

SADIE BOSQUE



*the* GLORIOUS  
*Bastard*

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# The Glorious Bastard

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*To all the boys who ever felt like they were less than...*

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# Author's note

*This work of fiction contains adult content, strong language, violence, death, childhood trauma, and other content that might be triggering to some.*

\* \* \*

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# Prologue

*Spring 1727*

Neville landed on his hands and knees, his forehead lightly slapping against the stone-cold floor.

“Get comfortable, lad,” a foul, grating voice snarled from behind him. Then the door banged shut, the harsh noise making Neville flinch before darkness enveloped the tiny chamber.

*Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.*

The pounding of his heart was the only sound in the room until a soft sob ripped from his throat.

Neville sat up and gingerly ran a finger over his aching palm. “Ow...” The scrapes burned, blood smearing his fingers. “Mama...” he whispered into the darkness, knowing full-well there’d be no answer.

And yet...

“No,” came a voice from the deep, dark corner. “Not mama. There are no mothers here.”

Neville shot up but tripped over his feet and collapsed onto his rump. He caught himself on his palms and scraped them all over again. He hissed, slowly sliding back against the stone-cold floor. “W-w-who’s there?”

“Don’t worry, I shall not hurt you.” The voice was deep and dark like the night itself, echoing in the empty chamber.

Tears burned at the back of Neville’s eyes. “I-I... don’t believe you,” he whispered, his voice shaking.

“Good,” the voice said from the shadows, the word reverberating through the stone walls as if the speaker was nowhere and everywhere all at once.

Neville crawled backward, the aches in his palms forgotten, only fear driving his actions. He staggered back, his elbow bending painfully, but continued crawling away, until he encountered the thick, oak door.

His little shoulders shook from fear and desperation. His teeth chattered and his eyes closed as he turned away and pressed his cheek against the door.

He was stuck here.

“Do not believe anybody.” The voice sounded closer now. “That’s how you survive.”

Panic gripped Neville by the throat, and he could neither move nor speak. He peeked through his eyes and watched as a silhouette appeared before him.

It wasn’t the silhouette of a grown man. No. This was a boy—a willowy one at that. His clothes were torn, his face was covered in something dark, and his long, blond hair was tangled and disheveled. He looked like a vengeful ghost.

“He-elp!” Neville finally found his voice. He jumped to his feet and started banging on the door as hard as he could.

Tears ran down his cheeks, obscuring his vision. “Somebody help me! Please!”

Arms hard as steel weaved around him, a hand covering his mouth before dragging Neville away from the door. Away from the only source of light coming through the crack under the door and into the darkness.

*This is it.* He was being dragged into hell, Neville was certain.

All the stories his mother had told him were true. The devil had come to take him to hell for he had not listened to her.

He would listen. He would. If he had just one more chance.

Neville kicked and screamed, trying to break free. He would not go to hell without fighting.

“Shh... quiet!” the voice said in his ear. “I am not the one you should be afraid of. They’ll beat you if you don’t calm down.”

Neville fell limp in the ghost boy’s arms, shaking. “Who is going to beat me? Demons?”

He scoffed, and then his arms loosened, setting Neville free. “Sit here.”

The ghost boy nudged him toward a haystack in the corner, sparsely illuminated by the moonlight shining from the tiny window just under the ceiling. Neville hadn’t noticed the window before. He hadn’t noticed many things before, as the room had seemed to be shrouded in complete darkness.

Neville obeyed and sat on the haystack. Not because he trusted the ghost boy, but because he was tired and scared, and he didn't know what else to do. He wanted to go home to his mother. Only he couldn't. Not anymore.

*There are no mothers here.*

No. And Neville's mother wasn't here either.

She was dead.

"Demons are not the ones you should be afraid of," the ghost boy said.

"W-Who should I be afraid of?"

The ghost boy threw a look at the closed oak door. Footsteps approached them, the clicking of heels echoing through the halls and reverberating against the bare walls. "The Lords."

A terrible feeling of foreboding took over Neville, and he instinctively moved back closer to the wall. "What are they going to do to me?"

"Nothing," the ghost boy said confidently, although a glimmer of something ominous laced his voice. "I am going to make sure of that."

Neville turned toward the ghost boy, seeing a flicker in his eyes that he hadn't noticed before. One that terrified him at this moment. Conflicting emotions invaded his soul, throwing him off kilter. He needed something to cut through this air of uncertainty. "What is your name?" Neville asked, hoping that knowing the ghost boy's name would help him feel less

frightened. If he knew his name, perhaps that would make him his ally. A friend.

The lock turned on their door, and Neville was afraid his question would be left unanswered. But before the door even cracked open, the ghost boy's voice sounded once more. "William."

\* \* \*

The door opened, and a tall, broad-shouldered guard entered the room, bringing with him the foul smell of unwashed male body, urine, and something else that William had trouble—but no desire—deciphering.

The guard stepped forward, and the new boy stepped back, almost treading on William's toes. William steadied him with one hand, and the poor fellow jumped in fright.

He was a tiny little thing, not older than five or six years old, slightly younger than William had been when he first set foot in a place like this. He was a bit chubbier than William ever remembered himself being, and his clothing was in finer condition than any William had seen in a while.

Freshly plucked from home, then.

Luckily, he wasn't going to stay here much longer.

A part of him felt bad that the boy had ended up here, but another part was glad to finally have company. Ever since William was seven or eight—he truly didn't remember—he had been on his own, and the mere thought of having a friend warmed his heart.

The guard, seeing the boy's frightened demeanor, took a menacing step toward him. He paused, studying the little boy's features, and then, "Boo!" came his loud shout, followed by his ugly laughter. It was like the creaking of an old carriage as it moved along a broken country road.

The boy jumped and screamed in fright, prompting William to take him by the shoulders, steadying him once more. The boy's shoulders shook as he cried, loud sobs coming out of his mouth with every breath.

Still laughing, the guard threw a bowl of porridge onto the dirty floor, then turned around and left the room, shutting the door behind him. He locked it and stalked away, his laughter still audible from behind the thick oak door.

"It's just the guard," William tried to soothe the little fellow, but his voice came out rough. He wished he could protect the boy from this horrible place. He tried to be the person he wished he'd met when he had arrived at a place like this the first time, but he had no idea what that entailed. So, he just waved a hand toward the single bowl of porridge. "You can eat if you wish."

The boy turned toward him, his eyes liquid. "I've soiled myself."

William blinked, surprised at the open admission, but quickly shrugged. "That happens. No need to cry about it."

The boy wiped his face with his sleeves and walked farther away from William, obviously ashamed. "My mama would have scolded me."

William winced, and his heart squeezed a little, just as it always had at the mention of the word “mama.” “It’s better to forget your mama, boy,” he said hoarsely. “It’ll be easier to look out for yourself that way.”

The boy didn’t say anything. William could not see what he was doing in the dark corner. Probably crying, huddled up by the cold wall.

“There is nothing to clean up yourself with here. And that’s fine. The filthier you are, the better.”

“Why?” came the shaking voice from the darkness.

“That’s the only way they will leave you alone at the netherplace. Otherwise, they’ll be the ones to clean you up, and it’s... it’s better if they don’t.”

“The netherplace?” His voice sounded confused.

“That’s what I call it,” William said with a proud puff of his chest. “A place between this awful place and the place even more awful than this. There is a bath and beautiful paintings. Very beautiful. It looks like heaven, but it’s a lie. If they come for you... to clean you up... and take you to this netherplace, that’s when you worry.”

“There is a place even worse than this?” came the boy’s horrified whisper.

“Much worse than this, lad,” William confirmed, and the boy whimpered in the dark. “A place your nightmares would be scared of. But do not fret. You’re not going to go there.

When they come to take you to the netherplace, we shall run away.”

There was a shuffle in the corner, and William could see the boy moving. “Run away? But how?”

“What’s your name, boy?” William asked as he stepped closer, trying to make the fellow feel more at ease. He leaned his shoulder against the cold wall, looking into the darkness where the little boy’s form was barely visible.

“Neville,” came the boy’s hoarse voice, followed by a loud sniff.

“Good, Neville. Now, listen to me. You just stay close to me, and we are going to get the hell out of this place.”

Neville wiped his face with his dirty sleeve. “The door is closed, and the only window is so high up the wall that we will never reach it. How are we to run away?”

William shrugged nonchalantly. “Doors and windows are not a problem, Nev. Running away is not a problem. I’ve escaped at least four times before.”

“Then why are you still here?” came Neville’s high-pitched voice.

“Because, Nev, although running away is not a problem, staying away is.” William pushed off the wall and took the final step to stand right in front of his new friend. He lowered himself to his haunches and placed a reassuring hand on the little boy’s shoulder. “But now, it’s the two of us. It will be more difficult to find us if we look out for each other. Right?”



Neville raised his face to William's, his dark eyes glinting in the dark. "You said we can't trust anyone."

William shook his head. "Only each other."

\* \* \*

### *Eighteen years later...*

The metallic clink echoed through the damp walls, accompanying the rattling sound of chains as the guard secured William's restraints to the floor.

"There. Now sit tight and relax," he said, before bursting into loud and obnoxious laughter. The musket-wielding guard by the door joined in, shaking with amusement.

William glanced down at his shackled hands as the familiar sound of iron restraints clinking together grated on his nerves.

For years, this sound had haunted his dreams, following him into the darkness. The sensation of rusted metal encircling his limbs had not left his skin. It was a burden, a fear that followed him wherever he went and whatever he did. He couldn't even sleep in complete darkness for fear of waking up chained to the walls.

That was until he met her.

*Victoria.*

The evening he first saw her, everything changed within him. She chased the darkness away with her mere presence. She slayed his demons with a single smile, a touch, a kiss. Her

scent replaced the foul odors in the chambers of his deepest memories, her lovely visage eclipsed gruesome images in his mind, and her melodious voice drowned out the haunting echoes of his past. Especially when she whispered his name in that sweet, breathy accent of hers.

Perhaps that was the reason he had fallen head over heels in love with her and fought relentlessly to keep her close. Because she was the embodiment of hope for him.

Now, as he closed his eyes, her face was the only thing he saw.

He would never regret meeting her. Without her, his entire life was shrouded in darkness. She was a sliver of light that enriched his life, convincing him that it was worth living. That life was more than a struggle, a race, and a plot for revenge.

He was born into darkness with shackles about his ankles and wrists, and he knew that was how he would die. And he was content with that.

Because only with her did he know the true meaning of freedom. Without her, he might as well never have been free.

With her, he realized he was capable of feelings, capable of love, because he did indeed love her. That meant those who had ruined his childhood hadn't succeeded in ruining him entirely. A speck of humanity remained. And he gladly shared that speck with her.

A hard push between his shoulder blades propelled William a step farther into a solitary, dim, and squalid cell, his

chains jangling against the stone floor.

William smirked at the tiny window below the ceiling, a sense of familiarity and an odd comfort washing over him. His first childhood memory was of a similar window in a similar cell.

While other children's first memories might have been of hugging their mothers or playing with their siblings, his was different. Perhaps it was better that his first conscious recollection was of this tiny window and not the horrors that came before. Those memories were so terrible that his mind chose to erase them, only occasionally slipping them into his nightmares.

That tiny window had once been his beacon of hope during the toughest days of his life, a symbol of a brighter future filled with joy and happiness.

Now, as he looked at it, it didn't represent that hope anymore.

It represented the end.

He turned as the guard slammed the cell door shut.

"Three days, William," the guard said through the barred opening. "Three days and you'll finally hang for your sins."

# Chapter 1



*Sixty three days before the execution...*

William sat at a card table in the center of a crowded room choked with smoke swirling up to blacken the low ceiling. He tapped his foot against the floor, a half-smoked cheroot clamped between his teeth. His cards fanned out in one bejeweled hand, while he reached for a mug of warm gin with the other. Laughter and shouts rang out as dice clattered across the felt tables.

God, he hated this place.

Typically, he steered clear of both hells and bawdy houses, as he shuddered at the thought of any place that reminded him of the past. However, William wasn't exactly welcomed in many places, forcing him, on occasion, to hold his nose, grit his teeth, and walk through the seedy halls of the houses of depravity.

With Hades blissfully away on a wedding journey with his wife, this was the sole remaining refuge left in England where he had friends.

Very well, not friends exactly—he had none—but... associates? Individuals he could tolerate and who could endure his presence in kind. And for the business he had in mind, he was willing to tolerate a lot.

So, here he was, in the bawdy house aptly named the House of Pain and Pleasure. A little on the nose, in his opinion, but what did he know?

Through the hazy gloom swayed a harlot in a provocative silk gown trimmed with tattered lace. An elaborate white wig was teased high atop her head, with ringlets spilling over her powdered shoulders. As she sashayed closer, William saw her face was painted ghostly pale with two spots of rouge on the cheeks.

The harlot smiled coyly and settled onto William's lap, eliciting whistles from the surrounding card players. Up close, the cloying scent of her cheap rose perfume mixed with the smells of unwashed bodies, smoking tobacco, and hair powder that permeated the stuffy gaming hall. Unperturbed by the bawdy chaos, she draped an arm around William's shoulders and leaned in close, her breath hot against his ear. William took a long drag from his cheroot, exhaling smoke. He tapped her on the thigh and tipped his head in a gesture unmistakably asking her to vacate his lap.

Instead, she shoved her breasts into his face and got the reaction she desired. His cock stirred and hardened in excitement. But his demeanor didn't falter. His body might have responded physically, but he was not amused.

"Please, get off my lap, my sweet. I am not interested in what you have to offer."

"Your body says different," she whispered saucily and wiggled her soft bum for proof.

William clenched his fists. It would be impolite, not to mention embarrassing for her, to physically remove the lady from his lap, but he was sorely tempted.

“My body does not rule me, madam. Please, remove yourself from my lap. I am a married man.”

“So are most people in this establishment,” she sulked, her lips in a pout.

“I am not most men,” he said, his gaze hard.

She tipped her head back and assumed a nonchalant demeanor before climbing off his lap. “If you’re such a faithful husband, why are you not with your wife?” She disappeared into the crowd and smoke, not waiting for him to respond. But the question stuck to William’s mind like a burr.

Why the devil not?

The answer was as simple as it was complicated.

Because she hated him.

She had rebuffed all his advances, torn up his letters, and thrown out the flowers. He knew; he had been watching.

But ever since the fiasco two years ago when she’d found out the depth of his deceit, Victoria—his wife—refused to have anything to do with him.

At first, he tried begging for forgiveness, requesting her audience, serenading her beneath her window. All he got for his trouble was that she had switched her room.

Later, he had to leave the country, and his only solace was getting news about her from his spies.

And if the absence made her heart grow fonder, she had shown no indication of that fact.

He had made mistakes—serious mistakes—while courting her, and an even bigger one in marrying her. As a husband, he was farther from her now than he'd been before they married. If she was elusive before, now she was completely unattainable.

He shifted in his seat and bit down on his cheroot. That had never stopped him before, and it was not going to stop him now.

Another harlot approached him, her hips swaying suggestively from side to side. Instead of climbing onto his lap this time, she simply bent down and whispered in his ear, “She has arrived.”

William grinned and shot from his seat.

“Oi! Where are you going? We are not done!” Lord Norfolk, William’s long-time gambling partner, slurred, waving his hand of cards.

William dropped his remaining fish onto the middle of the table. “Consider me a forfeit.”

Norfolk leaned back and laughed, allowing William to slip away without further protest. William pushed through the crowd of drunken men and slipped into a more private corridor.

The wide passageway amplified the sound of his heels clicking on the floor, their resonance bouncing off the stony walls. Paired with the cling of his swordstick as he twirled it in his hand, it caught the attention of the startled patrons of the establishment.

Heads turned toward him, their eyes reflecting either hatred or desire, but William kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, paying no heed to anyone.

William breezed through the long hall, his focus unwavering, and he blocked out the sounds of kissing and seductive whispers emanating from the patrons. He single-mindedly approached the stairwell ahead. Upon reaching the top floor, a woman in a revealing crimson-red gown, a high curly wig, and a brightly painted face greeted him with a smile.

However, as soon as she saw his face, her smile faded. “You.”

One side of William’s mouth curled up in a smile. “Good to see you too, Patience,” he said with a wink and walked past her. “You look lovely, by the way.”

“Grace is busy, you shameless flirt,” she scolded to his back. “And where have you been?”

William didn’t bother to answer as he navigated a maze-like corridor to the proprietress’s office. Without knocking, he threw the door open and confidently entered the room.



The fire danced behind Grace's back, casting her shadow onto the large desk in front of her. She stiffened, no doubt gripping her small dagger tightly between her fingers.

In the dim light, he couldn't see her features clearly, but he doubted she was surprised as he stepped into the light.

"William," Grace whispered on a breath before putting the dagger away.

William smiled wickedly. "I am back. Missed me?"

She snorted. "Not particularly."

William shrugged and slowly advanced closer to her desk, propping his weight against his swordstick. "I am back, nonetheless. And I am here to stay."

"You don't say?" she asked in a bored tone. "And what is the reason for your untimely return?"

William unhurriedly pulled out a chair and took a seat across from her. "I'm in London to reclaim what's rightfully mine."

Grace didn't budge, merely observing him, as she always did. That level of stillness often unsettled others, but not William. "And what is that exactly?"

William lit a cheroot, leaned back in his seat, propped one foot on his knee, and exhaled a smoky breath. "My wife."

Grace tilted her chin slightly and responded as if she were addressing a question he hadn't asked. "I don't know anything about your wife."

William let out a laugh, a few puffs of smoke leaving with his breath. “Somehow, I highly doubt that.”

“I highly do not care,” she replied in a measured tone, her demeanor unwavering.

“I know what you do here, Grace,” he stated with a hint of irritation.

“Then you know that we don’t have any reason to spy on your princess. Besides, nobody from her circle frequents my establishment. The only man she’s close to is her uncle. And he’s never set foot here.”

That was true. Victoria, a princess with ties to two countries, was the niece of an English marquess, making her familial situation rather complicated. Her uncle had once been one of William’s associates and that man had never been one for brothels. Especially now since he was married. “I’m sure there are other ways you can—”

A blood-curdling scream pierced the air from outside the room.

Grace and William exchanged quick frowning glances before leaping from their chairs and hurrying toward the source of the commotion.

Muffled voices and loud footsteps led the way to a private room with the door left wide open, with a few onlookers peering in. Grace and William forced their way through the small crowd and entered the dimly lit room. A woman stood there, frozen, her face a mask of horror visible even through

the thick layer of bright paint. At her feet lay a corpulent gentleman, his blood forming a dark pool around his unmoving and unmistakably lifeless body.

William instantly recognized the man as a member of the Brotherhood of the Crimson Fist, a detestable secret society.

Bile rose in his throat, not because of witnessing death; he'd seen far too many corpses before he was old enough to shave for it to ever bother him. No, it was the secret society and their men that made him nauseous, like everything from his past.

He swallowed and maintained an unemotional exterior. Tilting his head, he asked calmly, "Curious, isn't it?"

Grace narrowed her eyes at him before instructing everyone to leave the room. "Out! And make sure no one comes closer than ten feet of this room," she shouted at the guards. "Blast! Now I'm going to get caught up in this mess."

"What mess?" William shrugged. "A useless aristocrat is dead. Why should you care?"

She turned to him, studying him suspiciously. "I care because I'm a woman who owns a brothel. I'll be thrice persecuted for this useless, as you say, aristocrat's death. You know this. But of course, you do not care."

He shrugged. "I do not."

"Why are you even still here?"

"Like I said, I just wanted to find out the latest gossip about my beloved."

Grace might as well have rolled her eyes, her expression displaying clear exasperation. She'd never shown this much emotion in front of him before. "Then go to the gilded ballrooms of your brother and his friends. Nobody knows anything about your beloved princess here."

"He is *not* my brother," William grumbled.

"I cannot emphasize how much I do not care. I have problems of my own, if you haven't noticed." She waved a hand toward the deceased man. Then she raised a brow. "Unless you know something about this?"

William shrugged, assuming his carefree expression. "Of course not. What would I know about it?"

"Then leave." Grace let out a sigh. "The constables are sure to arrive soon, and you don't want to be here when they do."

"You're right. I don't." William sketched a curt bow. "Besides, I have more important things to do, like getting my beloved wife back into my life. Mark my words, before this month is out, we shall be together."

Grace did roll her eyes this time.

William smiled, but his smile faded as he cast one last glance at the lifeless body on the floor. One more member of the Brotherhood was dead.

*Good.*

\* \* \*

## *Fifty six days before the execution...*

Victoria Christine Louise von Mecklenburg-Schwerin, the daughter of Karl Leopold, Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, and Catherine Ivanovna, Tsarevna of Russia, or simply Princess Victoria, stood at the edge of the ballroom. She smiled widely as if this were the happiest day of her life, although it was anything but.

On the surface, it appeared she had everything any woman could ever desire. She was born into an influential, wealthy, and powerful family, a merger of two great lineages, a princess to two empires. Having all the riches anyone could desire, she had been pampered since childhood. If gowns came into fashion, she was the first to wear them. If there were gems other women coveted, Victoria was the first to possess them. Now, as foreign royalty residing under the roof of an English marquess, she herself was the most coveted gem on English soil.

“Your Highness.” Lord Porter, the Earl of Shaftesbury’s second son, dressed formally in a lavish green coat and an intricately tied cravat, bowed before her so low that she could see the top of his heavily powdered white wig.

Victoria fanned herself lightly, regarding the young gentleman from beneath her thick lashes. “Nobody calls me Your Highness, Lord Porter. It’s just Princess Victoria.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” he said, bowing once more.

Victoria suppressed the urge to roll her eyes, a polite—if feigned—smile gracing her lips.

“May I have this dance?” Lord Porter offered his arm. “That would make me the happiest man on earth.”

Such empty flattery. “Then it would be my honor to bestow such happiness upon you.” Still smiling, Victoria snapped her fan closed and placed her gloved hand on Lord Porter’s forearm.

He beamed up at her, and they walked toward the center of the dance floor, with a sea of envious gazes directed their way. Every young woman in the ballroom wanted to be her. Dressed in a lavish blue gown with flowers embroidered in golden threads, on the arm of the second most eligible gentleman in England, while the rest of the men eyed her greedily, it appeared to outside observers as if she had every advantage in the world. She had every man in any country at her feet, ready to worship the ground she walked upon. What more could a young and beautiful princess want?

Victoria turned to face her dance partner, working hard to maintain a beaming smile on her features. But it wasn’t as simple as that. It was all just an illusion.

She moved closer to her dance partner as a melodious minuet filled the room. Lord Porter smiled at her and started a customary polite conversation about the weather. Smiling softly, Victoria nodded from time to time, only half-heartedly participating in the conversation. This was the third time in as many weeks she had danced with Lord Porter, and he had yet to ask a single personal question about her.

It wasn't just his character flaw, though. Not one man who had shown her signs of affection had ever asked anything about her, not even something superficial. They complimented her beauty relentlessly, asked about the weather, fashion, and other frivolities of high society, and then proceeded to tell her about what they found exciting or important. She might as well not have been there. Sometimes, she wished she wasn't.

She stepped away from Lord Porter in the dance and twirled, wondering if he'd notice if she swapped places with the lady next to her. The light was dim enough in the ballroom, and if she took his spectacles away, she wagered she could even replace herself with a life-sized doll.

No, she wasn't worshiped. She was barely acknowledged, which, if she were honest with herself, was a smidgen better than being unwanted, and that's precisely what she had been for most of her life.

As they joined together in the dance, Lord Porter continued his one-sided conversation, while Victoria tumbled deeper into her lonely thoughts.

Discarded by her mother, who took her away from her father as if she were an object, simply to spite him, and then left her to her own devices after that. Rejected by her father, who claimed her after her mother's death, merely to prevent both his daughters from being raised in Russia, and then threw her at the first relative who would take her in. Victoria had known the feeling of being unwanted ever since she was a little child.

Perhaps, that last turn of events might have been the best for her. Her sister was now imprisoned in her home country, a victim of a new greedy ruler, ejected from the throne during a coup and locked up in one of the palace bedrooms.

At least Victoria still had a loving family in the form of her uncle and great aunt who had cared for her since she was a little girl, doing their best to keep her safe in this mad world.

Now, separated from her sister forever, living in a foreign land, all Victoria wanted was a family of her own, a place where she belonged more than anywhere in the world. And even that, the only thing she could control, had been taken away by her loathsome husband!

Victoria huffed aloud and Lord Porter gave her a confused look before continuing his ramblings.

Oh, yes. She was married!

A big surprise—if it were ever uncovered—to everyone in the world except for immediate family and friends.

And to whom did this honor fall, one might ask? To the lying, thieving criminal and the most repugnant scoundrel this world had ever known.

William.

The man who tricked his way into her heart and made her his wife.

At times, Victoria thought—hoped—that it was false, just a strange dream from which she yearned to wake up. At other times, she hoped the marriage was real...



Aaaaargh!

Victoria took a deep breath.

“And that’s when I upped the wager by a hundred pounds! Can you imagine?” Lord Porter said, briefly intruding into her thoughts.

Victoria smiled politely and nodded, twirling in the dance, before returning to her thoughts.

She didn’t want *this* marriage to be real, she felt the need to clarify to herself. She didn’t want a marriage with a man who had lied about being a lord, costing her the chance to rule by her sister’s side. A man who blackmailed her friends then vanished without a trace.

No, she wanted a real marriage. To be cherished, adored, and loved.

It still struck her as rather strange and unfair that she couldn’t simply divorce her lying husband. Her father had divorced twice and married thrice, yet Victoria was effectively tied to the man she now loathed forever.

However, it didn’t matter because if she couldn’t have a loving husband, she could have an adoring lover. She was rich and powerful in her own right. She could keep as many lovers as she wanted, even bear children if she ever decided to do so. And if she became ostracized from English society—which she doubted because of her connections—she could travel the world.

With this mission in mind, she wore her most provocative gown to the charity ball she was hosting for the benefit of a women's shelter, smiling and pretending this was the happiest day of her life.

It was rather poetic that she was helping women escape their miserable lots in life while taking her own life into her own hands. She had spent enough time sulking around her uncle's house, resenting fate for all her misfortunes. It was time to create her own destiny, and this new fate started here, today, with Lord Porter.

Sure, he was a bit boring and self-centered, but so were all the men she had met in recent months. Lord Porter had redeeming qualities, however. He was kind and clever. He cared about his lands, unlike some people who cared about nothing. He was honorable, unlike some men who only tricked, lied, and stole to get what they wanted from life...

She shook the thoughts from her mind. *No. I am not going to think about my husband.*

Lord Porter was an elegant dancer, and Anna—Victoria's sister—had always said that the way a man danced could tell a lot about his love-making abilities. If one was a graceful dancer, it meant he would be an attentive lover.

Victoria had never danced with William, so how was she supposed to know he was a selfish bastard?

"Nobody thought that Brunswick would win," Lord Porter continued, not noticing that her mind had drifted. "But they didn't know that I meticulously studied the racing history of

all the horses and calculated their chances to win according to different terrain and weather conditions. And the only horse to do well in the rain on a racing track like Ascot was Brunswick. It's not for nothing I spend every evening locked up in the study going over racing records. Still, it was an exhilarating win."

Victoria smiled and nodded as if she were following along with the conversation. She'd heard about his interest in betting on horse races every time they met. She found it endearing if somewhat—well, very—boring. But she didn't need to find everything about him exciting, did she? He cared so much about horse racing, and that was the epitome of passion.

The dance ended, and Victoria thanked her lucky stars. Now it was time to set her plan in action.

She fanned her heated cheeks. "I am rather warm. Would you mind stepping outside for a moment, perhaps?"

Lord Porter's eyes widened in surprise, followed by a flicker of anticipation. He bowed lightly. "Of course, Your Highness."

Victoria chuckled and fanned her cheeks again, an easy smile on her lips. "Princess Victoria, please. Or simply Princess, if you prefer."

He sketched a low bow. "Of course, Your Highness."

Victoria's lips pursed on their own, making her attempt at a smile awkward. But Lord Porter didn't seem to notice or care.

He proffered his arm, and Victoria gently laid her gloved fingers atop his forearm.

They slowly made their way toward the french doors. Lord Porter held his head high, a smile on his lips as he nodded to every passing couple. He was proud to have her on his arm, loving the attention from her and from every other man who envied that he had caught a princess's attention.

No doubt, he was thinking of courting her and perhaps marrying her.

Victoria didn't harbor any illusions. She wasn't the naive, young girl with stars in her eyes that she'd been when she'd first arrived in England. She knew that neither this man nor the countless other men who beat around her doorstep were interested in *her*. They were interested in her sizable dowry, her status as a princess, and perhaps even her looks. Victoria wasn't vain, but she was aware enough to know that she had desirable features—pale white skin, wide dark eyes, and gorgeous, thick jet-black hair.

But she wasn't the girl who dreamed of someone to look past all of her advantages. Not anymore. She was determined to use all her good fortunes to get what she wanted. Although she still needed to weed out men who could only benefit from marrying her. Most men wanted her dowry. Some wanted her political connections; even with her mother's family imprisoned in Russia, her father's family remained prominent in Europe.

And if they found out who she was married to, they would certainly run the other way.

Lord Porter was well-connected politically. He was the second son of a marquess. He was well-off. He didn't need her fortune. So, perhaps his interest in her was genuine, not matrimonial.

As they stepped out of the French doors, Victoria tugged him farther. "Lord Porter, would you mind if we took a turn about the gardens?"

Swallowing hard, his eyes widened, and he looked around as if to see if anyone else had heard her. Victoria waited patiently for him to move past his surprise, watching him comprehend that she wanted to be alone with him in the unlit garden.

"Please, call me Gregory..." He paused, his voice hoarse and a bit strangled. "Princess."

A good sign. Her smile widened. "As you wish... Gregory."

His arm tensed beneath her fingers, but he didn't say anything further. They walked in silence toward the garden, only the sounds of music filtering away from the ballroom filling the air.

"It's a beautiful evening, is it not?" Victoria asked, slowing her pace.

Lord Porter matched her step. "Undeniably so."

Taking a deep breath, Victoria slowed her pace a little more and a little more until finally, she was standing still. Lord Porter turned to face her and looked her squarely in the eyes. His voice was deep and thick when he said, “Your beauty rivals the radiance of the moon.”

He lifted his gloved hand and touched her cheek gently. Her cheeks heated and her pulse quickened, aflutter with a mixture of excitement and embarrassment.

Everything was going according to plan. He’d readily agreed to escort her to the gardens, a place where couples went to do very private things in the dark. He’d complimented her and looked at her as though she was the only person in the world. He was clearly captivated by her. Now, how did one subtly inquire if the gentleman was receptive to the idea of a liaison?

Before she had a chance to find out, a sudden and strange sensation enveloped her in a cold embrace. Gooseflesh crawled up her arms, and her hair stood on end, while a slight prickling feeling overtook the back of her head. She had felt this way before, a few times, in fact, but she was never able to figure out what caused it.

She felt as if she were being... observed. Stalked. Hunted? Like a fawn under the penetrating gaze of a Siberian tiger.

Suddenly cold, she wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her upper arms. One thing was certain, though: this sensation had nothing to do with the man before her, who, for

some unfathomable reason, elicited no feelings from her whatsoever.

“Do you want me to bring you a drink?” Lord Porter’s voice jolted her out of her stupor.

How long had she been standing there silently? Victoria shook her head and stepped closer. “No. I’d rather you stayed.”

She needed to stay focused. What else had her sister said in her letters about seduction? *Everything you need to know about a man is in his kiss. Lean closer with your face tilted toward him. If he takes you enthusiastically and shivers cover your arms at his touch, relax and enjoy the rest. If his kiss makes your head spin and his hands lead your body in a sensual dance, then he shall make certain you will enjoy the rest.*

Remembering further instructions, she reached out and touched his arm lightly, her finger only grazing his coat. *There.* His gaze followed her finger’s movements. Subtly leaning into him, her face tilted up, she silently asked for a kiss.

Or at least, that was what she thought she was doing. She was following her sister’s instructions, and if anyone knew anything about seduction and liaisons, it was her sister.

She’d had two lovers at the same time who adored her, and her husband, who was jealous of that attention, yet still bowed to her every whim. And she was incredibly happy with her relationships prior to her imprisonment.

And if her sister could find three people to bed, surely Victoria could get one person to kiss her.

Instead, Lord Porter furrowed his brows and steadied her, pushing her away, “Are you unwell? Are you about to swoon?”

“What?” Victoria flushed from embarrassment. Had she done it wrong?

“I don’t have smelling salts on me, but I surely can—”

*Oh, Boje!* Victoria couldn’t take it any longer. “Kiss me, Gregory! Please!” And although she had said please, as English people always did when they asked for anything, it wasn’t a plea. It was a demand.

“Kiss you?” He looked confused and rather shaken to the core. “Now? Here?”

“Yes, here.”

His cheeks turned deep red, and finally, he stepped closer, his eyes flickering with anticipation.

*Snap!*

The sound of a breaking branch nearby jolted them apart.

“Forgive me, Princess,” Lord Porter stammered. “But we may be caught here.”

*Interesting.* If he was worried about getting caught, then perhaps he wasn’t interested in marriage at all. Another good sign. Although his cowardice left a lot to be desired.

He offered his arm. “Perhaps we should—”



Victoria shook her head, not letting him finish his sentence. She wasn't ready to go back to the suffocating ballroom. "I would like to be left alone."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, I still feel rather warm," she lied.

As he sketched a low bow and skittered away, Victoria cursed under her breath.

*What did I do wrong?*

Was she just not enticing enough to kiss? Was she to spend the rest of her days completely alone?

The sound of crunching leaves alerted her to approaching footsteps. Had he returned? Was he finally going to kiss her?

Victoria turned, but instead of Lord Porter, enveloped by the shadows stood the silhouette of a man she could never mistake for anyone else.

Her husband.

## Chapter 2



“**Y**ou!” Victoria’s heart drummed rapidly in her chest as if trying to escape from its prison, pumping blood to every corner of her being, warming her from the inside and heating her skin. Her breath caught, and she could not take her gaze away from the familiar—and oh, so lovely—features of her husband.

Her chest leapt as if tugged by the strings attached to her heart, dragging her entire body toward the man she had married. A man she used to love.

She took two steps in his direction before stopping herself in her tracks.

What was she doing?

Surely this feeling he elicited from her was rage. Yes, yes, rage. Because...

For a moment, she forgot why she was supposed to hate her scoundrel of a husband.

*Ah, yes.* Because he was a liar and a bastard. And the reason for all her misfortunes.

“Him?” His voice was mocking, his eyes glinting with mischief like they always did. She used to love that fire in his eyes.

*Him what?* He probably saw her confusion because he tilted his head toward the disappearing Lord Porter. “Really?”

“You dare criticize *him*?” Her face exploded with furious heat.

“You do realize,” he said leisurely, before putting an unlit cheroot between his teeth and clamping it down, “that that man is a coward. He is not very bright, either. Unlucky, too. Lost half of his fortune in cards. And to top it off, he is rather cowardly. I am willing to wager that if you were ever in any sort of peril, he wouldn’t even try to save you. The most he would do is throw a shoe in the direction of trouble and run away, leaving you behind.”

Victoria narrowed her eyes. “I do not need him to have luck or courage or even a fortune. I have that in spades. And why would I ever be in peril when I am with him? Peril only surrounds *you*.”

He shrugged and stepped forward. Victoria instinctively stepped back.

He smirked but didn’t continue his advance. “You are a princess. Why wouldn’t you be in peril?”

Victoria huffed a breath. “I am safe as long as I stay away from you.”

“You should have chosen the Earl of Pembroke,” William said in a leisurely contemplation. “You have danced with him, haven’t you? At least he has mettle.”

Victoria blinked, otherwise frozen in a stupor. She had danced with the earl a couple of times. He was rather handsome and elegant, she had to admit, although he was about twice her age.

He was also silent. Not in an awkward way, rather it was a different kind of silence. Deadly. As if he was planning something ominous. Something that had nothing to do with her or any other lady in the ballroom.

Although, who was she to judge? She had never known there was something off with William. If she'd ever felt anything ominous, it should have been from him. She'd married him having no idea what a criminal he truly was.

Either way, Pembroke so rarely attended social events that she hadn't truly considered him as a prospective lover.

How did William even know that she had danced with him? She narrowed her eyes and gritted through her teeth "Were you spying on me?"

William looked around in mock confusion. "What gave it away?"

Suddenly, Victoria remembered all those moments when she'd felt as if someone's eyes were on her. As if someone was burrowing into her soul through the distance. She always felt William's presence beside her but always dismissed those thoughts as childish dreams.

What if she had been right? What if he had been following her all this time?

“Bastard!” she cried and wished she had something to throw at him. Then she added in Russian for a good measure, “*Ubludok!*”

“Yes,” he answered calmly. “I think we’ve already established that is exactly what I am.”

“How long have you been following me?” she seethed. “And what gives you the right to spy on me?”

“I am your husband,” he said evenly. “It is my duty to protect you.”

Victoria balled her hands by her sides, a breath whooshing out of her lungs. She was so tired. “To protect me from what exactly?”

“From men who want to take advantage of you,” he said nonchalantly.

Rage returned, easily replacing her lethargy. “Then you should have protected me from you!”

“I never thought of taking advantage of you!” William appeared genuinely affronted. “All I ever wanted was you, nothing else. And it’s still the truth.”

“If that were true, where the devil were you for the past two years? If all you wanted was me, you would have fought for me, stayed for me. But you didn’t.”

His jaw clenched, and he had to forcefully unclench it before he spoke. “Are you mad at me for following you or for not following you enough?”

“Yes!” she cried.

“Which one?”

“Which one, what?” she asked in frustration, her mind a blur.

He wrinkled his brow. “Look, dear, I am your husband. It is my job to look out for you and make certain you’re safe and that you won’t do anything you’ll regret. So, when you openly started looking for a lover, did you think I would not notice?”

“It is none of your business!” she enunciate every word.

He moved so fast that Victoria flinched as he reached her side. He stood so close now that she could smell his cologne, a fresh and earthy scent mixed with his own masculine musk. That scent of his was intoxicating. It made her want to burrow her nose in the juncture between his shoulder and neck and breathe in. She wanted to bask in his heat and let it wash over her.

But he didn’t touch her, had not even tried. He stood a few inches away, his chest rising and falling with the intensity of his breaths. “You *are* my business,” he gritted through his teeth. But then he shook his head, and his regular aloofness came over his eyes, his tone rising one octave. “Besides, you do not appear to have the best judgment when it comes to men.”

Victoria stared him right in the eyes. “Yes, I am starting to see this to be true.”

He let out a little chuckle, his carefree demeanor back completely, and took a step back. “I am the only right choice you’ve made. And only because you weren’t left to your own devices when it came to choosing me.”

“Oh,” she said with a chuckle. “You mean, because you tricked me.”

“I didn’t trick you. I stripped off all the external factors, the wealth, the title and all that’s left was just me. And that is who you fell in love with. I wanted you to know the real me and base your decision on my character.”

“And now I know your character,” she agreed. “You are a liar and a criminal.”

He dropped his cheroot to the ground and crushed it beneath the heel of his boot. “I might be a criminal, but I never lied to you!”

Victoria couldn’t help herself; she laughed at that. “Really? Are you going to lie to my face about never having lied to me?”

“I didn’t.” He shrugged.

“You said you were a lord!” she cried.

“I never said that!” He raised a finger heavenward. “I never said I was a lord. I said I was a duke’s son. And I am.”

“A bastard son,” she seethed.

“Perhaps I omitted that little part. But it’s not a lie. Yes, I deceived you, but I never lied to you.”

She stared at him in disbelief for a moment before licking her dry lips. “English is not my first language. It is not even the second. And perhaps lie and deceit mean different things in English, but they both translate the same.”

“What would it take for you to forgive me?” He spread his arms. “Or at least, to give me another chance.”

A bubble of laughter left her lips before she could help it. “Hmm... let me see... You knew I needed to marry a titled lord, and you lied to me about it to get me to marry you. Because of this, I was unable to travel to Russia and be there for my sister and her family when the coup happened—”

“I’d call it a blessing.”

She continued as if he hadn’t spoken, “You stabbed my uncle in a duel, you blackmailed my friend, and you killed at least three gentlemen for their riches.”

“I never killed anyone!” he protested.

*Liar.* “Right. Then maybe you didn’t kill them. You slaughtered them, murdered, erased them from this world, or whatever word you can use to justify your *deceit*. So, no. There is nothing you can do to stop me from hating you.”

“Look, I am your husband. And as a husband, I have rights that I can claim. I could have told everyone that we are married and exercised those rights. I could have taken you with me by force. But I didn’t. I could’ve snatched you out of the house—God knows I am capable—and yet, all I did was try to get you to forgive me by honest, conventional methods.”



She narrowed her eyes at him. “You want praise for acting like an honest human being for once in your blasted life? For not acting like the scoundrel that you are?”

“Well... yes,” William answered earnestly, and Victoria knew that he truly believed that.

“You are a lunatic!” she spat.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I am. However, I’ve done everything you asked of me. You wanted time, I gave you time. You wanted space. I left you alone. Doesn’t it show you that I am willing to change? For you.”

Suddenly frustrated, Victoria swiped away a lock of hair that clung to her forehead. “I don’t want you to change for *me*, William. I don’t want you putting up a charade of an honest man just to gain my trust back. I want you to actually become a trustworthy person.”

“And when I do?”

“*If* you do, then perhaps you’ll understand why I can never be with you. William, know this, I will never, ever, ever go back to you willingly. I will not step into the trap you set for me of my own volition.”

If she thought that would deter him, perhaps she should have known it wouldn’t. William just smiled. “Hypothetically —”

“I don’t know what that means!” she cried, ready to stomp her foot. *And I don’t want to.* He was the only man on earth who could rile her up to this point of frustration.

“Just... imagine for a moment an alternate world. A fantasy. What would it take for you to even entertain the idea of taking me back?”

A lump in her throat made it difficult for her to speak. She swallowed it. As much as she hated William, sometimes she still dreamed of being reunited with him. A little over a year ago, he came to his brother’s house and made a grand speech asking for her forgiveness, begging her to take him back, and she almost caved on the spot.

Later, she found out that the coup happened in Russia and that her sister and her extended family were imprisoned. If it wasn’t for William, she would’ve been in Russia at that time, and perhaps, she would have been able to help. Later still, she found out that William had blackmailed her friend.

Victoria hated him. With every bone in her body.

There was no forgiveness for him. Ever.

And yet...

In the dead of the night, she still thought about him. About his lips on her skin, his hands on her body, his comforting smell. Oh, how she wanted to find comfort in his embrace right now. She’d loved him then, and she loved him still, and she had no idea why.

She was a blasted weakling! “There is nothing you can do, William. You are a villain. You’re selfish and hypocritical. The opposite of what I would want in a man by my side.”

“And Porter is that man?” Disbelief and bitterness lined his voice.

“I don’t know.” She licked her lips. “I don’t know him. You and I are married, and for some unfathomable reason, it’s for life. I am *stuck* with you for life. But I will be damned before I spend the rest of my life with you. If I ever find myself a lifetime lover, he will be a hero. Someone who helps people, who saves people and does not ruin their lives.”

“A hero.” William scoffed. “If you think you’ll find a hero among lords, you’ll be very disappointed. But know this. No matter what you think of me or how you feel about me, you’re still my wife. You will always be my wife.” He stepped closer, his face an inch away from hers. “And if that knave, Porter, or anyone else for that matter, so much as dares to kiss you, I shall rip their lips off their face. And if they dare touch you, I shall break off their extremities. Because you’re right, my dear. I am a villain. And I am also your husband. Forever.”

\* \* \*

### *Autumn 1741*

Moonlight sifted through the ornate windows of the church, casting a radiant glow upon Victoria. She looked like an angel, as though she had been sent from heaven to bring him peace.

For peace was what William felt in her presence. She didn’t need to say or do anything; a single glance from her endowed him with a renewed purpose in life.

He had spent most of his life stealing, cheating, and blackmailing people, content to live alone in the service of vengeance. Then she had entered his life, and everything had changed.

Her smile warmed his heart and filled him with vitality, hope, and, dare he say, happiness?

She looked exquisite in her simple midnight-blue gown, a rose from her uncle the Marquess of Roth's garden adorning her thick, jet-black hair, in an attempt to look festive. She had said she wanted to look beautiful for him on their wedding day, not realizing that for him, she would be beautiful regardless. To him, no one in this world rivaled her beauty, regardless of what she wore or how she styled her hair. Whether she wore a simple frock or an old worn nightgown, as long as she stood beside him, today would be the happiest day of his life.

Their wedding day.

The minister William had bribed to perform the ceremony spoke the words, but William didn't listen. Two witnesses, also compelled by William to participate, stood to the side, ready to sign the register.

However, William's entire focus was on Victoria, who stood in front of him, holding his hands and gazing deeply into his eyes with anticipation and excitement.

Then the minister turned to William. "William, will you take Victoria to be your wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you

love her, honor her, comfort her, and keep her, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, so long as you both shall live?”

William gently squeezed Victoria’s fingers. “I will.”

Turning to Victoria, the minister repeated his question. Victoria cast a playful glance at William before answering with a broad smile. “I will.”

“Do you have the rings?” The minister raised an eyebrow.

Victoria began to shake her head, as they hadn’t had the chance to buy or order the rings. However, William raised a reassuring hand. “No, we don’t have rings, but I do have this.”

He reached into the inside pocket of his coat and produced a pearl necklace. “Will this suffice?”

The minister frowned but accepted the necklace with a sigh.

“Where did you get it?” Victoria whispered, her eyes sparkling.

William grinned. “I stole it.”

Victoria chuckled, probably thinking he was joking, while the minister gave him a knowing sidelong glance, likely suspecting the truth. William simply shrugged, confident in his choice.

“Hold up your hands,” the minister commanded. William took Victoria’s hand in his and raised them before the minister. He took the pearl necklace and draped it over their wrists twice as he said, “Repeat after me. With this necklace, I thee

wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods, I thee endow: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

William repeated the words, and the minister covered their hands with his. “Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

Not willing to wait any longer, William leaned in and kissed Victoria on her lips.

Their hands still joined by the necklace, William wrapped his other arm around her waist, while Victoria caressed his cheek. Their kiss deepened, as if their souls were reaching out toward each other.

They were lost in their sensual kiss, savoring each other’s taste and reveling in their closeness when the minister cleared his throat. “We still need to sign the register. And... um... consummation of the marriage is not allowed on the church premises.”

Victoria broke the kiss, wiping her lips with the back of her fingers. William stared at her in wonder. He couldn’t believe his luck.

He slowly unwound the pearl necklace from around their bound wrists, then reached up and draped it around her neck. “Now that we are married, I would love to see you wearing just this necklace... and nothing else,” he whispered in her ear as he secured the clasp.

Victoria glanced up at him, mischief dancing in her eyes.  
“Soon.”

The minister cleared his throat again, and William chuckled. He pressed a swift kiss to Victoria’s lips and whispered against her skin, “We’re married.”

She grinned at him, her eyes sparkling with happiness.  
“We are married. Now and forever.”

# Chapter 3



*Forty nine days before the execution...*

Victoria left the Stranton ball in a hurry, still wiping at the red wine stain on her ice-blue gown. She loved this gown. She had imagined wearing it one day at her wedding. The one she'd ended up wearing was a much simpler, midnight-blue gown because it was a spur-of-the-moment wedding. And at the time, she didn't regret that.

Now... well, now, she realized she had made poor decisions. Both in her choice of wedding gown and in her husband.

Not that the ruined dress mattered anymore. She would never wear it down the aisle. Never marry again period.

She continued wiping at the stain, her fingers shaking as she moved toward the line of carriages farther down the street. She was in no hurry.

She had told Uncle Bastian and Lavinia to finish their night and not to worry about her. She'd be waiting for them in the carriage.

The night was not going well anyway.

Ever since that night at the charity ball, where William had dared to accost her in the garden, the atmosphere around her



had shifted. The crowd of her admirers suddenly thinned, the gentlemen hesitating to approach her as if a shadow loomed over her, casting her in an eerie darkness they did not want to be swallowed by.

Naturally, her initial thought was that William had gone back on his word and revealed their marriage to all. Yet, if that was the case, she would have expected to be openly cut and publicly shamed. Instead, she found herself... almost revered? Feared?

She struggled to find the right word to describe it.

The only person who dared to dance with her was the Earl of Pembroke. And while she considered the possibility that his presence might have something to do with the unusual atmosphere surrounding her, he paid her no attention otherwise. And he wasn't even present at most of the social gatherings.

The sound of shuffling feet had Victoria snapping her neck and looking around. The chilly wind blew, sweeping fall leaves down the street, adding to the ominous sensation.

*Don't be a fool, Victoria!* It was probably one of the carriage drivers stretching their legs, or servants rushing to do the bidding of their masters.

Suddenly, she wished she'd waited inside for Uncle Bastian and Lavinia. Victoria shook her head and continued down the street, looking for her uncle's carriage.

*Click-clack. Click-clack.*

The sharp, rhythmic click of heels echoed through the street. She was not mistaken this time. Someone was walking behind her. Perhaps even following her.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end, warning her of something ominous. But before she had the chance to pick up her skirts and flee, a low masculine voice said, “Princess Victoria.”

Victoria yelped and turned, her hand on her heart, only to see a wide-eyed and quite bewildered Lord Porter before her.

“Lord Porter!” she breathed and looked around. Her chest moved rapidly with the strength of her breath.

“Apologies, I didn’t mean to startle you.” His eyes darted from side to side as if he was frightened himself.

“I didn’t expect someone to follow me out.”

“Forgive me.” He bowed low, and she dipped into a curtsy.

“No need to apologize. Is there a reason you frightened me out of my wits?” Victoria’s tone was steely. After all, this coward had left her in the gardens at her charity ball about a week ago and had never bothered to approach her since, even going so far as to avoid her. And to think she was entertaining the idea of making him her lover.

“I wanted to speak to you. I was afraid to approach you in the crowded ballroom, so when I saw you leave early, I thought it would be best to follow you silently.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t want you to think that I was insincere in my affections toward you.”

“Why would I do that? Because you left me in the gardens alone after I had asked you to kiss me? Because you ran away with the excuse of bringing me a drink only to avoid me since?”

His cheeks were flushed, and he cast his eyes down in embarrassment. “Yes.”

“In that case, you have failed to convey how you feel, because I do indeed think your affections insincere.”

“But that’s not the case at all,” he said pleadingly and stepped forward. “However, when I went back to the ballroom to fetch you a drink, I received a note.”

“A note?” Victoria’s brows crinkled in a mask of confusion, although in the back of her mind, a clear picture had emerged.

It was William!

That bastard had promised not to let other men near her and he had gone so far as to frighten each and every one of them.

And it worked! Every potential suitor ran away like a rat from a sinking ship.

“Yes, and this note told me to stay away from you or else...”

“Or else what?” Victoria fought for composure. What did that weasel blackmail them with?

Lord Porter opened his mouth to reply, except his eyes widened even more, and he let out a shrill scream before running in the opposite direction from her.

Victoria watched him in stunned confusion, frozen in the middle of the street. What a coward!

Collecting her wits, she slowly and carefully turned around to see what had frightened him so. She wished she had just followed the coward Porter’s lead and dashed away as two burly men appeared as if from out of nowhere, grabbed her by the arms, and started dragging her away.

Victoria screamed, her feet kicking the air, as she was hauled like a sack of potatoes. A couple of liveried men ran after them, yelling something and shaking their fists, and this was the last thing she saw before she was unceremoniously stuffed inside a carriage.

“You two, stand on guard outside. You are with me,” one of the thugs barked.

Victoria couldn’t see what was going on from her supine position on the carriage seat. She struggled to sit up, pushing at her wide, puffy skirts, only to fall flat on her back once more as the carriage jolted into a start.

“You arrogant, crude, bad... smelling brutes!” Victoria cried, unable to come up with a more cutting insult in the heat of the moment. “Help me sit up right now! And let me go!”

Rough, calloused, and dirty hands grabbed her by her arms and helped her sit up. Before she was able to thank the rude criminal for complying with her demands, he stuffed a linen cloth into her mouth. “Don’t bite,” he said in a terrible, hoarse voice. He grinned, showing his rotten teeth.

Another man reached up from across the carriage and tied her wrists together.

“Bastards!” she spat, although it came out as “Bassal.” And then her eyes narrowed at the two burly thugs. They might not have been bastards, but the person behind this kidnapping definitely was. “It’s William, that cowardly bastard! He told you to kidnap me!” Victoria tried to yell, but because of the cloth inside her mouth, it sounded more like an indecipherable jumble of vowels.

“Do not worry, Princess,” said the thug sitting across from her, a bald, huge, and foul-smelling man with half of his teeth missing. “All we want is money. As soon as your dear uncle opens his purse strings and gives us what we want, we’ll let you go.”

“What?” Victoria squeaked, her words muffled. Then she glanced at the man sitting next to her. He was smaller than the other one, and Victoria wrongly surmised she would feel more comfortable talking to him. But his gaze was uncomfortably lascivious and coupled with the fact that he was sitting uncomfortably close to her, she felt her body shiver and tense. “Why does William want my money?”

It shouldn't have been surprising that her blackmailing, thieving, and lying bastard of a husband would extort money from her relatives this way. Although, if he were to abduct her, she doubted he would let her go for any amount of money. And where was he, anyway? Why wasn't he in the carriage with her?

"In the meantime..." The first thug, the one across from her, looked her up and down suggestively. "We have a lot of time to pass. And I have never tasted a princess before."

Cold sweat covered her body. William would never let his thugs touch her. Would he?

She glanced out the window and into the darkness. Where were they driving? The carriage rattled and jolted as it careened down the rough, moonlit road. If they were leaving town, in a few more minutes, nobody would be able to find them. They would just disappear among the country roads!

As it was, she didn't have the cavalry rushing to help her.

*Oh, Boje.* What was going on?

"Where's William?" she tried to ask, but it all came out like a squealing whine.

The thugs didn't even bother answering. Victoria tried asking them more questions, but they ignored her. And with every passing moment, the horror started sinking more and more into her soul.

Something felt very wrong about all this.

“Such a pretty bird,” the thug in front of her finally said, his gaze caressing her body in a way that made her want to cast up her accounts. “Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle. I’ll be sure to get us a nice and soft mattress.” The laugh that followed that declaration made hackles rise all along Victoria’s body.

Her eyes widened in horror, and then to add to her discomfort, the smaller thug reached out and dragged his dirty finger across her cheek.

That’s when the horror completely overtook Victoria’s mind, and she started to scream and kick with her feet, pushing at the thug sitting beside her with her shoulder and elbow.

She didn’t have a plan. Only panic and horror were coursing through her veins.

It wasn’t William who had snatched her, she now realized. And as much as she hated the bastard, she’d give anything to be in his arms instead.

One of the thugs wrapped his arms around her shoulders to keep her calm. The other one grabbed her ankles, so she wouldn’t kick him anymore, but that only made her panic even more.

She was completely at their mercy.

Just then, the carriage slowed down, its abrupt deceleration throwing every passenger off balance. Both thugs let go of her, and they all skidded to the side. The whinnying of the horses and the intensifying sounds of horse hooves gave Victoria a bit of hope. Something was happening outside the carriage.

Perhaps her uncle had caught up to them! Surely Porter had alerted everyone to what had happened, or more likely the servants had, the ones who'd attempted to save her.

As if prompted by her thoughts, the door of the carriage flew open, and strong arms reached inside, grabbing the hulking thug who had just sat across from Victoria and hauling him away. Victoria let out a squeak as the man was unceremoniously dragged out. The second man rushed after his companion, jumping out of the carriage with a cry.

The carriage continued to sway violently, tossing Victoria this way and that. Nausea threatened to overtake her, and she desperately longed for stable ground beneath her feet. She couldn't see what was happening outside, but she could hear the sounds of chaos, hoofbeats thumping alongside the carriage, screams, and struggle. The grunts and yelps let her know that a fight was happening outside, and her instincts screamed at her that she needed to get out of this carriage and run.

With her wrists still tied together in front of her, she was able to remove the cloth from her mouth, and with quite a bit of struggle, she managed to get her skirts out of her way before sitting upright. The carriage slowed considerably at that moment, almost rolling to a stop. But Victoria wasn't going to wait for someone to get inside. Lord only knew what had happened to her would-be rescuers, if they even were that.

So, she opened the door of the carriage, fully prepared to jump out of the still-moving vehicle. Before she could take a



step into nothingness and jump, a firm grip wrapped around her waist, lifting her effortlessly. The next moment, she was dumped across the lap of a rider on horseback.

*William.*

Of course, it was William.

Who else would be brazen enough to steal her right out of the moving carriage? He urged the horse to a gallop and whisked her away, leaving the kidnappers lying on the ground and the carriage sitting on the side of the road.

A sob of relief tore out of her lungs as Victoria threw her arms around his neck and held him tightly. She burrowed her nose in that comforting spot between his shoulder and neck and took in his sweet, masculine scent. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she held on tightly to her husband, her fingers biting into his back. It felt good, oh, so good—too good to confess out loud—to finally be in his arms again. As if feeling her turmoil, William slowed his mount until finally stopping at the side of the road. He wrapped his arms around her waist, his hands drawing soothing circles around her back.

“How do you feel, my sweet? Did they hurt you?” His voice was tender and slightly hoarse from emotion.

She shook her head and hugged him close.

“Shh,” William soothed her, whispering comforting nonsense in her ears.

When Victoria finally felt calm, she leaned back and looked into William’s eyes. “At first, I thought it was you,”

she said, her voice still raw from crying. “But the things they said...” She shook her head, and William’s fingers tightened on the back of her dress.

His frown was fierce as he gritted, “What the devil did they say?”

Victoria bit her lip. “It doesn’t matter.”

He nodded, his tension melting away. “You’re right. It doesn’t matter. I am here now. Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Victoria wiped her cheeks and swallowed hard. “I stood on the street, speaking to Lord Porter when these men appeared out of nowhere and whisked me away.”

William scoffed. “That coward Porter didn’t lift a finger to help you?”

Victoria shook her head.

“I told you he was a coward. And I guess I was giving him too much credit when I said he’d toss a shoe at the attackers. Instead, he just left you and ran.”

A flicker of doubt crept into Victoria’s mind, but she dismissed it. “Yes, he did run. But to be fair, anyone would.”

William puffed out his chest. “I wouldn’t. I would never leave you in harm’s way. And even the servants tried to help. Anyone has more mettle than Porter.”

Victoria disengaged from his arms, that flicker of doubt settling back. “How did you know that?”

William blinked. “Know what?”

“That the servants tried to help.”

“I just assumed—”

“How do you even know that any servants were in the vicinity?”

William cleared his throat. “It is obvious by your clothing that you were leaving a social function. It’s a logical leap.”

“I might have been having a liaison with Porter.”

His features darkened. “Were you?”

“No, but I could have!”

William touched her cheek. “Come now, sweetness. Let me get you home.”

But his reassurances weren’t enough anymore. Her mind raced, thoughts tumbling one over the other. “How did you find me so quickly? How did you even know I was taken?”

William clenched his teeth. “Are you interrogating me? I rescued you!”

Her eyes narrowed as she realized what had been gnawing at her. “You did this! You orchestrated this whole thing just to play the hero, didn’t you?”

“Vic—”

“You lying bastard!” she cried. “And to think I was happy to see you!”

“You were happy because you love me.”

“I thought you saved me!”

“I did!”

“Take me back,” Victoria demanded, straightening her clothes in nervous gestures.

“Ugh!” William threw his hands up. “What does it take to please you?”

“It’s quite simple, really,” Victoria said calmly before shouting in his face, “Just stop lying to me!”

“How can I not lie when your standards are incredibly high! How can a man like me, a bastard and a thief, have any chance of competing with princes and dukes?”

She looked him squarely in the eyes. “By *not* lying!”

William gritted his teeth. “You wanted a hero! And I gave you a hero.”

“Everything you have told me is a lie. So, do one decent thing in your blasted life and take. Me. Back!”

“Fine!” he growled and spurred the horse to a start. “As you please.”

“And to think I was happy to see you—Ugh!” Their bodies slapped against each other as the horse moved into a gallop, and Victoria wrapped her arms around William’s back so as not to fall.

As angry as she was with the idiot for trying this stupid scheme, she was angrier at herself.

She had been so blasted happy to see him, to touch him again, that she hadn't even questioned the events that took place!

She was the one who was an idiot! A naive idiot.

He obviously hadn't changed one bit during their two years of separation. And as much as she had changed, her feelings toward him did not.

# Chapter 4



Victoria's life had turned upside down after one night.

And once again, it was all William's fault.

Sure, Lord Porter was the one who ran back into the ballroom screaming at the top of his lungs that she'd been taken, ravished, and utterly ruined. But the only reason the coward had done that was because of William's actions.

Victoria couldn't fault Porter, truly. Apparently, he had fallen and ripped his breeches in the least opportune place and had to divert the attention away from himself by exaggerating the story of Victoria's abduction. And instead of sympathizing with her, what did the sophisticated society crowd do?

They hailed Porter as a hero while calling Victoria a harlot.

A harlot! And for what?

For being alone in the street at night, for courting trouble, for not listening to her elders, for not taking a chaperone, and for any other sin that could have been attributed to her situation.

Some people even speculated that she had orchestrated her own kidnapping to extort money from her uncle!

Did nobody realize how absurd all of that sounded?

But worst of all was the thought that if she were indeed kidnapped by villains, tortured, ravished, and taken advantage of, society would still have blamed *her*.

“I am going to kill him!” Uncle Bastian growled, prowling his little study like a caged tiger.

“No, you’re not.” Lavinia’s voice was calm and soft.

“Why the devil not? I should have done that a long time ago. That would have freed Vicki from the marriage and would’ve relieved us all from further turmoil.”

“Nobody’s going to marry me now anyway,” Victoria said quietly. “Even if you do kill him.” Nobody was going to take her as a lover either. She was worse than a cheap harlot now in the eyes of society, “ruined” by the dirty thugs.

“We can go back to Europe. You’re still the Prinzessin von Mecklenburg-Schwerin. Sure, the rumors might travel there, but we can preemptively start our own set of rumors. Or we can return to France.”

“You can’t leave,” Victoria countered. “You have your lands to look after. Not to mention little Amelia. You have just started going back out in public. Do you think she is ready to travel at such a tender age?”

“Don’t you worry about Amelia,” Lavinia soothed in the calm, motherly tone she’d adopted ever since giving birth to their child. She had always been clever, calm, and measured, but maternity had given her an air of wisdom she hadn’t

possessed before. “She is a strong little girl. She can weather it all.”

“All I am saying is that you have just started your lives here. I don’t want to be the reason you leave it all behind.”

“You can go with Frau Elinor,” Uncle Bastian offered.

Frau Elinor, who sat by the hearth, a wool blanket snugly wrapped around her legs, raised her stern gaze to her nephew. “Watch your tone, boy,” she said in German.

“She can, can’t she?” he countered softer.

“Perhaps it’s better we return to Mecklenburg-Schwerin, then,” she said in English now, her eyes fixed on Victoria.

“No!” The word fairly burst out of her chest. “I am not going back to *him*, a failure, with my tail tucked between my legs.” She shuddered just thinking of her father’s ice-cold gaze. She had nothing there. It wasn’t home.

She would have loved to go to her sister, but she would be arrested the moment she stepped onto Russian land.

“Well, then, what do you propose we do?” Uncle barked.

Victoria reared back, and Frau Elinor tsked in disappointment.

Uncle Bastian looked apologetically at his aunt and ran a hand through his hair. “I am sorry. I didn’t mean to raise my voice. I am just... so angry with that devil!” He growled the last two words.

“I know,” Victoria said quietly.



“You should have killed him when you could,” Frau Elinor offered calmly, as if discussing the dinner menu.

“Maybe if I call him out to a duel again?”

“The last time you dueled you lost!” Lavinia interjected.

Uncle Bastian turned on her sharply, his eyes glinting with anger, but his scowl immediately softened as he looked at his wife’s features. That was the only way he ever looked at his wife—with admiration. Adoration.

Victoria’s heart skipped a beat.

“That bastard doesn’t play by the rules,” Uncle Bastian said quieter.

Lavinia stood and approached him slowly. “And he won’t play by the rules this time either.”

She reached her husband and placed her hand on his shoulder, where William had stabbed him during their duel for Victoria’s honor after Uncle had discovered they had gotten married.

Uncle Bastian absently stroked his wife’s hand, and Victoria looked away.

*It’s all my fault.*

Sure, she could blame William ad infinitum, but the truth was... she was the one who’d fallen for his charm.

She had been so young and naive that she’d fallen for his sweet words, or rather his skillful omissions of truth. Yes, he had lied to her. But he had never forced her to marry him. In

fact, she was the one who had insisted on it. And she had been only too happy to keep their marriage a secret.

It had all sounded so romantic at the time. God, she'd been such a fool.

A light rap on the door jolted her out of her gloomy thoughts before the butler appeared on the threshold. "His Grace the Duke of Kensington and Her Grace the Duchess of Kensington have arrived, my lord. My ladies," he said with a bow.

"Thank God," Lavinia breathed.

"Please, let them in," Uncle Bastian commanded as Victoria jumped to her feet.

Caroline, the Duchess of Kensington, would no doubt be so disappointed in Victoria. She was the one who'd taught her English etiquette. She was the one who'd sponsored her into society. She was also one of the most poised women in England. A woman who had never been embroiled in any scandal and who probably had never even sneezed in the presence of another.

The couple entered, and after a bow and a curtsy toward Frau Elinor, the duke immediately walked toward Lavinia, while Caroline approached Victoria and, to her surprise, pulled her into a warm hug.

When she released her, she still had her hands on Victoria's shoulders, her gaze sharp but full of compassion. "Do not worry. We'll take care of everything."

Victoria's eyes started tearing up. "How?" She was prepared for scolding, and she could withstand anger, but she was not prepared for kindness.

Caroline chewed her lower lip, such an uncharacteristic action for her. "I don't know yet. But I am a duchess. I will figure it out."

Victoria chuckled. "And I am a princess. And yet all I seem to be able to do is get myself into trouble."

Caroline waved a dismissing hand and smiled. "You are right. You are a princess. You can afford to get yourself into trouble."

"Thank you for coming so quickly," Lavinia said when everyone settled down and turned to Caroline. "Especially since you have so much going on. How's the duke?" Lavinia meant the Duke of Wolverstone, Caroline's late uncle's friend, who was like a family to her.

Caroline's late uncle was the only family she knew. He was the man who had raised her, and he had passed away by his own hand after William had blackmailed him. So naturally, Caroline hated William. And now, she latched onto the Duke of Wolverstone, her uncle's best friend, as the only reminder of the person she had lost.

She swallowed visibly and nodded. "He is... Well, he is still bedridden."

Her husband took her hand, and she gave him a grateful smile.

“I assume that’s why William is back now,” she continued, her voice strained. “The duke was the only person William ever feared. Perhaps feared is not the right word... Avoided. Now that Wolverstone can’t touch him, he’s back.”

Wolverstone was a powerful man. Besides being a duke, he was also the leader of a secretive spy society called the Shadows, a society Victoria knew little about. She knew that they aimed to eradicate violence toward the most vulnerable and least protected. She knew that not many people were aware of that and as a result, they feared the Shadows. However, she knew them to be a group of vigilantes who’d inherited their mantles from their parents, and a few of her friends, including Caroline, her husband, and her other friend’s husband, Viscount St. John, were part of this group.

She also knew that the leader of this society, Wolverstone, was called Erebus, a pseudonym used to hide his real identity.

And, of course, in his usual fashion, William had taken advantage of this society and managed to smear their reputation. He’d pretended to be Erebus and blackmailed a good portion of the general population using his name as a shield.

When Wolverstone found out about this little detail, William was forced to leave the country. And now he was back.

“Regardless of the question why now, we have to ask ourselves, why come back at all? What are his motives?” Kensington asked.

Lavinia glanced at Victoria and cleared her throat. “He wants his wife back.”

“Yes, but why?” Kensington didn’t relent.

“Because he loves her,” Lavinia insisted, in a tone that conveyed her conviction.

“I doubt the bastard can love anyone,” Uncle Bastian growled. “He must have selfish reasons.”

“Isn’t love a selfish enough reason?” Lavinia countered.

“Love is caring about another person’s well-being, not jeopardizing their safety and social standing so long as you are the one who possesses them like a coveted item! I can’t believe you would...”

Uncle Bastian continued with his tirade, Lavinia softly rebuking his statements, but although Victoria heard their voices, she didn’t comprehend the meaning of their words anymore. At some point, the Kensingtons interjected with their own opinions. Everyone was trying to solve *her* problem. Everyone put their lives aside to save her from another misfortune caused by her youthful mistake like they always did. Ever since she’d married William, she had expected her uncle to sweep up the rubble of her poor decisions. It was time for her to get off her bottom and take responsibility for some of them, too.

She glanced at Frau Elinor, who looked back at her at the same moment as if reading her mind. She gave her an encouraging smile coupled with a light frown. Only Frau

Elinor was able to make that kind of grimace of stern approval. And Victoria felt comforted by it.

With a nod toward her aunt, she stood, her fingers curled into fists by her sides. “I think it’s time we told everyone the truth.”

The room fell silent for a long moment, and everyone turned sharply toward her.

Finally, Kensington asked, “Whatever do you mean?”

She bit her lower lip, her heart racing, thumping against her ribcage. “About my marriage to William.”

“Not a chance in hell,” Uncle growled.

“How can that possibly help?” Lavinia added.

Victoria started pacing the carpet, her chest heaving. “Of course, being the wife of a known profligate and a rake will sting. As will the fact that he’s a bastard. But he is a duke’s bastard. Your half-brother. That ought to count for something, right?” She glanced at Kensington, sitting silently, his wife’s hand in his, and continued pacing. “And with your help, perhaps, we can smooth over some of the scandal. Besides, it’s better if it’s known that I was taken by my own husband than by a band of brigands. Or we can tell them that we eloped because you”—she waved in her uncle’s direction—“were understandably against our union. We can say that Porter lied out of jealousy. That would smooth over some of the damage he’s done.”

“That will still ruin your reputation,” Uncle Bastian said gravely.

Victoria let out a nervous laugh at that. “It is already ruined. At least this way, it won’t be destroyed. And then, after a few months, I can openly divorce him. And be free.”

“Divorce him?” Lavinia reared back. “What makes you think he will agree to such a thing? What makes you think the courts will even allow it? There hasn’t been a divorce in England for decades!”

Kensington shrugged. “I can deal with the courts if that’s what you truly want. It might not be easy, but not impossible.”

“And I will deal with William,” Victoria said. “You said he had to marry me to gain social status, or something else of that manner. I will figure out what he wants, and I shall give it to him as long as he agrees to our scheme.”

“Suppose he agrees. What then? People still hate him. He is still a bastard. How will that make anything better?” Lavinia asked.

“We’ll turn everything society knows on its head!” Caroline exclaimed. “We’ll turn Victoria from a meek little victim to an eccentric princess who is ruled by passion. English ladies are supposed to be poised and graceful. But Victoria is not English. With the right attitude, foreigners are actually forgiven a lot. And we shall endow Victoria with those attributes.”

“An Eccentric Princess campaign,” Lavinia mused. “I like it.”

“Yes,” Caroline said, “we’ll tell most of the truth about her and spin it on its head.”

“Right,” Victoria agreed. “I suppose my life would seem a bit eccentric under the right circumstances. My father was divorced twice and married three times. And we can say that it is due to his passionate nature, which I happened to inherit.”

Caroline raised her finger with a smile. “Exactly.”

“And wasn’t your sister well-known and revered as well as judged for having two lovers of both genders? That would help cement your eccentric status for certain,” Lavinia added.

Kensington looked puzzled at that, seemingly trying to reconcile that idea in his head. “We can feed the information to the papers, embellishing the details as much as we can.”

“And then we shall parade you around with your new husband,” Caroline continued. “Telling everyone who will listen that instead of following a political agenda you decided to follow your heart and marry the man you fell in love with. For this, of course, you’d need to pretend affection. And we will have to... ahem... publicly acknowledge William as part of our family. But luckily for us, that will make you my sister-in-law.”

Kensington groaned. “Do I really have to publicly acknowledge William?”



“Recognizing a bastard has been done all over Europe, including England.”

“Everybody already knows William is my bastard brother,” Kensington countered. “And they also know we can’t stand each other.”

“You’ll have to try your best to convince them of your acceptance if not love,” Frau Elinor spoke for the first time since Kensington’s arrival.

The duke nodded, and a brief lull fell in the conversation before Caroline spoke up thoughtfully. “We were wondering all this time what he wanted from you. Perhaps it’s this. He could never be a duke’s son. Not legitimately anyway. So, now he is the princess’s husband.”

“Are you sure William will agree to all this?” Lavinia asked. “I know we are all quite certain he has his selfish reasons, but I am convinced that you—and not your status—are what he wants.”

Victoria swallowed and turned away. “And *I* am quite certain you’re wrong.”

“I’ll write to Annalise and Olivia to help.” Lavinia stood and approached her husband’s desk to do just that. “And Olivia, no doubt, will inform Helen as well.”

Caroline nodded. “We need all the help we can get.”

“Do you want me to try and contact him?” Kensington asked. “I can’t say he is easy to find.”

Victoria chewed her lower lip. “You don’t have to worry about that. I know exactly how to contact him.” She stood and curtsied to the room at large before leaving her uncle’s study and climbing the stairs leading to her bedchamber. Once inside, she walked toward her side table where a little wooden box adorned with silver filigree sat and took out a blood-red handkerchief stored inside.

She clutched it between her fingers and, for a brief moment, pressed it close to her heart. After a deep sigh, she walked toward the window and gently hung the handkerchief outside. Next, she lit a few candles and positioned them on the windowsill, ensuring the handkerchief, gently swaying in the wind, remained within the path of the soft candlelight.

# Chapter 5



*Autumn 1741*

Victoria sat on a solitary bench in the garden. She could still hear the music playing in the ballroom and the cheers and the chatter going on nearby, but all that was just noise to her.

This was her night, her coming-out ball! She had waited for this night forever. And yet, all she felt was utter and complete disappointment.

Her sole goal for her Season was to meet an eligible man to marry a foreign princess, someone she could bring to Russia to further her sister's political agenda. However, all those gentlemen inside the ballroom, on a mission to impress her, showing off their wealth and power like peacocks displaying their tails, only managed to confuse her.

She couldn't even remember half of those men's names. How in the world was she supposed to choose a husband?

And her uncle was of no help. All he did was usher more and more men toward her, further adding to her confusion.

But the most disappointing part of it all was Victoria herself. She knew the goal, she knew what her priorities should have been, but all she wanted was to feel some kind of

connection to the men while all she could see were their peacock tails.

She'd grown overwhelmed with all the prospects, and as a result, had slipped out of the ball to get a lungful of fresh air.

She let out a wistful sigh.

This wasn't the only reason why Victoria felt disappointed tonight. A couple of weeks ago, she'd met a man... briefly.

She had been deliriously ill at the time. At times, she even wondered if he was a figment of her imagination. If it weren't for the blood-red handkerchief he'd left with her, the one she was now twirling between her fingers, she might have been convinced of that.

He had been kind, understanding, and rather agreeable. Although in her feverish delirium, she might have attributed qualities to him that he may have never possessed. Still, she had immediately felt a sort of kinship with him. She'd felt he understood her in a way no one else did. Butterflies fluttered inside her belly every time she thought of him.

That was another reason she wasn't able to choose a prospective husband so easily. No other man in that ballroom had made her feel this way.

Victoria had hoped that he would make a formal introduction to her during her debut, but he was nowhere to be found.

Once more, she had to admit that it was her fault for dreaming up a romantic scenario of meeting a mysterious and

handsome man—was he even handsome? She'd barely seen him in the dark. All she remembered was his smoky, low voice—which she might have remembered wrong due to the ringing in her ears—and falling in love.

She sighed once more and looked down at her gloved hands.

“You do not sound like a lady happy to be making her debut,” a low, dark, and mesmerizing masculine voice said from the shadows.

Victoria shivered, unsure if it was from fright or anticipation.

She squinted at the dark silhouette of a man as she composed herself. Could it be? Was it him? “I don't suppose you are enjoying yourself either, since you are out here and not in there,” she said, pointing back to the house. Her voice was breathless, but to her joy and surprise, it wasn't shaking.

The silhouette moved closer, silent, graceful, and almost deadly, like a snow leopard ready to strike. “Your observation is correct. Can I assume mine is correct as well?”

Victoria cocked her head to the side. “Step into the light, please.”

There was a pause, and for a moment, Victoria thought he might refuse. But after a moment of hesitation, he stepped forward, letting the light from the windows bathe his features.

Victoria caught her breath.

She had never seen a creature more gorgeous than the man before her. She still couldn't make out if he was the handsome stranger from a few weeks ago, although how she could mistake this angel for anyone else was beyond her. Even if she had been delirious and it had been completely dark.

Unlike many other gentlemen, he wasn't wearing a wig, which stood out to Victoria the most. She loathed the powdered wigs, both the smell and the ridiculous look of them. They looked like sheep resting on the heads of unkempt lords!

Instead of atrocious headwear, the gentleman's thick, gold, silky hair framed his face perfectly, accentuating his strong, square jaw, sharp cheekbones, and straight aristocratic nose.

A painting of the Archangel Michael hung in the Winter Palace, and somehow, this man looked more gorgeous than that. More beautiful than an angel!

His lips, however, were nothing if not sinful. They were full and plump, and Victoria had an undeniable urge to walk toward him and plant her lips on his.

Her cheeks heated, and she was thankful for the dark alcove, and that the light from the house was behind her, shading her features.

The stranger smirked as if interpreting her silence correctly as one of awe and admiration.

Victoria cleared her throat. "Have we met before?"

A light smile softened his features, a mischievous fire playing in his deep, dark eyes. “Not officially.” He paused and bowed gracefully at his waist. “Princess Victoria.”

Victoria blinked. “And yet you know my name.”

His smirk turned into a genuine smile, and Victoria couldn't help but catch her breath once more. Had she even been breathing since he had stepped into the light?

“I make it my business to know everyone, especially as beautiful a flower as you. After all, it is your official debut,” he said.

Victoria's cheeks burned in earnest now, and she fully expected them to burst into actual flames. How silly of her. Of course, he knew who she was. She had been announced to the ballroom full of people just a few hours ago.

“I am at a disadvantage then.” She cleared her throat. “I do not know who you are.”

“You can call me William,” the stranger said in his silky voice that made her heart skip a beat. *William*. The name rolled silkily off his tongue.

“No.” Victoria shook her head. “I can't call you that.”

“Why not?” He stepped closer, his presence crowding her even though he was still at a respectable distance. Her skin hummed with anticipation, and his voice enveloped her like a gentle caress.

“It is not at all proper, my lord.”

One side of his mouth kicked up in a half-smile, while his eyes glinted with mischief. God, he was gorgeous. “Then... My Lord will have to do.”

Victoria was too flustered to form a coherent reply.

“What are you doing here all alone with the ball raging inside?” he asked.

Victoria had to tear her gaze from the stranger to collect her thoughts. She looked down at her entwined fingers and heaved a sigh. “I had to get away. My uncle, though he means well, has chased me into a corner with a bevy of lords.”

William let out a hoarse chuckle, making shivers break out on Victoria’s flesh.

“This is not amusing.” She frowned at him, the conversation finally pulling her out of her thrall.

“My apologies,” he said with a smile and bowed again. “I cannot imagine it being pleasant.”

“It isn’t. They are all strange and speak to me of their horses and lands, but they do not wish to hear what I have to say. As if I do not have horses and land too. As if I do not understand how to run the lands or contribute to society, while my sister—” She abruptly broke off.

“Your sister?” William cocked his head.

“That is of no importance.” She waved a dismissive hand. She was rambling. Nobody liked it when she rambled. She was supposed to answer with one-syllable words and coo about how fascinated she was about whatever a gentleman was



talking about. However, she felt free in the company of this handsome stranger. So, she decided to speak her mind, if only a little. “I know more about running a country than most of them know about running an estate. They think I’m a fool and won’t accept any claim to the contrary.”

William scratched his jaw, a thoughtful expression on his features, his rings glinting in the light. He wasn’t wearing any gloves.

“I apologize,” Victoria hastened to add. She had committed yet another faux pas, and no doubt made this gentleman realize she was trouble. “I did not mean to offend.”

“You did not,” he answered good-naturedly. “I am not easily offended, believe me. May I sit?” He gestured toward the empty space by her side.

Victoria looked down at the place beside her, and butterflies started raging inside her stomach. His presence in this alcove was already muddying her mind and fogging her thoughts. Her skin shivered from the sound of his voice, and she blushed fiercely from one look at him. What would such proximity to him do to her?

This wasn’t her only concern either. If somebody caught her out here sitting next to a handsome stranger, the scandal would be imminent.

But the unrepentant desire to have this golden-haired Adonis sit next to her, to feel his closeness, tugged at her heartstrings. The simple idea made her stomach clench in anticipation.

It was dark, she rationalized, and if anyone approached them, surely, she'd hear footsteps. With a nod, she acquiesced, and he settled next to her.

He was large, his shoulders broad, his muscled thighs taking up most of the bench. Heat radiated from him, warming her bare arms where the sleeves of her dress ended and before the gloves began. Victoria could not help but lean closer to him.

A mistake.

Now that he was so close to her, she caught his scent. An unfamiliar smokiness with a hint of spice and a touch of dark desires.

He smelled like sin.

She didn't remember his scent from before, although she'd had a pretty congested nose at the time. His handkerchief, the one she was clutching in her hand, held no lingering trace of him as she'd washed it with soap a few times since their first meeting.

"Tell me more," he said, staring at her as if looking straight into her soul.

*Blue.* His eyes weren't as dark as she had thought before. They were frosty blue, the most beautiful color she had ever imagined seeing.

She dropped her gaze for fear of staring.

Another mistake.

His soft, full lips beckoned her to touch them... to kiss them.

He smiled, and Victoria could swear her body was actually on fire. Only this time, she couldn't blame it on a fever. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything." His reply was immediate, without a hint of hesitation. "Whatever is on your mind."

She let out a sigh. After listening to dozens of men speak tonight, it felt nice to be asked to speak for a change. "I feel like a complete failure."

"Why is that?"

Victoria smiled. "Because I cannot choose a husband from a bevy of suitors."

William let out a hoarse laugh. "It's only your debut. You shouldn't feel this much pressure. You're hardly expected to fall in love in one day."

Victoria's smile widened. "Fall in love? Oh, no, love is not even on the list of things to take into consideration while picking a husband."

He raised a brow. "Truly?"

"Truly," she said with a small smile and a nod.

"What things *are* on the list, then?" He cocked his head to the side, looking at her intently, waiting for her answer.

"He needs to come from a powerful family with vast political connections. But he shouldn't be royalty so that he

can follow me to Russia.” Victoria ticked off every item on her fingers. “He needs to be polite and charming but also strong-willed and resourceful.”

“What about passion, love?”

“Passion and love are not for marriage. That is what lovers are for,” she said confidently.

William gazed at her intently, a light frown between his brows, his full lips pursed in a thoughtful pout. “What if you marry for political reasons, but the man you love declines to be your lover?”

Victoria was startled by the question. She had never even considered this as a possibility. “Because he doesn’t love me back?”

“Because he has self-respect,” was his immediate answer.

She let out a laugh. “If he loves me, he’ll find a way for us to be together.”

Something dark flickered in his eyes as he looked at her, but he quickly masked it with a smile. “So, how much time do you have to find the perfect husband you don’t love?”

She smiled, too, her fingers tightening on the crimson handkerchief. “Not much, I am afraid. My sister keeps writing to me, urging me to marry. My uncle is pushing his choice of suitors on me, too. Between the two of them, I think I will be rushed to wed in a fortnight.”

“Hmm...” He tapped his finger against his plump lips, and Victoria suddenly became acutely aware that her own lips

were extremely dry. She licked them and caught him staring at her. “You have a lot of demands heaped upon you by your family.”

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I suppose so.”

“But what do *you* want?”

Victoria straightened her spine. Nobody had ever asked her that. What did she want? “I suppose, I want to be useful. I want to make a difference. I want to make changes for the better in this world, just like my sister does.”

He smiled. “You look up to your sister.”

“I do. She is a lot wiser than me, although many people dislike her for her passionate nature, including my uncle.”

“Hm...” He paused. “Family means a lot to you.”

“Doesn’t it mean a lot to you?”

William grimaced. “I am not close to my family. But that is why I think if I were to choose a wife, I wouldn’t choose her for her political affiliations.”

Victoria frowned in thought. “What would you choose her for then?”

William pursed his lips. “For her wit, intelligence, and charm. For her ability to make me laugh. For her strength to get through tough times. For her opinions and convictions. And for her ability to see me for who I really am.”

Victoria shifted in her seat to face him fully. “And how will you know that you’ve found her?”

His smile turned gentle. “I have never been a romantic man, I will be honest. But recently, I found that I believe when the right person comes along, you can see their soul in their eyes. I think it is just a matter of recognizing it when you see it and not letting go.”

Victoria stared into his ice-blue eyes, and she could’ve sworn she saw an entire world inside. A world full of mystery, intrigue, and wonder. A world she would love to explore. Gooseflesh covered her skin, and the butterflies inside her stomach grew to the size of horses, or at least, that’s what it felt like.

She didn’t know what was going on. It was like something brewed inside her, warning her of a storm to come.

The back of William’s hand brushed against Victoria’s, sending a surge of warmth through her. She felt his heat against her skin, a gentle yet thrilling contact that made her pulse quicken. In that moment, time seemed to stand still as they shared this delicate touch. Their fingers lingered, tracing an unspoken connection, and their eyes locked in a silent exchange. Victoria’s breaths grew shallow, and her heart raced, the world around them fading into the background.

William was the first to break their gaze. He turned his eyes away and cleared his throat. “It has been a pleasure conversing with you, Princess Victoria. But I’m afraid it’s best for you to leave. Your uncle will be searching for you.”

Victoria instantly sobered. *My uncle!* He was probably already looking for her. And if he found her on a bench in a

dark alcove, sitting close to a handsome stranger, he would be disappointed, to say the least.

Victoria straightened her gloves and peeked at the man seated beside her. He seemed completely unflustered and composed. "I have to admit I enjoy our conversations."

A lazy smile adorned his face. "I have to admit to the same thing."

Her cheeks burst into flame again. "Perhaps we can continue our conversation at the ball?"

He grimaced lightly. "I have to be honest. I am not really welcomed in many ballrooms."

Victoria blinked. "You're not?"

"I am what you can call the black sheep of the family. It is best that you're not associated with me in public."

Victoria's lips curled into a pout. "Then how can I see you?"

His gaze dropped to her hand, the one that held his crimson handkerchief.

"Oh, do you want it back?"

One side of his lips kicked up in a smile. "Not yet. But how about this? If you want to see me, hang this handkerchief outside your window. And light a candle on the windowsill so the handkerchief is visible from outside. And I shall come to you."

Victoria chuckled and asked in a teasing tone, “How will you even know whether I hung the handkerchief outside my window?”

He shrugged. “I have my ways.”

“And how long does this rule apply for?”

He took her gloved hand and gently lifted it to his lips. His kiss was lingering, sensual, sending shivers up her spine. He looked up at her, his mouth still close to her hand, his warm breath hitting her skin through the fabric of her gloves. “For as long as I’m alive.”



## Chapter 6



William clamped a cheroot between his teeth and lit it, his back to the small cottage he had just exited to inhale the blend of fresh air and smoke. The uneasy tingle at the back of his neck had already alerted him to an interloper approaching, but the swish of fabric only confirmed that the trespasser was female. So, it could only be one person.

“How did you find me?” he asked gruffly.

“Please, William. You might be an enigma to others, but I know all your hiding spots.”

He snorted, smoke puffing out of his nose and mouth. “I don’t hide.”

“And since you were not at Hades or home, there are only two options left. Either following your...” she paused in a deliberate show of hesitation, “*wife* or here.”

William turned slowly and studied the dark silhouette draped in a long cloak with a hood over her head. “Have been spying on me, have you?”

The intruder tossed her head back, revealing the bouncing, pitch-black curls beneath the hood. “I don’t need to spy to know things. And despite what you might think, I know you. Very well might I add.”

“What do you want, Grace?” His patience was waning, but most of all, William hated it when people implied they knew him. Nobody knew him. And nobody could trust him. That’s how he’d survived so far.

“I need your help.” Her voice was calm and measured, as always. And for some reason, that prompted a burst of laughter from him.

“Help? To leave your sordid business affairs behind, I hope.”

She straightened. “No. I need *help* with my business affairs. That man—the toff—you saw dead on the floor of one of our rooms. He wasn’t the only one killed in recent months. The constables think I am responsible for those deaths.”

“And you’re not?” William raised a brow, and for the first time since she appeared before him, Grace’s demeanor faltered.

“You know that’s not what we do...” she paused and bit out, “anymore. You have no love for aristocrats just like me. Do not deny it.”

William waved an elegant hand. “I have no love for you either.”

“Hades is away on his... romantic trip with his wife.” Jealousy lined her tone. “I have nowhere else to go. The constables completely ransacked my brothel, my house. People are out of work. I am hunted like an animal.”

William took a menacing step closer, but she didn't move a hair. "It's not my problem. I can't help you. I want nothing to do with brothels, you know that."

"And yet you had no problem coming to me for help," she countered.

William let out a chuckle. "And you helped how, exactly?"

She licked her lips. "Please." This was the first time in a long time, if not ever, that she was pleading with him.

William thought for a while before saying through his teeth, "I can't help you."

She gave a sharp little nod and was ready to turn away when he continued. "But I know someone who can."

Her gaze snapped back to his, surprise evident in the dark pools. "You do?"

"He doesn't like me though," he said with an ironic tone in his voice.

She scoffed. "Does anyone?"

"And he will hate *you*."

She let out a delicate snort. "Nothing new about that either."

A little boy dashed out of the bushes a few feet away and ran at full speed until he reached them. William leaned down and listened to the boy's hushed message, and his heart filled with happiness. Victoria had used their secret signal. She wanted to see him. He tossed the boy a coin before turning

back to Grace. "I'll arrange a meeting with your new savior and send you a note with the details."

Grace turned away with a nod but paused. "Be careful, William. They will come after you next."

William chuckled softly and threw the stump of his cheroot to the ground. "They have never stopped coming after me. Although your concern is refreshing."

"We used to be friends," she said, her back still turned to him.

"No, we didn't." He crushed the glowing embers of his cheroot under his booted heel. "And we shall never be."

Grace didn't answer. She just slunk away into the shadows quickly and seamlessly, leaving William to wonder if she had been there to begin with. The damned woman was like a ghost.

Letting out one last breath mingled with cheroot smoke, he turned on his heel and climbed the steps into the small cottage outside of which he had been smoking.

He walked inside and peeked his head into the corridor, only to see light shining from the half-closed bedroom and a soft, female voice singing a lullaby.

Nodding to himself, William took his little book and a coal pencil from the inside of his coat and jotted down a quick note.

*Gone on business. Will be back when I can.*

Then he tore the note out of his book and placed it carefully on the kitchen table, weighing it down with a candle holder.

He looked around the dimly lit kitchen, soaking up the cozy ambiance it always had, and took a deep breath filled with longing.

Victoria was waiting for him. What could she possibly want?

The last time they'd spoken, she'd told him in no uncertain terms that she wanted nothing to do with him. Ever.

He wasn't the type to give up, especially when there was fire in her eyes belying her words. Her feelings for him had not gone away.

Neither could he ignore the joy in her eyes when she'd seen him in Roth's garden during her charity ball.

Whatever she wanted now, he was ready to give. His heart jolted in anticipation and... could it be hope? A part of him, the cautious, hyper-vigilant part of him, was on alert, warning him that this might be a trap.

But that wasn't new. Every time he stepped out of the house, he knew quite well he might meet a bad end.

He stomped toward his horse, saddled it, and raced away.

William stared for a moment at the red handkerchief flowing in the wind as it hung from the second-story window. A candle glowed behind the glass, illuminating the crimson fabric.

He hadn't thought he'd ever see that signal again. But there it was.

He circled the building, peeked into the windows, and took all other precautions, but he couldn't find any signs of a trap. And even if it was, did it matter?

Life without Victoria was a glum existence.

Her window was cracked open, he realized as he climbed up the trellis. He glanced inside at an aching beautiful view. Victoria sat in a wingback chair by the hearth, reading a book, her long, pitch-black curls tumbled down her shoulders and back like a waterfall. Her brows were furrowed, and every so often, she raised her head to glance at the clock on the mantelpiece.

William couldn't see the clock hand from here. But he knew it was almost three o'clock in the morning.

He gently untied the handkerchief from the window, pushed it open all the way, and rolled onto the floor in one swift motion.

Startled by the sound of William's grand entrance, Victoria jumped to her feet, grabbed a poker from the hearth, and directed it at him. When she saw him, her eyes glinted with emotion before her face went blank.

William straightened and waved the red handkerchief. "You can't shoo me away. You're the one who invited me here."

"I didn't expect you so soon..." She glanced at the clock again, betraying the truth. She'd been eagerly waiting for him. Warmth traveled throughout his body at that realization.

“So... to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Victoria replaced the poker by the hearth and straightened, clasping her hands together. “I need your... help.”

William crossed his arms over his chest. “You know what’s strange? I’ve been hearing this all day today. Very odd.”

Victoria pursed her beautiful lips. “I need help untangling the chaos you created.”

“What did I do this time?” He raised a brow.

“You must be joking. You know what you did. You abducted me!”

William shrugged. “I brought you back, no harm done. Nobody would’ve known unless you told them. My men were very careful.”

“Not careful enough.” Victoria walked back to her chair and plopped down. “Porter witnessed my abduction, as you know. And thanks to him, rumors have spread that I was ravished by two burly thugs and therefore have been ruined forever.”

“You can’t really fault the man, can you?” William leisurely walked toward the hearth and propped one shoulder against it, crossing his feet at the ankles. “He had to divert attention from the fact that he’d ripped his breeches,” he said dryly.

Victoria’s eyes widened, and she let out a chuckle before covering her mouth. “How do you know about that?”

“I hear things.” He cocked a brow. “I trade in information, or have you forgotten?”

“Oh...” She pursed her lips. “You mean you spy on people and blackmail them.”

He spread his arms. “Do not feign surprise. You know exactly who I am.”

“I do now,” she grumbled under her breath.

William took a step forward. “What is the purpose of my being here, *Lubimaya*?”

Her eyes blazed with fire as she looked at him. “Do not call me that.”

“You used to love it.”

“I used to love a lot of things.”

He grinned. “I remember.”

“William,” she huffed in frustration. “That’s not why you are here.”

“Then why am I here? Please, enlighten me. Because if Porter is the reason for your downfall, I would assume you’d go to him to sweep up the rubble.”

Victoria’s jaw tensed, and she visibly unclenched her muscles to speak. “I would have gone to him in a heartbeat if I thought it would help. But the problem is, marrying someone else, marrying anyone, will not save me because I am already married. To you!”



William's lips twitched in a barely suppressed smile. "I thought you'd forgotten, judging by the way you were behaving."

"How was I—?" She shook her head, stopping herself mid-sentence. "It doesn't matter. I did not ask you here to argue. As I said, I need your help."

"To do what exactly?"

She let out a breath. "We need to spin the narrative."

He narrowed his eyes. "Spin the narrative?"

"Yes, from an unwilling victim getting ravished by thugs to a spoiled princess who..." she paused and swallowed, then continued in a hoarse voice, "eloped with the man she loves."

William cocked his head. "And by the man you love, you mean me?"

She jumped out of her chair, clasped her hands in front of her, and started pacing like a madwoman. "An extravagant, exotic princess who does what she wants is forgiven more freely than a poor victim who stepped out of the ballroom at an inopportune time. Being a victim creates blame for some odd reason, inspires pity, and repulses people, while being a spirited foreign princess who follows her heart just adds to the tales of exotic foreigners who live by their own rules."

Oddly, that tirade made sense to William. He nodded. "You want to tell everyone that we eloped. I understand. You'll need to parade me around town to sell this grand love story... which is the truth, by the way."

She tossed her head back, her eyes directed heavenward, her milky-white neck bared for his gaze. “For a little while.”

“And then what?” William’s eyes traced her neck, down to her chest, and lower still, pausing at two soft mounds of her breasts peeking above her bodice.

“And then we can officially separate.”

His eyes snapped back to her face. “Separate?” He would never let that happen.

“Yes, and I shall have no need to lie to anyone anymore. I shall be able to live my life the way I want to.”

“What about me?”

“You’ll gain whatever you wanted by marrying me in the first place, be it notoriety or open doors to society ballrooms.”

William snorted. Did she truly think that’s what he wanted? All he’d ever wanted was her. “I care about none of that.”

“Then what do you care about?” she whined.

He narrowed his eyes on her. “You know what I want; you’re just not willing to let yourself believe it. I want you.”

“And you’ll get me,” she said, feigning excitement. “Here’s the deal. We pretend to be blissfully married for a month. However, I shall continue living with my uncle, and we shall appear three times a week at social events of my choosing to perpetuate the picture of marital bliss. And we separate after that.”

“No.” He pushed off the hearth, took a couple of steps, and settled in the chair she had occupied a few moments prior. He picked up her book from the side table and read the title. *The Scoundrel*. He’d heard about the book; Hades’s new bride was the author. He wondered if anything in there had been written about him. He would never risk reading it to find out.

“No?” Victoria’s question was a hoarse whisper.

William shook his head as he nonchalantly put the book back on the side table. “No.”

She cleared her throat. “You refuse to help me?”

He pursed his lips and slowly, thoughtfully shook his head. “No.”

“No...” She sucked in a breath. “You don’t refuse to help me?”

“You shouldn’t have expected me to accept your terms,” he said as he shifted in the chair, finding a comfortable position.

“I expected nothing less.”

Bending his right leg, he rested his foot on his left knee. “If you want to parade me around like a prized stallion, you shall do so on my terms.”

She gritted her teeth. “Which are?”

William took out a cheroot and clamped it between his lips. “We continue the charade for six months. You stay with me during that entire time, and we go out to social

engagements together once a fortnight. And if, after that, you still want to leave me, I shall petition the courts for divorce.” William felt confident that she would not accept these terms, just as he was confident that even a month with her would turn things in his favor.

Her head snapped back in surprise. “Do you truly think you’ll be able to get a divorce in England? How do you plan to accomplish it?”

William shrugged. “Easy. Bribery.”

Victoria’s eyes fell closed. “Why am I even surprised?”

“I bribed our minister to marry us, and although more cumbersome, I can arrange a divorce as well.”

“Ugh!” Victoria waved her fists in the air, so adorably frustrated. “How is our marriage even legal?”

William let out a chuckle. “I am sure your powerful friends have checked; otherwise, we wouldn’t be here.”

Victoria mumbled something under her breath before raising her eyes to his once more. “You want me to live with you for six months?”

“That’s right.”

“And go out for outings every fortnight.”

“I don’t care about the outings. I would prefer we stayed at home instead.”

“What in the world are we to do at home every evening?”

He raised a brow suggestively.

She licked her lips, collecting her bearings. “Two months. We both stay here with my uncle. We go out twice a week and alternate making decisions about where we go.”

William stood and approached her, stopping only a foot away. “Three months. You live with me. We go out once a week to wherever you please.” He stretched his hand for a handshake, and with a deep breath, she placed her small, soft hand in his. William’s fingers enveloped her hand, and he squeezed her fingers lightly. Add a pearl necklace around their wrists, and it reminded him of their wedding day.

She raised her face to his, her eyes wide, her mouth slightly open.

Did she remember their wedding as well? Or did she feel the tingle in her skin, the desire coursing through her veins just like William did?

William caressed her wrist, where her pulse beat rapidly beneath his thumb.

She didn’t move to snatch her hand away, and William took this chance to plant a brief but heated kiss on her mouth. “Collect your belongings. We are leaving first thing tomorrow.”

# Chapter 7



Victoria didn't know exactly what to expect when she loaded her trunks onto the waiting carriage. It was coal-black, a reflection of William's soul, no doubt, and had no identifying markings, no ducal crest, nor any other symbol.

Of course, it wouldn't. It's not like he needed to parade around the fact that he was a criminal. But what she saw when she stepped out of the carriage an hour and a half after their departure caught her off guard.

There was no grand palace with gilded gates, no towering mansion with an imposing facade, not even a modern townhouse or fashionable suite.

What stood before her was a round, red-bricked tower of Tudor times, with only a handful of tiny windows and a heavy, iron door. Victoria glanced this way and that, wondering if this was some kind of joke. Were they stopping here for a brief respite before reaching their final destination? Just moments ago, they had passed a large manor house; surely, they could have stayed there.

William unlocked the iron door and gestured for the footman to proceed with Victoria's trunks. She doubted her clothes alone would fit inside, let alone herself.

“You must be jesting,” she scoffed. “Is this a repository where we’re leaving my trunks?”

One side of William’s mouth curled into a smile. “It’s not a repository. It’s a tower where I keep all my prized possessions. You included. Get inside.”

Victoria took a step back. “I will not!”

William offered his gloved hand. “You can come inside with me now or stay outside and freeze to death.”

“Then I choose death,” she said confidently, raising her chin for good measure.

William crossed his arms. “There is nothing around for miles except the forest to the south and a lake to the east. When I say you’ll die from exposure to the natural elements, I’m not jesting.”

“We passed a mansion a few minutes ago; I saw it!”

He shrugged. “It’s empty.”

“Why can’t we live there, then?” she whined.

“Because it’s empty, aside from rats. Do you want to live there? You can. But I’m staying here.”

Victoria shuffled from one foot to the next, rubbing her arms from the cold as the footman disappeared with the last piece of luggage. He returned no more than two minutes later, and William waved for the carriage to leave them behind. Now it was just the two of them standing by the strange, round tower with no vehicle, no means of escape.

“How far are we from the nearest village?” Victoria asked, her lip protruding childishly.

“On foot, hours away. By carriage...? Nobody is allowed to drive you anywhere without my permission.”

“That’s not fair,” she breathed.

William took a step forward, crowding her with his larger-than-life presence. “And what made you think that being my wife had anything to do with fairness?”

Victoria narrowed her eyes at him, her chest heaving. She wanted to give him a piece of her mind, to tell him exactly what she thought of him. However, she knew there was no point. She had made a deal, and she was to live with him for the next three months.

Victoria skirted past him and entered the tower, her head held high. Perhaps, it wasn’t as bad as it seemed. But as she stepped inside, her optimism rapidly waned. It was as bad as it seemed, perhaps even worse.

The tower felt oppressively small and cramped, its dimness engulfing her with a sense of foreboding. There was no hall or corridor to speak of, just a room that was an odd combination of a kitchen and dining area. And it was round! She shouldn’t have been surprised, it was a round tower, after all.

There was a large hearth, larger than she’d ever seen in an English house. The size of the crackling fire and warmth briefly reminded her of Saint Petersburg. A big oak table, a few worn chairs, old cupboards, and a single small rug lay



near the fireplace. A large armchair nestled in the corner by the hearth, big enough for two people to sit side by side.

*Is that it?*

Victoria twirled around slowly, taking in the entire room. She noticed a winding staircase tucked into the eastern side of the chamber. Intrigued, she went to explore the rest of the house, climbing the creaky stairs only to find herself met with a closed door. There was no landing; the stairs directly led her to a door.

With a determined push, she opened the door and found herself in what she assumed to be a bedchamber. She blinked, her eyes trying to adjust to the dim interior. It had a single narrow bed nestled by the window, not the grand four-poster bed she was accustomed to. The room appeared large enough for two people, provided those two people did not move while they slept. A hearth, though smaller than the one in the other room, still dominated the space it occupied.

Victoria stepped inside and turned slowly, taking in the humble decor—if one could even call it that. The walls were stark and unadorned, with no other furnishings except for the bare necessities. Most of the space was occupied by Victoria's trunks lining the unembellished stone walls on either side.

William walked in just then, and she stared at him. “That’s it?”

One side of William's mouth kicked up in a smile. “There’s a dressing room through those doors, including a bath and a chamber pot,” he said proudly.

Victoria blinked in stupor. “But where am I to read?”

He waved a hand toward the bed.

“Where am I to do needlework?” she continued.

“Downstairs. There is a really nice armchair by the hearth.”

She scoffed. “And where am I to write letters?”

He puffed out his chest and hid his hands in his pockets. “Have you noticed the table downstairs? Perhaps you’d like to see that room again.”

She spun on her heel and shouldered her way past him. “Surely you jest! This is just a suite of rooms. We do have more rooms?!” she asked as she made her way back downstairs.

William followed her on her heels. “We do not. Listen, pet. Until today, I have always lived alone. What do you think I need a large townhouse for? To collect dust? Besides, it would take forever to clean, and I do not like people snooping through my things; therefore, I do not have servants—”

“You don’t have servants?” Victoria stopped, and William stumbled into her back. She turned toward him and watched him with her mouth wide open.

He gritted his teeth. “Just the carriage driver, Matthew, and a couple of stable hands whom I trust. I don’t have any use for anyone else.”

“Then why in the world did you refuse my servants?” Victoria had never had a conniption before, but she was certain she felt the beginnings of one.

“I am not going to fill my house with people I don’t trust. Yes, I did have a grand mansion and a bevy of servants at one time, but that place was burnt down by your friend’s uncle. Then I was forced out of the country, and now, I have this.” He spread his arms to punctuate his speech.

“Well, you do not live alone anymore. And I need a maid. Who is to undress me?”

He gave a wolfish smile. “I can accomplish that task all by myself.”

“You are shameless.”

“I assure you, you are right.”

She turned away and paced the length of the room. “And where are you going to sleep?” There was a poignant silence in answer. She turned back to him to see a smug smile on his face. “If you think I am going to share a bed with you, you are sadly mistaken. I’d rather die!”

“I doubt you will die. I have some rugs; you can always sleep on the floor.”

“Ah!” She gasped, her hands fisted by her sides. “You are despicable.”

“I thought you were willing to die,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “But yes, I am quite shameless and despicable. I am

also selfish and hypocritical. I am a villain, darling. And that's why you love me."

Victoria's entire face burned from humiliation. "When I agreed to live with you, I thought—I hoped—you would act like a gentleman. I should have known better." She paced around the room in panic, looking for something, anything to ease her mind.

She paused in front of their only armchair before stalking back into the bedchamber. She pulled the covers from the bed with a grand show and brought them downstairs before dropping them onto the armchair. "I am going to sleep here," she declared proudly.

William's lips twitched from barely suppressed laughter. "As you wish, my lady," he said with a shallow bow. Then he climbed the stairs to his bedroom, leaving her alone, not even trying to dissuade her from her decision.

\* \* \*

Victoria woke up with a numb pain in her neck and back. She stretched and almost toppled over the side of the armchair. Right. She wasn't in her lovely bed at her uncle's house. She was in—the smell of fire mixed with the aroma of food penetrated her nostrils—the kitchen...

She sat up and frowned at William's back. He was kneeling by the hearth and stirring something atop a frying pan. He was barefoot, clad only in breeches and a single shirt.

He was cooking. By himself. Victoria couldn't help but let panic set in. He wasn't joking about having no servants. He truly expected them to live this way!

How would she ever manage with no one to help dress her, style her hair, and launder her clothes? She had never cooked a meal in her life. And although William seemed quite adept with a pan in his hand, what if he expected her to make their food in the future?

And clean the floors? Empty the chamber pots!

The very thought made her shudder in disgust. This little tower was no place for a lady of her standing. She was a princess, for heaven's sake! Her hands were made for embroidery and harpsichords, not mops and pots. At least he seemed capable in the kitchen...

But the unfairness of it all sent her mind reeling. All the horrible possibilities of their life in this little shed whirled inside her head.

He turned to her then and paused in surprise as he saw her sitting up. His eyes softened, and a small smile appeared on his lips. He always smiled. It was part of his charm. Part of the reason she fell in love with him. He always made her feel at ease.

"I prepared a pitcher of water for you upstairs in the dressing room. Clean yourself up and join me for breakfast."

"Clean my..." She cleared her throat for it had been scratchy. "Clean myself up and join you for breakfast? I can't

just do that. I need to get dressed. I need help getting dressed!”

She had been able to undress herself the night before. She'd brushed out her hair and prepared for bed. But getting ready for the day ahead was different. All her clothes aside from the dressing gown required a maid's hand. And aside from a tight bun, she wasn't able to arrange her own coiffure.

William leisurely studied her form from head to toe, making her shiver. She pulled the sheets up to her chin and huddled in the chair, making herself as small as she could.

“There's no one to see you. You can walk around in your nightgown.” He winked and added with a lascivious smile, “Or naked.”

Victoria jumped out of the chair and dashed toward the dressing room, hurling obscenities in Russian in her wake.

She washed herself carefully and patted herself dry with a towel. What an inconsiderate brute! Did he truly intend to strip her of her dignity and her clothes by forcing her to trot around this dark and tiny tower without proper clothing?

She walked into the bedroom and paused by the bed. What she hadn't noticed when she stormed through the bedchamber was not only that the bed was made—she'd expected it to be unmade, they had no servants after all—but also, on top of the bed lay a simple wool frock with lace on the front, so it didn't require a second person to dress her.

Victoria swallowed and approached the gown. She took it into her hands and was surprised at the softness and comfort it

presented.

The bastard could have told her that he had a day gown for her! But no, it wouldn't be him if he didn't rile her up before revealing he had done something thoughtful.

She got dressed and went down to breakfast. The kitchen was clean, no sign of the blankets and sheets she'd used for her bedding. Instead, the table was laden with breakfast foods.

Victoria frowned. "How do you manage to keep this house clean without servants?"

William raised his head and studied her from head to toe in that insufferable, licentious, self-satisfied way of his. "The dress suits you."

Her cheeks heated, and she hid her eyes before joining the table. "Thank you."

"I have a housekeeper. Someone I trust. She comes here weekly to do major chores. Otherwise, I can manage well by myself."

"You can't be expecting me to do any of the chores, can you?" She started stabbing at the food with her fork.

"No. I can provide for you all by myself. Isn't that what you wanted? A husband who could take care of you no matter what?"

"I didn't expect him to clean like a peasant." Victoria flinched at the harshness of her own words.

William, however, chuckled. “Labor doesn’t scare me. Fixing things, cleaning things is not something I am afraid of. In fact, I love sticking my hands in the gutter, lifting the rubble, cleaning, and fixing it until it resembles a working, useful thing. I love to”—he raised his hooded eyes to run his gaze over her form like a caress—“keep my hands busy.”

Victoria swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. How in the world did he manage to make the conversation about cleaning so... seductive.

“You know what scares me?” He dropped his gaze and continued eating.

“What?” Victoria’s voice was oddly breathless. He was able to light his charm on command and douse it just as quickly, while Victoria was still unsettled by his previous words.

“Idleness. Inaction. Complacency. I am scared of sitting on my arse and watching life go by while I complain about it without lifting a finger to change the way it is.”

Victoria placed her fork on the edge of the plate. “You mean like me?”

He leveled her with his gaze. “No, I wasn’t talking about you. But I find it interesting that you came to that conclusion.”

Victoria cleared her throat. “Touche. Apparently, I am not content with my lot in life. So, please, let your men know to prepare the carriage.”



He leaned back in his chair and raised his brow. “And where are you planning to go?”

She shrugged. “To the modiste. I need a lot of gowns tailored for putting on and taking off without external help. And then for tea at my uncle’s house. Should I disclose every location I want to visit?”

William grinned. “Don’t worry, my men shall disclose them for you.”

“You were so right, husband,” she said with a self-satisfied smile as she stabbed at the food with a renewed appetite. “Since I am not content to spend my days confined to this dark tower, I shall spend them elsewhere.”

William’s lips twitched in a barely suppressed smile. “I concede. You won this hand. But need I remind you? I often cheat at cards in order to win.”

“I know,” she answered with a smile. “So do I.”

# Chapter 8



*Forty days before the execution...*

William spent the first week living with his wife in near solitude. He was used to living alone. He had always kept himself busy. He had things to take care of, business to attend to, errands to run.

Yet this time, it felt different. Though Victoria's physical presence was scarce in the daylight hours, her ethereal essence permeated the house. He could sense her in the lingering scent of perfume, the rumpled sheets on her chair, and the half-finished needlework left on its arm. She haunted the tower even when absent, a specter his thoughts returned to again and again amidst his tasks.

Somehow, William had imagined this going differently. But truly, what did he expect?

Had he thought she would be thankful to be living with him? He had stripped her of everything she had ever known. He'd taken her away from her family, from the place where she was pampered and taken care of. And now she was living in a small, dank tower with the husband she loathed.

A part of him, a naive, quixotic part of him, hoped that she still loved him and that living with him would reawaken that love. As a result, she would overlook everything he had done

in the past, and they would live happily for the rest of their lives in their own perfect little world.

What he'd failed to realize was that even if his illusions proved to be true, if Victoria did indeed love him still, then it would still take her time to accept her new reality, come to terms with her circumstances, and lastly learn to trust William again.

During their years apart, William had spent every moment yearning for her, longing to be with her again, while she, no doubt, had spent her time trying to forget him.

And now, she spent every waking hour trying to erase him from existence. Even when they went to their first outing as a couple to a theater, she spent the entire time ignoring him, chattering away with her friends.

On her solo daily outings, his carriage driver and the stable hands always accompanied Victoria, reporting everything she did and everywhere she went.

She never lied. She went to the modiste often, she visited her family daily, had visited Lady St. John for their weekly nuncheon, and she also spent an inordinate amount of time at the women's shelter in St. Giles. And William's men were always extremely giddy at the prospect of accompanying her to every place she wished.

Perhaps it was just being in the company of a sophisticated, gorgeous woman that made them feel special. Or perhaps they were bored living in the little cottage by the tower, and every outing with Victoria was an adventure.

But also, William felt they were already half in love with her, because who wouldn't be?

William was determined to give her time to come to terms with their living arrangements. He couldn't—nor did he want to—force her to stay inside the house with him. As long as she spent her nights under his roof, she wasn't breaking any rules of their deal.

She'd loved him once. She would love him again.

His love for her had never dimmed. Why would hers?

He was the reason she was mad at him, after all. He'd made his bed, and now he had to sleep in it.

*Alone.*

And that was the hardest part of their living arrangements.

As difficult as the days were with her continued absence, the nights were worse. Sleeping in an empty bed without her while she lounged in a chair in another room was akin to torture.

He started to resent that armchair.

Perhaps not resented exactly. He had complicated feelings toward the chair. He loved that it now smelled like her. It was filled with her things, like a shawl she wrapped herself in while she read by the fire, a comb wedged into the corner and remaining there the entire day, until she needed to use it, her handkerchief draped over its arm unless she was clutching it in her fist. Even her slippers were constantly by its side as she picked up her legs to curl into the armchair.

On the other hand, he was jealous... Yes, of a chair.

He wanted to be that chair. He wanted her to curl up on his lap, to sit by his side, sleep on top of him.

He was going insane.

He supposed the only sane thing he could do was leave the house. It was a good thing he had some business to attend to, a promise he needed to uphold.

William got dressed rather quickly and breezed out of his room. He paused in the kitchen as Victoria wrestled with the sheets, trying to make herself a comfortable bed in the armchair. William slowly approached her and watched her struggle. She huffed and puffed, her face red, the sheet slipping from one side of the chair and then to the other before she had a chance to pull it over.

“Do you need help?” he asked slowly, and she turned to him with narrowed eyes before swiping a lock of hair away from her face.

“What gave it away?”

William chuckled and stripped the chair of the sheet in one swift motion. He collected her shawl from the corner of the chair and draped it over a kitchen chair before grabbing two ends of the sheet. “Grab the other end and lay it flat on the chair.”

She did just that, and they gently lowered the sheet. Then William started tucking it into the corners and the edges,

spreading the sheet smooth. “You know you can use the bed, right?”

Victoria scoffed. “I am not sharing a bed with you.”

“That is not what I am proposing, although that would be preferable. I just mean that you can take the bed on your own, and I shall test this magical chair for myself.”

She shrugged. “I quite like this chair. Besides, its size is just enough for one small person, while the bed is so wide. I don’t want to be thinking of you joining me in the middle of the night.”

William recoiled in disgust. “Is that how lowly you think of me? That I would force myself into your bed? What am I? A ruffian?”

She bristled. “I did not mean to offend. However, it would not be the first time you tricked me.”

“I would never hurt you. And I would never force myself on you. If that was my goal, this chair would not stand in my way.”

She licked her lips. “I still don’t want to use the bed. Besides, I don’t think you’ll fit in this chair.”

William snorted. “Trust me, I’ve had worse.”

She looked up at him, startled. Her gaze was penetrating, as if she was trying to read his mind and find out whether he was joking. He wished that he was. She shook her head, trying to dispel some unwanted thought, and said, “Either way, I

don't want to get comfortable here. It's a temporary arrangement, and I'd rather not use your bed."

William let his eyes fall closed against the hurt. He had to be patient. One week was not enough for her to forgive him. Although he wished it was. It had taken her two weeks to tell him she loved him. How long was it supposed to take her to love him once more? He stepped away. "The bed—the chair—is ready. Good night."

"William." Her voice stopped him in his tracks. "Are you going somewhere?"

He turned back to her slowly. "Yes. I have, um... business to attend to."

She chewed on her lower lip. "In the middle of the night?"

Did she sound jealous? He nodded. "Yes, exactly."

"And will you be gone long?"

William smiled. "Are you missing me already?"

She scoffed. "I just wish not to be disturbed during the night."

He nodded sharply. "Not to worry. I shall be as slick as a thief. Oh, wait..." He winked and turned to leave once more when she called him back.

"William."

"Yes?" He turned back and raised a brow.

She shifted from foot to foot. "I just wanted to remind you that the next week we have the Kensington ball to attend. Our

first ball together and your official introduction into society as my husband.”

He nodded. “I remember.”

“I would like to arrive there early and take full advantage of Caroline’s maids since I have none and I need to look presentable.”

He nodded once more. “As you wish.”

There was a brief pause before William bowed his head, ready to leave, but then Victoria spoke again. “Can we have visitors? Can I invite people here?”

William turned slowly to fully face her with a frown. “You want to entertain guests in our little tower?”

She shrugged. “I’d like to be able to receive guests.”

He thought for a short brief moment, before shaking his head. “No. I am afraid this is completely out of the question.”

“Why not?”

“You might not have noticed, my darling wife, but people don’t really like me.”

Victoria blinked innocently. “I don’t think that’s as big a surprise as you thought it’d be.”

He stifled a chuckle. “And those people who don’t like me, they wish me ill will. When you go out, you have my men to protect you. They take secret paths and different routes daily so you cannot be followed. But you can’t be giving out our directions to anyone you please. That way leads to disaster.”



“I am not asking to host a ball here,” she protested. “I just want to be able to have tea with my friends.”

“Out. Of. The. Question.”

She huffed, pushing a lock of hair away from her face. “Let me get this straight: you’re allowed to walk out of this blasted tower at any time of the night and do God only knows what, while I need written permission from you and a host of gaolers to accompany me outside, and I am not allowed to have my friends visit me to boot?”

“It’s for your own good,” he insisted.

“Then I *am* a prisoner here. You might as well have abducted me!”

“Do not be dramatic. You are free to leave.”

“Under your guard!”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Fine. Give me a list of people you’d like to visit to curate. I shall see what I can do.”

“To curate? You will control who I can and cannot see in my own home?”

He smiled at that. “I am glad you’re finally seeing this place as your home. But yes, you can’t just share our location with anybody.”

“I don’t even know where we are!” she cried.

“And it is to remain thus for the entire duration of your stay. Regarding your friends, if you tell me in advance, I shall arrange for an unmarked carriage to bring them here.”

She grumbled something under her breath that sounded like, “I don’t even have that many friends, why do I argue?”

“Pardon me?” he asked, to be sure he hadn’t misheard.

“It doesn’t matter.” She waved a dismissive hand. “I don’t need a list. It’s just five people: Annalise, Olivia, Helen, Lavinia, and Caroline. Every Thursday, we have a nuncheon at one of our houses, and I would like to host it at least once. That’s it.”

He scratched his jaw in thought. “All those people are fine, except for Caroline.”

She blinked up at him. “Why not Caroline?”

“She is a shadow. A spy. Surely you know this. Even with blinded windows, by turns and sounds outside the carriage, she will recognize where we are.”

“You are being ridiculous.” She let out a laugh.

“I am being safe.”

“Even if she does figure out where we are, what does it matter? What do you think she’ll do with that information?”

He gave her a blank stare. “It’s better we don’t find out.”

She swallowed and nodded. “Fine. I am still allowed to call upon her at her residence, right? Without your presence?”

He nodded. “Right.”

She seemed satisfied with her inquiry, yet still watched him carefully.

“Anything else you’d like to discuss?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Very well.” He turned toward the door, and that’s when she spoke again.

“You’re still leaving?”

William threw her a quick glance and a smile. “As tantalizing as our conversation was, I am afraid I still have business to attend to.”

He opened the door and left the tower. Before the door closed on her, William heard one last question. “What business?”

# Chapter 9



**W**illiam saddled his horse and urged it into a gallop, the countryside racing past in a blur. He needed to clear his head, and the stinging wind whipping his face never failed to sharpen his mind.

Lost deep in thought, he reached his destination quickly. He tied the horse in a copse of trees and swiftly approached the familiar ramshackle building, raising his cloak collar and lowering his hat. This area wasn't safe for a man of his reputation.

With practiced ease, he cracked open a grime-encrusted window and climbed inside, landing softly on the creaking floorboards. This wasn't his first time breaking into this place. With luck, it would be the last.

William made his way toward the rickety stairs. He tiptoed silently until one of the wooden steps creaked loudly. *Ah, devil take it!* William cursed under his breath.

It was too late for stealth now. He rushed the remaining steps, wanting to meet his opponent on even ground.

Just as he reached the first floor, a silhouette lunged from the shadows wielding a dagger. William ducked and rolled, then sprang to his feet with hands raised. "I'm not here to fight!"

The figure paused, blade glinting. Then he jerked his chin at a candle sconce on the wall. "Light it."

William moved slowly to light the candle, illuminating the dingy room and the man's harsh features.

Ford Gunning, the prominent thief-taker, narrowed his eyes. "How interesting. A thief breaks into the thief-taker's house. If you wanted to get arrested, all you had to do was ask."

William let out a chuckle. "You truly do not think that I would knock and wait on your doorstep for you, did you? People on your street really do not like me."

Ford raised a brow. "Does anybody like you?"

William frowned in thought for a brief moment before pursing his lips. "Touché."

"Tell me one reason why I shouldn't arrest you right now?"

William shrugged. "You have nothing against me."

"You want to wager on that?"

William scoffed. "You'll lose, Gunning. And you know it."

Ford scrubbed his face with his hands. "What do you want, William? You are not welcome here."

"I was hoping for a friendly chat first. Perhaps an offer of a glass of whisky?"

"William," Gunning growled in warning.

“Perhaps not. I presume you know about the murders of the aristocrats in town?”

Gunning scoffed. “You presume right.” Then he let out a sigh, took the candle off the sconce, and tilted his head. “Come.”

They went into a small, cramped room that probably served the purpose of a study, although it reminded William of an abandoned scriptorium. Gunning placed the candle on the table and proceeded to rummage through the clutter until he took out a half-filled bottle of whisky and an empty tumbler with a satisfied look on his face. He quickly filled the glass to the brim with the amber liquid and settled in the chair.

“None for your guest?” William asked, settling across from him.

“You are not a guest. You are a trespasser,” Gunning countered, then took a long sip, grimacing as the burning liquid passed down his throat.

“Any idea who’s going around killing toffs?” William asked after Gunning slammed the glass onto the table.

The thief-taker raised a brow. “I have an idea.”

William let out a chuckle. “Let me guess, me?”

He nodded. “You.”

“I have to admit, I am quite flattered.”

“That I think you’re a murderer?”

“No. That you think I’d have the gall to come straight to you for help if I were a murderer.”

“You never lacked the gall, William,” Gunning said before resting his arms against his desk and leaning closer to William as he watched him from between his squinting eyes. “You came here to ask for help?”

“Now, now. No need to become all giddy. It’s not for me.”

Gunning leaned back and took another sip of his whisky. “For whom then?”

“It’s really in bad form to drink whisky, while I thirst away —”

“For whom, William?”

William leaned back in his chair. “Have you heard of the House of Pain and Pleasure?”

Gunning snorted. “The owner is number two on my list of suspects.”

Well, that complicated things.

Although William shouldn’t have been surprised. The man was good at his job. “You think so because one of those gentlemen was killed in the pleasure house?”

“Listen,” Gunning shrugged, “it may not be the owner himself, but—”

“Him...self?” William mumbled under his breath.

“—one of his cronies.”

“*His* cronies?”

“Either way, our priority is to find him. And determine his involvement.”

“Huh.” William nodded thoughtfully. So, Gunning wasn’t as well-informed as William had thought. He should have realized that Grace was hiding in plain sight as the owner of the brothel. He should have also realized that aside from Hades and his people, nobody had a reason to suspect who the owner was. Grace dressed and acted just like one of the harlots unless she chose otherwise. “And in the meantime, the establishment is ransacked, dozens of people are out on the streets, with no roofs over their heads and no jobs.”

“You want me to feel pity for whores?” Gunning’s nose twitched in disgust.

William curled his fingers into fists by his side. “Their profession of choice is out of necessity, not desire.”

“Maybe for most places that would be true. Not for the House of Pain and Pleasure. Not for the Hades’ Hell.”

William relaxed and threw up his hands as if in self-defense. “Fine. I am not here to argue about the labor shortage for underprivileged masses. I am here to ask for... a favor.”

“A favor?” Gunning’s frown turned grimmer.

“Do not worry, it is not for myself. It’s for your brother-in-law, Hades himself. And by extension, for your sister.”

Gunning’s facial features twisted as if in pain. He loathed being reminded about his sordid connection to the king of the underworld. But William always enjoyed bringing it up.



Especially since he was the one who'd aided the connection between the thief-taker's sister and the most dangerous man in London. "What can you possibly know about the favors my sister would want?"

William shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I know that she grew quite attached to some of her husband's friends. And some of them are now in trouble due to the situation that we've just discussed."

The thief-taker let out a weary sigh before putting his tumbler onto the desk and shoving his fingers in his hair. "What do you want?"

"Don't be so brash. This can actually help you, as well."

Gunning spread his hands in question.

"There is this one woman, from the house—"

"A harlot."

William pursed his lips in thought and then nodded. "Yes, let's call her a harlot if you please. Well, she believes that the owner of the House of Pain and Pleasure is innocent..." He paused. "As far as the murders are concerned anyway. And she wants to prove h... um... the owner's innocence."

"How is she planning to do that?"

"Likely, by finding the person or persons responsible. But it's more complicated than that. The constables, and the king's guard are now all looking into the scattered people of the house. They are all being tormented and harassed. This woman is no exception."

Gunning grunted. “She needs protection.”

“Yes,” William conceded.

“And in return, she is willing to help with the investigation?”

William shrugged. “She might be in possession of information nobody else has access to.”

“And what do you have to gain from this?”

William smiled. “I get to clear my name.”

“I should have known you weren’t doing it for magnanimous purposes.”

“Oh, no.” William’s nose twitched as he waved the notion away. “I don’t have such purposes. Only self-serving ones.”

“At least, I can count on one thing from you.”

William chuckled, stood, and walked toward the door. As he reached for the knob, Gunning spoke again. “Do not think for a moment that I don’t remember how you abducted my sister.” He paused. “Twice.”

William turned back and bowed low with a chuckle. “You’re welcome, my friend.”

\* \* \*

Victoria tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep. It was not fair that he knew where she was at all times and had a say in who she could see and where she could go, and yet he didn’t say anything to her about where *he* went in the middle of the night.

She knew that a lot of men had mistresses. Hell, she had contemplated having a lover herself, but not while she was physically living with William! Surely, he hadn't dragged her all the way here just to spend his nights with other women.

But then again, she had refused him company in bed.

What was she to do?

She couldn't just live under the same roof as him for three months and watch him have illicit affairs every night!

Since he insisted on knowing where she was at every moment of the day, she would insist on the same. Surely, that would work. Right?

She needed help and advice... Lucky for her, tomorrow she would have some time to converse with Caroline and perhaps ask for some advice.

She wasn't certain how helpful Caroline would be since she hated William with all her soul. He had blackmailed her uncle, and that pushed him to his death. That hatred could be beneficial to Victoria, in a way. If she directed it toward thwarting William's plans.

If Caroline wasn't helpful, she still had a weekly nuncheon with her friends on Thursday. And she'd be able to discuss all of her reservations with them then.

She turned to her side and drew her knees closer to her chest.

If William was going to be out all night, the least he could do was tell her that she could take the bed! Except... he had

told her that. He'd even offered to sleep in the chair in her stead. But she was too damned stubborn to allow him that.

She told herself it was because he was too tall, too broad-shouldered to fit in the chair comfortably. But the truth was simpler than that... The idea of sleeping in William's bed made her tingle from the inside. Sharing a bed with him would be bad enough, but lying there alone while he was a few feet away curled up in an uncomfortable chair just sounded like torture.

Victoria growled and covered herself with a sheet. She was so utterly confused... about everything!

She ripped the sheet away from her face, sat up, and squinted at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was half past three.

*Where. Is. My. Husband?*

It had been over four hours since he'd left. God only knew how long it had taken him to arrive at his mysterious destination. And only the devil knew what he was doing there for she doubted God would stick his nose in William's sinful business.

She flopped onto her back and wiggled this way and that trying to get comfortable. It didn't help and now she was hot and clammy.

A key clinked against the lock, and then there was the familiar sound of the mechanism turning. In the time it took William to turn the key, Victoria jumped out of her armchair, prepared to confront her wayward husband, then reconsidered,

jumped back onto her armchair, curled on her side, and covered herself with a sheet and a blanket. The doorknob rattled, and the door finally opened as Victoria lay peacefully in her chair, covered by a sheet from her collarbone to her toes.

There was a brief silence before the footsteps alerted her to William entering the tower after closing and locking the door. Then the footsteps got louder and louder as he approached the armchair.

What was he doing? Why was he not going to his bedroom?

Victoria tried to relax and breathe evenly so as not to give any indication that she was awake. There was a pause, and she could practically feel his gaze on her skin. Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps she had misheard, and he'd kneeled before the hearth to stoke the fire. Or maybe he had already left and gone into his room because surely, he wouldn't just stand there silently watching her sleep... Would he?

Just as she decided to test her luck and take a peek, his cool fingers touched her forehead. It took everything within Victoria not to flinch from an unexpected touch and took even more not to lean into it. He ran his fingers across her forehead, sweeping away a lock of hair from her face and tucking it behind her ear.

“Goodnight, *Lubimaya*,” he murmured under his breath.

Then his footsteps retreated out of the room, up the stairs, and eventually, she heard the door to his bedroom close behind

him.

Victoria opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, her heart beating frantically in her chest. Her fingers flew to her forehead where she could still feel his touch. “*Spokoinoi nochi, Lubimii.*”

*Good night, my love.*

\* \* \*

### *Autumn 1741*

Victoria hung the blood-red handkerchief outside the window and placed the flickering candles on the stone windowsill. Honestly, she should have stopped removing them by now and should have just left the handkerchief billowing in the wind. They’d been secretly spending time together every night since her debut ball, and she was certain he was already lurking in the moonlit gardens below her bedchamber, awaiting her summons.

She paced the floor, glancing at the clock every fifteen seconds, waiting for him to come climbing through the window. Instead, there was a rap on her door.

Victoria glanced at the window and then back at the door, her breath catching.

“It’s William,” came the hushed whisper from the hallway.

Heart pounding, Victoria rushed on light feet to the door and threw it open, hastily ushering him inside. “What are you

doing coming through the corridor? Someone could have seen you!”

He leaned in close, the scent of his skin intoxicating, and placed the warmest, sweetest kiss on her lips. “Nobody saw me,” he said against her lips and then gave her another quick kiss. “I saw your uncle head upstairs to his studio with a woman, so I suppose he’ll be occupied for some time.”

He walked farther into the room and jumped onto the bed.

Victoria followed him and climbed up next to him. “With a model, I presume?”

He rubbed his stubbled chin in thought. “A model, yes, that must be it.”

Victoria rubbed her palms in anticipation. “So, did you bring it?”

“Of course.” He gave her an offended look, though his eyes sparkled playfully. From his waistcoat, he produced a deck of cards. “Now, before we start, you must know the loser owes the winner a forfeit.”

“A forfeit?” She wrinkled her brows. “What is it?”

“A prize, if you wish. Only it needn’t be a physical prize. For example, should I win... I may ask for a kiss.”

Victoria let out a chuckle. “A forfeit. It’s a beautiful word.”

William looked at her with a soft gleam in his eyes. “Yes, quite beautiful indeed.”

Suddenly flustered, Victoria averted her eyes. “Ahem... So, which game should we play?”

“Have you heard of brag?”

Victoria chewed her lower lip. Of course, she had; she played it nightly with her uncle and excelled at it. “It does sound familiar.”

“Shall I explain the rules?”

She straightened her spine, the picture of an eager student. “I would appreciate that immensely.”

As William laid out the rules, his hands nimbly shuffling and dealing the cards, Victoria watched him avidly, enthralled by the cadence of his voice. She adored that voice, the way it seemed to caress her, doing scandalous things to her insides. She could listen to him speak for hours on end.

Unfortunately, he finished explaining quicker than she would have liked, and they proceeded to play. William dealt the cards with a flourish, his deft hands gliding smoothly. Victoria studied her cards with a frown, glancing periodically at William. As he reached for a glass of wine, she slyly switched one of her poor cards, hiding it up her billowing sleeve. With her new switched card, she easily won the first round.

“Well, then, I believe you owe me a forfeit,” she declared proudly, her cheeks burning with excitement and nerves.

“Name it,” he said eagerly.



“A kiss,” she breathed as if she would ask for anything else.

William grinned and leaned in, pressing his soft lips tenderly to hers. Victoria parted her lips, welcoming him, tasting wine on his tongue.

As William pulled away, he cleared his throat. “I don’t believe I ever enjoyed losing as much.”

Victoria chuckled. “May I deal this time?”

He handed her the deck of cards, and Victoria eagerly dealt another hand.

This time, despite Victoria’s best cheating efforts, William was victorious.

“Now you must pay the forfeit. What shall it be?” Victoria asked, trying to calm her racing heart.

William’s mouth curled in a roguish grin. “I choose a kiss as well.”

As Victoria leaned forward eagerly, he halted her with a hand on her waist. “Ah, but not on the lips. You must choose elsewhere.”

Flushing an even deeper red, she bit her lip, and slowly perused him before leaning in to place a delicate, feather-light kiss on his neck.

William chuckled as she retreated, her cheeks as hot as flaming coals.

Another round passed, and Victoria was once again the winner.

“Well, I suppose I should claim another kiss as my prize,” she said with a giggle.

“And shall I select the location this time?”

She gave him a coquettish nod.

He took her hand and brought her wrist teasingly to his lips before Victoria could protest.

“Not there!” She wrenched her hand away in sudden panic, and a single card fluttered from her billowing sleeve onto the floor.

William gasped theatrically as he picked up the card. “You’ve been cheating, you sly minx!”

Unable to contain her laughter, Victoria collapsed onto her back. William leaned over her, his face hovering above hers. “How does one say, ‘sly minx’ in Russian?” His words were low and oddly sensual.

Victoria’s laughter ceased, and she pursed her lips in thought. Then an idea came to her mind, so with a barely contained smile, she said, “*Lubimaya.*”

“Hmm... *Lubimaya,*” he said, slowly rolling each syllable on his tongue. “Somehow I doubt that means what you claim.”

“And how could you know?” Victoria dared to look affronted.

“Well, I don’t, but I know you. And that roguish look says I just called you something far more affectionate.”

She swallowed, her eyes dropping to his tempting mouth. “What if you’re right? What then?”

His smile broadened. “Then I should like to know the true meaning, so I may call you that and mean it.”

“Or you could simply kiss me again...” Victoria trailed off as their lips met once more.

His tongue teased her as his fingers delved into her hair, pulling out the pins one by one, freeing the jet-black locks. Victoria’s hand traveled down his chest, across his firm stomach, then dipped slyly under his waistcoat. Her fingers slid over the smooth, slick fabric within, craving to touch the skin beneath. Suddenly, the crisp corner of a card poked sharply into her palm.

With a dramatic gasp, Victoria broke the passionate kiss, her hand emerging from his waistcoat clutching the telltale evidence of his deception.

“You rogue, you were cheating too!” she cried in feigned indignation.

Not even trying to deny the obvious, William collapsed in laughter beside her. “What a devious pair we make!”

# Chapter 10



The door handle turned with a click, the lock rattling as the key struggled to catch. Finally, the heavy iron door swung open to reveal the striking vision of Victoria's wayward husband silhouetted in the doorway.

Victoria, who was flipping through a book with no interest in it whatsoever, flew off the armchair and almost into William's arms. She stopped herself a foot away, bewildered by her own reaction. It was out of boredom, she assured herself. Nothing else.

She hadn't missed him. At all.

And the fact that he'd been absent the entire night for the second night in a row didn't bother her either!

In fact, she had kept herself quite busy. Mostly snooping through his things, trying to find anything she could about what he had been up to in the past two years.

She had found nothing interesting or incriminating, to her chagrin, except for a small metal trunk of mysterious origins with an elaborate lock she wasn't able to open.

She blew away a lock of hair that had fallen onto her forehead from her mad dash to the door. "And where have you been, pray tell?"

William's gaze scanned her up and down before settling on her lips. "Missed me, have you?"

Victoria scoffed. "Not in the least. It is rather unceremonious of you, however, to leave me locked in this tower the entire night."

William leisurely took a watch from his pocket and flipped it open. "It's barely sunrise. I thought you'd be asleep."

Victoria cleared her throat. "Even so. Our deal required me to sleep under your roof for three months."

"Ah." He nodded and walked farther into the room. "But it doesn't require the same of me."

Victoria crossed her arms over her chest as she followed him with her gaze. "Do you mean to tell me that while I am forced to spend my nights here, you can gallivant around town to your heart's content?"

"I have business to attend to," he said, slowly shedding his coat and draping it over her chair. "I do not gallivant. Besides, I am a thief. Can't really do my business in the light of day."

"Is that what you were doing?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "Stealing?"

"No." His answer was succinct and didn't brook further questions.

Victoria questioned still. "Then what were you doing?"

"Helping out a friend." He paused and scratched his brow. "Um... not a friend. An acquaintance."

“Do you even have friends?” she asked scathingly. She expected him to laugh and wave the question away. It was rhetorical and meant as an insult.

Instead, his face took on a serious facade as he answered softly, almost solemnly, “I do not.”

What followed was a brief and uncomfortable silence. Victoria didn’t do well with silence, especially not when William watched her under his hooded eyes as if planning something nefarious. So, she said the first thing that came to her mind. “I am hungry.”

William smiled. “There are meats and cheeses for sandwiches in the larder.”

Victoria frowned. “We have a larder?”

“Yes, a larder, a milk room, and a pantry all at once. Downstairs.” William gestured to the floor with both hands, as if Victoria didn’t know which way downstairs was.

“We have a downstairs? How was I supposed to know that?”

“You are right,” William agreed with a nod. “I have not been the most accommodating host. But to be fair, you spend most of your time out of the house. When was I supposed to show it to you?”

Victoria licked her lips. “The very first day.”

A lazy smile adorned his lips. “Touché. To tell you the truth, I have never had to live with anyone before, so I haven’t taken into account that I would have to...”

“Show me around?” Victoria stifled a chuckle.

“I suppose I should have realized that. My mistake.” There was a short, awkward pause before William cleared his throat. “Would you like a tour then?”

He extended his arm palm up, and Victoria watched it as if it was going to sprout a head and bite her. But after a moment’s hesitation, she nodded and placed her hand on his.

The jolt of awareness that passed through her was rather surprising. She gasped and attempted to pull her hand away, but he closed his fingers around hers, and, as if not noticing her reaction—and more disappointingly not feeling the same—led her toward the back of the room.

There, hiding behind a hideously monstrous hearth that he used for cooking, was a little nook with an oak door. He took a key hanging on the wall and unlocked the door.

Victoria peeked inside the dark space and glanced at William. He waved his hand. “Please, proceed.”

She walked into the narrow corridor, only to realize it was a stairwell leading downstairs.

The sound of a striking tinderbox was followed by the faint light of a candle. William held the lantern out before Victoria and tilted his chin. “Go on now.”

Victoria followed a winding staircase downstairs until she stopped by the large wooden door. She pushed it forward and was welcomed by a gust of cool air. Victoria stepped inside and looked around. The room was small and empty of any

furniture save for some shelves and chests. He opened some of them and showed off his collection of cheeses and butter. A couple of loaves of bread were wrapped in a cloth as well. And there were some other things wrapped and stored that Victoria didn't have the mettle to explore.

William puffed out his chest. "So, if there's a time you are hungry, you can go down here and use whatever you want. There's bread and cheese, jam and pickled vegetables, dried and smoked meat on this side and..." He paused. "This section contains raw foods that, unless you know how to cook, are better avoided."

Victoria glanced at the food briefly, but her eyes were on her husband. Something had changed when he'd entered the room, as if his eyes lit up with, dare she say, pride? He looked so smug as if he was showing off a room full of gold. And a part of Victoria, that part in the middle of her body, warmed and tumbled at this look in his eyes.

That twinkle in his eyes was almost boyish. It wasn't arrogant or self-satisfied. It was like a window that briefly opened into his soul, and to Victoria's surprise, that soul wasn't pitch black and full of anger.

And that little realization tipped her off-balance. Unwilling to decipher her feelings further, she opted to change the direction of her thoughts. "So," she asked instead with a raised brow. "Never?"

He looked at her with evident confusion on his face. "Never, what?"



“You have never lived with anyone before?”

William frowned. “Well, no. I suppose not. Obviously, I lived with a...” He cleared his throat. “With my mother as a child. And then with a friend. But that was a long time ago.”

His face became grave, and Victoria had an inexplicable urge to pull him back into a lighter mood, to a mood where he was boyishly proud of himself—or if not that, then at least to his regular flirtatious charm. Victoria placed her hands on her hips. “Really? You were a child? You didn’t just sprout into adulthood forged out of hellfire?”

Luckily, her ploy worked, and William chuckled. “Sometimes I wish I had. Come. Let’s continue with the tour.”

Victoria gave him a sidelong glance as he waved his hand for her to proceed. “There’s more?”

That’s when his smug facial expression returned. “Of course, there’s more. Do you think I brought you here just to showcase bread and cheese?”

Victoria smiled and trotted in front of him. “I was hoping for more bread and cheese.”

William placed his hand on the small of her back as she passed him, guiding her toward yet another door. His hand burned her skin through the layers of her gown, and yet shivers covered her body. Only William ever had that effect on her. A part of her hated it, but another part of her... felt comfortable with the familiarity of this feeling.

He led her through a heavy wooden door into a room she'd never expected to see in this little tower. A library!

The room brimmed with shelves from top to bottom, filled with books of various sizes and colors. The room was small, like every room in this place, and there was barely enough space to walk between the shelves, let alone sit and read. But that didn't matter to Victoria.

She had a library!

The air carried the intoxicating scent of aged paper and leather bindings, a smell that never failed to bring her back to the memory of her childhood.

“Here.” William handed her a lantern. “Feel free to explore.”

As Victoria stepped into the room, her eyes widened in awe. She couldn't help but smile, her fingers running over the spines of the books as she walked through the shelves. Some books were familiar, others were not, and some were—she paused and made sure she wasn't dreaming—some of the tomes were in Russian!

Her heart skipped a beat.

She had missed the language dearly. Ever since she had left Russia, the only source of the language was the books she had carried with her and the letters her sister had sent her.

Victoria missed her childhood language so much that tears burned in the back of her eyes.

She reached out and ran her fingers gently over the titles in Cyrillic script, tracing the familiar characters with a smile.

Victoria felt as though she had been given a precious gift, a sanctuary where she could reconnect with her roots, even if just for a brief moment. She turned to her husband, gratitude, and joy dancing in her eyes. “*Spasibo*,” she whispered, her voice filled with emotion, thanking him in the language she cherished.

William shrugged in his nonchalant way. “You’re welcome.”

Victoria returned her gaze to the books and started going through them one by one. “Where and when did you get these titles?”

“I knew you’d come to live with me eventually, and I prepared myself the best I could for that eventuality.”

Victoria stilled, her heart racing at that thoughtful gesture. She hated that she was so easily won over. A few books and she was melting at his feet. Except it wasn’t just about the books.

He listened. He remembered. And he worked hard to give her what she wanted.

More than that, he did it all while not knowing whether they would ever be reconnected.

Victoria twirled around between the shelves, taking in the entire library. It was nothing compared to the library her family had in the St. Petersburg palace, but this tiny piece of

her motherland brought her immense joy. “I don’t think I’ll be able to finish all these books in three months even if all I did was read all day.”

William’s voice was an octave lower when he said, “Then perhaps you’ll stay longer.”

Victoria whipped toward him as this innocuous phrase lit the fire within her veins. “I knew it!”

William looked confused. “What exactly did you know?”

“Everything! For a brief moment of weakness, I contemplated that you were selfless, but you were never more self-serving. Everything you do is for your benefit. This little tower to keep me in close quarters with you. A larder of food so we never have to leave the house. A horde of books. All you’re doing is trying to trick me into staying with you!”

William arched his brow and crossed his arms. “What gave it away?”

“We have a deal,” Victoria enunciated clearly. “I spend three months with you, and then I go back.”

William casually stepped closer. “And what makes you think I won’t do everything in my power to make you stay?”

“To trick me into staying, you mean? Because I will never willingly stay with you.”

William shrugged. “You said the same about coming back to me, and yet here you are.”

Victoria was so flabbergasted all she could do was open her mouth to speak and then close it repeatedly like a fish out of water because the words escaped her. “That was not willingly,” she finally found enough wits to say. “I had no other blasted choice!”

William, bless his dark, infernal soul, frowned in utter confusion. “I didn’t force you to come to me. You made the deal all on your own.”

Victoria let out a chuckle, but not in humor, rather in defeat. The blasted rogue really did not seem to understand the difference. “Out of desperation!”

“You entered this house on your own two feet. I did not abduct you.”

“You might as well have. I can’t believe you argued the difference between lying and deceit, yet you can’t see the difference between consent and coercion!”

“I didn’t coerce you into doing anything.”

Victoria scoffed. “You didn’t directly coerce me into it. But your actions resulted in my need to make a deal.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Is that also how you justify blackmail? As if you’re not threatening people into doing what you want, you’re just giving them a choice?”

He snorted. “Blackmail is such a dark word. I prefer... reminding people of their past immoral actions and possible outcomes that may follow if those actions were to be revealed.”

Victoria threw her hands up in agitation. “That’s exactly my point! Your perverted logic and the bizarre justifications for your terrible actions are exactly the reason why I will not be staying with you a day longer than I have to.”

She turned to walk away and even made a few steps toward the door when William spoke again. “And I am willing to wager you’re wrong.”

Victoria whirled around, her finger in the air, ready to argue, but her anger turned into defeat. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why in the world do you think I would choose to stay with you? Ever?”

“Because, my dear Victoria, despite all your bluster and declarations, I know you still love me.”

“How?” she cried. “How can you think that I still love you? After everything.”

“I don’t think so. I know so.” The rogue seemed quite confident in his words.

“What makes you think that?” she asked weakly.

“Because you never said you don’t. Because despite what you might think, I know you very well. And I might lie by omission, but that’s how you tell the truth.”

Victoria just stared at him. She didn’t have the strength to contradict him or argue further. Her throat constricted,

blocking her airways. When she was finally able to breathe again, she asked, “You really think you know me that well?”

He crossed his arms over his chest in a defiant pose and shrugged. “I certainly know what you want more than you do.”

Victoria couldn’t help it; she laughed. Not a happy laugh, but a bitter one. “Do I, by any chance, want to be locked up in a tower with nothing to do but read and eat, while you gallivant about town? Did I, by any chance, ever want to be married to a bastard, to be ostracized from my sister? Because I remember wanting the opposite.”

A light smirk appeared on his lips. “When we met, you were young and naive. Easily led astray by other people’s wants! Marry an English titled lord?” William thrust a single digit in the air. “It was your uncle’s dream, not yours. Return to Russia and lead by your sister’s side?” A second finger joined the first. “That was your sister’s dream, not yours! Marrying someone for the title and procuring lovers?” He counted the third item on his fingers, then waved his hand to the side in irritation. “Once more, your sister’s influence. You didn’t know what you wanted, you still don’t! Yet you were ready to set yourself aflame if it meant your family would be warm.”

Victoria’s nostrils flared, her voice trembling with anger. “And are you insinuating that you are better than my relatives? You took away my ability to make decisions by tying me to you!”

“I didn’t take anything away,” he said calmly. “You were the one who wanted to get married. That was the only thing you ever did for yourself.”

Victoria clenched her fists at her sides, her knuckles turning white, and took a step toward him. “And I was a fool to do that! That shows my naivete more than anything you described. I didn’t even know you!”

William’s jaw tightened as he retorted, “You knew enough.”

“You made me think you were everything I wanted in a man,” she breathed.

“The only thing I wasn’t honest about, upfront about, was the fact that I was a bastard.” William took a menacing step. “Aside from the superficial dressing of a title, I am exactly who I said I was, and *you* wanted *me*.” By the time he finished speaking, he was less than a foot away from her.

“And being a criminal, blackmailing people for your benefit? Are those superficial dressings, too?” Victoria’s voice dripped with scorn.

He shrugged lightly. “No one’s perfect.”

“I loathe you,” she enunciated, her face only inches away from his.

William stepped even closer. So close that when he spoke, she could feel his breath on her cheek. “Then prove it.”

Her breathing intensified, her nostrils flaring with every inhale. “How?”



“Simple,” he said, then added in a rugged whisper, “push me away.”

Victoria stared at him, her breasts gently brushing against his shirt with every shallow breath. She raised her hands and placed them on his chest as if to push him away. She paused, her gaze dropping to her hands, and she spread her fingers over his body.

She wanted to push him away, she truly did. But something within her halted her actions, and all she could do was bask in the warmth of his skin.

William leaned in, bringing his face closer until their lips were just a hair’s breadth apart. “And do not return my kisses,” he said hoarsely before claiming her mouth in a demanding kiss.

Victoria’s knees buckled, her fingers bunching the fabric of his shirt just to keep herself upright. When he broke the kiss, they were both panting, their breaths the only sound in the room. For a moment, Victoria couldn’t think. All she wanted was to reach out and kiss him once more.

But he disengaged from her and took a step back. “See?”

Victoria pressed the back of her hand to her bruised lips, but no matter how hard she tried, no witty retort came to her mind. So, she turned on her heel and fled.

# Chapter 11



*Thirty one days before the execution...*

Victoria fought the urge to twist her aching neck this way and that as she walked down the stairs, her back straight as a lance, her hand on William's arm.

She wore her finest gown, and her neck was adorned with a pearl necklace that William had gifted her on their wedding day. She had other jewelry, of course, but she thought it fitting to wear this particular necklace during their first formal outing.

Except, she couldn't quite enjoy herself because everything ached. The corset was the only reason she was standing upright because her back was sore as well, all because of sleeping on the blasted armchair.

Oh, how she hated her husband. Yes, she was stubborn not to move to the bed, but she thought that her little rebellion was the only way she could assert her independence in that cramped little tower, to show him that just because he'd gotten her to live with him didn't mean he'd won her affection.

Now, he was walking beside her, smelling like a fresh winter morning, reminding her of the first day they met.

Everyone's eyes were turned to them as their heads bowed toward each other, and a hushed whisper spread around the ballroom.

*The bastard and the rebellious princess.*

Most people present at the ball looked at William with either disdain or disgust, though Victoria noticed a few who regarded him with something akin to curiosity, and some bold women unabashedly admired him with eyes heavy-lidded and brimming with desire. Her fingers tightened on his sleeve possessively.

He had never been welcomed in many aristocratic homes before, which she attributed to his bastard status, but now she wondered if it was because he had cuckolded one too many noblemen.

With his youth, wit, charm, and pleasing looks, he had always turned heads, of that she was certain. She had fallen for him, after all. And she couldn't be the only one.

Now married to someone of Victoria's lofty lineage, connected to not one, but two of Europe's oldest royal families, he'd undoubtedly become the most coveted prize among women seeking a passionate dalliance.

Victoria followed his line of sight, wondering if he was looking at anyone in particular, but he seemed oblivious to the attention he was getting. He held his head high, a carefree smirk playing upon his lips.

After all, he'd gotten what he'd wanted, hadn't he? A foot in the door of high society and a lovely princess on his arm.

They made their way down and were met by the Duke and Duchess of Kensington at the base of the staircase.

"Brother!" William exclaimed loudly. "What a pleasure to finally be welcomed into your home."

Kensington's jaw clenched, his lips thinning into a single line. He didn't reply, just bowed politely toward Victoria.

Caroline flicked a quick glance toward her husband, communicating silently in a way only married couples did, and the duke immediately turned toward William, unclenched his jaw, and smiled. "Lovely to see you... ahem... brother."

That was the most insincere greeting Victoria had ever seen.

"Yes, welcome, Victoria, William." Both Caroline and Victoria dipped into polite curtsies.

"You seem tense, brother," William noted. "I thought we managed to mend the bridge between us."

Kensington's nostrils flared. "Quit calling me brother, *brother*. And do not pretend like you didn't put a huge gash in that bridge by abducting my wife's cousin."

William frowned in thought for a while, mouthing something to himself, then smiled widely. "Ah, yes, Victoria *is* your wife's cousin. We are twice as relatives now, aren't we?"

"Do not remind me," Kensington growled.

“You are the one who reminded—”

“How about we take a turn about the room, shall we?” Caroline interrupted the childish banter between the brothers. Then she added in a hushed whisper, “We need to keep up appearances. Please, pretend to be civil.”

“My wife doesn’t like it when I pretend or lie or deceive,” William drawled.

Victoria let out a deep sigh. “And yet you never had a problem with it before.”

Caroline fairly snatched William’s arm, while Kensington offered his elbow to Victoria, and both couples moved in a circular pattern along the room.

“How is your living arrangement with William?” Kensington asked with genuine worry in his eyes.

*Well, Your Grace, I sleep on the armchair, dress and clean myself, eat the food cooked by your brother, and I am not allowed to leave the house without an escort.* She smiled. “Quite well, thank you.”

He greeted an approaching couple with a polite smile and a bow before returning his concerned gaze to Victoria. “Are you certain? Because if there’s anything that you are uncomfortable with...”

Victoria shook her head, still smiling. She didn’t want anyone to think that she was a damsel in need of rescue. She could—and would—take care of William by herself. “I assure

you, Your Grace, I am quite well and content. Besides, it's just a three-month arrangement, and after that, I shall be free."

They stopped, and the next moments were followed by them fielding questions from the curious crowd. "I think it's time for you to have your first official dance as a married couple," Caroline said when the curiosity died down a little.

Victoria brightened up, excited to finally enjoy herself during this strange affair, but William put up a staying hand. "Absolutely not."

Victoria looked up at him with a frown. "Pardon me? You can't just say absolutely not and—"

"I just did," he said stonily.

"It is best for your reputation if—" Caroline started, but he interrupted her as well.

"I will not dance. Not with Victoria, nor with anyone else."

Victoria huffed and turned away, fanning her heated cheeks. Such a brute! And to think she'd ever thought he was the perfect man for her. What had she been thinking?

"Then what do you expect us to do?" she grumbled.

Luckily for them both, Lavinia and Uncle Bastian came up to them, and Victoria was happy for the distraction.

"Lavinia!" She clasped her friend's arm and led her away, "Just the person I needed to speak with."

Lavinia looked at Victoria with worried eyes, "Is something amiss?"

Victoria looked around and feigned a smile. “Everything is amiss. Life with William is hell, and the worst part is I can’t tell anyone about it because all of it is my fault!”

Lavinia led her to a quiet corner of the ballroom. “Do you want to stay with us for a while?”

Victoria bit her lower lip. “No. I can manage to live with him for three months. It is just hard because I need to pretend as though I am happy when I am anything but.”

Lavinia frowned in thought. “I have to say, you two make quite a striking couple. People can’t take their eyes off you.”

Victoria nodded and placed her hand on her chest, calming her racing heart. She didn’t even know why she was so upset with this outing or with anything for that matter. William could rile her up simply with his presence. He didn’t need to do anything at all. Whether he did something right or he did something wrong, her heart just raced like a runaway horse. Something about him set her aflame. Around him, she was constantly on edge, anticipating his next move, never knowing whether he would fan her desires or ignite her fury. His effect on her was profound and dizzying.

Her fingers caught on the pearl necklace she wore, and she let out a deep breath. Could it be that deep in her heart she still wished he could win her back?

\* \* \*

She’d worn the pearl necklace.

Victoria was always gorgeous no matter the occasion. But today, in her deep midnight-blue gown with a low bodice and puffy skirt embroidered with golden thread that accentuated her tiny waist, she was exceptionally beautiful. Yet the detail that caught his eye was the simple pearl necklace he had stolen for her. And that little detail gave him hope.

Of course, she was mad at him. She was always mad at him, and he understood that he deserved it. His only hope was that in a few days, she would get tired of it and simply fall into a routine with him. Perhaps, it was a stupid plan.

Perhaps, he needed to be proactive in winning her back. He had spent two years pining, longing after her, but now that she was finally close, he had a chance to prove his love. And that necklace was like a beacon of hope, a lighthouse showing him the way in darkness.

She spent a good portion of the night talking to her friends and avoiding him, angry at the fact that he wouldn't dance with her and unable to get another dance partner because William had threatened any man who would dare come close to her.

And now that Lavinia left on her husband's arm toward the dance floor, William swept in and placed a hand on the small of Victoria's back.

She threw him a sidelong stare.

“Do not look at me as though you're plotting my murder, dear,” he murmured.



“What if that is exactly what I am doing?”

William chuckled. “Then do it with a smile. We are supposed to pretend to be a couple deeply in love, remember?”

“How am I supposed to do that when you won’t even dance with me?” Frustration glistened in her eyes, and William gritted his teeth. He hated that there was something he couldn’t give her. He hated it even more that she was so upset by it.

“It is not because I do not want to, love.” She looked up at him with a frown, and he let out a deep breath. “I do not know how.”

She blinked in confusion. “You do not know how...” Realization hit her face, and she looked at him with a completely different expression. “How is that possible?”

Sometimes William forgot how different their backgrounds were, and that as much as he wanted to convince himself to the contrary, she truly didn’t know much about him.

“My dear princess,” he said slowly, “while you were spending your days in a palace, dancing your troubles away, I was dancing on the streets, and by that I, of course, mean stealing.”

Victoria pursed her lips together. “You never learned how to dance.”

“I am barely ever welcome in aristocratic homes. Why would I even need to know how to dance?”

She bit her lip, watching him from between her narrowed eyes. “Then what are we supposed to do now? How do you propose we spend our time?”

He had an idea or two, but none of those ideas would be appropriate in the crowded ballroom. And their aim for today was to convince this ballroom full of people that they were indeed in love.

“I have a suggestion,” he said.

“Yes?”

“When we started courting—”

“Courting? Is that what it was?” She raised a brow.

William swallowed. “When we first met, we spent quite a few nights just enjoying each other’s company.”

“Yes, that was before I knew who you truly were,” she grumbled and took a sip of her wine, emptying the glass.

“That’s fair,” William agreed, unwilling to argue. “But since we are to pretend to be deeply in love, why not just emulate what we did when we met?”

Victoria frowned. “I do not think I follow.”

“Why not try and enjoy each other’s company?” William snatched her empty glass and placed it on a footman’s tray, then took her arm and led her around the ballroom at a sedate pace. “Perhaps even get to know each other better. You say that you didn’t truly know me back then, although I could

argue differently, but let's say that's true. Now you have a chance to find out the truth about me."

Victoria pursed her lips in deep thought, her gaze fixated on William. "You would answer any question I ask you truthfully?"

William leaned in, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. "Yes, but please, let's keep them lighthearted. We wouldn't want to raise any eyebrows."

Her brows knitted in thought, and William could practically see her mental gears churning. She was undoubtedly weighing the questions she had for him, selecting the ones that wouldn't lead to a heated argument. Finally, she raised her eyes to his, a calculating glint in her gaze. Her fingers absently traced the pearl necklace adorning her neck.

"Did you truly steal this?" she asked, her tone revealing a fair amount of curiosity.

William bit his lower lip. "Yes."

"From whom?"

"A very unpleasant gentleman," he said with a careless wave of his hand. "He didn't deserve it."

Victoria's eyes widened. "You stole it from an unpleasant man and gave it to me?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Would you rather I stole it from a kind-hearted, good-natured person?"

She furrowed her brow, and after a moment gave a brief shrug. “No, I suppose you’re right. It’s better to steal from the undeserving, although I’m not sure how you determined that.”

William snorted softly. “You’ll have to trust me on that. Besides, it looks a lot better on you.”

Victoria couldn’t help but chuckle, a rosy flush gracing her cheeks. In this moment, it felt like they had returned to the early days of their acquaintance, filled with laughter and curiosity.

“How do you do it?” she asked, her gaze distant as her tongue briefly traced her upper lip. “How do you steal?”

William stopped in his tracks, cleared his throat, and looked around the room cautiously. “Would you like me to show you?”

She pursed her lips in contemplation and, to William’s surprise, nodded. “Yes, absolutely.”

He blinked, genuinely taken aback by her request. “You want me to steal something?”

Victoria nodded confidently. “Yes. You want me to learn the real you, the side of you I haven’t seen before, and that’s something I’m curious to explore.”

“Hmm...” William couldn’t hide his astonishment. “But why?”

With a delicate shrug of her shoulder, she simply said, “It’s a significant part of who you are, isn’t it?”

William released a deep breath. “Very well. If that’s what you want, then that’s what you’ll get.”

# Chapter 12



Victoria didn't know why she'd challenged William to steal. She wanted to unsettle him, perhaps, to remind him why they were at odds, to remind him of the difference in their stations, to remind *herself* of who he really was.

However, a part of her truly wanted to see him do it.

She'd heard it said about him all the time: he was a criminal, a thief. Perhaps, the best thief this world had ever known. And all those talks had piqued her curiosity.

William scanned the glittering ballroom, eagle-eyed. He grimaced and turned in a different direction a couple of times, and Victoria wished she knew what he was thinking. He glanced toward her with a raised brow. "Are you certain this is how you wish to spend our evening?"

Victoria wasn't certain at all. But her stomach fluttered in excitement. "Absolutely."

"Very well." He rubbed his hands together, his gaze thoughtful. "See Lady Carlyle?"

Victoria searched the ballroom until her gaze settled on the gorgeous, young blonde widow, bedecked in expensive jewelry from head to toe. "Yes."

"I am going to... um... borrow her ruby choker."

Victoria raised a brow. “How are you going to do that?”

William shrugged and offered his arm. “Come and see.”

Victoria took his arm and they moved in Lady Carlyle’s direction. As they reached her side, the ostentatious widow greeted them with a smile. “Princess Victoria, a pleasure! And William!” She turned toward him, and her gaze turned undeniably lustful. *William!* She’d called him by his Christian name. Of course, nobody had ever called him anything else, except when calling him a bastard. But hearing Lady Carlyle address him so familiarly, Victoria felt a visceral feeling of jealousy forming in her belly. Her fingers tightened on William’s forearm, and she suddenly wished they were very far away from the gorgeous widow.

William bowed low, his eyes never leaving Lady Carlyle’s face. “My Lady Carlyle. I am most pleased to see you again.” *Again.* So, they were definitely previously introduced. They’d probably spent some time together in the past. The widow was known for her numerous liaisons.

Why would he choose Lady Carlyle as his target at all, if not because she was at ease in his presence?

Something boiled within Victoria, and she wished she could yank her husband back. Instead, he dropped her arm and sidled closer to the lady in question, his gaze caressing her body. “You look exceptionally lovely tonight, although I shouldn’t be surprised as your beauty rivals that of the sun.”

Lady Carlyle fanned her red cheeks, her eyes hooded. “Oh, dear William. You should save your flattery for your wife.”

Then she leaned in close to William, her bosom conveniently pushed directly into his line of sight and whispered loudly. “I can be charmed without words.”

Victoria couldn’t bear that blatant disrespectful flirting, if she could even call it that, for it was not flirting; it was open coupling! And now William placed his hand on the small of Lady Carlyle’s back! And he whispered something in answer.

“Lady Carlyle!” Victoria snapped, then cleared her features as the woman turned toward her. “I have to admit that the gown you are wearing is the top of fashion.”

“Thank you,” she said, then let out a giggle, as if from being tickled, and threw a lascivious glance toward William. How rude!

“I admire your bravery in trying the newest designs, as it is always a risk wearing something designed for a person with a much smaller waistline. It isn’t flattering on any figure to wear clothes that seem to be coming apart at the seams, yet somehow, you make it work.”

Lady Carlyle’s jaw dropped at Victoria’s pointed insult. She closed her mouth and opened it once more, trying to find an appropriate retort, but ended up staying silent.

William visibly swallowed a chuckle and bowed low. “Lady Carlyle, always a pleasure.” Then he placed his hand on the small of Victoria’s back and guided her away. Victoria struggled not to shake his hand off her, remembering how he’d touched Lady Carlyle in much the same way.



“That was brilliant,” he said with a boyish smile that made it difficult for her to stay angry at him. She persevered still.

“Did you have to be so openly flirtatious with her?” she snapped.

William raised a brow. “Is it jealousy you exhibit?”

Victoria huffed a breath. “Not in the least. I am only vexed because tonight we have to present a united front of a loving married couple, so I would assume our flirtations should be reserved for each other.”

William licked his lips, a smile threatening to break out on his features, then lifted his right hand in front of her, rolling a gorgeous ruby choker between his fingers. “I had to make her drop her guard in order to steal this. Or had you forgotten?”

He quickly replaced the choker inside the pocket of his jacket. Victoria’s cheeks burned and heat traveled down her body because she indeed had forgotten about their mission.

“How did you do that?” Victoria stared at him, stunned.

“If you weren’t burning with jealousy, perhaps you would have noticed my subtle trick.”

“I wasn’t burning with jealousy!” she countered, but he continued as if she hadn’t spoken.

“However, I have to say that your little cutting remark helped me accomplish my task. Poor Lady Carlyle was so stunned she didn’t even notice that the load had been lifted off her neck.” He gave her a charming grin.

“Show it to me again?” Victoria demanded simply to turn attention away from her unwarranted jealous fit.

William pulled out the choker and dropped it into her palm. Victoria studied it briefly, her eyes darting this way and that, making certain that no one was observing their actions. Had anyone even noticed that Lady Carlyle’s jewelry was missing?

She handed it back to him. “What are you going to do with it?”

William shrugged. “Perhaps I shall keep it as a memento of sorts.”

“Of Lady Carlyle?” Victoria’s voice was dripping with venom, and she could not disguise her tone.

“Why not?” William asked, not even looking at her, then bowed toward a passing couple. “Lady Norfolk, Lord Norfolk.”

“William!” Lord Norfolk exclaimed. “Haven’t seen you at the card table for a while now. I have to admit, I am in need of a win. Perhaps you’d consider joining us at Hades’ Hell soon?”

William laughed and patted the man on the back. “Perhaps later. At this time, most of my time is occupied by my beautiful bride.”

Victoria curtsied, and they briefly exchanged pleasantries. For a man who was not welcomed in many society homes, he sure had a lot of... ahem... acquaintances.

William and Norfolk quipped for a few minutes before William bowed low. “It was a pleasure to see you again. And Lady Norfolk, may I say, what a beautiful necklace you have.”

As William said those words, he swiftly guided Victoria away. But her eyes were glued to Lady Norfolk’s neck as she was sporting Lady Carlyle’s ruby choker around it.

Victoria had to pry her eyes away from Lady Norfolk’s new jewelry. “How did you do that?” she whispered furiously to her husband.

He raised a brow. “You didn’t seem enamored with the idea of keeping a reminder of Lady Carlyle in our home, so I had to get rid of it.”

A chuckle left Victoria’s lips before she could stop herself. “What happens when they realize what’s going on?”

William shrugged nonchalantly. “Chaos, I presume.”

“William!” Kensington’s growl startled them both, stopping them in their tracks. “A word, please.”

The duke seemed quite angry, but William didn’t seem perturbed at all. He lifted Victoria’s hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “I shan’t be long.”

Then he turned toward Kensington with a wide smile. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your continued attention today?”

“Do not even think I do not see what you’re up to!” Kensington said in a hushed but stern whisper as he led his brother away.

Victoria chuckled and shook her head in wonder. How did William do that? Well, she'd asked to see a thief in action, and she had.

"Your Highness." A soft masculine voice prompted Victoria to whirl around.

She blinked in surprise. "Lord Porter."

He bowed low before offering his arm. "Would you give me the honor of escorting you to the patio for a breath of fresh air?"

Victoria stared at his hand with a frown. "I have to admit, I did not expect to see you here. Or at all."

Lord Porter grimaced. "Please, it shan't be long. I just need a chance to apologize and explain myself."

Victoria let out a deep breath. "Very well." She took his arm and let herself be led away toward the French doors.

They walked in silence for a while until they finally stepped outside. That's when Lord Porter turned toward her and took her hands in his. "Princess, I just wanted to apologize for the misunderstanding I caused the last time we talked. You were clearly preparing to elope, and your... uh... betrothed no doubt had hired men to pick you up and carry you to the carriage as it would have been easier than you running on your own. I have been replaying that evening in my head ever since it happened and I wish I'd acted differently. I wish I hadn't let them take you."

Victoria listened to his speech patiently, but at his last sentence she reared back in surprise. “Whatever can you mean?”

He let out a breath. “Perhaps it wasn’t obvious, but I was trying to court you. I was too timid in my advances. To tell you the truth, I didn’t think I was worth the air you were breathing. But knowing that you chose a bastard, I wish I had been more insistent.”

“More insistent in your courting or more insistent in saving me from my alleged abduction?” Victoria tensed her fingers, trying to pull away from his hold, but he tightened his grip.

“Both. I hope you can forgive me for both.”

Victoria pursed her lips. “That’s truly not an issue at all. You are forgiven.” She tried to free her hands once more, but his grip didn’t lessen; on the contrary, he now stepped even closer.

“Remember that night during your charity ball? We spoke in the garden, and you wished for a kiss,” he said, his voice low, his eyes probing.

“Yes, well, it was a lapse in judgment.” She fanned her heated cheeks.

“I hope I can ask you for one now.” His eyes moved to her lips and then lowered to her décolletage.

Victoria blinked in surprise. This ball was full of surprises for her, and she’d been unable to find her footing all night. “For a kiss? Why?”

He stepped even closer, crowding her. “To soothe the past hurts. A gesture of good faith, if you will.”

Victoria’s first instinct was to push him away and say no. Not only was this man a coward who couldn’t even kiss her in the gardens when he’d thought she was unmarried, but he was also a man who’d left her on the side of the road when two men abducted her. He was also the reason for all the rumors that led to her acknowledging her husband and living with William.

But deep inside her, curiosity rose to the surface. Not about Porter; she didn’t care about him at all. However, if she were to spend three months with William and then separate from him as planned, she would once again be free.

Would she be able to go out in search of lovers? How would it feel to kiss a man who was not William? What if that weak-kneed feeling she had felt at his kiss, that heat that traveled up her body, was the feeling evoked by any kiss? Not just William’s.

Unpleasant shivers rose up her spine from just thinking of another man’s lips on hers. She shuddered and took a step back. But Porter stepped closer, too close.

Victoria raised her head to meet his eyes and opened her mouth to tell him to step away, but at that moment, he leaned in for a kiss.

Victoria closed her eyes just as Porter’s lips pressed against hers. She felt strangely frozen, trapped. She forced

herself just to breathe, while her mind whirled in panic, unable to act.

Finally, she raised her hands to his chest, to push him away. But at that same time, Porter wrapped his arms around her, trapping her hands between their bodies and deepening his kiss.

When William kissed her, heat unfurled inside her belly and spread through her body, down to the tips of her fingers and toes. This time, that did not happen. Instead, Victoria froze again, a paralyzing cold overtaking her limbs.

Porter moved away with a self-satisfied smile. “Perhaps we can see each other again? In a more intimate setting?”

Victoria reared back and stifled a grimace. If his kiss left her cold like the Neva River in winter, then his following words might as well have unleashed a blizzard.

Not only did she not want to see him again, but the idea of him kissing her one more time caused her stomach to turn.

She felt embarrassed that it had gone this far. How did she lead this man to believe that it was appropriate to kiss her? Why couldn't she push him away even if that was all she wanted? Was it her fault? Had she allowed him to be this brazen with her?

Suddenly another realization crossed her mind. When he'd thought she was an unmarried lady, he was too frightened to be seen with her, spooked at the idea of being caught kissing her, although he was receptive to the idea of the kiss itself.

Now that she was married, he'd suddenly become extremely excited about the prospect of becoming her lover, of cuckolding another man.

William might not have been an honest man—he was a thief, a liar, a blackmailer, and an all-around criminal—but at least he had honor when it came to affairs of the heart. While Porter... Well, Porter was a coward.

And who would have known, but that appeared to be the one trait that Victoria found revolting.

“I thank you,” she said evenly as she finally managed to collect her wits, “but I refuse.” She snatched her hands back in one violent gesture and took a step back. “I am happily married. And the kiss we shared was a mistake. I never meant to allow it, and this will not happen again. Good day.”

\* \* \*

She had fucking kissed him.

After spending a few moments being lectured by his brother about stealing right under people's noses and agreeing to fix what he'd done, William went in search of his wife. It wasn't difficult for him to find her. He'd noticed Porter leading her away, so he walked toward the patio only to see Victoria kissing the bloody coward!

Wasn't she the one who'd insisted they act flirtatious and very much in love? Wasn't she the one who was jealous of the attention he'd bestowed on Lady Carlyle to cater to her whim



and steal a necklace from her? And now she was hiding on the patio, kissing the insipid lord.

William whirled on his heel and stalked away.

If he didn't, he would stomp onto the patio and break Porter's face, rip his lips off, and stuff them into a deep, dark place.

He would not make a scene, embarrassing Victoria in the process. But Porter would regret ever pressing his lips against Victoria's. He would pay for his brazen actions, of that William would make certain.

The most vexing part of it all, however, was that Victoria had let him kiss her.

Why?

Why had she done that? Did she feel something toward the coward? Or did she want to make William jealous?

William tried to shake the images of them kissing out of his mind, but he couldn't.

He was so close to getting what he wanted. She was living under his roof, sleeping inside his house—if not his bed—walking into ballrooms on his arm, and calling him her husband. But if she was willingly kissing other men and turning her nose from him, was there anything else he could do?

What if this entire charade was all for naught?

How was he supposed to convince her to fall in love with him again? What if the thieving he had demonstrated tonight only pushed her away while he just wanted to give her what she wanted?

William had never felt so much doubt in his life.

He needed to clear his head. So, he stalked out of the ballroom and walked aimlessly through the Kensington house.

This wasn't the first time he'd been in this house, not even the second. However, this was the first time he'd ever been invited, the first time he'd ever walked in through the front door.

He stopped at the corridor leading to the duke's study. He had broken into this house a few times, most notably the time when he'd demanded the duke acknowledge him. Driven by his need to belong.

William scoffed.

He'd spent his entire life carving out a spot for himself in the criminal world. But he'd never felt at peace there, never belonged there. Forever the lone wolf. He then tried to shove his foot into the aristocratic world, but people looked down their noses, refusing to accept a bastard among them.

Trying to fit into both worlds, he ended up an outcast in each. And all he'd wanted since the day he was born was to simply belong. Somewhere. Anywhere.

When he'd met Victoria, he'd thought he'd finally found that place.

He had never felt the way he felt with Victoria. The entire world fell away when he was around her, and nothing else mattered. There was no need for boasting or bluster, no need for puffing out his chest and pretending to be someone he was not. He was more than the sum of his secrets and sins when he was with her, and it was a liberating feeling he'd never thought he'd experience. With her, he could just be... himself. Speak his mind, tell his jokes, smile earnestly, and laugh genuinely, and Victoria accepted him just as he was. It was a kind of freedom he had never known before.

Perhaps, he'd been mistaken.

William walked along the long, dark corridor until he noticed an open door at the very end. He walked toward it and slipped inside, curiosity and a feeling of foreboding guiding him. There was something eerie about this room. He found a candle by the light of the moon peering inside the window and lit it, illuminating the room in a warm, golden glow.

Then he looked around and immediately regretted entering. He now knew what the eerie feeling was trying to warn him about.

The past.

William stood in the middle of the room, looking at the exquisite paintings. For a random observer, this gallery would seem like a treasure trove of beautiful art. For him, it was laced with pain.

His gaze was drawn to one dramatic Baroque work, its vivid colors and lavish details thrilling yet chilling. It depicted

a beautiful woman in a vibrant crimson gown, her bare legs exposed scandalously. In her hand, she grasped an ornate knife by the blade, fresh blood dripping from her cut palm, down her pale thigh.

He remembered that painting vividly. Even now, as he closed his eyes, he could still see the crimson-red spots on the woman's thighs. He had spent hours staring at those spots.

As he examined the lurid scene, the walls around him fell away, and he was back in that lavish, gilded room he'd called the netherplace as a child.

Other paintings had hung there too, but this one, in particular, always caught his eye, positioned across from the copper bathtub. He could see it through the steamy haze as he sat motionless in the bath, staring blankly ahead while someone pulled at his hair, washing it with pungent lavender soap.

He hated that smell.

It used to bring him peace eons ago. Not anymore.

And still, the painting flickered before his eyes.

He could recall overhearing a hoarse, low voice from behind the half-open door. *"I want that painting."*

He could recall spying two dark figures arguing outside the half-open door.

*"We've already given you eleven paintings," the second voice had said.*

*“This one will make an even dozen,” the first man answered. “Besides, the list of Shadows operatives is surely worth the price.”*

*“You came to us begging for money!”*

*The first man bowed, as if in solemnity, although there was a sneer in his voice. “And yet the information I am offering is worth far more than what you’ve given.”*

*The sounds of sloshing water drowned out the rest, cascading over his head and body. He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing to be anywhere else but there.*

William turned away in disgust, forcing the memories away.

“You shouldn’t be here.” A calm, female voice pulled William out of his dark thoughts. William had never been so grateful for the interruption.

He took a deep breath, collecting his wits, and turned toward Caroline, the Duchess of Kensington, with a smile. She stood on the threshold, draped in shadows.

In the dim light, Caroline’s posture and mannerisms somewhat resembled those of her late uncle, pulling William back into the unwanted memory. As the room shifted and morphed, Caroline’s facial features blended with those of her late uncle’s.

*“What will you do with the people on the list?” the first man, Caroline’s late uncle, had said, handing it over.*

*“That is none of your concern.”*

Caroline stepped forward into the glittering light of a glowing candle, and the unpleasant memory faded away once more.

William cleared his throat. “Yes, I am aware.”

Caroline walked farther into the room and looked around. “Searching for something else to steal?”

William let out a scoff. “I never stole from you, and I don’t intend to start now.”

Caroline pursed her lips. “You have a very narrow understanding of the word ‘steal’ if that’s what you truly think.”

William directed his charming smile her way. “I saved your husband.”

“You killed my uncle.”

William shoved his hands into his pockets. “Perhaps. But what about what he stole?”

Caroline frowned. “What did he steal?”

William shrugged. “A lot of things. From a lot of people. Besides, his death wasn’t entirely my fault. It was a result of his own actions, his own demons.”

Caroline continued her advance into the room, slowly perusing the paintings on the wall. “What about tricking Victoria into marrying you? Staging her abduction?”

Another shrug. “That *was* my fault. I admit to that.”

“William, I do not know you very well, and what I know I do not like very much, but you know who I am and what I am capable of—”

“Is that a threat?” William’s smile widened. He loved a challenge.

“No.” She pursed her lips. “But if you hurt Victoria, then it will become a threat.”

“Hmm...” He nodded. “Fair enough. I suppose I better go and find my wife lest you think I am not treating her well.”

“Mm... Good idea,” she agreed.

William walked past her and turned at the door. “You should get rid of these paintings, you know.”

At that, her features changed, her eyes taking on a curious look. “Wolverstone said the same thing.”

“Huh.” William shrugged his shoulders. “How is the old man?”

Caroline steeled her spine. “Dying.”

“Hm.” William pursed his lips. “Can’t say I shall mourn his death.”

There was a pause before the duchess spoke again. “Why?”

“Why won’t I mourn him?”

“Why do you hate him this much? Why impersonate him? Why put his legacy at risk?”

He let out a chuckle. “His legacy,” he said hoarsely and shook his head.

“Do you have a deeper motive? Or are you as self-serving as you want us to believe?”

William huffed a breath. “I am what you see. No tricks.”

“You are a trick, William,” she countered immediately. “Everything you are and everything you do is all made of tricks. Nothing about you is what it seems.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Then that should answer your question, shouldn’t it?”

She stared at him with what he assumed was her coldest and most calculating stare. William responded with a flirtatious wink. Then he whirled on his heel and walked away.



# Chapter 13



William was already in a foul mood when he encountered Lord Porter in the deserted corridor.

Well, damn. At least he had a chance to improve it.

Porter, noticing William from several feet away, turned to flee.

William tsked. “No, no, dear Porter. Stay. Let’s have a chat, shall we?”

Porter turned slowly, standing rigidly as William approached. “What do you want?”

“I thought I warned you to stay away from my wife,” William bit out.

Porter shrugged weakly. “I didn’t know she was your wife before. Otherwise, I never would have heeded your warnings.”

William raised a brow. Had Porter found some backbone? “Is that so?”

“Well, you threatened to expose my proclivities. But who will care that I enjoy a good whipping when your princess is the one holding the whip?”

In a flash, William unsheathed his sword-cane, the whistling air slicing the space before Porter even realized what was happening.

“I warned you about kissing her, did I not?” William asked in a deadly whisper. “I told you I would rip off your lips, or did you forget?”

Porter’s hand flew to cover his mouth, eyes wide with shock, scarlet blood seeping between his fingers from the deep gash across his lips.

“Now, imagine what I might do if you tried anything more,” William purred. He lowered the blade, letting it hover mere inches from Porter’s crotch.

With a choked cry, Porter staggered back, terror in his eyes. A sob tore from his mouth before he whirled around and ran away as if the hounds of hell were on his tail.

\* \* \*

Victoria sat in her favorite—her only—armchair the next morning, pretending to read while she watched her husband prepare breakfast.

She had to admit that she quite enjoyed watching him cook. She had never seen anyone cook before, at least not from start to finish. She’d never thought she would find the process fascinating, but fascinating it was.

His deft handling of breakfast ingredients was a mesmerizing spectacle that she couldn’t quite take her eyes off. With infinite gentleness, he lifted the eggs before breaking them swiftly and decisively. Then came the stirring and mixing of the ingredients in the pot, his actions sharp, his muscles flexing and rippling with every movement.

He had rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, exposing his tanned, muscled arms, sprinkled with golden wisps of hair for Victoria to see. It was as though he did it on purpose, to taunt her.

Watching him wield the knife was an exceptional sight. She knew—had witnessed it even—that he could inflict tremendous pain using that weapon if he wished. Yet instead, he employed it to prepare her a meal.

But it was the kneading, oh, the kneading that truly ensnared her senses.

He had often taken to baking bread in the morning, crafting a few buns for breakfast, and wrapping the rest away in the pantry. Watching him prepare the bread was one of her favorite activities, and today was no exception.

The raw strength he poured into the task, the liveness of his movements, the mastery with which he manipulated the dough, the skill with which he flipped it in his hands, and tugged on it with his strong fingers...

She swallowed. Each detail drew her in like an irresistible spell.

Why, oh, why did it feel so sensual to watch him in the kitchen?

The moment he stepped behind the work table, a subtle sensuality hung in the air. Her heart raced, and a familiar heat pooled within her, a desire stirred by the carnal artistry of his hands. Perhaps, she wished she were in the place of that raw

dough in his hands, and that was why every sinuous twist and pull seemed to ripple through her skin, evoking a deep, unspoken hunger.

And not the type of hunger that came with anticipating food.

It was both exciting and unnerving.

But the most unnerving part was that this time William didn't even acknowledge her during the process.

Usually, he was playful and flirtatious in the mornings since it was the most time they spent together all day. After breakfast, they'd go their separate ways, not reuniting again until late in the evening. But today, it was as if she wasn't in the kitchen at all. He barely glanced her way, spoke little, and his mood was cold and detached. Gone was the lighthearted banter and affection she had come to treasure in their brief time together each morning. Today, an aloof stranger occupied her husband's body, making her presence feel utterly inconsequential.

He skillfully flipped the dough into the bowl and covered it with a clean cloth before setting it aside. Then he washed his hands and started dressing the table for breakfast.

"Do you need help?" Victoria asked, lowering her book and putting it aside.

William threw her a strange glance. "And what exactly do you think you can help me with?"

Victoria tapped a finger against her lips. “I can carry plates,” she finally said excitedly.

William raised a brow but quickly passed her a couple of plates, and Victoria brought them to the table. She helped William set the dishes and settled into a chair.

William’s mood had turned morose since the middle of the ball last night. One moment, they’d been enjoying themselves, laughing and reveling at his stealing talents, and the next, his charm had vanished, leaving brooding silence and detachment.

It had happened after Kensington had pulled him aside. After that, William had disappeared for about half an hour, returning in foul spirits. At first, Victoria had wondered if perhaps the duke had managed to spoil William’s mood. But the longer this bitter air clung to her husband, the more she wondered if something else was afoot.

“I enjoyed the ball last night,” she finally said, unable to bear the silence any longer.

“Did you?” William set his fork aside and leaned back in his chair, studying her intently. “Which part did you enjoy the most?”

Victoria frowned. He was obviously alluding to something—she had no idea what—but his attitude left a lot to be desired. “I can tell you which part I enjoyed the least: your flirting with Lady Carlyle,” she snapped.

“Hmm...” he rumbled low in his throat, then slowly tore a piece of bread with his fingers, not taking his eyes off her. “So,

I am not allowed to flirt with anyone, yet you're free to kiss other lords on the balcony?"

Victoria's eyes widened, and her face burned from shame. "You... You saw that?" Since he had been gone from the ballroom for a long time after Kensington had pulled him aside, the fact that he could have witnessed the kiss hadn't even entered her mind. Besides, she'd spent the rest of the night trying to forget it ever happened.

"Yes," he bit out. "I did. And here I thought you said we were supposed to act like a couple very much in love."

Suddenly it all made sense. His abrupt change in demeanor, the silent hostility toward her. He thought that she had betrayed him when she had not.

Well, she had let another man kiss her... But she didn't mean to! She should have fought him harder, she knew. She shouldn't have entertained the idea of a kiss, giving Porter an opportunity to press his lips against hers. But she'd froze, and that made her feel guilty and confused.

What if she did kiss him on purpose? The deal she'd made with William didn't include not keeping lovers. She was free to do so, not that she would.

But his attitude, the way he sulked for the entire night instead of telling her what bothered him, instead of confronting her left her feeling quite cross. "Yes, we agreed to act as a couple very much in love. But I also have an image of an unpredictable and eccentric princess to uphold. Loyalty was never in the bargain."

William's fingers curled into fists. "Are you saying that you shall continue acting this... *unpredictably*? That you will continue kissing other men during our social outings?"

Victoria straightened her spine and lifted her chin for good measure. "I might," she said, just to be contrary.

"Oh." William bristled. "Then I shall do the same."

"You will kiss other men?" Victoria asked with a raised brow.

William simply shrugged. "Men, women, do you really care?"

Victoria gasped. "You wouldn't dare!"

William crossed his arms over his chest. "I would."

"You already have an advantage over me! You are free to leave this house in the middle of the night to go devil knows where. I never know where you go or what you do, while you know my every step. And now you want to continue flirting and start kissing women at an event where I am present? Then why did you even want me back?"

"I wanted you back as my wife. Completely back. Body and soul. But since you are renegotiating the terms of our agreement, then I shall have the freedom to do the same."

"Not kissing other men was never a part of our agreement!" she bristled.

"Well, it is now," he growled. "And if you think that your little rebellion won't go unpunished, then you have a surprise

or two waiting in the wings.”

“Punished?” Victoria cried. “You are going to punish me?”

William lowered his head and resumed eating with a great deal of show.

Victoria narrowed her eyes at him. “If this is how you’re going to act, then I shall spend as little time as I can inside this house.”

He snorted. “As if you’re ever home as it is.”

She gasped. “Then you won’t mind my leaving now, will you? Please, ask the driver to prepare the carriage and escort for me right now.”

William finished chewing in tension-filled silence before asking, “And where is it you wish to go?”

Victoria tossed her head. “The women’s shelter in St. Giles.”

He scoffed. “For a woman who dislikes peasants, you sure spend a lot of time with them.”

Victoria bit her lip, remembering the thoughtless remark she’d thrown his way a few days ago. She couldn’t believe he was still angry about that. Especially since she’d visited the women’s shelter a few times already and he had never made the same remark. “I didn’t mean to offend peasants by my statement the other morning. I cannot fault anyone for where or to which family they were born.”

“Except for me, apparently,” he grumbled under his breath.



“I do not fault you for the circumstances of your birth, you understand,” Victoria said emphatically, placing her butter knife on the plate with an audible clink. “What I do fault you for are the consequences of your actions.”

“What you must understand, my dear wife,” William said, not taking his eyes off his food as he fished around his plate with his fork, “is that my actions are a direct result of the circumstances of my birth.”

She scoffed. “I work with people at the shelter who are a lot less fortunate in their circumstances than you, and yet none of them have lowered themselves to theft and deceit.”

“How can you possibly know what I went through?” he asked as he looked up and met her eyes. His voice was still soft, dare she say, gentle, but she could clearly see an inexplicable fire raging in his gaze. Was that anger?

“You are a duke’s son! You inherited his money. He paid for your education. You skirt the fringes of high society because of who you are.”

His fingers flexed around the fork before he resumed chasing his food across the plate. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Those people in the shelter... they were born with nothing!” She slashed the air with her hand. “No money, no title, nothing! And they managed to get to where they are without trickery and blackmail.”

“Truly?” This time, he dropped his fork and leaned against the back of his chair, folding his arms over his chest. “And what do they have now? What have they gotten for their benevolent ways? They claw and scrape and work their arses off only to hide in squalor from men and women who used, abused, and tossed them aside. And now they get scraps of food from people above their station who got everything they have simply by the luck of the draw and not by merit. And unlike what you might believe, everything *I* got I had to work for. I had never got anything I didn’t put effort into. Even if that effort was to trick, steal, and cheat from the more fortunate but less deserving than I.”

Victoria took a few seconds to reel from shock. “Is that what you think of me?” she whispered. “That I am more fortunate but less deserving than you? Is that why you pursued me? Tricked me? To get what you think you deserve?”

He swallowed, closing himself off again. “One day you will realize that everything I did was not the selfish act of a criminal. Everything I did was for you. Even if you can’t see it yet.”

Victoria scoffed and stood, leaning her hands against the table. “And I hope that you will realize one day that there is no excuse for lying and tricking someone. Especially someone you claim to love.” She turned on her heel and dashed toward the bedroom.

She was not going to continue arguing with him, especially now when she knew how little he thought of her.

Besides, she needed to bathe and prepare for her outing. She had no time to waste on the selfish bastard who was deluded and thought he knew best.

How could she have ever lusted after him, the inconsiderate lout! How could she have ever thought she loved him?

And lastly, what devil had prompted her to marry him in the first place?

\* \* \*

### *Autumn 1741*

Victoria lay prone on the bed, looking at the clock every two minutes. She glanced at the windowsill; the candle was running out, and soon the room would be enveloped in complete darkness. The lonely handkerchief billowed in the wind outside, soaked in rain, but there was no sign of William.

At Victoria's urging, tonight he was supposed to formally ask her uncle's permission to court her. However, there was an air of hesitancy around him, his demeanor quiet, ever since she made the request.

Part of her worried he merely wanted to steal a few liberties, dally with her affections, and then disappear.

Yet he sounded so sincere speaking of a future with a loving wife. Aside from their clandestine meetings, he had conducted himself like a perfect gentleman, being respectful

and not presumptuous. He never stole more than a few kisses and made no empty vows.

Victoria couldn't imagine he would simply vanish without a word. And yet... doubts started creeping in. Had she been mistaken to trust him? Was he truly serious or just masquerading as an honorable suitor?

She prayed her faith in him wasn't misplaced. The thought of being so intimate then cast aside was too painful to bear. All she could do was hope her instincts about him were right and that soon his intentions would be proven true.

And then another worrying thought crept in. What if he had asked her uncle's permission to court her, only to be refused?

William had admitted to being the black sheep of his family. But surely Uncle Bastian wouldn't reject him for that. Her uncle wasn't exactly a favored son himself. He, Frau Elinor, and Victoria had always been the misfits, the scapegoats of the family.

A slight rap on the window startled her out of her thoughts.

*Slava Bogu!*

She jumped into a sitting position and glanced at the rain-soaked window. She couldn't see clearly due to the rain, but she didn't have to. Who else would be crazy enough to climb the wet trellis to a second-story window, especially in the pouring rain?

She opened the window, and William swiftly crawled inside.

As he straightened, he took her hands in his cold ones and looked into her eyes with a desperation she had never seen.

“He said no,” Victoria guessed immediately.

William swallowed and gave a sharp nod. “He said no.”

“But why?”

William smiled sadly. “He doesn’t think I deserve you. And he is right. I am disliked where you’re revered. I am unwelcome where you are loved. I shall never be a man worthy of your attention, even if I give you my whole heart.” He paused, shallow breaths leaving his mouth. “I am beneath you. And if your uncle won’t approve of our match, your sister won’t either, and then all your dreams are dashed.”

“You don’t know her.” Victoria shook her head, rejecting the thought.

His gaze was forlorn. “She doesn’t know me either.”

“She will love you,” Victoria said vehemently.

“You can’t know that.”

“Oh, yes, I do,” she said confidently. “Because I love you.”

He briefly closed his eyes. “Sometimes love is not enough.”

She squeezed his fingers. “It will be for us.”

He looked at her with a question in his eyes. “What are you saying?”

She straightened her spine. “Since Uncle refused your courtship, I propose we skip it altogether.”

“Skip the courtship?”

“Yes. And get married. Right away.”

William’s lips curled in a smile. “If you marry me, it won’t be easy.”

She waved a dismissive hand. He was a duke’s son, black sheep or not. He was a gentleman, a part of noble society, welcome or not. They didn’t need Englishmen’s approval. They would marry, go to Russia, and fulfill her and her sister’s dreams. “There is nothing we cannot overcome if we’re together.”

He raised her hands to his lips and held them there as he spoke. “I truly hope you mean that.”

“I do.” Victoria grinned. “As long as you agree to marry me.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist, picked her up, held her close to his body, and twirled.

Victoria laughed as she threw her arm around his neck, her gown getting soaked from his wet clothes. But she didn’t care.

He kissed her deeply, his tongue sweeping broad strokes inside her mouth. “I love you,” he whispered against her lips.

She grinned, her palm stroking his cheek. “I love you too.”

He covered her hand with his, leaning into her caress, staring deeply into her eyes as if looking into her soul. “I’ve

loved you since the moment I met you.”

“Truly?” she whispered.

“Truly. Seeing you, lying in the heaps of your skirts, your nose red and runny. Who wouldn’t have fallen in love with you right then and there?”

“Be serious.” She playfully swatted at his chest. “Was it love at first sight?”

“Hmm...” He frowned in thought, a deep rumble reverberating through his chest. “No, it wasn’t. It took me a full five minutes to fall in love with you.”

She chuckled as she looked deeply into his glittering blue eyes. “It took me four.”

“Liar.” He grinned before pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. “How would you like to get married?”

She chewed her lower lip, excited at the idea of marrying him. “Well, a big church wedding is not an option. What about a fleet marriage?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “No, I am not going to marry you in the debtor’s prison. But if you’re in a hurry, I shall arrange for a common license tomorrow.”

A giggle left her lips, and Victoria covered her mouth with her palm. “Does it happen so quickly?”

He shrugged. “It will for us.”

Victoria squirmed in glee. “I will be your wife tomorrow.”

He nodded and kissed her lips once more. “And when your uncle finds out?” There was a hint of worry in his eyes.

But her smile broadened, and she answered with every ounce of confidence she possessed, “I shall stand by your side. As your wife.”



# Chapter 14



When Victoria stepped inside the women's shelter, she immediately sensed a festive atmosphere. She couldn't quite pinpoint what was going on, but the house was bustling, with women running back and forth, their faces lit up with huge smiles.

Those smiles only widened when they noticed her and her escort—the carriage driver, Matthew, and the guards—entering through the door.

“Princess!” Maggie, the housekeeper of the shelter, cried from the staircase landing. “We were waiting for you. Please, come inside. And we've been waiting for you lads, too,” she added, gesturing to the men.

The first time Victoria had arrived with her new escort, the men had followed her inside just to check for safety and had spent the rest of the day inside the carriage. The second time, Maggie had invited them to stay for a meal, and ever since then, they had been spending most of their time in the kitchen, eating hearty meals and flirting with the house's inhabitants.

The men immediately bowed out and rushed into the kitchen, while Victoria followed Maggie into the main room.

That's when the surprise greeted her. All the women currently residing at the shelter stood in a line. Gertrude, the

woman who had stayed at the shelter the longest and acted as an assistant to Maggie most of the time, had two large sacks by her side.

“Ever since we heard of your wedding, we have been hard at work,” Maggie said. “Everyone here loves you, and we wanted to give you a gift.”

Victoria was so surprised she was momentarily speechless.

“We collected them into these sacks and prepared them for you!” Gertrude added.

Excited and deeply touched by the gesture, Victoria thanked everyone profusely.

“Do you want to look through them?” The women led her to the bed, and she opened one of the sacks, going through every gift they had given her. All the gifts were handmade with such care that Victoria felt tears gathering in the back of her eyes. She looked in awe at beautiful quilts, a gorgeous dressing gown with multiple layers of frills, bedsheets, and even curtains embroidered with beautiful patterns.

“You must have worked so hard!” Victoria said, recognizing the amount of labor that must have gone into these items.

“We wanted to show you our appreciation,” Maggie said. “You’ve spent so much time with us when you should have been spending this time with your new husband. Not only that, but ever since you stepped into this shelter, you’ve filled this house with hope. Even just that is a significant

accomplishment, not to mention all the new patrons you've involved. All of the items we've made for you are from silks and other materials the ladies donated during your ball! And we have quite a bit to spare."

"We wish to start selling things such as these!" Gertrude added. "To raise money for the upkeep of the shelter. We couldn't be more grateful. And we hoped we could give a little back."

"Thank you very much. You are all so kind, but it's my pleasure. I do this because I love it, because I want to make a change in people's lives, and helping you is an outlet for my soul. I do not need praise or gifts. And I am happy to be your first customer and pay for all this!"

"Oh, but making these things was our pleasure," Maggie said. "Take them as gifts. And if you like them and decide there's something more you need for yourself, your new home, or perhaps your husband, we shall happily accept your paying order."

Victoria looked at the quality gifts she'd acquired in awe. "I already know that I shall be ordering a lot more! And perhaps at the next ball, we can have a little auction!"

"Great idea, as usual!" Maggie chuckled, before noticing that a few children had toddled into the room, and chaos started to unfold around them. She turned toward the women. "Very well, I think it's best that you all move along now and take care of your usual business."

Gertrude timidly approached Victoria, her cheeks flushed. “Did um... Did Matthew come with you today?”

Victoria tried to conceal her surprise, but she was probably unsuccessful.

Had she missed Gertrude’s interest in her carriage driver? Matthew was a young man roughly the same age as William judging solely on his appearance. He was a good-looking man with a gentle spirit. What he was doing in William’s employ, Victoria had a difficult time understanding.

She did notice his eagerness to drive her to the women’s shelter. Was that eagerness based on the prospect of seeing Gertrude?

Victoria smiled. “Yes. He and the guards, John and Bryce, are in the kitchen.”

“Should I warm up a meal for them, Maggie?” Gertrude asked, fairly brimming with excitement.

“Yes, of course.” Maggie agreed, although her attention was already on other matters as she instructed women to clean something off the floor in another room.

“Maggie, can I speak with you?” Victoria asked as Gertrude rushed away. The idea that she had played with in her mind before was now fully formed and ready for execution.

“Of course, of course. Anything.”

“I’ve been thinking for a while now that I would like to do more to help you.”

“But you’re already doing so much.”

“Yes, but ever since Helen hired Abbey from this shelter to be her companion and maid, I was thinking of doing the same. And now that I run my own household”—she grimaced, as it wasn’t so much a household as a... towerhold?—“I have the opportunity to do so. I don’t need a live-in maid, but I need some help with cleaning and cooking, and once a week, I need a maid to help with dressing me and my hair for a social occasion.”

Maggie clapped her hands together. “Our maidens would be thrilled to work for you! Oh, this would be wonderful.”

“And perhaps it would inspire other ladies to hire women from this shelter. Of course, we would need to train them, but I don’t think it will be a problem.”

“A marvelous idea! Simply marvelous!” Maggie exclaimed. “Who would you like to employ? Do you have a person in mind?”

Victoria nodded. “I think I would like to take Gertrude. She is already acting as an assistant here at the shelter. I think it would do her well to venture out once in a while.” *And see Matthew on a more regular basis.*

“Oh, I shall tell her right away—”

Victoria halted Maggie with a gentle hand on her arm. “I would like to do it myself if you don’t mind.”

“Absolutely, she would love to hear from you directly.” Maggie immediately turned away. The shelter always had

things to do, and Maggie rarely sat in one place for long.

Invigorated by her new mission, Victoria went down to the kitchen. But instead of walking inside, she stood on the threshold, observing the women interacting with her driver and the guards. She didn't want to intrude. A flirtatious atmosphere was palpable, but it was Gertrude and Matthew who caught her attention. They were in deep conversation with each other. Gertrude, although a grown woman, acted like a young girl in love, giggling and chattering with avid enthusiasm. Matthew was just as engrossed in the conversation, so much so that neither of them noticed anything going on in the room around them, both sporting flushed cheeks and timid smiles.

Victoria smiled as she watched the young couple, remembering with fondness the feeling of absolute bliss that the new feeling of love brought.

*I shall talk to them later,* she decided and slowly backed out of the kitchen, giving the lovebirds some time to themselves.

Victoria returned home that day in a lovely mood. Matthew held the door for her as she entered, followed by two grooms who held her gifts in their arms. "Just set them down on the armchair by the hearth," she said as she walked toward the staircase only to stop in the center of the room. Something was different with the kitchen today. It seemed bare—barer than usual, if that was even possible. The grooms paused a few feet into the room, looking around in confusion. "Which chair

do you wish us to set the items on, Princess?” one of them asked timidly. Victoria turned around the room slowly, her mind refusing to comprehend the situation. And when it finally dawned on her what had happened, fury washed up her face.

“Just leave them on the floor,” she said with a tight smile and waited patiently for the men to exit the tower. When the door had closed after them, Victoria dashed up the stairs in hopes of finding her wretched husband in the bedroom. He was not there, but there was a faint whistle coming from the dressing room. For some reason, it made her even angrier. He dared to whistle happily in the dressing room, no doubt rejoicing in light of his little scheme. Victoria stormed inside, not bothering to knock since he did not deserve the courtesy and immediately yelled, “What did you do to my chair?”

It didn’t take her long to finally notice her husband. William was lying inside the copper tub, his torso and knees sticking out of the water, a sponge in his hand, paused in the act of gliding up his arm. His hair was slick with water, his lips still pursed mid-whistle. He blinked innocently. “It was in the way.”

Victoria gasped. His nonchalant answer just made her even angrier than before. “You threw it away because it was in the way? In the way of what, exactly?”

Still paused in the act of bathing, he narrowed his eyes as if thinking of something nefarious—as if he was ever not thinking about something nefarious—then nodded to himself

and continued washing, his hand rubbing his shoulder and up his neck. “In the way of our intimate life.”

“We have no intimate life!” Victoria cried. How could he be so unbothered by her distress? “And getting rid of the only piece of furniture I enjoyed in this damned house will make certain there will never be any intimacy between us.”

“Fine...” he said, not meeting her eyes but very concentrated on washing himself. “Then it’s the punishment I promised you for kissing Porter.”

“You... you knave!” Not finding anything else to say or do, Victoria whirled on her heels and stalked into the bedroom. She paused in the middle of the room, desperately trying to find anything she could do to ruffle her husband’s unbothered demeanor. Water sloshed in the dressing room, and then the sounds of wet footsteps against the bare floor warned her of her husband’s arrival. She turned toward him, only to see him standing in the doorway, water cascading down his naked form.

Victoria’s gaze roamed along his body, unsure where to rest her eyes. One place, in particular, drew her attention, but she tried her best to look anywhere but there.

She had been married to William for over two years. They’d courted for a few weeks before that, and they had been living together for the past two weeks. Yet, this was the first time she had ever seen him naked. And the view was... unsettling, to say the least.



If she'd ever thought him handsome, which she obviously had, now she was completely captivated by the raw, rugged perfection of his exposed physique.

She would have been lying if she said she had never imagined what he would look like naked, but what she saw before her defied all her expectations.

William's bronzed skin glowed like warm honey, his sinewy muscles rippling with each subtle movement, showcasing the strength beneath his flawless exterior. His bare chest was sculpted muscle and smooth skin dusted with fine golden hair. As he crossed his arms, his biceps flexing enticingly, it drew her eyes to his powerful shoulders and lean, muscular forearms.

His body told a tale of grueling physical labor, not only from the sheer strength he exuded but also from the scars and marks mapped across his skin. Pale scars crisscrossed his shoulders and arms, mingled with darker bruises and fresh scrapes. A ragged, knotted gash on his side spoke of a violent past. Barely visible, thin silver tracks of old wounds hinted at childhood horrors best forgotten. Yet, for all their hardened memories, the scars could not undermine the vital power of the man standing before her now.

Her gaze traveled down the ridges of his rippling abdominal muscles, begging to be traced by eager fingers. A trail of hair descended from his navel to his...

*Oh, my!*

Victoria hastily averted her eyes, unwilling to openly ogle the magnificent display of manhood, even as her pulse raced wildly and a fiery blush crept up her neck. She instead traced her gaze down his muscular legs, honed from years astride a horse.

Utterly mesmerized by this vision of flawless virility, Victoria's breath caught at the sight of masculine perfection laid bare before her. No mere statue could ever hope to capture the rugged splendor of the living, breathing work of art that was her husband.

“Are you done?”

Victoria's eyes flew to meet his, and she found his usual self-satisfied smirk on his lips. Mortified at being caught unabashedly observing him, Victoria tugged at her clothes in hopes of dispelling the heat that covered her body. She opened her mouth, but words failed her. Her throat had gone dry, rendered speechless by the knowing gleam in his eyes.

He leaned his shoulder against the doorjamb and crossed his long legs at the ankles, as one side of his mouth kicked up in a smile. “I can wait some more.”

“You...” Victoria fisted her hands at her side, angry at herself for being unable to take her eyes off him, angry at him for pointing it out, and angry at the entire situation. “You are shameless!”

His smile only widened.

“And unfair!” she cried, her mind finally returning to the problem at hand. “And cruel!”

A simple shrug was his answer.

“Do you have nothing to say for yourself? Did you haul yourself out of the bath to stand here and... and slosh water all over the floor of our bedchamber?”

“I am just giving you time to admire my manly physique.” Another shrug. “You, my dear, are the one who renegotiated the terms of our agreement yesterday. Since you are convinced you can go around kissing men on balconies, I decided that I can choose an appropriate punishment every time this happens. And since this is my house, I can set my own rules. Therefore no chair. You kissed a man and now you’ll have to live with the consequences of those actions.”

“The consequences being me sleeping on the floor? Or should I sleep in the bathtub?” She waved her hands toward the dressing room.

“Not at all,” he said with that infuriating calculating glint of his. “You are free to sleep by my side in my bed just like a spouse is supposed to.”

Victoria gasped. “I prefer the floor.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I know. You would rather sleep on the floor, or even outside, than share my bed. But as I said, my rules.”

She scoffed. “And why would I abide by your rules? What makes it palatable for me to do as you say? We have already

been on one outing, and my reputation is patched if not mended. I might as well go home.”

William scratched his jaw. “For all your talk about honor, it turns out I am the honorable one, doesn’t it? I won’t even mention our vows, for you did vow to forsake all others and stand beside me in sickness and health. However, we agreed that you’ll stay with me for three months. And for three months you shall stay.”

“And how will you make me stay?” She raised a brow in challenge.

He shrugged. “I have my ways. And I always get what I want.”

“Is that so?” She narrowed her eyes at him, her jaw clenched.

“Yes, it is so.” In contrast to Victoria, who was as tense as a bowstring, the knave looked utterly relaxed.

“Well, if you think I shall willingly share your bed, you are sadly mistaken.”

He pushed off the door frame and stepped fully into the bedroom. “What if I offer you another deal?”

Victoria backed away from him. “What can you possibly offer me?”

He pursed his lips in thought, and Victoria’s eyes drifted down his body once more.

*Oh, Boje!* His body was too enticing; she couldn't take her eyes off him. While he spoke, at least she had a refuge, the choice to concentrate on his words, but now that he was silent, her gaze couldn't help but wander again.

"I have an idea," he finally said. *Thank God!* She forced her gaze to meet his. "Let's say we share a bed... No, do not interrupt. We share a bed, and by share, I mean literally. Half is yours, and the other half is mine. I won't touch you, I won't attempt to touch you, won't even look your way unless you decide to speak to me. In which case, it can't be helped, I am afraid."

Most of Victoria's strength went into her resolve to stare him in the eyes instead of... elsewhere. But the little energy that she had left, she directed into thinking through his proposition. She had to admit it didn't sound half bad. Perhaps her back and neck wouldn't hurt as much anymore. Yes, it meant sleeping by William's side every night, but surely, she could manage that? As long as he didn't sleep naked...

"But..." he continued, and Victoria threw her hands up.

"I had a feeling there would be a catch. You always have an ulterior motive. You never do anything if you do not benefit from it."

He smiled impishly. "Oh, my dear wife, it seems that you're finally learning to appreciate my resourcefulness."

"That is not resourcefulness; that is..." She looked around the room in panic, her mind working tirelessly, searching for the right word. "Blackmail!"

He shrugged. “Whatever you want to call it.”

“What do you want?” Victoria asked on a weary breath.

William smiled then, his eyes glinting with mischief. “A goodnight kiss.”

“You’re mad,” she breathed, although her cheeks grew increasingly hot.

“Just one kiss before bed is all I ask.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Victoria turned away, wrapping her arms around herself, her hands stroked up and down her arms, tracing away the chills.

“Listen.” William stepped closer. She could feel his heat even from a distance. “Putting our arguments aside, I have thought quite a bit about our arrangement and I feel like we need change.”

“Why?” She turned back to him, surprised to see him closer than she’d anticipated.

“Because when two people strike a deal, each of them should be getting something out of it.”

“And?”

“You are getting back your reputable standing in society. And all I want is a chance to prove to you that our marriage can work.”

Victoria paused, her mind a jumble. “Forcing me to kiss you won’t help you in this endeavor.”

“I am not forcing,” he said with a shrug. “Negotiating.”

Victoria let out a chuckle. “I admire your insistence on arguing the meanings of words. You should write your own dictionary and sell it to rogues.”

To her surprise, he wasn’t offended in the least. He just laughed, his hand on his chest, a boyish grin on his lips. Damn, he was charming.

“One kiss?” Victoria asked, finally giving in.

“Just one.”

“A peck,” she clarified.

He raised his arms in a shrug. “If that’s what you wish.”

“That’s the amount of intimacy there will be between us for the rest of my stay here.”

“That’s it,” he conceded.

“And there will be no more renegotiating the terms.”

He nodded. “Agreed.”

“Fine.” She expelled a deep breath, tired of the back and forth, ready to finish this conversation and leave the proximity of her naked husband. “But can I have my chair back? It is my favorite reading spot, and since you got what you wanted, a huge renegotiation on my part, I think it is only fair I get something else in return.”

He grinned. “See? You’re learning already! Now, isn’t it a better arrangement for us?”

Victoria just shook her head. How in the world had they come to this? One minute they were arguing, and the next she

was agreeing to kiss him goodnight every night. He was indeed a master manipulator. “My chair?” she asked, not willing to relent on this one thing.

He smiled sheepishly. “It will be back tomorrow afternoon.”

Suspicion crept into her mind. “Back from where?”

He shrugged and turned away, striding back to the dressing room. “From the carpenter’s. As I was cleaning this morning, I stumbled into it, toppling it over, and accidentally broke its foot. I had to take it to the carpenter to replace the leg.”

Victoria’s eyes widened. He had never had any intention of getting rid of it. “You lied to me!” she accused his back.

He paused in the doorway, turned his head, and raised a finger. “I absolutely did not.”

“You took advantage of the situation to spin it in your favor!”

William gave her an odd look. “Darling, are you really that surprised?”

She grunted and turned away, feigning affront. “Unfortunately, I am not.” *And I am not even mad.*

\* \* \*

William had a raging erection by the time they stopped arguing. It wasn’t the first time it had happened either. Just talking to her was invigorating. The mere sight of her, or even the thought of her, set his body aflame. But when she argued



with him, fire glowing in her eyes and her rosy cheeks flushed with fervor, this was the closest he came to feeling her passion.

If he couldn't feel her ardor in their bed, at least he could feel it in her words. As long as she argued with him, he knew she cared.

William leaned his hips against the copper bath and took himself in hand.

God, how he wished it were her fingers encircling his cock, sliding up and down his length, slowly at first, then picking up the speed and stroking him in sharp, short jerks.

He could envision her clearly, kneeling between his knees, holding him in her silky-soft hands, looking up at him with her dark brown eyes. Gazing at him with a desire that left him breathless, just the way she used to look at him two years ago when they'd just met.

He closed his eyes and threw his head back.

In this vision of his, Victoria let down her jet-black hair and it cascaded down her shoulders in thick waves. She'd look up at him with a gaze that told him she saw him for exactly who he was. And she loved it.

Loved *him*.

When she looked at him, she could see straight into his heart. She could read all his desires and feel what he had felt for her ever since the moment he saw her on the ground, in a heap of her skirts, in the middle of the night two years ago.

This vision of her was something he had dreamed about for years. He imagined her taking him into her mouth with a gleam in her eyes, closing her lips around the tip of his cock.

*Oh, Victoria!*

He groaned and continued his rhythmic stroking, his hips moving, thrusting into his palm. Only in his mind's eye, it wasn't his hand, but her lovely mouth that he plunged into. And she enthusiastically took him in, her tongue circling his tip, her hands teasing his base, as she coquettishly glanced up at him.

In his vision, she knew exactly who he was: a bastard, a thief, a criminal. And she still loved and accepted him. She desired his body, and she ached for his soul, just as he ached for hers.

Oh, how he wanted to plunge his cock into her depths and fuck her hard until she cried his name. His name on her lips was one of the sweetest sounds he'd ever heard.

His body tensed, his hips quickening the rhythm until his seed spilled with the strength of his release.

William froze for a few long moments, still holding his erection, softer now, sticky with the evidence of his lust. He took a few deep breaths to calm his rioting heart.

He had dreamed of Victoria for so long. And now that she was finally so close, he felt that the need in his body could never be slaked. Not by his own hand, not by anyone else's.

Just hers.

He only hoped that having relieved his urges, sleeping in the same bed with her wouldn't be so painful.

# Chapter 15



**W**illiam had been wrong.

They hadn't even gotten to bed yet, but his entire body tensed in anticipation. Excitement was palpable in the air. William had stirred the coals, ensuring the hearth wouldn't go out in the middle of the night, when all he wanted to do was douse the fire. He wanted this room to be cold, so he had an excuse to be closer to Victoria, to envelop her in his arms, to warm her with his kisses.

But he had a feeling she wouldn't be happy about that. And even though he'd tricked her into marrying him, he'd bargained with her to make her live with him, to bestow her kisses upon him, one thing he would never do was trick her into giving her body to him.

She would have to do so on her own.

And a part of him thought—hoped—that that day wasn't far away. The way she stared at his naked form earlier, the way she couldn't take her eyes off of him, spoke volumes. Her mouth had slackened, her eyes had gone dark, and her breathing had been accelerated.

She was aroused. And since she had allowed him goodnight kisses rather easily, he assumed that she was warming up to the idea of more intimacy between them.

She hadn't been angry at him throughout the day either. She didn't try to renegotiate the terms or go back on her word. She just walked around the house, laying out little gifts she had received from the shelter. She even talked about bringing a maid into the house. Apparently, the carriage driver, Matthew, had taken a liking to one of the maidens at the shelter, and Victoria wanted to play matchmaker by making sure they spent more time together outside the shelter, even if it meant bringing this woman into their home.

William didn't mind. He trusted Victoria's judgment, and most of all, he enjoyed this newfound excitement of hers regarding rearranging their house and making it feel like home.

*Her* home. Their home.

And if this woman, Gertrude, would help her accomplish that, who was he to say no?

He wanted Victoria to feel at home. He wanted her to bring new bedsheets, to walk around the house hanging tapestries and spreading out quilts.

Something had changed within her, and he wondered if it had anything to do with their naked confrontation, or if perhaps there was something more. Some deeper change within her that he had overlooked. Either way, he hoped this change was permanent and positive.

In the meantime, he would work to convince her of their bond in his own way. They wanted each other. Despite everything uncertain between them, of this one thing he was

quite sure. And they had ten more weeks to explore that physical attraction. Starting tonight.

Victoria entered the bedchamber draped in an oversized, puffy dressing gown, her voluminous white nightgown peeking out from underneath. The hem of the robe whispered across the floor as she glided farther into the room. The sleeves of her nightgown billowed around her hands, hiding them up to the fingertips.

That ensemble on anyone else would extinguish all allure. But not Victoria.

She was ethereal in her beauty. She had a lovely face; he would never deny that. Her large, doe eyes framed perfectly by thick, dark lashes shone with vulnerability, her skin was silky, and her soft, plump, rosy lips begged to be kissed. Her long jet-black hair cascaded freely down her back in relaxed waves, a few unruly strands curling softly at her temples.

But when William looked at her, her sensuous features were not what he saw.

He saw the strength it took her as a child to leave her home country and the only family she knew, and still retain that childish innocence. He saw the delicate grace with which she treated everyone, no matter their station in life. He saw the love she had for her family, the fierceness with which she was ready to protect them. He saw a loyal friend, a kind and generous soul.

And yes, he saw a woman who was mad at him for all his lies, and yet who had seen something within him that called

straight to her soul.

He saw his love. His heart. His mate.

And every time William looked at her, something primal stirred inside him.

Then she covered her stomach with her arms, glancing at the bed in uncertainty, vulnerability shining in her dark eyes, and William felt like a brute for forcing her to share a bed with him.

Determined to make the transition as comfortable as possible for her, he turned away. “You can pick a side of the bed you want to sleep on and climb under the covers. I shall join you after dousing the candles.”

There was a brief pause before Victoria inhaled a deep breath. “Very well.”

The sound of rustling fabric alerted him that she’d shed her dressing gown, then the mattress dipped with a slight creak, and then more rustling, no doubt Victoria covering herself up with the sheets. She cleared her throat. “All done.”

William slowly doused the candles, then lifted his shirt over his head, folded it, and put it away. He briefly covered the band of his breeches with his palm, his mind whirling.

He always slept naked. But that would make Victoria even more uncomfortable. It was one thing to embarrass her by getting out of the tub in the heat of the argument. It was another thing spending an entire night next to her stark naked.

So, he removed his hand and climbed beside Victoria.

She looked at him as he did so, curiosity evident on her face.

“Is anything amiss?” he asked, turning his head toward her.

She lay beside him, covered up to her jaw with a sheet. “You don’t wear a nightshirt to bed?”

William cleared his throat. “I don’t possess a nightshirt. Usually, I do not even wear breeches to bed. I find the rubbing of the fabric against the sheets quite uncomfortable. But I didn’t think you’d appreciate me being completely nude.”

“Thank you,” she said after a brief pause.

“You’re welcome.”

“Would you like me to get you a nightshirt?” she asked after another charged lull in the conversation.

He turned on his side, facing her. “Get me a nightshirt? As a gift?”

She shrugged. “If you wish. A few ladies in the shelter took to sewing. And while they are not as adept with a needle and thread as to sew evening wear yet, I am certain they can manage a nightshirt. They sewed my dressing gown for me.” A delicate hand peeked out from the covers as she said that, pointing in the direction of the chair by the bed where she’d draped her dressing gown. “I am certain it would be more comfortable than wearing breeches. And um...” She swallowed. “It would keep your chest covered.”

William let out a bark of laughter. “Why do you want me to cover my chest?”



Victoria pursed her lips. “It’s... unseemly. No, not your chest,” she hastened to add at his raised brow. “The fact that you’re bare-chested in the same bed as me is unseemly.”

“You mean arousing,” he countered. And the look of light irritation she gave him made him laugh again. “Very well,” he said with a soft smile. “Get me a nightshirt. Now, I believe you owe me a kiss.”

“Very well.” Victoria shifted to lie a little closer, stretched her neck, tilted her face toward him, and closed her eyes.

William chuckled. “No, no, no.”

She opened her eyes and frowned. “What?”

He shook his head and tsked. “You are the one who is going to kiss me, not the other way around.”

“Why is that?” Her voice came out strangely squeaky.

William shrugged. “That’s the deal. A kiss from you to me. Not the other way around.”

She furrowed her brows. “You are saying that I am going to be the one to kiss you every night?”

He nodded. “Is that an issue?”

She expelled a breath. “I suppose not.”

“Since you kissed Porter it’s only fair—”

“I did not kiss him!” she cried, before clamping her lips shut, her brows furrowed. “He kissed me. And if you must know, I did not enjoy it at all.”

William's lips melted into a smile. Her words were a balm to his bruised soul that he did not know he needed. "You did not?"

She shrugged. "Not in the least."

"Glad to hear that."

"And I was not going to let him kiss me again," she continued. "So, you don't need to worry about that."

William snorted. "I wasn't worried. In fact—" He paused, debating whether he needed to say that Porter was taken care of, and decided against it.

"In fact, what?" Her brows were furrowed.

"In fact," William said, "I don't want to talk about him anymore. I would rather we got to the kiss."

Victoria let out a breath. "Of course."

William shifted a little closer as Victoria chewed her lower lip. She was so adorably nervous, William couldn't help but smile.

"Are you going to look at me the entire time?"

He chuckled. "You don't want me to look at you?"

"Yes, I would prefer it if you closed your eyes."

"As you wish, my darling." William closed his eyes and held his breath, waiting for the kiss.

There was a long pause, and William wondered if she'd ever comply. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the

bed dipped, and she moved closer. Another eternity later, her warm breath caressed his cheek.

And then there it was. A light, warm peck against his lips. A soft press of her lips against his. A pause. A sweet smacking sound before she disengaged her lips.

A small ball of warmth unfurled inside William's stomach and slowly spread wider. A tickle low in his belly and the small of his back preceded the pooling of the blood to his sensitive male organ.

William opened his eyes and stared right at Victoria. She hadn't moved away yet. Her face was only inches away from his as she stared right back.

His cock stirred and pressed against his breeches, and he was suddenly very excited about the idea of a nightshirt that wouldn't squash his manhood every time he got hard, which he expected to be quite often if he were to sleep with Victoria every night. If he was to endure her sensual kisses every night.

She licked her lips, and his gaze dropped to her mouth.

It took everything within him not to put his hands on her shoulders and drag her toward him. Not to press his lips against hers and drink from her mouth like a thirsty beast after years without water.

It took everything within him to simply whisper, "Good night," and turn away.

Three long beats of silence followed, and Victoria finally whispered back, "Good night."

The bed dipped and creaked under her delicate weight as she turned away from him as well, and William expelled a breath.

Pressing the back of his fingers to his lips, he allowed himself to revel in the memory of her lips pressed against his.

This was the first kiss she had willingly bestowed on him in years. And the warm feeling she brought with it? He would cherish it until tomorrow. Until they could do it again.

\* \* \*

That little kiss haunted Victoria the entire night and late into the afternoon of the next day.

It was a brief peck. A press of her lips against his for less than three seconds, she was certain, although it had felt like an eternity. And she hadn't wanted to stop. Her heart had raced wildly in her chest, and her fingers had itched to grab him by the neck and pull him closer, while her spine arched instinctively, seeking more contact.

She had to force herself to break the kiss and lay there in a stupor, unable to move away, too stubborn to move forward. What in the devil was she supposed to do? How was she supposed to keep kissing him every night and then lie there next to him until morning?

This was an exquisite torture of her own making. Yes, her own. Because she could have said no. She could have resisted. She could have laughed in his face. But she didn't. Because

the idea of experiencing his kisses again was way too tempting.

Sure, she could have lied to herself, telling herself that the reason she agreed to the kisses was because he had manipulated her into it. Because he had muddled her mind with his games, his tricks, because she didn't know up from down as he confused her with his naked form.

But the quickening of her heart and the warmth low in her belly didn't lie. She wanted to kiss him. The same way she didn't want to stop kissing him the night before. The same way that she wished she could wrap her body around him and let him do anything he wanted to do to her and more.

Thankfully, William had left their home for whatever business he had, leaving her to her own devices for most of the day. If he were at home, she didn't know how she would deal with her overwhelming feelings. Perhaps she would lose control over her actions and kiss him again.

Oh, God, she was an idiot. It had only been a bit more than a fortnight! Sixteen days, and the walls of ice she'd built around her heart were already crumbling. What would happen in two months? How was she to resist his charm and her own urges for this long? She needed help. She needed lots and lots of help.

As the carriage pulled up to the door at the designated hour, she decided she would seek solace in her family. She climbed into the carriage, opened the little window that

separated her and Matthew, as she always did during long drives, and directed him to drive her to the Roth townhouse.

He nodded, and they started the journey.

She sat in silence for a while, sifting through her thoughts, but then turned to Matthew. “Matthew, how long have you worked for William?”

Matthew turned his head slightly, acknowledging that he had heard her words over the noise of the carriage and the sound of hoofbeats.

“Since forever, Your Highness.”

“Do you know where he goes when he leaves for business every day?”

He shrugged. “I couldn’t say.”

“You couldn’t say, or you don’t know?”

“He does not tell me where he goes, Your Highness.”

Victoria smoothed her skirts. His servants, although very small in number, were extremely devoted to him. And although Matthew had taken a liking to her, as had the other grooms, she had a sneaking suspicion that they would not betray him even for her.

She decided to change the subject. “I spoke to William, and we agreed to start inviting Gertrude to our house. I would love to have her as my companion.”

Matthew turned his head toward her, and she could see a smile on his lips. He cleared his throat. “Would you like me to

drive her to and from the house?”

“Yes, that would be a perfect arrangement.”

Matthew turned back to the road, his shoulders loosening, and he looked a lot more relaxed than before.

Victoria smiled. Even if she couldn't fix her love life, at least she could do it for someone else.

A few minutes later, they had stopped in front of the Roth townhouse. A groom helped her down from the carriage, and she was greeted by her uncle's butler, who welcomed her with a warm smile.

Victoria smiled back as she ascended the steps toward the house. “And how are you feeling today, Mr. Brimmings?”

“Lovely to see you, Princess Victoria.”

“Is Lavinia home?”

“Yes, she is. She is in the parlor.” He started to turn, ready to escort Victoria, but she stopped him with a gentle touch to his shoulder. “No need to announce me. I know the way.”

She was already rushing down the hall when she heard Mr. Brimming's weak protest. “She is entertaining visitors.”

It didn't matter. Whoever she was entertaining certainly wouldn't mind the interruption. If they did, Victoria could always blame her impetuous nature.

She reached the door and listened to the sounds of merriment coming from within. It seemed like Lavinia was having a great deal of fun.

Curious to see what was going on, Victoria pulled the door open and walked inside.

Victoria's smile died on her lips at the picture before her. Lavinia and Frau Elinor were laughing merrily, holding onto their stomachs, while sitting across from them was none other than her husband!

"Victoria!" Lavinia exclaimed as she noticed Victoria's entrance. Her eyes grew wide, a guilty look on her face.

"A lovely surprise, *Kindchen!*" Frau Elinor said enthusiastically.

William turned slowly toward her and stood. "My dear wife," he said with a bow.

"What are you doing here?" Victoria addressed her husband.

"I had... um... some documents to bring to Roth, and your dear cousin-in-law invited me for a cup of tea. I couldn't refuse, not to such enchanting company, surely," he said in his usual charming way.

Victoria directed her seething gaze toward Lavinia, who uncomfortably folded her skirts.

"But I should go," William added solemnly. "I have already overstayed my welcome, I am sure." Then he turned toward the seated ladies. "Lady Roth, Frau Elinor, a pleasure."

"Oh, but you didn't finish the story about the Duke of Maine's body," Frau Elinor protested.



Victoria folded her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow.

William pursed his lips. “I was telling them about the grave-robbing incident that led to my arrest in France. So, it’s about the Duke of Maine’s dead body, not—” He faltered as Victoria’s look turned even more disapproving. “Never mind. It is a long story, one I shall continue telling some other time.”

He bowed low and walked toward the door, only to pause right beside Victoria, sending shivers dancing all over her body. He sketched a shallow bow and walked out of the room.

## Chapter 16



**T**he moment the door closed, Victoria rounded on Lavinia and Frau Elinor. “You invited him for tea?”

Lavinia grimaced. “He came to see Sebastian, but he is not home. What was I to do, turn him away?”

“Yes!” Victoria cried. “That’s exactly what you were supposed to do.”

“That’s rude.”

“It is not rude if the person you’re being rude to has been rude to you in the past.”

Lavinia and Frau Elinor exchanged confused glances. “Are you certain you are mad at us or is there’s something more?” Lavinia asked.

“Come, *Kindchen*. Have some tea,” Frau Elinor soothed.

Victoria took a deep breath and settled in the chair her husband had recently vacated. “I don’t understand why you are so nice to him,” she grumbled.

“Well,” Lavinia said hesitantly as she poured Victoria tea. “He is a part of the family now.”

“He is not!”

“Yes, he is. He is my cousin-in-law... in-law...” Lavinia grimaced before passing the cup of tea to Victoria.

“Thank you,” Victoria said and placed the tea in front of her. “And yes, he is my husband, but only because he lied to me. And he lied to you, too. For God’s sake, Lavinia, he blackmailed you!”

Lavinia folded her lips in a pout and looked down at her hands. “He apologized.”

“He apologized?” Victoria was too flabbergasted to even comprehend what surprised her more: the fact that he apologized to Lavinia when he had never apologized to her or the fact that an apology was enough for Lavinia to forgive him.

“And it wasn’t his intention to cause me stress,” Lavinia added. “Besides, it all turned out well. Without that incident, I wouldn’t have married Bastian. And for that, I can only be grateful.”

“He stabbed your husband!” Victoria cried out of desperation.

“He did.” Lavinia calmly stirred her tea. “But he stabbed him in a place that he knew wouldn’t do permanent damage, and he was right.”

“Lavinia! He is a thief! He was telling you the story of how he robbed a grave!”

Lavinia licked her lips. “We’ve all done things we are not proud of at one point...”

“Are you seriously defending him?” Victoria breathed.

“No,” Lavinia said as she set a spoon aside and finally fully faced her. “And I am on your side, I promise. But he is your husband. And since you are living with him, it only makes sense to make peace. He is a part of my family now, too.”

“He lied his way into our family.”

“Only because he loves you so.”

Victoria raised her hand, unwilling to argue with Lavinia anymore, and turned to Frau Elinor, who had been peacefully sipping tea this entire time. “And you! You agree with her?”

Frau Elinor shrugged. “The fact that he is a part of this family is impossible to argue, *Kindchen*. You live with him.”

“But you hate him!” Victoria whispered furiously. “You yelled at him. You cursed him when he showed up on our doorstep.”

Frau Elinor frowned. “Yes, and I did all those things because he hurt you. I only hate him because you do, dear. I barely know the man.”

“And if you did know him better, could you approve of him?” Victoria asked in shock. “After everything you know he’s done?”

Frau Elinor expelled a deep breath. “Do you not think that I don’t blame myself for the predicament you’re in? You loved him once, did you not? You came to me, telling the tales of how wonderful he was and how in love you were. I was the one who encouraged you to marry him.”

Now it was Lavinia's turn to look flabbergasted. "You did?"

Frau Elinor shrugged the question off. "I didn't know he was a bastard, I didn't know anything about him. All I knew was that Victoria was so clearly and deliriously in love."

Victoria wrinkled her nose at such a recounting of events. Frau Elinor wasn't wrong. She had been deliriously in love with him. And when Uncle Bastian refused his plea to court her, Victoria went to her aunt in tears. She had been determined to marry him already. But her aunt's reassurances were what helped her to go through with it.

She shook her head. "That is not the point. The point is that he is very charming, indeed. And seeing you being charmed by him just made me question whether you can keep a level head when it comes to dealing with issues about him. I am living with him now, and I need advice from you, the women I most admire. But I am doubting your objectivity now. Are you going to take his side over mine?"

"Of course, we are on your side, darling!" Lavinia reached out and covered Victoria's hand. "And as we have said, we are only civil to him for you..." There was a pause and the women exchanged guilty glances. "For the most part."

Victoria wrenched her hand away and covered her face. "Oh, that rogue is too charming. Not even you can resist him."

"Do not be ridiculous, *Kindchen*." Frau Elinor patted a place beside her on the settee. "Come. Tell us what is wrong."

Victoria moved to sit on the settee between her great-aunt and cousin-in-law. “That is the problem,” she said emphatically. “He is too charming. And I have to withstand ten more weeks of this.”

Lavinia wrinkled her nose. “Are you sure you want to withstand it and not... you know... enjoy it?”

*Ugh!* Victoria groaned again. “Lavinia!”

“What?”

“He has locked me up in a tower with two rooms and no servants. He doesn’t allow me to leave the tower without his permission, yet he gallivants about town doing God knows what. Then he comes home and demands where I sleep and what I do when I am around him. And yet, his blasted charm lets him get away with it every single time. I cannot fight him. When I do, he still wins. He is a master manipulator and I am supposed to enjoy it?”

“Have you asked him why he is doing what he’s doing?” Frau Elinor asked.

“Yes, about a thousand times.”

“And why does he say he does it?”

“Because I am his wife, and he wants to keep me close.”

Lavinia took a sip of tea, her eyes narrowed in thought. “And why does he want that?”

Victoria took a deep breath. “That is the ultimate question, is it not?”

Lavinia set her cup down and turned toward Victoria fully. “Don’t you want to find out?”

“Of course, I do. But who is to say that anything he says is even true?”

“*Kindchen.*” Frau Elinor patted Victoria’s knee. “If you want to know how a man feels, you do not ask him a direct question. No, no. You watch his actions.”

Victoria let out a chuckle. “Well, his actions are not speaking in his favor.”

“Not the actions of the past,” Lavinia intervened. “The actions of today. And for that to happen, you need to actually communicate with him. You’re living with him. You’ve been given an opportunity to get to know him better than you ever have. And will you forgo this opportunity simply because you’re mad at him? Because you’re holding on to the past? Yes, he’s made mistakes, and so have you. But you have grown up during the last two years; you are practically a different person. Hear him out. Learn something new about his intentions perhaps.”

“He’s made mistakes? He has made every mistake under the sun. Lying, blackmailing, killing, threatening, tricking, stealing, and apparently, even graverobbing! Why should I forgive him?”

“You shouldn’t,” Lavinia said decisively. “You shouldn’t just forgive him. But you should try to understand him. I know you’re frustrated with him. I know what he did—everything he did—is wrong. And he went about your relationship wrong,

too. He lied and tricked you. I don't know what has been happening between you in the past two weeks or what he has done since you reconnected but try to understand it from his side. All he ever did throughout his life was lie and steal. That is all he knows. He was born to a duke but was never given the opportunity to live a noble life. His brother was the heir, while he was no one. He had to steal to give himself the lifestyle he thought he deserved. In the same way, he tricked you into marrying him because he thought he would never have you otherwise.”

Victoria frowned in thought. He had said the same thing himself. He never thought he deserved her, so he got her the only way he knew how. Because even though she loved him, if she had known the truth about his origins, she probably would not have married him.

And that was the core of the issue, was it not? It was why she was angry with him. She'd had this ridiculous dream of marrying a titled man and reuniting with her sister, ruling Russia by her side.

But so many things had changed since then, yet the frost between Victoria and William had never melted.

And then other doubts started plaguing her mind. If he'd lied about one thing, who was to say he hadn't lied about everything else? Had he even truly loved her? Or did he want her for other selfish reasons?

“He never had a real family,” Lavinia continued. “No one set an example of how to win women over, how to treat them



in a marriage. He does not know what communication, trust, and support are. Of course, he thinks that stealing is the only answer.”

“Who within our friends’ group has a real family?” Victoria countered. “Surely not you. The way your father treated you and your stepmother, it is a wonder you trust any man at all. And what about me? My mother wrenched me from my father’s side just to hurt him. Then she happily left me to my own devices. My father took me away from the only home I knew, and I was dumped with the nearest family who would have me! Until I was eleven years old, my family was my sister, who was only two years older than me. What was I supposed to learn from her? Yet, I have never stolen. Neither have you, as far as I know.”

Lavinia snorted. “I’ve made my fair share of mistakes. You of all people know that. And you’ve had a pair of exemplary people to look up to since you were twelve. Sebastian and Frau Elinor are the best people I know. Even following their example, you still have made your mistakes as well. You married William in secret, did you not? However, whatever mistakes you made, you had your family’s support and their love to fall back on, and William never had that.”

Victoria frowned. She was so focused on her own pain and distrust that she had never stopped to think about William’s. How could she? He always seemed too confident, too arrogant, too charming, and self-assured. He always got what he wanted. Was he hiding pain beneath his haughty exterior?

She remembered looking at his naked form. He had a perfect body, one that any man would be jealous to have, and any woman would be happy to have in her bed. But what had it taken for him to get this way? What scars on his body had contributed to his current state? Did those scars ever cut too deep?"

She let out a deep breath. "So, what do you suggest I do?"

Lavinia shrugged. "Stop arguing with him. Stop fighting him. You won't get anything from him by being confrontational or by trying to avoid him. Talk to him. Calmly. Get to know him all over again. Even before your rift, you barely knew him. You fell in love with his charm and wit, but that was never enough to make a marriage work. But my question for you is this... Once those three months lapse, if you continue on the same trajectory you are moving in today, will there be anything you regret?"

Victoria looked down at her hands. The answer to that question was as simple as it was complicated. Because if she continued living with him and avoiding him, once free, she would regret it all.

She would regret not playing brag with him, she would regret sitting in her armchair and watching him make her breakfast without offering to lend a hand, she would regret not reading her favorite passages from her books out loud to him. She would regret not wrapping her arms around him while they slept, not burrowing her nose into the crook of his

shoulder and inhaling his dear scent... not kissing him. Not letting him kiss her back.

She would regret it all.

Yet if she did all those things and let herself be free with him, she might also have regrets. Especially if he deceived her again.

She didn't trust him, not one bit.

She wanted to but couldn't let herself.

Remembering the piercing hurt he caused, the literal ache in her chest when she had uncovered his deceit was too painful. It had taken her two years to overcome that heartache. Two blasted years.

Now he had slid back into her life.

If she let her guard down and he betrayed her again, how long would it take to recover this time?

Letting him in was a risk. But keeping him out might leave the deepest regrets. She was torn, longing to trust but needing to protect her heart.

“I know it might sound as though I am pushing you toward him, or that I am encouraging you to forgive him. I assure you, I am not. Believe me. He stabbed my husband!” Lavinia let out a chuckle. “But I remember how in love you were with him when you just met? You had stars in your eyes when you talked about him. I saw how happy and content you were when you got married. And I saw how heartbroken you were all this time you were apart. I want you to give him a chance to

make it right, not for his sake, but for yours. And when those three months elapse, at least you won't have regrets and what-ifs. At least you'll know you've given your best chance. Do not just forgive him. Because you'll make him believe that what he did has no consequences. But do not just throw this chance away either."

Victoria looked to Frau Elinor for help.

"If you want me to tell you what to do, then you will come away disappointed," she said. "*Kindchen*, I took you off your father's arms precisely so you could make your own decisions. As a princess, you were bound to be married off for some grand political purpose. I took you in to spare you a worse fate. To spare you a fate like your father's, who married thrice and was thrice miserable. I wanted to spare you a fate like all my siblings, who went mad from loneliness, drunk on power, and were all unhappy in love. I will not push you into your husband's arms or out of them. I trusted you when you married him, and I shall trust you in your next endeavors. I will continue supporting you no matter what decision you make. You have a chance to live your life. Take it. Whether it means weathering these three months and divorcing your lout of a husband or sticking with him for the rest of your life. But whatever decision you make, just know that I shall be ready to support you."

\* \* \*

Victoria came back to an empty home. William was going out more and more often. She wondered if it was because she was

never around and he was tired of waiting around for her, or if, perhaps, some mysterious business required most of his time and attention.

She wanted to know where he went when he was gone. She wanted to know what he did all day and even some nights. She wanted him to share his woes with her. And she didn't know why she cared so blasted much!

She wished she didn't.

But the words of Lavinia and Frau Elinor invaded her mind. What if she was holding on to her anger for nothing? What if she talked to him and got to know him? If she truly understood him, would she revise her opinions on his betrayal?

And most importantly, what if the months went by and she was still as unsure as she felt today?

But whatever questions she wanted to ask William would remain unanswered, because as the night came, he was still nowhere to be found.

Victoria washed and dressed herself for bed, looking out the window every so often, waiting to hear the key turn in their iron door.

What if he got caught by one of his numerous enemies? What if he died right now while she was contemplating ever forgiving him? What would she feel then?

She tried to cast the intrusive thoughts away. William was as wily and resourceful as they came. Nothing could ever

happen to him.

As if in confirmation of her words, the door to their residence opened and heavy footsteps heralded his approach.

Victoria jumped into bed and hid under the covers. For some inexplicable reason, she didn't want him to think that she'd waited for him this entire time, although she'd done exactly that.

And even though she wanted nothing else than to talk to him, to ask him where he'd been, instead, she pretended to be asleep.

William stepped into the room and paused, his heavy breathing the only indication of his presence. After a few brief moments, he walked past the bed and locked himself in the dressing room.

A few more moments passed, and Victoria already felt the irresistible pull of sleep, when William climbed into bed beside her.

Victoria shifted to her side and opened her eyes.

"Oh, good." William smiled as he looked at her. "I was afraid I missed my kiss."

"You almost did," she chided, feeling foolishly angry at him because of that fact. She didn't even *want* to kiss him!

"As long as I didn't..." He shifted closer, his large body rocking the bed with his movements.

Victoria wanted to ask him where he had been this entire time. She wanted to argue that it wasn't fair for him to leave her all alone for half the night and then climb into bed with her and demand the kiss as if that was his right.

But a deal was a deal.

And instead of doing any of the above, she leaned in and pressed her lips against his. At that moment, all her anger and resentment fell away and she was finally at peace.

\* \* \*

*A tiny spot of light flickered in the oppressive darkness.*

*It grew bigger and bigger and bigger still until it turned into a small window. As the wind whistled behind the wall, branches covered the window, throwing dancing shadows across the room.*

*William stared at the inky wall, fingers clawing at the damp stones. His shoulders burned, his knees buckling under the weight upon them.*

*"Hurry, Neville," William whispered urgently as his friend scrambled through the window above.*

*"I can't reach!" Neville cried, though somehow, he was suddenly on the other side. "Now you, come on!"*

*William backed up, then sprinted at the wall, leaping up to grab the windowsill. He scrambled for purchase, ribs scraping the rough stone.*

*“Hold on!” Neville cried, grasping William’s wrists as he tried to squeeze through the narrow window, perilously high on the wall.*

*William was drained, using his last dregs of strength to scale the sheer surface. Now his grip faltered, slippery with sweat.*

*Neville clutched his forearms desperately, trying to haul him up, but the boy was too small, too frail.*

*William’s legs kicked in the air as he struggled for a foothold. Suddenly a viselike hand seized his ankle.*

William sat up in bed, his breaths shallow, covered in cold sweat. He immediately glanced up at the reassuring window by his bed. Only it wasn’t reassuring this time. This time it was the reason for the nightmare.

He scrubbed his face with his hand, trying to regulate his breathing.

“William?”

He turned sharply at the gentle call of his name. Victoria reared back at his violent reaction before raising her hands in a calming gesture. “You had a nightmare,” she said, her voice hoarse from sleep.

William nodded and let out a deep breath. “I suppose I did.”

They both sat in silence for the next few moments, until William lay back down. Victoria still sat by his side, her features thoughtful. “Who is Neville?” she finally asked.



He didn't realize he'd screamed his name out loud.

William shrugged. "A friend."

Victoria frowned. "I thought you said you don't have any friends."

"I don't." William nodded and turned away.

It took Victoria a couple of moments before she settled back under the covers. But instead of turning away from him like she usually did, she sidled closer to him until she plastered herself to his back, her arms and legs wrapping around his body.

William turned his head toward her. "What are you doing?"

She let out a small chuckle, her warm breath hitting against his bare back. "When I was little, I used to have nightmares that my father would come and take me away from my sister. Because of that, although I had my own room, I usually slept by my sister's side."

William's heart ached for the little girl who was afraid to lose her sister, and it ached even more for the grown woman who had.

She tightened her arms around him. "My sister would hug me just like this, and then I wouldn't have nightmares anymore."

William reached up and covered her hand with his. The idea that this tiny little woman could protect him from the demons of his past should have been laughable. But as he lay

there, her warmth enveloping his entire being, he believed she could.

# Chapter 17



*Twenty four days before the execution...*

**T**he next few nights were both torture and bliss.

Sleeping next to Victoria, inhaling her scent and hearing her soft breaths, was something William had dreamed of for over two years. But having her so close and not being able to touch her was worse than anything he had endured in the past... Well, perhaps not everything. But he would give anything to be able to hold her close to him again.

Ever since they made the deal to share the bed, Victoria had been spending less and less time on outings and more time at home. But in a weird twist of fate, William had barely any time to do the same. A few issues needed his immediate attention.

First were the whispers going around about his involvement with recent murders. The aristocratic deaths had gained much attention, and the news about every little detail spread like wildfire. Somehow, it came to be known that every man who had passed away was blackmailed at one point or another by William. This wasn't a surprise at all.

William had blackmailed half the town, so any combination of deaths would reveal the same thing. But the more disturbing part was that all of those deaths were also

members of the Brotherhood of the Crimson Fist, the society responsible for all his childhood horrors.

The only other suspect was the proprietress of the House of Pain and Pleasure, and she had disappeared without a trace together with Ford Gunning. That meant only one suspect remained, and that was William.

If convicted of the deaths, William would be hanged by the rope.

William was not about to let that happen, which meant he had a lot of things to do. He planned to leave London as soon as his time with Victoria elapsed. Whether she came with him or not remained to be seen, but even before returning to England, he had prepared a lovely abode for them in France. It was a much lovelier place than this tower, but he wasn't going to tell that to Victoria. If she were to come with him, he didn't want it to be for the promise of gilded gates and glittering mansions. He wanted her to come with him for him...

And then there was another issue involving the people who depended on him and everything he could do for them while he was in London. Suffice it to say that he had spent very little time inside the tower lately, but it had made climbing into bed with Victoria and waiting for her kiss all the sweeter. Another thing that had changed since their bedroom deal, and it had nothing to do with William, but Victoria.

Every time William came home, he found something new around the house, whether it was new curtains or new bedcovers. She even brought some of her uncle's paintings to

hang inside the bedchamber and kitchen. She'd wanted to hang a few in the dressing room, but William had refused. It was the only room he didn't wish to contain paintings. Having a copper tub and paintings on the walls brought too many dark memories for him to allow it, and thankfully, she did not argue at all.

In less than a week, their little tower was adorned with various paintings, decorated with curtains, little statuettes, vases, and other various objects the names of which William had never known.

William had to admit that it was rather nice having these unnecessary things around the house. They made it feel cozier somehow. He had never had things like this before. Every place he had lived in, no matter how extravagant, always consisted of only essential furniture. But more than that, what pleased him about this was the realization that Victoria was making their house into her home. And it gave him hope.

The biggest surprise happened when he came into his home only to see Victoria, wearing an apron as she stood in the kitchen holding a ladle. William paused in the doorway, staring at the odd vision. Was he asleep?

She turned around with a smile on her face. "I made stew! Can you believe it?"

William walked toward her slowly, his mouth agape. "Not even a little bit." He sneaked a peek into the pot, and the lovely aroma penetrated his nose. It looked very appetizing as well.

“How did you do it?”

“Well, Gertrude made most of it. I asked her to teach me, and she did. She left five minutes ago, instructing me to take it off the flames in ten. So, in five minutes more it shall be ready. You have time to clean up for dinner.”

William stared at her dumbfounded while she smiled at him with a strange glow in her eyes. After a moment's pause, Victoria reached out and touched his forehead. As her warm fingers grazed his skin, he couldn't help but lean into her touch. “Are you unwell?” she asked.

William snapped his head back. “Pardon me?”

“You look... shocked or ill, I do not know which.”

William attempted a smile. Shocked, yes. “Maybe both,” he answered instead.

“Well,” she said proudly, “stew should help with both.”

Still reeling from surprise, William went upstairs to clean himself up and change into fresh clothing. There, in the bedroom, he saw a long nightshirt strewn on the bed.

He smiled, as something tugged at the strings of his heart.

What the devil was going on? He felt as though he had traveled into his dream world, where Victoria was an attentive loving wife. Perhaps when he returned to the kitchen, she would be laid out on the table, naked. That would complete his fantasy vision.

Perhaps he'd died, was killed by either constables or the thugs, and he was now in heaven. Just in case this was a dream, he washed and changed his clothes hastily and hurried back downstairs, just as Victoria was setting the table. He paused at the base of the staircase, just watching her.

She was humming something under her breath, looking quite content. William swallowed a boulder in his throat. This was too perfect to be real. Slowly, he walked toward the table, leaned against it just next to Victoria, and smiled. "Do you need help?"

She glanced down at the table, biting her lips in an adorable concentration, then shook her head. "I think I did quite well, don't you?"

William didn't even bother looking at the table. A far more exciting view presented itself just in front of him. "Absolutely."

Victoria looked at him with light reproach in her eyes. "I worked very hard on this."

With a sigh, William looked at the fully laden table and nodded. "This is the best dinner I've ever seen."

Victoria laughed musically. "Wait till you taste it."

William pushed off the table, helped Victoria into her seat, then sat across from her. "I hope the reason you're so gleeful is not because you poisoned the food."

Victoria choked on her laughter and started coughing into her napkin. William stood and patted her on the back. After

she was done, she took a sip of water and waved a hand. “No, I am not trying to kill you. Although, you haven’t tried the food yet. Perhaps, I needn’t have added any poison.”

William chuckled before filling his spoon with stew. He blew on it a little, watching the steam evaporate away. Victoria watched him just as closely. He threw her a quick glance, winked, and took a taste.

“Mmm.” He nodded approvingly. “Very good.”

“Really?” Victoria excitedly picked up a spoon and gave it a try. Now it was William’s turn to watch her eat.

She was so animated, the exuberance fairly oozing out of her. She reminded him of the Victoria he fell in love with. Or more accurately, the Victoria who was in love with him. She was a ball of sunshine ready to burst and wash over the world with her glee. And for the first time in two years, he felt like he had her back.

Victoria raised a brow. “Are you not going to eat it?”

William smiled. “Of course, I am. It’s very enjoyable.”

“Yes, although I am not quite surprised. I did it under Gertrude’s guidance and a steady hand. If I make a meal from scratch, that’s when you need to worry.” She punctuated her speech with a lovely little laugh, and William couldn’t help but stare.

He placed the spoon on the table and leaned back.

Victoria glanced at him again, a question in her eyes.



“Can I ask you something?”

Victoria put her spoon down as well. “Of course.”

“Why the change?”

“The change?” She looked truly confused.

“Well, you decorated the tower, you started cooking, you brought me a nightshirt.”

“Oh.” Victoria smiled. “You’ve seen it? Did you try it on?”

“Not yet.” He raised a brow in question, and Victoria let out a low chuckle.

“Well... after a long time of deliberate thinking, I concluded that I could either spend our entire time together being bitter and angry with the world. Or I could accept the circumstances and make the best of it.”

“Make the best of... living with me?”

She licked her lips and averted her gaze. “I am not saying I forgive you for everything you’ve done. But I am willing to open a dialogue to understand why you’ve done the things you did. And since I am going to live here for ten more weeks, it would be extremely uncomfortable if I didn’t try to adapt.”

William nodded thoughtfully. “So... you decided to learn how to cook.”

“I wanted to try it.” She shrugged. “And I have to admit that I quite enjoyed it. I never thought I would until I saw you do it. You made it look very easy, I have to admit, and rather... fun.”

“Hmm...” he rumbled low and picked the spoon back up again, his appetite returning. “Perhaps, I can teach you some more?”

“I would— I might enjoy that,” she amended quickly.

They proceeded to eat in silence, each of them lost in their thoughts. William wondered if what she said was indeed the truth. If she simply wanted to enjoy her stay in the tower. And it made sense. It wasn't easy living together under one roof if they were always arguing.

A part of him already missed her angry stares and snapping comments. But a part of him grew content with this new image of domestic bliss.

It wasn't perfect, of course. Nothing ever was. But it was a start.

“Can I ask you something?” Victoria asked, repeating his earlier words with a sidelong gaze.

“Yes?” He nodded, still scooping up the stew from the plate.

“And please, no omissions of truth this time, no lies or deceit.” She was mixing her stew with her spoon with no apparent interest in eating it.

“I'll try my best,” he answered, getting increasingly worried. What was she about to ask him that she requested the full truth?

Was she going to ask about his past? About his love for her perhaps?

She turned to look at him and bit her lip. “Where did you learn to bake?”

William let out a chuckle, all tension leaving his body. “In France.”

“You lived in France?”

William nodded. “Yes, my... um... father, I suppose that’s what he is, he paid for my schooling there when I was about thirteen years old.”

“You learned to bake in school?” Victoria set the spoon down and, in a completely unprincesslike gesture, placed her elbow on the table and propped her cheek against her palm, listening intently.

William let out a brief huff of laughter. “Not exactly. But a baker lived next to the school. He would get up early in the morning, about four o’clock, and start baking. And right when he opened the doors for customers, I would run in with a coin for my loaf. I’d never had freshly baked bread before that, you see.”

“You didn’t?”

He shrugged. “Not unless I stole it.”

To his surprise, she let out a choked laugh. Then she looked at him, laughter still shining in her eyes. “I should have expected that.”

He smiled. “Well, this was the first time in a long time—ever—that I had money. And as powerful as the duke was, believe it or not, he didn’t share that much with me. So, I

always anticipated the money running out. But I wasn't ready to give up the fresh bread."

Victoria's eyes widened slightly, and she leaned forward in anticipation, not even noticing that she was doing it.

"I asked the baker to teach me, and surprisingly he agreed. It meant I had to sneak out of my dormitory every night, because, naturally, we weren't allowed to leave our rooms at night. But I could easily pick a lock and leave, then return before breakfast without anyone being the wiser."

"Hmm..." She narrowed her eyes in thought. "And did you run out of money?"

He bit his lower lip, thinking through his answer. "Not really. Mostly due to the fact that I had always complemented my savings with other types of income."

"Mhm..." She nodded. "Stealing?"

"Sometimes," he acquiesced. "Other times, grave robbing."

She wrinkled her nose.

"It paid very well, and I helped scientific societies. If you ask me, they should add my name to their footnotes when they publish books about their discoveries because without me a lot of them wouldn't have been discovered."

Victoria clapped her hand over her mouth, trying unsuccessfully to hold her laughter. "You are going to hell for that. You know that, right?"

“Then you’re going alongside me for laughing.”

“I am not laughing!” she exclaimed, even as a giggle escaped her lips. Victoria pressed her fingers to her mouth in a vain attempt to smother her smile before clearing her throat and pretending solemnity. “And I would be very interested in learning to bake bread.”

“Whew!” William theatrically wiped his forehead. “For a moment, I was afraid you were going to say you would love to rob a grave.”

She chuckled, although her eyes spoke of a subtle rebuke.

“It is rather difficult, you know.”

“Baking?”

“No, grave robbing. Digging up a grave takes a lot of strength and creates all sorts of calluses on one’s palm. And hoisting the body up creates rope burns on one’s shoulders.”

“Oh, that’s why you have scars on your shoulders?” she asked earnestly, and William winced inwardly. Of course, she’d noticed his scars. She had seen him naked.

He cleared his suddenly constricted throat. “Some of them, yes. Baking bread, on the other hand, is quite easy.”

Either his ploy to lighten the mood worked, or she had sensed the shift within him because she beamed at him. “Then I would love to learn.”

She picked the spoon back up again and studied the stew thoughtfully before turning toward him again. “How about

tomorrow? Unless you have more acquaintances to help?" Was there a note of jealousy in her voice?

William grinned. "No, I think they can wait one day."

Her face lit up with a smile. "Excellent! Although, I hope you're not expecting me to wake up at four in the morning."

William's grin softened. "Not at all."

It seemed as though she wanted to ask more, and a part of William wanted her to ask all her questions. Another part of him was afraid he wouldn't be able to answer her honestly or give her the answers she'd be satisfied with. So, when she silently continued her meal, he felt relief mixed in with a sense of disappointment. It was a difficult line to walk, and he felt like this all the time when he was with Victoria.

They finished the meal soon after, and then William cleaned the pots while Victoria took a long bath. They read for a while in separate chambers until Victoria came to bed in her billowing nightgown, her dark locks slightly damp, spilling over her shoulders and back.

William doused the candles and took off his clothes, then threw his new nightshirt over his body. The soft fabric felt rather nice against his skin, and although it wasn't as comfortable as being naked, it was still better than wearing breeches.

He turned toward the bed, only to see Victoria, sitting up, watching him. She gave him a little smile as he raised his brow in question. "It looks good on you."

William looked down at himself and smirked. He looked hideous. But if she said he looked good, who was he to argue?

He climbed onto the bed and turned toward her.

She immediately leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

William's eyes fell closed. This was the moment he'd been longing for all day. He inhaled deeply, relishing the sensation of her lips against his and the fragrance of her jasmine soap. It called to him, beckoned him to draw closer, run his fingers through her hair, grab her by the waist, and pull her close.

He did none of those things. Instead, he parted his lips and tenderly kissed her back. Typically she would pull away now, blushing as she bid him goodnight.

But this time, she didn't.

A soft moan escaped her lips as she eagerly reciprocated his kiss. Then, she reached up and gently brushed his shoulder.

William covered her hand with his own, slowly guiding it to his neck and keeping it there as their kiss grew more intense, insistent even.

Victoria did not resist or object. Her fingers curled into his neck, urging him closer as she opened her mouth to him, allowing his tongue to explore freely. Each stroke of their tongues and brush of their lips elicited tiny moans from her throat. Her body pressed closer to his, her hands tugging at his nightshirt.

In one swift motion, William wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her tightly against him. Together, they worked to free her legs from her skirts, bunching the fabric at her waist, all while their lips remained locked in an urgent kiss. When Victoria finally straddled his hips, they both sighed in relief.

Now, only a single layer of fabric separated their bodies.

His cock stood tall, burning with need. Victoria rocked her hips, grinding her wet core against his length. With a hiss, William tightened his arm around her waist, drawing her nearer.

She continued to rock her hips, deepening their kiss, occasionally grazing his lips with her teeth, sending him into a frenzy of pleasure.

*Oh, God, it feels so good. Too good for it to be real.*

Just as the thought crossed his mind, she broke the kiss and turned away. William trailed kisses down her cheek and along her jawline, ready to move his mouth to her neck. However, before he could do so, she weakly uttered, “Wait...”

William stilled, not moving a muscle, waiting for her to tell him to continue. To kiss her again.

Instead, she whispered, “Stop.”

William immediately disengaged his hands and raised them by his sides. They sat like that for a long moment, their breaths intermingling in the dimly lit room. Victoria placed her



hands on his shoulders and pushed herself away from his body, taking her warmth with her.

Without looking in his direction, she quickly scrambled off the bed and locked herself in the dressing room. With a groan, William collapsed onto the bed, his hand cradling his groin. His nightshirt clung to his erect length, dampened with Victoria's juices.

She was so aroused. So exquisitely wet.

Why did she stop?

He slowly stroked his cock through his nightshirt and cursed under his breath.

How long was he to continue enduring this torture? His eyes darted to the closed door of the dressing room. Oh, how he wished he could barrel through there, bend Victoria over the bathtub, raise the skirt of her nightgown, and ram into her wet center.

He didn't need long. Two thrusts and he'd come apart inside her, of that he was certain. He'd burrow his nose inside her hair, or perhaps lick that tantalizing beauty spot on the juncture between her neck and shoulder. He was quite intrigued by it.

The door handle rattled before Victoria flung open the door and made her way inside the room. She silently climbed into bed, hid beneath the covers, and turned away.

William let out a deep breath. This night was going to be a silent torture.

# Chapter 18



Victoria was unable to get a wink of sleep. That kiss... Oh, that kiss had haunted her throughout the entire night, resulting in her tossing and turning aimlessly until morning.

William had left the bed in the middle of the night and hadn't returned since, only adding to Victoria's anxiety.

What had he been doing? Why hadn't he returned? And why didn't he kiss her again?

She knew the answer to her last question. Because she had told him not to.

And she cursed herself for doing it.

She had gotten frightened of their shared passion. Afraid that it might lead to something more...

So what?

They were already married. What would it have changed if they got lost in each other for a night?

Everything.

Because if she fell into bed with William, if she let herself get lost in his passionate embrace, then she would never want to leave.

And there was too much uncertainty between them for that to happen.

She didn't think she could trust him with her feelings. And she didn't know anything about his business dealings.

Well, she could find out once and for all, could she not?

Determined to put an end to all her worries, she jumped out of bed.

William always prepared a bucket of steaming water in the dressing room, and Victoria used it to carefully wash, brush her teeth, and get dressed in her most beautiful day gown.

She descended the stairs on shaking legs and ventured into the kitchen, where William was rattling dishes.

“What are you doing?” she asked as she moved closer.

“I heard you moving upstairs, so I decided to prepare everything for our baking lesson.”

Victoria glanced over William's shoulder to see the flour, a jug of water, salt, and some other ingredients, the names of which she did not know, on the table, and two bowls. She grinned and put on an apron. “Very well, teach me, Master.”

He winced. “I don't think I like being called that.”

Victoria raised a curious brow but didn't protest. “What would you like to be called then?”

He stepped closer, crowding her with his being. “How about Husband?”

Victoria swallowed and looked deeply into his ice-blue eyes. Only they were darker now, almost midnight blue. “Very well... Husband. Teach me.”

William turned toward the table and cleared his throat. “It is really quite simple.”

“Don’t say that,” Victoria said with a chuckle, looking at the dry ingredients and feeling quite intimidated. “Because then if I fail, I fail at a simple task, which means I am completely useless.”

William threw her a side-long glance. “You didn’t let me finish. I meant to say, it is really quite simple to fail at this.”

Victoria laughed, and William placed a brief kiss on her forehead. They both froze at the spontaneous and rather easy gesture of affection. It felt so natural, so instinctive for him to do, that both of them only realized that it wasn’t right after it was done.

William turned back to his bowl. “Right, let us begin.”

Victoria bit her lip and did the same.

William mixed the dry ingredients, guiding Victoria to do the same. Then he poured the mix of yeast, oil, and water, and Victoria squeaked at the strange sensation.

“What am I to do with that?” She looked at the gooey mixture with distaste.

“You are supposed to mix it,” William said with a smile. “Let me show you.”

He moved closer to her and plunged his hand into Victoria's bowl. Victoria let out a tiny sigh, barely able to contain herself as William's fingers caressed her skin, and then his strong hands gently enveloped hers, guiding her movements.

William shifted to stay behind her, his body pressed against her back and her rump. His chin was moving against her hair, one hand in the bowl with hers, his other hand propped against the table, caging her in the circle of his arms.

His lovely scent enveloped her senses, and she nearly forgot what she was doing. If she thought the idea of baking bread was sensual before, now she thought it was absolutely sinful.

Victoria relished the silky feel of the soft dough squeezing between her fingers; she relished even more the feeling of William's touch on her hand. Her heart raced, and Victoria raised her hand from the bowl, the dough sticking to her skin, stretching upward, following the gesture of her hand.

"This feels... rather strange," she said in an attempt to distract herself.

William chuckled, the rumble in his chest reverberating against her back and spreading heat throughout her body. "It needs a little more flour and a little more work before it's ready. There are three types of dough: soft, hard, and the bâtard."

Victoria twisted her neck to look at William, her nose perilously close to his clean-shaven chin, her lips hovering just

a few inches away from the strong column of his neck. “The bastard?”

William chuckled once more. “Correct. The mix between the two.”

“Is that the one we are making?”

His lips twitched in a smile. “Indeed.”

Victoria turned back to the dough and continued kneading it. William had removed his hand, letting her do it on her own, but he didn’t move away from her.

“This isn’t as easy as you make it seem,” Victoria complained, as her hand started getting tired.

“In bakeries, usually the worker who is responsible for kneading the dough is called the *geindre*.”

Victoria paused and searched her French vocabulary. “The moaner?”

“Yes, exactly,” William said straight-faced. “Because of how difficult it is, the kneader moans and whines loudly as he or she kneads the dough.”

Victoria couldn’t help it; she fell into heaps of laughter. “You are making that up!”

William raised his hands in a gesture of self-defense. “God’s honest truth.”

Victoria turned around fully, leaning her hips against the table, her breasts brushing against the front of William’s shirt, and raised her face to his. “Would you like me to moan then?”

William's eyes drifted to her mouth and then returned to her eyes. "If I wanted you to moan, baking bread would not be the activity I'd select."

Victoria's heart slammed into her chest with such a force that she was certain William could see it. Her breaths grew shallow, and all she could do was just stare at him as heat pooled low in her belly, and her entire body trembled with anticipation.

He cleared his throat. "I should prepare the oven." And then he walked away, taking his heat and strength with him, leaving Victoria weak in the knees and almost collapsing to the floor.

\* \* \*

William was hard as a rock. A bead of perspiration was moving down his forehead, and he wiped it away with the sleeve of his shirt. He washed his hands in a basin and wiped them clean before readjusting himself in his breeches and walking toward the oven.

Being so close to Victoria, smelling her scent, feeling her rump against his cock, her fingers on his skin, and not being able to kiss her, envelope her in an embrace, raise her skirt, and plunge into her was driving him insane.

And he wouldn't change a moment of it.

If this was what it took to be near her, he'd take it in a heartbeat. Even if he couldn't relieve himself in the shadows of the night. Even if he was forced to endure this torment

every waking moment of every single day. He wouldn't trade it for anything.

He took a few deep breaths to calm his mind and body before getting the oven ready for bread.

By the time he had prepared everything, Victoria's dough was ready.

It didn't have perfect consistency, but it was her first time, and for a pampered princess who hadn't seen what yeast looked like in its raw form until this day, he'd say she did quite well.

William found himself feeling a sense of pride not only for her accomplishment but for her attitude through it all.

She wasn't receptive toward him during their first days together at all, but she took every hardship in stride, slowly but quietly making this tower into her home.

Little by little he started seeing the Victoria he had fallen in love with. The woman he saw himself spending the rest of his life with. Whether they traveled uncharted roads, hid out in the tower, or lived in a gilded mansion, she was the woman he wanted to have beside him.

She could make him laugh in the most difficult of times, and they could spend hours talking about anything and everything. Life with Victoria would never be boring.

If, of course, she learned to accept him for who he was.

As the table was cleaned and the bread was in the oven, Victoria took off her apron and hung it on the wall beside the



hearth.

“How long should we wait for it to bake?” she asked, hands on her hips, lips pursed, looking solemn. And yet a smudge of flour adorably dotted her nose.

He walked toward her with a wry smile on his lips. “About an hour.”

He reached out and she leaned back, confusion in her eyes. “What are you doing?”

“You’ve got a little something...” He gestured at her nose. “Here, let me help.”

“What is it?” She still looked puzzled.

William slowly raised his hand, caressing the tip of her nose with his thumb. “Just a smudge of flour,” he murmured.

Her lips parted in surprise at the gentle contact.

He rubbed away the pale powder, letting his fingertips linger perhaps a moment too long. “There, flawless once again,” he said softly.

Instead of stepping away, Victoria’s eyes fell closed, and she leaned into his touch. And they stood like that, with William’s hand cupping her cheek, his thumb caressing her nose.

“Victoria,” he said with all his longing laced into his voice.

“No.” She shook her head, before opening her eyes and taking a step toward him. “Don’t say anything. Just... kiss me.”

William's eyes widened, and he was shocked into inaction for one long moment. Too long. Longer than it should have been.

In his thoughts and dreams, whenever Victoria asked him to kiss her, he didn't linger for a single moment. And there he was, frozen.

Victoria parted her lips to say something else, but William couldn't let her say another word. He wouldn't make her ask him twice. He wouldn't make her beg. And, most of all, he wouldn't let her take it back.

He dipped his head and pressed his lips to hers.

A sweet sigh escaped her lips and then her arms wound around his neck, her body pressing against his. A gentle caress of their lips quickly turned into a heated embrace. She clawed at him, her pelvis rubbing against his, her leg raised and hooked behind his knee as if she were trying to climb him.

It was a scene right out of his dreams.

William picked her up, and she immediately wrapped her legs around his waist. His hands went to caress her buttocks through the skirt of her gown, as his tongue swept into her warmth.

She returned his kisses with equal ardor, her tongue dancing against his, little sighs of pleasure escaping her throat. William took a few steps and lowered her to sit on the edge of the table. His hands delved under her skirts, stroking up her

legs, caressing the back of her knees, then tenderly sliding up her thighs.

He broke their kiss only to move his mouth down to her jaw, her neck. He sank his teeth into the crook of her shoulder, then soothed the area with his teeth. Victoria whimpered, arching her back, her breasts rubbing against his chest, her beaded nipples tickling him even through the layers of their clothes.

“Oh, God!” she cried as his hand moved to stroke her breast. “I almost forgot how good you are at this. How wonderful this feels.”

William raised his head and looked into her hazy eyes. “I dreamed about this every single night. And yet none of those dreams feel anything like the real thing.”

“William,” she breathed, and he groaned, before covering her mouth with his again.

His name on her lips was the sweetest sound nature had ever created. And with his kiss, he wanted to lick it out of her tongue.

He wanted to swallow her every whimper, every sigh. “Spread your legs wider,” he commanded against her lips. And when she did, he moved his hips, his cock rubbing against her center, spreading her juices over the fabric of his breeches.

She cried his name again, her pelvis joining in the sensual rhythm, her tongue stroking against his.

“Mm... I like the feel of your tongue,” she whispered between their kisses.

“Do you, now?” he rumbled deep in his chest.

She licked her lower lip in a slow, seductive manner. “I do. I missed it greatly.”

William grinned. *I missed your tongue, too.* He gently swept her hair away from her shoulder and kissed her neck.

“Mmm...” she moaned, the sound stirring him from the inside. Then she tilted her head more, giving him more access. He opened his mouth and licked her skin. “Ah!”

He bared her shoulder and traced her skin with his tongue. “Do you like this?”

“Mm... very much.”

“Tell me, where else do you want to feel my tongue?”

She looked at him wide-eyed. “I don’t understand.”

“Which body part is quivering with need and begging for my touch? For my tongue?”

Her breaths accelerated, and her cheeks pinkened. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, I think you do know.” He ran his fingers down her shoulders, her arms, then back up again. “I’ll trace my finger down your body and you stop me at a place you want more of my touch. Deal?”

She swallowed and nodded. He slowly traced his finger down her chest, onto the mound of her breast, then grazed her

nipple. She cried out, her body arching as his finger slowly continued his downward trajectory, but his eyes pierced into hers.

“Stop, go back,” she breathed.

“Go back where?” He moved closer, crowding her with his presence, craving to feel more of her heat.

She took his hand and brought it to cup her breast. Her breathing erratic, she looked him in the eyes before moving his thumb over her nipple. It was hardened into a pointed peak, and she moaned again at the touch. “Do you want my tongue on your nipple?” he whispered.

Victoria closed her eyes and swallowed. “Yes. Please.”

*Yes, please.*

Those two words undid him unlike anything before. He was ready to fall to his knees and worship her the way she deserved.

Instead, William hooked his fingers inside her bodice and tugged hard, exposing her beautiful, soft, milky-white breasts to the cool air. His eyes fixed on the two dark tightened little peaks, William dipped his head and took one nipple into his mouth with a groan.

“Oh, William,” Victoria moaned, her hands going to cradle his head, her fingers sifting through his hair, scratching his scalp.

William groaned in pleasure as he suckled her nipple in his mouth and felt gooseflesh cover her skin.

She was so damn passionate, so easily aroused. So fucking beautiful.

His hand went to weigh her other breast in his palm, feeling its softness, pinching her nipple between his fingers.

Victoria jolted and whimpered, but William continued his ministrations, determined to learn her taste, to assuage his hunger with her body, to fill his nostrils with her scent and his ears with her screams and moans.

He never knew it could be so good just having a woman in his arms. To receive pleasure while giving it to her. This act had never been so sensual. It had always been about relieving the desire, taming one's own urges, or filling one's emptiness. One of the two people was a giver, while the other took what they needed.

This felt different.

It wasn't just a physical act, it was a feast of his soul while feeding hers at the same time.

William bunched the skirt of her day gown in his hand and lifted it to her waist.

He pressed his thigh between her legs and she arched her back more, pushing her hips forward, grinding her center against his leg.

He moved his mouth to her other breast, licking around her dark areola, sucking on her hardened peak, while his hands slid up her inner thighs, then up to her hips, her waist, and down to her soft belly. As he gripped her thigh with his left

hand, his right moved lower and caressed the mound between her legs.

She gasped and tugged on his hair until he looked up at her. Her eyes were clouded with passion, her pupils dark and large, glinting in firelight.

“Do you want me to stop?” William rasped, his voice hoarse with desire.

And if she said yes, he would have stopped in a heartbeat. He would have stepped away with an aching heart and a throbbing cock.

He would have walked away and given her time and space to collect her bearings.

Instead, she looked into his eyes, fire burning in her irises. She smiled her mischievous smile and said, “No. Make me moan.”

Shock mixed with triumph and William’s smile turned wolfish. “With pleasure.”

# Chapter 19



**M***ake me moan.*

Victoria didn't know how she'd found the gall to say what she'd said, but she didn't have any time to lament her choice of words, or to feel even a slight hint of embarrassment, because the next moment, William slanted his mouth over hers. He delved deep, robbing her of any rational thought.

Then he broke the kiss and dropped to his knees in front of her.

He clasped her ankle with gentle hands and proceeded to pepper kisses up her shin, traveling up her knee as his fingers caressed her skin. He paused before placing his palms on her knees and slowly spreading them farther apart.

With her skirts bunched at her waist, her most sacred place, the very center of her, was now bared to his gaze.

Victoria squirmed in her seat, feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, mortified even, until he dipped his head and kissed her inner thigh.

A ticklish feeling traveled up her leg and settled at her center. Her muscles clenched together as warmth seeped out of her. Victoria's fingers curled into the edge of the table, keeping her upright, her knuckles white from tension.



He pressed another kiss a little higher up her thigh before biting into her flesh.

Victoria cried out, her head thrown back, her chest heaving as if from exertion.

“Hmm...” William rumbled deep in his throat, his warm breath wafting over her skin. “That’s better.”

Then his finger touched the juncture between her legs, and Victoria moaned, her muscles clenching. He tickled her lightly, circling his finger, playing with her damp curls.

“William,” she whispered, unsure what she wanted him to do. Unsure why she even called his name.

All she knew was that there was an unknown hunger in her soul and only he could quench it.

He moved his mouth higher up her thigh and bit into her flesh again, teasing her with his teeth and tongue, while his finger traced the seam of her feminine lips, leaving her breathless.

What was he doing to her?

*Oh, Boje, I hope he never stops.*

Then one of his hands went to grab her bottom, his fingers tightening on her soft globe, and his mouth, oh, that wicked mouth, settled right in the center of her.

With the fingers of his right hand, he caressed her inner thigh, while his thumb spread her feminine lips, opening her even more for his view, for his mouth, his lips, his tongue.

“William!” she moaned, unable to make any other intelligible sound, her entire being concentrated on the part of her that he devoured. His tongue stroked along her cleft, sending shivers up and down her body, making her squirm and writhe.

Her hands moved to caress his head, her fingers sifting through his hair, bunching it in her grasp, guiding William’s mouth to where she wanted him.

Her juices flowed out of her and traveled down his mouth, his chin... Oh, that chin of his now pressed into her center, filling the void, while his tongue did unconscionable things to a place where a single touch sent fire through her veins.

*What am I doing?*

It couldn’t have been right, pushing her center closer to his mouth, urging his face to move just so his tongue could caress her most hidden delights. Her hips thrust forward to feel more of him, and it should have felt so wrong, shameful, and full of sin. Yet all she felt was pleasure, delight, bliss. And all she wanted was more of that feeling.

Victoria arched her back, bringing her body closer to William, urging his tongue to press against her hill of pleasure, to slide and circle it as she moved her hips.

“Yes, William, yes!” she cried in encouragement, and he grunted in approval.

*Make me moan*, she’d said when she had no idea what she was asking. Because what she felt now was beyond what her

imagination could conjure.

William continued lapping at her center, collecting her juices with his tongue, spreading the feeling of ecstasy.

Then he hit the spot that sent a lightning bolt through her. Victoria cried out, and William doubled his efforts, licking at her until she sobbed. Incoherent sounds were exiting her throat, her entire body shaking, as her muscles contracted and released all on their own.

Her body was no longer under her control and her mind had succumbed to the darkest of delights. And only one word echoed through her mind and soul.

*William.*

\* \* \*

It took William forever to push himself off the floor. His hands trembled, and his entire body shuddered from tension, demanding relief. His cock strained against his breeches, aching, begging to be let out.

He palmed his raging erection through the fabric of his breeches and leaned over Victoria, closing his eyes.

This moment was both magnificent and painful all at the same time. He had never felt such joy, such satisfaction from making a woman come apart in his arms. He had never felt such incredible power from knowing that his hands, his lips, and his tongue had brought a woman to incredible heights of pleasure.

And not just any woman.

*His* woman.

*Mine*.

And if this was as much as he ever got, if this part of her was all he would ever have, he would still be content.

She looked up at him then, her eyes still clouded with passion. “What was that?” she asked, in awe.

He smiled and cupped her jaw. “That was... love.”

She didn't say anything to that, just stared at him, her breath still labored.

She shifted on the table and accidentally kneed William in the groin. With a loud hiss, he jumped back, his face a grimace of pain.

“Oh my god! Did I hurt you?”

William contained his grimace and tried to smile. “No. I mean, yes. But only a little.”

Her wide eyes shifted from his face to his crotch and back again. “You didn't... that thing that I felt, you didn't...”

William chuckled. “No. No, I did not.”

“Well, can I...? Should I...? Is there anything I can do to...?” She waved a hand in the direction of his cock.

He stepped closer and kissed her jaw, lost for a brief moment in her scent, then took her hands and squeezed. “Only if you want to.”

“W-what would I have to do?”

He smiled, as he caressed her fingers gently with his. “You don’t *have* to do anything. But there are things you *can* do if you wish.”

She raised a questioning brow, and William released her hands, his mouth curling in a smile. “Undo the falls of my breeches.”

She licked her lips adorably, before biting her lower lip. She glanced up at him from time to time as she started slowly and carefully undoing the buttons one by one. When she was done, William slightly lowered the breeches down on his hips, showcasing his cock in all his might and power.

There was an expression of curiosity in her eyes. She was still chewing her lips, periodically licking and pursuing them, visibly unsure how to proceed next and what to do with herself.

“You can touch it if you want,” he said hoarsely.

She smiled timidly. “I have never touched a man this intimately.”

“Hmm...” He rumbled low in his throat. “Good to know.” Then, seeing her hesitation, he added, “You don’t have to touch me if you don’t want to.”

“Oh, no, I want to,” she protested immediately. *Thank God.* “It’s simply that I do not know how to do it for you to enjoy it.”

“Just touch me any way you want, love. Don’t think too much about it. And then I’ll guide you.”

Victoria took a deep breath and gently caressed his length with her fingers. William’s eyes fell closed, and he collapsed onto his hands propped against the table, leaning his forehead against Victoria’s.

She continued her careful touch along his shaft, her fingers tickling, grazing his sensitive skin. Then she wrapped her fingers around his base, tenderly running her hand along his length and William groaned.

“Does it hurt?” she whispered.

William shook his head. “No.”

He wrapped his hand around hers and squeezed.

She gasped.

“Just like this,” he whispered, guiding her hand, showing her exactly how he liked it.

His hips joined in the sensual rhythm, his heart beating wildly in his chest. Victoria looked at him, her mouth slightly open, her eyes dark, her breaths shallow. She was aroused again, he realized, and smiled.

“William,” she whispered, her free hand moving to clutch at his shoulder.

He dipped his head and captured her lips in a kiss. She moaned against his mouth, her body arching against him.

She wanted him again. Her hips were copying his rhythm, her fingers tightening around him, her lips desperately clinging to his.

William moved to stand between her legs and pressed his thigh against her core. Victoria moaned, squeezing his length harder, stroking it in short, urgent jerks.

Damn, it felt so good. So fucking good.

He wrapped his arm around her bottom, squeezing her buttocks, pressing her closer to him. She ground against his hip, the wet sounds of their joining echoing in his mind. For a moment, William imagined guiding his tip toward her opening and thrusting inside her heat.

“Ah!” With a loud groan, William spilled his essence, his hips still thrusting into her delicate hand. Her fingers tightened around his cock and shoulder as she let out a cry as well, her wet core rubbing against his thigh in mindless thrusts. She shook and trembled in his arms, just as his seed spilled around her fingers.

This, William thought as he leaned in and took her mouth in another sweet and gentle kiss, was the definition of bliss.

\* \* \*

By the time Victoria cleaned herself up—and it took her an extraordinarily long time to do so—William already had bread, jam, butter, and tea set up on the table. Her bread was strangely shaped, but it smelled divine.

Victoria decided to concentrate on the food because she couldn't look her husband in the eyes.

For some reason, after the incredibly carnal coupling where he'd literally drank from her intimate juices and then covered her hand in his, she felt extremely shy.

"Mm, it smells remarkably good," she said as she sat across from him.

"I wager it tastes just as nice." Her stomach rumbled loudly, and he chuckled. "And apparently, just in time."

"Yes, well, we didn't have breakfast today," she noted, briefly meeting his gaze.

He raised a brow. "Perhaps, you didn't. But I had a wonderful one."

Victoria opened her mouth to ask him when he'd managed to have breakfast, but his knowing smirk made her cheeks burst into flames.

He broke off a piece of bread and handed it to her with a self-satisfied grin. "Fresh bread is better eaten like this, not cut with a knife."

Glad for a change in subject, Victoria accepted the hunk of bread and proceeded to slather it with jam. "Why is that?"

He shrugged. "It's just tastier that way."

Victoria chuckled, for some reason finding that idea amusing. But as she took a bite of hot, fresh bread, she didn't question it any longer. It was delicious. "You are right," she



said between moans of delight. “Why did you not tell me this earlier?”

He chuckled around the bite of food. “I didn’t want to give up my secrets all at once.”

She glanced at him from under her lashes, wondering what other secrets he was hiding.

“What?” he asked around a bite.

“Nothing,” she said and continued to eat in silence.

William studied her features closely. “You want to know something.”

Victoria let out a chuckle. “I want to know a lot of things.”

He leaned back in his chair, his brows furrowed. “About what?”

“About you,” she exclaimed. “I don’t know anything about you. Actually, that is not true, I know quite a lot of things about you from other people. But I would love to hear them from you.”

“What do you know from other people?” He seemed curious, delighted even by the fact that people were talking about him.

“Well, I know that you’re the best thief in London. But what I don’t know is how you came to be that way.”

He shrugged easily. “I am good at what I do.”

She smiled. “Yes, I remember. You made quite a demonstration at the Kensington ball. But that’s not what I

mean. I mean, how did you start stealing and why? And how did you become so proficient at it?”

William let out a huff of air and took another piece of bread. He played with it for a moment, rotating it between his fingers before reaching for the jam and carefully applying it to his bread. “I was around six or seven,” he said, without looking up from his task, his brows furrowed in concentration. “I don’t remember exactly. I don’t remember many things from my childhood, but echoes of the past remain in the chambers of my mind. I lived with my mother back then. One day, she fell very ill. I don’t know what illness she had, I am not sure whether she knew it either. But I had to... I had to eat. And I had to take care of my mother. That’s when I first started stealing.”

Victoria’s mouth fell open and stayed that way. Whatever she’d expected to hear, that wasn’t it. He was six or seven years old! And he was stealing to feed his ill mother.

He chuckled as he rotated a piece of bread between his fingers. “Bread was a luxury. Any type of food was a luxury. So, when I finally gained money, I promised myself that I would never ever go without food again.”

That’s when Victoria’s mind traveled back a few weeks in time. She remembered the glint of pride in his eyes as he showed off his modest larder filled with different foods.

She had wondered about the gleam in his eyes and now she understood. He’d spent years worrying about where his next piece of bread would come from. And while stealing, he risked

getting thrown into gaol, perhaps even hanging. So, he had to get good at what he did because his mother depended on him.

“What about your father?” she asked when she was able to collect her wits.

He frowned. “What about my father?”

“I thought... You said that he paid for your schooling. I heard that you inherited money from him. Didn't you have his support then?”

William's laughter was bitter and rough. He shook his head, placing the bread onto his little plate. She wished she hadn't asked the question. It seemed to have ruined his appetite.

“My father never acknowledged my existence. Never. When my mother was ill, I went to ask him for help, but he threw me out.”

Victoria couldn't stifle her gasp. “But you were a small child!”

William shrugged. “He didn't care. I got my schooling money and my allowance only because I blackmailed him. It was later, when I was about twelve, and I had met Hades and other brigands. Together we had enough power to threaten the duke's reputation. That was the only thing he cared about his entire life. So, he sent me off to France, as far away as he could afford. Gave me some allowance and demanded that I never return. And so I didn't. Not until his death anyway.”

Victoria didn't know how to react to what she'd just heard. All she could do was imagine a small, golden-haired boy, scouring the streets, stealing food so his ill mother wouldn't go hungry. So she would get better.

But she didn't get better. Because otherwise, William would never have gone to his father to ask for help, that much she knew.

He must have noticed something in her expression because he hastened to add, "Yes, he was the first man I ever blackmailed. Rather poetic if you ask me. I know you don't condone it—"

"No," Victoria said quickly. So quickly that he raised his head in surprise. "I mean, mostly, I don't condone it. But not in this case. He owed it to you. He is the reason for your troubles. He deserved it."

William let out a chuckle. "Really? Is a righteous princess condoning blackmail?"

She licked her lips. "He was your father. And as bad as my father was, he at least always provided for me. I can't imagine —" She shook her head. "If your father wasn't dead already, I would kill him myself."

William let out a bark of laughter. "You can be fiercely protective sometimes, do you know that? And I love that it is directed at me. But I don't think you would be able to kill anyone."

"Why not?" She felt oddly offended.

“It takes another kind of person to kill in cold blood. In self-defense, perhaps. But the look in people’s eyes as the life fades out of them is... it’s not something one ever forgets. It’s not something one wears lightly upon one’s shoulders.”

Victoria looked at him, enthralled. This man, this confident—arrogant even—man with a devilish charm and attitude had gone through so much hardship. And at this moment she realized that she hadn’t even scratched the surface.

The crisscross patterns of the scars on his back and shoulders came to her mind, and then the other scars covering his perfectly bronzed skin. She remembered the conversation they had had about his scars. And when she’d asked him whether the scars on his shoulders were from rope burns. His answer had startled her then, and it broke her now.

*Some of them, yes.*

Because she suddenly understood what he meant by that. Every scar on his body had a story to tell. And it might take her a lifetime to learn every single one.

What other horrors were hidden in his past? And what other scars weren’t evident on his skin?

“Do not pity me, my princess,” he said with an easy smile. Victoria looked up at him and realized in horror that her throat was constricted, tears burning behind her eyes. *Oh, God!* How embarrassing. “It made me the man I am today.”

Victoria swallowed and shook her head. “I don’t pity you.”

William pursed his lips, suppressing a smile, then reached up to gently wipe away a stray tear trailing down her cheek.

Victoria started, not even realizing she had begun crying. William's thumb brushed over her skin, catching the glimmering droplet.

Victoria let out a breath and wiped her face, to make certain no other tears betrayed her.

"I don't," she said emphatically. "I don't pity you. But I do pity the little boy you were. I pity the child who had to steal in order to feed his sick mother. I pity the boy who had to grow up too fast once she died. I pity the boy whose father tossed him out like an unwanted pair of boots. And I pity the boy who had no other option but to steal and blackmail. But I do not pity the man you have become. Because no matter what life throws at you, you just seem to catch it and turn it around for your benefit."

He spread his arms with a smile. "My past made me the man I am today. Without it, I wouldn't be me. Although, I know you wish I were a duke's legitimate son. Perhaps a duke myself."

Victoria looked away with a frown.

She had wished it before. But she had met plenty of dukes... and none of them made her feel even a wisp of the excitement she felt when she was next to William.

She knew there was merit to William's words. Without the hardships he'd endured, he wouldn't be the man he was today.

But how much of his personality and charm, how much of *him* was sculpted by his rough past, and how much was just inherently him?

Would she feel differently about him if he were born into a dukedom? Would he still be the same person he was now? Would she have ever fallen in love with him if he were a duke's spoiled son?

Would she still love him if he wasn't fully him? The questions gave her a slight headache, and she decided to shift the focus if only a little bit.

“What about the other people you've blackmailed?” she asked.

He seemed nonplussed. “What about them?”

“Well, you said your father was the first. How did it evolve?”

“There are things about my past I hope you'll never know,” he said evenly. “There is a part of my life that I am not yet ready to share. But that past involves some powerful people who... let's just say hurt a lot of children. And those people were next on my list. Then I moved on to others who were all rich and powerful aristocrats, but all people with dark pasts. People who had things to hide.”

“So, they were all bad people,” she surmised.

William shrugged. “They were bad to someone. But almost every one of us has at least once in our lives been bad to someone.”

“I haven’t been,” she answered easily. “Not to the point that you can blackmail me with it. What I am trying to say is that those people probably deserved it, too. You were on the side of their victims.”

He let out a scoff. “I am on my own side.”

“No,” Victoria hastened to add with an impish grin. “You’re like Robin Hood. Take from the rich, standing up for the poor.”

William let out a laugh and shook his head. “Victoria, I understand that it must be confusing for you to be married to a criminal. And after this morning, you’re probably trying to find justifications for why you would be attracted to someone like me. But do not mistake who I am, *lubimaya*. I am no hero. Never was, never will be.”



# Chapter 20



*Twenty days before the execution...*

Victoria hummed an old Russian folk song under her breath as she rearranged the furniture in their bedchamber for possibly the dozenth time since she had moved into the tower.

One of the women from the shelter had moved out and married a carpenter, and in order to support her, Victoria had ordered a few small items for herself. These included a side table, a writing desk, and a couple of ornate shelves for her books. She didn't want to keep walking back and forth to the library when she could have a little stack in her bedchamber instead.

William had helped her put the furniture in their new designated spots and was now in the dressing room getting ready to leave for another of his clandestine outings while Victoria rearranged the items atop her new furniture.

Ever since the morning of passionate baking, Victoria had been deep in thought about her future. What did she want it to look like, and could she see her life without William? The one concern she kept circling back to was William's secrets. His constant absence from the house, his avoidance of the truth, and even this small metal trunk she was currently moving to a

new place. She had never seen him open it. It wasn't terribly heavy either. What did it hold inside?

He had been right when he'd said she struggled to reconcile her feelings for him, but he was mistaken when he assumed it was because of his past. She had accepted his past without question. What she worried about was whether the past was a reflection of his present.

William exited the dressing room in simple trousers and a coat over his shirt. No cravat in sight, no buckskin breeches, and not even a waistcoat. She had to admit he looked quite dashing with his tousled hair, not like a lord at all.

A common man. A thief.

"I have to visit... uh..."

"An acquaintance?" She finished his sentence with a raised brow.

He smiled. "You know me too well."

She licked her lips. "Do I?"

His brows furrowed, creating a crease between them. "I am not sure I know what you're asking."

"For instance"—she waved at the metal trunk by her side—"what's inside this trunk?"

"Important, valuable papers."

"Important for blackmailing purposes?" she inquired carefully.

He straightened his spine. “If you’re asking me whether I am continuing to blackmail people then the answer is no.”

Victoria let out a breath. She had upset him. “That is not what I am asking. I think I just want to know more about you.”

“You know everything you need to know.”

“*Need* to know? What does that even mean? I am your wife.”

He stepped closer and brushed her cheek with his forefinger. “You are.”

Chills ran down her back, and her knees buckled, but Victoria refused to be charmed so easily. “A-and as your wife, there shouldn’t be a part of you I don’t need to know. I *have* to know everything about you.”

He chuckled. “Is that so?”

“It is so! As a spouse, I am supposed to know you like my five fingers!”

William pursed his lips in thought before a hoarse chuckle left his lips. “Do you mean like the back of your hand?”

Victoria blushed, realizing she had simply translated the Russian saying into English instead of using the appropriate equivalent. “It means the same thing!”

William’s smile softened. “I am touched that you want to get to know me better, but knowing everything about me... I am not sure it’s the best thing.”

“If I have to decide whether I want to continue living with you after our arrangement ends, I need to have all the information.”

He raised a brow. “Are you considering staying with me? Indefinitely?”

Victoria licked her lips and stepped away, her fingers tangled in her skirts. “You must have realized that I started wavering in my convictions.”

“Is that because of yesterday?” His face became grim.

“No!” she hastened to reassure him and then grimaced. “Yes? Partly? I don’t know. I would be lying if I said I hadn’t been considering it from the start. However, our physical attraction certainly helped to push me farther in this direction.”

He grinned then, his boyish grin. “Can’t resist me, can you?”

“William!” she reproached while her cheeks burnt from embarrassment and need.

He stepped closer, crowding her, before placing two warm fingers under her chin. He tipped her face up and gently pressed his lips against hers.

Victoria’s eyes fell closed, and her hands clutched his shoulders for stability as her legs betrayed her.

He pulled away and pressed a kiss to her forehead before cupping her face between his palms. “We can have a deep conversation about everything tonight. After I get back.”

“About everything?” Victoria beamed at him.

He chuckled and kissed her nose. “As much as we can get through in one night.”

Victoria immediately perked up. “Then I am going to make a special dinner for this occasion!”

William let out a laugh. “What kind of dinner?”

Victoria grimaced. “Stew? But all on my own this time.”

“I can’t wait,” William said with a chuckle, then wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed her soundly.

By the time he pulled away, they were both panting, heat collected in between her thighs, and all she wanted was for him to stay so she could pull him into bed and stay there the entire day.

Instead, he just brushed her lips with his thumb, said his goodbye, and strode out of the house.

\* \* \*

William finished most of his business dealings rather quickly, but he had to take deceptive routes because he noticed more and more people following him each day.

There was something in the air. Perhaps someone from his past had come to collect on the debt and take his life. Perhaps it was the King’s men coming to finally throw him into gaol. Whatever it was, William didn’t intend to find out.

Before he went home, however, he needed to make one more stop. Guiding his horse down narrow side paths, William

came upon the secluded wooden cottage he'd visited often of late.

He paused on the stairs leading to the door and looked around. The eerie feeling that had followed him the entire day intensified, something in the pit of his stomach warning him to turn back, to stay away tonight.

He ignored the feeling.

Instead, he climbed the stairs and knocked on the door.

A beautiful woman with dark brown hair and light blue eyes opened the door. "William!" she exclaimed happily, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Please, come in."

"Good evening, Melissa." William stepped inside and locked the door behind him. He walked into the kitchen and peered out the window.

"Is anything amiss?" Her voice wasn't worried. She left the worrying to him.

"I am not quite certain." He turned to look at her. "There wasn't anyone lurking around your house today, was there?"

Melissa clasped her hands together. "No, I haven't noticed anyone. Did you?"

William shrugged. "Probably nothing to be worried about. Although it is better to stay on the safe side. Do you still have the pistol I gave you?"

"Of course." She waved a hand toward another room. "It's in the bedroom."

William nodded. “Well, keep it by your side, just in case.”

“Always,” she answered with a smile.

“It will be better when the new house is finished. It’s not in a better area than this.”

Melissa’s smile widened. “This place is nice, too.”

William looked around the small and dark cottage with drafty windows and low ceilings. “Yes, well, the new one will be better.” William cleared his throat. “How is Neville?”

Melissa’s face instantly split into a smile. “He is better. The fever has finally broken this afternoon.”

“Wonderful news!”

“Yes, but he is sleeping now. Which is also good, I suppose. Now you don’t have to visit as often,” she added softly.

“I would visit more if I could,” William said awkwardly. “But I already feel as if I’ve put you in enough danger.”

“You didn’t,” she reassured. “Would you like to stay for supper?”

“I would love to,” he said, his tension suddenly dissipating and warmth enveloped his being. “However, I have... um... special plans for supper.”

“Really?” Melissa raised a brow. “How special?”

“The kind of special that leads to forever, I hope.”

Melissa’s mouth slackened, but her stunned expression quickly changed into one of concentration. “Is that blood on

your face?”

William snorted. “Why would I have blood on my face?” Melissa raised her brow and he waved her implication away. “If anything, it is probably jam.”

Melissa took out her crisp white handkerchief and gently wiped at the spot on his chin. “There, now you don’t look as if you murdered someone.”

William chuckled. “Thank you. Now I better leave.”

“Of course.” Melissa deftly stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket. “In case there’s more... jam on your way home.”

William smiled and hugged her shoulders. “Tell Neville I stopped by.”

“Visit us for dinner next week?”

William nodded and headed for the door, the eerie feeling creeping over him again. Not wanting to worry Melissa further, he stepped outside and waited to hear the lock clicking behind him before slowly making his way toward his horse.

Wind blew into his face, bringing with it the foul stench of unwashed bodies. He winced and looked around. Everything was quiet, but he could feel something lurking in the darkness. He had a dagger in his boot, but he had left his sword cane hanging off the saddle. If he reached it quickly, he might have a chance against whatever foe was lying in wait.

William dashed for his horse, only to skid to a halt as the barrel of a pistol loomed before his eyes. William glanced past the cold, oiled metal to a man several inches taller and



considerably heavier than William's lean frame. The man's unwashed odor wafted on the wind, mingling with the pungent scent of horse and damp earth.

William could drop to the ground, unsheathe the dagger, and stab his opponent in the gut before the man managed to pull the trigger. But just as he thought that, movement flashed in his periphery—three more figures emerging from the surrounding trees and brush.

William's heart hammered as the men fanned out, encircling him with ominous purpose. The leader kept his pistol aimed unwaveringly at William's face, a grim smile twisting his ragged features.

“How can I help you, gentlemen?” William asked with an easy smile and nonchalant attitude.

“You have a price on your head, Bastard,” the man with a pistol said in a hoarse, unpleasant voice. “And we are here to collect on the bounty.”

\* \* \*

At first, it was anger that overtook Victoria. She'd waited hours for William to come home to a table laden with food, freshly baked bread she had worked meticulously on and stew that had burned a little and wasn't at all perfect, but as well as she could manage. She'd even brought up a bottle of wine from the larder, only she could not open it on her own.

As time progressed, the anger only strengthened. If he didn't want to talk to her about his past and present, to put

their issues behind them, then why even agree to it? Why bring her here in the first place? She had worked so hard to accept everything he threw at her. The tiny tower with no servants? She made it her home. No cook? She went so far as to learn to make stew. No guests at the house? She made a little haven by the hearth where she spent her time reading and otherwise occupying her time.

And the only thing she'd asked in return was to be honest with her completely, to spend an evening opening up his soul to her, and he couldn't even do that!

But once the stew cooled into a cold and sticky mix, so did her ire. After a few hours more, her anger dissolved into worry. It wasn't unlike him to spend the night away from the house. However, he had promised he would come home for supper. And she didn't remember a single instance when William had gone back on his promise.

But the worst part was that even if something did happen to him, Victoria would never find out. She didn't even know where to look for him, where to even start. Where did he go?

After pacing around the house in worry, Victoria decided to find some help. She exited the tower, filled with uncertainty. She didn't even know where their stables were! She had always ordered a carriage to be ready by the front door either through William or by telling Matthew at the end of their outings. Now, what was she to do?

She stood in front of the tower, the wind whipping her hair into her face, her arms wrapped around her torso, feeling

completely lost.

The sounds of footsteps alerted her to another's presence, and Victoria whirled around to find John, one of her guards, emerging from behind the trees.

"It's just me, Your Highness!" he said, his hands up in the air. "Did you wish to go for a walk? I can accompany you if that's the case."

She furrowed her brows. "Are you always here, waiting for me to exit the tower?"

He nodded. "Either me or Bryce. We take turns."

*Interesting.* "I need Matthew to bring around the carriage. And..." *And where will I go?* She shook her head, changing her mind. "Where is he? I wish to speak to him."

"He is at the stables, rubbing down the horses."

"Take me to him," she commanded confidently, and to her surprise, he complied. For some reason, a part of her still thought of herself as a prisoner in this place.

Perhaps, she hadn't quite adapted as well as she thought.

It took them about ten minutes to get to the stables, and Matthew greeted them with surprise evident on his face.

He bowed low. "Your Highness, what a surprise!" Then he threw a disapproving glance at John.

"William hasn't returned home," she said. "And he promised he would. So, something obviously happened to him. I need you to tell me where he could be."

Matthew shifted from foot to foot looking down. “He doesn’t tell me where he goes. But it’s only just past midnight. Surely, he will return.”

“No, he promised to return for supper. And it’s been hours!”

“Your Highness, even if I knew where he’d gone, I would never take you there.”

Victoria reared back as if he’d slapped her. Something in his tone stoked the fires of her ire. Something that hinted at the fact that she wasn’t allowed in places he frequented.

“What if he does not come back at all? What if he is imprisoned or dead?” she cried.

“I have clear instructions, Your Highness. If William does not return within twenty-four hours after his leave, I am to send a note to the Duke of Kensington to collect you.”

Victoria frowned. “Why the Duke of Kensington?”

Matthew hesitated. “Because if William is gone, and there’s a chance that your life is in peril, only the duke will be able to protect you.”

# Chapter 21



The burlap sack was ripped from William's head, and he blinked against the sudden change in lighting. It wasn't particularly bright, but a few candles on the windowsills paired with the pallid light streaming through the windows were enough for him to make out the interior of the room.

Except, there wasn't much to see. A trunk sat a few feet away, and... was it a bed in the corner? It wasn't as tall as a regular four-poster bed, but it certainly looked like a heap of sheets on top of a mattress.

While he admired the decor, the same burly man who had caught him off guard earlier, stood pointing a pistol at William's head from a foot or two away, and another man placed chains around his wrists and ankles, binding him to the wall.

*Great.* Just what he needed.

"I have a supper I am late to. If you'd care to unbind me, that would be lovely," William said saucily.

"I wouldn't hold your breath," the man with the gun said, his foul breath hitting William's face.

"And yet, I can't resist," William said as he indeed held his breath so he wouldn't cast up his accounts.

Once the chains were secured, the men backed away and walked out of the room.

There was a brief conversation outside the door. William could not make out the entire dialog, but he surmised it was about exchanging money, and at the end, he heard the jingle of a coin purse.

He wondered idly how much his head fetched—hopefully a substantial sum.

Then footsteps moved toward the room and the person he least expected to see walked inside.

William let out a sigh. “Porter. What an unpleasant turn of events.”

“It certainly is for you,” Porter said, his disfigured lips twisting in a snarl. Then he pulled up a chair and sat across from William.

“Is this your house?” William asked.

“Why would I tell you?”

William shrugged. “I’m just wondering why you would have chains in a guestroom.” Then his eyes widened as he attempted to shake out his arms. “Oh, no. Don’t tell me. Is that why I am here? Because I assure you, I am not interested in you that way. I know you might have perceived the slash on your lips as a flirtation, but I didn’t mean it like that.”

Porter looked unamused. “You think you’re funny, don’t you? A court jester.”

“I think I am charming.” William smiled widely, artificially so.

Porter folded his arms across his chest. “You’re smiling now, but once the leader of the Brotherhood arrives, it won’t be so amusing.”

William chuckled. “The Brotherhood of the Crimson Fist? I really doubt you have a path to the leader. You’re new, right? Want to make a name for yourself? If so, I wouldn’t brag about catching me. I am really not that big of a fish to interest them.”

“Perhaps not as William the Bastard.” Porter shrugged. “But I would love to see the reactions on their faces when they realize that I, the young, new member, figured out who the infamous Erebus is.”

It took William but a moment to realize Porter was serious before he burst into laughter. He laughed so much that he almost wheezed. “What? You think I am Erebus, the leader of the Shadows, the group that is the only greatest threat to your Brotherhood?”

“That’s right! You’re the only one who makes sense. You know everything about everyone. You’ve blackmailed half the country. How else would you have gotten a princess to marry you?”

William wrinkled his nose at the insinuation that Victoria would never fall for him unless he blackmailed her... which was partially true. “My charm?”

“Once you disappeared from London, the blackmails ended! You returned and here we are. Besides, how else would you have known that I am a part of the Brotherhood?”

William jangled his chains as his wrists started to ache. “Because for a secret society, you are quite brazen with branding a crimson fist on your bodies.”

“When would you have ever seen me naked?” Porter’s eyes narrowed for a moment before he bit his lip. “The House of Pain and Pleasure. Are those whores part of the Shadows too?”

William couldn’t help it. He laughed again. “You are clever, very clever. Except even an idiot knows that the Shadows are an aristocratic group! Only aristos are allowed. And I am not one. Why would they let me be their leader? You’re a nobleman; would you make me your leader? Or would you have eaten me alive? Besides, it’s passed on through primogeniture. So, even if my father *was* Erebus—which he wasn’t—then Kensington would be Erebus now.”

“For someone who claims he is not a Shadow, you sure seem to know a lot about them.”

William grinned. “Now *that’s* what I do. I know things. I trade in information. I also know a lot about the Brotherhood. Do you think I am your leader, too? And if you tell anyone that I am Erebus, you’ll get laughed out of the Brotherhood. Not that I care. In fact, it would be for your benefit.”

“And why is that?”



“Have you any idea what the Brotherhood does? What you’ve gotten yourself into? You’re a good man... well, compared to them. You have not done anything wrong. Believe me, I looked. Aside from kissing my wife—which is an egregious sin, I have to admit—the only thing I could find was your proclivity for chains and whips. Now, I might not see the allure, because,” William raised his arms as much as he could with his shackles on, “let’s be honest, every time I am in chains, it does not end well. But it’s not even on the list of things I condemn. And trust me when I say that list is very short.”

“It is obvious that you think I am stupid. But I am anything but.” Porter bristled, shifting in his seat. “All the people who were blackmailed by Erebus had ties to the House of Pain and Pleasure. The moment you threatened to expose me, I made the connection. But it took you slicing my lips for me to realize how dangerous you are.”

William licked his lips. “The Shadows are a vigilante group. They consider themselves a force of good. Do I look like a force of good to you?”

“You look like someone looking to get out of those chains any way you can.”

“That is true,” William agreed. “But only because I have supper to get to.”

“You won’t be getting anywhere. You’re going to spend the night here. And then I am bringing you and my evidence before my peers.”

William grimaced. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. For your sake. Nobody is going to take you seriously. My involvement with the Shadows is easily refutable. However, if you let me out right now, I shan’t slice your face for the second time.”

Porter stood and laughed. “You make a lot of threats for someone who is in chains.”

“It’s not my first time chained to a wall, Porter. And I wager it won’t be the last. Somehow, I always turn out on top.”

Without another word, Porter smirked and left the room, locking the door behind him.

If Porter thought that his chains were enough to hold William, he was sadly mistaken.

William had a pin attached to every pair of breeches he wore especially for situations like this. He pulled out the pin and diligently worked on uncuffing himself. It took him longer than usual because his hands were bound apart rather than together, but after about an hour of concentrated effort, he managed to undo all of his chains.

He looked out the window and shuddered. It was a three-story drop, and not a trellis in sight. He rummaged through the trunk and aside from whips and other... recreational aids, he found nothing.

Wiping his hands on his breeches, William tiptoed to the door and pressed his ear against it. No sounds came from the

corridor on the other side.

He exited the room and slowly walked down the corridor. He looked down the stairs; a few footmen lined the base of the staircase, and a couple more stood by the main door. He wasn't going to use the main entrance to escape; that would be too brazen of an act even for him. But he wanted to find out where Porter was.

At that moment, Porter's voice came from another room, calling for his butler.

Satisfied with this knowledge, William returned to the corridor and looked for avenues of escape.

The layouts of most of the townhouses were extremely similar. So, he walked toward the room that was likely to be Porter's bedchamber and entered.

He made his way to the window and opened it. The opening was of a decent size, and a trellis ran down the wall.

*Perfect.*

Before jumping out, another idea crept into William's mind.

He walked toward Porter's writing desk and scribbled a note.

*I could have killed you. I didn't. Remember that.*

*W*

He placed it on the bed before escaping through the window.

“Sorry, Porter,” William murmured. “I have places to be.”

\* \* \*

The door to the tower creaked open, and William appeared on the doorstep, dirty, disheveled, and bedraggled. His blond locks were tousled and matted, having lost all their shine, and streaks of dirt smudged his rugged features. The pungent aroma of horse and stale sweat preceded him, making Victoria’s nose twitch.

As soon as he locked the door and turned toward the room, Victoria flew off her chair and flung herself into his arms. She did not care about the grime or the smell... for the most part. She was only happy to see her husband back home, healthy and in one piece. William’s arms closed around her, his nose burrowing in her hair as he inhaled deeply.

As she relaxed in his arms, letting peace wash over her, another feeling fought to escape. Victoria pulled away and thumped his chest in frustration. “Where have you been?” she cried.

“Oof!” William grimaced and rubbed his chest as if she’d hurt him, and Victoria immediately, covered his hand with hers, trying to soothe his pain. “Well, dear, I was abducted by your lover, Porter.”

“What?” Victoria’s shock rapidly shifted from shock to anger and then to annoyance all in the span of a moment. “He is *not* my lover!”

“I know. I was being hyperbolic.”

“Why did he abduct you? What did he do? What did he want?” Anger reached for the surface again, and it was William’s turn to soothe her. He took her hand in his and squeezed.

“He thinks I am someone I’m not. And he actually thought he could hold me in his room of depravity.”

Victoria frowned. “A room of what?”

“It doesn’t matter.” William waved the issue away.

“Come, sit!” Victoria led him farther into the room, but he shook his head.

“My clothing is all dirty, I traversed half the distance on foot before getting a horse. Details are unimportant, but I’d rather get straight into a bath. Do we have water ready by the fire?”

“It needs heating,” Victoria said absently before shaking her head. “What should we do? Should we alert the constables? O-or perhaps the King’s men?”

William let out a chuckle as he placed a bucket of water above the fire. “Darling, nobody would care. I am not a nobleman.”

“But you are my husband!” she cried, her hands fisted at her sides.

He smiled. “Touching, really, how protective you can be. But do not worry, my sweet. Porter doesn’t pose a real threat. I already gave an order to have him watched, however. And

you're going to have double as many guards as before, just in case."

"Me? You are the one he abducted!"

"Yes, and I can take care of myself. You, on the other hand, cannot. From now on, I really don't think you should ever be alone in this house." He scrubbed his face with his hands. "In fact, I think you should stay at the Kensingtons' for a while."

Victoria reared back. "You want me to leave?"

William grimaced. "I want you safe."

"So, you do think that I am in peril?"

"No, not necessarily." William leaned his back against the hearth. "I don't think Porter is the peril. But it is better to be on the safe side."

"And you think I am safer with Kensington than with you?"

"Sweetness, nobody's going to snatch a princess from a duke's townhouse."

"But nobody even knows where we live! Isn't this safer?" She raised her arm to indicate their tower.

"Not when you are alone, no." He shook his head for emphasis. "I can't be worried about you every time I am out."

"Then I won't be alone!"

"As much as I would love to stay locked inside this tower with you for twenty-four hours a day, I have to find the thugs

who abducted me on Porter's behalf. I have to silence them and find out if anyone else is looking for me. I also need to make sure Porter doesn't open his mouth and spread lies about me. All in all, an honest week's work." His voice was rough, not a hint of playfulness. She almost didn't recognize it.

Victoria swallowed. "If you want me to stay with the Kensingtons during the day, that is fine. But we have a deal. And I am going to stay true to it. So, every night when you're done with your business, you will take me home."

William's gaze softened then, a gentle smile on his lips. She was glad to see that expression on his face. "As you wish."

Victoria approached him, wishing for a kiss, but he stopped her halfway, with an outstretched hand. "It's better if I take a bath before I can kiss you properly. I've been chained to the wall in Porter's... room of depravity. Who knows what else other than dirt I got smeared on my hands and clothes." He shuddered in thought.

"Should I help you... bathe and heal?"

He chuckled and crossed his arms over his chest. "I would love nothing more. But I am extremely tired. And you no doubt are, too. And if you start bathing me, it will take a lot longer than necessary. Go to bed, and we'll talk more in the morning."

"But—"

William tilted his chin toward the clock on the mantelpiece. “It’s after three in the morning. You should get some sleep. We’ll need to wake up early.”

“Very well,” Victoria agreed rather easily. She didn’t want to argue with him. And it seemed that this event had triggered past hurt or perhaps he was simply very tired.

So, she went to the bedroom and prepared for bed.

William came upstairs a few minutes later, lugging a bucket of steaming-hot water, and a moment later, carrying a bucket of cold water and filling his bath.

When Victoria finished brushing her hair, she went into the dressing room to dress for bed. Once she had donned her nightgown, she noticed William’s nightshirt on the shelf. She took it out and brought it closer to the bathtub.

William was clearly lost in the moment, and his breath, steady and content, was the only sound breaking the silence.

He briefly glanced toward her and smiled before returning to relaxing in the tub.

Victoria decided to leave him to his own devices. It was evident he needed this time to himself.

She collected his dirty clothing from the floor in a heap, taking in the musty scent of sweat and dirt clinging to the fabric. She lifted the pile and carried it to a hamper, dumping it with the rest of the clothing in need of washing.

She turned to leave when her eyes were drawn to something out of place. A crisp-white piece of a handkerchief



peeked out of his coat pocket, in stark contrast to the sweaty and dirt-stricken clothes she had just handled. Curiosity piqued, Victoria retrieved it carefully.

Her fingers explored the soft texture, and she couldn't help but bring it to her nose. It was perfumed. And it smelled of roses.

## Chapter 22



Victoria arrived at Caroline's house quite early. William insisted he had to take care of the business from the other night, so he dropped her off at the Kensington townhouse and went on his way.

Victoria spent her morning worrying about William, the handkerchief, and all the events of the night before.

Had he truly been abducted? Was he lying? Where did he get the perfumed handkerchief? And most importantly, why didn't he kiss her?

He hadn't even let her kiss him last night. He hadn't demanded his good night kiss and hadn't even kissed her this morning!

She didn't want to believe he had a mistress. She didn't want to believe that he was lying to her. But doubts screamed in her mind.

Not only because of the few nights he had spent away from home but mostly because he refused to tell her everything about himself. What was he hiding? Even if it wasn't a mistress, it was something else. And Victoria wasn't certain she would be happy with any answer.

Suspensions whirling in her mind, Victoria paced around the Kensington house while Caroline was busy with her chores.

She was preparing a ball to welcome the Earl of Pembroke as the heir to the Duke of Wolverstone. Since Wolverstone had fallen ill, Pembroke was now officially taking over all of his duties in the House of Lords and on his estates.

Victoria worried that celebrating while the duke was on his deathbed was in bad taste, but Caroline insisted that it was Wolverstone's idea.

Since Pembroke had spent most of his life as a recluse, he wanted to make sure that everyone knew of Wolverstone's approval of his heir.

When the clock struck noon, slowly but surely, all their friends started gathering in the parlor for nuncheon.

Olivia, Viscountess St. John, and her sister-in-law Helen arrived first. Annalise, the Countess of Payne, was next. And the last one to grace their presence was Lavinia.

After brief greetings, everyone settled in a circle and started chatting about their children. Since all the women in the group except for Victoria were mothers, most of their conversations revolved around that. This meant that Victoria rarely, if ever, participated in those conversations, occasionally making subtle remarks about Amelia, Lavinia's daughter.

Victoria had never really had a passion for children. She'd always thought she wanted them because that's what everyone said, but as her friends became mothers, she never felt the tug at her heart of wishing for a babe of her own.

The conversation drifted and morphed until Lavinia turned to Victoria. “What about you? I am always eagerly waiting for Thursday to hear more news about your husband’s escapades.”

*Escapades, yes.* That was exactly the word. “Last night he was abducted,” Victoria said simply, and the women gasped.

Victoria briefly recounted the entire story starting with Porter and their shared kiss, William’s dislike for the man, and now this abduction. And then she told everyone how she was afraid this wasn’t the entire story because she’d found a crisp, white, perfumed handkerchief in his pocket.

“Let me see if I understand this correctly,” Caroline said. “He knows every step you take and everywhere you go. Yet he leaves sometimes for nights on end without telling you anything other than he has business to attend to?”

Put like that, Victoria did sound incredibly naive. “Yes?” she asked uncertainly.

“And now you fished a perfumed handkerchief from his pocket after he’s been absent the entire night?” Olivia chimed in.

“Do you think he has a mistress?” Annalise asked, with a wrinkle between her brows.

“No!” Victoria dismissed it out of hand, although her cup shook a little in her hand as she brought it to her lips.

“No.”

“Of course not!”

“That would be ridiculous!” everyone echoed.

And then silence fell onto their circle like a bad omen. Victoria managed to take only a tiny sip and was forced to put the cup back in her saucer lest she spill it in its entirety. “You don’t think he would do that, do you?”

The shakes of their head and gestures of denial became less confident.

“You were married for two years without any contact,” Olivia said with a shrug. “Who is to say he doesn’t have a mistress in town?”

“I was away from my husband for two years and neither of us had found lovers or mistresses during that time,” Annalise countered.

“Yes, but Blake was going through a traumatic ordeal while you were grieving. And you were ready to marry another man, might I add,” Lavinia chimed in.

“Men can be quite selfish in their needs,” Caroline added. “And William is the most selfish of them all.”

Victoria looked down, her heart heavy as a rock. That was not the reassurance she was looking for.

“Are you sure it isn’t his handkerchief?” Lavinia asked cautiously.

“Aside from knowing which soap we use to wash our handkerchiefs and which perfumes we have in our house, I also happen to know that he carries exclusively blood-red

handkerchiefs,” Victoria said and pulled out the handkerchief he’d given her the night they met for reference. “Like this.”

Lavinia wrinkled her nose. “Why are they all blood red?”

“Probably to hide the sight of blood once he wipes his hands on it?” Caroline ventured a guess.

“Yes!” Olivia said excitedly. “Perhaps he doesn’t have a mistress; maybe he just killed a woman.”

A brief pause was followed by chortles of laughter.

“I don’t think that’s better, dear,” Caroline said.

Olivia covered her mouth with her hand, holding back a chuckle. “I have to admit to not thinking my theory through.”

“I don’t think he has a mistress,” Helen said rather confidently for a woman whose late husband kept not one but several mistresses during their marriage.

“You don’t?” Victoria forced herself to swallow hope.

Helen let out a deep breath. “I don’t know William very well, obviously. But I have been in a marriage where my late husband had a few mistresses the entire time. He didn’t keep it from me, so I knew he was visiting mistresses. I know that I am just speaking from my own experience and yours will be different. But I am just now starting to realize how wrong our relationship was all this time. All the time I thought he loved me, he just loved the attention I gave to him. He loved being loved. And that’s why he kept mistresses. He was too charming, dare I say beguiling.”

Victoria pursed her lips. “William is quite charming.”

“Yes, but he doesn’t care to be. Everybody hates him. *Everybody*. And yet the only person he seems to care about is you. So, I highly doubt that he would have you locked up in his home and go to his mistress.”

“I have to agree,” Lavinia said. “And I know what you’re going to say, that I am charmed by him as well, but of everyone here, I was probably the only one who saw you two interact, and the way he looks at you... I just don’t think he has eyes for anyone else.”

“What can you really tell by a look?” Caroline murmured under her breath. “And why does it even matter? Why do you care if he’s romping around with other women? As long as he is not bothering you, I’d think you’d be glad that he is gone at night.”

Victoria bit her lip. She didn’t confide her doubt and her conflicting feelings toward William with Caroline or the others. Only Lavinia and Frau Elinor had been present during that conversation. And even they didn’t know the full truth of what had transpired between them. They didn’t know about the day she had made stew or the morning when they baked bread together. They didn’t know that her heart skipped a beat every time she saw him. And she didn’t plan on sharing those details with them.

So, she raised her chin and lied, “It’s not about whether I care that he is with another woman or not. It’s just the principle of things. He is forcing me to live with him for three

months as his wife. So, he shouldn't be seeing other women in the meantime. But I don't even think he has a mistress. The fact that he is keeping secrets bothers me the most."

"Well, if you really want to find out, there are ways," Caroline said after a sip of tea.

"Are you suggesting spying on him?"

Caroline lifted her shoulder in a delicate shrug. "I can do it if you want."

"Or I can ask my husband to," Olivia suggested.

"So can I," Helen chimed in.

Victoria let out a chuckle. "What a family of spies we are. Thank you all, but he forbade you, Caroline, and all your husbands from visiting our house. If you don't even know where we live, how will you be able to follow him when he leaves?"

Caroline waved a careless hand. "Do not worry, dear. I'll take care of it. You are basically living in our house now. Following him from my own home will be a piece of cake."

"And you have a ball to organize," Victoria reminded her.

"Pft." Caroline took a sip of tea. "I can organize a ball with my eyes closed."

Victoria frowned and wanted to ask more because Caroline had sure seemed nervous about the ball to now be so nonchalant about it, but Helen cleared her throat.



“But while Caroline is following him, make certain that you spend as little time as possible with him.”

Victoria smiled sadly. “Considering I am spending most of my days at Caroline’s house because of his insistence, I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

Helen grimaced. “It’s nights that I am worried about.”

“Oh, yes,” Annalise agreed eagerly. “Do not sleep in the same bed with him.”

Victoria stilled. “Why not?”

“Because if you spend time sleeping in the same bed as him, it can lead to kissing and other things,” Helen said carefully. “You might get attached to him. And then if Caroline finds out that he is indeed seeing a mistress, it’s going to hurt a lot more.”

“Um...” Victoria ran a finger against the edge of her cup. *It’s too late for that.* “We only have one bed in the tower.”

Lavinia covered her mouth with her hand, hiding her smile. Annalise outright laughed, and Caroline raised her eyes heavenward. “Do not tell me you consummated the marriage already.”

“No!” Victoria said emphatically, trying to force her memories of their kisses and other activities out of her mind, as her cheeks blazed with fire. That wasn’t really a consummation, was it? “Yes?”

“Oh, dear!” The room was drowned in exclamations while the women seemed to look uncomfortable, blushing, and

smiling timidly.

“What? Why? Do you think it’s too late?” Victoria asked hastily.

“Too late to avoid becoming too attached to him?” Annalise asked. “Nobody can tell that but you. But please, be careful. Perhaps try to stay away from him from now on and until Caroline finds out the truth.”

Victoria huffed a breath. “How do I do that? Should I find ways to dissuade him from making advances toward me?”

*And dissuade myself from making advances toward him.*

“A nightcap!” Annalise exclaimed, her hands raised in the air.

“Pardon me?” Victoria raised a brow.

“Blake hated the nightcap,” Annalise clarified as she regained her composure. “Not saying it will dissuade William entirely, but in combination with other things...”

“What other things?” Victoria frowned.

“Nightgowns!” Now it was Helen’s turn to be excited. “Those billowing, frilly ones, the ones that envelop you from head to toe!”

Victoria swallowed an uncomfortable chuckle. That’s what she’d been wearing all along. Were they inappropriate for the marital bed? They didn’t seem to deter William at all.

“Oh! Smells can dissuade,” said Olivia, who was a perfumer. “Sometimes when I make perfume, it makes Jarvis

sneeze or gives me a headache.”

That actually sounded like a sensible idea. “You don’t happen to have some of these saved on your shelves, do you?” Victoria leaned closer to Olivia.

“Don’t worry. I have just the thing.”

\* \* \*

The next day, while at Caroline’s, Victoria received a vial of perfume from Olivia and a note.

*Use in moderation.*

And now, as she sat in her bedroom inside the tower, getting ready for Lord Norfolk’s musicale, she was ready to try out the magic elixir.

She doubted she needed the perfume at all as William had barely touched her or looked her way since the night of his alleged abduction.

He was too busy, too tired, and too preoccupied with his thoughts to indulge Victoria with an intimate embrace. And therefore, the perfume Victoria was going to apply was for her benefit. Not his.

Because if she had to sit next to William the entire night, listening to a musical performance, his arm brushing against hers, his heat by her side, the scent of his skin mixed with his spicy cologne wafting to her nose, she needed something to help her avoid jumping into his arms.

Gertrude helped her get dressed and made an elaborate updo. She was very happy with her work and was whistling happily the entire time. When she was done and left the tower, Victoria took the vial of perfume and dabbed a little on her neck and a little more on her hair.

It didn't smell too bad. Perhaps a bit pungent, but not nearly enough to cause a headache. After a moment's thought, Victoria dabbed a bit more on her wrists and between her breasts.

Perhaps now she would—

Victoria's nose twitched and she let out a sneeze. And then another and another.

She dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief. Were they watering? They certainly felt itchy.

William, who was washing up in the dressing room, rushed into their bedchamber. His brows knitted in a frown as he pressed the back of his hand to her forehead. "Do you feel sick? I heard you sneeze."

"No, I—" Her nose twitched and she turned away, letting out another sneeze. *Oh, no!* Was it the magic of the perfume? Perhaps she did use too much.

She dashed toward the dressing room and splashed some water onto her face. It seemed to help a little bit, but the smell was now surrounding her, making her eyes water all over again. Why had she dabbed that perfume all over herself?

“What’s wrong?” William strode into the room with a look of worry in his eyes.

“It’s the perfume,” Victoria said honestly. “I think I used too much, and now it’s making me sneeze and my eyes water. Isn’t it bothering you?”

He shrugged, the knave! He didn’t seem to care at all. She’d gotten it with the aim of repelling his advances, and not only were there no advances to repel, but he also didn’t seem to mind the smell of the perfume! “It smells a bit pungent, I have to admit. I prefer your natural scent either way.”

Victoria just blinked at him before another fit of sneezes came over her.

“I think that’s enough,” he said gently. “Let’s get that perfume off you. Where did you apply it?”

He took a cotton cloth and dabbed it in water, ready to wipe her off. Victoria’s eyes watered once more, whether from the perfume or frustration, she wasn’t certain. “Everywhere,” she admitted. “My wrists, my neck, I even splashed some in my hair.”

The face William made was almost comical. And if the urge to sneeze didn’t overpower every other feeling, she would have laughed. It was obvious that William was tempted to laugh, too. Although his facial expression showed a bit of pity as well. With a shake of his head, he leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. “I shall prepare a bath.”

## Chapter 23



Victoria sat in the fresh and warm bath water, her head thrown back, her throat exposed to his view, her eyes closed.

Her tantalizing body was covered by clear water but it wasn't nearly enough to hide her beautiful breasts, her thin waist, the dark patch between her legs...

At first, she'd asked him to leave as she cleaned herself. She'd washed her hair at least twice and scrubbed her skin raw trying to get rid of the smell of that awful perfume, prompting William to haul her out of the bath and change the murky water for fresh, while she sat in the corner of the dressing room, wrapped in a towel, looking miserable.

Now that he'd lowered her into the bath, with his sleeves wet and his cock hard, he couldn't quite make himself leave.

"You seem tired," he said as he lowered himself onto his haunches by her side, his hand dipping into the bath. "Do you need help washing yourself?"

She peeked at him through half-closed eyes. "I think I just want to lie here forever."

He chuckled. "I wouldn't mind."

She licked her lips, and his cock swelled even more. He swallowed. "We missed the musicale, I am afraid."

“Hmm...” was her only answer.

“You know what we also missed?”

“What?”

He cleared his throat. “Two kisses.”

She turned toward him, her eyes wide now. “What?”

“Two kisses,” he repeated. “You haven’t kissed me two nights in a row.”

Instead of a playful gleam in her eyes and an eager kiss to his lips, she frowned. “Neither of those missed kisses was my fault at all.”

He cocked his head to the side, startled by her reaction. “Yes, I was abducted. Such an inconvenience.”

She shifted in the bath and looked at him as if trying to stare into his heart as if searching for something she could read in his eyes. “And where were you abducted from?”

An odd question. “From the street.”

“Hmm...” She looked away again.

“Why did you decide to try this new perfume?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

She shrugged. “Perhaps I thought you wanted a change. Which perfume do you like best?”

He smiled. “As I said, my favorite scent is the scent of your skin. No perfume is required. Actually, my favorite scent is probably the scent of your desire,” he amended. As he predicted, her cheeks took on a rosy tint. Finally.

“I thought you liked the scent of roses,” she said with that odd look in her eyes again.

“Why would you think so?” When she didn’t respond, William couldn’t take her strange and cold behavior. So, he stood and stripped off his shirt.

Her eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

“Clearly, you are in a bad mood. And I think that’s because you’re lonely in that bath.”

“What?” Now her eyes were round from surprise. “No! I’m not lone—”

Before she could finish her sentence, William stepped into the bath.

“You’re still wearing your breeches!” she cried, but to his joy, that odd expression was gone from her face, and her eyes sparkled with laughter.

His hands clutching the rim of the bath, he crouched lower. Victoria sat up, her hand on his shoulder, her breasts bobbing in the air, pushing him up. “No!” she shrieked with a chuckle. “This water is so clean. You can’t sit here with your dirty breeches!”

William gasped in mock affront. “First off, they are not dirty. But if you wish me to strip off my breeches, just say so.”

With that, he straightened in the bath and quickly undressed, water sloshing all over the floor, and threw his breeches over the rim of the bath. Victoria now sat in a



crouched position, her mouth forming an ‘O’ of surprise, her hands on her chest, hiding her succulent nipples.

He lowered himself to his knees, the warm water washing over him up to his hips and snaked his arms around her waist. “Better?” he whispered, his voice already hoarse from passion.

Her breathing grew shallow, her eyes darkening with desire. “William,” she said. The word was a plea, a benediction.

William decided not to wait any longer. He simply pulled her closer and took her mouth in a demanding kiss.

\* \* \*

Victoria wrapped her arms around William’s shoulders, clinging to him with all her might.

God, she’d missed his kisses, his touch!

It had only been two days that they had missed their nightly kisses, she knew, but it felt like an eternity.

She was supposed to be strong, to keep her distance. She knew that, too. Yet with him so near, joking with her, kissing her, she could only think of kissing him back.

Perhaps she was weak, unable to resist his charm.

Or maybe deep down, she trusted that he would confide in her fully when he was ready. Maybe he needed proof of her commitment first. After all, she was the one holding back.

Maybe these were all excuses, so she could keep kissing him.

Or perhaps her heart ached for him, called for him, regardless of her apprehension and her vows to stay away. Caution be damned.

Their kiss was a wild joining of lips, teeth, tongues, and souls.

His fingers entangled in her wet hair, and Victoria sighed at the feeling it evoked. She tilted her head back, letting him fist her hair in his hands and tug.

He broke the kiss, his lips now trailing down her throat, eagerly licking and devouring her.

He took one of her breasts into his mouth, causing her to arch her back and push more of herself into his mouth, demanding him to suck on her delectable nipple.

William chuckled, his hand caressing her other breast and gently circling her nipple, playfully teasing it with his touch, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger.

Victoria couldn't deal with the amount of passion and hunger within her. Her skin tingled and ached, making her twist and scratch and claw at William, needing some kind of relief, needing something she could not achieve by herself, while there was a profound emptiness within her she longed to fill, and she wanted William to fill it.

Her hands roamed his body until her fingers wrapped around his aroused length. They both moaned at the contact, as she relished the feel of hot steel beneath smooth velvety skin.

One hand squeezed his length just as he had taught her to, and her other hand grabbed his shoulder, her fingers biting into his flesh, as she moved to straddle his hips.

William drew her closer, seating her on top of him as the water sloshed around them, flooding the floor.

Victoria raised herself on her knees and guided his throbbing erection toward her core.

William chuckled and kissed her neck and her jaw. “Not yet, sweetness.”

“Please,” she cried. “I want you there. I need you there.”

She looked into his eyes, begging him to thrust into her depths and fill the void within her.

“You’re not ready yet,” he rasped before kissing her lips, his tongue delving into her depths. Victoria returned his kisses with all her ardor. Her fingers still worked around his cock, caressing it, stroking it, feeling him swell within her fist.

William kissed her shoulder, then licked around her dark beauty mark. He loved doing that, and Victoria couldn’t help but relish in the affectionate gesture.

Feeling playful, she dipped her head and bit on his earlobe. He chuckled and she soothed the area with her tongue. William pulled back, his hands lingering on her waist, a devilish smile dancing on his lips. “You sly minx,” he chided, though his eyes had grown dark and hooded. Then added after a brief pause, “*Lubimaya.*”

Her heart clenched and for a moment, she felt as though she was falling into an abyss. The only thing anchoring her to this world were his hands, his eyes, his lips...

She leaned in and kissed him deeply, pouring every emotion she possessed into the kiss.

And that word, that damnable word sang inside her heart and surged to every corner of her body through her veins.

As they kissed, their tongues caught in the carnal dance, his fingers traveled to her core and split the seam of her intimate lips. He circled her center, gathered the wetness he found there, and traveled to her swollen nub. He proceeded to massage it gently, fingers moving in arousing ways, caressing, brushing, pressing on her most sensitive flesh.

Victoria squeezed his cock harder between her fingers, and he growled against her lips. The fingers of her other hand curled into his shoulder from pure bliss. The feeling of his arousal in her hand was empowering enough, but his reaction to her touch was what sent her over the edge.

Oh, he knew how to make her feel as though the entire world had disappeared and it was just them, just this moment, just this.

He continued caressing her, pressing all the right buttons, and then one of his fingers dipped inside her.

Victoria moaned, her back arching, her entire body demanding more contact. She rubbed her breasts against his chest, as her hand started mimicking the motions of his finger.

As his digit was dipping in and out of her, rubbing at some sacred place inside her that was driving her wild, Victoria caressed his length in short bursts, up and down, imagining his cock inside her instead of his finger. How would it feel to have his swollen cock, so hot and throbbing, against the walls of her opening? How would it feel to be filled by him so completely?

Then the second finger joined the first and Victoria cried out. Warmth seeped out of her and spread onto his hand, adding to the delight of their act. He curled his fingers, caressing that wonderful place that brought her closer to bliss, spreading the waves of pleasure coursing through her veins.

“William!” she cried and that’s when he shifted to press the tip of his cock against her core.

*Finally!*

His fingers slipped away from her center just as her hand fell away from his cock, and it was only his hot arousal pressed against her entrance.

“William,” she whispered, looking deeply into his dark blue eyes that shone like sapphires.

“Hold on to me,” he rasped.

Victoria wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held on tightly, the feel of his hot chest against hers giving her comfort. His cock probed at her center tentatively at first, then more insistently, stretching her, pushing at the walls of her core. Victoria took a deep breath and relaxed, and that’s when he thrust, seating himself deep inside her.

## Chapter 24



**T**his feeling of having Victoria in his arms, her body wrapped around him, her legs bracketing his thighs, her nipples rubbing against his chest, her breath on his ear—that was the definition of bliss.

If William died tomorrow, he would die a happy man.

Not today. Not right now. Because he hadn't felt her come with him inside her. He hadn't watched her sleep, her cheeks rosy, her lips puffy from his kisses, her body warm and pliant, relaxed after an orgasm or two.

But this feeling, right now, was what he had been waiting for his entire life. He was content now.

He felt at home.

Odd, that. He'd never really had a home.

He'd had places where he lived, slept, and ate. But he'd never felt that he belonged.

Well, he'd found it now. Here. In Victoria's arms, inside her sweet and sizzling core.

If he could spend the rest of his life inside her, he would.

But he couldn't.

As it was, he felt as though he was bursting at the seams, his cock swollen to such a size that he was afraid he was

hurting her.

“William,” she whimpered with that sweet voice of hers that only came out in the throes of passion.

*Sweet Lord, have mercy.* He was ready to climax right then and there.

His hips moved, pushing more of himself inside her, feeling the muscles of her sheath tighten around him. She was so hot, so wet, so fucking tight.

Victoria’s fingers dug into his skin as she cried out in ecstasy, while the biting of her nails on his skin sent pleasure coursing through his veins.

“Does it hurt?” he rasped, his throat constricted.

Luckily, she shook her head. “It feels... good. So, so good.”

He kissed her lips, his entire body coiled with tension. “Hold on tightly,” he warned, and as she gave a little nod, he withdrew his length before thrusting in again.

Water sloshed around them, creating waves in the tub, but he didn’t care. It seemed she didn’t either, as her head was thrown back, her throat exposed, her mouth slightly open. She was stunning in that moment, so passionate, so lovely, and so infinitely arousing.

William gripped her hips, guiding her down his cock and then up again, as her inner muscles contracted and gripped his length. When she opened her eyes, surprise was evident in

their depths. She had just realized that she could actively participate in this delightful dance, and she liked the idea.

Using his shoulders as leverage, her warm fingers gripping him tightly, she moved her hips, gliding up and down his length as the sweet precursor of bliss was slowly gathering low in his back and belly. Her mouth was slightly open, and a glimmer of surprise in her eyes.

“Yes,” he whispered, encouraging her as she moved, a grin on his lips. “Just like that.” He didn’t know whether he derived more enjoyment from the act itself or the wonder in her eyes and her unabashed enthusiasm. Both were equally as arousing.

William thrust into her, meeting every movement of her hips with his, and each time their bodies met, she cried out in pleasure.

“Yes, my love,” William rasped, barely able to hold on to his wits, his cock straining against the waves of pleasure. He begged his body to slow down, to endure this sweet torment just a little longer, to let her climax first. “Ride me. Ride me until you come.”

Her eyes widened at his words and then she smiled and the entire world stopped. She was a goddess in that moment. *His* goddess. And he would do her every bidding if she would but ask.

William brought his thumb to her clitoris and pressed lightly. As she whimpered, he moved the pad of his thumb lower just under the little hood, circling it, spreading the wet evidence of her lust.



Victoria threw back her head, moans leaving her body with every brush of his finger, every thrust of his hips, and then she did something that made him snap.

She disengaged her arms from him and cupped her breasts, her thumbs playing with her hardened nipples.

William tightened his grip on her, ramming into her wildly. She cried out then and froze on top of him, her inner muscles contracting, tightening on his cock and intensifying his pleasure, drawing his orgasm out of him.

With a cry, William lifted her off him, just as his seed shot out with an eagerness he'd never experienced before.

\* \* \*

Victoria woke up the next morning feeling deeply relaxed, a languid sensation overtaking her limbs. Soft early light filtered through the curtains, bathing the room in a gentle glow. She stretched beneath the covers, savoring the soothing serenity that came with lingering in a warm bed. Her body felt pleasantly heavy as if she could sink blissfully back into slumber. However, the soreness in her muscles reminded her of the passion she'd experienced in William's arms the previous night.

She smiled against her pillow, her cheeks flushing at the memories. She shifted slowly and carefully, rolling over to ensure she didn't disturb William's sleep. She gazed at his serene features as he lay on his back, his chest slowly rising and falling with each breath. A wayward lock of golden hair

tumbled over his eyes, and she had to resist the urge to reach out and brush it back. His features were smoothed of any worry in repose, making him seem younger and unburdened. Pale morning light softly illuminated his skin, drawing her attention to the sculpted angles of his face—his elegant brow, chiseled jawline, and full lips relaxed in sleep. He was achingly beautiful like this. Part of her wished he would wake up, just so she could see those brilliant blue eyes open and gaze at her.

Another part of her, the more rational one, didn't want to disturb his sleep.

And there was also this tiny, minuscule, but very loud part of her that screamed that they had finally—*finally!*—consummated their marriage last night.

And it couldn't have happened at a less opportune moment, when everything was off balance.

Victoria climbed out of bed, trying her best not to awaken her sleeping husband. She didn't know how to feel about last night. She didn't know how to feel about anything at this moment.

So, she did the only thing she had control over. She went to the dressing room and washed up with cold water. She put on a shift and walked back into their bedroom, looking for her dressing gown, not yet ready to put on a day gown.

“Are you getting dressed?” William asked in a hoarse, sleepy voice. Victoria turned eagerly, to see her husband lying

on his side, his head propped against his hand, utterly, completely naked, watching her under hooded eyelids.

“Y-yes.” Her voice trembled.

“Did I say you were allowed to get dressed?” His lips curled in a sinful smile.

Victoria’s gaze slid down his length, her eyes lingering on his raging erection.

She raised her brow. “Do I need your permission?”

He got off the bed and stalked toward her, moving with the lithe grace of a predator ready to strike his prey.

He wrapped his arm around her, grabbing her bottom and bringing her flush with his hard body. Victoria gasped.

“Oh, absolutely,” he rasped, then lowered his head and kissed the crook of her shoulder, tickling her skin and comforting her all at the same time. “Unless you want to be punished.”

Victoria’s eyes widened as he whirled her around and lifted the skirt of her shift to her waist.

“Hold this,” he whispered, his fingers tracing the curve of her bottom, covering her skin in gooseflesh.

Victoria held the bunched-up shift close to her waist as dampness accumulated between her thighs, and she grew increasingly hot. Collecting her hair and shifting it to the side, William kissed her earlobe, behind her ear, and the back of her

neck. He slowly walked her over until her hips pressed against the edge of her writing desk.

He continued kissing her neck and her shoulders, biting and licking her skin, while his hardened length pressed against the cleft of her bottom, his hips moving in a sensual rhythm.

Victoria's nipples hardened into pebbles, grazing against the fabric of her shift, intensifying the sensations of arousal coursing through her.

It didn't take much to ignite her desire. A single glance, a word, a touch from him was all it took to make her his.

Yet, when he did things like he was doing now, her mind succumbed to yearning and lust.

William stepped back, allowing cool air to swirl around her, sending a shiver down her spine and embracing her lower body.

His warm palm traveled a path down her spine, caressing her back.

Then he massaged her buttocks, and his palm traced a path back up, caressing her lower back, pressing down, bending her over the cool surface of her writing desk.

He paused before leaning over her and whispering in her ear, "Look to the right."

She turned and met her own gaze in the reflection of the mirror across from them.

“Look how beautiful you are,” he rasped, which was ironic since at that exact moment, she was looking at *him*, admiring the hard planes of his body, peeking at his erect, proud, and beautiful cock.

“Look at your pretty little rump,” he said, and his fingers traced along her crevice until he reached her wet center.

Yes, she was already soaking wet.

“This is mine,” he rasped, caressing her center. “How do you say ‘mine’ in Russian?”

She chuckled. “*Moya*, if you’re referring to me.”

“Mmm,” he rumbled low. “*Moya*.”

“And you are *moi*,” she added.

He grinned. “Yes, I am.”

He continued to trail his finger lower, spreading the moisture along her slit, circling the swollen nub, and then moving back up.

Victoria’s eyes fell closed, but she immediately opened them, captivated by the sight of them in the mirror, relishing the opportunity to see his facial expressions as his fingers explored her, seeing every jerk and twitch of his manhood.

“Is this my punishment?” she breathed.

“No,” he said, then lowered himself to his knees and bit on her soft rump. “This is.”

Victoria let out a carnal cry, and he chuckled, his warm breath caressing her skin.

Then he spread her feminine lips with his thumbs, leaned in, and licked. Yes. There! Right along her slit.

And he didn't stop there. Holding her by the buttocks, his thumbs exploring her feminine lips, opening them to allow him better access to his core, he licked and sucked on her wet center. Victoria moaned, unable to control the movements of her body. She arched and pushed her bottom toward his face, relishing the feeling of his lips, tongue, and nose pressing against her, spreading that feeling of bliss. His arm traveled around her thigh, pulling her closer, and his other hand dropped to grip his arousal, tugging and pulling, caressing his length. Liquid heat exited her body, as soft moans escaped her throat with his every lick, every touch, even every thrust of his cock into his own hand.

She felt it all, she saw it all, and she wanted more.

Victoria whimpered, urging him to go faster, urging him to never stop, although she was already on the brink of a precipice. He swirled his tongue, and Victoria's fingers scraped the wooden surface of her desk.

She came quickly and violently, shuddering in his arms, whimpers now leaving her throat with every breath.

She shook, her muscles clenching, spreading the feeling of ecstasy throughout her body.

William kissed her soft globes one by one, then slowly, carefully rose to his feet and pressed his cock against her core, circling his hips, bathing his cock in her juices.

“William,” she whispered and pressed her buttocks firmer against his body. William softly caressed her hips, her thighs, before returning to grasp her bottom and thrust into her heat.

Victoria cried out, her back arching even more.

William thrust into her with renewed vigor. He threw his head back, holding on to her bottom tightly, his fingers curling into her soft flesh, as he continued sinking his length into her core.

The wet slapping sounds and their labored breaths and moans were the only sounds in the room. And those sounds only added to the erotic atmosphere, winding her up again.

The image they made in the mirror was something she was unlikely to forget. and it roused the fires of desire and need within her. William dipped one hand around her waist and pressed it against her mound. He played with her swollen, sensitive nub, while his other hand traveled up and fisted in her hair, pulling lightly, firing unknown sensations through her scalp, heightening her senses.

“Yes, William,” she cried as her entire body tensed on the brink of something wonderful. “More, please, ah!”

Her cries of pleasure were drowned out by the incredible feeling that spread throughout her body and down to her toes. She wasn't in control of her actions anymore; her body shuddered and pulsed from the inside.

His forehead placed against her shoulder blade, William growled low and withdrew only to spill his seed onto her

buttocks and lower back, his cock dancing and shuddering against her skin.



## Chapter 25



Victoria had a smile on her lips the entire day. She couldn't concentrate on any task, and all her thoughts kept returning to their bedroom, to the image of her bent over her writing desk, and William, thrusting into her like a wild beast.

They had finally consummated their marriage! Granted, she had always imagined their consummation to be a gentle joining of two bodies, not the feverish, vigorous, and intense coupling of the night before and this morning.

Remembering how she'd wantonly pressed her womanhood against his mouth and watched their lovemaking in a mirror sent her into a heated frenzy. She wouldn't have it any other way. And now, she was finally truly his.

The realization made her feel lighter somehow as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. All doubts and suspicions vanished in an instant. Nobody could make such passionate love to her, crave her so desperately, only to run off to a mistress afterward. The idea seemed unfathomable now.

She still yearned for an open conversation with William, for him to lie in her arms and unburden himself willingly. He had always relied only upon himself, and perhaps that's why he was keeping secrets and all his worries to himself. Perhaps

he was waiting for their deal to end, for her to choose him willingly, not realizing that she already had.

Perhaps he was preoccupied with his recent abduction and everything that came with it. Because of that, she decided to give William space and do as he wished. There would be time for truth and comfort later.

For now, she found solace in knowing his heart belonged only to her. She would wait patiently for the day he felt ready to share his innermost thoughts. And when he did, she would help bear the weight so he didn't have to carry every burden alone. For now, loving him was enough.

Right before supper, Caroline dashed into the room Victoria had occupied, interrupting her whirling thoughts.

Her eyes wild, her hair disheveled, and with her clothing in disarray, Caroline looked like a madwoman. It seemed that she was wearing breeches under the cloak?

She grabbed Victoria by her arm and pulled. "Put on your riding habit, now!"

"I don't have a riding habit in this house," Victoria protested as Caroline was already dragging her out of her room and into Caroline's bedchamber.

"Then wear mine. We need to leave, and you need to be comfortable enough to ride for a distance."

"What is going on?" Victoria cried as Caroline's maid started fussing over her, helping her out of her gown and into Caroline's clothes.

“You should see for yourself,” Caroline said before rushing out of the room. “Meet me outside the townhouse.”

Left with no other choice, Victoria quickly donned more comfortable riding attire and descended the stairs. Two saddled horses awaited them at the door, and the groom assisted Victoria in mounting.

“What happened? Where are we going?” Victoria asked, bewildered.

“Follow me,” Caroline said and urged her mount into a canter, quickly escalating it into a gallop. They rode at breakneck speed for what felt like hours, allowing Victoria ample time to imagine every conceivable reason for such haste.

Had William been killed? No, that couldn't be it. Caroline wouldn't want to show her that. Was he imprisoned? Hurt? Was he the one doing the hurting?

Disturbing thoughts swirled through her mind as they finally stopped by a rundown little cottage.

Her body ached, not only from the long ride but also from her tender state following her passionate encounter with William last night and again this morning. The reminder of the amorous moments with William for some reason only brought more pain.

As they dismounted and tied their horses, Victoria gripped Caroline's arm. “Caroline, please, tell me what's happening. Please, put my mind at ease.”

Caroline wrinkled her nose, and guilt seemed to glimmer in her eyes. “I want you to witness it yourself. Otherwise, you might not believe me.”

“Witness what?” Victoria implored. “Please, just tell me.”

Caroline let out a breath, her face showing signs of pain. “See William inside that cottage.” She gestured toward a small, ramshackle building. “Your suspicions were accurate. He comes here to visit another woman. He is even constructing a house for her in a different location. They were about to sit down for supper when I left to fetch you. I’m uncertain if they’re still...” She paused, noticing Victoria’s blank reaction.

Victoria didn’t believe any of that. Even if what Caroline told her was the truth, there was another explanation, of that she was certain. However, her certainty couldn’t dispel the strange ache in the middle of her chest.

“That woman has a son,” Caroline continued, “I think... I think it’s his family.”

Victoria remained frozen for a long moment, unable to move or speak. When she finally found her voice, she said, “I think you’re wrong.”

“If that’s true, then you can ask him yourself,” Caroline said, tugging on Victoria’s arm. “Now. Come!”

Following Caroline numbly, Victoria arrived at the door of the small, dilapidated cottage. It was a place she wouldn’t have expected William to select for himself or someone he cared

about, but what did she know? After all, he had brought her to live in a tower.

Caroline raised her hand and, with a nod toward Victoria, knocked firmly on the door.

Friendly chatter and even laughter emanated from behind the door, stopping briefly after the knock. There were a few moments of complete silence and when Caroline was about to knock once more, the door swung open, revealing William standing on the threshold.

Victoria and William stared at each other in complete silence. She was numb, unable to utter a word or move a muscle.

A child ran to William and hugged his leg. “Who is it?” asked the little boy, who was about six or seven years old with achingly familiar blue eyes.

It was his son!

It must have been. There was no denying the shared facial features. Yes, he had dark brown hair, but other than that...

“Neville, come back!” a pleasant feminine voice called from inside the cottage.

*Neville!* The boy’s name was Neville, the same as William’s friend from his nightmare.

“See?” Caroline said, “He has a family.”

Victoria’s eyes widened, and all she could do was whisper, “Is that true? Is that your family?”

William then opened his door wide and invited them in. “Come inside.”

Victoria frowned and peered into the small cottage. It was dim inside, with a blazing fire in the hearth the only noticeable source of light.

“William?” Her voice quivered, and tears welled in her eyes.

Sensing her distress, William finally responded, “Yes, it is true. This is my family.” He waved a hand at the woman who came closer and gently peeled the little boy off William and took him into her arms. “That’s my half-sister, Melissa, and my nephew, Neville. Now, come inside before anyone else sees us.”

Victoria entered the cottage on unsteady legs, with Caroline at her side. William locked the door and discreetly peeked through the kitchen window.

Melissa stepped closer, still holding Neville in her arms. “You must be Victoria! A pleasure. I’ve heard so much about you!”

Victoria was too shocked to respond politely, and her next words unintentionally stung. “Yet I haven’t heard about you at all.”

Melissa’s eyes widened, and she glanced from Victoria to William and back again, her voice trembling. “Apologies, I know, y-you’re a princess. Should I have curtsied or—?”

Victoria immediately felt remorse. This woman had done nothing to deserve her anger; she was not the reason for the mix of emotions brewing inside her. “No, there’s no need,” she replied in a hoarse whisper, attempting a smile, although it may have come off more like a grimace. Then she turned toward William. “Can I speak to you for a moment? In private.”

Melissa waved a hand toward the corridor. “There is a bedroom that way.” Then she turned to Caroline and beckoned her to come to the table a few feet away. “Would you like some tea?”

Caroline accepted, and they moved away, murmuring introductions and quickly engaging in a conversation.

William waved a hand, gesturing for Victoria to precede him into the adjacent room. His gaze was icy, nostrils flared.

He seemed angry with her when he had no right to feel this way. He was the one keeping secrets!

Once they entered the tiny bedchamber, he closed the door behind them and rounded on her. “What a pleasant surprise, wife.”

“I can’t say the same thing!” Victoria snapped back.

“Did you truly think I was unfaithful? Did you believe that finding out I had a mistress would expedite our deal and force me to divorce you? Well, sorry to disappoint.”

Victoria flushed, not out of embarrassment, but because that idea hadn’t even entered her mind. She glanced past the

accusation, not even willing to address his scathing remark. “Why didn’t you tell me you had a sister?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I have about half a dozen other siblings. Do you want to know about them all?”

“Yes!” she cried. “Especially if you visit them on a regular basis, have suppers with them, and are building them a house!”

William stilled. “Did Caroline tell you all that?”

“Yes,” she bit out.

“Well, then she should know why I am doing this, should she not?”

Victoria chewed her lip. “She didn’t tell me.”

“Then I will tell you.” William crossed his arms over his chest. “Because after finding out that I was impersonating Erebus, Wolverstone went on a rampage in his goal to find me. He stalked anyone who had any proximity to me just to hurt me. He burned my house and the houses of people whom I cared about even a little, including Melissa’s. She had to move with her son to this tiny hole she calls home because of me! And I might not be an exemplary brother, but I was not going to let her and my nephew suffer because of my actions.”

Tumultuous thoughts tumbled one after the other in Victoria’s mind, not finding purchase. She finally asked, “But why didn’t you tell me?”

He waved a hand toward the bedroom door, indicating the room on the other side. “Because of the company you keep.”



“So, you don’t trust me?”

“You brought a Shadow into her home!” William raised his voice for the first time since they’d met, and Victoria reared back.

Her voice small, the only thing she could retort was, “Technically, she brought me.”

“And technically, I am not a Shadow,” Caroline called from another room.

William turned to the closed door. “Would you mind not butting into a private conversation?”

“Then you shouldn’t argue so loudly!” she cried back. “You’re frightening Neville.”

William ran his fingers through his hair in agitation.

Victoria stepped closer, whispering furiously. “I only felt compelled to follow you because of the secrets you keep!”

“Because you don’t trust me,” William reiterated.

Victoria scoffed. “Obviously, you do not trust me, either. So, we’re even.”

\* \* \*

“Stay here a moment, I shall go and check if your arrival alerted any other intruders to our location,” William said as he and Victoria walked into the kitchen.

Victoria felt slightly dizzy and disoriented. The past twenty-four hours had been a storm of emotions. Melissa and

Caroline turned toward them, studying them with open curiosity.

“If I am not back in twenty minutes,” William said as he reached the door. “I am dead.”

“William!” Melissa chided, tilting her head toward the innocent child playing on the floor. However, the boy, having inherited his uncle’s dark sense of humor, just laughed.

“Go in peace,” Caroline said with an impish smile.

William tipped his hat and left the cottage, leaving the women and the boy on their own.

“Would you like some tea?” Melissa asked.

Victoria beamed her an artificial smile that she hoped with all her heart looked genuine. Her heart still ached from the argument with William, but she didn’t want to be rude to his sister. She walked toward the table and settled in a chair beside Caroline.

“I apologize for being abrupt with you earlier,” she said as Melissa handed her a cup of tea. “I was just surprised.”

“No need.” Melissa waved a dismissive hand. “It’s not your fault, Your Highness. William can be quite... difficult at times.”

“Oh, no!” Victoria grimaced. “Please, call me Victoria. After all, we are family.”

Melissa clasped her hands and grinned, obviously glad, but also feeling uncomfortable. Victoria would have lied if she’d

said she didn't feel the same way.

The entire situation was just odd.

"Melissa was just telling the story of how she met William," Caroline supplied, breaking the charged silence that followed.

"Oh, I would love to hear that," Victoria said with a genuine smile now, shifting in her seat, and leaning closer to Melissa.

"It happened over seven years ago. I was working at Hades' Hell," Melissa said with a slight grimace, "when I found out I was with child. Hades was a very considerate employer, despite his name. He vowed to help me and find me a place to live. He was so kind, and I was emotional, so I told him my entire life story. And when he learned who my father was, he immediately contacted William. Apparently, William had been on a mission to find his siblings for some time. And he had just returned from France. So, I hadn't heard about him before. Of course, now he is infamous.

"I won't bore you with all the details. But when I met William, he was nothing like I imagined. He was very guarded but also very kind. He said his life was dangerous, so he didn't want to keep me close. But he introduced me to this woman, Maggie, who took me in and helped me during my difficult time."

"Maggie?" Victoria repeated. There were probably hundreds of Maggies in London, but Victoria felt the need to be certain.

“Ah, yes,” Melissa continued in her positive tone. “After that, she continued hosting other women in her house. William had helped her renovate her home just for this purpose. And then Hades and other acquaintances of William’s joined in to help, and, I believe, she now owns a shelter for women dealing with situations similar to mine.”

Victoria’s eyes widened. “The women’s shelter in St. Giles?” It was the same Maggie! Oh, William. Why hadn’t he told her any of this?

“That’s correct,” Melissa exclaimed excitedly. “You’ve heard about that place?”

Victoria smiled politely. “Yes, I have.”

“In any case,” Melissa continued. “I was so grateful to William that I let him name my beautiful child. Neville, isn’t it a wonderful name? We haven’t met very often since, but after my house burned down... Well, we reconnected. Leaving me to rely on his generosity once more.”

“Melissa,” Caroline chimed in solemnly. “I don’t know what William has told you about Wolverstone, but he is a very sick man. He won’t hurt you anymore. And had I known about your situation, I would have helped, not harmed, as William seems to think. He does not trust me, understandably so, and the feeling is mutual. But you’re my sister-in-law. And I am quite certain my husband will be glad to get to know you.”

“But doesn’t your husband hate William?” Melissa frowned.

Caroline grimaced. “They have a... complicated relationship. But they’re brothers. He would love a sister. Especially one who hasn’t blackmailed anyone.”

All three women erupted in chuckles, and Neville sidled closer to his mother. “What is blackmail?”

Just at that moment, William entered the house and took in the picture before him. “I see you’re teaching Neville new vocabulary,” he said stonily. “Everything seems in order. We should leave.”

“Oh, but we just started—” Melissa said but was swiftly interrupted by William’s dark tone.

“We should be off now.”

## Chapter 26



Silence accompanied their ride home. Silence followed them into their bedchamber and swallowed them whole as they shed their clothing and prepared for bed.

Silence continued to haunt them as Victoria sat by the hearth, brushing out her hair, a thoughtful expression on her face.

But in William's heart, mind, and soul, there was pure chaos.

He couldn't sleep in the same bed with her, he wouldn't be able to relax. Not that sleep was in the cards for him. His thoughts tripped and tumbled over each other. But the one thought that kept screaming louder and flashing bigger than any other was that she didn't trust him.

Of course, one might say that it was expected when one married a thief, a liar, and a criminal, but what hurt most was that she didn't trust his love for her. Hadn't he demonstrated to her time and time again that no matter what he did, he would never hurt her?

He would give her the world if she just asked. He would steal her the moon if that was her wish. He would employ all his talents, connections, and power only to make her happy.

And maybe, in the beginning, he wouldn't have been hurt by her mistrust. But after weeks of living under the same roof, after all they'd shared, after their passionate nights, and just this morning! He'd expected her to have a little faith in him.

William collected a sheet from the bed, a quilted blanket from the chair, and moved toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Victoria asked. Her voice, after such a long silence, was like a balm, but also a jolt to the heart.

"I am going to sleep downstairs tonight," William said roughly.

"Why?"

He turned toward her, slowly. "Why do you think?"

She lowered her eyes. "Because you can't stand the idea of sleeping next to me?"

He kept silent.

"I won't apologize for wanting to find out more about you. You can't fault me for that when you have told me nothing about your life."

"I've told you everything you needed to know to make judgments about me and I showed you the rest! For all my faults, I never explicitly lied to you."

"Yes, only by omission." She looked at him then, fire blazing in her inky-black eyes. "How was I to know you didn't omit a mistress or two?"

William's head snapped back as if she'd slapped him, and she might as well have because it would've hurt less. "You were the unfaithful one, or need I remind you? And did you truly believe that after last night, after this morning when I fucked you in front of that mirror"—he waved a hand—"I would go to rut on some other woman?"

"No," she said quietly, her breaths labored, her breasts straining against her nightgown, distracting him. "I didn't think that. That was Caroline's assumption."

"Good to know how easily you're swayed," he said bitterly.

"You can't expect me to trust you blindly."

"Why the devil not?" he barked, his mind reeling with emotions. Hadn't he proved himself enough? Hadn't he shown her over and over that she was the only woman he wanted?

"Because trust is earned! And do not pretend to be a saint!" she cried and rose to her feet, pointing the brush toward him. "You didn't trust me either. Otherwise, why would you keep Melissa from me? And why would you not tell me that you are the one who started the shelter I happen to patronize?"

William blinked. "So, Melissa told you that."

"Yes!" she snapped. "Or did you think I would not notice that her son carries the same name as the person from your nightmare? Did you think I would not ask her about that? What else are you omitting and why?"



“Because those things do not define me!” he growled. “And I don’t want you to think that they do. I don’t want you to think that I am some kind of a knight or a hero. I don’t want you to forgive me because somehow the good I’ve done might outweigh the bad in your mind. It does not! I want you to love me and accept me for who I am and not for what I can do for others or even you.”

Victoria looked down, her lips pursed and huffed. “So, you want me to know only the bad. You don’t want to share your past, you even hide half of your present and you expect me to love you nonetheless!”

“I want you to love me for who I am,” he repeated with a shrug.

Victoria let out a bitter chuckle. “You are so confused that you don’t even realize this *is* who you are! And yes, you’re a thief, a blackmailer, and an all-around criminal. But you’re also a man who helps his sister. You are also a man who cares about others. You’re all of those things. You are the sum of all your past and present, not just your mistakes and your flaws.”

“That’s your issue, Victoria,” William said gravely. “You think that my stealing, blackmailing, and everything else were mistakes. But they were not. They were choices and things I would choose to do again. Things I *will* do again. Things I am good at. And if the things I am best at are my flaws, then all I am is a flaw. If you can’t accept that, then you can’t accept me.”

Victoria just stared at him, her mouth partly open.

William nodded sharply. "That's what I thought."

\* \* \*

The desperation in Victoria's core was a living, breathing being. Her thoughts were muddled, and her mind was a jumble of incoherent thoughts. Even if they weren't, her heartbeat was so loud she could barely hear any of them.

All she knew was that she didn't want William to leave. She didn't want him to think all those awful things he was thinking at the moment, yet she couldn't say a coherent word if she tried.

She didn't want to spend the night without his warmth by her side, without hearing his quiet breathing as he slept.

So, she did the only thing she could do. She flew into his arms and kissed him deeply. She expected him to wrap his arms around her, pull her close to his body, and return her kisses. He did none of those things. He just stood there, bed sheets still clutched in his arms, his body rigid, his lips pursed.

Victoria broke the kiss and stared at the cold, unyielding expression on his face, his dull and emotionless eyes, and a shiver traveled up her spine.

Not having anything clever or witty to say to pull him out of the current stupor, she opted for frustration.

She gripped the sheets and quilt with her fingers and pulled on them hard, ripping them from his grasp. "We had a deal. We sleep in this bed each night. Together."

William crossed his arms over his chest, his face still an expressionless mask. Victoria dropped the sheets and the blanket to the floor and looked around the room in despair. Her gaze dropped to the pearl necklace he'd given her, spilling out from the jewelry box on her side table, the sweet memories of their wedding day flooding her. She turned back to him, her breath labored. "Oh, and since I am still your wife, you have a husbandly duty to fulfill, too!" With that, she pulled the nightgown over her head and dropped it onto the pile of sheets on the floor.

She stood like that, her eyes wide, her chest rising and falling with the strength of her breaths, not knowing what to do next. This was it. If he were to walk out now, she had no cards up her sleeve. She had no sleeves... She was absolutely naked, exposed, body and soul.

William stalked toward her calmly, and she trembled as he got closer and closer. He snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her hard against his body. Victoria gasped, her hands flying to his chest.

He took her hand and pressed it against the bulge in his breeches.

"Oh, is this what you want?" he growled.

Victoria's heart drummed loudly in her chest. "I want you."

He kissed her deeply, his mouth slanting over hers, leaving her breathless. He picked her up easily and slammed her back against the wall.

Victoria whimpered, and he finally released her mouth.

“You don’t want me,” he whispered roughly. He traced his warm hand over her breasts, her belly, then lowered to the juncture of her thighs and cupped her there. “You want this. You want my mouth, my fingers, my cock, but not me.”

He split the seam of her feminine lips with his fingers, spreading the moisture he found there, and she moaned. “You want me to make you come?” he growled. “I’ll make you come.”

He released her center and cupped her jaw, the scent of her desire lingering on his fingers. He kissed her mouth as his hand traveled lower. He circled his fingers around her neck, keeping her pressed against the wall. Not hurting her, but rather providing just enough pressure to send thrills of delight through her body.

His other hand reached out toward the side table with the jewelry box on it. He picked up the pearl necklace and pressed it against her skin.

The cool beads against her hot skin were so pleasant, Victoria couldn’t resist another moan. He rolled the necklace against her nipples, massaged her belly, and then moved them lower still.

“You don’t love me, don’t trust me. So, am I a toy for you to use for your pleasure?” he rasped.

Her eyes widened in horror. “William!” His name was a protest, a plea, a prayer.

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you exactly what you want,” he whispered.

His fingers still gently but tightly wrapped around her neck, his other hand brought the pearl necklace to her core. He rolled the beaded necklace over her center, bathing it in her juices, making certain to touch every sensitive part of her there.

Victoria arched her back, her hips moving, riding his hand and the necklace, writhing in pleasure.

The firm but gentle pressure of his fingers on her neck and the ticklish and slippery sensation of the pearls against her center were driving her wild. Her beaded nipples begged to be touched, and as if he had heard her thoughts, William lowered his head and licked each one, sucking tenderly.

Victoria cried out in pleasure, her hips thrusting against the pearls in his hand in wild abandon.

The beads rolled against every sensitive part of her, igniting all her senses all at once.

William raised his head and whispered in her ear, “Take your pleasure, my sweet. Take what you need from me.”

His warm breath on her skin and his raspy voice in her ear were the last straw that threw her over the edge, and she came in a violent storm of pleasure.

She screamed his name, gripping his shoulders for stability as her hips still moved, rubbing her core against the pearls, drawing the last waves of bliss from her body.

As her spasms calmed, Victoria opened her eyes to meet William's. But instead of the passion she hoped to see, his gaze was empty.

Slowly he withdrew his fingers from her throat and the wet, glistening pearls from her core. He let them dangle lewdly from his fingers before dropping them to the floor with a careless gesture.

"I hope you're satisfied," he bit out darkly, before turning to walk away.

Victoria gaped after him, stunned and exposed. With cold nonchalance, he had used her most shamefully, then discarded her without a glance back.

## Chapter 27



*Twelve days before the execution...*

Victoria wore the pearl necklace on purpose. To remind William how he had treated her. To remind him of his cruelty during what was supposed to be a passionate moment between them. To remind him that she was hurt.

But so was he.

Perhaps even more than she was.

And his hurt was more frightening than hers, for when she was angry, she cried and wailed and stomped her feet, arguing with him and pushing him away, so he could move closer as if in a dance. Yet his hurt was quiet, detached—a wary, perilous calm that lingered ominously, poised to swallow them whole.

When she was hurt and angry, one could feel the passion radiating from her and crashing against William in a storm. His hurt, on the other hand, was deadly silent.

And for all the times she'd thought the opposite of love was loathing, now she was afraid it was indifference.

As she walked with her arm on his sleeve, arriving at Pembroke's welcoming ball, she could feel the ice beneath his skin. He looked relaxed and nonchalant on the outside, but his muscles tensed and bunched beneath her touch. The moment

her slippers hit the floor they became surrounded by a crowd of curious onlookers, eager to talk to the infamous couple. William took this opportunity to disengage from her and move away, eventually getting lost in the crowd.

With an inward sigh, Victoria continued smiling at the other guests, laughing at their jokes while on the inside, she was crying.

Victoria hoped that he would return, hoped that he would take her arm and lead her in a promenade around the room.

He didn't. He continued to ignore her, deftly avoiding her every time she was near.

Ever since the night of their confrontation, William dropped Victoria off at Caroline's early in the mornings, and he took her back to the tower late at night. Sometimes, she wondered why he bothered to drive her back and forth. But she also feared that one day, he would just leave her behind.

His cold demeanor toward her was like a lance through her heart. And no matter how many times she tried initiating a conversation, she was summarily dismissed and ignored.

She didn't even know what sins she'd committed to be treated so badly, to be ignored so completely.

She had run their last conversation over and over in her mind, and the only thing that she could think of was that he didn't think she could ever accept him for who he was.

But she did accept him! She was living with him, wasn't she?



*You don't love me, don't trust me. So, am I a toy for you to use for your pleasure?*

His words rang through her mind.

How was she to prove her love to him, her trust if he refused so much as to talk to her?

And then her wise aunt's words came to mind.

*If you want to know how a man feels, you do not ask him a direct question. No, no. You watch his actions.*

And perhaps her actions so far weren't as indicative of her feelings.

Victoria recognized that it was all her fault. The closer they became during their stay, the farther she wanted to push him away because she was afraid of getting hurt again. She didn't even give him a chance, while he clawed and scraped to get her attention and affection.

Now, she wished she could do the same for him. But he was so much better at displaying cold indifference than she was that all her overtures had ended before they even began.

But the greatest fear of all was that he wasn't feigning this indifference. That she had finally driven him away with her immature actions.

*Congratulations, Victoria!*

Victoria spotted Caroline's familiar figure across the crowded ballroom. She made her way toward her friend, eager for a distraction.

As she drew nearer, Victoria noticed Caroline's usual delicate smile was absent, a furrow of worry creasing her brow instead. But she was nibbling her lip anxiously, which was even more telling. Caroline only did that when she was in distress.

"Caroline, is anything amiss?" Victoria asked gently once she reached her side.

Caroline started slightly, her lips curving into a weak imitation of her normal grin. She opened her mouth to respond, then closed it, before opening her mouth again and closing it once more.

Victoria stepped closer, ducking her head to hear Caroline over the orchestra. "What is it?"

Caroline looked around the ballroom as if in search of someone before taking her by the hand and pulling her away. "Come with me."

Weaving their way through the crush of guests, they walked onto the balcony. The gust of cool midnight air that met them there made Victoria shiver.

Caroline closed the doors, making certain no one would follow them. Victoria raised her brow, running her hands over her arms in an attempt to warm herself. "Well?"

Caroline swallowed. "I have to admit that I didn't organize this ball at my uncle's urging."

Victoria frowned. "Then why did you do it?"

"Because I need to steal Wolverstone's journal."

Victoria blinked in surprise. “What? Why?”

“Because there is something about my uncle that I don’t know, and Wolverstone is about to take it to his grave!”

Victoria scowled, her mind trying to make sense of Caroline’s words and failing. “What are you talking about?”

“Wolverstone is delirious half the time. He talks sometimes and then forgets what he’s said. And he said, repeated it a few times, actually, that I had to forgive my uncle for the turmoil that he caused.”

“What did he do?”

Caroline shrugged. “I don’t know! He wouldn’t tell me. I know my uncle used to be a part of the Brotherhood of the Crimson Fist. I know that William used that information to blackmail him. What I don’t know is what he did as a part of that wretched group. But Wolverstone just seems very troubled by it. So, whatever he did must have been bad. Bad enough to force one to end one’s life.” She bit her lip again. “I was plagued with doubts ever since I found out some details from William. And I think he knows even more, but he has no interest in sharing.”

Victoria scoffed. *Isn’t that the truth?*

Caroline leaned in closer. “But Wolverstone, in his delirium, has confessed that he’d made a few references to my uncle’s past in his journal, which is hidden in his study. That I need to burn it.”

Victoria covered Caroline's hand with hers. "Caroline, he is gravely ill. Perhaps it is some malady of the brain that makes him say all those things."

"Yes." Caroline nodded. "It's quite possible. However, I need to know. I need to find this journal and see if there's really anything there. I mean, my uncle *was* a part of the Brotherhood of the Crimson Fist. What if he did something terrible?"

Victoria grimaced. "What if he did? It was in the past. Your uncle is dead. Will it aid anyone?" For some reason, a part of her believed it wasn't a good idea to dredge up the past. Especially the past that lay dormant for so many years.

Caroline shrugged nonchalantly. "There's only one way to find out."

Victoria let out a breath. When Caroline made up her mind, there was no talking her out of it. "Did you ask Pembroke for this journal? I am certain he is the one who inherited it. Or, at the very least, he has a key to the safe."

"Yes, I did. But he refused. He said he is not willing to share anything under his control."

Victoria frowned. "Why not?"

Caroline lifted her hands in frustration. "I wish I knew. He is not the friendliest of men out there. Hence the ball."

"Oh!" Victoria finally understood her meaning. "You arranged this ball so Pembroke would be distracted while you snooped in his study!"

“Yes, exactly.” Caroline smiled.

“So, why are you not doing that?”

“Well, I...” She wrinkled her nose. “I already did.”

“And?”

“And Wolverstone installed some strange lock onto his safe that I cannot open. I am not sure if anyone else can open it, because Dane wasn’t successful either. And Pembroke keeps the key close to his chest. Literally. It’s hanging over his neck.”

“Oh.” Victoria grimaced. “So, it’s impossible to either break the lock or steal the key?”

Caroline chuckled wryly. “Exactly. Pembroke is very aware of his surroundings. I am not sure if anyone would be able to steal anything from him. They’d have to be the best thief in the world.”

Victoria frowned in thought and then both women exchanged a knowing look. “Good thing I am married to him.”

\* \* \*

Giddy for two distinctly different reasons, Victoria went in search of William. The first reason was that she could help her friend!

And the second reason, well, she finally had a reason to talk to her husband. She had a plan for what she would say, and he couldn’t just ignore her, or at least, she hoped so.

Victoria found him talking to Lord Norfolk and caught him by the sleeve before he could leave. “May I speak with you for a moment?”

William looked around as if looking for avenues of escape. Then he bowed politely toward Norfolk and turned to Victoria. “Very well. What would you like to speak to me about?” His demeanor was just as cold as usual, and though it would have deterred her before, now she had a mission to accomplish so she persisted.

“I am actually here to ask for a favor. Not for me,” she hastened to add. “It’s for Caroline.” She grimaced. “I know you dislike her. And I know you don’t owe me or Caroline any favors—”

He interrupted her with a scoff. “I will do anything for you, you know that.” Her cheeks flooded with heat, and her heart melted. Had he truly just said that? It meant not all was lost.

“What do you need me to do?” he asked gruffly, a scowl on his face.

“We should talk privately,” Victoria murmured and raised her brows.

He nodded, took her by the hand, and led her out of the ballroom.

Victoria held onto him tightly, not willing to let go. It felt so good to be by his side again. And the ice around him seemed to shift, replaced by worry.

He still cared about her. And that gave her hope.

They hid in a small parlor two doors away from the ballroom, and William leaned against the door, his arms crossed over his chest, listening to Victoria describe the predicament.

Victoria briefly explained about the journal, the safe, and the key that rested over Pembroke's heart.

When she was done, William frowned. "I am not certain that's what's best for Caroline."

Victoria's eyes widened. "She was right," she whispered. "You do know the truth."

William nodded. "And finding it out is not going to put her mind at ease."

Victoria frowned. "What is the truth? And how do you know?"

William sucked in a breath, then crossed his arms over his chest. "I am going to tell you something, but you have to promise me not to react, no matter what I tell you."

"Not react? What do you mean?"

He grimaced. "At least not until I finish the entire story. It's something I do not like talking about."

Victoria nodded. "I will try my best."

He looked away, his jaw clenched. "I told you how I started stealing when I was little. But after my mother died, I

ended up on the streets, alone, hungry, with nowhere to go. Well, somehow, I ended up in a brothel.”

Victoria’s eyes widened. “D-doing—”

William raised a hand in a staying motion. “I asked you not to react.”

Victoria clamped her lips shut, while on the inside, she was screaming.

“I don’t know how I ended up there. For the longest time, I thought my father was the one who brought me there, and it could be true. But I don’t remember. It wasn’t pleasant there, as you probably surmised. But I was wily for a little boy. I escaped at least four or five times. Every time, they would find me and bring me back.”

Bile rose to her throat, and Victoria wanted him to stop. But she’d asked for it. And he’d asked her not to react, so she wouldn’t. Even if it killed her.

“The more I ran away, the more I learned about the place I’d been to. There were other boys there, too. It was run by aristocrats. A circle of men calling themselves the Brotherhood of the Crimson Fist, you might have heard the name. The brothel was something they did in secret, their front was a smuggling operation of forged art and other valuables.

“They were too powerful, with nobody to stand up to them. Except that the Shadows did. As you know, vigilantes and all that.” He waved a careless hand. “I didn’t know that



back then, nor did I care. The last time I ran away, I met a boy. Neville.”

“Your friend from the nightmare,” Victoria breathed.

“Right.” He nodded. “The night we ran away, I overheard a gentleman giving a roster of the Shadows’ operatives to the leader of the Brotherhood, in exchange for forged paintings. Later, I learned that he’d sold over half of them to cover the deep pit of debt he’d dug himself into. Later, I’d meet him and find out his name. But at the time, I didn’t know who he was. He didn’t get to sell all the paintings, though. Because soon he inherited a marquessate from his dead brother.”

“Wait a moment,” Victoria stopped him, trying to untangle his words in her mind. “The man who exchanged the paintings for the list was Caroline’s uncle?”

William nodded. “Yes. He inherited the title soon after when Caroline’s father died. Want to guess who killed him and why?”

Victoria’s mouth slacked open. “The Brotherhood? But why?”

William smiled. “Because he was on the list of Shadows. And so were many others.”

Victoria couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Caroline’s uncle was responsible for her parents’ death!”

“Yes. And he got rewarded for it with a title. I don’t know what happened next. But I suppose Caroline’s late uncle went to his old friend Wolverstone, repented his sins, told him the

truth, and Wolverstone swept everything under the rug. Because when I returned from France, half of the Brotherhood had been eradicated.”

“You think Wolverstone killed them?”

William shrugged. “I do. Probably used his Shadow assassins to eliminate people who knew that Caroline’s uncle had provided the brotherhood with a list. Or perhaps people who knew something else incriminating about him. Either way, Caroline’s uncle became an upstanding lord. Nobody ever questioned why so many people died in the same year. Including many of the Shadows. Caroline’s parents, St. John’s, even Kensington. All wiped out. Because of her uncle’s selfish needs.”

Victoria sat there in shock, unable to form a thought.

William smirked. “Do you still think we should let Caroline see the journal? Do you think she needs to know the full extent of her uncle’s monstrous behavior and the aftermath?”

Victoria took a moment to process everything before she spoke again. “You knew about the list all along. That’s what you blackmailed her uncle with. That’s why he killed himself.”

“Couldn’t deal with being reminded of his sins, I suppose,” William said with a nonchalant shrug.

“If you tell Caroline all of this, then she will understand your actions more. She will be able to forgive you.”

He chuckled bitterly. “Yes, or feel extreme guilt for loving her uncle, a man who was responsible for her parents’ death.”

“She needs to know,” Victoria countered.

“If Roth was responsible for your parents’ death, would you want to know?”

She grimaced in thought. “Well, they were never good parents to me. I don’t know if I would hate him for it.”

“Very well. What if your uncle was responsible for your sister’s imprisonment?”

Victoria took a moment to digest the question and think it through. “I’d want to know, yes.”

“What if he was dead and there was nothing you could do about it?”

Victoria let out her breath. “I am not Caroline. She will find out eventually. She is tenacious. But if it comes from you, perhaps your relationship with her could be mended.”

“I am not looking to mend our relationship, Victoria. I am not seeking anyone’s approval. I am not craving anyone’s love. Not anymore.”

Victoria froze. Did he include her in that statement?

“And even if I decided to tell her everything, she might feel better about me, but she would feel a thousand times worse about her uncle, a man that she loved and mourned. It’s only going to add unresolved issues for her. She can blame me for his death all she wants. But if I tell her the truth, she will

also blame her uncle for her parents' death. How is that fair?" He shrugged. "If you still want me to steal the journal, I will. But that's the extent to which I am willing to go. If you want to tell Caroline the entire story, you're free to do so on your own."

Victoria bit her lip. "I still want you to steal the journal."

William nodded. "So I will."

"William?" she asked once he turned away.

He turned back, a brow raised in question.

"What happened to Neville?"

He cleared his throat. "He died."

"How?"

William hung his head. "When Hades opened his hell, I left their group because I couldn't be close to a place that ran a brothel, no matter what type of brothel. But Neville... he decided to stay. He wanted an honest job, whatever that meant. And I let him." He raised his head and met her gaze. "I left him. We've been through hell and back together. And when the tide had shifted and everything was good again, I left him behind. And he died. I wasn't even there when it happened. I haven't had a single friend since. Never cared for anyone since. Until you."

Victoria didn't quite know how to react to that. But some things started to make sense about her husband. She realized why he didn't have friends, why he didn't allow himself to get tangled up in relationships, and perhaps even why he had

tricked her into marrying him. He had fallen in love with her very quickly and hadn't wanted to leave her behind. In his mind, the only way to ensure it had been to marry her, to tie her to him forever. However, it ended up tearing them apart instead.

Victoria walked toward him and took his arm. "Do you need help stealing the journal?"

A soft smile played about his lips for the first time in days. "Yes."

## Chapter 28



They walked out of the parlor, Victoria's hand on William's arm, her warmth along his side, her scent in his nostrils. He'd missed this. He had missed this a lot.

He loved her.

Of course, he would do her any favor she wished. She had a hold over him no other person ever had.

Unfortunately for him, she didn't truly love him back.

She wanted him. She appreciated his skill. But she'd worked so hard to find good in him, something she could latch on to, that she'd missed everything else. She couldn't accept him for what he was, no matter how hard he tried.

When he hid his status as a bastard, he'd always thought their love would overpower that hurdle. But in the past two months, he'd come to understand that she had never loved him at all. Not truly. And most of all, she didn't trust him. Not even a little.

And he was tired of trying to win her back.

Their time together was coming to an end, and once the time lapsed, he would have to live with the fact that they were going to separate. Perhaps get a divorce. And she would be able to pursue a legitimate duke's son.

Just as they reached the doors to the ballroom, a man rushed out, and they nearly crashed into him.

*Porter!*

His eyes wide, he backed away before giving them a wide berth.

Victoria raised her gaze to William. “He is here. Should we do something?”

William shrugged. “You don’t have to worry about him. He won’t be a threat.” And he wouldn’t be. William had spread the message that if anyone in the criminal world ever worked with Porter, they would be severely punished. He’d also made certain to let Porter know that the rumors of his proclivities would spread were anything to happen to William. But most of all, Porter was too bewildered by William’s easy escape and frightened by the note he’d left on his bed. At least, William assumed this was what had finally forced Porter to leave William alone.

Victoria gave him a strange look, then glanced after Porter. “Have you noticed his lips?” William raised a brow, and she raised her eyes heavenward. “Not in that way. His lips are deformed!”

“Oh, that...” William tensed as he led Victoria inside the ball. “I might have had something to do with that.”

Victoria blinked up at him. “After he abducted you?”

William lowered his head so Victoria would hear him over the noise in the ballroom. “No, after he kissed you.”

“Oh.” Her eyes shifted, her fingers tightening on his forearm.

They didn't get far from the door when William spotted Pembroke cutting a path toward the exit.

“What do you want me to do?” Victoria whispered in William's ear as she spotted Pembroke, too.

“Engage him in a conversation. And...” He paused. “Do you think you'll be able to make him bend over for a little longer than a brief bow?”

She chewed her lower lip in thought and then nodded confidently.

*Perfect.*

William disengaged from her and moved a few feet away to grab a glass of wine from an approaching footman. He slowly moved after Pembroke as he got closer to Victoria. Pembroke wasn't even looking at her, so concentrated was he on the exit, but she blocked his path.

He paused, startled by her sudden appearance, and as agreed, she quickly engaged him in conversation. Though usually morose, Pembroke even smiled a little.

William curled his fingers into a fist. This was a ploy, he calmed himself. His ploy, and he needed to not wreck it.

He moved closer still, and when he was about a foot away, Victoria deftly, and rather gracefully, dropped a handkerchief to the floor.



William's handkerchief.

Just as a gentleman would, Pembroke bent down to retrieve it. With nimble fingers, William plucked his chain from his neck and pulled out a key. He quickly hid it in his pocket before the man straightened and handed Victoria her handkerchief.

Pembroke glanced around sharply, as if sensing something amiss. William smoothly joined Victoria's side and offered her a glass of wine.

"Thank you, dear husband," she replied, beaming up at him.

William returned a doting smile before bowing politely to their host. "Pembroke."

The earl bowed curtly in answer, then excused himself from the ballroom.

Victoria raised a questioning brow, and William gave a subtle nod of confirmation. "You were perfect," he said with a smile.

Her eyes shone with joy as she looked at him. His wife was so beautiful. He wanted nothing more than to kiss that lovely smile.

"Wait here for me," William murmured, already moving to disengage from her.

"I can help," she protested.

He flashed an indulgent smile and bowed. “Better if I go alone.”

It had to be a five-minute job. There was a risk that Pembroke had felt him pilfer the key off his neck, and William wouldn't allow Victoria to be caught up in that.

He exited the ballroom and quickly rushed downstairs toward Pembroke's study. It was located on the first floor, and William prayed he wouldn't run into anyone on the way.

Luckily for him, the corridor was clear. He easily made his way to the study, unlocked the door, and with the aid of the key, opened the safe.

He found a dark brown leather journal in there and hid it in the inside pocket of his coat. He locked the safe back up, left the key on the desk, and withdrew from the study.

It was easy. Too easy.

William climbed the staircase back to the second floor when he heard the sounds of... gurgling? A couple of lovebirds might have been hiding under the stairs for an intimate meeting, but it didn't sound like that. Unless they were doing something he'd never done before.

Curiosity overtook him, and he moved toward the sound. He rounded the stairwell and paused in horror.

Just under the staircase lay Porter, blood gushing out of his neck.

Without thinking, William hurried to his aid. Perhaps he could apply a tourniquet and save the man. But as he felt

Porter's absent pulse, he realized he was too late.

William sprung to his feet and rushed back to the ballroom. Getting caught crouching over a dead body would not be the best turn of events. Especially not for him. Especially not when he had Wolverstone's journal in the inner pocket of his jacket.

He stormed into the ballroom and quickly found Victoria only a few feet away from the door, nervously fiddling with her gloves. "We need to leave, now," he murmured.

"Why, what's wrong? Were you caught?" she whispered frantically.

"No, and I got the journal. But the sooner we leave, the better. Where is Caroline?"

"I told her to wait for us in the parlor."

"Good." He took her arm and fairly dragged her out of the ballroom. They hastened toward the parlor and slipped inside. Caroline and her husband immediately flew off their chairs and came to greet them.

"Did you get it?" Caroline asked eagerly, her hand outstretched.

"Yes." William reached into his pocket and retrieved the journal. He handed it to Caroline and said, "If you really want to read this, you need to know that there are truths in there you can never unlearn. Some things in life are better left a secret."

Caroline gripped the journal but paused without taking it. For a moment, William thought she had changed her mind.

Only then did he realize what she was looking at. There was a smear of blood on William's white glove.

\* \* \*

"Is that blood?" Caroline asked, and Victoria squinted at William's glove.

It did look like his fingers were smeared in it.

"Take the journal," William gritted between his teeth, and once Caroline obliged, he took off his gloves, hiding them in his pockets. He then looked at Victoria. "I shall explain it later, but we need to leave now."

His eyes were filled with desperation, and a muscle ticked on the side of his neck. Whatever scrape William had gotten into wasn't good. She nodded and took his hand, and William briefly dropped his gaze to their intertwined fingers.

A blood-curdling scream sounded somewhere in the townhouse, followed by rapid footsteps. William closed his eyes and cursed under his breath.

"What's wrong?" Victoria asked, but he didn't answer, just ran his fingers through his hair.

Caroline and Kensington exchanged worried glances and dashed out of the parlor.

Victoria wanted to follow them, but William squeezed her hand, stopping her in her tracks.

"What's wrong?" She looked at his pale features with worry.

There was a long silence before William swallowed and said, “Porter is dead.”

Victoria’s eyes widened. “Did you—?”

“Of course not!” He let go of her hand and scrubbed his face. “How can you even think that?”

“Well, then, how do you know?” she cried. “And why do you have blood on your gloves?”

“Do you truly think I’d murder someone in cold blood?” he growled.

Victoria threw up her hands. “Perhaps it was in self-defense.”

Caroline rushed back into the room and locked the door behind her. “Porter is dead,” she gritted between her teeth. She pointed a finger at William. “You need to leave.”

William nodded, and Victoria looked from Caroline to William and back again. “Perhaps we can use the servants’ stairs?”

Caroline shook her head. “You are not leaving, only him.”

Victoria let out a strangled chuckle. “You must be joking.”

“No, I am not. I don’t know what your husband did, but if you leave, you can be punished by association.”

“I didn’t kill him,” William said weakly. “But people will think so nonetheless, won’t they? Just like you do.”

“William,” Victoria protested, but he continued as if she hadn’t spoken.

“I threatened him more than once. I left a note on his bed after he abducted me. I cut his lip.”

“You literally have blood on your hands,” Caroline supplied.

William’s head snapped up, his gaze filled with fury, but he quickly calmed down. “You know this house. It must have secret passageways.”

“It does,” Caroline agreed.

“Show me.”

“No, no!” Victoria stepped closer and took William’s hand, squeezing his fingers. “Not just you. Us. I am going with you.”

William looked at her with surprise shining in his eyes. Then some other emotion overtook his gaze, and he snatched his hand back. “You will slow me down.”

Victoria opened her mouth to protest again, but Caroline stepped toward her. “He is right. You need to stay here.”

“I don’t want to stay here! Our tower is safe. Nobody even knows where we live.”

“And you will be hiding out with a killer?” he asked coldly.

Victoria swallowed. “You didn’t kill him.”

William chuckled. “Do you truly believe that? Don’t answer that. It’s better that I don’t know.”

\* \* \*

## *A week later...*

Victoria carefully hung the handkerchief outside the window. Next, she lit a few candles and positioned them on the windowsill, ensuring the handkerchief, gently swaying in the wind, remained within the path of the soft candlelight.

She had been doing the same for the past week, yet her husband was nowhere to be found. She had stayed up all night the entire week waiting for him to come for her, but he didn't.

"You are supposed to come for me," she whispered into the void. "You promised to come for me as long as you're alive."

There was no news on Porter's murderer, so Victoria was confident that he hadn't been caught. Or as confident as she could be without her thoughts intruding into her mind.

Then where the devil was her husband?

Victoria propped her arms on the windowsill and rested her cheek against her hands, remembering all the time they spent together.

She had been so annoyingly stubborn during the weeks she had lived with him. They could have made so many memories. Instead, she was angry and distrustful.

Why couldn't she just trust him?

Because she was afraid of getting her heart broken by him once more. As a result, it had been broken anyway.

Life was unpredictable. And even though she knew they only had three months, she'd never truly believed they would separate after that. Somehow, she'd believed he would be by her side forever. Since the moment they met.

*"It took me a full five minutes to fall in love with you,"* he had told her once.

*"It took me four."*

She'd lied to him when she'd said that. Because for her, it had been love at first sight.



# Chapter 29



## *Summer 1741*

William exited the big country house and let out a breath of relief. He had come to visit his old acquaintance who had recently joined the English aristocracy and regretted this decision immensely.

He hadn't known that there was a house party going on. And not just any house party, but the house party welcoming the new marquess. Which meant that all of London's fops were gathered at this house at the same time. William wasn't surprised that he wasn't invited. After all, Sebastian—the new Marquess of Roth—couldn't have known where to send his invitation. And the person who'd actually organized this event was betrothed to William's brother, the Duke of Kensington. If anyone wanted to see William here, it was not his brother.

William didn't mind being around people who hated him—if he did, he would have to live all alone in the woods—he was surrounded by them every day. He didn't mind being around people he hated; that was just business. But he was looking forward to spending time with the one person who might have actually not minded his presence, and due to his duties as a host, that was almost impossible. So, once again,

William found himself on the periphery of the party, looking in.

He glanced at the window where the young people played parlor games and smirked. The things the aristocracy amused themselves with...

He slowly started down the path that led around the house, the heels of his boots echoing in the silent night. The English countryside was beautiful, he had to admit. He had lived most of his life in London, surrounded by buildings, bitter smoke coming from the chimneys, and the rotten smell of the Thames. If he could, he would probably have moved to the countryside. But there was no work for him there. He would get bored in a pinch.

William paused as the strange sound of something scraping against the wall caught his attention. Add to that the rustle of fabric and the heavy breaths, and he would have sworn—

“Ah!” A loud plop was followed by a feminine screech.

William turned the corner only to see a woman lying in a heap of skirts. At least, he assumed it was a woman—a lady, in fact—based on the clothing she was surrounded by. She sat up, scraped the hair away from her face, and sniffled loudly.

William leaned his shoulder against the wall and studied her unhurriedly. The candlelight filtered from inside the house, bathing her in a soft, warm glow.

She had midnight-black hair, which was tangled and matted as if it hadn't been brushed in a few days. Her cheeks

were red, but so was her nose, and it was surrounded by flaky skin, while her lips were as dry as a desert. She looked up at him with her red, droopy eyes and frowned.

“A gentleman would have helped me up by now,” she grumbled in a beautiful, albeit strong accent of unknown origins. The fact that her voice was hoarse and scratchy, and her nose was congested probably didn’t help.

“What makes you think I am a gentleman?” He cocked a brow.

“You are at my uncle’s house party,” she said irritably and stretched out her ungloved hands toward him.

William stepped forward, took her blazing hot hands in his, and tugged her up. “You have a beautiful accent,” he said as she stood a foot away, her hands in his. “Very exotic.”

“It is not exotic,” she countered and lifted her chin. “You are just not educated enough to ascertain it.”

William was so taken aback by her reply that he didn’t know whether to laugh or take offense. And then she sniffed loudly, before pulling back her hands, covering her mouth, and coughing violently.

William blinked and shook his head. Brazen, headstrong, and quite disagreeable, this woman seemed inexplicably charming. Granted, she was sick, and possibly delirious with fever, so perhaps she had no patience for pleasantries.

He took out his crisp, signature crimson handkerchief and handed it to her. “You are most certainly correct,” he said, as

she cautiously took the handkerchief into her hand. “I usually pride myself on being well-educated and worldly. I travel quite a lot, you see. But you’re absolutely right. The fact that I do not recognize your accent puts me at a disadvantage. Especially since you seem to speak my language almost flawlessly. And your pronunciation is most precise.”

“Well, my nose is stuffed, so perhaps that makes it easier to pronounce certain sounds.” William swallowed a laugh since the lady didn’t seem to be joking.

“May I ask?” he started cautiously. “You seem incredibly sick. What are you doing climbing down the trellis outside of what I assume is your bedroom?”

“Because my uncle is trying to kill me,” she said, her voice cracking on the last syllable. She turned and coughed into his handkerchief. “Now go away.”

William blinked. “Pardon me?”

“I need to blow my nose,” she said and placed the handkerchief against her face. “You need to be away.”

William shrugged and took a step back. “That’s the best I can do.”

She grumbled something under her nose that sounded like it wasn’t in English, and then she turned away and loudly blew her nose.

“Are you in need of a rescue, by any chance?” William asked nonchalantly.

“Why would I need a rescue?” she asked, still frowning. But to be fair, she looked extremely ill. So, perhaps her displeasure did not have anything to do with William but with her state of illness.

“Well, you said your uncle is trying to kill you.”

She waved a hand and leaned against the stone-cold wall as she whispered, “Not literally.”

“How then?”

She took deep breaths and threw him a sidelong glance. “The doctor told me to lie under the covers with my windows shut and the fire blazing in my room. I’ve been stuck this way for two days, and I am suffocating. But the... the”—she stumbled, clearly searching for the right word—“not clever old doctor told me that this is how I know that the illness is leaving my body, through sweat and sn—” She paused and looked at him apologetically for the first time since they met. “I don’t think I was supposed to tell the details. I am just tired.”

“The climb down the trellis didn’t help, I suppose,” he mused.

“The nurse is sitting by my door. She fell asleep, but she would awaken if I attempted to leave the room through the door. And people are walking in the corridor. I didn’t want to run into anyone. I don’t want this to be my official introduction to English society.”

William lifted one side of his mouth in a half-smile. “Don’t mind me, then. You can be off on your way.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere. I just want to breathe fresh air.” She let out a deep sigh. “And something to drink.”

William perked up. “That is something I can arrange. Wait here.”

She let out a snort and immediately covered her mouth and nose with his handkerchief. “Where would I go?”

William strode back into the house and took two glasses of warm ale from inside the parlor. Nobody paid him any heed, so he slid right back out.

He handed the lady her drink and leaned against the wall next to her. For some reason, he was drawn to this sick and rather disheveled young lady. He was certain she was beautiful, although at the moment she looked rather frightful. But it wasn’t her looks that he was attracted to.

She had a bold, rebellious spirit that he connected with. And it was incredibly refreshing to sense that about a young woman yet to make a society debut. She didn’t look young either, although he was certain she was. The look in her eyes was of a weathered soul, much like William’s. Although probably not as weathered—lucky for her.

But what he enjoyed about her most was her directness. It was probably due to her illness that she did not have the strength to perform the dance of politeness. Or perhaps it was

the fact that she was a foreigner. Even aristocracy tended to be less cordial in countries other than England.

“Why are you here?” she asked after taking a few sips of her drink.

“Here at the house party?” he asked with a raised brow. Had she finally discerned that he didn’t belong? William could sometimes swear that he had *bastard* written across his forehead.

“No, here. Outside of the house party.”

“Oh.” William exhaled a breath of relief. For some reason, he didn’t want this woman to know his status as a bastard, didn’t want her to look down on him. Usually, he didn’t care. Odd, that. “They don’t like me much.”

She let out a chuckle that quickly turned into a fit of coughs. He held her drink for her as she tried to regain composure. “Why is that?”

“Well, I am not exactly fit to socialize with lords. See, I do not own any land, so they look down on me for that. I own horses, though, and they win at every race, so they envy me for that.”

He grinned, and the lady chuckled, relaxing in his company. “Besides, I speak my mind, I do not dance around the truth, and I do not stoop to lick their boots. In short, they don’t like me.”

The lady looked up at him as if trying to decipher something on his face. He supposed she could not see him

clearly in the dark, nor could he see her. But she was probably feeling quite light-headed and weak due to her illness. “If you were a duke’s son, they would not look upon you that way,” she noted.

William directed a charming smile toward her. “But I am, in fact, a duke’s son.”

Her jaw dropped an inch, and she squinted at him more carefully.

“You are a marquess?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Unfortunately for me, I am not the first son. And not even the second. And thus I live in the shadows. But I vastly prefer it this way. No responsibilities weighing me down, no estates to look after. I am free to do as I please.” William decided to omit that he was a duke’s bastard son. But then, so were most of Kensington’s children.

“And yet you are here,” she pointed out.

He gave a low laugh. “And yet I am here. And for the first time in a long time, I do not regret it.”

He took her hand—her warmth traveled through his fingers, up his arm, and spread all over his body—and slowly brought it to his lips. He kissed her knuckles, his gaze never leaving her face.

She caught her breath, and her eyes widened, her pupils dilating. Something passed between them during that short kiss. “You shouldn’t have done that,” she breathed.



“Why not?” he whispered back. “Because it’s improper? Should I ask for your hand in marriage then?”

“I might be contagious,” she said rather seriously.

William barked a laugh. This was not what he imagined her saying at all.

She looked at him offendedly and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I appreciate your directness,” he said, still chuckling.

“You laugh at me,” she accused.

“No, I was laughing at my naivety. I suppose I hoped my kiss had left a deeper impression than it did.”

She raised a brow. “People have kissed my hand before.”

He smiled. “I do not doubt it. But I was hoping that I was more charming than other people.”

She frowned. “My apologies then. But I am sick, so I might not recognize the full potential of your charm. Also, you might be a dream, I am not quite sure. I feel slightly dizzy.”

William smiled. “I am not a dream, be certain of that.” He smirked and gave her a sidelong glance. “Perhaps a nightmare.”

It was her turn to laugh.

“Let me escort you to the servants’ entrance. Someone will lead you to your room without the guests noticing.”

She nodded and pushed off the wall. “Thank you.”

William took her arm, and she instantly leaned against his side. “That’s what a gentleman is supposed to do, isn’t it?”

She shrugged. “You’re a duke’s son. You should know better than me.”

William should have corrected her. He *was* a duke’s son. But he was far from a gentleman. However, she was weak and did not need the sad story of a duke’s bastard. Or perhaps, he just didn’t want to ruin this lovely evening. She was the first person aside from Roth to treat him as an equal at this damn house party.

They stopped by the door to the servants’ entrance, and he peeked his head in. “I need a footman to escort a lady to her room,” he barked and peeked back out. “Well, I shall take my leave now.”

“Will I see you again?” she asked before he stepped away.

“You can be certain,” William said as he dipped his head, “I shall return for my handkerchief.”

# Chapter 30



The knock on the door pulled Victoria out of her sleep. She sat up and immediately glanced at the window.

No. Not William.

She must have fallen asleep, waiting for William to come to her like she did every night.

Another knock. Victoria stood gingerly and rubbed her bleary eyes. “Come in.”

The butler appeared at the door, bowing low. “You instructed me to wake you up as soon as the morning paper arrived.” He’d been saying the same thing every morning for the past week.

“Yes, thank you!” Victoria snatched the paper from his hands, searching for any mention of her husband. She didn’t have to search for long. One of the first articles on the page sent ice flowing through Victoria’s veins. The introductory sentence stated: *The bastard, the princess’s husband, and a murderer—one man’s incredible fall from grace.*

Victoria skimmed the contents of the article, a few bits and pieces jumping out at her: “*The bastard was arrested,*” “*convicted for the murder of an aristocrat,*” “*sentenced to death.*”

Victoria's hands shook as she read the last phrase. She didn't believe her own eyes. This couldn't be true. Her knees wobbled as she walked toward an armchair a few feet away and leaned against it lest she fell.

"Where's Caroline?" she asked the butler with a shaking voice.

"She is sleeping, Your Highness," he answered meekly.

Victoria raised her eyes to the loyal servant, her gaze incinerating. "Then wake her up! I need her to get me to see my husband."

As the butler bowed out, she reread the contents of the paper more carefully, to make certain she hadn't missed anything, that she hadn't misunderstood anything.

Unfortunately, she hadn't.

William was to hang in three days.

\* \* \*

*Victoria.*

William woke up with her name on his lips and fell asleep with her image in his mind.

Victoria.

His love for her was responsible for his current state.

When he'd escaped the brothel for the last time with Neville in tow, he'd promised himself he would never be imprisoned again. He'd decided he would do anything to avoid this fate. But then, he hadn't known he'd meet her.

After Neville's death, he had promised himself that he'd be self-sufficient. That he'd never depend on anyone, so that when they inevitably left, betrayed him, or died, he would not feel that pit in his soul that he felt now.

He had promised himself many things, and he had broken every single promise. All in her name. And he hadn't regretted a thing. Until now.

He closed his eyes and saw that alcove of roses in the Roth gardens, felt the scent of flowers, the light breeze against his skin. That fateful day flashed before his eyes.

The day he'd married Victoria had been the single most wonderful day of his life and the most devastating at the same time.

That day was his one and only regret. If he could redo any day over again, it would be that one. Not because of the wedding—he wouldn't change that for the world—but for what happened after.

They had just married, and instead of taking her to bed right away, as he should have done, they sat in the garden in each other's embrace, enjoying the cool autumn air. She had been telling him all about St. Petersburg and how he was going to love it once they went there. With the enthusiasm of a child, she'd told him how she was looking forward to showing him the Winter Palace. And how she couldn't wait to share her home country with him and introduce him to her beloved sister.

It had felt nice getting lost in the fantasy, even if William had known it would never come true. He hadn't dared interrupt her; her dreams were a joy to be a part of.

And then the real world came crashing in. Lavinia and Victoria's uncle, the Marquess of Roth, had barged in on their intimate moment, bewildered at what they saw.

Furious to realize Victoria and William had just secretly married.

William remembered Victoria's expression of disbelief when her uncle had told her that William was a bastard and a thief as if it was yesterday. He remembered the hope and trust shining in her eyes as she'd waited for him to deny it. To refute those ugly words.

She had trusted him. Believed in him. Loved him.

And when he couldn't, she whispered in a broken, barely audible voice that still haunted his darkest moments, "How could you?" Her trust and love had been snuffed out in an instant, replaced by devastation at his betrayal.

A slew of mistakes had followed in the wake of this devastation, a myriad of regrets.

William regretted dueling with her uncle for her honor; he regretted stabbing him in the shoulder and fleeing like a coward. Perhaps, if he'd explained himself to her, refused the duel, and instead spent that time winning her back, things would have gone differently.

But he still remembered the hurt in her eyes, the shock, the distaste that stated clearly that as a bastard, he wasn't worthy of her.

And now, two years later, after an infinite number of attempts to get her back, he was back where he started. Still not worthy of her.

Perhaps his capture and inevitable death were a blessing in disguise. He would finally be able to give Victoria what she'd wanted all along—freedom from him.

And he would get the ending he deserved.

Footsteps sounded somewhere in the corridor and got louder.

William sat up straight.

Were guards coming for him two days early? Would he hang today without ever seeing Victoria again? Without hearing his name on her lips one more time?

The hope of seeing her again was the only thing that had kept him from crumbling completely. She was his only hope, his only salvation.

He didn't believe in God, in heaven, in absolution.

But he did believe in *her*.

If only she believed in him just as much, perhaps they would have been able to escape this nightmare. Perhaps they could have been in Paris or Venice. Anywhere but here.

Except she didn't believe in him. Over and over, she had proven to him that no matter what he did, she would never love him the way he loved her. And she would never trust him the way she had before she had learned the truth about him.

The offbeat clicks of heels against the stone-cold floor and the rustling of fabric indicated that more than one person was moving toward William's cell. And at least one of them was a woman.

William's gaze was glued to the barred opening of the door, praying silently to see her face one more time. Her name became a benediction in his mind.

And then the footsteps slowed, a few words were exchanged, and finally—finally!—Victoria's lovely face appeared behind the door.

William jolted up, lithely jumping to his feet as though he hadn't spent the last week sitting in the same place, unmoving, lost in self-pity. His heart beating wildly against his chest, he stared into her beautiful eyes, as black as midnight. They were shimmering with tears, and her eyelids were puffy as if from hours of crying. Had she been crying for him?

A part of him questioned whether this was even happening. Was she really in front of him, looking at him with sad, dewy eyes? He had dreamed about this for so long that he couldn't trust his own mind.

Perhaps he had fallen asleep. Was he dreaming?

"William," she said, taking in his appearance.



He smiled. “I know. Not my best look, is it?”

Victoria stepped closer, her fingers encircling the grimy iron bars separating them. She swallowed and licked her lips. “I waited for you. I didn’t know how to find you, so I tied a handkerchief to the window and waited for you. But you never came.”

His heart jolted at her words. He raised his hands as much as he could, his iron shackles jingling. “I was a bit tied up.”

Victoria smiled weakly. “I can see that.”

“I am glad you came. I wished... I dreamed you would come.”

“Of course, I came!” Her voice was no longer soft, notes of anger seeping into her tone. She was the only person he knew who could be smiling one moment and angry the next.

“I wanted to tell you so many things,” William said. “So many things, but I remember none of them now.”

Victoria shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. You’ll tell me later.”

William licked his lips. “There might not be a later, *lubimaya*.”

“There will be. I promise you.”

William flinched. “Do not make promises you can’t keep.”

“William—” she started to protest but he shook his head.

“I wanted to tell you so many things, but in the end, only one thing matters. I was wrong.”

“Pardon me?” Her features grew confused.

“I was wrong about everything concerning you. I was selfish and hypocritical. I married you for my own self-serving reasons. I fell in love with you so quickly that my mind refused to process that you could never be truly mine.”

“But I *am* yours,” she said weakly.

He shook his head again. “You fought me all through our marriage so do not stop now. I don’t want you to be sad that I am about to die. I want you to live a long and happy life. I want you to remember all the good times we’ve shared if it brings you comfort. But I know you enough to understand that you’ll need to be angry with me. So, be angry, even furious at me.

“In fact, hate me. You have ample reasons to hate me. Hate me for all the things I did in self-service, disguising it as an act of love. For tricking you, seducing you, and dashing all your dreams. For trying to be good enough for you and failing miserably every time.”

“Oh, stop!” Victoria cried, tears of frustration glistening in her eyes. “You want me to hate you? Well, I do! But not for the reasons you think. I don’t hate you for your lies or tricks, I don’t hate you for your stealing, graverobbing, and even blackmail. I don’t hate you for bringing me to the tower, demanding kisses, and forcing me to share a bed with you. I don’t hate you for anything that brought me closer to you. What I do hate you for is right here, right now. Not because you were caught, but because you’ve given up. Because after

all we've been through, you're telling me to live a life without you. So, yes, I hate you. But only because I love you. I always have.

“I know you think I don't trust you, but I do. I have trusted you this entire time. I forced myself to act like I didn't because I thought I'd be a fool to do so. But I was twice a fool not to. I ruined our time together even as I enjoyed every moment of it. I ruined your trust in yourself and as a result, here you are. Yes, it's my fault you got caught, don't you see? You would have never been involved with anything to do with Porter if it wasn't for me. You wouldn't be forced to endure social functions where half the people can't stand you because they envy you. Because what they have is purely a result of the luck of the draw. They managed to be born into families with titles and that's their only accomplishment in life. While you fought for everything you have. And that's why I love you. I love you for your past, your present, and your future.

“And right now, I need you to stop with the self-pity and despair. I need you to fight again.”

William stood numb, frozen in place. The words that would have melted his heart only a few days ago crashed against the ice around it. For the first time in his life, William didn't believe her.

“Maybe I am tired,” he rasped. “Maybe I have fought for the wrong things my entire fucking life. Chasing butterflies when I should have lived in the gutter covered in flies.”

She swallowed. “It is not a weakness to get tired sometimes, William. You’ve fought and scraped your entire life in order to keep your head above water. Did you shoot for the stars? Perhaps. But guess what? Only because you could reach them. Everything you ever desired you got! Do not tell me you aimed too high when you married me because you were reaching for the stars long before I ever met you. It is normal, acceptable even, to get tired, especially when you’ve been fighting for breath for years. But do not sit here and tell me that you’re giving up, because that’s not the man I married.”

He scoffed. “The man you married tricked you into this union, locked you in a tower, demanded your kisses, and threatened anyone who dared to come close to you. The man you married stole and lied, abducted and blackmailed all for his own benefit. The man you married would have kept you forever entrapped in this marriage. Don’t you see? I can set you free now.”

“By dying?” she cried.

“There is nothing we can do, Victoria. I am going to die in two days. You should accept that and start thinking about what’s best for you.”

“You know what’s best for me?” She bristled. “You! You are the only person in the world who can make me so angry that I am ready to kill you myself, but I will also fight anyone who attempts to do the same. You are the only person who can get me so frustrated that I want to stomp my foot and throw

things at the wall. But in the next breath, you make me laugh. I admire you more than any other person in this entire world. You are talented, quick-witted, and resourceful. There is no duke in the world, no prince or king, who I would rather be with. I don't want a title. Hell, I'll throw mine away. I will live with you in that tiny tower, baking bread for you every morning if only it means I can be with you. Do not stop fighting for me now. I need you to fight."

He shrugged, melancholy spreading to his bones, "What if I can't?"

There was a brief pause. "Then I'll fight for you." Victoria confidently extended her hand to him, her fingers curled into a loose fist.

William moved closer, as much as the shackles allowed him, and took her hand in his. He rubbed her soft skin between his calloused fingers and caressed her knuckles. The touch of her hand, the look of certainty in her eyes, awakened something within him that he'd thought was forgotten.

A will to live.

"I'll fight for you, William," she repeated, her voice hoarse. "And I'll work tirelessly to convince you that I do love you, just the way you did. Even if I have to lock us in the tower for another three months. I will not let you die. Because I love you. I always have. I was just too stubborn and too stupid to realize that."

William's heart squeezed at her words, and his breath caught in his throat. "You can't love me. You can't trust me,

Victoria, I am a thief, a liar, a manipulator!”

“Yes.” She nodded. “I know all that. I know *you*. I know you like my four fingers!”

William chuckled, his lips slowly curling in a grin. “Wasn’t it five?”

She bit her lip and shook her head. “No, I know you even better than that. And I love every part of you.”

He leaned forward and kissed her fingers.

Kensington appeared by her side then and threw William a brief nod. “Hello, brother,” he said with a wink, before turning to Victoria. “Caroline is in position. We have about ten minutes.”

“Good.” She nodded, and he disappeared behind the door.

Screeching sounds came from somewhere below, and William frowned. “What is going on?”

“We are breaking you out,” Victoria said with a twinkle in her eye. Then she opened her palm, revealing a hairpin. “Now take this pin and undo your shackles. We don’t have a lot of time.”

William’s eyes widened, and he carefully took the pin from her hand, grazing her soft skin. “I belong here. Even though I didn’t kill Porter, you know that I belong here, right?”

“Perhaps. But I am selfish and hypocritical.” She shrugged. “And I want my husband back.”

William chuckled earnestly. “And I want to kiss you.”

Victoria beamed at him. “Then you better get your shackles off and do it.”

William immediately started undoing his shackles. Before he was done, the door creaked, as a slight opening appeared on the side of the door where the hinges used to be. Kensington pushed the door open even more until it was open just enough for William to slip through.

William quickly shed the shackles and slipped through the crack. And the first thing he did as a free man was kiss his wife soundly.

Victoria wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back, her fingers sifting through his hair, her body molding against his. William slipped his tongue inside her mouth, pouring all his love, all his longing into that kiss.

A loud clearing of the throat jolted them apart. “We need to move,” Kensington reminded them.

“Right.” Victoria wiped her puffy lips, her cheeks rosy, her gaze suddenly timid.

“Right.” William took her hand in his and squeezed. “How am I going to walk past the guards?”

Victoria pursed her lips, holding back laughter. “We are going to smuggle you through.”

He raised a brow. “How?”

Victoria slowly started shedding her clothes, and that’s when he realized that not only was she wearing a few layers, but her clothes were far too big for her.

In his defense, he'd only seen her face in the barred opening of the door, and when he'd gotten free, he was more interested in her lips than her clothes.

“Wear this,” she said, handing him women’s items of clothing one by one, complete with a wig and a shawl to put around his head.

“You’ll have to crouch to look womanly—you’re too tall—but we’ll pretend to weep,” Victoria instructed with a mischievous grin.

William pulled her close, planting a desperate kiss on her lips before donning the clothes and wrapping the shawl around his head. Arm in arm, they shuffled out, shoulders shaking with fake sobs. William buried his face in the crook of Victoria’s neck for the duration of their escape, his knees and thighs aching from the uncomfortable position. But he could endure a bit of pain for the end goal.

The guard barely spared them a glance as they passed, too distracted by something Caroline was telling him, her hands frantically waving in the air.

Kensington stopped by another guard to inquire about William’s execution date, while Victoria and William shuffled away.

Once outside the prison walls, they bolted down shadowy alleys, Victoria pulling him in farther away. Leaning against a damp stone wall to catch their breath, they looked at each other, grinning wildly as exhilaration coursed through them.



“The carriage is waiting just around that corner,” Victoria said and tugged at his arm again. They made the last wild dash toward freedom, giggling as they reached a black, unmarked carriage. Matthew was at the helm.

“Thank god!” he cried as John opened the door for them, gesturing with his hands for them to hurry.

William looked at the overcast sky before climbing into a carriage. He was free.

As soon as they settled inside the carriage, William pulled Victoria onto his lap, holding her close, savoring her warmth and the soft curves resting against his body. He leaned his forehead against the top of her head, his nose burrowing into her hair, and inhaled her dear scent. “Where to now?” he asked. “You know as soon as people realize I am gone, I will be hunted like an animal.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“We can’t return to the tower, we can’t travel openly. We’ll need to hide out, and that means hiding with the cargo on a ship, staying in cramped little shacks for extended periods until we find a safe haven. Can you live like that?”

Victoria nodded without hesitation. “I don’t care where we live as long as you’re beside me. I never felt as though I had a home until that little tower we lived in. But it wasn’t the tower, not really. It was you. You are my home. And as long as we’re together, I do not care where or how we live.”

William shook his head, his heart aching for everything he couldn't give Victoria, everything she deserved. "How can you agree to that? You're a princess."

"Yes, your princess," she said with a smile. "And you're my bastard. My glorious bastard."

# Epilogue



*A month later...*

When the carriage stopped, it was pitch dark outside. Victoria, who was sleeping curled up by William's side, her head on his chest, her arms around his waist, lifted her head with a frown. But as soon as their gazes met, her lips curled into a smile.

"Where are we?" she asked, the remnants of sleep clinging to her hoarse voice.

William tightened his arm around her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Home."

Rubbing her eyes, she leaned over him and stared at the darkness outside. "Home?"

"Yes. Come." William jumped down from the carriage and helped her alight.

They had spent the past month on the road: first, smuggling themselves from London to Calais, then making their way to the South of France.

Her hand in his, another holding her skirts, she tilted her head back to take in the sight before her.

They stood in front of an elegant chateau, stone turrets and arched windows rising amidst sprawling wings framed by

manicured gardens. It was difficult to see the full grandeur of this place in the dark, but Victoria's mouth hung open as she stared at it in awe.

Cool wind whipped around them, lifting her shawl and exposing her skin to the cold midnight air, but she didn't seem to notice. She was too engrossed in the vision before her.

"Come inside," William urged and tugged on her arm.

Victoria followed him, her eyes running over the cobblestone walkway, through the thick oak door, and once they entered, over the glittering walls of the hall, or as much as she could see in the dim light.

"This is our home?" she asked.

William nodded, a grin on his lips, loving the gleam in her eyes.

"Yes. Our new home. I won it in a game of brag some years ago but never truly had a need for it. After we married, I began working on renovating it, hoping to bring you here someday. A palace for my princess."

She leaned against him, burrowing her face into his coat.

William cleared his throat. "I hope you like it."

Her eyes brimmed with tears when she looked up at him. "Like it? I love it!"

"I understand that a tour is in order, but since it's late and you seem tired, perhaps it can wait until tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "I want to see it. As much as I can."

William laughed and placed his hand on the small of her back. “Very well. Let me get some lanterns for us first.”

Just then, the housekeepers of the place, having noticed their carriage, rushed through the doors. “Monsieur William, welcome home!”

Victoria turned to them with a smile, and they bowed. “Madame.”

“This is my wife, the mistress of this house, Princess Victoria,” William said proudly in French. Then he turned to Victoria. “Monsieur and Madame Laurent are the housekeepers of this place. They live in a cottage on the grounds.”

He quickly gave instructions for them to awaken the servants and prepare them a bath and something to eat. When he finished and the Laurents left, Victoria raised a brow. “We have servants?”

William let out a chuckle. “Even a cook. But they have their separate quarters in an adjacent building and will only come here at designated hours. They won’t be standing over us during meals and won’t crowd the house during the day. Gives us more freedom to...” His hooded eyes fell to her lips. “*Explore* the house whenever we want.”

She licked her lips. “How thoughtful,” she said, her voice breathless.

William shook his head. “Tour first.” And he led her away with enthusiastic, long strides.

They needed to wash the grime off their bodies from their journey before he could kiss and lick every inch of her. And before that could happen, their baths needed to be ready. So, they had just enough time for a quick tour around the house.

He led her through the soaring rooms—a bedchamber draped in silks, parlors with plush furnishings, and a grand ballroom. But it was the library that stole her breath—floor-to-ceiling shelves, filled with leather-bound books in different languages. Most importantly, a large and cozy armchair by the stone-carved fireplace. She even sat in it for a moment, gauging the comfort level of her favorite new chair.

Finally, he took her to the kitchens. “And of course, we shall have fully stocked larders,” he said, gesturing at the empty pantries. “I shall instruct our servants to get us bread and jam the first thing in the morning.”

Victoria threw herself at him, knocking the wind out of him and wrapping her arms around his neck. William chuckled and held her tightly against him.

“Hopefully, this place is closer to your dream house than the tower we’ve lived in before,” he said.

She gazed deeply into his eyes. “You are my dream, William. As long as I am with you, nothing else matters.”

He chuckled. “I am no dream, dear wife. More of a nightmare.”

“Then this is the nightmare I never wish to wake up from,” she whispered, then stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to

his lips.

\* \* \*

*Two weeks later...*

*Or three months since their deal.*

Soft morning light filtered into the bedroom as Victoria sifted through the possessions Gertrude and Matthew had brought from their tower. They had arrived a few hours earlier and were now settling into their new quarters in the little cottage adjacent to Victoria and William's mansion.

Victoria picked up a small metal trunk, turning it over curiously. "What is this? You never told me."

"Oh, you can open it." William swiftly tugged a pin from her hair and unlocked the trunk.

Victoria raised a brow. "Don't you ever use the keys?"

William shrugged. "Sometimes keys are just a waste of time."

With a chuckle, Victoria lifted the lid and peered inside.

Letters. These were all letters.

She glanced at William, but he was looking through the other trunks, unperturbed by Victoria's actions. She swallowed, feeling slightly uncomfortable going through his things, but he seemed so at ease that she convinced herself to continue. She took out a stack of letters and shuffled them in her hands, her gaze quickly running over the inky scribbles.

Most of the letters were from someone in Russia, and they were all regarding her sister Anna.

Her heart quickened, and her hands trembled as she tried to figure out the content of the letters. Some weren't even in English, but they weren't in Russian either.

As if sensing her turmoil, William shifted to sit closer to her, snaked his arm around her waist, and propped his chin on her shoulder.

“What is this?” she whispered in bewilderment, scanning the letters. “It’s all about Anna.”

William nodded. “I’ve kept in touch with acquaintances who happen to live in Russia. Many of them are close to the new Tsarevna. It helped me ensure your sister’s well-being and to open communication about a visit.”

“Visit?” Victoria’s eyes went wide. “I can’t visit; I will be imprisoned.”

He raised a brow. “Do you doubt my resourcefulness?”

She pursed her lips. “Never.”

“I thought everything through. We shall have counterfeit documents ready by the end of the month.”

“And then we can travel to Russia?”

William smiled. “There are a few issues to think through, but yes. And I have enough intelligence on the security of their palace to plan their escape.”

Her eyes widened. “Escape?”



“Exactly,” he said proudly. William puffed out his chest, mischief in his eyes. “Have I ever told you that I am the best thief in the world? I can steal anything. Even people.”

Victoria threw her arms around his neck, giggling. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” she chanted, peppering kisses all over his face.

William laughed. “Don’t thank me yet. We still may end up imprisoned if caught.”

She shrugged, undaunted. “Then we shall escape. Have I ever told you that I smuggled my husband from Newgate Prison?”

William tightened his arms around her with a wide smile. “Quite a devious pair we make.”

The end.

Read more from *The Shadows* series!

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08VYP3M4T>

*The Notorious Lady* (Grace and Ford’s story is next)

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### Fact or Fiction?

If you'd like to discover the inspiration behind some of the events, characters, and places in this book, keep reading!

# There's Something About Victoria

Writing about royalty and navigating a fictional world based on true events can be challenging, because while trying to honor the history, my goal, ultimately, is to entertain.

So when I crafted the character of Victoria, I had to delve deep into history to determine where she would fit in.

And lucky for me, the stars aligned.

Although Victoria herself is a fictional character, her immediate family is very real.

If you were to explore historical records, you would easily find her parents, Karl Leopold, Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, and Catherine (or Yekaterina, using Russian phonetics) Ivanovna, Tsarevna of Russia. Just as easily, you can discover information about Victoria's beloved sister, Anna Leopoldovna, the Regent of Russia. I tried to keep the dates and other key historical events of this family as close to the truth as possible while introducing a new member to their family, Victoria.

In reality, Anna was imprisoned during a coup, and unfortunately she died in captivity, due to an infection following her fourth childbirth. However, in my story, there's still hope that William and Victoria will free the family.

Read more from *The Shadows* series!

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08VYP3M4T>

# William's escape from Newgate

How did William escape Newgate Prison so easily?

Well, his remarkable escape was also inspired by true events, specifically by a man named Jack Sheppard.

Sheppard was a notorious English thief who lived in the early 18th century, best known for his incredible escapes from Newgate Prison. He had escaped Newgate a total of four times and became legendary for these audacious feats. One of his most daring escapes involved his accomplices distracting the guards, while he removed an iron bar from the door, and fled while dressed as a woman. (Sound familiar?)

How did he manage that?

Well, it turns out that locks during those times weren't as secure and could be easily picked with a pin or a long iron nail. Moreover, the security at the prison was, to put it mildly, rather lax. At the height of its operation, the prison had a ratio of just 1 guard for every 90 prisoners.

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*updates!*

# William's Tower

If you've ever wondered about Victoria and William's residence and the appearance of the tower while reading this book, you'll be pleased to know that there was indeed a real-life inspiration for it as well.

The location and the tower are a fictionalized version of the Round Tower situated on the grounds of Bruce Castle. Bruce Castle is presently a museum, so if you find yourself in London, you can visit and witness it firsthand.

I imagined William and Victoria's tower to be somewhat more spacious, though, in order for them to be able to live there comfortably, and have all the amenities.

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# The French Bread

Did *geindre* really moan?

Did bastard dough exist?

I've done a bit of research on French bread history in order to write the scene where William teaches Victoria to bake.

But if you want to read more, here's the article where I drew most of the information:

<https://leslefts.blogspot.com/2018/01/french-bread-history-eighteenth-century.html>

Written by Jim Chevallier, a food historian.

Read more from *The Shadows* series!

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08VYP3M4T>



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