

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing. The man is wearing a white shirt and dark trousers, while the woman is wearing a red, off-the-shoulder, floor-length gown. They are standing in a field with a large, classical building in the background. In the upper right corner, there is a large, golden clock face with intricate gears and a white, stylized musical note or flourish overlaying it. The overall scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

Love through Time Series
— Book 1 —

TIME
TO LOVE
THE DUKE
LAVINIA GLEN

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TIME TO LOVE THE DUKE



CHAPTER 1 - In which Olivia ends up in an unexpected place



“IN ONE HUNDRED FEET, turn left.”

The robotic voice of the navigation system jarred her out of her stupor and made Olivia realize how distracted she had been.

Surely she had not fallen asleep behind the wheel, had she? No, she had her eyes open the whole time. But she had fallen into a sort of trance. A result of being jet lagged and exhausted. Damn, she needed to stay focused.

The road ahead and to the left was dark beyond the car headlights, and there was no sign of a place to turn left. She looked again, trying to see past her car’s headlights into the absolute darkness that surrounded her.

“Turn left.” The GPS repeated.

“There’s nowhere to turn left!”

She kept driving straight as the GPS recalibrated the directions.

“Damn.” Hitting the steering wheel solved nothing, but it sure helped vent her frustration. She hadn’t even arrived, and she was already messing up. It did not bode well for the rest of this trip.

She should have arrived at the cottage an hour ago. She had looked up the directions before leaving Heathrow Airport and it was about an hour and a half trip. She had been on the road for three hours. It was obvious something was off, but she had dismissed her concerns and kept driving.

Ten minutes later, the GPS kept repeating “Proceed to the route”, and she was getting frantic. She was well and truly lost. At night, in a foreign country, on a rural and deserted road. Fucking fantastic.

She took a deep breath and willed herself to calm down and make sense of the GPS directions.

Another jarring sound, this time the ring of her phone. A brief glance at the screen, and she couldn't suppress a groan. Mom. It just needed this. Hadn't she already talked to her mom upon landing? What did she want now?

"Hey, Mom."

"Livvy, sweetie, have you arrived at the cottage yet?"

"Not yet, mom. I told you I'd let you know when I get there."

"I know, but it's been hours. You told me it was a short drive."

"It is, Mom. But it's taken longer than I expected. I'm almost there, though." The white lie was worth it if it kept her mom from worrying more. Ever since Olivia's sister had been killed in an accident a few years back, her mom's grief had turned into anxiety. Now she insisted on checking in on her way too much.

"Is everything ok, Livvy?" Mom's thready voice betrayed her mounting unease.

"Yes! I just... took a wrong turn before and got a little sidetracked. But I'm already on course."

As if on cue, the navigator's voice chimed in again. "In one hundred feet, take a slight right—"

"Did you hear that? I'm following the GPS."

"I don't know Livvy. You shouldn't be driving alone in England. You are not used to driving on the left side of the road."

"It's fine, Mom..."

"You shouldn't have gone on this trip alone. At the very least, you should have taken your assistant."

Ah yes, because poor, incapable Livvy couldn't do anything by herself.

“Mom, Sasha needs to be in the office to take care of business while I’m gone. And I’m thirty-two years old. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Well, maybe not a babysitter, but a friend. Or better yet, a boyfriend to keep you company. I would worry less.”

Deep breaths. She shouldn’t snap at her mom. She had already suffered too much.

As gently as she could, she replied, “We have been over this. At the moment, my focus is my business.”

“Excuses, my dear. One thing does not preclude the other.”

“I have tried.” She said defensively. “Didn’t I sign up for that dating site you suggested? I’ve even gone on a handful of first dates.”

“And?”

“I have felt no chemistry with the guys.”

“Why? What’s wrong with them?”

“Nothing’s wrong with them, mom. But there was no spark. They were simply strangers, and I didn’t feel like getting to know any of them better. It was... awkward.”

“I think the problem is you are afraid to open up, darling. You know, just because you had one disappointment doesn’t mean you can’t find love again.”

Trust her mom to cut to the heart of her insecurities. It’s not as if she didn’t want to find love again. To have a man hold her, kiss her... it had been so long since she had felt desired. But she didn’t know how to date. She had married too young, to her first boyfriend. She had never had to seek love. It had been easy, and she thought her life would be a happily ever after. Ha! Look at how that had ended.

After years of working together with her ex-husband, building their company, they had split both personally and professionally. He had kept their construction company, and she had established her own architecture and design firm.

Her determination to make it a success by herself was the only thing that gave her purpose nowadays. It kept away the fear that her time was running out and she would never find love, have a family... no. Don't dwell on that.

If all went well on this trip, she was about to achieve professional success. After a few minor jobs and a year of trials, she had finally landed her first big client. Mrs. Hartfield was a rich and eccentric lady who wanted to build an Elizabethan Style manor house in Naples, on the west coast of Florida.

The project was ideal. Olivia had always loved historical architecture. She had done meticulous research, created the plans, and after some back and forth, had won the bid against two other firms. An opportunity like this comes once in a lifetime. It could make or break her business. She had to be her best.

There was still much to do, and it would be weeks before construction began, but her client had found out about an estate auction taking place in England. It was to be held at an authentic Elizabethan manor that had been owned by an English lord. A Duke, no less. Now the house and its contents were being auctioned to a few select buyers, and her client was one of the invited few.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Hartfield couldn't make it, so she had sent Olivia as her representative, declaring there was no one else she trusted to make the purchasing decisions. Which brought Olivia to her present predicament of being lost on a rural road somewhere in England.

Her mom's voice brought her out of her thoughts.

"Livvy, are you still there?"

"I'm here, Mom. Listen, I gotta let you go. Need to focus on the directions. I promise I'll text you as soon as I arrive, okay?"

"Okay, sweetie. Please do that. Love ya."

"Love you too, Mom."

Olivia hung up, relieved to be done with the conversation. Now, back to the matter at hand. Where was she?

She turned her attention to the phone and rolled her eyes. According to the GPS, she was now apparently driving cross-country. Ridiculous. She was obviously on the road!

That's it. She needed to use a different navigation app. Her thumb swiped through her phone. Where was this other app —

Without warning, her seatbelt locked as she was thrown toward the steering wheel. Panic washed through her like an icy wave. Oh, God! Had she hit something?

She couldn't see anything except the road in front of her, but it felt as if the car had hit a wall of water. Something fluid but thick. The car was still moving and stepping on the brake didn't seem to slow the momentum. What was going on?

A blinding light rushed toward her. It was something big. A train? A truck? She frantically turned the steering wheel to avoid it, but she was no longer in control of the car. Some unknown force dragged her forward. A scream of pure terror escaped her throat, but she didn't hear it. She couldn't hear anything. In the next second, the light enveloped her, and she knew no more, as darkness swallowed her consciousness.



AWARENESS RETURNED slowly. She opened her eyes. It was pitch dark. What had happened? How long had she been unconscious? Was she badly hurt? The questions swirled through her head in a jumbled chaos. Her head throbbed with the worst headache she had ever had, but her limbs seemed to work, and she didn't feel pain from any other injuries.

She still sat in the car. She still wore her seatbelt. The airbags hadn't deployed, so hopefully the accident hadn't been too serious. Her phone glowed beside her, still on, but the GPS directions had gone blank. She grabbed her phone to call 911. Was that the emergency number in the UK?

It didn't matter.

The phone had no signal.

She had to get out. Assess the situation. Get help. Surely she would be able to find help. This was England, for goodness' sake, not some remote wilderness. Moving carefully, Olivia released her seatbelt and slid out of the car. The slight movement caused her head to pound and ache even more, which she hadn't thought possible. No matter. She had to keep going.

Holding on to the car, she walked all around it, squinting to see in the darkness and running her hands over the bumper and hood. No dents that she could tell. Hopefully, that meant she'd avoided a collision. Likely, she had just gone off the road. Where was the road? Everything was so dark! Only faint moonlight illuminated the scene.

She walked a few yards in the direction she thought the road might be. The terrain rose slightly. She was climbing up some embankment. Onto the road, perhaps? The headache pinched around her skull like a metal band, squeezing, squeezing until she couldn't see, couldn't breathe, couldn't stand. She crumpled to the ground, unconscious once more.



CHAPTER 2 - In which the duke finds a lady in the forest



WILLIAM EDWARD COLLINS, the fifth Duke of Avondale, paced his study as he dictated another round of instructions to his weary secretary.

“The biggest priority is the roof repair in the Spitalfields house and securing the house in Southwark. Contract a specialized company to install secure windows and locks. And hire more guards. We cannot have another break-in.”

The secretary jotted down the instructions. “Noted. Would that be all, Your Grace?”

Avondale raised his eyebrows. It was a measure of how tired his secretary was that he dared to hint at wrapping things up.

“Just a couple more things, Jameson.”

The other man visibly deflated and tried unsuccessfully to smother yet another yawn.

He wasn't insensitive to the man's obvious exhaustion, but much remained to go over. Matters regarding Avondale's refuge houses usually required immediate attention, but he felt reluctant sympathy for his secretary. Jameson had been traveling all day and then working with him since he arrived in late afternoon. They had already addressed the most urgent concerns. He supposed he could show the poor man some mercy.

“On second thought, we will continue tomorrow.”

The look of relief on Jameson's face made his eyes sparkle and his mouth go slack in a way that was almost comical. Recovering, the secretary hastily gathered his papers, as if Avondale might change his mind if he lingered too long.

With a sardonic smile, Avondale turned towards the window as a flash of lightning shot out of the pitch black sky. It hit somewhere in the distance, but it startled him all the same. There was no thunder, and the earlier storm had already moved on.

“Bless me! Did you see that?”

“See what, Your Grace?” Jameson asked warily, no doubt fearing his departure would be delayed.

“Nothing. Never mind. Good night Jameson.”

“Good night, Your Grace.” He fled, setting the papers aflutter with his haste.

Avondale swept from the room, too. To investigate. Of course, the most sensible thing would be to wait until morning and then explore the area with a few of his grooms. But he couldn't possibly wait that long. He'd never seen a stranger thing in his life. He must look into it. It could be a meteorite or some other phenomenon. It might be nothing but stray lightning, but it had not seemed so.

He strode to the front entrance and grabbed his overcoat, throwing it on as he ran to the stables. Judging by where he had seen the light, he should go to the area where the road traversed the west woods. Thankfully, that area, an artificial park made to look like a forest, was not very dense. With luck, light from the moon would infiltrate through the trees.

Avondale entered the stables silently. He located Samson, his gray stallion, and saddled him quickly. Then he grabbed a lamp and some matches and set off.

It didn't take long to reach the area where he thought the lightning had hit. At first, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. No burning meteorite, no charred wood from a lightning-struck tree - nothing. Everything was eerily normal. He could almost believe he had imagined the light. Almost.

Samson pranced beneath him, shying away from something and rearing in the air. Bringing his horse under control with the skill of an experienced rider, Avondale looked

around. What had spooked his normally steady horse? There. On the ground. What was that lumpy shape?

Avondale jumped from Samson and approached cautiously. A cloud moved past the moon. The newly revealing moonlight glinted off long, light colored hair. The lump had the shape of a woman crumpled on the ground. Oh dear Lord. He leapt into action. Please let her be sleeping. The alternative was not worth considering.

He fell to his knees in front of her, his hand gently smoothing her hair to the side as he reached for her neck to feel for signs of life. He exhaled, somewhat relieved that his fingers picked up the faintest of pulses. Leaning closer to check she was still breathing, he turned his head to listen and froze as her warm breaths caressed his cheek, sending shivers coursing down his spine and throughout his body.

Confused, but immensely glad the woman lived, Avondale leaned back to better assess the situation. She was cold. Was she badly injured? He needed more light. He lit the lamp he had brought and scanned her for injuries.

She wore rather strange clothes—some sort of trousers that were shredded in places. But the rest of her garments seemed to be in good condition.

After assuring himself she didn't have any wounds or broken bones, he finally looked at her face. And for the second time that night, his breath caught.

To simply call her beautiful didn't do her justice. She was stunning. A perfect oval face, straight little nose, and full kissable mouth. Her hair, long and wavy, was several shimmering shades of blonde. Her dainty features were the definition of ethereal beauty, and for a moment he had the strange thought that she was a fairy or an angel, some sort of otherworldly creature cast to this mortal plane.

A fairy? He snorted. Poppycock. Fancies when he needed practical action. You should take care of her, you idiot. She had been injured. He had to get her to the manor, warm her up, and call the physician to examine her. What if she had been struck by lightning?

There was no sign of horse or carriage, so either she had been on foot or her mount had run away.

“Where did you come from, sweetheart?” he mused, softly caressing her cheek.

Was she running away from something or someone? His protective instincts flared at once. He had spent years trying to save countless women, trying to make up for the one he had failed to save. Yet here was a woman in need he could help personally. It felt different. As if finally he was being offered a chance at redemption. This time, he would not fail.

Moving carefully, he lifted her and set her over the saddle. Then mounted the horse and settled her comfortably between his legs, gathering her against his chest. With one arm, he held her while he maneuvered the horse towards the house. “I’ll keep you safe.”



CHAPTER 3 - The mystery of the peculiar lady



HOLDING THE WOMAN IN his arms, Avondale strode straight to the front door and kicked it. The footman stationed near the door at night looked sleepily through the peephole and, upon seeing his master, hastened to open the door. When he saw the unconscious woman, his eyes rounded.

Avondale didn't pay him any mind. He marched toward the staircase, tossing orders over his shoulder. "Wake Mrs. Simmonds, and have her attend me in my room. Send a groom to the village to get the doctor immediately, and see to my horse."

He took her straight to his bedroom. He didn't even consider any other possibility. His was the only bedroom that was ready, anyway. By the time he had deposited her in his bed, the housekeeper slipped in through the door, still tying the sash of a robe tossed hastily over her nightclothes.

"Your Grace. How may I be of assistance?"

"Mrs. Simmonds. I found this lady unconscious in the forest. She may be hurt. Could you have a maid attend to her and make sure she is comfortable? I have sent the doctor."

If the housekeeper found the story strange or wondered why he was in the woods, and how he had found a woman there at this hour, she didn't show it. She was too discreet and well trained for that.

"Of course, Your Grace. I'll do it myself. I'll go find a nightgown. One of mine should do for now. Tomorrow we can get more garments."

She left, and he set himself to study the sleeping woman again, now that he had better light, to see if he had missed any injury before. He ran his hands into her hair, feeling her head for any lump or cut that could account for her loss of

consciousness. He found nothing, but her hair smelled wonderful, like some exotic fruit. In better light, she was even more stunning, and her clothing even more strange than it had seemed at first.

Before, he had assumed she was wearing men's clothing. Some sort of disguise, which fitted with his theory that she was on the run. But upon closer examination, he realized her trousers were made of a fabric he had never seen before. They were dark blue, and faded in places, thick and strong, but also flexible, molding to her hips and thighs before flaring out at the knees. Peeling his gaze from that part of her anatomy, he examined her shoes. She was wearing boots, although they did not look like any ladies' boots he had ever seen. They looked almost masculine. Made of black leather with no embellishments other than a logo imprinted in the leather, they had a thick rubber sole.

He then turned his attention to her torso, which proved to be a mistake because the way the fabric of her tight-fitting shirt molded to her body did something to his insides. Not that her neckline was revealing. Indeed, he had seen more skin exposed by the ballgowns of many society ladies... he cut off that train of thought. He was a beast. Here she was, a lady in obvious distress, unconscious, and he lusted over her.

Mrs. Simmonds returned at that moment, so he left her to attend to the lady of the forest.

"I will be right outside, Mrs. Simmonds. Please make her comfortable and let me know when you finish. Leave all her garments in the room, please."

With that, he left, closing the door after him. He didn't go far, though. He sat on a bench in the hallway and waited for Mrs. Simmonds to emerge. Try as he might, he could not fathom where she could have come from and what style of clothing she wore. He would bet she was foreign. Her features didn't look quite English, although he would be hard-pressed to explain why.

But where was she from, then? He had traveled far and wide, throughout Europe and even to Asia and the Americas,

had met people from many cultures, and he had never seen anything like what she wore. Intriguing...

The door to the bedroom opened, and Mrs Simmonds stood there wearing a bemused expression. "I put her in a nightgown and tucked her into bed. I also built up the fire and left all her clothing draped over the chest at the foot of the bed. Is there anything else I can do? Bring her some hot broth or tea? Do you want me to keep watch over her until the doctor arrives?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Simmonds. That won't be necessary. I will keep watch over her. You may return to your rest."

The housekeeper bowed and left. He moved one of the deep comfortable chairs by the fireplace next to the bed, sat on it, and contemplated her. Her hands caught his attention this time. Slim and elegant, they looked so delicate. Compelled by an unknown force, he reached out and grabbed her hand. It was so cold. He rubbed her hand between his to warm it up. It felt like a fragile little bird trapped in the cage of his much larger hands. Little by little, her hand warmed up. He should let go of it now, but the handclasp felt so right, he was loath to break the contact.

A knock on the door.

He released her hand, as if caught in a forbidden act, then took a calming breath, and bid, "Enter."

Mr. Harris, the butler, entered, followed by the physician.

Dr. Roberts was in his late sixties and boasted a white head and beard with a grave but warm disposition. He cared for his patients and often provided his services for free to those who could not pay. He had been the doctor in this village since before Avondale's birth, and Avondale trusted the man with his life at both a personal and professional level

Avondale shook the physician's hand and showed the woman on his bed. "I found her unconscious in the forest near the road."

Dr. Roberts raised his eyebrows at that, but refrained from making any comment. With the calm assurance of one who is

used to dealing with disease and injury, he went to see the patient. Avondale retired to the far corner of the room to give them privacy.

The doctor checked her pulse, temperature, and then, frowning, pulled out a strange tube with a bell-shaped piece at one end and placed it against her chest, applying his ear to the other end as he listened intently while moving it around her torso and back. He continued his full examination. From head to toes, checking her throat, nose, ears, arms, hands. Even poking her with strange instruments.

Avondale could not stand to watch the doctor poke and prod her anymore, so he turned to the window and fought the urge to look over his shoulder at her pale, quiet visage once more. He knotted his hands behind his back, barely able to keep the air flowing in and out of his lungs.

What if the doctor could not help her? She seemed well, almost as if she were asleep. Even the color was returning to her cheeks as she warmed up. But she could have some grave internal injury. It surprised him to realize how much her wellbeing mattered to him, given he had only set eyes on her a mere hour ago. Yet now it seemed necessary for his sanity that she recovered.

He wanted to see the color of her eyes, hear her voice, and know her mysteries.



CHAPTER 4 - She's a fairy! She's an angel! She has a magical device



“IT IS INTRIGUING, INDEED, Avondale.” Dr Roberts called from his position next to the bed. “I don’t see any signs of an injury. All her vital signs are well. Her breathing, her heart. I also don’t see any bruises or wounds. No signs of a concussion either. She might have fainted from exhaustion and cold.”

The doctor adjusted his spectacles, considering his patient. “Let her rest. Keep her warm. When she wakes up, give her some broth. My instincts tell me she will regain consciousness soon, by morning at the latest. The best we can do now is keep her comfortable and wait.”

“If she has not awakened by morning, what then?”

“We will cross that bridge when we get there. I’ll come back first thing in the morning. For now, there’s naught to do but wait. May I suggest you get some rest too?”

Avondale didn’t hide his glower. Dr Roberts, knowing him as he did, smiled as he recognized his frustration. Avondale preferred action. To be able to do something, to be useful. Sitting and waiting, doing nothing, was unacceptable.

More soothingly, the doctor added, “Patience. I know it’s difficult, but sometimes the best we can do is nothing at all.”

With a familiarity born of a long acquaintance, and that few people enjoyed, he set a hand on Avondale’s shoulder and asked, “Is she very important to you?”

“No! I mean... I have never met her. I chanced upon her about an hour ago in the forest. I know nothing at all about her. Not even her name... and yet, I find myself oddly invested in her fate.” He smiled humorlessly. “Strange, isn’t it?”

“Not strange at all, my boy. You have a caring soul. You are a protector by nature. I remember how you used to bring

me every hurt creature you found. Usually birds or rabbits, once even a fox!” The doctor smiled.

“Yes, well. They needed help, and you are the only doctor I know who was willing to treat an animal.” Avondale shuffled from foot to foot, his cheeks reddening under the doctor’s knowing gaze.

“Yes, but there is probably not another lord in all of Great Britain who would care about the fate of a fox. They’d be more likely to hunt and kill it for pleasure. But not you. You would protect every defenseless creature. That is why I always found the rumors about your wife’s death extremely absurd.”

Blanching, Avondale turned and walked away from the doctor. That was a topic he could not yet broach, not even with his trusted physician. Growing stiff to try to put some distance, he said, “Thank you for your efforts, Dr. Roberts. I will send for you if there are any developments.”

Taking his words for the dismissal it was, Dr. Roberts said mildly, “My pleasure. As always, I’m at your service.” Then he bowed and retired.

Avondale sat down again, slumping lower in the chair, widening his legs and loosening his cravat. He intended to keep watch until she awoke. This woman was a conundrum that he intended to solve.

But his mood had taken a turn for the worse. The mention of his late wife always had that effect on him. He wished it wasn’t so. Seven long years had passed since Eloise had died. How long would he have to live tormented by the memories and regrets? Better not to dwell on that now.

Raising from the chair, he went to the pile of clothing neatly folded at the foot of the bed and grabbed the first garment. It seemed awfully intrusive to be pawing through her clothes while she slept, but he wanted to investigate further the strange garments. Surely he could discover some clue in them as to the identity of his mysterious lady of the forest.

All the garments were stark and plain. No adornment or ribbons or lace anywhere. The colors, too, were very subdued.

Cream, dark blue, and light brown. Her outfit seemed almost masculine. Except it wasn't. The cut and fit proclaimed the pieces had been designed for a woman. They were of fine quality, too. Why would she purposely have men's clothes made for herself? Unless she masqueraded as a man often. But then, she didn't look masculine, even in her manly clothing.

Another mystery was the unfamiliar fabrics of the garments, and the labels they had on them. He looked more closely at those labels. There were names, numbers, letters, and many unknown symbols written on them. Her shoes said 'Made in Italy', but her trousers said 'Made in China', while her top said, 'Made in Vietnam'. And the lettering was printed, like the type in a newspaper. Had she been to all those distant lands?

An object fell out of the coat pocket and onto the thick rug. It was rectangular and flat, about the size of his hand, smooth and shiny like a dark mirror. When he smoothed his hand over the glossy surface, it lit up from within.

The object flew from his hands as he jumped, startled. He grasped for it as it fell and caught it, fumbling for a few heart-hammering seconds until he held it secure in both hands.

He turned it around in his hand to see the source of the light, but could not figure out how it worked. The only thing he could see was an image on the glass surface, a portrait of his mysterious lady looking out into the sea while the sun sank on the horizon. She was on a beach, surrounded by cliffs, and on the cliff behind her, rested a white town clinging to the side of the mountain. It looked like a Mediterranean town. Maybe in Spain or Greece?

Who was this woman? What was this strange little device she carried? Was she from another, more advanced civilization? One that had harnessed unknown powers? That device was way beyond anything he had ever seen. And he kept abreast of the latest technologies.

No. Crazy thought indeed. He shook his head to dismiss it, half amused and exasperated at himself. But once he had opened the door to irrational thinking, another crazy thought

followed. Could she... possibly hail from the future, or maybe, as he had previously imagined, she was an angel, cast from the sky? Maybe that was the light he had seen? She could also be a witch. Or a fairy.

What on earth was wrong with him? He ran a hand through his hair in confusion. He was not given to fanciful thoughts. His whole life he had been practical, sensible, logical. Yet since he found his lady of the forest, he had had more imaginative thoughts than in the whole of his thirty-eight years.

Whoever this woman was, wherever she came from and whatever this device was, there had to be a rational explanation. And he was going to wait right here for her to wake up, to hear it straight from her delectable lips.



CHAPTER 5 - The strange (but handsome) gentleman.



SHE WAS FALLING, FALLING. The light was approaching fast. It was going to hit her, swallow her... nooo!

Olivia jolted awake with a scream. The brightness of the day pierced her eyes, so she slammed them closed, falling back onto the pillow with a groan. Then a deliciously deep voice with a British accent laced with anxiety spoke.

“Madam? Are you well?”

She forced herself to open her eyes more slowly this time, and peered in the voice’s direction, and gaped.

The most handsome man she had ever seen hovered over her. Dark blond hair, thick and wavy, a few strands falling forward over his tall forehead and almost touching slashing eyebrows that were just a shade darker than his hair. Beneath those eyebrows, piercing blue eyes fringed by ridiculously long lashes any woman would envy, a straight nose, and the most kissable lips she had ever seen. Not too full, not too thin, just perfectly shaped and firm. He had a day’s growth of beard accentuating the strong contours of his jaw and chin, and an expression of concern on his face. For her? He was concerned about her?

Her sluggish brain clicked into gear, and memories of the strange accident flashed through her mind. The headache was gone, and it didn’t hurt anywhere else. She wanted to tell him, but her mind refused to cooperate. She got all tongue-tied and flustered. Oh my god, how embarrassing. What was she, a teenage girl? Mistaking her silence for confusion, he addressed her again.

“Do you speak English? Can you understand me?”

He must think her an idiot. At long last, her addled brain clicked on. “Yes.” The word croaked out of her dry mouth, and

she cleared her throat.

Seeming relieved that she understood him, he continued talking.

“Would you like some water?”

His voice was as beautiful as the rest of him, and his accent made it all the sexier. What was it about a British accent that caressed her ears and turned her insides to warm honey? Water, he was offering water. And she was parched.

“Yes, please,” she said.

He slid a powerful arm behind her shoulders and supported her so she could sit, then pressed an exquisite cut crystal goblet full of water into her hand.

She almost swooned again at the sensation of being held so close to him, feeling the warmth of his embrace, the strength of his arms. He smelled good, too. Like a forest full of exotic plants. She gave a mental head shake. Enough fanciful notions. She gulped the water greedily and almost choked, coughed a couple of times, and then sipped again more carefully.

She could sit on her own, but his arm around her felt nice. Intimate. The water was fresh and delicious, a soothing balm to her dry throat. She sipped the rest of the cool liquid, hoping to drag out this closeness for as long as possible.

Once finished, Mr. Hunk set her back on the pillows and withdrew his arm. More's the pity.

“Could you tell me your name?” he asked.

“Olivia. Olivia Mirabal. But everyone calls me Livvy.”

“Miss Mirabal. That's a Spanish name. Are you from Spain?”

“No, not at all. I'm American. Some of my ancestors were Spanish, I suppose. My father is Cuban, and I was born in Miami, that's in Florida. So I guess that makes me Cuban-American.” Now she was babbling. Great going Olivia. But he didn't seem to mind. He was listening to her with undivided attention.

“Interesting. I don’t know your hometown, but I know of Cuba. It is the biggest island in the Caribbean, correct? North of Jamaica. A Spanish colony.”

Did he just refer to Cuba as a Spanish colony? He probably meant that it had been a Spanish colony once. Still, an odd way of describing Cuba, given that it hadn’t belonged to Spain for well over a century now, but whatever.

She had more pressing matters. She had no idea where she was, how she got here, or who this handsome stranger was. The last thing she remembered was waking up after the accident. She had tried to call for help but didn’t have a signal. So she got out of the car to get help, and then she had no memory of anything else until she woke up in this room.

She studied the room in wonderment. It was the most opulent room she had ever seen outside of a museum. In fact, it looked like a museum. The high ceilings, framed with thick and intricate gold crown molding, were a work of art. Heavy wood furniture stood against every wall. The bed hangings were of deep blue and gold brocade that matched the curtains. If her client saw this, she would swoon and then demand she do her bedroom exactly like this. Olivia took mental pictures of everything. She was going to take actual pictures with her phone before she left. But back to the matter at hand. Where was she?

The place looked like a palace. Maybe a manor house that had been converted into a hotel? If so, it must be a very expensive hotel. But how had she gotten here? And why? If she had been found unconscious, shouldn’t she have been taken to a hospital?

“Miss Mirabal?” Mr. Hunk had leaned forward and seemed seconds away from waving a hand before her face. “Are you unwell? Your eyes have gone glassy. Should I send for the doctor?”

Yes. “No. No. I’m well. Thank you. But... where am I? Who are you?”

“Yes, of course. Forgive me for the oversight. I’m Avondale, at your service Miss Mirabal.” He executed a

perfect bow. “And you are in my home, Crestview Hall.”

Crestview Hall! Wasn't that the name of the estate where the auction was taking place? Had he said it was his home? Surely not. She had been told it was uninhabited. The last person who had owned it had died without heirs, and while the courts decided what to do with it, the house had remained uninhabited for years.

This place didn't look uninhabited. It must be a different house. But that wasn't important now. What she wanted to know was how she got here. And why was this guy with her while she slept? Was he a doctor, maybe? But he wasn't wearing a white robe. In fact, he dressed strangely. Like an actor in a period drama.

Stranger and stranger.



CHAPTER 6 - Duke, where is my car?



“HOW DID I GET HERE?” she asked. “Excuse me, but my memories of last night after the accident are incomplete.”

“Understandably so. I brought you here. I saw a flash of lightning from my window and went to investigate. That is how I found you lying unconscious in the forest.”

So the guy had rescued her like a true knight in shining armor. A pity she had been unconscious. She would have quite enjoyed being rescued by her own hero. But if she had been conscious, no rescue would have been necessary.

Still, now that her mind was working better, she realized how strange the situation was. If he had found her unconscious at the scene of an accident; why hadn't he called an ambulance and had her taken to a hospital, as any normal person would do? She needed to be examined by a doctor, have some tests done. MRIs, X-Rays, and such. She felt better, but head injuries were sometimes unpredictable. She didn't want to be rude or seem ungrateful for his hospitality, but she needed to ask.

“Has a doctor seen me? I need to go to a hospital.”

“I assure you, Miss. Mirabal, you have nothing to worry about. A physician examined you last night. He determined you likely needed only a bit of rest and would wake up by morning. As indeed you have. So you see, there was no need to have you taken to a hospital. He will be here soon to check on you again.”

No need to have her taken to a hospital? What kind of doctor would say that without proper tests? Astounding! Is that how they handled medical emergencies in England? Just sleep it off and see if you wake up the next day? Of course, the healthcare system worked differently here. Maybe it wasn't

customary to rush to the hospital unless there was a very serious, apparent injury.

In either case, she'd better not pursue the matter further. He had been very kind to rescue her and bring her to his home. She should not repay his kindness by criticizing him. Instead, she would thank him, leave as soon as possible, and take herself to the nearest hospital on her own.

That brought another thought. What about her car, her phone, her suitcases, all her belongings? Had they been recovered? She looked down at what she was wearing, registering the garment for the first time. It looked like a house robe, although very old-fashioned. How had she gotten into it? Had this guy undressed her? She fought to control her racing thoughts and growing anxiety.

"I'm sorry... Dale is it?"

"Avondale."

"Thank you very much for helping me. For bringing me to your home, for everything. I feel much better and think I might be able to leave now. Do you know where my car is? Has it been recovered?"

"Your car? Like a train car?"

"No, my car. An automobile." Anxiety was escalating. So many details needed her attention. And she didn't know if she was well enough to deal with it all. Apparently, they did things very differently here, and it would be a nightmare to figure it all out. What a mess she had made of things.

And the auction was tomorrow. She couldn't miss it. A wave of overwhelm threatened to drown her just thinking about it all and she had to take one deep, calming breath. One thing at a time. First, she needed to locate the car.

"It is a silver Land Rover. Do you know what happened to it?"

"A land rover?"

Was he just going to repeat her words? The look of confusion on his face would be funny in other circumstances.

As things stood, it didn't help the rising panic in her chest. She was in a strange place with a handsome but clueless man who was weirding her out.

"My apologies, Miss Mirabal," he said, "but I don't have the faintest idea of what you are talking about."

"You didn't see my car then? No vehicle nearby where you found me?"

"Indeed I did not, but it was dark, and my primary concern was to ascertain your condition and take you to safety. I did not look for a car."

"Yes, of course, I understand. It must still be there then. And my bags too... Could you take me to the place where you found me? And where are my clothes?"

"Your clothes are right here on the chest at the foot of the bed. The boots have been cleaned, and the coat brushed, and they are like new. But I'm afraid your... trousers are beyond help."

At least he knew where her clothes were.

"My jeans, you mean? What happened to them?"

"Well, they are a little worse for wear. They have holes in them. A maid could try to repair them, but I doubt they are salvageable. Do you remember how that happened? I must admit I am rather puzzled by it, as you don't seem to have any wounds in the places where the holes are."

A startled laugh escaped her. Was he serious?

"Have you never seen a pair of distressed jeans? They are supposed to be like that."

"Supposed to be how?"

"Ripped, with holes in them. They were made to look like that."

"Well, that makes no sense at all. Why would anybody purposely wear torn clothing?"

He had a point there. "When you put it like that, it does sound ridiculous. But sometimes fashion is absurd like that,

don't you think?"

"I admit it, but I had never heard of this particular folly." He said with a puzzled frown.

"No? That's strange. They are everywhere." She rolled her shoulders in an attempt to relieve the tension growing in her. "I was kind of late to adopt this trend."

"Hmm." He cocked his head to the side and studied her with his piercing eyes.

"Could I use the bathroom, please?" She asked.

"Do you wish to take a bath? I can order the servants to draw a bath for you."

"No, thank you. I just need to use the toilet and get dressed."

He looked at her blankly.

"The loo, the water closet," she explained.

"Ah! Excuse me. Of course. It is through that door. I will wait for you in the sitting room, through that other door."

"Thank you. I'll just be a minute." She grabbed her pile of clothing and hurried to the bathroom. Wanting only to escape this strange conversation. She didn't know what was going on, but something was off. What the hell had happened to her?



CHAPTER 7 - No Wi-Fi.



SHE OPENED THE DOOR and inhaled in surprise. Instead of the porcelain features she expected, she found herself in a room full of wood cabinets.

“Well, if this isn’t the most wonderfully preserved Victorian bathroom I have ever seen.” She swept her eyes over everything, taking in every detail. If she had not been a trained architect, who was moreover engaged in recreating a historical English mansion, she would have been completely baffled by this room. As it was, she had only read about these features and sometimes seen drawings and photographs of them. She had never seen them in person.

She ran her hand over the exquisitely carved wood encasing the bathtub. The gorgeous sink cabinet had a stone top, and next to the bathtub on the far side, she spotted a sitz bath. Thank goodness that had gone into disuse. She could not see the practicality or hygiene of sitting and soaking your nether regions in one of those. The bidet had been a much better invention, even though it had fallen into disuse in the US too. Not so much in Europe. There, she was happy to see the bidet tradition was alive and well.

Ok, this bathroom was spectacular, and she was going to study it and take pictures like there was no tomorrow. She already had so many ideas about things she could implement in her designs for her client’s mansion. She was going to blow the lady’s socks off! But right now, she needed to pee. Historical accuracy was all well and good, but she hoped there was a real flushing toilet under that elaborate wooden box. She sat down and relieved herself. But then... where was the toilet paper? She found a little flat wooden box, opened it, and found it contained thin linen squares. They were rough and looked more like paper napkins than toilet paper, but they would have to do.

She quickly washed and dressed and used a comb she found in a cabinet to bring some semblance of order to her hair. Where was her hairband? Ah, yes, on her wrist. Good. She put her hair up in a high ponytail, then rinsed her mouth with water and something called cream dentifrice, which she assumed was toothpaste, even though it was in a jar instead of a tube. These people went all-in with the period recreation. If it were up to her, she would recreate some of the aesthetics, but would also incorporate modern conveniences, and no way would she ever cover a toilet in wood! That must be a heck of a job to keep clean.

After donning her clothes, and restoring herself, she felt more optimistic. She looked at herself in the mirror. Not too bad. Maybe she had avoided a crash after all, and the extent of the accident was no more than her car going off the road. Losing consciousness was worrisome, though. She had never fainted in her life. Probably a side effect of jet lag and exhaustion, not to mention the panic of going off the road. It had all been too much for her. Yes, that must be it. She was well now.

Exiting the bathroom, she crossed the bedroom and went to the other door Dale had indicated. The open window showed a spectacular view of a magnificent garden and park. This place was as grand as a palace. And she couldn't feel more out of place. She needed to get to her car. And her cell phone. Where would her cell phone be? In the car? No. She had it with her when she came out of the car. A pat to the coat pockets confirmed it wasn't there anymore. She'd ask him.

Opening the door to the sitting room, she found him standing in front of the window with his back to her. He didn't hear her enter, so she took a moment to admire his figure. Tall, broad-shouldered, and athletic. His back was a perfect inverted triangle, accentuated by an exquisitely cut coat narrowing down to slim hips. He wore high-waisted trousers that skimmed his muscular legs. Long elegant fingers were clasped behind his back... and there was her phone!

He turned as if alerted by the heat of her gaze. He wore an arrested expression on his face as he stared back at her a bit

longer than was polite. Under his intense scrutiny, she felt her cheeks heating and had to fight the urge to squirm. He truly was the most attractive man she had ever met.

She broke the awkward silence. “Ah! I see you have my phone. Wonderful. I was concerned I had lost it.” She approached him, pasting a smile on her face and extending her hand for the phone.

For a moment, he seemed confused, then, looking down at the phone as if trying to puzzle a great mystery, he handed it to her.

She wasted no time and, unlocking the phone, she opened the map app in order to find out her location and the nearest police station. But the phone was frustratingly without signal. She paced this way and that, holding the phone up towards the window, but it was no use. Not one bar.

“Could I use your Wi-Fi?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your Wi-Fi. To connect to the internet. My phone has no signal. Is that common around here?”

He simply shook his head. A pensive frown formed between his eyebrows.

“I’m not sure what you mean.” he prevaricated.

She groaned inside. He was acting weird again, and this situation was getting creepier by the minute.

“Well, my phone is no use. I can’t call an Uber. Besides, I don’t even know where my car is. I wonder if you would be so kind as to take me to where you found me last night?”

“But of course. It will be my pleasure, Miss Mirabal. But before, would you care to join me for breakfast?”

Breakfast sounded divine. Now that he mentioned it, she realized she was famished. The last meal she remembered had been on the plane eons ago. But no. She had to get out of here. There were a ton of things to do and there was something weird going on. Even if she couldn’t put her finger on it, she felt uneasy.

She shook her head. “I don’t want to impose. You have done more than enough for me already and probably have plans for today. I’ll grab something to eat on the road. If you could just drop me off or call me an Uber, I’ll get going.”

“Nonsense. I have nothing so urgent that it could not wait until after breakfast. Besides, I don’t know about you, but I am good for nothing until I have been properly fed.”

She bit her bottom lip. Was she overreacting? Maybe she could grab a quick bite. Despite his weirdness, the guy had been nothing but kind to her.

He continued. “Why risk the chance of poor quality food on the road when my cook has prepared a fantastic meal for us?” Extending his arm, he smiled. “Come, it will be my pleasure to have your company.”

If he was handsome before, when he smiled, he could dazzle the sense out of her. Forgetting her previous discomfort in the face of that charming invitation, she took his proffered arm. “If you insist.”



CHAPTER 8 - The year is what?



A STRANGE SENSATION of unreality settled over Olivia as they walked towards the dining room. Why was that? She tried to analyze it. The whole situation was odd, to be sure. Get into a car accident and wake up in a beautiful palace that seems straight out of a fairytale? Unlikely. And it's inhabited by a glorious Prince Charming. A fairy tale. Except fairytales were not real, and the guy walking beside her was very real indeed. As was the effect he had on her without even trying.

Were all English guys this chivalrous? She suspected not. Who was this man? Drop-dead gorgeous, gentlemanly, dignified. And obviously rich, considering this opulent palace he lived in and the servants shuffling around every corner. He looked to be in his late thirties, not much older than she, but he carried himself with such gravity and radiated such authority that he gave the impression of being older.

And what about the way he was dressed? Sort of old-fashioned, but impeccably turned out. Like he had just stepped off the set of a period movie. He was a woman's fantasy come true. Even the servants she had seen wore elegant uniforms. She felt horribly underdressed in her ripped jeans and boots.

This guy could be a real prince for all she knew. She chuckled at that. She was letting her imagination run away.

"Is something humorous, Miss. Mirabal?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking. Are you, by any chance, a prince?"

"Well, not quite." He answered seriously. "But I am a nobleman. I am the Duke of Avondale."

"Oh, I was half-joking, but it figures." She shook her head. "I feel as if I have fallen into a fairytale. You know, the ones with the damsel in distress being rescued by the heroic prince?"

He smiled, but a shadow seemed to pass over his face so fleeting she wasn't sure she'd truly seen it.

"I assure you, I am nobody's notion of a heroic prince."

"You rescued me most heroically last night." The words tumbled out of her mouth unthinkingly, but they were true.

"Think nothing of it, Miss. Mirabal." He looked away, apparently embarrassed by her effusive praise, and she blushed to the tip of her head.

Oh my god, was she flirting? She didn't know how to flirt. That was an art she had never quite mastered. And now her awkward attempts at flirtation had embarrassed the poor guy after he'd been so attentive.

They finally made it to the breakfast room and sat down at the sumptuously set table. The opulence of the room distracted her from looking directly at him. Was that an authentic antique gaslight chandelier over the table? The thing was a work of art. As were the elaborate cornices and wall treatment. She fidgeted with her napkin, while her dazzled eyes roamed around the room, taking in every detail. They finally settled on him and found him looking straight at her with a curious intensity she couldn't interpret. It made her blush again.

Fortunately, a servant appeared, dispelling the awkwardness a bit. He carried a tray containing tea, coffee, cream, and sugar.

"Tea or coffee?" he asked.

"Er, coffee, please." She knew the English were obsessed with their tea, but she needed her coffee in the mornings. It would not be breakfast if she couldn't have a hot cafe con leche.

The servant immediately poured her a steaming cup of delicious-smelling coffee.

"Hmmm," she said, feeling better simply by inhaling the aroma.

"You can leave all the plates and retire, Oates. We will serve ourselves." He addressed the servant without prying his

attention from her.

“Certainly, Your Grace.”

Two more servants arrived carrying covered dishes, which they set at the table. Oates uncovered them, revealing eggs, ham, sausages, and a bowl of delicious smelling buns still hot from the oven. Then he bowed and retired. Jeez, how formal these Brits were. Looking down at her travel outfit, her feelings of discomfort grew. Probably even the servants were judging her and finding her lacking. She thought she had accepted an invitation for a casual breakfast, but now she felt like she should have consulted an etiquette manual for having tea with royalty!

She sighed. Oh well, so be it. It wasn't her fault. It was not as if she had any other outfits to wear, or could have expected to be thrown into this situation.

She was going to act like she normally did. She might not belong to the British aristocracy, but her parents had taught her manners. If she made a faux pas, he probably wouldn't be too shocked, given that she was American.

She grabbed the cream pot and added a generous amount to her coffee, and then she added a teaspoon of sugar. Stirred and sipped carefully... ahh exquisite.

He merely observed her with that enigmatic expression on his face. It looked something like...wonder? Okay, he was weirding her out. Making her feel even more self-conscious and ruining a delicious breakfast. He wasn't kidding when he said his cook could prepare something much better than anything she could get on the road. Even if she could find a Starbucks in these parts.

He wasn't talking much, so once more the silence stretched awkwardly between them. She reached for a roll and started buttering it while he helped himself to some eggs and sausages.

“So,” she said, unable to bear the silence any longer, “how far is it from here to where you found me?”

“Not far at all. The place is visible from my study window. That is the reason I saw the light and decided to go investigate.”

“You saw a light? I saw a light too, right before the accident. I think that was what made me go off the road.” She considered it for a moment. “You know, I haven’t heard the whole story of how you came to find me. Could you tell me, please?”

“Certainly, but there is not much more to tell. I was looking out my study window when I saw a light that looked sort of like a lightning strike, but not quite. It seemed more like an explosion of light at ground level. I felt quite compelled to go investigate immediately. So I went to the area where I had seen it, and I found you... or perhaps I should say Samson found you.” He smiled.

“Samson?”

“My horse. You were lying on the ground, and he got a little spooked. That is how I noticed you. After ascertaining you were not badly hurt, I brought you back to the house.”

“You carried me unconscious on a horse?” She didn’t know whether to be horrified or awed by his resourcefulness.

“I assure you, you were not in any danger. I had a firm grasp on you.”

For some reason, thinking about this man having a ‘firm grasp’ on her made her tingle inside. As if he could read her thoughts, a flash of sensual awareness shimmered in his eyes. But it was suppressed so fast she was left wondering if it had really been there. He continued matter-of-factly.

“So I brought you home, sent a servant to fetch the doctor, and had the housekeeper tend to you until he arrived. When he came, he examined you, confirmed you were not badly hurt, and recommended we let you sleep. After he left, I sat by the bed because I didn’t want you to wake up alone in a strange place and feel disoriented.”

Touched, she met her eyes and said softly. “Thank you. That was very thoughtful of you.”

“Think nothing of it, Miss Mirabal.”

“Call me Livvy, please. Miss Mirabal sounds so formal. I feel as if I am in school.”

“I don’t know if I should. To call you by your nickname sounds very... intimate.”

Now, why did he have to put it like that? Everybody called her Livvy. “Don’t you have a nickname that your friends and family call you?”

“I used to. When my father was alive, I used to be called Dale by my friends.”

“I thought you said that was your name.”

“I said Avondale. That’s my title. But when my father was alive, he was Avondale. It is customary for the heir to take his father’s next highest-ranking title as a courtesy title. Confusingly, in our case, that title was also Avondale. The Marquess of Avondale. To distinguish me from my father, our friends and family started calling me Dale. But I haven’t been called that in years.”

“Do you like it?”

He shrugged, as if the matter was of little importance. “I like the way it sounds on your lips.”

Flustered, she rushed forward with another question. “And what is your given name, then?”

He tensed slightly. “William. But only a handful of people ever called me that. I would prefer Dale. It has happier associations.”

“Dale it is then. I think it suits you better, anyway.”

“Could I ask you something now, Olivia?” he said, using her name. Deliberately rolling it over his tongue like honey.

“Of course.”

“What is that object? I think you called it a... a ‘phone’?”

She stared at him blankly. “What do you mean, what is it? It is a phone, a cell phone, a mobile.”

He stared back, his gorgeous eyes clouding over while a frown appeared between his brows.

Was he serious now? Did he really not know what a cell phone is? Everyone had one! “You have never seen a cell phone?”

He said simply, “No.”

“How is that possible? What century do you live in?” She laughed.

“The nineteenth-century, of course.” He gazed at her, steady and intent.

She scoffed. “The nineteenth century, indeed! No, but really, all joking aside. How come you don’t know what a cell phone is?” Impossible, and... wait. She hadn’t seen any TVs here or any light switches, for that matter. She looked again at the chandelier hanging above the table. The gas chandelier. No lightbulbs. Actual gas. It was beautiful, but why would someone choose to have gas lights instead of electricity? Weirder and weirder.

“Are you Amish or something like that?” she asked. Were there even Amish people in England?

“Amish? What do you mean?”

“Well, you don’t seem to use electricity or watch TV or even know what a cell phone is. It is my understanding that Amish people live without modern conveniences by choice. Maybe you don’t call yourself Amish in England. But you practice something similar.”

He now regarded her even more intensely. “Olivia, I assure you, I’m not one of these ‘Amish’ people you refer to, and I have no objection to availing myself of the latest modern conveniences. In fact, I insist upon it.”

“I don’t understand, then.” He was quizzing her. Had to be. Asking her questions just to make her realize something he already suspected.

“What is the date today?” he asked.

“The date?” Her flight had left on the fourth and arrived on the fifth. That had been yesterday, so today must be the sixth. “November 6th, I think. Isn’t it?”

“But of what year?”

“What year? Why, 2022 of course.”

He sat back and looked at her, speechless.

Unease built within her. Something was wrong here.

“Olivia,” he said, “today is indeed the 6th of November... of the year 1872.”



CHAPTER 9 - Escape the madman!



NOW IT WAS HER TURN to look at him, speechless. What the heck was he talking about? Could he be insane? But he sounded so normal! Maybe he was a rich eccentric guy who suffered delusions and lived isolated in the countryside in this humongous mansion, pretending to live in the nineteenth century.

Another horrifying thought occurred to her. What if he meant to keep her prisoner? Make her pretend it was 1872? If he was unhinged, he could be capable of anything. This is exactly how scary movies started. A woman was kidnapped and kept prisoner by a psycho. She had to get out of here, the sooner the better. But she had to be smart, had to think. For the moment, pretend to go along.

“Oh, of course,” she said, smiling to look calm and nonchalant, while she smoothed the napkin on her lap to keep her hands from clenching. “Did I say 2022? Sorry, my mind must still be scrambled from the accident. I feel a headache coming on. I think I need to see the doctor. Could you take me to him, please?”

“I will send for Dr. Roberts right away.” His eyebrows lowered with a worried expression.

Oh god! It was as she expected. He would not let her get out of this house, or see anybody who could help her. Maybe the servants and the ‘doctor’ were his accomplices, too. If he had enough money, he could buy their compliance. Or maybe it was a cult, and he was the cult leader, and they all followed his orders unquestioningly. Her imagination was running away. She needed to consider her options. There had to be a way to get out of here, but she couldn’t let him suspect she was trying to escape.

“Would you like to recline in a bedchamber while we await the doctor?” He asked, concern reflected on his face.

Yes! That was the ticket. Let him think she needed to lie down. She would request to be left alone and then escape through a window.

“Yes, please.”

She put a hand to her head and tried to look sick, which wasn't difficult since she truly felt nauseous, although for a different reason than she was letting on..

“I have had a bedchamber prepared for you. The one where you stayed last night is mine. I took you there for the sake of expediency, since it was the only one ready.”

Now he had a room made up for her? But she wasn't staying! Thank you very much.

“Okay, thanks. I will just lie down for a few moments, and I will feel better, I'm sure.”

He stood and prowled around the edge of the table. When he took her arm to pull her to her feet, her heart leapt into her throat.

He escorted her through the house, looking at her every few steps. Was he worried she was going to faint? Or maybe getting suspicious about her? She tried to look faint. He stopped in front of a door, opened it for her, and gestured for her to enter. Another sumptuously appointed bedchamber. Thank goodness he did not try to enter.

“The doctor should arrive soon,” he said. “In the meantime, try to rest, and if you need anything, just ring.”

Smiling weakly, she thanked him. Then closed and locked the door. Breathing a sigh of relief, she ran to the window to peer out, dismayed to find nothing to aid her escape. The window was on the second floor, and it was a vertical drop to the garden, some thirty feet below. No trees, trellises, cornices, or anything she could use to get down.

What to do? Perhaps there was something inside the room. She scanned her surroundings. Ah! There—the ropes used to

tie back the drapes. If she used all the ropes in the windows and the bed hangings, would she have enough to get down? It was worth a try. She ran from drape to drape, collecting all the ropes, then started tying them together. But the knots were not holding. She was no girl scout, and her knot tying abilities were very basic. If the rope came undone, she could fall to her death or badly hurt herself, but she had to attempt it.

She managed to tie several knots that felt somewhat secure, but still did not have enough rope to get down. The sheets! She could use the sheets, too. She would use every scrap of fabric in the room, provided she had enough time. Running to the bed, she yanked the sheet out, tying one corner to the end of the rope. She looked out the window again and saw no one outside on this side of the house. Carefully, she lowered her makeshift rope, and it came to about ten feet off the ground. It would have to do. She could probably jump from that distance without hurting herself.

And then what?

Run! Run as fast as she could and avoid being seen!

Oh God, how had her life come to this? Just the day before, she had been on a business trip, driving through the English countryside, and now she was in this strange situation that she didn't even comprehend very well. But she knew she had to escape.

Next to the window sat a big armoire. She tied the end of the rope to the leg of the armoire and then, making sure she had her phone in the back pocket, she sat on the window sill, threw her legs over, and gripped the rope. With a fervent prayer for the rope to hold, she pushed herself from the window and started sliding down.

The friction hurt her hands, and her arm muscles were shaking from the effort, so she wrapped her legs around the rope to support herself and continued inching down. Coming to the end of the rope, she looked down. With her arms stretched overhead, the height of the drop was not bad at all. She let go, jumping to the ground and bending her knees as she hit the floor to break the fall.

Crouching down behind the hedge that surrounded the house, she peered through the leaves, but saw no one. She darted out from behind the hedge and started walking at a near run, following the wall towards the rear. She needed a means of getting away from the house while keeping undercover, but the house sat in the middle of a clearing, surrounded by lawn and open parterre gardens. Very charming and decorative, they were, for sure, but they provided scarce cover.

Seeing there was no way to stay undercover, she decided her best course was to aim for speed, and hope that if somebody noticed her, they wouldn't think to pursue, and if they did, that she could outrun them until she reached safety.

She spotted the gates of the park and sprinted towards them. In a few minutes, she could reach them, and beyond them, she hoped to find a road and help.



CHAPTER 10 - The chase



AVONDALE PACED IN HIS study, waiting for Dr. Roberts to arrive. What on earth was taking him so long?

Blast! What a fool he'd been since she'd awakened. When he'd announced that they were in the year 1872, she'd gone still as stone, then anxious as a hunted fox. Her eyes were pools of fear, her every muscle tense as if she planned to bolt. She had tried to cover it and bluff, but he noticed. For a man famed for his finesse when dealing with delicate business matters, and for his eloquence when addressing the House of Lords, he could sometimes be quite clumsy when it came to mundane matters.

Not that there was anything mundane about this situation. He still did not know how to proceed. Should he keep trying to talk to her, reassure her? But what could he tell her? He didn't know what was going on himself. Where she had come from or how. He only knew she thought it was the year 2022, and judging by the way she dressed and spoke and that object she called a phone, she might well be from the future. How she got here, he had no clue. But he had seen that weird lightning... that probably had something to do with it.

Should he go to her? But what if she wanted to be left alone? What if she had a severe headache and was in no condition to talk at the moment? Something told him she shouldn't be alone, and he had learned to listen to his instincts.

Where was Dr. Roberts? He looked out the window again, impatient for the doctor's arrival, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement on the back lawn. A lone figure was running towards the gates at breakneck speed.

Olivia!

Damn! He was a damn obtuse fool. He dashed out of his study to pursue her. Of course she had run. If she didn't believe him, she must have thought he was a lunatic. Even if

she was willing to consider the idea that she'd somehow slipped into the past, she would need confirmation.

He ran fast after her. He had to catch her before she got into the forest where she could hide. Where she could get lost. It could take several hours and enormous effort to find her. She was fast and had a good head start, but he was faster, and his legs longer. Little by little, he gained on her. When he was about twenty yards behind her, he called out. She looked back. Horror twisted her features into a silent scream. She ran faster.

She wasn't going to stop. She feared him, and was trying to escape from him.

"Olivia, stop!" he called again. "Let's talk for a moment. I mean you no harm."

"Get away from me!"

"What have I done to make you scared of me?"

No answer. She just kept running. But she was tiring out. He suspected only fear had kept her running far beyond her capacity.

She was nearing the woods now. Redoubling his efforts, he increased his speed and lunged at her from behind. He wrapped his arms around her body and twisted in the air to cushion her fall. She screamed and fought, trying to break free as they hit the ground with a thud. She fell half on top of him with a strangled, forced exhalation. The fall knocked what little air he had from his lungs as well.

She gasped and tried to break free again, but she was breathing hard, scarcely able to keep going. He rolled over her to keep her down, his legs bracketing hers, his forearms braced on either side of her shoulders, and used his body to hold her down while he caught his breath enough to talk.

"Stop... running. We need... to talk. I am not... going... to hurt you."

Still she struggled, pushing at him, but with little force. It was obvious she had surpassed the limit of her strength. He could have subdued her easily, but didn't want to frighten her

more. So he loosened his hold, lifting away from her to give her some room until she calmed down.

She stopped fighting. Her eyes went wide with fear as she gasped for air. Then those eyes filled with tears, and she choked back a sob. She closed her eyes and fought for composure, taking breaths in and out, and the sight of her in such distress undid him.

He held her closer while caressing her head. “Shh. Everything is going to be fine. I will help you. Please trust me.”

Little by little she recovered her composure, but remained silent and continued to lie unresisting beneath him. When she attempted to sit up, he let her go and sat up next to her on the grass.

“Tell me what you are thinking,” he urged.

She gave a brittle laugh. “I don’t know what I’m thinking, or what I should think.” She looked him straight in the eyes. “The funny thing is that I feel I can trust you, but the things you say make little sense.”

“I know. I have trouble believing them myself. But I see no other explanation. We will figure this out.” Standing up, he reached down a hand to her. “Come. I’ll take you to where I found you. We can walk there. It is not much farther from here. Let’s see what else we can find.”

Side by side they walked, circling the forest at first, then turning into a small lane that seemed to cut across a less heavily wooded area. She gave him sidelong glances as they walked and appeared ready to bolt again at the least provocation. He tried to look unthreatening and sincere, and he must be succeeding because she appeared to relax by infinitesimal degrees.

He pointed to a place where the lane curved and announced. “We are almost there. Up ahead, beyond that bend on the road, a little to the left is where I found you.”

“My car must be nearby then. I remember I didn’t walk very far before passing out.”

They rounded the bend and stepped away from the road. He kept looking at her, still afraid she would bolt again, and that's how he noticed the moment she saw what she was looking for. She gave a little triumphant shout.

“There it is! The car.”

And before he could react, she took off running towards it.



CHAPTER 11 - The shiny machine



HE FOLLOWED CLOSE BEHIND. His gaze followed the direction she ran in, and he saw it too, the thing she had called a car. It was a strange, shiny, carriage-like contraption with no place to harness horses. She opened the door, climbed inside, and the machine roared. He jumped back in alarm, but she didn't seem concerned.

The glass window lowered smoothly, and she said, "Jump in. I think it's fine to drive. Let's get it on the road, and then you can direct me where to go."

He couldn't look away from the machine. He had never seen anything like it. All shiny metal and glass. It looked a bit like a carriage, but different. The door handles didn't protrude, they were flush with the doors. He had to try several times before he could operate it. Once he got the door opened, he put a leg inside, marveling at the clever design.

"Don't get in the back!" she exclaimed. "Get in the passenger seat." With a nod of her head, she pointed to the seat next to her.

He crossed to the other side, and this time he knew how to pull the handle. It gave. The door swung open, and he climbed inside.

The inside of the car was even more amazing than the outside. All shiny buttons and lights. Warm air was coming from small vents. The surfaces were polished, made of a material he had never seen, or covered in leather. In the center of it all, there was a rectangular piece that looked like the object she called the phone, but bigger, and like her phone, it was lit from within. He could not stop looking around.

Suddenly, music exploded around him, as if an entire orchestra had climbed into the small confines of the car. He jumped in surprise, and she hurried to touch some buttons that made the music disappear.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you. My music came on automatically when I connected the phone.” She apologized, but he waved away her apology. She could play music without an orchestra or instruments? Astounding.

“So, this is the car you kept referring to. What does it do? How does it work?”

She looked at him again, with a mixture of disbelief and wariness, but instead of answering, she pulled a lever, and the car moved backward. He grabbed the door handle in a white knuckle grip.

“What’s going on?” He refused to show fear in front of her, but he couldn’t deny his alarm.

She rolled her eyes, dismissing his unease. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m driving the car. You can give me directions to the nearest town and I’ll drop you off at your house on the way.”

“You can not possibly be thinking of going to the village in this carriage!”

“Of course I am. Why on earth couldn’t I?”

“You will call too much attention. Even scare people!”

“Okay, this joke about the past is getting old. Pun intended. Is this some sort of hoax, maybe for a TV show? What is it about? Prank a tourist and that sort of thing? Do you have a camera on you?”

While she talked, she continued moving the car, maneuvering it towards the road.

“Once again, I don’t have the faintest idea what you are talking about. Olivia, listen to me. This is not a prank. Stop the carriage so that we can talk, please.”

She stopped the car but did not turn it off. Turning to him, she asked. “What? What are we going to talk about? Are you going to keep trying to convince me I’m in the nineteenth century?”

“I do not have to convince you. We are in the nineteenth century. If you don’t want to believe me, the evidence will convince you soon enough. But it will be best if you don’t do

anything rash in the meantime.” Pigheaded woman! Yet... this situation was indeed an odd one. He could not blame her. In her position, he’d deny it as well.

“All right,” he said, “I understand this is rather unbelievable. I have had more proof. Seeing that object you call a phone, and this conveyance... they could have come from nowhere but the future. I am convinced, and yet I still can scarcely credit it. What would it take for you to believe it?”

She looked at him, mouth open, head shaking.

“What would it take for me to believe I have somehow fallen into the nineteenth century? Nothing! The mere idea is preposterous. Time travel is science fiction. I have watched movies about it. The concept makes for an amusing story. But I’ve never believed it was possible.”

“And yet, believe it or not, here you are.”

“Okay, take me to the nearest city. A big city. Not a little village isolated from the rest of the world. Let me see for myself. Interact with other people.” This way, if he was crazy, at least she would be surrounded by people and could get help. If he was right... no. Of course, he was not right.

“All right, I will take you. Oxford is but an hour away. However, we can’t go in this carriage of yours. And if you want to interact with people, you must wear appropriate clothing.”

“No. I’m not getting out of my car.” She looked down at her phone, which still had no signal, and an icy fear tried to creep up her certainty. She shook it off.

“I’m going to find the nearest town or road by myself. England is not that big. I’m sure I’m no more than a few minutes away from a gas station or some place where I can ask for directions. I can drop you off at your house. Otherwise, get out now.”

“I am not going anywhere. You need my help, even if you don’t realize it yet.”

“Suit yourself. I suggest you buckle your seatbelt.”
Signaling to her own fastened seat belt, she put the gear lever into drive and started moving again down the dirt road.

And just like that, they were off at an alarming speed.



CHAPTER 12 - Far from Home



“WOULD YOU SLOW DOWN, please?” Dale asked as he grabbed onto the door handle. “How in heaven’s name am I supposed to fasten this thing?”

Livvy watched him struggle before she lost patience, reached out, grabbed the strap, and inserted it into the buckle. Her hand brushed his leg as she did so, and he sucked his breath. Heat flooded her face. She had not intended to touch him. Shaking her head, she concentrated on looking forward.

She kept driving a couple of miles down the dirt road away from the manor until she got to an intersection. Several signs on a post indicated the way to different towns to the left and right. She chose the right by instinct. And kept driving.

The road was dreadful. She hoped to intersect a paved road soon. That thought gave her pause. Last night before the accident, she had been driving on a paved road. But this morning, the only road near the car was the dirt road they had left behind. There had also been electrical posts running parallel to the road. She saw none now.

Even if she was in a remote location, it didn’t explain how she had gotten there. Again, a creepy feeling overtook her. Could this guy be telling the truth? But it was absurd! This sort of thing didn’t happen in real life. She stopped the car.

He had been observing her, his eyes kind and understanding. Strangely enough, even as her intellect suspected and was wary of him, on some deeper level, she felt safe with this man. But she wasn’t ready to trust her instincts where a handsome stranger was concerned. She needed to be cautious.

Up ahead, she spotted a clearing in the trees that flanked the road. She stopped, got out of the car, and walked to them. The road ran high over a small hill, and down in the valley

below, she saw a village. She observed for a while, trying to absorb every detail.

She saw no cars, motorcycles, or bicycles. She saw only carriages, horse carts, and some people riding horses. No electrical posts. No lighted signs on the businesses. The people were all dressed in period costumes. The scene resembled a theme park designed to look like nineteenth century England.

But this was no theme park. Being from Florida, she had grown up going to theme parks. A park might recreate the look of the eighteen hundreds, but it would still employ modern inventions. They would have electrical lights and rides and tourists mingling with the costumed employees. This was real. The conclusion was inescapable. But impossible.

She turned around. Her unfocused gaze settled on Dale, who was just a few steps behind her. The implications of her situation hit her all at once, like a cannonball. She was completely stranded and alone. She had no family, no friends, no home, no money. She was nobody. She was in a strange world, and she didn't have the faintest idea how she got here, or how to go back.

“I am really lost now,” she whispered.

The edges of her vision started to darken, her heart beat too fast, and fear as she had never felt before suffocated her. The world seemed to be spinning too quickly, the ground falling beneath her feet. With the last shred of consciousness, she felt strong arms grasp her—Dale—catching her before she hit the ground as she fainted once again.

She came to her senses slowly, the strong smell of lavender and alcohol stinging her nose. Dale's worried face hovered above her. She was inside the car, laying across the back seats, her back supported in his arms as he cradled her in a half sitting position while he waved her hand sanitizer under her nose.

“Thank God you are awake,” he said. “How do you feel?”

“Fine.” She started to sit up, and he helped her to recline against the backrest. Then he half turned in the seat to look at

her.

“You don’t look fine. Do you faint often?”

She had to smile at that. “I had never fainted in my life before yesterday. But then I had never been transported back in time and left stranded in a strange place.”

His understanding gaze saw too much. The sincerity and kindness in the blue depths was too much to bear, and she had to look away before she broke down again.

“Do not worry Olivia. You may be in a strange place, but you certainly are not alone. I don’t know how you got here, or how to get you back to your time, but I will help you in any way I can.”

His presence and calm manner made her feel safe. He was like a wall protecting her from the tempest of fear raging just a few steps behind her. Wanting to consume her.

“Thank you.” She had an urgent overwhelming need to be held, but was ashamed to ask. They were near strangers, but oh God, how she needed a hug! She drew her legs up and hugged them, curling in on herself since she couldn’t bring herself to ask for the embrace she desperately needed.

He seemed to understand, though. Wordlessly, he put an arm around her shoulders, holding her to his side.

It was all the invitation she needed. With a sob, she turned and threw her arms around his torso, burying her face in his chest. Holding on tightly as if she were drowning, and he was the only thing keeping her afloat. Both of his arms came around her then, and he made soothing circles on her back. Holding her while she fell apart and cried her fear out.

Little by little, she regained her composure. Her situation was dire, but at least she wasn’t alone. Thank God for Dale, who seemed not only willing but able to help her. He appeared the most capable and solid man she had ever known, and he inspired so much trust. Which was strange because she scarcely knew him. But she sensed honor and strength at the very center of his character. This was a man of his word.

Reliable. Trustworthy and kind. So kind. He had been so patient with her.

“Should we go home now?” he asked quietly.

“Home.” The mere word caused a deep pang of longing that threatened to crush her chest. “If only I could. But I don’t know how to get back to my home.”

“Then my home will be your home.”

Such a simple statement. Such a big promise. Stunned, and more than a little awed at his generosity, she looked up at his eyes.

He regarded her tenderly, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her lips. It was a light kiss, a mere brush of lips, undemanding and brief. More comforting than passionate. Yet his lips were warm and soft and the contact spread warmth all through her body. Oh, he was good. And he pulled away too soon after that fleeting contact. She couldn’t bear that. She wanted more, leaned in... and found emptiness.



CHAPTER 13 - Driving the horseless carriage



DALE LIFTED OLIVIA from his lap where she had crawled while weeping, set her aside, and exited the car. Then held out his hand to her, all composed courtesy.

“Come. If you still desire it, we can go to Oxford tomorrow.”

The prosaic comment after that stunning kiss left her momentarily disoriented. Obviously, he had not been as affected as she had been. Recovering and attempting to match his casualness, she took his proffered hand and followed him outside.

“You will have to drive this thing back,” he said. “I do not know how it works. Although I would like to learn someday, if you don’t mind teaching me.”

“I don’t mind at all. In fact... want to try right now?” She added, a hint of mischief to her smile. “It’s easy. I bet driving a carriage with several horses attached to it is much more difficult.”

He appeared taken aback for a moment but recovered and, smiling, opened the passenger door for her. “If you trust me not to wreck it, I would love to try.”

He took the driver’s seat and put his hands on the wheel as he had seen her do. “What do we do now? How do I make it move?”

“First, adjust the seat and mirrors to your size. You look cramped in their current position. See there,” — she pointed to the side of the seat — “push that button to move the seat, and that other if you want to adjust the backrest.”

He did just that, tensing for a moment when the seat moved beneath him. He quickly got the hang of it and adjusted

the seat to where it was comfortable.

“Now adjust the mirrors so that you can see behind you,” she instructed. After he had done that, she pointed toward his feet. “You have two pedals by your feet. The one to the left is the brake, and the one on the right is the gas, the one that makes the car move. Step on the brake, and then grab this lever and move it to the ‘D’. After that, release the brake pedal and the car will move. If you want to give it more power, slowly step on the gas.

He let go of the break, and the car inched forward. Startled, he stepped back on the brake. He let go of the break again, and this time, when the car moved, he was prepared.

“Now use the wheel to direct the car. You will want to keep straight most of the time, unless you are on a curve. The car will tell you how much to turn.”

He grabbed the wheel in a white knuckled grip and guided the car forward, a frown of concentration appearing between his eyebrows despite the light of excitement in his eyes.

“I am doing it. I am driving the horseless carriage.” He said with an excited smile.

Guys! They loved cars no matter what century. She enjoyed watching his excitement and well-remembered her first time driving a car. It had been a heady feeling. Her father had been so patient while he’d taught her to drive. Tears sprang to her eyes unbidden, and she blinked rapidly to wipe them away. A knot had formed in her throat, choking out speech. Oh papa! Will I ever see you again?

Her parents would be devastated if she disappeared, and the thought of their pain was more than she could bear, so before she dissolved into tears again, she cut that line of thought.

She had not made a sound, and Dale had seemed so focused on driving, surely he hadn’t noticed her crisis. Good.

“What is the matter?” he asked quietly. Had noticed, after all. “Tell me.”

She saw no reason not to. “I was thinking about my family. How devastated they are going to be if I can’t return. And how much I miss them.”

He hit the brake, and the car jolted to a halt. Both their seat belts locked, and she looked at him, startled.

“Why did you stop so abruptly?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to do that. It is just that I had not thought... How remiss of me not to realize that you may have a family. Are you married?” His tone was neutral, but it hid a darker note, speaking of inner turmoil. Was he upset at the thought of her being married?

“No! I am...” She started to say she was divorced, when she remembered that divorce did not become socially acceptable until the twentieth century. If she said she was divorced, he might judge her immoral, maybe even an adulterer, since that was the only reason divorces were granted in the nineteenth century. She was at his mercy. So far he had treated her with respect and kindness, but that might change if he thought her a loose woman. She could not afford that. “I am not married. When I referred to my family, I meant my parents.”

Was that relief she saw in his eyes? He definitely seemed to relax. Until he frowned. But why should he care?

He reached out and covered her hand where it rested in the center console of the car, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I know you must worry about your family most dreadfully, but please don’t despair. We will do all in our power to find out how you got here and how you might get back.”

“Okay. I’ll try to stay positive. Now, do you want to keep driving?”

He did. And driving required all his focus, so the conversation waned. She would occasionally give pointers, but overall, he did a decent job. He had maneuvered the thing and had stayed on the road and not crashed into anything. It sure helped that this was not a busy road. If another carriage had happened by, they might have been in a bind, and not only

because the road wasn't wide enough. She could only imagine the shock on people's faces.

“What are we going to do with the car? If people see it—”

“I've been considering that. There's a small tool shed near the stables. That might be the most convenient place. Once in there, I can lock the door. It is unlikely to be discovered there, but still close enough to have it at hand.”

“Sounds good. But will it fit through the door? And how are we going to get it there without being seen?”

“It will fit, but once we get near the estate, there will be employees—grooms, servants, tenants. Too many people.”

They were nearing the end of the forest, so he stopped again. This time more carefully.

“I think we should hide the car here among these trees and wait until night time. Then we can bring it into the shed without being seen.”

“Yes, you're right. Let me just grab a few things from my suitcase, then. I'll wait until we have it in the shed to bring my whole luggage in.”

She went to the back of the car and grabbed her backpack. Opening her suitcase, she transferred a few garments and her toiletries bag to the backpack and locked the car.

“Do you think anyone will find it here?” She pointed to the car.

“I guess it is possible, but unlikely. As you see, these woods are very scarcely traveled.”

“Let's hope so. Okay, ready to go.”

“Allow me to carry your bag, please.”

With a smile and a thanks, she handed him the backpack, and they walked towards the manor. Towards this new, strange reality.

She was stuck in the past where she knew no one, had no money, no way of getting home, and had fewer rights than she was used to. But the man walking beside her radiated

confidence and calm. And crazy as it was, when he said he'd help her find a way back (forward?), she believed him. What other choice did she have?



CHAPTER 14 - Nocturnal expedition



LATER THAT NIGHT, AFTER dinner, as he dressed in black clothes in preparation for their little excursion to retrieve the car, Dale pondered his unusual guest.

She had been ravishing at dinner, if not precisely proper. She wore her hair loose, the soft waves falling freely around her face and shimmering halfway down her back. Only a few strands had been pinned back with a sparkly ornament. Her plush lips had been made an even deeper rose by the subtle application of cosmetics and... had she darkened her eyelashes? He couldn't help but stare, mesmerized by how big and luminous her eyes were.

Since she had recovered some of her luggage, she had more clothes to wear, and she had worn a beautiful dark blue satin dress that clung to her splendid figure and ended mid-calf, exposing well-shaped legs and slender ankles.

At least she was covered on top, the dress had long sleeves that buttoned at her slim wrists, and a bodice that crossed in the middle forming a deep V. On her feet, she wore cream leather shoes that had a pointy toe and high spindly heels. They couldn't be comfortable, and yet she walked with fluid grace, her hips subtly swaying in a tantalizing way.

He had choked and almost dropped the glass of cognac he was drinking when she entered the drawing room for pre-dinner drinks.

She'd blushed, and he'd kicked himself mentally for being an insensitive dolt. Of course, she didn't have a proper wardrobe for the times. She was from almost two hundred years in the future. This dress must be completely appropriate in her time, and men were accustomed to seeing women in such attire, but here and now it wreaked havoc with his peace of mind.

All he had thought about throughout dinner was ripping that flimsy gown off of her and doing things he had not allowed himself to think about for a long time. Even now, just remembering how she had looked, desire simmered in his veins. Desires he had thought dead sprang back to life with a power all the more potent for having been denied for so long. Things flitted through his imagination that would probably shock her if she could see the contents of his mind.

Oh, this would never do. He had to get firm control of himself and his unruly desires. She was alone in a strange world. Vulnerable. He was her only friend, her safe harbor. It would be unforgivable to do anything that might make her the least bit uncomfortable. Therefore, he must stay away from her. He must remember what had happened the last time he had succumbed to such passions. The disaster he had caused. The many lives he had ruined. God, would he never change?



LIVVY HAD CHANGED OUT of her dress and donned a pair of black skinny jeans and a black sweater, put on her chunky boots, pulled her loose hair back into a ponytail, and waited for Dale to pick her up.

Since she had gotten ready quickly, that left her some time to think. And her thoughts kept circling back to her too-handsome host.

Fear and confusion still shrouded her mind, but he made her feel calmer, as if everything would be fine. Why did she trust him? After all, he was still a stranger.

Perhaps it was his confidence, his air of utter command and reliability, coupled with his patience and kindness. Yet despite his impeccable manners, she sensed hidden shadows in him.

She snorted. She shouldn't be so fanciful. The guy was from another time. She was alien to his world. Of course, she was bound to find him mysterious. That didn't mean the guy had hidden shadows. No more than the average person, anyway.

A knock on the door signaled Dale's arrival, and she opened the door to join him on their midnight quest.

The light from the candelabra he carried illuminated his features and showed the merest flicker of something in his eyes. It betrayed his reaction to her outfit, although he said nothing or even move a muscle. In these times, her clothing would be scandalous and even provocative, but she could do nothing about it. This was all she had to wear, and in all honesty, she had a hard time thinking of herself as being provocative in a pair of jeans and a high-necked sweater.

They descended the staircase in silence and exited the house through the back door. Then she followed him through the gardens to the stables, where he started to saddle his horse.

The huge horse tried to nuzzle her, and she shrank back. "We are going to ride?"

"That was the general idea, yes."

"I can't ride."

"I guess with the invention of that machine we are about to retrieve, riding horses became unnecessary."

"Somewhat. At least in the cities, it is very rare to see horses. They are mostly used for parades and such."

"Nobody rides then? You have no horses?" His tone dripped with sadness as he drew his hand in a smooth line down the beast's flank.

"Some people still ride. Mainly in the country. Some as a sport. Unfortunately, I'm not among them. I've only been on the back of a horse once in my life. As part of a tour. With a guide and a very docile and well-trained horse. I didn't have to do much."

"I see," he said and seemed to struggle with a decision. Appearing to come to terms with it, he sighed and continued. "You will ride with me then. Come." He said as he lead his horse towards the mounting block.

"If I help you onto the saddle, can you sit astride and hold on to the pommel? I'll ride behind you and control the horse.

You don't need to do anything.”

Smiling self-deprecatingly, Livvy replied, “Yes, I think I can manage that much.”

Following his instructions, she soon mounted, holding onto the pommel for dear life, trying not to look at how far the ground was or how powerful the beast felt. But the next moment he mounted in one elegant move and his arms wound around her. He held the reins expertly and controlled the horse with ease. She relaxed, confident he would not let her fall.

The relaxation lasted only a moment as a different type of tension suffused her. She was pressed to his front. Against her back, she could feel the muscles of his chest as he worked to maneuver the horse. His strong legs bracketed hers, and his arms surrounded her. She was glad for the concealing darkness. At least he wouldn't be able to see how red her face had become with awareness of him. The press of their bodies was deeply erotic. Her heartbeat accelerated while heat pooled between her legs.

Oh my god, this was insane. She was not a teenager, but the physical reaction taking control of her body was unlike anything she'd ever felt before, more visceral, more real, more raw. In fact, she could not recall another time in her life when she had been so affected by a man. Luckily, the ride wasn't long, or she might have spontaneously combusted.

As soon as they arrived at their destination, Dale dismounted with alacrity and held his arms up to help her dismount. She flipped her leg over and put her hands on his shoulders, allowing him to grab her waist, but just as she was about to slide from the back of the horse, the beast moved. She lost her balance and fell forward in an ungainly heap.

Good thing Dale quickly adjusted and caught her, but in doing so she ended up gathered full length against his front, his powerful arms holding her tight. She could feel his bulge against her belly, branding her with its heat. So he had been affected as well! Nonplussed, and not ready to face this attraction, she scrambled to get her footing and peel herself from him.

“So, how are we going to do this?” She tried to sound nonchalant in an attempt to pretend the searing moment between them had not happened.

“You drive your machine and follow me. I will lead the way on my horse,” he replied, tacitly agreeing to the pretension.

“I imagine I should not turn on the lights.”

“Yes, keep all the lights off. There’s a bit of light from the moon. That should be enough to see the road. We will go slowly.”

“Sounds like a plan. Lead the way!”

The ride back to the tool shed was uneventful. She did not think they had been observed. After parking the car and retrieving the rest of her luggage, they entered the sleeping house through the same back door they had exited and climbed the staircase in silence. They did not touch or even get close again.

At the door to her bedroom, he deposited the suitcase on the floor. Evidently, this was as far as he would go.

“If you require anything, please don’t hesitate to ring for it. My servants are at your service. So am I, for that matter. If you need my help, you may call me anytime. My bedroom is through that door.” He pointed to the set of ornate double doors on the wall opposite.

“I will be fine. Thank you. That is... There is one thing,” she said hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“Could I have access to a bathroom? I know that in these times they are considered a luxury, but in my time they are a necessity. I don’t know how to manage without it.”

“But of course. I’m afraid we would have to share mine, though. There’s only one bathroom in the house at this moment. I am having another one constructed on the other wing, but it’s not ready yet. The bathroom is through that door on the left.” He bowed and left to enter his room.

And she was left alone. Her fears and anxieties rushed in to take up the empty spaces in her. Oh God, but the nights were going to be difficult. During the days, she could distract herself by exploring this new world and interacting with her fascinating host. In fact, he made everything feel fine. His presence kept the fear at bay.

She was more than a little ashamed of her need for him. It wasn't healthy. She despised being so needy and clingy, but she never thought to find herself in these straits. Feeling desolate, she dug her pajamas out of her luggage and started preparing for bed, grateful for the warmth of the fire and the comfort of the bedchamber. She could have done much worse. Just imagine if Dale had not found her and had taken her under his care. She shuddered to think about what could have happened to her.

Pulling the gloom around her with the covers, she crawled into the big, empty, unfamiliar bed and curled up. Her tears fell, and she didn't even try to contain them. Maybe if she cried enough, she could exorcize all her fears and melancholy and homesickness.



CHAPTER 15 - A matter of temptation



IN HIS BEDCHAMBER, Dale fought his own demons. Despite the few hours of sleep he'd managed to win the previous night and the exhaustion of the day's activities, sleep eluded him.

It was not a novel experience. He was familiar with sleepless nights and troubled dreams. They resulted from a less than clear conscience, but what was different this time was the cause of the insomnia. The shadows of the past did not haunt him this night, but the reality of the present.

The inescapable, vivid, vibrant reality of the woman sleeping just across the hall. She intrigued, scared, and excited him. He felt as if he was waking from a long sleep, and just as muscles felt uncomfortable when first exercised after being in disuse for a while, his emotional muscles felt distinctly unequal to the challenge she presented.

He had so far behaved like a beast and embarrassed himself in the process. She could not have failed to notice his rampant erection when he helped her dismount. Had she been alarmed by his involuntary reaction? After all, she had scrambled to get away from him. She had reasons to be wary.

She was alone, lost, and frightened. And here he was, displaying inappropriate passions. Did she worry he planned to take advantage of the situation? Good god, what if she thought that in order to secure his help and protection she was obligated to satisfy his lust? The idea repulsed him at a visceral level.

She was not a courtesan, nor was she in a position to fend for herself if she wanted to rebuff his advances. She needed him. That made her indebted to him, and vulnerable. The mere idea of her bargaining her favors was so revolting that he knew

he could never even attempt to seduce her. He must squash his inclinations and act contrary to his desires.

What to do about her? Or, more precisely, what to do about the way he felt about her? It was ridiculous, of course, to feel such intense emotions when he had just met her and could not even begin to understand her.

He was trying to understand the pull she had over him. Her beauty? Yes, she was beautiful. His loins tightened just thinking about her, but he had met lots of beautiful women in his life and never felt more than a passing attraction.

Was it her situation, because she came from a different time and place, which made her so alien and exotic? Or that she was alone in this world and in need of help and bound to him by circumstances? Or was it her valiant temperament, a mix of bravado and fragility, which proved his undoing?

Maybe it was all of that, and something more undefinable, but no less real. When he had briefly kissed her lips, that lightest of contacts had seared his soul. She had leaned in, and for a moment, the kiss was on the brink of careening out of control. Thank goodness he had mastered control, had become so adept at hiding his emotions. He didn't think she had suspected how much that kiss had affected him.

He now realized it had been a grave mistake, that kiss, but at the moment he had not been thinking about propriety. She had been distressed, and he had been able to feel her emotions. All her fear, her loneliness and despair, had found an echo inside him, and he had wanted to comfort her, to banish the cold desolation which was so familiar to him. To kiss her had been the most natural thing in the world. Almost necessary. But the emotions unleashed had been totally unexpected... and somewhat unwelcome.

Well, no. Not unwelcome, he couldn't even bring himself to wish he felt different. But these emotions were wrong. All wrong. The wrong person at the wrong time. Literally. Impossible. And yet, despite the conflict, or perhaps because of it, he felt more alive than he had felt in years.

But this was dangerous. He knew the treacherous nature of these emotions. He knew about their potential to cause devastation. What good could come from an attachment between them? She did not belong in his world, and whatever force had brought her here could take her away any day, leaving him in a worse situation than he had been before.

There was also the possibility that she didn't feel the same way about him. She had said she was not married, but perhaps someone held her affections. Impossible to think that such an attractive woman would not have men flocking to her.

But right now, she was under his protection; he was her only friend and ally. If he showed interest in her, would she accept him out of fear he would remove his help? And what if she then found his attentions unpalatable? It had been made very clear to him in an indelible form that his inclinations were repugnant to any decent lady. The thought of inflicting himself on an unwilling woman, or of being endured out of obligation and necessity, made the bile rise in his throat.

The only solution remained to leash his desires and to treat her with courtesy and respect. He was going to have to create some distance between them and limit the amount of time they spent together. He must avoid touching, embracing, or physical contact of any kind. Certainly no more riding together.

That brief excursion tonight had been exquisite torture. Having her sitting between his legs, his arms around her, her back pressed to his front... he grew hard again just thinking about it. He had to avoid these kinds of thoughts. As it was, it would be excruciating to be around her and not touch her. But he had learned self discipline in the hardest way. He would control himself if it killed him.



HIDDEN IN THE FOREST, two pairs of displeased eyes observed the house.

“Well, that’s a complication. Mission is compromised,” said the female.

The male snorted. “An understatement. It needs to be dealt with.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know that.”

“Should we take the car and disappear it?” He insisted.

“For what purpose? They know what is going on. And they have already concealed it.”

“It worries me. The woman... She doesn’t belong here. We do not know the consequences. We need to cover our tracks. Need to eliminate possible consequences.”

“Yes, Dariux. I know that too.” She kept her eyes on the house.

“Kalli, look at me. How? Should we just take her and be done with it?”

“No! It’s too soon.”

“When?”

“We’ll know when the time comes. Now let’s just observe and be ready to intervene if needed.”

“If you say so,” Dariux replied, still unconvinced. Kalli was too soft, but he was determined to do whatever it took to keep this mission on track.



CHAPTER 16 - Encounters in the bathroom



LIVVY WOKE EARLY THE next morning and watched as the sunrise bathed the tops of the trees in hues of pink and gold. The clear autumn sky held a hint of chill in it, and as Livvy took a deep breath, she cleansed her mind and restored her optimism.

She had always loved sunrises. She much preferred them to sunsets. There was something magical about the beginning of a new day. So much promise and potential. It was a gift, each new day. She had not contemplated a sunrise in a long time. Ironic that she was a night owl, but loved sunrises.

There was a faint knock at the door and a maid entered, bobbed a curtsy, and bustled off to tend to the fireplace.

In a few moments, a cheerful fire roared in the hearth, spreading warmth and well-being through the room.

“Would you like some drinking chocolate or tea, madam?”

“Chocolate would be nice, thank you... although, do you know at what time the Duke has breakfast?”

“At eight in the morning, madam.”

“Does he usually have breakfast in the dining room or in his bedchamber?”

“In the dining room.”

Livvy looked at the clock. Seven thirty in the morning.

“I think I will prefer to have breakfast in the dining room myself. Thank you.”

“Very well, madam. Do you need help to dress? I’m no lady’s maid, but I’d be happy to help.”

Livvy smiled a little. “I don’t need help. Thank you. I’m sorry, I don’t think I caught your name.”

“My name’s Molly, madam. At your service.”

“Thank you Molly, and please call me Olivia,” she added with a little laugh. “Being addressed as ‘madam’ makes me feel old.”

“I’m sorry ma... Miss Olivia. I will let the kitchen know you plan to go down for breakfast.” She bobbed a curtsy and left, closing the door silently behind her.

Livvy studied her clothes, folded and resting in the bowels of her suitcase. It lay on the bed, splayed open, an odd anachronism in the Victorian surroundings. She tapped her lip. What to wear? All her clothes were going to be inappropriate for this place. The sweater dress she had brought? No, too casual. In fact, anything was going to be too casual.

She knew how people dressed in these times. The clothing was very elaborate and elegant. With lace and ruffles and corsets and wide petticoats. She had seen the magnificent costumes in museums and movies. Maybe she should have eaten in her room after all.

Nonsense. She could not hide in the room forever. Besides, her lack of proper attire was not her fault. How could she have known she’d be catapulted into the nineteenth century when she’d packed her suitcase? She shook her head. That was still difficult to believe. There had to be a logical explanation. Maybe she was just having a very real dream?

Half an hour later, after rummaging through her meager belongings, her fears were confirmed—she had, in fact, failed to pack for the nineteenth century. Mentally shrugging, she let go of her worry and grabbed one of the dresses. It was a high neck, dark green cable knit dress with long voluminous sleeves fitted at the wrists. The skirt flared gently and reached mid calf. It was the most modest dress she had. She paired it with knee high brown leather boots and studied the outfit in the long cheval mirror. Not too bad..

Next, she needed to comb her hair and brush her teeth. Oh, the restroom... Dale had said they would have to share it. She went to the door and knocked. No answer. Good. She turned the handle slowly and peered inside. It was empty. She went in, locked the door behind her, and proceeded to use the toilet.

Thank goodness this house had one of these. She could not imagine how she would manage if she had to use a chamber pot or, worse, a latrine. She shuddered. It was one thing to marvel at the splendor of palaces and castles of bygone eras, but another very different thing to go about day-to-day life without modern conveniences.

She had washed her hands and was brushing her teeth when a door cleverly disguised in the paneling swung open and Dale walked in, rubbing his eyes. He looked sleepy, and so deliciously ruffled from bed that her knees grew weak with improper desire.

He was bare chested and for a moment she forgot to breathe as she admired the male perfection of his wide shoulders. Muscular arms flexed as he ran his hands over his face, and his well-defined pecs showed a smattering of golden hair. His abs seemed to have been lovingly carved by an expert sculptor and disappeared into the waistband of underwear shorts made of a thin fabric that did nothing to disguise the outline of his - gulp - penis.

A fit of coughing seized her as she swallowed toothpaste and a wave of heat rose to her face from the fire deep in her belly.

Becoming aware of her presence, he stopped dead in his tracks, his head whipping up, eyes wide with a horrified expression. He started to retreat. "My deepest apologies, Olivia. It didn't occur to me that you could be here."

"No need to run, Dale. I'm almost finished." She rinsed and wiped her mouth with a towel. "See, all done. I'll get out of your way. I'm sorry too. For intruding."

"Nonsense. You are not intruding. I gave you the use of the bathroom. I simply wasn't thinking this morning. Force of habit. I will be more careful in the future." He said as he

retrieved a robe from a cabinet and threw it on, covering his body. She sighed. What a pity.

“Yes, and I’ll make sure to lock both doors when I’m inside,” Livvy said with a nervous laugh. “It was a good thing you did not walk in five minutes before, or you would have caught me on the toilet... the loo.” She babbled.

At the mortified look on Dale’s face, Livvy realized the poor man was embarrassed by this situation. They did not discuss bathroom matters in this century. Or in hers. She was such a klutz.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, flustered. “I’ll leave now.”

“No need to apologize,” Dale said with a self-deprecating smile. “Would you like to join me for breakfast this morning?”

“Sure! I was hoping to join you.”

“Excellent. Allow me ten minutes and I will escort you to the dining room. The house is a veritable maze. You could get lost.” He grinned.

“Very well. Thank you.” She flashed a shy smile, befuddled by his dazzling smile, and left.



CHAPTER 17 - The Fate of Crestview Hall



TEN MINUTES LATER, Dale knocked at her door. Immaculately dressed in a suit of beige trousers, a dark blue coat and tall riding boots, he was the epitome of the English gentleman she had seen in movie depictions of Jane Austen novels. She still preferred him in deshabille.

He was too well mannered to stare at her outfit or look her up and down, but his discomfiture was apparent in the way his smile seemed frozen and his eyes darted all over the place. However, he bowed with exquisite courtesy and offered his arm to escort her downstairs.

It was quite a pleasant experience to be treated with such gentlemanliness. It made her feel cherished. Deciding that she had better broach the subject of her clothing, since he looked uncomfortable with it, she ventured.

“I apologize for my attire. I realize it’s inappropriate, but I’m afraid I have nothing suitable to wear in the nineteenth century.”

He turned his head and briefly met her eyes before flashing a self-deprecating smile. “It is I who must apologize if I made you feel inadequate, Olivia. I was considering how to bring up the subject without giving offense. I should have addressed the matter sooner. After all, when I found you, you were wearing ripped up breeches.”

“Not breeches, jeans,” Olivia corrected with a smile.

“Right. Jeans. The point is, your clothing is very distinctive. And forgive me for being blunt, but also somewhat scandalous.”

Her face flamed with embarrassment. “I see that. I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize, please.” He threw her an assessing glance before continuing. “We need to have a proper wardrobe made for you. Otherwise, there will be talk amongst the servants. In fact, there probably already is. After breakfast, I will instruct Mrs. Simmonds to start working on putting together a wardrobe for you.”

If there was something more humiliating than being told your outfit was scandalous, it was having to depend on that same person to provide proper attire. But she had no other choice but to accept his help in this, too.

The immensity of her helplessness was never more evident. She had no money. The pound bills in her wallet were worth nothing more than the paper they had been printed on, her credit cards even less.

“Thank you,” she said. “I appreciate all your help. I don’t know how I could ever repay you for your kindness and all the trouble—”

“Please don’t. Don’t say that. Don’t even feel you owe me anything.”

He turned to face her, his face earnest. “You never need to repay me. My help is unconditional.” He caught her eyes to make sure she received the message. “Unconditional.”

The intensity behind his words took her aback. It seemed she had touched a nerve. Oh, but it was so difficult to know what the proper thing to say or do would be under these circumstances!

“I understand,” she said. “Please don’t be offended. You have been nothing but kind and generous to me. It is my fault if I don’t know how to accept the help graciously.”

She dropped her gaze. “I’m just not used to being so helpless. In my time, I earn my own money. But here I am nobody. I have nothing. I don’t even know how things are done. You are my only friend. My lifeline. I don’t want to become a burden.”

“You will never be a burden. I cannot imagine how you must feel, but I would probably feel the same, or worse, if I

were in your situation. But please believe me when I say you are very welcome here. You have brought something to my life I didn't even know I was missing. I feel more alive than I have felt in years. That is something you have given me and is priceless. So you don't owe me anything, for I am benefiting from our friendship too."

"If that is the case, then I'm glad, Dale."

He flashed one of his beautiful smiles and extended his arm again. "Shall we have breakfast, then? I don't know about you, but I am famished."

"I'm starving." She replied with a smile. Her previous discomfort vanishing.

Breakfast was served, and just like the day before, Dale dismissed the servants so they could eat in privacy.

Dale tapped his finger on the polished surface of the table as he eyed her over the rim of his teacup. When he'd taken a sip and swallowed, he said, "Would you be so kind as to tell me about yourself? What is your life like? How does the future look?"

"Hm... where to start? Well, I am an architect. I recently set up my design firm and was working on my first big commission. In fact, that's what brought me to England. My client wants to build a mansion in the style of an English country manor, and furnish it with authentic pieces. She found out about an estate sale and sent me here to act as her agent and buy pieces for her mansion."

"I see. And where is this estate? Is it possible that it has already been built? I know all the important estates in this part of the country."

"The name is Crestview Hall."

Dale's whole body stilled, and his gaze snapped to hers. "This is Crestview Hall."



CHAPTER 18 - What is lost in the future



“I KNOW. WHAT A COINCIDENCE, isn’t it? Or maybe not.” She added gently, noticing the news seemed to distress him. “In a way, it makes sense. I was driving towards the place when I got transported back in time.”

He remained pensive, contemplating her words. “I guess that means in the future this place and all its contents will be sold. Maybe my line will have died out.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of it that way.” Livvy looked at Dale and her heart clenched at the sorrow in his eyes. The news must be more than a little unsettling for him. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It shouldn’t distress me at all. Obviously, that happens well after my lifetime. What year did you say you come from?”

“2022.”

“That’s a hundred and fifty years in the future. It really has nothing to do with me... and yet, my ancestors have lived in this land for over seven hundred years. It is sad to know it will end.”

“I really don’t know much about the story of what happened in this place or why it’s for sale. I think—wait! I have a brochure about the sale! Maybe there’ll be more information there.”

“I guess it doesn’t really matter. But I find myself curious as to what will happen to my home in the future.”

“Of course. It is only normal.” She wanted to cheer him up. “Would you like to see pictures of my life in the twenty-first century?”

“Do you carry pictures with you when you travel?”

“Yes! I actually have them right here on my phone.”

“The little device that looks like a dark mirror and lights up from the inside?”

“Yes!” She stood and rounded the table to sit nearer to him.

He also stood up.

She looked at him in surprise. Was he leaving? Oh. No. He had stood up because she had. Really, his manners were impeccable. It was rather charming.

Livvy sat down in the chair to his right and started browsing through her pictures. Now that she thought about it, she did have a lot of nonsense in her camera roll. She would have to skip through a lot of these. Finally, she found some pictures worth sharing.

“Here. This is my town. This was last month, when I went shopping with my mom. Here, we were taking a break while having coffee.”

He looked at the picture, his fascinated gaze roaming all over the image, as if he wanted to absorb as much as he could. She scrolled through several pictures while he asked questions about places and things. When they came to a selfie of her and her mom, his gaze honed in on them.

“You greatly resemble your mother,” he said, giving her a sideways glance.

“Yes, I do.” A lump formed in her throat, and she could barely speak. How long until she saw her parents again? Would she ever see them at all? She had to believe she would because the thought of being cast away from her life forever was so despairing she couldn’t breathe.

With extraordinary effort, she continued sliding through the pictures and describing her life and world. There were more pictures of her family, her dad barbecuing in the backyard of their home, her mom cooking. Of her and her coworkers on the day of the inauguration of her new offices.

He shook his head. "It's fascinating, truly. Who else can boast such a rare glimpse into another century, another world? The manner of dressing is so odd. And there are so many cars. The roads are impossibly smooth and the buildings impossibly tall." His voice increased in speed with each new word, each new image he processed.

She grinned, knowing precisely how he felt.

He pointed at the screen. "What is that? Is it in the air? How is it held aloft?"

She laughed. "It's an airplane." She described, as best she could, what it was and how it worked. "It shoots up in the sky like a cannonball and you can get from America to England in a matter of hours."

"Hours? Impossible."

"That's how I came here. I assure you, in the future, it's very possible."

"Amazing."

The next picture was of her and her niece at Disney World. His whole body stilled, and he looked at her intently.

"Your daughter?" He asked, his tone neutral.

"No. She's my niece. Her name is Lana." She touched the screen and zoomed in on Lana's face. "She does look a lot like me, doesn't she?"

"So much so that if you were not in the picture with her, I would have assumed it was you at that age."

"Yes, the women of my family breed true. We all look like my mother. My sister and I used to be like two peas in a pod. People often thought we were twins."

"Used to?"

"She passed away four years ago in a car accident."

"I am very sorry to hear that."

"A drunk driver hit her car. She and her husband were killed instantly. Lana was just a baby. I was babysitting her so

that my sister could go out and have a date night with her husband. I encouraged her to do so. Told her to go out and have some fun. I sometimes wonder if I hadn't encouraged her, if she would have been at home with her baby that night, and would now be alive and raising her daughter."

"You can not blame yourself for that."

"I know. But I can't help it. I still miss her so much."

She had to get out, or she was going to break down in hysteric sobs in front of Dale. Again. What the hell was wrong with her lately? She had become such a watering pot! She shot to her feet, trying to breathe deeply, to contain her tears until she was safely out of his presence. "Excuse me, I... need to be alone."

"Of course." He stood, too.

She put up a hand, palm out in a staying gesture. She couldn't bear for him to follow her. Scrambling for the door at a near jog, she exited the dining room just as her face crumbled and tears overflowed.

But where to go for some privacy in this grand house full of servants? Blindly, she threw open a door on the opposite side of the hallway, finding a snug little office that was blessedly empty. She closed the door and reclined against it. Then, slowly, she slid to the floor, hugging her legs as she rested her head on her knees.

She wept. For the sister she would never see again. For her parents and the niece she had left in the future. For the life she might never be a part of again. She was trying to cling to hope that somehow she would be able to return, but she couldn't see how it would be possible. She had to believe that whatever force had thrown her into the past would bring her to the present again, but she had never been very good at trusting and believing in anything over which she had no control.

After her sobs died out, she sat for a while staring into nothing. Little by little, she regained a measure of calm. She had cried more in the past two days than in the whole previous year. Disgusting. She normally wasn't such a wimp, although

she deserved some slack. It wasn't every day one was thrown into such a bizarre adventure.

But she had to pull herself together. Come up with a plan. Even if there wasn't much she could do about her circumstances, she could take it one day at a time. Concentrate on the day to day, the minute to minute business of adapting to life in this time.

Slowly she got up, cramped muscles protesting, and opened the door of her refuge to go look for Dale. She had some explaining to do. He was his only friend and ally. She was grateful for that.



CHAPTER 19 - Do the clothes make the lady?



THE FOLLOWING DAY, a modiste and a lady's maid descended on the house with the task of creating a wardrobe for Olivia. The housekeeper had produced some gowns from somewhere and now the modiste and the maid were talking about the alterations needed not only to make the gowns more fashionable but also to ensure they fit her.

Apparently, she was more 'voluptuous' than the gown's previous owner. As someone who didn't like her voluptuousness and would have preferred to be slimmer, that comment rankled. But, more annoying than that, they kept talking about what styles and colors would suit her without even consulting her. She was not a doll to be dressed. She liked fashion!

Granted, she had no idea what was fashionable in 1872, but she had her own taste, and she was the one who would have to wear the dresses, so they should ask her about her preferences. After the modiste had suggested yet another ruffle and bow, she spoke up.

"I don't think a ruffle and bow in the center of my butt would be very flattering, and I don't care for that color."

"But madam, it's the height of fashion! All fashionable ladies are wearing it."

"I understand, madam, and I wouldn't dare to question your extraordinary fashion sense," Olivia said, trying to smooth the modiste's ruffled feathers, "but I'm not comfortable wearing that much adornment. I think the ruffles in the sleeves and around the edge of the skirt are more than enough. We wouldn't want to clutter the elegant line of the dress."

After that diplomatic speech, the modiste preened and became a lot more receptive to Livvy's input.

She spent the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon likewise, deciding the style of dresses, taking her measurements, being fitted as well as selecting petticoats, corsets, chemises, and even pantalets. Personally, Olivia preferred her own undergarments, but apparently the entire ensemble was necessary to make the dress fit correctly. She would see about that when the time came.

By the end of the day, she had learned a ton about how people dressed and lived in these times. And she was exhausted. Now late in the afternoon, she wanted nothing more than to put on cozy loungewear and drink some wine by the fire... in Dale's company. She had barely seen him all day, and she missed him.

At lunchtime, he had popped in to see how things were going, but upon seeing the explosion of ribbons, lace, bows and petticoats, he had turned around and left. But not before making some on-point suggestions about what he thought would suit her. The man had a good eye for aesthetics, even if the frilly and feminine ambiance in the room was too much for him to bear.

Now, the modiste was packing up with the help of the maid, leaving Olivia wearing one of the pre-made gowns that had required only a few alterations. It was one of the simpler gowns, with minimal ruffling, in a soft peach color that was both pretty and flattering. The neckline was quite open, and the sleeves perched right on the edge of her shoulders. She felt that with a strong shrug she could unmoor the sleeves, but for now they seemed to hold on.

The dress was not as uncomfortable as she had thought it would be. At her insistence, and much to the dismay of the modiste who wanted to create a smaller waistline, the corset was not tightly laced. The skirts were heavy and somewhat cumbersome with the petticoats, but at least they were roomy. She didn't feel the constriction she sometimes felt with jeans and other modern pants. And she didn't have to worry about how her butt looked in the outfit. She smiled. These Victorian

ladies were sneaky. Nobody could tell the shape of her body under this dress because the dress created the body. It was almost like armor.

At long last, the modiste left Livvy in blessed solitude. She reclined back on the chaise, brought her feet up, and contemplated going to her room to take a nap when Dale entered.

Her sleepiness evaporated in a wave of heat. Every moment with him felt invigorating, electrifying.

“How did the meeting with the modiste go?” he asked.

“Very well, I think. You can see the results for yourself.” Livvy stood up and pirouetted to show off the dress. She had to admit, she felt as pretty as a princess.

Dale’s eyes warmed up. “Beautiful.”

“Thank you. It is different from what I’m used to wearing, but I think the dress is beautiful, too.”

“I didn’t mean the dress.” His voice was low, almost seductive.

“Oh.” it took only a moment for Olivia to understand he referred to her, the expression in his eyes one of unmistakable male appreciation. She blushed. “Thank you.”

As if realizing they inched nearer to uncomfortable territory, Avondale walked over to a cabinet, opened it, and lifted a decanter with amber liquid.

“Would you care for some cognac, sherry...?”

“I’ll have whatever you are having.”

“I am planning to have whisky,” he said with a daring quasi smile while lifting an eyebrow.

“Whisky sounds great. It is a favorite of my father’s, and he made me develop a taste for it.”

“Your father seems like a man of good taste. Whisky it is then.” He poured two glasses and handed one to Olivia. Their fingers touched when she took the glass, and a zing of awareness shot up her arm.

He must have felt it too, for his hand withdrew as if burned.

She looked into the glass, thinking, feeling his gaze on her. Unnerved by his stare, she dove right into the conversation.

“The modiste told me she would deliver two more gowns tomorrow. And another the day after. They only needed minor alterations.” As always, when she was nervous, she chattered. “Making a wardrobe from scratch would have taken much longer; these gowns are very elaborate. I don’t know how she managed, but it was fortunate your housekeeper was able to procure these gowns on such short notice.”

He looked away and seemed to consider for a moment before confessing. “They belonged to my wife.”

“Oh. I hadn’t realized...” What... that he was married? What should she say? She had been lusting after a married man! Why had it never occurred to her he could be married? And why was this revelation so incredibly unsettling?

His face hardened as he took another sip of whisky. “Realized what? The source of the gowns? No way you could have.”

“I mean... no. I suppose not. What I meant to say is that I hadn’t realized you were married.” She looked around as if to find evidence of his wife, almost expecting her to come through the door and reclaim her gowns... and her husband.

“That is because I am not, Olivia. My wife passed away seven years ago. I am a widower.”

The relief she felt at knowing he was not married was only surpassed by her shame. How could she take joy from his pain? His wife had died, for goodness’s sake.

She sipped her whisky, letting it burn down her throat. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. It was a long time ago.” Turning, he downed the rest of his whisky. “Excuse me, but I just remembered I have something to attend to. Will you join me for dinner tonight?”

“Of course.”

He left. It was obvious the talk about his wife had upset him. She wished she could go to him, hug him, somehow drive away the sadness she sensed in him. This powerful urge to comfort him was a little shocking. They were almost strangers.

He must have loved his wife very much to still feel that way after seven years. She looked down at the dress she wore. It had once belonged to his wife. Had seeing her in the dress reminded him of her? Did she look like her? The dress had needed only minor alterations, so she must have been of a similar build.

She wanted to know. Needed to know more about the woman. How did she look? What had she been like? What were her hobbies and passions? How had she inspired such undying devotion in her husband?

Because God help her, she wanted that kind of devotion for herself.



CHAPTER 20 - Afternoon delights



“EXCUSE ME. ARE YOU looking for something?” Olivia opened the door to her bedchamber, wanting to rest for a little while before dinner, only to find a maid rummaging through her wardrobe.

“Oh no, madam. I’m just organizing your clothes and putting away the new garments.”

“I see.” Olivia realized with surprise that the girl had not only been assigned to help with the modiste, but to continue serving her every day. And now that she thought of it, she needed help to get in and out of these clothes and to create the elaborate hairstyles that were fashionable these days.

She was not used to having servants, much less a personal one, to help her dress. The one and only person who had ever dressed her was her mother when she was a child. And her sister on her wedding day. Melancholy weighed her down at the memory. Her sister had been her maid of honor and had helped her put on her wedding dress, which, now that she thought about it, was very similar in style to the dresses of this era.

It was a strange concept to have a person assigned to dress you and undress you every day. The time spent getting ready each morning would increase as well. Groaning, she sat down on the bed. She needed to get rid of the girl, to get some privacy and hopefully some rest.

“Molly, is it?”

“Yes, madam.”

“Could you help me unbutton my dress now?” Olivia said, standing up. “I think I’m going to take a nap.”

“Certainly, madam,” said the girl, coming up behind her and unbuttoning the row of tiny buttons on the back.

When the dress was undone, Molly helped her remove it over her head, followed by the petticoats. She could have done it herself, but the dress and petticoats were so voluminous that it was easier if someone helped.

Luckily, when she reached back, she was able to pull the string and unlace the corset by herself, so she stepped away when the maid reached for the laces. It was one thing to get help to unbutton a dress, but it felt weird to have another woman completely undress her.

“Would you like me to brush your hair, Miss Olivia?”

“No, thank you, Molly. I’ll do that myself.” Noticing the girl’s disappointment, she offered, “You can help me style it later for dinner.” At that, Molly’s face brightened. The girl wanted only to please her and was probably worried she wasn’t doing a good job.

She would have to explain to Molly it was not her fault. Livvy was not used to having people hover over her, helping her with tasks any functioning adult could manage on their own. She sighed. Explanations could wait until later. Now she was tired and wanted to be left alone.

The maid left after hanging the dress, and Livvy locked the door behind her. She still wasn’t used to people wandering into her room unannounced. That was another point she had to address with the servants. After removing the corset and wire frame and letting down her hair, she laid in bed in her shift. Ahh, it felt good to be free of all the clothes. Her body felt free and... warm.

Surprised, she realized what she was feeling was arousal. It had been a long time since she had felt the emotion. But after only a couple of days in Dale’s company, her senses were awakening. When was the last time she had pleased herself? She couldn’t remember. Months. Even longer since she had felt the touch of a man. A mental image of Dale’s hands as his fingers brushed hers when handing her the glass brought color to her cheeks. He had such beautiful hands...

She was already lifting the shift over her head and removing her panties before she had consciously thought

about it. Now she ran her hands over her torso. Her breasts felt so sensitive. A brief caress to her nipples made heat pool in her privates. She skimmed her fingers down to her core, dipping into the wetness inside, and a whimper of pleasure escaped before she could smother it. She was so eager, her body so starved for pleasure, that it would take very little to send her over the edge.

Spreading her thighs wide, she danced her fingers over the tiny bud that was the center of her desire while her other hand caressed her nipples. The tide of pleasure kept rising, rising until it burst and waves of pleasure spread heat through her body from the epicenter of her clit, liquefying her limbs and leaving her boneless and satisfied, as she hadn't been in so long. In a warm haze of pleasure, she dozed off.

A knock on the door woke her up some time later. She groaned and opened one eye. As a teenager, she had loved afternoon naps, but it had been years since she had indulged in one. She stretched and rolled out from under the covers, her naked body shivering in the cool air. There was another timid knock. It must be Molly, coming to help her dress. Judging by the light outside, she had slept about an hour or so, and had another hour to get ready for dinner. Grabbing her discarded shift, she threw it on and opened the door. There was no one there, but Dale strode down the hall towards her.

“Oh, hi.” Flustered, Olivia half hid behind the door, reliving the memory of her naughty delights inspired by Dale.

He stopped when he saw her, his eyes taking in what was visible of her body for a moment before he lifted his gaze to her face.

“Olivia.” He nodded, looking nonplussed.

“Did you knock on my door?”

“No, I was just coming up to my room right now.” He wouldn't look at her now.

“I heard a knock. That's why I came to the door. Did you see somebody?”

Another knock echoed down the hall. It seemed to come from a door hidden in the panels, a few feet down the wall.

“Oh, never mind, I just realized the knock was on another door.”

“That would be the servant’s door. It is hidden in the panels. Probably your maid, coming to help you dress for dinner.”

“Yes, that must be it. I just hadn’t realized she would come through a different door.” Good god this bedroom had more doors than a public restroom. How was one to get some privacy here?

“The servants would not come through the main door. There are doors and passageways for them to use so they can complete their jobs as unobtrusively as possible.”

“I see. Thanks for the info. Well, gotta get ready. See you soon.” Flashing him a smile, she closed the door behind her and leaned against it. She had the fanciful notion that he could see in her body hints of what she had been up to.

And had responded to it.



CHAPTER 21 - The Drawbacks of Celibacy



DALE STOOD AROUSED and confused in the corridor. He shook his head. What was he going to do with this woman? She had an intoxicating mixture of worldliness and innocence, and yet thought nothing of talking to him at her bedroom door while wearing only a shift. With any other woman, he would have taken it as a wanton advance, a brazen invitation to seduction. But he had seen her ineffective attempt at covering herself with the door. Obviously, she thought that enough to satisfy modesty.

If she only knew how he felt. She was teasing a tiger and didn't even know it. He had wanted to pounce. Snatch her in his arms, take her back to the rumpled bed he could see in the background from which she had obviously just risen and...

He ruthlessly cut off that line of thought. That way lay madness. He had to get a hold of himself. Perhaps literally. Maybe the self imposed celibacy he had endured these past seven years was no longer a good idea. It was easier to be celibate when temptation did not live under his own roof, did not ambush him in his own corridors.

He had to find a solution. He pondered one while he entered his bedroom and disrobed. Perhaps if he sought release, if he slaked his lust somewhere else, he wouldn't be so volatile. He grabbed his stiff member and stroked. The pleasure was blinding. Briefly, he considered visiting one of the houses that provided that kind of entertainment. He knew a few. Had availed himself of their services before his marriage.

The women were always beautiful, welcoming and skilled. It would be so easy, so pleasurable. He could let go and... The image almost made him come right then and there, because the woman he saw in his fantasy was Livvy, not some faceless courtesan. And he knew then it wouldn't be enough. His desire

was very specific. For whatever reason, he wanted the woman in the next room, and only she would do. The others wouldn't be more than a temporary solution, offering no more relief than what he could do himself with his hand.

Completely naked, he walked to the bathroom door and pushed. Locked. Then he heard her inside. She hummed some melody while the splashing sounds of water indicated she took a bath. Thank goodness she had remembered to lock the door this time. If he had walked in on her in his present state... he shuddered. Just imagining her naked and wet, all slippery from the soap, drove him wild.

Leaning his back against the closed door, listening to her in the bathtub, he grabbed himself. Just a few strokes were enough to push him over the edge, for he was almost at the boiling point. Muscles tensing, he let out a deep groan with his swift and powerful release. He felt a little less crazed but no less desirous. Would he need to keep masturbating to avoid importuning her? If that is what it took... He smiled without humor. Ridiculous. The man who hadn't enjoyed physical pleasure in seven years would likely not last seven minutes before needing another release.

That evening, the conversation at the dinner table proved easy and uncomplicated. Avondale had tried to be formal and impersonal to create distance, but that didn't hold against the strength of Olivia's warmth and charm. She told stories about her family and friends, her work, her hobbies, painting a picture of a rich and fulfilling life filled with love.

What a contrast with his own life. There had been a time, a long time ago, during his childhood when he had thought he lived a charmed life. His parents had fought like devils among themselves, but they had each been affectionate towards him in their own way. But even that little affection had vanished.

Sometime in his youth, he had become yet another point of contention between the duke and the duchess, and it soon became apparent he could not please them both. In trying to do so, he had pleased no one. Including himself.

Then his father had died, and he had tried to repair his relationship with his mother, but with only limited success. And even what little had been salvaged had been shattered after the disastrous end of his marriage. When Eloise died, his mother had washed her hands of him and had never spoken to him again.

Sometimes he wondered what made him so unlovable that even his own mother had not been able to love him enough to accept him as he was, faults and all. Weren't mothers supposed to love their children unconditionally? Ah well. That was in the past. He had long ago accepted that to seek love was a recipe for disappointment, so he had stopped.

He concentrated on the charming woman next to him, paying attention to her words so that he could keep up his end of the conversation. She brought such a bright spark of joy into his dull life. He could become addicted to her. It would be very easy, indeed.

He bid her good night after dinner and retired to his private study. There he removed his shoes, jacket, and cravat, poured himself some brandy and sat by the fire. The fact was that he wasn't doing a very good job of controlling his desire for Olivia. Just thinking about her now had his loins tightening. He adjusted himself, trying to relieve the pressure.

Starting tomorrow, he would avoid spending too much time with her. She was too much of a temptation, and he had been avoiding temptation for seven years.

Nothing good could come of the way he felt about her. He would keep busy during the days. He had plenty of things to keep him occupied between running his estates and other business interests, his charities, and his parliamentary work.

He considered going to London for a few days, but it would be rude to leave her all alone in the country while he went away. No, rude was not quite the right word. Insensitive was more like it. He had to remember that for all her cheerfulness; she was alone and scared.

He was the only friend she had in this world, and in order to be a good friend, he had to find a balance between being

present for her and keeping his distance.

Friend. Hell and damnation.



CHAPTER 22 - The vanishing Duke and Riding Lessons



DALE WAS AVOIDING HER. There was no other way to rationalize it. Though she'd tried her hardest to do so as she lay in bed trying to sleep. In the past five days, she had rarely seen him. He was always present during dinners, but even that had become a very formal affair, with servants present and very stilted and meaningless conversation. Oh, he was always polite, but the easy friendliness of the first days had evaporated. She could sense it, and it hurt.

She wanted—needed—more. But what could she do? She really had no cause to complain. He was housing her, giving her all his consideration and protection. The rest of her wardrobe had continued to arrive. The servants catered to all her needs. She had full use of the house and gardens, and he checked in with her every day to make sure she was well and had everything she needed.

He had even hired a detective to investigate her case. It had been a delicate matter because, of course, they couldn't tell the guy the whole truth, at least not yet. Dale, displaying his usual resourcefulness, had sent him to investigate the nearby villages for anything or anyone out of the ordinary and had managed to give enough instructions to convey to the detective what they were looking for without revealing what they couldn't.

He was so capable and masterful. He took care of things and people and effectively managed everything and everyone around him. He was doing more for her than anyone had ever done in her adult life, even though she was a stranger to him. She should be a good guest and be as unobtrusive as possible. She would not act clingy or needy. She absolutely refused to be that person!

She was trying to do just that. She had taken to wandering the house, taking pictures and trying to learn all the ins and outs. She talked to the housekeeper and offered assistance, to which the housekeeper had replied, horrified, that she would never dream of putting a guest to work.

When she had tried to do small things for herself, like making the bed or picking up her own messes, the housekeeper had inquired if the maids were not doing the job to her satisfaction and what could they do to improve. She even offered to talk to the maids in question. She had to assure Mrs Simmonds that everyone was doing a phenomenal job, and if she did things for herself, it was out of habit and wanting to be useful, not because anything was deficient.

That put Ms Simmonds at ease, but unfortunately left Livvy with nothing to do and too much time on her hands. She was not used to being idle. She had worked nonstop since she was eighteen. What could she do to pass the time?

She jumped out of bed and sat down at the cute little writing desk in her room. It was stocked with pens, pencils, papers and everything one could need. She started to write a list of things she could do, starting tomorrow:

Exercise. (She had downloaded and saved several of her favorite workout videos on her phone, because she didn't know what the Wi-Fi situation was going to be.) Ha!

Explore the area where Dale had found her. (Maybe she could find a time portal or some such thing that would explain how she had ended up here and would take her back.)

Read. (She had seen the library in her wanderings and there had to be thousands of books there. She loved to read, surely she could find something interesting)

Ride! (She could learn to ride a horse. That had the advantage of being both fun and practical, and this house had plenty of horses and grooms who could teach her.)

Travel and sightsee (Not too far, just to the nearby villages and towns. Oxford wasn't far away, maybe even London?)

She would do exactly what she had planned to do in England. Explore and sightsee, she would just do it in a different century. And this could be even more fun. Now that the shock had passed, she realized she had a rare opportunity to glimpse first hand what other people only learn about in history books.

Yep, the list was a good start. It made her feel good to have a plan. With that settled, she returned to bed and finally fell asleep.

The next morning, she got up bright and early and set out to do as she had planned. She would start with a riding lesson.

At her suggestion, the modiste had created a 'riding gown' with wide legged pants instead of skirts. The fabric was a beautiful burgundy color with gold trim and embroidery at the waist. They fit perfectly and were quite comfortable. No wedgies or bunching in awkward places, either. There was something to be said for custom-made clothes, after all.

She donned a shirt, threw on the matching jacket on top, and pulled on her own pair of cognac brown leather riding boots. Finally, she was completely and (mostly) properly dressed, wearing her own modern underwear and all without having to wear a corset or needing the help of a maid. It made her feel more like herself.

Now for her hair. She didn't know how to do the elaborate hairstyles, so she combed her hair back and tied it in a low bun. The final touch on the ensemble was a little hat perched at an angle. Olivia examined herself in the mirror and approved. She looked very well indeed.

Feeling energized, she came down to breakfast. Dale had not joined her in the past few days, and today was no exception. No matter. She wouldn't dwell on that anymore. She had a plan.

Next stop, the stables. Where she would inquire about having riding lessons. Just as she expected, the head groom arranged for a steady mare and assigned one of the best grooms, a solid and capable looking guy, to teach her.

The first problem came when they presented her with a sidesaddle.

“I can’t ride sideways.”

“We know, miss. That’s why we are gonna teach you.”

“No, you don’t understand. I have no interest in learning to ride sideways. I want to learn to ride astride.”

“But, miss, that’s just not done.”

“Well, I have to do it like that. I have only been on the back of a horse once in my life, and it seemed difficult enough astride. I am not about to balance sideways on top of that huge beast. Besides, I’m prepared.” She kicked her legs to show the trousers.

The groom looked nonplussed.

“Saddle my horse Jameson. I’ll help Miss Mirabal.” The deep, commanding voice came from behind her.

Goosebumps rose all over her arms and around the back of her neck at the familiar voice. She turned slowly as the groom scampered to do as he was bid.

“Dale, what a nice surprise.” She said with a wide smile. It was ridiculous, really, how much his presence infused her with happiness.

“Likewise, Olivia. I gather you are planning on learning to ride?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I hope that is all right? The grooms said they could teach me.”

He inclined his head, all gracious courtesy. “Of course. Would you like me to give you your first lesson?”

Was he really offering to spend time with her? “I’d love that! I mean... if you don’t have more important things to do.”

“Not at all. Now, could I persuade you to at least try the sidesaddle? I promise it’s not as difficult as it looks.”

“And how would you know? Have you ever ridden sidesaddle?”

His lips twitched. “Touche. No, I haven’t. But all ladies ride like that. Just try it. I promise I won’t let you fall.”

“All right. So, how does it work?”

He bent down and laced his gloved hands. “Put your right foot in my hands, grab the pommel, and spring up. I’ll guide you to your seat.”

Her leg brushed his shoulders as she did as he bid, and his nearness calmed and galvanized her at the same time. This position brought his head close to her breasts, who immediately perked up at his nearness. Her breath caught, and then she was flying through the air. “Whoa!” she yelped as she landed in the saddle, holding on for dear life.

“That’s it. You’re doing great. Now just hook your leg over the pommel.” He said calmly. “I’ll bring your left foot to the stirrup.” It was a measure of how much she trusted his capabilities that she even attempted this.

“How do you feel?” he asked, smiling up at her.

“Unsteady.” She replied. And from more than being on the side saddle. That smile was enough to make her head spin. But when he laughed at her reply, her heart did a double beat.

“You’ll do fine.”

At that moment, the grooms came back with his horse and he mounted in one graceful move. “C’mon. We’ll go slow. Just follow me.”

And she did. At that moment, she would follow him anywhere. Admiring the way his pants hugged his well muscled backside and strained over powerful legs. She started enjoying herself, despite the side saddle and her unease at her precarious position.



CHAPTER 23 - Just take my money already



THE NEXT DAY DAWNED sunny. A perfect day to explore the gardens. Did she hope for a repeat appearance from Dale? She shrugged. She had only herself to blame for being a hopeless optimist. After their ride yesterday, he had disappeared again for the rest of the day, even excusing himself from dinner. It seemed nothing had changed, after all.

The gardens were marvelous. Meticulously kept parterres surrounding a central fountain, pathways that led to secluded benches, and niches inhabited by sculptures. Even a gazebo large enough to accommodate a table and twelve chairs. She still marveled at a lifestyle that included things like these gorgeous gardens.

When she asked, one of the gardeners informed her that the gardens were forty acres, not including the park and the forest beyond, which also belonged to the estate. In total, the estate was about ten thousand acres. Enough land to build an entire city!

The estate had many tenants and other businesses like the dairy, a kiln, and a wool mill. And Dale was the master of this small kingdom. He managed it all with his usual efficiency, for the prosperity of the estate was obvious. No wonder he didn't have time for her.

She was probably as important to him as a stray puppy he picked up on the street. Good enough to keep around the house, feed, and even play with when he had nothing better to do, but easily forgotten afterwards. And meanwhile, like a stray puppy, her whole day revolved around catching a glimpse of him. Gaining his attention. The thought was depressing.

Well, no more of that.

The following day, she planned a trip to the nearest village. She had to get out of the house, perhaps meet new people. Try to achieve some independence. Could she find employment in this century?

The butler provided instructions on how to get to the nearest village. Although he seemed unconvinced at first that she should venture so far by herself. To ease his concern, she agreed to take her maid. She didn't mind. She was capable of going places by herself, but a local guide could prove useful when traipsing about a different country and period.

Then she went looking for Dale to tell him of her plans. He might be avoiding her, but she didn't want to leave the house without him knowing. She found him in his study, elbows deep in paperwork, but he put it aside when she entered to give her his full attention. When she told him of her plans, he insisted on giving her money to spend in the village.

"No, thank you Dale. I appreciate it, but it's not necessary."

"Of course it is." Opening up a drawer, he took out several banknotes and handed them to her.

"This is just some pin money for you to have in case you want to buy something or eat anything."

"I don't plan to buy or eat anything," she said, refusing to take the money. "I just ate breakfast, and I'll return before lunch. As for buying, I need nothing. You have provided me with everything I could want." And her codependence chafed.

"Nevertheless, you should have pin money." He insisted.

"No." Spoken in a polite but firm tone.

He put the money on the desk and pushed it toward her.

"I can't accept money on top of everything else you have given me. It doesn't seem right."

"Don't think of it as me giving you money. When the inhabitants or visitors of the manor buy things from the village, it is good for the local economy. But I never go there. Nor have I had visitors who may do so. This is my long

overdue contribution to the local economy, and you are just my means of doing so.”

Olivia had to smile despite herself. “How can you give me money and suggest that it is me who is doing you a favor?” She shook her head.

“It is the truth, Olivia. Being the biggest landowner in the region, I am responsible for the villages that depend on the estate. I have not been doing my duty well by them in recent years.”

“I find that hard to believe. From all I’ve seen, you take excellent care of everyone and everything.” An idea struck her. “Why don’t you come with me then? It is always more reassuring when the lord shows up and not just an unknown guest. I’m sure the villagers will be happy to see you.”

“No, they will not. There’s a reason I excluded myself from local life.”

She didn’t want to pry, but the curiosity must have shown on her face because he made a wry expression and replied.

“I am not ready to talk about my past sins just yet. Maybe I never will be...” he added in a sotto voce. “Take the money, please. And also your maid and a footman. If you need more, just charge whatever you want to the estate account. All the shops will extend the credit. They’ll take my money even if they don’t want to see me darken their doorstep.”

With that, he lowered his head back to the paperwork, effectively ending the conversation and dismissing her all at once. Olivia stood rooted to the spot. Gritting her teeth.

She advanced towards the desk. The bank notes still sat upon it.

“Just take the money already,” he said with a touch of exasperation, still not looking at her.

It went against her grain to just take money for nothing, but she could not reasonably refuse it. In fact, she might offend him if she did so. Swallowing her pride, she put the money in her pocket and walked out.

She wanted to hold on to her pique, but it was hard to do so. All she had seen from this man was generosity and caring. Even now he was trying to do his duty by the local business owners who, by his own admission, did not want to have anything to do with him. It was obvious he cared for all the people who depended on him, which were many. His employees seemed happy working for him. But now that she thought about it, she sensed an undercurrent of sadness and secrecy beneath this home's gilded facade.

What had happened? She would bet it had something to do with his wife's death. She had no right to pry, but she felt tempted to do so. Not out of idle curiosity, but because she wanted to help. How, she had no idea, but she would know more once she learned what tormented him.



CHAPTER 24 - The village gossips



HALF AN HOUR LATER, she sat in a carriage en route to the village. She looked out the window the whole time. The countryside was so beautiful! It was amazing how there were some places that just seemed to fill her heart until she felt she could float in the emotion. The Amalfi coast had been one of those places. The Swiss Alps, the Cote d'Azur. She still got goosebumps remembering them. This tranquil countryside had the same effect, despite not being as majestic and dramatic as the others. It had an energy, a beauty that burrowed deep and found an echo in her soul.

The village came into view, and it was even more charming than she had expected. Little stone and brick buildings with tall, high-pitched slate or thatch roofs and window sills boasting flower boxes lined the winding high street. Some buildings were half-timbered in the Tudor style, while others looked more modern. She spotted several shops through the windows—a bakery and what appeared to be an accessories shop displaying umbrellas, fans, and other lady's articles in a riot of colors in the shop window. She rapped on the coach roof, as the coachman had instructed, to signal that she wanted to get out and explore by foot.

As soon as she alighted from the vehicle, however, she realized she had attracted the attention of quite a few people. Many were staring, clustered in groups of three or four outside the shops and houses. There seemed to be cautious curiosity on their faces. The elegant coach had caught their attention. They must have realized it belonged to the Duke, and now they wanted to know the identity of the unknown lady stepping out of it. She never thought she would attract so much attention and already regretted the trip. What would she say to these people if they asked questions about her?

She wanted to get back in the coach and retreat to the safety of the manor. But there was nothing to do but brave it

out. Slinking back into the coach would seem like an attempt to escape. That would create even more gossip.

She would say as little as possible. Maybe buy something from one of the shops to make it seem like that was the purpose of her visit, and then she would leave as soon as possible. How she wished Dale had accompanied her! He would know how to handle the situation.

She threw a friendly smile and a small nod to the nearest group of people and entered the first shop she encountered. It was the accessories shop, called the haberdashery.

The shopkeeper approached her, delighted she had entered her shop. Whether that delight was because of the prospect of business or gossip, she didn't know. Maybe a bit of both. Oh my, she was bound to disappoint the woman, for she would not provide much of either.

“Good day, miss. Is there something that catches your fancy?” The shopkeeper said, waving a hand at the colorful clutter that seemed to occupy every nook and cranny of the small shop.

“Good day.” She looked around for an object to mention, and her eyes fell on a pretty ivory fan with a painted scene and gold lace trim. “I was looking for a fan. That one over there. May I see it?”

“Of course, Miss.” The shopkeeper took the fan out of the display stand and handed it to her. “It's beautiful. You have good taste. Your accent is not from these parts. Are you American?”

Ah! And so began the Inquisition.

“Yes, I am.”

“Ah, I thought so. Have a cousin who married an American, and he spoke like you. And are you visiting us or staying for good?”

Goodness, these people were nosy. “I am visiting.”

“Is that so? Well, are you interested in something else? Maybe some mementos to take back with you for your family

and friends? You don't have to worry about carrying them. I can have it all packed and delivered. Are you staying in the Hall?"

Wow! The police should hire the woman as an interrogator. She was relentless.

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary. I can take the fan with me now." She threw the shopkeeper a friendly smile to take the sting out of her rebuff because she would not answer the other question. "How much is the fan?"

"Two shillings, Miss."

She had no clue how much that was. Oh, how stupid she had been to visit this village! She was not prepared. The only thing she would accomplish was to create massive gossip. She took out the smallest note and held it out, admitting to being confused.

"I am afraid that, being American, I am not familiar with how your money works. She held out a pound note. Will this cover it?"

"Oh yes, miss. That's more than enough." The shopkeeper took the note, opened a wooden box, counted out some coins, and gave them back to her. She had no way of knowing if the change was correct, but it didn't matter. She said goodbye and exited the shop. The footman stood right outside. The maid had followed her into the store but had not said a word.

She saw the carriage was still stopped a few yards away, so she walked towards it, intending to leave before she could get into any more awkward situations.

But just as she was about to climb in, a piercing whistle rent the air, and she felt a rumble on the ground. It sounded like a train. Could it be?

"What was that?" she asked the footman, who was giving her a hand up to the carriage.

"That'll be the train, miss."

"A train," she repeated, smiling with delight. She hadn't realized they had trains already in this period. "Take me to the

train station, please.”

“Aye, miss.”

When she got to the train station, the train was still there. An idea formed in her mind, but instead of launching into it without thinking, she had to get more information. She asked the footman, who was a bright young man named Johnny, to accompany her and approached what seemed to be the ticket booth.

There she learned the train’s destination was London, by way of Oxford. The ticket master also informed her it would take about an hour to reach Oxford, and that there would be another train from Oxford to Avondale departing at four that very afternoon. She could explore Oxford for a few hours and return in time for dinner. In a larger town like Oxford, she would attract far less attention. On impulse, she got three tickets for herself, the maid, and the footman and jumped on the train just before it departed.



CHAPTER 25 - Where the hell have you been?



THE TRAIN RIDE WAS enjoyable, as was their time in Oxford. With Johnny's help, she hired a hackney cab at the train station to take them around the city and see the sights. They bought meat pastries and lemonade for lunch at a market stall and ate them sitting on a bench in a park.

It was a fantastic day of fun and sightseeing. By the time they arrived back at the hall, it was almost six in the afternoon. As soon as the butler let her in, he informed her that His Grace wanted to see her in his study.

Curious and a little surprised because Dale had not sought her out in days, she followed the footman to the study. As soon as the door opened, he jumped up from his chair with an intense look of equal parts relief and... anger?

There was another man with him. He had also come to his feet and observed her with something like amusement. Who was he?

"Thank you, Andrews," Dale addressed the man without taking his eyes from her, "As you can see, Miss Mirabal has returned. You can leave us now."

"Certainly, Your Grace." The man executed a small bow and left with the crisp stride of a man who had someplace to be.

She could not fathom what this meeting was about. Had Avondale found information about the events that had brought her here? The harsh lines of his face and unreadable glint in his eye gave her no answers.

"Where the hell have you been?" Dale demanded as soon as the door closed behind Andrews.

She swung to look at Dale, whose face had boiled to a red and whose hands had formed fists at his sides. His voice had been quiet but hard and sharp, and she couldn't help but flinch.

He had always been such a perfect gentleman, so courteous and proper, that to hear him curse was a shock. She realized with surprise he was angry... at her. Had she done something wrong?

“I... I went to Oxford. I took the train at the village station —”

“Oxford. By train.”

“Yes. That is what I said.” She spoke each word cautiously. The man was volatile. She seemed to have done something wrong, and while she didn't want to argue with him after all his kindness, she felt a little annoyed at his tone.

“And you didn't think to inform me of your plans? When we spoke this morning, you said you were only going to the village for a couple of hours, not to damn Oxford for the whole day!” he exploded.

“Please stop cursing at me. I'm sorry. It was a last-minute decision, and I thought the coachman would tell you. I went to the village, but everybody kept staring at me, and the shopkeeper started asking questions. I didn't know what I should say. It was so uncomfortable. I thought it best to get out of there as soon as possible. I thought...”

“You should have thought to return home then, not continue wandering farther off,” he interrupted again.

Olivia took a deep breath, reigning in a temper threatening to escape her control. He reprimanded her as if she were a naughty child, not a grown woman, and that raised her hackles as few things could. She didn't need to ask his permission to go out, and she almost told him so, but stopped the retort before she could antagonize him further.

“I was going to return,” she said instead, “but then I heard the train. By the way, I didn't know trains existed already in this year. Anyway, I went to check it out and found out it was headed to London by way of Oxford. London was too far, of

course, and too big for me to venture into alone. But Oxford seemed safe to explore on my own.”

“Well, it is not safe, especially for a lone woman who does not even know how things are done in these times.”

“I had Molly and Johnny with me. I wasn’t alone.”

“Yes, but they are servants. And very young ones at that. Little more than children. They couldn’t have offered any significant help had any problems arisen.”

“But nothing happened. We are all back safe and sound, so please calm down.”

“I have been worried sick for hours. Not knowing where you had gone, if you were going to come back, or if something had happened to you. And now you just come in, cool as a cucumber, and want me to calm down? You can not wander off without telling anyone!”

Ah. Now she understood. He was worried. She should have seen it earlier, but it had been difficult to think with the shock of his rage and her own temper threatening to get out of hand. She wanted to reassure him, but she also had to make clear he could not treat her as a wayward child.

“I’m sorry for having caused you concern, and now that I know I did, I won’t do it again. There’s no need to issue orders or reprimand me as if I were a child. You could just ask, you know.”

“I should not even need to ask.”

“It never even crossed my mind that you would worry! I thought you wouldn’t even notice I was gone until maybe dinner time. If you deigned to show up for dinner!”

“How could you think I wouldn’t notice you were gone?” he asked with an edge to his voice.

“Well, can you blame me? You haven’t been around much. In the past week, I’ve rarely seen you. We only meet at dinner, and even then you are distant and formal. I thought my presence was bothering you, so the less I was around, the better. I feel like an unwanted guest. In other circumstances, I

would leave immediately, except I don't have anywhere to go.”

To her horror, her eyes started watering. She blinked back the tears and cleared her throat. “But I promise I won't be a burden much longer. In Oxford, I saw an advertisement in a newspaper for a job at an architectural firm. I'll find a job and...”

The rest of her statement was silenced when he walked up to her and enfolded her in his arms.

“Hush, Livvy,” he said, his voice rough as he held her close. “How can you think I want you gone? That I wouldn't notice if you were here or not?” He snorted without humor. “I am aware of you every moment of the day and night. During the day, no matter what I'm doing, I keep track of your whereabouts in the back of my mind. At night when I go to sleep, I dream about you. I feel your presence. Today when I came back into the house, I immediately sensed you were not here. Don't ask me how I knew. I just did. When I asked about you, and was told you had gone off on a train...” He broke off, unable to continue.

Olivia looked up from within the circle of his arms, which were still fiercely holding her close. She tried looking into his eyes, but he wouldn't meet her gaze. She had no idea. He always seemed so aloof, controlled, unemotional. It was difficult to reconcile that person with the intense man who held her too tight and fairly vibrated with emotion. She raised her hand and placed it against his cheek. Slowly, she exerted pressure so he would look at her.

“I didn't know you felt that way. Why, then, have you been avoiding me and acting all cold and aloof?”

As he looked down at her, what seemed like one thousand emotions flickered across his stormy blue eyes. A muscle ticking in his clenched jaw was the only sign of movement before he slammed his lips down on hers.

Olivia hesitated for only one second, before desire inundated her like a flash flood and her whole body responded. He kissed like a master. His lips didn't ask permission. They

conquered. Confident and assured of their welcome, they slid sensuously, owning hers. His hands caressed her back in languid circles that seemed to soothe and inflame at once.

She moaned, and he took advantage of the opening. His tongue invaded her mouth, exploring and claiming with uncompromising command. Her tongue met his, greeting, then tangling, retreating and re-engaging in a teasing duel before he took control and suckled her tongue, capturing it, demanding her surrender.

She gave in.

But in surrendering, she found victory because she had never felt so much pleasure from a kiss in her life. Pulses of desire streamed through her body, turning her limbs to jelly. His arms tightened around her, holding her, molding her to his hard body, and she heard him utter a low groan.

Her hands came up to frame his face, feeling the delicious friction of his bristles against her palms. Without breaking the kiss, he leaned into her caressing hands, seeking her touch.

He smelled so good, of shaving lotion and mint and male. A whimper escaped her throat, and she slid her hands into the warm silken locks of his hair, grasping, tugging, softly scratching his scalp in mindless desire. Then, with a guttural curse, he tore his mouth away, leaving her bereft and moaning in protest.



CHAPTER 26 - Kiss me like you mean it



AVONDALE'S BREATH CAME in uneven spurts. He still held her to him as he tried hard to bring himself under control. Good god, what was he doing? A moment more of this and he would have taken her right here on top of his desk. She didn't know how close the beast inside him had come to being unleashed. Her sweet surrender, the desire he could feel radiating from her, was like the scent of prey to a ravenous wolf. He wanted to possess, to devour.

The hours of worry he had endured while she had been away had weakened his defenses. He had thought she had left for good, and as irrational as he now realized that thought was, he couldn't shake it. He wanted to hold her, possess her, bind her to him so that she never left. She was becoming an obsession he could hardly afford, for the price would be his soul.

Slowly, by infinitesimal degrees, he forced his muscles to relax and release her.

She stumbled a little, but caught herself. She didn't seem distressed. Just a little dazed.

"Are you all right?" he asked warily.

"Yes, of course. Just a little unsteady." Her hand came up to touch her lips. "That was quite a kiss."

There was no insincere adulation in her tone. Nor condemnation. It was just a statement of fact said with the innocent wonder of someone who had discovered a treasure. This pleasure was no treasure, though. It was a drug that delivered short term enjoyment at the cost of long-term pain.

"It shouldn't have happened," he said. "I don't know what came over me. I'm sorry. Now you know why I was keeping my distance."

“Because you desire me?”

He nodded.

She walked closer to him until the hem of her dress covered his shoes. “Well, I think it is obvious I desire you, too. Why must we fight it, then?” Her tone contained both bravado and shyness.

He forced a smile, moved away from her to the other side of the desk, and stared at her. “You tempt me, almost more than I can endure. The only thing restraining me from giving in is the reminder that giving in to desires can be destructive. You are in a very vulnerable position, and I don’t want to take advantage. You don’t know what you are asking for.”

“Don’t I? Of all the condescending...” Temper flared in her eyes before she averted her gaze. Her color was high, her fists clenched. From rage, passion, embarrassment? All of it, he would guess.

She took a deep breath. “As you wish. We will avoid entanglements. But aren’t we adults? Can’t we control ourselves enough to at least interact? Or are you going to continue avoiding me?”

“I’m sorry Olivia. I’ll try to do better. I must be very careful.”

“Fine then. In that case, I want to go to London.”

“London? Why?” And why such a sudden change in subject?

“Well, for one, there will be more distractions. I am getting bored here all by myself in the countryside. And it’ll be worse if you don’t want me to go off exploring by myself. Second, we haven’t found out anything about what brought me here. Maybe we can find answers in London. And last, well. I’ve been thinking. I hope I can find out what happened and go back home, but if I don’t, or if it takes longer than expected, I can’t continue to live here as your dependent, relying on your charity. Luckily, I am an architect, a career that is as relevant in this century as it is in mine. I was hoping you could

recommend me to some architectural firm. Help me find a position. It would be difficult on my own, but if you—”

“Olivia, you don’t need to work. I can provide for you far better than you could ever manage on your own working as an architect.”

“No doubt, Dale. And trust me, I do appreciate your hospitality and generosity. I don’t know what I would do if it wasn’t for you. But I’ve worked my whole adult life and have been financially independent. I don’t feel comfortable letting another person support me.”

Every fiber of his being rejected the idea of her working to support herself. He wanted to keep her under his wing and protect her. But he had to take her feelings into consideration.

“Let me think about this, Olivia. Today has been an eventful day, and I don’t feel like I can make a decision about anything right now. We will talk about this tomorrow.”

She nodded and then turned and left, leaving him seething in confused frustration and yearning.

What was he going to do about her? He pulled his hands through his hair, no doubt making a bigger mess of locks she had already tousled. The memory sent a shiver through him.

He couldn’t keep avoiding her. She had already said she was unhappy about that, and to be honest, so was he. It was torture to know she existed so near and yet to deprive himself of her company.

But if he continued spending time with her, he would give in to his desires and importune her. Look at what had happened just now. Granted, she hadn’t seemed repelled by his lust, but that kiss was a mere prelude to all the things he wanted to do to her, with her. If she knew the extent of it, she might recoil. And that would not solve the dilemma of her independence.

The other option was to do as she asked and secure her a job at an architectural firm. He could set her up in her own place. That would get her off his hands. He had excellent connections with an architectural firm he had contracted for

several jobs in the past. The owner was a brilliant architect and a decent, open-minded fellow who might actually accept the idea of hiring a female architect, especially one recommended by him.

The architect was also young, good looking, and unmarried. One look at Olivia, and he'd be smitten. How could he not? And Olivia was bound to like him, too. They'd have shared interests, and with the proximity of working together, something would develop between the two.

The idea was like acid in his stomach. He couldn't do it. It was a selfish, unworthy sentiment, but he couldn't help it. He could not give her up. He would not throw her into another man's arms.

No way in hell.

What to do? An idea floated up from the deepest recesses of his mind. So absurd that at first he scoffed at it. But once conceived, it wouldn't go away. It presented itself with the persistence of a dog that awaits in the corner for his master to acknowledge it.

He turned it over in his mind for the rest of the evening. It followed him to bed and haunted his dreams. The next morning, the idea remained ridiculous. More than that, it seemed insane. He would have to tell her everything. It would cost him his pride and his secrets. She would probably reject it, anyway. Half of his mind, the rational half, rejected it too. But, blast it all, he would do it anyway.



CHAPTER 27 - The Proposal



THE NEXT MORNING, DALE surprised Olivia by joining her for breakfast. Apparently, he had decided to stop avoiding her, and his appearance gave her more pleasure than she cared to contemplate. But he had offered no conversation so far, seeming preoccupied by his thoughts. She was trying to act cool because he had made it clear he didn't want any entanglement with her. She wouldn't go around making a fool of herself. After breakfast, she would busy herself, go practice her riding, and—

“I have thought of a solution to your situation.”

She blinked at him. “You have? What—”

“You could marry me.”

The sip of coffee Olivia was swallowing went down the wrong way, and she coughed. Dale got up from his chair as if to help her, but she stopped him with a raised hand.

She must have misheard him. He couldn't mean what he said.

She finally stopped coughing and dabbed at her watery eyes with the napkin.

“I'm sorry. I didn't quite catch what you said.”

He narrowed his eyes in annoyance, not fooled by her pretense at misunderstanding.

“I said.” He enunciated each word carefully. “That you and I should get married.”

So she had heard him correctly, but still. The idea was so preposterous she could hardly credit her ears. She stared at him.

“You mean to marry as in becoming husband and wife?” she further clarified.

“Yes, of course. That’s the only kind of marriage I know. Or does marriage mean something else in the future?” he replied testily.

She had better not get into that conversation. “No, it means just that. I was just wondering if it meant the same thing to you because the idea seemed kind of...” How could she put this in a diplomatic way? “Kind of unexpected.”

“I know how it sounds. When the idea first occurred to me, I didn’t even want to contemplate it because it sounded absurd. But the more I thought about it, the more advantages I could see.”

“Really? Please explain them to me, because just yesterday you were trying to keep your distance. I don’t understand how you went from that to marriage literally overnight. To me, they are opposite ideas.”

“Not necessarily. Many marriages among the aristocracy are merely business transactions. No affection or closeness is required.”

“Is that the marriage you are proposing? Even so, why?”

“We can have any kind of marriage you want, Olivia. We can decide that later.” She raised her eyebrows, and he held up a hand. “What I am concerned about is your reputation and being able to protect you and provide for you.”

“But you already do that, Dale. I still don’t understand the need to take such a drastic measure.”

“For one, it is rather scandalous for you to be living here with me, alone. My servants are loyal, but rumors get out. You already experienced it yesterday in town. For now, they are just curious. They don’t know what to make of you. But soon they’ll begin questioning and making conjectures. And they will assume the worst. They will think you are a... lady of easy virtue, my mistress.”

“I don’t care. It’s none of their business, and I don’t owe them any explanations. I don’t even know them!” She heard her agitation in the higher pitch of her voice and took a deep breath.

“You should care. If you continue to live here, you will want to be able to go to the village and interact normally without being whispered about or, worse, insulted directly. Even if you don’t care, I do.” He looked down and fidgeted with his napkin, betraying he was anything but calm, regardless of his reasonable tone. “I already have a bad reputation. I’d rather not make it worse.” He added, sotto voce.

“Why do you have a bad reputation, by the way? You mentioned yesterday they would not receive you.”

“We will talk about that later.” He sighed and looked her straight in the eye. “There are things I need to tell you about me before you decide what to do.”

“Okay,” she said warily. “But I’m still not convinced I should marry you just to placate a bunch of gossips I don’t even know.”

“It is not just that.” He reached out across the table and grabbed her hand. “Consider this—as a guest, there’s only so much I can do for you. If something were to happen to me, you would be left alone and unprotected.”

“Why think about that? Do you have reason to believe something will happen to you? Are you ill? Do you have enemies that want to kill you?”

“Neither. But life is uncertain for everyone. We are here today, and the next we could have an accident and be gone. I should know that.” He added with bitter irony. “It is a very troubling thought.”

“I guess, but you are talking as if I was going to stay here forever. I might go home soon. Whatever force brought me here might take me back.”

His hand tightened possessively around hers. “If that happens, then the marriage is of no issue. In your time, it would be like it never even happened.”

“For me, maybe. What about you? How will you explain the disappearance of a wife?”

He looked away evasively. “I could say you went back to America and then died there. It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does! You would have to get proof of my death to be free, which will be near impossible short of faking a certificate.”

“That can be arranged.” He said, raising an eyebrow arrogantly. “But being ‘free’ would only matter if I intended to marry again. And I do not plan to do so. Ever.”

She made an exasperated sound. “You don’t know that. You may change your mind and then regret this rash action.”

“I won’t change my mind. But even if I do, I told you, there are ways around it. The most important thing now is to protect you.”

“I don’t know. This all seems rather rash and unnecessary.” She stood up and started pacing. “If you are concerned about my financial status in case of your death, you could just settle a small inheritance on me. Whatever sum you consider appropriate to support me until I get a job. Or better yet, you could help me get a job now, and then I won’t be your responsibility.”

“It is not only financial considerations. As the Duchess of Avondale, you will have prestige, connections, and advantages that you could never have as a stranger in this world.”

“I suppose you are right. But I don’t know, Dale. The idea of marriage seems so extreme. Are you sure it’s necessary?”

“Maybe not absolutely necessary,” he confessed with complete honesty, “but certainly the best course. And also consider this. You feel uncomfortable receiving my help, and you think of it as charity. As my wife, you wouldn’t have to feel that way because it would be my responsibility to provide for you.”

“A responsibility you didn’t ask for. One could say the marriage itself is an act of charity.”

“Be that as it may, if I didn’t want it, I wouldn’t do it. Please believe me when I say that I’m glad you appeared in

my life. And any responsibility towards you, I assume happily.”

“Thank you, Dale. You are the most generous man I have ever met.”

His eyes shuttered before he looked away, shook his head, and waved a hand dismissively. “It is nothing, really. So, will you marry me?”

This was so strange. Marriages of convenience existed even in her time, but she had never contemplated one. For her, marriage was a serious commitment, a bond of everlasting love. Granted, it did not always work out that way. Her own marriage was proof of it. But she still believed in marriage. To receive this cold proposal that had nothing to do with love... but desire and liking existed between them. Was that good enough?



CHAPTER 28 - Living in the matrix



“LET ME THINK ABOUT it. We still have to talk about what kind of marriage we would have. There’s much to discuss and decide.”

“I agree. There are also things you need to know about me.”

He seemed so solemn that a shiver of apprehension ran through her. She had sensed secrets and darkness around Dale. Would he reveal them to her? What could be so terrible about him that he looked so grim and determined? And what would she do when she found out what tormented him? She was almost afraid to find out.

“Ok, I will see you at dinner then.” She replied uneasily.

After that eventful breakfast, she took a walk through the gardens to think and clear her head. Of all the things she should consider, she had not thought marriage would be one of them.

The idea was insane. She had only known Dale for a couple of weeks. They were from, literally, different worlds.

She didn’t belong here.

Oh, she had learned to appreciate his world. After the initial shock of being unexpectedly transported in time, she had begun to enjoy her time here. It was easy to do when Dale provided such a lavish lifestyle and there were so many wonderful things to see and learn. Even so, she was very aware that she didn’t want to stay here permanently. She was visiting, doing touristy things. That’s the way she saw it in her mind.

Of course, she had rationally contemplated the idea that she might not get back, since she didn’t have the means to do

so, but in her heart she knew this was all temporary. She didn't know how or when, but she felt this visit would one day end. How could it not? She didn't even understand how she had ended up here. What was it that had caused this? Aliens? Angels? Magic? Or maybe she had just really crashed and gotten massive brain damage and was right now lying in a coma in a British hospital and this was all an illusion.

Was this all a dream? She remembered the movie *Inception*, which she had watched years ago. It was a complicated movie, and she didn't remember the details, but she kind of recalled that time was warped in the dream world, and people did things in their dreams, and the dream world seemed real to where they could live a lifetime in the dream and not even know they were dreaming. Of course, the movie was a fantasy, but so was time travel.

How about the *Matrix*? In a different way, it also posed the idea of the mind creating the world while the body lay asleep and unresponsive.

Her heart started to beat faster. What if the key to this mystery lay not in external circumstances, but in her mind? Was this really just an illusion?

She gasped. If all this was an illusion, then Dale was also a figment of her imagination, created probably out of the deep yearning of her heart to find a good man to love her. The truth was that if she had consciously tried to come up with her ideal of the perfect man, it wouldn't be much different from Dale. He was incredibly handsome, kind, smart, rich and powerful, and his kiss melted her bones... In short, he was her every fantasy.

She had reached the gazebo at the far end of the gardens. The structure stood on top of a raised slope and allowed fantastic three hundred and sixty degree views of the landscape. She went inside and sat on one of the stone benches facing the gardens and the house.

How could she tell if this was an illusion? She tried to remember. In *Inception*, the mind was able to bend the surrounding reality. Could she do that if she tried? She

concentrated on the house. Tried to make it change form in her mind. Nothing happened.

She touched the stone bench on which she sat, tried to open all her senses to the world around her. To see if she could detect the slightest incongruity, to see if she could unravel the dream, as you could pick a loose thread and unravel a fabric. But everything seemed solid and real. Oh, she was getting nowhere and would drive herself mad with all these theories. Still, she couldn't entirely dismiss the idea.

She tried another tack. She consciously thought about Dale. Closing her eyes, she conjured his image and tried to imagine him in her modern world, going about life the way she usually did. Driving cars, going to the supermarket, to movie theaters, traveling by plane, doing the myriad other things that made up life in her time.

The idea was incongruous at first, but the more she imagined it, the more real it became. And the more appealing. Did that mean she could shape reality as she pleased just by imagining it? In her time, many subscribed to a belief in manifestation, although it probably wasn't quite what she was doing.

How could she know if the world around her was real or not? How could she test it? What about that philosopher she had studied in college? Descartes, was it? The one that doubted everything and posed the famous theory of "I think, therefore I am." That was a way to prove one's own existence, but not that of the world around you.

Did he explain how to find proof of the world's existence? She wished she had paid more attention to her philosophy professor, but frankly, the subject had bored her. Maybe she would be able to find one of his works in Dale's library. Getting up from the bench, she headed back to the house.

Time to prove if she was living a fantasy.



CHAPTER 29 - Cogito, ergo sum



DALE SAW HER ENTER the house with a determined stride. Olivia never idly strolled, as other ladies did, with mincing steps and affected mannerisms. She walked with purpose, with sure and efficient movements that were still somehow deeply feminine and sensual. She looked like she had a mission to accomplish, and he found himself reluctantly curious. What could she be up to now?

Would she accept his proposal? They had agreed to talk in the evening, and he intended to give her until then to think about his offer on her own. But now he regretted that decision. He was sure the more she thought about it, the more ludicrous the idea was going to seem. He wanted to go to her now.

He looked down at the page in front of him, unable to make sense of anything, focus on anything other than the alluring woman living in his house. Would she accept? Reject? Either scenario terrified him in its own way, for his desire to marry her was as intense as his fear.

If she accepted and chose to have a marriage in name only, would he be able to keep to himself? Or if she wanted a genuine marriage... he closed his eyes as a wave of pure desire washed over him, leaving him hard and aching. He pushed at his erection with consternation.

He had thought that with abstinence, desire would die. That if he deprived himself long enough of the pleasures of the flesh, the cravings would, in time, disappear. After all, monks lived without it. It seemed to work. Until Olivia appeared. Now he understood why monks lived in monasteries secluded from the rest of the world and the temptation of women.

Temptation. That was the key. As long as he remained removed from temptation, he could bear it. But abstinence did not prepare one for dealing with constant and unavoidable temptation. Just the opposite. He felt like a volcano about to

erupt. All the years of celibacy had created a craving, a hunger, frightening in its intensity. He wanted to devour her...

No. He had to take it easy. Let her set the limits. He could do that, right? Or maybe he was deceiving himself. He had abstained for good reasons. But now, as soon as a desirable female crossed his path, he was willing to throw all reason away and give in to his cravings.

Was this all about desire and sexual frustration, then? No. He dared not name it, but he felt its pull on him. And it frightened him. He had already lost so much.

A noise in the room next door brought his attention outward again. It appeared Olivia was in the library. Another noise, a thud, followed by a loud crash and a curse. He was out of his chair and crossing towards the connecting door to the library in an instant.

Olivia lay on the floor, her skirts thrown up by the petticoats, exposing her legs. Her very naked legs. She didn't wear stockings and only the merest excuse for pantalets. Books lay scattered around her, and a small table had been knocked over. For a few seconds, his bewildered mind swirled with arousal, laughter, and concern, each emotion fighting for control.

His gentlemanly manners finally asserted themselves and concern won. He stood over her and extended his hand to help her up.

With only the faintest shadow of laughter in his voice, he asked. "Are you alright, Livvy?"

She seemed quite annoyed and a bit embarrassed by her mishap, but she didn't appear to have suffered any major damage from the fall. She took his hand and got her skirts under control to stand.

"I'm fine, thank you. It is just these damned skirts. I don't know how women can go about in them. I feel like a bull in a china shop. They are too wide. I keep bumping into stuff."

He said nothing, but his lips twitched as he kept trying not to laugh.

“I was reaching to get to a book, and accidentally knocked over the table with this ridiculous hump in my backside.” She said, patting the bustle over her behind. “I tried to save the vase and lost my balance instead. And you saw the rest; I ended up on the floor like an upside-down turtle struggling to get on my feet while these stupid skirts kept getting in the way.”

“Like an upside down turtle?” He couldn’t contain his laughter anymore. It burst out of him like a warm spring. It had been so long since he had laughed out loud that he was unfamiliar with the sound.

He was afraid to offend her with his mirth, but he couldn’t help it. She studied him with narrowed eyes. It only made him laugh more. She looked so damned adorable.

“Oh, stop it. It’s not funny!” But her lips pressed thin as if to contain a smile.

Then she was laughing too. Not a chuckle or a practiced laugh. She laughed with gusto. Her lovely mouth opening wide to reveal two rows of perfectly straight teeth; head thrown back, exposing that lovely neck; her eyes watering with mirth.

Her right hand pressed to her abdomen. “Oh, my... I can’t. This dratted corset won’t even let me laugh. It’s too tight!”

The mention of her corset took him on another turn towards desire. Unbidden, his mind conjured up images of her in nothing but her tightly laced corset. The delicious globes of her derriere spilling out, her breasts pushed up high for his mouth to devour.

She looked at him questioningly, and he realized he had stopped laughing and wore an intent look. Before she could ask questions for which he had no appropriate answer, he sought a diversion.

Looking at the tumbled books, he noticed the titles for the first time. He crouched to pick one up and asked, “Philosophy? A rather heavy subject for such a sunny

afternoon, don't you think? Wouldn't you rather read a novel? I have the full works of Austen, Radcliffe, Dickens..."

"No, thanks. I mean, some other time, yes, I would love to read them. But now I was looking for a philosophy book. More specifically, for the works of one philosopher in particular. Descartes. Are you familiar with him?"

"Cogito, ergo sum?"

"That's it! 'I think, therefore I am'. I couldn't remember how it went in Latin."

"But why are you so interested in that now? Are you questioning your existence?" he asked jokingly.

"No, I'm questioning the existence of everything else. Do you remember what led up to that conclusion?"

"Cartesian Doubt." He thought hard, digging up his philosophy studies from the depths of his mind. "He started by doubting everything, and in the end the only thing he could prove was that he existed because he was able to doubt, which requires thinking, which requires someone or something to do the thinking."

"Exactly. But he hypothesized that everything else could be a lie. That an evil demon or some other entity could be tricking him into believing that all which surrounded him was real when it was not."

He studied her with narrowed eyes. She wasn't making much sense. He had studied philosophy. He should be able to have a coherent conversation about this subject, but his mind remained stubbornly blank. Descartes? What on Earth?

She took a deep breath and continued.

"Let me start at the beginning. I was pondering again the issue of how I got here and it occurred to me that so far, we have only considered the possibility that I slipped through time. But then I remembered a couple of movies I have seen in my time in which the people have real-like dreams. In one movie, the dream was self-induced, and you had some control over the perceived reality. The other movie was more like what Descartes had posed. There were evil entities fooling

people into believing they were actually living, when they were actually asleep, in some kind of hibernation state, and..."

"Wait. What are these movies you keep mentioning?"

"Oh, sorry. Right. A movie is like a theater play. They tell a story for entertainment. I'll explain in more detail later, but now that's not the point. These 'plays' gave me the idea that maybe this is just a dream. What if I really crashed, and I am right now in a hospital bed in a coma, and all this"—she gestured around—"is just my mind creating a reality? How would I know the difference? After all, when one dreams, one usually believes the dreams are real until one wakes up and realizes that it was just a dream."

He lifted a hand, opened his mouth.

"No. Wait. There's more. What if we are all the slaves of some evil entity that keeps us asleep and dreaming, each in its own reality? But somehow there was a malfunction in the system and our pretend realities merged when they were never supposed to."

"My goodness gracious. Here I thought you were considering my proposal and instead you have gone down a rabbit hole of abstract considerations and implausible conclusions." He ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "I don't even know how to respond to all that. Or if it even matters what I think, since you apparently decided I am a figment of your imagination. Or better yet, I am the creation of an evil entity bent on deceiving you. I confess I have been called many things, but never that."

"Please don't be angry. I didn't mean to offend you. This idea just popped into my head, and I was trying to explore it. I have never given any credibility to these fantastical notions, such as time travel and real-dreams. And yet, here I am. Everything is surreal, strange. Can you blame me for questioning reality?"

He walked over to her and took her hand, then slowly raised it to his chest and trapped it there. "Do I feel real enough to you?"

Her eyes widened slightly, and her lips parted. She shook her head. He yanked her against his body with his other arm around her waist and took her mouth in an all-consuming kiss.

And he was drowning.

Drowning in her flavor, her warmth, her softness. Pleasure coursed through him like a warm tide. He felt her arms reaching around his neck, tangling in his hair, and groaned helplessly. She thought this was not real? This passion, this desperate need, was very real to him. If this was a dream, he never wanted to wake up.

Slowly, he lifted his mouth. She moaned and tried to recapture his lips.

But he held himself away and asked her, “Still think I am a dream?”

“Now more than ever,” she replied with a dazed smile.

He growled low in his throat and took her lips again. Maddening woman. She was driving him crazy, and he couldn't get enough of her. How dare she say he was not real? To discount him as a mere figment of her imagination? He felt more alive than ever in his life. The desire she inspired was a flame consuming him from within. He had kissed her to make a point. To show her he was real, that he was unpredictable and dangerous and she could not dismiss him as she would a fantasy.

Instead, he had become swept away in her. Her mouth was so delicious, her lips pillowy and soft. Her unabashed response was like tinder to flame. She was not coy. She kissed him back with an honest enthusiasm that set fire to his blood. He wanted more, needed more. Now.

Without conscious thought, he had already backed her up against the big library table. She half sat on it, but the draped skirts were in the way. He couldn't get close enough, couldn't press his aching flesh against the sweet heaven between her legs. His fingers were already undoing the buttons in the back of her dress, making it gape at the front and exposing a bigger expanse of chest and the tops of her breasts.

More. A little tug and her nipples escaped the prison of the corset. He brought his hands to massage and cup the gentle orbs through the thin fabric of her chemise. She moaned and arched her back, pressing her breasts into his palms.

She did not retreat, in fact, she urged him on, and he couldn't stop. For the life of him, he couldn't stop. He kept kissing down her neck, finding pulse points of exquisite pleasure and licking and sucking while she made inarticulate sweet sounds.

The chemise came undone with a little tug of the ribbon. He pushed it open and her delicate pink areolas peaked through the fabric. Crazy with desire, his mouth descended on her breasts and took one of her nipples. Sucking it hard while his fingers pinched and rolled the other nipple until they became hard, aching points. She cried out softly, shuddering, her hands grabbing fistfuls of his hair and holding him there.

He was going to take her. Right here, right now. In the library. His hands were bunching up her skirts, grabbing fistfuls of it, trying to get underneath, while his mouth still licked and suckled. Her hands were not passive either. They roamed his body, slipping under his vest. Her fingers sneaked under the waistband of his trousers and pulled his shirt free. He felt the touch of her cool hands on the bare flesh of his back, and it was almost his undoing.

They were both wearing too many damn clothes. It was impossible to get enough. He wanted to be naked, skin to feverish skin, sinking inside her hot, wet flesh. He caressed her leg under her petticoats, moving up to her molten center. How to remove her dress?

Click.

Damn. What was that? A door closing? He snapped to attention, leaving the heated tangle of their bodies behind. Shattering the spell.



CHAPTER 30 - Her Story



HE TURNED HIS HEAD to look at the door, then at her. Her dazed eyes overflowed with frustrated desire.

“I think it was Mrs Simmonds.” She said in answer to his unspoken question. “I glimpsed her just as the door closed.”

He closed his eyes, ashamed, and rested his forehead against hers. “My deepest apologies. I got so carried away that I let it go too far in a public room. I should have realized any servant could have walked in.”

“Don’t apologize. I wasn’t exactly trying to stop you.” She caressed his nape. “Shall we continue in a proper bedroom?”

Good God, she wasn’t shocked or embarrassed. She wanted to continue! The temptation was so strong that for a moment his mind clouded and he couldn’t articulate a refusal, even though he knew he must. What was he going to do about her?

“No, if we retire together to a bedroom in the middle of the day, everyone will know what we are about.”

“I hate this lack of privacy.”

“I have lived my whole life like this.”

“So who cares if they find out, Dale? We are adults. You are their employer. They have no right to question or judge.”

“Shh, Olivia. I don’t like it any more than you do. But that is not the way it is done.”

“Come to me tonight, then.”

He stared at her, slack jawed. What a miracle of an offer. What a miracle of a woman. He’d never desired any woman more than he did her and it was obvious she desired him too. She had made no attempt to cover herself, and her delicious breasts were still partly uncovered in her disarrayed bodice. He didn’t know what to make of her.

She still had not agreed to marry him. Most women of his time would jump at the opportunity to marry a Duke, even him, with his tarnished reputation. They would see tolerating him in their beds as the price they had to pay for the ducal coronet. She apparently didn't see sharing his bed as a price to pay, but as the prize itself.

He had offered her what other women strived for, and she didn't seem to want it. She seemed to want him. Not his title or his money. Just him, the man. It was a heady feeling, more powerful than any aphrodisiac. But still... she deserved more than a quick tumble in the library.

And now, more than ever, he wanted to marry her. He knew he couldn't hold her forever, but for whatever amount of time he could have with her, he wanted her to be his, and his only.

“Does that mean you agree to marry me?”

She sighed, finally pulling her bodice together and restoring order to her clothes. “Dale, I still don't think it is necessary. Would you button my dress, please?”

“I explained to you why it was.” She turned her back to him. He couldn't resist running his fingers up her spine in a last wishful caress. Her body trembled, and he swallowed and hastened to redo the buttons and lacing he had enthusiastically undone just a few minutes before.

“I'm not convinced. I haven't had time to consider it, and now lust may be clouding my judgment. It is a big decision.”

“I understand. But what have you got to lose?”

She turned around to face him.

“I just don't know if there'll be hidden pitfalls we haven't considered. There's still so much we don't know about each other. What if you discover in me a character flaw you find repellent?”

“Unlikely. I've always been an excellent judge of character. I may not know everything about you, but what I know is enough to know I won't regret my decision. But I

guess the opposite is not true. You have reservations about my character.”

“You have done nothing to make me distrust you. All the opposite. You have been all that is good and kind and solid in this strange reality. But how can I trust my judgment when I don’t even understand my situation? I have been so wrong before.”

“You have been disappointed in love.” It was a statement. How had he not considered it before? She was obviously not a virgin, but neither was she married, by her own admission. Nor did she say she was a widow. What had happened? He wanted, needed, to know. Not because it would change his opinion of her one bit, or his decision to marry her, but because he wanted to know everything that made her who she was.

“Yes, of course. Who hasn’t?” she responded flippantly.

“What happened? You can tell me, Livvy. I won’t judge you or think any less of you. God knows I am no model of proper behavior myself.”

She seemed to consider what to say. Then determination replaced indecision in her gaze.

“Remember when you asked me if I was married?”

He nodded, holding his breath.

“I am not now,” she said, “but I used to be. I got divorced almost two years ago.”

Divorced. The word was like a hammer on an anvil, hard and ringing. Not as bad as he’d imagined, though. He needed to know more. He knew that was not the complete story.

“Please don’t think I am immoral.” She hastened to explain. “I understand that in these times, divorce is very rare, and that it is scandalous and carries a stigma. But it is not so in my time. It is socially acceptable for a couple to divorce if either party wishes to do so.”

“I know you are not immoral, Livvy.” He said, looking into her eyes.

“Thank you for your faith.” She smiled sardonically and raised her eyebrows meaningfully. “I could forgive you for thinking otherwise.”

“Please, don’t consider me so judgemental.”

“Sorry. Anyway, as I was saying, it is acceptable in my time for either spouse to seek a divorce for any reason. Getting a divorce is relatively easy. It doesn’t mean it is easy going through it, though. Especially if you are not expecting it and didn’t want it.”

“So he divorced you.” It was not a question.

“Yes. He had been having an affair with a former girlfriend. They had met in school, before he even met me.” She sighed. “Maybe I should start from the beginning. But I warn you, it might be a long story. Do you have the time?”

“For you, always.” And he meant it. He would always make time for her.

She leaned against the library table. On the same spot were moments before he had her in his arms. He wished he was still there, between her legs—

“In that case,” she continued, pulling him out of his fantasies. “Charles and I met when I was seventeen years old. I had just finished high school and was on my summer break before college. He is a contractor and my parents had hired him to remodel the kitchen. We spent lots of time together while he was on the job. He was older than me, ten years older to be exact, and had such charisma and physical magnetism. I thought he was the most worldly man I had ever met. Compared to him, all the other boys my age looked like... well, boys. I couldn’t believe he seemed to like me.”

Her mouth twisted self deprecatingly and his heart twisted too. How could such a beautiful and sweet woman doubt her likeability?

“A few weeks later, when I turned eighteen, he asked me out on a date. That is, he took me on an outing. We became romantically involved soon after that. I had originally planned to go to college out of state, but I changed to a local university

to be near him. A year later he proposed to me, and we married three years after that when I graduated from college. It was a beautiful wedding. Not extravagant, but everything I had dreamed of.”

Ah yes, he knew firsthand how often dream weddings don’t turn out to be dream marriages.

“We went to work together. With my architectural degree, we expanded his company. We went from doing small remodeling jobs to completely custom work, designing and building houses. We worked really hard in the beginning, and were focused on achieving success. But once we got more comfortable, we traveled, designed and built our own house, and I began thinking it was time to have children.”

He sucked in a breath at the mention of children. Bracing for a blow.

Her fingers were white from clutching the edge of the table on either side of her, belying her apparent serenity while relaying her story.

“In hindsight, he really didn’t seem that interested in having kids, but I was really looking forward to this next phase of our lives. But then my sister died, and I couldn’t get pregnant. That sent me into a tailspin of depression and obsession for months.”

“Oh Livvy. I’m so sorry, darling.” Dale was familiar with both emotions. He wouldn’t have wished them on his worst enemy. Imagining vibrant, laughing, Livvy depressed so much, aroused in him such protectiveness he could barely stand it. “What did your husband do about it?”

“He didn’t handle it well. He is a physical guy, not comfortable dealing with emotions and feelings. So he retreated emotionally. I finally pulled out of the depression, but my marriage was not the same. I tried to fix it, but I didn’t even know what was wrong. I only knew Charles was different. Distant.”

“So what happened?” He asked warily, fearing he already knew.

She started pacing.



CHAPTER 31 - His Story



“OH, NOTHING TOO DRAMATIC.” She said airily, but her tone did not fool him. “Another year went on like this. Everything I did seemed to bother him. We argued a lot and the distance between us kept getting greater until he finally confessed he had been having an affair with a former girlfriend. It had been going on for over a year.”

The ass. Dale thought savagely, trying to control his reaction.

“They had been high school sweethearts, and apparently each other’s first loves.” She went on, subsiding into the chair. “But they had split up when they went to different colleges and then eventually she got married. Then, while I was lost in my depression, they found each other again. She had divorced recently, and they rekindled their flame. He said our marriage wasn’t working and had not been for a long time, and he wanted a divorce.”

She said it so matter of fact. But her shoulders slumped, and her voice was little more than a thread. He knew it must have been a terrible blow. Dale tried to appear calm, but inside he seethed on her behalf. What kind of insensitive bastard goes and gets himself a mistress while his wife is grieving? The worst kind of excuse for a man, that’s who.

“I was so stunned,” she went on. “I couldn’t believe my marriage was ending. And the worst part was there was nothing I could do about it. I even would have forgiven him, I think. After all, I thought I was at fault too, for neglecting him and our marriage, but he didn’t want forgiveness. He just wanted to get rid of me to be with his girlfriend.”

“That is utter nonsense!” Dale refuted, his hands fisting at his sides. She blamed herself for her husband’s selfishness. Unacceptable. “You were going through a difficult time, which is understandable after all you had been through. He should

have been by your side, supporting you. Not gallivanting with another woman. The selfish prick.”

“I totally agree with you. Now. At that moment, I didn’t see it that way. I blamed myself for not seeing it, for not preventing it. I kept thinking if I had handled things differently, my marriage would not have shattered the way it did.” She held out a hand for him and he took it.

“You see, my whole life was crumbling around me. Until then, I had never faced a difficult situation. Then in the space of a couple of years, I lost my sister, I failed to get pregnant, and I also lost my marriage, my home, my work. And I thought it was all my own damn fault. I mean, only a total loser would lose so much.”

Gazing earnestly into her eyes, Dale crouched in front of her, captured both Livvy’s hands, and gave them a gentle squeeze. “Sometimes life deals us a bad hand, and no matter how you play it, you cannot win. It was not your failure, Livvy. You just went through a bad streak.”

Her shoulders, which had arched high toward her ears, relaxed, and the hands he held in his own squeezed back, a warmth tingling back into them. She managed a smile and a nod, and she no longer looked so defeated. Good. He’d given her some small measure of comfort. He wanted nothing more than that.

“By the time we finalized the divorce, I felt much better, stronger. My ex kept our house and the company, but since I was a partner and co-owner, he had to buy me out. I took the money from the settlement and invested part of it in starting my own architectural firm. I also got my own place to live. A house that I planned to renovate and eventually sell for a profit. Close to my parents, so I could be nearby for them and Lana, but independent. I was thirty, and it was the first time in my life I was living and doing things on my own. It has been... interesting.”

“Did you consider marrying again?” He asked, letting go of her hands and walking towards the fireplace. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know about other men with whom she might

have been romantically involved, but the question burst out of him. “You said there’s no stigma attached to divorce in your time, so that means you were now free, still young, and beautiful. Surely you had men interested in you.”

“Yes, of course I wanted to find love again, and marry and have kids. But it’s not that easy. From time to time, a man would ask me to go on an outing. It is the accepted form of courting in my time. You go out, usually to dinner or some other place, spend time together, talk, see if you suit. They were... adequate. But I felt no sparks with any of them. So I focused on my business and my home renovation for the time being.”

He put all these fresh revelations into his picture of Olivia. He had already realized she was extraordinary. Now, her story filled in the blanks as an artist’s brush fills in color and detail into a basic outline. All the qualities he had already sensed in her came to vibrant life. As pretty as she was kind. So capable, yet hesitant. Independent, but fearful. Strong and fragile. So many contrasts. He had met no one who had so many interesting angles. He could spend his whole life discovering her... but he probably wouldn’t have the chance.

She didn’t belong here.

One thing that was glaringly obvious in her story was how important family was to her. How close she was to her parents and her niece. She had already lost so much. It was so cruel for her to be yanked from her world and from her family now that she had rebuilt her life.

He could never replace all her loved ones. All he could do was to protect and care for her until the moment she was taken back to her world. He didn’t know how or when that would be, but he knew it would happen. At least he hoped it would. For her sake. As much as he would like to keep her with him forever, he didn’t want it at the cost of her happiness.

She had already told him her story. Now it was his turn. He could do no less. She deserved the whole truth. She had taken a risk revealing herself to him, trusting he would listen with an open mind and not judge her. His story wasn’t as pretty, or

maybe he should say it didn't paint a pretty picture of him, but he hoped she could understand as well.

She had stopped talking and now sat with her elbow on the armrest; her head propped in her hand. She stared pensively into the unlit fireplace. She looked so exquisite he wished he could capture her at this moment. Alas, he was not a painter. Then he saw her little device, the 'phone', laying atop the table. She used it to capture images and had shown him how it worked. He took it and snapped a picture of her.

The sound made by the phone alerted her, and she looked up, a little surprised. "Did you just take a picture of me?"

"Yes. I'm sorry if that was too forward, but you looked so lovely just now. I wanted to keep that image forever."

"No, I don't mind at all. That's actually one of the nicest things anyone's ever said to me. Let me see the picture."

She analyzed her picture. What did she see in it? With her new clothes and coiffure, she looked different from when she arrived.

"I barely recognize myself. I look like a painting." She looked up at him speculatively. "By the way... do you have any paintings of your wife?"

He recognized the overture.

"Yes. There are three throughout the house. My favorite is in the picture gallery. Have you been there?"

She nodded. "I have, but don't remember any picture in particular. I guess I paid little attention. Will you show it to me?"

"I guess it's my turn to open up about the past. Come." He offered her his arm. "Let's take a walk in the gallery."

The last thing he wanted was to reveal his sins and risk losing the warmth he saw in her eyes when she looked at him. But he knew he must. He would do anything for her. Even act against his own best interests.



CHAPTER 32 - His Story



THEY LEFT THE LIBRARY arm in arm and ascended the staircase. Livvy found herself grateful for the strength of his hold on her because, after her revelations, she felt drained and a bit weak. The entrance to the picture gallery was through a pair of massive double doors at the top of the grand staircase. It extended in both directions, taking up the whole north side of the center wing of the house.

Dale turned left when they entered the gallery. The sun sat low in the sky, and the rays streaming through the windows painted rhomboidal patterns on the wood floor. It still disoriented her how early the sun set in the fall in England. It looked to be past six in the evening, even though it was not yet four in the afternoon.

Dale stopped and turned in front of a portrait, causing her to turn with him. She was in front of a life-size portrait of a beautiful young lady with golden hair and laughing blue eyes, wearing a dress very similar to what Livvy wore now.

Olivia looked slowly from the painting to her dress to Dale. He stared straight at the painting, his face like granite, revealing nothing. It was obvious he was trying to conceal all emotion behind a wall of impassivity, but that in itself revealed how deep his feelings for his late wife must run.

She read the plaque under the painting:

“Eloise M Collins

Fifth Duchess of Avondale

August 1860”

She had many questions, but felt reluctant to ask. The subject seemed, understandably, a painful one for Dale. So she waited patiently for him to speak first.

Tearing his eyes from the picture, he ran his hands over his face. “That painting was done right before our marriage. My father commissioned it upon our betrothal, to serve as the official painting of the future duchess.”

“It is a splendid portrait. Obviously she was beautiful, but the painting also conveys some... mischievousness?”

He made a half smile. “Yes, she used to be. Long ago, before our marriage. By the time she had been married to me long enough, all the laughter and mischief had left her. She was only a miserable shadow of her former self.”

That surprised Olivia. She had had the impression it had been a happy and loving marriage. It was clear Dale loved his wife. What could have caused the woman to be so unhappy? Again, she waited patiently for him to continue.

“We were childhood friends. She was the daughter of the Earl and Countess of Cavendish. They own the neighboring estate. Our fathers were friends and wanted an alliance between the two families, so from the time we were children, they arranged our marriage.”

“Yours was an arranged marriage? I thought it had been a love match.”

Dale shrugged. “A bit of both, I guess. I grew up knowing someday I would marry Eloise. Some young men may have resented having their right to choose a bride taken from them, but I didn’t mind. I liked her well enough.”

He looked straight at her, endeavoring to explain.

“We were playmates ever since I can remember. I was two years older, but she was an intrepid little girl; always following me around, getting into all sorts of scrapes. Our parents allowed us much more freedom than was traditional because of the understanding that we were practically betrothed.

“I was in no hurry to get married, though. I was too busy sowing my wild oats in London and abroad. After finishing university, I took two years to travel the continent in what’s called ‘The Grand Tour’. I went from Portugal all the way to

Constantinople, staying in all the capitals and enjoying what each one offered.

“But eventually I was called back home. My father decreed I had dragged my heels long enough regarding Eloise. Her parents were getting impatient for her to marry since she was getting old waiting for me.”

“Old? Seems to me you both were really young. How old were you?”

“I was twenty-four. She was twenty-two.”

Livvy snorted. “Hardly old. I got married at twenty-two and everyone kept saying how I was marrying too young.”

“For London society, in these times, twenty-two is positively ancient. Girls are presented at seventeen or eighteen. By the time they are twenty-two, they have had several seasons. If by then they have not secured a husband, the Ton considers them ‘on the shelf’ condemned to a life of spinsterhood.”

“How ridiculous.”

“That’s the way it is. Anyway, I didn’t mind. I came back willing to do my duty. After all, I had had my fun, and I was fond of Eloise. I didn’t want to cause her any embarrassment.

“My first encounter with her after several years was a shock, though. I remembered her as the tomboyish little girl who followed me around in my shenanigans. But while I was away, she had blossomed into a beauty. Half the gentlemen in London wanted to marry her. I felt very lucky indeed that I was to have the privilege.”

He exhaled roughly. “I was so infatuated with her, I didn’t even notice that while my feelings for her had transformed from almost brotherly affection to romantic love, hers for me had not.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed.”

“But surely, if she didn’t want to marry you, she could have refused, couldn’t she have?”

“It’s not that simple. Maybe, if she had felt strongly enough, she could have refused. But I think she didn’t even know her own feelings. My guess is that she confused the innocent affection she felt for me for actual love. I was, after all, her childhood friend. Her closest male acquaintance. And I mistook her reticence for modesty.

“So we married. But needless to say, the marriage did not go as expected. At first I hoped that given the foundation of affection and friendship we had, in time, with closeness and intimacy, she could come to love me. Instead, she became more distant. Even repulsed by me.”

Olivia thought ‘repulsed’ was too strong a word. Oh, she knew there was no rhyme or reason to chemistry between people, but Dale was one of the most attractive men she had ever seen. Not to mention kind. She had had a small taste of his kisses and something more, and he was, frankly, irresistible. Maybe Eloise hadn’t been attracted to him, but repulsed? Livvy’s disbelief must have shown on her face because he insisted.

“It is true. She tolerated my kisses well enough in the beginning. Although she never showed overt enthusiasm, I always thought it was due to maidenly reticence. But after we married and became... intimate, she took a violent dislike to me.”

Oh. Now she saw where this was heading and how humiliating it must be. Brave of him to confess despite how horrible this must feel for him. She didn’t quite want to know any more about this uncomfortable story.

“Dale, you don’t have to share with me anything you are not comfortable sharing. I don’t need to know all the details.”

“I want you to know. Because, see, I asked you to marry me. And you know I desire you. I think you desire me now, but I never want to see disgust on another woman’s face ever again.”

“Why would my desire turn to disgust, Dale?” Her overactive imagination tried to come up with scenarios. “Do you have some sort of... ahem, deformity or disfigurement

that is not evident under your clothes? Or do you have any unusual preferences?”

He stiffened slightly.

Ah. She seemed to have struck a nerve. It confirmed she was on the right path, then. “What is it? You can tell me. Whatever it is, I promise to hear you with an open mind and without judgment. And to be honest with you.”

“We will discuss it later. This is not the right time or place.”

Reminded that he was telling her about his marriage, she tried to put the other subject aside and focus. He had listened sympathetically when she had told her story. She could do no less.

“Right. I’m sorry for getting off topic. You were telling me about your wife.”

He turned his back to the portrait and walked over to the window that overlooked the gardens, looking out into the distance.

“As I was saying, she took a dislike to me. I tried to be patient and take it slow with her. She was a very sheltered virgin when we married, so I assumed marital relations must have been quite a shock to her.

“I tried to give her time and introduce her to pleasure little by little. But it seemed nothing worked. She never quite refused me. She had been raised to believe it was the wife’s duty to submit to her husband’s demands. But I didn’t want a suffering martyr in my bed. I wanted her passion! Yet whenever I touched her, she recoiled. Whenever I tried to talk to her about it, she turned red and avoided my eyes. I tried everything I could think of. But the more I did, the more uncomfortable and unhappy she seemed.

“I think it was about two years into our marriage when I finally gave up. But I never stopped loving her and desiring her. I would still visit her bed sometimes. After all, it was our duty to produce an heir to the title, and she knew that. But I would try to make it as fast and unobtrusive for her as

possible. It was done in the dark, fully covered and with the least amount of touching possible. That was about all she could tolerate.”

Olivia tried to imagine the situation. How horrible it must have been for both of them. For Eloise, if she was so repulsed by sex, it must have felt like a violation. And for Dale, who was passionately in love with his wife, those encounters must have been deeply unsatisfying. More than that, the knowledge that the woman he loved barely tolerated his touch out of duty must have been corrosive. No wonder he had not married again.

She placed her hand lightly on his arm. “Wouldn’t it have been better, under the circumstances, to separate?”

“Maybe. But divorce is nearly impossible, and I had a duty to beget an heir. I wanted to get her pregnant with the same intensity I feared it. On the one hand, I would have loved to have a child and not only as my heir. Even if it had been a girl, I would have loved her. On the other hand, I knew that as soon as Eloise produced an heir, she wouldn’t have anything more to do with me, and I wouldn’t have that excuse to visit her bed. I was so pathetically in love with her, I couldn’t bear the thought. Even knowing she didn’t love me, I wanted her by my side in any way I could have her.”

“Oh, Dale.”

He snorted and turned on his heel, breaking their contact. “I told you it was pathetic.”

Olivia didn’t know what to say. She understood obsession, understood what it was like holding on to something, or someone, beyond reason.

She leaned casually against the windowsill and spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. “Who am I to talk? God knows I’ve been a fool in love myself. Love, obsession and foolishness seem to go hand in hand.”

“But in my case, those emotions ended up destroying the person I loved.”



CHAPTER 33 - The Bargain



OLIVIA ABSORBED HIS declaration. She knew about guilt too and what a corrosive emotion it was. Irrational too. You didn't have to be directly at fault for something to feel guilty about it. Especially when it involved someone you loved.

"Tell me what happened," she said.

"I don't know if I can. I had resolved to tell you everything. But now that the moment has come, I... I'm afraid. I have never talked about it with anyone."

"Whatever it is, I won't judge you. Anyway, I doubt I could judge you any worse than you yourself have done." She went to him. Reaching for his hand, she cradled it in hers. The simple touch seemed to act as a calming balm. Did he feel it too? He looked down at their joined hands and contemplated them in the silence. Wrapping his strong fingers around her delicate wrist, he absentmindedly rubbed circles in her palm as he continued.

"The thing I both feared and wanted finally happened. We were going to go to London for the Season and were all packed to leave the next day when Eloise came to my bedroom. She seemed nervous but also happy and... relieved. It surprised me, because she never sought me out, much less in my bedroom. But she had important news. She came to tell me she was expecting. And to request a... separation and cessation of our marital activities on account of her condition.

"It was only what I expected. Even so, I was stunned. I couldn't believe I was losing her. If the child was male, she would have fulfilled her obligation to the title and need never return to me. She wanted to stay here at the hall, but told me I should go on to London and enjoy the season.

"She even implied she wouldn't mind if I took my pleasures elsewhere. She was going to spend her pregnancy here and notify me when the baby was born. If the baby was a

boy, she wanted me to allow her to continue to live separately. If it was a girl, she would continue her duty to try to produce a male heir after a reasonable time.

“I was hurt, and furious, and a little crazed. I refused to let her leave me. She pleaded, and I became even more upset. It was the first real argument we had had since we married. Until then, we had pretended cool civility.

“Finally, out of desperation, I proposed a bargain. She’d let me make love to her the way I wanted, with no barriers, no taboos. I could do whatever I wanted. If after that she didn’t find pleasure, I would let her go and never bother her again.

“I thought I was clever. That if I could show her the pleasures of lovemaking, she wouldn’t want to leave me. I just needed a fair chance.” He closed his eyes. “I can still see her haunted face. Her fearful eyes. But she wanted her freedom and probably concluded that a few moments of unpleasantness were well worth it. She accepted with one condition. She would set the time and place. I agreed, and she decided to have it done there and then.

“I was more than a little taken aback. I had imagined a slow seduction at night. Wine, roses and candlelight. I wanted to plan my strategy and take my time, not to be thrown into the action at a moment’s notice and in such an awful mood. But she said that she couldn’t deal with the wait. That she would lose her courage or tie herself into knots with nerves. She wanted to get it over with.

“When I still hesitated, she asked me with a little taunting smile if I wasn’t up to the task. That sealed it. I had her on her back before she could utter another word. But she could be at ease. She squirmed and retreated and cowered at the slightest caress. She was so tense! I needed her to relax and allow me to touch her if this was going to work. I told her we should stop, that the mood wasn’t right. But she frantically refused. She instead asked me to tie her.”

Olivia gulped and looked down. Slightly uncomfortable and unsure if she should be listening to such private details, but still entranced by the tale.

Oblivious to her mixed emotions, Dale continued. “I was shocked. I had played with ties before, but that had been before I married, with a skilled courtesan in a specialized place. I never thought of using them with my wife. I refused, but she insisted. She said it would be the only way she’d be able to relax and submit. And she wanted to go through with it.

“If I had been thinking clearly, I probably would have stopped the whole thing. Looking back, everything was wrong. The timing, the emotions, the motivations. But I wasn’t thinking clearly. I was desperate and aroused, and in my arrogance, I thought I could make her enjoy the act. I was frantic to prove so.

“So I tied her hands and feet to the bedposts and for the first time in my marriage I was able to touch her the way I wanted to. I kissed and caressed her until she shuddered with her climax. I felt elated. Heady with the belief that we had finally broken through a barrier and everything would be well now.”

“I gather it wasn’t so simple,” Olivia said, bringing her other hand to cover his where it was still clutching hers.

“God no. She burst out crying and asked me if she had fulfilled her side of the bargain and could stop now. It was like a splash of ice water on my face. I had forgotten the bargain. Had forgotten everything but the pleasure I thought we were sharing. I looked at her eyes and my heart shattered. I knew in that instant that nothing had changed. That there was no hope of a happy future together. It wasn’t a matter of experiencing pleasure, after all. She really did not want me. I felt like I had raped her even though we hadn’t even... had intercourse.

“I untied her, and she immediately rolled over and out of bed, wrapping herself in the sheet. Without a word or a backward glance, she went into her room quietly and locked the door behind her. The click of the lock sounded loud in my mind, like a symbol of her shutting me out.

“I rode away, mindless and numb. I rode until both the horse and I were exhausted. But I finally accepted the

inevitable. I had to let her go. When I returned, it was only because a storm brewed on the horizon. She was... gone. Took a carriage and a valise. By then, the storm was raging. I ran after her with a premonition of disaster. Hoping she had gone to her parents. But I found the carriage wrecked on the riverbank, horses struggling, Eloise nowhere in sight. We never found her.”

Olivia was horrified by the story. What a tragic turn of events. No wonder Dale blamed himself. Still, something didn't seem quite right.

“You never found her? Isn't that strange? Is it possible she may have survived?”

He smiled bitterly. “I held onto that hope far longer than was reasonable, thinking that as long as there wasn't a body, she was not dead. I kept the search going for over a year. We found her bonnet tangled in some branches by the riverbank about five miles down. It is quite possible that her dress dragged her down, and then the river washed her body out to sea. In any case, it's been seven years. If she were alive, she would have been found by now.”

“I suppose,” Livvy said. “I am so sorry, Dale. The whole thing is so... tragic.” She released his hand to wrap her arm around his waist and put her cheek on his shoulder. She hoped the embrace would comfort him. Both his arms came around her and she felt him drop a kiss on the top of her head.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

“For what?”

“For everything. For not considering me a monster as I surely deserve. For trying to comfort me. For accepting me and for being here. Ah, God. It feels so good to hold you.”

“I certainly don't think you are a monster. I'm sure you blame yourself for your wife's death, and to be honest, I'd probably feel the same in your place. Maybe it is human nature to feel responsible for everything that happens around us and to our loved ones. We see cause and effect. Action and reaction.”

She disentangled herself from the embrace to look him in the eyes.

“But life is never that simple. Every day we make many decisions and we never know what repercussions they will have. Some will be good, and some will be bad. Some will be small and some life-altering. We try to do our best, but we are human. We make mistakes, and we don’t know everything.

“And remember that others also take part and can affect the outcome of things. When someone we love dies, we see only our actions and what we could have done differently. But how about them? I blamed myself for encouraging my sister to go out. But ultimately, the decision to go out was hers. And perhaps nothing would have happened if the drunk driver who hit their car had not chosen to drink and drive. There are many elements involved in an outcome.”

“Thank you for trying to exonerate me, but I think my actions were a lot less innocent than that. I was selfish and arrogant. What right did I have to keep her against her will? Or to put any conditions on her freedom? I practically raped her! And that caused her to run to her death.”

Olivia sighed. It was clear words and reasoning would not dissolve his guilt and pain. She didn’t know what to say. How to reach him. But she had to try.

“Did she have any reason to believe you would be cruel or hurtful? I find that hard to believe. You are one of the most considerate and generous men I’ve ever known.”

“Proposing that bargain wasn’t generous. She accepted out of desperation. Because she thought it was the only way to be free of me.”

“Or maybe she wanted to prove to herself that she could overcome her aversion. Dale, would you say she was fond of you in a non-sexual way?”

“She used to be. There was a time when we were best friends.”

“Then maybe she really wanted to love you that way, but couldn’t. You were two people caught in unfortunate

circumstances. She made a mistake marrying you, feeling the way she did. From then on, you two were tangled together in an unhappy relationship, with no way out.”

He caressed her face and tucked a curl that had escaped behind her ear. “I see your point. Thank you for trying to ease my conscience. How did you become so wise?”

Olivia shivered under the light touch. “Hardly wise. I told you, I used to feel the same way. I got help from a therapist to work through all of that and gain the insights I have now. But I doubt you have gotten any help. I’m no psychologist, but sometimes all we need to shift our perspective is a friend.”

“Are we friends then?” He asked casually, but she sensed the intensity underneath.

“Something like that.” she was mesmerized by his gaze.

“Are you still considering my proposal or have I scared you off?”

“I’m still considering it.” Was she? Or had her heart already made the decision? And why was her voice so breathless?

He framed her face with his hands. He was going to kiss her. She closed her eyes, dizzy with desire and anticipation, but only felt the whisper pressure of his thumb over her lips.

“At least you are not saying no.” His voice was low, intimate, intense with leashed emotions.

No, she wasn’t. Where this man was concerned, she was not sure she was capable of ever saying no.



CHAPTER 34 - The Pianist



SHE COULDN'T SLEEP. Olivia tossed and turned and re-adjusted the pillow for the tenth time in an hour. The emotional revelations of the day had left her exhausted, but too restless to sleep. She wondered what Dale was doing. Had he retired already? She had not seen him at dinner tonight. After their conversation in the gallery, he had disappeared. He'd sent her a note excusing himself from dinner.

Not wanting to eat alone in the huge dining room, she had eaten in her bedroom and had decided to have a pampering night. She had taken a hot bath with a soothing lavender scent while sipping excellent wine, and then read a book on her phone until it had run out of charge. It was so inconvenient not to have electricity! Now it was late, and she had run out of things to do.

But that meant she had way too much time alone with her thoughts. How did people entertain themselves in these times? If she were in her world, she could watch tv, or online videos, listen to music or check social media. Well, she could keep reading, just not on her phone. She would have to go down to the library to get a book. Surely she could find something to read among the thousands of volumes in that room.

She didn't much fancy the idea of wandering around the house alone at night. It was one thing during the day; the house was bright and there was always someone nearby. But late at night, the house was dark and empty and a little creepy. She was grateful Dale's room was right next to hers. She found comfort in the knowledge he slept nearby. Hearing him in the next room, or seeing the sliver of light under his door, reassured her.

But today she couldn't feel his presence on the other side of the door, and that made her feel very alone, bereft. She had to go downstairs. She would go nuts in this room with nothing to do and sleep eluding her.

She lit up a candelabra from the little lamp by her bed and peeked into the hallway. As expected, it was empty. She shivered a little. From cold or fear? Chiding herself for being a coward, she threw on a robe over her nightgown and, candelabra in hand, stepped into the hallway.

She made her way downstairs without incident. Thankfully, the house was not completely dark. There were lamps lit at regular intervals throughout the hallways. She was about to reach the library when she heard music. Very faint but unmistakable—Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. One of her favorite classical pieces. Someone was playing the piano.

Lured by the melody, she followed the sound down the corridor beyond the library to a small salon at the end called the music room. She had visited it on her tours of the house. The room was full of instruments, including a piano, a harp, a couple or violins in display cabinets, and even a cello. It looked like a museum, and she had wondered if anyone ever played them. It must be Dale. She doubted the servants would play, even if they knew how, and there was no one else in the house. She opened the door slowly, and there he was, sitting at the piano, his hands coaxing the haunting melody from its keys.

Dale was so engrossed in the music he didn’t notice her entrance, and she had no intention of announcing herself. The last thing she wanted was to interrupt him. He was magnificent, his deft fingers moving rapidly and surely over the keys. His head bent, his body swayed to the tempo, and all the emotions of the piece flashed across his face.

The music filled the space and inundated her whole body; the emotions finding an echo in her heart. She could barely breathe.

At last, the music ended in a triumphant crescendo, and the last notes reverberated in the air before fading into the silence.

He finally looked up and saw her.

She couldn’t talk. The emotion he’d poured into her with his playing welled up into her throat, silencing her.

He stared at her for a moment, seeming neither surprised nor displeased by her presence.

“I’m sorry if the music woke you. I didn’t think it would reach all the way to your bedroom.”

“It doesn’t. It didn’t. More is the shame. I came down to look for a book because I couldn’t sleep and heard it. That was... extraordinary.”

He shrugged, and the corner of his mouth hooked up in a shy grin as his gaze skittered away from hers. “Thank you. I’m no brilliant pianist, but this is one of my favorite pieces.”

“I disagree. I think you are very good. Moonlight Sonata is one of my favorite pieces as well. But I had never heard it played with so much passion. I have goosebumps.” She ran her hands over her arms.

She had moved closer as they talked. Now she stood almost within arm’s reach, leaning casually against the piano. He watched her hands.

“I wouldn’t move any closer if I were you,” he said.

The way he said it, his eyes dark and desire evident in every line of his body, sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine. She wanted to move closer, much closer.

“Why?” Olivia asked, and her voice sounded breathless.

He narrowed his eyes, not fooled by her challenge. “Because, Olivia, I want to make love to you. I want to tear up your nightclothes and take you right here and now, like a barbarian.”

Oh, yes, please. “Alright then.” Her response was breathless. Her heart had sped up at his impassioned declaration.

“No. I’ve wanted to do that since you showed up in my life, and I’ve been able to restrain myself. But you saw what happened earlier in the library. Now you are here again, alone with me. I’m afraid I will lose control and do something we might both regret.”

“Why would we regret it, Dale?”

“I would if you did.”

“Surely you know I wanted that kiss as much as you did.”

“Passion and sex have wreaked havoc in my life before.”

“Yes, they can have destructive powers. But I am not her. I will not run away.”

“You have nowhere to run. In some ways, you are even more vulnerable than Eloise. Maybe you won’t want to. I keep hoping it will be different. But what if I’m selfishly deluding myself just because I want you? What if you find my touch distressing, too?”

“Why would I find it distressing? I have enjoyed myself in your arms before. I know where that leads, and I’ve never found it distressing.” She came back to what she had asked him before. “Unless you have some unusual preferences?”

“That is the thing. I don’t know if my preferences are unusual... or exaggerated. Especially for someone like you. I don’t know what is ‘normal’ in my time, let alone in yours.”

“I see. Well, the sexual standards and what is considered ‘normal’ have relaxed since your century. I am not the most experienced person since I married young and have only had one sexual partner, which, by the way, is highly unusual in my time. But even I am aware of all kinds of preferences and inclinations. But why do you say you don’t know what is ‘normal’ even in your time? You said you sowed wild oats. Does that not include, well, gaining sexual experience?”

“I have sexual experience. But all of my experience before my marriage was with courtesans.”

She tilted her head at the unfamiliar word.

“Prostitutes,” he clarified.

Her eyes widened in amazement.

“I had great fun,” he admitted, “experienced quite a bit and learned many interesting things. But considering the source of my experience, I doubt it is the way of normal people. And likely, I never received honest feedback on my performance,

except from my wife. You can see how I have reason to be unsure if my inclinations are normal.”

“Oh boy.” Olivia could now see the recipe for disaster. “All your experiences apart from your wife were with prostitutes?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “That was the option most readily available to me. In my society, it is unthinkable to have a sexual relationship with an unmarried lady. And I have no taste for adultery, so that also eliminated the married women. That leaves only widows. But they might have harbored expectations of marrying me to become a duchess. I was already promised to Eloise, so I thought it best not to encourage their ambitions.”

“I see. What about since Eloise’s death? It’s been quite a few years. Haven’t you wanted to have a normal relationship that would lead to marriage?”

“God, no. I have not sought any kind of relationship. Since Eloise’s death, I have forsworn sex. I never intended to marry again.”



CHAPTER 35 - Foreplay



THE MAGNITUDE OF WHAT he had revealed struck her to the core. He had given up sex altogether, and he never intended to marry again. Yet he had proposed marriage to her and obviously desired her.

“Don’t you think that is a little extreme? ‘Never’ is a very long time.” She countered, shocked.

“Maybe. But I also saw the wreckage of my parent’s marriage because of my father’s promiscuous tendencies. My own relationship with my mother soured because of how much I turned out to be like my father. She despised him ever since I can remember. When I was little, she sometimes expressed affection for me. But when I turned thirteen, my father took me to my first brothel, and I started down his path. I could see the disgust on my mother’s face every time she looked at me.

“I became yet another point of contention between my parents. He accused her of trying to turn me into a ‘molly boy,’ and she accused him of turning me into a disgusting lecher like himself. Apparently, she was right. After that, the only thing I ever did of which she approved was marrying Eloise. But then, after what happened, and Eloise’s death, she never spoke to me again. She died two years ago and didn’t want me by her side even then.”

Oh, my god. How horrible. Even though he had warned her to stay away, she was unable to do so. He might consider himself a ‘disgusting lecher’ as he had put it, but she had seen nothing but an honorable man with a healthy sexual appetite. Led astray by his father while still a child, then rejected by his own mother, and later his wife, no wonder he carried a mountain of guilt.

He still sat on the piano bench, but had turned sideways to face her, so she walked right up between his spread legs, within touching distance, but not touching. She could feel the

heat radiating off his body. He didn't move away, but neither did he pull her closer. His fists clenched where they rested on his thighs.

"Let's do something," she said. "Tell me what you like, and I will be honest. If there's something I don't like, I will speak up. No hysterics. I liked what you were doing before. I think you know that. So at least we have a starting point."

He wiggled a few inches backward, putting space, small as it was, between their bodies. He would not meet her eyes with his own.

Since he was not comfortable enough to talk, she would. "Okay, I will ask you straight out, starting with the most outrageous. Are you into orgies, weird rituals, sex with animals, children, or corpses?"

His gaze flew to hers in shock. "What?! No!"

"Ok, good. Those would have been deal breakers for me. How about with men?"

He flinched, reddened, and his brows drew together as he prepared to speak.

She held up a hand to silence him before he uttered a word. "That's perfectly acceptable in my time. I don't think you swing that way, but there are people who are bisexual, and while I may not judge, I prefer a man who is only interested in women."

"You have altogether too much naughty information in your mind, Olivia. I'm afraid of what may come out of your mouth next. I assure you, I have always only been sexually interested in women."

"Excellent! So far, we are off to a good start," she said with a cheeky smile.

"This is not a joking matter, Olivia."

"Of course not," she answered, sobering a little. "If I take a light tone, it is to make it easier to communicate. But I realize this is a delicate subject. Next, are you into bondage, sadism,

punishment, that kind of stuff? You mentioned you had played with ties.”

Avondale froze. He seemed to war with himself, the dim candlelight flickering in his dilated pupils, the muscles clenching along his chiseled jaw. Knowing that she was getting somewhere, Olivia lent forward and lightly placed her hands on his shoulders.

Licking her lips, she huskily asked, “Did you enjoy it?”

He let out a groan. “I did.” But still he showed great restraint and hesitated to say more.

Olivia cocked a sly smile and trailed her fingers up his neck and over his jaw. She ran them deep into his luscious, thick hair. Taking a firm grip, she tipped his head back, forcing him to look up at her. Biting her lip, she moved forward until she hovered only mere millimeters from his ear. “Tell me, Dale, do you like to be dominated... or to be the dominator?”

He sucked in a breath, and his hands gripped her hips. “Careful. You are playing with fire.” He growled in her ear.

“Tell me.” She whispered back, unintimidated and more aroused than ever.

He hesitated for a couple of heartbeats. His grip on her hips became punishing, before he unclenched his hands and admitted. “It was in a specialized house that catered to more exotic tastes. But nothing as extreme as what the Marquis de Sade wrote about. I just enjoyed having the woman tied up and at my mercy. I allowed myself to be tied up a couple of times, too.”

He yanked her against him. “It was... titillating, having no control. And the woman was quite skilled.” He groaned and buried his face between her breasts. Against her leg, she could feel the hard ridge of his arousal. “I can’t believe I’m telling you any of this. I must have lost my mind. This is no suitable subject for a lady.”

“On the contrary,” Olivia replied, running her fingers through the silky locks, “I think this kind of frank talk is

essential between lovers. If there was more communication, there would be less dissatisfaction.”

“Perhaps. But if I tried to talk about this with any society lady, they would have the vapors. It would only confirm in their minds that I’m a depraved reprobate.” His voice labored between desire and humor.

“So far, I have heard nothing that would make me think you are depraved. Just a passionate man with a creative sexuality.”

He raised his face to look at her. Eyes full of desire were an invitation she couldn’t resist. Olivia kissed down his cheek to his mouth. When she arrived at his lips, he captured hers and took control of the kiss. He kissed her deeply, hungrily, his tongue invading her mouth and sliding sensually. Leaving no room for retreat. His lips sucked at hers, creating cascades of sensation running down her body. Her knees softened, and he supported her by hugging her hips.

Olivia brought her knees up to straddle him on the bench, bringing their pelvises together with exquisite intimacy. She rocked herself against his rigid shaft, enjoying the hardness against her most sensitive spot. Dale sucked in a breath, his every muscle going rigid. He held her hips steady while deep shudders rocked him.

Thinking he had orgasmed, Olivia groaned internally. She had gone too fast. The man hadn’t had sex in years. No wonder he was ready to explode. No matter. There would be other opportunities. She was actually kind of pleased with herself that she had made him lose control so thoroughly.

Huskily she asked, “Dale, did you just finish?”

His low chuckle was devilish. He looked at her with mischief in his eyes. “I haven’t ‘finished’ anything. In fact, we are just getting started. You have broken my control, so prepare yourself. Before the night is over, I’m going to make you come for me several times. So hard that you are going to scream my name.”

The naked sensuality of his tone and the promise of pleasure in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine. It was so at odds with his previous coolness and detachment. It was as if a layer had been peeled. And to think that he hid all this carnality beneath a veneer of propriety. She now saw the profoundly passionate man under the surface and the contrast started a fire in her veins.

“I think I will marry you after all,” she said.

He growled and grabbed the knot of her robe, pulling at it while taking her mouth again in another drugging kiss. His clever fingers untied the knot and opened her robe. He pushed it off her shoulders, and the heavy material fell to the floor in a heavy whoosh. He caressed her through the thin fabric of the silk nightgown. His hands traveled up her thighs, around to her bottom, grabbing fistfuls of her ass, before contouring her waist and making soothing circles on her back. She melted under his touch like wax licked by fire.

It was too much, and at the same time, it wasn't enough. She wanted his hands on her with no barriers. He seemed to know exactly what she wanted. He redirected his hands and ran them up her thighs, dragging the hem of her gown up and up. She stood on her knees to let it pass under her bottom and lifted her arms. He pulled the gown over and off, finally freeing her. She was totally naked, spread, straddling his lap. Her sex felt heavy and wanton as his gaze scorched her skin, her nipples beading in the cool air as his eyes roamed possessively over her body.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered thickly.

His admiring gaze inflamed her further. He remained fully dressed, and the contrast of his clothed body against her complete nakedness added another layer of wicked pleasure.

He let the moment stretch, but she could not wait any longer. Her breasts felt heavy, her core wept with desire, and the little bud at the center of her pleasure ached, swollen and sensitive, crying out for attention. She undulated her hips, trying to find some release in the movement, and took both her

breasts in her hands, massaging them, rolling her sensitive nipples between her fingers.

He snapped.

Groaning, he took one of her breasts in his mouth, sucking and licking and teasing it to aching hardness. He did the same with the other, alternating between the two, while his clever hands moved down below from every direction. He smoothed one hand down her back, slipped it between her butt cheeks to cup her sex from behind. Owing, possessing. He dipped a finger into her core and spread the moisture, circling her entrance before delving in again, deeper this time.

Her vagina contracted, her internal muscles trying to grab onto him, and the slippery digit escaping and driving her mad. His other hand cupped her from the front, unerringly finding and rubbing her swollen and sensitized clit. Drawing inarticulate sounds from her throat.

His mouth at her breasts, his fingers on her, in her. Her breathing fractured. She felt the familiar climbing; the tension winding tighter and tighter within herself until she passed some exquisite point. And the pressure released. She gasped and spasmed as wave after wave of a powerful climax wracked her body. His hands and mouth never stopped. They stayed with her, drawing every ounce of exquisite pleasure from her orgasm until she finally fell limp on his chest.

He slowly drew his hands from her pussy to wrap one arm around her waist and the other under her butt, propping her up.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he commanded a moment before he stood up with her in his arms.

And just like that, with her naked and twinned around him like a limpet, he walked out of the music room and through the sleeping house toward his bedroom.

She felt no shame, no embarrassment at being paraded naked through the house. In a distant corner of her mind, she was vaguely aware that a servant might see them, and she didn't even care. In the arms of this man she was pure desire, a creature made for hedonistic pleasure.



CHAPTER 36 - The Deed



DALE PUSHED OPEN THE door to the bedroom and deposited her in the center of his massive bed. Leaving her there, prowled back toward the door and turned the key in the lock, then made his way to the fireplace to stoke the fire.

She turned on her side and, propping her head on her hand, watched him with dreamy eyes. His body was male perfection. He moved with such languorous grace and efficiency as he saw to the tasks at hand.

He finally came back to the bed. Taking her in his arms, he pushed her on her back, crawling half on top of her, one of his legs between hers. He looked at her, his gaze tender and fierce at the same time as his hand caressed down her side from breast to hip.

She reveled in his regard. Maybe she should have felt exposed, vulnerable, self conscious. Instead, she felt powerfully feminine. She enjoyed being naked with him, found it freeing, empowering. His slow caress once again stoked the hunger of her desire. She opened her legs in silent invitation. She needed him there. It was surprising to feel so inflamed again after being so thoroughly satisfied.

Desperation ripped through her with the suddenness of a summer storm. He wore too many clothes. She needed to feel his skin against hers. She wanted to kiss and explore his whole body. And he knew it. She could see it in his eyes. He knew exactly what this slow caress, this apparent pause, was doing to her.

“Dale,” she moaned.

“Hmm.”

“As much as I enjoy the piquancy of being naked while you are fully dressed, I want to see you, too. I need to feel your skin.”

He smiled slowly, wickedly, as he stood up. “Your wish is my command, my lady. Do you want to help me undress?”

She got on her knees on the bed and grabbed hold of his coat before he had finished the sentence. It probably would have been faster if she hadn't helped, but not nearly as enjoyable. She pushed the coat off his shoulders. Next should be his cravat and shirt, but she'd rather remove his pants and look at the hard cock straining against the front of his trousers. She went to work on the buttons at his waist, and he chuckled, working to remove his cravat and shirt himself.

He had the cravat undone and waistcoat unbuttoned when she squeezed his member through the fabric of his drawers and his hips pumped into her hand while a strangled groan escaped his mouth. He threw off the discarded cravat and removed his shirt and waistcoat in one smooth motion, revealing the hard planes of his exquisite body. The view of his magnificent torso momentarily distracted her from her ministrations below the waist.

She stared, transfixed. He grabbed hold of her hands and slid them over his chest. “Touch me.” He pleaded and commanded at the same time.

She needed no more urging as she ran her hands over his abdomen and chest, feeling the hard contours. She kept going over his wide shoulders, down his muscled arms.

He was perfect, all hard muscles and warm skin. Unable to help herself, she leaned forward and kissed his chest, feeling his heart thundering under her lips, then ran her mouth over to one of his flat nipples and bit softly. He made a choking sound. How enjoyable to be able to drive this powerful man crazy with lust!

Her hands wandered down his back while she kissed and nuzzled his chest. She slid her hands beneath the waistband of his undone breeches and drawers to slide over his rock hard ass and he rolled his hips into her. The next moment, he stepped away and removed his breeches and drawers in one smooth motion.

She had one moment to contemplate the magnificence of his fully naked male body before he grabbed her by the back of her knees and flipped her on her back. He would take her now, and she was ready, more than ready. Her legs opened in silent invitation. But instead of falling on her and entering her, he slowly lowered his head and started kissing down her torso.

He was going there.

And then his mouth found her most intimate part, licked, sucked, teased and inflamed until her hands fisted on the sheets and she could make only inarticulate sounds.

“God, you taste so good.” He murmured against her flesh. “You have no idea how much I’ve dreamed of doing this.”

It was a full on assault. He wasn’t slowly bringing her to culmination; he was hurtling her there. His tongue circled the entrance to her body, dipping inside her to lick deeply before immediately darting out, making her delirious with want.

He introduced two of his fingers and curled them up, stimulating a place inside that made her eyes roll back in her head, while holding her still for the onslaught of his lips and tongue as they moved on her clit, licking and sucking relentlessly.

She felt the pleasure climbing inside, felt the urge to run towards the culmination. It was so close, but... no. Not like this. The next time she came, she wanted that glorious thick cock inside her. She had to make him stop. He was finishing her too fast. Grabbing fistfuls of his hair, she tried to dislodge him. Useless. He remained immovable.

“Dale no, wait! I’m going to come.”

She felt rather than hear his low growl of pleasure. The rumble of his words; “Yes, come for me,” uttered against her core, almost pushed her over the edge. He wasn’t going to stop. And she was powerless to resist him.

“Dale, please. I want you inside me.” She begged. That caught his attention. He eased the assault, though she could still feel his breath over her sensitized flesh. A delicious sensation.

Olivia pulled on his hair again to bring his gaze up. “I want to come with you inside me. Please, take me now.”

It was all the invitation he needed. He crawled on top of her and settled his heavy erection against her flesh, rolling his hips to rub it over her moisture. She moaned and drew her knees back, opening herself more to get closer to him. But he kept playing with her, rubbing back and forth.

It was exquisite torture. It was maddening. Digging her heels into the mattress, she lifted her pelvis and rolled her hips, trying to take him inside, but he retreated. Holding her hips with one hand, he asked her low in her ear.

“Is this what you want?”

“Yes! Please...” she almost sobbed.

“Say it then. Tell me what you want.”

“I want... I need your cock inside me. Now!”

With one quick movement, he changed the angle and entered her in one smooth motion, every delicious inch of him stretching and filling her, completing her.

“Ahhh, yes.” Their groans of pleasure mingled in harmony, and they both stilled, as if wanting to absorb the mind blowing perfection of this moment.

He felt so good. A substantial fullness. Filling her. Completing her. Her internal muscles clenched around his hardness, and he gasped.

And then he started moving. Slow and deep. Delicious. She ran her hands over the lean sides of his torso, settling momentarily on his rolling hips. His skin there was so soft, so at odds with the firm muscles underneath.

Her hands continued their roaming exploration, and she flexed her fingers over his rock hard ass, urging him to go faster. Although he gasped, he continued his maddeningly controlled rocking.

He lowered himself to his elbows on top of her and bracketed her head in his hands, holding her immobile for the plunder of his mouth. His tongue slid deeply in time with the

rhythm of their bodies below. His chest rubbed against her sensitized nipples with each thrust, and she whimpered in frantic need at the multilayered onslaught.

She didn't know sex could be so deep and sensual. He had her shamelessly begging for release before he increased the tempo. Their excitement grew. Faster, faster. Higher. She reached for the pinnacle.

With a series of deep, rapid thrusts, he growled in her ear, "That's it, come for me, darling."

And she exploded. The orgasm started deep in her core, triggering such violent waves of pleasure that she feared she would break apart. She held onto him during the storm, her powerful contractions milking him and triggering his own potent release. His cock spasmed inside her as his guttural sound of pleasure moved her to her core, just like his music had done before.



CHAPTER 37 - Come again?



DALE HALF COLLAPSED on top of Olivia, barely remembering to support part of his weight on his elbows to avoid crushing her. He remained inside her. Even after the most intense climax of his life, he couldn't bear to disengage. His body might be sated for the moment, but he was keenly aware of another kind of hunger. A hunger of the soul. A need that went beyond the physical.

When had he ever felt so content, happy even? Never. In his youth, he had enjoyed the uncomplicated couplings with courtesans and mistresses. They had satisfied his body, but it had always been a transaction. Bedding was a sort of sport, and his emotions had never been involved. Later, with Eloise... he cut off that line of thought. He had loved Eloise, and to think about her at this moment seemed like a betrayal to both her and Livvy.

Generous, passionate, adventuresome Livvy.

She didn't seem in a hurry to part from him, either. Her hands caressed his back in soothing motions, while below, her feet slid languorously up and down his legs. It was heaven. He felt accepted. No, more than that, he felt wanted. Himself. Not the wealthy duke, or the husband who had to be tolerated. The man.

He finally gathered the willpower to lift his head and roll over with her still gathered close to his body. The motion made him slide from her sweet depths, and he grieved the loss. Apparently she did too, because she gave a small moan, and her internal muscles tried to hug onto him. They lay side by side, their limbs intimately intertwined.

He brushed a lock of hair from her face. "Are you all right?"

"Uh hum," she purred.

He smiled. “No regrets then?”

“None. Unless you have them.”

“No, I have no regrets. This was...” He tried for a word that could describe what had just passed between them, but nothing could adequately express it, “extraordinary. Thank you.” He deposited a kiss on the tip of her nose.

Olivia smiled. “No thanks necessary, Dale. I enjoyed it just as much. Which is as it should be. ‘El amor jamás es un favor,’” she murmured softly, almost to herself.

But he heard her and understood the Spanish words. They sent a prickling sensation akin to panic throughout his body that dissolved the languid calm of the moment before.

He looked at a spot over her head. “Love is never a favor? No, but sex often is.”

She lifted her head to look at him, surprised. “Is that all this is then? Sex?”

He didn’t know why he felt the need to warn her not to speak of love. “No, it’s far more than that,” he said seriously, looking at her. “I should know. I’ve had plenty of sex without love. But I don’t know what it is. Friendship... passion, perhaps?”

“Of course. That is just a line from a song. It popped into my head when you said thank you. I didn’t know you spoke Spanish.”

Now she looked ashamed of having spoken. He felt like an ogre. He wanted to dispel the shadows from her eyes.

“My nurse was from Spain. I called her Nana. She spent more time with me than my actual mother.”

“You are full of enchanting surprises,” she said, a hint of hesitation shadowing her smile.

“Me? I am quite boring, I assure you.”

She laughed, and the sound lifted his spirits. Maybe he had not hurt her feelings after all.

“Ha! You are the least boring man I know. Just today, I found out that you play the piano, you speak Spanish, and you’re an amazing lover.”

He didn’t quite believe that last part, but he wanted to. So much. “I don’t know about that, but I am happy if I please you.”

He said the words lightly, but they meant the world to him. After being so thoroughly incapable of pleasing his wife, Livvy’s pleasure was everything to him.

Olivia cupped his jaw and replied in that direct way she had. “You please me, Dale. Very much.”

He closed his eyes and turned his face to plant a kiss on her palm. “Will you marry me then?”

“My objection was never about sex.”

“I know. But still. The matters of your reputation and your protection persist. I worry about you, Livvy.”

“You know what’s ironic? Under different circumstances, I would be happy to marry you.”

His heart skipped a beat. “What circumstances are those?”

“To be from the same time period, for starters.”

“Why does that make a difference?”

“Because I feel like we are from two different worlds, and neither one of us can successfully inhabit the other’s. When two people marry, they are supposed to become one. But we can never be one, can we? We would be making false marriage vows. And even though I am divorced, or maybe because of that, I have the utmost respect for marriage. I don’t think it is to be undertaken lightly.”

“I wouldn’t be making false vows.” He looked straight into her eyes, trying to impress his sincerity. “If you accept my proposal, I will fulfill all my vows until death do us part. If you return to your own time, we are as good as dead to each other, because neither one of us is alive in the other’s time.”

“I guess you are right. But I still don’t know. I don’t know enough of this world to see the whole picture and understand any drawbacks.”

“Do you trust me?”

She raised her brows pointedly. “Look at us Dale. I wouldn’t be lying here with you if I didn’t trust you.”

“Not in this. I know intimacy requires a certain amount of trust, but I mean on a deeper level. Do you trust me to take care of you, to have your best interests at heart?”

“I do.” Olivia sighed. “But I could be wrong. I was wrong about my ex husband. I am a very trusting person by nature. I had resolved to be more cautious and not trust blindly. I guess what it all comes down to is that I don’t trust myself.”

“I see. How can I help you trust?”

“I don’t know. Just keep being yourself. I feel very close to you at this moment. Not only physically, but emotionally. I feel as if some barriers have come down. Do you feel the same?”

“Ah, Olivia. You have been sneaking under my barriers since the moment I found you.”

A little smile curled the corners of her mouth, and she pressed a kiss to his chest.

But he went on. “I disagree with something, though.”

Brow furrowing, she asked, “What?”

“We are not close enough.” He rolled half on top of her again. “I need to be closer. I need to be inside you. Will you let me in?”

“Dale!” Olivia exclaimed with an alarmed laugh. “You can’t possibly be ready to do it again!”

“Are you sure about that?” And just to impress on her how ready he was, he rubbed his erection against her thigh. Her little exclamation of surprise sent another wave of desire to his loins.

“Even if you are ready, I don’t think I can come again. You have wrenched every iota of pleasure out of me for the night.”

“Hmm, that sounds like a challenge to me. Shall we put it to the test?”

Kissing her face was a good place to start. Her eyebrows, down her temples, circling her ear, biting softly on her lobe, inserting a wet tongue before continuing down her cheek to her mouth. He kissed her deeply and languorously.

He lifted from atop her to lie on his side, and she made a little sound of disappointment, as if she missed the contact of their bodies as much as he. But he didn’t plan to go far. Not at all. He gently rolled her over to her side, facing away from him, and settled spoon style behind her. Now he could caress her breasts while his member lay pillowed by her buttocks. Delicious. Under his ministrations, her nipples soon pebbled, and she pushed them against his hand.

“You don’t have to do anything. You don’t even need to move. Are you ready for me?” He murmured in her ear.

She thought about it for a moment. “Hmmm. Demanding, aren’t you? I’m a bit sore.”

Shame slammed against his chest. Once again, he was going too far. Demanding too much. “I’m sorry. You are right. I should let you...”

But she grabbed his arm, holding him in place. She snagged his gaze over her shoulder, held it tight. “I was just teasing, Dale. In fact, I find your demands... stimulating.” She rolled her hips. The minx.

The vise of shame around his chest eased, and he could breathe again. With one long thrust, he sank deep into her, and then held still. The better to savor the sensation of being inside her hot, welcoming flesh.

“I love being inside you. God, you feel so good.”

His hand continued to tease her breasts. Alternating between one nipple and the other until they were both stimulated to aching hardness.

Without the frenzy of movement, he was more aware of the subtle movements of her flesh. He could feel every pulsation and contraction of her core around him. It was an exquisite pleasure. They aroused his own member to excruciating hardness and demanded swift satisfaction, but he wanted to make her come first. He loved to see her come apart in his arms. Loved the sounds that she made in her ecstasy. It heightened his pleasure tenfold. She squirmed and tightened around him, drawing a ragged groan from his throat.

“Easy, don’t reach for it. Let it come to you, slowly,” he murmured in her ear.

“Dale, I can’t. How do you... without even moving? I need more.” She moaned, turning her face into the pillow. Lost in a frenzy of desire, she reached down to touch herself.

He laughed softly. That’s how he wanted her—frenzied. “Who is being demanding now, you greedy wench? Put your leg over mine.” She did so, and he lifted their legs together, opening her.

His fingers slid over her stomach, meeting hers over her place of raw sensitivity. They learned the motion, the sweet glide and circling, and then took over, caressing her in sweet counterpoint to the gentle rocking of his hips. Bringing her higher and higher. He felt her insides tighten, her spine stiffen, and she exploded into a rain of moans and erratic hip thrusts. Her cries of ecstasy unknotted something inside him. He bit her shoulder as the spasms of her internal muscles brought about his own shattering release.

She was so sweet, so sweet. Her responses were so honest, so completely uninhibited. A man could get addicted to such pleasure. And that was his last conscious thought as he succumbed to a deep sleep, still inside her.



OLIVIA AWOKE THE NEXT morning when the first rays of sun filtered through the partially open curtains. Dale still slept, one of his legs between hers, his arm draped over her waist. She remembered falling asleep with him still inside her, after

the tempestuous climax. She had not slept so well in a long time.

They had moved and shifted throughout the night, but always remained closely intertwined. His face rested mere inches away on the pillow, and his features were so beautiful, so relaxed in sleep. The temptation to touch his face, and keep running her hands over the magnificent body she had come to know so well, was great, but he needed to sleep. So did she.

The sun had just risen. She couldn't have had over four or five hours of sleep, yet she felt rested, but not ready to leave their cozy bed and his warm body. She closed her eyes, not expecting to sleep. She wanted to enjoy the feel of his body next to her.

She laid still and calm by his side for several breaths when her eyes popped open and her pulse raced. And not from the naked man pressed against her. He had come inside her twice. Without protection. Might she become pregnant as a result? Her heart slammed in her chest. She wasn't sure whether from fear or excitement.

Unlikely, she decided, bringing her heart rate under control. She had actively tried to get pregnant for over a year, and it had never happened.

That guaranteed nothing, of course. After all, she had never been diagnosed with infertility. Still, it seemed unlikely that she would conceive after only one night, when she had failed to do so for over a year. Even if it happened, it wouldn't bother her as much as it should. A surprise, that.

She was surely losing her mind. A baby under these circumstances would be a disaster. Even so, she could not change her heart. Was she falling in love with Dale? She didn't want to look deeper into that. But maybe she should marry him, if this is how she felt. It was ridiculous to balk at a piece of paper if the thought of a baby did not make her panic.

Hugging these new thoughts to her heart, she fell asleep again and woke up later when he dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose.

She opened her drowsy eyes and contemplated his smiling face above hers. His dark blonde hair fell carelessly over his brow. He looked different. Younger, more carefree. Happy? She smiled in return, and before she lost her nerve, she told him what this morning's revelations had put in her heart.

“Okay, I will marry you.”

His smile grew, and his eyes became more focused. Intent. “I’m very glad. Also very honored. But may I ask what brought about this change of heart?”

Impossible to tell him about her feelings. He had made it clear they were unwelcome. Besides, she didn’t even understand them herself. She was probably just infatuated. Liar. She was falling hard, and she knew it. Even if she didn’t want to admit it to herself.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe a good night’s sleep helps to clear the mind. I realized I was overthinking the whole thing, letting my fears lead me. I decided to go with my instinct.”

He didn’t seem entirely convinced, but thankfully didn’t press the matter. “Whatever the reason, I’m happy you accepted, and I’ll do my best to make you happy.”

She knew he would. If only they had time to be happy.



CHAPTER 38 - The Wedding



OLIVIA ENTERED THE chapel on unsteady legs. She had barely slept last night and her mood this morning was something akin to panic. What the hell was she doing? She was marrying a man she hadn't known for even a month. In a world that was alien to her. She had known Charles for years before marrying him. They had similar interests and backgrounds. And look how that had turned out. This had disaster written all over it. She should turn and run...

She lifted her eyes and saw Dale standing at the foot of the altar. Her heart skipped a beat. He was so handsome. So heart stoppingly, drop dead gorgeous. His stern features were perfectly softened by what she had come to recognize as a spark of mischief in his eyes, a twist of sensuality around his mouth. The sight steadied her. Like he always did. He inspired trust. She could barely believe she was marrying him. Even under the most extraordinary circumstances.

Once she accepted his proposal, Dale had put in motion all the necessary arrangements with his usual efficiency. He had his secretary, housekeeper, butler, cook and gardeners, all of them working to arrange the wedding. And they all did their tasks diligently, even cheerfully. It was like having a little army of happy elves conspiring to give her a fairytale wedding. And only three days later, here they stood in the small estate chapel, about to get married.

They locked eyes across the length of the nave. And his steady, appreciative gaze gave her courage. She started walking towards him.

He had become so dear to her in such a short time. Even sitting in his office, keeping him company while he attended to business matters, was enjoyable. It was astounding the amount of work involved in running such a large estate. She thought Dale lived a life of relative leisure and luxury. She was right about the luxury but not about the leisure. The man worked

restlessly. It made her admire him all the more. Not only was he handsome and kind, but also smart and hardworking. Those were qualities she could appreciate.

The smell of hundreds of hothouse blooms that decorated the chapel infused her with happiness and serenity. The light streaming from a stained glass window above the altar created an explosion of colors on the stone floor and splashed across her cream and turquoise gown as she walked through the beam of light.

She had to keep reminding herself that this wedding was a matter of convenience because she could not help but feel like an actual bride. She reached his side, and he smiled at her, taking her hand. His smoldering gaze made her all tingly inside. She wore one of her new gowns that the modiste had delivered just yesterday. It was a lovely creation, but most importantly, it was not one that had belonged to Dale's previous wife.

The vows were a deeply poignant moment for her. In her heart, she could not take those lightly. They made everything real. This man was to be her husband.

He said his vows with a clear and steady voice, his gaze never once leaving her face. Then the moment came to kiss, and he bent his head to press his mouth to hers. She had thought it would be a light, chaste kiss, but their lips clung to each other for a moment longer than was appropriate, as if reluctant to separate.

The guests clapped, waking her from the spell that had kept her in a bubble where only she and Dale existed. She had forgotten that the vicar's wife, Dr. Roberts, and the senior employees were sitting right there in the front row. She smiled shyly at them, while her face warmed.

They left the chapel in a flurry of well wishes and flower petals. His employees were deferential, but also warm. Those closest to him held him in high regard, that was certain.

Now they were eating the wedding breakfast. It was more like a brunch, in her opinion, since it was past noon. The housekeeper and butler had made sure everything was set up,

and then went to have their own feast with the rest of the servants.

It made their wedding celebration very small. Only the vicar and his wife, the doctor and Dale's secretary. Still, conversation flowed easily. They were all amiable people and seemed pleased to welcome her into the community. Dr Roberts in particular seemed happy to see Dale marry again.

Their welcome made her feel like a fraud. She and Dale had concocted a tale about her origins and the reason she had come to England. Dale put about the story that she was the granddaughter of a distant relative who had emigrated to America generations ago, and therefore they were some sort of distant cousins. She had recently found out about her grandfather's English family, and since she was widowed and had no other relatives in America, she had decided to seek them out

Of course, Mrs. Simmonds and the butler doubted her story, but they knew better than to question anything. They were loyal to Dale. Dr. Roberts must suspect something amiss as well, but again, his evident affection for Dale seemed to make him suspend judgment.

She felt bad about lying to these people, but what choice did she have? She couldn't very well tell them she came from the future. They would think she was crazy. Even if she could prove it to them, showing them her phone and the pictures in it, it would be a tremendous shock for them. No. Better to give them a story they could accept.

After the wedding breakfast, the guests took their leave. They bid them farewell in the drawing room. From the window, Livvy watched the carriages cross the gates on their way out.



FROM ACROSS THE ROOM, Dale looked at Olivia with wonder. Every moment in her presence, he wanted to make love to her, to possess her. And yet, when desire had been momentarily satisfied, he still craved her. Her conversation,

her laughter, her presence. He wanted to absorb her into his life and have her fill all the empty places with her warmth and spirit.

Dale walked up behind her and put his arms around her waist. She sighed with pleasure and leaned back against his chest. His arms tightened around her, and his head lowered to kiss the side of her neck. Her subtle fragrance teased him as her skin heated. He liked that she never wore too much perfume, as some ladies were wont to do, using it like a weapon to assault the senses. Instead, her perfume was like a whisper, only noticeable if you ever got close enough. It was for him alone to discover as he explored her skin. She purred with pleasure and turned her head, offering more of her neck.

He wanted to devour her on the spot. Just lift her skirts and take her right now, here in the drawing room. But he buried that urgency, for he had other plans in mind. This was their wedding day. He wanted it to be special, and he had a surprise for her.

“Are you feeling up for a ride?” he asked.

He meant it in the literal sense, but obviously her mind had been wandering down a naughty path similar to his, for she reached behind her back, slipped her hand between their bodies, and cupped his already hard cock.

“Hmmm. I believe I am.”

He choked on a laugh as his unruly body pressed against her palm.

“You wicked wench. I meant a ride on a horse. Just a short distance. There’s a place I want to show you. And then you can ride me all you want.” He said the last as a wicked whisper against her ear.

Her eyes lit up with excitement as she turned around in his arms to look at him. “Oh, a surprise. I like it! Yes, I can ride a little. I have been taking lessons. But I can only ride astride, wearing pants,” she said with a slight frown. “Would that be okay? I’m afraid the grooms are still scandalized about it. I don’t want to cause a spectacle.”

That made him laugh aloud. He remembered the faces of the grooms when a lady insisted on riding astride while wearing trousers. He was also the tiniest bit jealous that all his grooms had seen her magnificent derriere in breeches. Just remembering how good it looked caused him to harden even more. He needed to cut off those thoughts or he would be the one unable to ride.

“Wear your trousers then. You are not going to be seen by anyone other than the grooms, who have already seen you in such a guise. We are not going far. The place where we are going is within the estate.”

“In that case, I’ll go change and be right back.”

“Meet me at the stables,” he said to her back as she skipped to the staircase.

Dale headed to the stables and had the horses readied. He caught sight of her as soon as she exited the house. Surprisingly, she wore a regular riding habit. Damn, she looked good in the more fitted style, but how the hell did she plan to ride astride wearing that? She would have to change outfits, more’s the pity.

But when she neared, he realized she wore trousers indeed. The wide legged pants and matching jacket were an excellent compromise between her style and what was acceptable in his time. Clever girl. She stopped a few steps away from him and smiled.

“You look very fetching, my dear. Brilliant design. Was that your idea or the modiste’s?”

“Thank you.” She twirled to show off her outfit. “It was my idea, but the modiste ran with it and created this design. Do you like it?”

“It looks charming. I daresay you will start a new fashion, although I doubt every lady will have the... assets necessary to make it look so good.” He fixed her with a heated look that traveled the length of her body and made her blush.

He tucked a stray curl behind her ear. “Come on. I had the groom saddle the mare you have been riding for practice. Let

me help you mount.”

He guided her to the horses and put his hands around her waist. “Jump.”

She did as he asked, and he hoisted her up onto the saddle. She shrieked and held onto his shoulders for dear life.

“What are you doing?”

“Helping you up onto the horse.”

“How’s that supposed to work?”

“Just straighten up, grab the pommel, then place one foot in the stirrup and cross the other over.” He replied, suppressing a smile.

“I can’t do that. I’ll fall. Please bring me down.” The mare moved sideways a little, and Olivia let out another squeak, digging her fingers into Dale’s shoulders.

Dale tried to keep a straight face as he brought her down, but his voice strained with contained laughter. “How do you get onto the horse then, Olivia?”

“A groom brings the mare to the mounting block and holds the reins, then I put the foot on the stirrup, grab the pommel and swing my leg over.” She showed.

“I see,” and he did see her, body and soul. Everything about her charmed him more than he dared to admit. “We will have to work on your mounting technique.”

“Oh, I’ll show you my mounting technique.” She said with a wicked glint in her eyes.

The laughter he had been trying to contain before broke free. How could she make him laugh and burn at the same time?



CHAPTER 39 - The Pool House



OLIVIA SAT PROUDLY on top of her mare. She knew her seat wasn't very graceful, but she was very happy with her progress so far.

“Are you comfortable on the horse? Do you think you can follow me without problems?” Dale asked, studying her.

“I think so. I already know Pearl, and she knows me. As long as you don't go too fast.”

“No more than a gentle trot. We are not going far. We could have walked, actually. But it would have taken longer, and I'm quite eager to get there.”

He turned his horse with graceful ease and led the way. Pearl followed without even having to be commanded. Livvy had the notion that Dale was guiding both horses with his will alone.

They kept to an easy pace over beautiful parkland, and Olivia raised her face, absorbing the light of the sun, inhaling deeply the crisp air. The day was beautiful—sunny and cool, with a gentle breeze ruffling her hair and disarranging her chignon. She felt happy in this moment, in this place, with this man.

They entered a narrow path that curved through a forest. Within minutes, they arrived at a clearing that contained a rectangular stone building. It looked like a miniature palace and seemed as out of place in the forest as a jewel box would be.

Three arches completely covered by paned glass dominated the center of the building. She could tell there were mirroring arches on the back side. The sides of the building were solid and had a window each. A wide set of steps led to a door set into the glass of the center arch.

What was the use of the building? Why was it here? She had seen many palaces and grand houses that featured structures built solely for entertainment and pleasure. But usually those buildings were displayed prominently on a rise, clearly visible from the main house and gardens. This one was secluded away in the middle of the forest. It seemed like a strange location.

A hand lighted on her arm, and she jumped. “Oh!”

Dale stood beside her, holding the reins. He must have dismounted as she’d studied the building.

“Will you allow me to assist you, or do you have another preferred method of dismounting?” his eyes danced with amusement.

She grinned mischievously at him. “I usually dismount the same way I mount, but I’ll allow you to assist if you promise I won’t fall.”

“I would never let you fall, Livvy.”

“In that case, what do you want me to do?”

“Bring your leg over and sit sideways. I’ll lift you down.”

She did bring the leg over, but over the back of the horse, which left her facing away from him. He quickly wrapped his hands around her waist from behind and plucked her easily from the horse. But he didn’t let go after she was settled firmly on the ground. Instead, his arms encircled her waist, and he brought her back against him, murmuring in her ear. “That wasn’t precisely what I had in mind, but I think I like the rear view just as well.” Laughter mixed with desire in his voice.

She turned her head, and he gave her a quick kiss before taking her hand and leading her towards the building.

“Come. There’ll be time for that, but I can’t wait to show you this.”

His excitement was contagious, and to be honest, she was curious, too. He opened the door, and she found herself in a hot and humid environment, a mineral smell wafting in the air. But the ‘*pièce de résistance*’ dominated the oblong room.

“A pool,” she said with wonderment.

Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that this building contained a swimming pool. The glass arches on both sides made the room bright and cheerful, and the light bounced happily on the surface of the water.

Being born and raised in Florida, she was no stranger to swimming pools. She had grown up with one and had also had one in the house she had built with Charles. But this pool was on a different level.

She looked around. The walls were made of stone, and the floor appeared to be slate. There were chairs and chaises scattered around the pool, and a door on each side led to the enclosed rooms she had seen from outside. On one side, water bubbled over a rock formation to fall into the pool.

“Do you like it?” Dale asked, uncertainty in his voice.

“Like it? I think it’s wonderful! Absolutely fantastic. Can we swim in it? Is it warm?”

“Yes, to both questions. In fact, I had hoped you would want to join me for a swim. The water comes from a thermal spring, so it stays warm. A few years ago I had this structure built on the site of the spring, to be able to enjoy it all year long. It also became my own personal retreat. I come here when I want to be on my own, away from people and responsibilities.

“There’s a bedroom through that door.” He pointed to the room on the left. “And a sort of drawing room through that one on the right. I use it mostly to read and eat my meals when I stay here.”

“You sleep here sometimes?”

“Oh yes. I have my servants provision it with everything I may need for a couple of days, and then they leave me here alone. I have never shared this place with anyone, but I thought we might spend the night here together. Just the two of us.”

“I would love that. Thank you for sharing this place with me. It is lovely.”

He smiled and took her hand again. “Come, let me show you the bedroom.”

She followed him and entered the room, marveling at every little detail they passed. The bedroom wasn’t as big as the ones in the manor, but it was cozy and bright, with windows on both sides. A massive bed made of carved light wood occupied the center of the room, with a light blue and gold coverlet that matched the curtains and other decor. Two comfy wing chairs occupied the near right corner next to the fireplace, and to her left stood a big armoire made of the same wood as the bed. Everything was opulent but understated and calm at the same time. She liked it.

She could feel Dale’s gaze on her. He watched her reactions. But something else simmered in his look—a heated hunger that stoked a similar fire within her. The sight of the bed only made her think of rumpling it as she tangled with him upon it. But he made no advances, no doubt leaving it up to her to decide what she wanted.

What she wanted, first of all, was to get comfortable. Lifting her hands, she removed the pins from her hair and gave it a little shake until it fell free in loose waves down her back. Then she unbuttoned her riding jacket, starting with the cuffs and then proceeding to the first button on her bodice. Below, she wore only a short chemise and corset. She saw his eyes darken and heat as she removed it and placed it carefully over the back of an armchair.

With a slight smile, she bent to unzip her boots and kicked them off. Her socks went the same way. Dale still watched, reminding her of a lurking panther, poised and ready to pounce. She was a willing prey.

Next, she put her hands to the waistband of her pants and flicked open the buttons there. When the waistband gaped, she shimmied her hips to let the pants fall to the ground in a heavy swoosh of fabric, and she stood before him clad only in her short chemise, corset, and modern panties.

He snapped. With a low growl, he swooped in.



CHAPTER 40 - The Honeymoon



DALE WAS AT HIS LIMIT. Livvy had no idea of the extent to which she affected him. It had taken all his willpower to stand still while she removed her clothing. He had wanted to rip it off her like a barbarian, then throw her on the bed and fall upon her.

But he had also enjoyed the slow revelation of her body as she removed each item. The little scrap of lacy material she wore as underwear had completely unraveled him. The corset tightened her waist, pushing out her generous hips and buttocks, and he wanted to grab and squeeze the bountiful orbs.

He did just that. In two long steps, he stood before her, grabbing the top of her panties, pulling them up, tightening the fabric to provide friction against her core, then filling his hands with her delectable ass as he devoured her mouth in a violent kiss. A distant corner of his mind told him he probably moved too fast, acted too rough, but she wasn't stopping him, and he couldn't stop himself.

She unwound his necktie, kissing his neck, pushing his coat off his shoulders. When her diligent hands pulled his shirt out of his pants and slid under, caressing his back, he groaned with pleasure. He wanted to feel those hands everywhere on him, just as he wanted to run his hands over and explore every inch of her.

Her hands kept moving, sliding over his ribs and down his abdomen to cup his straining cock.

The blinding pleasure almost buckled his knees. Dale took a deep breath, removing her hand. He had to pace himself or he would come too soon. Already he was on the edge and he wanted to make this last. He had to prevent her from touching him again.

In a frenzy of need, he turned her around and leaned her against the bed. She supported herself with her arms, looking at him over her shoulder with as much desire as he knew glowed in his eyes. The vixen. She would unman him if she kept this up.

He grabbed the laces of her corset and untied them, but instead of taking the garment off, he pulled them tighter. She gasped but did not retreat. The tighter corset pushed her breasts up and out, and her overflowing hips provided a sharp contrast to the artificially created tiny waist. She was his most carnal fantasy come true. Fisting his hands on the lacy material, he ripped off her panties.

“Ow, those were my favorite panties.” She teased with a sparkle in her eyes.

He would have told her they were his favorite too, that he would buy her a whole trunk of them, but he was too far gone for teasing banter.

“Get on the bed. On your hands and knees.” He managed through gritted teeth.

Moving with cat-like grace, she readily complied, throwing him an inviting look over her shoulder. While her ass was stuck up in the air, open and inviting.

Bloody hell, he was ready to burst. He urgently undid the fall of his trousers and climbed in behind her. The tip of his erection slid against her opening, testing for readiness. She was slick and hot, and he couldn't wait a second longer. He slammed into her with a primal growl.

The wild pleasure of pumping into her heated depths consumed him, but still he monitored her responses. She was right there with him, and her enthusiasm propelled him on. His left hand gathered her hair and pulled it back tight, lifting her face, while his other hand grasped her hips for dear life, surely leaving marks on her creamy flesh. This was madness. Frenzied need. Lovemaking at its most savage and primitive.

He watched. Watched his hard flesh sinking into her. The sight of her round ass bouncing with every bump of his hips

was a provocation. He wanted to punish it for inflaming him so. Mark it, own it. Without conscious thought, his treacherous right hand lifted and came down forcefully to slap her ass.

The crack of his hand as it connected with her flesh sounded loud in his mind, parting the haze of desire. She gasped, and he froze, appalled. He had finally gone too far. He would not be able to withstand the look of disgust on her face. For an explosive moment, desire and shame warred in his befuddled brain.

Shame won, and he started to retreat. “Livvy, I’m so sorry —”

She growled—growled!—and pushed back against him, swinging her hand around and grabbing his thigh to stop him from retreating. He held her hips, trying to control her movement, to get his mind to work out what this meant, but she gave no reprieve. She continued moving against him, and he gave in to the madness.

With a few more forceful thrusts, he pushed her over the edge. Her choked exclamation of delight and the moans of her surrender to her climax fell like music on his ears, while the deep contractions of her internal muscles brought him to his own shattering release. His seed erupted forth, and he jumped into the abyss where nothing existed but this intoxicating pleasure.

He fell sideways on the bed beside Livvy, who had collapsed onto her stomach. She turned her head towards him and smiled shyly. That sweet smile, so trusting and true, after the savage lovemaking they had shared, burrowed into his heart and nearly broke it. It certainly felt as if something was cracking inside him, but instead of pain, he felt only the release of a sweet balm that soothed all the jagged pieces inside him.

Gently, tenderly, he stroked the side of her face, tucking her hair back, before sliding his hand down her back to the corset’s laces and undoing them so that she could be more comfortable. He had laced her too tight, ridden her too

roughly, pulled her hair, even spanked her. Hard. He should be ashamed of his actions.

And he would be. He would have been devastated if he saw even a shadow of hurt, pain, or discomfort on her face. But he saw only contentment and satisfaction. It warmed his heart as nothing could, and in that moment he realized that here, laying by his side, was his perfect mate. The one who truly saw him and accepted him. All of him, exactly as he was.

He looked down at her face, surprised to see a wicked little smile.

“And what are you smiling about?” he asked.

“I was just thinking that once again you are still fully dressed.” She toyed with the buttons of his waistcoat as she snuggled close to him. She slid her hand inside to caress his chest under the shirt. “You really can’t be bothered to undress before sex, can you? We are going to have to work on that because your body is too beautiful to keep covered.”

He couldn’t care less about the supposed beauty of his body, but he was glad she found him attractive. And he yearned to feel her hands on his naked skin, so he slowly started to undo the buttons on his waistcoat.

“It is because you make me desperate to have you,” he explained. “The only thing I can think about is how fast I can be inside you.”

She smiled, pleased. “That was the best answer. I propose we stay naked for the rest of our stay in the pool house. It will save time when going swimming or indulging in... other activities.”

The image sent a pang of lust through his thoroughly sated body.

“I wholeheartedly support that idea.”

“Are we going to swim now?”

Now? He would rather do more of those ‘other activities’.
“If you wish.”

She had discarded her corset and chemise by the time he finished the sentence. With a happy cry, she ran completely naked to the pool and dove in.

Dale followed Olivia at a more leisurely pace. After unhurriedly discarding all his clothes, he strode out of the bedroom, glad he had brought her here. A dip in the pool was an inspired suggestion, after all. He had never made love in a pool. The idea held interesting possibilities.

As he entered the pool area, Livvy was swimming away towards the other end of the pool, and he observed her lithe body fluidly slicing the water. He was already semi erect again, just watching her. When she reached the far edge, she flipped underwater and, pushing her feet against the wall of the pool, changed direction, coming towards him with a smile.

He lowered himself into the pool without breaking eye contact. The mild temperature of the water soothed his sensitized flesh. When she drew near, she dipped under the water. He felt her grazing his body, fondling him in an apparent accidental touch before resurfacing a moment later, right in front of him.

“Oh, hello there.” Her eyes were wide with mock innocence as she sidled close to him.

With a lightning quick movement, he grabbed her. She squealed, laughing, and tried to slip away. He held her squiggling body against him, splaying his hands over her ass, and lifted her against him. Her buoyant body slid sensuously against his, and she wrapped her legs against his waist.

Her eyes glinted with wicked amusement. “What are you going to do? The gun has been fired, and I don’t think there’s been enough time to reload.” She looked so pleased with herself.

“A... gun is only one of the weapons I possess. And it’s been disarmed only briefly. I still can do this.”

Dipping his head, he lifted her up and captured one of her breasts with his mouth. He suckled gently and licked the tip until it was hard and distended. Then he scattered kisses across

her chest before moving to the other breast and giving it equal treatment.

Her eyes had lost the amusement and had grown heavy-lidded with desire. Her mouth parted slightly, and he couldn't resist taking her lips in a deep, all-consuming kiss. He lost himself in the feelings she inspired.

The truth was, even with his body momentarily sated, he couldn't get enough of her. Of her taste, the texture of her skin, the little sounds she made when he drove her to ecstasy.

Blind with desire, he climbed the steps out of the pool, holding her in his arms, and carefully laid her down in one of the chaises. Only then he left her lips to trail a path of heat down her body. She squirmed with desire, opening her legs, and he took the invitation eagerly. He had wanted to make her come with his mouth from the first. He wanted to taste her release, feel her tremors against his lips.

After lapping softly at the water misting her sweet nether lips, he delved deeper. Finding moisture of another kind. Her own. His tongue slid inside once more. She tasted divine. Her skin was so soft, so slick. The noises she made drove him insane.

He embraced the insanity wholeheartedly.



CHAPTER 41 - Mutual bliss



OLIVIA WAS OBLIVIOUS to anything but the exquisite pleasure he elicited between her legs. Nothing mattered, nothing existed but the languorous strokes of his tongue along her sensitized flesh. He was everywhere. His lips sucking at her clit, his teeth softly nibbling at her inner lips before soothing and inflaming her anew with each stroke of his tongue. His wicked, wicked tongue kept sliding sinuously along the seam of her entrance, then plunging deep into her, lapping at her very core, over and over until she was insensible with ecstasy.

Her legs shook, her core wept, and she couldn't control the mindless begging streaming from her mouth. She needed to come; she needed release from the madness now. But he kept her there, on the edge of desire, prolonging the delicious torture.

She opened her legs wider, pushed harder against his mouth, but the relentless assault continued at the same leisurely pace.

“Dale... I need to come. Let me come.”

“Not yet. I want to taste you a bit more. God, I can't get enough of you. Yes, that's it, my darling. Weep for me. You are so sweet... so sweet.”

Her only response was an undignified grunt. Speech had become increasingly difficult. Even her breathing was erratic. How long could a body endure?

The rhythm changed. He swirled his tongue around her clit relentlessly. Finally, he would push her over. She was lifting, lifting... almost there. His tongue paused, and he waited, pillowing the sensitized bud.

Nooo.

She wasn't even sure if she screamed or not, but he chuckled, and after the wave had retreated, he resumed his ministrations.

She lost count of how many times he brought her to the brink of orgasm, only to retreat at the last moment. She began to fear it might never happen.

Then his movements changed once more. His thumb took over, tormenting her clit while he plunged his tongue deep into her. The double assault proved too much. She couldn't resist it. This time, she would come. He curled his tongue up deep inside her, hitting a place of pleasure so exquisite she began to tremble. The orgasm built and built. It was a tsunami, gaining strength as it rolled through her until it finally crashed over her, inside her, all around her.

She heard her own scream of release as if from a distance. She must have lost any notion of reality, for when she finally resurfaced, she held him by the hair, her legs thrown over his shoulders as his prodigious mouth wrenched the last ounces of pleasure from her exhausted flesh.

Olivia felt flayed. As if a layer of skin had been removed, and she experienced everything deeper. Never in her life had the pleasure been so intense. She looked at Dale—who observed her with male pride from within the cradle of her legs—and smiled. She was profoundly sated, and still, she craved him. His touch, his nearness, had become a drug. She couldn't get enough. He pressed a kiss to the inside of her thigh, and she sighed.

She sat up, and he stood, which brought his rampant erection directly level with her face. Hmmm. She reached out and grabbed him before he could turn away.

Her slim fingers could barely encompass his member, and the sight of his big, heavy cock almost made her purr. Her warm breath fanned the tip, and his breathing fractured.

“Olivia. You don't have to do that.”

She looked up at his eyes. They were dark with latent desire. “I know. But I want to. Will you deny me the

pleasure?”

“I can’t deny you anything.”

She smiled with satisfaction, knowing he was in her hands. Literally and figuratively. Slowly running her cool fingers over his member, she lowered her gaze and looked at it. A small bead of desire had gathered at the tip. She lapped it up with her tongue and heard him groan in helpless anticipation.

Emboldened, she took the entire head into her mouth and suckled. He made a strangled sound, and his hands came to hold her head. She suckled again, moving one hand around his base.

“Oh, god. You’ll be the death of me.” His fingers flexed in the wet strands of her hair, neither pulling nor pushing, simply grabbing on as if he needed an anchor to steady him. His head fell back and his eyes slammed shut. He seemed in agony and ecstasy at the same time.

Inarticulate, guttural sounds escaped his throat as she continued suckling, fondling, massaging his entire member. His hips rolled instinctively to the rhythm set by her mouth. To have him reduced to this estate of helplessness, completely under her control, proved a heady aphrodisiac. He was usually so masterful, the one who took control and drove her insane. But now she controlled him.

He uttered a curse and tried to pull out, but she would have none of it. He was hers. Her hands shot out and grabbed his ass, holding him tight, while she took his whole cock into her mouth, as far as it would go. She gagged a little at the gigantic intrusion but didn’t even care.

He was nearing orgasm. She could feel it in the heightening tension in his muscles and the ragged quality of his breathing. The thought propelled her on. She was hungry for him.

“Olivia, no, wait. I’m about to come. Let go...” He sounded desperate. Fighting now in earnest to dislodge her. She held on tighter. Sinking her nails deep into the hard

muscles of his ass, while she redoubled the efforts of her mouth.

“I can’t... hold it... please.” He sounded frantic. Pleading.

She loved it.

“Yes, come...” She hummed the words around his cock because she wasn’t about to let go now. She felt the start of his release. His belly contracted, his fingers spasmed in her hair, and a guttural sound escaped his throat.

“Argh!”

His seed erupted into her mouth in strong bursts while his hips pumped helplessly, gripped in the throes of his orgasm. She eagerly took it all. Wanting to extract up to the very last drop of his pleasure. When the last shudders left him, she finally let go and looked up at him to find abashed pleasure in his eyes.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” he said.

“I did, and I’m not sorry.”

“Wicked,” he said with a glint in his eye. “I’ll just have to think of new ways of driving you wild.”

And he did. For the rest of the day and night they adhered to the no clothes suggestion, reveling in the glory of their naked bodies and the incandescent passion that bound them.



UNBEKNOWNST TO THE blissful occupants of the pool house, they had been followed, and their fate was now being discussed.

“Truth, that is an unforeseen twist,” said Kalli.

“For real. What are we going to do now?” replied Dariux.

“Nothing for now. It has to do with our mission. Let’s observe, study. It’s not time to intervene yet.”

“You said that before. When do you think it will be time to intervene, then?”

“When our mission is complete. When it’s time to go back.”

“How are we going to do it? Are we to reveal ourselves or simply snatch the woman and take her with us?”

“I don’t know, Dariux! This entanglement changes everything. Before we could have done that. Transport her and just leave her to wonder what had happened. But if they fell in love, that would be cruel now.”

“Would it? They both will find someone else to attach themselves to. They are both premium specimens and shouldn’t have any problems finding another mate.”

“It doesn’t work that way. Have you learned nothing from all the studies we have done?”

“I have read about love. But I don’t understand the emotion. I think the literature exaggerates.”

“I don’t think so. You have seen their brain scans readings. Testosterone and estrogen are super high. So are serotonin and dopamine. All those speak of a great attraction, but the one that’s really interesting is oxytocin. Dariux, that’s the elusive love hormone. We have never gotten a high reading. We thought that might be the key. In them, its levels are off the chart. Like nothing we have seen before. I think we found the real deal.”

“Then that’s a complication indeed. Because they don’t belong together. They should’ve never met. It was an accident.”

“Sometimes the best science happens by accident.”

“Kalli, you are becoming a romantic.” It was not a compliment. “Are you too under the influence of the hormones you are studying?”

“Not at all, Dariux.” She replied coolly. “I’m merely excited about my research. This could be a breakthrough.”

“If you say so. What do we do, then?”

“For now, keep observing and gathering information. We still have some time. We’ll see later.”

Dariux nodded without enthusiasm. He knew Kalli had good intentions, but this mission was not going as planned, and he suspected it would be up to him to make the hard decisions.



CHAPTER 42 - An unwelcome visitor



THE NEXT MORNING, AFTER a leisurely lovemaking followed by breakfast and another dip in the pool, they reluctantly donned their clothes and rode back to the manor.

Olivia was loath to leave the pool house. It had become their own precious romantic retreat, and she wasn't ready to return to the real world. But she cheered herself up as they had excitedly made plans to go to London the next day.

She had been to London only once before, and briefly. It had been no more than a long layover, but she had taken the opportunity to peek around the city, and she had been more enchanted than she thought she would be. So she had resolved to return one day with more time and energy to discover more of the charming city.

Dale had laughed when she described London as 'charming', saying it was a bustling, gritty, overcrowded monster of a city. She wondered how bad it could be in these times, but was looking forward to seeing for herself soon.

They approached the house from the side and, after leaving the horses in the stables, entered from the side door. Therefore, they did not see the coach in the front driveway. As soon as they crossed the front entrance hall, however, the butler approached.

"Your Grace. You have visitors. Lady Cavendish and Mrs. Carmel are waiting in the drawing room."

Dale went rigid beside her.

"It is Eloise's mother. I suspect this encounter will not be amicable. She quite despises me."

"Why do you think she is here, then?"

“I suspect she wishes to berate and accuse me once again. She blames me for her daughter’s death. I should have known there would be some sort of backlash from her as soon as our marriage reached her ears.”

“But why?”

He shrugged with chilling indifference. “After Eloise’s death, she came here to throw bitter accusations at me. Accusations she then proceeded to spread through the rest of the Ton and the village. And I never refuted them, for she was not entirely wrong. I was guilty, so why bother to deny it?”

Olivia shook her head. “Oh Dale, that’s not true.”

“That’s irrelevant to her. Would you like to go upstairs and wait for me?”

All traces of the warm lover had vanished. Livvy squeezed his hand, trying to break through the barrier of ice he wrapped around himself. “I would rather stay by your side for emotional support.”

Dale shook his head. “Thank you, but no. I would prefer it if you don’t have to listen to her vitriol.”

Maybe he was trying to shield her from unpleasantness. Why, then, did it feel as if he was shutting her out?

“Alright, I’ll wait for you upstairs.”

She walked towards the stairs. But she got no farther than the center landing when the door to the drawing room opened with a bang. Olivia turned. A woman burst out, her cheeks flushed, eyes wild, hands fisted.

“There you are at last, Avondale! I have been waiting for you for the better part of an hour.”

“Good morning, Lady Cavendish. If I had known you would grace us with your presence today, I would have ensured you were received immediately. I trust my staff made you comfortable. Have you been offered tea?” he asked, impeccably polite, despite the woman’s rudeness.

“I don’t want any tea. This is not a social call,” she bit out. “I came because I heard the most absurd rumor that you had

married. I could hardly credit it, of course. Nevertheless, the notion disturbed me so much that I had to come see for myself that it was not true.”

“But it is true, madam. I remarried yesterday.”

Lady Cavendish’s face became even more flushed until she was an unbecoming shade of purplish red. “You contemptible lecher! How could you remarry and put some hussy in my daughter’s place? Are you so desperate that you resorted to marrying one of your mistresses? She could not be any gently bred lady, for none would put up with you and your disgusting habits!”

“Madam,” Avondale said in a warning tone, “I have allowed you to say what you would about me, for I understand your pain. But I shan’t allow you to insult my wife.”

“Your wife? Your wife! Does she know the truth about you? Did you tell her how you made my poor daughter so miserable that she ran away to her death?”

The scene proved uglier than Livvy could have imagined. Her heart ached for Dale, who had to deal with the unhinged woman. She was vicious, and Dale refused to defend himself, likely because of his guilt. The lady was attacking him where it hurt the most.

Livvy thought she’d helped Dale heal a little since their first night together, but this encounter would set him back. Indeed, it was probably tearing him to shreds. The woman had not seen her, and she longed to run back down the stairs and confront her, to defend Dale the way he was not doing for himself.

But he had asked her to go. He probably didn’t want her present in this conversation. She could imagine how humiliating it was for him. Caught between the urge to run to him and the duty to leave as he’d requested, she hesitated for a second; and suddenly, the decision was taken from her.

The countess had noticed her. “You! Are you the usurper?”

Livvy opened her mouth to reply that she was Dale’s wife, not an usurper, but Dale spoke first.

“She is my wife, Lady Cavendish. I understand this is a shock to you, but I demand that you accord her the respect due a duchess.”

“Respect! You are one to talk about respect. But maybe what I should feel for your new bride is pity.” Turning a gaze full of malice towards Olivia, she asked, “Did he tell you the story about how my daughter died?”

“He did, madam. He also told me how much he loved your daughter and how he has been grieving her death all these years.”

The countess’s eyes filled with tears. “If he grieves, it is because of a guilty conscience. But I doubt he has suffered more than me, or more than my daughter suffered at his hands.”

This was getting ridiculous. Olivia could understand this woman’s suffering; but someone needed to make her understand that blaming others solved nothing.

“My lady, with all due respect, I know you are grieving, but blaming Avondale for your daughter’s death won’t ease your pain. Nobody can know all the complexities of a marriage except the two people involved in it. Maybe theirs wasn’t an easy union, but I don’t doubt Avondale loved Eloise and would have never purposely hurt her.”

“And how would you know that? You know nothing! You are nothing more than—”

“I am his wife now, and I can say with certainty that I have seen no trace of cruelty in his behavior. What happened was an accident. It was very tragic, and it has brought a lot of pain to everyone who loved Eloise. But she is at peace now. Could you try to find peace yourself?”

“What do you know about anything? You were not even here when all of it happened. What gives you the right to tell me how I should feel?”

“That is not what I’m trying to do that, madam. I am just saying that blaming others is not the solution. I have also lost someone very dear to me. My sister died in an accident a few

years ago. For a while, I was angry at the unfairness of it all; and the anger and pain almost consumed me. It wasn't until I let go of the anger that I began to heal.”

Lady Cavendish didn't seem to have an answer. She stared at Olivia with frenzied eyes. She seemed deflated, as if all the fight that had sustained her had drained away, and she didn't know how to go on.

She turned to her companion. “Helen, I wish to leave immediately. Let's go.” And without a backwards glance, she exited the house as if the hounds of hell were at her back.

They watched her briskly descend the front stairs of the portico and climb into the waiting carriage. Olivia hoped she would be able to grieve properly and find a measure of peace, but wasn't sure what else she could do. She really felt sorry for the woman. Losing a child was, without a doubt, one of the hardest things that could happen to a human being. She had seen her own mother grapple with this pain.

She turned to Dale. He was watching the carriage depart, but he didn't seem to look at anything at all. In truth, he seemed lost in his thoughts. She went to him, wrapping her arm around his waist and leaning her head against his shoulder, offering comfort.

His right arm came around her shoulders automatically, but he didn't pull her closer. He had retreated into a familiar shell of stoicism and self imposed penance. She desperately looked for a way to draw him out and came upon something that had been nagging her at the back of her mind.

“Dale, why does Lady Cavendish blame you for her daughter's accident?”

He looked at her, surprised. “What do you mean, why? I told you what happened that day.”

“Yes, but how does she know all the specifics? What occurred between Eloise and you was a private matter, which should have remained between the two of you.”

“Eloise's maid told her. That same night, while we were still looking for Eloise, the maid ran to the Cavendishes's

house and told them I had mistreated her mistress and that's what had made Eloise run away."

"Why would she do something like that?"

Dale shrugged, as if the matter was of little consequence. "It was the truth."

Livvy gave him a look, exasperated at his relentless need to blame himself. "It was one version of the story. The truth is more complicated than that. Besides, why would she take it upon herself to go to Eloise's parents to tattletale? I have little experience with servants, but from what I've seen of their behavior, that seems out of the norm. Look at how discreet Ms. Simmons and all your staff have been about the irregular circumstances of my arrival."

"She was Eloise's maid long before we married, and she was very devoted to Eloise and never too fond of me. I think she always knew the problems in our marriage, and she blamed me for her mistress's unhappiness. She was never impolite to me, of course, but I could feel her hostility. Her actions did not surprise me."

"Hmm. What became of the maid after that?"

"She stayed with the Cavendishes for a time, I think, but after that I was told she returned to France. Why do you want to know?"

"I don't know. Her actions just seem so spiteful." Livvy shook her head, unable to explain why the maid's behavior bothered her so much. Probably because she had attacked Dale at one of the worst times of his life.

"Let it go, sweetheart." He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "There's nothing there but pain and tragedy."

"But that is in the past." She replied, lifting her gaze to his.

"Yes, it is. And for the first time, thanks to you, I'm not living in it. Isn't it ironic that it took a woman who traveled to the past to yank me away from it? I'm sure there's a pun in there somewhere."

Livvy chuckled. “However ironic, if I have brought you some joy and healing, I’m glad.”

“You have Livvy. That, and so much more. I feel like I’m awakening. It is uncomfortable sometimes, and scary. But I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

“Neither would I.”

Their gazes met and held. His eyes lowered to her mouth, and her lips tingled in anticipation. She raised her face and closed her eyes, waiting. He lowered his head slowly, and his mouth brushed hers, softly at first, but inexorably intensifying.

He had thoroughly kissed her before. With passion, or frustrated anger, or possession. But nothing like he kissed her now. His lips suckled at hers, and when she moaned, he held her closer and angled his head to deepen the kiss, his tongue gaining entrance and probing, tasting.

It was the most sensual coaxing of her senses. It entranced her, stealing her mind’s ability to process anything but the pleasurable slide of his tongue against hers. The friction of his lips over hers. If his previous kisses had been a conquest, this one was a persuasion.

Not that she needed to be persuaded. She reveled in the feel of him, this man who aroused so many feelings inside her that sometimes she felt as if she was going to crack.

She slid her fingers into his hair. She loved his hair. So heavy and silky. His arms came around her, molding her to his body, and her fingers curled involuntarily, softly scratching his scalp. And the drugging kiss still went on and on.

His arms around her, his mouth on her. She rested fully against him, and still it wasn’t enough. She wanted to meld with him.

She could feel his arousal, and yet he was in no hurry to progress to intercourse. Neither was she. This kiss was a mating in itself. He poured his soul into her, flooded her with his feelings, a warm tide pulling her under.

And then something changed. It wasn’t anything tangible, but she was so attuned to his emotions that she could feel the

most infinitesimal shift in him. Like a drop in temperature, cold seeped into the place where their souls had merged so perfectly for a few moments.

Slowly, he ended the kiss, and for a second rested his forehead against hers, as if nothing was amiss. But she knew differently.

With perfect aplomb that somehow seemed forced, he stepped back and said, "I should run along. I have to attend to some estate matters before we leave for London tomorrow. I will be in the study if you need me."

"Okay." Livvy watched him go, perplexed. What was wrong with this man? One moment he was kissing her as if he wanted to own her soul; and the next he was taking his leave and announcing in a formal tone devoid of any feeling that he needed to attend some business.

But why? Was it because of Eloise's mother's visit? Was he remembering his first wife, maybe even feeling like he had betrayed her for marrying again?

It was exasperating and disconcerting. But she could do nothing about that. He had to come to terms with it on his own. In the meantime, she would provide warmth, acceptance, and companionship. And try not to lose her heart in the process.

She feared it was too late for that.



CHAPTER 43 - The Incriminatory letter



HE WAS A COWARD FOR escaping like that. Avondale wasn't sure he had fooled Olivia, but he had needed to get out of there. The feelings that kiss had awakened inside him scared him to death. He had never wanted to let go. He was becoming too vulnerable.

He reached his study and closed the door behind him. Then, after taking a few deep breaths and downing a whisky to fortify himself, he sent for his secretary to coordinate some meetings.

One of the main matters he needed to attend was the meeting with the private investigator he had employed to look into Livvy's case. He had to give the man his address in London. He also wanted a report on the progress of the investigation.

As it turned out, Mr. Granger had a bit of information.

“The innkeeper of the next village said a strange couple appeared about a month ago and stayed a few days before moving on. They said they were conducting some research about the local fauna; but the innkeeper was suspicious because he never saw them studying any animals. Instead, they seemed to spend most of the time talking to people.”

“Was that all that was odd about them?”

“Well, they were not from these parts. From London, they said, but the innkeeper says there was something off about them. I tried to press him for details, but he says he isn't sure exactly what. He said it was something in the way they spoke or moved or dressed. Nothing was overtly wrong, but they seemed almost as if they wore disguises. Like they didn't really belong amongst the other guests.”

“Hmm, interesting. It is something worth pursuing. Do we know where they went next?”

“The innkeeper didn’t know. But I went to the train station, and the ticket master said a man by that description was there the day before last, and bought two tickets to London.”

“If they went to London, they may be impossible to find. They could be anywhere, and whatever activities they might undertake would be less noticeable in London. If indeed they were doing something suspicious. It might be worth looking in every town on the train path from here to London. They might have gotten off. It is not much, but it’s the best we have so far. Any other suspicious activity? Has anyone reported something strange happening?”

“Nothing more, Your Grace.”

“We will go to London tomorrow. If you need to contact me, send a message to my London address.” Dale said, handing him a card.

“Certainly, Your Grace.” Mr. Granger stood, executed a quick bow, and left.

Next came meetings with his steward and his secretary. Goodness, but one would think he was going on a protracted trip around the globe, not merely to London, where probably more work awaited. He really needed a holiday. When was the last time he had gone away for a few days, with no work and no responsibilities other than to enjoy himself? It had been years.

Right after Eloise’s death. He had gone away for two years. But that had not been a true holiday. It was more like an escape. He had been a man in agony, bent on outrunning his grief and guilt.

But now, he would really like to go on a holiday with Olivia. Maybe the Channel Islands or Provence. Near the sea. It was a tempting idea. He would have to propose it to Livvy. It would be like a real honeymoon. He grimaced. There would be no safeguarding his heart if they spent several days alone, with nothing for him to do but make love to her.

But he suspected his heart was past the point of being protected, anyway. She had already conquered the fortress, torn out the walls—no, not really. The walls remained in place. What she had done was burrow behind the walls, gaining access to his most private places. She had been doing it since the moment he found her on the forest floor. There was no help for it, so he might as well enjoy it while it lasted.

Checking the time, he realized it was almost six in the evening. The meetings had consumed more time than he had expected. Dinner would be served in a couple of hours, but he had skipped luncheon and was ravenous. Besides, he missed Livvy already. He would seek her out and try to cajole her into joining him for a late tea, then he would propose his idea of taking a proper honeymoon.

No sooner had he completed the thought than Livvy exploded into his study, brandishing a piece of paper in one hand. Her eyes found him immediately.

“Dale, you need to see this!”

“What is it?” he asked, somewhat alarmed, for her expression was one of someone who had discovered something momentous.

“It is a letter. Or more like a note, or a page of a diary. I don’t know, but it is strange. Here, read it.” She thrust the paper into his hand.

‘My love, I long for the touch of your hands, for another taste of your lips. How could I ever give up the bliss I have found in your arms now that I have discovered it? I wish I could run away with you, to a place where we are free to love each other the way we want. To a place where our love is not forbidden. Does such a place exist? Maybe in another life; where I’m not a wife or a duchess. I would have to die and be born again. I would do it. I would choose any life with you. Would you follow me there...’

Dale slowly lifted his head from the note. The pain of the implications of this note tore through him. He could hardly breathe, his muscles felt locked in an impossible vise.

“Where did you find this?” His voice had all the warmth of an arctic wind.

“In my new bedroom.” She answered in a rush. “They moved my things to the Duchess’s suite while we were gone. I was rummaging through the armoire and I noticed one drawer didn’t seem to have the right depth. As an architect, I’m trained to think about dimensions and...” she shook her head. “Never mind that. I found a secret compartment, and this paper was inside. Is it—?”

“Eloise was in love with someone else,” He snarled, crushing the paper. “She had a lover. Right under my nose, and I never even suspected it.”

“So the letter is hers?” Olivia asked softly, sympathy and pity coloring her tone.

“Without a doubt, this is her handwriting.”

“I feared so, but was hoping it would be older, from an ancestor maybe. I know it must be difficult to accept, but at least that explains why you had difficulties in your marriage.” She offered.

“This explains nothing!” Fury rapidly replaced the pain. “If anything, it opens up more questions. When did she meet and fall in love with this man, before or after marrying me? And when did she even have a chance to carry on an affair? Who is this person? Where is he now? How could I have been so wrong about everything? The one thing I never questioned was her fidelity. Despite the problems between us, I thought she was too virtuous to be unfaithful.” He shook with anger and betrayal and stunned disbelief.

“I was faithful to her. Ever since I married her, there was never another woman for me until you. I spent seven long years celibate, the five before that, in a passionless and unsatisfactory marriage, and I never strayed. How could she?”

“We don’t know if she was actually unfaithful. It might have been an infatuation. Or a platonic love. In any case, it is in the past. What intrigues me more is some of the things she said. She said her love was ‘forbidden’ and that she would like

to run away. Dale, could she have been trying to run away with her lover that day?"

"What?! That is... that is... preposterous. Hideous. It would be an even worse betrayal. No, she wouldn't have done that."

"Perhaps, but if that was the case, it might ease your conscience about your role in her death."

"Even if it's true, what do you think I could do about it now? Look for her lover? I have no idea who he is. And for what? What purpose would it serve to find him?"

"To know the truth. To find peace."

Peace. It was an elusive state. He thought he had achieved a measure of it with Livvy. But one visit from Lady Cavendish, and now this, was all it took to destroy his newfound peace.

He turned his back to her and went to the fireplace. Bracing one hand on the mantle, he stared at the glowing embers on the hearth, but his mind was far away. His jaw ached. He clenched it so hard a muscle ticked in his cheek.

Then Olivia's gentle touch fluttered on his back, making gentle, soothing circles. His tension dissolved.

"Where would I even start?" he asked, voice ragged.

"The servants. They live here. They must know what is going on at all times, even if they act like they don't. If questioned directly, they might provide useful information. Whether she had visitors, or corresponded with someone."

"Her maid!" Dale said. "She would know all her secrets. She is not here anymore, of course, but it should not be difficult to locate her."

"Yes, we definitely need to find her. Who else?"

"I think that's a good start. I will summon Mrs Simmonds and Mr Harris, and we will question them. Then we'll go from there." He bowed his head, sighed. Torn between needing to know and wishing he could forget everything.

“I’m so sorry, Dale. I didn’t stop to think. Maybe I shouldn’t have shown you that letter. Let’s forget about it.”

He reached out and grabbed her hand. “No. It is better this way. Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

But he wasn’t. He wanted to go back to yesterday. Before Lady Cavendish, before this awful letter.

This morning he had woken up entwined in Livvy’s arms. He had found acceptance. He had been happy. But happiness without absolution was fragile. Easily destroyed. Now the past had come back to bite him and he wouldn’t have peace or happiness again until he found out the truth and, hopefully, redemption.



CHAPTER 44 - The servants tell all



THE INFORMATION THE butler and housekeeper provided, if not plentiful, proved to be crucial. They categorically denied any knowledge or even suspicion of any affair the late duchess might have been having and were in fact as shocked as Dale had been.

They said she had not corresponded with anyone unusual, just some friends and family and such, nor did she have any male visitors. But when questioned about the maid, they said she went to the village every week and would sometimes return with a letter.

It was obvious the maid, Ninette, was not popular among the servants. Mrs Simmonds said she put on airs and considered herself above the rest.

“She would never take her meals with us, Your Grace,” Mrs Simmonds said. “She preferred to eat with the duchess or alone, and she spoke to the rest of the servants as if she were their superior.”

Eloise, on the other hand, had been well liked.

“She was a gentle soul. Very kind and caring. She was always asking about my arthritis and even recommended a poultice,” Mr Harris said, his eyes shining with emotion. For a man whose position required perfect decorum and solemnity at all times, this was indeed a great outburst.

Olivia liked Mr. Harris and Mrs. Simmonds. They were honest, loyal and hardworking people. But she found herself a little peeved at all this praise for the late duchess. From hearing them talk, the lady had been virtue personified. And yet she had obviously been no saint. She may have been having an affair right under her husband’s nose. Olivia chastised herself for the unworthy sentiment. After all, the

poor woman was dead, but she couldn't help it. Was she jealous?

“Do you know who this person is with whom Ninette was corresponding?” Olivia asked to change the subject away from Eloise's many virtues and also because that was the best possible thread they could follow to find out more about the affair.

“She never said, of course,” Mrs. Simmonds replied. “but she always visited the milliner's shop when she went to the village. Maybe that's where she received her letters. As for who and where they were from, I don't know. She was very private about all things, and downright secretive about these letters.”

Dale sprung from the chair where he sat, taking Olivia's hand. “Let's go visit the milliner right now. Mr. Harris, have the coach brought around.”



THEY WERE HEADING TOWARDS the village fifteen minutes later. As expected, the shop had closed for the day, but the owner, Mrs. Rossington, lived above the shop, so Dale knocked and a young girl leaned out the upstairs window to see who was at their door. Her eyes widened in shock when she saw them on their doorstep. “Ma! Hurry, open the door. The duke is downstairs.”

A moment later, the front door opened and a flustered Mrs. Rossington greeted them.

“Your Graces,” she said, curtsying to both of them. “To what do I owe this unexpected honor?” She stepped to the side and waved them inside..

“We are hoping you could be of help on a delicate matter.” Dale said, inclining his head.

“Of course. I would be honored.”

They followed Mrs. Rossington up the stairs, where she invited them to a small and cozy parlor.

“I’d be happy to help any way I can. Could I offer you some tea?” She looked from Dale to Olivia, no doubt wondering what kind of assistance she could provide.

“No, thank you, Mrs. Rossington,” Dale said. “Our visit will be brief. Do you remember my late wife’s maid, Ninette?”

Mrs. Rossington’s face shuttered at the mention of the name.

“Vaguely, Your Grace. She used to come to my store sometimes, but it was such a long time ago.”

“I have been informed the reason she frequented your store was to retrieve letters.”

Mrs. Rossington picked at her skirts, avoiding their gazes. She obviously didn’t expect him to know this information. Something was definitely suspicious here.

“Letters, milord? I guess she might have received a letter or two. Sometimes I provide that service. I don’t remember anymore. It was such a long time ago.”

Dale was losing patience with the woman. She knew something and was trying to hide it. Why? And how to get her to spill what she knew? Thankfully, Olivia intervened.

“Madam, do you keep a register of the correspondence that passes through your hands?” Olivia asked gently.

“No reason to do so, milady. I just pass the letters along.”

“I see. And you don’t remember anything about the letters Ninette received? A name, an address, even the city where they came from?” Olivia persisted.

Before the woman could respond with more denials, Dale had an inspiration.

“Think carefully, Mrs. Rossington. We have reason to suspect Ninette might have been involved in some illegal activities. This has recently come to light, and we are investigating it. I am sure you would never want to be involved in any crime. Any information you provide would be appreciated and handsomely rewarded.”

Mrs Rossington's eyes widened, and she paled. Now the fear of the repercussions and the enticement of a potential reward showed in her eyes, warring with whatever had kept her silent before.

"I have done nothing wrong! I know nothing of the content of those letters. I just received them for her."

"We understand Mrs Rossington. I have known you for many years and know you are an honest, hardworking woman. But if the investigator who is looking into this for the magistrate finds out about the letters..." Dale trailed off, leaving her to imagine the consequences. "That's why I wanted to talk to you first. To point him in the right direction."

Fear won. Mrs Rossington started spilling what she knew.

"The letters were from a French gentleman, but they were coming from a London address." She scrunched up her face in thought. "If I remember correctly, his name was Antoine Duvall. No, wait, not Duvall. Dubois."

"Do you remember the address?"

"Not exactly. But I remember the name of the street. Bedford, that's what it was called."

"Thank you, Mrs. Rossington." Dale placed a few gold coins in Mrs. Rossington's hands. "That information might prove useful indeed. We appreciate your help. If you remember anything else, please send a note to the hall."

Then they departed, leaving Mrs. Rossington looking pleased to have received a reward and relieved to have the duke's support.

Sitting across from Olivia on their way back to the hall, Dale pondered the significance of what they had learned.

"Do you think this gentleman who was corresponding with Ninette could be Eloise's lover, and Ninette was picking up the letters for her mistress?" Dale asked.

"Maybe. Are you sure you want to pursue this? It's all in the past now. Or is the subject still too painful to put behind?"

Dale thought about his response for a few moments. “Not precisely painful. The subject will always be sensitive to me, but the years have dulled the pain of her death. The guilt, however, has never lessened. I guess that’s why I’m pursuing this. I need to know if there is some detail in this story that may make me less... guilty.”

“In that case, there might be some value in learning the truth. I will support you in your quest.” She said, getting up and sitting on his lap. Draping her arms over his shoulders, she leaned in and gave him a soft kiss on the lips.

The spontaneous gesture caught him off guard for a second. The next, he tightened his arms around her waist and pressed her to him, devouring her mouth. Wanting only to get lost in the sweet oblivion of her passion. But the carriage was drawing to a halt and the change in momentum brought him back to reality. Dale groaned in frustration while tearing his mouth from her lips.

Olivia opened her eyes to stare at him with unfocused eyes.

“Later,” he told her.

It was a promise.



CHAPTER 45 - The Arrival in London



THEIR ARRIVAL IN LONDON was met with more interest and excitement than either of them expected or desired. Within hours of their arrival, invitations to balls, soirees, musicals, and all sorts of events started pouring in. An enterprising matron or two had even dared to pay a call. They had been turned away, of course. They were not ‘at home’ for visitors, but the mere fact that they had the audacity to call outraged him.

Dale reflected ruefully that he should have expected this. He was, after all, a Duke. But he had left society under a cloud of scandal, never expecting to come back. He had become so accustomed to his solitude, had curated his life of isolation so well, that he could not envision the world beyond his domain might still remember or welcome him. For his part, he had retreated behind the walls of his estate and had done his best to put this shallow society out of his mind. Oh, he still attended parliamentary sessions and supported what he considered worthwhile bills and reforms. But he never socialized with his peers. He had not set foot in any club in years.

His first instinct was one of utter rejection. He wanted to tell everyone to go hang and ignore all invitations and attempts to socialize. He had more important matters at hand. Like finding out what the hell had his former wife been up to.

This visit to London was because of Livvy and her desire to explore the city. He had promised to take her to see the sights, go to the theater, the park and other entertainments. He would not want to subject her to the company of polite society, which, in his experience, was not polite at all.

But then he realized it was precisely because of Livvy that he should not remain isolated from the rest of society. He had lived in a bubble for the past seven years, and he thought it

was enough to protect him and her from the world. But the world had intruded, anyway. He would have liked to keep her hidden away, safe. But Lady Cavendish had found out within hours of their marriage. She would spread her poison again. He didn't care if she maligned him, but Olivia was another matter. He didn't want her to have to live as a pariah.

More than a month had passed since she had appeared, and so far, they still had no clue how she had gotten here or how she could go back to her time. More and more, the possibility was becoming less likely. They had to consider the idea that she might have to remain here with him. He tried to tamp down the selfish joy that thought brought him, for he knew what it would cost her. The thought of not seeing her family again would devastate her.

He was torn between wanting her to have what she needed and wanting to keep her by his side forever. Ultimately, the decision would not be in his hands, but he could damn well do his best to ensure that if she had to stay, she wouldn't have to live as an outcast.

Yes, they should attend a few events, establish her in his world before malicious gossip could compromise her chance for her to do so successfully. He went in search of Livvy. They had much to discuss.

He found her in the Duchess's bedchamber, debating with the maid about the sleeping arrangements.

"You may put the clothes wherever you like, but I'm not planning to sleep here."

"But milady, is anything wrong with the room? Is it not to your taste? We could arrange—"

"No, it's not that. The room is magnificent. It's just that I'm planning to sleep with my husband."

That brought a smile to Dale's lips.

The maid blushed, bobbed a quick curtsy, and tried to hide her smile as she replied, "Of course, milady."

He knocked softly on the partially open door to announce himself, and Livvy immediately lit up at his arrival. As usual,

her brilliant, honest smile did something to his insides and caused a responding smile to appear on his lips.

“Dale!” she exclaimed, rushing to him. “You are just the person to help us solve this. Molly has unpacked my things in this room. She says this is my bedroom, but I’d rather share a bedroom with you.”

He didn’t blame her. After the discovery of that letter, it had likely dawned on her she was taking possession of Eloise’s things. She probably didn’t want to inhabit his former wife’s space. He would have to see about having the rooms redone.

Suddenly appearing troubled, she said, “Unless you prefer these arrangements? I’m sorry I didn’t ask you...”

Dale reached out and circled her waist with his arms, drawing her to him for a quick peck on the forehead. Anything more than that, and he would have to carry her to his room in order to ravish her properly.

“Of course you are sleeping with me, darling. But I suggest you keep your things in this room. You’ll have more space for dressing and getting ready. Consider it your personal domain. You can have the rooms redone to your liking.”

She shook her head. “No, they are fine. I’m just not used to such big houses and couples having separate bedrooms.”

“I can’t say I’m too fond of that custom at the moment, either. But I came to talk to you about something else. We have received a number of invitations to social events.”

“We have? But when? How? I thought you said you didn’t go out in society anymore.”

“I don’t. But that doesn’t seem to deter some people from sending invitations in the hope I might change my mind.”

“But how do they even know we are here? We have just arrived in London...”

“Word gets out, apparently,” he said dryly. “What I wanted to ask you is if you would like to attend a few of those events. A ball, perhaps?”

Her eyes lit up with excitement, but almost immediately, she deflated. “I can’t Dale. I know nothing about the social etiquette or the dances of this period. And you move in such elevated circles... I will do something wrong and embarrass us both. No, I think it is better if we stay clear of any social events. In fact, I’m beginning to think it was a mistake to come to London at all. I thought we could do it in anonymity. Now I feel so exposed.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, Livvy. We could refuse all invitations and callers, or even go back to the country. But I suspect you’ll want to see a little more of my world, and that won’t be possible if we just hide ourselves in the countryside. Besides, that will only increase people’s curiosity.”

“Oh, no.” Olivia leaned her forehead on his chest and Dale rubbed her back in comforting circles.

“I’m afraid, Dale. I don’t know what I’m getting into. So far, I’ve only considered the effects on me and you, but the more people I meet, the bigger the effect I have on others. And I don’t know what the consequences of my actions could be. All I know is that I don’t belong here.”

It hurt to hear her say she didn’t belong here. For him, nobody had ever belonged more in his life, but he understood what she meant. “If your fear is that you will do something wrong, don’t concern yourself about that. I can coach you in etiquette and dancing and any other subject you need to know to navigate any event successfully. And if you make a mistake here or there, it won’t signify. The most important thing is to act confidently, even if you don’t feel it. Never let them see doubt or fear. You are a very smart woman, Livvy. I am sure you can do this.”

His confidence seemed to reassure her, but she still looked nervous.

“What about you Dale?” she asked. “Do you want to return? You have avoided society for years. Are you sure this is what you want, or are you doing it only for my sake?”

He thought about it for a moment before answering. “It is not comfortable. I was used to my solitude and tranquility. But I think it is time.”

“Oh Dale, I have disrupted your life so much. I’m sorry for all the chaos I’ve brought.”

“Hush, no. Don’t apologize. I am glad for the disruption. I needed it.” He offered her a tender smile. “And I’m glad to have met you. I don’t regret that in the least.”

“Neither do I. You have turned what could have been the scariest, most disastrous experience of my life into something magical. Sometimes I imagine what it could have been like if you hadn’t taken me in, and I shudder to think about it.”

“Don’t think about it then. I only want you to shudder from pleasure, not fear.”

In answer, she smiled and placed a quick peck on his lips. God, how he loved these little gestures of affection. It came so naturally to her he doubted she even noticed. But for him, every brief touch, kiss, and caress was more precious than gemstones. He hoarded them all in his heart like a miser collecting treasure.

He looked down at her smiling face, her arms draped softly over his shoulders, and he felt a compulsion to dance with her. It would be worth it to attend a ball, just to have the pleasure of waltzing with her. To whirl with her smoothly across a dance floor carried by the torrent of sound from an orchestra. He hadn’t danced in years, even though he had once enjoyed it.

“I want to dance with you.” The words felt like air on his lips, as if he hadn’t said them at all. He hadn’t meant to voice his thoughts.

But he must have, because Olivia answered.

Her brow puckered a little in confusion, and a small smile played on her lips. “Now? But there’s no music.”

“It doesn’t matter. If we are to go out in society, you need to practice. Come.”

He took her hand and guided her to a room at the back of the first floor. It was a spacious room, spanning the width of the house. Three enormous chandeliers hung from the ornate ceiling, and three glass double doors opened to a terrace and the gardens beyond. The room was sparsely furnished, with only a scattering of sofas and armchairs around the perimeter. On one end, there was a grand piano on a dais.

“The ballroom,” he said, waving his hand to encompass the room. Then, executing a perfect bow, he took her hand, kissed it and continued. “Welcome to your first London Ball, Duchess.”



CHAPTER 46 - The Waltz



OLIVIA TURNED AROUND in amazement. No matter how long she lived in his world, she would never get used to the extravagant opulence he seemed to inhabit so comfortably.

“It is magnificent. What a terrible waste that such wonderful spaces should go empty and unused.”

“We are about to make use of it.”

Olivia turned to him, her eyes wide with shock. “You are not thinking of hosting a ball, are you?”

He smiled, and grabbing her right hand, pulled her against his body. His right arm circled her waist, and he raised their joined hands in a waltz position. “Just a very, very private ball. For you and me. Would you do me the honor of granting me this dance?”

“We are still missing the music,” Olivia said in confusion.

“Ah, yes. That is a problem.” He replied with mock seriousness. “Hmm, what shall we do?” Then he shrugged. “I’ll just have to hum something.”

Olivia smiled. She loved this playful, teasing side of him. It was hard to believe this was the same starchy aristocrat she had first met. Wanting to play along, she smiled up at him and said, “I see you are a multi-talented man. In that case, how can I refuse? It will be my pleasure... although, I have to warn you. I have never danced a waltz. I might step on your toes.” She giggled.

“Don’t worry, I’ll guide you. Put your left hand on my shoulder. Yes, like that. Now, I will go forward with my left foot. You step back with your right, one, two, three and forward with your left... Yes! You’ve got it. Keep doing that.”

He started to hum a melody, and she followed him. He was an excellent dancer. Of course he was. He seemed to excel at

everything he did, whether it was riding a horse, swimming, playing the piano, running a large estate, or making love. Athletic and sure-footed, he guided her with graceful ease, but she kept looking down and making mistakes. He covered her missteps and made it all appear effortless. But she felt like a klutz, bumbling her way through the steps, tripping over her feet to catch up and trying not to look too terrible.

“Stop looking down, Livvy. Look at me. Your feet know what to do.”

She obeyed and lifted her gaze to his eyes, a little frown forming between her eyebrows as she focused really hard, then her gaze lowered to his mouth, and for a moment she forgot about the steps as she thought about kissing him. He had such wonderful, sexy lips... she lost her rhythm and scrambled to catch up. Dale gave her a naughty half smile as if he knew exactly where her thoughts had wandered.

He brought them to a stop. “This isn’t working. You are too focused on the steps and not feeling the dance. I think we need real music. How I wish we had an orchestra... oh, wait. Don’t you have music on that phone of yours?”

“I do,” she replied, taking the phone out of her pocket. She didn’t know why she still always carried it with her. No one was going to call her, but old habits die hard. “I have my music library in here, but I don’t think I have any waltzes.”

“It doesn’t have to be a waltz. I believe any song with a $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature would do.”

“A time signature? What is that?” she asked, opening her music app and handing him the phone.

“It is a way of organizing music in time. It tells you the timing of the piece, how many beats in a measure.” He scrolled through her music options, shaking his head. “I know none of these musicians. I’ll have to listen to the pieces to know what will work.”

“Oh, I see. But how are you going to know that? I have never seen the time signature displayed anywhere in the song info.”

“I can probably recognize the time signature if I listen to the song. How do you make it play the music?”

Olivia leaned in and touched the screen over the first line. The music started. It was a catchy song, but Dale shook his head.

“This one won’t do. How do I play the next one?”

“Simply touch the screen over the title of the song.”

He did that and observed in wonder how the music changed to a completely different song. He kept doing that, listening to each song for a few seconds until he found one he thought would work. He listened to it for several more seconds until he was convinced. “This one. This one will do.”

Olivia listened, a half smile curving her lips, while a little frown tugged between her eyebrows. “‘You and me?’ That song is a waltz?”

“It has the same beat. We can dance a waltz to this song.”

“That is amazing. Let’s do it then.” She re-started the song, then placed the phone in his coat pocket near his chest. The phone could never produce enough volume to fill the ballroom, but with the phone between them, the music surrounded them, creating a special bubble of sound just for two.

Dale took her hand again, and they assumed the waltz position. Softly, he counted down, and they started dancing again. This time it was much easier to follow the steps, maybe because she was feeling the music instead of focusing on her feet.

Dale regarded her intensely, and the lyrics of the song gained new meaning as she peered into his eyes. A song about time ceasing to have meaning, about time running out, and a feeling so powerful that it kept two people completely focused on each other. The words seemed to have been written for them. It was exhilarating. The music, the lyrics, their movement across the dance floor. She had no trouble following him now, their movements synchronized, as if they were one soul.

When the song finished and Dale gently brought them to a stop, she realized they were pressed together from chest to waist, his legs amongst the folds of her skirts, his arm at her waist holding her flush against him. He looked down at their bodies as if just then noticing too and smiled.

“Well, I think you have mastered the waltz. The bad news is, it is entirely inappropriate to dance this close together, nor do I want you to dance like this with any other man.” His lips brushed hers. He had probably meant to drop a quick kiss on her mouth, but she captured his lips, kissing him hungrily, her tongue invading his mouth while she angled her head to plunder deeper. He made a choked sound in his throat and returned her kiss in full measure.

Soon she was tearing at his trousers, struggling with the buttons in her haste to free his cock. So many buttons! Damn, when were zippers invented anyway? Livvy thought in frustrated amusement. She was desperate for the feel of him. Finally, she unbuttoned the fly and greedily reached inside to wrap her hand around his rock hard length.

Her hum of pleasure melded with Dale’s growl as he took over, pulling her to him.



CHAPTER 47 - Why the Waltz is considered risque



DALE GROANED AND WALKED backwards, pulling her with him, until the back of his legs bumped into one of the sofas around the edge of the room. Without breaking the kiss, he sat down, frantically lifting her skirts to run his hands along her thighs while she sat straddling him. The sound of her underwear ripping under the force of his fists sent a thrill of excitement through her belly. Then his fingers slid into her moist core, caressing and coaxing her into frenzied readiness. She needed him. Now.

He seemed to know exactly what she needed, seemed to be as desperate as her. The next moment, he grabbed her hips in his large hands while she positioned him right at her entrance. With one powerful movement, he thrust up while bringing her down, impaling her on his engorged shaft.

The savagery of his possession brought a hoarse cry to her throat that mingled with his groan between their fused lips.

He steadied her hips for a moment, as if trying to regain control, then his hold loosened, and she started moving.

He felt hard and heavy inside her. The slippery friction sending delicious rivulets of pleasure all throughout her body from that one place of exquisite sensation. She kept chasing them. It was too much, and yet it wasn't enough. She needed more. An explosive climax hovered just beyond her reach, and she was desperate to grasp it.

Then his clever fingers caressed the little bud where all sensation coalesced, catapulting her into the explosion. A hurricane of pleasure rolled through her and slammed her senses. She shook with the violent contractions of an intense climax before collapsing satisfied on his chest.

Somewhere in the tumult of her mind, she knew that he had been right there with her, sharing the storm. She had felt the strong pulsations of his cock deep within her while he exploded with his release. The feelings evoked by that shared experience went beyond satisfaction to a sense of rightness, of belonging.

She had never felt this urgency before, as if she would die if she didn't have him at this very moment. He was her mate, the ultimate male to her femaleness. The thought caused a curl of pleasure in her belly and her internal muscles tightened. He gasped at the intimate caress.

“Dale? I don't think we should go to any balls.”

“We won't go, then. But didn't we dance beautifully a moment ago?”

“Too beautifully, and look what happens when we dance like that.”

That surprised a laugh out of Dale. “I think you are right. It would be exceedingly bad form to fornicate in the middle of a ball.”

“It would certainly shock the other guests,” she said with a laugh of her own.

“The hostess would never forgive us,” he confirmed with mock regret. “But you know, there are always unoccupied rooms and hideaways we could sneak into if we are overcome with passion during a ball.”

“You really mean that, don't you?”

“Absolutely.” The smile slid from his face. “I will have you in any way I can, anywhere, at any moment, for as long as I am able.”

Olivia lifted her head from his shoulder to look into his eyes. “That is the most romantic thing I've heard in my life.”

“Is that so? Has no one ever compared your hair to rays of sunshine or your eyes to honey, or your skin to the finest silk, and your mouth to a rosebud?”

Her light laughter from before bloomed into guffaws that shook her body as she buried her face in his chest. When she could breathe once more, she said, “No, and I wouldn’t consider that romantic, but corny.”

“Good thing I didn’t say those things then.” He said with a playful smack of her butt under her skirts. “Although I find myself having mawkish thoughts about you quite often. I’ll try to keep those to myself.”

“Hmm, no. I don’t want you to keep anything from me.” She brought her ‘rosebud’ mouth close to his. “I also want all of you for as long as I can have you.”

Someone cleared his throat in the doorway behind them, and Olivia froze in embarrassment. They were still joined under the folds of her skirts! Had someone just seen them having sex? She closed her eyes in mortification, feeling unbearably exposed.

But Dale simply responded calmly, as if they had just been having tea. “Yes, Hawkins?”

“Your Grace, pardon the intrusion.”

Yeah, no shit, Olivia thought in indignation. Why didn’t he simply go away so that they could make themselves decent?

“Mr. Collins is here to see you.”

Oh, no! Was there yet another person looking at them? Olivia reflexively moved to stand, but Dale held her in place with his hands at her waist, giving her a tiny shake of his head. Right, if she stood, they would be even more exposed. Could this get any worse?

“I have put him in the library,” the butler continued.

Oh, good. At least this other guy was not standing there too, looking at them.

“Thank you Hawkins,” Dale said. “I’ll be there in a moment. Please have refreshments sent to my cousin.”

“Certainly, Your Grace.” The butler bowed and left, closing the door behind him.

Livvy heard the click of the door and melted with relief. “Is he gone?” she asked, while hot waves of humiliation coursed through her.

“Yes.” Dale stood and set her on her feet, an amused smile on his face. “Here, have my handkerchief.” He handed it to her while he did up his pants buttons.

She turned around to clean herself. “How can you be so relaxed? I’ve never been so mortified in my life.”

“After that session, I cannot be anything but relaxed. But you don’t need to fret. He didn’t see anything. Your skirts covered us thoroughly.”

“Be that as it may, he must have guessed what was going on beneath the skirts.”

“Not necessarily. I think I played it off well,” Dale said with a smug smile. “Even if he did, I don’t care. You are my wife, and what we were doing is no sin.”

“Maybe not, but we definitely need to stop doing it in public rooms,” Olivia replied tartly.

“You were the one who jumped on me,” he pointed out, raising a brow in challenge.

“Yes, I did. How embarrassing. I’m so so...”

“Don’t you dare,” Dale exclaimed, pulling her close against him. “Never say you are sorry for that. I loved every minute. I hope you do it again and again.” He emphasized each word with a kiss.

Olivia threw her arms around his neck. “I will. I can’t seem to help myself, anyway. But now, don’t you have a visitor waiting for you?”

He sighed. “Yes, my cousin Alasdair. He is also my heir.”

A cousin? She didn’t even know about this cousin. He had only told her about his parents and late wife, but of course he must have extended family. The fact that she didn’t know about it just underscored how little she knew about him.

“I didn’t know you had a cousin.” She said, and the hurt must have shown in her voice.

“I haven’t seen him in years. He has been abroad. Maybe you should come with me and meet him. I’m sure he will be curious to meet you, too.”

“Do I have to? I feel like the more people I meet, the more complicated the situation becomes and—”

He kissed her objections away. “You are overthinking.”

She sighed. “You are right. I don’t know why I feel so reluctant to meet new people. It is a mix between feeling like an impostor and fear of doing something wrong.”

“If you don’t want to meet him, you don’t have to. But fear not. If you do something wrong, people will attribute it to you being American, and I will stand by you because you are not an impostor. You are my wife in every sense of the word.”

“All right, then. I’ll go meet him with you.”

“Perfect. I’m sure it will go well. He is a pleasant chap.”

The meeting was going better than Livvy could have imagined. Mr. Collins was indeed a delightful gentleman; and if he resented the possibility that she could provide an heir that would replace him as the heir for the dukedom, he didn’t show it. In fact, he seemed genuinely pleased that Dale had found a wife.

“I have to say, cousin, there were rumors you had married, but I did not believe them. I had all but resigned myself to being on the hook for the title. Glad to see that you have taken your responsibilities seriously, and soon I shall be freed of this burden.”

“Don’t be hasty, Alasdair. I did not marry to provide an heir. I already did that once before and failed. Maybe you should try your hand at it this time. When will you marry?”

“When I find a lady as lovely as your wife.”

“She is indeed a rare gem, but I daresay if you applied yourself to the task, you’d have no shortage of lovely ladies to choose from.”

“Maybe I will now. You two certainly make marriage look appealing.”

The conversation continued to flow with an easy familiarity between Dale and Alasdair. Olivia was happy simply to listen and let them speak. They shared a deep and obvious affection. She had not thought of Dale as being the kind who had close friends. When she met him, he was so much a loner that she had gotten used to thinking about him by himself, without family or friends. She was glad to see him rebuilding relationships. She didn't want to think of him alone again if, or when, she left.

The thought of returning to her own time produced bittersweet emotions now. She didn't want to stay and never see her family again. But each day made it harder and harder to imagine a life without Dale. In so short a time, he had become such an important part of her. Was it only because of the extraordinary circumstances? No. The answer resonated clearly in her mind. He was extraordinary, regardless of the times or circumstances. She was unlikely ever to meet another man like him, and after having loved him, she could never settle for less.

Love? Was she in love with him, then? She quickly checked with her heart. It beat faster, fluttering in her chest at the notion. Oh yes, there was no doubt. She was utterly, irrevocably in love with Dale.



CHAPTER 48 - Cousin Alasdair comes to visit



OH, WHAT A COMPLICATION. What an unwise thing to do. But it had been inevitable. How could she not fall in love with him, given the kind of man he was? Would it have been better to avoid his company, never have tasted his kisses, or experienced his lovemaking? Maybe that would have delayed the inevitable, but from the moment she awoke in this strange reality and saw him, she had felt an inexorable pull toward him. She could no more have contained her feelings than she could control the tides.

What now? Did he love her in return? He seemed very attracted to her, and he certainly enjoyed their intimacy. But she knew that for some people, sex and love did not always go hand in hand. Maybe for him she was just a convenient release of his pent up sexual urges. He had indirectly warned her not to speak of love after the first time they had been intimate. Maybe he had been hinting at his emotions. He certainly had never spoken of love in relation to her, and had made it very clear he had loved his first wife dearly.

Yeah, given the evidence, she had to conclude that while he was probably sexually attracted to her (and she had to admit; they were very compatible in that regard); he was not in love with her. And would probably never be. All his love had gone to Eloise, who hadn't been able to appreciate it or return it.

Ah, how unfair and chaotic human emotions were. Why couldn't people fall in love in a rational manner? But wasn't that part of the beauty of love? Its unpredictability and irrationality?

"My dear?" Dale asked.

"Uh?" Olivia shook away her musings. "Sorry, my mind wandered for a second there."

“Cousin Alasdair was asking if we will attend his mother’s ball the day after tomorrow?”

“I...” What to say? This was Dale’s family. She didn’t want to seem rude, but now more than ever, she didn’t want to become more entangled in his world. “I am not sure. I’ll leave it to your discretion.”

“We have not yet decided how long we will stay in London, cousin. I will send word tomorrow if we are able to attend, but if not, give my regrets to my aunt and tell her I trust her ball will be a complete success.”

“I understand. If I was newlywed, I wouldn’t want to spend my evenings going to balls either. Much more fun to spend the time on other, more worthwhile pursuits,” Alasdair said with a wink. “Isn’t that so, cousin?”

Dale narrowed his eyes at him. “Don’t be impertinent. I can still thrash you, you know.”

Alasdair laughed at the empty threat and took his leave. “Duchess, it’s been my absolute pleasure to meet you.” He took her hand and kissed it. “I wish you and my cousin many years of happiness. And many sons.”

She didn’t know how to respond to that, so she smiled genially. “It has been my pleasure as well.” What was it with these aristocrats and their obsession with procreation? Although the pang she felt deep inside at the thought of a little boy just like Dale seized her breath for a moment. Granted, it was improbable. But the possibility existed. She had already considered it, and in her heart, she was not averse to it.

Pure insanity.

She should take care and insist on some sort of contraception. They must have something in these times. If she got pregnant, it would be a great complication. That would definitely ensure she would not be able to return to her life. She would never leave her child behind, and to take it from Dale would be just as cruel. No, if she were to conceive, she would have to stay here with him. The prospect was equal parts terrifying and appealing.



DALE NOTICED OLIVIA'S preoccupation after his cousin left. He was so attuned to her he could feel the smallest changes in her mood. What was she thinking? Did she reflect on how she had failed to conceive before? Had his cousin's thoughtless quip brought back that pain? Damn Alasdair for being an indelicate prig. He had no right to mention babies, even if that was what society expected of an aristocratic wife.

Or maybe her mood stemmed from her not wanting to have a baby with him. How could he not have thought about the possibility before? Even during his youth, he had always been so careful not to conceive a child carelessly. As far as he knew, he had sired no bastards. The only other person he had never avoided impregnating had been Eloise. The thought of that baby that never came to be was like a raw wound in his heart that he knew would never heal. He had not only destroyed Eloise, but their unborn child as well.

And now there was Livvy. It would be unwise, given the circumstances, but wise or not, his heart overflowed at the thought of creating a child with her. It might have happened already. They had certainly been quite diligent in that regard.

The craving was so strong he had to cut off that line or thought. No, he shouldn't wish to trap her like that. His selfishness had destroyed the woman he had loved before. He could not allow his selfish wishes to cause Olivia any harm. They had not been thinking clearly, the two of them. They had rushed headlong into their passion without considering the consequences. But now that he had, he would talk to her and abide by her decision. It was the least he could do.

That night when Olivia entered his room, already in her nightgown, he broached the subject. They had to discuss it before things spiraled out of control.

"Livvy, there's something my cousin's comments made me think about. The possibility of a child."

She looked up sharply. In her eyes he saw that the idea had been on her mind as well, but also saw surprise at him

broaching the subject. As if startled that such a private thought was out in the open.

“I can’t believe I had not considered it before,” he went on, “and I want to apologize for my carelessness.”

“No need to apologize, Dale. I was just as careless. I thought about it briefly, after the first time we were intimate. But the possibility seemed very slim, given that before I spent over a year trying to get pregnant, and it never happened. It would be unlikely that I would conceive so soon now.”

“Unlikely, but not impossible, isn’t it?”

“I guess... it is possible.” She looked down and fidgeted with the laces of her gown.

Dale walked up to her and gently placed his hand under her chin, urging her face up to look at him. “Do you want it to happen? What would you do if you conceived?”

“I don’t know, Dale. I don’t know the answer to either of those questions. Or rather, I should say my head and my heart can not agree on the answer. When I first considered the possibility of a pregnancy, my heart jolted with joy, and my head recoiled in panic. I really don’t know what I want or what I would do if my carelessness has consequences.”

“I feel the same way. On the one hand, I want you to have my baby with frightening intensity. But I see what a difficult situation that would create for you. I would never want to take your choices away from you.”

“Thank you for that.”

“I think, since neither of us considers it wise, we should take precautions.”

“I agree. Although it may already be too late.”

“When will you know?”

She mentally calculated. She had had her period just the week prior to becoming sexually involved with Dale. That had been about a week ago.

“In a couple of weeks, I think. Although I’ve always been irregular with my periods. A slight delay may be normal.”

“Let’s hope there’s no delay this time, for both our peace of mind.”

“Yes, let’s hope.”

That night, they made passionate love as usual. Dale took his time stoking her flames and driving her into a frenzy, and stayed with her until her shattering culmination. But then he withdrew before spilling his pleasure.

It was the wise thing to do. Why, then, did it feel like such a loss?



CHAPTER 49 - A matter of property



THE NEXT MORNING, THEY set off for Bedford Street. They were on a quest to find the mysterious Monsieur Dubois and find out whether there was any significance to his letters to Ninette. Coincidentally, Dale was familiar with Bedford street, even though it was a small and lesser known street around Covent Garden. He had frequented it often enough in his youth, for it was where a certain actress with whom he had carried out an affair used to live.

They had expected finding Dubois would require some time, if they could find him at all, but finding him proved to be surprisingly easy. Bedford street was a busy little passage between two larger thoroughfares, containing a mix of private homes and businesses. Midway through the street, Livvy spotted a sign hung over a door that read: ‘Monsieur Paul Dubois. Agent Immobilière’. She pointed it out to Dale. They looked at each other for a moment before walking towards it with purposeful steps.

The door was opened by a young clerk, who looked a little flustered at the sight of such distinguished visitors. After having a look at Dale’s calling card, he became downright awestruck. He promptly ushered them into a receiving room while he went in search of his employer.

He came back a moment later and led them to his employer’s office. Mr Dubois stood behind his desk, just slightly less flustered than his clerk. He was a somewhat heavysset man who looked to be about sixty with balding white hair and bushy sideburns. One look at him and both Olivia and Dale dismissed the idea that he could have been Eloise’s lover. But the question remained of his connection to the maid.

“Your Graces.” he said, executing a bow that strained the buttons of his waistcoat. “Please be seated. To what do I owe

the honor of your visit?”

Dale decided to be direct. The man obviously wanted to ingratiate himself to him, and that might make him more open. “Monsieur Dubois, thank you for receiving us. Our reason for seeking you out is that we are trying to locate a person you may know, as it seems you corresponded with her a few years ago.”

“Oh, I’ll be glad to be of service. What is the name of this person? I correspond with many people because of my business. If she was a client, I may have a record of her.”

“Her name is Ninette DeGault.”

“Ninette. The name rings a bell. How long ago was this correspondence I had with her?”

“A little over seven years ago.”

“Hmm, that long ago... I will ask my assistant to look through the archives for that name. If you would just give me a moment.” He pressed a bell, and it rang somewhere inside the building. The same clerk returned and Monsieur Dubois gave him instructions to search, after which he diligently left to begin his search.

“It might take Mr. Peterson a while to find the file, if indeed we have a record of that. May I offer some refreshments while we wait?”

Dale accepted, mainly to have something to do while they waited and to talk to Dubois some more. The man seemed honest and open. Unlike Mrs Rossington, he didn’t seem to be trying to hide anything. Maybe there really was no mystery to unveil, and Ninette was simply corresponding with him on a business matter unrelated to his late wife. But since they were already here, they might as well see it through. Mr Dubois didn’t seem inconvenienced by their presence. He appeared quite pleased to host such distinguished guests.

So they settled in to have tea. Mr Dubois was all too happy to talk about himself and his business. He mainly dedicated himself to selling properties in France to English buyers. He obviously considered Dale a potential client; because he

continuously extolled the virtues of chateaus surrounded by vineyards and holiday mansions by the sea.

Dale listened with only mild interest. He wouldn't be averse to buying a property on the beach. Especially now with Livvy, he could quite imagine spending romantic holidays, only the two of them. They would bath in the sea during the day and make passionate love at night. Oh, yes, the idea appealed in various ways and deserved more consideration. But for now, he wanted whatever information this man could provide so they could go on with their day. He quite looked forward to sharing the sights of London with Livvy. She had such unabated enthusiasm and *joie de vivre* that it was infectious, and it prompted him to view the city he had known his entire life in a whole new light.

After several minutes, the clerk returned with a folder and handed it to his employer. "Here is the record you are looking for, Monsieur. Will there be anything else?"

"No, thank you Peterson. You may return to your duties."

The young man nodded and left, closing the door softly behind him.

Monsieur Dubois opened the file and sifted through the papers. After a moment, he grunted in recognition.

"I remember this client now. The young lady is French. She was looking for a property in Provence. But she didn't want it close to the sea, as most people who seek a property in this area do. She wanted a house deep in the countryside."

"What kind of property was she interested in?" Dale asked, his curiosity piqued.

"It took a while to find exactly the right property, for she was very specific about what she wanted. But we finally found a beautiful farmhouse with a lovely piece of land that was near a town for convenience, yet secluded enough for privacy. Not too big or small. The strangest thing was that she bought it sight unseen. As soon as I described the property—and I sent her some prints of the house—she decided she wanted it and completed the transaction."

“Indeed? And how much does a property like this cost?”

The amount given by the agent made Dale raise his brow. It was a small fortune. How could a maid afford that? Extremely interesting. And why would Ninette want to buy property in France? Had she planned to move there? He had always thought her quite devoted to Eloise, had thought she would never leave her employ, but... maybe he had been wrong. Maybe she had yearned to return to her country. Or... the house could be for retirement.

But where had she gotten the money to buy the property? He needed to find out more. Something wasn't adding up. He needed answers, and he might find them in Ninette. Now all he needed was to find the address of the property and pay her a visit.

“Monsieur Dubois. Could you provide me the address to this property?”

Dubois' eyes widened with apprehension. “Your Grace. I don't know if I can. I may have already revealed too much information. My clients expect me to maintain confidentiality.”

“I understand that, Monsieur, and I have the utmost admiration for your professionalism. But is this information really confidential? I could probably get her address by some other means, but it would take longer and considerably more effort. Besides, I mean her no harm. All the opposite. It recently came to my attention that my late wife had left her a bequest. I am searching for her to make sure she receives it.”

“In that case, and being that she didn't specifically ask me to keep her location secret...”

In the end, they left Dubois' offices with the property address. Plus the directions on how to get there and recommendations for which inns to stay during the trip and once they arrived there. The agent had proved to be a veritable fount of knowledge.

“So, what do you make of this information? I honestly didn't find it very useful. It is just a property purchase.” Olivia

said, shrugging.

“On the contrary, my dear. This information is very useful. Just as I thought, the price for a property like that would be far out of reach for a simple maid. Someone must have helped her purchase it, and I’m sure the reason will prove very interesting indeed.”

“Really? So this wasn’t a complete waste of time. What do you plan to do now?”

“Pay Ninette a visit, of course. I hear the south of France is lovely this time of year. Fancy a trip to Provence?”

Olivia smiled widely. “But of course! I love the south of France. I visited Cannes once. It was a very brief visit. I was on a cruise and was only there for a day, but I remember thinking that I had to come back and spend some days exploring Provence... Sorry, I am babbling. It’s just that I love to travel and get really excited when I’m going to cool places.”

Dale smiled indulgently. He didn’t mind at all if she babbled. In fact, he loved her enthusiasm. It was one thing he loved about her. Seeing her happy and excited had become his greatest pleasure in life; only surpassed by sharing that excitement with her during lovemaking. He should tell her that. Instead, he said simply, “I don’t mind your enthusiasm at all. Although I’m not sure about the cool part. Unless the climate has changed radically in the future, Provence is quite warm.”

Olivia laughed out loud. “I don’t mean cool weather wise. It is an expression we use in my time. It means different things, depending on the context, usually good things. In this case, I meant beautiful, enchanting, very special.”

“I see. Can I say you are ‘cool’ then?”

She laughed again. “It doesn’t have quite the same connotation when applied to a person. In that case, it means something like relaxed, fun, trustworthy. A person who’s a pleasure to be around.”

“Hmm, I think it definitely applies to you then.” He tucked her close under his arm and deposited a kiss on the top of her

hair.

“You are cool too, Dale.” She slid her arms around his torso and hugged him tight. “I think you are the coolest man I’ve ever known.”



CHAPTER 50 - From London to Nice



WITH HIS USUAL EFFICIENCY, Dale procured a private train coach that would take them to the port of Dover the very next day. From there, they took a ferry to Calais. By evening they were already in Paris, where they spent the night in a hotel before boarding another private train car to Nice. That was the easiest and fastest part of the trip. The village Monsieur Dubois had indicated was quite remote, and only accessible by a horse carriage. They spent another night in Nice before Dale could make arrangements for a coach to take them there.

Olivia didn't mind the delays. She was regarding this trip as something of a honeymoon, and the slower pace allowed for better sightseeing and enjoying time alone with her new husband. Away from the servants and anyone who knew them. He occupied the space as well as her mind, and it was impossible to feel bored in his presence. She relished these moments with him.

For she felt time running out. Deep down in her bones, she knew this time out of time could not last forever. Somehow, she would return to her normal life. She didn't know how she knew this, but she just couldn't see herself staying. Couldn't imagine her future here. That's why she had settled to enjoy the moment and had stopped trying to figure out what had happened and looking for a way to go back.

Only this certainty no longer offered any comfort. Oh, she wanted to return to her life. She missed her parents, her niece, her house, even her work. But with each passing moment, she was painfully aware that returning to all that meant leaving Dale. And the thought so devastated her. How would she ever go on without him? She could not win. There were

heartbreaking losses on both sides, so she did not wish to rush toward any resolution.

Dale must have sensed her dark mood, for he grabbed her hand and pulled her towards him. She reclined against his chest, put her head on his shoulder, and held on to this moment of perfection. He made her feel so good. Yet 'good' seemed like such a bland word to describe him. He was strong, competent, and yet sensitive. Passionate and tender. She was sure that if she had a lifetime with him, she could find a few flaws. Nobody was perfect after all. But she didn't have a lifetime, so for her, he would always be perfect.

"We should arrive within the hour," Dale informed her.

"Hmm, okay. What do you expect to find now that we are almost there?"

"I don't know. Answers. Enlightenment. Everything I thought I knew has been rearranged. I'm questioning things I took as facts. I want to understand."

"And do you think Ninette can provide these answers you seek?"

"I believe she knows a lot. She was very close to Eloise. More like a companion than a lady's maid, although she performed those duties too. But their relationship was more than just employer and employee. They were friends. Confidants. If someone knows anything about Eloise, it is Ninette."

"I see. And do you think she will talk to you? You told me she slandered you and was very hostile."

"To say that she hates me would be putting it mildly."

"All the more reason to doubt her cooperation. Do you think you can make her talk to you and tell you all she knows?"

Dale shrugged. "I'll find a way to make her tell me what I want."

Olivia smiled. "I see you plan to be very persuasive."

“Persistent, more like. Persuasion through persistence,” he said, smiling too.

“Are we going today? By the time we reach the village, it will be almost dark.”

“No. Better to wait until tomorrow morning. We might get lost trying to reach the farmhouse at night, and it will be very bad form to show up unannounced after dark.”

That meant another night with him. Alone, together at a hotel or inn. Perfection.

“I agree. Besides, I don’t know about you, but I’m tired. I lack the energy for a confrontation tonight.” As if to punctuate her exhaustion, she yawned and tried to stretch her back muscles, sore after all day in the carriage with only a brief stop for lunch.

Dale turned her away from him and put his hands on her shoulders, massaging them, applying exquisite pressure on exactly the right spots. She was melting under his talented hands.

“Hmmm, you are so good at that.”

“I am good at several other things too,” he said, wicked suggestion on his voice.

“Don’t I know that!”

“Any chance I can persuade you to sample my other talents later, or are you too tired?”

“Never too tired for that.”

“Good. In that case...” He leaned forward and whispered in her ear all the things he planned to do later.

Her exhaustion vanished in a wave of anticipation.



CHAPTER 51 - Arriving at the Farm



THE LIGHT COMING IN through the partially open window was cool and clear, and the breeze carried the scent of lavender. Waking up with Olivia in his arms after a night of passion felt so right that he wanted to savor the moment forever.

Unfortunately, there wasn't time to dawdle. They must get ready, grab some breakfast and set off for Ninette's farmhouse. He hoped he could find the answers he was looking for. He had mourned and punished himself for seven long years. Now they had come all this way... he needed to close this chapter. Look into the future with Livvy.

And what was he hoping to learn? Something that would help him understand Eloise. For that would help him make sense of his marriage and possibly the reason for its failure.

An hour later, they were both ready. Olivia had heartily partaken of the excellent breakfast provided by the inn. She had almost consumed half a loaf of bread by herself. He had barely downed some coffee. Olivia kept giving him sidelong glances and trying to keep a cheerful chatter. Thankfully, she didn't insist he eat more. He usually had a hearty appetite. If he wasn't eating this morning, that was a sign of his mental state.

"Are you dreading this encounter with Ninette?" She said, touching his hand where it lay on the table.

He made a face. "I can't say I'm looking forward to seeing her, no."

"Do you expect unpleasantness?"

"Oh, certainly. That is almost guaranteed. But that is not why I am uneasy about this visit."

“Why then?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s that everything related to my first wife’s death puts me in a bad mood. Or maybe it is because I have the feeling we may uncover more than anticipated.”

Olivia wove their fingers together. “We can leave. You don’t need to talk to her if you don’t want to.”

“That is out of the question. We came all this way, and I want to find answers. Don’t mind my moods.”

“Then don’t worry. Whatever we uncover, I’ll be by your side to support you. Together, nothing will be more than we can handle.”

He squeezed her hand and took it to his lips for a kiss. “Thank you Livvy. You are the best thing that’s happened to me. Let’s go then.”

They got directions from the innkeeper and set off for the farmhouse. It wasn’t far away, just about five miles outside of town, and the trip there in the small curricule they rented from the inn proved pleasant and easy. Really, if it wasn’t for the tension churning inside him, the drive would be idyllic.

The road, set among fields of lavender, was the type of picture-perfect landscape adored by painters. Olivia had brought her phone, but having been far away from the car for several days meant it was almost out of power. She was able to snap a couple of pictures, though, especially of the house when it came into view.

It was the quintessential stone farmhouse with the blue shutters so typical of Provence, but big. A lot bigger than he had expected.

“This might have been a farm in the past. But it is definitely not a farm now,” he said.

“How do you know?” Olivia asked, turning an inquisitive glance his way.

“Because, darling, managing an estate such as mine involves knowing a lot about farming, and this is not a

working farm. There are no animals, farming tools, barns, threshing halls, or any evidence of labor. All the grounds are decorative. And the house is much grander than a simple farm would be. This place is a country mansion masquerading as a farm. Very charming, but that means the owner must have other sources of income to maintain it.”

“I see. Even more puzzling. Well, we might discover soon enough the source of Ninette’s wealth.”

“I hope so.”

They approached the house with no one intercepting them. Dale maneuvered the small carriage with ease to park it right in front of the main door, then leaped down, tied the horses and went to the other side to help Olivia down.

Still, no one had come out of the house to greet them. Either the house did not have many servants or they were poorly trained. He mentally shrugged. It was to his advantage. He preferred the element of surprise when dealing with Ninette.

He brandished the simple iron knocker, and the sound reverberated loud throughout the house. Almost as loud as his heart. He couldn’t explain why this meeting should make him nervous, but it did. A few moments passed before they heard hurried footsteps inside. Then the door was thrown open by Ninette herself.

Dale had only a second to register how her eyes widened and the blood drained from her face before she tried to shut the door in his face.

He reacted just quick enough to block the door.

She shrieked. “Go away! I will scream. I will call for help and people will come to my aid!”

Dale’s fury rose at her extreme overreaction, but he tamped it down. She was obviously nearly hysterical. It would not help things if he lost his patience. “Ninette, calm down! I’m not here to harm you. I just want to talk to you.”

“I have nothing to say to you. Go now! And don’t you ever come back or...” She grappled for a threat big enough to use

against a Duke “Or I’ll shoot you and then claim you assaulted me.”

“Stop talking nonsense, woman!” Dale finally had enough and easily pushed the door open all the way. “I just want to talk to you for a few moments and then I’ll go away. I have come all the way here and will not leave until we have spoken.”

“How did you find me?” Ninette backed up a few steps to grab a fireplace poker, and she brandished it against them as he stepped through the threshold. The woman was unhinged.

Before Dale could answer, he heard rapid footsteps approaching from the back of the house and a familiar voice calling, “Nina! Are you all right? I heard a scream.”

No. It couldn’t be. His blood froze. His breathing ceased. He had no time to prepare before the other woman burst into the room and stopped, her eyes fixing on Dale and widening in agonizing shock and horror. The small pottery vase she was carrying dropped to the floor, the noise it made as it shattered loud and discordant in the tense silence. His tortured mind whirled, trying to assimilate what he was seeing.

Eloise.



CHAPTER 52 - Eloise



DALE COULD NOT BREATHE. Shock wrapped around his lungs and squeezed the air out. Reality had splintered, lost all meaning. Surely he must be dreaming. Stranger things had happened. Olivia had traveled from the future, which surely qualified as more extraordinary, but seeing Eloise return from the dead shook him more. He felt... unmoored, glad, confused, relieved, furious, everything at the same time and with the same intensity. Such a storm of violent and contradictory emotions left him breathless and paralyzed.

The frozen tableau could almost be farcical if it wasn't for the raw emotions permeating the room.

A burst of movement to his right broke the stillness,

Ninette had run to a credenza, shoved her hand into a drawer and pulled a pistol which she was trying to aim at him.

Eloise gasped. "No!"

Livvy was the closest to Ninette. She jumped to the other woman, and they grappled for the gun.

Dread dropped heavily in Dale's gut at the danger to Olivia. It broke through his shock and galvanized him to action. In two strides, he reached them and snatched the weapon from Ninette's hands. He quickly checked it and noticed, with rising fury, that it was loaded. She could have shot Livvy. He scowled at the maid.

"What were you planning to do, you lunatic? Shoot me?" He roared.

"I will kill you before I let you take her!"

"Enough, Ninette!" Eloise finally spoke up. "You will not kill anybody. Least of all Avondale. I need to speak with him. I owe him that."

“You owe him nothing! Remember how he treated you? He will demand that you return to him.”

“It would be his right to do so. Nevertheless, I need to speak to him. Alone.” The authority in Eloise’s voice, coupled with her poise and direct stare, managed to subdue Ninette.

The maid begrudgingly moved toward the front door. She looked deflated, but then she turned to Olivia. “If I have to go, this woman should go as well,” she spat out.

Olivia merely looked her up and down. “My name is Olivia, and I will go only if Avondale so wishes.”

She looked back at him, asking for guidance. In her eyes he saw an emotion he couldn’t decipher, ...sadness, perhaps. She looked fragile, almost lost. But he couldn’t deal with it just now, not with his own emotions in a jumbled chaos.

There was an apology and a plea for understanding in his eyes when he asked, “Please, Livvy. Just give me a few minutes.”

She nodded and left with Ninette.

When they were finally alone, he turned to Eloise.

She turned and motioned for him to follow her to a cozy parlor just off the entrance.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered. A woman in her prime. But also, she had something she’d never had before. Something like inner peace, happiness even shone from her.

“Would you like to sit?” she asked nervously. Maybe she wasn’t so at peace after all.

“No, thank you. I prefer to stand.”

She nodded, swallowed.

He waited.

“I... I’m sorry, William.”

“Sorry for what, exactly? For running away? For letting me think you were dead for seven years? For what, precisely,

are you sorry?" His voice rang with fury. He couldn't help it.

"For everything. For marrying you, for my inability to make you happy, for the failure of our marriage. And yes... also for letting you think I was dead."

His fist slammed down on a console table, making the figurines atop it rattle and Eloise jump. "And do you think saying you're sorry fixes anything? Do you think it erases all the pain and guilt I suffered? I mourned you! I have not known peace these past seven years. Why?"

Such a small word. Such a big question.

Eloise sat, wringing her hands. She looked fragile, deflated. "It is difficult to explain." Her voice was thin, her head bowed.

"Try. By God, I deserve an explanation." Her obvious pain lanced some of his anger, leaving only sorrow behind.

"Yes, I know. I just don't know if I can explain, just as I wasn't able to make you happy." She looked up at him then, a plea in her eyes. "I will try, for you. Just... please understand, this is very difficult for me. So difficult that I ran away rather than face it. But I can't run anymore, can I?"

"What were you running away from, Ellie?" Despite his chaotic emotions, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to call her by the pet name he had given her as a child. "I'd think it was from me. But you don't seem afraid of me now. What or who were you running away from? Was somebody threatening you? You can tell me. You could have trusted me back then. I would have protected you."

She gave a bitter little laugh. "Ah, Will. Why do you have to be so damn good? It makes my guilt so much worse. You couldn't have protected me because the person I was running away from was myself. What I am."

"What you are? I don't understand."

She looked down at her twisting hands again. "I am not normal, Will. I don't feel the way a woman should." She made an impatient gesture with her hands. "This is so difficult to explain. Especially to you."

She stood and paced in agitation. “Ever since I was a young woman, I suspected I was different. All the other girls were always falling in love and tittering about one gentleman or another. They would blush and simper and get all nervous and excited when the gentleman who caught their fancy addressed them or asked them to dance. I, in contrast, felt no attraction toward any man.

“At first I was glad I felt that way, since I was already promised to you, and it would have been inappropriate for me to develop feelings for another man. I thought myself virtuous. I was even proud, thinking myself above such girlish folly. But it was just that I had not met the right person. By the time I realized my true feelings, it was too late. I was already married to you. You must believe me, I didn’t know. I never would have married you if I had known my nature.”

“So it is true! You fell in love with someone else. You had a lover. Who is he? Where is he?” He looked around as if expecting his rival, his wife’s lover, to saunter into the room at any moment.

“Not he, but she. The person I am in love with is Ninette.”



CHAPTER 53 - Confession



THE TRUTH SLAMMED INTO Dale with the power of a cannonball. For the second time in less than an hour, he was stunned to his core. Good god! He had not expected this. And yet, now that she had said it, everything made sense.

He couldn't think, didn't know how to react. The only phrase going through his mind was, Eloise likes women?

He felt more than a little sick at the thought. Of course, he knew that some men and women preferred people of their own gender. He even knew a couple of gentlemen of that ilk and some establishments that catered to those desires.

But to the extent that he had ever thought about it, he thought of those people as... not normal, as consumed with unnatural tendencies. He never imagined the issue could hit so close to home. His own beloved wife. His sweet little Ellie, whom he had known his whole life, was...? He couldn't even think about it. He could hardly reconcile it. Yet the evidence was undeniable.

In some ways, it was worse than it would have been if she had merely been in love with another man. Logically, he understood it didn't make any difference. His wife was in love with someone else, that was the fact. Whether it was a man or a woman didn't make the betrayal any more or less. But for some strange reason he couldn't decipher, it mattered. And it hurt more.

He should say something. The silence had stretched for too long. Eloise regarded him with vulnerability in her eyes, her expression taut, as if braced for his anger, condemnation, disgust even. But when she looked at him like that, he couldn't bear to hurt her more. So he pushed down his emotions and asked the question that was tormenting him the most.

“Were you disgusted by my touch?”

She lowered her head. “I don’t know if disgust is the right word. I wasn’t repelled by you as a person. As a friend, I found you very appealing. I liked it when you hugged me or held my hand... as long as it was in a non-sexual way. Which wasn’t very often because sexual attraction always colored your feelings after we married. But sex felt... wrong.”

“And it felt right with Ninette?” His voice was strangled. “Were you and her lovers while we were still together? In our house, right under my nose?” He couldn’t even bear to think about it.

“No! I mean, yes. Once. That’s when I found out. But never again. That’s why I had to leave.”

“But was it necessary to run away and let me think you were dead?”

Eloise sighed, remorseful. “Maybe not.” She looked down. “I didn’t plan it that way. Please believe that.” She beseeched. “But then that’s how things happened and I thought... I thought maybe it was for the best. That way, you could be free to find a new wife who could love you and fulfill the duties I could not. And I wouldn’t feel so guilty. I would be free... we would both be free. Don’t you see?”

“And you thought I could simply move on, find another wife, and live contentedly without grief or guilt?”

“I thought you would grieve, of course. But in time, you would heal and find somebody to love. Marry again, have children.”

“Then you underestimated the depth of my feelings for you. It took seven years and a miracle for me to find someone. Even if I had wanted to find a wife; Ninette and your mother blackened my reputation so thoroughly that it would not have been easy. Besides, you forget. With you alive, any marriage I entered would have been invalid. Any children I might have had, illegitimate.”

As he said the words, Dale realized with sudden pain that his marriage to Livvy was indeed invalidated because Eloise lived. He couldn’t wish Eloise dead, but now he understood

just how precious Livvy was to him. How much he wanted to be really married to her. He buried that pain for now, for there was something else that needed discussing.

“Speaking of children, on the day of your supposed death, you had told me you were expecting a child. Was that another lie? I must assume it was, because I can’t believe you would be so cruel as to keep my child away from me.”

“Not so much a lie as wishful thinking.” She picked up a porcelain figurine from the table, traced its contours. It was of a mother and child. “I had better explain everything from the beginning.”

“That would be nice, yes,” Dale said sarcastically.

Eloise put down the figurine, and in a small voice, started her tale. “You know how unmarried girls are very sheltered and uninformed about intimate matters.”

He nodded.

“But even in my ignorance I felt like something was wrong with me, that I didn’t feel the way I should. When I told my mother, she put it down to maidenly vapors and told me not to be missish and that all would be alright after I married. She vaguely described the basic act, which seemed very unappealing to me. But again she told me not to worry, that every woman goes through it and it only hurts the first time, after that some even come to enjoy it. But even if I didn’t, I should be able to tolerate it with grace and forbearance. After all, the act was necessary to beget children, and my first and foremost duty as your duchess was to give you an heir. She told me to submit to and trust my husband and everything would be fine.”

“I tried, Will,” she said, finally lifting her tearful eyes to look at him. “I tried to submit, as my mother said. And I did trust you, for I loved you as a friend. But every time you came to me, I felt deeply invaded. And I don’t mean in the physical sense. Honestly, the act wasn’t painful. Instead, I felt thoroughly violated in my soul.”

He winced.

“I am sorry. It wasn’t your fault or anything you were doing or not doing. I realized that very soon. Married ladies are not as sheltered as maidens. They would sometimes talk about the act, and from those conversations, I understood you were a kind and generous lover. Half the women envied me. I should have been able to enjoy it the way other women did. Instead, I found it so distressing, unpalatable, deeply wrong.”

She walked to a vase of flowers in front of the window, picking up a fallen petal and twisting it between her fingers.

“Ninette found me crying once. And I poured my heart out to her. After all, she was the closest person to me. She knew me intimately in her job as my maid, and I felt more comfortable with her than with anybody else. I will spare you the details, but she tried to console me and one thing led to another. Suffice it to say, she made me feel the way I should have felt in your arms.” Her voice had lowered to almost whisper, her gaze far away beyond the window.

“From that day forward, I knew I couldn’t possibly stay by your side. I’d never be the wife you needed, so I started planning for a separation. Ninette suggested we move to France and live quietly, anonymously, and it seemed like a good idea. But even if that were possible, it would deprive you of an heir, because for as long as I lived, you couldn’t marry again, and you didn’t deserve that.”

She spun, and her eyes met his.

“It was most unfair really, that I never conceived, even though I had submitted dutifully to the act that is supposed to engender children. So I convinced myself to keep trying for a little while longer while we looked for the perfect place to move to. I hoped I could give you an heir and then ask you for a separation with less guilt. Even if you were not able to remarry, you could enjoy... the pleasures of the flesh. You could have lovers or a mistress. I could live quietly with Ninette as my companion, and we would be amicable and share in the raising of our child. It was not ideal, but it was the best solution I could imagine.”

He listened to the story with an impassive face, but inside he boiled with a mixture of pain, shame, and anger. Finally he understood, and he was glad for the enlightenment. But at what cost? To hear her say their encounters had felt like a violation...

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Dale asked in a tight voice. “Forget the heir; I would have granted you the separation.”

“How could I possibly tell you, Will?” Eloise exploded. “I felt like a freak, like the lowest sort of creature on the planet. If you had been a cruel or neglectful husband, I wouldn’t feel so guilty about how I felt, but you were loving and kind. I wanted to at least give you a son. Something to make up for my shortcomings. I wanted it so badly that I deluded myself into thinking I was pregnant that day. The fact was that my courses were a few days late, but it was far too early to be sure.”

“What happened the day you left? I blamed myself for your death. I thought you had left because of... what had transpired between us.”

She shook her head. “I had already decided to leave. Ninette and I had been looking to buy a property in the south of France for several months. I planned to use the inheritance from my grandmother to purchase it. It took some time to find the right place, but eventually our agent succeeded, and I bought it.

“I knew it was time to leave, but I kept delaying, hoping to still get pregnant and be able to give you an heir. When my courses didn’t start as expected, I got the notion that I was finally pregnant. I had done my duty and could be free with a clear conscience. Everyone could get what they wanted and everything would be civilized.”

“But I didn’t want to let you go, so I proposed my bargain. And you took it out of desperation.”

“Not entirely... I wanted to try, one last time, before I made an irrevocable decision. I wanted to see if there really was no chance for us. That’s why I asked you to tie me.”

Eloise hung her head in shame once more. “I wanted to overcome my nature. Even if I had to force myself.”

“Instead, you used me to force you.” His voice was hoarse with shame.



CHAPTER 54 - The aftermath



“NO!” ELOISE’S GAZE flew to him. “I didn’t see it that way. I thought it was what you wanted.”

“Wrong. I didn’t just want your body. I only ever wanted your passion, your love. I died a little every time we were intimate because I knew you didn’t desire me as I did you. At first, I thought you were too innocent, and with time, you’d feel more comfortable with sex. After a few months of marriage, it was hard to cling to that hope, but I still deluded myself thinking I could make you want me, love me. I did not know I was on an impossible quest.”

“I’m sorry, Will. If I could change the way I feel—”

“Don’t apologize for being the way you are, or feeling the way you do. After all, we can’t choose who we are, can we? I don’t fault you for that, Eloise. But we can choose how we act. I want to know how you came to think it was a good idea to make me believe you were dead.”

Eloise swallowed and sank back down into the chair.

“As I said, I had already planned to leave, and after our encounter that afternoon, I confirmed without a shadow of a doubt that there was no hope for us, for even though I found... pleasure in your arms and my body reacted to your touch, instead of feeling happy and fulfilled, all I felt was deeply ashamed.

“I had to leave immediately. I couldn’t possibly face you again. So I just grabbed a few essentials and told Ninette to pack the rest of my things and meet me in London. I was going to wait for her there, to travel to France together, and then ask you for a formal separation.”

“It seems you had your escape well thought out.” The barely suppressed anger in his voice made her flinch.

She stood and started pacing again. “Except... a storm broke out. When I was crossing the bridge, the wind pushed the carriage to the side. I tried to compensate by pulling on the reins, but the horses skidded, the carriage ended up going over the low wall of the bridge and sideways into the water.”

“I was tossed over the side and into the river. Stunned, but not seriously injured. I managed to grab hold of the carriage and pull myself to shore. Fortunately, the rain had just started, and the river wasn’t swollen yet. I was able to keep my footing. If it had been overflowing and deeper as it gets sometimes, I probably would have drowned. As it was, it took all my effort to get out of the water. The current was so strong that it ripped away my cape and hat.”

“We found those two articles down the river the next day while searching for you. It further confirmed that you had gone into the water and reinforced our belief that you might have drowned.”

“I tried to unleash the horses, but they were wild and wouldn’t let me near them. And I was slipping in the mud and wet. I figured they were in no imminent danger, so I grabbed my light suitcase, which by some miracle was lying on the shore, and left.”

“Where did you go? How did you disappear so thoroughly?”

Eloise shrugged. “In part by luck. At first, I wasn’t trying to disappear. Just looking for refuge from the storm. I took shelter in the woodsman cottage. While there, I discovered I was not expecting—”

“So you lost the baby.” The sadness of that invaded him anew.

“No! I just found I had my menses. A few days late, but as normal as ever.”

The news that there had been no lost baby eased the constriction around his heart.

“So I was back at square one.” Eloise continued. “I had no heir to offer you, and I couldn’t continue to be your wife. At

that moment, I conceived the idea of vanishing and letting everyone think I was dead. It was probably cowardly, but I told myself it was for the best. I couldn't be a normal wife, couldn't make you happy, and couldn't even provide you with an heir. What use was I to you? I was only a burden ruining your life."

"I see. But you were completely wrong in one regard. I would have preferred honesty. I would have granted you the separation and even would have sought a way to make us free." Dale sighed and rubbed his face in an attempt to control his emotions. It wouldn't do to lash out at Eloise now. What was done was done. "But now I understand a little better the extraordinary circumstances under which you labored."

"What do we do now? That woman who accompanied you ___"

"She is my wife," Dale said promptly. "At least, she was. We got married a few days ago. Now I don't know." His mouth twisted into a bitter line.

"She can continue to be. Nobody needs to know I'm alive. I have assumed a new identity. We can carry on as we were. I swear I will never turn up in your life."

Dale shook his head. It couldn't be that easy. "I don't know, Eloise. I need to consider the possibilities. This changes everything. I just don't know."

"I am so sorry, Will." Tears filled Eloise's eyes. "I have caused you so much grief, and now when you are finally rebuilding your life, here I am again, standing in the way of your happiness."

That was true, but looking at her bent head and the patent misery in her eyes, he couldn't help but feel deep compassion for her. Yes, she had caused him great suffering, but she had acted with good intentions and had not had any easy options.

She had suffered quite a lot, too. He walked up to her and placed a hand under her chin, bringing her face up to look into her eyes. "Everything is forgiven, Ellie. Please don't cry. We

were victims of a difficult situation, and whatever happened, it was both our faults.”

She was still Ellie, his friend. The little girl who had been as inseparable from him as his own shadow. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to wrap his arms around her and kiss the top of her head. And for the first time since they were kids, she did not recoil when he hugged her. Maybe because she sensed that there was nothing sexual about his embrace anymore. It was chaste. She wrapped her arms around him too, relaxing into him as if relishing his warmth and comfort.

And that is how Livvy found them as she entered the room.



CHAPTER 55 - I want to spend time with my wife



OLIVIA CAUGHT A GLIMPSE of the kiss Dale had deposited on Eloise's head. Saw how his arms embraced her so tenderly, and knew that her worst fears had been realized.

Dale still loved Eloise and she, regardless of her reasons for disappearing before, had apparently decided to give their marriage a second chance. Her head was buried on his shoulder while her arms embraced him tightly.

All this time in the garden, she had tried to imagine what was going on. What could they be talking about? The situation was strange and shocking, to say the least. She still didn't know what to make of it. But she hadn't imagined this.

Seeing them embrace, seeing his display of affection. Oh, it was a kick to the gut. She couldn't breathe. She tried to hide her feelings and didn't know if she was successful, but she was proud of herself that her voice came out evenly and neutral when she said, "Sorry to interrupt. I was in the garden and saw Ninette come back into the house and I... thought it best to warn you."

Dale gave her a searching look, and then, unhurriedly, released Eloise. There was something in his eyes she couldn't quite decipher. Did she detect some regret in those depths? She hoped he couldn't see how her heart was shattering in her chest. Obviously, he didn't feel the least bit guilty about being found embracing his wife. His wife. It was another twist to the knife already piercing her heart.

And why should he feel guilty? She knew he had proposed this mad marriage for convenience's sake. It was supposed to be a practical arrangement. The fact that they had become lovers and found mind-shattering passion in each other's arms did not mean he had come to love her, the way she had come to love him.

Dale was saying something, so she pulled herself out of her despairing thoughts.

“You are not interrupting anything, Livvy. Eloise and I had already finished talking. It seems we have reached an understanding.”

“Great! I’m so glad for you.” She faked cheerfulness to salvage some of her pride. “I will go back outside. Just... beware of Ninette.” She had to get away from here as soon as possible, or she was going to break down in front of them, and she refused to be so pathetic.

“Better yet, I’ll go back to the village.” She hurried out the door and down the driveway with only one thought in her head. Escape!

Oh God! She was so foolish. Such a complete, utter, unmitigated, idiot. Why couldn’t she just disappear? On top of the pain of seeing them together, she didn’t even have the choice of leaving with some dignity, for she had put herself in a position of depending entirely on him.

She should have insisted on her independence. Instead of marrying him, she should have found a job and fend for herself. At least then she wouldn’t be in this situation. She was going to suffer the humiliation of having to travel back to England with them. Feeling like a third wheel until Dale found her some other accommodations, which she hoped would be soon.

How had she gone, in an hour, from being his wife to being the cast away ex-lover he now needed to dispose of? Just this morning, they had greeted the sunrise naked in each other’s arms. It was her own damn fault for showing him that letter, sticking her nose in something that was none of her business. Why couldn’t she have left matters alone? She should have burned that letter. Should have torn it to pieces.

She had almost reached the lane leading to the village when she heard Dale’s voice calling her from the house. But her eyes were overflowing with tears she didn’t want him to see, so she pretended not to hear him and walked faster. She wanted to run, but that would be undignified, and he had

already proven he could catch up to her, so she fervently hoped he decided not to follow.

Her hopes were not to be fulfilled. Running footsteps were getting closer, and he called again a few steps behind her. She could not pretend not to hear him anymore, so she stopped but didn't turn, and surreptitiously dabbed at her eyes. When he caught up to her, she was as composed as she could manage.

“Livvy, where are you going?”

“I told you. To the village.” She started walking again.

“But why not wait for me?” He asked, falling into step beside her.

Was the man daft? “I thought you might want to spend more time with your wife.”

“I do. I want to spend as much time as I can with my wife.”

Livvy pressed her lips together in a grimace of a smile, nodded jerkily, and continued walking. “There you go, then. I'll go so that you two can spend time together without having to worry about me.”

He put out a hand and grabbed her arm to stop her. Then he turned her and gently placed his fingers under her chin, lifting her face.

“You are my wife.”

A tear rolled out uncontrolled. “No, I am not. Eloise is your real wife. I was just someone you married in order to protect. Our marriage was a mad scheme and isn't even legal anymore.”

“I don't care about the legalities or anything else. You are my real wife.”

“What about Eloise?”

“She is in the past. I'm glad she is not dead. It is a great relief for my conscience, but our marriage is very much dead.”

“It didn't seem that way when I saw you two embracing just now.”

He had the audacity to smile. She frowned and tried to break loose. He held her firmly with an arm around her waist. “Livvy, are you jealous? I must confess, I find the idea somewhat gratifying. No one has ever been jealous of me before.”

“It is not funny, Dale! I don’t like the way I feel. I know it is foolish and I have no right—”

He kissed her, hard and deep and full of pent up emotion. She couldn’t help but respond in kind. She melted against him and brought her arms up to circle his neck.

He ended the kiss and leaned his forehead against hers. “You have every right. You are my wife. I asked you to marry me, and you accepted. We shared vows in front of God and men. We shared our bodies, our passion. The embrace you saw between Eloise and me was one of friendship and comfort. We talked and cleared up a lifetime of secrets and misunderstandings. But neither one of us wants to resume our marriage.”

It was a passionate and strong declaration, although she noticed he didn’t mention love. She yearned to hear him say that he loved her. Even if he wasn’t in love with Eloise anymore, it didn’t automatically mean he was in love with her. In any case, deeds spoke louder than words, right?



CHAPTER 56 - The reckoning



THE TRIP BACK TO ENGLAND had transpired smoothly. In the three days it took to reach London, they had talked, made love, and spent every minute of every day in each other's company. On the surface, everything was the same. But he knew better. A new insidious emotional distance had developed between them. It was something intangible, but he sensed it. And he knew the reason, too.

That first night after they found Eloise, Livvy had broached the matter with the directness that characterized her.

“Are you going to tell me about your conversation with Eloise?” she had asked in a deceptively casual tone while preparing for bed.

Caught off guard by her question, he asked warily, “What do you wish to know?”

She shrugged. “Well, anything you wish to share.”

He regarded her blankly, paralyzed by so many conflicting emotions he didn't know where to start.

As if reading his thoughts, she stated. “You could start by telling me why she ran away and left you to think she was dead all these years.”

So he had told her the story, including the part about Eloise's preferences. He still felt somewhat uncomfortable discussing that. It was not his story to tell, but he knew Livvy could be trusted to understand and not judge.

And he had been right. She had taken it all in stride. Even showing sympathy for Eloise. But that hadn't been the worst part. The difficult questions were not over.

“What are you going to do about this whole situation now?”

“What do you expect me to do?” he asked, bewildered.

“You are still married to her. Our marriage is not valid anymore.”

“But she will never return. She is dead in the eyes of the world. We can continue on as we are. Pretend we never found out that she is alive.”

That had been the wrong answer. He had seen the hurt and disappointment in Olivia’s eyes.

“So you will not seek a divorce?” She said in a neutral tone.

“I can’t. Not without causing a great scandal that would expose Eloise and destroy her reputation and the life she’s forged for herself.”

“I see.”

That’s all she had said. I see. What did she see? Did she think he did not care about her? Dammit, he wished there was a way to free himself of any ties to Eloise, but he really couldn’t. Not without causing significant damage.

Finding Eloise, while good for his conscience, had driven a wedge between himself and Livvy. He knew she felt unsure of her position in his life, and he couldn’t blame her.

Now they both sat in his study. Her trying to read, him pretending to work. He couldn’t even concentrate enough to write a simple letter. Dale studied Olivia surreptitiously.

“You look distressed.” His voice made her look up.

She tried to smile reassuringly. “Distressed? No, merely a little pensive.”

“Deep, disquieting thoughts I would imagine them to be. You always get a little frown between your eyebrows when you are upset. Makes me want to kiss it away, along with whatever is distressing you.”

“I was thinking about my mom. I miss her. My dad too, and my little niece Lana. Today is the anniversary of my sister’s death in my time. That is, today’s date is when she died. I don’t know if it would qualify as an anniversary now,

since technically it hasn't even happened yet. I don't know the meaning of time anymore. But I still miss her so much."

It was not what he wanted to hear. It could hardly surprise him she missed her family, but he had hoped... what had he hoped for? That she would be so happy with him she would forget her loved ones? Absurd. He knew it. He could never replace her family, nor fill the void they would leave in her heart if she never saw them again.

It was an impossible situation. He had known it from the start. From the moment he first saw her, he lusted after her. When he got to know her better, he liked her. And from the moment they became intimate, he had been falling in love. It may have taken him a while to recognize the feeling for what it was. Even longer for him to admit it, but he could deny the truth no longer. He loved her with all his soul. Seeing Eloise again had made it crystal clear, for even at his most infatuated, he had never felt for Eloise the depth of feeling he felt for Livvy.

She was his perfect mate, in every sense of the word. When he was with her, he felt at ease, accepted, understood, and stimulated and more alive than ever. She soothed and inflamed at the same time. His world would be empty without her. And yet, if they found the way to return her to her time, he had to let her go. Because he loved her too damn much to want his happiness at the expense of hers.

But until, and if that moment arrived, he was going to love her so much, she would never forget him, no matter where life took them.

He stood and strode to her side, picked her up from the chair and sat in her place, nestling her snug and warm on his lap. She clung to him, burying her face in his shoulder.

"My poor darling," he crooned in her ear. "I wish there was something I could do to make all your wishes come true. To bring you complete happiness, the way you do for me."

She smiled crookedly. "Complete happiness doesn't exist. Or at least, it doesn't last very long. You make me as happy as

I could be, more than I could have ever hoped for, under the circumstances.”

“Then, if it won’t last, let us enjoy happiness now. At this moment. This moment is perfect. We will create as many moments of perfect happiness while we still have time.”

He covered her mouth with his in a deep, all-consuming kiss. Her lips parted in welcome and he plundered inside, their tongues entwining and sliding in a sensual rhythm that destroyed his sanity. He couldn’t get enough of her, her taste, her essence, the feel of her in his arms. He was addicted and didn’t know how he would ever live without her, if it came to that.

He wouldn’t think about that right now. She was here now, with him, responding to his kiss with fevered urgency, inflaming him to madness. His hands roamed without conscious volition. They were already under her dress, caressing up her thighs, extracting and giving pleasure.

She broke the kiss to gasp. “Let’s go to the bedroom.”

He grunted, a sound that offered neither assent nor disagreement. He was too far gone for articulate speech. But she grabbed the sides of his face and looked into his eyes, capturing his attention. “Let’s go to the bedroom, Dale. We can’t continue to scandalize people by being found in compromising positions in public spaces.”

A sliver of sanity permeated his mind, and he realized she was right. In the last month, they had already been caught twice in very compromising positions. He was acting like the debauched cad his mother had accused him of being. Even worse than his father.

He turned his face into her hand and gave her an open-mouthed kiss in her palm. “You are right, of course,” he said. “Forgive me.”

She sucked in her breath. “No forgiveness needed. I’d just rather not be interrupted.”

“We are in total agreement.”

As if on cue, a knock sounded on the door. With great reluctance, they moved apart and stood, and Dale called permission to enter.

Mr. Harris came in and bowed. “Your Grace, forgive the intrusion, but we have visitors who insist on speaking with both of you.”

Dale lifted an eyebrow, every inch the duke. “Did you not inform them we are not at home?”

“I did, Your Grace. But they are not regular visitors. They insist it is a matter of utmost importance, related to the duchess. I would not have troubled you otherwise.”

Dale and Livvy shared a look, a silent communication passing between them.

“Do you think... do you think it’s them?” she asked, her voice breathless and not from their recent endeavors.

He couldn’t answer. He hoped it wasn’t who he feared it was—the strange couple. But a shiver of premonition ran down his spine.

Time had just run out.



CHAPTER 57 - The strange couple



THE STRANGE COUPLE they had been trying to locate for the better part of a month was indeed sitting in the parlor. He knew it as soon as he saw them, for they were an unusual pair. The man was tall and dark, with longish brown hair that he wore tied back in complete disregard to the current fashion. The woman, in contrast, was small, fair and red-haired. They were dressed in the appropriate style, but there was something about them that marked them as outsiders. Instant apprehension gripped Dale.

They stood as he and Olivia entered, but neither of them bowed or curtsied. Their only greeting was a grave nod. Their presence here could only mean one thing.

That must be the reason why, eschewing the pleasantries and in his haughtiest tone, he got straight to the point.

“My butler informs me you have an important matter to discuss with us, but I am afraid he didn’t mention your names. How remiss of him.” His butler was never remiss. If he didn’t convey the names, it is because these people, whoever they were, had not given them.

The man spoke first, doing an almost perfect imitation of an upper class English accent. “Forgive the omission, Your Grace, I am Dariux, and this is my partner Kalli.”

“We have the answers you are seeking. We know how she ended up here. In fact, we are the cause,” Kalli said.

Olivia slowly sank down to a settee, her face pale. Dale stared at them, while something akin to rage or pain brewed inside him. But when he spoke, his voice was as even and measured as always.

“Please have a seat. It seems we have much to discuss. May I offer refreshments?”

“Thank you, but no. That won’t be necessary.” Kalli took a seat opposite Olivia. Dariux sat stiffly on the other armchair while Dale sat next to Olivia on the settee and took one of her icy hands in his. The contact felt good, necessary, comforting. Although he didn’t know who was taking comfort from whom. Olivia was pale, fairly vibrating with tension. He had gone numb inside.

The woman, Kalli, spoke again. “You both must be wondering what happened. How she ended up here. The answer is that we accidentally dragged her back with us into the past. The full explanation is much more complicated than that, of course.”

“I would like the full explanation,” Olivia said tightly. “First, what are you two?”

Kalli offered a blank stare of incomprehension. “We told you. He is Dariux...”

“No, not your names. Are you aliens?” Olivia asked. “Spiritual beings?”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that,” Kalli said. “We are humans. Just like you. Only from the future.”

“How far in the future?” Dale asked.

“We are from the year 2172,” This came from Dariux.

“That’s one hundred and fifty years more than my time, and we are now one hundred and fifty years before my time. Is that a coincidence?” Olivia asked.

“Not exactly. The machine can travel to any time, but only in 150 years increments. We call it a ‘bounce’. My guess is that during this ‘bounce’, we picked you up. It was not supposed to happen. There are safety mechanisms to prevent that. But obviously they failed in this case. Time travel technology is very new, even for us. We are still working out the problems.” Dariux explained, looking chagrined.

“Do you mean to say,” Olivia closed her eyes, licked her lips, and squeezed Dale’s hand so hard he feared she might grind it to dust “I was just caught up in some experiment gone wrong and that was the reason I was dragged into the past?”

Just because you guys were fooling around with some untested technology? What sort of irresponsible behavior is that? Is humanity forever going to be subjected to the threat of disruption just because...”

“Nothing like that,” Dariux interjected in soothing tones. “We performed exhaustive tests and implemented stringent security measures. This was the first time we tried it in an inhabited area. We knew about the risk of accidental drag. That’s why we studied the maps of the region in your time. According to our records, there was not supposed to be a road in the coordinates where you were picked up. It was supposed to be a wooded area. Empty and uninhabited.”

“Yeah, well, where did you get your information from? My GPS seemed to be just as mistaken right before I was ‘picked up’, as you call it.”

“That’s exactly it,” he said pensively. “We were relying on GPS information from your time. It was obviously inaccurate. This will have to be considered for subsequent expeditions.”

Olivia was shaking her head, and her mouth twisted into a troubled line. Her body vibrated, and when she finally let go of his hand, it was to tangle her fingers in her own skirts, to keep them from shaking to pieces.

Dale stroked a comforting hand down her shoulder. “We have established how Olivia ended up here. But we have not yet ascertained the reason for your expedition.”

“Does there need to be a reason other than innovation, science, and technology advancement?” asked Dariux innocently.

“The development of new technology is usually expensive,” Dale replied, pinning him with a glance, “not to mention dangerous. Time travel doesn’t seem like an enterprise to undertake without a very compelling reason.”

Dariux eyed Dale warily. “You are right. Our mission had a purpose. And as it turns out, what happened with Olivia turned out to be a happy accident in terms of our mission.”

“How so?” asked Livvy.

“We came to learn about human interactions and relationships. About love. In order to explain, we need to give you a panorama of how the world is in our time.”

“In our time,” said Kalli, “humans are dwindling at an alarming pace because people are not having children anymore. It’s not that we are physically incapable. We have created robots that look like humans, and they can be designed and programmed with all the characteristics one person could want in a partner.”

“So why attempt to create a lasting bond or make a relationship work with another imperfect human being when these robots are available and a relationship with them is easy and satisfying?” Dariux added an edge to his voice.

Dale sought Olivia’s eyes instinctively. Did this make any sense to her? What were these robots that had apparently replaced humans in their relationships with each other? To him, they sounded like automata. People were having relationships with machines? It was all so strange. Fortunately, Livvy seemed as dumbfounded as he.

“The robots, of course, can not reproduce,” Dariux continued. “There was an attempt to create a male robot equipped with sperm from donors, in order to impregnate women, but it was an abysmal failure. Very few women were interested. They consider child bearing and rearing a dreadful prospect that would damage their bodies and interfere with their personal pursuits, so they did not want this robot. So far, the creation of a robot capable of bearing children has been unsuccessful. And given the poor acceptance it has had, the idea has all but been abandoned.”

“This mission to the past was to observe and study first hand what made people fall in love and stay committed in a relationship with each other.” Kalli threw Dariux a look full of animosity. “Both Dariux and I are scientists. He is an engineer, and I’m a neurobiologist. We hope, by traveling to different time periods, to find a common thread to the human amorous relationship that can be used in a rehabilitation program to turn the tide on a generation addicted to robots.”

A stunned silence followed these revelations.

Dale's head was spinning. Nothing made sense. One thing was obvious, though. These people didn't understand love. They wouldn't hesitate to take Olivia. He leaned forward, one basic question still unanswered. "What are these robots you keep talking about? Are they some sort of automaton?"

"Similar, but much more advanced," Dariux explained. "They look exactly like humans, and possess artificial intelligence, which means they act like humans too. In Olivia's time, robots already exist, though none as advanced as the ones in our times."

"In my time, robots look like... machines." Olivia said. "I don't think anyone would think of having a relationship with one of them. Of course, I have seen movies that depict advanced robots like the ones you are describing, so I have no trouble imagining them. Although I have to confess that it seems far-fetched that people have reached the point of preferring a fake relationship with a robot over a real one with another human being."

"Why is that so difficult to understand?" replied Dariux. "Just consider how many human relationships fail. Getting along is difficult. Personalities clash. Life's problems erode relationships. Even monotony, boredom, and weariness affect even the best. Is it any wonder that people prefer a relationship where there's no drama and all their needs are met? When they aren't, or even if they merely change their minds, they can simply exchange or reprogram their robot and receive all the benefits of a new relationship."

"But what about love?" Livvy asked, appalled.

"What about it?" Dariux replied almost defiantly.

"I mean, don't people want to feel loved? To love somebody in return? Surely that is not possible with a machine!"

"There is affection involved," Dariux protested. "Some people have stayed with the same robot for years, even when more advanced models have become available. When asked

why, they say they are fond of its quirks. Isn't that a sign of this emotion you call love? The behavior has no logical explanation."

Dale looked straight at Olivia as he replied to Dariux. "I don't think Livvy is talking about the partiality you may feel for an inanimate object. Or even the affection one might feel towards a dog or another animal who has served us well. She is talking about a deep bond between two souls."

He felt that bond. Did she feel it too? "A bond so strong you can't imagine life without each other, because nobody can replace that person in your heart or your life."

Dale spoke from his heart. He was not used to expressing his feelings aloud, much less in front of people who didn't seem to understand what love was. But he needed to do so now, even though it made him feel vulnerable. These people had the power to take her away, and he couldn't imagine his life without her. He was willing Livvy to listen to his unspoken plea. Please stay with me. I love you. I need you!

He stared at Livvy with all his fierce emotions burning in his eyes.

But she didn't once look at him. Her gaze kept skittering around. Her hands had gone lifeless in her lap. Never had he seen her so diminished, dejected. Not even when she had thought him a madman and then realized that she had been transported in time. She had been shocked and scared. But nothing like the bone deep despondency he saw in her now. She looked like a puppet whose strings had been cut. He couldn't bear it. But what could he do? Every fiber of his body demanded that he do something, anything, to keep her with him. But he couldn't.

It had to be her decision.



CHAPTER 58 - To stay or to go... that's the question



OLIVIA TRIED TO TELL herself it was what she wanted. She had to leave; she couldn't abandon her parents and niece. And Dale would never agree to come with her. Dale... he looked so stoic. How did he really feel about her leaving? Was that speech an oblique declaration of love? Was he as devastated as she?

For their part, Kalli and Dariux appeared equal parts fascinated and mystified. This was exactly what they had come to find out about. Heck, they had traveled through time for this. But they obviously didn't understand it. It was tragic, really. How humanity had come so far in technology that they were able to travel in time, yet had forgotten about the very essence of what made them human.

Unbearably saddened by the complexities of love and the human spirit, Livvy asked the only remaining question. "Are you here to take me back to my time?"

"Yes," Dariux answered. "That is why we are here. We will finish this mission and depart a week from Sunday. We will take you back to more or less the exact moment when you were transported. Nobody from your time will have had time to miss you or notice you were absent."

"I see. That is good then. Wouldn't want to worry my parents," Livvy said, looking down at her hands. She still hadn't looked at Dale, but she could feel his agony beside her. It echoed in her own heart.

"I just want to add something," Kalli said, "because you don't seem very happy. Leaving or staying is your decision. We would never try to force you one way or the other."

Dariux's head snapped back, his eyes flashing at Kalli. "Transporting her here was an accident. We can't leave her

here. We don't know the consequences. It's dangerous."

"Consequences could be already underway without us knowing. She should be allowed to decide."

"I don't agree." He bit out.

"That's because you don't understand the very emotion we came to investigate." Kalli replied, her nostrils flaring.

"And you do?" He sneered..

Kalli raised her chin. "I'm beginning to understand."

"Faulty reasoning."

"Perhaps."

"Guys," Olivia said, "there's no need to argue. I already decided I would go."

She heard Dale's sharp intake of breath, felt his gaze snap to her. But she refused to meet his eyes. She couldn't. She might break down in tears.

"I'm just saying you can change your mind," Kalli spoke softly.

"I won't." Her voice sounded wooden to her own ears.

Kalli simply nodded, unconvinced, but willing to let the matter go. Dariux looked thunderous. She chanced a glance at Dale. His face was grim, his posture stiff, fists clenched. He looked... devastated, but determined. Olivia was simply exhausted, numb, too emotionally drained to even feel much. There was a world of pain dammed, waiting, and the floodgates were straining.

She stood up, and Dale immediately stood too. He touched her elbow, as if knowing she needed his support and silently offering it. The simple gesture, so characteristic of him, threatened to break down her defenses. She needed to get away, lay down.

Gathering her strength, she spoke to end this visit. "Thank you for seeking me out and clearing everything. You said you are departing a week from now. Where and when will we meet again?"

“At the country estate. It is necessary to depart from the same place we arrived, or nearby. The machine can travel in time but not in place. We can meet at the manor on Sunday, before sunrise at five on the clock. You must bring the car. It can’t be left behind.”

Olivia nodded. “Now, if you will excuse me, I need to go rest for a bit.”

Kalli and Dariux promptly took their leave, and Dale accompanied her upstairs to her chamber. He paused at the door, uncertain.

She dragged him inside. “Will you lay down with me for a little while?”

He picked her up, deposited her on the bed, and silently started removing her clothes. When she was clad in her chemise only, he stood back, removed his own clothing except for his underwear and, still without saying a word, climbed in the bed with her. He didn’t attempt to seduce her, simply gathered her against his chest and wrapped his arms around her, creating a cocoon of comfort and protection. She felt so cherished that quiet tears rolled from her eyes, dampening his chest. The steady beat of his heart under her ear was a lullaby that lured her to sleep.

Olivia woke up in a sensual haze. Desire burned like a low fire in her belly. For a moment she lay there, disoriented. Dale was caressing her so tenderly. The sun’s rays slanted low, painting a pattern on the bedroom floor and flooding the room with golden light.

Then she remembered.

The visit, how exhausted she had felt. They had laid in bed and she fell asleep. How strange. To be able to sleep with all her emotions in turmoil. They must have slept for a couple of hours at least.

Dale’s hand slid under her tangled chemise and caressed the side of her waist, her hip, her thigh, coming up behind to caress her butt, igniting the fire, feeding it. When he saw she was awake, his mouth descended on her breast, suckled

through the thin material of the chemise. Her hips moved on their own now, undulating against him, seeking completeness, release.

His clever fingers sought her core, and she sighed with relief, but they didn't linger. They merely tested for readiness. And she was ready, so ready for him. She whimpered when his hand moved away. Without further delay, he rolled on top and, holding her gaze, smoothly slid into her. She felt every inch of his slow possession while his eyes held hers captive, dared her to recognize she was his. At the same time, they pledged he was hers.

It was too much... too much feeling, too much emotion, too much pain. She couldn't bear it and closed her eyes, allowing pleasure to pull her under and obliterate everything else. Tilting her head, she arched her back, trying to get closer to him, even though they were as close as two bodies could be. He took that opportunity to kiss her neck, her face, lick the curve of her ear.

Dale set a slow rhythm, moving in her with slow, heavy strokes. His arms slid under and around her, embracing her to him as his mouth captured hers in the deepest, most tender kiss. Even in her dreams, she had never imagined its like.

When his mouth left her, she opened her eyes. And she couldn't look away. The fierceness in his gaze compelled her, held her captive while he fed her need to unreasonable heights.

She exploded, her climax battering through her in merciless waves that rippled on and on. She gave a hoarse cry and her eyes flooded with unshed tears. And still she held his gaze, letting him see. She had never felt more exposed. Her heart, her soul bare. It would have been unbearably vulnerable, except he was right there with her. After two more strokes, he let go with a shudder, his powerful body spasming on top of hers, in hers. She wrapped her legs around his waist, holding him close. His arms were bands of steel crushing her to him with all his might while the final shudders coursed through his body.

But no matter how strong his arms were, they could only hold her for so long. They couldn't prevail against time.



CHAPTER 59 - No way to win



DALE FELT GUTTED. HE had found love, happiness, and completeness. Only for it to be snatched away. How could he ever live without her? He knew how. The same way he had lived these past seven years. In an empty void of loneliness.

But no, it wouldn't be exactly the same. He had found nothing but acceptance in her from the moment they first kissed. She had given him his life and self respect back while banishing the ghosts of his past. He was whole again. No longer consumed by guilt and regret. Maybe he could go on in a better way... without her? No. His mind, his heart, his whole being refused to accept that.

“Dale?”

“Hmm.” He still lay atop her, still held her too tight. She must be uncomfortable. In a corner of his mind, he knew he should move, but he didn't want to let her go.

And she didn't seem in a hurry to get him off her. She was caressing his back, running her fingers up the line of his neck, through his hair. He could smell her. Feel her softness pillowing him. It was heaven.

“You haven't said a word since they left.”

“I can't say the only words I want to say. And even if I did. They would make no difference. So there's no point in me saying anything.”

“I am sorry.” She said. “I... I don't want to leave. But I must.”

“I know.”

“I can't do this to my parents. They already lost a daughter, and it almost killed them. And Lana, she needs me. She—”

He kissed her because he couldn't, didn't want to, hear anymore. All the insurmountable reasons why she couldn't

stay. All the people whose interests must come ahead of him. Maybe that wasn't an entirely fair assessment. He even agreed with her reasons. And that was the worst of all. He didn't have any counter argument. He agreed.

Still, he had to say something. "I know. I know why you must go. I know all the reasons. I have no right to ask you to stay, and yet that is what I want you to do. Therefore, I better say nothing."

He hesitated for a moment, then asked. "If it wasn't for your family, would you want to stay here with me? Would you give up your world with all its modern technology and conveniences to live here with me?"



FOR A MOMENT, SHE WAS taken aback. She had never considered it that way. Her family was the one thing she knew she couldn't abandon, so she never thought about anything else. Could she live in this century? Even with all the luxuries and comfort Dale could provide, it was not the same. No Internet, no planes, no phones, no cars. Was electricity even used yet? More importantly, medicine was not as advanced. She wasn't sure, but she didn't think they had even discovered microbiology yet. She could die of a simple infection that could be easily cured with antibiotics in her time. The idea momentarily terrified her.

He watched her intently and must have noticed the play of emotions on her face. An angry sort of desolation entered his gaze. He jumped out of the bed and walked towards the window.

Olivia observed him. She knew she had to say something. That she had hurt him with her silence. But the beauty of his nakedness momentarily distracted her. The late afternoon sunlight bathed his gorgeous body in golden light, displaying it for her pleasure in all its glory. She had just held that body in her arms, skin to skin. She had touched and caressed it. They had just thoroughly satisfied each other, and still her mouth went dry at the sight.

Did she want to stay? If it weren't for all these other reasons, could she be happy with him here? She would give up a lot. Everything, really. Her career, her independence, the life she had carved for herself. But she would have him.

Her eyes roamed hungrily over his body. He stood before her, naked in both body and soul. He should have looked vulnerable, diminished somehow. Instead, he wore his hurt with pride. Unashamedly naked, arms crossed. Displaying himself, letting her look as if to taunt her with all she would be giving up by leaving.

He looked magnificent. A wounded warrior.

She gulped, finally raised her eyes to his and saw pure rage there mixing with the hurt. Like a tortured animal whose pain had turned to something vicious. She had never seen such an implacable expression in his eyes. She never wanted to see it again. Olivia realized in that moment she would give up everything to love this man. Forever.

“I would stay.”

His beautiful mouth twisted in an awful sneer. “Don't bother to lie. Your face told the truth about your feelings.”

“That's not true!” she cried. “I was considering the question seriously. Because my family was foremost in my mind, it had never occurred to me to think about everything else. But I considered it, gave it serious thought, and I decided I would give it all up to be with you.”

In two strides, he stood again by her side. He braced his hands on the mattress on each side of her and forced her back down.

“Lusting after my body?” He said fiercely, “I saw the way you were looking at me, and I don't think you are thinking rationally now. I mean, do not misunderstand me, it is gratifying. I am glad to be able to at least inspire lust. And I really should thank you. It's been fun bedding you.”

She gasped at his crudeness and the unfairness of his accusations. Rage rising in her chest as well.

“How can you say that?! What on earth have I done to...” Her voice wavered into a higher pitch, and she choked. She took a big breath, fighting for composure. “I thought you understood what was between us.”

He pushed away from her again. Turning his back. “I thought I did too.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.” He walked over to the connecting door and disappeared into his dressing room.

Olivia simmered in a white rage like she had never felt before.

How dare he! How dare he accuse her of using him for her pleasure and then abandoning him! As if the only thing she had ever wanted from him was sex. Yes, the sex was glorious, mind numbingly amazing. But there was so much more to him. She had been falling in love with him before he had even kissed her. And it wasn’t for his male beauty, either. Looks without personality never held her attention for long. No, it was his quiet strength, his honor, his generosity. The quick intelligence and charm. How loyal and loving he was. Those were qualities that made him who he was, and that was what she loved. A gut wrenching sob escaped from her chest.

Oh God. This was so difficult. How could she ever leave him? Yet how could she stay?



CHAPTER 60 - Love hurts



WHY HAD HE LOST HIS temper so thoroughly? There was no call to say all the awful things he had said to Livvy. Self condemnation and pain were a tide pulling him under. Hadn't he always known that she didn't belong here and she would leave someday? But he had begun to hope that maybe she wouldn't leave.

He had allowed himself to want more, to imagine a future together. And then these people appeared... and to hear her say so readily that she was leaving. He went a little crazy. He tried to tamp it down. Be strong and stoic for her. His logical mind understood the reasons, but his heart refused to accept reason. His heart felt trampled, betrayed, abandoned. And he had finally snapped and taken all his frustrations out on her.

What if she didn't forgive him? What if she left while being angry...? The door banged open behind him, and Livvy stormed in. She had been crying, he could tell, even though she had tried to hide the signs of her tears. His chest was tight, there was a giant knot lodged in his throat, and his eyes were prickly, as if they were shattering from the inside. Was he crying too?

He cataloged these signs as if from outside his body. He never cried, much less in front of another person. Not since he was a child and both his parents had drilled crying out of him. It was probably the only thing they ever agreed on. Crying was a weakness, a shame, and it was unacceptable behavior for a duke.

Yet he was crying now, and he found he didn't much care if Olivia saw. She had donned a robe and had her hair tightly pulled back in a queue. And she was angry.

"How dare you walk out on me? It is like you condemned and dismissed me without even giving me a chance to respond!"

“I’m sorry, Livvy. I didn’t mean any of that. I’m just...” He trailed off as words failed him. He was what? Devastated? That sounded so pathetic. He must be strong. For her, at least, if not for his own pride.

She started to say something, probably something scathing. But then the fight seemed to leave her. She looked deflated, as unbearably sad as he felt. And when she finally spoke, her words were the last he expected to hear.

“I love you.”

His breath froze in his throat as a raw emotion rolled through him. With a few quick strides, he crossed the space between them, taking her in his arms, holding her tight.

“I do. So much it hurts.” She spoke the words against his chest, as if she were speaking directly to his heart.

And his heart responded without his permission. “I love you too. I’m completely, irrevocably in love with you. Please forgive me. I’m going mad.”

“I don’t know if saying it makes things worse. I still have to go.” She looked at him with an apology in her eyes.

“I know.”

“But I had to say it. Because the truth of it is so big it burst out of my heart. I couldn’t contain it any longer.”

“I think it’s better that we said it.” He cupped her cheek, wiping away a stray tear with his thumb. “Even if it changes nothing. What is the point in keeping what we feel from each other? It wouldn’t have made it any less true, or the separation any less painful. In fact, I think it might be the opposite. Knowing that you love me too is like a balm to my heart. The idea that you didn’t love me as much as I love you was eating my soul. Now at least that burden has been lifted.”

“For me too.” Her hand came up on top of his as it rested on her cheek, and she turned her head into his palm to deposit a kiss that scalded his soul. “I thought you were still in love with Eloise. That you could never love me the way you love her.”

“Oh, my darling love, no. Eloise is in the past. What I feel for you is a hundred times stronger than what I ever felt for Eloise.” What an idiot he had been. Keeping his feelings from her.

She dropped her gaze. “I didn’t know. I thought she was your true love, and I was just... available.”

“Just like it happened with that idiot husband of yours?”

Her gaze snapped back to his, surprised by his perception.

“What? You didn’t think I would realize that’s what hurt you the most?” He couldn’t stand that this beautiful, sweet, loving woman could doubt for a second that she deserved to be loved passionately.

“Livvy, you are extraordinary. Don’t allow anyone to make you their second choice. You should always be the first, the only. In the future, never settle for anything less.” It tortured him to say those words. The mere idea of Livvy being loved by another man made him want to howl and cry, ‘mine!’

But they had to part. He wouldn’t be there in her future to love her the way she deserved, and he genuinely wanted her to be happy. He hoped she would find someone who loved her the way she deserved. Although no one would love her as much as he did.

“I don’t want anything less, or anybody else.” She echoed his thoughts. “I only want you. I’ll never find someone I can love as much as I love you.” She leaned up and kissed his lips tenderly, desperately. He clung to her with just as much fervor.

She pushed out of the kiss, looked at him with blazing eyes. “Come with me. Please?”

The plea was so unexpected that it momentarily rocked him back. They had always talked about her staying or leaving, but never about the possibility of him going with her. He had never contemplated it, and now that he thought about it, he realized why.

He was the Duke of Avondale. It was his identity. This was his place, his birthright. His position was like an anchor. Taking care of his heritage was his purpose in life. He handled

the livelihood of thousands of people that he employed in his estates and various businesses. He belonged here. Could he leave it all to follow her? And be what?

It wasn't simply a matter of material possessions and responsibilities. Who would he be in her world? He wouldn't have an identity, quite literally. She had marveled at how he was able to create an identity for her here, and had confessed that in her time it wasn't nearly as easy, that the government kept a much stricter control on citizens and it was virtually impossible to create an identity out of thin air. It was, in fact, illegal to do so. He could end up in jail for trying something like that. So could she for being an accomplice.

Besides that insurmountable problem; how would he support himself and her in a place where he didn't know how anything worked? He would have nothing. Be nothing. Worse than a beggar. He could not live like a dependent of hers. Soon she would come to resent him, and honestly, he would have no self respect left.

He had been silent for a few seconds while pondering this, and Livvy was looking at him expectantly. He could see how the little bit of hope that had sparked in her eyes faded as she correctly interpreted his expression.

"Livvy, my love," he said slowly, sadly because he hated to dash her hopes. "There's nothing in the world I want more than to be with you. But I hope you understand why me going to your time is not feasible. Who would I be in your time? How would I go about obtaining an identity? What do I know of how things are done, the machines you use? I would be more helpless than a baby. I can't do it. I wouldn't be myself."

He would give up all his material possessions for her, but if he also lost himself, then who would be left to love her?



CHAPTER 61 - The Breaking point



WITH A SINKING HEART, she realized he was right. The problems were insurmountable. She wanted to have him with her, but not at the cost of everything that made him who he was. This man was a lord and master. He had a prominent position and extraordinary fortune. He was part of the government of a powerful empire, where he wielded significant influence. His estate was like a palace fit for a king. In fact, all his properties and businesses were like a small kingdom that he ruled competently.

He was rich, powerful, and smart. Now that he was free of the guilt for his wife's death, he could marry again, have children to carry on his title and legacy. He would love once more. Of that she was sure, for he had a great capacity for love. Yes, she had to let him go. He was not for her. They had had an idyllic time together. They had helped each other heal and love again. This was a special time away from time. A bubble. But like any bubble, it couldn't last too long. She bowed her head to hide the crushing sadness in her eyes. But when she spoke, her voice was almost calm.

"I understand. It seems neither of us can successfully inhabit the other's world. But we had this time together, and it's been lovely. I want you to know I don't regret it. I wouldn't change it for the world. Even if in the end it will bring us pain."

"Neither would I. This time with you has been the happiest of my life. But it is not over yet. We still have seven days and twelve hours left. Let's use them well." And to emphasize the point, he sealed her mouth with a kiss.

The next day, Dale had to leave early for several appointments. He said he wanted to deal with business matters here in London, so that they could retire to the country and

have the next several days completely to themselves. He didn't want to waste one precious hour of the time they had left.

It had been so difficult to get out of bed this morning. She had clung to him, not wanting to lose his warmth, the feel of his body next to hers. She wanted to go back to sleep and pretend the previous day had not happened.

He had made love to her until she was soft and pliant, and exhaustion gave her a measure of peace to go back to slumber. She was not peaceful now, however. She was restless and anxious. It was torture to wait for him. The more their time ran out, the more clingy she became. It was appalling, and she had no control over her emotions.

“Livvy, is something the matter?”

She startled at the sound of his voice and turned around to greet him, trying to summon a smile that probably looked more like a grimace. “It's nothing. I'm glad you are back.” She went to him, arms outstretched and walked right into his open arms and snuggled her head in the crook between his neck and shoulder. He hugged her to him and deposited a kiss on her upturned face.

“What's wrong, love? I can tell you are upset. Did something happen while I was out?”

“No, nothing happened. It's just... this whole situation.” She shrugged. “I suppose it is hitting me now... hard.”



HE TIGHTENED HIS ARMS around her, rested his cheek on the top of her head. “I know, sweetheart.” It was hitting him hard too and was going to hit him even harder when she left. But he had to be strong for her. For both of them. It was clear she was on the verge of a breakdown. Livvy was all emotion and feelings, and he loved her for that.

Whereas if there was one thing they had drilled him on since birth, it was how to conceal emotion, show an impassive facade, give nothing away. Even in the face of unbearably painful loss. And as hard as the lesson had been at times, he

had to admit it had served him well in his life. As a peer, he was always under scrutiny, his actions always analyzed and commented upon. He was glad he was able to not add fodder to the gossip by effectively hiding his feelings.

Yet he had let his guard down with Livvy. Yesterday, his mask had slipped completely. He had to rebuild his facade before they both spun out of control. They needed a distraction. He wasn't sure now that going back to the hall immediately was a good idea. They would be constantly aware of time slipping by. London provided more entertainment, but they would have to deal with the ever present intrusion of society. And now that she was going to leave, the fewer people who met her, the better. Maybe they could go to one of his other estates.

He caressed her arm, took a deep breath, and spoke calmly. "I have an idea. We have several days. Why not take a holiday? Would you like to go to the sea? I have a small estate near the coast. It would be just the two of us." he wanted to have her all to himself. No interruptions or intrusions. He had to pack a lifetime's worth of memories of love into a few short days.

She looked up, her eyes full of sadness, but he thought she looked a little more calm. "I would like that."

"It's settled then. We will spend a week there before going to the Hall. It will be us, the sand, the sea, nature. And there will be no past or future. We will live each day only in the present. I'm going to send word to have my train carriage prepared. If we leave tomorrow at dawn, we can be there before noon. I think you will love it. There's a secluded cove with a white sand beach. It will be fun."

And for a few days at least, they would purposely forget that for them, there was no future.



CHAPTER 62 - Travels and ties



FOR THE NEXT WEEK, they traveled. After spending two nights at the beach property, Livvy had grown restless and melancholy again, so they kept moving. He was being so accommodating. So sensitive to her needs. Yet this whole situation must be just as hard on him as it was on her.

They went to Bath, where they spent only one night before proceeding north to another of Dale's properties near Nottingham. For him, it was a minor estate he visited once a year, but for her, it looked like a charming miniature palace straight out of a fairytale. She still had trouble comprehending a lifestyle that took properties such as this for granted. They were enjoying a bit of cognac in the library after dinner when Dale announced.

"We must leave for York in the morning. I regret to say we won't have time to visit the Lake District, as the area is quite remote."

"That is okay, Dale. I'm even regretting having to leave this house so soon. It is lovely."

"Ah, yes. I like Bradmore Manor as well. The estate is not big, but the house is a jewel. In fact, the house is the reason I keep this property."

"All these properties... they must take a lot to maintain."

"Certainly. All my properties are self-sustained, but they are still a lot of work to manage."

"How do you do it? Manage all these plus all your other businesses, and your charities, and the parliament work?"

He shrugged. "I have good managers and agents. Plus, before you appeared, I had little else to do but work."

"You never took holidays?"

“For what purpose?” He sipped his cognac. “Work was my refuge. I avoided having free time. That’s when regrets attacked the fiercest.”

“I, on the other hand, don’t think a lifetime will be enough to visit all the places I want to see. I am a little restless.”

He leaned his head back in the chair and studied her under lowered eyelids. “We can stay here one more day and spend only one night in York.” He shrugged. “It is your decision.”

“I am very much looking forward to seeing York. I’ve seen pictures, and it looks very charming. But I also want to stay here.” The parallel with her current situation did not escape her. She sighed. It was so difficult being torn.

“Well, we can not have all we want, can we?” he said, apparently picking up on the direction of her thoughts.

“No. I guess... not.” Suddenly, with startling clarity, she knew what she wanted, and she made up her mind. She wanted to stay here. In this house. With Dale. Enjoy the peace and quiet and his company. She wasn’t torn anymore. York could wait. If only she could decide to stay with him forever as easily.

“Let’s stay. I am enjoying it here.”

He just nodded and sipped his cognac. “As you wish.”

Two nights later, Livvy awoke to his hands roaming her body. They were caressing the side of her waist, moving up towards her breasts. She was completely naked, but that wasn’t strange. Ever since she and Dale had become lovers, they had not worn clothes at night. It was easier to get down to business that way. And she very much enjoyed the feel of his naked body against hers.

He was on top of her now. She opened her legs wider and tried to bend her knees, the better to cradle him. But her ankles were tangled in the sheets, and she couldn’t pull her legs up. She tried to kick to disentangle herself, but the sheet wouldn’t let go.

“Shhh, don’t pull. I tied you up,” Dale whispered in her ear.

Her eyes snapped open at that. He had tied her? While she slept? And she hadn't even noticed... She tried moving her hands. They were free, but Dale promptly captured them with his own and held them down above her head. She felt his strength and power. She was immobilized and at his mercy.

The notion sent a frisson of instinctive alarm through her, followed almost immediately by a thrill of arousal. She felt him slide something over her wrists, and then her hands were tied and secured to the bed. Alarm wanted to take over again, but this was Dale. She trusted him. He wouldn't harm her.

He was studying her, his gaze never leaving hers. Then his head dipped, and he sucked her nipple into his mouth, causing it to pebble and bead under his rough attention. As pleasure shot from her breast straight to her core, she bucked and arched off the bed as much as her bindings allowed, basking in glorious ecstasy. He moved to her other breast, lavishing loving attention on the other nipple, sucking hard and gently scraping his teeth along her heated flesh. The perfect mixture of pain and pleasure. She felt a flash of cool air on her breasts. Dale had moved away from her.

She moaned his name, needing him above her. Caressing her. Bringing her pleasure. She writhed on the bed, seeking his touch as he lit up a candelabra. The glow cast his muscular features in gold. He brought the candelabra to the side of the bed, enveloping her in the golden glow, too.

He set it down by the night table. All the candles were lit but one. Taking the unlit candle, he turned to her. A dark glint in his blue eyes. His attention turned momentarily away as he ran the bottom of the unlit candle over the flame of the candelabra. The thick shaft of the candle glistened and wept as the wax softened. Slowly he rotated the candle, creating a smooth and rounded end.

What was he up to? Being tied and exposed was strangely erotic. He watched her, and wherever his gaze traveled felt like a caress. She observed him too, his beautiful body bathed in candlelight. She focused her eyes on his member, semi-erect already, and watched it grow and harden under her gaze as if willed to readiness under her attention. The sight soaked her

own core with need, but he seemed in no rush despite their state of readiness.

“Dale, please,” she begged, unable to contain her need any longer.

As an answer, he skimmed a hand over her belly. It felt nice, but she needed a more fulfilling caress. She moved her hips to get him to touch her there, between her legs, or to at least caress her breasts, but his hand remained maddeningly elusive. The knowing little smirk on his face seemed to understand her desperation, but he prolonged her torment.

“What do you want, Olivia?”

“You.”

“I’m right here.” He pretended to misunderstand.

The maddening man wanted her to spell it out.

“Inside me.”

“This?” He took hold of his member. Stroked it.

“Yes!”

“But you won’t have this anymore. Not after tomorrow.”

She closed her eyes in despair. Why? Why did he have to remind her of their impending separation right now? He was in a strange mood. Arousal, sadness, and fury seemed to meld in his eyes, but all were leashed together under his iron control. Her throat hurt and tears threatened to spill, and then she felt it.

Something smooth penetrated her. Sliding slickly into her moist core. She gave a choked cry and her vagina seized hungrily upon the invasion, as she realized it must be the candle he had smoothed over the flame. The shaft was still warm from the heat of the fire and his hands. Her eyes snapped to his. He still studied her with an inscrutable gaze.

“Like that?” He accompanied the question with a twirl of the object he had inserted in her.

She couldn’t even form a coherent thought, so she made some assenting noises. She was so aroused her clitoris was

throbbing. It would take only a slight touch to get her off, but she couldn't do it, and he would not.

"Please," she begged again, past the point of caring if she sounded plaintive.

He continued to twirl and slide the object inside her as if he hadn't heard her plea, and she closed her eyes again against the onslaught of pleasure.

"Yes, you seem to like this well enough. Just as well, as you may have to do with something like this when I'm not there anymore. Or maybe you won't," he mused. "Maybe you will find someone to replace me after all."

Her eyes flew open, full of hurt. "Please don't." Olivia begged. She wanted to say more. But it was difficult to form complete sentences.

So he went on relentlessly. "Or maybe I won't let you go. I could keep you tied up in this bedchamber. My prisoner. Mine. Tomorrow, when we don't appear as agreed, the future people will assume you have changed your mind. Even if they think to look for you, they will never find you here. They will have to leave you behind."

She regarded him calmly. So that is what he was fantasizing about. She almost dared him with her gaze. The idea half tempted her. If his intent was to scare or intimidate her, it wouldn't work. She knew he would never do it. He might be tempted, just like she herself was. But in the end, his natural decency and sense of right and wrong would never allow him to carry it through. So she just looked at him. Unafraid. Her heart shining in her eyes.

He looked away. Then he yanked out the candle he had inserted in her.

She gasped.

He covered her, ravishing her mouth, mouthing in between kisses. "I'm sorry. You are mine, Livvy, you hear me? Mine."



CHAPTER 63 - No Tomorrows



SHAME AND NEED CLASHED inside him, creating an explosion of feeling he was unable to control. He fell on her, kissing her mouth with desperation, seeking absolution and solace while he buried himself in her. She was so hot, so wet. He started pumping furiously, frantically. He wanted to forget, to lose himself in her.

The shreds of his consciousness sounded an alarm. He shouldn't be doing this. He had tied her without permission. Was this ravishment? Or was she agreeing to this? Her body seemed to be. Her mouth devoured his while her hips undulated to meet his thrusts. He untied her hands, and her arms immediately wrapped around his torso, holding him close. Ah, yes. She accepted him. His lovely, warm, welcoming Livvy, who had always accepted him as he was.

Her acceptance calmed him somewhat, taking the edge off his frantic need. He slowed the tempo, while keeping his thrusts long and firm, the way he knew she liked it. He observed her face, her beautiful, dear face, for signs she was reaching her climax. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes scrunched closed. She arched her back, throwing back her head from side to side in an agony of ecstasy. He had never seen a more erotic sight. With a groan torn deep from his chest, he let go and emptied his seed deep within her. The most bittersweet sense of homecoming enveloped him.

With a superhuman effort, he slid from her sweet body and collapsed on his side. Reaching down, he untied her legs and gathered her in his arms. She burrowed into his chest and went quiet and still. A few moments passed, and he heard her inhale desperately, then her whole body shook with sobs. His arms tightened, and he murmured apologies against her hair.

“No,” she sobbed, “I... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cr-cry.”

She kept trying to talk but could barely drag enough breath in between the most heart wrenching sobs he had ever heard. To say his heart was breaking seemed like a gross understatement. Each labored breath she took was like a whiplash tearing his heart to shreds.

He couldn't talk either, so he held her and caressed her back as she convulsed with her cries. He felt like crying himself, like raging against fate. It was so unfair that they had found love together just to lose it again.

At length, he didn't know if five minutes or an hour had passed, her sobs abated. Livvy tried to speak again.

"Please forgive me. I didn't mean to do that."

"Don't apologize, Livvy. I wish I could take away your hurt." He captured a stray tear with his thumb and kissed her forehead.

"But you shouldn't have to. I don't want to add to your burdens. I thought I was doing so well. Staying composed, stoic. But then... it must have been the intensity of what we just did. I broke down."

"I am the one who should apologize to you. For acting like a brute. I caused you distress."

"No! That's exactly what I didn't want you to think. You didn't cause me distress, you..."

"But I tied you down without your consent. I brought up your impending departure. And then I took you like a barbarian while you were still tied and distressed. Please darling, forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive Dale. You didn't distress me. Your lovemaking could never distress me because I... I adore it. You could take me anytime, anywhere, in any way, and I would be enthusiastic about it. The only thing that distresses me is the thought of not having it. Of not having you."

"Ah, my love. And I reminded you of that."

"I don't need reminding. That thought is ever far from my mind. Or yours. We were just trying to be stoic. Suffering in

secret to not overburden the other. And I caved in.” She smiled without humor. “British are so very famous for their stiff upper lip. I didn’t know what that meant until now.”

He snorted. “I have not been a very good example of stoicism. I have lost my temper more than once in the past few days. And behaved badly when I did.”

“Not so bad.” She rubbed her cheek against his chest, burrowing into the angle of his shoulder and neck. “You have been my rock. You make me stronger. I love you so much, Dale.” She felt him suck in a breath and tense all over. “I’m sorry for saying it now. We haven’t mentioned it again since that day. It’s like we want to forget it. Make it go away. But it doesn’t work that way, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t.” He tightened his arms around her and turned, rising above her. “I love you so much that it fills me up inside until there’s no space for anything else. Until it feels as if I’m made of this love. You are more dear to me than my life and... and I’ll love you until the day I die. And if there’s life after death, I will keep loving you in the afterlife.”

Olivia reached up and cupped his jaw with her hands. “Oh, Dale. I will always love you, too. This love is part of me. Part of you. It doesn’t matter where I am. Even if I never see you again, I will never forget you, and will never stop loving you.”

“It doesn’t seem possible.”

“What doesn’t?”

“That a love like this could be torn apart. That there’s no way, somewhere, somehow, for us to be together.”

“At this moment, I want to ask you again to come with me. I would like to beg, cajole, and persuade. Anything that would make you come with me.”

“I feel the same. With every fiber of my being, I want to hold on to you and never let you go. But how can I even ask you to stay when I know it will cause untold suffering to your parents and your niece?”

“And how can I ask you to leave everything behind to come with me? Your place in the world, who you are. I want

to. I want to say forget about everything and come with me. We will figure it out. But I know things don't work that way."

They stared at each other, acknowledging the impossibility. Trying to make peace with it.

"No tomorrows, then. Only tonight. Let's make it worth an eternity." He took her lips in a soul-consuming kiss. And that was the last either of them spoke. He made love to her until they were both too sated to move, and he fell asleep with her in his arms. They slept the sleep of exhaustion, and when morning came, they awoke to face the rest of their lives. Apart.



CHAPTER 64 - The ruins of my life



THEY ARRIVED AT THE Hall later in the day. The trip had been uneventful, but Olivia felt drained because of the emotional turmoil that raged in her heart. Dale looked solemn, the stoic mask back in place. But she knew he felt no better than she did. They spoke little, for there was too much to say, but neither time enough nor words appropriate to say it.

Livvy felt as if with every minute she was approaching the hour of her execution. It was heart wrenching, unthinkable.

Kalli and Dariux arrived soon after nightfall and were invited to stay the night in the house, as it would make the preparations in the morning smoother. They had agreed to take her car and drive it to the ruins of a castle that stood on Dale's land. It had been the original seat of the Dukes of Avondale, but it had fallen to ruin some three hundred years ago. Still, some walls remained standing, proud and defiant against the passage of time.

They had chosen that location because, according to Kalli, it was a remote and deserted place, even in their time, so they could be confident of not being observed.

They shared a meal in silence and, after discussing some details, they all retired for the night. It was still early, but they planned to be at the spot before sunrise and neither of them was in the mood for company. Even Kalli and Dariux seemed very solemn and preoccupied. The mood was that of a funeral.

That night, Olivia snuggled next to Dale under the covers, but neither one tried to make love. Passion was banked, drowned by a smothering sorrow that neither one could shake. So they embraced in comfort and tried to distract themselves by talking about inconsequential things until sheer exhaustion dragged them into sleep.

Next morning came too soon. Olivia heard the knock on the door and came awake instantly. She donned her modern clothes, which she had not worn in over a month. The same pair of jeans and sweater she had arrived in. Dale eschewed his usually impeccable style in favor of a pair of trousers and shirt, not bothering with a vest, jacket or necktie. He threw on a long overcoat for warmth.

Dale grabbed hold of Livvy's suitcase, and they walked to the storage shed where the car was. Everyone climbed inside. Livvy took the wheel, Dale sat next to her in the passenger seat, and Dariux and Kalli sat in the back. After everyone was settled, Livvy started the engine, and as quietly as possible, with the lights off, they lumbered toward the ruins.

They got there just as the first light of the sun was illuminating the eastern horizon. Dariux set to prepare the equipment for departure inside the car while they waited outside. Livvy was strung tighter than a bow. Her nerves seemed to twang and cause tremors throughout her body. She was chilled. A chill, she realized, that had nothing to do with the temperature outside. It came from within. She stood mute and motionless, incapable of making conversation or even moving too much for fear of shattering.

Kalli was to her right, saying something about the ruins, but she couldn't make sense of the words. Conversation was too much of an effort for her anguished brain. She allowed Kalli and Dale to carry the conversation while she drowned in her own pain.



“THESE RUINS ARE STILL standing in my time. Isn't that amazing? Do you know how old they are?” Kalli asked, turning to Dale.

The brittle cheerfulness in her tone was irritating. Dale shrugged. How could he be expected to care about the age of these old ruins while his heart was being minced inside him? But politeness forced him to reply.

“The original castle is over a thousand years old.”

“Is that so?” Kalli persisted. “How fascinating. I knew it was old, but I did not realize how much. Do you know anything about its history? I must admit I’m fascinated. I’ve always lived near these ruins. Sometimes I visit this place to walk through them and think about bygone eras and how the castle must have been in its heyday. I think it’s what sparked my interest in time travel. But in my time, nobody knows about the history of this place. Nobody cares either. So it’s been a mystery.”

Dale sighed. It seemed he would have to talk about the damn ruins, whether he wanted or not. In a monotone voice, he recited the history he had learned by heart as a child.

“The castle has been damaged and rebuilt several times. The last time was in the sixteenth century, when it was attacked during the dissolution of monasteries. Subsequently, the family lost favor with the crown, so the castle was abandoned. It was not until some fifty years later that the next Duke of Avondale returned, intending to rebuild. But by then, the castle had fallen to ruin, and it was not worth rebuilding. He built the Hall instead. For which I am grateful, as these old castles are notoriously drafty and gloomy. In contrast, the hall is so much more comfortable and modern. So, the castle has lain in ruins for three hundred years or so.”

Now that he thought about it, the similarities between the old castle and himself were striking. How many times could a life be destroyed until it was not worth rebuilding?

“Fascinating.” Kalli said, running her hand over the old stones. “I will forever look at it with new eyes, now that I know a little about its history. I wish I could stay longer. Find out more. Not only about this, but also about so many other subjects from our past that my society seems to have purposely forgotten.”

Dale nodded distractedly. He didn’t give a fig about these old stones. His complete attention fixed on Livvy, standing a few feet away, hugging herself and rubbing her arms as if cold. He was afraid to touch her. Afraid he was going to break down completely. Goodbyes were hell. He went to her anyway because he couldn’t stand not to.

Opening his greatcoat, he pulled her close against his chest and enfolded her in his warmth. She came unresisting, wrapping her arms about him and burying her face in his chest. She was trembling slightly, and he wasn't sure it was from the cold. They stood there motionless and silent until Dariux said they were ready. His body locked up, unwilling to let go of her, and he sensed her tremors increased.

Only by exercising extreme discipline, he forced his arms to loosen and stepped away from her. She looked up for one moment and her eyes were so lost, she seemed to be in a trance.

“Goodbye, Livvy. Be happy.”

Her chin trembled, but she said nothing. He guessed she couldn't. She turned away, ran to the car, and launched herself in.

The next few moments passed in an instant. So fast it was almost anticlimactic. Dariux and Kalli also got inside the car, and a few moments later, there was a bright explosion of light. The car disappeared, taking with it the woman he loved.

His legs gave out, and he fell to his knees. Stoicism could only carry you so far, and he had reached his limit. Once again, he had been abandoned by the woman he loved. He wouldn't have thought possible to hurt more than he did when he lost Eloise. But this was indeed worse.

Livvy was gone forever. The years stretched out in front of him, empty and meaningless. Just duty and loneliness. He threw himself face up on the grass and stared at the sky. If only he could vanish like the cloud floating overhead. Or die right here and now and become one with the earth. What was the point of living anymore?



CHAPTER 65 - She is gone



OLIVIA SAW A FLASH of light. Everything went white, and then the landscape reappeared. She saw the same ruined castle, and for a moment she thought nothing had happened. Except the vegetation was slightly different, and Dale was no longer in the spot he had been.

The pain of loss was swift and shocking in its intensity. She doubled over, but Kalli held her back. “Don’t move, or you will pass out. You must remain in the same position for the next thirty minutes to give your body a chance to rebalance.”

Staying still was not difficult, not when she had no desire to move ever again. She had no will, no strength. So she closed her eyes and tried not to think. Not to cry. At least not in front of these people, who didn’t even understand love. There’d be time to fall apart later.

A while later, Kalli tapped her shoulder, and she cautiously opened her eyes.

“You can move now. The village is down that road over there.” She pointed to the distance where a road meandered through gentle hills. “It is the morning after the night you were transported. Your phone should have a signal.”

Olivia checked and confirmed the GPS was working. She also had several messages from her mother. Crap. It was the morning after, and she had promised to text her mother as soon as she got to the cottage. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since that last conversation, but for her mom, it had only been a few hours.

She shot a quick text to her mom, letting her know she had arrived safely but had fallen asleep.

“Do you need any further instructions from us?” Kalli asked kindly.

“No, I guess. So, it’s the day after. Nobody has missed me? Everything continues as if I had never left?”

“Correct. You can proceed on your route and nobody needs to be the wiser. Are you okay to continue on your own, or do you need further help?”

Olivia nodded. “I’m okay, I think. I should be able to reach my destination. At least it is morning.”

Kalli nodded once. “Good day, then. We will be on our way.”

Suddenly Olivia felt panicked to let them go. After they left, that would be it. Her link to Dale would be lost. She had no way of contacting them. No way to go back...the need to ask them to take her back was overwhelming. “Wait! What if something comes up? What if there are any problems or unexpected consequences? Is there any way for me to reach you?”

Kalli’s eyes were compassionate. “There shouldn’t be any problems. If it makes you feel better, we can accompany you to your lodgings.”

The ding of a text arriving startled her. She glanced at her phone but didn’t read the words. Just saw the hearts and smiley faces her mother liked to sprinkle on her messages. She closed her eyes in agony.

“No, that won’t be necessary. Thank you.”

Dariux motioned her over to take the driver’s seat and he and Kalli got out of the car.

“We will leave now if you are fine.”

Fine? She wouldn’t be fine in the foreseeable future. But that wasn’t something these people could understand or fix, so she bid them goodbye. To be honest, she was glad to be rid of them. She was miserable, and by their own admission, they didn’t understand love, so they were making her feel vulnerable. Judged.

Olivia moved the lever to drive and started moving the car towards the road. It felt almost strange to be back in her time.

She had both a sense of familiarity and of not quite belonging anymore.

When she reached the road, she turned right and five minutes later she was entering a town called Westbury, where she should have arrived that night that now seemed so long ago. She looked up the address of the Airbnb and put it in the GPS, who amazingly gave the right directions this time.

After a few more minutes, she was at the entrance of her rented cottage. She keyed in the code and the door opened without issues. Everything was as planned. The cottage was clean and waiting for her. She locked the door behind her and went straight to the bedroom to fall face first on the bed and cry her heart out.



CHAPTER 66 - He is gone



OLIVIA YANKED THE COVERS aside and sat up in bed. The pale light of the sunrise filtered through the curtains, so it must be the next morning already. Thank goodness, for she was done trying to sleep. If what she did could be considered sleep at all. In fact, her night had consisted of fits and starts, and exhausted slumber between bouts of crying. Preceded by a day of wallowing and avoiding her mom's calls.

With a groan, she dragged herself out of bed. Life must resume. Even if she didn't feel fit for it, she couldn't hide from reality forever. For one, today was to be the damned auction.

Oh, God! How could she go to Dale's house knowing he would not be there? She might even find out when and how he had died. She wasn't ready. A wave of panic washed through her. How could she go to the one place where she had found the love of her life, and bid on pieces that might have belonged to him? Pieces he might have touched...

The idea felt like twisting a blade inside a bleeding wound. But she must go. Apart from the fact that it was the entire purpose of her trip, she had a compulsion to go there. The place called to her like a beacon on a dark night. It lured her and would not allow her to stay away, even if it killed her. She'd feel closer to Dale wandering the same halls where he lived. Where they had been happy, even if for so short a time.

She should eat something, but for once in her life, she was not hungry. She needed distraction, so she turned on the TV, all the lights, and played a YouTube video on her phone. Anything that would distract her from her fears while she got ready.

The lyrics of the song "Ordinary World" floated into her consciousness from somewhere amid the noise. The words seemed to be written about her. Yes, she would learn to survive. Wouldn't she? She had to. But not today.

Makeup could not conceal the ravages that crying had done to her eyes, but she applied it carefully, doing her best not to look like a raving lunatic. Her own clothes felt strange now, after all the time she had spent wearing Victorian gowns. She looked in the mirror and winced at her image. The black pantsuit and white button-down shirt looked awful on her. With a shrug, she turned and left for the auction.

It was a short distance to the Hall, and soon she was driving through what had been Dale's property. The differences were evident at once. The park and gardens, which were immaculate in Dale's time, were unkempt and derelict. She drove up the long gravel driveway and followed the signs showing where to park, then entered the house by a side door and was led to what used to be the estate office. How many times had she sat in this same room, keeping Dale company while he worked?

Dragging a ragged breath past her clogged throat, she handed her ID to the attendant, who checked it against a list and gave her a tag and a paddle with a number on it. Then she was allowed to enter the rest of the house. Well, not the whole house, only the parts that were open to the public.

The auction would not start for another thirty minutes, and the house called to her. Sneaking through a concealed servant's entrance was easy, and then she was off wandering through the house.

Everything was familiar, and yet so different. The rooms were in the same configuration, but all the furnishings and decorations were gone. The place was almost unrecognizable. Which was both good and bad. It was as unkempt as the lawn and in need of repairs.

Driven by an unwise desire to feel closer to Dale, she climbed to the upper floors. She was hesitating in front of Dale's room, her hand on the doorknob, when a gruff voice stopped her.

"This area of the house is off limits."

She whirled, startled. An old man in uniform was walking towards her, a scowl on his face.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” She lied. She knew, but the compulsion to explore the house had been too great.

“Go on now. And make sure you stick to the open areas of the house.”

Chagrined, she turned and descended the stairs without another word. Maybe it was for the best. It had been unwise to venture into the house.

She entered the ballroom, which had been setup for this purpose, and took a seat. There were perhaps twenty people. Then the auction started. She forced herself to look at the items and not think about whether she recognized them, but only about how useful and fitting they would be for the design plan of her client’s home. It was hard. She now felt so disconnected from this project that, until a little more than a month ago, had consumed her.

She recognized only a little table and a pair of chairs. Most of the stuff was from the early nineteen hundreds. She bid on some pieces that fit the decor plan of her client’s house and, after the auction was over, arranged to have them shipped home. There, her job here was done. Now she could leave.

She had no intention of lingering. However, as she walked towards her car, she took a detour through the gardens. She didn’t know what possessed her to do so. Every sight and memory was painful, but it exerted an almost obsessive pull on her emotions. She couldn’t let go of Dale, and being here in his house... she felt closer to him.

She walked around the house towards the gardens that stretched out from the back terrace. Remembering how she had climbed out the window and ran. And how Dale had caught her. She had been terrified. And he had made her feel better.

The gardens were overgrown and sad. She was about to turn back when she spotted what looked like a memorial stone. She could not remember it being there before. Of course, it could have been placed there any time during the last one hundred and fifty years.

She approached it slowly, a sense of foreboding spreading through her. The name and date carved into the stone had her sinking to her knees, crying. Her vision clouded and all the pain she was holding back poured from her.

Dale.

This was worse than anything she could have imagined. She knew he would already be dead in her time, but she had hoped he would live a long and happy life, not that he would die so soon after her departure.

“Oh, my love, I’m so sorry.” She was ugly-crying now, tracing the name on the stone. She didn’t know what she was apologizing for. Maybe for leaving him. Could she have prevented his premature demise? Or had she, in fact, caused it with her departure? The thought was too horrible to contemplate, so she shoved it from her consciousness, but the devastation and guilt lingered. Maybe they would never leave her.

It seemed impossible, but at some point, she ran out of tears. Olivia looked up, grateful that the garden was deserted. She needed to leave. The parking lot was on the other side of the house. Turning the corner as she dried her eyes, she looked up and froze.

In the distance, she saw two men approaching the main door of the house. And one of them resembled Dale. For a moment, the past and present merged, distorting reality. She felt almost dizzy and had to lean on the wall to keep her balance. Then she shook her head.

That was impossible. Hadn’t she just seen his memorial stone? Was she going to see him everywhere now? Maybe she was hallucinating. She needed to see him with an intensity that frightened her. It might even be worth losing her mind, if that meant she got to see him.

The brief trip back to her rented cottage passed in a blur through the film of tears in her eyes, and yet somehow she made it. But she didn’t want to stay here. A deep yearning to be in her home again, near her family, took hold of her heart.

She had planned to stay in England the whole week, to do some tourism around the area. The guidebooks called it an 'area of outstanding natural beauty'. But now there was no point in staying. Her job here was done. She didn't need to linger. She was going home tomorrow if she could manage it.

Her decision made, she called the airline and paid the fee to have the plane ticket changed for the next day. She also notified the cottage owner that she would leave earlier. She didn't expect or ask for a refund. In all honesty, it wouldn't be fair to the hostess. It wasn't her fault she was leaving early.

With her departure plans in place, she felt a little calmer. She would leave tomorrow. That left this afternoon to do something she knew she needed to do, but dreaded.



CHAPTER 67 - Researching the past



GOOGLE SUPPLIED LITTLE information, so after considering her options, she paid a visit to the village parish. As she understood it, they kept many records. Finding the church did not pose a challenge, as the spire towered over the village rooftops. Olivia hesitated by the entrance, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the interior of the church. Then she spotted a youngish slim man with a receding hairline and big glasses rearranging some pieces. He looked like he worked there.

“Hello, excuse me. My name is Olivia. I’m trying to research the history of Crestview Hall. Do you know if it would be possible to peruse the parish records? I know this must be an unusual request, but there isn’t much online, so I figured maybe I could find more information here.”

The man walked towards her, extending his hand in greeting. “Hello, Olivia. I’m Mr. Simmonds, the vicar. I would be happy to help you. What are you looking for?”

“Anything pertaining to the Hall. Marriage, births and deaths certificates, any records at all about its inhabitants and their history. Also, if there are newspaper articles with relevant news.”

“Hmm, the hall was built about four hundred years ago. But the same family has lived in that land for much longer than that. Perhaps eight hundred years. Of course, parish records were not instituted until 1534, and even then, very loosely kept. What time period are you interested in?”

“Only the last two hundred years.”

“Come with me.” He led her into the back of the church to where the parish offices were. “They keep the complete records in the county’s record offices. You may want to pay a

visit there. But I have copies of some record books from the nineteenth century, as well as some other relevant facts I have collected myself. I'm a history buff and my family has lived in this area for generations. When I took my position here, I tried to learn as much as I could about the history of this village. And of course the Hall is a big part of it. I discovered that my four times great grandmother had worked there. I admit it, that place holds more than a few intriguing mysteries, and its history fascinates me."

Grateful for the vicar's willingness to assist her and his obvious knowledge on this subject, which will make her endeavor easier, she followed, while listening to him prattle on about what he had uncovered.

They reached a small room that could be called a library, and the vicar deposited two leather-bound volumes on the table in front of her. He also produced a folio with loose copies of newspaper articles.

"This is the information I have collected. I would like to write a paper about the life of the sixth Duke. Mystery shrouded his life. He lived during the time my ancestor worked there, so that makes his story a little more personal. His name was William. His first wife died under suspicious circumstances, and rumor has it that he might have driven her to her death, but it gets even better. It seems he married again, but the identity of the second wife is an enigma. I found the copy of the marriage certificate, but there's no mention of her in any society papers or any other events."

He drew a quick breath before he continued, his fascination with the subject evident.

"You would think the marriage of a Duke would warrant more ceremony, but it seems this marriage was almost secret. Then she vanished, and I can find no more trace of her in any record. Not long after that, he disappeared too and was presumed dead. A newspaper from the time speculated he might have taken his own life after his second wife left him. But of course, that is only speculation."

Olivia listened to this with growing dread. This was Dale's story. Of course, she could not share this with the vicar.

She feigned only polite interest in the tale of the sixth Duke, praying her face didn't give away that she was dying inside. This tale corroborated what she had seen engraved in the memorial stone. Dale had died shortly after she left.

She looked at the books and newspaper articles. She glanced over the date of Dale's first marriage, a couple of newspaper articles speculating about Eloise's death, and her own signature in the register of their marriage, dated 1872. Then she found the horrible article the vicar had mentioned, which claimed that Dale had taken his own life.

A bullet to her heart would have probably hurt less. It was too much. She had to go before she broke down in tears. She stood up.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Simmonds. You have been most kind, sharing your own research with me."

The vicar gave her a look she couldn't decipher. Maybe he didn't know what to think of her, either.

"My pleasure, Olivia. Let me know if I can be of further help. By the way, did you notice that the Duke's second wife's name was Olivia, just like you?"

She went cold inside. "Was it? I was looking at so many records that it must have escaped my notice. How coincidental! Of course, Olivia is not such an uncommon name."

"Wish I could talk to that Olivia from long ago. She would have had an interesting tale to tell."

If only he knew. "I'm sure she would," Olivia smiled. She needed to get out of here fast because she couldn't maintain the detached façade anymore. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Simmonds. I appreciate it, but I must be going now."

With that, she exited the church and started walking back to the cottage. Her stomach growled, which alerted her to the fact that she was faint with hunger. She realized she had eaten very little since arriving in the present time. She hadn't been

hungry. It was hard to eat when your heart felt like it was being squeezed inside your chest. But the body had its own needs. So she stopped by a little shop on the way, bought herself some dinner to go and went straight to the cottage.

Tomorrow she would go back home. She longed for her family, longed to bask in her father's good humor and her mom's warmth. In other times, she could have unburdened herself with her mom. She had always talked to her about everything. When she was little, her mom would prepare her a snack and sit with her, hearing the stories about school and her friends and the not so friendly kids.

Once Olivia had become a woman, they had shared a bottle of wine between the two of them and talked about life. Her mom's sympathetic eyes and sound advice always made all problems appear solvable. They hadn't done that since Leah's passing. Maybe it was time to have a long talk with her mom. Hopefully, a bit of sanity and normalcy would come from that.

Tomorrow she will have a very early start. She should sleep now, but her brain refused to shut down. The revelations of the day and thoughts of Dale swirled through her mind until she could hardly breathe for missing him.

Oh God, how could she have left him? How was she going to live the rest of her life without him?



CHAPTER 68 - The Writings of a desperate man



DALE HAD BEEN WRITING compulsively since yesterday. Unfortunately, the sleep that claimed him after Livvy left was not the eternal kind. He had woken up with so many emotions bottled up inside; he thought he might explode. The only thing he could think to do to survive this storm of feeling that threatened to drown him was to write. Get it on paper. Maybe that way he could exorcize the emotions from his mind.

So he did. He wrote about his pain, his guilt, about the night when he had found Livvy. The powerful attraction he had felt. The wonder, the denial, the hope. The happiness. The love, the fear, and of the black despair that consumed him now. The sense that his life had no purpose anymore and... he hesitated to write it because it was such a weak and unworthy thought, but this was just for him, and if he couldn't be honest with himself, then with whom? His desire to end it all.

After writing all night and half the next day, he felt a grain of sanity return to him. He was still in the grip of all-consuming grief, but he had dealt with grief before. In time, it might lessen to endurable levels. He could only hope.

If he found it unendurable, the ending was always available, but not before trying to survive. He should try to live well, if only because Olivia might find out about his fate. Who knows what they would say about his life and death? There were bound to be records and newspaper stories. Livvy was just the sort to dig out information about him. He would try to live a life worthy of her respect if she were to find out.

A few days later, he had to admit defeat. It wasn't working. He was not well. Maybe he would never be again. He couldn't focus on anything. All his duties felt burdensome when thoughts of Olivia occupied his whole mind. What was the point of it all? He was making a muck of things, trying to

go on as if nothing had happened. When in truth, his entire world had stopped the moment she left.

Ten days. That's how long he had been trying to live without Olivia, and it felt like ten years in hell. He was waiting for some semblance of recovery to appear, but it seemed like each day he was worse. His servants had been giving him worried glances. They were the epitome of discretion and would never engage in emotional behavior. But he could feel their collective worry over him, and the questions about Olivia hung heavily in the air. He wanted to escape it all. Only he didn't know where to run to.

He had taken refuge in the library. His favorite room in the house. Closing the curtains so that not even the gray light of a cloudy afternoon could invade his retreat. Light was so intrusive when his soul had gone dark. A glass of cognac sat untouched on the table next to him. He had contemplated getting drunk, but couldn't even summon the enthusiasm to do that.

So he sat, staring into the flames. He rubbed his hands through his face and was almost surprised to feel the bristles of a beard. How long since he had last shaved? He couldn't even remember. Probably since before Olivia left. His hair was no better, and his face must show the ravages of little sleep. He looked down at his clothes. Still wearing his robe, even though it was afternoon. He couldn't even bring himself to care.

A sudden knock was his only warning before his cousin Alasdair peeked into his lair.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Dale asked, surprised.

"And a good day to you too, Avondale." He strolled into the room, going to the windows to open the curtains.

Dale squinted as the light reached his eyes. "I'm sorry." He said with exaggerated politeness. "That was rude. Good day, cousin. To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of your visit?"

"Sarcasm now? Tut, tut. You should know I'm not put off by your grumpiness. You look like hell, by the way."

Dale glared. “Given the fact that you didn’t visit me for years, I thought it was working remarkably well. Bugger off.”

“I was out of the country for much of that time,” Alasdair replied with an amiable smile. “Besides, I didn’t think you would welcome my visits. You were a recluse.”

“I still am.”

Alasdair took the chair opposite to his and studied him. “Ah, but I thought now that you have lovely Olivia, you might be ready to rejoin society.”

“I have no such plans”, Dale said, gritting his teeth. He was not ready to talk about Livvy.

“But why? If you think that old scandal still exists, I assure you it doesn’t matter anymore. Society will receive you and your new duchess with open arms. Where is she, by the way?”

Dale had to close his eyes for a few seconds before answering that. “She’s gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?” The bewilderment was evident in Alasdair’s voice. “Where did she go?”

“It doesn’t matter the place. She is gone, and she is not coming back.” It was the first time he said the words aloud, and it felt like a knife piercing his heart. Damn Alasdair and his meddling.

“The devil you say! How could she be gone? I saw the two of you together with my own eyes. You were in love. You were happier than I have ever seen you.”

Yes, he had been. He closed his eyes in despair. “It is a complicated story. Yes, we are in love. But as you may have surmised, she is not from here.”

“Yes, she is American, right? Her accent was a little different from that of other Americans I know. Nevertheless, their country is so vast that they have different accents—”

“Shut up Alasdair, you are babbling.”

“Sorry. I’m just so confused about all these happenings. I thought... Never mind that. What happened?”

Dale thought fast about how much to say. He'd have to start slow. If he told his cousin everything, he might think him crazy. "Yes, she is American. And she had family back in her country. Her parents and an orphaned niece she was helping to raise. She thought she might not be able to go back. But when an opportunity presented itself to return to her home, she had to take it."

"But she married you! Isn't that a commitment? Didn't she know what that entailed? And why couldn't she bring her relatives here? God knows you have enough space in this house to house several families."

Dale sighed. "Not that easy."

He had to tell the whole story if he was going to make any sense. Then again, his cousin might still think he had taken complete leave of his senses. "Do you really want to know the complete tale?"

Alasdair nodded.

Right then. Maybe talking to his cousin would be good for him. "Pour yourself a drink. It is a complicated and incredible story. I warn you, you may not believe it. You may even think I'm crazy or lying. I ask that you keep an open mind."

Alasdair did as asked and went to the sideboard to pour himself a drink. He came back and sat, drink in hand. "I'm ready. I promise I will keep an open mind."



CHAPTER 69 - Written in the stone



AND SO DALE TOLD HIM everything. About how he had found Livvy, where she came from, how she got to be here. He told him about the future people and even the part about Eloise. Alasdair listened to everything in silence, occasionally raising his brows or frowning. Looking at Dale wide-eyed but with intense concentration.

“Well, do you believe me, or do you now think I’m fit for the madhouse?” Dale challenged.

“If it were anyone else, I would indeed believe that person had taken leave of his senses. But I know you. You are the sanest, most logical person I know. You also lack the imagination required to come up with a tale such as this,” he added with a wry twist of his mouth. “So it must be true. As impossible as it may seem. Now I understand why Olivia couldn’t stay. But couldn’t you have gone with her?”

“Of course not!” The suggestion, so casually offered, was like a blow to his chest.

“Why not? The future people wouldn’t take you?”

“I don’t know! I didn’t ask. I couldn’t possibly leave my place here and inhabit Olivia’s world.” Couldn’t his cousin see it was impossible?

“Why ever not?”

“Are you daft, or are you purposely trying to provoke me? I don’t know anything about her world! I wouldn’t even have an identity there. From what I learned, citizenship, papers, certificates and such are very important. It would not be easy to drop in on that world and fit in unobtrusively. Besides, I belong here. I am the Duke of Avondale. I have a place here and many responsibilities.”

“Ah, yes. The dukedom. Yet after you pass, someone else will take over those duties. Nobody is irreplaceable.”

“If I were to die or leave right now, those duties would fall on you. Are you hankering for the dukedom, Alasdair?” He needed to strike back at his cousin for suggesting the impossible, for making him question his decisions.

“Don’t be an ass. This is not about me. You know I’ve never coveted your bloody title. I am content with my life and have more than an adequate fortune of my own. But it seems you need this woman to be happy. Can the dukedom bring you happiness?”

“It is not just that. Don’t you understand? Here I have a purpose, a place. I know who I am. I have useful knowledge and abilities. In her world, I’d be without resources or status. I would know nothing. Have nothing. Be nothing. I could not provide for her. Probably the opposite would be true, and she would have to support me. I can not live as her dependent. Surely she would soon lose all respect for me and would see me as the charity case I would have become. Do you think she could love me under those circumstances?”

“Maybe the Future People could have helped you with that. I’m sure you could have adapted and learned what you needed to learn. You used to be an intelligent chap. You are more than your title, Dale.”

Dale knew his cousin was using his nickname for him and not his title to emphasize the point. Could he be right? Was he so caught up in his title and position that he didn’t give the idea of going with her appropriate consideration? Going with her. The way Alasdair put it, it seemed possible. A good idea, even.

Could he leave everything behind and go into the future with her, not knowing what challenges awaited him? Yes. It had seemed so impossible back then. But he had since come to realize nothing was more impossible than trying to live without Livvy.

His heart started beating faster, radiating panic throughout his being. Maybe he had been too hasty. Too stubborn. He had

let her go. She had asked him. Twice. She had almost pleaded.

And he had refused.

Dale doubled over, leaning his elbows on his knees, burying his head in his hands. "You are most definitely trying to torment me. I assure you, your help is unnecessary. I'm in enough torment as it is."

Alasdair reached out, put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Will.. I shouldn't have said that. I know how much regrets hurt."

"You don't know how much I'd wondered if I did the right thing. Now I'm convinced I messed up." He was having difficulty breathing. "I should have done something different. God, if I could go back." Dale leaned back in his chair and ran his hands over his face. "If I could just... but she is gone, and there's nothing I can do. Even if I decided to go to her now, I can't travel through time."

Alasdair's gaze was full of understanding and compassion. "No, nobody can. At least not in these times." He shrugged despondently. "Must be nice for these Future People who can."

The future people. Like a ray of sunshine through parting clouds, an idea shone through.

"The future... you are right. I can't travel through time, but I know people who can. I just need to send them a message."

"A message? How?"

Energized as he had not been in days, he sprang out of his chair under the perplexed stare of his cousin, who now probably thought he had lost his wits at last.

"You are welcome to stay, Alasdair. I need to go out now. See you later." He dashed out the door.

Heart pounding from the run and what he was going to attempt, he stormed into the tools shed. He needed a pickax, or a chisel, preferably a chisel, but any object with a point would do. Maybe even a big nail. And a hammer. Yes, he also needed a hammer. He collected the objects and, saddling his horse, he took off at a gallop.

He started slowing down when the ruins came into view. Kalli had said this place still existed in her time, and that she visited it often. If he carved a message in the stone, would she see it during one of her visits? Would she be able or willing to help him if she did? He didn't know. But this was the only possibility, his only chance.

Dismounting his horse, he stood in the same place where he had stood the day Livvy left. There was a wall to his right. It was one of the great load-bearing walls that used to hold up the roof, and it looked thick and solid.

Taking out his tools, he chose a space in the wall that was in relatively good shape, smooth and about eye level, and considered what to carve. He needed to send a message, but it couldn't be too obvious. Innumerable people would see it throughout several centuries, so he needed to make sure it was neutral enough to not call undue attention, but clear and meaningful enough to the person for whom the message was intended.

The lines popped into his head. He tested them, adjusting them and, when satisfied, set the chisel to stone and started carving. He worked for over an hour, painstakingly engraving the letters in the hard stone. In the end, he stood back and admired his handiwork. There in the stone was clearly carved:

K

If Time could go backwards

To the moment I lost

I would leap through the times

To the woman I love

Avondale Dec 14, 1872

There. It was done. Now he just had to wait. It was a very remote possibility his message would work. The chances were slim to none. He couldn't get his hopes up. The wall could fall, the message covered. The intended recipient might not see it, or if she did, she might not understand it or not be able to do anything about it. So many things had to fall in line. So many

obstacles could arise. He was being a fool. His earlier elation left him and hopelessness set in.

He fought against it. He would not give up. He would not stop sending messages, each one more visible.

Until someone paid attention.



CHAPTER 70 - The visitors from the future



IF IT WAS GOING TO work, it could happen at any moment. They had the advantage of traveling to any specific day in time. That's the reason he wrote the date on the stone. He had to be prepared.

First order or business had been to tell Alasdair of his plans. His cousin was his heir and instrumental in him being able to leave with a clear conscience. It was fortunate he was here now. That way, Dale had time to prepare him to assume the responsibilities of the dukedom if necessary.

To that effect, Dale was working in his office the next morning with his cousin when the butler announced there was a gentleman who would like to speak with him. His heart leapt. He never had callers, so this had to be it.

“Did he give a name or have a card?”

“No, Your Grace. He said his name was Roys Kinkaid, and that you had summoned him.”

He didn't know, much less summon, anyone by that name. The mysterious visitor must be speaking metaphorically, referring to the message on the stone. This had to be it!

“Send him in, Harris.”

The butler bowed and stepped out just to return a few moments later with a stranger. The newcomer was tall and athletic. His brown eyes were sharp and studied his surroundings before focusing on Dale.

His long brown hair fell loose about his shoulders in a style that made him look foreign. He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties and had a look of competence about him.

He was sure he had never met him before; however, there was something familiar about him.

“Your Grace,” he said in a neutral accent before performing a somewhat awkward bow, as if he wasn’t used to that manner of salutation.

“Mr. Kinkaid,” Dale said, tilting his head. “Harris, you may leave us now.”

The butler backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Dale gestured to the armchair that flanked the window. “Mr. Kinkaid, would you have a seat?”

The stranger shook his head. “Call me Roys, please. And I would request to speak to you in private.”

“This is my cousin, Mr. Collins. You may speak in front of him.”

When the other man still hesitated, Alasdair spoke up. “I’m sure we can catch up later. For now, I will leave you two to discuss your business. A pleasure, Roys.”

“Likewise, Mr. Collins.” Roys said with a thankful glance.

When his cousin had left, Dale stepped from behind the desk and sat by the window. Still eyeing his visitor, he once again gestured to the other chair.

The younger man relented and sat. Clearing his throat, he ventured. “I think you may have an idea why I’m here?”

“I think I do,” Dale said, “but I would like confirmation before I get ahead of myself.”

“My parents are Dariux and Kalli. Do their names sound familiar to you?”

“Of course,” Dale replied, barely daring to breathe.

“Did you perhaps write a message on a castle wall intended for my mother?”

“I did.”

“Your Grace, I think you know enough to know why I’m here. I came because of that message. If it means what we thought it meant, speak up now.”

This was it. The moment of truth. “I want to go to her. Is it possible?”

The other man smiled and nodded, appearing relieved.

“Yes. That is why I’m here. Mind you, it will not be a simple mission. My mother saw your message years ago, before I was even born, but there was nothing she could have done at the time. After their expedition, time travel was suspended for years. When it was resumed, she could not do it anymore.”

“I trust your mother is well?” Dale asked, concerned. He had just seen Kalli a few days ago. Strange to think years had passed in the future.

“She is very well, thank you. It is just that she has been having babies and taking care of them. She kept working as a consultant in the Project for the Repopulation of Earth. And making a good contribution to it, I daresay,” Roys said with a sardonic twist of his lips. “I have ten siblings.”

“What an extraordinary achievement. From what she said, women in her time had stopped having babies.”

“Yes, that is correct. After their expedition to this time, she and my father fell in love and married. They then made it their mission to propagate the message and educate people about the importance of love between human beings. It hasn’t been easy. The big companies that manufacture the robots tried to silence them many times. But they persisted, and at long last their message is taking on. This year, for the first time in over a hundred years, births were higher than deaths. The tide may at last be turning. And it was all thanks to what my parents learned when they came here.”

“I am glad for the future of humankind.”

“You and Olivia had a big role in it. We have much to thank you for. That is why I’m here.”

“I am grateful you came to help me, but I assure you I did nothing to deserve it. Your parents did their research with no help from me.”

“I beg to differ. You and Olivia fell in love. They had a chance to observe you, study you. What they learned from you was invaluable for their research and further decisions.”

Dale did not know how to respond to that. To think that the love between him and Olivia had affected humankind in a distant future was... staggering. Thankfully, Roys did not seem to expect an answer.

He continued. “Which is why my parents resolved to help the two of you be together. They had to bide their time. Time traveling was put on hold for almost twenty years. By the time it was resumed, about ten years ago, they were both retired. But I had been training to enter the program. I had been establishing myself, waiting for the opportunity to travel back here to help you.”

Dale leaned back, awed. “It looks like this has been a life mission for your family. I have no words to express how thankful I am.”

Roys waved a hand. “You have nothing to thank me for. You and Olivia are a legend in my family and among my parent’s circle. Neither me nor any of my siblings would exist if not for what my parents learned from you. It’s an honor to help the two of you be together again. I had to fight three of my siblings for the privilege of being the one who undertook this mission. I won because I’m the eldest,” he said with a cocky grin.

Dale had to smile at Roys’s enthusiasm. He trusted the younger man, who looked earnest and capable. He would go with him. “Tell me—what’s the plan, then?”

Before Roys could answer there was a knock on the door and Alasdair entered, followed by a young woman of about Roys’s age. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I found this young lady wandering in the gardens. She says she is with you, Roys.”

Roys scowled at the newcomer. “Anlise! I told you to stay hidden until I came for you.”

“You didn’t think I was going to let you have all the fun, did you, brother?”

Roys glared at Anlise, but with a sigh, accepted the futility of arguing with his sister. “Sirs, allow me to introduce my insubordinate little sister, Anlise, who doesn’t know how to obey commands.”



CHAPTER 71 - Plans for the future



ANLISE SMILED WITH blinding charm. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Grace.” She gave a curtsy as awkward as her brother’s bow had been. “I already met Alasdair in the gardens.” She offered Alasdair a sugary smile.

“A pleasure, Miss Anlise.” Dale replied. Charmed by the young woman. “Why don’t you and my cousin both join us? We were about to discuss the plans to transport me to Olivia’s time.”

“Oh, so you are going to Olivia?” Anlise replied excitedly. “Mother was right about the meaning of the message!”

“Of course she was right. Did you ever doubt it? The woman has an uncanny ability to always be right. It is most annoying.” Roys grumbled.

“In that case, Roys, we will need to create an identity for him. You can concentrate on the time travel part, and I will hack the databases as needed to create the pertinent records.”

“We are not going to do anything, Anlise. You will wait for me here, and I will continue the mission by myself as planned.”

“But you know I can help!”

“Listen, sister,” he continued in a reasonable tone, “I don’t do this to be mean to you. You know I could get in trouble for what I’m about to do. My career is on the line if anyone finds out what I’ve been up to while in the past. This way, if I get caught, at least I would go down by myself. No need for both of us to run that risk.”

“What risks?” Dale asked, not liking the possibility of any consequences for Roys if he was discovered.

“I am not authorized to transport people in time. Much less hack into primitive systems to change things. We still don’t know the consequences of interfering with events in the past. For now, we are only allowed to observe and carry out very selective and small changes to study their impact. I would say taking you to the twenty-first century does not qualify as a ‘small change’”

“I don’t want to cause any trouble for you.”

“I have been preparing for this my whole adult life, Avondale. I have a good plan, and I think I won’t get caught, but nothing is a hundred percent sure.”

“I am honored and humbled by your dedication to my predicament.” Dale said feelingly.

“Yes, yes, but enough of that. We need to get to business.” Anlise rolled her eyes.

“She is right. For once,” Roys admitted, throwing an annoyed look in her direction. “We will travel to Olivia’s time, but it is more complicated than simply transporting you there. I cannot just drop you off in the twenty-first century with no papers and no records of your existence. I’m thinking we need to create a lineage for you, complete with a birth certificate and other pertinent documentation.”

“Olivia lives in America. Can’t we just say I’m from England and therefore my documents are on that side of the Atlantic and go from there?”

Roys smiled indulgently, “Not quite. It doesn’t work that way. You would need a passport in order to even enter the United States. But don’t worry. I have it figured out.”

“What’s your plan, Roys? Run it by me. Maybe I can help...”

Roys shot his sister a warning glance.

She held up her hands, palms flat. “Without going with you. I get it. I’ll just help you revise and polish the plan.”

“Father helped me plan the entire mission. First, we need to land in the year Avondale is supposed to have been born if

he were to be the same age he is now in the year Olivia traveled back. Once there, create hospital records and a birth certificate. I also looked up the last of the line of the Avondale dukes. He was a bachelor who died a few months before Olivia's time travel. He didn't leave any descendants. Never married. I was thinking of creating a marriage certificate to a lady who died shortly after Avondale's 'birthdate'. One who didn't have family or close friends. I have researched a few and have some prospects. She would be his mother and the secret wife of the last Duke. That way you could claim your title in the twenty-first century if you so desire."

Anlise nodded her agreement. "That would establish his lineage and inheritance."

Avondale didn't like this. "What you are suggesting sounds highly illegal and dangerous, not to mention fraught with potential pitfalls. We are talking about falsifying documents, creating records. Basically lying and stealing."

"C'mon Avondale. This is unfamiliar territory we are covering here." Roys said defensively. "Nobody has ever traveled in time with the intention of actually staying in that other time period. There aren't any laws that cover this. Besides, we would not be stealing anything from anybody. There's no heir to the Avondale title in 2022. And we are not lying either. You are the rightful Duke of Avondale. We would just be relocating you within the lineage." He added with an impish grin.

"What if I'm discovered?" Dale said, pacing to the fireplace and turning back to Roys.

"How?" Roys replied, shrugging. "They may think you are a bit odd, but I don't think anyone could imagine the truth."

"We are talking about deceiving the crown of England into giving me my title."

Roys sighed. "You don't need to claim your title if you don't want to. But either way, we need to create a lineage for you. Parents and such. Nobody comes from thin air. We might as well use your true lineage. Whether you claim your title will be up to you, and you can decide that later."

Dale considered it. Did he need the title? He was proud of his heritage, but if it proved to be a challenge, he could relinquish it. This house was another matter. He felt a strong connection to this place. It was where he belonged.

Turning away, Dale ran his hand over the mantelpiece. “Olivia said this house and its contents are being auctioned off in her time. That is actually why she came to England. Do you think I could take some money, gold coins, jewels and such? Would that be enough to purchase this place?”

“It might be, if we invest it and multiply it.” Roys smiled slyly. “We have the power of foresight. You could make as much money as you need to buy and renovate this place, if that is what you want. Mind you, it would be expensive to maintain.”

“I know.” Dale replied, still staring at the fireplace. “I will need to think of ways to generate enough income to maintain it.”

“Yes.” Roys confirmed. “Either way, you will have a significant challenge in front of you. Are you ready for it?”

Dale turned to face the room. His gaze encompassed the three people in it. All of them were making sacrifices to help him reunite with Olivia. “Nothing is more challenging than living without Livvy. Yes, I’m ready. Take me to her, please.”



CHAPTER 72 - The long way back (or forward)



THEY HAD BEEN TRAVELING for days. In fact, it could accurately be said they had traveled for over a century, but since he had skipped a lot of that time, he would not count it.

He had never imagined the plan to get him to Olivia's time would be so elaborate and demanding. They had traveled to at least a dozen time points, another dozen places, and they still had some more stops to make.

He was impatient to be reunited with Livvy, but had to defer to Roys's leadership on this project. In the few days they had been together, they had talked easily and gotten to know each other better, and the two men had become friends.

Roys was methodical, thorough and very intelligent. He seemed to have thought of everything in advance, and Dale was eternally grateful to him for that. On the other hand, he was feeling rather restless and useless. There was little he could do but to tag along while Roys did most of the work.

But what could he do? He helped a little by providing facts, making calculations, and sometimes even suggesting plausible explanations. But most of the work seemed to involve time traveling and using something Roys referred to as an LT, short for 'Laptop'.

With that strange device, which looked like a thick piece of paper, but that emitted light and sounds when unrolled, he said he was 'hacking'. A term that didn't mean what he thought it did. It had nothing to do with cutting or riding. Instead, he explained, it meant secretly accessing some other such apparatuses and creating all sorts of records for him.

He had no idea how any of this worked. It looked like magic to him. To be honest, he didn't know how most things

around him worked and was constantly feeling bewildered, confused, and just plain stupid.

This was exactly the fear that had kept him in his place when Livvy had left. The fear of the unknown, of feeling out of place and useless. He was worried, and tired, and beginning to have second thoughts about this entire enterprise.

But whenever he thought of going back to his old existence, the idea of not having Livvy, of not being able to hold her ever again, was enough to shore up his determination. He could do this. He had to do it. Once he held her in his arms again, everything would have been worth it. So he kept looking forward. Keeping his eyes on the prize.

Since Roys' plan called for inserting him in the lineage of his last ancestor, (or would that be a successor?), they had traveled to 1983. The last duke had been the right age to be his father. Roys created a marriage certificate for him and a birth record for him dated a year later. A few years later, they also created school records. They had to make him an orphan who was raised in the public welfare system. With the superior technology and skills Roys had, it wasn't difficult for him to hack into the public records system and create the paper trail. But it took quite a lot of traveling, both in time and space.

Then there was the matter of making money. The next stop was the year Dale was supposed to turn 18. They sold some valuable jewelry pieces and gold coins he had brought to different pawn shops. The proceeds from the sale, which he had found to be quite adequate, but Roys had scoffed at, they had invested in the stock market.

At least this he knew how to do. Although he had to learn new ways of doing it, at least the investing part he understood. With Roys's knowledge of the future, it was easy to choose the investments that would multiply his money the most, and by this point in time, he was quite rich. He might know less than a child about how things worked in this new world, but at least he wouldn't be a financial burden on Livvy.

Using part of that fortune, he bought a townhouse in London. Roys said they needed to establish an address for him

and the townhouse was a fantastic investment as the price would multiply in the coming years. It also helped with the time traveling part, having a secure and private place from which to travel. Until that point, they had been using isolated and abandoned places, but even that was risky.

Everything was falling into place. Now he only needed to get back to her.



ONE MORE STOP. DALE thought as he looked out the window of his townhouse at the moonlit park across the street. They only needed to make one more stop, and then they could finally go to Livvy. Anxiety gripped him. The timeline was muddled, but by his calculations, it had been almost a month of jumping through time and fabricating a whole life out of thin air.

It was strange to think that for a while now, during this trip, he had been alive at the same time as Livvy. He ached to call her. It would be so easy to do using these phone apparatuses. To hear her voice, tell her he was here. That he was coming to be with her.

He heard Roys enter the room and turned to face him. “Do you think I could call Olivia or send her a message?”

Roys was horrified at the prospect. “Absolutely not. You can’t contact her yet.”

“Just to let her know I’m coming.”

Roys carefully placed the equipment he carried on top of the dining table. That and two chairs were the only furniture in the townhouse, besides their beds upstairs.

“Dale, listen to me. At this moment in time, she doesn’t even know you exist. If you call her, she is going to think you are a lunatic.”

“Damn! You are right, of course.” Dale dropped onto one of the chairs and placed his elbows on the table. “I should be able to realize that. But it is so frustrating to know that I’m

now living at the same time as her and yet I still can't reach her."

"Patience. You will be able to see her in a few day's time." Roys pushed one of the LT's in his direction, "In the meantime, why don't you google her, if you miss her so much?"

Dale narrowed his eyes at Roys's laughing face. "If that is a euphemism for something improper, I don't appreciate your —"

"No, no." Roys laughed and waved his hands in a placating motion. "Settle down. Googling something or someone in these times means searching them up on the internet. Here, let me show you." He said, taking a seat next to Dale.

And Roys had taught him about the Internet and how to use a computer. It was all so fascinating. This internet thing was almost like an oracle, or maybe like a never ending library of infinite knowledge. He could search for anything, even people. And he had that information available anywhere, anytime, thanks to the phone he had acquired. He had been somewhat familiar with phones from seeing Olivia's, but it was amazing to discover all the other things it could do.

He had taken to looking Olivia up, and he had found a couple of articles that mentioned her in relation to the different projects she had worked on with her ex-husband's company.

When he discovered social media, he started following her there too, absorbing every picture, every word she wrote, every place she went, everything she did. Roys laughed at him and called him a cyber-stalker. He didn't care, couldn't help it. He needed to know about her life.

Even when that meant seeing countless pictures of her with her ex-husband. Except he wasn't her ex-husband yet. In many of the pictures, he appeared next to her. His arms around her, his hands on her waist or her hip, their faces together. They were even kissing in one picture!

Dale had to look away. It was like a cannonball to his gut. His mouth twisted with disgust while his hands had curled into fists. He wanted to reach through the screen and strangle the bastard. He wanted to smash his smug face in and demand that he take his hands off Olivia.

This jealousy was unexpected. He knew it was nonsensical. She had told him about her past. But somehow, seeing her next to her not-yet-ex-husband did something to his insides. This time-traveling business was messing with his brain. He couldn't tell the past from the present or future anymore. All he knew was that at this moment in time, Olivia was still married to another man. While he slept alone in this cold, almost empty house, she was sleeping next to him and... he stopped himself before he started thinking of them being intimate. If he dwelled on that, he would go stark raving mad.

So he avoided her pictures with him, focusing instead on the ones with her family. And what a beautiful family it was. Even through the pictures, you could sense this was a group of people bound by something more than blood ties.

One photo in particular haunted him. It was of Livvy and her sister. Livvy was holding her newborn niece, and her sister had an arm around her, her head resting on Livvy's shoulder. Leah was so young, and she looked so happy. She was looking at her newborn daughter with such wonder and love. To think that less than two years after that, she would be dead. He closed his eyes. It was so wrong.

Tragedy would shatter this beautiful and loving family who looked so happy, and he knew it. He felt he had to do something about it. Prevent it if he could. He knew Roys wouldn't like the idea and would probably outright refuse. So he had to be careful in bringing it up.

What was the date of her death? He couldn't remember exactly, but one day Olivia had mentioned that it was the anniversary of her sister's death. He thought it was November, four years prior in her time. So they needed to travel a bit past the date and find out how it happened and where so they could prevent it.

Yes, it was the right thing to do. Now he only needed to convince Roys.



CHAPTER 73 - Changing the past



THE NEXT MORNING, EVERYTHING was ready to undertake the last leg of their journey. They had packed all their clothing and belongings and placed them in front of them. No food or anything that could spoil remained in the house, and they had drawn shut the blackout drapes. Not a sliver of light penetrated the absolute darkness inside the townhouse. That was necessary. If no light from the outside creeped in, it meant the explosion of light their time travel generated couldn't get out either.

They sat at the table while Roys finished preparing the machine that would transport them in time. Spherical in shape, no bigger than an apple, the device sat in the middle of the round table between them. Having gone through this procedure several times, Dale was familiar with the steps. Not much longer now until they were ready to depart. It was time to bring it up.

Dale took a deep breath and decided to be direct.. "I would like to prevent Olivia's sister's death."

The other man predictably bristled. "You can't do that Dale! I thought we had already discussed this."

"No, we talked about me contacting Olivia, which is not the same. I will not contact her or let her know I'm here. I'm talking about us preventing that accident. Anonymously."

Roys looked up to the ceiling in annoyance. "Besides the fact it would add another stop or two to our already busy schedule, don't you realize the implications?"

"What implications?" Dale countered. "A young couple will survive to see their baby daughter grow up."

"I can't believe I still have to explain this. Dale, if you mess with events, you don't know how that might change the future."

“How could their survival have any negative impact in the future?”

“I don’t know!” Roys got up to pace in agitation. “That is the great mystery. Nobody has done that. I was supposed to carry out small experiments. Changing minor events to see the effect they have.” He turned and pinned Dale with a glare. “Preventing the death of two people is not what I call small.”

“None of what we have done is small Roys. We have made innumerable trips, we have created documents. Heck, you transported me and have created a whole new persona in this time period.” Dale reasoned.

“Yes, but all we have done so far involves only you and people who are already dead. We have not interfered in the life and events of people who are living right now. What you suggest would change people’s lives. This would change the present and will surely have consequences in the future. Let me see if I can explain this. If we change events that happened in Olivia’s life before she traveled back in time and met you, she may not travel back in time and meet you at all.”

“How can that be? She did it. It already happened. She was there. We met.”

“Yes, and so it also happened that her sister died before that. What if once we interfere and her sister doesn’t die, she doesn’t get a divorce, she never makes that trip to England when she did, and therefore never meets you? We could have done all of this for nothing. You may get to her and she may still be married and have no idea who you are.”

That stunned Dale for a moment. Time travel logic was very convoluted, but he could sort of understand Roys’s point. What if he arrived at Livvy’s doorstep and her life had changed as a result of his interference? What if she was still married and happy and had no memory of their time together because it didn’t exist for her?

The idea was too painful to bear. It would devastate him. He would have lost her for good this time. But she would be happy. She would have her sister and her marriage. Even if the idiotic bastard could never love her as he did, she wouldn’t

know that. She would not have had to go through the pain of a divorce, and she wouldn't experience the pain of their separation, either.

He could still remember her expression the day she left him. How sad she looked, how her face had crumbled and her eyes overflowed with tears. Her unhappiness tortured him just as much as his own. That firmed his resolve.

"If that happens, I will win her over again. Even if she has no previous memory of me."

Roys exhaled in exasperation. "I am beginning to regret this entire mission," he said, but without heat. "All we wanted was for the two of you to be happy together. I don't like the odds if this doesn't work."

"You have the advantage of hindsight. Don't you know what happened to Livvy and me?"

"No. There is no record of what happened to you two. It is as if history had not yet been written. I only know—" Roys cut himself off as if unsure of what he was going to reveal.

"You only know?" Dale prompted

"My mother found out she descends from Olivia."

Dale went still at this revelation. "Who is the father of Olivia's offspring, then? Is it me?"

"We don't know." Roys paced the room, running his hands through his hair. "Do you see the far-reaching consequences of this now? What if we wipe out my entire family by doing this?"

That gave Dale pause. He gave it serious consideration, turning it over in his mind. "I think it is unlikely. It is more logical to think that either way, Olivia will have offspring. Whether or not I am the father seems irrelevant. And you guys already exist. People will not vanish into thin air."

"I hope to God you are right." Roys's eyes were somber.

"Does that mean you will help me?"

Roys looked down and exhaled. “Against my better judgment, yes.”

Dale slunk low into his chair and stared out the window. He chuckled, a low, humorless thing. “Don’t worry, I’m going against my better judgment on this, too.”

Roys just threw him an annoyed sidelong glance and shook his head as he headed back to his equipment. “Let me do some research. The trip is postponed until tomorrow.”



CHAPTER 74 - How to save two lives



AS IT HAPPENED, SAVING two people's lives was the easiest thing they had done during this whole endeavor. They just had to travel to a time soon after the accident had occurred. After looking up all the details, they went back to the day of the accident and reported the drunk driver with an anonymous call to the police. The fellow was stopped and arrested before he could cause the accident.

Now they finally arrived on the day after Livvy had gotten back to her time. Dale's nerves were stretched to the max with a mix of yearning and trepidation. At long last, he was going to be reunited with Livvy. He would hold her in his arms... or so he hoped. If the consequences of their interference had not changed events and everything was as it used to be.

It was the day of the auction and they had decided the estate was a good place to look for her, as they knew she planned to be there. They went to the same ruins from where Livvy departed with Roys's parents and traveled to the day of the auction, then walked towards the house to look for her.

Dale's first glance at his home in Olivia's time was a punch to the face. He had not wanted to see it before now. Maybe it was a bit of cowardice, but he hadn't wanted to be torn, didn't want to feel a yearning for the past. To say that seeing his estate so changed and unkempt was a gut wrenching experience would be a massive understatement. But then everything was bizarre about this entire business.

He pushed thoughts of his estate aside. He would worry about it soon enough. Right now, the only thing that mattered was finding Olivia. He had come all this way for her. They hurried to the house, trying to catch up with her there. But by the time they arrived, the auction was over, and they didn't find her or anyone who could give them information.

Undaunted, they continued looking for her through the nearby village. Fortunately, the town was not large. But that also meant it didn't have a big inn or hotel where she could stay, which left a multitude of private homes to search. Roys looked up all the rental places in town and they went through them, one by one.

With no idea of where she was staying, it proved a slow process, and by nightfall, they had not found her. There was also the possibility she was not even staying in this town. If that was the case, they might take days to find her.

Not willing to give up, they stayed the night and the next day they found a clue at the vicarage. When they asked for an American woman of Livvy's description, the vicar told them that yes; she had been there yesterday, interested in some records, but that he didn't know where she was staying.

After visiting more than a dozen cottages and finding them empty or occupied by other people, they found the one they were looking for. By pure chance, they met the owner who was cleaning the place. She confirmed Olivia had indeed stayed there, but that she had left early this morning, cutting her stay short since she had rented for the entire week.

Dale thanked her, and then, cursing the timing, turned to Roys.

"What do we do now?"

"Go back to last night, of course," Roys replied with a weary smile.

"Of course! Stupid me. You'd have thought that by now I would have gotten into the habit of thinking about moving backwards in time."

"It takes some getting used to. Let's go back to the ruins and travel to last night."



HALF AN HOUR LATER, they were back on the night before, walking back to town from the ruins. Dale was almost running in his impatience to get to Olivia.

“Dale, slow down. We need to talk about some things before we show up in front of Olivia.”

“What else is there to talk about? We are here, and I’m going to her right now.”

“Dale, we don’t know how things stand. We messed with events, remember? What if she is still married? What if she didn’t travel back in time?”

“She traveled to England. We have confirmation on that. So that means everything else in her life must have remained the same.”

“Not necessarily. That is the big unknown. I also need to look up her sister. We know we saved them that one time, but we don’t know if she is still alive, and if she is, whether Olivia knows about it.”

“Can’t you find out? Look it up. The same way you looked up everything else.”

“That takes time. I would rather do it in the comfort of a pub or restaurant. Not out here in the wild.”

“It doesn’t take that long. Please, Roys. Let’s find a place and look up whatever we need to know and go now. I won’t be able to rest until I see her.”

With an irritated sigh, Roys gave in. “You know, people in love are damn irrational.”

Just as Dale had said, it didn’t take long at all to find out that Olivia’s sister and brother-in-law were, in fact, still alive. Their social media platforms said it all. However, Livvy’s social media had gone completely silent in the last year. Roys kept digging for information about her, but after half an hour of record searching, he still had not found what he was looking for.

He looked at Dale, concern evident in his eyes. “I haven’t been able to find her divorce certificate.”

“Let’s go, then. We will find out soon enough.”

A few minutes later, they stood in front of Olivia’s rented cottage. By then, it was past midnight and all the windows

were dark in the house. In fact, the entire neighborhood was quiet.

“She must be sleeping. You are going to freak her out. We should wait until she wakes up,” Roys whispered, looking uneasy.

“I have traveled across two centuries to be with her. Now I’m a few yards away. There’s no power on this earth that would keep me away.”

Roys rolled his eyes. “How melodramatic. Fine. If you put it that way.”

Dale went to the front door. Seeing a knocker, he made to bang it, but Roys pointed to a small little button on the side. “Ring the bell. It might be less disruptive.”

He rang it twice, but there was no answer. Then, for good measure, he knocked too. Still nothing.

“We are probably scaring her to death. You do realize she is probably in there alone and a call at the door at midnight is highly irregular, right?” Roys said, displeased.

“Could we somehow let her know we are here?”

Roys took out a phone and dialed her number.



CHAPTER 75 - The midnight visitors



SOMEONE WAS BANGING on her door. Except it wasn't her door. It was Dale's house. But there were no servants. Why were they not answering the door?

The dream faded, and she woke up to realize there was real banging on the door. Disoriented, her eyes roamed the room. Where was she? Ah yes, the cottage in England. But it was still dark outside. Was it already time to wake up?

Her heart picked up its pace, and a shiver of apprehension went through her. A quick look at the digital clock on the nightstand confirmed it was just a few minutes after one in the morning. So she had only been asleep for a couple of hours. Who could be calling at this hour?

What if they were burglars? But burglars wouldn't knock, right? Unless they thought the house was empty and wanted to make sure before they broke in. No, that didn't sound logical either.

Cold with fear, she grabbed her phone and crept to the window that overlooked the front door of the house and looked down.

There was a strange man standing there. He spoke to someone who was knocking on the door, but she couldn't see the other individual because the eaves blocked him.

Then the unknown man dialed a number on his phone, and her own phone buzzed. She almost dropped it in surprise. Were they calling her? Who were these people, and what did they want with her? She didn't answer, and the phone settled into silence. Then it jumped to life again with an echoing ring. She hurried to silence it. Nope, not answering that. Too creepy. Her phone settled again. Then it vibrated with a beep. A text message. From... She peered out the window. From them?

She tapped open the message and skimmed over it.

Hi Olivia. You don't know me. My name is Roys. I'm Dariux and Kalli's son from the future. I have Dale with me. Open the door, please. Before the neighbors call the police.

Dale? Dale was here? The heartbeat drumming in her ears drowned out every other sound. With trembling fingers, she typed back.

Where is Dale? I don't see him.

"She wants to see you," she heard the guy called Roys say.

A shadow separated from the darkness around the house. Her breath froze in her throat as the man looked up. The pale moonlight bleached the golden color of his hair, and the azure of his eyes, but it was definitely his beloved face she saw bathed in the silver light. Dale.

She opened the window, leaning out.

"Livvy." He lifted his hand in a small wave.

"Dale? Is it r-really you?" Her voice trembled.

"Yes, sweetheart. It is me." He replied in a low voice.

"But how? I—"

"Open the door, and we will explain."

She made a choking sound and ran. The narrow and uneven stairs of the ancient cottage were a challenge for her unsteady legs. She tripped and almost fell, but regained her footing without losing momentum. She couldn't get to the door fast enough. What if he vanished? If it had been a trick, an illusion. A dream. She could not bear it. Reaching the door, she ripped it open.

There he was in front of her.

With a sob, she launched herself at him. Her only reality was his solid body against hers. Her arms and legs twined themselves around him, vine-like, holding on to him. She never wanted to let go. His arms hugged her. She was in his arms. He was here.

She inhaled his fragrance, buried her fingers in his hair, seeking reassurance. It was his smell, the texture of his hair. It had to be real. Little by little, she nuzzled her way to his mouth, and he took her in a possessive, all-consuming kiss. His kiss. His flavor. The heat of his body started dissolving the icy knot of anxiety, and her mind finally believed it was real. Taste, sight, smell, touch. All her senses offered the same information. Dale was here, against all odds.

Someone cleared his throat, and they both looked up, dazed. Roys was standing a few feet away, looking remarkably uncomfortable.

“As loath as I am to interrupt this reunion, I think it would be better to move inside.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Please come in.” Embarrassed, she tried to lower her legs and step away from Dale to invite them inside, but Dale was having none of it. Holding on to her thighs, he carried her in, followed by Roys who closed the door behind them. Olivia flipped the switch as they entered, and bright light flooded the room.

Dale put her down and looked at her. She saw the moment he realized she was not wearing much at all. His eyes widened and darkened, while his nostrils flared at the sight of her satin camisole with thin straps and matching shorts. At his pointed attention, her nipples hardened and poked through the thin fabric of the top, creating little dots.

He frowned and removed his jacket, throwing it over her to preserve her modesty, although it hadn't even occurred to her to be embarrassed. Her mind was too befuddled to feel anything but wonder at his appearance.

Royce interrupted the moment to announce, “I think I'm going to go find myself a hotel or an inn where I can spend the night. I'm exhausted. We can talk in the morning.”

“Wait. No need to go. You said you are Dariux and Kalli's son?”

“Yes, and if my mother's research is to be believed, I am your several - times - great - grandson.”

Olivia stared at him wide eyed. “You are a descendant of mine? She looked from Dale to Roys. You guys have a lot to explain. How did you two meet? How did this all happen? It feels like a miracle. I can scarcely believe it.”

“We will explain everything, my love. But the long story can wait until tomorrow. The short version is that I sent a message to the future. Kalli saw it, and years later, sent her son on a mission to bring me to you. And so here we are.”

“Yes, that sums it up pretty well.” Roys laughed.

Olivia shook her head. “I can’t wait to hear the complete story, but you are right. You guys look tired. Roys, you can stay here. The cottage has an extra bedroom. Let me go make sure everything is in order.”

With that, she ran up the stairs. Loath to part from Dale for even a second.



CHAPTER 76 - The reunion



DALE'S EYES FOLLOWED her retreating back.

“She is something special, all right,” Roys said with frank admiration. “I’m beginning to understand why you followed her across two centuries.”

Dale frowned, realizing Roys’s gaze was glued to Olivia’s back. “You are staring at her.”

Roys had the audacity to laugh. “Man, relax. She is sort of my great grandmother.”

Dale shook his head with a self deprecating half smile. “It is so bizarre to think about that. Don’t pay me any mind. Seeing the pictures of her with her ex, followed by days of uncertainty when I still didn’t know if she would remember me, has brought out a jealous streak I didn’t know I had.”

At that moment, Olivia popped back down. “Everything is ready. We can retire whenever you guys want. I hope you are not hungry. There’s no food in the house, as I was planning to leave in the morning.”

They shook their heads no and climbed the stairs.

“We know. Don’t worry, we are not hungry. All I want is a soft bed and you,” Dale said with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh, so you are hungry after all,” she said under her breath, so only he could hear her.

“Roys, this is your room over here. The bathroom is through that door. There’s a clean towel in there for you. If you need anything, just let me know.” She dragged Dale further down the hallway to the opposite side of the house.

“I’m sure I will be fine. Good night to you both,” Roys said as he entered his room, closing the door behind him.

Olivia opened a door at the other end of the corridor and led Dale inside, closing and locking the door behind her. Then

she turned and walked straight into his arms.

“Now, about that hunger...”

He crushed her body to his, his mouth descended on hers, devouring her in an all-consuming kiss. All his desperation, longing and hope were pouring out of him. She must feel the same way. She ripped his shirt open, running her hands over his naked torso and back. Her mouth followed. Tearing her lips from his, she deposited open-mouthed kisses across his chest, biting his shoulder, her hands roving lower over his stomach. She was just as ravenous as he, and he was going insane with want.

Then her hands cupped his erection through his pants, and a grunt escaped him as his hips pushed desperately against her. This wasn't going as planned. During all these weeks of traveling, he had been dreaming of a thousand ways to seduce her when he finally had her in his arms again. He was going to take his time, make it last all night. He was going to love her long and slow, but this was burning too fast. And he was incapable of slowing down.

When her questing hands found the fly of his pants, he stopped all thought of going slow. He needed her, and he needed her now. So much so, he thought he would die if he didn't bury himself in her at once. His erection sprang free into her hands, and she squeezed. The pleasure was swift and blinding. A little bead of fluid collected on the tip of his member. She looked at it and licked her lips, then crouched down and lapped it up, almost unmanning him.

He retreated just enough to finish kicking off his pants and shoes, and she took the time to discard her own flimsy nightwear. Then she stood before him in all her naked glory. God, how he loved this woman. Holding his gaze, she pushed him onto her bed. He fell backwards, and she straddled him. Taking his erection in her hands, she rubbed his tip at her entrance, moistening it with her juices. Then she slid down, moaning as she slowly took every inch of him.

Her flushed face and half-closed eyes were the most erotic thing he had ever seen. His hands roamed without conscious

thought all over her legs, around to her buttocks. Molding her waist before coming up to cup her breasts and torment the little peaks that were crying out for attention. He lavished them, teasing them with his fingers until she was gasping, and her movements on top of him were no longer smooth, but frantic and wild.

She didn't even realize all the sweet and wild sounds she was making. She was in a frenzy, a frenzy that fed his own. Mad with want, he raised himself and captured one of her engorged nipples in his mouth, sucking deep. Making her gasp as her internal muscles contracted in a fierce orgasm that triggered his own. The pleasure went on and on forever. He thought he might die in the white heat of the passion they shared.

Breath by breath, they floated back down to earth. When the madness subsided, she lay sprawled on top of him, her head resting next to his, her soft breath tickling his ear. His arms were around her and he was still inside her. It seemed every time they made love, neither one of them was keen to separate afterwards. He had never known such peace, such absolute certainty that he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

He closed his eyes slowly. At long last, he could rest. He had arrived home.

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CHAPTER 77 - The morning after



LIVVY WOKE SLOWLY, stretching languorously as she took note of the muted light seeping through the closed drapes. The passion of the previous night had left her drained and happy. She had slept better than she had in days. The next moment, her heart did a painful somersault as she realized she was alone in her bed. Had it all been a dream, after all? She bolted upright; her panicked mind taking a few moments to process the sounds coming from the bathroom and notice the discarded clothing before concluding that Dale must be taking a shower.

She smirked as she thought of his body, all wet and glistening from the water. Hmmm, maybe she should join him. Getting up from the bed, she walked naked towards the bathroom door and knocked. He invited her to enter. The sight that met her eyes made her all warm and molten inside. He had figured out how everything worked, because he was taking a steamy shower and lathering himself up with her pink puff. Her frilly pink puff sliding around his very male body and leaving a trace of foam behind was incredibly erotic.

“Do you need help with your back?” She said, walking up to the shower, opening the glass door and stepping inside.

“You can wash any part of me you want,” he whispered in her ear. “As long as you allow me to wash any part of you.”

“Hmmm, that seems fair.” She poured body wash into her hands and slid them all over his chest, down his arms, up to his shoulders, coming down his back before skating around his waist to the front and grabbing the proof of his desire. He made a sound of pleasure and started pumping languorously into the tight tunnel she had created with her hands.

Then he stopped, turned her around and put her hands against the wall, covering her body with his from behind to whisper in her ear, “My turn.”

His slippery hands tormented her breasts before sliding down to her weeping center and circling her clitoris, which was swollen and sensitive with desire. Her hips started undulating with a will of their own, pushing her buttocks into his hardness. His turgid member slid between her slippery thighs, and she closed them to squeeze him and keep him there, urging him to slide further into her and give her the fullness her body craved.

But he was on to her and didn't linger. Instead, while holding her hips in place with his left hand, he retreated, his wicked right hand circling back and slipping confidently between her buttocks. He met her initial instinct to clench up with a coaxing caress, the fingers of his left hand working her from the front until her body relaxed and accepted the intrusion. When she moaned with desire, he slid the tip of a finger inside her behind. She gasped, shocked anew. Not at the invading finger, but at her own unexpected pleasure from the experience.

His left hand continued to torment her clitoris while the right invaded the very private and so far unexplored part of her. His finger was gentle, but inexorable. She could feel him there and that heightened her pleasure.

He nuzzled her neck and bit her ear a shade short of pain. "You like that, don't you?"

She could only make inarticulate sounds and nod her head. He chuckled wickedly. "One day, I'm going to take this sweet little hole. I want to take you in every way a man can take a woman. I want to make you all mine."

"Yes!" she moaned.

"But not today. You are not ready, and I am too impatient with need." Stepping between her feet, he widened her stance, positioned the head of his cock between her thighs and plunged home.

His wicked fingers caressed her from front and back, creating such a maelstrom of sensation that it didn't take any time at all to make her explode into a fierce climax. He followed her into the storm. Pumping hard while he shot his

seed deep inside her. She would have fallen to the floor in a heap of rubbery limbs if he hadn't held her up.

After that, she didn't know how she found the strength to finish washing and drying. She crawled back into bed and wanted to sleep a couple more hours, but Dale was wide awake and grinning at her. Looking very pleased with himself.

She groaned, half laughing. "I need coffee."

"I could use some, too."

Accepting there would be no more sleeping this morning, she dragged herself out of bed and rummaged through her bags. "Let me get dressed, and then we can go find some breakfast."

She walked out five minutes later wearing a pair of black leggings, a gray t-shirt and a beige duster cardigan. On her feet was a pair of cozy boots. She didn't give much thought to her outfit other than she wanted to be comfortable. But when she saw Dale, she stopped in surprise.

He was wearing a pair of blue jeans that showcased his long, strong legs to the best advantage, while a cream-colored polo enhanced his blonde coloring and strong shoulders. On his feet a pair of brown leather boots proclaimed he hadn't eschewed comfort while looking good enough to appear on a magazine cover.

She stared, arrested, not only by how good he looked but by how well he wore modern clothes. She had never seen him dressed like this. Last night, she had not paid attention to his attire. Her only focus had been tearing it off of him.

"Damn, I am very underdressed. You look expensive, while I look like a bum," she said with an appreciative smile.

"Actually," he said, also taking in her attire, "you look deliciously provocative. I know these are the clothes women wear nowadays, but I still have trouble seeing so much of the female shape on display. Especially yours. I want to cover you up with a great overcoat and glare at any other man who dares to look in your direction."

She smiled, a little contrite at his admission. “I rarely wear leggings out, although it is acceptable to do so. I wear them around the house for comfort. But if they make you uncomfortable, I can change.”

He pulled her into his arms. “No, don’t change for me. I’m the one who has to learn and get used to the customs of these times.”

“You seem to have done a good job with your own attire,” Livvy observed.

Dale looked down at himself. “These? Roys took us shopping at every stop in time we made. He said dressing appropriately was important to blend in. Since neither of us knew the little nuances of dressing at that particular time period, we would just buy whatever the mannequins on display were wearing.”

“Wait. You guys made several stops in time? You mean you didn’t come directly from your time to mine? And you went shopping at each stop? What else have you been up to?”

“Let’s go down, and Roys and I will explain everything over breakfast.”

And damn if they didn’t have a lot to explain.



CHAPTER 78 - How we got here



“GOOD MORNING, SLUGABEDS.” Roys waved cheerfully from the dining table. There was a paper bag and two big paper cups on the counter. He pointed to them.. “I woke up hungry, so I went out and got us breakfast. I don’t know what you like, so I bought several things. Help yourselves.”

Roys had brought a veritable feast of bagels, croissants, breakfast sandwiches and coffee and tea for everybody. While they all partook of breakfast, they told her about how Dale had carved a message for Kalli on the wall of the old ruins. And how Roys had come back for him and all the things they had done in order to establish him legally.

“So, in order to create a believable identity for him, we had to make several stops along the way.”

“I see.” Olivia could barely wrap her mind around all the things they had had to do in order to get to this moment. She felt humbled by Dale’s willingness to follow her and Roys’s dedication, which had made it possible.

“There’s one more thing,” Dale said.

“What?”

“Have you talked to your family?”

Olivia sighed. “No. I have sent a text or two to my mom to let her know I’m okay, but I’ve been purposely vague. I only arrived the day before last, and didn’t want to talk to anybody.” She looked down at her coffee cup. “I wasn’t really in the mood.”

“Maybe it’s for the best. That way we can prepare you—”

“For what?” Olivia shot to her feet in dread. “Has something happened to my parents?”

“No, no! It’s actually good news. Forgive my clumsiness. What I was trying to say is that we may have manipulated

some events so that the accident that killed your sister and her husband never happened. And they are still alive. Are you aware of that?”

“My sister is alive?” Olivia slid back down into the chair, dazed. “I didn’t know... wait, no, I think I did. I just didn’t know that I knew, if that makes sense?”

Little by little, the last four years of memories of her sister were pouring into her consciousness. Just as if a dam had been opened and her mind was being flooded with new knowledge.

“You know, then?” Roys asked with interest.

“Until you guys mentioned it a moment ago, I didn’t know. But now I realize I have memories of the last four years with my sister, and they feel... normal. Yet I also know she had died in that accident. It’s weird, but I’m aware of both realities.”

“How about your parents? Do you know if they know?”

“Hmmm, I don’t think they are aware of anything weird. At least I can’t recall any conversations about it with them. No, I think for them it is like it never even happened. The same for my sister and her husband.”

“Maybe it’s just you because you traveled in time. You were taken out of the time sequence, and so your case is an anomaly. This is worth investigating further—”

“Roys,” Dale said, shaking his head, “there are other important implications to discuss.” He turned again to Livvy. “How about you? Since apparently you just now realized what happened to your sister before and after, are you now aware of any other reality regarding yourself?”

“What he’s clumsily trying to ask in a roundabout manner,” Roys interjected casually, “is whether your ex husband is still your ex husband and completely out of your life.”

Dale shot him a venomous glare, but Roys simply smiled unrepentantly.

“Charles? Oh my gosh, yes! We divorced about two years ago, just as I had told you Dale.” She looked inside her memories for any other discrepancies, but found none. “I don’t think my life has changed much.”

Dale released a breath, and his shoulders sagged in relief. “I am infinitely relieved, Livvy. I have to confess, my biggest fear in interfering with events so that your sister could live was that I was going to change the present reality too much to where you didn’t recognize me. Or you would still be with your husband—”

“Dale.” Livvy turned to him and placed a soft hand on his cheek. “You are my husband.” She said, repeating his words from when they found Eloise. “Never refer to him again as my husband. He is my ex. In fact, let’s not refer to him at all.”

Dale slowly got up from his chair and carefully set one knee to the ground in front of Livvy. Taking her hands in his, he looked into her eyes and asked quietly, “Will you marry me again, then?”

His proposal was so unexpected, so surprising, that she stared at him for a moment. She had not even thought that far. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Roys leaving the dining room quietly.

Apparently, it was a moment too long for Dale, for he rushed to speak. “I know I just dropped into your life unexpectedly. And you probably need time to rethink our relationship now that you are in your world, but—.”

She started shaking her head. “Dale, I—”

“You must think I will be a burden to you because I know nothing of your time, and it is true. I have a lot to learn, but I ___”

Livvy kissed him to stop him from talking any more nonsense. When their lips parted, she took his beloved face in her hands and looked him straight in his eyes.

“I have nothing to rethink. You surprised me, that’s all. But there is no time, place, or reality in which I wouldn’t want you as my husband. I will marry you as many times as necessary,

in whatever time period. I'm already your wife, and I will want you to be my husband for as long as I live."

"Livvy, my love." He kissed her with so much passion, she felt her insides melting. "I promise I will strive every day so that you never regret your decision. I may not be a duke now, but I am not completely improvident. You will want for nothing."

Livvy laughed, raining kisses on his forehead, eyes, the bridge of his nose, his lips. "I already want for nothing. I was missing only you, and now I have you."

He stole another kiss, as if he couldn't help himself. "When do you want to get married? Shall we go to the courthouse today?"

She shook her head, smiling. "Not today. I want my family to be present. I would rather you meet them before the wedding. Imagine just showing up already married and having them think we met and married impulsively in less than a week."

"Of course. As you wish then." A shadow of doubt clouded his eyes for a moment. "Do you think they will approve of me?"

"I'm sure they will love you. It might surprise them at first, but as soon as they get to know you, they will understand."

"Do you think a month from now is enough time?"

Joy bubbled from her at his eagerness. "More than enough. My family will think I've gone crazy." She said huskily, leaning her forehead against his. "But I'm sure you can bring them around. You are pretty lovable, you know."

"Am I?" he asked, smirking.

"Oh yes. Just look at the way you made me fall head over heels in love with you."

"Show me." He said, grabbing her and standing up with her in his arms.

"Again?" She laughed against his lips.

“Time after time,” he said seriously.

“Forever?”

“And beyond.” He sealed her mouth with a kiss.



EPILOGUE - A marriage made in time



A MONTH LATER.

The day of the wedding dawned cool and sunny. One of those perfect winter days in Florida. Under the bluest sky she had ever seen, the light was brighter; the air felt cleaner, and the colors more vibrant. Or maybe she saw them that way today because she was extra happy?

In just a few hours, she was going to marry Dale for the second time. She shouldn't be anticipating it so much. After all, she had been married to him from the first time they exchanged vows. But to be able to share her happiness with her family was priceless. And to have him here, in her life, to know he had come across distance and time to be with her was... She didn't have a word that properly conveyed her feelings about that. She only knew it made her feel special, cherished. He had put her above everything else in his life, and he was her life.

"Are you ready, sis?" Leah said, entering the room after a perfunctory knock.

She turned to her sister, smiling. To have her sister again was without a doubt the greatest gift Dale had ever given her, even more valued because she knew it came at significant risk to him. If that didn't prove he loved her above all else, even his own happiness, she didn't know what would.

"Yes, I'm ready." She wrapped her sister in a hug. "I could not be more ready. When are we leaving?"

Her sister returned the hug wholeheartedly, laughing with joy at her eagerness. "As soon as the car arrives. Mom is already pacing downstairs."

They had rented a small pavilion set among the beautiful gardens of a botanical park to hold the wedding ceremony and

dinner. She had overseen the preparations, but mostly left it all in the capable hands of the people who worked there. It was easy to decide because no matter the color of the flowers, or the flavor of the cake, or the type of food served, she would be the happiest woman on earth, for she had the man she loved. And soon they would have another little person to love.

It was a secret she was holding near her heart. She hadn't shared it with anyone since she found out a few days before, not even her mother or sister. Dale should be the first to know. She was looking for the perfect opportunity, but since he had so many things to take in and adapt to, and she had been planning the wedding and dealing with the news of her pregnancy herself. The right moment hadn't presented itself. But she had better tell him already, or she might burst with the news.

Tonight would be the perfect time. Once they were alone at the fancy hotel they had rented for their wedding night before departing for Europe in the morning. They would spend their honeymoon traveling through the continent for two weeks before settling in England.

Dale had shared his hope of purchasing his ancestral home. Of course, he could just claim it, since his papers said he was the legal son of the previous duke. If he claimed the title, he would have a right to it, and Roys had told him so, but he was hesitant to do so, and she could understand his reasons. His sense of honor couldn't tolerate lying and pretending to be who he was not. Establishing him legally in these times had required a lot of shady business, and she guessed he didn't feel completely at ease with that.

So for the time being, they only wanted to see the place, assess its condition and the cost to restore it to its former glory. They had discussed what to do with the place in the event he could purchase it. The days of living in lordly splendor in manors had passed, but it was obvious he felt a deep pull towards Crestview Hall, and Livvy did too. It was the place where they fell in love. And he belonged there. He had given up so much for her. She wanted him to have this.

At her suggestion, he was considering turning it into a luxury hotel. It would take an enormous investment of time and resources, but he had both, and she would help him. She was bursting with plans and ideas. They could live at the Dower House on the grounds of the property and from there oversee the repairs and then the running of the place.

She would have to live mostly in England, although she planned to keep her home in Florida for when they came to visit her family, but that was okay with her. She could visit them, and they could visit her in England whenever they wanted. They were only a few hours apart by plane.

“Are we ready to go, then?” Her father popped in his head, beaming at her. He looked very dapper in his tuxedo. “Livvy, you look radiant, mi niña. I confess, I had my misgivings about this guy you are marrying in such a hurry, but if he is the reason you look so happy, I approve of him wholeheartedly.”

It surprised her to learn her father had harbored any reservations concerning Dale, for he had been very congenial. In fact, she had thought the two men were getting along very well. But she supposed it was a father’s way to always worry about his daughter.

“You had doubts?” she asked. “They didn’t show while you guys were talking about fishing, whisky, and billiards. Or discussing politics and business.”

Her father shrugged. “I was sizing him up. He seems like a sound guy, but his best recommendation in my eyes is how happy he makes you.”

“He does, dad. You’ll see. You will love him like a son in no time.” She took his proffered arm, and they made their way downstairs.



DALE STOOD BY THE MAKESHIFT arbor, surrounded by thousands of orchids and other tropical plants. But he wasn’t looking at any of them. He looked to the end of the aisle created by the arrangement of chairs on either side of a red

carpet. She was bound to appear at any moment now. Was she late? It seemed she was running a little late.

“She will be here just in time, Dale. It is still early,” Roys said, reading his mind, as he stood next to him.

The young man had stayed for the wedding, but tomorrow, as they left to embark on their honeymoon, he would travel on to his own time. Dale didn't know if he would ever see him again, but he hoped their paths would cross in the future.

Just then, Livvy appeared at the end of the aisle, and his heart swelled with a mixture of anticipation and awe. No matter how many times he gazed upon her, she still took his breath away. Soft lace adorned her shoulders, while shimmering beads and intricate embroidery cascaded down the bodice. The skirt billowed with every step, a delicate symphony of silk and lace. Her hair, delicately styled, framed her face like a crown of spun gold, enhancing her lovely features.

But it was his face which held him captive. Her eyes, sparkling with a combination of joy and love, locked with his, conveying a silent promise of devotion. Today, her happiness radiated from her. He vowed silently that he would always try to make her happy.

He wished they could be done with this ceremony and they were alone together in their marital bed. This was all for legality's sake and the benefit of her family. In their hearts, they were already married. Had been since the day they made those vows in the chapel on his estate.

She walked gracefully on her father's arm toward him, their gazes never breaking contact. As he reached out to take her hand, he could feel the warmth and tenderness radiating from her touch, solidifying their connection. She was not only his bride but his lifelong companion, his partner, in every joy and every challenge that awaited them.

The notary public performed the ceremony with flair and panache. Thankfully, it wasn't very long. Bishops took much longer. A few minutes later, he was kissing Livvy to the cheers and applause of her family and a few close friends.

The dinner was intimate and cozy, the food and drinks were excellent. Afterwards, there was even some dancing, and he was able to impress the ladies with his ability to waltz. Apparently, no other man in attendance knew how to, so he was happy to dance with Livvy's mom and sister, and even her little niece. They were such a warm and loving family. It was amazing how endeared he had become with them in the short time he had known them. And even more amazing perhaps how they had all accepted and taken him into their fold.

Now they were finally alone in their hotel room. The last rays of a golden sunset were sinking into a molten sea. The view from the floor to ceiling glass doors of their high-rise hotel room was breathtaking, but not nearly as entrancing as the woman next to him. Standing in the middle of the room, Livvy turned around so he could unbutton her dress. He couldn't think of anything else he wanted more than to unwrap her slowly, like the finest gift.

The dress fell in a heavy heap to the floor. He barely had a moment to appreciate her form. Clad in only a small corselet and the briefest of pantalets, she turned and draped her arms over his neck. Pressing her lush form against his rapidly responding body, she nuzzled his neck.

It was all the invitation he needed. He swept her up in his arms and carried her to the massive bed. Intoxicated with need, he tore at his clothing.

Olivia smiled knowingly. "Wait. We will get to that in a minute. But first, I have some news to share with you."

"Oh?" He had not expected a conversation. It must be serious indeed if it made her pause at a moment like this. He looked at her apprehensively.

She looked suddenly shy, as if she didn't know how to tell him whatever it was she needed to tell him. Getting up on her knees on top of the bed, she reached out a hand.

His uneasiness grew. Taking her hand, he stepped close to her and cupped her face with his other hand, caressing her cheek with his thumb. "What is it, darling?"

“I... I am... we are going to have a baby.” She let it out in a rush. Her words were so unexpected that it took a moment for the meaning to sink in and his brain to acknowledge them, and another second or two to form a reaction. She looked up at him, a question in her eyes, and suddenly her beloved face was a blur as his eyes became moist and a startled laugh escaped him.

They were going to have a baby? Their love had created the miracle of life! A little person to love. He wanted to say so many things, and yet, nothing came out. He just gave up for the moment and hugged her hard.

“That is wonderful news. Livvy, my love.” He said when he finally could articulate words. “I don’t know what I did to deserve such happiness. How long have you known?”

“A few days. I’ve been wanting to tell you, but I couldn’t find the right moment. I’ve thought of not much else since I found out.”

“You should have told me immediately.”

“I guess I didn’t want to overwhelm you with too many things at once. I mean, you have been through so many changes in the last month, adapting to the way of life in these times, and we had the wedding to get through, and the deal with the estate—”

He stopped her with a tender kiss. “Nothing is more important than this. Just when I thought it wasn’t possible to be happier... I love you so much.”

“Oh, Dale, I love you too.”

And that was the last thing they spoke for a good long time, allowing instead their bodies and spirits to communicate in ways beyond what words could ever express.

THE END



DALE AND OLIVIA ARE together and happy again! They are married, surrounded by family and expecting another family member in a few months. This is their Happily Ever After. The end of their story. Or is it? I have written an extended epilogue to answer questions such as:

- Is Dale going to claim his title and become a Duke again?
- What will happen with Crestview Hall?
- What does their future together look like with their new baby?

If you want to get a glimpse into their life in the present, this extended epilogue is for you. Download it for free on the link below:

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/r16k4zhz85>

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