



Cobalt Fairy
PUBLISHING

THE
MARQUESS'
UNWANTED
OBSESSION

DAPHNE BYRNE

THE MARQUESS'
UNWANTED OBSESSION
A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE
NOVEL

THE UNWANTED WIVES

BOOK FOUR



DAPHNE BYRNE



CONTENTS

Before You Start Reading...

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Preview: The Duke's Unwanted Virgin](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Also by Daphne Byrne](#)

[About the Author](#)

ABOUT THE BOOK

“You belong with me, Raven. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Faking a betrothal to the most rakish Marquess is the only way for Raven to keep her secret buried.

Renowned for being the worst rake of the ton, Ethan has never cared for anyone. But with Raven, he becomes obsessed...

And when their fake betrothal comes to an abrupt end, Ethan must do anything to keep her close...

Even ruin her.

BEFORE YOU START READING...

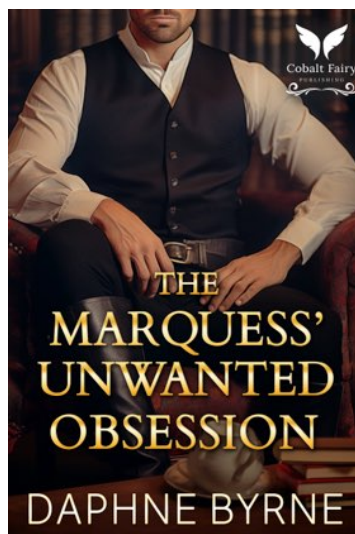
Ethan has had a very complicated and dangerous past...Many rumors surround him, the most crucial one being about his involvement in the murder of one of his friends...

Here is Ethan's prequel chapter, which will help you understand what happened to him and his friends (like Jackson from the previous book in the series).

Many of my readers have requested it and that's why I am giving it away for FREE! I know you'll love it!

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

Read the story of *Ethan's Trial* [here](#).



Just click on the image above! ↑

CHAPTER 1



*R*aven Davenport stood amidst the throng of strangers, her every sense under assault by the opulence of the grand ball. She stood beside her mother, Mathilda, and her father, Oscar, watching as the strangers dressed in their finest silks and satins swirled around her. Her chest tightened as the sea of unfamiliar faces and the chime of laughter echoed off the high ceilings of the ballroom.

The room was awash with the soft golden light from the chandeliers, yet all the splendors felt oppressive to Raven. The air was heavy with the scent of exotic perfumes, and the subtle musk of wealth seemed to suffocate her. She was a lonely island in a torrent of jovial merriment.

Begrudgingly, Raven found herself the unwilling participant in her parents' quest to find her a suitor. She yearned for escape, for the comforting silence of her own quarters away from strangers, prying eyes, and unspoken expectations.

“Raven, sweetheart, you’re slouching again.” Her mother’s tone was laced with a hint of exasperation. “These are very

influential people with means and connections. It's crucial that you make a good impression."

"Remind me again why you dragged me to this ball," Raven retorted softly, careful not to let the bitterness seep into her voice. "You know I have no interest in these 'influential people' or their connections."

"Nonsense," Mathilda said, dusting Raven's dress with her fan as if clearing away the dust. "You know we are here to find you a suitable match. Now, look sharp. I believe the Viscount is headed our way."

Raven's eyes shifted to the crowd, only to find a handsome man, resplendent in his finery, approaching them. "Ladies," he greeted, a confident, almost imperious smile tugging at his lips as he bowed to them. "Anthony Smith, the Viscount of Rochford, at your service."

The Viscount of Rochford was the epitome of aristocratic charm, and his commanding presence demanded attention. Standing tall and regal, he was every inch a nobleman, his finely tailored ensemble accentuating his athletic silhouette. Raven drew her eyes to meet his and found herself dazzled by his hazel eyes that held an enigmatic glint that unnerved her the longer she stared into them.

Raven scanned the Viscount over once more and couldn't help but notice his slicked-back dark hair that contrasted with his

fair complexion. He flashed her a dazzling smile that radiated confidence, but for Raven, it was a testament to his high birth and privileged upbringing.

Raven's eyes narrowed as she studied the Viscount a moment longer, and her lips curved into a thin, unimpressed, polite smile. There was something about the man that she found incredibly irksome. Perhaps it was his boldness to approach her that she found irritating, or maybe it was the way he carried himself. Either way, she knew, deep down, she wasn't going to like the man. He was far too pompous in his attire and mannerisms, not to mention there was an air of superiority about him.

She distrusted him immediately and saw through the veneer of nobility to the possible manipulation and self-interest that likely lurked beneath his regal appearance. No matter how he presented himself, to Raven, the Viscount was nothing more than an overprivileged aristocrat, unaware of the world beyond his own opulence. To trust such a man, she thought, would be a monumental error.

"My Lord, we are honored," Raven's mother gushed, her flattery as airy as the finest Chantilly lace. "May I present my daughter, Raven Davenport."

The Viscount turned his eyes to Raven, a predatory glint in his gaze. "Miss Davenport," he said, taking Raven's hand for a brief moment. "I was quite taken with your beauty from across the room."

Raven recoiled subtly, her spirit bristling at his audacity. “I am pleased to meet you,” she replied, a veneer of politeness barely masking her defiance.

“Lady Davenport,” Anthony began, turning towards Raven’s mother. “I was informed of your daughter’s beauty, but seeing it for myself, well, I must say, it’s rather remarkable that the rumors, for once, are true. I’ve come to ask for her hand if, of course, Lady Davenport, you and your husband will permit it.”

Raven’s heart crashed into her stomach as the world started to sway, with the rhythm of the music filling the room. Every breath she took was rough and coarse as it pricked her lungs.

Mathilda, flushed with pride and seemingly oblivious to her daughter’s discomfort, immediately responded, “My Lord, we would be honored.”

Raven found herself stunned by the Viscount’s audacity and felt a surge of panic rise within her. The idea of spending any more time with this man, let alone marrying him, was practically unbearable for her to think about.

“I’m sorry, My Lord, but I believe that such decisions should also involve the one being courted, don’t you?” Her voice was shaky but determined as she rolled her shoulders back and held her breath, unsure of how he would respond.

Anthony flashed a genuine smile that warmed his otherwise cold demeanor for a moment. He cleared his throat as his attention shifted from Raven to her mother and back again. “Miss Davenport, I must say, I admire your forthrightness. However, I was under the impression you were here to see me this evening.”

Raven’s head whipped about to find the gleeful smile on her mother’s face. The sight appalled her as she felt her world toppling around her. Mathilda batted her eyelashes as she remained silent and unmoving next to Raven. Panic surged through Raven as she found herself nothing more than a pawn to her mother’s scheming.

Realizing she would have to find her own way out of the mess her mother created, Raven cleared her throat. She took a deep breath, her eyes brimming with a mix of defiance and sadness as she squeezed her gloved hands together. “My Lord, I feel it necessary to inform you that I cannot accept your proposal,” she said, her voice steady.

A murmur of surprise rippled through the room.

Mathilda’s expression turned from shock to incredulity. “Raven, what are you doing?” she demanded, her tone sharp as she shifted uneasily next to Raven.

Raven turned towards her bewildered mother. “I am seeing someone, Mother,” she admitted boldly, her gaze unwavering.

Both Anthony and Mathilda looked at her in stunned silence.

“Seeing someone? Who might that be, Raven?” her mother asked, her voice a mixture of confusion and anger.

Raven’s eyes scanned the room, her heart pounding in her chest. She was frantic to find someone, anyone, to validate her bold claim. The last thing she wanted was to be stuck with the pompous Viscount.

As Raven’s eyes darted around the room, a sense of urgency was evident in her gaze as she hunted for a prospective savior within the crowd. Her gaze landed on Jackson Deumond, a recent groom, his arm lovingly wrapped around his new wife. Raven wished more than anything he would be her savior, but she knew he wouldn’t be coming to her rescue.

She then spotted Harrison, a man of honor and integrity, who was happily married to Mary-Jane. He, too, would offer her no solace for her troubles. Her eyes then shifted to Liam Monrow, who, despite being unattached, she found juvenile. Her heart pounded in her chest as her options dwindled.

Just when the sense of impending doom was about to overwhelm her, her eyes fell on Ethan Holloway, the Marquess

of Whitland. A glimmer of hope sparked in her eyes as she considered the possibility. She had found her knight in shining armor.

Despite the rumors that swirled around the ton about Ethan Holloway, Raven had always found him incredibly handsome. Whispers of a dark past, even implications in a murder, clung to his name yet never seemed to tarnish his charm. The specifics of these rumors were vague and shrouded in mystery, with Raven only privy to the whispers that swirled at gatherings and balls.

Yet, she couldn't shake off the feeling that there was more to his story, a hidden depth behind those captivating eyes. Thankfully, as far as she was aware, he was single. This made him the perfect choice to back her claim. His reputation might not be the most honorable, but she was desperate. And in times of desperation, one must make do with what is at hand. Besides, she reasoned, it was only for now, just to save herself from the bothersome man standing before her.

"Mother, I beseech you, do not fret unnecessarily," Raven began, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Mathilda huffed in response, her brow knitting with concern. "Raven, darling, you know as well as I do that reputation is everything in our society. I only wish to know if this man you're seeing is... respectable."

“Respectable?” Raven echoed, her light-hearted chuckle echoing in the room. “Mother, in times such as these, respectability is a luxury we can ill afford. Rest assured, I am well, and that should be your primary concern.”

Mathilda sighed heavily, clearly not satisfied with the vague response. “Raven, dear, your well-being is always my paramount concern, but you know how rumors can tarnish a woman’s reputation.”

“Indeed,” Raven assured, her face alight with an impish grin. “But remember, it’s not the rumors that define us, it’s how we respond to them.”

“Miss Davenport,” Anthony began, his voice as smooth as silk and eyes filled with an intensity that was hard to ignore. “We make a delightful match, you must appreciate that. We are both wealthy, attractive, and well-regarded in Society. I don’t understand the resistance to our union.”

“My Lord,” Raven replied, a soft chuckle escaping her lips, “your silver-tongued flattery might work on other girls, but I am not one of them.”

“Raven,” Mathilda scolded.

“It’s quite all right,” Anthony insisted, straightening his back as he cleared his throat. “I’m certain Miss Davenport here will

see our situation a bit clearer in the morning without so many distractions.”

Raven’s smile didn’t waver. Instead, her eyes twinkled with fierce determination. “If the Viscount is implying that I’m incapable of making my own choices,” she replied, “he will be sorely mistaken, for I am not seeking the world. I am seeking love, honesty, and respect. And I believe I may have found that in the Marquess of Whitland.”

Anthony’s surprise was evident, his charming smile faltering for a moment. Raven, however, remained unfazed. She had made her choice, and it wasn’t him.

The music, until now a lively partner in the evening’s festivities, came to an abrupt halt as the murmurs began to spread. A palpable shift in the atmosphere was felt as the grand ballroom, awash with colors and sparkling lights, seemed to hold its breath.

All eyes shifted between Raven and Ethan Holloway, the Marquess of Whitland, whose face remained stoic and unfazed by the sudden attention bestowed on him.

Ethan flashed an uneasy smile as he walked through the crowd towards Raven. She could see the shock flickering in his steely gaze as he approached. A hush fell over the room as the announcement of their courtship hung in the air, leaving everyone in suspense.

CHAPTER 2



Ethan shifted his weight as he sat rigidly on the worn-out leather couch. He glanced about the cigarette-scented room and found himself surrounded by a motley crew of individuals whose air of self-importance seemed to suffocate the small room. His eyes stung from the smoke that lingered in the air and swirled around him.

In the corner of the room, Anthony, oblivious to his unease, poured a generous measure of whiskey into crystal glasses. Ethan watched the golden liquid glinting under the dim light. A thin smile pulled at his lips as he noticed Anthony's heavy-handed pour. Ethan couldn't help but feel a pang of apprehension as he watched the amber pool rising to the brim of the glasses.

Anthony turned towards Ethan with the crystal glasses cradled in his hands. "So, Lord Whitland," he began, the casual tone of his voice belying the intensity of his gaze, "how do you know Miss Davenport?"

Ethan swallowed hard, trying to mask his discomfort as he shifted once more in his seat, and he plucked a lie out of thin air. “We met at Hyde Park a while ago.”

“Interesting,” Anthony mused, handing Ethan a glass. The aroma of whiskey filled Ethan’s nostrils and twisted his stomach as Anthony studied the liquid in his own glass, swirling the contents around until it formed a whirlpool. “And how long have you been seeing each other?”

“Just a couple of months now,” Ethan replied, his eyes darting to the doorway as he wondered how he managed to get himself into such a predicament. Of course, things could be worse. He could be with Miss Crosby.

The thought sent chills coursing through Ethan’s body.

“Mmm,” Anthony hummed, taking a sip of his whiskey. “And what are your intentions with Miss Davenport?” His voice was steady, almost casual, as if they were discussing the weather, but his eyes never left Ethan’s face.

There was a subtle hint of something predatory in the Viscount’s gaze that unnerved Ethan.

“What are your intentions?” Ethan asked, daring to challenge the Viscount.

Anthony arched his eyebrow and glared at Ethan. “Clearly you’re aware of her family’s fortune, or you would not be interested in her.”

“Is that why you want to court her?” Ethan countered, shifting in his seat. “For her family’s money?”

“Is there any other reason to marry other than to accumulate wealth and power?” Anthony asked, his gaze narrowing.

“There’s always love. I hear that holds great weight, for some,” Ethan suggested, trying to keep his emotions under control.

There was an air of indifference swirling about the Viscount that made Ethan want to chuckle. He rolled his eyes as the feeling of irritation with the Viscount’s pompousness twisted his stomach.

“Love? Ah, what foolish nonsense, but I’m curious, why has she caught your eye?” Anthony asked, leaning closer to Ethan.

“She’s unlike any girl I’ve met before,” Ethan answered honestly.

He couldn’t help but chuckle at the irony of his predicament. After all, he never spent any time with Raven Davenport. She was far too pious for his taste.

“She’s definitely a different kind of woman if I must say.”

“Different?” Anthony repeated, raising an eyebrow. “In what way?”

Ethan struggled to find the right words, trying not to give too much away. After all, he didn’t have a clue as to who Raven was. He’d seen her a couple of times at parties and gatherings, but he never once approached her or even gave her a second thought.

“She’s... she’s independent. Strong-willed. And she doesn’t let anyone tell her what to do,” Ethan answered as if channeling every female champion’s words he’d heard them bemoan over the years.

Anthony chuckled, a sound that sent shivers down Ethan’s spine. “Yes, I can see why you would be drawn to someone like that,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Ethan was fully aware of Anthony’s implications. Everyone in the ton knew of Ethan’s scandalous past, but having it smeared in his face was something he wasn’t going to tolerate.

Ethan felt a wave of protectiveness wash over him at the thought of someone trying to harm Raven. He had no idea where that came from. He really didn’t know the lady, but her

face looking at him pleadingly when he was approaching her twisted his heart.

“If you’re implying that I would hurt her, you, My Lord, are sorely mistaken,” he stated firmly.

There was a silence that came between them, a silence that rattled Ethan to his core. The Viscount shifted his weight as he leveled Ethan with a judgmental glare.

“Stop seeing Raven,” Anthony said bluntly, cutting through the tension in the room. “I can give her a better life than you, Ethan. Your reputation... it’s less than respectable.”

Ethan frowned, and anger flared in his eyes. “What I do shouldn’t concern you, Anthony.”

“But it does, Ethan. It does.” Anthony’s voice was chillingly calm. “I have plans to woo Miss Davenport. Plans that involve providing her with the world she deserves.”

Ethan rose from his seat on the couch, his fists clenched at his sides. “Raven picked me. Not you, Anthony. She chose me. Whatever may be my past or my reputation, I will honor her to the best of my ability.”

With that, he turned on his heel and marched out of the room, leaving a stunned Anthony in his wake.

Ethan moved swiftly out of the room and down the hallway. He felt his body tingling as the questions bombarded him. Why Raven had to pick him was baffling. He didn't know the woman other than a few happenchance encounters. The one thing he did know was that Miss Davenport was the epitome of elegance and grace. She must have had a reason to choose him over all others.

The thought intrigued Ethan as his focus shifted to Anthony.

Ethan had heard the disturbing rumors surrounding the man and knew he'd snuff the light from Raven's eyes in a flicker of rage. A foreboding thought seeped into Ethan's depths, urging and nagging him to protect the innocent and stunning Miss Davenport.

As Ethan walked through the ballroom, he hunted for Raven as he tried to ignore the murmurs and soft laughter that swirled around him.

With his heart pounding in his chest, he navigated the crowd, his gaze hunting for that familiar face. Each whisper of her name quickened his pulse, sharpening his resolve to find her. He struggled to understand why Raven had chosen him, a man with an unsavory past, over the impeccable Anthony. Her bold admission and conviction made even Ethan question if they had some secret encounters he was unaware of and made him resolute in his aim to unravel the mystery of why she would lie about such a thing.

Ethan's heart skipped a beat as he spotted Raven across the room, her golden locks cascading down her back. The way her hair shimmered under the grand chandeliers was mesmerizing. She was stunning in a dress of midnight blue, and her eyes sparkled with an inner fire that stole his breath. Ethan found himself drawn to her, and his feet moved of their own accord, deftly sidestepping the dancers until he was at her side.

As he drew closer, the noise of the crowd faded to a faint muffle of sound until he stood mere inches from her. Raven whipped her head around, her eyes wide with shock as he bowed deeply to her.

“May I have this dance, Miss Davenport?” he asked, extending his hand to her with a hopeful look in his eyes.

Raven's face stiffened as a coy smile played on her lips. She stole a glimpse of the woman beside her. Ethan could only assume it was her mother, by how similar the two of them looked standing in such close proximity to each other. Raven rolled her shoulders back as she placed a timid hand in his.

With steely eyes and a fake smile plastered on his lips, Ethan led Raven to the dance floor. He knew all eyes would be on them as they started to dance, but he paid them no mind.

With their bodies swaying to the rhythm of the music, Ethan leaned in, whispering in her ear, “I hear we've been courting.

Strange, I don't remember anything of the sort."

Raven's body tensed as she stared at Ethan. He arched an eyebrow as his lips curled into a teasing smile.

"I'm terribly sorry to put you on the spot like that, Lord Whitland," Raven apologized as Ethan noticed the way her eyes shifted about, taking in the people around them.

"Well, if you were trying to make an impression, trust me when I say, you have," Ethan teased with a light tone as a spark of amusement flitted across his eyes. "But the last time I checked, one must normally be aware that they are courting for it to be plausible, don't you think?"

Raven's cheeks flushed a charming pink, her eyes avoiding his teasing gaze. "Well," she stammered, "if you must know, my parents have been pushing me towards a match with the Viscount, but I barely know the man. I'm sorry to get you ensnared in my problems."

Ethan's laughter rang out, causing a few heads to turn their way. "Ah, the age-old tale," he jested, "of parents arranging loveless unions. Believe me, I can relate. My family has been hounding me to find a suitable wife as well."

Ethan's gaze softened as he spun Raven around the dance floor, the melodious tune playing softly around them. "Miss

Davenport,” he began, his voice low and serious. “Our families mean well, but it’s our lives they meddle with. I believe love is something that should happen naturally and not be arranged.”

“And yet, they continue to try,” she replied, her voice tinged with exasperation. “It seems they believe they know our hearts better than we do.”

Ethan chuckled, his eyes twinkling with shared understanding. “Indeed, they do. But perhaps,” he said, lowering his voice conspiratorially so only she could hear as he arched an eyebrow, “we should show them that we are not mere puppets to their matchmaking schemes.”

Raven’s lush lips twitched at the corner, suppressing the hint of a smile as her eyes narrowed. There was a glimmer of defiance lighting her gaze as she nodded in agreement. “Perhaps we should. After all, what better way to prove them wrong than to choose our own destiny, right?”

Ethan, with a firm hold on Raven’s hand, whisked her away from the swirling vortex of the dance floor. He led her through a glass-paneled door and onto a private terrace where the evening air caressed his face. Nevertheless, Ethan felt an undercurrent of excitement ripple through him as he stole her away from the numerous pairs of eyes that were stealing peeks at them.

The night was still with the chirping crickets singing under the starry sky. Ethan barely glanced at the stars as they studded the inky blackness with their ethereal glow. Under the soft radiance, Raven was an enchanting sight. Her gown shimmered in the silvery light of the moon, and her eyes sparkled with a luminescence that rivaled the stars themselves. The serenity of their private haven, coupled with the breathtaking beauty of Raven under the celestial canopy, lent a magical quality to the air around them.

Raven, her eyes wide with surprise, glanced around at the secluded balcony. “Lord Whitland,” she started, a mix of hesitation and curiosity in her voice. “Why have we come here? We shouldn’t be out here.”

“You may call me Ethan if you wish. But why so jittery? Are you afraid I might kiss you senseless?” he teased. However, noticing the uncertainty in her tone, he offered her a reassuring smile. “There is nothing scandalous about meeting out in the fresh air. The doors are still open, and if your family wanted to find you, they could. I just wanted us to have a moment away from the noise and prying eyes,” he explained, his gaze never leaving hers. “I thought this might be a fitting place for us to make our own decisions without the interfering opinions of others, but if you’re uncomfortable, we can return inside.”

Raven shook her head, a small smile forming on her lips as she mulled over his words. Shifting her eyes to the sky, she smiled. “No, this is lovely. Thank you for bringing me here.”

They stood in silence for a moment, simply taking in the peacefulness of their surroundings.

Ethan turned to face Raven, his expression serious. “I was thinking.”

“Did it hurt?” she asked with a crooked grin. Ethan arched an eyebrow as he stared at her in confusion. “Thinking. Did it hurt?”

Rolling his eyes, Ethan stepped closer to her. “Yes, as it usually does. But, seriously, what are your plans for getting out of your engagement to the Viscount? He’s very adamant about courting you.”

Raven shrugged. “I was hoping we could pretend a bit longer—say, till the end of the Season.”

“I don’t think courting is going to be enough,” Ethan considered, rubbing the stubble on his chin. “In fact, I believe that the only way we are both going to be free for a while is if I state we are betrothed.”

Raven’s eyes widened, and the unexpectedness of his proposition caused her to momentarily lose her words. “B-betrothed?” she stuttered, a mix of shock and confusion washing over her. “But, My Lord, that’s... that’s so sudden. I-I... Are we ready for such a commitment?”

Ethan swiftly stepped forward, taking Raven's hands in his. "I understand this is overwhelming and sudden, but if we are to prevent your union with Anthony and keep my grandmother out of my business, being betrothed is the most viable option."

Raven, seemingly lost in a whirl of thoughts, simply nodded, her gaze distant. "I... I need some time to think, My Lord," she finally said, pulling away from him as she rubbed her temples.

Ethan watched as she paced the length of the balcony, never once turning to look at him. The weight of his proposal lingered in the air between them.

"My Lord, this won't work," Raven began, her voice quivering with uncertainty. "How can we convince everyone that we're truly... in love?"

"Oh, we'll be convincing," Ethan replied calmly. "My grandmother has been putting pressure on me to find a wife, for some time. And you, you clearly do not wish to marry the Viscount."

"There's no way anyone will believe us!" Raven exclaimed, her voice rising in pitch.

Ethan moved swiftly, placing a finger gently against her lips, signaling her to calm down. “Miss Davenport, listen to me,” he said softly, locking his gaze with hers. “Our engagement will only last till the end of the Season. When it’s over, you can call off the betrothal... and I will take the blame. There is no one here who would ever blame you for wanting to call off an engagement with someone like me. Your reputation will be intact, and come next Season, the Viscount will surely have found someone else, and you’ll be alone.”

Raven stared at him, her lips parting in surprise. His words hung in the air as she contemplated the gravity of his proposal. Ethan waited and watched her nibble on the tip of her nails.

As Raven tried to sort through her emotions and thoughts, Ethan snatched her by the arm, stopping her from pacing once again. The heat of his hand coursed through her veins, kindling a desire she wasn’t expecting. Recoiling, she stared at him, studying his features, searching for the answers to questions she dared not utter.

“I know this may seem like a lot to take in, but remember, it was you who first suggested we pretend to court. It was a brilliant idea, and it’s worked, for the moment. People are already talking about us, speculating, and some even believe there might be something more between us. The next logical step would be to announce we are together and make it official.”

Raven looked at him, her eyes wide, questioning. “But, My Lord, marriage... it’s sacred.”

“I know,” he acknowledged, nodding. “But think it through—what are these balls for if not to match people?”

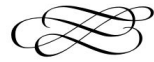
Raven glanced about as she chewed on her lower lip. “You’re right. It’s the only logical step we can take.”

“We’ll only keep the ruse up till the end of the Season. Once all the other couples have paired up and wedded, we’ll call it off. That way, the Viscount won’t get a chance to marry you.”

Raven fell silent, her mind racing. The air was filled with anticipation as Ethan awaited her decision. He was offering her a lifeline, but it was one that came with its own set of challenges and implications.

As Ethan’s gaze locked with hers, a shadow of a smirk playing on his lips, Raven felt a shiver of anticipation that made her question whether she could restrain the temptation and desires he was threatening to unearth from deep within her.

CHAPTER 3



*R*aven found her stomach turning as if she were standing on a precipice. She wondered whether to succumb to the elaborate charade of a faux engagement with Ethan, the notorious rake, or walk away.

She knew the situation could be her ticket to freedom, a means to extricate herself from the burdensome expectations of her family. Hope bubbled within her as she thought of how liberating it would be when she didn't have her mother harping on her to find someone with money and a title.

Yet, the idea of binding herself to Ethan was a bitter pill to swallow. Her heart fluttered with anxiety as she wrestled with the paradox of her situation. She yearned for the freedom this falsehood could provide but recoiled at the thought of being associated to such an extent with a man of Ethan's reputation.

Raven stepped back and leaned against the railing. Her mind raced as she tried to grasp the severity of the situation. Growing up in a strict household with high societal expectations, she had always felt suffocated by the stringent

rules and traditions that governed her life. Her parents had always hoped she would marry into a wealthy family to secure their own status in Society, but Raven yearned for something more than just being a well-bred trophy wife.

Ethan turned to Raven, his gaze steady and resolute. “I know you have reservations about this plan of ours, but, believe me, it’s a flawless strategy. We present ourselves as a couple during the social events of the Season.”

“I don’t know,” Raven hesitated, her eyes shifting.

“Come on, don’t you do anything spontaneous and wild? If not for you, then do it for me. My grandmother is relentless, and I’m in the same situation as you are,” Ethan pleaded.

“My Lord, this is a delicate situation, you know how Society can be. The gossip, the speculation...”

Ethan interjected, his tone reassuring, “I understand your fear, but consider this. We retain our independence while fulfilling our families’ expectations. We navigate Society’s gatherings as an engaged couple, but the rest of the time, we live exactly as we want—free and unwed. It’s the perfect solution.”

Raven looked at Ethan, weighing his words. A long moment of silence hovered between them before she finally nodded. “All right, My Lord. I’ll do it. I’ll agree to be your betrothed.”

“I knew you’d say yes,” he said, a huge smile stretching across his face as he rubbed his hands together gleefully. “Now, we’ve got to be convincing. No more My Lord or Miss Davenport. I am Ethan, and you are Raven. When we step back into the ballroom, we’re going to be assaulted with questions. Rumors will fly.”

“I know,” she replied, scanning the room once more as she noticed a few pairs of curious eyes observing them from across the room. “What worries me is what happens when we’re not in public.”

“What do you mean?” Ethan looked at her quizzically.

“I want my reputation intact when all this is over,” Raven explained, her voice barely audible over the music playing at the ball. She stepped closer. “I want no one to suspect that there was something undesirable going on between us.”

Ethan looked at her, surprised. “I understand your concern. I’d be concerned about that, too, I suspect. But I swear to you, I’ll not lay a finger on you, not unless you want me to.”

His eyes gleamed at his words, and Raven found herself blushing. She would never ask him to touch her, never. The thought alone made her tremble.

Raven glanced nervously at the other guests, her blue eyes widening. “I’ve noticed people stealing glances at us. It’s uncomfortable, and the last thing I want is a scandal.”

Ethan’s stern expression shifted into a smile, taking on an almost wolfish quality as he stepped closer. Raven’s breath hitched as she felt the heat from his body against hers.

“I wouldn’t dream of ruining you. When I make a vow, I keep it. I won’t lay one finger on you, not unless you want me to.”

Raven’s heart fluttered like a captive bird against the cage of her ribs as Ethan leaned closer. The warmth of his breath against her cheek held a familiar and intoxicating sweetness that made her pulse quicken. Keeping her eyes closed, she waited, her heart pounding audibly in her ears, the air around her thick with anticipation of a kiss that was sure to come and ruin her completely.

Raven found her body tingling with excitement as her mind whirled with reason. It was a moment that felt like an eternity, a precipice on which she teetered between wishful thinking and logic, but when she finally dared to open her eyes, she was met with an abrupt jolt of reality.

The space next to her, which moments ago was filled with Ethan’s enigmatic presence, was now empty. The balcony, wrapped in the cool embrace of the night, felt eerily lonely. A shiver raced down her spine, a cold contrast to the warmth that

had pervaded the space not long ago. Her eyes darted frantically around, searching, hunting for any trace of Ethan, but the only answer she received was the mocking echo of her own heartbeat and the bitter realization that she was alone.

She brought a hand to her lips, still yearning and aching in anticipation from the near kiss. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest. Ethan's promise reverberated in her mind—*not unless you want me to*—and she couldn't help but feel like she had struck a deal with the devil himself.



Raven walked into the opulent drawing room to find her mother and father waiting for her, their expressions solemn.

“Raven,” Mathilda began, her eyes soft yet stern, “we need to talk about this... engagement.” She seemed to struggle with the word as if it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“I know you disapprove,” Raven replied, her voice steady, “but I have made my decision. I’m marrying Ethan.”

Oscar snorted, his disbelief evident. “Ethan Holloway? That scandalous cad? No. He’s nothing more than a charming rake, Raven.”

“The Viscount is a far better match,” Mathilda added. “He’s reputable, well-mannered, and comes from a good family.”

“But I don’t love him. Don’t you understand? I need that in my life, in a marriage. You two married for love. I don’t see why I can’t, too.”

Their silence was deafening. Love, perhaps the most potent and unpredictable factor, was the one thing they hadn’t accounted for.

Raven had always been a dutiful daughter, obeying her parents’ every wish and following the rules of high society. But now, faced with the prospect of not marrying for love, she couldn’t imagine living a life devoid of passion and true emotion.

She looked at her parents, determination shining in her eyes. “I understand that you want what’s best for me, but this time, I have to follow my heart.”

“So many ladies have been ruined by him, Raven. You can’t possibly mean to throw yourself at his mercy?” Oscar said, voicing his deepest fears.

Raven squared her shoulders, looking both her parents in the eye. “I know what I am doing may seem farfetched, but trust me when I say that I care for Ethan Holloway. He’s titled with land and money. He’ll provide for me, just as you want.”

Her parents exchanged glances as hope bubbled and mixed with uncertainty. She had no clue what her parents were thinking, but she knew one thing—she wasn't about to wed Anthony Smith.

“Ethan will be coming over to ask for my hand, and when he does, it is my deepest wish that you both accept his offer.”

Mathilda gasped, exchanging a glance with Oscar. “But, Raven—”

“No,” Raven interjected boldly. Her tone was firm, and her body tingled from the top of her head to her toes. She hated lying to her parents and wondered just how long she'd be able to keep up the ruse, with her nerves wracked all the time. “I appreciate your concern, but this is my decision. He has my heart, and I trust him. Please, give us your blessing.”

The atmosphere in the room was tense, but Raven stood her ground. She knew that what she was asking for would not be easily accepted by her parents or by Society, but she was determined to fight for the only sliver of freedom she had. In the end, it was her life and her happiness at stake, and no one could make that decision for her.

Mathilda looked at her daughter, a mixture of desperation and disappointment in her eyes. “You must understand, Raven,” she pleaded. “Lord Whitland is not a good man. He was on trial for murder, or did he forget to mention that to you?”

Raven's jaw tightened, but she didn't waver. "I know about Ethan's past. Everyone in the ton does, Mother. But I also know he was acquitted because he was innocent."

"But, Raven, Lord Rochford is so much more suitable!" Oscar interjected, trying to reason with his headstrong daughter.

Raven shook her head adamantly. "I do not want Lord Rochford. I love Ethan, not him," she said, trying to mask the guilt that was crushing her spirit.

She hated lying to her parents, but she found no other path to take, not with her future and happiness at stake. All she could do was pray that her mother couldn't hear the undertones of doubt seeping through her voice.

The sound of the door creaking open drew Raven's attention to the doorway. She held her breath as the family's loyal butler, Jenkins, appeared at the threshold. His face was lined with age and wisdom. His monotone voice sliced through the thick tension that filled the room.

"The Marquess of Whitland has arrived."

The name hung in the air and rattled Raven to her core. She knew the moment Ethan stepped into the house and greeted her family, the ruse they had planned would become solidified.

She swallowed hard as her heart skipped a beat. She felt her palms begin to sweat and discreetly wiped them on her skirt. With great anticipation, she turned to face the door, bracing herself for the sight of Ethan's tall, broad figure.

Ethan entered the room with an air of confidence and determination. He stopped and bowed as Raven's parents greeted him before striding towards Raven without hesitation. His gaze locked on her, and he flashed a brilliant grin as if he could read her every thought and emotion. As their gazes met, Raven felt her chest tighten.

Ethan extended his hand towards Raven's parents, maintaining an air of respectful confidence. "Good day to you, Lord and Lady Davenport. I hope you are well," he greeted as he met their cautious gazes evenly. His voice remained calm, much to Raven's surprise.

How he managed to keep a straight face was beyond Raven's understanding. All she could do was hope that he hadn't changed his mind.

"I'm sure you are aware of why I've come today," Ethan said, extending his hand to Raven.

She took his hand and let out a heavy sigh. Having Ethan by her side made facing her parents a tad easier. Still, she couldn't help but wonder if they could see through her deceit.

“I am here to formally ask for your blessing to marry your daughter, Miss Raven Davenport. I assure you that my intentions are sincere, and I will do everything within my power to make her happy.”

His words resonated through the silent room and pounded Raven’s chest like a hammer. She swallowed hard, hoping that she was as stoic as Ethan seemed to be.

Mathilda and Oscar exchanged a hesitant glance. Raven could see the weight of Ethan’s words settling heavily on their shoulders.

Oscar’s brows furrowed. He glared at Ethan with a stern, discerning eye. Mathilda, her eyes glassy with unshed tears, clutched her husband’s hand urgently. There was a palpable undercurrent of uncertainty, of a parental instinct to protect, threading its way through the silence that blanketed the room.

“My Lord, as pleased as we are to have you here, we are still a bit taken aback by your sudden interest in our daughter. We never suspected that you and Raven were interested in one another,” Oscar stated as he stole glimpses of Mathilda. “Please understand this is all very sudden, and we will need time to think about your proposal. We just want what’s best for her, and we appreciate your sincerity, but this is a decision we simply cannot rush.”

Ethan nodded. "I completely understand your concerns, Lord and Lady Davenport," he acknowledged, his gaze steady and respectful. "And I want you to know that in no way do I wish to rush into this marriage either. Raven and I have discussed this at length, and we feel it would be best to have a long engagement. We figured the time would allow our families time to get better acquainted."

A look of sincerity was etched deeply into his eyes. "The happiness and well-being of Raven is my utmost priority, and I assure you, I am in no hurry to make her step into this new phase of life without ample thought and preparation."

A tense silence settled in the room again, but, this time, it was broken by Oscar's sigh of resignation. "Well," he said, his voice thick with trepidation as his attention shifted to Raven, "I see no reason this engagement can't proceed."

"Oscar," Mathilda scolded, her voice hitched with exasperation.

"They've made up their minds," Oscar mumbled. "Would you rather have them elope?"

Mathilda pursed her lips and held her tongue as she stood like a sentinel, glaring daggers at Ethan.

Ethan and Raven's eyes met across the room, a silent conversation taking place in that brief instant. A wave of relief washed over both of them. A subtle wink from Ethan, unnoticed by her parents, made Raven's cheeks turn a delicate shade of pink.

Ethan smiled, his demeanor polite yet firm. "I apologize for the abruptness, but I have some matters to attend to," he said, looking at Lord and Lady Davenport.

Mathilda and Oscar nodded in understanding, their eyes stalking him as he kissed Raven's hand.

"If you and your parents agree, I would like to take a stroll with you tomorrow." His voice carried a note of hopeful anticipation.

Raven's eyes shifted to her parents before she gave a slight nod. "I'd be happy to walk with you," she answered as a touch of rouge kissed her cheeks. Her body tingled with anticipation.

For a moment, she couldn't help but wonder when her parents would catch on to their ruse.

"Then I shall meet you at Hyde Park, say, first thing in the morning? There's a lovely place I'd like you to see," Ethan suggested as he flashed Raven a quick smile.

Stealing one last look at Raven, Ethan gave her a wink before he exited the room, leaving a palpable tension behind.

Raven, her heart fluttering in her chest, turned to her parents. Their soft expressions shifted to stern and despondent.

“You’re not going,” Mathilda stated in a stern, matter-of-fact tone that rattled Raven to her bones.

“But—” Raven started as Oscar lifted a hand to silence them both.

Raven flexed her jaw, her attention shifting from her mother to her father.

“Let the girl go,” Oscar said.

“You can’t be serious,” Mathilda said, her tone pitched. “You realize this courtship will ruin her and tarnish our family name. If Raven marries Ethan, then who can we expect to marry Penelope?”

“I expect my wife to do as I say. You and Penelope will accompany Raven to the park, where you will keep an eye on our girl,” Oscar answered.

“Father, please, I don’t need Mother to chaperone me. She’s far too busy for such things. Why not have Penelope or one of the maids accompany me?”

“Your mother and I both agree that this engagement is a bit suspicious, and you’ll have someone watching at all times. I’ll not have my daughter ruined by that man.”

Raven’s chest tightened, and her body tingled with frustration that grew to anger. The fact that her parents didn’t trust her enough to handle the matter on her own made her boil with irritation.

“Have I not been a dutiful daughter? Do you honestly think so low of me?” Raven asked, her voice quivering as she tried to mask her emotions.

“You are not the problem, my dear,” Mathilda said. “It’s that marquess that we don’t trust.”

“I can’t believe this,” Raven said, throwing her hands up. “I thought you’d be happy for me. I’m marrying for love, isn’t that what you both want for me? And yet, now that I’ve found someone, just because he doesn’t live up to your standards—”

She couldn’t finish because the tears were too close to spilling over. She darted out of the room and scurried to her bedchamber, slamming the door behind her.

Raven let out a heavy sigh as she stared at the empty room behind her. A mischievous smile quickly replaced her forlorn expression. She cupped her hand over her mouth, stifling the laugh that was building in her chest.

The fact that she had been able to trick her parents into thinking she had real emotions for the man amused her more than it should have. Slowly, reality started to set in as she walked to her desk.

They think I love Ethan Holloway... Oh, no... They really think I have feelings for that rake. What if they're right about him, though? What if, just by associating myself with him, I've ruined my reputation and Penelope's? Sure, he's handsome in a devil-may-care sort of way, but is it worth the years of suspicion that will come down the road?

What have I agreed to?

CHAPTER 4



*R*aven plopped down into the chair and stared out the window. Her mind reeled as if it were a flag whipping about in a violent storm. She knew there was only one way for her to calm the thoughts that bombarded her. Pulling out a quill and parchment from the desk, Raven started jotting down her thoughts.

“Raven?”

She jumped at the sound of her name. She’d been so engrossed in what she had been jotting down, she didn’t even hear her sister knocking. Hastily, she scrambled to clear the parchment from her desk and turned in her seat.

“What are you doing?” Penelope asked, craning her neck as Raven tucked away the papers she had been writing on.

“Just writing in my journal,” Raven answered, hoping Penelope couldn’t hear the panic in her voice. She watched as her sister plopped down on the corner of the bed with sad, weary eyes.

“I know what you’re doing,” Penelope said in a near whisper.

The words rattled Raven to her core, and her hands grew sweaty as she held her sister’s gaze.

“I heard everything. When were you going to tell me you were getting engaged? I’ve hardly heard anything about him. How did you two meet? When did you meet?”

Raven sighed as she got up and sat over to the corner of her bed. She looked up at Penelope, her gaze distant as she mulled over the various lies that popped into her head. Her mind warred between telling Penelope the truth or another lie.

“If I tell you something, you have to swear to me that you aren’t going to go blabbering to anyone.”

“Oh, I do love a good intrigue,” Penelope said, scooting closer to Raven, her eyes wide with anticipation.

Raven took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving Penelope’s. “Pen,” she began, her voice barely above a whisper. “What if I told you the engagement isn’t real?”

Penelope gasped, her eyes widening with shock. “What do you mean, not real?” she demanded, her grip on Raven’s hand

tightening.

Raven glanced at the door, ensuring no itching ears or wandering eyes were on them. “Ethan and I, well, we’re pretending,” she confessed, her words rushing out. “We’re pretending to be engaged so that Mother and Father stop pressuring me about marriage. It’s a ruse, Pen.”

Penelope sat in stunned silence, the enormity of the revelation sinking in. “But, Raven... why?” she finally managed to ask.

“I just needed them to stop, Pen,” replied Raven, her voice filled with desperation. “And Ethan, he understands. He agreed to go along with it.”

Penelope looked at her sister for a long moment before finally nodding. “I understand, Raven. And I won’t say a word, I promise. It’s your secret to keep. But you must know, you’re playing with fire,” she warned. “Keeping such a secret and from our parents, no less. It’s not like you to be so reckless.”

Raven simply shrugged, her expression nonchalant. “It’s only for a few weeks,” she said lightly. “Once the pressure is off, Ethan and I will break the supposed engagement, and that’ll be the end of that. I won’t marry the Viscount or anyone, for that matter, not until I’m certain they are the one for me.”

Penelope frowned, clearly unconvinced, but it was her next warning that truly caught Raven off-guard. “And what about Ethan?” she asked, her tone grave. “Do you really think it’s wise to involve him in all of this deception, especially considering his... reputation?”

Raven scoffed at her sister’s implication. “Please,” she retorted, rolling her eyes. “Ethan is an acquaintance, nothing more. The idea of anything happening between us is absolutely ludicrous. We’re simply two people helping each other out, that’s all.”

Despite the certainty in her voice, a soft blush had crept onto Raven’s cheeks, indicating that perhaps Penelope’s words had hit closer to home than she would like to admit.

“I never thought I’d ever say this, but I agree with Mother and Father. Have you ever considered the consequences of being with a man like Ethan? Rumors are dangerous and can ruin everything you’ve worked so hard for.”

Raven’s eyes narrowed. “Are you concerned about my reputation or yours?”

Penelope shifted in place as she frowned. “You know I want nothing but the best for you. But what if Mother and Father find out?”

Raven rose quickly and joined Penelope on the bed. “You’re not going to say anything, are you? Penelope, you can’t utter a word about the engagement being a ruse. They’ll force me to wed Anthony, and I won’t do it, Pen. I won’t.”

Panic shot through Raven like lightning. She grabbed her sister’s arms, holding Penelope in place as she hunted her sister’s eyes for hope and reassurance. The worry etched into Penelope’s brow softened as her shoulders slumped.

“I’ll not say a word, but the fact that you think I would bothers me. I’ve kept your secrets in the past.”

Raven’s eyebrow arched. “Who was it that told Mother about the missing sweets during the frost fair? Or what about the stain on the living room rug that cost a fortune to clean? Your lips can run away with you at times, but you must not utter a word about this to anyone. You’ll do more than ruin me.”

“It’s one thing to get in trouble for ruining a carpet and quite another for damaging the family name.”

“You say anything, and I’ll tell Mother and Father about your little hobby,” Raven threatened.

Penelope gasped, and her eyes grew wider as she leaned back. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me,” Raven answered, releasing her sister’s arms. “We both have secrets we’d rather not bring to light. I suggest you remember that before you decide to talk to anyone. Not even Amber can know.”

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this, though. Why Ethan Holloway? Out of all the men in the ton, he’s got to be the worst sort of character to get involved with.”

Raven let out a heavy sigh as her thoughts shifted to Ethan. What drew her to him, she couldn’t say. Sure, the man was handsome, and from the little time she’d spent with him, he seemed decent enough.

Shaking her head, Raven drew her attention back to Penelope. “I honestly can’t say why I picked him. He was just standing there by the table, looking as if the whole of Society had shunned him to the corner of the room.”

“And you thought you’d do him a favor?” Penelope asked.

“Something like that,” Raven answered, a bit downtrodden.

“Well,” Penelope said as she stood, “I certainly hope you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

Raven watched her sister as she left the room. The silence weighed heavily on Raven’s mind as the door clicked shut

behind Penelope.

There's only one way to find out, for certain. I'm committed now, and there's no turning back.

CHAPTER 5



*A*s dawn broke, the radiant sun began to ascend, casting a warm, golden hue over the sky. Slowly and steadily, its brilliant rays permeated the tranquility of the room, spilling through the window in a cascade of glowing light.

As the sun's splendor filled the room, Ethan groggily emerged from the depths of slumber. His mind quickly flickered to Raven, their last encounter playing out vividly in his thoughts. A soft smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

With a newfound sense of urgency, Ethan threw on his clothes haphazardly before making his way towards the door.

Just as he took the first step into the hallway, he was halted by the firm voice of his grandmother. Her croaky voice rumbled his ears and sent a chill that scratched down his spine like claws. Ethan paused and flexed his jaw before turning around. Her wise, weathered eyes meet his, filled with a mixture of concern and irritation.

“Ethan,” her voice rasped, echoing in the eerily quiet hallway, “where do you think you’re off to at this ungodly hour? The sun is barely up. Please, don’t tell me you’re just now coming in from White’s?”

Ethan’s lips curled as he batted his eyelashes. “I’m not coming in from anywhere.”

“Could have fooled me, and here I thought I taught you to dress a bit more respectable than... well, whatever it is you’ve got on.”

Ethan glanced down and quickly tucked his shirt in before turning his attention back to meet his grandmother’s probing gaze. The growing light of dawn cast strange shadows over her stern features, making her even more sinister than he’d ever seen her before. Perhaps it was the deep wrinkles under her eyes that seemed so formidable, but Ethan wasn’t about to cower from her.

“I’m off to see Miss Davenport,” he replied, his tone steady despite the increasing weight of her scrutiny.

A disapproving grunt escaped her, her eyes narrowing slightly. “That Davenport woman again? You’re wasting precious time, Ethan,” she chided, the sharp edge of her words slicing through the morning calm. “Good people keep decent hours.”

Ethan's gaze met his grandmother's stern one, defiance flickering in his eyes. He knew the old woman would disapprove of anyone of his choosing. She had made it clear she was to be the one to pick his bride, and the fact he had been the one to find such a well-mannered young woman was beyond his grandmother's comprehension.

Ethan found himself unwavering, despite the criticism in her glare.

“And here I thought you would be happy. Or are you upset at the fact you were not the one to find such a respectable young woman for me? The Davenports are well known, and she is, well, the diamond of the Season, is she not?”

“That, she is. I'm just curious as to how a woman of her status doesn't know of your indiscretions.”

“She knows of my sordid past and doesn't care,” Ethan said with a smile.

His grandmother's eyes narrowed. “Why do I get the feeling that you're up to something? A man just doesn't fall for someone, especially a man with your history. And there's not a woman alive that would consider ruining her reputation. Something is going on here that you're not telling me.”

Ethan clenched his jaw as the words of his grandmother echoed in his ears. The need to raise his voice, to argue back, flared up within him. With a deep breath, he chewed on the words he wanted to spew at her and swallowed them down as he reminded himself that his grandmother was only voicing her concern.

Composing himself and choosing to let the harsh comments roll off himself, he flashed a curt smile. He felt a pang of regret for the growing tension, but he could no longer endure the constant disapproval.

“I’ll be back later,” he stated, his voice firm yet gentle.

Without waiting for her response, he turned away from the woman who raised him, his footsteps echoing ominously as he made his way out the door, leaving behind the comfort of the familiar for the uncertainty that awaited him.

As Ethan stepped outside, he was greeted by the warmth of the sun, its rays bathing the landscape in a golden hue. The sunlight, pure and invigorating, felt like a soothing balm against the harsh words that still echo in his mind. He turned his face towards the sky, relishing the light that seemed to wash away the gloom of his grandmother’s disapproval.

The manor, imposing and stern, shrank behind him as he walked away, each step taking him further away from the stifling confines of old conventions. A new day had dawned,

and, with it, the promise of liberation from the chains of the past. The sun, in all its brilliance, seemed to be a beacon guiding him towards a future with Raven. A future where he could finally live true to himself, unshackled by the weight of his family's expectations.

As Ethan stepped into Hyde Park, he was instantly enchanted by the lively symphony of sights and sounds that encapsulated the vibrant pulse of Society. The park, a sprawling haven of verdant green, was awash with a merry throng of people. Families picnicked under the hospitable shade of age-old trees. Children frolicked on manicured lawns, their laughter carried on the gentle breeze. Couples wandered hand-in-hand, whispering sweet nothings to each other while they basked in the bliss of their togetherness.

The well-trodden paths were dotted with artists capturing the picturesque setting on canvas and street performers entertaining clusters of cheerful onlookers. The park's inherent charm was accentuated by the iridescent hues of blooming flowers and the mesmerizing dance of leaves rustling in the wind. It was a tableau of coexistence, where all walks of life converged and intertwined, mirroring the diverse and dynamic fabric of their society.

As Ethan traversed the park, he felt a sense of belonging that he hadn't experienced in a long while, as though he was an integral part of this vivid tapestry of life.

“Ethan! Over here!” Raven called out, her voice a melody that rose above the ambient noise of the park.

As he turned to look, his heart skipped a beat. Raven looked enchanting, garbed in a summer dress that danced with the gentlest gust of wind, its color a radiant blue that mirrored her sparkling eyes. Her sun-kissed hair, adorned with a delicate crown of daisies, cascaded down her shoulders in tousled waves, gleaming like molten gold under the afternoon sun.

The sight of her radiance elicited admiring glances from passersby, as though she was a human personification of an ethereal spring morning. A surge of pride filled Ethan as he acknowledged the silent praises bestowed upon Raven and the fact that it was he who was the fortunate one to be in her company.

In the quiet corners of his mind, Ethan envisioned Raven rolling about the verdant grass, which would provide a soft cushion for him to lay her down. His breath hitched as he imagined his lips tracing the contours of her tender neck as the world and all the troubles of the world faded away. His thoughts were fleeting when he heard the cry of a crow overhead, pulling him from the fantasy.

“Greetings, Raven,” Ethan greeted, his voice rich with unspoken admiration. “You look absolutely lovely today.”

Raven's cheeks flushed a rosy pink, her eyes sparkling with joy.

"Thank you, Ethan," Raven replied, her eyes shimmering with warmth. Suddenly, she turned and called out "Mother, Penelope, over here!"

Ethan's eyes widened in surprise as he saw two figures approach—Raven's mother, Mathilda, and her younger sister, Penelope. His gaze shifted uncomfortably as he swallowed hard, remembering all the stories that had been spun about him. His reputation preceded him, and not always in a positive light.

His lips curled into a polite smile as he greeted them. "Greetings, Penelope, Lady Davenport. It's... nice to see you both."

Mathilda smiled thinly, her eyes taking in Ethan's appearance with a critical gaze. "Likewise," she responded coolly.

"Shall we, then?" Ethan asked as he crooked his arm and flashed Raven his best smile. She scanned the area, rolled her shoulders back, and hooked her arm into his.

As they strolled along, a pesky swarm of gnats began to buzz around Raven's head. She swatted at them, her face twisting in annoyance.

“Oh, these bugs! They’re always so terrible this time of year,” she muttered, waving her hand in the air futilely.

A mischievous grin spread across Ethan’s face. “Do you ever venture outside?” he teased. “Or does the wild kingdom of nature’s minions disturb your regal peace?”

Raven scowled, aiming a light punch at his shoulder. “Very funny, Ethan. I go outside plenty.”

“Of course, of course,” Ethan continued, his grin undiminished. “The grand tour from the carriage to the main door is quite an adventurous journey.”

Even amidst her frustration with the gnats, Raven couldn’t help but chuckle at Ethan’s jesting. Penelope and Mathilda exchanged a knowing look behind them, both amused by Ethan’s charm and Raven’s reaction.

“You’re not funny,” Raven whispered as she strolled alongside Ethan.

He bobbed his head as he reveled in the attention he and Raven were attracting. The whispers and looks from the bystanders were tangible proof of his victory.

“Yes, I am. You just don’t know me very well,” he answered as they paraded through the park.

He could sense the envious glances and hushed whispers of the onlookers. His chest swelled with pride—he was the one arm in arm with the delightful Raven, not them. Every sidelong look, every muffled whisper about them, was a testament to his charisma and charm.

He wore a satisfied smirk, relishing in the tableau of their jealousy. The sun shone a little brighter, the grass seemed a little greener, and the day felt a little more perfect. After all, how often does one get to walk with a radiant woman under the watchful eyes of an envious crowd?

Raven hesitated, gathering her courage before changing the topic. “How has your grandmother taken the news of our betrothal?” she asked, looking at him earnestly.

Ethan shrugged, his eyes fixed on the horizon. “Does it matter? It’s my life, not hers. And you shouldn’t care about her opinion either.” He turned to her, his expression serious. “Why must everything be so serious and proper all the time? Don’t you ever wish to just enjoy life, sometimes?”

Taken aback, Raven blinked at him. “What on earth are you talking about? I enjoy life.” The genuine confusion on her face made Ethan chuckle lightly to himself.

Ethan sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I mean, don’t you ever get tired of being so proper? Have you ever broken a single rule?” he asked, echoing her confusion with his own.

Raven’s brow furrowed as she processed his words. After a moment, she responded, “Maybe if you surrounded yourself with more proper ladies, you wouldn’t be asking such questions. Besides, I am quite content with my level of propriety,” she retorted, a playful smirk appearing on her face.

Ethan looked at Raven, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Have you ever done anything scandalous, Raven?” he asked, his grin widening.

Raven looked at him, her eyes narrowing slightly before she leaned in. “Besides the fact that we are lying about our betrothal, you mean?” she whispered in his ear, a hint of mirth in her voice.

Ethan rolled his eyes and shook his head. “That doesn’t count,” he replied, his smirk undeterred. “I am talking about something truly scandalous, not mere courting games.”

Raven sighed, looking at Ethan seriously. “Ethan, you must understand, my family is my everything. I would never dare do anything to bring shame upon them,” she confessed, her tone measured and sincere.

Ethan looked back at her, his smirk vanishing as he responded, “You do realize that I am known as a rake, don’t you? By being seen with me, you are already risking a stain on your family’s reputation.”

His words hung in the air between them, the playful banter replaced by a serious conversation.

Raven stared at Ethan thoughtfully, her mind whirling from his words. Ethan, noticing her silent contemplation, decided to press further.

“Raven, you need to learn not to care so much about what others think,” he advised sincerely.

As he spoke, his eyes darted past Raven’s shoulder, catching sight of Jackson and Helen, the Duke and Duchess of Stonewill strolling by. Without warning, Ethan quickly ducked behind a nearby tree.

Raven blinked in confusion, looking around before spotting Ethan. “Ethan, what are you doing?” she asked, puzzled. She didn’t notice the approaching figures of Mathilda and Penelope behind her.

Before she could react, Ethan swiftly reached out and grabbed her wrist, pulling her behind the tree with him.

“Ethan!” she gasped, clutching her chest in surprise. “Who are you hiding from?” she questioned, her eyes scanning their immediate vicinity.

Ethan looked at her, his playful smirk returning. “No one,” he stated nonchalantly, “I just wanted a moment alone with you.”

Drawing Raven close to him, Ethan couldn't help but notice the charming flush that spread across her cheeks, taunting him. The proximity seemed to affect her more than she would like to admit, and it pleased him to see her usually composed demeanor slightly undone.

A whisper of a smile played on his lips as he yearned to crush his mouth to hers and claim her for his own. He didn't care who was around to see, and it took all his strength not to tug at the strings of her dress and slip her out of the restraining clothes he suddenly felt so jealous of.

His observant eyes took in the rosy hue of her cheeks, still glimmering faintly in the shade. He found it incredibly endearing—the way her cheeks turned a soft shade of pink, like the first blush of dawn. It was in these quiet moments that Ethan saw a different side of Raven, a side he found himself more and more drawn to. Her vulnerability was cute and teased him more than he expected. It was a stark contrast to the headstrong and independent woman he usually sparred with, and it intrigued him all the more.

Raven looked at Ethan with disbelief, her eyes narrowing. “Ethan, I don’t believe you,” she declared, crossing her arms over her chest.

Ethan laughed lightly at her reaction, lifting a brow in amusement. “Oh, Raven, always so skeptical. But tell me, would you like to break the rules?” His voice took on a challenging edge.

Raven blinked in surprise at his question. “What are you talking about, Ethan?” she asked, her voice rising slightly in confusion. “You’re being silly. You’re going to make a scene.” Her eyes darted around nervously, aware of the potential prying eyes.

Ethan’s gaze slid past Raven. He stealthily peered around the tree, his eyes landing on Mathilda and Penelope. The two were engaged in their own world of whispers and giggles, yet their watchful eyes were subtly trained on him and Raven, a fact that wasn’t lost on him.

A sigh escaped him, the weight of their scrutiny stirring a sense of fatigue within him. He was tired of the pervasive watchfulness, the silent monitoring of his every move, every interaction. He gave one more glance at Mathilda and Penelope, their faces alight with curiosity, and felt a prickle of annoyance.

A longing for a moment of absolute privacy, an escape from the ceaseless gazes of others, washed over Ethan.

Ethan turned back to Raven, his fingers lightly brushing the curls that tumbled over her shoulders. “Raven, how about we find someplace more private? Just you and me?” he asked, his voice low and soft.

Raven looked at him, taken aback. She took a step back, defensively tucking her hair behind her ears. “Ethan, no. What are you...” she trailed off, unsure of his intentions.

Ethan reached out, gently taking hold of a lock of her hair, twirling it around his fingers absentmindedly. His gaze was fixed on her, intense yet sincere. “Raven... have you ever felt the need to escape, just for a moment? That’s all I’m asking here. A moment away from prying eyes.”

Raven was silent for a moment, her eyes searching his. She hesitated, uncertainty stirring within her, but as she looked into his earnest eyes, he spotted a flicker of trust brewing in her gaze.

Finally, she gave him a small nod. “All right, Ethan... just a moment.”

Ethan nodded, gently letting go of her hair. “Just wait here a moment, Raven,” he said before walking over to where

Mathilda and Penelope were stationed. “Penelope, Raven seems a bit flushed,” he observed, nodding over his shoulder at Raven. “Could you fetch your sister a drink?”

Penelope glanced at Raven, her eyes widening slightly at her flushed appearance. After seemingly confirming what Ethan had pointed out, she reluctantly agreed.

But Mathilda, always the protective mother, interjected, “Penelope can’t go rushing off by herself, and I won’t leave Raven alone with you.”

Ethan gestured towards the open plaza around them. “Lady Davenport, look around, we’re out in the open. What scandal could we ensnare ourselves in with so many people around us?” he asked, a hint of frustration creeping into his voice.

Mathilda sighed, rolling her eyes slightly before finally agreeing. “Fine, I’ll go with Penelope to fetch something for Raven to drink.”

As Mathilda and Penelope retreated to find a drink for Raven, Ethan strode back to where Raven was standing, his eyes gleaming with the thrill of their impending adventure. Without a word, he extended his hand to her, and with a swift, assertive movement, he pulled her in the opposite direction of her retreating family.

Behind them, Mathilda's voice echoed out, calling for Raven, but Ethan only quickened his pace, leading Raven through the bustling park and into the welcoming embrace of the adjacent plaza. The corners of Raven's mouth turned upwards into a joyful laugh as she allowed herself to be pulled through the park, her laughter echoing in the air.

Taking a sharp turn, Ethan led her outside of the park and into a narrow alleyway, their footsteps echoing off the walls.

Panting slightly, Raven pulled away from Ethan to catch her breath. "I think we lost them, Ethan!" she exclaimed with a giggle, her eyes sparkling with exhilaration.

Ethan's laughter joined hers, a sound that was rich and warm. "I told you it would be an adventure, didn't I?" he replied, his eyes twinkling with mirth.

Before she knew it, they had emerged from the confines of the alleyway. Looming in front of them was the semi-ruined facade of St Dunstan-in-the-East, its gothic architecture a somber yet majestic testament to its storied past. The sight of it took Raven's breath away. Ethan looked at her, his eyes mirroring the awe in her own, and they stood there, hand in hand in the silent reverence of the moment.

Ethan watched Raven, his eyes tracing her every move as she explored the semi-ruins. Her curiosity was infectious, her delight in the smallest details a testament to her zest for life.

The way she tilted her head back to gaze at the towering architecture, the way her fingers gently traced the weathered stone, the soft gasp that left her lips at the sight of an intricate carving—every single moment was breathtaking.

The sunlight graced her blonde curls, turning them into a radiant halo that seemed to light up the semi-darkness of the ruins around them. He thought she looked ethereal, the embodiment of all things pure and beautiful. To Ethan, Raven was not just exploring the ruins, but she was also effortlessly becoming an integral part of their timeless charm.

“This is a lovely place,” Raven said, running her fingers over the ruins of St Duntan-in-the-East.

“I thought you might like it,” Ethan said.

“So, how many others have you brought here to sway their thoughts to favor you?” Raven asked, her eyebrow arched in suspicion. “And don’t you dare tell me I’m the only one you’ve brought here, for your reputation is known far and wide.”

“A few,” Ethan begrudgingly admitted as he followed her through the secret passages, watching her marvel at the ingenuity and creativity of the grand structure.

“No doubt they were smitten by your charms and the magic of this place,” Raven said, drawing her attention to him.

Ethan’s chest tightened. He knew there was no hiding his past, but he wasn’t going to be ashamed of it either.

“You find me charming, do you?” he asked, his eyes narrowing on her as if to undress her.

“Any man can be charming,” Raven retorted. “But can he be honorable? That is the question.”

“Tell me, why don’t you wish to marry the Viscount?” Ethan asked, finding it exhausting and exhilarating to have her alone. His mind went rampant, skipping through various fantasies of pinning her against the wall and undressing her under the ivy archway.

“You’ve met the man,” Raven said. “He may have all the trappings of a well-respected man, but you and I both know he’s not what he seems. Underneath his polished exterior, there’s something sinister about him.”

“Is that so? Are you a mind reader?” Ethan asked as he inched closer to her. “Do you know the secrets hidden within a man’s heart? If so, pray tell, what do you see about me?”

Raven arched her eyebrow as she sidestepped around him, refusing to be cornered into the nook of the ruins. A smile teased her lips as she gave a little shrug.

“One doesn’t need to read minds to know the Viscount is cruel to his servants. All one must do is listen to the gossip around the ton to learn of such things,” Raven observed as Ethan shot his arm out, blocking her from escaping him. She ducked, slipping away without any hindrance.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Ethan said as he reached out and grabbed Raven by the arm to stop her from escaping. “Why did you call on me to help you?”

“Why were you so eager to help? You could have easily denied the accusations, yet here we are,” Raven enquired, a smirk tugging at the corners of her lips.

“Here we are,” Ethan answered as inched closer to her. “All alone.”

Ethan’s attraction to Raven was undeniable. A strong undercurrent of desire ran through him every time he looked at her. She was so beautiful in her simplicity, her dress catching the golden hues of the sunrays and her hair shining like spun gold. He thought it would be a shame to disturb this picture-perfect scene, to cause even a single strand of her hair to fall out of place. But the pull was too strong, and his need to feel her lips against his own overwhelmed him.

As they navigated their way through the ruins, Ethan found himself following her, drawn by an invisible force.

“So we are,” Raven said, teasing him with each glance she stole at him.

Ethan’s body tingled as he wondered what it would be like to crush his lips to hers.

“But don’t think for a moment I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“And what am I doing?” Ethan asked as he scrambled around what was left of the stone column to block her path.

“Teasing me,” Raven answered.

Ethan’s eyebrows rose as a crooked grin tugged at his lips. “Is that right? And, pray tell, why ever would you think such things?”

“You’re aware I know your reputation,” she said, stopping at the archway to look into the open room.

Ethan didn’t care about the birch trees growing through the floor of what once was a library. All he was interested in was

Raven.

“Is that supposed to intimidate or deter me from getting what I want?”

Raven glanced over her shoulder, and her eyes narrowed. “What you want? And what about what I want? I’m certain you don’t have the foggiest idea of what a lady like me could want.”

“Is that so?” Ethan said as he inched closer to her.

Raven stepped back, and determination burned within her gaze as Ethan approached, trapping her in the desolate room.

“You want a passion that never dies. A love that sears the soul and ensnares the heart.” As Ethan spoke, he inched closer, holding her captive with his gaze.

Her breath hitched, and her eyes widened. She moved as he moved. With each step Ethan took, she ensured she kept the distance between them, only to find there was no more room for her to move.

“You think you know so much about me, don’t you?”

“There are a great many things I know, but you, Raven, remain a mystery, an enigma that I find myself eager to unravel.”

“Good luck with that,” she said, her eyes sparkling with defiance.

“Oh, I’m certain by the time we come to the end of our little arrangement, I’ll know all I need to know about you.”

“You, Sir, presume too much,” Raven scolded as Ethan found himself unable to resist her allure any longer.

He cornered her against an old stone wall that was covered in moss and ivy. The closer he got, the more her cheeks flushed a delightful shade of pink, her breath hitching as he neared. The sight of her, flustered and surprised, only added fuel to his desire.

“I presume nothing,” Ethan whispered as Raven’s body quivered so close to his.

With a firm hand, he tilted her chin upwards, meeting her gaze. His chest tightened as the spark of want coursed through her features, making her look like a divine creature of temptation. She didn’t recoil or protest as he leaned closer until he claimed her lips in a kiss that spoke of unbridled passion that taunted and teased the flame of lust burning within his soul.

“Ethan,” Raven whispered, breaking the silence that hung in the air, “how did you find this place?”

Her question pulled him back from his daydream. He looked at her, her eyes brimming with curiosity and innocence.

“As a child, I used to play here,” Ethan replied, his voice choked with emotion he didn’t recognize. Memories of a more innocent time flashed before his eyes. “Running around these ruins, imagining them to be grand castles and mythical lands,” he continued, a soft smile on his face.

Ethan felt himself drowning in her gaze. He could hardly breathe. The intensity of his emotions for her was almost overwhelming. “Maybe we should go before I do something that’s going to ruin you forever,” he suggested abruptly, his voice slightly shaky, attempting to create some space between them.

His heart ached at the thought, but he knew he needed to regain his composure before he lost himself completely in his desire for her.

Before long, they found themselves back at the park, where her mother and younger sister were calling out for her, their voices laced with frantic desperation.

“I should...” Raven started as Ethan stopped at the nearby tree, admiring the chaotic hunt for her.

“Perhaps you should,” he said with a smirk that masked his need to have her.

He leaned against the trunk of the tree as Raven darted off to her family. A pang of resentment jabbed at him for having to watch Raven go. He wanted to keep her all to himself.

Raven stole a peek at Ethan as she reunited with her family, and it made his heart soar. It took every ounce of his strength not to smile as he noticed their faces flushed with relief the moment they spotted her.

Ethan brushed his fingers over his lips, Raven’s kiss still burning his skin. “You think it is I who will ruin you? But it’ll be you who will be my ruin.”

CHAPTER 6



*H*er heart fluttered as if it were a caged bird, beating against the bars of its gilded prison. Raven's body tingled from the top of her head to her toes as her mind raced and skipped back to her stolen moment with Ethan. His stolen kiss still burned her lips.

Raven paced her chamber, each step a rhythmic counterpoint to the tempest that raged within her heart.

The memory of his lips on hers, and how they moved with such precision, was like an artist's brushstroke, painting bold strokes of passion and danger against the canvas of her heart. His charm was not the benign overtures of an average suitor. It was a siren's call to her soul, a bewitching melody resonating through the haunting silence of her solitude that seemed to lure her into the treacherous waters of forbidden love. For she knew about Ethan's sordid past, yet she couldn't resist his call despite the warning in her heart.

What am I doing? I can't allow him to invade my innermost being like this. He'll do more than ruin me if I continue this

madness.

Rubbing the back of her neck, she tried to ease some of the tension and find some way to ease her turbulent thoughts.

Our union is but an ornate masquerade, a pretense cloaked in the guise of love. I could not, would not, surrender to the tantalizing lure of his grim fascination. Yes, his presence is a thrilling danger to my reputation, but what happens when the Season is over, and he departs? I'll be as I am now—alone and wanting. Is that what he wants? To leave me so dissatisfied?

As she paced, Raven strengthened her will, steeling herself to navigate the labyrinth of Ethan's charm with vigilance and cunning. The dance was intoxicating, but she would remain the master of her destiny no matter what enticing tricks Ethan had in store for her.

Suddenly, an idea sparked within Raven like a lightning bolt against the black and stormy sky. In an instant, she was at her desk, her heart thundering in her ears with the rhythm of her newfound inspiration. Her quill raced across the paper, and the ink flowed like a river as she found an unexpected muse in Ethan's shenanigans.

His allure was not just a dangerous dance but also a well of inspiration from which she could draw. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips as she scribbled her thoughts down. He had become her dark muse, an unsuspecting kindle that quickly

roared into a flame that ignited her creativity and fueled her passion for writing.

But just as quickly as inspiration had hit, a stern knock on the door interrupted her creative outburst. Raven's heart jumped to her throat, her hand stilling and her breath hitching in surprise. With the swift agility of a cat, she secreted her hastily written words beneath a pile of neatly organized papers on her desk. She had to keep her muse, her dangerous inspiration, concealed from Penelope's prying eyes.

With a quick check to ensure no trace of her writing was visible, she composed herself and moved to answer the door.

"Penelope, what are you doing here?" Raven asked through the crack of the door, using her body to hide her room and stifle her sister's curiosity.

"What are you hiding?" Penelope asked with a wry smile as she craned her neck and her eyes shifted about the room as if trying to uncover some forbidden secret Raven had been hiding.

"Nothing," Raven spouted defensively. "Was there a purpose for your visit?"

"It's dinner time," Penelope answered, her eyes narrowing as her lips curled into a devious smirk that rattled Raven to her

core. “Aren’t you joining us for dinner?”

“Who is us?” Raven asked as she opened the door a bit wider to glance down the hallway.

“Mother, Father—oh, and Lord Whitland.” Penelope’s voice echoed through the room, disrupting the peace within the room. Raven’s heart sank into the abyss of her stomach.

“What is he doing here?” Raven gasped as she stepped out of the room and swiftly closed the door behind her.

“He said you two had planned for him to come over. And, believe me, Mother and Father were just as surprised as you look.”

Raven blinked, her gaze straying to the light pouring through the window of the hallway. She swallowed hard as she patted down the wild strands of her hair and adjusted the lace at her collar.

“Well, we must not keep Lord Whitland waiting,” she responded, her voice as composed as ever.

“What were you doing in there?” Penelope asked as they walked down the hallway.

“Nothing really, just reading,” Raven answered. “I just lost track of time. Let’s go.”

Together, they descended the grand staircase and made their way into the dining hall. The opulent room was aglow with the warm light of the chandeliers, casting a comforting radiance over the polished silverware and crystal glassware. But as Raven entered, her heart skipped a beat at the sight that welcomed her.

There, seated casually at the dining table, was Ethan. He was engaged in an idle discussion with her mother, their chatter filling the room. A sudden realization hit Raven. Her dangerous muse was not just a figure of her imagination but a reality seated right in front of her.

Raven cleared her throat, stealing a glance at Ethan before turning to her parents. She strolled into the room, trying not to let herself feel too rattled by Ethan’s presence in her home. She could feel the tension in the room weighing on her as she walked by Penelope to take the only seat available at the dining room table, right beside Ethan.

Her nerves were on fire as she settled in the seat, trying desperately not to stare at the uninvited guest next to her. She was well aware of the eyes shifting from her to Ethan, and she felt like a specimen on display for the world to see.

“Evening, Miss Davenport,” Ethan said, his voice as husky as she remembered.

Regaining some resemblance of normalcy, Raven gently cleared her throat and shifted her attention to Ethan. “Lord Whitland, what an unexpected surprise,” she answered, keeping her tone as light and airy as she possibly could despite the uneasiness that was rolling through her bones. “And what brings you here?” she asked, her voice echoing in the opulent room.

Ethan paused, his blue eyes meeting her gaze. “Raven,” he began, his voice gentle yet seductive. “We are courting. It’s only appropriate for me to engage with your family occasionally, don’t you think?”

Before Raven could respond, her mother spoke, her voice filled with surprised enthusiasm. “Ethan was just explaining the fiasco at the park yesterday.”

“The fiasco?” Raven’s eyebrow rose as she hunted Ethan’s face for the answer, which he kept well concealed.

“Yes, when we thought we had lost you,” Mathilda explained as she poked at the food on her plate. “I never knew you were interested in birdwatching, dear.”

Raven turned to face Ethan, her eyes wide in surprise. He gave her a small nod, his expression urging her to play along.

“Yes, Mother, birdwatching is... fascinating,” she answered, trying to sound as convincing as possible despite the fact she was lying to her family. She shifted in her seat, the uneasiness of the situation settling within her.

As the servants began to serve dinner, Oscar turned his attention to Ethan, his gaze scrutinizing. “So, Ethan, we hear you are in the trading industry?”

Ethan nodded, a confident smile on his lips. “Indeed, My Lord. I have an estate in the Caribbean. We import and export goods such as sugar, coffee, and tea.”

His answer seemed to impress Oscar, who nodded in approval.

Raven leaned closer to Ethan, her voice dropping to a hushed whisper. “Is it true? Your business dealings are in the Caribbean?”

Ethan gave her an unabashed nod, but she could see a hint of mischief in his eyes. She wasn't sure she wanted to believe him, and yet... her heart raced at the thought of him being so adventurous and successful.

As the night wore on, Raven found herself captivated by Ethan's stories of his travels and business ventures. She could feel herself falling deeper under his spell with each passing moment.

As the dinner conversation progressed, Raven found herself growing increasingly skeptical of Ethan's tales of adventure and fortune. She forced herself to harden her heart, reminding herself how clever he was and that he was probably spinning tales to get a rise from her family. With each word he spoke, each story he shared, she couldn't help but question the veracity.

Well, isn't he a cunning fox.

She flashed him a polite smile, refusing to fall for his charming facade.

Ethan, noticing her quiet demeanor, leaned in closer. She froze. "Perhaps," he whispered, his hot breath caressing her neck, "after dinner, you and I could take a stroll around the estate?"

Raven gasped as her leg tingled from Ethan's fingertip grazing it. Her eyes shifted to her parents as if they were aware of his advance. Yet, they remained unresponsive and dismissive as the air grew thinner around her.

Before she could respond, Oscar interjected, his curiosity piqued, “Ethan, do you play cards?”

Ethan turned towards Oscar, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “Indeed, My Lord. In fact, a game of chance is how I acquired my Caribbean estate.”

Oscar chuckled, shaking his head. “Well, we won’t be playing for such high stakes tonight.”

A smirk tugged at Ethan’s lips as he leaned back, resting his gaze on Raven. “My Lord, I believe I’ve already won the highest prize.”

It was as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over her. The tingling he left on her leg lingered as he straightened himself in his seat, grabbing his napkin and dabbing the edges of his bowed lips. She flexed her jaw, biting back the words she wanted to spew at him, and she found her heart hardening as her irritation rose.

Just another trophy to add to his collection.

The thought of being viewed as a prize, of being reduced to an object to be won, angered her more than she liked. She was not a trophy and would not be seen as such either by Anthony or any other suitor who sought her hand.

Ethan's words felt like a jarring wake-up call, reinforcing her resolve. She would not let herself be charmed by Ethan's cunning words or stolen touches any longer.

"If you'll all excuse me," Raven said, placing her napkin down, "I believe I'd like to retire."

"What's wrong, dear? Are you not feeling well?" Mathilda asked as Raven felt her mother's concerned gaze fall on her.

"It appears the hour has caught up with me," Raven said.

"Nonsense," Ethan interjected as he scooted back from the table. "A bit of fresh air will regenerate you. Come, let us take a stroll under the starry sky."

Raven's eyes narrowed, her heart hardening further. "I believe you owe my father a game, and I'll not keep you from such things."

"Raven, dear, Ethan is here at your bequest. Surely you can find it within you to entertain him a bit longer," Mathilda suggested, her voice laced with scorn as she reprimanded Raven for trying to flee.

"Of course, Mother," Raven conceded, resigned to lingering in Ethan's company a bit longer.

“Now that’s settled, come, Lord Whitland, to the drawing room,” Oscar said, rising from his seat.

Raven watched as her parents led Ethan into the drawing room, with Penelope lingering not far behind. As they strolled down the hallway, Penelope leaned in closer, her eyes straying to Ethan every so often.

“What was that all about?” she asked in such a hushed voice that Raven could barely hear her.

“Nothing,” Raven answered curtly as they moved from the dining room to the drawing room.

Raven could clearly feel the shift in the setting but not in the dynamics. Ethan, ever the opportunist, tried to steal touches, his hand brushing against her arm or the small of her back. Each time, she recoiled, a smile of practiced politeness on her face.

“We need to keep up appearances, my dear,” he whispered in her ear.

Raven shot him a look, her voice icy. “I will not let you make a fool out of me, Ethan.”

“That’s not my intention,” Ethan responded as they emerged into the grandeur of the drawing room.

Oscar, already engrossed in shuffling cards, looked up at them, his eyes twinkling with anticipation. Raven, eager to distance herself from Ethan, walked over to the bookshelf, pulling out a book at random. She tried to immerse herself in the story and ignore Ethan’s annoying presence.

But as the evening wore on, bits and pieces of Ethan’s conversation with Oscar stole her attention. She heard about his travels, his time at Eton, and his grand plans for the future. She found herself intrigued despite herself. He was more complex, more interesting than the rakish persona he presented.

His final revelation about his intent to marry and give his future bride the world elicited disbelief from Raven. She dismissed it as just another of his tall tales, but as the hour got late, and Ethan excused himself, Mathilda suggested that Raven walk him to the door.

Reluctantly, Raven complied.

At the door, she couldn’t help but comment, “You certainly know how to woo my parents with your tales, Lord Whitland.”

With a serious look in his eyes, Ethan responded, “Every word I spoke tonight was true, Raven.”

The sincerity in his voice made her pause, realizing that there might be layers to him she had yet to uncover.

Ethan gently took Raven’s hand in his, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles. “Accompany me to the theatre tomorrow night,” he requested, his voice soft in the stillness. “They’re performing *King Lear*.”

Raven hesitated, uncertainty filling her eyes. “I’m not sure.”

He kissed her hand again, a charming smile playing on his lips. “I’ve already purchased two tickets for us, as well as two extra for whomever you wish to have chaperone us,” he revealed, his gaze never leaving hers. “If you don’t accompany me, I will have to invite someone else.”

A burst of jealousy flared within Raven at his words, surprising her, but she quickly reined it in, reminding herself that they weren’t truly engaged. That this, whatever it was between them, was a ruse, and she couldn’t get swept up in his world. She needed to keep her priorities in check.

She offered him a small nod, her decision still unmade. “I will think about it, Ethan.”

Ethan, with a final lingering look, stepped outside, closing the door behind him. Mathilda, who had been quietly observing the exchange, turned to Raven with a thoughtful expression.

“Well, that was certainly an interesting evening,” she admitted, a soft smile playing on her lips as she began to clear the table.

Raven opened her mouth, about to caution her mother not to get too attached, but she bit her tongue at the last minute. She couldn't let her secret slip, not yet.

“And do you have plans to see him again anytime soon?”

“I...” Raven paused, unsure of herself or Ethan's invitation. “Ethan asked me to the theatre tomorrow, Mother,” she confessed, her eyes avoiding Mathilda's.

An excited gasp escaped her mother. “You'll need a new dress—we should visit Mrs. Peters tomorrow...” Her voice faded into the background, her mind already abuzz with preparations.

Raven listened to her mother's excited chatter with a growing sense of unease.

*Why is Ethan going to such lengths to keep up appearances?
Is there something more going on?*

A sudden memory hit her—his playful threat to invite someone else if she didn't accompany him. Who would that be? Curiosity burned in her chest, but she shook her head, trying to focus.

“Mother,” she said, causing Mathilda to pause in her excited chatter, “I won't be going. I have other plans.”

Mathilda's face fell. “Why, Raven?” she asked, disappointment clear in her eyes.

“I... I just have other plans,” Raven insisted, her heart heavy as she made her way back up to her room.



As the day relinquished its hold to the encroaching night, Raven was left in the throes of uncertainty and longing. Ethan's words echoed in her mind, an uninvited guest that refused to depart. Driven by a need to know, she slipped away from the comfort of her home, drawn to the theatre like a moth to a flame.

Hidden in the gloom, she waited with bated breath for the arrival of Ethan. And there he was, bathed in the soft glow of the theatre lights, but not with the woman she anticipated. Instead, it was a man she'd seen many times before at balls and other Society events, although his name escaped her.

Raven found herself surprised by Ethan's choice of guest, and from where she stood, the man seemed indifferent to the occasion. Inching closer, she couldn't help but listen in on their private conversation.

"Is there a reason you're just standing out here? Or are we going inside?" the man asked as Raven shifted her attention to Ethan, wondering how he would respond.

"Just a few moments longer, Liam. I'm sure she'll be here," Ethan said, his eyes scanning the shadows of the buildings and street.

"Alison Monroe is waiting, and she is not one to be kept waiting," Liam said, wagging his eyebrows, his words laced with a scandalous undercurrent.

As Ethan's gaze swept the area, Raven recoiled into the shadows, her heart pounding in her chest.

Alison Monroe. The name was unfamiliar to Raven, yet she couldn't shake the feeling he was toying with her. He did, after all, mention bringing another if she didn't go. A sprig of hope shot through her. Was Ethan looking for her? Did he want her there instead?

Questions swirled in her mind, leaving her caught between hope and confusion.

With a heavy heart, Raven retreated from the theatre, her soul tormented by the thought of Ethan in the company of another. The journey back home was a blur, each step weighed down by the tumultuous thoughts raging within her. Silently, like a phantom, she crept back into her house, hoping to remain unnoticed.

She eased her bedroom door shut, the soft click echoing the closure she yearned for. Leaning against the cool wood, she let out a sigh that whispered of her fractured emotions. Ethan's unexpected guest should mean nothing to her, she reminded herself sternly. Yet, a haunting question lingered, echoing through the silence of her room. Why did this matter so much to her?

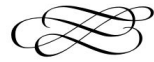
Raven lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling bathed in the moonlight's faint glow, her thoughts spiraling around Ethan. She had always admired him—his charm, his talent, and his charisma. But as she replayed the night's events, she couldn't help but imagine a different reality, one where Ethan's eyes sought her in the crowd, one where she was the woman he escorted to the theatre.

She found herself longing for his touch, his voice, his laugh—his mere presence. A peculiar sensation blossomed within her, like a flower unfurling its petals to the day. A sensation, she realized with a sudden jolt, that felt dangerously like love.

Was she falling for Ethan? Could she be mistaking their friendship for something more? Or was it her heart attempting to comprehend feelings she had denied until now?

Such thoughts were risky and unsettling, yet they held an allure she found hard to resist.

CHAPTER 7



Under the incandescent glow of the city lights, Ethan stood like a lighthouse in front of the grand theatre, his heart pounding like a drumroll. The city's hum was a symphony to his ears, but his eyes were fixed on the labyrinth of streets, hunting for a sight of Raven.

His companion, Liam, paced with the impatience of a metronome out of sync, the lines on his face deepening as he stated, "Ethan, the curtain is about to be drawn. We should get inside."

But Ethan, with the gentle sigh of a man in love, merely shook his head. "I'll wait a moment more," he said, his voice carrying the hopeful melody of a romantic sonnet, echoing in the night's embrace.

Confronting Ethan's resolute stance, Liam turned towards him, his voice resonating with curiosity and concern. "Who are you looking for, Ethan? Who is worth keeping us from witnessing the grandeur of the performance?" he asked, piercing the veil of Ethan's thoughts.

With a sigh of defeat, cloaked in the moon's melancholy luster, Ethan murmured, "No one, Liam, no one at all."

The pair moved towards the theatre, its opulence swallowed by their somber procession inside. As the theater door closed behind them, Ethan's soul echoed with unspoken whispers, his heart throbbing with the phantom presence of Raven.

Why was I so hopeful to see her?

The question unnerved him. It wasn't like him to be waiting for anyone. Usually, they were the ones waiting for him. Chewing on his lower lip, he followed Liam to their seats as the echoes of his longing rang throughout his being.

As they settled into their plush velvet seats, Liam's eyes twinkled with mischief. "See that lady over there, the one draped in silk and diamonds?" he asked, his voice barely audible over the buzzing chatter of the audience. "That, my friend, is my companion for the evening."

Ethan, lost in his reverie, nodded absentmindedly, his gaze fixed on the stage, although his thoughts were miles away.

Noticing Ethan's distraction, Liam nudged him gently with his elbow, bringing him back to the present.

“What’s gotten into you tonight? You aren’t normally this distracted,” Liam inquired as Ethan shifted in his seat.

“Sorry, what was it you were saying?”

“I was trying to point out the lovely actress, Jazel. If you fancy her company, I might be able to arrange a meeting.” Liam’s voice took on a persuasive tone.

Ethan, his mind far away, responded mindlessly, “Sure, Liam, that sounds good.”

As the final curtain fell, its resounding echo seemed to awaken Ethan from his trance. Liam, ever the opportunist, guided him towards the backstage area, the air filled with the intoxicating fragrance of face powder and lingering stage smoke.

Ethan found himself a bit dazed by all the commotion going on around him. At any other time, he would have reveled being back there with so many beautiful women vying for his attention or his money. But his thoughts lingered on only one: Raven.

“Ethan, meet Jazel and her friend, Morgan,” Liam introduced them.

Morgan, a radiant beauty, immediately turned on her charm, her flirtatious words washing over Ethan like a shallow

stream. He found himself mechanically returning her smiles and nods but felt a strange emptiness within. He didn't find her attractive, and his heart and mind were elsewhere.

“Ladies, you did wonderful tonight,” Ethan said, complimenting them with a kiss on the hand. “Truly, your performance was stunning.”

“Why, thank you, My Lord,” the women said in unison as their cheeks flushed a darker red.

Ethan couldn't help but feel a tug within the center of his being. He'd seen the come hither look before and found himself immune to their siren call. Stunned by his lack of interest, he stepped back from them.

“As much of a delight I believe it would be for me to stay, I must go,” Ethan said.

“Ethan, mate, what are you doing?” Liam whispered through pursed lips. “These ladies are expecting entertainment, and I'm certain Miss Jazel would love to show you her dressing room.”

“Perhaps another time,” Ethan found himself uttering before his mind could even comprehend the words he spewed out.

The shock on Liam and the girl's faces didn't distract Ethan from his calling. It wasn't their company he wanted but Raven's.

He gave a slight bow, turned on his heel, and started for the side door.

I must be going mad.

As he left, he heard Liam smooth over his abrupt departure. "Ladies, Ethan is a busy man. Let's enjoy ourselves and make the evening memorable!"

Ethan found himself wandering the quiet streets, drawn almost magnetically towards Raven's house, a beacon in the otherwise dormant neighborhood. He didn't know exactly where he was going, just that he couldn't stay there with Liam and the women any longer. It wasn't that he didn't trust himself to be a complete gentleman. It was more like there was an invisible chord pulling him away that he had to indulge.

Ethan blinked as the shock of where he found himself dawned on him. The Davenports' grand estate stood like a shrouded beacon of hope and frustration.

I shouldn't be here. Why am I here, when I know the others would be more accommodating? I've got to be the most foolish

man alive.

Swallowing hard, Ethan tried to calm the throbbing of his heart as he stared at the windows and doorways. The house was dimly lit, with a solitary window illuminating the darkness like a lighthouse in the night. Through the window, he could make out the silhouette of a woman that he knew all too well.

Raven.

He watched as she moved around the room, her every action laced with a grace that was unmistakably hers. A strange longing flooded Ethan, and he yearned to share in that graceful solitude.

Overwhelmed by a sudden resolution, his heart pounded at the audacity of his own decision. He needed to know why she had turned down an evening at the theatre, why she would choose solitude over his company. With stealth he did not know he possessed, Ethan moved towards the back of the house, finding an unlocked window that swung open to the softest touch.

In a moment's decision, he found himself inside Raven's world, his heart pulsating with a mix of excitement and trepidation. The quiet hum of the house was punctuated by his expectant breaths as he began his search for Raven.

As Ethan ascended the stairs, he stumbled upon a room bathed in a warm, golden glow. His heart clenched as he saw Raven, ensconced in her sanctuary, engrossed in something as she hunched over her writing desk. The soft candlelight danced on her features, enhancing her ethereal beauty.

He lingered at the doorway, watching her with a sense of wistful longing as he wondered about the recipient of her letter. Was it another man she was writing to? Or someone who had already claimed her heart, rendering his affections futile?

Gathering his resolve, he entered the room with a silent step. Raven, engrossed in her writing, failed to notice his presence. He took a quiet breath before stepping forward and gently resting his hand on her shoulder. She jolted in surprise, turning to look at him with wide, startled eyes. The faint look of surprise in her eyes was mirrored by the timid smile that crept up her lips.

“Raven,” Ethan said.

She jumped from her seat and recoiled from his touch faster than he expected. Her eyes were wide with fright and confusion as her attention shifted to the open door before returning to him again.

“What are you doing here, Ethan?” she growled as she scurried past him to close the door. “How did you get in? What

do you want?” She paused and then added with a dismissive wave of her hand, “Actually, I don’t care what you want. You should leave. Now, before I call attention.”

Ethan folded his arms over his chest and shook his head. “You call for anyone, they find me in here, and you’re ruined, and you know it.”

“What do you want, Ethan? And be quick about it,” she ordered, her eyes shifting to the papers on her desk.

Ethan arched an eyebrow as he snatched a sheet from the desk.

“Stop, what are you doing? You can’t read that. Give it here,” she demanded as she pried the paper from his hand before he could see to whom it was addressed.

Ethan watched as she gathered the rest of the sheets that were fanned out on the desk and stacked them into a neat pile. He waited for her to turn back to him.

“I came to ask why you didn’t come to the theatre.”

“I didn’t want to,” Raven said, shrugging nonchalantly. “Now that you have your answer, you can leave.”

“Why not? The theatre is a reputable place for anyone to go,” Ethan asked as he moved about her room. He couldn’t help but notice the way the place was filled with the scent of lilacs—it was a scent he wouldn’t soon forget.

“I didn’t feel like it,” she answered defiantly. “But I’m sure a man of your stature was more than capable of finding another to attend with you.”

“Well, perhaps it was a good thing you didn’t accompany me. It would have been most difficult explaining to Jazel who you are.”

“Is that so?” Raven said, her face hinting as if she was harboring a secret. “Then tell me, how was your evening with your other companion?”

Ethan frowned, feeling a stab of disappointment. “Not as enjoyable as I had hoped,” he admitted.

Raven glanced at him and then quickly added, her tone teasing, “I suppose it was a new experience to hold another man’s hand instead. Not unless, of course, you enjoy that sort of thing?”

Ethan stared at her a moment, processing her words. A small gasp escaped his lips. “You were there,” he accused.

“I was not,” Raven countered as he moved quickly to block any path of escape.

“How do you know, then, that I was with another man and not a lady?”

Raven glanced about as if the empty room would give her some hint, some answer that eluded her. “If you were with a lady, then I’m certain you wouldn’t be here, sneaking into my family’s house to annoy me or gloat over what a wonderful time you had.”

“Lying isn’t your strong suit.” Ethan chuckled. “You were there. So, why didn’t you greet us?”

“I wasn’t there,” Raven denied, but her voice wavered.

“You wouldn’t know that I was with Liam unless you were there,” Ethan said, his voice hardening. “Why did you lie?”

Raven turned away, her voice cool and detached. “I was curious about who you’d brought. It’s none of my business who you spend your free time with, and I shouldn’t have gone. There, are you happy now?”

“But you came anyway,” Ethan noted, moving closer. “Jealous, perhaps?”

Raven scoffed, but he noticed the color rising to her cheeks. “Absolutely not. I don’t care what you do during your days or evenings.”

“Sure you don’t,” Ethan teased as he glanced at the desk. “So, what were you doing? Don’t tell me writing in your journal? Or were you penning a love letter for someone?”

Fear flickered in her eyes, and she darted past him to hide the piece of paper she had been writing on. Ethan sighed, feeling a strange mix of disappointment and relief.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said as a loud, rattling noise caused his heart to skip a beat.

“You should go before my father catches you and flogs you for being in here,” Raven suggested as she started pushing him closer to the window.

“Is that concern coming out of your mouth? Why, Raven, I never would have thought you cared so much about me,” Ethan teased as he shuffled to the window, trying to bide his time.

“Will you just go?”

“I’ve obviously misread the situation. I thought you enjoyed the thrill of defying Society’s rules. I’ll leave you to your writing.” Ethan flashed her a smirk as her eyes sparkled from the candles burning around her.

He was going to remember this moment. Even if he never got the chance to see her like this again, he was going to savor every detail.

Just as he swung his legs out of the window, he heard a noise from the hallway. Raven’s eyes widened in panic. “You need to hurry, now,” she hissed. “If you’re caught in here, it will ruin everything.”

Ethan gave her a quick nod and descended hastily, slipping and falling to the ground with a thud. As he grimaced in pain, he saw Raven’s concerned face peeking out of the window.

Despite his discomfort, he felt a surge of hope. Maybe, just maybe, there was more to Raven’s feelings than she was willing to admit. He made a silent promise to himself, as he rolled over in the grass and rose to his feet, that he would find a way to win her heart.

CHAPTER 8



“So, how are things going with Ethan?” Penelope asked, her eyes filled with curious anticipation. “It’s been two weeks since you two made your engagement official. And I’ve got to admit, I’m impressed with how well you’ve managed to keep up the ruse.”

Raven smiled, a soft blush spreading across her cheeks. “Things are going great. Ethan and I have been spending a lot of time together—actually, there hasn’t been a day we haven’t seen each other.”

Penelope sighed, tossing her hair back with a somewhat playful annoyance. “I must admit, I miss our long chats. Ever since Ethan entered the picture, it seems like I’ve barely had any time with you. But as long as you’re happy, that’s all that matters.”

Raven reached out to hold Penelope’s hand. “I promise, I’ll make more time for us.”

Penelope leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a low whisper. “Good, I just hope you remember, this engagement... it’s supposed to be fake.”

Raven pulled back with a mildly surprised look on her face, quickly glancing over her shoulder to ensure no one had overheard Penelope’s words. “Shh, Penelope,” she hissed, her fingers tightening around her sister’s hand. “You can’t say things like that so loudly. I can’t let my parents know the engagement isn’t real.”

Penelope’s expression softened, understanding the gravity of the situation. “I’m sorry. It’s just... I worry about you, sometimes. We both know our parents can be quite controlling and manipulative.”

Raven nodded, a hint of sadness crossing her features. “I know, but for now, I have to keep up this charade until I figure out a way to break free from their hold on me.”

Penelope looked at Raven, curiosity twinkling in her eyes. “So, what are your plans with Ethan tomorrow?”

Raven laughed lightly, her eyes far away. “I’m not sure. We’ve already exhausted all the usual places one might go to be seen by Society. We’ve been to the tea house so many times that I think they might start charging us rent, and we’ve wandered through all the parks in the ton. I do hope, though, that Ethan might take me for a ride out in the country.”

Penelope gasped, her face a picture of surprise. “Out in the country? Just the two of you? Do you think our parents would approve of that?”

Raven shrugged, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. “Who knows? But that’s what makes it so exciting.” She paused, then continued with a sly grin, “Besides, Ethan promised to show me some hidden spots in the countryside.”

Penelope shook her head in amazement. “I can’t believe you’re doing all of this just to keep up appearances. You must really care about your reputation.”

Raven’s smile faltered, her eyes clouding over with a hint of sadness. “It’s not just my reputation, Penelope,” she admitted quietly. “It’s also our family name and our standing in Society. I have a duty to uphold their expectations and ensure our place among the elite.”

Penelope reached out and took Raven’s hand in a comforting gesture. “I understand, Raven, but just remember, you don’t have to do it alone. You have friends who will support you no matter what.”

Raven smiled at Penelope, feeling grateful for her sister’s understanding and support. “Thank you, Penelope,” she said sincerely. “It means the world to me.”

Penelope hesitated, then looked directly into Raven's eyes. "Do you ever think, Raven... that you might be getting in over your head with Ethan?" she asked softly. "It's not just outings and adventures anymore. It feels like there's something more between you two."

Raven's heart pounded at the question. She quickly averted her gaze, her fingers fiddling with the lace trim on her dress. "There's nothing, Penelope," she protested weakly. "We're just... friends, that's all."

But even as she denied it, a flurry of images flashed through her mind—Ethan's warm smile, his kind eyes, the gentle way he treated her. She swallowed hard, pushing away the strange fluttering feeling in her chest.

Penelope took a deep breath, her concern for Raven clear in her eyes. "Raven, you know as well as I do that Ethan... well, he has a certain reputation," she began cautiously. "He's known as quite the rake among the elite."

Raven's cheeks flushed, but she kept her gaze steady. "I'm aware of Ethan's reputation, Penelope," she defended. "But he's been nothing but kind and respectful towards me."

"I don't doubt that, Raven," Penelope replied gently. "But a leopard doesn't change its spots overnight. Just... be careful, all right? You're my sister, and I don't want to see you get

hurt.” She gave Raven a reassuring smile before turning to leave.

Raven felt torn and conflicted. She couldn’t deny that there was something between her and Ethan, but she also couldn’t ignore the warnings from Penelope.

Raven found herself at odds with her own heart. She was drawn to Ethan, his humor and his kindness, in a way she hadn’t expected. His presence stirred in her a joyful exhilaration that she hadn’t known she could feel. Yet, Penelope’s words echoed in her mind, a grim reminder of the reputation that shadowed him. He was known for his carefree charm and dalliances, and Raven couldn’t ignore that side of him.

Penelope was right, she had to guard her heart. The engagement, after all, was only for a Season, a fleeting moment that would end as swiftly as it began. Raven couldn’t afford to let her feelings take a deeper root—not for someone who might not be there to catch her when she fell.

Their conversation was interrupted by a clamor of rough sounds as a servant passed by. The interruption was a reminder of the late hour.

Raven glanced at the ornate clock on the mantelpiece. “It’s late, Penelope.” She sighed. “I should try to get some sleep. I have an early morning with Ethan.”

Penelope's eyes twinkled with concern as she rose from her seat. "An early morning with Ethan, huh? Please, do me a favor, and be careful. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Raven rolled her eyes good-naturedly, picking up a nearby pillow and tossing it at Penelope. "Goodnight, Penelope." She laughed, feigning exasperation.

Penelope chuckled, catching the pillow effortlessly as she exited the room, the echo of her laughter a testament to the bond of their friendship.

As Raven settled into bed, her thoughts drifted to Ethan. She couldn't deny the attraction between them, but she also couldn't ignore the warning signs. Penelope's words had struck a chord with her, and she knew deep down that she needed to be cautious.

As Raven lay under the soft covers, the dim light from the bedside lamp illuminating her thoughtful face, her mind was a whirlpool of emotions and thoughts of Ethan. She found herself charmed by his quick wit and captivating presence, traits she hadn't expected from a man so infamous for his flirtatious tendencies. Each shared laugh and glance left her heart fluttering, a sensation that was both terrifying and exciting.

“He could be such a good friend,” she mused aloud to the empty room, her voice a mere whisper in the vast, quiet space. She appreciated his humor, his charisma, his casual charm that made her feel at ease.

But every time she allowed herself to entertain these thoughts, an echo of Penelope’s voice would remind her of the truth. She would close her eyes, take a deep breath, and mentally remind herself, “This is only temporary. He’s merely playing along.”

It was a bitter pill to swallow, this reality, especially when his laughter still rang in her ears, and his presence still lingered in her senses. She knew she needed to keep her emotions in check, to not let herself get too attached. The logical part of her mind knew that their paths, intertwined now, would diverge when the Season ended. It was a transient connection, like a fleeting gust of wind. She had to remind herself that the charm was temporary, the engagement was temporary, and so should her feelings.

The thought seemed to ignite something within her, a spark that quickly turned into a blaze of inspiration. Swiftly, Raven slid out from under the sheets, the cold air nipping her skin, but she hardly noticed. Her mind was filled with a kaleidoscope of thoughts and ideas, each one brighter and more vivid than the last.

Making her way across the room, she darted to the antique writing desk, its wooden surface gleaming under the muted lamplight. Seating herself on the cushioned chair, she eagerly

reached for the quill and parchment that lay scattered on the desk. Her heart pounded in her chest, a rhythm of anticipation and excitement as she poised the quill above the blank parchment.

And then, she began to write. Her thoughts flowed smoothly, like a river stream, pouring onto the parchment. Her hand moved swiftly, skillfully penning down the dramatic conclusion of her story. The characters that had been mere figments of her imagination sprung to life on the paper, their dialogues echoing in her mind, their emotions palpable.

She wrote about the divergence of paths, the impermanence of relationships, and the bittersweet realization of ephemeral connections.

Her hand paused for a moment, the silence of the room broken only by the distant hoot of an owl. She looked at the parchment before her, the words she had written speaking volumes.

“This is it,” she whispered, a sense of calm washing over her. Her story had finally found its ending.

CHAPTER 9



Ethan leaned against the worn, green felt of the billiard table, his eyes focused on Liam as he lined up his shot. The pool hall was dim, the overhead lights removed from their usual starkness by the smoky air that hung like a soft veil over the room.

The clink of glasses and low hum of conversation formed a comforting background noise. Liam, with his usual intense concentration, was sizing up his next move. His fingers lightly brushed the cue, guiding it back and forth in a measured rhythm. There was a moment of silence, broken only by the crisp *clack* of the cue ball meeting its target.

The room watched as the number 8 ball rolled smoothly towards its destination, the anticipation palpable.

“Liam, you’re really getting good at this,” Ethan said, raising an eyebrow as he watched the ball disappear into the corner pocket. “I guess you’ve found your calling.”

Liam chuckled as he set his pool cue down and turned to face Ethan. “I guess so. And what about you, Ethan? I heard you found your calling, too—or should I say, your cawing?”

Ethan looked momentarily puzzled before realization dawned on him. “Wait, are you referring to Raven?”

Liam merely grinned, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Who else? So, when’s the wedding?”

Ethan rolled his eyes and shook his head, trying to suppress a smile. “Very funny, Liam. There’s nothing going on between Raven and me.”

“Of course, mate. That’s why the whole town is talking about how you two are practically inseparable. Is she the one you were waiting for at the theatre last week?”

With a smirk, Ethan picked up his own cue and lined up his shot, the corner of his mouth twitching in amusement. “Well, they do say there’s no smoke without fire, but no, I wasn’t waiting for her.”

Chuckling, Liam leaned on his cue and eyed Ethan. “I see. I take it, then, that you were just after one last taste of freedom before the nuptials? Tell me, have you started picking out dining patterns with Raven yet?” he quipped, amused by the idea.

Ethan, rather unamused, responded coolly without looking up from his shot, “Very funny, Liam. You know it’s not like that.”

“Ah, so it’s more of a ‘secret elopement’ type of situation, then?” Liam retorted, his grin widening.

“No, Liam,” Ethan replied, a hint of irritation in his voice. He sank his shot with a satisfying *clack*. “It’s more of a ‘we have a business arrangement’ type of situation.”

Liam blinked, taken aback. “Oh, so no romantic candlelit dinners, then?”

“Not unless they’re purely for show,” Ethan retorted, lining up his next shot as the memory of sneaking into Raven’s room flashed through his mind, distracting him from the game.

“Are you going to take your shot, or have you lost your wits completely?” Liam asked, leaning down to catch Ethan’s gaze.

The sight of Liam’s face rattled Ethan and forced all thoughts of Raven to the back of his mind.

“If you’d stop pestering me, maybe I’d be able to take my shot.”

Liam chuckled and stood straight. Ethan was fully aware of Liam pacing around the billiard table, trying to distract him even further and savoring tormenting him every chance he got.

“You know what I don’t understand,” Liam said, his curiosity piqued. “Why Raven? Out of all the ladies in the ton, she’s no doubt the most attractive, but she seems so prudish.”

Ethan sighed, leaning back against the table. “I didn’t choose Raven, Liam. She chose me.”

Liam raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And how did that happen?”

Ethan smiled, remembering the event. “It was at the ball a few weeks ago. Raven announced to the entire room that we were engaged, and I just played along with it.”

The memory of that evening curled Ethan’s lips. His chest tightened as he thought of the way Raven looked under the pale moonlight. She had stolen his breath then, too.

Liam looked surprised. “But why the devil would you do that?”

Ethan shrugged. A small prick of uncertainty jabbed at him. He knew Liam would never give up his secrets, but still, it felt like a betrayal if he blabbed to Liam about what he and Raven had concocted.

Liam cocked his head, glaring at him, reading him like a book.

Relenting, Ethan sighed. “I understand the pressures a family can put on a person. Besides, it’s not as if I’ve got a line of ladies waiting to marry me.”

Liam chuckled at his friend’s dry wit, but his tone turned serious as he asked, “And how has your grandmother taken the news?”

Ethan rolled his eyes. “Well, if you thought she was cantankerous before, she’s become downright insufferable now.”

Liam winced in sympathy. “I’m sorry, mate. But why didn’t you just tell her the truth?”

Ethan chuckled, swiping his shot with a flourish. “Believe it or not, Liam, I’m having a ball with my grandmother’s reaction. Her irritation is actually quite amusing.”

Liam frowned. “But you’ve always said she’s unbearable.”

Ethan nodded. “True, but there’s something different now. Before, she was just annoying, a constant noise in the background. But now, with this engagement, she’s become

downright irritating. It's like she's turned up her annoyance factor to eleven. And it's hilarious.”

Liam laughed, shaking his head. “And you're actually enjoying this?”

With a wicked grin, Ethan replied, “Yes. Because now, every sharp word, every exasperated sigh, every disapproving glare—it's all because of me. And the more she squirms, the more I can't help but enjoy it. For once, I feel like I have the upper hand.”

Liam chuckled at his friend's twisted sense of amusement, raising his beer in a toast. “To irritating grandmothers, then.”

Liam took a swig of his beer and then leaned forward on the bar. “Speaking of grandmothers and engagements, what about Raven? How does she feel about being betrothed to a rake like you?”

Ethan's grin faded slightly, his eyebrows furrowing. “Raven... she's different. It's hard to tell what she's thinking. Sometimes, I feel like she sees right through me, but other times, it's like she doesn't see me at all.”

“So, she doesn't know about your... reputation?” Liam asked, trying to tread lightly.

Ethan laughed, a hint of bitterness in his voice. “Of course, she does. But whether she cares or not, that’s a whole different story.” He took another sip of his drink, staring into the amber liquid.

Liam leaned in closer, a serious look on his face. “Ethan, do you... do you actually have feelings for Raven?”

Ethan sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. It was a question he’d been mulling over without any answer.

Giving a slight shrug, he shook his head, refusing to think of such a thing. “Of course not. This engagement is a ruse. You really think I’d be that foolish as to fall for a con?”

Liam’s eyes widened in mock surprise. “You devil, you fiend. You scandalous cad.”

Ethan leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. “You and I both know the Viscount of Rochford.”

“That pompous fool, I’ve never taken a liking to him.”

Ethan waved his hand and bobbed his head. “Exactly. So, when Raven approached me with this absurd plan, I thought I’d help her out.”

Liam threw his head back and laughed. “So, let me get this straight. The whole ton believes you and Raven are in love and bound to be married, but in reality, it’s nothing more than an elaborate farce? This has to be the biggest prank you’ve ever pulled, Ethan!”

Ethan lifted his beer, a wry smile on his face. “And I must admit, I’ve never been prouder.”

As Ethan drained his beer, his gaze grew distant. He couldn’t dispel the image of Raven from his mind—the curve of her smile, the fire in her eyes, the softness of her voice.

“It’s just a ruse,” he muttered to himself, trying to convince his heart to fall in line with his head.

But each time he saw her, each time they laughed together under the false pretense of their engagement, he found himself tangled in a web of emotions he hadn’t anticipated.

Was he merely playing a part, or was he truly falling for Raven? The boundaries of their charade seemed to blur, the lines between reality and pretense increasingly obscure.

“Maybe this ruse isn’t just a ruse, after all,” Ethan finally admitted, a sense of fear and excitement intertwining in his heart.

Liam glanced at him with a sly grin. “How about a round of cards tomorrow night at White’s?”

Ethan ran a hand through his hair, a hint of regret in his eyes. “I’d love to, Liam, truly, but I think I’ll pass.”

A chuckle escaped Liam’s lips as he raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Please, tell me it’s not because you’re hung up on Raven? From the sound of it, this ‘false engagement’ of yours doesn’t come cheap, old friend. Why all the pomp and circumstance if it’s all just for show? I would understand if there was something more that you’re getting from this arrangement, but to me, it seems like a waste of time and resources.”

Ethan shrugged, a soft smile tugging at his lips. “Well, even a pretense should be convincingly played, shouldn’t it?”

Liam fixed Ethan with a penetrating gaze, leaning back in his chair as he swirled his beer. “You know Ethan, a man doesn’t shower a woman with such gifts if he doesn’t want something in return. Have you bedded her yet? Is that why you’re spending so much on her?”

Ethan flushed, his gaze hardening. “Liam, you’re out of line,” he snapped. “As enticing as it might be to lie with Raven, I can assure you that nothing of the sort has happened. Our arrangement is purely for show.”

Liam's eyes sparkled with amusement, a smirk playing on his lips. "Oh, is it, now?" he asked, his voice laced with skepticism. "Forgive me for saying, but your actions seem to suggest otherwise. You're wooing her."

Ethan blinked, taken aback. He opened his mouth to object, but he found himself at a loss for words. Staring at Liam, the realization slowly dawned on him. He was indeed spending an inordinate amount of time and money on Raven. But there was something about watching her face light up that was intoxicating to him and made him want to see her smile more and more.

Could it be that he was falling for her? Ethan's heart pounded in his chest as the implications of Liam's words began to sink in.

His denial was met with a knowing smile from Liam, who simply raised his beer in a toast, a clear "I told you so" written all over his face.

Ethan ran a hand through his hair, finally finding his voice. "Look," he began, his voice steady but with a hint of irritation, as he refused to let his emotions cloud his judgment. There was no way he would give his feelings any more time in his head. Yet, he couldn't deny the tugging at his heartstrings, no matter how hard he fought against them. "This isn't about wooing or any romantic nonsense. If I didn't shower Raven with gifts and attention, everyone would suspect something

was amiss. Her family, my grandmother—everyone. It’s all part of the plan.”

Liam chuckled, finishing off his beer. “Oh, I see. So, you’re saying that buying her expensive jewelry, taking her to fancy dinners, and whisking her off on romantic getaways is all just... smoke and mirrors?” he asked, a teasing gleam in his eyes.

Ethan nodded, a determined look on his face. “Exactly,” he confirmed, “it’s all just part of the act.”

Liam merely shook his head, an unspoken “we’ll see” hanging in the air between them.

Liam paused, studying Ethan for a moment before posing his next question. “So, when do you plan on calling off this engagement of yours?”

Ethan sighed, leaning back in his chair. “The arrangement with Raven will only last till the end of the Season,” he stated calmly. “That way, her family and my grandmother can’t force us to wed someone else.”

Liam laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. “I have to admit, Ethan. That’s a pretty smart plan.” His laughter faded, replaced with a serious tone. “But remember, there’s still time

for things to change. And enough time for you to develop feelings for her.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow at Liam’s warning but said nothing. After all, it was a risk that he was more than willing to take.

“I’ll admit, though,” Liam continued, leaning back in his chair and looking at his friend, “you do seem to have the perfect relationship. Raven... she’s a catch for any man. As long as you don’t ruin her, that is, and end up having to wed her.”

Ethan, taken aback, looked at Liam. “I won’t ruin Raven,” he declared, his voice steady. “She’s too good to ruin.”

“But how do you manage yourself around her?” Liam asked, his curiosity evident in his tone.

Ethan sighed and took a sip of his drink. “It’s not without some difficulty,” he admitted.

His thoughts skipped to Raven in the ruins. The kiss he stole burned his lips. With his breath hitching, he wondered just how far he could go with her. If perhaps he’d be able to steal more than a kiss.

Her rejection still stung as he pushed the memory from his mind, remembering who she was under her sultry exterior.

“But Raven... she’s prim and proper, completely unaware of the world. There’s an innocence to her, a naivety that intrigues me. She’s not like other women in the ton.”

CHAPTER 10



*A*s twilight descended and the world embraced the tranquility of the night, Raven carefully draped a cloak over her shoulders. With a gentle pull, she brought the hood down to conceal her face, her identity hidden in the shadows. Every sound in the old house seemed amplified as she tiptoed down the silent corridors, the familiar surroundings now cloaked in mystery. The weight of her decision pressed upon her, but she was driven by a purpose only she understood.

Raven slid her bag under her cloak, the compact bundle containing all she dared take with her. Clenching her teeth, she stepped out of the sanctuary of her room, each creaky wooden floorboard under her feet echoing like a cannon in the night. The stairs were her next challenge, their groaning protests under the lightest pressure threatening to betray her. Each step was a calculated risk, her every movement a dance between desperation and caution.

The foyer was a vast echo chamber, its grandeur now an intimidating expanse she had to traverse. Her gaze darted around, the grand chandelier above casting monstrous shadows that seemed to twist and lurch in the dim light. She

moved on, sliding along the wall and into the connecting hallway. The corridor was lined with portraits of her ancestors, their stern eyes seeming to follow her as she passed, silent judges to her clandestine escape.

Her father's study was next, a room filled with memories of stern lessons and tender moments alike. Here, Raven paused, her heart throbbing in her chest. Would her father understand? Would he forgive her? She pushed the thoughts away—there was no time for doubt now.

She continued down the hallway until she reached the kitchen. The warmth of countless meals and family gatherings still lingered in the air, a painful reminder of what she was leaving behind. But she had a purpose, a mission that only she could accomplish. With a final look around, she moved towards the kitchen window, her escape route, her pathway to the unknown.

“Have you heard about Miss Davenport and Lord Whitland?” whispered Sarah, the housemaid, her eyes wide with the latest gossip.

“Indeed, I have,” replied Jenkins, the butler, polishing a silver tray. “It all happened so suddenly.”

Sarah nodded, her expression grave. “I’ve heard talk about Lord Whitland. They say he’s quite the rake, you know. He never stays with one lady for long.”

Jenkins sighed, his gaze distant. “That’s the reputation he carries, I’m afraid. I do hope Miss Davenport doesn’t get her heart broken. She’s such a sweet girl, she deserves nothing but the best.”

“She certainly does,” murmured Sarah, her mind filled with concern for their young mistress. “Only time will tell, I suppose.”

As Raven reached the kitchen door, she froze. The low murmur of voices alerted her to the presence of Sarah and Jenkins, engaged in their usual evening routine. She knew she couldn’t risk being spotted now, not when she was so close to freedom.

Retracing her steps, she darted towards the servants’ staircase, a narrow, winding route barely used by the family. It was dimly lit and creaky, but it offered an undisrupted path to the backdoor that opened onto the vast gardens. She tugged her cloak tighter around herself, bracing for the chilling night air as she slipped out, leaving behind the warmth and familiarity of her home.

Raven moved swiftly, her cloak billowing behind her as she navigated the winding, narrow alleyways. The cobblestone path beneath her feet was cold and uneven, but she was unfazed, her resolve unwavering. Tucked safely under her cloak, away from prying eyes, was her precious cargo: a manuscript filled with ideas and dreams she dared not voice

aloud. She clutched it close, its weight a comforting reminder of the importance of her mission.

The publishing house was a few blocks away, a beacon of hope in her journey. A slight shiver ran down her spine—whether from the chill of the night air or the thrill of anticipation, she could not tell. Amidst the quiet solitude of the alleyways, the distant hum of the publishing house printers was a melody to her ears. She quickened her pace, her heart pounding in tandem with her steps, a symphony of hope heralding a new dawn.

As Raven approached the publishing house, she noticed a lone clerk hunched over behind the counter, engrossed in his work. Taking a deep breath, she approached him, her hands clenched around her manuscript.

“Excuse me, Sir,” she started, her voice barely above a whisper.

The clerk looked up, his expression clearly stating his desire to be left alone. “We’re closed, Miss,” he said, eyeing her cloak suspiciously.

“But I have a manuscript,” she insisted, revealing the precious bundle she had been clutching so tightly. “It needs to get to the printers.”

The clerk eyed the manuscript, then looked at her, his expression softening. After a tense moment of silence, he sighed. “Fine, I’ll take it. Can’t promise it’ll get looked at until morning.”

Handing over the money she had saved, she watched as he took her manuscript, placing it carefully on a pile on his desk. “Your book will be published by the end of the month,” he said, his voice gruff but not unkind.

“Is there a possibility of my book being published sooner than a month?” Raven asked, her voice trembling with a mixture of hope and anticipation.

The clerk looked at her with raised eyebrows. “Miss, that’s express service. We usually reserve that for established authors or urgent prints. It costs considerably more.”

“I understand,” Raven replied, reaching into her cloak again. She pulled out a sizeable amount of money, much more than she had previously given, and handed it to the clerk.

The clerk’s eyes widened as he took in the amount. He quickly composed himself and looked at Raven, visibly impressed. “Well, in that case,” he said, adjusting his glasses, “I believe we can expedite the process. Your book could be published in a few weeks.” He cleared his throat, picking up a pen from his cluttered desk. “Under what name should the publication be?” he asked, glancing back at her.

“David Thornhill,” she replied, her voice firm and clear.

“David Thornhill?” he echoed, his eyebrows knitting together in confusion. “I believe we have a purse held for him. Seems he’s a popular man, yet no one seems to have seen him around.”

Raven cut him off with a gentle smile. “Yes, I know. He’s a private man, a recluse, doesn’t want the attention, which is why he has me conducting this part of his enterprise.”

“I see,” the clerk said as he went around the counter and pulled a small purse from the till. With a hint of skepticism in his gaze, he handed the purse over to Raven.

“Thank you,” Raven said, reaching in and retrieving a coin for the clerk. “For your silence. Mr. Thornhill appreciates everything you do. I’ll come back after publication to pick up Mr. Thornhill’s profits from this book.” Her voice held an air of finality, and the clerk nodded.

The thrill of seeing her work come to life, of knowing that her words would soon be bound and inked on crisp, fresh pages, was intoxicating. Raven’s heart pounded in her chest with a mix of adrenaline and joy. Her titles may not have been printed in large quantities, but they never failed to sell out. Every single copy—bought, read, cherished—was a validation

of her talent, hard work, and dedication, a silent nod to her mastery over the written word.

With a nod of gratitude towards the clerk, Raven bundled herself up, ready to brave the journey back home. She stepped outside and was greeted immediately by the biting winter chill. As daunting as the trek was, it was a small price to pay for the exhilaration of seeing her work touch the lives of others.

Raven's journey back home was a daring dance with the dark. The cold wind nipped her cheeks, and the patter of her feet on the cobblestone road echoed through the silent night. But her heart was light with the thrill of her secret success. Her family's house, a looming silhouette against the moonlit sky, was now in sight. She approached it surreptitiously, careful not to awaken her slumbering family.

The old wooden door creaked as she eased it open, a sound that used to terrify her as a child. Now, it was just a part of her secret adventure. She slipped off her boots, her cold fingers fumbling in haste, and tiptoed towards the stairs. Each step was a delicate balance between haste and caution. The old house groaned under her weight, a cacophony in the silent night, but she was skilled at this game of shadows and silence. She silently cheered as she safely reached her room without stirring anyone.

Once inside, Raven let out a sigh of relief, her breath dancing in the moonlight streaming through her window. The thrill of the night's adventure and the sweet taste of her clandestine

success made her heart beat wildly. She was the author, David Thornhill, who touched the hearts of readers, and yet, in this house, she was just Raven—a secret she planned to keep. The thrill of not being caught, of living this mysterious double life, was intoxicating beyond words.



As Raven rounded the corner, an unexpected scene unfolded before her. Her parents were in the drawing room, ensnared in a heated argument with her younger sister, Penelope. The normally peaceful room was now a battlefield of clashing opinions and raised voices. From her hidden vantage point, Raven could make out the topic of their disagreement—Penelope’s audacious dreams of traveling abroad with her friends.

Mathilda’s voice, usually soft and soothing, was unusually stern, reminding Penelope of the propriety expected of a lady. Oscar, typically the mediator, seemed just as distressed. His deep-set eyes reflected a mix of concern and frustration as he echoed his wife’s sentiments.

The sight of Penelope, defiant yet on the verge of tears, tugged at Raven’s heart. She could see her sister’s dreams being crushed under societal norms and expectations. Despite the cold night, a warmth of empathy washed over Raven, a silent pledge to support Penelope in her ambitious dreams, and a promise to be the wind beneath her sister’s wings.

“Mother, Father, you don’t understand,” Penelope implored, her wide eyes glistening with unshed tears. “This world, this cage of expectations, it suffocates me. I feel as if I am dwelling in a house of glass with no room to grow, no space to breathe.”

Mathilda, her face a mask of resolve, retorted, “Penelope, you are but a mere child, naive and innocent. Your dreams are grand, but you are too young to comprehend the complexities of this world. You must understand that we only wish for you to be respected, to be held in high regard.”

Penelope’s face crumbled at her mother’s words. “But at what cost, Mother? Must I stifle my dreams to fit into the mold Society has cast for me? Must I abandon my desires to match their idea of respectability?”

A stern look from Oscar cut her off. “Penelope, there is much you can learn from your sister. She is a model daughter, always respectful and obedient. She understands her responsibilities and never shirks them. You should strive to be more like her.”

The room fell silent, the air heavy with unspoken words and unexpressed emotions. Penelope, her face ashen, turned sharply, storming out of the room. As she rushed past Raven, her eyes met her sister’s, a silent plea for understanding in them, before she disappeared into the labyrinthine corridors of the grand, old house.

Raven followed Penelope, the impact of the heated words echoing in her mind as she traversed the cold, dimly lit corridors. She found her sister in a secluded corner, curled into herself, her figure outlined by the faint moonlight seeping through a narrow window.

“Penelope,” Raven began softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I don’t want to talk, Raven,” Penelope cut her off, still not meeting her gaze.

“But, Penelope—” Raven tried again.

“No, Raven!” Penelope snapped, finally looking at her sister. Her eyes were red-rimmed, a stark contrast to her pale face. “How much did you even hear?”

“Enough,” Raven replied, her voice steady despite the turmoil within.

Raven’s gaze softened as she took in her sister’s distressed state. Her heart ached with a yearning, a desperate wish to bestow upon Penelope the liberation she so desperately sought. A silent vow formed in her heart—a promise to her sister, to herself, that she would find a way to help Penelope break free from the stifling conventions that shackled her spirit.

She knew the path would not be easy. The societal constructs they were up against were formidable, but Raven was resolute. She would not stand by and watch her sister's vibrant spirit be stifled by societal expectations. With a determined nod to herself, she made her promise to the moonlit silhouette of her sister. Their shared silent moment was broken by the distant peal of a clock, announcing the passing of another hour in the grand, old house.

"Penelope," Raven started, sitting down beside her sister, "things will get better."

Penelope turned and looked at her, her eyes filled with despair. "They won't, Raven. They simply won't."

Raven took her sister's hands in hers and looked her straight in the eye. "As long as there is air in our lungs, and we are alive, there's always hope."

Penelope's gaze dropped to their intertwined hands. "I wish I was you, Raven."

Raven squeezed her hands reassuringly. "No, you don't want that. You are perfect just the way you are."

"But I can't seem to live up to their expectations," Penelope confessed, her voice barely above a whisper, "and maybe I never will."

Raven moved into the room, wrapping her arms around Penelope, comforting her. “We don’t know what the future holds,” she said softly, “and the world doesn’t need another Raven. It needs a Penelope.”

Raven held Penelope closer, her heart aching for her younger sister’s anguish. Silently, she whispered comforting words in Penelope’s ear, trying to instill in her the strength she so desperately needed.

“Penelope,” she said, her voice steady despite the tears pooling in her eyes, “you don’t have to meet anyone’s expectations but your own. You are strong, you are brave, and you are more than enough, just as you are. Remember, the toughest battles are given to the strongest soldiers. We are in this together, you and I. We’ll overcome the challenges, one day at a time.”

She felt Penelope relax slightly in her arms, surrendering to the warmth and security of her embrace. For now, that was enough.

CHAPTER 11



*H*olland Park, a serene oasis amidst the urban hustle, was bathed in a soft golden glow. The park buzzed with the rhythmic chatter of people strolling down its verdant paths, their laughter and conversations intertwining with the melodies of chirping birds.

Among them, Ethan stood as still as a statue, his gaze fixed on Raven. He watched her with a sense of admiration that was palpable even from a distance. However, Raven seemed lost in her own world, her eyes reflecting a far-off preoccupation that was yet to be deciphered.

Ethan walked over to Raven, his footsteps crunching on the gravel pathway. “Is everything all right?” he asked, his voice laced with concern. “You seem like you’re a million miles away.”

Raven turned to face him, her eyes welling up with an amalgam of emotions. “I’m sorry, Ethan.” She sighed, her voice barely audible. “I’m just worried about Penelope.”

His brow furrowed in concern, but before he could utter another word, she cut him off.

“It’s nothing you should concern yourself with, Ethan,” she reassured him, the ghost of a smile playing on her lips. But her eyes told a different story. A story of heartache and uncertainty, a story that only Ethan could read with ease.

Ethan reached out and gently took Raven’s hand in his, sending a wave of comfort through her. “You know you can always talk to me,” he said softly. “I’m here for you.”

Raven pulled her hand back gently and looked at Ethan, her gaze filled with gratitude but also a certain firmness. “Ethan, I appreciate your concern, truly I do,” she started, her voice soft yet determined. “But you need to understand. This is my family. It’s something I have to deal with.”

Ethan opened his mouth, ready to protest, but she held up a hand, stopping him mid-sentence. “We have to keep up these pretenses for our own reasons,” she continued, her voice quivering slightly. “But that doesn’t mean you need to get tangled in my family drama. You have your own life, your own problems to worry about.”

“But, Raven—” Ethan said, desperation creeping into his voice.

“No, Ethan,” she cut him off again, a newfound determination sparkling in her eyes. “This is where I draw the line. I won’t let my family issues become a burden to you.” She gave him a small, sad smile, her eyes reflecting the strength of her resolve. “Let’s keep our worlds separate in that regard, all right?”

Ethan quietly studied Raven for a moment, then slowly turned his gaze towards Mathilda, who was now engaged in an animated conversation with Mrs. Hawthorne.

Turning back to Raven, he cleared his throat. “Raven,” he began, his voice gentle yet filled with anticipation. “I understand your boundaries,” he said, gripping her hand tighter and pulling her up from the bench, “but I need you to come with me, now.”

Raven protested, tugging her hand free from his grip. “Ethan! What are you doing?” she demanded, her eyes wide with surprise.

Ignoring her protest, Ethan grabbed her hand again, more firmly this time. “Trust me,” he pleaded, his eyes searching hers. He pulled her along with him as he started walking briskly into the deeper parts of the nearby wooded area.

“But, Ethan, I...” Raven began, her voice trailing off as she stumbled after him, her eyes scanning the dark, unfamiliar woods anxiously. “Ethan, can you please slow down?” she

asked, struggling to keep pace with him as they delved deeper into the woods. “We’re not being chased by wild animals.”

“Raven, you need to relax,” Ethan replied, slowing his steps and turning to face her. “Do you ever just be?”

“What do you mean, just be?” she answered, a slight hint of irritation in her voice. “Excuse me for having more on my mind than lounging about aimlessly all day.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Ethan said, chuckling. “I just meant, do you ever take the time to enjoy life? It’s not all about work and responsibilities.”

“For your information, I do plenty of fun things to take my mind off my ‘troubles,’” Raven retorted.

“What troubles could you possibly have?” Ethan teased, a playful smile on his face.

“You mean, besides the fact that I’m a woman?” Raven countered, rolling her eyes. “That’s trouble enough, as it is.”

Ethan burst into laughter, drawing a small, genuine smile from Raven. That’s when he noticed another couple entering the woods. “Look, there,” he pointed.

Raven followed his gaze, her eyes lighting up with recognition. “That’s Lord Dawner and Lady Anastasia,” she whispered. “They just announced their engagement.”

Ethan raised his eyebrows at this. “Why does it seem like this time of year is the only time people around here ever get married?” he wondered aloud. “It’s almost like there’s a conspiracy or something.”

“A spring wedding signifies fresh beginnings,” Raven suggested, her voice low but earnest. “It symbolizes the start of a new life with someone special.”

Ethan snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. “That’s rubbish. If I ever decide to get married, it would be in the winter,” he said defiantly.

Raven gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. “That would be horrible!” she exclaimed. “Winter weddings... There’s no color, no life!”

Ethan drew closer, his eyes dark and intense. “And how would you know that, Raven?” he questioned, his voice deep. “You couldn’t possibly know by experience, unless you’re hiding a secret from me?”

Raven frowned, her arms crossed defensively. “You’re not funny, Ethan. My aunt got married in winter, and her husband

died the next spring,” she said, her voice quiet. “I wouldn’t want that fate. To become a widow so soon. It was horrible. Everyone thought she had poisoned her husband, and she is an old maid to this day.”

Ethan moved even closer, his hand reaching out to gently touch her arm. “We make our own fate, Raven,” he said softly, his eyes never leaving hers.

Ethan could not help but study Raven’s incredibly striking features. Her golden curls cascaded down her back, shimmering and reflecting the light of the sun the way the sun illuminates a field of ripe wheat. Her eyes, as green and lively as the densest forest, held a captivating, enchanting allure that Ethan found himself lost in.

Her lush lips, painted a soft pink, were full and inviting, only fueling his deep-seated desire for her. He fantasized about the taste of those lips, the sensation of them against his, lost in a moment of passion and longing. The intensity of his desire pulsed within him. As he drew closer, he noticed, to his surprise and secret delight, that Raven did not recoil.

Encouraged by this, he leaned in, his heart pounding against his chest, and dared to close the remaining distance between them, pressing his lips to hers in a kiss that was as desperate as it was anticipated.

The kiss was like a spark igniting a flame, a rush of passion that washed over them in an intoxicating wave. Ethan poured all his yearning into that kiss, his hands cupping her face as if she were a rare treasure to be cherished. Her lips were as soft and inviting, as he had imagined, full of the sweet promise of unspoken desires.

Every fiber of his being vibrated with the excitement of the moment, the world shrinking until nothing existed beyond the sphere of their shared affection. His fingers traced the contour of her face, the smooth curve of her jaw, the soft swell of her cheeks, each touch a silent testament to his intense yearning.

Fire danced in his veins, a heat that was both thrilling and tormenting. It was a burning need, a vehement desire that could only be quenched with more of her. He wanted her—all of her—with a depth and intensity that left him breathless. The thought of having her, of making her his, was a tantalizing dream that filled him with untamed passion. Yet, deep down, he knew he was being selfish. His intentions were never to marry, and he couldn't offer Raven all that her heart desired or deserved.

“Ethan!” a voice echoed, shattering the intimate scene like a rock through a window.

Ethan pulled back abruptly and turned to see Penelope standing at the edge of the path, her face a mask of concern and surprise. He quickly stepped away from Raven, his hands

instinctively rising to brush a loose lock of hair from her face. There was palpable tension in the air, heavy and suffocating.

“Penelope...” he trailed off. He could not meet Penelope’s gaze, his eyes instead darting to Raven, who stood frozen, her cheeks flushed with the remnants of their stolen moment.

“Is everything all right, Raven?” Penelope asked, moving closer to her sister. Her gaze flitted between Raven and Ethan, picking up on the uncomfortable silence that had fallen between them.

Raven’s voice seemed to be caught in her throat, her mind still reeling from Ethan’s kiss. She could only nod faintly, her wide eyes still locked on Ethan’s. Any attempt at speech was lost, her thoughts consumed by the warmth of his lips against hers and the lingering scent of his cologne. It was an intoxicating, disorientating mix of shock and desire.

“Raven, Mother’s on her way home. She’s expecting you,” Penelope said, her voice filled with a gentle urgency.

Ethan’s gaze lingered on Raven, his heart pounding in his chest. “You should go, Raven. Be with your sister and mother,” he suggested, his voice soft yet laden with an unspoken longing. “I hope to see you again soon.”

Raven hesitated, torn between her desires and her obligations. With a stolen glance at Ethan, she finally nodded, reluctantly turning away to leave with her sister.

Ethan leaned against the tree trunk, a frown creasing his brow. His mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions.

“What am I doing?” he muttered to himself.

He had never wanted a woman as intensely as he wanted Raven. But maybe it was precisely because he couldn't have her that she had become this irresistible allure in his life.

CHAPTER 12



Penelope looked at Raven, her eyebrows knitted in concern. “Raven,” she asked gently, “what are you doing?”

Raven’s cheeks flushed pink. “I was just... um...” she stammered as she glanced back to Ethan for the answer.

Embarrassment rushed through her as Penelope stared at her, bewildered by what she had stumbled across.

“Bird watching,” Raven finished.

Penelope’s eyebrow arched as Raven felt her judgmental gaze bore into her like a hot iron. Yet, Penelope wasn’t convinced. She noticed the subtle change in Raven’s demeanor and the unnaturally heightened color in her cheeks.

“But you seem flushed, Raven. More like you’ve been running a marathon, not bird-watching. Or perhaps Ethan’s kiss is the cause for the flush in your cheeks?”

“Please,” Raven pleaded as she grabbed Penelope’s arms, “you cannot say a word.”

Penelope pursed her lips and shook her head as her eyes gleamed with wonder. “I shouldn’t have to tell you this.”

“Then don’t. I swear that will never happen again,” Raven hissed in hushed tones.

“We should get back,” Penelope answered as she looped her arm through Raven’s and started for the carriage.

Raven’s gaze involuntarily flicked towards the trees where she had left Ethan. He was gone. A soft sigh escaped her lips, her eyes sparkling with secrets yet to be revealed.

Lost in her thoughts, Raven instinctively touched her lips, an echo of Ethan’s lingering touch still making her heart flutter. A stunning image of the secluded ruins Ethan had shown her danced in her mind, where time seemed to stand still and the world around them ceased to exist.

It was a place where forgotten tales whispered in the wind and every stone told a story of its own. It was their secret sanctuary, the ruins, both mysterious and intriguing. In these stolen moments, Raven felt her heart, once hardened by life’s trials, slowly melting under Ethan’s warm gaze. Ethan, with his tender kisses and easy smiles, was thawing the icy fortress

around her heart, making her feel vulnerable and cherished at the same time.

As the thunder rumbled overhead, Penelope's voice pulled Raven back from her daydreams. Panic ensued as park-goers rushed to find shelter from the impending rain. Out of the corner of her eye, Raven caught a glimpse of Ethan. Even amid the panic, his countenance remained calm, a reassuring lighthouse in a stormy sea.

He flashed her an enigmatic smile, its warmth reaching her despite the distance, then gallantly approached and escorted them to their carriage. As the rain started falling down, Ethan wished them a safe journey home, his voice a comforting balm against the rhythm of the raindrops.

Raven found herself ensconced in the comfort of the carriage, her gaze locked on Ethan's figure through the rain-speckled window. He stood there in the rain, his shirt clinging to him as the water soaked it. His hair was a disarray of wet curls, and his eyes sparkled with unspoken mischief. He seemed to revel in the rain, looking more alive and invigorated than ever.

As the carriage started moving, Raven felt an overwhelming urge to jump out and run back to him.

Inside the carriage, Mathilda's grumbling filled the air. "Just look at this mess! My dress is completely ruined!" she lamented, tugging at the fabric of her soaked gown. "And to

think, I thought this day was going to be perfect. I swear, Raven, your love for the outdoors will be the end of me.”

Raven, still captivated by the memory of Ethan’s rain-soaked figure, responded absentmindedly, “Oh, Mother, a little rain never hurt anyone. Look beyond the discomfort and see the beauty of a storm.”

Mathilda scoffed, “Romantic drivel! It’s all that Ethan’s fault. He’s filled your head with such nonsense.”

Despite her mother’s complaints, Raven couldn’t help but smile, her mind and heart engulfed in the image of Ethan standing in the rain, his laughter echoing in her ears long after he was out of sight. His image was etched in her mind, a beacon that called to her, promising a love as refreshing and untamed as the rain.

Penelope turned to Raven with a bemused expression. “Such a swift turn of events, don’t you think?” she asked, a hint of amusement dancing in her eyes. “One moment, we were basking in the glorious sunshine, the next we find ourselves fleeing from nature’s whims. Isn’t the weather a metaphor for life itself? Always changing, always surprising.”

Her words hung in the air, an echo of the day’s unexpected showers and of the emotions that had overwhelmed Raven.

As the carriage pulled up to their home, Oscar came rushing out, an umbrella held high to shield them from the deluge. “My word, are you all right?” he asked, concern etched on his weathered face. He ushered them all inside, their dresses leaving a trail of rainwater in their wake.

Raven absentmindedly thanked Oscar as she headed to her room, her heart still throbbing from Ethan’s stolen kiss. As she changed out of her rain-drenched clothes, she found herself hopelessly envisioning Ethan sneaking into her room once again, his touch like wildfire on her skin. Lost in her daydream, she didn’t hear Penelope enter her room.

“Raven, are you all right?” Penelope asked, her voice cutting through Raven’s reverie like a knife. Seated on Raven’s bed, she watched her sister as she paced the room. “Out with it, Raven,” she said, her tone gentle yet insistent. “Since we left the park, you’ve been in a daze. Something happened with Ethan, didn’t it?”

Raven waved her hands dismissively, her gaze trained on the floor. “I’m fine, Penelope. Just tired, is all.”

Penelope’s eyebrows knitted together, a look of concern etched on her face. “You can tell me anything, you know. Haven’t we always shared secrets? You’ve already told me your relationship with Ethan is just for show.”

Raven whirled around, her eyes flashing. “Penelope, be quiet! I shouldn’t have told you about that.”

Penelope crossed her arms. “Raven, you can’t hide your emotions from me. Are you starting to feel something for Ethan?”

Raven paused, her lips parting as a soft sigh escaped her. “Perhaps... it’s possible I might be a little intrigued by him, but it’s nothing more than that. I swear.”

“Oh, Raven,” Penelope warned, her voice stern, “don’t you dare let him lure you with his charms.”

Raven’s gaze softened. “Maybe there’s more to Ethan than meets the eye.”

“Raven,” Penelope said, her voice full of worry, “remember, it was you who picked Ethan from the crowd to avoid marrying Anthony. You need to take off your rose-colored glasses and see that Ethan is only wooing you to ruin you. I want you to be happy, but Ethan isn’t the one to bring you that happiness.” She paused, leading Raven over to a mirror in the corner of the room. “Look at yourself. You are the diamond of the Season. There are so many worthy men out there who want to be with you.”

Raven studied her reflection in the mirror, her mind reeling.

Penelope continued, her voice steady and reassuring, “You should take some time to reassess before seeing Ethan again.”

Raven nodded slowly. “You might be right,” she confessed. “Perhaps I am getting a bit in over my head. A few days of separation might help me see things more clearly.” She turned to Penelope, her eyes full of gratitude. “Thank you, Penelope.”

As she left the room, Penelope called over her shoulder, “Just remember, Raven, the heart is a fragile thing.”

Raven sank to the bed, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. How had things gotten so out of hand? Surely, Ethan’s kiss wasn’t that magical. But something within her stirred at the memory of it, something she couldn’t deny.

She was torn between her growing feelings for Ethan and the warnings from Penelope. She needed time to think, to clear her head. She couldn’t let Ethan distract her from her true calling. Walking over to her writing desk, she pulled out a blank sheet of paper, ready to start a new story. But as her quill touched the paper, her thoughts strayed back to Ethan.

Raven’s heart pounded in her chest, her frustration mounting as the words refused to flow. She dropped her quill in exasperation, the ink splattering on the untouched parchment. With a sigh of defeat, she rose from her chair and walked over to the window.

The rain was pouring outside, each droplet cascading down the glass in rivulets, reflecting her tumultuous emotions. For a moment, she thought she saw him—Ethan, standing in the rain, his figure blurred and distorted. But as she blinked, the apparition vanished, leaving only the relentless patter of rain against the windowpane.

“Oh, Ethan,” she murmured, pressing a hand to the cool glass, the ghost of his image still imprinted in her mind. Her heart ached with a longing that was both sweet and agonizing, her thoughts of him as persistent as the falling rain.

Ethan was undeniably attractive, a fact that Raven couldn't ignore. His dark hair was damp, clinging to his forehead, and his shirt clung to his toned body, outlining the sculpted muscles beneath. Raindrops clung to his long lashes, each droplet a shimmering diamond that only added to his allure.

His rebellious aura, his devil-may-care attitude, his refusal to adhere to Society's norms—all these made him dangerously appealing. His charm was intoxicating, his good looks irresistible. Each glance from him was like a stolen kiss, each smile a promise of something forbidden.

Yet, Raven knew she was treading on dangerous grounds. She reminded herself that their engagement was a sham. It was a pact of convenience, a necessary falsehood. But the stolen kiss from Ethan was real.

The spark, the intensity, the connection—it was all too real. Did he feel it, too? Was her heart the only one pounding at the memory of that forbidden moment?

Questions swirled in her mind, like the raindrops in the wind outside. But the truth was undeniable. She was falling for Ethan. Despite the rules, despite the propriety, her heart yearned for the man who stood defiantly in the rain, his every action a challenge to the world.

CHAPTER 13



*A*s Ethan pushed open the door, his garments, heavy and saturated from the unforgiving downpour, clung to his frame. The echoes of the storm's wrath could still be heard on his weather-beaten coat, the droplets rhythmically falling to the floor, a somber symphony to his daring venture.

His grandmother, roused from the comfortable solitude of the drawing room by the invasive sounds of nature intruding on their sanctuary, appeared in the doorway, her countenance etched with a mixture of astonishment and annoyance.

"Ethan, dear boy," she chided, her voice a tremulous whisper against the storm's howl, "you should not be out gallivanting in such a horrid storm. It's no weather for a man, let alone a gentleman like yourself. Where on earth have you been?" Her tone was laced with vexation that was mirrored in her stern gaze.

"I told you, Grandmother, I was at the park," Ethan replied, his voice calm, like the eye of the storm that still raged outside. "I was with Raven."

“Such frivolity, Ethan! There’s no time for dallying in parks. If we’re to have a wedding before the Season is over, you need to be making plans!”

Ethan paused, turning to face his grandmother. “I have no desire to wed before the Season is out. I’ve been considering a winter wedding.”

“A winter wedding!” she exclaimed, aghast. “That is far too long an engagement. And winter is a horrible time for a wedding. No one will brave the snow to attend.”

“I don’t care who shows up, Grandmother,” Ethan retorted, his voice steady and resolute. “A wedding is between a man and a woman, not a spectacle for Society.”

His grandmother opened her mouth to protest, but he forestalled her, raising his hand in a gesture of finality.

“I will handle it, Grandmother. I’m off to my study now.” With that, he strode away, closing the study door behind him, leaving his grandmother standing in the hallway, mid-protest.

Ethan crossed the study, his boots leaving damp footprints on the polished hardwood floor. He crouched before the fireplace, stretching his hands towards the crackling flames in an attempt to chase away the lingering winter chill from his skin.

His mind began to wander back to the ruins, to Raven, her eyes twinkling like the stars they lay under. A memory of their kiss made his lips tingle, a resonating confirmation of the bond they shared. He was sure of it—she had kissed him back with an intensity matching his own. Lost in his thoughts, he was startled by the sudden intrusion of a servant.

The study door swung open with a creak, admitting a fresh gust of wind and a flustered footman into the room.

Ethan cleared his throat, focusing his gaze on the footman. “What brings you here at this hour?”

“I beg your pardon, My Lord,” the servant stammered. “You have received an invitation.”

He hurriedly handed over a cream-colored envelope, sealed with an elaborate crest. Ethan’s brows furrowed as he broke the seal, revealing an invitation to a grand ball hosted by the Duchess of Sutherland.

“A ball?” he muttered to himself, his mind racing. He had never been one for such frivolities unless he had business to attend to... or someone to attend to.

His thoughts strayed back to Raven. Would she enjoy such an event?

A sudden idea sparked in his mind as his smile stretched across his face. “Fetch the dressmaker. And bring me fresh clothes. I won’t meet her in this state.”

James, his servant, nodded, bowing out of the room in haste, leaving a trail of echoes in the now-silent study.

In the solitude of his study, Ethan stripped out of his damp attire, the fire crackling in the background. As anticipation for the upcoming ball engulfed him, he couldn’t help but wonder if the event might serve as more than just a social obligation. Perhaps it would be a chance to introduce Raven to high society as his future bride, a chance to see her dancing in the grand ballroom, her eyes twinkling brighter than any gem in the room.

A soft knock on the door ushered in another servant bearing a set of fresh clothes for Ethan. Swiftly, he changed into them, his mind buzzing with plans and ideas. Seated comfortably, he started to sift through his ledgers and letters, contemplating his finances.

His heart skipped a beat as he recognized the seal of correspondence from the Caribbean. Unfolding the letter, his mind immediately painted a picture of Raven, her beauty accentuated by the backdrop of golden sandy shores under a new moon. The stars themselves would pale compared to her luminescent presence.

Lost in this captivating vista, time seemed to slip away unnoticed. A sudden knock brought him back to reality.

“Enter,” he called out, his gaze still fixed on the letter.

The door opened to reveal a petite figure bustling with energy. The dressmaker, a man of immense talent and creativity, stood there with an expectant look on his face. His eyes sparkled with an undying passion for his craft, and his fingers twitched in anticipation of creating another masterpiece.

Just as Ethan was about to begin the discussion, the door swung open again. His grandmother stood there, looking confused. “Why on earth do you need a dressmaker, Ethan? You need a tailor!” she exclaimed.

Ethan, unfazed by the interruption, simply replied, “It’s none of your business, Grandmother,” and promptly closed the door in her face. Turning back to the anxious dressmaker, he inquired, “Are you familiar with Miss Raven Davenport?” Upon receiving a nod of affirmation, he continued, “I want you to craft the most stunning dress for her, one that would make the moon envious. Spare no expense.”

The dressmaker’s face broke into a wide smile, his eyes sparking with excitement. “It will be an honor, My Lord,” he said enthusiastically. As he left to begin his project, Ethan found himself lost in thoughts again, wondering how Raven

would react to the dress and the sparkling jewels he planned to accompany his invitation to the ball.

As the door closed behind the departing dressmaker, it was promptly thrust open again by Ethan's grandmother. Her keen gaze pierced him as she demanded, "What mischief are you up to now, Ethan?"

Maintaining his calm demeanor, Ethan responded, "I simply wished to give a gift to a dear friend."

His evasion did not sit well with his grandmother, who suspected him of not taking his impending nuptials seriously.

"Ethan, this is a wedding, not a child's play. The bride designs the dress, not the groom!" she chided.

Ethan, choosing his words carefully, revealed, "This dress is not for the wedding, Grandmother. It's for the ball."

Annoyance flitted across her face as she admonished him, "You lavish that girl with too many gifts."

Ethan, standing his ground, retorted, "I will do as I please."

His grandmother, not to be outdone, warned him, "We are not the King and Queen of England, Ethan. If you continue your

frivolous spending, we'll both find ourselves on the streets.”

Ethan, calm as ever, assured her, “That won't happen.”

Skepticism still clouded his grandmother's eyes. “You're stalling this wedding, Ethan. I just don't know why.”

Ethan, his voice filled with uncommon gravitas, confessed, “I just want to be sure that Raven is the right woman for me.”

His grandmother, entrenched in her old-world views, retorted, “Marriages are about alliances, not love.”

Ethan, a tinge of defiance in his voice, stated, “Perhaps it's time for that to change.”

CHAPTER 14



*W*ith a sudden burst of energy, the bedroom door flew open.

“Raven!” Penelope called, her voice bouncing off the walls. “You’ve got a package!”

Raven jumped, quickly shuffling her story pages into a neat pile and hiding them beneath her pillow. “Penelope,” she scolded, her tone sharp. “We’ve talked about knocking.”

But Penelope was a whirlwind, her excitement palpable. “You’ve got to come downstairs, Raven. Quickly, you’ve got a package!”

Raven furrowed her brow, her curiosity piqued. “Who’s it from?”

“I think...” Penelope paused for dramatic effect, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “It’s from Ethan.”

With her heart fluttering at the mention of his name, Raven set aside her irritation and allowed Penelope to lead her downstairs. As they entered the drawing room, Raven spotted a large, intricately wrapped box sitting on the table. She couldn't help but smile as she noticed the tiny bow perched atop it.

“Go on, open it,” Penelope urged, bouncing up and down in excitement.

Suddenly, Mathilda's voice echoed from the doorway. “What's all the fuss about?” she asked, her brow furrowed.

Penelope turned to her mother, excitement spilling with her words. “Raven has received a package!”

Mathilda's expression hardened. “Raven shouldn't be receiving any packages,” she stated, her gaze shifting to the box on the table.

Before Raven could reach it, Mathilda had plucked the note fastened to the top, her eyes darting across its contents. Her face drained of color. “This... this is from the dressmaker,” she stammered, her shock seeping into her words. She swiveled to face Raven. “Did you buy the dress without my permission?”

Raven shook her head vehemently. “I swear, Mother, I haven’t been to the dressmaker.”

Mathilda let out a sigh, her gaze softening. “Well... open it.”

Raven carefully untied the ribbon and lifted the lid of the box. Inside lay a stunning, midnight blue gown with intricate silver beading. She gasped, her mind reeling as she remembered the dress she had been admiring in the dressmaker’s window just a few days before.

“It’s beautiful,” Raven breathed out, her fingers lightly tracing the soft fabric.

Mathilda’s eyes widened as she took in the beauty of the dress. “This must have cost a small fortune. Who would send you such a dress?” she asked, her gaze fixed on Raven.

Raven pulled out a tiny note hidden beneath layers of tissue paper and read aloud, “To the most exquisite beauty, may this dress do justice to your elegance. Yours, Ethan.”

A moment of silence followed, broken only by Raven’s soft whisper.

“But how did he know my size?”

Before anyone could answer, there was a knock on the door. Mathilda excused herself, leaving the room to answer it.

Penelope, unable to contain her excitement, squealed as she admired the dress in Raven's hands. "It's perfect, Raven! The color brings out your eyes and makes them look like a starry night!" she gushed, her eyes reflecting the twinkling silver beading of the gown.

As Raven was left puzzled by Ethan's extravagant gift, Mathilda returned to the room, holding a smaller package wrapped in cream-colored paper. "This was left for you as well," she said, a hint of reluctance in her voice.

Raven took the box from her mother, her heart pounding in her chest. Unwrapping the paper, she opened it to reveal a stunning necklace, the silver matching the beading on her dress perfectly. The beautiful gemstones embedded in the necklace caught the light, making it sparkle like a night sky full of stars.

She gasped, taken aback by its sheer beauty. "It's exquisite," she whispered, her fingers tracing the cool metal and the smooth gemstones.

But Mathilda's voice was sharp as she retorted, "No man gifts such expensive tokens unless he's expecting something in return. You have not..." She left the question hanging, her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Feeling a blush spread over her cheeks, Raven quickly defended herself. “No, Mother! Ethan has never... We have never...” She paused, her mind racing back to the stolen kiss under the tree, but she didn’t dare bring herself to voice it.

“But why is he lavishing you with such gifts, Raven?” Penelope chimed in, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“I heard the Duchess of Sutherford is hosting a grand ball,” Raven explained, her voice barely above a whisper.

Mathilda, rummaging through the dress box, suddenly pulled out a small note. “Indeed. It seems that Ethan is requesting your attendance... as his partner,” she read out loud, her voice thick with jealousy.

Raven could feel her mother’s resentment seeping into the room, making her feel unworthy of such lavish attention. The joy of receiving such beautiful gifts was dimmed by her mother’s jealousy and her own confusion about Ethan’s intentions.

Raven’s heart pounded in her chest as she considered the invitation.

“Ethan is trying to act the gentleman, Raven,” Penelope cautioned, her voice laced with a hint of apprehension.

“Remember that you are meant to keep your distance from him.”

“But I haven’t seen him since the park,” Raven countered, a thread of longing weaving its way through her voice. “It’s been three days.”

Mathilda’s face tightened, her gaze sharp. “I do not want you attending without a chaperone, Raven. There’s no telling what Ethan could attempt at such an event.”

“I don’t believe Ethan would compromise me in a public setting,” Raven replied, her voice faltering slightly under her mother’s intense scrutiny.

“Raven, the Marquess has ruined far too many women in the past. I won’t allow my daughter to share their fate,” Mathilda warned, her voice rough with anxiety.

“But I am betrothed to him, Mother,” Raven retorted, trying to keep her voice steady. “He might just want to see me shine.”

“I do love you, Raven,” Mathilda said softly, her stern facade dropping for a moment. “But I think it’s best if you did not attend. I have a bad feeling about you two being together at such an event.”

“But you were starting to like him after dinner, weren’t you?” Raven asked, feeling desperation creeping into her voice.

Mathilda sighed, raking her fingers through her hair. “He’s charming, yes. But also very cunning. Keep your guard up, Raven.”

Penelope echoed their mother’s warning, a nervous edge to her voice. “Maybe Mother is right, Raven. Men don’t just gift such things without wanting something in return.”

Raven felt the room spinning as she clutched the gifts closer to her chest. “You’re just jealous,” she finally spat out, a hot tear rolling down her cheek. Without another word, she turned on her heel and fled upstairs, the heavy thud of her heart echoing in her ears.

Once in the safety of her room, she sank onto her bed, the gifts clutched tightly in her arms. She felt torn between her family’s warnings and her budding feelings for Ethan.

Could he genuinely be interested in courting her? Did he gift her these precious tokens because he wanted to see her shine? Her heart ached with confusion and uncertainty.

Raven held up the dress against her body, standing in front of her mirrored armoire. The stunning garment was a symphony of silk and lace. She could picture herself twirling around the

grand ballroom, the dress billowing around her like a blooming flower.

But a nagging question lingered in her mind. Why was her family so against her going to the ball?

The thought of Ethan made her heart flutter. She contemplated sneaking out but reminded herself that this was not a game—Ethan was not like the other boys she'd secretly met before. He was a marquess with a dark reputation that seemed to both scare and excite her at the same time. He brought out a mischievous, daring side in her that she didn't know existed.

Just as she was lost in thought, a knock on her door startled her.

“Raven, may I come in?” Penelope asked, stepping inside.

Penelope was the voice of reason Raven needed, her words acting like an anchor in the storm of her emotions.

“Oh, Raven, you'll look stunning in that dress. But is that what you want?”

Raven looked at the dress again, a different light dawning in her eyes. The dress was beautiful, but it was not her choice—it was Ethan's. He had picked out the colors and the jewelry,

essentially telling her what to wear and how to act. The realization hit her.

Did she really want to be part of this? Or was she simply being submissive to his will? A chill ran down her spine as she looked at the beautiful dress, now a symbol of her submission to Ethan's whims.

Raven gently laid the dress on the bed, her fingers lingering on the fabric before she sank onto the plush mattress. She looked at Penelope, her eyes filled with uncertainty.

"This whole debacle with Ethan was meant to be a ruse, a mere game," Penelope reminded her, her voice filled with concern. "But it seems to me that you've developed genuine feelings for him."

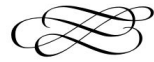
Raven swallowed and nodded, her voice barely a whisper. "I didn't intend to, Penelope. But things have become rather... complicated."

Penelope sighed, her gaze sympathetic. "I may have never felt the sting of love's thorns, but I know it can sometimes lead us to act foolishly. If you like the dress, then, by all means, wear it."

Raven's gaze fell back to the dress then rose to meet Penelope's. "You're right," she declared, a newfound

determination in her eyes. “I should wear it. After all, he did go through a lot of trouble to have it made. But... I just don’t know. What if it sends him a message that I’ll do whatever he wants? I can’t have him believe he has that sort of power over me.”

CHAPTER 15



Underneath the twinkling stars and the shimmering moonlight, Ethan paced the courtyard anxiously. His heart pounded with anticipation, his eyes scanning the distance for a glimpse of Raven. He had imagined her in the exquisite silk dress he had painstakingly chosen for her, adorned with the elegant jewelry he'd sent—a vision of breathtaking beauty.

Just as he was lost in his thoughts, Liam sauntered over, a smirk playing on his lips. “Eager, aren't we? Almost like a lost dog waiting for its master.”

Ethan bristled at the remark, retorting, “Hold your tongue, Liam. I'm not a lost dog.”

Liam merely chuckled, continuing to tease his friend. “Oh, Ethan,” he said, shaking his head, “always the dutiful knight, chasing after the fair maiden. I thought you made it clear that this engagement with Raven was merely a ruse?” He arched an eyebrow, a sly grin spreading across his face.

Without missing a beat, Ethan replied, “It is a ruse, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate beauty when I see it.”

Liam chuckled again, patting his friend on the back. “Whatever you say, my dear Ethan,” he said with a wink.

Their banter was interrupted by the clattering sound of an approaching carriage. Ethan’s heart leaped, but as the carriage rolled to a stop and the door swung open, his excitement mingled with confusion. Raven was stunning, as always, but why hadn’t she worn the dress or the jewelry?

Following her were Mathilda and Oscar, and trailing behind them was her sister Penelope. Ethan’s heart sank, disappointment replacing his earlier excitement.

Liam’s voice rang out, his laughter echoing through the courtyard, “Seems like your grand plans for the night have been ruined, Ethan. If you ever tire of these games, I know someone who’d be thrilled to entertain you.”

Ethan strode over to greet Raven, but she barely glanced his way before scurrying to her parents’ side, her dismissal stinging more than he cared to admit. Liam’s laughter echoed behind him, a taunting sound that further scratched at his pride. But Ethan recognized that this was neither the time nor the place for confrontation. Instead, he turned his attention to the grandeur of the Duke of Sutherland’s estate.

The Duke's residence was the epitome of opulence and elegance. High ceilings adorned with intricate designs loomed overhead while the polished marble floors reflected the soft glow of the chandeliers. Exquisite artwork by renowned painters graced the walls, the colors vibrant and captivating. The scent of fresh roses filled the air, adding to the estate's enchanting atmosphere.

Announced upon his entrance, Ethan's eyes quickly found Raven amongst the crowd, and his resolve to discover the reason behind her unusual behavior hardened. Approaching her, he requested the first dance. She reluctantly accepted, offering her hand hesitantly. Ethan guided her to the dance floor, his heart pounding in his chest as the musicians began to play. The melody filled the room, weaving around them as they began to move together.

As the music swelled around them, Ethan looked at Raven, a soft smile playing on his lips. "You look ravishing tonight, Raven," he said, his voice barely audible above the melody.

She gave him a curt nod. "Thank you, Ethan."

His brow furrowed at her dismissive tone. "Why aren't you wearing the dress I had made for you? Or the necklace I commissioned?"

She brushed back a stray lock of hair from her face. "I thought about it, I did, but this one was far more pleasing."

“Tell me, was it your mother or your sister who talked you out of it?”

Raven’s mouth fell open, and she quickly closed it once more. “It was a lovely dress, but it was just too much. I couldn’t accept any of it. I won’t allow myself to be bribed and left in your or anyone else’s debt.”

His heart clenched. “It wasn’t a bribe! Raven, I’d never...” he trailed off as he gazed into her eyes, deeply hurt. “Where did you get the idea that my gifts were an attempt to bend you to my will?”

She met his gaze squarely, her eyes defiant, “I can see right through you, Ethan. You’re as clear as a pane of glass.”

Raven tried to pull away, but he held her close. “Your words sound more like your parents’ than your own. A man in love dotes on his beloved.”

Raven’s gaze softened, and she asked quietly, “Is that how you feel about me?”

He met her eyes, his voice earnest. “Our engagement is a ruse, unless you have changed your mind.”

She sighed. “Your gifts... they were too much. My mother won’t stop harping on me about them. She thinks you’ve taken —”

Ethan cut her off, holding her gaze. “You would know if I had stolen anything from you. I vowed not to do anything without your consent.”

“But you did steal a kiss, Ethan, in the park.”

His heart pounded as he admitted, “Yes, that kiss... I did steal that. But have I stolen anything else from you, Raven?”

She hesitated, and for a moment, he dared to hope. Finally, she stated, “You can’t keep showering me with such gifts, Ethan.”

He acquiesced, “I won’t, I promise. I just wanted to see you dazzle tonight, to make the other suitors green with envy.”

She pulled away. “I don’t belong to you, Ethan.”

His voice softened. “You’re not a prize to be won, Raven. You’re someone to be cherished and adored.”

As the music faded, he noticed her flushed cheeks. She looked flustered, and she quickly excused herself, leaving him alone in the middle of the dance floor. He knew he had pushed her

too far, but he couldn't help himself. Raven stirred something in him that he couldn't ignore.

He followed her out of the ballroom and into a quiet corridor, where she was leaning against the wall, trying to catch her breath.

"I'm sorry, Raven," Ethan said sincerely. "I didn't mean to upset you."

She looked up at him, her eyes softening. "You didn't upset me. I just don't want to be treated like a trophy."

Ethan's heart swelled with emotion, and he took her hand in his. "I promise to never treat you as anything less than my equal. You are not a prize to be won or a possession to be flaunted. You are my equal, Raven, and I respect and admire you for that."

Raven's cheeks flushed with color as she looked at him. "I believe you, Ethan, and I am grateful for your honesty and sincerity. But please understand that I cannot be won over with flashy gifts or grand gestures."

Suddenly, their intimate moment was interrupted by a jovial voice. "Mind if I cut in?"

They turned to see Anthony, the Viscount of Rochford, standing there with a confident grin.

Ethan frowned. "Yes. Actually, I do."

"Ethan." Raven whispered his name like a curse.

Ethan shrugged as he inched closer to Raven as if staking his claim on her without saying a word.

"It would seem Miss Davenport would like more suitable company. Isn't there an actress you could visit? I hear they are more your type," Anthony suggested, his voice threatening.

Raven, growing tired of the two of them, stepped away. She glared at Ethan before her attention shifted to Anthony. "I think I need a drink," she said.

"Allow me," Anthony offered, a forced grin plastered on his face. "After all, that's what a real gentleman would do."

"Well, when you become one, let me know." Ethan smirked.

"All right, enough," Raven growled as she stepped between the men. "You both are acting like fools. I'll get my own drink, thank you very much."

“Now you’ve done it,” Anthony said with a chuckle as Raven shook her head and stormed off, leaving Ethan feeling a bit jilted by her.

Watching her leave, Anthony turned to Ethan, his expression serious. “You need to leave her alone, Ethan. Can’t you see you’re upsetting her?”

Ethan’s response was immediate and defensive. “It was your intrusion that upset her, not me. And for your information, Raven is mine,” he stated, more to convince himself than to warn off Anthony. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing her to another man.

Anthony squared his shoulders, his gaze unwavering as he faced Ethan. “You forget, Ethan,” he warned, his voice carrying a challenging edge, “that until you are wed, Raven is free to choose another.”

The thought of losing Raven sent a pang of irritation through Ethan. He watched as Anthony walked away, making a direct path towards Raven.

Just as he was about to chase after them, Liam sauntered over, a teasing smile on his face. “Ethan, old friend, I can’t help but notice—your ruse seems to be getting a bit out of hand. You seem... invested in Raven.”

Ethan's irritation flared into annoyance. "Liam," he bit out, "you should mind your own business. You don't know what you're talking about."

His gaze wandered back to where Anthony was now talking animatedly to Raven, his heart pounding unsteadily in his chest.

"Oh, Ethan." Liam's eyes danced with reminiscence. "You used to be such a carefree lad, not this man twisted up with longing for a woman who may never reciprocate his feelings."

Ethan flinched, wondering if there was truth in Liam's words. Had he let his obsession for Raven cloud his judgment and lead him astray?

Liam broke through his thoughts. "Come, let's play a round of cards and drain the deep pockets of the Duke while he's in his cups."

Ethan only offered a dismissive wave. "You go on without me, Liam. I'll catch up with you later."

With a shrug, Liam replied, "Suit yourself, Ethan. But remember, you're the one missing out on the Duke's lavish generosity. I hear he can be a bit heavy-handed when he's had one too many."

As Liam sauntered off, Ethan found himself wandering over to the bar. Despite his best efforts, his eyes were irresistibly drawn to Raven. She was a beacon, her radiance pulling him into her world. There was an undeniable desire within him to unravel her mysteries, to understand the woman beyond the beautiful exterior.

He found himself captivated not by the prospect of winning her over but by her vitality, her intellect, and her spirit. He would never view her as a mere prize to be won. To him, she had become so much more.

CHAPTER 16



*R*aven wrestled with Ethan's words, a mix of confusion and irritation churning in her mind. Could he perceive beyond her physical allure, discern the complexity of her character? She cast a glance towards the bustling ballroom, the elegant throng of dancers and revelers becoming a mere backdrop to her inner turmoil.

It irked her that Ethan managed to glimpse through the walls she meticulously built, and his insights struck a nerve.

"I do live my own life," she muttered under her breath, her fingers absent-mindedly tracing the rim of her wine glass.

He only knew of the surface, the facade she presented to the world. Yet, he discerned there was more behind the masquerade, an unsettling thought that made her grab the glass and down the wine in one gulp.

As if summoned by her tumult, her friend Theresa, the Duchess of Sutherford, approached, her eyes filled with

concern. “How are you doing, Raven?” she asked, unaware of the storm raging in Raven’s mind.

“I’m well,” Raven answered. “And you?”

“Actually, I’m a bit confused and thought perhaps you’d be able to shed some light on my predicament,” Theresa explained as she reached for a full glass of wine.

Raven’s eyebrows knitted with confusion as she wondered what could be troubling the Duchess.

“Well, if I can help, I will,” Raven answered. “What seems to be troubling you?”

“Rumors,” Theresa answered, her attention drifting from Raven to the ballroom before drifting back.

“They can be quite nasty at times,” Raven observed, noticing Ethan and Anthony still engaged in conversation. She didn’t have to wonder what the two of them were arguing over—their grievances were plastered on their faces.

“Yes, but I’m concerned about the ones circling you, Raven,” Theresa said, her tone serious. “Now, mind you, I figured your claiming Lord Whitland as your betrothed earlier in the Season was a mere ruse, but some are saying that you are indeed

engaged to the man. Is this true? Are you engaged to Lord Whitland?"

Raven hesitated for a moment before answering, "Yes, Theresa. Yes, I am."

The words hung in the air, a palpable symbol of the change in their relationship. Theresa's eyes quickly darted to Raven's hand, searching for a ring. "May I see it?" she asked, a note of excitement in her voice.

Raven flinched at the question, her fingers instinctively closing into a fist. The ring, or rather the absence of it, was a clear indicator of her discomfort. "He gave me one," she said, avoiding Theresa's gaze, "but it didn't fit. It's being resized."

Out of all the things they had done to keep up their ruse, the ring was the one thing Ethan hadn't thought of. It pained Raven to see the bare spot on her finger, remembering that there would never be a ring put on that finger by Ethan. A longing seeped throughout her body, causing her heart to ache. Unable to handle the harsh reality, Raven refilled her glass of wine.

Theresa seemed to accept her excuse, nodding with a smile. "I should say, Ethan will be a great partner for you, Raven," she declared. "But I don't know the man very well. What I can tell you is that by the way he's been watching you, he does care

about you. I don't think I've seen him gaze at another since he arrived, and for him, that's saying something."

Raven looked at Theresa sharply. "Perhaps he has, and you haven't noticed."

Theresa shook her head. "I'm very keen on things such as these, and I believe that man adores you."

"How can you know?" Raven found herself asking. The words were out of her lips before she had a chance to filter them.

Theresa shrugged, her expression thoughtful. "In my experience, there are two kinds of men—the ones that will show off a pretty thing and brag about it to puff themselves up, and the ones that will polish and refine it to bring out the beauty of the jewel so that it can shine ever brighter."

Raven eyed her friend warily. "Which one do you believe Ethan is, then?" she asked.

Theresa gave a soft chuckle, her gaze softening as she looked at her friend. "I can't answer that for you." She paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts before continuing, "Only you can answer that. Does Ethan try to bring out the best in you, challenge you, and ignite that spark in your life?" Her eyebrows furrowed in concern as she asked the next part. "Or

does he hide you away and disregard your thoughts and opinions?”

Raven fell silent, mulling over Theresa’s words. She lifted her gaze from her friend, scanning the crowd for Ethan. Her breath hitched when her eyes found him standing amidst the throng of people, his gaze fixed on her. The intensity of his stare made her heart race. His eyes, full of warmth and adoration, seemed to echo Theresa’s sentiment.

He was there to enhance her shine, not stifle it. His love was not a cage but a platform for her to soar. It was a realization that brought a tear to her eyes and a smile to her lips.

Their intimate conversation was cut short by the arrival of Lord Duncan. Duncan’s regal bearing and polished manners added an air of charm to his dark, stern exterior.

“Miss Davenport, may I request the pleasure of this dance?” he asked, extending a gloved hand to Raven.

Theresa squeezed Raven’s hand reassuringly. “Remember to follow your heart. It doesn’t matter what others may say or think. You are the one who has to live your life.”

Theresa’s words echoed in Raven’s head as she turned to face Duncan, her decision made. With a determined smile, she placed her hand in Duncan’s.

As the music swelled, Raven began to move in step with Duncan.

“You look quite fetching tonight, Miss Davenport,” he complimented, his eyes flicking appreciatively over her attire.

“Thank you, Lord Duncan,” Raven replied politely, but she couldn’t help feeling a slight annoyance at his overt attentions. “Have you found a match, Duncan?”

He sighed, admitting, “None of them shine quite like you, I’m afraid, although I doubt you had an inkling that I fancied you. But now that word around the ton that you’re engaged, perhaps I feel a bit bolder to state that I was rather displeased to hear your hand has already been taken.”

His words washed over her as she feigned interest, her eyes straying repeatedly to Ethan, wondering how he felt about her dancing with another man. To her surprise, Ethan didn’t seem to care that she was in Duncan’s arms.

“I’m sorry that I’ve displeased you, My Lord,” Raven answered mindlessly as she forced herself to take her attention off Ethan and turn it to the man before her.

“I wouldn’t say you’ve displeased me,” Duncan answered. “More like inspired me. If I’m to find a match this Season, I’ll

need to be a bit more forward. Take chances before I miss the opportunity, as I did with you.”

“Perhaps all will work out in the end, don’t you think?” Raven asked.

“Are you suggesting you’re a superstitious woman? Of course, my aunt has often given me the impression the female mind is a bit dubious at times and lacks any logical reasoning. How odd that such creatures exist.”

Raven’s eyes widened, and she couldn’t help but let out a peal of laughter. Never in all her years had she heard such nonsense before, and she found herself relieved she hadn’t ended up with a man like Duncan.

“As I was saying,” Raven started once she regained control of her senses. “I believe everything happens for a reason. I’m sure you’ll find the perfect match sooner or later.”

“Yes, well, I do hope it is sooner rather than later. My inheritance won’t come until I produce an heir, and I certainly can’t do that without a wife.”

Raven’s eyes widened as she bobbed her head, biting back her irritation at the situation. Of course, that’s what most men in the room wanted: a wife to produce heirs and little royal babies. It’s all anyone ever cared about. But Raven couldn’t

help but wonder if Ethan wanted such things. If they didn't have their agreement in place, if they were truly engaged, would he place that role on her?

Raven shook the thought away the moment it invaded her mind. She knew Ethan would never force such a thing on her. Nor would their relationship be normal. At least, she didn't think it would be, considering how things were transpiring between them.

A moment later, she realized that the two glasses of wine she'd consumed on an empty stomach might have played a part in her amusement.

Feeling a little light-headed, she excused herself from Duncan. "I'm feeling a bit dizzy. I think I need some fresh air."

"Shall I accompany you?"

"No, I'll be fine," Raven said with a slight bow.

Duncan bowed, and she quickly slipped out of the dance floor.

Once outside, she was greeted by the grandeur of the decked-out courtyard. Strands of little lanterns twined around the boughs of the trees, their soft glow casting flickering shadows on the cobblestones. Tables were adorned with elegant centerpieces, and candles lined the periphery. The sweet scent

of blooming flowers mingled with the cool night air, providing a refreshing contrast to the warm, heady atmosphere inside the ballroom. The cool breeze brushed against her flushed face, soothing her and grounding her once more.

She took a deep breath and grabbed a glass of wine, absorbing the tranquility of the night, a stark contrast to the tumult of emotions raging within her. Her thoughts were abruptly disrupted by the shrill voice of her mother.

“Raven, darling! There you are!” Mathilda said, striding towards her. Anthony was trailing behind her, a smug smile on his face.

Raven felt a pang of irritation. Anthony had gone to her parents to gain her attention, confirming her suspicion that he saw her more as a prize to be won rather than a woman to be respected.

Just then, Anthony’s voice cut through the noise. “Didn’t your mother ever tell you that a lady should never drink to the point where her cheeks turn so rosy, Miss Davenport?”

Raven bristled at his judgmental tone, the wine loosening her tongue. “That’s a bit rich coming from you, Anthony,” she retorted. “You’re not my husband, thank goodness, and I do believe you have no say in what I can or cannot do.”

Mathilda, horrified by Raven's rudeness, interjected sharply, "Raven! Apologize at once! You mustn't be so disrespectful to the Viscount."

Grudgingly, Raven murmured an apology, her eyes never leaving Anthony's. The sight of him grated on her nerves, and she found herself longing for Ethan's company more than anyone else's.

The smug smile returned to his face as he said, "Really, Raven, women simply can't handle alcohol the way men can. It's best you refrain."

As he plucked the glass from her hand and set it on the table, it was clear to Raven that Anthony was the type of man Theresa had warned her about—the kind who would brag about the gem he had acquired instead of taking the time to polish it.

Desperate for an escape, she scanned the crowd for a friendly face, a savior, but there was no sign of Ethan, and a sinking feeling overcame her. Could it be that he had left the party without saying goodbye? Was she truly alone in this sea of judgmental aristocrats? Did she push him away with the way she acted?

Oh, she shouldn't have let her family's comments affect her so much.

Raven felt her heart sink as the realization hit her. She had been so foolish to think that Ethan would actually care about her, that he would stick around even if things got tough.

Mathilda broke the tension with a soft sigh. “Ethan may well be your betrothed, dear, but we have yet to set a date or make any arrangements. I wonder if he is genuinely serious about the union at all,” she mused aloud.

Anthony, seizing the opportunity, interjected, “Perhaps what Raven needs is a steadfast husband. I’m willing to wait for her for as long as it takes, but, of course, I expect my wife to be intact.”

Raven could hardly bear their talking about her as if she were not present. “Excuse me,” she said abruptly, and without another word, she turned to walk away.

Mathilda looked at her in surprise. “Where are you going, Raven?”

“I need to go to the powder room,” Raven replied curtly, not meeting their eyes.

Anthony scoffed. “Raven needs to be better looked after. Allow me to accompany you,” he offered. “There are fiends here that I’m certain would love to take advantage of your current state.”

“No, Ant—My Lord,” Raven said, quickly recovering her proper upbringing despite her patience wearing thin. “I can manage on my own. I am not a child that needs to be led by the hand.”

Mathilda, interested now, interjected, “Perhaps I should accompany you, Raven.”

Anthony, giving an exaggerated bow, replied, “I think that might be best. We wouldn’t want our delicate flower to drift away in the gusty breeze of the evening’s events.”

In the sanctity of the powder room, Mathilda confronted her daughter. “Raven, what’s gotten into you? You’re not acting like yourself at all. Perhaps Anthony is on the mark about your excessive drinking?”

Raven turned to face her mother. “How many balls have we attended, Mother? Have I not been the epitome of perfection at every single one?”

Mathilda sighed. “Indeed, you have, but ever since you started spending time with Ethan Holloway, you’ve changed... and not for the better.”

“I haven’t changed one bit! I am still the same woman I always was. Maybe I just don’t like Anthony,” Raven retorted,

her voice firm.

“Raven, you need a fallback plan if you’re to be wed by the end of the Season. Has Ethan mentioned anything about a wedding?” Mathilda inquired, her tone softening.

“He has discussed wedding plans with me, Mother,” Raven answered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Mathilda’s face brightened. “And what sort of plans have been discussed? Do we have a date? Colors picked? Flowers? There are a great many things that must be addressed when making such arrangements.”

“Ethan wants a winter wedding,” Raven said, causing Mathilda to gasp.

“You can’t be serious! It is a bad omen to wed when all nature is dead.”

“But I think it’s a lovely idea. Imagine icicles shining like fire, and what is more pure than snow?” argued Raven.

Mathilda fell silent, seemingly unable to counter.

Raven took this opportunity to add, “You need to stop encouraging Anthony behind my back. I want nothing to do

with him. I'll marry Ethan, and that's final."

Exiting the powder room and returning to the ballroom, Raven reached out for another glass of wine. She spotted Anthony watching her from across the room, his face contorted in irritation, which made her smile. She was not his to control, to change, or to manipulate—he was learning that the hard way.

As she scanned the room for Ethan, the only person who had accepted her for who she truly was, she felt a small pang of disappointment upon realizing that he wasn't there.

"Miss Davenport, you're looking rather flushed," Lord Bradley said as he approached her. "Would you care to sit for a moment? I'm sure there's a chair available somewhere."

"Actually," Raven said, setting the wine glass down as she swallowed the last drop, "I'd prefer to dance. Do you mind?"

Before he could even give her an answer, Raven pulled him onto the dance floor much to the chagrin of Anthony. Watching Anthony squirm with frustration somehow delighted her.

"I must confess, I'm not well versed in the art of dancing," Lord Bradley mumbled as he tried to figure out which of his hands went where.

Raven found herself laughing at the awkwardness, the situation providing a much-needed respite from the night's events. "Just relax and let the music guide you."

"That's the problem," Lord Bradley answered as he fumbled over her feet, nearly tripping over himself. "I don't know how. I'm sorry."

She graciously accepted his repeated apologies, finding patience within her as the music continued to play. "If you can't lead, then I shall. Just do as I do, and all will be well."

CHAPTER 17



Ethan leaned against the column, his fingers idly tracing the rim of his whiskey glass as his gaze followed Raven. The dim light of the room cast shadows on her face, accentuating her beauty as she laughed and danced with the other guests. He watched as she twirled gracefully, her skirt twirling around her in a whirlwind of color. His heart tightened in his chest at the sight of other men's hands on her waist, a pang of jealousy jabbing at his insides. He wanted her, more than he'd ever wanted anything or anyone before.

"You look like a lost puppy, mate," Liam chided, amusement twinkling in his eyes as he sidled up to Ethan.

Ethan rolled his eyes, forcing a laugh. "I'm not lost, and I thought you were playing cards with the Duke," he retorted, his gaze never leaving Raven.

Liam chuckled, his smirk growing wider. "Oh, I never said you were. Just... enamored. And as for the Duke, well, I do believe his pocketbook is a bit lighter this evening. Poor chap didn't know when to fold them."

“Sounds like you had a marvelous time,” Ethan stated as he sipped on his whiskey.

Liam’s grin faded as he turned to look at Ethan seriously. “And where were you? You used to be the life of the party, Ethan,” he commented, his tone laced with concern. “You never took anything or anyone seriously, yet here you are, pining over a woman.”

Ethan shrugged, taking a sip of his drink. “Raven isn’t just any woman. She’s a lady. She deserves respect.”

Liam raised an eyebrow at him, a hint of amusement returning to his eyes. “Oh, you’re serious. How far have you gotten with her?”

Ethan’s jaw hardened. “That’s none of your business, Liam.”

Liam let out a laugh, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “I knew it. You’re in over your head, mate.”

Ethan sighed, downing the rest of his drink before standing up. “I need a refill,” he muttered, leaving a laughing Liam behind.

Ethan’s heart pounded in his chest as he scanned the bustling crowd for Raven. Panic clawed at his insides as he realized he

had lost sight of her. He moved swiftly, his gaze darting from one side to the other, praying to catch a glimpse of her vibrant dress amongst the sea of people. Relief washed over him as he spotted her standing alone, her beautiful face illuminated by the twinkling lights.

Ethan made his way towards her, each step filled with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. Liam's words echoed in his mind, fueling his desire for her. As he approached, he reached out, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She twirled around in surprise, and he quickly whispered, "Meet me in the library," before turning on his heel and striding away, leaving her in a state of confusion.

Ethan weaved through the crowd, his mind filled with images of Raven. He longed for a moment alone with her, to express his feelings without prying eyes and nosy friends. As he pushed open the doors of the library, the quiet hush of the room was a stark contrast to the loud festivities outside. He took a deep breath and waited, praying that Raven would heed his words and find him in the solitude of the library.

The library was a sanctuary of solitude, its hushed whispers and rustling pages creating a stark contrast to the boisterous revelry that echoed faintly through the thick walls. High, arched ceilings crowned the room, while rows upon rows of books nestled in mahogany shelves added a rich, earthy scent to the air.

Ethan moved towards the grand fireplace, its warm, flickering embers casting dancing shadows across his face. The muffled sounds of music filtering through the stone walls served as a distant reminder of the world he had momentarily escaped.

Ethan looked into the fire as his thoughts drifted towards Raven. The realization dawned on him that maybe this charade had to end. Liam's words echoed in his mind, stirring up a whirlwind of emotions he had never expected to confront. Raven was funny, clever, and beautiful in a way none of the women at the ball could compete with. She was real, not like the actresses Liam had paraded in front of him.

As the embers in the fireplace glowed brighter, he acknowledged to himself that he was falling for her. A sense of longing, mixed with a warm, unfamiliar feeling, filled him. He was changing, growing, for her—becoming a better man. And maybe, just maybe, that was a change worth embracing.

The door creaked open, interrupting Ethan's train of thought.

His heart leaped at the sound, and for a moment, he dared to hope it was Raven, come to join him in his sanctuary. He turned around, the anticipation evident in his eyes. But the silhouette framed in the doorway was not the one he had been hoping to see.

Instead, a couple stood there, their unfamiliar faces illuminated by the warm glow of the fireplace. The man wore

a sharp suit of rich navy, the woman was clad in a shining emerald gown, both adorned with festive masks that concealed their identities.

A wave of disappointment washed over him, the brief flare of hope extinguished. His heart sank, not recognizing the pair, realizing that they were just two more strangers. The couple walked in, and their eyes scanned the room in search of a quiet corner. Catching sight of Ethan, they hesitated. He offered them a polite nod, his gaze involuntarily flickering back to the door, still hoping for the sight of Raven.

“You seem to be alone here,” the man said, his tone edged with arrogance. “Why not give us the room?”

Ethan’s eyes narrowed at the challenge, and he squared off to face the stranger. “I’m afraid the room is occupied.”

The woman glanced around, scoffing at the apparent emptiness.

“If you wish to have an audience to your rendezvous, then by all means, come in,” Ethan said, his tone nonchalant.

The man frowned, exchanging a glance with the woman. “There are other rooms,” he finally muttered, a reluctant concession in his voice.

The woman pursed her lips, a stubborn glint in her eyes. “Why should we leave? It’s you who should be the one to go,” she challenged.

The man glanced at Ethan nervously. “Perhaps, good Sir, you could let us have the room? It’s only polite.”

Ethan arched an eyebrow at the man’s veiled bravado. “And what if I choose not to?” he questioned, itching to find some way to release the pent-up emotions rumbling within him.

The man shared a look with the woman. “There’s a better room I’m aware of,” he said to his companion. “We can be alone there.”

The woman crossed her arms. “I’m not going anywhere. I like it here.”

The man nodded, trying to placate her. “I do not wish for any trouble.”

The woman rolled her eyes at her companion’s cowardice and stormed off. Ethan watched as the man rushed after her, his previous arrogance replaced by worry.

“Puppy love,” Ethan mused aloud, mimicking Liam’s words. “Unlike him, I don’t chase after women. They come to me.”

As the couple disappeared, Ethan returned his attention to the fire. He found himself questioning his previous judgment of the couple and contemplated his feelings for Raven.

Would he chase after her if needed? Perhaps he already was, just in a different way.

CHAPTER 18



Raven leaned against the column, watching the dancers spinning around the grand ballroom. Her eyes scanned the crowd as Ethan's words intruded on her thoughts. A smile played on the corners of her lips as she pondered over his intriguing proposal.

The library?

Her attention drifted from the dancers to the corridor, contemplating going. She couldn't deny the fact that she was drawn to him. The pull was far more intense than she could have ever expected. And for a moment, she couldn't help but wonder if it was due to the alcohol coursing through her veins or if it was more. The champagne, after all, was making her warm and fuzzy, teasing and taunting the flames of her desires.

Raven chewed on her lower lip as she kept glancing over her shoulder, wondering how long he'd wait for her while she wondered why his roguish charm was pulling her in. She found herself twirling her hair around her finger, lost in her thoughts of him.

Ethan was unlike anyone Raven had met before. His carefree attitude and easy smile spoke to her without saying a word. He was an enigma that she found herself wanting to unravel, but a war raged within her. A part of her was tempted to retreat to the solitude of the garden grounds and get fresh air only to keep him waiting. And another part leaned towards the adventure of the secret rendezvous in the library.

She swayed slightly to the rhythm of the music, and her body moved gracefully as her head felt light and airy. Was it the music or the drink? Or was it Ethan? In the sea of gowns and fine suits, she found herself adrift, her compass pointing towards the library and to Ethan.

What harm could there be in meeting Ethan in the library? We are in a public setting, after all. And it's not like we aren't engaged...

The library was an open room, a public place, filled with books and stories of love and adventure. It wasn't a secret space, nor a hidden nook. Raven's lips curled at the corners as her thoughts drifted to the first moment they had ever spent alone. Ethan had pulled her to a secluded terrace, and while there were eyes on them at all times, she found herself drifting in his turbulent sea.

Even if we were discovered, I could easily say I was looking for a book to read or a reprieve from the loud blast of the trumpets.

But then, the image of her being caught alone with Ethan by the prying eyes of Society suddenly flashed in her mind. The whispered judgments, the scandal it could stir in their circle, and the repercussions seemed daunting. She shuddered slightly at the prospect.

The library, suddenly, was not just a library. It was an arena where perception and reality could collide. It was an uncharted territory and a place where the lines could blur and the rules could change.

Light footsteps fell behind Raven, and she whipped her head around to find Penelope approaching, her brow creased with concern. “Raven, are you all right? Your cheeks look a tad flushed.”

Raven chewed on her lower lip as she bobbed her head. The curiosity on her sister’s face rattled her. Did she dare tell Penelope about meeting Ethan in the library? The thought intrigued her and somehow gave her a sense of security. Surely if Penelope knew where she was, then it wouldn’t be so secretive. Yet, having her family unaware of her time with Ethan excited her.

“I’m fine,” Raven answered after some time.

“Are you sure?”

“Let me guess, Mother sent you to come looking for me, didn’t she?” Raven grumbled.

“She is a bit worried. She thinks you may have had too much to drink tonight. But I thought that was absurd. However, now that I see you, perhaps there is more red in your cheeks than there should be.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” Raven said, flustered from the berating of her sister. “Now, leave me be.”

She turned on her heel and started down the hallway. Penelope’s soft footsteps followed close behind.

“And where are you going?”

“To the library,” Raven answered, suddenly sure of her destination.

Penelope’s eyebrows crowded the bridge of her nose as she reached a hand to stop Raven. “Whatever for?”

“What is with all the questions?” Raven mumbled as she pulled her arm away. “Can’t I go anywhere without someone escorting me?”

“You are not yourself tonight. Maybe we should go back and tell Mother and Father we are ready to leave,” Penelope suggested in a small voice.

“You can, but I’m going to the library.”

“What’s so special about the library? Suddenly, it’s as if that room is a sanctuary you seem bent on going to.”

Raven’s lips curled at the corners as she stepped to the side and pulled Penelope closer to her. Penelope’s eyes flickered with uncertainty as Raven leaned in closer, her attention shifting as if her words could condemn her to death.

“Ethan wants me to meet him in the library,” Raven confessed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Penelope blanched, her hand instinctively reaching out to steady Raven. “You can’t go, Raven! If anyone caught you two alone, the rumors would spread like wildfire.” Her tone was earnest, a reflection of her concern for her sister.

Raven sighed and shook her head as her hand flew up as if swatting away a fly. A wary smile graced her lips, and her voice held a note of defiance. “I am so sick of caring what people think of me, what they say about me.”

Penelope searched her sister's face, her eyes landing on the empty glass in her hand. Snatching the empty glass, Penelope's voice was laced with concern. "Raven, seriously, how much have you had to drink?"

Raven shrugged nonchalantly as she smirked, a glint of mischief in her eyes. "I'm not intoxicated if that's what you're implying. I'm simply stating the truth here. I'm so tired of living up to people's expectations. Don't you ever get sick of the rules? And seriously, who made those rules? It boggles my mind."

Penelope shook her head, exasperated. "Are you sure you haven't had too much? I've never heard you talk this way before."

Raven rolled her eyes. "Well, maybe it's high time everyone started questioning things around here. Look around you, Penelope. The women here are hunting for husbands who will take care of them, and, in return, they're put off to the side like some ornament or trinket that improves their husbands' status. And their hopes and dreams are never realized."

"All right, maybe we should go home now," Penelope said, trying to loop her arm through Raven's.

Raven pulled away and shook her head. "Why are you so determined to hide me away? You're no better than Mother."

“When my sister starts abandoning her wits and thinks it’s a good idea to go meet a man in a quiet room alone, I feel it’s my duty to save her from herself. Now, come along,” Penelope answered.

“It’s just Ethan!” Raven exclaimed, her voice clipped as she noticed the people walking by giving her sideways, judgmental glares.

“Who’s a known rake,” Penelope hissed. “Or have you forgotten your little engagement isn’t real?”

“It’s just a harmless meeting in the library. What could possibly go wrong?” But even as Raven said the words, doubt gnawed at her mind and twisted like a blade in her stomach, the gravity of the situation slowly pulling her down.

Penelope sighed, knowing that there was no changing Raven’s mind once it was set.

Stepping back from Raven, Penelope scanned the area once before her attention drifted back to Raven. “Just be careful, Raven. I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret later.”

Penelope’s words were like a warning to Raven’s heart.

Raven looked at Penelope with a resigned smile. “You worry too much. Nothing is going to happen.”

“You say that now, but what if something does?”

Pressing her lips into a tight line, Raven dropped her shoulders. “Fine, you win,” she conceded as she turned her attention to the double doors and the lure of fresh air pulling her towards them.

“Now, where are you going?” Penelope asked as Raven stumbled into the darkness.

“Outside. I need air,” Raven answered over her shoulder.

“Do you want me to accompany you?”

Raven waved her hand. “No. You go and enjoy yourself. You don’t need to be following me about like I’m a stray dog. I’ll be fine. A bit of fresh air will clear my head right up. Besides, your dance card still has a few names on it, does it not? Go and enjoy yourself.”

“You promise you’re not going to the library, right?” Penelope asked.

“I’m not going to the library,” Raven grumbled as if her sister would find a way to irritate her even further.

Of course, there was a small part in the back of Raven's mind feeling grateful for her sister's intervention, but she still felt the lure of Ethan. He was like a siren call to her heart, pleading and begging for her to go to him.

"You better not be," Raven heard Penelope mumble as she turned and left, her steps echoing in the empty hallway.

Once outside, she inhaled deeply, the crisp night air seeping into her pores, chilling her heated skin. She wandered aimlessly, her thoughts a whirlwind of confusion and indecision. As she passed by the library, she glanced through the window. There, alone in a forest of books, was Ethan. His usually vibrant eyes were now clouded with what appeared to be sadness. It was a sight that tugged at Raven's heartstrings.

She found herself drawn to him, a silent yearning filling her. Was his melancholy her doing? She felt a hot surge of emotion that seemed to be a strange mix of guilt and longing brewing within her. Each beat of her heart echoed loudly in her ears as she took a step towards the library window, wishing she was by his side to comfort him. Each moment she kept her attention on him was one more moment for her resolve to stay away from him to waver.

Pulling in a deep breath, Raven took one last glimpse of Ethan and charged back into the ballroom. She pushed past the other guests, making a beeline for the library. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Penelope shaking her head.

Guilt jabbed at Raven, but she refused to let it deter her. With her heart set on Ethan, she pressed onward.

Sorry, Penelope.

Raven paused at the door of the library, her hand hovering over the worn brass knob. With a roll of her shoulders, she questioned her decision. Should she knock or simply make her presence known?

The door was slightly ajar, an open invitation, yet it was also a boundary she was unsure if she should cross. Stealing one last glimpse down the hallway, Raven's heart ached for Ethan as the guilt laid on her by Penelope mounted. As she teetered on the edge of changing her mind, the sound of Ethan's voice echoed through the quiet library, the resigned cadence of his words reaching her.

“Raven? Is that you?”

A jumble of emotions washed over her: apprehension, curiosity, and a hint of fear. Her heart pounded with an intensity that left her momentarily breathless. Brushing back the loose strands of her hair, she pushed through the door of the library.

Ethan's smile was welcoming and instantly eased the troubles brewing in her mind. The corners of her lips curled as she took

a timid step deeper into the room.

“I was wondering if you’d come and see me,” he said as he started for her. “For a moment there, I had thought you would stand me up.”

Raven arched an eyebrow. “For a moment there, so did I.”

“I take it your family tried to talk you out of coming?”

“How do you know I spoke to any of them?” Raven asked, her voice cracking as she sidestepped around Ethan to focus on the books lining the shelves.

“You’re not as adventurous as you’d like to think you are,” Ethan said, his tone light and teasing, but it grated on her.

“For your information, I do as I please,” Raven retorted.

Ethan chuckled lightly. “You only think you do. I saw how you were around your mother and Anthony. I figured you would spend thirty minutes mulling over whether or not to come here.”

“And how could you possibly know that I would?” Raven asked over her shoulder.

Ethan inched closer, and Raven could feel the energy radiating off him as if he were the sun warming her icy skin.

“Well, I hoped you would prove me wrong and come rather than hear me tease you for being too scared, but I’m impressed. I doubt your mother will be, though.”

Raven huffed and rolled her eyes. “My mother is ever the opportunist.”

“What do you mean by that?” Ethan asked.

“Didn’t you see how she was with Anthony around?” Raven pointed out, a hint of bitterness tingeing her words.

Ethan nodded. “I did, and I wish you’d be the master of your own destiny more often—it suits you.”

“And how can I choose you as a better option when our whole relationship is a farce?” Raven countered, her tone shifting from teasing to challenging. “After all, Ethan, you’re not any better than the other suitors vying for my affections. You all think you know me, yet all you know is the facade I wear.”

Ethan blanched, taken aback. “When have I ever put up barriers for you, Raven?” His voice was soft, the hurt in his eyes evident.

Raven bit her lower lip in thought. “No, I don’t suppose you have. But there’s more to me than meets the eye, Lord Whitland.”

“I want to know you, Raven. The real you.” Ethan’s voice was sincere, and that caused Raven’s heart to flutter.

“Why? Won’t it make it harder for us to call off this engagement if feelings get involved? And I thought you weren’t one to get involved with anyone,” she questioned, taking a step back as Ethan inched closer, closing the gap between them.

“Why do you think I asked you to meet me here?” Ethan changed the subject, noticing her discomfort.

“Why did you ask me to come? Or was this a test to see if I’d be obedient to you?”

Ethan shook his head and let out a heavy sigh as his eyes reflected the soft golden light from the fire. The mere sight of him made her mood shift, and she found herself wondering why she was so defensive. Ethan had never before given her reason or cause to be so frigid, yet here she was, standing before him like an ice queen.

“I thought you could use some space and a bit of room to breathe. Your suffocating mother and the Viscount, who never finds an end to his ramblings, seemed to be hogging all the air around you.”

Raven was shocked, her heart pounding at his perceptiveness. She reached out, her fingers brushing his chest before she quickly pulled away. From the corner of her eye, she spotted a familiar name on the bookshelf.

“Oh my, I never would have thought the Duchess would like David Thornhill,” she said as she reached for the book and plucked it off the shelf.

“Do you like his work?” Ethan asked innocently.

Raven ran her fingertips over the spine of the book and smiled. “I should. I wrote it.”

The instant the words left her lips, she wished she could retract them. A surge of panic shot through her as her mind skipped over various lies she could tell to cover her tracks.

“What?” Ethan asked, confusion evident on his face.

Trying to correct her mistake, Raven gave a little shrug of her shoulder and an awkward chuckle. “I mean that I’ve read it so many times, it feels like I could’ve written it.”

Ethan's eyes narrowed as he tilted his head down, trying to catch Raven's eye. "That's not what you said, Raven. You said you wrote it. Is that true? Are you David Thornhill?"

CHAPTER 19



É than stood frozen in disbelief as Raven's confession lingered like a heavy fog between them. He had always admired her beauty and the way her eyes sparkled with intelligence and humor, but he never expected being an author was her secret passion that burned just beneath the surface.

A smirk tickled his lips as he reached out to take the book she held so protectively. His eyes narrowed, keeping her locked in his gaze as he watched the waves of panic pounding against her. With a curious expression on his face, the tips of his fingers brushed the spine of the book just as Raven recoiled.

"You don't want to read this," she said, shifting her body away to keep him from snatching the book from her arms. Yet, to his surprise, there was a playful defiance dancing in her eyes that seemed to speak to his soul.

"Sure I do," he said, trying again and again to grab the book, only to let it slip from his fingers as she struggled to keep it away from his reach.

“No, really, you don’t,” she mumbled. “It’s not very good.”

“But you just said it was good, and seeing as how I haven’t heard of him, I think I’d like to read it,” Ethan teased as they began a friendly game of tug-of-war, his laughter echoing in the room.

“Ethan, stop.”

“Why? I told you, I want to know everything I can about you, and clearly this is something you like to do. Why shouldn’t I read it?”

“Because...” was the only answer she could manage to blurt out, and it made Ethan all the more eager to get his hands on the book.

“That’s not a good enough answer, you know that, right?”

“I don’t want you to read it,” she stammered as she jerked her body back and stumbled into the bookshelf.

“Let me get this straight,” Ethan started as he moved closer to her, his eyes burning with a playful curiosity. “You wrote a book, had it published for all the world to see, yet you don’t want me to read it? That makes no sense. What if I told you that I already have a copy?”

Raven's face scrunched as she shook her head. "You said you had never heard of the author."

"I don't see what the big deal is," Ethan explained.

Despite her feisty attempts to keep the book away from him, Ethan's determination won. He snatched the book, his heart racing in anticipation as he began to thumb through its pages, eager to uncover the secret layer of the beautiful woman standing before him.

"This is so embarrassing," Raven said, covering her face with her hands.

Ethan chuckled. "Why should you be embarrassed about this? It's remarkable," he observed, his eyes softening with admiration. "Have you earned money or anything with this hobby of yours?"

"Yes, a little," Raven admitted, her cheeks turning a deeper shade of red.

Ethan bobbed his head, and a swell of pride rushed through him as he stared at Raven. The fact that she was so much more than he ever thought astonished him. She was far more than just a pretty face, and her secret proved she did have a wild streak that needed to be unleashed.

“And what are you doing with your earnings? Saving for something special? Perhaps a way out of your parents’ house?” Ethan asked, trying to keep his tone light.

“Why is it any of your concern?” questioned Raven.

Ethan closed the book and held it out to her with a mischievous smile playing on his lips. “There is nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, you should be proud, Raven. This”—he gestured to the book—“shows me you’re an individual. Independent. More so than I ever gave you credit for, and you shouldn’t hide this away.”

“Why aren’t you scolding me?” Raven asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ethan laughed heartily at her shocked expression. “Everyone should have a hobby, Raven. A means to support themselves. Women included,” he said, still chuckling. “Have I read any of your books? No, but you can bet I’m going to, now. This isn’t the only place I can find your books.”

Raven’s blush deepened. Ethan laughed again, reveling in the rare sight.

“I can’t wait to read your work, Raven.”

Ethan was taken aback by the revelation. The beautiful, stunning, and polished woman standing before him was an author—a reality far removed from the simple, timid persona she projected. It was as if he had stumbled upon a secret door leading to a room filled with treasures of her unexplored depths.

This discovery added layers to her character that he hadn't anticipated, revealing a woman of substance hidden beneath the facade of naivety and innocence. The revelation led him to a profound realization—there was clearly more to Raven than met the eye.

“Are you going to tell my family?” Raven asked, her voice shaky.

“Why would I do that?” Ethan replied, his brow furrowing in confusion. “If you want this to be our little secret, then that's exactly how it will stay.”

Raven's eyes widened at his response. “And how do I know you'll keep your word?” she retorted, her voice growing stronger. “You do realize if people find out about this, it would ruin me.”

Ethan couldn't help but laugh. “You're always so concerned about your reputation. It must be exhausting to be you, sometimes. Perhaps you should learn to let loose every now and then.”

“I do let loose,” Raven protested, pointing around the library. “I came here to meet you, alone. That’s letting loose.”

Ethan chuckled. “That doesn’t count. Besides, would it be so terrible if someone barged in and found us here? We are, after all, engaged, are we not? And it’s not like I’m doing anything to you, as tempting as you are.”

Raven was silent, and Ethan took the opportunity to inch closer. The scent of her perfume filled his senses, stirring a longing within him. He handed her the book, and as their hands brushed, a rush of desire coursed through him.

With her hands occupied, Ethan took the opportunity to gently brush the back of his fingers across her cheek. “Maybe it wouldn’t be so terrible, after all,” he whispered, his voice barely audible.

Raven’s breath caught, and she turned to face him. Their eyes met, and at that moment, Ethan knew he could no longer resist her. He leaned in closer, his lips hovering just inches away from hers. His chest tightened as all his ambitions came to a head. Raven was far too much for him to resist any longer.

“Ethan.” His name caught in her throat as he leaned closer, sharing the same breath as her.

Deep in her gaze, he saw the desire that burned as hot as his. As their lips finally touched, a fire ignited between them. Ethan poured everything into his kiss. All his passion and longing for her, all his pride and astonishment. It was a kiss filled with fire and desire, one that they had both been longing for.

Caught in the throes of the moment, Ethan yielded to his pent-up yearning for Raven. Their kiss intensified, the heat of their desire radiating from one to the other as if they fed off each other. Raven wrapped an arm around his neck, pulling him deeper into her, and she consumed him. He cupped his hand around her face, holding her to him as he deepened the kiss.

Ethan subtly guided Raven backward, the rows of books providing a closed, intimate space away from prying eyes that might flit across the open door of the library.

The sudden touch of the cold bookshelf against her back startled Raven, causing the book in her hands to fall to the ground. It clattered to the floor, forgotten, as she looped her other arm around Ethan's neck, pulling him closer. Her actions fueled Ethan's desire, his heart pounding in his chest in rhythm with hers.

The taste of wine on her lips intoxicated him further, and the sweet tang left him wanting more. He framed her face with his hands, his fingers entwining in her hair and his thumbs caressing her cheeks. His grip kept her close, their bodies pressing against each other, their breaths mingling. At that

moment, the world beyond them ceased to exist. All that mattered, all that was real, was the undeniable connection between them.

Suddenly, Raven turned away, her breath hitching as she gasped for air. "I... I should leave," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ethan's brown eyes filled with confusion as he tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. "Why?" he asked, his voice soft.

Raven glanced at their surroundings, the towering rows of books seeming suddenly too close for comfort. "Someone could come in and see us," she pointed out, her voice fraught with tension.

Ethan chuckled lightly at her words, feeling a sense of amusement. "Let them see. There's no doubt in my mind they'd like what they see."

"Ethan," Raven gasped. Shock flittered across her face as if his words somehow appalled her.

He flashed her a crooked, mischievous grin as he tilted his head. "You've got to learn to trust people," he whispered. "I would never let anything happen to you."

His words hung in the air between them, challenging her to come up with a response. He found himself eager to hear the lie she was telling herself as his mind raced for answers to prove her wrong.

Raven was silent, and it was clear that she had no answer to his question. Still, she slipped out of his embrace, putting a gap between them that seemed as if it could stretch on for miles. Ethan watched her, his heart pounding in his chest. The way her eyes shone with confusion and desire, the soft pink flush that colored her cheeks—he found her absolutely captivating.

He loved this side of her—vulnerable yet on the precipice of falling into his embrace. She stared at him with a glint of defiance in her eyes, which only made his heart yearn for her even more, but he stepped back, giving them both room, and let her go.

For now.

“I should,” Raven started as her attention shifted from his face, breaking the spell he had placed on her.

As much as he wanted to keep her all to himself, he bobbed his head.

Raven moved around him like a timid animal, fearful he would strike her and pull her back into his embrace. Ethan didn't move. He stood like a sentinel, barring himself from extending his arm to block her exit. There was no way he was going to keep her there if it truly was her desire to flee from him.

Ethan watched as Raven slipped out of the library, her figure disappearing from his view. His attention shifted to the floor where Raven had dropped her book, and he leaned down, plucking it from the ground.

As he reached down to pick it up, a sense of curiosity washed over him. The fact that it earned a place in the Duchess's personal library intrigued him. A small smile curved his lips at the realization—they were sharing secrets, he and Raven, and getting to know each other on a level he hadn't anticipated. It brought about an exciting, unnerving feeling.

He flipped the book over in his hands as he wondered what other secrets she hid behind her captivating eyes, what other stories she held within her.

The yearning to know more about her grew stronger. The depth of his feelings for Raven took him by surprise, but it was a feeling he welcomed.

For now, he would enjoy this journey of discovering the layers of Raven, one secret at a time.

CHAPTER 20



*R*aven paced the length of her room, biting her nails as her heart pounded against its cage of bone. Her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, and each one was more fearful than the last. The fact that she had opened up to Ethan about her secret life as a writer haunted her.

What have I done?

As she paced, anxiety bubbled within her, and the thought of her secret reaching the ears of the ton sent a chill down her spine.

A part of her wanted to curl under a rock and hide away, but she knew she couldn't remain hidden forever. Sooner or later, she would have to face it. With a shaky hand, she reached for the doorknob, and then stepped out of her bedroom and into the hallway. She could feel the weight of her secret weighing heavily on her shoulders as she made her way down the hall.

Her heart hammered in her chest like a drumbeat as she descended the staircase.

A part of her expected grim faces to meet her the moment she entered the foyer. She pictured disappointment and judgmental glares driving into her like knives. Yet, the room was empty. Slowly, she continued through the house, trying not to let her nerves get the better of her. Each step she took echoed with dread.

The world, she felt, must surely already know her secret. It wasn't her sister that she blabbered it out to, nor was it Theresa. It was Ethan, of all people, and he had no reason to keep it hidden.

She reached the open door of the dining room, took a deep, steadying breath, and steeled herself for the onslaught she was certain to come.

“Raven, don't loiter there in the hallway. It's rude,” Mathilda called out, her tone casual, as if it were any other morning. “Come join us for breakfast. There are a great many things we need to discuss.”

Raven froze as the panic clawed its way up her throat. Mathilda's words, so ordinary and yet loaded with ominous undertones, sent her heart into a frenzy.

She knows. Ethan told her. And why wouldn't he? Oh, I'm going to kill him when I see him again. That is, of course, if I can ever step foot out of my house again.

The words “a great many things we need to discuss” twisted in her stomach, each syllable a hammering blow to her fragile nerves. As she stood rooted in fear, Penelope came around the corner and continued skipping past her without a care in the world.

“Good morning, dear sister. How did you sleep?” Penelope asked, her voice warm like morning sunshine.

Before Raven could answer, Penelope was already inside the dining room, and she only stopped to glance over her shoulder, expecting Raven to follow.

Gathering her courage, Raven managed a weak smile and trailed in after her, stepping into the dining room with a sense of inevitability.

With her heart still in her throat, Raven’s eyes darted to the faces in the room. Her mother’s nonchalant tone felt like a balm, but she couldn’t shake the nagging doubt flooding through her.

“Well? Are you just going to stand there? Or are you going to sit with us? If you’re planning on skipping out on us this morning, may I implore a few moments of your time?”

By the tone of Mathilda's voice, Raven knew her mother had just given her a direct order.

Raven quickly took her place at the table as her thoughts swirled about like a hurricane of uncertainty. Shifting her attention to her father, Raven noticed Oscar engrossed in the stack of papers surrounding him and completely oblivious to the turmoil raging within her.

"The harbor masters don't know their heads from their tails," he grumbled, slamming the paper down on the table. "Can you believe this nonsense?"

"What's the matter now, dear?" Mathilda asked as she sipped her tea and placed another biscuit on Oscar's plate, as she always did.

"The ship will be stuck at the port for days on end. How am I to move the merchandise from one place to another if those fools don't know what they're doing?"

"I don't know what to tell you, dear," Mathilda prattled on, her words as light and airy as the morning sun. "Raven, darling, I wanted to talk to you about the wedding. What do you think of silk taffeta for the bridal gown? The seamstress says it will hold up well, but it has to be just right, and he'll need your measurements come the end of the day." Her voice blurred into the background as Raven grappled with her feelings, the weight of her secret still heavy on her shoulders.

“Mother, I don’t really care about the dress,” Raven muttered, her gaze downcast as she glanced at the food on the table, none of which seemed to whet her appetite.

Mathilda’s brows furrowed in irritation. “Raven, you can’t be so dismissive. If you are to become a wife, you need to take charge. A wife is the captain of her household, and it starts with the planning of your wedding,” she stated.

Raven sighed. “We have plenty of time, Mother. Ethan and I have agreed on a winter wedding.”

Mathilda’s face turned cold as she shook her head in disgust. “A winter wedding? Nonsense. I’ll not have my daughter married off in the dead of winter. You need to get that idea out of your head and convince Ethan to choose a more appropriate date.”

Relief washed over Raven as she realized it was the wedding plans that had her mother on edge and not the fact that she was a published author. Letting out a sigh of relief, she couldn’t help but flash a brilliant smile that could easily rival the sun.

With her secret safe, for now, she let her shoulders relax a bit. The fact that no one had mentioned David Thornhill released the tension that had weighed her down.

Well, I'll be. Perhaps there's more to that scoundrel, after all.

Feeling more at ease, Raven reached for a biscuit and turned to face her mother. "Father always says the man is the head of the household. As Ethan's future wife, I will respect his wishes, and he wants a winter wedding."

Mathilda chuckled softly. "Oh, dear. The man may be the head, but the woman is the neck that turns the head. You must learn to present your ideas to your husband as if they were his own. That's the only way things get done in a marriage."

Oscar's brows shot up as he looked at Mathilda. "Is that what you do to me, Mathilda? Make me think your ideas are mine?"

Mathilda shook her head. "Oscar, I couldn't manipulate you if I tried. You're far too set in your ways and too clever. But Raven is a young bride-to-be, and Ethan is a young man. All young men are stubborn and guided by selfishness. They have yet to learn the art of compromise."

Raven could see the argument brewing between her parents and quickly snatched the biscuit from her plate and rose. "I think I'll take my food outside. And I was thinking of heading to the park later if that's all right with you?"

In an act of sisterly solidarity, Penelope jumped up, her eyes wide with the opportunity to flee the scene before things

between their parents got too out of hand. “I’ll go with you. We haven’t spent much time together recently, and the park sounds lovely.”

Without waiting for the response of their parents, who were too engrossed in their heated discussion about marriage dynamics, the sisters slipped out for a breath of fresh air. The tension in the room dissipated with their departure.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Penelope said as they trekked through the house, making a beeline for the front door.

“Do what?”

“You have this ability to turn things around and get the spotlight off of you. I wish I could do that,” Penelope said as they stepped out onto the footpath.

“You just need a bit of practice.”

“Seriously, though, I don’t know what I’m going to do when you aren’t around anymore. I fear Mother will turn all her attention to me, and I won’t be able to do anything I want,” Penelope lamented as their carriage came around the corner.

“You’ll be fine. Besides, it’s not like I’m going anywhere anytime soon. And who knows, maybe you’ll end up marrying

before I do,” Raven suggested, trying to give her sister some comfort and support.

Penelope turned to Raven, her brow furrowed in concern. “You seem rather tense, Raven. Is something troubling you?”

Raven flashed Penelope a casual smile and shook her head. “No, there’s nothing wrong. What could be troubling me? It’s a beautiful day, the sky is clear, and we weren’t given an hour to come home. From where I’m standing, everything is right as rain.”

“Now, I know there’s something wrong,” Penelope said, folding her arms over her chest. “You ramble when you’re nervous. What’s gotten under your bonnet?”

Raven pressed her lips into a tight line. “It’s just this wedding is a lot to handle.”

Internally, she was grateful for Ethan’s silence about David Thornhill, but she didn’t dare tell Penelope about that.

Penelope’s face lit up as she said, “I quite fancy the idea of a winter wedding, you know. Just picture it—the snow, the warm lanterns, and the icicles. It would be beautiful.”

Raven looked at her sister, a small smile playing on her lips. “You know, I have to admit the idea is starting to grow on

me.”

As they climbed into the carriage and set off towards the park, Raven, feeling somewhat more at ease, asked, “What about you, Penelope? How have you been faring? What news do you have?”

Penelope chuckled excitedly. “Oh, not much. Just finished that painting I’ve been slaving over for the past week. And you won’t believe it—Mother received an invitation to Lord Byron and Izabella’s wedding. I suspect that’s why she’s been pressuring you so much about your plans.”

Raven sighed, a twinkle of amusement in her eyes. “You’re probably right. I can see Mother already, taking copious notes at Lord Byron’s wedding, planning how to outshine every other bride in the ton with mine.” She shook her head, her amusement fading into resignation. “I sometimes wish the whole event was over and done with, so I didn’t have to think about it anymore.”

The ride to the park was short, and the comforting canopy of trees overhead provided a sense of tranquility.

Penelope looked at Raven, her concern evident. “What do you want, Raven?” she asked. Her tone was serious, and it cut through the peace that flowed over Raven.

Raven glanced over at Penelope, her eyes reflecting the turmoil within. “I don’t really know anymore, Penelope,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper as they climbed out of the carriage.

The crisp, fresh air nipped their faces and breathed new life into Raven’s weary spirit. The twittering of birds overhead and the rustling of leaves in the canopy were rejuvenating. Raven felt a sense of tranquility come over her as the familiar sights and sounds of the park reached her very soul, and everything seemed to be a welcome refuge from her troubled thoughts.

Penelope scooped her arm into Raven’s and started down the gravel walkway as a flurry of raised voices reached their ears. They exchanged a look of curiosity, wondering what the source of such commotion could be. Led by curiosity, they hunted for the source of the disagreement.

Off to the right, they noticed Theresa, her husband, Devlin, Mary-Jane, Harrison, Liam, Jackson, and Helen engaged in an animated dispute, each one squabbling over the selection of colors for their impending game of pall mall. Raven observed the scene with a faint smile, the quarrel far removed from the pressures of her own predicament.

“I was just thinking about you,” Ethan said, his voice warm and comforting, yet it still made Raven jump from the shock. She whipped around to find him standing behind her with a crooked grin curving his lips. “Might I say it is a pleasant surprise to find you here.”

“Lord Whitland,” she said, her tone soft but firm as she bowed her head to him.

Ethan returned the greeting as his attention darted towards Penelope. “Did you come for the game?” he asked, curiosity glinting in his eyes.

“What game?” Raven asked, intrigued as she glanced over at Penelope.

“Well, the one that should be starting soon if they ever figure out which colors they all want to be,” Ethan pointed out, nudging his head to the group sorting through the mallets. “Come, let us join them, shall we?”

With Ethan guiding them, the girls made their way over to the group. The others greeted them warmly.

“Raven! Penelope!” Theresa called out cheerfully. “We’re about to start a game of pall mall. Would you care to join us?”

Penelope threw her hands up in a dramatic fashion. “Oh, no, not me. I’m not coordinated enough to play this game. I always lose!” She grinned mischievously at Raven, giving her a gentle push towards Ethan. “Raven should play, though. She’s got a strong swing and has never failed to place when she plays.”

Raven hesitated, not sure if she really wanted to join. Ethan tilted his head to the side, observing her. “You look like your favorite color is blue,” he said, grabbing the blue mallet before anyone else could claim it, and he handed it to her. “But I’m not sure you can handle the competition.”

Arching her eyebrow, Raven couldn’t deny or ignore the challenge in Ethan’s tone. A fire ignited in her eyes.

She snatched the blue stick from Ethan’s hands and retorted, “You shouldn’t provoke me, Lord Whitland. You just might regret it.”

Liam’s eyes sparkled with delight at the sight of Raven’s competitive nature. “Ah! Now that sounds like a challenge if you ask me. Perhaps Ethan isn’t as good as he claims to be. After all, I’ve seen him play billiards, and the man is hopeless.”

His comment stirred Raven to action. There was no backing out now.

“Where’s the hoop?” Raven asked, her gaze scanning the field.

Ethan stepped closer to her, his body rubbing against hers. He leaned over her shoulder, pointing towards the end of the field where the hoop stood. His proximity was disconcerting, and

Raven could feel her heart pounding in her chest and his hot breath on her neck as he spoke, sending chills down her spine and causing goosebumps to form on her skin.

“That’s your target,” he breathed out, his words barely above a whisper. His tone was so intimate, so electric, that for a moment, she almost forgot they were surrounded by people.

Ethan’s gaze followed Raven’s as she spotted the distant hoop at the end of the field. “It’s closer than it looks,” he said, a teasing glint in his eyes. He leaned in closer, his voice turning into a conspiratorial whisper. “Lord Edinburg wouldn’t back down, would he?”

The words struck her as their meaning sunk in. Ethan had read her stories. Lord Edinburg was her creation—a daring young earl who was as hot-headed and carefree as she only wished she could be. Raven turned to him, her eyes wide with realization.

“I don’t cower from a challenge,” she retorted firmly.

Liam erupted into a chorus of hoots and hollers, excitedly declaring that the game was afoot.

Ethan provocatively suggested that women should go first, given their “weaker sex” status. This comment earned him a

swift shove from Theresa, who grabbed her own mallet, irritation clear on her face.

Devlin chuckled as he shook his head. Raven couldn't help but hear the dry humor in his tone. "You've provoked the Duchess, Ethan. You'll soon eat your words."

As everyone backed away to give Theresa room for her swing, Ethan positioned himself close to Raven. She could feel his fingers lightly tracing down her spine, near the strings of her corset, his touch both taunting and unnerving.

Theresa's swing was hard and sent the ball sailing through the air, a perfect arch that left everyone momentarily stunned. The applause came in waves, celebrating her show of prowess.

Ethan murmured in Raven's ear, "I wonder how our little storyteller can handle such a huge mallet," his tone teasing yet oddly anticipatory.

Raven glared at Ethan as a new surge of panic ricocheted through her. "You need to stop," she scolded.

"What's the matter?" Ethan taunted playfully.

"You know very well what you are doing, and I don't appreciate it one bit," Raven retorted, refusing to take her eyes off Mary-Jane as she stepped up to take her swing.

Mary Jane's swing wasn't as forceful as Theresa's but still commendable. The ball fell behind Theresa's, but the crowd was still appreciative. Helen, with her steely demeanor, took her shot, and there was a collective intake of breath as her ball out-rolled Theresa's.

As the applause for Helen died down, all eyes turned to Raven. She could feel the weight of their gazes, but Ethan's was the one she felt the most as she readied herself for the swing,

Ethan slipped up behind her, his voice a low murmur in her ear. "I'd love to see you handle the mallet, Raven. I wonder, could you handle me just as well if you chose to do so?"

His words were a challenge, rattling her out of focus. She swung, and her ball veered sharply to the left, disappearing from view. Embarrassment rammed her like the mallet she used. Never in all her years playing had she ever managed to miss her shot.

The crowd burst out laughing, and Liam's voice rang out above them, "Pall mall isn't for everyone! Raven, you have the drive, but your accuracy needs work. This is why women shouldn't play billiards, they lack the concentration!"

His words were teasing, but they stung.

Raven gritted her teeth, irritation simmering within her. She'd let Ethan distract her and ruin her shot. She vowed to herself that, next time, she'd do better.

Stepping back, Raven watched as the men took their turns, each trying to outdo the other in both skill and form. When Ethan's turn came, the air seemed to thicken with anticipation.

Taking her cue, Raven sauntered up to him, her voice a soft whisper, tinged with mischief. "Even if I gave you a compass and a map, Ethan, you wouldn't be able to handle me," she declared, her gaze unwavering.

The crowd held its breath as Ethan swung his mallet, and his ball launched into the air and landed out of bounds.

She watched as flames of desire flickered within Ethan's eyes, his competitive spirit seemingly evaporated. Laughter erupted from the crowd.

Liam's voice, rising higher than the others, taunted, "Ethan, you shouldn't let yourself get distracted, not even by a face as lovely as Raven's!"

The tension broke, and Theresa asserted, "I'm up next!"

All heads turned, following the players as they scrambled down the field to their respective balls.

Ethan turned to Raven, his eyes gleaming with a challenging spirit. “You underestimate me, sweet Raven. I’ve navigated through waters far more dangerous than you,” he declared, his voice low and full of hidden intent.

Her eyes sparkled with humor as she replied, “I don’t doubt that, especially seeing as how you’re such a rake.”

“I was talking about sailing through the treacherous tides of the Caribbean. Now, I’m surprised a lady of your stature would think of such crass things,” Ethan retorted, his eyebrow arched in playful accusation.

“Clearly, you haven’t read my work,” Raven shot back, her tone a blend of amusement and challenge.

Ethan moved closer, the playful banter escalating as he backed her into a tree, reciting a scene from one of her novels, where the Count takes what he wants.

Raven’s heart pounded as Ethan’s fingers lightly traced the line of her neck, his voice a husky whisper. “Do these stories of yours reveal your darker desires? Shall I find out?”

Before Raven could respond, he leaned in and captured her lips in a passionate kiss. His hand reached for the hem of her dress, slowly hiking it up. Raven glanced around, relieved to

see that the other players were engrossed in the game and too far out of sight for any of them to spy on them.

She pulled back slightly. “Ethan, you cannot be doing this. You cannot be kissing me like this.”

“No one can see us, Raven,” Ethan reassured, his voice gentle yet filled with desire. “I have no plans to ruin you, only to let you experience the kind of passion you so vividly write about in your stories.”

Ethan swiftly dropped to his knees and slipped under the voluminous skirt of her dress. The rustle of fabric and the sensation of his warm breath against her skin sent an electrifying tingle coursing through Raven’s body. A flush crept over her pale skin as her mind seemed to whirl in a fog of sensation.

Part of her, the conscious, rational part, was keenly aware of their surroundings. The dense trees surrounding them provided a measure of privacy, but anyone could stumble upon them at any moment. Yet, the risk and the danger only seemed to heighten the intoxicating thrill of Ethan’s touch. As Ethan’s tongue continued on his path, trailing up Raven’s inner thighs, she found herself torn between her sense of propriety and the overwhelming desire that Ethan had ignited within her.

She didn’t want him to stop, nor could she bear the mere thought of him ceasing. Her body betrayed her mind as her

back arched instinctively towards Ethan, craving more of his touch. Leaning back, she didn't mind the bark cutting into her back, nor did she care as the muffled voices around them seemed to grow closer. All she was focused on was Ethan's skilled tongue and the way his fingers taunted her desires for him.

Her breaths came in sharp bursts as heat surged through every vein in her body. She felt as if she'd stepped into a furnace and was willingly being sacrificed on the altar of lust. With her legs trembling under her weight, Raven threw her head back, focusing on the boughs of the trees.

"Ethan." His name lodged in her throat as he increased the pressure of his tongue that fondled her in such a way that made every muscle in her body tighten.

It was as if she were standing on a precipice, and Ethan was her only tether to solid ground. Rolling her eyes back, she blocked out the cries of the birds overhead and the muffled voices of pedestrians passing by, unaware of what was transpiring in the bushes of the park.

Raven couldn't help herself from falling off the ledge as Ethan's tongue delved deeper into her. His fingers pushed her body open for him to devour more of her. Air came in rapid gulps as the world around her faded completely. All that remained was her anchored to Ethan as he flooded her body with sensations she never experienced before.

“Ethan.” Her voice was strained as she clawed at the tree bark.

“Not yet. Don’t deny yourself this pleasure, Raven. Savor it.” Ethan’s muffled words spoke to the depths of her being. She could no longer restrain her body or her senses. It was like he was the conductor of her heart and played her heartstrings like a violin, fine-tuning her body until it sang.

“Ethan...” Raven gasped as her body caved.

What little strength she had holding herself upright gave away. If it weren’t for Ethan keeping her pinned against the tree, she would have fallen. The pressure and heat sent her soaring to new heights as little specks of light filled her eyes. Raven clasped her hands over the bulge under her dress, holding Ethan in place.

“Raven? Where did you get off to?” Penelope’s voice rang through the park.

Raven’s heart sank as reality slapped her like a cold, wet ball of snow. She blinked, stunned by what just transpired as Ethan casually slipped her dress over his head.

CHAPTER 21



“*R*aven! Ethan!” Penelope’s voice echoed through the clearing.

Raven, breathless and leaning against a tree, looked down at Ethan. His eyes gleamed with a mixture of mischief and satisfaction, the corner of his mouth curled in a smug smile.

“Now, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Ethan muttered, reluctantly pulling back, his hand emerging from the depths of Raven’s dress. His gaze lingered on her, taking in the flush that colored her cheeks and the burning passion in her eyes.

“Raven!” Penelope’s voice called again, closer this time.

Raven straightened up, smoothing out her dress and composing herself. “We should get back to the game,” she said, her voice steady despite the lingering thrill of Ethan’s touch.

Ethan nodded, still wearing that smug smile as they turned to meet Penelope.

“Raven! Ethan! What in heaven’s name were you two doing behind the trees?” Penelope asked, her hands placed firmly on her hips as they emerged from the forest.

“We were just searching,” Raven responded quickly, her eyes darting to Ethan before settling back on Penelope. “I lost my ball, you see.”

“Lost your ball?” Penelope echoed, her gaze shifting towards the edge of the forest. She pointed to a small collection of balls nestled near a cluster of bushes. “Are those not your balls over there?”

Ethan followed Penelope’s gaze and broke into laughter. “Well, I’ll be—would you look at that,” he said, his grin widening. “If they were snakes, they would’ve bitten us by now!” He roared with laughter, the tension in the air dissipating as he playfully nudged Raven, who couldn’t help but join in the laughter.

As they returned to the group, Ethan’s eyes were fixed on Raven, his gaze unshakeable despite the chatter of the crowd around them.

“Ethan, where in blazes did you scamper off to?” Liam questioned, his eyes darting to Raven, before a smirk played on his lips. “Never mind. Perhaps you were engaged in another game? A game of hide and seek, perhaps?”

Ethan chose to ignore Liam, his gaze still on Raven. “Is the game still on?” he queried, his voice ringing out in the green.

Devlin stepped forward, a proud grin on his face. “Sorry, Ethan, Theresa got her ball through the hoop on the seventh swing. She’s the winner.”

Jackson chimed in, “Are we ready for a rematch? I reckon I have a shot at winning this time.”

Theresa, basking in the glory of her victory, laughed lightly. “I’ll sit this one out and enjoy my victory.”

Meanwhile, Penelope, eyeing the flushed Raven, had other plans. “You seem a bit flushed, Raven. Sit out this round with me.”

As Penelope led Raven away, Ethan couldn’t help but smirk, a craving for more of Raven stirring within him.

“Liam, I assure you, I am a gentleman,” Ethan protested, his gaze still locked on Raven as Penelope led her away.

“Yes, a gentleman when the occasion suits,” Liam retorted, his gaze filled with amusement.

Ethan’s eyes darted towards Raven, longing to pull her back into their secret sanctuary, but he knew they couldn’t slip away unnoticed again.

“Ethan, where’s your mind? You seem a million miles away,” Liam asked, breaking Ethan’s reverie.

Ethan turned to face Liam, a distant look in his eyes as if he hadn’t heard a word Liam had said.

“I’ve seen that look before,” Liam uttered with a knowing smile.

“What are you talking about?” Ethan queried, confusion clouding his features.

“It’s the same look Jackson had when he started falling for Helen... Are you in love with Raven, Ethan?”

Ethan sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t know, Liam.”

“That right there,” Liam pointed out, a serious tone creeping into his voice, “is a clear sign that there’s more to this. I want my friend back, Ethan.” A hint of desperation laced his voice. “Let’s go on a hunting trip, no ladies allowed. It’ll help you get your head straight.”

Ethan hesitated, unsure.

Liam quickly interjected, “No choice, mate. We’re going tomorrow.”



Ethan and Liam moved stealthily through the dense forest, their steps muffled by the carpet of fallen leaves beneath their feet. But even as Ethan’s eyes scanned their surroundings for any sign of game, his mind was elsewhere. He found himself missing Raven, her infectious laughter, and the way her eyes lit up in animated conversation.

He yearned for the comforting familiarity of her presence, a stark contrast to the endless expanses of the wilderness. Yet, he did not miss the urban frenzy they had left behind—the unending noise or the crowds. No, it was not the city he missed. It was Raven, her presence serving as a soothing balm to his solitude.

Liam cast a sidelong glance at Ethan, noting his far-off gaze. He sighed. “Ethan, your head better not be stuck on Raven

again. We came out here so that you could clear your thoughts, remember?”

Ethan snapped out of his reverie. He sighed and confessed, “It might be.”

Liam’s expression hardened. “Listen, Ethan. This pretend thing with Raven—you’re getting too involved, mate. This isn’t real.”

“What if it is?” Ethan retorted, his tone hinting at defiance.

Liam was taken aback. “Have you lost all your senses? I knew this was going to happen. I warned you not to go all out, but you just don’t listen, do you? You’re falling for her, admit it.”

“And what if I am? She’s smart, funny, and believe it or not, she does have a wild streak in her,” Ethan shot back, his face a stony mask.

“Are we talking about the same Raven Davenport here? The prissy and proper diamond of the Season? Besides, when did you start liking blondes?” Liam questioned. “You’ve always been into brunettes.”

Ethan paused before replying, a hint of softness in his voice, “Raven’s different, Liam.”

Liam's gaze shifted from Ethan, landing on a large buck, its magnificent antlers glinting in the speckled sunlight filtering through the foliage. He slowly reached for his bow, an arrow already on the string. His fingers danced gently over the feathered end as he drew in a deep breath, steadying his nerves.

As silently as a whisper, he drew back the string, his eyes trained on the oblivious buck. Suddenly, with a swift movement that was almost a blur, Liam released the arrow. However, the arrow veered off course, colliding with a tree and sending a shower of bark to the forest floor, while the buck, alarmed by the noise, sprang away into the safety of the dense undergrowth.

Liam's shoulders slumped slightly as he watched his missed opportunity disappear into the woods.

Ethan watched as Liam retrieved the arrow, a smirk playing on his lips. "Nice aim, Robin Hood. I never thought I'd live to see the day," he teased.

Liam, visibly irritated, shot back, "Oh, and you think you could've done better? Your mind isn't even on the hunt, Ethan!"

Ethan's expression grew serious. "I have a different hunt on my mind, Liam. I intend to win Raven's heart."

Liam shook his head. “That’s a bad idea, mate. You’re just going to get your heart trampled on.”

Ethan’s eyes hardened. “I can’t stand the thought of her being with anyone else. I need to tell her how I feel.”

Liam argued, “You’re not even trying to get her off your mind, are you? You do what you want, but you’re setting yourself up to get hurt.”

“And what would you know about such things, Liam? Weren’t you the one who proclaimed you would never marry?” Ethan retorted.

Liam sighed. “You’re right, I did say that. Maybe if I found someone who caught my eye, like Raven has caught yours, I might change my mind, but I highly doubt that.”

“Have a little faith. Maybe fate will step in for you, just like it did for me,” Ethan suggested, hoping to give his friend a bit of encouragement.

Liam shook his head as he brushed off the comment. “I’d rather not talk about this. We came here to hunt, and I’m not going back empty-handed.”

Ethan's keen eyes suddenly caught a movement in the distance. He held his breath and squinted. The buck was back. He turned to Liam. "What say we make a little game out of this?"

"And what did you have in mind?" Liam asked, arching an eyebrow.

"A little wager," Ethan answered, a smirk stretching across his face.

A hint of interest flashed in Liam's eyes as he responded, "All right. Let's say if I bag this buck, we stay one more day."

Their attention turned back to the buck, its majestic antlers catching the fading sunlight in the distance. Ethan gestured subtly, pointing out the buck to Liam.

"And if I bag it, then we leave after we dress it," Ethan said, feeling his chest tightening.

It was a long shot to outshoot Liam, but he had confidence his aim would be steady and true.

A smirk appeared on Liam's face. "Challenge accepted."

The forest fell into a deep silence as they both began to track the buck, moving stealthily, their eyes not leaving their target for a moment. The anticipation was electric in the air as they took position, arrows nocked and bows drawn.

The moment stretched, then, with a release of breath and the twang of bowstrings, two arrows shot out simultaneously.

But it was Ethan's arrow that found its mark, bringing the buck down, much to Liam's chagrin.

“Pack up, we're going back.”

CHAPTER 22



*R*aven sat in the drawing room with a book in hand, but her mind was far away from the story she was trying to read. Her thoughts lingered on Ethan as she wondered when he would be coming back. Penelope sat across from her, busily engaged with her needlework.

The soft crackling of the logs in the fireplace was the only audible sound. However, even in the quiet, tranquil room, Raven's thoughts were turbulent. Every time she attempted to immerse herself in the tale, she found herself transforming the hero of the story into Ethan.

She snapped the book shut, irritated by her imagination. She had no right to miss him nor any reason to let her feelings for him shape her reality, yet she found herself unable to resist him. She harbored genuine feelings for Ethan, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't dispel them.

"What's gotten you so irritated? Does it have anything to do with Ethan being gone all weekend?" Penelope teased, breaking the silence in the room.

Raven shook her head, forcing a smile as she cultivated the lie. “No, I’m just not in the mood to read, I guess.”

Deep down, she had to admit that she was bothered because of Ethan. She wanted his company over all else.

“When is he supposed to return?” Penelope asked, setting her needlework to the side.

“I don’t know. When Father goes, he’s usually out for several days—sometimes even weeks,” Raven answered.

“Maybe he’ll stop by when he comes back into town.”

Penelope’s words gave Raven a bit of hope as she shifted her eyes to the open window, longing for Ethan to stroll through the doors at that very moment.

While Penelope’s words still hung in the air, Raven’s ears perked up as the clopping of horse’s hooves on the gravel pathway rattled her. Flying to the window, Raven stared at the horse rushing towards their house. Her heart dropped into her stomach the moment she realized it wasn’t Ethan’s horse approaching the house but Anthony’s.

Raven rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath, “What on earth is he doing here?”

Penelope looked puzzled and rushed to her sister’s side. “Who are you talking about?”

“The Viscount,” Raven grumbled, glaring at Anthony as he dismounted.

“It seems we have a visitor,” Mathilda said as she burst through the door with a wild gleam in her eyes. “Raven, Penelope, I want you both to stay in this room.”

“Mother? What is going on?” Raven asked as suspicions brewed within her.

“Seeing as how you refuse to take control of your future, your father and I have decided to expedite your union,” Mathilda stated as she arched an eyebrow, daring Raven to respond.

“What?” Raven gasped.

“Now, stay put, both of you,” Mathilda ordered before turning on her heel and walking out of the room.

Raven glanced at Penelope for some sort of explanation. With wild eyes and eagerness, Penelope bolted from the window to

the doorway. Raven trailed behind her.

Both girls poked their heads out the door, catching sight of their father greeting Anthony.

“Would you just look at him,” Penelope sneered. “What in the world is he wearing?”

“I don’t know,” Raven mumbled as she found Anthony’s boisterous outfit far too pompous for a simple meeting with her father.

“It’s as if he’s trying to win the favor of the Queen herself.” Penelope stifled a giggle, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

The girls quickly darted away from the doorway the moment Mathilda’s head whipped around. Her expression was stern, and the scowl on her face made Raven want to laugh.

“What is he even doing here?” Penelope questioned as she plopped back down on the couch.

Raven shrugged nonchalantly, opening her book once more. “Maybe he’s come to help Father with the ships stuck in the harbor. But we should do as Mother says and leave them be.”

“Aren’t you even a little bit curious as to what they’re talking about?” Penelope asked.

Raven shook her head as she returned to her previously abandoned story and left the mystery of Anthony’s visit hanging in the air.

In the quiet of the room, the muffled voices of the adults reached the sister’s ears. Their voices rose and pulled Raven from her book. Although it was hard to decipher the conversation, her curiosity was piqued by the hushed tones and the unintelligible murmur.

“It doesn’t sound like Father’s business,” Penelope observed, her brows furrowed in thought.

Raven concentrated a moment as she kept her eyes locked on the doorway. “You’re right,” she agreed. She then tilted her head subtly towards the door, her eyes holding a suggestion that Penelope understood immediately.

An unspoken agreement passed between the sisters, their shared intrigue compelling them to find out just what was transpiring in their father’s study.

With a conspiratorial glint in her eyes, Raven turned towards Penelope, whispering, “Why don’t you go find out what they’re talking about?”

“Why don’t *you* go?” Penelope retorted.

“You’re smaller and less likely to be seen than I am,” Raven countered as she placed the book down once again. Her voice was laced with excitement, and the prospect of a secret adventure lit her features.

Penelope, however, slumped and shook her head. She glared at Raven, her forehead creased with worry. “But you know I’ll get caught! Mother and Father are always harder on me than you,” she protested, her gaze darting anxiously towards the closed door. Her voice dropped to a whisper as she added, “Perhaps you should do it instead. They won’t scold you the way they’ll scold me.”

The room fell silent, the tension from their conflicting opinions hanging heavily in the air. Raven huffed, placing her book on the table as she rose from the couch.

“Fine, I’ll go. Can’t have you trembling in your boots and causing a scene, can we?” she retorted, her voice laced with sarcasm.

“I am not scared,” Penelope shot back, her face flushing with anger. “It’s called self-preservation. I don’t want another scolding, that’s all.”

Raven, hiding her apprehension behind a half-smile, stood and inched closer to the door. She peeked out into the hallway as her heart pounded in her chest. With a deep breath, she stepped out of the room, pretending as if she was merely headed to the kitchen.

As she moved closer to their father's study, the voices became clearer, and she stopped, her heart sinking. She caught phrases like "wedding by the end of the week" and realized with a start that she was being bargained off, much like a prized possession, to ensure that her father's ships could dock with Anthony's approval.

Rushing back to the drawing room, she found Penelope practically on the edge of the couch, her face lit up with eager anticipation, but Raven couldn't bring herself to speak. She was dumbstruck, her mind spinning with what she had just overheard. She couldn't believe her parents would do this to her—sell her off for their own gain. It was cruel and unfair.

Raven sank into the plush couch, her mind a whirlwind of emotions. The taste of betrayal was bitter in her mouth. She looked at Penelope and finally found her voice.

"I won't do it, Penelope. I cannot and won't have any part in it," she declared, her voice shaking with determination.

She could see the shock register on Penelope's face, but her eyes burned with defiance and an assertive determination that

Penelope had never seen before.

There was a new side to Raven, a side that was ready to fight for her heart, her future.

Penelope noticed the expression on Raven's face and immediately knew something was wrong. "What is it? What did you hear?" she asked, concern etched on her face. "Raven, what happened?" she pressed, shaking her slightly to snap her out of her daze. "What's going on?"

"I can't believe it," Raven mumbled, her voice barely audible.

Just then, they heard the voices of Mathilda and Oscar bidding Anthony farewell. Penelope slipped to the door, peeking out to watch Anthony leave.

She whispered over her shoulder to Raven, her voice trembling, "I don't like the smirk on his face."

Penelope pulled back quickly and scrambled back to the couch, pretending she had been there the whole time. The sound of their mother's footsteps echoed like thunder in Raven's ears, each step sending a wave of dread coursing through her body. She could feel herself stiffen, her heart pounding against her ribcage as the inevitable approached. She didn't want to hear the news, didn't want to face what she already knew.

The concrete reality was far too painful to confront.

Mathilda entered the room, her eyes instantly falling on the sisters, a scowl etched on her face as if she instinctively knew they had overheard the conversation. Penelope straightened up on the couch, her fingers quickly finding her needlework, and Raven knew she was trying to be as insignificant as she could be.

Mathilda's gaze lingered on Penelope for a second before it moved to Raven, and Raven watched as her mother's expression hardened. Raven swallowed the fear in her throat as her mouth dried, and she braced herself for the storm that was about to come.

“What was the Viscount doing here, Mother?” Penelope asked, her eyes narrowing.

Mathilda glanced at her and made a sweeping gesture with her hand, indicating that Penelope should move. Without hesitation, Penelope rose, leaving the couch and her sister to their mother. Raven felt a pang of abandonment as her sister retreated.

Mathilda slid onto the couch beside Raven, her features softening into a brilliant smile. “Anthony had come to ask for your hand in marriage, dear.”

Raven's heart clenched. Her fears manifested before her as the words spilled out of her mother's mouth. Regaining somewhat of her senses, she shook her head. "But I am to be married to Lord Whitland."

"Not anymore. Anthony is far more suitable for you and far more valuable than Lord Whitland ever could be," Mathilda replied, waving her hand as if the matter was trivial.

"But I love Ethan. I won't marry anyone else," Raven declared, her voice filled with determination.

"You will do as your father tells you," Mathilda scolded, her voice echoing through the room.

Raven recoiled from her mother's temper and waited till her ire had died down.

Mathilda cleared her throat and rolled her shoulders back. "No man in his right mind would have such a long engagement to such a lovely woman. He'd want to snatch you up as quickly as possible so that he could start a family," she reasoned.

Raven jumped from the couch, pacing the room. "I won't marry Anthony," she protested, folding her arms over her chest, trying to hold the broken bits of herself together.

“You will. He’s a far better option. Besides, he comes from a better family with more wealth than Lord Whitland’s,” Mathilda stated coolly.

“Is it influence you want, Mother? Is that why you’d make me settle for such a man?”

Mathilda paused, considering her words. “Yes, the Viscount does have a bigger influence that will help this family in ways you couldn’t even comprehend.”

Raven glared at her mother. “Does this sudden marriage to Anthony have anything to do with Father’s ships stuck in the harbor?”

Mathilda tried to shrug it off. “And what do you know of such things, huh? Nothing. And you should know well enough not to speak on matters that you are not familiar with.”

“Anthony could use his influence to get Father’s business back on track. That’s what this is really about, isn’t it? It’s orchestrated, so I have no choice but to marry him,” Raven spat out.

Mathilda didn’t deny it, confirming Raven’s worst fears.

“I won’t break off my engagement with Ethan!” Raven declared, her voice quivering.

“That’s precisely what you’re going to do.” Mathilda rose from the couch, storming over to her daughter. Her words were like a slap in the face. “You’re not married to him yet, and I don’t believe you ever will be.”

The harsh words stung, and Raven fought back tears. Her mother’s certainty crushed her. She knew Mathilda was right, but she couldn’t accept it.

“A woman’s duty is to marry advantageously,” Mathilda continued, her tone unwavering. “And that’s what you will do.”

As Raven’s mother left the room, Raven slumped on the couch, her mind spinning. How could she give up the man she loved for a loveless marriage based on status and wealth?

Raven sat there, lost in thought, and memories of Ethan flooded her mind. She remembered their first meeting and all of his stolen kisses. She could feel the cold tendrils of despair creeping into her heart, replacing the warm memories of Ethan with the icy reality of her future with Anthony.

Her engagement to Ethan had been a beacon of hope in her otherwise predictable life, a secret haven where she could escape and be herself. His laughter was her music, his smile her sunshine.

Now, all of that was on the brink of being ripped away from her, replaced by a cold, loveless marriage. The pain was unbearable, like a dagger relentlessly twisting in her heart. She clutched her chest, hoping to ease the ache, but it was unyielding. The room blurred as tears stung her eyes, rolling down her cheeks in rivers of despair. Her heart felt heavy, like a stone sinking in a deep, dark abyss. She was being torn away from her love, forced into an unwanted life, and there was nothing she could do about it.

“Raven,” Penelope began gently, her voice barely above a whisper. “I know this is hard, but life is full of these moments. We can’t always choose our path, but we can choose how we walk on it.”

Raven turned towards Penelope, her tears glistening in the faint candlelight. “You don’t understand, Penelope,” she choked out. “I can’t... I can’t just forget Ethan and pretend to be happy with someone else.”

Penelope reached out to her sister, her fingers gently brushing Raven’s shoulder in a futile effort to give comfort. “I understand more than you think, Raven,” she said softly. “And I’m not asking you to forget Ethan. But sometimes, we have to find the strength within us to move forward, even if it feels impossible. Besides, your engagement to Ethan wasn’t supposed to go this far. You weren’t supposed to fall for him. So, why does it matter that Mother wants you to marry

Anthony? Sure, he's not the best suitor for you, but surely if it helps the family..."

Raven turned away, her sobs filling the room. Her despair was palpable, and she felt a helpless pang of sorrow. This was a battle Raven needed to fight herself, and all Penelope could do was stand by her side, offering her unwavering support.

Penelope took in a deep breath, her voice stern as she uttered the painful truth. "Raven, the engagement to Ethan was a ruse, a diversion. I warned you not to let your guard down around him. Ethan is a rake, and he'll always be one. But Anthony is a reputable man, and if he can help Father, why not at least try to give him the benefit of the doubt?"

Raven's eyes flashed with defiance. "You're wrong, Penelope! Ethan isn't like that. He's kind, he's funny... He's loyal to a fault! And I don't believe he was ever a rake."

"He was on trial for murder, or had you forgotten that as well?" Penelope retorted, hoping to shake some sense into her sister.

"I don't care!" Raven shot back, her face set in determination. "He wouldn't hurt a fly. Those accusations... they're just rumors, like the rest of his reputation."

Penelope sighed, her face softening. “You’re going to have to tell him before anyone else does. If you really care for Ethan, then you should be the one to inform him of what’s going on.”

Raven wiped the tears off her face, her voice choked. “I don’t know if he’s back from his hunting trip yet, but you’re right, I have to be the one to tell him. It’s going to hurt him just as much as it’s hurting me.”

Without another word, Raven stood up, exiting the room; she run through the hallway and stormed past her parents.

“Where are you going, Raven?” her father demanded.

“Out,” she retorted, pulling on her cloak. She snapped at the servants to ready the carriage.

Her mother followed her outside, aghast. “Raven! Get back inside!” she demanded.

“You’ve ordered me to marry someone I don’t want, Mother. But you won’t always control me,” Raven fired back.

Her mother stood there, dumbstruck, as she rushed towards the arriving carriage. Climbing in, she ordered the driver to set off, leaving a trail of shocked faces in her wake.

CHAPTER 23



Ethan found himself eagerly anticipating the familiar comforts of home. His thoughts were consumed by Raven, her enchanting smile and the sound of her laughter echoing in his mind. He began to ponder when he would next be able to bask in her presence.

The weekend had seemed an eternity without her, and he found himself questioning if she had missed him with the same intensity. The possibility of Raven longing for him as he did long for her brought a sense of warmth and anticipation.

As Ethan approached the house, the servants were waiting to greet him. “My Lord,” one of them called, taking the reins of his horse as he dismounted, “you have a visitor.”

“Please tell me it isn’t my grandmother?” Ethan asked, his brow furrowing in curiosity. “I’m in no mood for her visit today.”

“No, My Lord,” the servant replied, hiding a small smile. “It’s Miss Davenport.”

Ethan's heart skipped a beat at the mere mention of Raven's name. Any fatigue he had felt from his journey instantly vanished and was replaced with an eager anticipation of seeing her face. Despite the dust on his clothes and the scent of the outdoors clinging to him, he was determined to see her.

Ethan's heart pounded in his chest as he stepped into the grand entrance of his home, his eyes casting about for the one face he desired to see above all others. More servants bowed to greet him, their warm welcome causing a brief, fleeting smile to touch his lips.

"Lord Whitland," the butler greeted, his voice echoing in the vast hall. "Miss Davenport is waiting for you in your study."

Ethan's heart leaped with excitement, though it was quickly tempered by the butler's sobering tone.

"However, My Lord, she seems quite upset."

Ethan felt a ripple of worry cut through his anticipation. He wondered, with a growing sense of unease, what could have transpired in his absence to cause such distress to gentle Raven.

With a quick nod of acknowledgment to the butler, Ethan strode purposefully towards his study, his mind swirling with

concern. As he entered the room, his gaze fell on Raven, standing by the fireplace. The flickering light from the fire cast dancing shadows on her face, highlighting the tear tracks staining her cheeks. His heart clenched at the sight, and all thoughts of his weariness and the dust of the road were forgotten. He moved towards her, his expression filled with concern.

“Raven,” he murmured gently, reaching out to her.

Raven took in a shaky breath, her hand moving to stop Ethan’s approach. “Please, don’t come any closer. I’m afraid if you do, I’ll not be able to say what it is I’ve come here to say.”

“What is going on? You know you can tell me anything, but you’ve got to tell me something. I’m going mad over here.”

“There’s news, Ethan,” she managed to choke out. Her voice was thick with unshed tears, her blue eyes filled with sorrow.

Ethan’s heart pounded in his chest, his brows knitting together in concern. “Raven, whatever it is, we can—”

“No, Ethan,” she interrupted, her hand held out in a silent plea for him to stop. “This isn’t good news.” Her gaze fell to the floor, her courage waning.

The worry in Ethan's chest transformed into gnawing dread as his mind raced with possibilities. He dared to take another step towards Raven, but she backed away, her gaze still fixed on the floor.

"Raven..." he began, his voice barely above a whisper.

Raven's gaze darted up to meet his, her heart pounding in her chest as she blurted out, "We have to call off our engagement."

Ethan froze, his heart plummeting at her words. "What?" he asked, his voice strained. "Why?"

Raven hesitated, her lips parting to speak yet no words coming out. "Our engagement was a ruse, you know this," she managed to stammer out, "and things have changed."

"What happened while I was gone?" he demanded, his voice trembling despite his efforts to keep it steady.

"The Viscount," Raven said, her voice barely audible. "He came to ask for my hand, and my parents accepted his proposal."

Ethan felt as though he'd been gut-punched, his breath coming out in a rush. "But we're engaged," he managed to say, the words catching in his throat.

Raven took another step back, shaking her head. “Ethan, you were never going to marry me. You’ve stated yourself how that is not something you could ever do,” she said, her voice trembling. “And we weren’t supposed to get close.”

“But we did.” Ethan’s voice was desperate now, pleading. “Raven, I know you have feelings for me, and I have them for you as well. Don’t you see? You and I belong with one another. This whole thing may have started off as a sham, but it’s not that way to me, not anymore—”

“That doesn’t matter now,” Raven cut him off, her voice breaking with the effort it took to hold back her tears. “I have to marry Anthony.”

“Do you even want to marry him?” Ethan’s question hung in the air, heavy and thick with tension.

Raven shook her head, a bitter laugh escaping her lips. “It doesn’t matter what I want, Ethan,” she replied, her voice trembling.

Ethan reached out to her, but she recoiled from his touch. “It does matter,” he insisted. “You’re the one who has to take charge of your life. No one else can live it but you. So, tell me now, and be honest, do you have feelings for me? Because I know that you do.”

Raven's tears spilled over, and she shook her head, clearly conflicted. The words lingered on her lips, but she wouldn't say them.

Ethan grabbed her arm, trying to pull her to him, longing to wrap his arms around her and reassure her. But Raven backed away again, her voice choked as she whispered, "Let me go, Ethan."

"No." Ethan's voice was firm. "You belong with me, Raven. I can't stop thinking about you. The weekend was torture without you there." He sighed, desperation creeping into his voice. "Don't marry Anthony. We can elope if that's what it takes. We can run away, and I promise to be with you for the rest of our lives, but, please, don't do this. You don't have to walk away from me."

Hope flickered in Raven's eyes at his words.

"We can leave right now, get married, and then no one will be able to dictate your life anymore. Please, don't marry him."

But she pulled away, shaking her head. "I don't have a choice, Ethan. I..."

Ethan's patience snapped. "Why are you even here, Raven? Why even come here if you already made up your mind? Was

it to spare my feelings? Did you think by telling me yourself that it would somehow be all right?"

"I wanted to be the one to tell you," she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper, "before the whole ton starts talking about it."

Ethan's expression hardened as he watched her, his eyes scanning her face as if searching for an unspoken truth. "I don't believe that's why you came here," he said, his voice low and steady. "You came because you knew I wouldn't let you go without a fight. That's what you secretly want, isn't it? Even though you won't admit it to yourself." He paused, taking a step closer. "There's something between us, and it scares you."

"Yes," Raven snapped, her eyes flashing with a mixture of fear and defiance. "Yes, I'm scared. But that doesn't matter, Ethan. Not unless you can somehow get my father's ships docked."

"What are you talking about?" Ethan asked, his brows furrowing in confusion.

"Anthony... he came to the house this morning. He proposed to my father that he could expedite the quarantine process and get the cargo off the ships by the end of the week," she explained, her voice breaking.

Ethan exploded. “But only if you marry him. Can’t you see you’re being used?” he roared. “You’re nothing but a pawn to them to advance your father’s business!”

“I know,” Raven retorted, her voice choked. “But there’s nothing I can do. I’m marrying Anthony. Besides, my mother knows you’ll never marry me. Maybe she knew from the start that our engagement was a sham.”

Ethan clenched his jaw. “It may have started that way,” he said, his voice laced with a mix of anger and desperation, “but things have changed. I want you, Raven. I won’t let you marry anyone else but me.”

Raven pulled away, tears cascading down her cheeks. “Ethan,” she whispered, “what we had... I’ll always remember it, but I have to go.”

She tried to leave, but Ethan blocked her path.

“Let me go, Ethan,” she begged, but he refused to budge and remained planted before her.

“If I keep you here, then you can’t marry him,” he said, his voice filled with a desperate sort of determination.

“You can’t force me to marry you, Ethan!” Raven cried, her voice shaking with frustration and fear.

“Why not?” he challenged. “Everyone else seems to be forcing you to do things you don’t want to do.”

“That’s not fair!” she fired back, her eyes blazing.

“Life isn’t fair, Raven,” he shot back. “Anyone who tells you differently is lying.”

“Please, just let me go,” she begged. “Forget about me.”

“I could never forget you,” he argued, his voice breaking as he grabbed her by the arm. But then, he saw the pity in her eyes, and he felt his resolve crumble.

He couldn’t keep her. Not like this. He let go.

As Raven walked out of his study, Ethan felt his heart shatter into a million pieces. He watched helplessly as the only woman he had ever truly loved disappeared from his sight. The mere thought of her belonging to Anthony was utterly wrong—monstrous, even.

Raven was his. But he knew he couldn’t just steal her away, lock her up, or coerce her into running away with him. The choice had to be hers—she had to choose to be with him.

Despair and frustration clawed at him, and he paced the length of his study, trying to find a solution. A sudden realization dawned on him like a break of day through the darkened horizon. Maybe he could speak to Raven's family and Anthony. Perhaps if he poured out his heart, telling them how he felt about Raven, they could reconsider the decision. If they truly cared for her happiness, they wouldn't force her into a loveless marriage with Anthony.

Ethan dashed for the front door, desperate to catch Raven before she left. As he flung the door open, his heart pounded in his chest, his breaths coming in short, sharp gasps. But he was too late. Her carriage was already bounding down the driveway, leaving only a cloud of dust in its wake. Devastation washed over him in agonizing waves.

A servant watching the scene unfold from the doorway cautiously approached Ethan. "Is there something I can do, My Lord?" he asked, his voice filled with concern.

Ethan spun around, his eyes hard and determined. "Prepare a fresh horse," he ordered. "I'm going to speak to the Davenports."

The servant hesitated for a moment, then ventured, "Begging your pardon, My Lord, but if you're planning on winning them over, you might want to be better dressed."

Ethan paused, glancing down at his disheveled clothing. The servant was right. He couldn't go to the Davenports' estate smelling like the back side of a horse.

"Fine," he conceded, the hint of a plan forming in his mind. "Prepare the clothes, but make it quick. I'm going after Raven. She will be mine."

His voice carried a thunderous determination that echoed in the grand hallway, a solemn vow to the woman he loved.



"Lord Whitland, you're not setting foot inside this house," Oscar declared definitively as he pushed against the door, blocking Ethan from entering.

"My Lord, I need to see Raven," Ethan implored, his eyes darting over Oscar's shoulder through the cracked door, hoping to catch a glimpse of Raven.

"That's not happening. The Viscount has already proposed to her. He's her betrothed now."

"We had an agreement, Oscar. Raven and I are engaged. I've been courting her for weeks now," Ethan countered, frustration simmering beneath his words.

“That’s exactly the point, Ethan. You’ve been courting her, but there’s been no talk of a wedding. You’ve been stringing us along like it’s a game,” Oscar spat out, cold fury in his eyes.

“I am in love with Raven, Oscar,” Ethan confessed earnestly. “I had planned a winter wedding.”

“Well, Ethan, the Viscount will be her husband now. Anthony is a more respectable man than you are, and you will leave this instance,” Oscar shot back.

“You mean he’s got more influence in the ton,” Ethan retorted as he pressed ever harder to make his way into the house.

Oscar didn’t deny it. “You’re a strapping young man, Ethan. I’m sure you’ll find another wife soon if that’s what you really desire. Now, go bother someone else. Raven doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

Bitter anger surged through Ethan’s veins as he relented and stepped back, the door slamming shut, sealing his fate. But a glimmer of hope remained as he caught sight of Raven, her face peeking out from behind the thin curtain in the window. Her face was stained with tears.

Seeing her like this pained him, yet it also fortified his resolve.

“I’ll make this right, Raven,” he muttered, mounting his horse. “If the Davenports won’t listen, then I’ll make Anthony change his mind.”



Ethan found himself standing within the grandeur of the Viscount’s foyer, deliberately trying not to blend into the ornately decorated background. The repeated slight by yet another servant passing him without acknowledgment was becoming infuriating. He couldn’t help but feel as if Anthony was delightfully toying with him, using these delays as some sort of power play.

But his patience was dwindling, and his frustration had begun to bubble up within him, urging him to take action. With a firm set to his jaw, Ethan made up his mind and started striding down the vast corridor to find Anthony. He was determined to discuss the matter of Raven’s hand in marriage, regardless of Anthony’s games.

Just as he was about to take a turn, Anthony made his appearance, descending the grand staircase with an air of pompous self-importance. The sight of the Viscount, with his annoyingly superior demeanor, grated on Ethan’s already frayed nerves.

Anthony fixed Ethan with a smug gaze, the corners of his mouth curling up into a knowing smirk. “I know why you’ve come, Ethan. But let me stop you there. The answer is no,” he

began, his arms folded across his chest. “No matter what lies you’ve concocted, I won’t listen.”

Ethan, taken aback, found his voice. “Lying is far too a common thing, one I’m sure you’re most familiar with. As for me, I find lying unamusing.”

“Is that so? Then tell me why you’ve come,” Anthony enquired, lifting his chin and shooting Ethan a callous glare.

“I love Raven,” Ethan confessed, his voice low but resolute. “If you’ve ever once in your life felt the sting, the torment of such a thing, you’d step aside so I may marry her.”

Anthony let out a dark, wicked laugh that echoed through the grand hall. “Oh, Ethan. I remember you at the ball a week ago, threatening me to leave Raven alone. But it isn’t you who will wed her. You would do well to leave my bride-to-be alone.”

“Your bride-to-be?” Ethan spat out, his expression incredulous. “You don’t even love her. Why are you marrying Raven?”

Anthony’s smirk widened, revealing his true colors. “Do you have a clue how much cargo the Davenports bring into the ton? The money I stand to make by expediting their ships into the harbor? It’s just good business, Ethan. Something you clearly know nothing about.”

Anthony's threat hung in the air as Ethan's expression hardened. "I have the power to either ruin or elevate anyone within this town. And you, Ethan... you've lost. Accept it graciously and leave before you make a bigger fool of yourself than you already are."

Fury ignited within Ethan, and he couldn't hold back. He slugged Anthony, who staggered back in surprise. Then, without another word, Ethan stormed out of the house.

With his knuckles pulsing from the pain, Ethan walked aimlessly through the streets under the cover of night, lost in his thoughts and in desperate search of a solution to prevent Raven's impending wedding. He found himself standing before Raven's house, staring up at the dimly lit windows.

With a newfound resolve, he decided to sneak in once more. He'd done it once, he could do it again. He had to see Raven, to talk some sense into her and convince her to run away with him and leave this world behind them. It was the only ointment he could use to mend the ache in his heart.

Under the cloak of darkness, Ethan traversed the quiet, manicured pathways of Raven's backyard. The moon provided just enough light for him to navigate the foliage without causing a commotion. His heart pounded in his chest, the adrenaline fueling his determination. As he neared the back entrance, he paused, hearing a soft rustle from the bushes nearby.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the side door. Ethan froze and pressed his body against the wall, holding his breath. Through the dim light, he spotted Penelope. If there was one person in all the ton he could get to help him, he hoped it would be her.

Carefully, he slipped out of the shadows with his hands up, and his gaze flickered from the door to the windows and back again. Her wide-eyed gaze met his, and he pressed his finger to his lips, hoping that would be enough to silence her.

Her mouth opened to scream, but Ethan swiftly covered it with his hand, stifling any sound that could escape from her and give him away. With his heart pounding recklessly in his chest, his eyes poured out what his heart couldn't say.

“Penelope,” he whispered, “I mean no harm, but I need to see Raven. It’s urgent.”

Fear and hope mingling in his veins, he peeled back his hand, giving her room to speak.

Please, don't call for help.

Penelope's voice trembled. “Ethan? What on earth are you doing here?”

“I need to see Raven.”

“She’s been in her room since she returned from your house. She won’t see anyone, not even me,” she divulged.

Ethan’s face fell further. “I can’t let her marry Anthony,” he stated, his voice barely above a whisper.

Penelope nodded in understanding, her gaze meeting his. “I know, and I wish it were different, but that’s what our parents want. Anthony’s influence and status in Society are solid, and he wants Raven to better his own social standing with her impeccable reputation. Lord Whitland, you should know the wedding... it’s happening tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? So soon?” Ethan gasped. “Events like this take weeks—months, even—to plan.”

“You clearly don’t know anything about my mother,” Penelope said. “She’s been planning Raven’s wedding since she came of age. Mother’s been squirreling away all the preparations, and even paid a large sum to the clergy so she’d have one on the ready.”

“And the license? Surely that takes time,” Ethan said, trying to remain reasonable despite the fear pounding him into the ground.

“From what I know, it’s all set, just a name and a signature are needed. You really don’t understand. Mother has thought of everything. She’d have it done tonight if it weren’t for the tailor upstairs right now, resizing the dress. All the invitations went out the moment my parents struck the deal with the Viscount. It’s all set. The only thing that could stop it would be something so scandalous that it would make the Viscount back out.”

“You’re brilliant,” Ethan said, trying to restrain the excitement in his voice.

Penelope’s words sparked an idea so wild and crazy within Ethan that he knew it would be the only thing that would stop a wedding.

Ethan looked around at the grand house, the manicured gardens, and the whispering trees. Suddenly, it all made sense—this was all about reputation and societal standings.

He embraced Penelope, his heart pounding with newfound resolve. She stiffened in surprise and then relaxed into his arms.

“Everything will work out in the end,” he promised her.

Ethan thanked her, stealing one more glimpse at the house as if committing it to memory. The plan slowly formed in his mind

as he scrambled back over the high hedge.

“Forgive me, Raven,” he mumbled under his breath, his heart heavy with regret. “I only hope you’ll forgive me for what I have to do.”

CHAPTER 24



*A*s the first light of dawn pierced through the thin curtains, Raven stirred, her eyes slowly fluttering open. A groan escaped her lips as she buried her face deeper into the plush pillow, desperately wishing to escape the cruel reality of morning. Her body felt heavy, each limb laden with a reluctance that mirrored her mind. Even as the day promised new opportunities and experiences, Raven just yearned for the solace of her dreams, the sweet sanctuary of sleep. Today, more than ever, she didn't want to face the world.

Yet, her dreams were of Ethan. She could still hear his laughter rippling through her consciousness like a warm, comforting breeze. Vivid memories of their shared joy and whispered promises invaded her waking thoughts, making the harsh reality of the day even more unbearable. The mere thought of facing her parents, their expectations, and the impending, inescapable union with Anthony sent a wave of revulsion through her.

Anthony was nothing more than a stranger, a cage intended to clip her wings and snuff out the fierce spirit within her. The

mere thought of him invoked a bitter taste in her mouth which was a stark contrast to the sweet memories of Ethan.

Suddenly, the door to her room burst open with a ferocity that broke her train of thought. Penelope stood in the doorway with an impish grin, her eyes sparkling with concern.

“Raven, you need to get up,” she declared with a theatrical flourish.

Her voice, filled with innocent excitement, was a jarring contradiction to Raven’s somber mood. Penelope’s impatience for the day was palpable, her spirit untamed and her exuberance a constant reminder of the life that Raven yearned for.

Despite the stark contrast in their temperaments, the sight of Penelope was a welcome distraction from her grim thoughts of Anthony, allowing her a brief respite from her impending reality.

“I know. It’s my wedding day, after all,” Raven murmured, almost to herself, her voice barely above a whisper. “But I don’t want to get up. Please, Penelope, tell me you have a solution to get me out of this.”

“I don’t think there’s going to be a wedding,” Penelope replied, her voice trembling slightly.

Raven's heart leaped at her sister's words, a glimmer of hope sparking in her chest. "What are you talking about?" she asked, her voice sharp with both excitement and apprehension.

"Anthony is downstairs. He's talking with our parents, and it doesn't sound good," Penelope relayed, her impish grin replaced with a look of worry.

Without another word, Raven threw off her covers and rose from her bed, her heart pounding in her chest. As Penelope left to wait outside, the room was filled with the quiet shuffle of servants. Their expressions were somber, and they averted their eyes as they went about their duties.

"What's going on? Why won't you look at me?" Raven asked, her gaze darting from one servant to the next.

Their silence only served to heighten her anxiety.

"Your mother... she gave us orders not to speak to you, Miss Davenport," one of the servants revealed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Confused and increasingly anxious, Raven finished dressing and stepped out to meet Penelope. The voices from downstairs reached her ears, Anthony's shouting standing out amidst the cacophony. A sense of dread washed over her as she grabbed

Penelope's hand, rushing down the stairs to confront the chaos unfolding below.

As Raven entered the drawing room, she was met by the seething figure of Anthony. His face was flushed with anger as he started to march towards her.

"You're not the woman I thought you were, and I cannot afford to have my name run through the mud the way you've done it to your parents!" he exclaimed.

"What is going on?" Raven asked, fear trickling into her voice.

Her father stepped in, blocking Anthony from getting any closer.

"Stop playing innocent, Raven! You know exactly what you've done!" her mother cried out, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "You've brought disgrace upon our family. You've ruined your father's business all because of your actions!"

"But I don't understand, what have I done?" Raven protested, her heart pounding with anxiety.

Anthony, unable to contain his fury, flung a sheet of paper at her. "Explain this!" he demanded.

Raven picked up the paper from the floor, her hand trembling in fear of Anthony's outburst. Her eyes widened as she read the news—she was revealed to be the author behind the David Thornhill books.

“Tell me this is a lie,” Anthony demanded, his voice shaking with betrayal.

Raven opened her mouth to deny it, but the words wouldn't come out. She was too shocked, too upset.

“I won't marry you, Raven. I... I thought you were a proper lady, that you knew your place in Society. Women don't do these things. They don't become published authors,” Anthony declared before storming out of the house, leaving a distraught Mathilda trying to calm him.

Raven, tears welling up in her eyes, turned to her father for support, but his face was etched with disappointment.

“I must attend to this. Hopefully, my business isn't ruined,” he mumbled before leaving the room.

Raven sunk onto the couch, the paper still clutched in her hand, shell-shocked by the morning's revelations. She had woken up thinking she was going to be married, and now, she was apparently responsible for ruining her family's reputation.

Trying to offer some solace, Penelope chimed in, “At least you’re not marrying Anthony, Raven. Just look at his temper!”

“But who will want me now, Penny?” Raven asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “Who could’ve known about my writing?”

“Is it true, then? Are you really the author?” Penelope asked, surprising her.

“Yes, Penny. I’ve been writing for years, but nobody knew,” Raven confessed, then paused, realization dawning on her. “Except... except for Ethan. He must have written the column. He’s the one who ruined me.”

Mathilda stormed back into the room, her features twisted in anger. “How could you? How could you do such a thing?” she yelled, her words cutting through the heavy silence.

Raven, devoid of any fight, took the verbal onslaught passively. She whispered weakly, “I just wanted something that was my own, Mother.”

Mathilda continued her tirade. “The whole ton will be talking about this. If your father can’t fix this, we’ll lose everything. His business will be bankrupt!”

“Stop being so dramatic, Mother,” Raven responded, trying to maintain her composure.

“Dramatic? You’ve become an author, Raven. Women are not authors! It’s a dreamer’s profession. They don’t amount to anything. I thought I raised you to know better,” Mathilda retorted angrily.

Raven stood, her eyes meeting her mother’s. “I will fix this, Mother.”

“You’ve done enough damage already, Raven. Haven’t you thought of your sister? This will ruin Penelope’s chances of finding a husband as well. Your actions have stained our entire family.”

Mathilda’s words stung, but the sense of betrayal Raven felt towards Ethan was worse. Why had he revealed her secret in the paper? He knew it would ruin her future. He had promised to keep her secret.

His betrayal was a harsh blow, one that left her reeling.

Overwhelmed by despair and frustration, Raven bolted out of the room, tears streaming down her face. Racing down the corridor, she rushed into her sanctuary, her room, and slammed the door shut. The silence of her room was a balm, offering a

temporary respite from the chaos outside. Suddenly, a knock broke the stillness.

“Go away!” Raven snapped. “I don’t wish to speak to anyone.”

Ignoring Raven’s plea, Penelope pushed open the door and stepped inside, closing it softly behind her. She calmly sat beside her sister, her eyes filled with a quiet understanding.

“You know, Raven, you’ve always said you never wanted to marry Anthony. Being known as an author... well, who knows? It might be beneficial for your business. I mean, David Thornhill is well-loved by all his readers,” Penelope argued.

“I can’t write anymore, Penelope. No publisher will accept a female author,” Raven retorted, her voice filled with resignation.

“Maybe it’s not as terrible as you think it is,” Penelope reassured her in a gentle voice.

“Do you not realize the magnitude of this?” Raven countered, her eyes welling up again. “Mother and Father... I’ve ruined everything for them. For us.”

Raven buried her face in Penelope’s shoulder, seeking comfort in the familiar warmth. The labyrinth of her mind was

crumbling, the walls she meticulously constructed over her lifetime were now mere ruins. She had always strived to be the perfect daughter, mastering embroidery and the piano with equal skill, reading extensively, and conducting herself with grace and refinement. She had envisioned herself as a fine wife, managing a household and attending social gatherings with poise. But now, her dreams seemed like distant fantasies.

“Who would marry me as a disgraced woman, now?” she whispered, the despair in her voice echoing in the room.

Her thoughts turned towards Ethan Holloway, the man who had played a central role in her downfall. A bitter taste filled her mouth as she thought of him. If only she hadn't met him, if only she hadn't trusted him with her deepest secrets.

As she contemplated the hurt he had caused, a shell of resoluteness formed around her heart. She would never allow him to cause her harm again. She would fortify her heart, making it impervious to his treacherous charms.

Penelope gently patted Raven's back, her voice soothing. “Raven, please tell me, how did you manage to keep this a secret? How could you write and have your books published all without any of us noticing?”

Raven pulled away, her eyes glinting with a strange fire. “You wouldn't understand, Penelope,” she replied, her voice thready with hurt. “The sleepless nights, the stolen afternoon hours,

the secrets... I worked so hard, relentlessly, hoping that one day I could tell the world my story. And for what? A life steeped in disgrace and dishonor?"

Without another word, Raven snatched the paper from Penelope's hands. With a swift, angry motion, she crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the roaring fire. The flames devoured the paper, reducing it to ashes within seconds.

"I can never step foot outside this house again," Raven said, her voice barely above a whisper. Her eyes were fixed on the burning remnants of her dreams. "My life, as I knew it, is over."

CHAPTER 25



Ethan awoke with a start, the cold leather of his study chair pressing uncomfortably against his cheek. His heart felt heavy, an unyielding stone in his chest. As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, his gaze fell on the chaos that had become his desk—a graveyard of crumpled, unfinished letters. He gingerly picked one up, squinting at the feeble words he had scrawled in a moment of desperation.

He ran his fingers through his disheveled hair, the memory hitting him like a lightning bolt. He had penned a letter, one he had actually sent, not to Raven but to the local newspaper, exposing her darkest secrets. A profound confusion washed over him.

Ethan wondered if Raven knew yet of his betrayal. The morning sunlight filtered through the blinds, casting an ominous shadow on the room, mirroring the dread that began to gnaw at his insides.

A clatter echoed in the hallway, and before Ethan could rise, the study door swung open with a bang. His grandmother

marched in, her face stern, her eyes flashing with untold ire.

“Ethan,” she acknowledged, her voice ringing through the silence.

Ethan straightened in his chair, bracing himself for the impending confrontation. He could only nod in greeting.

“Have you heard?” she demanded, slamming the morning paper onto his desk. “Your precious Raven isn’t the angel you’ve made her out to be!”

Ethan merely clenched his jaw and met her gaze. “Raven is exactly who I think she is.”

His grandmother snorted, her face scrunching in distaste. “You can’t possibly marry her now!”

“Is she not still engaged to the Viscount?”

Ethan’s heart pounded relentlessly against his ribcage, a wild drum echoing the inner turmoil that consumed him. His mind was a whirlwind of questions, the most pressing of which was about Raven’s engagement to the Viscount.

Was she still bound by her parents’ promise to another man? His palms felt clammy as he picked up the morning paper,

scanning it eagerly for any news of a broken engagement. His eyes flitted over the words, but they offered no comfort, no answers.

The uncertainty was a bitter pill, yet he swallowed it, desperation clawing at his insides. Raven's engagement was not just a mere piece of news to him. It held the key to his future, to their future together. His gaze returned to his grandmother, a silent plea in his eyes. He needed to know, needed confirmation that hope was not lost, that the woman he loved was still within his reach.

“No one will want her now. You should distance yourself from that family.”

Ethan rose from his seat, his eyes narrowing. “I will not.”

His grandmother, taken aback, shifted her gaze to his desk, her eyes landing on one of the crumpled letters. She picked it up, her eyebrows shooting up as she read.

“Ethan!” she gasped. “How did you know about Miss Davenport's secret life? Are you the one slandering her in the papers?”

Ethan's patience had worn thin. “It's none of your business, Grandmother. I suggest you leave.”

The command left her stunned.

He didn't wait for her response. "I'm going to speak with the Davenports. I expect you to be gone when I return."

With that, he stormed out of the study, barking orders for his horse to be readied.



Ethan stood outside Raven's parents' grand estate, his eyes scanning the imposing facade. He couldn't help but wonder what awaited him on the other side of the intricately carved front door. His heart pounded in his chest as he grappled with a cocktail of excitement and apprehension. Drawing a deep breath, he steeled his nerves and approached the door, his knuckles rapping against the solid wood.

A servant promptly greeted him, his polite demeanor barely masking the unease in his eyes.

"Lord Davenport, is he home?" Ethan inquired, his voice steady despite the turmoil of thoughts plaguing him.

As he stepped over the threshold, entering the grandeur of Raven's residence, he could sense an unmistakable tension hanging heavy in the air, tangible and thick as fog.

The servant dipped his head in acknowledgment, a polite smile stretching across his face. “Yes, My Lord. His Lordship is currently busy, but he should be with you shortly. Please make yourself comfortable in the foyer.” He gestured towards an elegantly furnished area adorned with plush seats and priceless paintings.

As Ethan made his way towards the designated area, he couldn't help but notice the quick, surreptitious glances cast his way by the bustling servants. Their curious gazes seemed to follow him, their whispers hushed and hurried, fanning the flames of his unease.

Suddenly, the quiet hum of the household was punctuated by the unmistakable sound of rushed footsteps echoing down the hallway. The rhythmic patter grew louder, signaling the approach of someone—or something—ushering a new wave of anticipation and anxiety within Ethan.

As Oscar Davenport rounded the corner, his face broke into a surprised smile upon seeing Ethan. “Lord Whitland! What an unexpected surprise,” he said, extending his hand. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Ethan met the handshake firmly, his gaze unwavering. “Oscar, I won't beat around the bush,” he said, his voice thick with purpose. “I've come to ask Raven to marry me.”

Oscar's smile faltered slightly, a flicker of nervousness flashing across his features. "Well, Ethan," he said, swallowing visibly, "that is... quite a matter to discuss. Perhaps we should adjourn to my study?"

Nodding in agreement, Ethan followed Oscar down the hallway towards the seclusion of the study. The whispers rose briefly as they passed, then fell into silence as the study door closed behind them.

The silence hung heavy in the room before Oscar finally found his voice. "Ethan, you must understand that the circumstances were different when I sent you away," he said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. "Things have certainly changed in a short time. I never meant to cause any harm."

But Ethan was fixated on his purpose. "Is Raven still engaged to Anthony?" he asked, his gaze steady.

Oscar hesitated, a flicker of unease crossing his face. "No, the Viscount called off the engagement earlier today," he confessed, his voice barely above a whisper. "Raven is no longer engaged."

At this, Ethan's eyes lit up. "Then send for her," he demanded.

Oscar looked taken aback. "I'm not sure—"

Ethan interrupted him, “I know about Raven’s double life, about the scandal and how the whole ton is talking. I also know about Anthony’s threat to block your shipments unless he marries Raven, which is no longer happening. That must be bad for your business.”

Oscar sighed deeply, the weight of his worries apparent in his hunched shoulders. “Yes, this will have a significant impact on our family and business,” he admitted.

Without missing a beat, Ethan proposed, “I have a smaller port nearby. It’s not much, but it can help you continue your business operations. It’s only used for my Caribbean shipments four times a year.”

Oscar eyed him suspiciously. “Is this conditional on you marrying Raven?”

“No,” Ethan said firmly. “I’m not the Viscount. I’ll not use Raven like that.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Oscar finally agreed and called a servant to fetch Raven.

As they waited, Ethan looked at Oscar. “The news about Raven must have hit you hard.”

“You have no idea,” said Oscar, his face a mask of concern. “I never expected this of Raven. I always thought it would be Penelope who would bring scandal to our doors.” He looked at Ethan warily. “But how can I trust you to let me use your port if Raven refuses?”

“I am a man of my word—” Ethan began to say but was interrupted as Raven stormed into the room.

“Ethan Holloway is anything but honorable,” she declared, walking past him to stand before her father.

“Raven, you are to wed Lord Whitland,” Oscar declared, his voice firm but his eyes soft with concern.

Raven was dumbstruck. “I won’t! You can’t force me to marry anyone! First, you promise me to Anthony, then Ethan, and then back to Anthony. I’m not a pawn you can move around your chessboard at will,” she cried out.

Just as Oscar was about to respond, the room’s door swung open, and Mathilda came in. She walked past Ethan, giving him a weary smile, and moved to stand beside Raven.

“Raven, we need to speak,” she said, grabbing Raven’s arm.

“There’s nothing to discuss, Mother,” Raven retorted. “I won’t marry Ethan. My reputation is in ruins now. I’ll end up an old

maid.”

Mathilda threw Ethan an apologetic glance before leading Raven to the corner of the room. However, Ethan could still hear her commands.

“You will marry Ethan,” Mathilda stated firmly. “If you don’t, there’ll be no opportunities left for Penelope after the mess you’ve made of our family name. Ethan is your only salvation.”

“Never!” Raven spat, but the determination in Mathilda’s eyes told Ethan this conversation was far from over.

Suddenly, Oscar interjected, “Perhaps we should give Ethan and Raven some privacy.” His voice was calm and resolute, but Ethan noticed the subtle tension in his posture.

Mathilda, caught off guard, was momentarily silent. After a few tense seconds, she relented, “Very well.” Her voice was tight, and she shot Ethan a scrutinizing glance before departing.

As the heavy wooden door closed behind Mathilda and Oscar, Ethan found himself alone with Raven. His heart pounded wildly in his chest, echoing the dread and anticipation that consumed him. He watched apprehensively as the last vestiges

of the family presence receded, leaving him in the stormy presence of Raven.

Ethan found himself holding his breath, the heavy wooden barrier now serving as the only thing separating him from the world outside—a world that seemed suddenly too distant and detached. As the echo of the closing door faded, it left behind a hollow silence that filled the room, amplifying the sound of his heartbeat drumming anxiously in his ears. He turned his gaze towards Raven, her fiery eyes still burning with defiance and indignation.

Her body language was tense, her fists clenched at her sides. She looked ready for a fight, and Ethan suddenly wondered if being alone with her was indeed a good idea. Her stormy presence was intimidating, her anger palpable. He could practically feel the electric tension crackling in the air around her. He swallowed hard, hoping he could navigate the stormy waters he had found himself in, but as he looked into her fierce eyes, he couldn't help but feel an undercurrent of intrigue and a sliver of inexplicable exhilaration.

Raven's eyes flashed with anger. "How dare you, Ethan!" she spat. "You have the audacity to come here and ask me to marry you after you've ruined my reputation?"

Ethan met her gaze steadily. "I had no choice, Raven. I couldn't stand to see you with another man. Especially Anthony."

“No right!” she shot back. “You had no right to announce it to everyone like that, to humiliate me!”

“But I can’t be sorry, Raven,” Ethan insisted. “I did it because... because it was the only way I could have you to myself.”

Raven’s voice was icy. “I’ll never forgive you for what you did.”

“But I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you,” Ethan countered. “I love you, Raven.”

She scoffed. “You don’t know the first thing about love, Ethan. If you truly loved me, you wouldn’t have exposed my secret so publicly.”

“But I saved you from a loveless marriage to Anthony,” Ethan snapped back. “I know you saw his temper. You know it, too.”

“That is not the point, Ethan!” Raven retorted. “Would I rather be a pawn of my family, a trophy wife to Anthony, or have my own life? You’ve taken all those options from me. I’ll only ever be seen as a troublemaker who settled for you.”

“Why do you care what others think?” Ethan asked.

“It’s just how life is, Ethan,” Raven replied, her voice weary. “You don’t understand. You’ve been free of societal restraints all your life.”

“I’m a man who was accused of murder. Half the ton still believes I had something to do with that. You think I don’t know what it’s like to be shunned? To be labeled as something I’m not. But I’ve gotten over the rumors and lies spread about me. Don’t you see? I’m free, and that’s exactly what I want to offer you,” Ethan shot back. “If you marry me, you could be free to do whatever you want to do. Write, paint, travel the world. It wouldn’t matter. Everything would be open to you, and you wouldn’t have to live the lie you’ve been stuck in any longer.”

Raven stared at him, her eyes filled with betrayal. “I can’t forgive you, Ethan. Our marriage would be nothing more than a gilded cage.”

“I don’t want to cage you, Raven. I won’t manipulate you. I want the best for you,” Ethan replied.

“If that was true, you wouldn’t have revealed my secret,” Raven said.

“But it shouldn’t have been a secret, Raven,” Ethan insisted. “You pulled me into a fake engagement, and we both went along with the charade. You wanted to write, to be free, but

that freedom comes with consequences, including the possibility of being shunned by Society.”

“I won’t let you turn this around on me,” Raven said firmly. “Everything would have been just fine if you hadn’t told the world who I am.”

“Do you really think you would have been happier with Anthony?” Ethan responded.

“No, I don’t love him,” Raven admitted.

“But you love me,” Ethan stated confidently.

“I was *fond* of you,” she corrected him. “But you’ve ruined all chances of anything happening between us. You’re selfish.”

“Yes, Raven, I am selfish,” Ethan responded unabashedly. “I wanted you for myself, and I’ll marry you this very day to prove that to you. I don’t care about a winter wedding, I just want you to be mine. I went hunting with Liam and returned to find you crying in my home. If you didn’t love me, you wouldn’t have let the news affect you as much as it did, and I wouldn’t be here now, ready to marry you. You can lie to the world, but you can’t lie to me. I know you care about me.”

“I could never care about or love a man as dishonorable as you.” Raven held her stance.

Ethan straightened his back. “You will marry me, Raven. There’s no one else who will marry you, and that’s because of what I did. But I’m not sorry, nor am I ashamed of you. I can’t lose you, and I won’t. I’ll spend my life making it up to you.” He reached out to touch her, but she recoiled immediately. “I’ll step outside and give you a moment. When I return, I’ll announce to your family that we’re getting married tonight.”

Ethan exited the room to find Oscar and Mathilda looking apprehensive. Mathilda’s face lit up as the door opened. Raven emerged with a glare directed at Ethan as she slipped her hand firmly into his. He could feel her rigidity, but he silently vowed to win her over, regardless of the cost.

“We’re having a wedding tonight. Start the preparations.”

CHAPTER 26



*R*aven sat solemnly before the vanity mirror, yet she was not paying any attention to the woman staring back at her. With her heart heavy with dread and despair, she felt numb as her sister threaded silky strands through her golden locks, crafting an intricate updo befitting a bride. Her dark eyes, usually alight with fiery determination, now reflected the emptiness she felt within.

Betrayed and cornered, Raven found herself on the precipice of a life-altering commitment, with her marriage to Ethan hours away. She wanted to run away, but deep down, Raven knew there was no place for her to go. She was trapped, coerced into a marriage to the very man who had shattered her trust. Her parents, oblivious to her inner turmoil, busied themselves around the house, preparing for her wedding.

Although Raven knew her mother wanted a huge wedding that would be the talk of the town, she knew fully well that her marriage to Ethan would be talked about, just not in the way she had hoped.

“There, done,” Penelope said, pinning the last tassel up.

Raven focused on how intricately Penelope had done her hair. With teary eyes, she swallowed hard.

Noticing her sister’s despair, Penelope put her hand on Raven’s shoulder. “Oh, please don’t cry. It’s not all that bad.”

Raven arched an eyebrow and glared at her sister’s reflection in the mirror. “I can’t see how any of this is a good thing, Penelope,” she responded, her voice a bitter whisper.

Her engagement to Ethan was supposed to be nothing but a mere ruse, a charade, one she was going to get out of by the end of the Season, yet now she found herself on the brink of a permanent bond, tethering her to him indefinitely.

“I’ll never forgive him, Penelope. Not after this,” she stated, her voice filled with a hollow resolve. As the words left her mouth, she knew she was echoing a promise not just to her sister but to herself.

Penelope cleared her throat, her gaze meeting Raven’s in the mirror. “It wasn’t Ethan who led a double life, Raven. He may have a past, but he’s not the one who has denied it. From where I’m standing, you brought this on yourself.”

The words hung in the air like a violently swung mallet crashing on an iron nail. Raven blinked, her heart pounding in her chest as she stared at her sister in shock.

Turning in her seat, Raven kept her eyes on Penelope as she stood. “What exactly are you saying?” she demanded, her voice shaking.

Penelope inhaled deeply as she licked her lips. Folding her hands in front of her, she drew her eyes back to Raven. “Tell me, did Ethan know the engagement was a charade?”

“Yes,” Raven answered.

“And when he found out about you being an author, what was his response? Because I’m fairly confident that he didn’t care. If he did, he wouldn’t have come to ask for your hand once everyone in the ton found out,” Penelope explained. “Don’t you see? Despite everything, he still wants to marry you. He cares about you, Raven. You saw how fast Anthony turned on his heel and ended your engagement with him, but Ethan doesn’t care.”

Raven felt as though the floor beneath her had disappeared. She had been so absorbed in her own deception, her own victimhood, that she failed to see her part in this convoluted mess. Her vision blurred as her eyes welled up with tears. She was the architect of her own demise.

Feeling weak, she reached out for something to keep her stable. Although the truth was right in front of her, she found her anger towards Ethan even more rampant. The fact that he betrayed her trust was the only thing she could cling to.

“But it was Ethan!” Raven protested, her voice strained and desperate. “He was the one who told my secret to everyone—”

Penelope cut her off abruptly, her voice biting and sharp. “And what then, Raven? Would you rather have ended up with Anthony, the man who abandoned you the moment your secret was out? At least Ethan was honest with you. He told you upfront. He didn’t run. He stood there and took responsibility. And he’s the one out there, waiting for you. Can you say the same for Anthony?”

Raven threw her hands up in defeat as she started pacing her room. “I don’t want to marry anyone. That was the whole purpose of the charade, in the first place. And now I’m supposed to tie myself to him for the rest of my days. How is that fair? How is any of this fair?”

The knock on the door rattled Raven and Penelope, silencing both of them. Oscar stepped into the room, with his shoulders back and his face stoic. His demeanor commanded attention as the room fell silent.

“It’s time,” he announced, his voice echoing in the room.

“Father, please!” Raven pleaded, her voice shaking as she spoke. “You have to help me. Ethan isn’t the man for me. I can’t marry him.”

Oscar frowned, his eyes hardening as he faced his daughter. “Raven,” he began, his voice stern, “there is no one else willing to marry you.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Oscar cut her off, his voice rising. “Our family’s name is at stake. My business is at stake. If you don’t go through with this, we will be ruined. This is not just about you. Now, you will marry Ethan, and you will do it for the sake of our family, or so help me, I’ll cut you off, disown you, and send you packing this very moment.”

His words sucked the air out of the room. The warmth in Raven’s body drained from her as she glanced at Penelope. There was no other choice for her. She had to marry, and that was final.

Raven’s heart pounded in her chest as she reluctantly approached the staircase. The decorations that lay before her seemed to her that they were, at best, hastily thrown together, a poor attempt to bring some festive charm to the grim occasion. The once vibrant colors of flowers and ribbons now appeared faded and dull, much like her dreams of a happy wedding. Her mother had tried her best to bring light to the dark situation,

but the result was a soulless, rushed semblance of a celebration.

Tears welled up in Raven's eyes as she slowly descended the intricate staircase, her hand gripping the railing for support. Each step felt like a step towards her doom. A lump formed in her throat as she glanced out of the window towards the terrace. Ethan was waiting for her, his hands nervously clasped together, his face void of emotion. Behind him, the priest awaited, his expression one of irritation.

A wave of dread pummeled Raven, its icy cold grasp choking her. She had never imagined her wedding day to be filled with such despair. The once cheerful, naive dreams she held about her special day were replaced by the harsh reality of a marriage not out of love but necessity.

The finality of the situation sank in, and Raven knew there was no turning back.

"For what it's worth, you look lovely," Ethan whispered as she took her place next to him.

"Do not talk to me," Raven snapped as she tried to keep her attention on the priest.

Yet, with each word spoken and vow made, resentment and anger bubbled within her. She could feel her parents' watchful

eyes boring into her back.

Raven wanted to collapse but didn't want to give Ethan any reason to touch her.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the priest said, his voice monotonous and detached.

Raven felt like a prisoner being sentenced to life. She heard the faint sound of clapping as Ethan leaned in. She turned her head before his lips could find hers and stood like a statue, waiting for him to stop.

"If that will be all," the priest said as he moved around Raven and Ethan.

"Thank you, Father Bryon, for coming on such short notice," Mathilda said, scrambling to the priest's side to shake his hand.

"Yes, well, under the circumstances..." The priest glanced at Raven, and she could feel his judgmental glare, one she knew she was going to have to get used to from everyone in the town.

"Shall we, then?" Ethan asked, extending his hand to Raven.

Her eyes narrowed as she pressed her lips into a tight line before sidestepping around him and making a beeline for Penelope.

“I’ll miss you the most,” Raven whispered as she counted down the moments until she could finally be alone to release her tears.

“Everything will turn out for the best,” Penelope said, pulling her sister into an embrace. “You’ll see.”



As the carriage clattered down the cobblestones, Raven and Ethan settled into an uncomfortable silence. With every moment, the familiar silhouette of her parents’ home faded further out of view until it became a pale speck in the growing distance.

“For as rushed as the ceremony was, it was rather nice. I’m sorry it wasn’t what you wanted,” Ethan said, trying to make small talk.

“Nothing about this was anything of what I wanted,” Raven grumbled as she refused to even give him a sideways glance.

“I understand you’re mad at me, and I’ll grant you this night, Lady Whitland,” Ethan said, his voice pinched with a hint of glee that irked Raven. “Sulk, cry, toss things about in a fit of

rage, I don't care. But you are my wife now until the day I die, and you will respect that position."

"Respect? What do you know about respect? Are you so blind as to not see what you've done?"

"I know what I've done, and I said I'm sorry, but you don't understand the need I have for you. You are more to me than my entire estate, the coin in my purse, or any gossip that could fly out at us. I don't care about those things. All I care about is you. And I couldn't bear the thought of Anthony, of all people, having you."

"So," Raven snipped, "you ruined me out of greed? I should have known better. Penelope warned me not to get attached, that I would get hurt. You promised you wouldn't tell anyone, and you might as well have shouted it off the rooftop."

"What bothers you more? The fact that people know who David Thornhill is or the fact that it's no longer a secret? Do you really think you write better as someone else?"

"Write? I can never write again. Don't you see? You've done more than ruin me—you stole the one thing in this world that gave me pleasure, and I can never have that back," Raven argued, her voice bending under her emotional turmoil as she folded her arms over her chest trying to keep herself from falling apart. "I swear to you, Lord Whitland, I'll make you regret marrying me."

Ethan leaned forward, his eyes steady on hers. “You might hate me now,” he said, “but eventually, I will win your affection. You thought I was stubborn before, but you don’t know the meaning of stubborn.”

She mumbled under her breath, “I doubt that.”

Their arrival at Ethan’s home was a stark contrast from the last time she saw it. It dawned on her that this was no longer just Ethan’s estate but hers now, too. And what seemed like a pleasant manor house on the outskirts of the town, so close to everything, was now her cage.

“Welcome home,” Ethan said as the carriage came to a halt. He stepped out, extending his hand to her, but Raven, her eyes flaring with defiance, dismissed him outright and stepped out of the carriage with her chin up and her eyes focused on the large wooden doors that would seal her in like a tomb.

She stormed towards the front door, refusing to wait for Ethan.

“My Lord,” a young servant greeted as she pulled open the door.

Raven noticed the girl’s eyes widening as she walked past.

“Rebecca, if you’d be so kind as to show my new bride to my room,” Ethan said.

Raven’s frosty gaze shifted from Rebecca to Ethan and back again. “Just because we’re married doesn’t mean I’m going to sleep with you. I want my own room, preferably on the opposite side of the manor. The further I am away from you, the better.”

Frustration flickered across Ethan’s features, and he let out a heavy sigh. “My room is bigger, and seeing as how you’re in a fit right now, I thought you might get pleasure from destroying my things.”

“The guest room,” Raven insisted without a side glance, “will suffice.”

Rebecca glanced over Raven’s shoulder to Ethan, looking for direction. It took every ounce of Raven’s strength not to turn and see what Ethan’s response would be.

“As the lady wishes,” Ethan said in a soft, collected tone that only seemed to grate on Raven’s nerves.

“Right this way, My Lady,” Rebecca said as Raven followed the servant to her new room. “You’ll find this side of the manor far lovelier, especially in the morning light.”

“Thank you,” Raven answered, trying not to be so curt with the servant. After all, it wasn’t Rebecca’s fault Raven was stuck there, and Raven knew that if she was going to survive, she’d need someone to talk to.

“I’m surprised Lord Whitland married,” Rebecca observed as she dared to glance over at Raven. “It was my understanding he would never find a bride.”

“I’d prefer not to discuss such things,” Raven said, knowing that if she spoke about such things, it would make all of this feel more real.

A part of her wished she’d wake up from this nightmare, but the reality was far worse than she could imagine.

“Of course, forgive me, My Lady. It’s just that you must be awfully special to have caught Lord Whitland’s eye. It’s certainly not a feat just anyone can manage, yet here you are.”

“Yes,” Raven sighed as Rebecca opened the bedroom door. “Here I am.”

Raven’s eyes widened as they stepped into the large room. The room was an embodiment of elegance and comfort. At its heart stood a large, four-poster bed adorned with the finest satin sheets that shimmered under the soft glow of the chandelier. Raven pressed her hand to her mouth as she looked about.

A grand, handcrafted fireplace occupied one wall with intricate details of carved ivy running up to the mantelpiece. Rebecca swiftly started a fire, and Raven couldn't help but admire the way the fire reflected the dancing light of the flames. It added a warm and welcoming aura to the room's stuffy atmosphere. Opposite the fireplace was a set of double doors.

Raven's eyes swept across the room, a visible spark of surprise flashing in her gaze. She'd expected grandeur, but this was something else entirely. If this was the guest room, she couldn't help but wonder what Ethan's room looked like. The thought was quickly dismissed as a frown replaced the brief flicker of curiosity on her face.

With trembling knees, Raven approached the double doors and threw them open. Her heart skipped a beat as memories of her first private moment with Ethan rushed to the forefront of her mind. She sucked in a deep breath, struggling to dislodge the thoughts, but it was no use. The garden kissed by the silvery light of the moon drew them out of her as the cool night air kissed her cheeks.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Rebecca asked.

Pulled from her thoughts, Raven whipped her head around, stunned that she'd completely forgotten the servant was even there. Shaking her head, she answered, "No."

“If you’re hungry, I can send someone up with a tray of food,” Rebecca offered as she stopped at the door, ready to shut Raven in.

“I’ll be fine,” Raven answered.

The doors closed on her, and the silence was like a millstone tied around her neck. She dropped to the floor, the weight of the day finally getting the better of her. Tears poured down her cheeks.

“Whatever spark we may have had, it’s gone, and I swear, Ethan Holloway, I will make you regret marrying me if it’s the last thing I do.”

CHAPTER 27



Ethan trudged down the hallway towards his study as he pondered his actions, wondering if maybe there had been another way for him to wed Raven. But no matter which scenario played out in his mind, Ethan was confident that the path he had chosen was the only way forward.

Never did he think Raven would react in such a way. A part of him knew she'd be mad, but having her hold a grudge against him never crossed his mind. After all, how could he predict how Raven would react? He ran his fingers through his hair, wondering if she would ever forgive him or even see him as a friend.

Yet, deep within the crevices of his heart, he held a steadfast belief that his actions had liberated her from the shackles of her secret and Society. He had given her the ticket to the freedom she'd been longing for if only she could see past her stubbornness.

Reaching his study, he unconsciously loosened his tie. The weight of his decision seemed too constrictive. He sank into

his chair, a sigh escaping his lips as he pondered over the labyrinth of emotions and choices he found himself in.

A soft knock sounded at the door before James, his loyal servant, entered the study.

“Forgive my intrusion, My Lord, but dinner is served,” he announced, his voice echoing softly.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Ethan wondered if he should invite Raven down to eat with him. It was clear from their discussion in the carriage ride home that she wanted nothing to do with him.

“Thank you, James,” Ethan said.

“I’ve already informed your guest,” James continued, causing Ethan’s eyebrows to rise with hope. He swallowed hard and shifted in his seat.

“And what did she say?” Ethan asked, hanging on the servant’s every word.

“The lady wishes to eat in her room,” James answered.

“I see,” Ethan mumbled, his voice strained with disappointment. “Well, if that is how Lady Whitland wishes it,

then so be it.”

“Lady Whitland?” James asked, his voice pitched with surprise.

“Yes, Raven Holloway, the Marchioness of Whitland. She is my bride as of an hour ago, and see that she is treated as such,” Ethan said as a small smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

Just the thought of having Raven as his wife was enough to chase even the darkest clouds away.

“Very good, My Lord. And the lady of the house, will she have the liberty to alter things as she pleases?”

Ethan looked up from his desk, his features softening. “Of course. Raven should feel free to make any changes she wants. This is her home now, just as much as it is mine. I want her to be comfortable and feel welcomed here.”

“But, My Lord, if I may be so bold as to ask, why aren’t you with your new bride?” the servant asked, a trace of curiosity in his voice.

Ethan sighed heavily. “It’s complicated.”

The servant nodded knowingly. “Marriages of this nature often are, but Her Ladyship will come around. Just don’t lose hope.”

Ethan leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight. “And how do I win her favor again, James?”

“Flowers and jewelry, My Lord. They’re the standard tokens of affection that ladies appreciate,” James suggested, his tone thoughtful.

Ethan shook his head. “I don’t think Raven is the type to be swayed by such things, and I’m at a loss for how to proceed.” He paused, deep in thought. “Tomorrow, have breakfast sent to her room. And... include a bouquet of flowers. Fresh ones, beautiful and vibrant, to express how much she means to me.”

James bowed lightly. “Very well, My Lord. I shall personally pick the flowers at dawn.” He then retreated, leaving Ethan alone in his study once again.

Glancing around, Ethan slowly rose and started for the dining hall. He had hoped Raven would at least come to eat, but if she wanted to stay in her room for the length of their marriage, there was nothing he could do about it. As he drew closer to the dining hall, he caught Rebecca carrying a tray. There was no doubt she was on her way to Raven’s room, and a brilliant idea popped into Ethan’s head.

“Rebecca, come here a moment if you will,” Ethan said, wagging his finger at his servant, who quickly rushed to him.

She gave a slight bow of her head as he scanned the tray. There wasn’t much on it—pears, dinner rolls, and half a roasted chicken.

“Is this for the Marchioness?” Ethan asked.

“Yes, My Lord,” Rebecca answered. “Her Ladyship requested her meal be brought to her.”

“Well, we shouldn’t keep her waiting. I’m certain she is in need of substance. If you’ll allow me,” Ethan said, motioning for the tray.

Rebecca’s eyes widened with a start as Ethan took the tray from her hands.

“See that my dinner is brought out momentarily. I’d like to deliver Raven’s first if it’s all the same,” Ethan ordered before carefully maneuvering to the stairwell.

As Ethan approached the grand staircase leading to the private quarters, he realized the task may be far more challenging than he could have imagined. The tray was heavy and awkward in his unpracticed hands.

Climbing the steps turned out to be a delicate dance as he struggled to maintain his noble demeanor while ensuring none of the food dropped. Each stair seemed to increase in height, and the tray seemed to gain weight with every step. His arms ached under the unfamiliar burden, yet he pressed on.

Finally making it to Raven's door, Ethan pulled in a deep breath and, carefully balancing the tray with one hand, knocked. His nerves rattled within as his ears strained to pick up Raven's delicate footsteps growing closer.

Swallowing hard, he waited.

"Come in," Raven answered.

Ethan reached for the doorknob and opened the door to find Raven sitting on the chair facing the fireplace. Her cheeks were moist from crying, and it broke his heart to see her so distraught. She didn't glance over at him as he moved deeper into the room, setting the tray on the small table by her side.

"That will be all," she answered as she turned. Her eyes widened with shock as she jolted back in her seat, nearly falling backwards. "What are you doing? Get out. Now. I said I don't want to see you, and there's nothing you can say to me that will make this any better."

“Raven, please,” Ethan started as she jumped to her feet and recoiled from him.

“I don’t want to hear a word you have to say—now, get out!” Raven shouted.

The thumping of footsteps echoed down the hallway, and Ethan knew better than to make a spectacle out of Raven’s pain. He hastened to the doorway and stood a moment. His heart ached for her, and as much as he wanted to wrap his arms around her and tell her all would be well, doubt clouded his thoughts.

What if she never forgives me? Is this how we are to live the rest of our lives?

Without another word, Ethan stepped back and drew the door close, cutting off Raven from his presence. He walked back down the steps and wandered until he reached the dining hall. Plopping down in his seat, he stared at the empty chair next to him.

Tomorrow will be different. She’ll come around tomorrow.

The next morning wasn’t any better. Ethan stood outside, under Raven’s balcony, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but the only thing he managed to catch were the flowers she had tossed over the railing along with the note he wrote raining

down like confetti. He walked back into the manor with his shoulders slumped and a stern expression etched on his face.

“I don’t believe the Marchioness enjoyed the flowers,” James said as he spotted Ethan entering the kitchen.

“No, it wouldn’t seem so,” Ethan answered.

“Perhaps what you need to do is shower her with jewels, My Lord. I heard that Queen Anne was gifted necklaces of rubies, diamonds, and emeralds. Perhaps the way to the Marchioness’s heart is through sparkling things?” the cook suggested, followed by a hearty chuckle.

Ethan’s eyes lit up. “Molly, you’re brilliant,” he said, his demeanor swiftly changing. “James, will you bring to the study my mother’s jewels?”

“Are you sure you want to be giving those away? Or see them ruined?” James asked timidly as he fiddled with the tips of his fingers.

“I shall give my wife all that I am,” Ethan stated, “and if that includes my mother’s trinkets and baubles, so be it.”

Ethan moved swiftly back to his study and sat down to pen a note to Raven. He poured his heart out and explained the story

of how his mother acquired the precious stones from his father just as James came into the room.

“My Lord,” James said, his voice wavering as he sat the box on the desk before Ethan, “you are aware these stones have been in your family for generations. And I would hate to find them broken or damaged.”

Ethan gingerly opened the ancient box, revealing two stunning necklaces. It had been forever since he looked at them, but he knew if there was nothing else that would catch Raven’s attention, these necklaces certainly would. The first was a splendid array of emeralds, and their deep green hue reminded him of an enchanted forest. Each gem was intricately cut and set into a band of polished, shining gold.

The second necklace was a cascade of rubies, their dazzling red glow reminiscent of a glowing sunset. Each ruby reflected the ambient light, making the necklace seem to hold a fire within it. The brilliance of the rubies was harmoniously balanced with a delicate, silver chain.

“My Raven may have a temper on her, but she’ll understand the importance of these heirlooms,” Ethan said with an unwavering resolve as he sealed the letter and placed it within the box. “Now, if you’ll deliver these to my wife.”

James, a bit apprehensive, took the box and left Ethan praying that his gifts would be enough to at least warrant her presence

at dinnertime. But when dinner rolled around, Ethan once again found himself sitting alone.

Days turned into weeks, and Ethan continued to shower Raven with gifts of fine dresses, jewelry, and books he thought she'd enjoy. Yet, no matter what he sent to her, they were returned with no word or explanation.

Ethan knew winning Raven over wouldn't be easy, but he had hoped for some shift in her mood. Yet, each time he crossed paths with her, she turned her chin up and started back the way she came. Of course, the bits of encouragement Ethan received from the staff seemed to damper over time, but the tokens of his affection never wavered.

Ethan made certain to do at least one nice thing for Raven each day in hopes that he would wear her down with his persistence, repeating the same thing to himself each night...

Tomorrow... tomorrow will be different.

CHAPTER 28



Morning light poured through the crack of the curtains, pulling Raven from her dreamless slumber. She let out a soft groan of discontentment and swiftly pulled the pillow over her head, trying to slip back into the void of sleep. The light rap on the door was an unwelcome intrusion. She wasn't ready to face another dreary day trapped within the confines of the manor. A part of her longed to experience the outside world again, to stroll through the park and enjoy the open air of nature. Yet, how could she face the world?

“Good morning, My Lady,” Rebecca said, as cheerful as ever, as she entered the room. “It’s another lovely day.”

“How can you say that?” Raven moaned, her voice muffled by the pillow.

“Well,” Rebecca answered as Raven listened to the servant’s footsteps moving around the room, “the sun is shining, the birds are singing, and you’ve still got your health.”

“But not my freedom,” Raven said, tossing the pillow from her face and squinting her eyes at the onslaught of light coming into the room.

“Whatever do you mean? Lord Whitland isn’t keeping you trapped inside,” Rebecca answered as she pulled out a lovely dress for Raven to wear. “In fact, he encourages you to do whatever you wish.”

Raven huffed with discontentment as she eased herself back and leaned against the headboard. She tucked the pillow to her chest and held it as if it were a shield.

“Whatever I wish? Ha. What I wish is to be free of my gilded cage, to go and see my friends and family again. It’s been months since I’ve laid eyes on the field of Hyde Park or played pall mall with my sister.”

“From where I stand, no one is stopping you from doing those things but yourself, My Lady,” Rebecca answered.

Raven flashed Rebecca a disdainful glare, her sharp eyes penetrating like shards of ice. Her expression was one of incredulity, as though she was struggling to believe the audacity of the words spoken.

Seemingly unperturbed by the icy response, Rebecca smiled as she stepped towards the door. “Well, who am I to give such

advice?”

“No, please,” Raven said, reaching for her. “It’s I who should be apologizing. It’s just been a very stressful time, and I shouldn’t be venting my frustrations out on you.”

Rebecca gave a sharp nod as she tried to conceal her shock. She swallowed hard and flashed Raven a smile. “Let’s get you dressed, shall we? Maybe a new outfit will lift your spirits.”

Raven steeled herself as Rebecca proceeded to help her dress. The fabric brushed against her skin like a whisper of the past, and Raven couldn’t help but admire how it suited her mood for the day. She thanked Rebecca before she moved over to the small table, plopped down into the chair, and started picking at the food on the tray.

“If there’s anything else,” Rebecca said as she started for the door. “Don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” Raven said as Rebecca slipped out of the room, leaving her alone with her thoughts. She glanced at the tray and shook her head as her heart hardened at the sight of it.

Once again, it was all Raven’s favorites—freshly baked bread with Brea and a steaming cup of chamomile tea. While the smell of the food was enticing, Raven found her appetite evading her. Her gaze shifted to the small piece of parchment

resting beside the plate. It was a familiar sight, one she had seen every day since her arrival at Whitland Manor.

“Oh, what now?” she grumbled bitterly as she stared at the handwriting scrawled across the front of the paper. “When will he ever learn?”

Biting her lip, she found herself hesitating, her fingers hovering over the note as she contemplated opening the letter. With a sigh of irritation, she snatched up the parchment, her fingers tearing open the seal.

My Dearest Raven,

I trust this letter finds you in good health and spirits. The other day, as I was out in the garden, a Blue Jay landed on the branch of the oak tree. Its vibrant hues of blue and white reminded me of the captivating sparkle in your eyes. It left me wishing fervently that your day is filled with more joy than the previous one.

I heard about the unfortunate incident in the drawing room. I understand that you may be upset about the paint that spilled on the rug, but I implore you not to worry. Remember, it is the imperfections that breathe life into our surroundings, making them more endearing and personal. And if you wish, I'll be more than happy to get you a new set of paints.

As always, I do hope to see you at dinner. Even if you have nothing to say to me, your presence is enough to sedate my appetite to have your company. However, if you choose solitude, may I suggest the garden as a peaceful alternative to your room? The scent of blooming roses and the gentle hum of nature could serve as a soothing balm to your heart.

I remain, as always, eternally sorry.

Yours,

Ethan.

Raven's hands clenched the letter tightly, the edges crumpling under the strain. Her heart pounded in her chest, a cacophony of unspoken words and stifled emotions. A whisper of betrayal echoed within her, mingling with a bitter sense of regret.

With a swift, decisive movement, she crumpled the paper into a tight ball, her eyes blazing with a fire that mirrored the one crackling in the hearth. She tossed the wadded letter into the fireplace, watching as the flames leaped greedily upon it. The inked words of love and remorse were consumed by the fiery tongues, turning into nothing more than ash and smoke. A pile of similar ashes sat there, the remnants of previous letters that Ethan had sent her over the past weeks, each one meeting the same fiery end.

She turned away, leaving behind the dying embers, and moved to the double doors and threw them open. The cool, crisp air of the morning rushed in, washing over her like a cleansing wave. She stepped outside and closed the doors behind her. She inhaled deeply as she took in the beauty of the cloudless sky above her. She walked to the edge of the balcony, leaning on the railing as she gazed out at the sprawling gardens below.

From the corner of her eye, she couldn't help but notice Ethan sitting under the shade of the oak tree. His eyes were fixed on a book he held in his hands, and he appeared unaware she was on the balcony. She turned her gaze away, refusing to give in to his charm once again. He had fooled her once into believing he was a man of his word, yet, now, the only thing she held in her heart was resentment towards him.

But as she stood there, surrounded by the peaceful tranquility, a small part buried beneath the layers of anger and hurt began to wonder if Ethan's words held some truth. Raven didn't give herself time to let the thought settle before she turned and stormed back into her room, sealing herself off from the rest of the world once more.



As the sun tenderly kissed the horizon, casting an array of ambers and purples across the evening sky, Raven couldn't help but find beauty in the moment. She let out a heavy sigh as she placed her book down to give the scenery her full attention when a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” Raven called over her shoulder.

The door creaked open as Rebecca walked in, cradling a tray brimming with Raven’s dinner. The aroma of the food drifted through the room. The sweet scent of cooked meat and roasted vegetables was tantalizing, causing her stomach to grumble and her mouth to water.

With a hesitant voice, Raven turned to Rebecca, her eyes locked on the tray of food she had brought. “Do you think I could perhaps have my meal on the terrace tonight?”

Rebecca’s eyes widened as she fought back the smile tugging at her lips. It had been a while since Raven had shown interest in anything beyond the confines of her room, but Rebecca’s surprise swiftly morphed into a warm smile.

“Of course,” Rebecca said, overly enthused to see Raven finally stepping out, embracing the world beyond her solitude. “I’ll go and set up the area for you and call you when it’s ready.”

“If it’s too much trouble...” Raven started only to have Rebecca shake her head.

“No trouble at all. You are the mistress of this manor, and if it pleases you to have dinner outside your room, then that’s what

will happen,” Rebecca said, swiftly turning around and scrambling out of the room.

Raven couldn't help feeling a bit apprehensive. It wasn't as if she had been locked away in her room by force, and she had ventured out for a change of scenery once in a while. But Ethan's letter and Rebecca's words gnawed at her.

Why should she remain captive when she had places to explore?

Raven took a deep breath, gathering the courage to step out of her room. She hoped she wouldn't run into Ethan. Perhaps he had suggested the terrace because he planned to be there. Still, the thought of spending such a beautiful evening confined in her room was unappealing.

With a determined stride, she began her descent down the staircase, passing Ethan's study. To her surprise, it was empty. Her heart pounded in her chest as she moved down the hallway, and there he was in the library.

Raven stopped in her tracks, frozen for a moment as Ethan looked up, setting the book he was reading aside. Her heart clenched at the sight of her book in his hand. A wave of anger washed over her, replacing her initial apprehension.

With a fiery gaze and a swift pace, she stormed into the room, demanding, “What do you think you’re doing with my book?”

“Actually,” Ethan said, keeping his attention on her, “I believe this is *my* book.”

“You know what I mean,” Raven said, swiping the book off the table, and she started waving it at him. “Why do you have it? Are you trying to taunt me? Gloating over the fact that I can never write again? I never thought you could be so cruel.”

Ethan arched his eyebrow as she ranted. He didn’t say a word as she reared her hand back, ready to toss the book into the fire. It was bad enough that she could never pen her stories again, but seeing one of her books in his hands was more than she could bear.

Before she could release the book, Ethan snatched her by the wrist, and his eyes bored into hers. Without a word, he pried the book from her fingers and set it down once more on the table.

“I told you when you first arrived that I’d allow you to go through the house, destroying whatever you wished. I believe I gave you more than ample amount of time to release your vengeance, but that time has passed, and I’ll not see such a work of art destroyed in such a manner.”

Ethan released his grip and straightened his vest as she fought back the tears welling up in her eyes.

“Out of all the books you could have picked up, why that one?”

“It’s a good story—one of my favorites, actually,” he answered.

“Now I know you’re just mocking me. Do you find pleasure in torturing me so?”

“There is no one in this manor torturing you,” Ethan answered. “If you feel that way, it is of your own doing.”

“My doing?” Raven’s voice pitched as she dropped her arms to her sides, feeling completely deflated.

“Yes,” Ethan answered boldly. “No one has kept you locked in your room. I haven’t denied you access to any part of this manor, including the library and the grounds. Yet, you’ve remained hidden away as if you have leprosy. Maybe if you dared to step out of your room more often, you’d find that the world doesn’t despise you as much as you think it does.”

“How can I believe a word of what you’re saying? All you ever do is lie,” Raven snapped.

“If you don’t believe me, then perhaps you should get a second opinion,” Ethan said, sidestepping around Raven to snatch a paper from the table. “Here.”

Ethan threw the paper at her. She fumbled with it as the pages scattered about from the force of his toss. Carefully, she gathered the thin sheets into one lump and stared at him.

“Go on,” he implored, gesturing to the papers in her arms. “Read for yourself. You’ll find there’s a great number of people in the ton who support you—some even asking when you’ll be publishing your next book.”

Raven’s face scrunched with uncertainty as she started thumbing through the paper. Her eyes widened the moment she reached the opinion section. As she scanned the words, her heart dropped to her stomach. Ethan hadn’t been lying. There, typed up in black letters for the world to see, were columns of responses.

I don’t see what the big deal is, one reader had penned, voicing their admiration for Raven’s work. Who cares if she published under David Thornhill? I wish I could be as brave as she is.

“What is this?” Raven gasped, her eyes running down the page to find another comment stating how they wanted more books from her.

“Your admirers,” Ethan answered.

“I don’t understand,” Raven said, stumbling back a step as the words from her readers seeped into her subconsciousness.

“Well, perhaps if you wouldn’t hide yourself away, you’d see that no one cares that you’re a female writer. You have hundreds of people in the ton rooting for you to succeed and continue your work,” Ethan explained.

Raven’s eyes narrowed as she glared daggers at Ethan. “And what of you? Would you allow me to write again?”

Ethan pulled in a deep breath as he closed the gap between them. Towering over her, he refused to let her drop her eyes from his. “It’s one of your attributes that made me fall in love with you, Raven. I could never squash your dream of being an author. You, however, are your own worst enemy and seem to still think the way your parents do—which is a pity, seeing as how remarkable you truly are.”

“How do I know you didn’t write these things and claim to be someone else?” Raven asked, refusing to bend or suspend her ire against Ethan.

“You’re going to believe what you want,” Ethan answered, retrieving the book from the table. “And maybe one of these

days, you'll find the courage to step into the role you were meant to have and free yourself from the rules and regulations that you've embedded into your soul. I can't do that for you, only *you* can. I've shown you the door, but now you must be the one to step through it."

CHAPTER 29



Ethan leaned over the billiard table as his fingers tightened around the cue. His brow furrowed in a mix of concentration and frustration as he tried to concentrate on his shot.

Billiards, of course, was a game of precision and strategy, yet, tonight, he couldn't focus on anything other than Raven. He had hoped coming to the pool hall would give him a reprieve from his lonesome existence at the manor, but no matter where he went or what he did, Raven was constantly in the back of his mind, haunting his every thought.

Across the table, Liam wore a smug smile, his eyes glinting with barely concealing his amusement. It was clear that Ethan's head was not in the game at all, much to Liam's enjoyment.

The balls clattered around the billiard table as Ethan took his shot, yet not even one of them found their home in any of the pockets. Ethan's usual prowess seemed to have abandoned him and was replaced with a poor performance that lacked his

typical finesse. His shots, typically a spectacle of accuracy and smooth control, were now misfired attempts and miscalculations.

“If that isn’t the most pitiful thing I’ve ever seen.” Liam chuckled, leaning on his cue with an air of nonchalance as Ethan picked up on the amusement in his tone. “Ethan, my friend, you’re about as accurate as a blindfolded bowler today.”

“What can I say? It takes talent to be this bad,” Ethan said, trying to keep his tone light and airy, but deep down he was fully aware that his heart just wasn’t in the game.

Liam nudged Ethan away from the table and flashed him a wicked grin. “Watch and learn, mate.” He lined up his shot, his gaze never leaving the table.

With a swift jaunt of his arms, Liam sent the white ball sailing into the other balls, which started a chain reaction until the ball closest to the corner pocket landed in the hole.

“There you have it,” Liam cheered with a huge smile of satisfaction smearing his face. “Now for the others.”

He then dispatched another, and another, until, finally, the black 8-ball rolled smoothly into its destined pocket, and with a loud triumphant cheer, he won.

“You didn’t call your shot,” Ethan teased, trying to find some excuse to win.

“You don’t have to call the last shot,” Liam bantered. “I made it in, that’s all that matters.”

“No,” Ethan said, playfully arguing with him. “You’ve got to call the last shot.”

“Would you have heard me if I did call it?” Liam asked, arching his eyebrow.

The jig was up, and Ethan knew it.

“That’s what I thought,” Liam said, straightening with a triumphant smirk on his face. “Game over. I must say, though, you’re normally sharper than a double-edged sword, but today, you’re about as sharp as a cannonball.”

“Well then, I suppose it was a good thing my wallet wasn’t on the line this match,” Ethan countered.

“Aye, I would have cleaned you out today, and then where would you live? Suppose your wife could take care of you. She is a fancy writer now, isn’t she? Must be bringing in something to contribute. Although, I doubt she makes enough

to keep up with your extravagant lifestyle,” Liam teased as he went around the table, pulling the balls out of the pockets.

Noticing Ethan hadn't even cracked a smile, Liam tilted his head to catch Ethan's eye. He paused a moment, and with his eyes twinkling with mischief, his smile softened and turned into a quizzical expression.

“All right, what's going on?”

“Nothing,” Ethan lied as the concern in Liam's voice pulled him from his thoughts.

“Something's up, mate. You're usually not this off your game. Best tell me now. You don't want me to make a scene now, do you?”

Ethan sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “My mind is elsewhere, Liam,” he admitted, avoiding his friend's probing gaze.

Liam gave him a knowing look as he began to set up another round on the table. “Tell me something I don't know. First, you don't want to place a wager on the game, and you folly even the simplest of shots. Now, you're standing there, looking into space as if you're contemplating life's greatest mysteries. You might as well be back at school, studying for one of the tests they gave us. It's a bit amusing to see you so

rattled—it's not a sight I've seen very often—but to this degree, I know there's something wrong.”

“I've been married for two months, and my wife won't talk to me. She barely even gives me a sideways glance,” Ethan bemoaned.

“Ah, matrimony not quite what you thought it would be?” Liam teased, his eyes locked on Ethan's. “I warned you, Ethan. Marriage isn't something to rush into. But I must commend you for such an accomplishment. I've been told that what you've already accomplished with your wife usually takes a man years to master. Although, I don't see what you're complaining about. At least you don't hear her nagging about anything.”

Ethan grimaced as Liam finished racking a new game. The thought of having Raven nagging him didn't seem all that bad at the moment—at least it would mean she talked to him. What he had, though, was no contact whatsoever, and it troubled him more than he'd ever let on.

“To be honest, I think I'd prefer the nagging, at this point. We live under the same roof, yet she hasn't spoken more than three words to me in days. She doesn't talk at all,” Ethan explained as Liam leaned over the table to take his shot.

The balls scattered, and Ethan stepped back, waiting for the game to end swiftly.

“Never thought Raven would be a mute,” Liam teased.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Then how does anything get done around the manor?” Liam asked, banking another shot as he worked his way around the table.

“If there’s something she has to tell me, messages are passed through the servants,” Ethan explained. “And we are never in the same room. Like just the other day, I had gone into the library to find a book and found her there, reading. The moment she spotted me, she closed the book and left without a word. It’s gotten to the point where I just avoid her, and I’m sure that’s not how a marriage should be.”

Liam bobbed his head as if he understood completely, but Ethan knew there was no advice Liam could give him, considering Liam had never been married and certainly would never find himself in the same situation. The frustration ran deep.

Liam raised an eyebrow, lining up his shot. “And what exactly were you expecting, Ethan? Raven isn’t the submissive type. I saw that coming a mile away. Word has it that you’re the one who wrote that article exposing her. What have I always told you? Women are like flowers in winter. You’ve got to take

care of them, protect them, or they're just going to wither and die."

Compassion flickered across Ethan's face. "Yes, I suppose I deserve every ounce of her ire, but I thought it would fizzle out, by now. It seems to only grow colder with each passing day, and I really don't know what to do about it anymore."

"Have you tried to make amends?"

Ethan tilted his head and arched his eyebrow, glaring at Liam with indignation. "Of course, I've tried. I gave her my mother's jewels, first edition books I was certain she'd like, and then there were the dresses and sweets. I wrote a letter to her every day and sent it up to her room with each meal. You should see the garden—there's nothing left to pick. I've had to resort to the florist in town to give her fresh flowers."

Liam glanced back at Ethan, shock etched on his face. "So, for once the rumors are true."

"Seriously? Since when do you listen to gossip and rumors?" Ethan scolded.

"Since Raven is the only thing the ton has been talking about since your article about her came out. She's become very popular, with a lot of the women in the ton gushing over how brave she is for following her dreams. Abigail and Ruth

haven't stopped talking about her. It's like she's become the savior for all womenfolk. It's quite maddening if you ask me."

Ethan's eyes widened as Liam finally missed a shot, giving him a chance to shoot. Although, it didn't really do much good. Ethan's head and heart just weren't on the game.

"What else have you heard?" Ethan asked, trying not to sound too eager. He braced himself for the worst.

"Word on the street is that she's gone a bit... off. Became a recluse," Liam added, glancing at Ethan to gauge his reaction.

A defensive glint appeared in Ethan's eyes. "Can you blame her? Being a writer is a lot harder for women than for men."

Liam shrugged as he stepped back up to the table, leaned down, and sank another ball. "So, what's your plan, Ethan?"

"There's nothing I can do," Ethan replied, exasperation seeping into his voice.

"Why don't you defend her?" Liam asked, his tone challenging.

Ethan snapped, "I would if there was something to defend, but how do you defend against words? It's not like I can go

around, starting debates with everyone in the ton. And I doubt writing another column will make a bit of a difference. Once people get an idea in their heads, it's hard to change their minds. All I can do on that front is let them talk. Anyone who spreads lies is not worth my time. “

Liam looked at Ethan, admiration clear in his gaze. “I don't know how you keep your wits about you.”

Ethan shrugged, a bitter smile on his lips. “I've been on the brunt end of gossip more times than I care to admit. I've learned the hard way, and I wish I could shield Raven from such things, but I fear she's going to have to learn what we both learned a long time ago. If she wants the freedom to do things she loves, she'll have to face her fears. I can't do that for her.”

Liam bobbed his head as he leaned down once more and took his shot, the sound echoing through the room as the final ball clattered into its pocket, ending another game. He slowly straightened, his focus fixed on the doorway as he let out a small groan.

“What is he doing here?” he asked, quickly turning his back to the door.

“Who?” Ethan asked as he scanned the room and found the source of Liam's disdain. Rolling his eyes, Ethan's expression went flat.

“Now, there’s a man I’d paid to see knocked down a peg or two,” Liam grumbled. “You know he’s been gloating over the fact that he’s not married to Raven. After all the boastfulness he prodded on about the night before the article came out, how fast he changed his position on the matter. It’s sort of a pity that the scandal didn’t come out after they were wed.”

“Hold your tongue,” Ethan scolded. “That’s my wife you’re talking about, and you know as well as I that he’d have ravaged Raven the night of their wedding, which would have done far more damage to Raven than I ever could.”

“Sorry,” Liam said. “I didn’t mean it that way. But the fact is, men like Anthony need to be taught a lesson. He’s been gloating over the fact that he’s destroyed Raven’s family by blocking their shipments from coming into the harbor. What kind of man prides himself on ruining another family that way?”

Ethan’s eyes narrowed as he picked up his pint and guzzled it. “Would you look at that, I believe I need another drink. What about you?” he asked, his eyes glistening with mischief.

Liam let out a little chuckle as he bobbed his head. “I can go for another round. But what are you planning to do? Thought you said trying to stop gossip is a waste of time.”

Giving a little shrug, Ethan's smirk shifted. "I never said that I couldn't beat fire with fire."

Making a beeline for the bar, Ethan eased himself onto the stool next to Anthony, a smug smile playing on his lips as he purposefully ignored Anthony beside him. From the corner of his eye, Ethan noticed recognition flickering across Anthony's face.

"You know," Anthony's voice boomed over the clacking of balls and small chatter, "not many men can say they dodged a bullet, but I certainly can boast about that aspect. Could you imagine what my life would be like had I married that charlatan Raven Davenport? It's a good thing that article about her came out when it did, or I would have made the biggest mistake of my life."

Ethan didn't budge as he listened to Anthony. He bided his time, waiting for Anthony to make the first move.

"It's a pity about the rumors, though. Now, her poor father can't dock in the harbor," Anthony said, his voice laced with malice as he turned to face Ethan.

Ethan took a sip of his freshly poured beer, keeping his eyes locked on the back wall.

“Lord Whitland, I didn’t see you there,” Anthony said with a hearty chuckle. “Seems that you’re the one to take the brunt of that family now. How is the crone doing? Heard she went mad after her wedding to you. Of course, it would take someone off their rocker to be tied to such a man as yourself.”

Ethan turned slowly to Anthony, a calm smile on his face. “Yes, I suppose it would take a certain type of woman to marry me. One that was bold and daring, even daring enough to forge her own path in this life instead of piggybacking on their father’s company. How is that going, by the way? I heard that your old man cut you off.”

The barkeep glanced at Anthony, a suspicious glare flashing in his eyes. “You said you’d be squaring away your tab today.”

“Don’t pay him any heed,” Anthony snapped. “My father would never disown me, I’m his only son. And don’t we give you the first pick of our goods? Surely you know Lord Whitland is only blowing smoke.”

“Nonetheless,” the man behind the bar said as he snatched his ledgers from under the bar, “you owe twenty crowns. Best pay now, or I’m going to assume you don’t have the funds.”

“This is madness,” Anthony grumbled. “You know I have the money. I just didn’t bring it with me. And twenty crowns? Are you certain that’s right? As I recall, I paid the last time I was in here. In fact, I’m sure of it.”

Ethan sat back with a smug grin as he watched Anthony scramble to find his purse. The look of embarrassment flashing through Anthony's face was far more satisfying than Ethan could have imagined.

"No money, no drinks," the barkeep said, retrieving the full pint in front of Anthony.

"You can't do that. Do you know who I am?" Anthony grumbled, his voice pitching with irritation.

"Aye, you're the bloke that doesn't pay his bills. I have it in mind to get the constable here and put you in jail till your debt is paid," the barkeep said, much to Ethan's enjoyment.

Watching Anthony squirm was far more entertaining than it should have been, and Ethan wondered if maybe he should step in and say something.

"Funny what a little rumor can do, don't you think?" Ethan asked, a bit overly smug.

"Tell him you're jesting," Anthony demanded, turning his ire on Ethan.

“I could do that,” Ethan said, bobbing his head. “But then what lesson would that teach you? You see, the rumors you’re spreading about my wife and her family could have destroyed them.”

“That family is finished around here. They have no place to make port, and they’ll be penniless in a matter of weeks. Now, does it sound like my family couldn’t pay the twenty crowns I owe this establishment? I could even have my uncle come here and close this place down if I so wished it.”

The bartender glared at Anthony as he polished a glass and glanced at Ethan. Ethan reached into his pocket, retrieving his purse. He placed the money for his drinks on the bar with extra to pay for Anthony’s. A smile drifted across his face as he winked at the bartender.

“The rest you can keep,” Ethan said, “for your troubles.”

“I don’t need you paying for my tab,” Anthony sneered.

“Actually, this comes from the cut I get from the Davenports’,” Ethan said as he grabbed his pint. “You see, that family will be better off than you ever will be. They don’t need you or access to your port to bring their supplies to shore.”

“Nothing gets to shore without my say-so,” Anthony snapped.

“Again, rumors will be your ruin,” Ethan replied. “Maybe I should go around, advertising that I have a port not far from here, where I don’t charge nearly as high a price as you do for import and export. Huh, I wonder what that could do to your family’s business?”

“Is that true?” the barkeep asked, and his eyebrow rose with interest. “I’ve got family who would be happy to switch ports.”

“He’s bluffing,” Anthony said, shock etched on his face. “You’re bluffing.”

“Am I?” Ethan asked as he winked at the barkeep. He picked up his drink from the counter and strolled back to the billiard table, leaving a stunned Anthony in his wake. He clapped Liam on the shoulder, his smile growing wider. “Now, where were we?”

Liam watched Ethan stride back to the table, shooting a glance at Anthony. “What was that about?”

“Bittersweet justice,” Ethan declared. “Maybe it’s time I headed home.”

Without waiting for a response, Ethan picked up his coat and headed out of the door, leaving a stunned silence in his wake.

Once he reached home, he was immediately relieved of his coat as his servants glanced towards the hallway. Ethan didn't need to know what they were glancing at to know he had company. The servants, who normally would ask him if he'd like a drink or dinner, didn't say a word. Their stiff presence could only mean one thing—his grandmother had come for a visit.

“Let me guess, my grandmother is here,” Ethan said as he straightened his vest and let out a heavy sigh.

“Yes, My Lord, she awaits you in the drawing room,” the servant replied.

For a moment, Ethan thought of letting her wait while he pored over the piles of paperwork that awaited him on his desk. A small smile tugged at his lips as he thought of how Raven would respond to his request to go to the Caribbean. He knew she'd find solace and peace far away from the judgmental whispers of the ton.

“Ethan Holloway,” his grandmother spat, her eyes blazing as they fixed on him the moment he passed by the drawing room.

He paused and pinched the bridge of his nose, wishing he had just gone upstairs instead.

“Tell me it isn’t true. Tell me you haven’t disgraced our family name once again.”

Ethan, arched an eyebrow at her as he paused at the doorway.
“It’s nice to see you as well.”

“Enough small talk. Answer me.”

“And what wild notions have you been listening to, now?”

“Don’t play coy with me, Ethan. Is it true that you’ve married that woman? What is her name? Ah, yes, Raven Davenport? The news of the wedding traveled up and down the whole countryside, and why was I the last to hear about it? You couldn’t send me an invitation?” she demanded, her voice filled with contempt.

Ethan let out a chuckle, his eyes twinkling with mischief.
“Indeed, it is true. I am married to Raven Davenport, and as for invitations, well, it was a bit rushed, and I didn’t have time to invite anyone.”

“No!” his grandmother gasped dramatically, her hand reaching out to steady herself against the door. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am quite serious. I am married to Raven, and there is absolutely nothing anyone can do about it.”

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done? Our name will be dragged through the mud. I’ll never be able to show my face in this town again. People will turn me away,” she gasped, her hands balling into tight fists.

“You said the same thing when I was on trial for murder. Or have you forgotten your eagerness for me to marry anyone as soon as possible? Well, I have. I’m surprised, I thought you’d be pleased.”

“I wanted you to marry someone of good standing, not someone with a double life!” she hissed.

Ethan’s eyes hardened as he retorted, “And why should it matter to you? You’ve always said that a woman should be business-savvy and have a good head on her shoulders and that she should be poised and modest. Was that all that just a lie?”

“I was not lying, Ethan,” she snapped. “But there are certain rules that we must follow.”

Anger flashed through Ethan’s face. “You are a hypocrite. Raven is a smart businesswoman, she’s trying to build a name for herself, and she’s witty. What scares you? The fact that she dared to step out of the lines Society drew for her? And if Society has so many rules, how is anyone expected to follow them all?”

His grandmother, looking desperate, pleaded, “Ethan, have you consummated the marriage? There might still be time to annul it.”

Ethan silenced her with a glare. “I don’t want to annul my marriage. And if you’re so distraught over it, you should return to Italy, where you won’t have to listen to petty rumors anymore. Now, I am going to live my life as I choose. I won’t be bullied by rules or Society. I love Raven. I loved her from the moment I laid eyes on her. I knew she was different, and I’ll wait till my dying breath to consummate our marriage if that’s what it takes.”

“I cannot believe you would choose a pretty face over family, Ethan.”

Ethan grabbed his grandmother by the arm and ushered her towards the door. “If you can’t see that I am happy with Raven, then you don’t need to be here.”

“Ethan, I’m just trying to help you,” his grandmother pleaded as he gave a nod of his head.

The doors opened, and as his grandmother stepped over the threshold, she turned to glare at him.

“No, you’re trying to help yourself, and I’m finished with you and your silly rules,” Ethan retorted.

With that, the doors closed. He turned to face his servants as he let out a heavy sigh. “See that she doesn’t step one toe over that threshold, is that understood?”

“Yes, My Lord,” the servants said in unison.

As he scanned the room, he spotted Raven near the end of the hall, no doubt coming to see what the commotion was about. She had a shocked expression on her face that made him feel a pinch of shame, but he didn’t need to be scolded by her either.

Without a word, he straightened himself and walked to his study, leaving Raven and the servants to process what had just happened.

CHAPTER 30



Raven slowly opened her eyes to the pale morning light filtering in through sheer curtains. A sense of profound determination surged through her as she remembered Ethan's words and his actions. The fact that he had the courage to stand against his grandmother for her sake stirred something within her. Raven realized that if he could shun everyone, including his own flesh and blood, then maybe she could, too.

Tossing the blankets, Raven decided she wouldn't squander another day in the confines of her room. If Ethan could face his world for her, she could face hers for him. With a new vigor, she moved to the window and tossed back the curtains, allowing the first light of day to pour into the room.

Pulling in a deep breath, Raven started by dressing herself before Rebecca even arrived with her morning meal.

Just as Raven finished pinning up the last lock of hair, the door creaked open. She glanced at Rebecca through the reflection of the mirror and smiled at the stunned expression on the servant's face.

“My Lady,” Rebecca gasped. “This is certainly a surprise to see you up and about. Don’t get me wrong, I’m pleased to see you in such high spirits, but may I ask what caused this sudden change?”

“Let’s just say I’m turning over a new leaf today,” Raven proclaimed as she stood.

“Well, fancy that,” Rebecca answered as she walked over and sat the tray of food down on the table.

Raven picked at the food and gave Rebecca a huge smile.

“Is there anything you’ll be doing today, My Lady?”

“Actually, I thought I’d go out today and get some fresh air,” Raven declared with a steady voice, her eyes ablaze with determination. “Inform the Marquess that I’ll be back later.”

Rebecca blinked in surprise. “Where will you be heading, My Lady?”

“I think I’ll start by paying my sister a visit. It’s been far too long since I’ve seen her, and I’m sure she’d be pleasantly surprised to know that I’m well,” Raven stated, her voice firm as a small voice whispered deep within her.

You're only going there because she's the only one who will accept you, admit it.

A slow smile spread across Rebecca's face. "Well, I'm sure the Marquess will be pleased to know you're going out. I shall inform him at once and get the carriage brought around for you."

"Thank you, Rebecca," Raven said, trying to steady her nerves as Rebecca left the room.

Raven waited a moment, pacing the length of the room as she refused to let the small voice screaming at her steal her nerves. With new determination, she stepped out of her room with her chin held high. She moved with purpose down the stairwell and out the door.

The carriage came around just as she stepped outside, and the chilly morning air caused her to draw her cloak tighter around her. Ignoring the surprised and curious glances of the servants watching from the windows and doorway, she stepped up into the carriage.

"Where to My Lady?" the driver asked as he paused at the window of the carriage.

“My parents’ house, please,” Raven answered. “I’d like to pay my sister a visit.”

“As you wish,” the driver said and disappeared. The carriage jolted a bit as he climbed up into his seat, and with the crack of his whip, the carriage was off.

As the carriage clattered through the town, a sense of apprehension began to settle around her like a shroud. The fear of how her family would respond to seeing her was unknown, but Raven was determined not to let anything deter her from accomplishing her mission. She refused to let anything bring her down, not even the weariness growing in the darkest recesses of her heart.

The carriage came to a halt in front of her parents’ house, causing her heart to pound faster. Swallowing hard, she paused and stared at the house before her. Although she spent most of her life within the walls of the manor, the place looked strange and unfamiliar.

“Everything all right, My Lady?” the driver asked as he pulled open the carriage door.

Raven’s mouth felt dry, and the words she wanted to say clogged her throat. She didn’t say a word as she grabbed his hand and slowly approached the door, trying to tame the tremors in her hand. Pulling the cord to the door, her heart fluttered as she waited.

The door opened, and Raven's eyes widened. "Hello, Mother."

"Raven, what are you doing here?" Mathilda asked, fussing over her as she glanced over Raven's shoulder, ensuring no one had seen her arrival. "If you've come to discuss the annulment of your marriage, I'm afraid I'm going to have to send you back to the Marquess. We cannot help you."

"Nothing's wrong, Mother," Raven replied calmly. "I came to see Penelope."

The mention of her sister appeared to temper Mathilda's anxiety. "I see. Well, I suppose you'll want to come in."

"Where are the servants?" Raven asked as she stepped over the threshold.

"Around," Mathilda stated as Raven spotted Penelope rushing down the stairs.

Before Raven could get a word out, Penelope threw her arms around her in a tight embrace.

"It's been ages, Raven! What took you so long to visit? What have you been doing? How is married life? Oh, I have so many questions. I thought you had abandoned me."

“I was wrong to stay away for so long. I’m sorry,” Raven apologized, returning the embrace. “Perhaps we can discuss such things, say in the park? I’d love for you to take a stroll with me in Hyde Park. That is, of course, if you’re not ashamed to be seen with me.”

Penelope grinned, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Let me get my shawl.”

Amidst the bustling crowd, Raven and Penelope strolled around the park as Raven tried not to pay any heed to the sideways glances from passersby. Yet, she couldn’t ignore the fact they were indeed watching her with their judgmental glares.

“I still can’t believe you’re married,” Penelope gushed. “But how has it been?”

“An adjustment, to say the least,” Raven answered. “But how are you doing? I hope all is well with you.”

“Things have been a bit difficult, but once Father got word to his ships to change their course and go to Ethan’s port, it’s gotten better,” Penelope whispered.

Raven understood all too well the need to keep such information discreet.

“Is that why there was no servant to greet me?” Raven asked.

“Mother says it’s only temporary,” Penelope stated. “Once things start progressing a bit more, I’m sure everything will go back to just as it was before. I still can’t believe how Anthony had been blocking so many of our ships. Father was blissfully unaware, thinking it was a normal part of the process. It’s clear now how power and greed had corrupted Anthony. And I must admit, I’m so glad you didn’t marry that man.”

Raven nodded, expressing her relief. “I’m glad to hear the family is doing well.”

“So, tell me about your life, Raven. Now that you’re married, are you planning to have children soon? Or are you already with child, and you came to see me so that I would be the first to know? How I’d love to be an auntie,” Penelope cooed.

Raven blushed, shaking her head. “I’m not expecting yet, Penelope.”

“Well, Mother seems to think you’ll never have children,” Penelope commented nonchalantly. “She thinks that you’ll need to wait at least three years to even start so that your children won’t be burdened with the scandal.”

Raven shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Perhaps waiting is the best option. But I know that we’ll have them when we’re ready and not a moment sooner. For now, there are a few things that still need to be sorted out.”

Immediately, Raven’s thoughts shifted to Ethan. The subject of having children had never come up between them. Raven knew that was mostly her fault. After all, how could they discuss such things if she never gave Ethan any time to talk about their future?

“What does Ethan have to say about the matter? Does he want children?” Penelope asked, her eyes wide with wonder and excitement.

“To be honest, we haven’t spoken much about that topic, but I’m sure he’ll want many. He is, after all, kind and charming, and, no doubt, he would make a wonderful father.”

At that moment, Raven realized Ethan’s patience and understanding had far surpassed her expectations. She felt a warmth spread within her as she acknowledged her feelings for him. “I love him, Penelope. He’s nothing like what I thought he’d be.”

Penelope eyes brightened as she turned to Raven and said, “I’m truly happy for you, Raven. I hope I find a love like yours one day.”

“Um, excuse me,” a small voice behind Raven whispered.

Startled a bit, Raven turned to find a young woman with long brown hair and dark chocolate eyes as wide as saucers staring at her.

“May I help you?” Raven asked, giving Penelope a sideways glance.

“My name is Violet Hemshaw, and I was just curious if you were... are the author, David Thornhill?” the woman asked as she rocked on her heels.

Raven hesitated, unsure of how to answer or if she even wanted to.

But Penelope, who was beaming with pride, chimed in, “Yes, Raven is David Thornhill.”

“Could you sign this for me?” Violet asked eagerly as she produced a book and a quill from her pocket.

Raven, taken aback, stared at the hardbound book being pressed into her hands. She found the air around her growing thinner as her fingertips grazed the top of the book. Slowly, she pulled out of her stupor as the girl tilted her head to catch her eye.

“Yes, of course,” Raven answered as she opened the book and quickly jotted down her name.

“Oh, thank you so much. I have all your books. The way you write—it’s like you’ve lived every adventure you’ve put in them,” Violet said, her eyes shining with admiration. “You’re so brave.”

Raven found herself touched by the young woman’s words, and she felt a sense of validation. Ethan was right, she did have admirers. Raven could hear Ethan’s voice whispering in her ear that he told her so.

“So, when can I expect your next book? Surely, you have one ready to publish,” Violet asked.

“Not quite,” Raven admitted. “Things have been far too messy as of late for me to even think about writing.”

“Oh, that’s a pity,” Violet bemoaned. “I do hope, though, that things settle for you, and I can see another title soon.”

“I’m sure they will sooner rather than later,” Raven answered, but as she spoke, she noticed people gathering around them. Their whispering reached her ears as she handed Violet back her book.

“I do hope so,” Violet said. “Thank you again.”

“Of course,” Raven answered, trying to shake off the feeling that the others around them were chatting about her.

As Violet stepped away, another young woman approached Raven.

“Is it true?” the woman asked. “Are you David Thornhill?”

“In the flesh.” Penelope beamed with pride for her sister. Raven’s cheeks flushed as the woman’s eyes widened.

“You are such an inspiration,” the woman said. “Gwen, Madeline, look who’s here. It’s David Thornhill.”

Raven glanced around to see a horde of women coming to see what the commotion was about. Bombarded with questions, Raven tried to answer everyone. Looking around, she realized that she was impacting the lives of these young women, inspiring them to chase their dreams, regardless of societal norms. She was making a difference, and it felt wonderful.

As the group of women departed, bubbling with excitement, Penelope turned to Raven, unable to contain her enthusiasm. “Raven, I never thought I’d see the day when you’d be showered with so much adoration. Look at everyone your books have reached, and they all want you to write another.”

Bobbing her head, Raven was completely taken aback. “Me neither. Never in a million years did I ever imagine this sort of support for what I do.”

Penelope’s face lit up with a sly smile. “You know, I think Ethan might be a good influence on you. Before him, you would have never been brave enough to reveal yourself to the world. I’m glad he took my advice.”

Raven’s brows furrowed, aghast, stealing the high she had been feeling. “What are you talking about?”

Pressing her lips into a tight line, Penelope averted her eyes. “I may have given Ethan the idea to do what he did. I mean, I didn’t think he’d be so bold or the secret would be so damaging, but I just couldn’t bear to think of you marrying Anthony.”

Raven’s mouth dropped as her eyes widened. “You knew about my writing?”

“I had my suspicions, but it’s not like you did a good job hiding it. The way you were so secretive about what you were writing and the notes you shoved into pockets in your room. Still, I never guessed you’d be an author, let alone a published one. When I heard Anthony at the market talking about how you’d be the ‘perfect addition’ to his collection, I knew I couldn’t let you be trapped in that loveless marriage. So, when

Ethan appeared on the terrace the night before your wedding to Anthony, and he looked so desperate to see you, I may have suggested for him to do something bold.”

Raven was speechless as she tried to process Penelope’s words.

“I never meant for it to cause you pain, Raven. I just couldn’t bear to see you married to such a horrible man.”

“Tell me again, how did Ethan look when you found him on the terrace? What was he doing?” Raven asked, her mind racing.

Penelope described Ethan’s desperate climb over the wall and his determination to see Raven in great detail. She let out a heavy sigh as she finished. “But honestly, who dares to sneak into someone’s house to see a woman he loves? It was just too romantic, and it was then I knew he was the right man for you.”

As memories of Ethan sneaking into her room flooded back, Raven couldn’t help but agree. As daring as Ethan was, he was just like the heroes she’d written about, men who were brave, passionate, and willing to risk everything for love.

A clap of thunder pulled Raven from her thoughts. She glanced at the darkening sky.

“We need to go,” she and Penelope said in unison as a strong, chilling wind picked up, rustling leaves and causing the treetops to sway violently about.

Small droplets of rain fell from the dark clouds that seemed to grow denser and heavier with each passing moment.

The once peaceful park was soon filled with chaos as people scrambled frantically to their carriages and homes before the rain turned into a torrential downpour. The rumble of thunder echoed through the air and rattled Raven’s nerves.

Without a word, Raven grabbed Penelope by the hand as they raced to her carriage. The driver’s eyes were wide with fright as Raven and Penelope climbed inside. The rain came down in sheets of water as a clap of thunder drowned their giggles of relief.

“Mother is going to kill me,” Raven said to Penelope as the carriage started down the cobblestone streets.

“You? What about me? I promised her I wouldn’t get dirty, and look at me—I’m soaked to the bone.” Penelope chuckled.

“I would say I’m sorry, but I have no control over the weather.” Raven snickered as she looked at the way her sister’s hair clung to her neck like seaweed.

Their carriage, drawn by a pair of sturdy horses, heaved forward, creating startling splashes as the wheels hit the puddles formed on the uneven streets. The rhythmic clatter of hooves on the cobblestones was muffled by the pounding rain, and the lanterns affixed to the carriage threw eerie shapes onto the wet stones.

The journey from Hyde Park to Penelope's home was typically a short one, but the storm made it seem like an endless, tortuous ride as Raven and Penelope were jostled about. Each turn of the carriage wheels amplified the turbulence of the storm, and the wagon splashing through the puddles of the streets felt like a ship on rough seas.

As the carriage came to a halt in front of Penelope's home, she turned to Raven, her eyes glistening in the dim lantern light as her voice was nothing but a whisper over the relentless pounding of the rain. "Don't be such a stranger."

Raven smiled, her expression softened by the warm glow of the carriage lanterns. "You're always welcome to visit, Penelope. It could be your refuge from our parents if you need one."

"Thank you," Penelope answered, pulling Raven into an endearing embrace. "I just might have to take you up on that."

Penelope pulled away and braced herself as she opened the carriage door and sprinted towards the front door. Raven waited until her sister was safely inside before craning her neck out to the driver.

“Let’s get home, and make it quick.”

Just as they started off, a resounding crack reverberated through the air. The carriage lurched to a sudden stop, throwing Raven against the carriage wall. Righting herself, Raven poked her head out of the window of the carriage as she tried to figure out what happened despite the greyness swallowing the carriage.

“What happened?” Raven called out.

The driver’s lantern swayed with the wind, but it didn’t take long for him to reveal the unfortunate truth.

“Seems we’ve broken an axle,” he answered.

Raven glanced down the road, debating if running to her parents would be a smart choice. But with the rain coming down so hard, she didn’t know if that was the smart option. Her heart sank as she swallowed hard and stared at the driver, expecting he would have a solution.

“Where are we?” Raven asked.

“If you’re thinking of running back to your family’s estate, it’s a ways back, and I promised His Lordship that I’d keep you safe,” the driver announced. “We could try going home if you don’t mind getting a bit wet.”

“Wet?” Raven chuckled as she wiped away the stream of water cascading down her face. “I think we are a little past that point, don’t you agree?”

“Aye,” the driver answered. “We could wait here and get the carriage unstuck, but I’ve got no tools to fix it.”

“I’ll go and get others to come and help you,” Raven stated.

“And let you roam these streets in this sort of weather? I think not. The Marquess would have my hide.”

“You don’t expect me to wait here, do you?”

The driver glanced down the lane as he dropped his shoulders. Raven didn’t wait for him to give an answer as she climbed out of the carriage.

“Am I not the Marchioness?” she stated boldly, daring him to answer. “Then I’ll go and send back someone to help you. Stay here and keep safe, I’ll get someone to come help you.”

CHAPTER 31



Ethan pulled back the thick curtain and peered out of the window. Water flowed down like a wild stream dropping from the cliffs of a mountain. He couldn't help but marvel at the dramatic display of nature's fury. The rain fell in relentless sheets, pounding against the windowpane, making it nearly impossible for him to see more than a few inches out into the courtyard.

The wind beat against the window, shaking the glass as it howled. Each gust tore through the leaves of the trees, making Ethan wonder if even the mighty oaks would bow to the ever-increasing wind.

"My Lord," James said behind Ethan.

"Please tell me you've got good news," Ethan replied, refusing to turn away from the window in hopes of catching a glimpse of Raven.

"There's no word as of yet," James answered, much to Ethan's distress as he noticed puddles forming under the awning and

rising over the stones that cut through the garden.

Pulling in a deep breath, Ethan could smell the scent of damp soil as it rose and drifted through the room. The rain brought an earthy perfume that was both comforting and ominous.

His heart pounded in his chest as he gripped the curtain tighter. There was no debate, nothing to ponder. He whipped around, pulling his eyes off the window as his hope dwindled. “Where is she?”

“The Marchioness stated she was going to visit with her sister,” James answered. “Perhaps she’s stuck there.”

Ethan’s heart eased a fraction, thinking perhaps she was staying with her family until the storm passed. Nevertheless, a knot of anxiety remained, tightening with each pulse of his heart. He couldn’t shake off the feeling that something was amiss.

“And what if she isn’t?” Ethan countered as the fear grew within him. “What if she got caught in this mess and is stuck somewhere? What if she’s hurt?”

“Do you want me to send a messenger out to the Davenports?” James asked.

Ethan dropped his shoulders and shook his head. “And risk his life? No,” he stated as he flexed his jaw. “If anyone is going out there in this tempest, it’ll be me.”

“My Lord, it’s too dangerous,” James said with a gasp.

“Which is exactly why it has to be me,” Ethan stated. “I’ll not put one life in danger on my account. Prepare my horse,” he ordered, his voice taut with worry. “I need to see with my own eyes that she’s safe, and if she is, we’ll stay at her parents’ house, but I just have a bad feeling.”

The servant gave a swift nod before hurrying off to fulfill his command. As the door shut behind him, Ethan turned back to the window, his gaze lost in the stormy twilight. He quickly cleared his desk, pushing aside all the paperwork that that seemed so trivial compared to the worry swelling within him.

The door creaked open, drawing Ethan’s attention. James’s soaked figure emerged as he stepped over the threshold. He rolled his shoulders back and cleared his throat. “Your horse is ready, My Lord.”

“Thank you, James,” Ethan replied as he rushed around the desk. “Make sure you keep the fire going. If I come back with her, I want it hot enough to bake bread, do you understand?”

“Of course, My Lord, but may I say once more, this is madness,” James said.

Ethan patted him on the shoulder as he passed by. “Suppose that is what love does to a man,” he stated as he flashed him a weary smile and made a beeline for the front door.

“My Lord,” Rebecca said, holding his jacket out for him, “are you sure this is a good idea?”

“No,” Ethan answered. “But I’ll not leave my wife out in this weather. Now, be ready. There’s no telling how long I’ll be gone, but pray that we return safely.”

“Godspeed,” Rebecca mumbled as Ethan dashed out into the harsh rainfall.

Ethan slipped his foot into the stirrup and hoisted his body up into the saddle as the rain drenched his hair, causing it to stick to his face.

“Ethan.”

He paused, wondering if he really heard his name drifting through the wild torrents of the wind. Peering through the sheets of rain, Ethan’s heart dropped. He spotted a dark figure trudging up the flooded driveway.

Nearly instantly, his fear vanished as he jumped off the horse and handed the reins over to the stable boy.

“Raven... Raven!”

With an explosion of adrenaline, Ethan raced down the path until his arms encircled Raven’s tiny frame. “Oh, Raven. My God. I was just about to come looking for you. Are you hurt?”

Ethan’s eyes roamed over Raven’s body, hunting for any wounds that would explain why she was walking and not with the carriage.

“Ethan, you’ve got to send help,” Raven cried out, her voice barely audible over the wind. “I left the driver with the carriage. The axle broke, and he needs help.”

“Let’s get you inside,” Ethan said, trying to corral her to the house. She held her ground despite the water pouring down on them.

“No, we need to help the driver,” she demanded.

“Don’t worry about the driver,” Ethan shouted. “I’ll get someone out there to help him, but we need to get you inside now.”

Before Raven could protest again, Ethan leaned down and hoisted her up into his arms. Her drenched garments weighed her down, but there was no way Ethan was about to drop her.

“Bring my horse back to the stables,” Ethan ordered the stable boy as he carried Raven to the manor.

“Ethan, put me down,” Raven demanded.

“Not until we’re inside. You clearly hurt yourself and are in no position to walk another step. How you managed to get this far is astonishing.”

“Please,” Raven pleaded. “The driver. He’s not that far from here. You just need to stay on the main road, and you’re sure to find him.”

Frustrated, Ethan glanced at the stables. The soft glow of the lantern burned through the rain. “Fine. I’ll get someone to help the driver. But I want you inside, do you understand?”

Carefully, Ethan lowered Raven to her feet and set her on the front steps. She flashed him a woeful smile as he turned on his heel and charged for the stables.

“My Lord,” the stable boy gasped as Ethan barged in. Ethan glanced around, hunting for someone older to help. “Can I help you?”

“I need someone to go back out to help the driver. The axle to the carriage is broken, and he stayed behind,” Ethan explained.

The boy’s eyes widened as the color drained from his face. “That was my father,” he cried. “Please, My Lord, allow me.”

Ethan hesitated. He didn’t like the fact that such a young boy would go trudging out into such a storm, but seeing as how there was no one else, Ethan had no choice.

“Are you sure you can manage?” Ethan asked, his hands gripping the boy’s shoulders.

The stable boy gave a short but determined nod.

“Then Godspeed. Don’t worry about fixing the carriage. Just come back here and let the rain take the carriage. Understand? It isn’t worth risking your life over. And take my horse. He’s already saddled and ready to go. Your father can take one of the horses there and lead the other.”

“Thank you, My Lord,” the boy said as Ethan helped hoist him into the saddle.

Wiping back his wet hair, Ethan watched as the boy raced out into the storm. He turned his attention to the house and darted out of the stables to the front door. The manor was toasty compared to the freezing rain that pelted him.

Ethan's eyes darted about as he hunted for Raven. "Where is she?" he demanded as he passed Rebecca.

"In the sitting room, My Lord."

"Is the fire going?"

"Of course, just as you commanded," Rebecca replied as Ethan made his way to the sitting room.

With his heart pounding in his ears, Ethan barged into the room to find Raven sitting down, soaking the cushions of the couch, but he didn't care. All that mattered was that she was safe.

"Are you all right? Where does it hurt?" he asked as he went to her and dropped to his knees to inspect every inch of her.

Raven's protest was soft but firm. "Ethan, I'm fine. I assure you, it's just a few bruises."

“I want to be certain,” Ethan said, scouring over her, checking and double-checking. He paused as Raven lifted her hand to his cheek, her gaze penetrating his.

The love in her eyes was overwhelming, and seeing it beam out of her like a bolt of lightning turned his world upside down.

“I swear to you, I’m fine. I’m worried for the driver, though.”

“I’ve sent someone out to get him,” Ethan said as the servants rushed about, bringing in more firewood and fetching blankets to warm Raven. But his thoughts weren’t on them as he cupped his hand over Raven’s, which still cradled his face.

He didn’t want to let her go. Just having her touch him was an affirmation of love that he had been craving since they wedded.

“What happened?”

As the fire crackled in the hearth, warming the room, Raven began to explain her journey. Ethan eased into the empty spot beside her, not caring about the wetness of their clothes or the fact that he must look like a sopping monster to her.

“I went to see my sister,” she explained, her voice a whisper against the crackling of the firewood.

Ethan, despite the heaviness in his heart, managed to smile. “I’m glad you got to get out of the house, Raven, but how did it go?”

“With my sister, it was as if nothing changed between us. It felt nice to see her again. My mother was a bit confused as to why I showed up and looked a bit apprehensive the moment I stepped into the house. It was almost as if she wondered if the walls had eyes and would see her disgraced daughter entering their home.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Ethan said, exhaling.

“I only stayed long enough to ask Penelope to go for a walk with me,” Raven continued, much to Ethan’s surprise.

“You ventured out in public? The nerve,” he said with a faux gasp that earned him a swift slap on the arm.

“It wasn’t as bad as I was expecting. There were a few people who looked at me like I was a troublemaker,” she confessed, her fingers tracing an absent pattern on the armrest of the couch. “But other people came up to me and asked me to sign my book.”

Raven’s eyes narrowed as she stopped talking and tilted her head, catching Ethan checking her over once again. She was

quick to interrupt his musings.

“Ethan, I’m fine. You don’t need to dote on me so much. I’m not made out of glass,” she said, her tone firm yet gentle.

“If you were, I surely would treat you with extra care.”

Raven’s expression softened, and her eyes darted to the fire
“You treat me better than I deserve, Ethan. And I owe you an apology. Penelope told me she was the one to plant the seed for your actions.”

“I hope you don’t hate her, too. She was just trying to look out for you.”

“I don’t hate her, and I don’t hate you,” she answered as she slowly returned her attention to Ethan.

“Penelope didn’t tell me to reveal your secret, but it was the only thing that came to mind so that I could stop your wedding.”

“I understand,” Raven said quietly, “and while I wasn’t thrilled with your methods, I understand why you did what you did.”

The room fell silent, the only sound being the gentle crackling of wood in the fireplace. Ethan found himself transfixed by

Raven, her vulnerability rendering him speechless. Her usually distant demeanor had melted into something softer, making his longing for her even stronger. He gently brushed away the strands of hair from her face, tucking them behind her ear, and the action caused his heart to throb.

She looked breathtaking to him, and it took every ounce of his being not to lean in and kiss her.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, his voice trembling. “I can’t imagine a life without you.”

She hesitated and then placed her hand on his leg without saying a word. The heat from her touch seemed to radiate throughout his body and stirred emotions he’d been keeping at bay.

“You should get changed before you catch a cold,” he suggested, attempting to rise.

Raven held him back, a flame of desire burning brightly in her eyes that left him stunned.

“Ethan,” she began, her voice quivering. “Thank you for seeing me as I’ve always wanted to be seen. I’m sorry I didn’t realize how much you meant to me sooner.”

Her words left him speechless, her admission shaking him to his core.

“You’re the most kind and loving person I’ve ever met, Ethan. Despite your unconventional methods, you’ve always wanted the best for me,” she observed, her words filling him with a warmth he hadn’t felt in a long time.

Before he could respond, she leaned in. Her lips against his sent waves of longing through every fiber of his being. There was no suppressing his want for her any longer. She had opened the floodgates, and he didn’t want to let her go. He wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off the couch.

“I want to take you to bed,” he whispered as he pulled away.

Raven’s lips curled into a smile as the fires of desire burned ever brighter.

“Then take me to our bed.”

CHAPTER 32



The rain drummed against the windowpanes, drowning out the crackle of the fire as Raven's heart pounded fiercely in her chest. Little bumps rose over her skin as the soft glow from flickering flames warmed the room. Her eyes shifted from Ethan as she scanned the room.

“So, this is your room,” Raven mumbled, trying not to let the high-beamed ceiling or the majestic four-poster bed distract her from Ethan.

He leaned closer, pressing his lips to her shoulder as he teased the strings of her corset. She shivered as she took in the grandeur of the room, her breath hitching in awe.

The enormity of the space was astounding, yet it felt intimate and secure. Her gaze followed Ethan as he moved around her, his silhouette creating a captivating dance against the firelight. The soft rustle of fabric echoed in the room as he began to unlace her corset, each pull of the string intensifying the charge between them.

Despite the cascade of events, Raven felt no fear. On the contrary, she felt a sense of serenity, and her trust in Ethan was unwavering and absolute.

“Now, you see why I offered it to you,” Ethan pointed out. “I knew you’d like it.”

“The room you set up served its purpose,” Raven said, running her fingertips up Ethan’s neck as he caressed her shoulder. “Don’t get me wrong, I like it, but I like this one more.”

“I knew you would,” Ethan whispered, kissing her neck as he slid the corset off her body.

Raven’s breath quickened, and her heart raced at his touch. She closed her eyes, allowing herself to bask in the sensation of his lips against her skin.

Ethan moved slowly around her, and with each revolution, a new article of clothing dropped to the floor. Raven refused to move, she felt as if Ethan had enchanted her with his steely gaze.

“You should get closer to the fire,” Ethan suggested, guiding her to the warmth of the fire.

As Ethan guided her closer to the fire, the room was bathed in a soft, golden glow. The flickering flames danced with the

shadows that jumped across the walls, transforming the chamber into a mesmerizing spectacle of light and darkness. Each burst of flame mirrored a pulse in her heart, the shadowy figures on the walls echoing the rhythm of their shared intimacy.

“Is that better? I don’t want you to catch a cold,” he said as he cupped his hand to her face.

“I’m not going to catch a cold,” Raven assured him as her fingers fiddled with his sopping wet vest.

Drops of water dropped from Ethan’s clothing and splattered on the ground at her feet. The cold water was a small reprieve from the inferno that burned within her.

“What are you thinking?” Ethan asked, catching her eyes.

The firelight cast his chiseled features into sharp relief, highlighting the strong lines of his face and body, while softening them with a warm glow. His eyes sparkled with an intensity that was almost divine. It was as if the universe had conspired to present Ethan not as a man but as an angel—an angel of fire and shadow. His presence was almost surreal, yet she knew he was real and completely hers.

Raven’s heart fluttered uncontrollably as he took off his wet clothes. The roof of her mouth felt dry as she watched him

stand before her, bared for only her.

“What are you thinking about?” Ethan asked as he closed the gap between them.

Raven felt waves of his body heat pound against her bare skin. She didn't know what to think or do, but she trusted Ethan completely.

Shaking her head, Raven tried to find her voice. “Nothing.”

“Are you nervous?”

“A little,” she managed to answer as Ethan stretched his hand out and placed her palm on his chest.

Raven's eyes widened as his heartbeat drummed against her hand.

“Me, too,” he answered bashfully.

“You? You're nervous?”

“And why wouldn't I be?” Ethan asked as he tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “You've flipped my world

upside down, and I've never wanted anything more than I want you."

"Will this hurt?" she asked, gulping down air.

"I don't want to hurt you, Raven. I've never wanted to do that," he said as his hand molded to her face. His eyes bored deep into hers as if speaking directly to her soul.

Raven bobbed her head and swallowed hard. Finding her courage, she entwined her fingers with Ethan's and turned. Although she didn't know what she was doing, she lured Ethan to the bed. A smile tugged on his lips as she spun him around and pushed him down onto the bed.

"That's not how I do things," Ethan said, grabbing her and pulling her to him.

Raven stumbled forward and had no choice but to straddle him. She felt his manhood against her inner thigh as she sat on his lap. Twisting his fingers into her hair, Ethan drew her to his lips. Without hesitating, she kissed him passionately and dropped her inhibitions at his request.

"Lie back," he whispered, his lips moving like feathers on her mouth.

She didn't argue or hesitate. Carefully, she climbed further onto the open bed and looked up. She couldn't help but admire the high ceiling as Ethan pried her legs apart.

“And try to relax.”

Chewing her lower lip, Raven clawed at the blanket beneath her in anticipation of what Ethan was about to do. Thoughts of being in the park with him flickered into her mind as her body shifted. She arched her back and let out a soft moan the moment his tongue slipped between her folds.

The sensation was more than she was expecting. A small voice in the back of her head wanted her to cry out for more, but she held back, refusing to make a sound, as a warm tingling sensation raced under her skin, causing little goosebumps to rise all over her.

Ethan's tongue moved with grace and precision over the tender bulb of flesh between her legs. The way he moved and fluttered his tongue made her squirm uncontrollably under his guidance.

“Did you want me to stop?” he whispered, teasing her inner thighs with light kisses.

“No,” Raven whispered as she lifted her head to find him staring up at her. His smile was intoxicating.

“What do you want, Raven? Just say the word, and it’s yours.”

“You.”

“You’ve got me, now and always,” he answered as he pressed his fingers into her body, opening her up to further advances.

Raven’s fingernails dug into the blanket as she focused on the way the fire danced about the ceiling.

“Then make me yours,” Raven said. “For I don’t want anyone but you. I love you, Ethan.”

Ethan eased his body down, gliding over hers as he framed his arms around her head. Raven shifted as her mouth parted. She kept her eyes locked on Ethan’s as her body opened up for him.

“I love you as well,” he whispered in her ear as he filled her in ways she never thought anyone could.

Ethan was no longer a separate entity but was now embedded into her. It was like their souls mixed and mingled as their bodies joined together as one.

“You’re mine now, Raven. Forever.”

“Forever,” she whimpered as he pushed deeper into her, eternally linking not only their bodies as one but their hearts and souls for the rest of their lives.

EPILOGUE



“Ethan, what are you doing?” Raven asked, her voice echoing through the dimly lit hallway. “And what’s with the blindfold? Is this really necessary?”

“Do you trust me?” Ethan asked, his voice pitched with excitement as he guided her gently by the elbow.

“I trust you. But I still don’t understand why I can’t see what you’re doing.”

“It’s called a surprise for a reason, Raven. Now, don’t touch that, or you’re going to ruin everything.”

“I’m not sure I like surprises,” she argued, her voice wavering slightly.

“You’re going to love this one,” Ethan assured her, his voice filled with excitement. “And I’m sorry it’s long overdue, but I wanted everything to be perfect.”

A smile stretched across her face.

He was dying to tell her what he was up to, but he knew he couldn't, not yet. Even with Raven's curiosity threatening to ruin his present for her, he pressed on and pushed through the doors to lead them out into the garden.

"Are you taking me outside? It's gotten brighter," Raven asked.

"Just be patient," he said, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice. "You can take off the blindfold in three... two... one. All right, take it off."

As Raven slowly peeled off the blindfold, her gasp echoed through the quiet garden. She was completely shocked, and the sight of her surprise was finally enough to make Ethan burst into laughter. It was a beautiful sight and one he'd been planning for a long time.

"I know you always wanted a grand wedding, and I'm sorry that we didn't have time for one, but now that the frost is here, I thought, why not?"

"Oh, Ethan," she gasped as her face lit up the moment she spotted her sister sitting in a chair along with her mother and father. She scanned the garden to find several unfamiliar faces and quite a few old ones. "This is beautiful."

The garden had been transformed into a winter spectacle of ethereal beauty under the frosty baby-blue sky. Her eyes widened as she noticed the ground was covered with a fresh blanket of white snow, and the icicles clinging to the trees sparkled in the sunlight. Everything was like a magical realm that Raven could never fully grasp in her writing.

An aisle was carved through the snow and lined with lanterns that cast a warm glow on the snow, leading up to a beautifully decorated arch that was lined with white fabric and adorned with winter flowers and pinecones. The guests were huddled together, their breaths visible in the chilly air. Despite the cold, the atmosphere was filled with warmth and happiness that made Raven's heart feel as if it would burst from the love that was shared.

Ethan dropped down to one knee and reached into his pocket. "Raven Davenport, will you do me the honor of being my wife? Will you stand by me and walk through this journey we call life?"

"Oh, Ethan, yes, of course, I will," she replied as Ethan slipped the ring on her finger. He couldn't help but grin as he led her down the wintery aisle to the priest.

"I can't believe you managed to pull all of this off without me knowing about it," Raven said as they reached the end of the aisle.

“It wasn’t without some difficulties,” Ethan confessed. “But so worth the trouble. And I told you, I’d get a ring on your finger.”

Raven glanced at the beautiful ring on her finger.

The wedding ring that now graced her finger was a marvel of craftsmanship. It was a delicate band of gold that shimmered under the sunlight. In the center was a radiant-cut diamond that gleamed with a fiery brilliance that mirrored the depth of Ethan’s love for her. Flanked on either side was a trio of smaller round-cut rubies.

“This is more than I could have ever dreamed of,” Raven said as she squeezed Ethan’s hand. His smile stretched across his face as the priest cleared his throat.

“Are you ready?” the priest asked.

“Whenever you are,” Ethan answered.

The ceremony was short and sweet, mirroring the ceremony they had before, yet Raven didn’t mind. She had already given Ethan her heart, and as tears pooled in her eyes, she leaned closer and kissed Ethan passionately, solidifying their love once and for all.

Ethan took Raven's hand, leading her onto the dance floor as the soft glow of the lanterns illuminated their smiling faces. Their bodies swayed in harmony with the romantic melody of the violins, creating a magical moment that left the onlookers enraptured.

Drawing her closer, Ethan's eyes met hers, a silent promise reflected in their depths. He pulled her into a passionate kiss, whispering against her lips, "I can't wait to take you upstairs, my love."

A blush spread across Raven's cheeks, her eyes sparkling with anticipation and desire, and she responded in a voice only audible to him, "Then, my love, what's stopping you?"

A mischievous playful smile tugged at Ethan's lips. Taking Raven by the hand, he led her back through the double doors, nodding to their guests as they passed. His heart pounded in his chest as they reached the top of the steps.

Ethan glanced over his shoulder, taking in all of Raven's beauty as he pushed through the bedroom door.

"What are you doing?" Raven asked as he swept her up into his arms.

"It's tradition, is it not? Carrying the bride over the threshold?" Ethan asked as he walked into the room.

Raven stretched her foot out and shut the door. “Since when are you a man of tradition?” she asked as she tugged at Ethan’s tie and flung it over her shoulder.

“I suppose, my dear Raven, you know me better than most,” Ethan said, laying her on the bed.

Raven scrambled to her knees, and the frustration etched on her face made Ethan chuckle.

“Oh, all these layers,” Raven bemoaned as she struggled with the vast layers of her skirt, trying to tame them. “What good are any of them when all they do is get in the way of what I want.”

“And what is it that you want, my dear?” Ethan asked as he tugged at his linen shirt.

“You know exactly what I want,” Raven said as Ethan leaned over her and cupped his hands around her face.

He’d never seen her so hungry for him before, and the sight only added fuel to the passion that raged within him.

“Perhaps I could indulge you. It is, after all, your wedding day,” Ethan teased, his voice low and seductive.

Raven's eyes sparkled as she reached up and slipped her hands under Ethan's shirt. Her fingers brushed against his skin, sending little goosebumps throughout his body.

The heat between them was overwhelming. Ethan found himself lost in Raven's gaze and found solace and love in her arms. Unable to hold back any longer, Ethan ravaged Raven's neck with kisses as he fumbled with her petticoat and tugged at the laces of her corset. It only took a matter of moments to get her undressed.

Raven's adoration for him and the lust that boiled through her matched Ethan's. He couldn't help but let out a light chuckle as she fumbled with his breeches and the buttons of his vest. Yet, in their throes of passion, each tossing bits of clothing off to the side, it only took a moment before they were as God intended.

Ethan stopped a moment and took in long, deep breaths. He didn't want a speedy, self-serving night, but rather he wanted one that showed Raven just how much he cherished her.

"Lie on your stomach," he whispered as he ran his fingers through her hair.

Raven's eyes narrowed in suspicion, but she didn't say a word. Turning her back to him, she eased herself down. Ethan's eyes widened as he studied the curves of her body.

The valley of Raven's back was like a blank canvas, desperate for color. He brushed his fingertips down her spine. Watching the way her body quivered under his touch thrilled him. A smile tugged at the corners of his lips as he admired the way her body curved.

"What are you doing?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"Nothing," he teased, his voice breaking as he tried to mask the longing in his voice.

Ethan wanted to give in to his cardinal urges and ravage her, but tonight wasn't about his self-gratification. It was about her. Everything he had done was only ever for her, and he knew he couldn't be selfish.

"Just admiring the view."

"Is that right?" she asked as she started to roll over.

Ethan pressed his hand to the middle of her back, stopping her. "Don't—let me worship you tonight. I want you to enjoy every moment of this."

Gracefully, Ethan ran his hands from the crest of her buttocks to her shoulders and back again. Raven's moans were

intoxicating. He relished listening to her little groans of pleasure as he kneaded his fingertips into the tense muscles of her body.

It wasn't just her back he rubbed, but he allowed his hands to roam freely over every inch of her. The fact that she was so trusting of him and willing to allow him free-range filled him with ineffable pride. She was his, completely.

“What do you think about the Caribbean?” Ethan whispered as he slowly brushed his lips down her back.

“Mmm?”

“The Caribbean,” he repeated between kisses as he reached her hips. “I would love to see you laid out like this on a secluded beach, basking in the sun with no care in the world.”

“What's brought this on?” she asked, her voice dripping with seduction.

“Well, we never had a proper honeymoon, and I was thinking, perhaps you'd like to travel. It might give you a bit of inspiration for your next novel. That is if you want to go,” Ethan answered as his manhood throbbed in the tight space between her thighs.

“Ethan?” Raven’s voice hitched as his fingers curled around her hips and propped her onto her hands and knees.

Positioned behind her, Ethan’s body ached to be inside her as thoughts of taking her on the sunny, secluded beach flashed before his eyes.

“Raven.” He groaned her name as his fingers traced the slit between her legs.

Raven’s body was eager and willing as he slid the tips of his fingers into her.

“Yes,” she moaned and clung to the sheets.

His smile stretched as he pressed his body against hers. “Is that a yes, you want to go? Or was there something else you craved now?”

“I don’t care where we go as long as I’m with you,” Raven answered as she squirmed under his touch.

“Well, I don’t want you do to anything you don’t want to do,” he said playfully, enjoying the fact he was prolonging the experience for her.

“Are you trying to torture me?”

“I would never do such a thing,” Ethan said as he pushed his fingers deeper into her.

Raven dropped her head and moaned with such intensity that Ethan couldn't contain himself any longer.

“Yes, you would,” Raven replied playfully as her voice was muffled by the thick blankets she clung to.

“How's this for torture,” Ethan groaned as he positioned himself behind Raven and guided his manhood into her. Her body was like a welcoming embrace that soothed every desire and need he ever had.

As their bodies converged into one, Ethan knew there was no other place he'd want to be, no other woman that would satisfy him the way that Raven could. And as her moans filled their chambers, only one thought filled Ethan's head.

How I love this wonderful, spectacular, stunning woman.

The End?

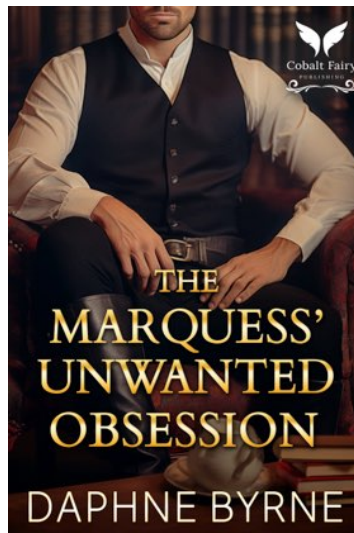
EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Eager to learn how **Raven and Ethan's** relationship evolved?
Then enjoy this complimentary short story featuring the
beloved couple.

Simply **[TAP HERE to read it now for FREE!](https://go.daphnebyrne.com/wS6l9xAO)** or use this
link: **<https://go.daphnebyrne.com/wS6l9xAO>** directly in
your browser.

I guarantee you, that you won't be disappointed ♥



MORE STEAMY HISTORICAL ROMANCE

Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of *The Duke's Unwanted Virgin*, one of my best stories so far, and the second standalone in the series!



PREVIEW: THE DUKE'S
UNWANTED VIRGIN



CHAPTER 1



“So help me, Helen, I am losing my patience with you.”

Helen Smith shifted her attention and stared at her father’s reflection in the mirror as she pretended to fix the tangled mess that was her hair. She glared daggers at the man but kept the emotions off her face.

“And here I thought you wanted me to look my best,” Helen said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of her tone. Throwing his hands up in frustration, Helen wrangled with a smile tugging on her lips. Watching her father’s face turn red and the vein above his left eyebrow bulge delighted her to no ends.

“You have fifteen minutes, understand?” her father, Scott Smith, the Marquess of Valenford, warned as he stormed out of the room. Helen dropped her hands to her lap and contorted her face to silently mock her father. Her stomach twisted knots as she stared at the girl in the mirror.

“I don’t understand,” Helen mumbled to herself and tucked away the last strand of her brown hair up with the rest of it.

“Why can’t he just let me be?”

“Because you are my daughter, and you will do as you’re told.” Helen heard Scott’s voice boom from down the hallway. Her chest tightened as she realized Scott wasn’t as far from her

door as she had expected. “Now get up—you’re not going to make yourself any prettier by sitting there.”

“You do realize this is the fourth event we’ve gone to this month. Can’t we sit this one out? I already have plenty of suitors and don’t need to be looking for any more,” Helen pleaded. “Besides we don’t even know who invited us.”

The thumping of heavy boots rattled Helen. She rose quickly and grabbed her lacy smock before Scott reached her door. Anger, disappointment, and irritation seemed to burn through him. He folded his arms over his chest. Helen flashed him a bright smile and batted her eyes innocently at him.

“Are you coming?” Helen asked as she squeezed between her father and the wall and made a beeline for the front door. Dread seeped into her as she felt Scott’s glare on her back.

“I was not the one taking so long. And to answer your question, we go because I have an insolent daughter who refuses to make up her mind as to whom she will marry.”

“You cannot force love,” Helen argued, trying to keep the conversation light, but she knew all too well what her father thought about love and matters of the heart. For Scott, it wasn’t a matter of love but the acreage he could get or the money that would fill his bank account. Helen had hoped that since her father forced Theresa to wed Devlin, she would be free to make her own match.

Instead, the new connections and business transactions Scott managed to have, now that her sister, Theresa, was married to a Duke, made him even more power-hungry and greedy.

“Love is but an illusion—one I’m surprised you and your sister still believe in. But it matters not,” Scott replied, corralling Helen closer to the doorway. “You’ve had plenty of

time to decide on a husband. So, I tell you this now, daughter, by the time the clock strikes midnight tonight, you will announce your engagement, or I will do it for you.”

“You cannot be serious,” Helen gasped. The warmth drained from her as she stood in front of the carriage doors. Every inch of her felt as if it was going numb. Never in a million years did she expect her father to make such a proclamation and decree over her life. Scott’s words felt like a punch to the gut, and it took all of Helen’s strength to remain upright.

“You are burdensome child who needs to understand the ways of the world. You cannot stay under my roof any longer. It is time for you to marry, or perhaps you’d care to join a nunnery instead?” Scott said as he arched his eyebrow, daring Helen to say another word.

Flustered and angry, Helen planted her feet to the ground refusing to move a muscle. “You cannot mean it.”

Scott stepped closer; his breath hung on the evening air as he towered over Helen. “That, dearest daughter, is where you are sorely mistaken. I mean every word. Now, get in the carriage, so we can be off. We are already behind schedule as it is.”

Scott’s hand flew to Helen’s arm. His grip tightened, causing Helen’s arm to pulse with each pump of her heart. Tears threatened her eyes as she looked at her father with contempt and fury. It was easy for her to see where she had gotten her anger from, for staring into her father’s face was like looking into a mirror.

“Get in that carriage,” Scott growled as he pushed Helen into the seat and quickly climbed in after her. Refusing to meet his glare, Helen whipped her head around and stared out the window of the carriage. The tears burned her eyes as she

fought against them. The last thing she wanted was for all of the ton to see her in distress.

The brick buildings passed by in a blur. Rubbing the feeling back into her arm, Helen refused to acknowledge Scott was even in the carriage with her. She kept her eyes locked on the city as it passed by.

Music drifted through the window causing Helen's heart pound harder. Every muscle in her body twitched as the need to flee overtook her senses. The instant the carriage stopped, Helen's hand was on the door ready to push it open and make her escape.

Scott's hand was on her faster than she could move it. "You will wait for the footman and present yourself properly."

Jerking her hand out from under Scott's, Helen did as she was told. It seemed like an eternity before the door finally opened for her. The evening air was cool on her face, and the fresh air cleared away the dreariness in her heart. She was free, at least for the moment.

"The Marquess of Valenford." Helen flinched at the announcement of her father's title. She scanned the foyer searching for a friendly face, someone who would save her from her father's presence. The girls around her continued their chattering without even a second glance at Helen.

Scott led her through the hallway to the ballroom. In the corner to the left, Helen caught sight of Serena and exhaled with relief.

"Miss Helen," a young, athletic man said, bowing low to her as he stopped. "If your dance card isn't too full, I'd be honored if you would save a dance for me."

“Her card is full,” Scott answered before Helen could open her mouth. She arched her eyebrow and tried not to let her irritation show too much. Glancing at the man with an apologetic smile, Scott cleared his throat and leaned closer to the man.

“I do believe, however, we have few things to settle, do we not, Mr. Yorkshire?” Scott asked as he hooked his arm around the man. Helen watched as the life in Mr. Yorkshire’s face drained from him. She wasn’t quite sure what business her father had with him, but she could only assume it had to do with her.

“How do you expect me to uphold my end of the deal if you refuse to let me dance with any of the suitors?” Helen leaned in and whispered to her father. She wanted to help Mr. Yorkshire by taking her father’s attention off of him for a moment.

Scott turned to face her. She tried not to laugh at the sour face plastered on her father’s face and quickly covered her mouth with her hand.

“Mr. Yorkshire is unsuitable for you,” Scott answered in such a low tone, Helen wondered if Mr. Yorkshire could hear.

“And how are you so certain you know what kind of husband I prefer?” Helen asked. She tried to smile but knew it didn’t reach her eyes. The anger she felt in the carriage only magnified as her father abruptly turned his attention back to Mr. Yorkshire.

“Come, let us find a more suitable place to talk. Preferably one where we won’t hear annoying buzzing in our ears,” Scott suggested. Relieved her father would be occupied for a while, Helen darted for Serena. With her heart pounding and her

anger threatening to unleash the tears swelling in her eyes, Helen snatched Serena and dragged her out the side doors.

“Greetings to you as well,” Serena said as Helen gulped the fresh air. Her world felt as if it were growing smaller somehow. The control Scott had on her strangled her. “You don’t look so well. Should I fetch a physician?”

Helen glanced over her shoulder and moved deeper into the night. She glanced about the courtyard, hunting for a place to sit. Helen dragged Serena out to the courtyard and to the bench near the orchard.

Helen huffed as she sat down and quickly jumped back up. Her body was too lively for her to sit still and her mind far too troubled to be able to think straight. Serena watched Helen as she paced a few steps before turning and walking back.

The air didn’t seem to want to come to her. Helen snatched the fan from Serena’s hand and tried forcing some down her throat.

“The audacity of that man,” Helen complained with such frustration, she wished she could kick something.

“Why yes, this is a new dress; thank you so much for noticing,” Serena said, batting her eyes and smoothing out the wrinkles from her dress. Helen glanced over to her friend to find her sitting as if she were a peacock ruffling her feathers.

“I’m sorry, truly,” Helen apologized as she sat beside Serena. “And, yes, you do look stunning. I told you the soft pink would be good with your complexion.”

“Do you think it’s enough to catch anyone’s attention?” Serena asked as she glanced to the ballroom. Helen grabbed Serena’s hands and gave them a tight squeeze.

“Any man here would be fortunate to have you. If you’d prefer to go inside, I won’t stop you. I just needed to get some air.”

“Or an excuse to get away from your father?” Serena observed, flashing Helen a knowing look. It was comforting to Helen how well Serena knew her. It was as if they shared the same mind at times.

“Of course,” Serena continued, “I suppose I’d be a bit overwhelmed too if I had five suitors vying for my attention.”

“Please don’t start,” Helen groaned. “I’ve already been told I’m to find my husband by midnight tonight, or my father will choose one for me.”

“No!” Serena gasped, sighing with pity and woe. “How are you to find one in such a short amount of time? It seems there’s one in particular your father favors.”

“Why would you think that?” Helen asked.

Serena shrugged. “If there are five wishing to marry you, your father already knows you have no interest with them.”

“How could I?” Helen asked. Five suitors, that was Helen’s curse. Sure, they all had land and titles which made her father swoon. As for Helen, though, none of them stole her heart or captivated her attention.

Scanning the crowd, she easily spotted the first three and rolled her eyes as the men stood in a semi-circle chatting. To Helen, it seemed the only reason they offered their hands was to win a bet on which one she would pick. The thought of being a prize didn’t settle well with her.

Just as quickly as she met their gaze, she turned away. Standing in the far-right corner, Helen spotted her father chatting with a gentleman who looked horrified to be at the

party. She could relate and felt pity for the man her father had cornered.

“Who is that man speaking with my father?” Helen asked as she nodded her head to the corner of the room. Serena craned her neck and cupped her hand to her mouth.

“I think that’s the Duke of Stonewill,” Serena said so lowly Helen had to lean closer to hear her.

“Who?” Helen asked, trying to pull her eyes off the man, but there was something intriguing about him. She couldn’t tell if it was because he was new to the ton, or if it was because he was handsome that caused her to notice him.

“The Duke of Stonewill,” Serena repeated, her voice bending with desire. “And from what I’ve heard, he’s looking for a wife.”

“Well, maybe you’ll get a chance then,” Helen said feeling timid due to the way her father inched closer to the Duke. She could tell by the way Scott’s shoulders were pinched and how he kept nervously scanning the room that there was something more going on.

“Wonder what they could be talking about?” Serena asked as she sat straighter.

“Ah, there you are niece, I was hoping to find you here.”

Serena and Helen glanced over their shoulders to find a regal looking fellow that reminded Helen of a rooster.

“Uncle, I didn’t expect to see you here,” Serena said as she greeted her uncle with a kiss. “Oh, forgive me. Helen, this is my uncle, Lord Edward Smith.”

Helen gave a polite bow and flashed him a smile. The Lord puffed up a bit more and grinned. Serena leaned in closer and

cupped her hand over her lips.

“Be mindful of my uncle. He never does anything without purpose. The man schemes all the time. And heaven forbid you dine with him, or you may end up leaving in a hearse.”

Helen’s eyes widened as she tried to keep the shock off her face.

“Yes, well, what can I say? I look forward to these events every year. Sadly, I don’t get to attend them very often,” the man said with a spark to his eye. Helen couldn’t help but get the impression the man was scheming. There was a spark to his eye that Helen had often seen in her father’s eye when he was conducting business.

“Anyone catch your eye?” the Lord asked as Serena scanned the room. “If you’d like an introduction to Lord Pott, I’d be happy to oblige.

Serena glanced over to Helen and gave her a little smile. “I don’t think I would have much in common with the Lord.”

Helen glanced over to Lord Pott and shuddered. There was no way she’d be within two feet of the man, let alone consider his hand. Helen couldn’t help but feel pity for Serena. The man was more than double her age, but the wealth that he brought with him was enough to make him a fine match.

“Perhaps instead you could introduce Serena to Lord Umberg. He’s handsome and charming,” Helen pointed out as Serena swooned over the Lord’s physical attributes.

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Serena cooed.

Helen’s gaze shifted as she noticed all the other single ladies stealing glimpses of him too, and the smug expression on the Lord’s face gave Helen all the information she needed to know about the man.

“Oh, no, you don’t want him,” Lord Smith said with a wave of his hand.

“And why not? He’s everything my family is looking for, wealthy, titled, and he is closer to my age than most of the suitors in the room,” Serena said.

“For starters, he’s cocky, not to mention conceited,” Lord Smith replied, turning his attention back to Serena.

“There’s no way that’s possible. I’ve seen in around the ton. He’s never given me that impression,” Serena said.

“The Lord is right,” Helen said sympathetically. “He’s called on me three times, and each time, all he ever talked about was himself. He stretched like a peacock, prancing about as if he was in Duke or Earl. Every lady at this event has her eyes on him, and he’s soaking up the attention like a parched hound. Which is precisely what he is—a hound and a rake.”

“Helen?” Serena whispered and lifted her finger to get her attention. Turning around, Helen came face-to-face with the tall, muscular man with dark hair and brooding brown eyes who had been talking with her father only moments ago.

He towered over her like a sentinel guarding a treasure. Stoic and unyielding, the man’s eyes bore into her, causing her heart to race. Helen knew she should be intimidated by the man, but she found herself more drawn to him than anything. Helen’s body tingled with excitement and wonder as the stranger kept his gaze locked on her.

“Ah, Duke Stonewill, what a pleasure it is to meet you,” Lord Smith said, thrusting his hand out to greet the Duke.

The Duke’s gaze was direct and focused on Helen. She couldn’t help but feel as if the Duke had come specifically to

see her. With his steely eyes boring into her, she felt as if he were reading her soul.

“I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced,” Lord Smith said with a crooked grin. “I’m Lord Edward Smith.”

“Pleasure, I’m sure,” the Duke said in a husky voice that made Helen’s body tingle. She stared at him as Serena tried not to fidget.

“May I help you, Your Grace?” Helen asked as she felt compelled to ease back and give the stranger space. There was an air about the Duke and a glossy sheen to his eyes that made Helen feel two feet tall. She swallowed hard and waited patiently for his response.

Helen couldn’t ignore the other ladies in the room, all eager and watching her. Their whispers drifted to Helen’s ears.

“Of course, he’d go to her first,” Helen heard Serena mumble, her voice laced with jealousy.

“How does she even do it?” another asked in the same hushed tone. Pride pricked her as she focused on the stranger before her. There seemed to be a shadow hovering around him, something dark that seeped out of him. Helen couldn’t help but wonder if it was because she did not know the handsome stranger with his bowed, plump lips. She’d never seen him before at any other event, yet at the same time, she couldn’t shake the feeling they had met before in some past life.

The Duke’s eyebrow arched as his attention shifted from Helen to Serena. He straightened his jacket and cleared his throat.

“Dance with me.” His voice was husky and rough, exciting Helen more than she expected. Helen blinked as she admired his straightforwardness. In all the balls and soirees she’d been

to, no one ever approached her with such confidence. Most of the other men who had offered their hand to dance were timid and nervous.

“What a splendid idea,” Lord Smith said as he pushed Serena closer to the Duke. “Serena.” The more Helen stared at the man, the more she wanted to know him. By the way he stood, confidence rolling off him, Helen’s heart pounded.

“I wasn’t asking her,” the Duke said without giving Serena a second glance. Helen couldn’t help but feel bad for Serena; Helen knew a rejection like that had to sting.

“I’m afraid my dance card is full,” Helen teased as she noticed Serena in the corner of her eye covering her mouth to hide her embarrassment.

“I don’t see you dancing now,” he observed, his eyes meeting hers. Helen’s heartbeat quickened as his eyes bore into her. It felt as if he were drawing out her secrets and exposing her soul to the world.

“Are you denying me a moment to recover, Sir?” Helen asked.

“Not at all. I just don’t see what you have to recover from, seeing as how you’ve just arrived and have been standing in this very spot.”

“Have you been expecting me?” Helen asked as her breathing became a bit erratic. Had he been waiting for her? Her father’s words came rushing back to her. Helen scanned the crowd, hunting for her father in a panic. Standing in the corner, she found him watching her with a crooked grin plastered on his face. The nod of Scott’s head rattled Helen. Slowly, she drew her attention back to the stranger before her.

“Would it surprise you if I were to say yes?” he asked.

“Indeed, it would. Forgive me, but I think I would have remembered you if we were to have met before. I do not know you, and I am confused as to why you have been waiting for me.”

“To dance with you,” he answered as he curled his fingers around her wrist. Helen’s eyes widened as her skin burned from his touch. The heat rushed through her veins, igniting a fire Helen couldn’t put out. Her breath hitched as his grip tightened.

Staring into his eyes, she felt compelled to do as he wished. Her mind scrambled, trying to figure out how he whisked her to the dance floor.

With her senses coming back, Helen stood still as still a statue, pretending feet were rooted to the floor.

“If you do not dance, I will make you,” the Duke vowed in the low, stern voice. Helen’s skin tingled as a sliver of fear cut through her.

“A gentleman asks for a dance; he does not demand,” Helen complained as she noticed the eyes on her. Tapping her foot, she waited for him to ask her instead of demanding. The music started, and before she could protest, the man grabbed her by the hips and hoisted her up into a spin.

Helen didn’t let out a scream, but the suddenness took her breath away. Her heart raced as the world spun around her for a moment. Once on her feet, her senses returned.

“Who do you think you are?” Helen asked as she allowed the stranger to lead. His steps were calculated and precise. Helen had no choice but to follow wherever he went. The grip he had on her hand had a domineering composure that made it difficult for her to slip away.

“Why ask a question you already know the answer to? Clearly, you’re aware I’m the Duke of Stonewill; is there anything more that one needs to know?” he answered plainly.

“Well, Your Grace, if you weren’t aware, it’s rude to drag a lady to the dance floor without her consent. Typically, a gentleman will wait until he is introduced prior to asking a lady to dance,” Helen lectured as the man continued to dance with her around the room. “So, I ask again, who do you think you are to drag me out here with no introduction or consent? And what do you want?”

“Your company,” he answered, his face as stoic as ever. Helen stared at him, bewildered by his ability to mask his emotions so well. Tilting her head, she felt flustered by his lack of empathy.

“I beg your pardon, but wouldn’t you be better suited to my friend Serena? She’s a lovely woman with an ear for music and reading. Surely, you would find her far more interesting than I,” Helen suggested, wishing she could make eye contact with someone who would be willing to interrupt. Yet, as she scanned the area, the host of suitors she had thought to be fond of her all turned their eyes away the moment she made eye contact.

“Your friend does not interest me,” the Duke said in a rather monotone and plain voice as he spun her about. She landed in another’s arms as the second half the song picked up in tempo. Pressing her lips into a tight line, Helen glanced over to the Duke only to find his eyes following her as she moved around the dance floor with another.

“He’s so smug,” Helen mumbled under her breath as her new partner curled his fingers around her waist to hoist her up.

“Are you talking about me?” the man asked as he set her back on her feet. Glancing at her new dance partner, Helen’s cheeks flushed from embarrassment.

“No, Lord Steinwell,” Helen said.

“I must say, I’m pleased to see you here tonight. You look amazing,” the Lord said as he wagged his eyebrows. Helen didn’t know which made her more irritated, dancing with Lord Steinwell, who couldn’t seem to stay off her toes, or the fact that the Duke’s face never shifted with shock as their conversation halted so abruptly.

Eager to get back to the Duke, Helen danced as best she could. When the music switched, Helen found herself back in the arms of the Duke.

“Since you want to continue to be mysterious, and not tell me your intentions? Could you at least explain to me why you are here? I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” Helen said. The Duke kept his eyes locked on some distant spot in the room as they danced about.

“You find me mysterious, do you?” the Duke asked, his voice bent with amusement.

“That is not the point,” Helen replied as she came back up from the dip. “But if you must know, you’re more infuriating than anything.”

“And what, pray tell, have I done to cause such ire?”

“You’re rude,” Helen said with a huff. “Why won’t you tell me what you want with me?”

“I believe you can walk away from this little interaction whenever you want. You’re not shackled to me. Yet, you remain. I think you happen to like me.”

Helen's eyes widened from shock. Her heart skipped as she felt her skin tingle. It took every bit of nerves she had left not to slap him.

"You presume too much," Helen snapped as the music stopped. She stepped back from him and shook her head. Without another word, Helen scrambled off the dance floor and back to Serena.

"Well? What did you and the Duke talk about? He's a bit intense don't you think? How fascinating. I wouldn't mind a man with confidence like that," Serena said. Helen's head felt wobbly. It was as if she hadn't had a single gulp of air since he whisked her away. Her mind was reeling. She had never seen him before, and the mystery only made her want to know more.

"By all means, you can have him. I don't like men that are so arrogant and rude," Helen answered a bit flustered and wishing she could leave. She'd spent enough time at the party, but she knew she couldn't leave without a proper farewell to the host.

"Maybe he's a foreigner and doesn't speaking English very well."

"That would explain his lack of manners," Serena considered, bobbing her head in agreement.

Helen glanced around the ballroom, hunting for the mystery man. The sea of faces caught her view, and she felt her heart skip.

"You looked like you were having fun out there," Serena observed.

"Hardly. The man barely said two words to me. His dancing was far too calculated and precise. And let us not forget his

rudeness,” Helen complained.

“But it must’ve been something special to him because he’s talking with your father,” Serena pointed out. Panic shot through Helen as she followed Serena’s pointed finger to the corner of the ballroom.

“I wonder what they could be talking about,” Serena said, wagging her eyebrows.

“No. It couldn’t be,” Helen gasped as it felt as if the air was pulled from her lungs. She shook her head and flexed her jaw.

“I’m not someone to be treated like cattle,” Helen said as she glanced to Serena. Without saying a word, Helen jumped up and stormed over to her father.

“And there she is,” Scott said, embracing Helen as if she were his favorite child. Shrugging out of her father’s embrace, she focused on the broad-shouldered man before her. “My little wallflower.”

“This is such a lovely party, wouldn’t you say?” Helen asked as she refused to let her gaze drop from the mystery man.

“Indeed, it is,” Scott said in agreement. “Helen, may I introduce to you the Duke of Stonewill.”

“Your Grace,” Helen said politely with the bow of her head. “It is nice to finally be formally introduced. Your title does explain a few things.”

“Beg your pardon?” the Duke asked.

“Why you think it’s all right to just take what you want,” Helen answered, keeping the smile plastered on her face.

“Did I not tell you she was feisty?” Scott remarked with an awkward chuckle.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Helen said as she realized that the Duke was as much of a pompous hind as her father.

“I do hope you have other intentions besides perpetuating the gossip as the other ladies around here seem to be doing,” the Duke said.

Helen forced her smile as she tried to keep up the façade. “I do not recall you being my father or being granted any rights to tell me what I can or cannot do.”

“Well, I may not be your father, but I am your husband. Or at least I will be.”

CHAPTER 2



“*I* beg your pardon?” Helen’s voice cracked as she did all she could to keep her composure. “Father, tell me this is untrue.”

“Don’t look so put out,” Scott replied. “You and I both know you were never going to find a husband, so I took the liberty of finding you one myself.”

Helen’s mouth popped open as she looked at the man before her. How could she ever marry a man she knew nothing about and just met? Shaking her head, Helen tried to see the bright side of the situation. Helen couldn’t believe what was happening, so she rolled her shoulders back and tried to convince herself this was all just a horrible dream, and she would wake up in the moment.

Determined not to believe what was going on around her, Helen stood like a pole. Her attention lingered on man. The shadows played about his face heightening the man’s features. His cupid bow lips were inviting as was the clean line of his jaw. Helen felt heat rush through her as she drew her eyes to meet his. He was handsome and intimidating. For a moment she couldn’t help but wonder if this was all but a prank her father was playing on her. Surely the man before her could get

any woman he wanted, so why did he want her? “This is not right. I can’t marry him.”

“And why not?” Scott asked with a hearty chuckle. “He’s in fine health, can provide for you, and is well endowed—by his estate of course.”

“Do you not see that he’s double my age?” Helen complained, exasperated and clearly exaggerating. One look at the Duke and it was clear he was only a few years older than Helen, but his demeanor aged him significantly. Sure, the man was handsome in a ruggish and devil may care sort of way, but the stern expression on his face seemed to age his flawless face. “And what do we know about him?” Helen asked as she kept her eyes locked on the Duke. She couldn’t help but notice that no number of insults she threw at him made him flinch.

“I assure you, that is not going to be an issue,” the Duke stated.

Helen’s entire body was numb. She couldn’t feel the difference between her father’s clammy hand and the stranger’s as they paraded her around the dance floor as the new Duchess. She felt as if she were five again, spinning around in the courtyard as the clouds swirled together until she fell. Only this time, she didn’t expect a soft landing.

The days that followed the announcement were like a fragmented dream she couldn’t quite piece together. Her hopes of finding love fled from her; as much as she tried to find the bright side, all seemed dark under the Duke’s brooding shadow.

Helen rolled her eyes at him every time he came calling. She had nothing in common with him. Even their afternoon tea sessions her father insisted on were dreary with only a handful

of words shared between them. It became clear to her the kind of marriage she was being forced into.

“Come now, it can’t be all bad,” Theresa assured as she sat next to Helen in the sitting room enjoying a cup of tea. Helen shook her head in disappointment. It was clear that she was not quite getting the dreariness of the situation across to her sister.

“It’s a week until the wedding,” Helen whispered, “and I have not shared a single dinner with him. There’s been no flowers or any other tokens of affection. It’s like the man has no soul, no joy, no... love.”

“Everyone has a soul,” Theresa pointed out, rolling her eyes at Helen’s dramatic behavior.

“I know you think I’m being over-the-top here, but I’m not. Stay for the evening, and I’ll prove it to you,” Helen suggested as her voice bent with desperation.

“I once thought I could never love Devlin, but I do. It’s just a matter of adjusting and compromise. Trust me when I say I completely understand you. I’ve been through what you were going through, but unless you find some way to convince the Duke into releasing you from this obligation, I’m afraid you’re just going to have to marry him.”

“Don’t you think I should have a say in the matter though?” Helen asked.

Theresa let out a little chuckle and nearly dropped her teacup. She looked at Helen as if she had never seen her before in her life. “You have met our father, haven’t you?”

“Of course, but still, there must be something more to do. Maybe I should run away. Surely, we have family in France I

could stay with for a while? Perhaps I should stay with you,” Helen considered reaching for her sister’s hand.

“You are not going to run away,” Theresa said, rolling her eyes and setting the teacup on the table before it was accidentally broken. “And I’m afraid we have no family in France—trust me I thought about it too. But what if you gave the Duke a chance?”

“I doubt you’d be giving me such advice if you knew the Duke,” Helen grumbled. “Perhaps, we could revisit this conversation after dinner? And maybe then your senses will have returned to you.”

The doorbell jingled a few hours later. Helen’s skin crawled, and her body tingled. She sat her book down and glanced at Theresa. Hesitating to rise, Helen listened for the rushed footsteps of Scott coming to greet their guest.

“Are you ready?” Theresa asked.

“No, but do I have a choice?” Helen mumbled as she followed Theresa out into the foyer. Scott was already there, eagerly shifting his weight as the Duke entered.

“Welcome, Your Grace,” Scott greeted with a bow. Helen and Theresa bowed as well to greet the Duke. Helen’s chest tightened as she dared to steal a glimpse at her sister. She wanted to gauge her sister’s first impression. Without a word or nod to Helen and Theresa, the Duke followed Scott into the hallway and disappeared into Scott’s study.

“Well, that was interesting,” Theresa said, giving Helen an apologetic smile. Helen’s skin tingled as she swallowed hard. It seemed that even in the morning light, the man had an air about him that didn’t settle right with Helen. The Duke was

just as intimidating in the daylight hours as he had been in the ball.

“Did I not tell you he was peculiar?” Helen urged, craning her neck to spy down the hallway.

“That would be one way to describe him,” Theresa said as she curled her arm into Helen’s and led her back to the sitting room.

“I told you they’re planning everything, didn’t I?” Helen asked as she plopped down into the plush chair, feeling defeated. “The color theme, flowers, dinner, all of it. And not once did they ask for my input. I feel like I’m nothing more than one of father’s hounds being traded to the highest bidder.”

“Oh, Helen. I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe it’ll be different once you’re married. Often times the business side of the marriage is cold and unflattering. But who knows, maybe after a while, you’ll find common ground with your husband.”

“Aren’t you optimistic,” Helen huffed with disdain.

“This whole situation is out of your hands, but you have a choice. You can be moody about it or find some kind of joy in it. Remember...” Theresa assured with a loving smile that filled Helen with hope.

“...there are no coincidences,” Helen continued, finishing Theresa’s sentence. “But the only issue here is father wanting me out of the house. Why can’t I stay with you? Father will never know.”

“You and I both know that my house would be the first place father would come looking. He’d then drag you back, and the wedding would proceed. You know, once he sets his mind on something, he becomes obsessed.”

Helen dropped her shoulders as she glanced at the fireplace. She pulled in a deep breath and bobbed her head. “Well, I suppose it’s best this way. I mean, I could ruin my reputation and get caught alone with Umberg.”

Theresa tilted her head. “Are you certain that is the path you would want to take? You’d ruin not only your future, but you’d be bringing father’s wrath on you as well.”

“No,” Helen huffed, defeated. “You’re right. Even if I managed to get out of the marriage to the Duke, father’s ire is not something I’d want to see firsthand.”

No matter what plan Helen came up with, none of them panned out. There was only one thing left for Helen to try. She would have to confront her would-be-husband. Steeling her courage, Helen rose from her chair.

“And where are you going?” Theresa asked.

“I shall speak directly with the Duke,” Helen stated boldly. “Perhaps if I plead my case, he’ll take pity and call off the wedding.”

Helen walked over to her father’s study and slipped around the corner. She would stand there all night if she had to. As the hours ticked by, Helen popped her head around the corner, wondering if she’d missed the Duke’s exit.

“I’m leaving,” Theresa called down the hallway. Helen popped her head out and waved to her sister. Although she didn’t want her to leave, she understood that it wouldn’t be right for her sister to stay. Theresa did after all have a husband of her own to tend to.

Leaning against the wall, waiting for Scott and the Duke to finish, Helen wondered how she’d approach the Duke. He was an intimidating man. It wasn’t just the stern lines in his face or

his glossy glaze that rattled her. He towered over her and could snap her like a twig if he so desired.

The thumping of boots growing closer pulled Helen from her thoughts. She straightened, and her ears perked. The door moaned as it opened, and through the crack, Helen spotted the Duke. She held her breath, realizing her idea may not have been thought out thoroughly. Her tongue felt rough as it scraped the roof of her mouth. Everything she had planned to say slipped from her mind the moment she saw him.

“Then it’s settled.” Scott’s voice grated on Helen’s nerves, and she focused on the Duke’s stoic expression. In a spark of anger, Helen knew exactly what she wanted to say to him.

“So, it would seem,” the Duke answered as he shook Scott’s hand. Helen waited for the doors to close. Once the Duke was out of the study, she’d approach him.

The clicking of the door echoed in Helen’s ears, and she knew if she wanted the wedding to be canceled, she’d have to find the courage to face the Duke. Stepping out of her hiding place, Helen followed the Duke down the hall.

In a whirl of black, the Duke spun on his heels and drew his blade. Helen stopped dead in her tracks and clutched her chest as terror gripped her. She slowly retreated as the Duke’s eyes filled with remorse. Clearing his throat, the Duke stowed his blade and tugged on the hem of his vest.

“Is that what I get to look forward to once we are married?” Helen asked as she noticed the Duke’s face twitching. “Well, if you’re going to do it, then be done with it. Why wait till after the wedding? You’ll be doing us both a favor.”

The shock on the Duke’s face wore off quickly as his eyes narrowed. “Is death so inviting that you’d rather embrace it

than me as your husband?”

“To answer truthfully, yes. I know you don’t care for me, you don’t even know me, and I don’t know you,” Helen replied.

“Jackson Deumond,” he said, dipping his head ever so slightly while keeping his dark eyes on Helen. “And you are Helen Smith, soon to be Duchess of Stonewill.”

“Your Grace,” Helen replied, forging a smile as the tension only made her more aware of his body. She could see the way his chest rose and fell as quickly as hers did. The room felt as if it were too small for the two of them. “I’ve come to ask something of you as it is customary to exchange wedding gifts.”

“There will be no exchange,” Jackson said coldly.

Helen’s heart sank. Her mind raced for another way to approach the subject. “I see, and that is absolute?”

“Indeed,” Jackson said. “There’s nothing you have that I want. And while I’m certain I have something you want, you’ll get it when we marry.”

“I don’t want this marriage,” Helen blurted out.

“Irrelevant,” Jackson said; what little emotion he had in his eyes vanished.

“My feelings towards you or the marriage?” Helen asked.

Jackson gave a little shrug, “Both. Your feelings in this matter will not change my position. We will marry.”

“But don’t you want someone who will make you happy?” Helen asked.

Jackson shook his head and lifted his chin. His eyes glossed over as his stare drifted to some far away point in the room.

“Silly notions, don’t you think?” Jackson asked. “Emotions. Happy, sad, joyful, or sorrowful. None of that matters when you are presented with the facts. And the fact remains, you and I will be married next week.”

“I see, your joy comes from making others miserable, is that it?” Helen asked as tears burned her eyes. All her hopes were crushed, and she knew there would be nothing more she could say to him to stop the wedding.

“How amusing. I make you miserable even now? And we aren’t even wed yet.”

“Now, I amuse you, do I? You’re insufferable. Clearly, you enjoy hurting others,” Helen huffed.

“And pray tell, how have I hurt you? I’ve not laid a single finger on you, and I’ve barely spoken two words to you.”

“All the more reason not to marry me,” Helen argued, hoping to turn the situation around. “If I’m so quiet, then what’s stopping you from accidentally running me through. Surely, you want a wife who is far more outspoken and boisterous.”

Jackson’s lips tugging at the corner only infuriated Helen. She could tell he was enjoying irritating her more than one should.

“I cannot marry a man like you,” Helen said.

Jackson’s eyebrows rose. “A man like me?”

“Brooding and lifeless. It’s like you live in a world without color. What horrid thing happened to make you so soulless?” Helen watched as Jackson’s eyes twitched. His nostrils flared as he glared at her.

“As heartless and soulless as you may perceive me, My Lady, I assure you, no amount of insults will make me change my

mind,” Jackson said. “We will marry—much to your dismay, I’m sure.”

“Nothing I say will change your mind?” Helen whispered as she stumbled back in defeat. Her one shot at getting out of the arrangement crashed and burned around her. Why did he have to be so irritating? If only she would have bit her tongue, but it was far too late to make amends with him. The gleam in his eye was one of a conquering hero who had come back from battle.

“No,” he said in a stern, absolute tone. It rattled Helen to her core. “I hate to break it to you, Sunshine, but we’re going to be stuck together forever.”

CHAPTER 3



“*T*his can’t be happening,” Helen said, pacing the room. She fiddled with the tips of her fingernails as if trying to pull them out from the bed. Her heart raced as she glanced out the small window. The carriages going down the road seemed endless, and she couldn’t help but wonder just how many people her father invited to the ceremony.

“Did he have to invite the whole ton?” Helen grumbled, exasperated, as she turned to face her sister. How Theresa was so calm and composed irked her. She wished she could be as collected as her older sister, but her nerves were getting the better of her.

“I doubt father could afford to invite everyone,” Theresa said with a smirk. “As much as he would like to think he is rich and powerful, you and I both know it is limited.”

“I’ve counted at least fifteen carriages headed towards the church. That’s the least sixty people if there are four people per carriage,” Helen said, doing the quick math in her head. Her chest tightened, and her head felt foggy. A part of her had hoped that she’d find some way to call off the wedding, but no matter what she did, Jackson refused to comply.

“Sister, you’re going to work yourself into a frenzy. You’ve got to calm down and accept your fate,” Theresa observed as

she curled her fingers around Helen's arms to get her to stand still.

"That's all the advice you have for me? You seriously want me to accept the fact that I'm going into a loveless marriage?"

"What do you want me to tell you? There isn't anything I can say to you that will make this better. Yes, you are marrying a man you don't know, but time changes people. Who knows? In a few years you could grow to love him, and he you."

Helen pressed her lips into a tight line and shook her head, "And that worked out so well for mother."

Sarcasm dripped from each syllable as she glared at Theresa. The fact that her sister was no help to her in her time of need pained Helen more than anything else. What Helen needed was an escape, a way out, but with each passing moment, her options were dwindling.

"It may not have worked for mother, but it did for me," Theresa pointed out. "And who knows? Things could work out between you and Jackson. You don't know what the future holds."

"Did I tell you he brandished his sword at me?" Helen asked as the bells of the church rang loudly through the time. "What does that tell you about the man? Clearly, he is unstable."

Theresa rose from her chair and walked over to Helen. She curled her arms around her sister. "I really wish there was something I could do to help you make this better."

Helen wanted to fall into Theresa's embrace and cling to the safety she found within her sister's arms. Life was safe there in the space of her sister's bosom.

"I know you're scared. Every bride is during their wedding. The unknown can be intimidating and unnerving. You will

face this challenge with grace and dignity,” Theresa assured in such a loving tone that it made Helen want to cry. She wasn’t ready to marry. Helen had thought she would be able to pick someone that would steal her heart and sweep her off her feet. Instead, she was being forced to marry a man colder than the winter’s chill.

“What is this nonsense?” Scott grumbled as he stepped into the room. Helen refused to leave her sister’s embrace. “You’re not even ready. Theresa, I thought you came in here to get your sister dressed. Instead, I find the two of you dawdling?”

“Father, please don’t make me do this. I don’t love the man,” Helen pleaded, but her cries fell on deaf ears. Scott marched to the small table and snatched the veil off the back of the chair and shoved it into Theresa’s hands.

“Get her dressed,” Scott demanded. “I’ll not have the Duke wait. If you’re going to be a decent wife, you’ll learn to do as you’re told the first time the order is given.”

Helen glanced at Theresa; her heart ached as her body felt numb. Slowly, Theresa released Helen and gave her a timid smile.

“On the bright side, at least once you’re married will no longer have to listen to father’s orders anymore. Your husband will have the final word.”

Helen rolled her eyes, but she realized she should be grateful for the little blessings that came her way. Not being under her father’s thumb would be a good thing, but for all Helen knew, she was merely exchanging one cold hearted man for another.

“You know that doesn’t make me feel any better,” Helen said.

“I’ll give you a moment to collect yourself,” Theresa instructed as she placed the veil on Helen’s head and smoothed

out the wrinkles. “When you’re ready, I’ll be right outside waiting for you. And don’t make me have to remind you to come out. We do not want to bring father’s wrath on us before the ceremony.”

Helen let out a heavy sigh as she watched her sister walk out of the room. Doom lingered around her like a cloud of smoke blotting out the sun. Helen fought the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks.

Staring at the girl in the mirror, Helen tried to muster the courage to leave the room. Sounds of laughter mingled with music as the people outside the house enjoyed the merriment of the occasion, but for Helen, there was nothing merry about what she had to do.

Her eyes widened as her attention drifted to the open window. A burst of hope exploded within her as she walked over and savored the cool spring breeze that flowed into the room. The chirping of the birds perked her ears, and she glanced to the tree.

A plan raced through her mind as she estimated the distance between the window and the bough. Glancing to the ground, Helen realized there was no safe way for her to get out of the tree once she got into it. It was at least a fifteen-foot drop to the ground, and she knew she’d have better luck just jumping from the window. She shuddered at the consequences of such an action; knowing her luck, she’d end up with a broken leg and still be carded to the church to be married.

“I wonder if she knows?” Helen caught a woman’s voice and noticed the servants coming out of the side door. Ducking around the corner of the window, Helen’s body tingled. Panic drummed against her chest.

“I doubt it. No woman would marry such a man with that kind of reputation,” another voice answered. Helen’s eyes widened as her knees gave out from under her. It was bad enough she had reservations about her wedding, but what horrid secret was Jackson keeping from her?

I’m marrying a rake? It would explain why he is so cold and distant. Oh God, I’m just a front for society, and I’m supposed to what? Allow him to have such affairs outside the marriage bed?

Helen’s fragile heart quickened. If there was ever a reason to back out, surely this had to be it. There was no way her father would marry her to such man, would he?

“I’m surprised the news of the murder trial didn’t reach here.”

Helen’s mind went wild over the servants chattering.

Trial? Murder? Are they talking about Jackson? No, they can’t be; there is no way. Certainly, Jackson wouldn’t have killed somebody, would he have?

Terror replaced the panic swirling in her stomach as she leaned in closer to the window. Helen had to know what kind of man she was marrying. Images of Jackson pulling his sword out flickered through her mind. The air in the room seemed thinner and harder for her to take in.

No. No. This cannot be happening.

Helen forced herself up off the ground and raced to the door, her veil flapping behind her. It was bad enough to be marrying a rake but a murderer?

“I was just about to come and get you,” Theresa said as Helen fell into her sister’s arms. “Oh dear Lord, what have you done? I thought I told you to compose yourself, not have a panic attack.”

“I... can’t... do this,” Helen huffed as she stalked the shadows with her eyes. An icy chill tickled her spine, causing her blood to run cold.

“We’ve been over this,” Theresa said. Helen shook her head.

“Did you know?” Helen asked as she controlled her ragged breathing. Theresa scrunched her eyebrows to the bridge of her nose in confusion.

“What are you going on about?” Theresa could no longer hide her irritation as her patience with her sister grew thinner.

“Did you know Jackson was tried for murder?” Helen’s voice cracked with terror.

“What? Where did you hear such things?”

Helen pointed to the door. “Servants. I heard them talking about it under my window.”

Theresa’s stare vanished and was placed by a cynical glare. “Helen, did you ever think maybe they knew you were listening? Perhaps they just wanted to torment you.”

Helen grabbed Theresa’s shoulders and stared deep into her sister’s eyes. With as much conviction as she could muster, Helen tried to get her sister to understand.

“They did not know I was there,” Helen argued. “Is father marrying me to this man to kill me?”

“No one is trying to kill you,” Theresa assured with a light chuckle.

“You say that now, but how will you feel when you discover my lifeless body come morning?” Helen asked as she arched eyebrow. “The Duke is a powerful man; he could do it and get away with it.”

“You wound me, Miss Helen.”

Helen froze as Jackson’s voice echoed in her ears. She didn’t dare turn around, but she stared at her sister as her fingers tightened around Theresa’s arms.

“Your Grace,” Theresa greeted, bowing her head.

“I was aware from the ball that you were one to gossip,” Jackson said. His voice was frigid and distant, but it rattled Helen to her core. “Seeing that you will be my wife soon, it seems I’ll be the one to correct that habit of yours.”

“My sister is a little overwhelmed at the moment,” Theresa tried to explain as she pulled her arm away from Helen.

“Understandable,” Jackson said, “but Helen should be more careful about spreading rumors. It could end up getting her hurt one of these days.”

Helen’s eyes widened with horror as Theresa forced Helen’s fingers off of her. Suddenly, it felt as if Helen was floating. Somehow gravity wasn’t holding her down. Theresa was her anchor, and now, she was adrift with terror and panic her only companions.

“Our guests are waiting,” Jackson snapped as he grabbed Helen by the hand. She felt dizzy and disconnected from everything she’d known before. Stealing glimpses of Jackson as they walked to the church, Helen tried to silence her troubled thoughts.

“Just tell me now, am I going to die?” Helen asked as she averted her eyes to the ground. In the corner of her eye, Helen noticed Jackson’s eyebrow arching, and his lips twitching at the corner.

“Yes,” he answered much to Helen’s horror. “Unfortunately, it is a rite of passage that we all must go through.”

“You know fully well what I mean,” Helen huffed, trying to control the anger that was bubbling within her.

“Have I not given you my word that no harm will come to you?” Jackson whispered as he kept his eyes locked on the church. Helen didn’t know if it was a rhetorical question or not. All she could do was focus on taking the next step, so she didn’t keel over.

“You have.”

“But make no mistake, this marriage is one of convenience and nothing more. I will respect your boundaries and privacy so long as you do the same for me. And I will not tolerate your wagging tongue. I meant what I said before—it will get you into trouble if you do not cease.”

“I couldn’t help but notice you didn’t deny the claims I brought to my sister’s attention,” Helen observed in such a squeaky tone that it sounded foreign even to her own ears.

“How observant of you,” Jackson answered as they walked up the steps to the church doors. Helen’s mind was going too fast for her to grab onto a single thought. Her world was crumbling brick by brick around her. The only thing left for her to do was to pray that the church would cave in on them and put her out of her misery.

Helen did everything she could to block out what she was about to do. Her mind just couldn’t wrap around the fact that her father was having her married to such a callous and distant man. She focused her attention on the hem of her wedding dress and the way it drifted around her ankles as she strolled up the steps of the church. For a brief moment, Helen wondered if dirt had soiled the hem. She couldn’t bear the thought of ruining such an elegant wedding dress, even if it was the one she wore to marry the Duke.

The music from the pipe organ sounded its ominous notes, causing the birds to take flight from the belfry. She looked up and saw how easy it was for them to leave. Rolling her shoulders back, Helen took what solace she could at the fact that after this moment, her father would no longer have any control over her.

The ceremony was a blur. Helen could barely understand the bishop as he conducted the wedding vows.

“You may now kiss your bride,” the bishop said. Helen’s scalp tingled, and her heart quickened. It was the final seal that would bind her to Jackson forever. Turning to face him, Helen studied the lines in his face. He looked unamused, as if he were somewhere else and not standing before the whole of society and God.

Reluctantly, Jackson leaned closer. Helen didn’t know what to do. She froze and watched as he inched closer. With her eyes wide open, Jackson crushed his lips to hers. He pushed through her and flowed like a wild river throughout her body. The feeling was unexpected and shocked Helen. She pulled back, uncertain if what stirred within her was the accumulation of her nerves or something else.

Standing, she stared at Jackson and waited to see a response from him. To her surprise, she found a mirror image of the shock and uncertainty in Jackson’s face that she clearly had on hers. The kiss had caused her heart to skip and wreaked havoc on her body. Helen noticed Jackson experiencing the same confusion and shock.

“May I introduce the Duke and Duchess of Stonewall,” the bishop announced. In the corner of her eye, she noticed Jackson moving to flee down the aisle. It was strange for her

to notice since she had the same eagerness to get away from the prying eyes.

“It’s done,” Jackson mumbled under his breath. Helen didn’t know what to think as he snatched her hand and pulled her down the aisle, eager to flee the church as if he’d burst into flames at any moment.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

My Book

Thank you very much!

ALSO BY DAPHNE BYRNE

Thank you for reading *The Marquess' Unwanted Obsession!*

I really hope you enjoyed the story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

It would be wonderful if you could leave me a **review** [here!](#)

My previous best-sellers:

Three Promises to the Duke

The Duke's Unwanted Virgin

Four Rules for the Viscount

The Earl's Unwanted Bride

Five Dates with the Duke

The Duke's Unwanted Temptation

Your support means the world to me!

Thank you for going on this journey with me today,

Daphne Byrne

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A California girl born and raised, Daphne Byrne's ancestry holds from the gloomy English countryside, but she loves the sunny weather that California offers. She can often be found exploring the picturesque hills of nature with her hyperactive puppy dog named Freddie, daydreaming of ghosts of the past.

Hopped on a plane to London to study Creative Writing, Daphne put her imagination to the test. Countless efforts, friends, heartbreaks, tears and laughs, she returned back to California armed with a writing degree and an English husband, to live the rest of her life putting the stories in her head on paper.

Immerse yourself in her heartfelt romances, drawn from her memories of England. Let her take your hand and lead you to London of the 1800s, with wicked Lords and passionate Ladies, thunderous villains and happily ever afters that can only be found in...books.

