because I was not the *eel* you were waiting for?”

Nancy folded her arms across her chest and straightened up, hoping to make herself seem as intimidating as possible. “I am an honorable lady of the ton, sir, unlike whatever barrel you have been scraped from. I would not wait alone in the dark, in another Lord’s gardens, for a gentleman, for that would make his position as a gentleman rather debatable. I am a lady to be wooed properly, in a formal courtship. I would never indulge in a secret tryst with anyone, much less a scoundrel like you.”

“Ah, so you would wait alone in the dark, in *your* Lord’s gardens?” The man took a good look at her, making her wish she had a cloak she could shroud herself with. “Pray tell, who *is* your Lord?”

Nancy swallowed thickly. “My father is a Lord, and he would not be happy if—”

“As are everyone else’s inside that manor,” the man interrupted. “What I meant is, as you well know, who is your husband? I should like to speak with him directly, to explain the misunderstanding. Being a gentleman, he will understand the situation far better than you. Ladies rarely comprehend such things unless they are part of the fun.”

Nancy unfolded her arms and rested her hands on her hips. “I have no husband, but my cousin is—”

“You are to marry your cousin?” The man pulled a face.

“Would you let me finish my sentence!” Nancy cried, her face hot with frustration, though a little of the warmth had to be blamed on the way he was looking at her, as if he had seen a delicious delicacy in the window of a sweet shop and had a sudden craving for sugar.

He shrugged. “Be my guest.”

“My cousin felt unwell. *She* is over there at the pagoda. I was waiting for her because our chaperone—her mother, my aunt—is otherwise engaged, trying to arrange a match with Montague Harding.”

The lie felt clumsier this time, but Nancy was certain this rough fellow would believe it.

The man grinned. “Monty? You would have a greater chance of arranging a match with his beloved horse.” He paused, pretending to be in deep thought. “But if you would like me to say a good word about you or your cousin, so we might forget this whole debacle, he is a great friend of mine. I would be happy to oblige.”

*Curses.*

Nancy had not expected such a wretch to be acquainted with Mr. Harding. Unless this fellow was a gifted liar and consummate performer.

“No, thank you,” she said.

“Still, I hope you heed my warning. You see—and I trust you can be discreet—Monty has a temper. Generally, he uses it for good, but even *he* knows he cannot be trusted with a wife,” the man explained. “Although, you also seem to have a temper... and a rather impressive punch. Where did you learn to hit like that?”

Nancy scowled at him. “I do not have a temper. I have an instinct to protect myself when I am being attacked.”

“It was not an attack,” he said. “If you had been the intended recipient, you would have welcomed what I had planned.”

She snorted. “If that were true, the ‘intended recipient’ would have made herself known by now. As she has not, I have no choice but to believe that you are a common, lecherous rogue who delights in the fear of lone women.” She felt somewhat satisfied by the brief flit of his gaze, as if it had only just occurred to him that no one else had appeared. “As for my punch, my sister taught me. She used to brawl with the boys from the village, and though I never joined in, I did learn a thing or two.”

“Goodness, a brawler. Are you certain your father is a Lord and not the *landlord* of an unsavory inn?”

“And what manner of man are you, hmm?” she challenged. “Is that how you managed to weasel your way into this ball? By Mr. Harding’s invitation?”

The man laughed, smoothing his hands down his lapels, drawing Nancy’s eyes to his broad chest and the loosened cravat beneath the collar of his shirt. An exposed triangle of sun-tanned skin glistened with perspiration, revealing a deep, muscular line down the center of his chest. Indeed, if he had undone one more button, she was convinced she would have been able to see the top of his abdomen.

“*Unseemly!*” her mind chided, while a little voice in the back whispered, “*But not unpleasant.*”

“Do I seem like a commoner to you?” he asked.

She sniffed, forcing her gaze away from that exposed flesh. “You seem very common, yes.”

“Then allow me to introduce myself, and let us see if we cannot dull the sharp edge of your tongue,” he said, smirking. “Nameless waif with the punch of a brawler, I am the Duke of Stapleton. I would say it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, but my nose cannot allow it.”

Nancy’s eyes widened, her mouth falling open in horror.

The Duke smiled and lifted his fingertips to her chin, pushing her jaw up until her mouth closed. “I do not want you to catch flies, Miss, lest you choke on one.”

At that unwarranted touch, a bolt of alarm splintered through Nancy, sending her stumbling backward before he could attempt to touch her again. In her haste, she had forgotten that she was standing on a slope and had not realized that the hem of her skirts had caught under her feet.

All at once, she was falling toward the treacherous water that hid monsters beneath the surface, her arms flailing in a vain attempt to keep her balance. She stared wildly at the Duke, torn between needing help and not wanting him anywhere near her.

His arm shot out, his hand grabbing one of her flailing wrists. With a powerful tug, he pulled her toward him, doing the very opposite of helping her to keep her balance. She fell into his hard, broad chest, bumping her chin and knocking her teeth together. And as she struggled to find her livid voice, too shocked to do anything but suck in ragged breaths, his arm slipped around her waist, teasing her.

“I sense you might be one of those clumsy girls,” he purred. “Do you trip in front of gentlemen in the hopes they might sweep you off your feet and fulfill your every innocent desire?”

She glowered at him. “And *you* seem like one of those gentlemen who enjoy startling people for their own amusement.” She lowered her voice and grasped his lapel, curling the fabric into her fist. “If you touch me again, even the slightest accidental graze, I shall reveal the other things my sister taught me about combat.”

In truth, she still did not know how she had managed to punch him so hard and so well, for she had never hit anyone in her life. And when her sister used to fight with the boys from the village, she could never bring herself to watch, terrified by the mere thought of blood. So, if the Duke *did* touch her again, she had nothing left in her arsenal.

*And the screaming did not work. Not even Marina was drawn by the sound—Where is she?*

Glancing toward the pagoda on her left, Nancy’s gaze skimmed the lakeshore, her heart twinging in fear that something might have happened to Marina. A second later, her heart lurched into her throat, for there *was* someone standing there, a short distance away, half-hidden by bushes, but it was not Marina.

“Mr. Colby,” Nancy rasped, her throat choked.

She would have recognized the cretin anywhere, even without the glint of oil upon his thinning hair, shining like a beacon.

The Duke snorted. “That is not my name.”

“No, Mr. Colby!” Nancy hissed, jabbing a finger in the direction of that wormy little wretch.

The Duke followed the tip of her finger, and as he laid eyes on Mr. Colby, the slimy devil ducked back into the bushes with a violent rustle of leaves and branches. A low growl rumbled in the back of the Duke’s throat, and though the moonlight had already made him very pale, indeed, his face turned ashen.

“We have been seen,” the Duke said, grimacing. “Find your cousin, if there *is* a cousin out here, and gather your chaperone. You ought to leave. Immediately.”

Nancy gulped. “What?”

“Duck your head in the lake if you need to wash out your ears. You heard me,” he said curtly, before releasing his hold on her. “Forgive me, Miss Brawler, I have a snake to catch.”

With that, he sprinted off, charging into the same bushes where Mr. Colby had disappeared. And as she watched him go, Nancy clasped a trembling hand to her heart, praying with all her might that the overly familiar stranger with the surly attitude would take Mr. Colby down like a hunter diving upon a stubborn boar.

For if the Duke could not, Nancy dreaded to think what tomorrow might bring, if not the rest of her life.

**Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story!**

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**Thank you very much!**



## ALSO BY SALLY VIXEN

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**Thank you for being my reason to smile today,**

***Sally Vixen***

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Pennsylvania by a mother of British ancestry, it is no wonder Sally developed a love for British culture. An avid reader since she was a child, it wasn't long until she stumbled onto the Regency classics, and the rest is history.

A couple of years and a Creative Writing degree later, Sally has truly found her calling. She is rarely found without a book in her hand, but when she isn't reading or writing, she likes taking walks in nature, traveling and spending quality time with her very own happily-ever-after, her wonderful family of four.

So, allow Sally to take you on a majestic trip, full of passion, boundless romance and glamorous balls, and let your heart be stolen by the dashing Lords and seductive Ladies of an era where fairytales came to life...

