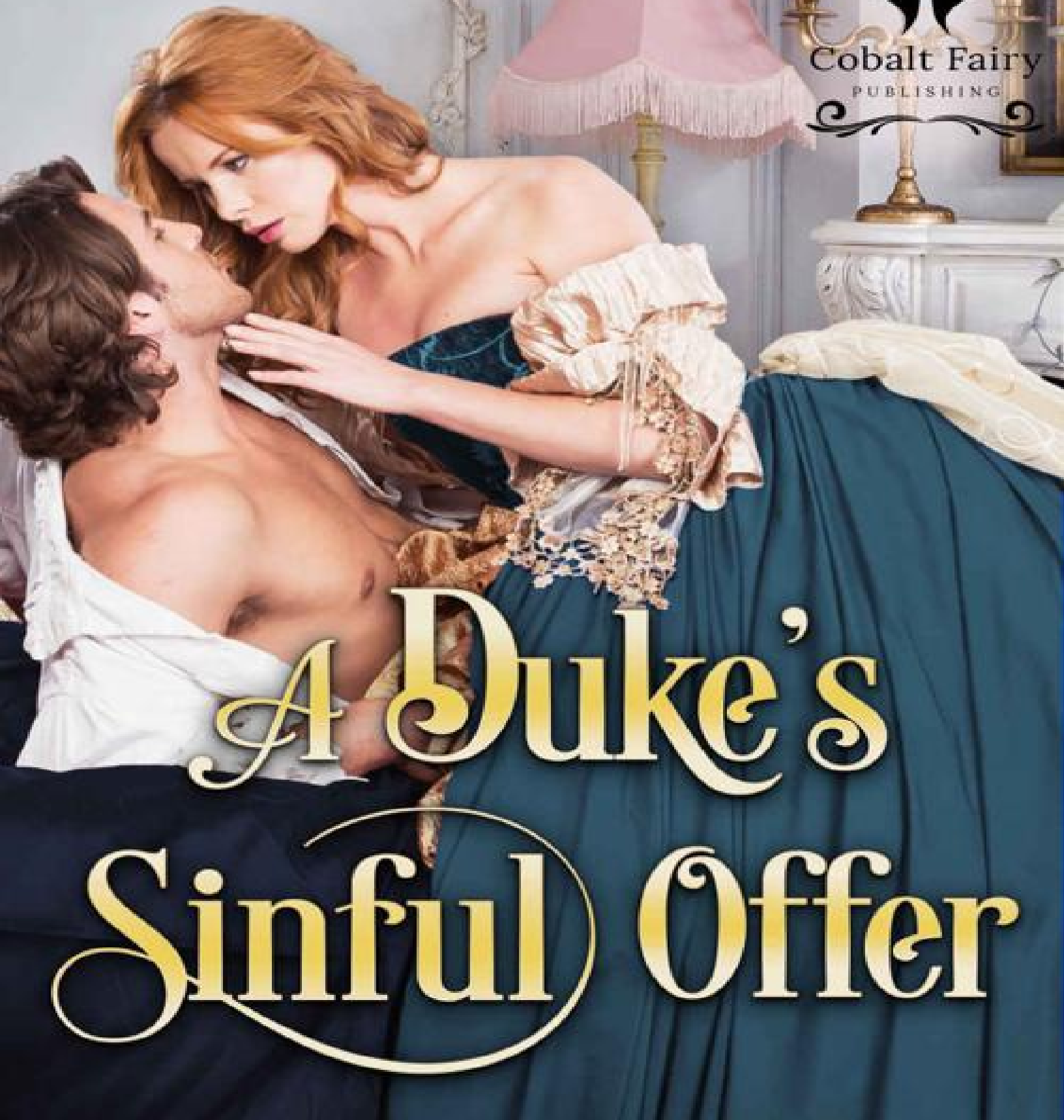


OLIVIA T. BENNET



A Duke's Sinful Offer

A DUKE'S SINFUL OFFER



OLIVIA T. BENNET



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ABOUT THE BOOK

“What if we marry... or pretend to at least?”

Calculating, cold, and meticulous, everything the new Duke of Perbrook does must benefit him. Until he meets the alluring minx next door and, for the first time, he loses control...

No one could ever guess the dark secret a wallflower like Lady Cecilia holds. Yet when her cousin suddenly goes missing, a mysterious duke seems to know a lot more than he lets on. And he makes her an offer she cannot resist...

But Gilbert's help comes at a great cost when Cecilia realizes she has no choice but to marry him. And soon the duke proves he can protect her from everyone... Except himself.

BEFORE YOU START READING ...

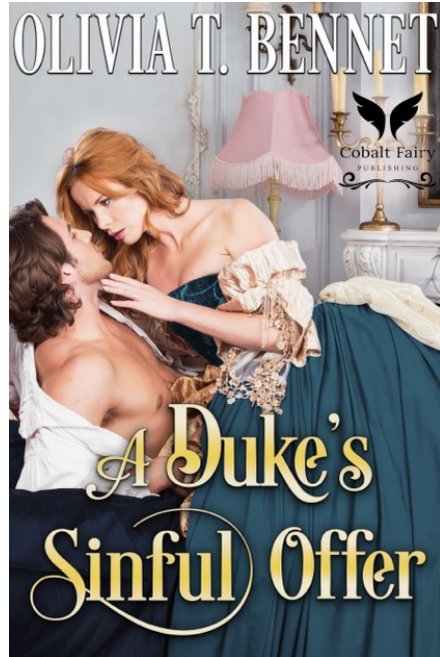
When Lady Cecilia's cousin goes missing her sole savior is a mysterious Duke... But getting involved with him uncovers the dark side of the Regency era...

Here is a **Historical Fact Sheet about illegal activities the aristocrats in Regency era involved themselves in** which will help you understand and visualize the story inside my book better.

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CHAPTER 1



Minfield Manor, London Countryside, 1814

“Dear me,” Letitia Mullens, Viscountess of Huntington and aunt to Cecilia Hawkings, fluttered her hand fan while the carriage trundled on. “I am certainly not happy that Jeffrey has not returned yet.”

“Don’t fret,” her husband, Barnard, replied while turning a page of that morning’s paper. “The lad went out with his friends. Lads their age are not inclined to keep a timetable.”

“Not fret?” the Viscountess exclaimed. “How can I not? He is my sole child and your heir. What if he is hurt somewhere? What if he was burgled? What if he lost his inherence on a Whist table? Are we ruined? Has he sent us to the poorhouses?”

As calmly as she could, Cecilia turned her book’s page, even while her heart danced itself right up her throat at the mention of her cousin. She turned her head to the window and swallowed over the secret bubbling up in her breastbone.

“Calm down, my dear,” Barnard said, his tone droll and wry. “The boy has not made us paupers. He is simply having a lark with his friends from Oxford. Must you make a mountain out of a molehill?”

“How should I not worry?” her aunt fluttered her fan. “You know about my disposition; you are a very vexing man. Oh, my poor nerves. You have no mind for them.”

“On the contrary, I have every respect for your nerves,” Barnard replied. “They are my dearest friends. The boy is fine, dear. If you are that concerned, I shall organize a search party with blood hounds and spy men from the Crown.”

“Thank you,” Letitia replied.

Coughing a little, Cecilia added, “Pardon me, Aunt, but I do believe Uncle is being facetious.”

Her aunt gaped, “Truly?”

“As much as I love you, dear, your worries are unfounded.” Barnard replied, folding the paper and setting it aside. “The boy is fine. I remember my days in Town cavorting at Whites. We men don’t sip tea and gossip as you women folk do. For men, anything between having a good round of cards to a duel at Rotten Row can happen after you’ve had a few drinks.”

“Was that meant to be comforting?” Letitia gasped, her hand flying to her

heart. “Barnard!”

“I’m simply saying that men are made of stronger stuff,” her uncle replied. “Please, put your worry aside and try to enjoy this luncheon with the Duke of Pembroke.”

“I cannot do as you wish,” her aunt huffed while fixing her turban. “It upsets me, and furthermore, this would have been an excellent meeting for Jeffrey; you know he’s been searching for more investors for his business.”

“We shall tell His Grace about our son, and later when Jeffrey returns, he can request a morning visit,” Barnard suggested. “That is a simple matter.”

With her eyes trained out the window, Cecilia gaped at the large iron, ivy covered gates approaching and the beautiful estate perched on the hill in the distance. “I believe we have arrived, Uncle.”

All through the extensive parklands and tailored gardens, Cecilia’s eyes were focused on the four-story Tudor-style mansion, perfectly situated atop a hill.

It’s so high... it is possible that someone could have seen? Our estates are neighbors...

“Are you nervous, dear?” her aunt asked.

Tearing her gaze away, she blinked, “No. Why would you ask?”

“Your face went pale a moment ago.” Her aunt patted her hand. “You shouldn’t worry, dear. He is not a despicable one like those lords in London with all their gaming parlors and houses of ill-repute.”

“It might be a tad early for those claims,” Barnard said. “We do not know the man, only what was bandied about Town—how he came into this position by pure chance.”

Frowning, Cecilia asked, “Pardon?”

“Oh yes,” her aunt nodded sagely. “It’s known that his family is Gentry dear, and his father acquired many businesses, but His Grace, in his young days, took them on and made them exceptionally profitable, enough that even the *ton* turns a blind eye to a fortune made from trade. He is considered one of the most eligible bachelors in the country—if not the continent—and his wealth far exceeded most of the other eligible men.”

“It’s said that his distant relative, the previous Duke of Pembroke—a wily old man, with no heirs—had gone through his family, seeking anyone smart enough to continue his work, and he selected the lad to take over, skipping dozens of men older and more mature than he is,” Barnard added.

“How...how old is he?” Cecilia asked.

“One and thirty,” her father said. “I was told he left Oxford at two and twenty with degrees in business, foreign affairs, and law. Certainly, a brilliant lad.”

“An unmarried *duke*,” her aunt stressed, giving her a pointed look.

At two and twenty, Cecilia knew her time for finding a husband was trickling away—but it mattered little to her. Few lords wanted a headstrong, independent, bluestocking for a bride. Besides, she wouldn’t settle for anything less than a love match.

She gave her aunt a weak smile.

This was solely a courtesy call, nothing more; meet the new Duke, have tea and watercress sandwiches with polite conversation, and then part ways on good terms. There was nothing more to that.

Besides, I have other things to worry about.

The vehicle came to rest at the carriage gate where a man, clad in full black, was waiting at the broad doors while two men, dressed in the gray with red piping of the manor’s livery, stood beside him; one came to the carriage.

Her uncle descended first and helped Aunt Letitia out while Cecilia took the footman’s hand. The butler bowed. “Welcome to the Seton Estate. My name is Rowe, His Grace’s butler. Please, come in.”

Entering the room, Cecilia bit her lip. She had been raised on a lovely estate up north, and while her parents had indeed taken a good deal of pride in their

family home, their estate could not hold a candle to the opulence and elegance of the ducal home.

She looked up at the high ceilings and fought a sudden swirl of vertigo as her gaze followed the spiral staircase up and up and up. Right above her head, a tiered chandelier winked with crystal teardrops, and watered ivory silk flowed over the walls.

“His Grace is out at the moment,” the butler said, “but he will be by shortly. The east drawing room is ready for you.”

The drawing room was as opulent as the foyer; airy and high-ceilinged, the room had celestial blue walls and white moldings with massive bay windows and two tea tables.

“Please,” the butler gestured to two footmen who pulled out their chairs, and wordlessly, Cecilia sat.

While they sat, the footmen served platters of triangular sandwiches and poured tea. Finding the reticule sitting on her lap to be cumbersome, Cecilia stood and went to rest it at a place near a window, glanced out, and stopped halfway.

A man, with thighs as thick as her uncle’s stout body, was riding on a massive black beast of a horse. He stopped at the foot of the steps and alighted from the beast without trouble before patting the horse and handing it over to a footman there.

His hair was a dark mane around his face, but from her angle, she could not see his face. All she saw was that he was in shirtsleeves, a navy waistcoat that hugged his lean torso, and tan rising breeches that followed every line of his hard tight muscles tucked into tall, polished boots.

Before he stepped forward, as if sensing her gaze, he looked up and met her gaze. His eyes gazed upon her with assessment, reserve, and interest. They crackled, the pale jade orbs almost silver in the daylight. A slight stubble teased his jaw, and a white silk cravat was elegantly knotted beneath his chin.

He cocked his head to the side, allowing the jetty strands of his hair to touch his cheeks. Was his jaw the granite edge that it looked? His beautiful, seductive face flashed once again before he vanished inside, and she peeled away from the window and sucked in a breath over her burning lungs.

“Cecilia?” Aunt Letitia asked, her frail fingers holding a cup of tea. “Are you all right, dear?”

Mustering a smile, Cecilia replied, “Yes, Aunt. I’m fine.”

Was that man the Duke of Pembroke? He certainly had the commanding air of a man in that position.

But why was he looking at me so intently?

Unbale to manage another worry on top of the ones already besetting her, Cecilia eyed the plate of tarts on the table and felt the dollops of blackberry

jam taunting her. With a staunch heart, she turned her gaze back to her cup—no tarts for her, she was already too plump for the ton’s taste.

The door pulled open, and the man who had just arrived stepped in while pulling off his gloves.

“I apologize for being tardy,” he said, his voice warm and deep, sending resonant shivers down Cecilia’s spine to curl in the bottom of her belly. “The ride from town took longer than I had anticipated.”

Barnard stood and bowed. “Your Grace.”

Cecilia was stunned that his butler had not come in and made the introductions. Still, she and her aunt stood and curtsied, unable to quite face him.

She’d once read a description of Hades, the destructively seductive god of the dead. If Hades had dark, silken hair, and bronzed, chiseled features like this fellow and looked upon her with those crystal green eyes, it was no wonder Persephone had been trapped.

“Lord and Lady Huntington,” the Duke greeted. “My new neighbors. I’m pleased to meet you, and...” his eyes flickered to her, “... Lady Cecilia Hawkins, daughter of Lord Gillingham, is it not?”

“I am, Your Grace,” Cecilia replied.

His gaze rested heavily on her, hard enough that it felt as if it were piecing under her skin, and she found herself squirming.

“Wonderful,” he replied. “If you will give me a moment to change, I’ll be right with you. I hardly think the smell of horseflesh and sweet tarts go together.”

“We shall wait, Your Grace,” Barnard replied.

The young Duke nodded curtly then turned on his heel and left; Cecilia sunk to her chair, thighs quivering under her dusky yellow carriage dress. She returned to her lukewarm tea and sipped it to keep the thunder under her breastbone quiet.

“I am astonished,” her uncle said. “He is young, but I sense an old soul within him.”

“I too am astonished but not about that,” her aunt added. “I am surprised women aren’t climbing the trellises to get to him. He is handsome one; that he is.”

Scandalized, Cecilia whispered, “Aunt, please. You never know which walls have ears.”

“She’s right,” Barnard agreed.

“I simply wish Jeffrey could be here,” Aunt Letitia sighed while tapping her turban. “He would have loved to meet His Grace.”

Looking down into the soft amber of her tea, Cecilia gave a soft sound of agreement. She knew it fell flat, but her aunt was not good at picking up on small things like the subtle lifeless undertone in Cecilia’s tone.

“Please stop worrying; the boy is fine,” the Viscount stressed. “He is probably foxed with the rest of his chums.”

“I don’t like that image,” Letitia huffed. “Drunk men do foolish things at any age, but young men have immaturity added to their stupidity.”

Before Cecilia or her uncle could further try to assuage her aunt’s fear, the Duke reentered the room. He was clad in a dark suit, sterling white cravat, and a Prussian blue waistcoat, his buff trousers tucked neatly into his polished hessians.

“I hope I haven’t missed anything,” he said while going to a sideboard, and he waved a footman away, grasping the handle of a silver coffee pot while Cecilia made her tea with milk and sugar.

The Duke poured the black liquid liberally, the dark liquid steaming as it spilled from one vessel to the next. His sharp gaze flickered up—to Cecilia. “Have I?”

“Nothing important,” Barnard said, giving Letitia a warning look. “My wife

only mourns that our son was not here to meet you. He went off to London with his friends for a night of carousing. Surely, you recall how these things went.”

“One drink turns into another and a third turns into a massive fortune being wagered over the edge of a card table,” the Duke replied wryly, taking his cup from the table. “Unfortunate, I do know. I do hope your son didn’t end up like the poor fellow I found passed out on the edges of my property this morning.”

Startled, her aunt almost upset her cup. “Beg your pardon?”

“A young fellow, blond haired, dressed in a marron suit and a dandy blue cravat,” the Duke replied. “He had a nasty gash on his left temple, and I called the physician to look after him. He is still unconscious in one of my guest rooms.”

Her aunt flew to her feet, “That’s my son. That is what he wore last night. He—he’s here? Good heavens. Please, Your Grace, let me see him.”

The Duke stood, suspiciously unruffled by her aunt’s cry. “Please, follow me.”

Cecilia hesitated in following them but got on her feet still. The Duke led the way down a corridor, past the landing of the great staircase, and into another half of the grand mansion. He bowed his head to acknowledge greetings from a veritable army of employees until they came to the end of the hallway and entered through a set of double doors.

A young man in the ducal livery stood while every eye dropped to the unconscious form on the bed. Stripped down to his shirtsleeves, Jeffrey lay prone, his long eyelashes lay in shadowed crescents against his pale skin, and dark gold stubble covered his jaw.

A thick wrap was circled around his head, and his chest rose evenly, but there was no doubt, he was dead to the world.

“Jeffrey,” Letitia cried, stepping forward, her hand outstretched while horror edged itself into her face. Her face whitened even more under her face powder.

While Barnard went to hold her, Cecilia edged away from them all, finally turning and dashing through the door, hoping her sudden absence would be taken as a flight of distress.

It was only right for her to be left alone as she fled to one unknown part of the house...but she didn't plan for the Duke to be right on her heels.

CHAPTER 2



The little rabbit had found herself a hutch in the broom closet.

Granted it was a bigger than the average broom closet, but still...a broom closet. He pulled the door out and leaned on the doorway as she spun in place.

The dark yellow—or was it gold; Gilbert knew he was a bumbling fool when it came to such mundane things— of her simple carriage dress and golden ribbon around her nipped-in waist glistened iridescently in the light.

Her hair tumbled over her shoulders and down her back in loose waves, its shining blonde strands intermixed with brown strands a perfect foil to her alabaster skin. She was curvy with a tucked middle and a sinfully rounded backside while the firm, rounded tops of her breasts quivered with every breath she took.

“And where are you all dashing off to, little one?” he asked, oddly amused.
“Surely, you know you’ve found yourself trapped.”

She spun, her dainty hands flexing at her side. “By what, or should I say, by *whom*? You? Are you the big bag wolf, Your Grace?”

“Are you done being the scared little rabbit?” Gilbert asked, stalking her. “Is it that you cannot stand seeing your cousin in such a condition...or is it something more?”

Her irises widened in stark fear, but she notched her head up in defiance. “And what more could there be?”

“You tell me,” he replied. “I’m willing to play this game if you are.”

Her cheeks bloomed with raging red, and her eyes flashed rebelliously at him while her bosom rose and fell in swift surges beneath yellow silk.

They were standing nearly toe to toe, neither backing down, and her clean, feminine scent drew him like a moth to a flame.

“And what game would that be, *Your Grace*?”

He ignored the touch of contempt in her words.

“For you, an unending dance around the Maypole; for me, a swift game of chess where I will topple your Queen and put your King in checkmate,”

Gilbert replied.

“I have not the faintest inkling of what you are referring to,” Cecilia replied. “And please, excuse me as I believe my aunt would have noticed my absence.”

He stepped aside, and she moved past him, but Gilbert flung a hand out, grasped her arm, and turned her back to him. With his other hand, he grasped her chin, tilted her head up, and forced her to meet his gaze. “I shall advise you to become a chess master in a few days, Lady Cecilia, because this game has just started.”

“I believe I was dancing around the Maypole,” she replied dryly. “Do you not wish to join me?”

Smart, quick on her refrain, and able to parry with wit and sarcasm, Gilbert felt his amusement and appreciation for her growing another inch.

“Touché, little rabbit, but since I have no intention of dancing whatsoever, we shall be playing chess. Consider your moves smartly, my lady; I have never been bested yet.”

She stared at Gilbert, eyes wide in disbelief. Her mouth even parted, lips trembling. An errant thought about how they would feel when his lips roved over them ran though his mind.

Finally, she must have seen that he was not jesting and spun on her heel with

a huff, marching off the way she had come. Gilbert followed a few paces after, idly wondering if she could retrace her steps, and he felt another notch of admiration score itself into his mind when she led them back to the room where her cousin lay.

Her aunt was now seated near her unconscious son, holding his hand with her trembling one, while her husband rested a comforting hold on his wife's shoulder. It did not seem that either was aware of his and Cecilia's absence.

Maybe they thought we had stepped into the corridor to give them privacy?

“Not to give you more distress, but when my butler and footman undressed him for the physician, his money pouch was gone,” Gilbert said. “Paired with the attack on his temple, my theory is that he had been attacked unawares and robbed, and then in his drunken state, he mistook my property for yours.”

Letitia's breath hitched, and she shoved a handkerchief under her watering eyes. “My poor boy.”

“The physician said the blow on his temple is why he is unconscious, and he will stay that way until the injury heals,” Gilbert explained. “He said he has seen such injuries in men coming from war and men in accidents, and it might take a while to do so, but they mostly do recover.”

Barnard turned, emotion rife on his face. “We are in your debt, Your Grace. Thank you for saving our son's life. I think it best to carry him home with us.”

“I understand,” Gilbert nodded, “but the professionals said that it is important to keep him stable. Any additional jerks of bumps might aggravate his condition. I have no issue keeping him here for as long as he needs to be.”

“We shall reimburse you, Your Grace,” Barnard vowed.

Gilbert knew it was standard not to accept—he could pay for the man’s treatment ten times over—but he also knew the Viscount had his pride. “I appreciate the offer, but this is a goodwill gesture between friends and neighbors.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Barnard nodded.

“I am relieved that the lad has been identified,” Gilbert added. “I was debating on making an announcement in the Times.”

“I—I think I should go back to the drawing room,” Cecilia said quietly.

Her aunt looked up. “It distresses you, doesn’t it?”

Cecilia’s reply was a flickering smile that her aunt must have interpreted as sorrow and grief, so she waved her hand at the young woman. “Your Grace, if it not too much trouble, would you accompany her for a while?”

“I’ll have a maid sit with us,” Gilbert replied. “Take all the time you need here.”

With a nod, he held the door for Cecilia and followed her as she headed to the drawing room, and he summoned a passing maid to follow them then directed her to a chair.

He pulled the chair out for Cecilia and went to the sidebar then quickly made a refreshed cup of coffee for himself and a cup of tea for Cecilia. With a new cup, he returned to the table and sat the cup before her. Her eyes flew to him with surprise, but he didn't mind and sat across from her with his brew.

Silently, he examined her directly, not willing to hide his perusal; his gaze ran from her golden curls to dainty hands and the delicious soft swell of bosom under her gown. Her golden silk gown with small and puffed sleeves and an empire cut accentuated her small waist and ample bosom enough to garner many admiring glances from the opposite sex—him included.

She took the cup to her lips, and the soft bow of her beautifully cut lips was tempting as was the soft rosy hue which reminded him of strawberries.

“You made my cup exactly how I like it,” Cecilia remarked, her eyes flickering to him. “How is that?”

“I watched you as you made your cup earlier,” Gilbert clarified, his eyes roving over her face. “I must warn you, there is little that passes my attention.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“I think you already know.” Gilbert stirred his coffee. “Don’t play a bird-brained Miss. It does not suit you,” he ended succinctly.

“How dare you,” she glared. “You know nothing about me?”

Gilbert sat the cup down and stared at her with one of those penetrating gazes that used to make all his schoolmates flinch and his company overseers shiver in their seats.

“You don’t wear jewelry or cosmetics,” he said after a long, fraught period, “which tells me you don’t subscribe to every trend that comes along since the latest tendencies are rouge and lip pomades.”

“I see no need to kill myself with arsenic and a venetian ceruse,” Cecilia retorted, her eyes narrowing.

“You know full well those trends are long past.” Gilbert’s lips ticked up. “But I am glad to know you have studied history. Queen Elizabeth the First is a study of irony, is she not? However, we’re not here to discuss her; you, my dear, are the subject here. The book over there...” he nodded to her reticule and the book laying on its side.

“...the Castle of Otranto, I believe, tells me that you don’t care for the clear meaning of the book which is, the sins of the father follows the sons...but you are one that prefers line of good triumphs evil, even better when such good acts are done by a handsome hero...”

She pinked.

“If I were to go to your home, I believe I would see tales of Arthur and Guinevere on the shelf, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* or *Merchant of Venice*, Greek heroes such as Achilles or Perseus, and Rome’s Aeneas or Hector.”

She turned a painful red and averted her eyes while her hands tightened around the teacup.

I wonder if that flush goes to the tips of her toes.

“You are not a risk-taker. You’ve never had been, not from lack of wanting to, but you’re hampered by the knowing that what you do want to try is probably not worth trying at all,” Gilbert said, “So you stay in the lines drawn in for you to be a respectable lady of the ton.”

“And what is it that do you think I would like to do, Your Grace?” Cecilia dared him.

To answer that, Gilbert stood, retrieved her book and slid it to her while drumming his fingers on the cover. “You want an adventure.”

Without looking at the novel, Cecilia replied, “Your assessment is... wrong.”

“Is it now?” he replied, quirking a thick, jutting brow. “Do you disagree that I am right, or is it that you will not accept that I am right?”

Her lips thinned, and her bosom rose in agitation while her eyes narrowed. “I dare not tell you what I am thinking.”

“No need,” he sipped his drink. “Your eyes cannot hold a secret even if you hire a spymaster to cloak them. You think I am arrogant.”

“It’s one of the many,” she replied coolly.

Utterly humored, Gilbert leaned in, “You have my permission to speak your mind, Lady Cecilia, and be as bold and brash as you want. I’ve been called more monikers than you could conjure in many other languages too.”

Her eyes darkened with caution. “How brash?”

“I’ve had a lady tell me I’m a horse’s behind and another who, with a vague translation from the Italian, told me I am the muck stuck between a pig’s toes,” Gilbert said plainly. “I invite you to add yours.”

“You are an arrogant, conceited, brash, holier-than-thou attitude nodcock, who thinks he is right on everything,” she replied stiffly, “Your Grace.”

“I see,” leaning in, Gilbert steeped his fingers, “but *am* I wrong?”

“I don’t like you,” Cecilia said boldly.

He laughed, a deep gravelly sound. “Well, be content, little rabbit, because you are not the only nor the first one to say such a thing. I’ve made my peace with temerity.”

“Please stop calling me that,” she huffed. “I am not little nor a rabbit. Besides, young rabbits are called—”

“Kittens,” he interrupted her while tracing the rim of his cup with a long forefinger. “Would you prefer if I call you that instead?”

Cecilia’s eyes dropped to his hand, but Gilbert didn’t stop tracing the gilded edge. “I would rather you call me by my name instead of toying with me.”

“Toying with you?” he asked. “How disrespectful. You impugn my honor, my lady.”

She gave him a long look.

“Would you tell me where your parents are?” Gilbert asked, jarring the conversation into another area.

Blinking at the sudden shift, Cecilia replied, “Why do I have the suspicion

you already know about that matter?”

“Maybe I do, maybe I do not,” he shrugged. “Humor me.”

“They have gone to the West Indies, but I cannot tell you which island they are in at the moment.”

“Do they do this often?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said reluctantly. “They’ve been to the Ireland, Scotland, the Far East, America, the Indies, and I believe they once went to New Holland to visit and stopped at some Cape in Africa. They have sent me letters from all those places.”

“Ah I see,” he replied. “You’ve lived their lives vicariously, and now, you want an adventure of your own.”

“Cavorting through half the earth is not my desire,” Cecilia replied. “They have written to me about pirates and blackguards, poisonous snakes, and man-eating beasts. I shall not place myself such a position.”

“And what position *do* you want to be in?” Gilbert asked.

He was acutely aware that this question had a proudly scandalous undertone, but he was not willing to amend his words. The dark blush on her face told him she had gotten the hint as well.

She opened her mouth then snapped it closed and did it a second time, but now words came from her. Her eyes were shifting left and right, her lashes fluttering. “What do you mean?”

“Like being birdbrained, being coy does not suit you,” Gilbert said. “You know what I meant.”

The steel in her spine sagged, and she bent over the cup, staring glumly into its depths. “What...did you see?”

“Enough,” he replied gruffly.

“It was not as it seemed,” Cecilia replied softly. “It was not as it seemed.”

“Oh, I know,” Gilbert lips lifted, “but I doubt you know anything more than the basics.”

Confusion was heavy in her azure gaze. “What do you mean?”

“Come by tomorrow evening,” he said, eyes glittering. “I will show you what I mean. I could show you the *real* Jeffrey Mullens.”

She blinked. “Could show me? You say that as if he is... a hooligan or a

blackguard or something worse. Jeffrey only owns a warehouse, dealing goods.”

“He deals in *goods*, yes,” Gilbert grinned, “but not cloth or hosiery or rich wine. Believe me, you’ll see what I mean.”

Suspicion was birthing in Cecilia’s chest, and the growing fear that he might have seen something secret made her stomach feel hollow. Still, she had to keep up the façade that nothing was wrong. “My cousin is not that sort of man.”

Gilbert gave her a dry smile. “Keep thinking that if it soothes your heart.”

Her reply was cut off by her aunt and uncle reentering the room, and Cecilia stood. “Aunt? How are you feeling?”

“I’m fatigued, my dear, and distressed,” her aunt said. “I feel I’ll need a fainting couch with how weak I am.”

“On that note, I will be taking her home,” Barnard said, wrapping an arm around the slender, sparrow-like woman. “Thank you for your hospitality and unfathomable generosity, Your Grace, but we must be going.”

Cecilia stood, relief flushing her face. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Standing, Gilbert inclined his head, “My pleasure, and Lady Cecilia, please

remember my offer.”

“Offer?” Barnard asked, his dark gaze shifting between the two.

“To— to visit Jeffrey whenever I have the time,” Cecilia lied. “He said his home is open to us at our fancy.”

“She’s right,” the Duke fibbed easily. “It’s simply my Christian duty,” Gilbert replied kindly. “Be at rest; he is in good hands, my lady.”

“Oh, thank you, Your Grace,” Letitia replied, her hand fluttering over her breast. “You are a saint.”

“Have a safe journey home,” he said.

After the following bows and curtsies, the three left his manor, and Gilbert went to his study, uncovered a bottle of scotch, and poured a generous glass. Reposing in his chair, Gilbert looked around the room at the leather seats clustered around the marble fireplace. Bookshelves lined the spaces between the windows, loaded with ledgers, law tomes, leather folios of paper, and reference books of all kinds.

Looking down at the folio on his desk, Gilbert spun it open and read over the words. “I mean what I said, come to me little rabbit and find out the truth of the wolf you’re living with.”

CHAPTER 3



Old ground digging into her back...

A hard grip on her arm...

The rip of her skirt...

A menacing whisper in her ear... *you'll be mine, whether you like it or not.*

Cecilia shot up in bed, gasping at her nightgown, her vision sifting from that horrible night to the familiar yellow striped walls, the cluttered rosewood desk, and the hangings of the canopied bed in her aunt's house.

Flustered, she slipped out of bed and donned the housecoat left hanging over a chair before lighting a lamp and seeking out a pail of drinking water. Moonlight slipped through the parted curtains as she poured out a glass and sipped it then pressed the cool cup to her temple.

“Will these nightmares end?” she whispered.

With the thin light, she perused the books on the shelf and plucked a book of poetry by Lord Bryon and turned to her favorite work. “She walks in beauty, like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies. And all that’s best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes...”

Dimly, she heard the gold ormolu clock chime the hour as two, and she placed a finger at the last line of the poem. The Duke’s ominous warning about Jeffrey was resting heavily on her mind and heart.

What did he mean by the *real* Jeffrey?

But hadn’t I seen a part of that myself?

Anxiety quickened her pulse the moment her eyes fluttered open, yet as much as she asked the question, no answer was forthcoming. What she did know was that heaven would crumble before she took the insufferable man up on his offer.

Turning on her bed, she punched her pillow into shape, crossed her arms on it, and cradled her head.

The Duke isn’t a deviant...no, he’s devious. And devilishly handsome.

Puffing out a breath, Cecilia felt conflicted; the man intrigued and irritated

her in equal measure. How dare he make so many assumptions about her life without knowing a thing about her?

“Cecilia dear?” Aunt Letitia said through the door after knocking. “Lady Anabelle is here for you.”

Startled at the mention of her best friend, Cecilia shot up in bed. She hadn’t expected her friend to be by at all. However, she had no qualms at telling her aunt to let Anabelle—or Belle as she preferred to be called—into her room.

They had shared a dorm room at Miss Easton’s Finishing School for Genteel Ladies after all, and Belle had seen Cecilia at her worst many a times.

“She can come,” Cecilia replied while slipping off the bed to dart behind her screen to do a quick ablution.

“Cecilia, dear,” Belle called out while the door closed, “did I wake you?”

Patting her face dry and pulling on a thin robe, Cecilia moved from the screen and smiled at her friend. Belle’s black curls were gathered into a flattering hairstyle that framed her heart-shaped face.

She was lovely, her thin figure sporting soft womanly curves in her light pink muslin dress. Though not a traditional beauty and taller than most men preferred and wittier than most men liked, Belle was engaged to marry a navy captain turned viscount in the next month.

“No, you didn’t,” Cecilia replied as they traded air kisses, “but I am surprised to see you. Shouldn’t you be planning your wedding?”

“I have been, and it’s so dreary,” Belle replied while removing her gloves and setting them aside. “If it were up to Marcus, we’d be wed in his tiny garden with papa and his pair of wolfhounds as our witnesses. I’m already arm deep into the planning, and with the stress it’s bringing me, I am this close to allowing Marcus to do as he sees fit.”

As happy as Cecilia was for her friend, a twinge in her heart reminded her that she wouldn’t be so fortunate. Her dance card had never been full, no morning calls and flowers had come, and no lord’s interests had been shown. So many days she’d watched others swirl around the ballroom while she sat alone, merging with the wallpaper behind her.

“Maybe you should let him have his way,” Cecilia replied. “Seems to me, it’s the most efficient way to handle matters.”

“Efficient yes,” Belle sighed, “But I hardly think I was wed beside an overgrown hedge with a bouquet of thistledown and sagging lilies is the tale I want to tell my children.”

Cecilia giggled. “I’m sure some roses would make the lilies brighten a little.”

“I’m sure they would, but for now, tell me what’s bothering you.” Belle sat primly.

Cecilia blinked. “Nothing is bothering me.”

“And the trees are made of purple chiffon, and the grass is white,” Belle replied, cocking a brow. “You know, I can always sense when you’re unhappy. Tell me why, or we shan’t get any of the cake cook sent over.”

“I shan’t have any at all,” Cecilia replied unhappily while pressing a hand to her middle. “I have to stick to my slimming plan.”

“For the fifteen thousandth time, you do not need such a thing,” Belle harumphed. “Times have changed, Cecilia. Not everyone needs to look like Miss Rafferty.”

The memory of their wisp-of-a-woman French madam from their finishing school made Cecilia laugh. “You do have point. But I was thinking somewhere in-between?”

Belle rolled her eyes. “Now, would you care to discuss what truly holds your attention?”

“I’ve met the newest Duke in London,” Cecilia said shortly.

Her friend’s thin brows lifted, and Belle leaned in. “And?”

“And I think he’s a pompous wiseacre,” Cecilia said, even though heat began to creep up her cheeks. “I made the mistake of taking a book with me—”

“The Castle of Otranto,” Belle said knowingly.

“And he began to judge me by it,” she huffed. “Saying that I prefer the theme of good triumphing evil instead of the true meaning, that sins follow one’s bloodline. Then he tells me if he were to look in my library, he would find tales of Arthur and Guinevere—”

“He would.”

“—Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* or *Merchant of Venice*—”

“Those too.”

“—Tales of Greek heroes such as Achilles or Perseus—”

“My God, he’s right.”

Cecilia was not sure if her friend was on her side or not. “—and Rome’s Aeneas or Hector.”

“It’s actually Lysander, but that’s splitting hairs,” Belle said. “I must say, Cecilia, if he could assume that much about you from one book, he must be a smart man.”

“Smart is one thing, being overbearing and assured one is right all the time is another, and I am sure he thinks he is,” Cecilia replied then grumbled, “The nodcock.”

“But was he right about the books?” Belle asked.

Yes.

“He doesn’t need to know that.” Cecilia replied. “Fortunately, that is and was the extent of our interactions. I shall not see him again.”

With how the Duke had rubbed her soul the wrong way, it was best to keep going and forget him.

“I heard he is the most handsome man in the *ton*,” Belle added. “Well, second handsome. My Marcus holds that title for me.”

Thinking about the Duke and his piercing amber stare, how his hair tended to flop over his left eye, and the rugged dark scruff on his cheek, it was hard for Cecilia to hold back the undue warm sensation in her middle.

“That’s up for debate,” Cecilia shrugged.

A soft knock on the door had Cecilia giving the maidservant permission to

enter. The young woman laid a kettle of tea, cups, and platters of fruit and bread before then with accompanying condiments before curtsying and leaving.

“I see,” Belle nodded sagely.

“You do?”

“Perfectly,” Belle spooned her milk in the sipped it, “I can see how dearly you’re trying to tell yourself that that he has not affected you and that out of all the men in London, the one person with the attributes you admire is the one person you feel will never look at you twice.”

“What?” Cecilia’s mouth dropped. “What on earth— Have you lost your senses? I do not—I cannot—”

“There you go, lying to yourself again,” Belle said candidly. “Is it that hard to admit you feel something for this man?”

“The only thing I feel for him is that he makes me uncomfortable,” Cecilia objected and fought the surge of another upsetting feeling that came from a flickering thought about Jeffrey. “He makes me feel as if I’m...cheesecloth.”

“It’s about time someone other than me sees through your defenses,” Belle hummed. “You’ve made them like a curtain wall around a Scottish castle.”

“There’s absolutely nothing wrong with that,” Cecilia replied.

“Not if you want someone to breach them,” Belle argued, her brows inching higher. “And from the number of romance novels you read, you surely do.”

Cecilia was sure her clothes were on fire or just possibly her face. “Since when have you done away with the fine art of subtlety?”

“Since Marcus,” Belle grinned shamelessly. “You know, I think with how rattled you are from meeting His Grace, I may pay him a visit myself.”

“No,” Cecilia almost toppled off the edge of the bed where she sat. “Don’t do that, please.”

“Why?” Belle cocked her head, “I won’t be sharing any of your secrets.”

“It’s not that.” Cecilia shook her head then went to sit beside her friend on the opposite chair. She made her tea then added, “I just don’t want anyone close to me in contact with him. He’s got this aura around him that—”

“Has sent you into a tizzy,” Belle replied. “Believe me, Cecilia, you might think I have lost a feather in my cap, but this is a good thing.”

“Distressing me is a good thing?”

“No,” Belle smiled. “You say distressed; I say spirited as if you finally awoke from your dour state... and that is a good thing.”

* * *

A week later, when Cecilia was comfortable that the irritating Duke had forgotten her and his offer, Cecilia left her house in the afternoon while her uncle had gone to his town office and her aunt had taken laudanum to sleep, tired from her constant visits to the Duke’s home to see Jeffrey.

Her uncle would not be home until late, and her aunt would sleep till morning light. Cecilia intended to take a quick run to her favorite bookstore and return home without either of them being any the wiser.

She was roaming the shelves in Temple of the Muses, clad in a non-descript blue walking dress, too plain for honorable lady of the *ton* wear, especially when the Season was about to begin, but she didn’t make much of it.

Instead of curled or coiffed, Cecilia’s hair hung in a simple braid over her shoulder. Soft blonde wisps haloed her face as she hunted for a third addition to the books in the crook of her arms... when a strange hush fell in the store.

Caught up in her search, she didn’t take much notice of the sudden quiet until the subtle smell of leather and citrus spice tingled her nose. An arm lifted above her and plucked a book—a copy of *Arabian Nights*— from its place.

“You’ve disobeyed me.” His voice was rough; his words curt.

Her heart thundered in her ears while she found her voice.

“I had no reason to obey you at all,” Cecilia replied to the Duke quietly while simply stunned that he was there. Even as her heart twisted, she had to keep up with the lie. “You do not know my cousin. He is only a merchant until he can take his father’s place in parliament.”

“No, my lady, you do not know your cousin. His *merchandise* is not what you believe it to be.” The Duke slanted her a steely eye of jade fire. “I find it hard to believe you can possibly think him to be a genteel man, not after...” His arched brow and pointed words made her stomach turn.

Stalled with horrified memories running through her mind, the Duke took advantage of her conflict and rested a hand on the small of her back.

“We’re leaving—*now*.”

“But—”

“May I take your books, my lady?” an unknown girl asked as they got to the end of the row.

Confused, Cecilia shot a look to the Duke, who looked utterly unflappable, then back to the waiting girl. “Y...you’ve hired a woman to pretend to be my maid?”

“Nonsense,” he dismissed. “I brought her with me for that reason. You’re a naughty girl, Lady Cecilia, leaving home without a companion, not once, not twice, but three times now. Now give her those books, and let us leave.”

The implications his words carried shocked her more than his actions. Did it mean he had planned this? How? Had he been watching her? Heavens above, this was not right.

Cecilia stood still, her breast trembling in mortification as the Duke settled her purchase. He didn’t seem to be aware, but every eye in the room was fixed on them, and she was sure but that evening, her name would be on everyone’s lips over supper.

The wallflower and the enigmatic duke.

She took the wrapped package and headed out with the Duke’s imposing presence mere feet away from her. A black, lacquered carriage stood waiting, and the Duke’s men came down to open the door.

“Get in,” he ordered while helping her inside. “We have a lot discuss.”

He closed the door behind them after the maid entered, and he stretched out a long leg. “You’re stubborn, aren’t you?”

“Have you been following me?” she asked. “Spying on me?”

“Yes,” the Duke replied without any pretense. “I’ve been waiting and watching for you to see sense and come to me about your cousin, but now, I’ve taken matters into my own hands. Whether you like it or not, you’ll be seeing what your cousin truly is.”

“My cousin is—”

“A reprobate,” the Duke interjected. “You know nothing about Jeffrey Mullens, who at seventeen was already known to be a self-proclaimed womanizer. He is a horrible, disreputable young man with tastes that will shock you.”

Clutching the package tight, Cecilia asked, “H—how do you know about my cousin? What do you know?”

He cocked an elbow on the window and propped up his head on his fist, his searching green gaze locked on hers. “I know a lot of things. I may be a duke, but I am still a businessman first, and to excel in business, one must know his surroundings. Before I took up residence at Seton Estate, I made sure to know who was around me, and your cousin stood out for all the *wrong* reasons.”

His insistence grew on Cecilia. “Like what? Please tell me. I need to know.”

“It’s better if you see it than if I say it,” he replied. “Then you can believe your eyes and not my words.”

Dread began to curdle in her stomach, and she gripped the wrapped books

until her hands grew numb and bloodless. “What are you going to show me, Your Grace?”

“The first piece of a very intricate puzzle,” he replied. “And call me Gilbert... Cecilia.”

CHAPTER 4



A veritable war waged itself in Gilbert's heart. Was it right to show Cecilia these things, or should he carry her home and let her live in ignorance? She was such a pure, untainted soul, not like the jaded person he'd become.

Still, it is better to know the devil in her midst. She had to know the danger lurking around the corner.

The carriage trundled to St. Giles, to the warehouse that was a median between London proper and the wharves at the Ilse of Dogs. Well, that was what it looked like. So close to London, but far enough away, it was easy for people from the heights of Mayfair and the slums of Whitechapel to mix and mingle.

All things considered, Mullens did have a stroke of genius when he made the warehouse here.

The carriage turned off to the minor street where the warehouse stood with its unassuming two floors of dark wood and stone, and Mullens and Co,

Merchandisers etched into a gently swaying sign on a pole.

The vehicle halted, but Gilbert then pulled out a bag and handed it to her. “Put these on.”

Inside was a red wig and a long, thick scarf. Cecilia looked at them aghast. “You want me to wear these?”

“They certainly would not look right on me, would they?” he asked, a brow high to his hairline. “Do you *want* anyone to recognize you?” he asked brashly then answered his question, “I think not. Make haste; we don’t have much time to linger. There are plenty of feminine whatnots in there—everything you need to disguise your identity and protect your reputation, I give you, my word.”

He watched as she fixed the red hair atop hers, used the small copper mirror to affix the powder and paint to her face and lips, and when she was done, wrapped the cloth around her shoulders.

She had transformed.

At the sight of her scarlet lips, smoky eyelids, and darkened lashes, his gut clenched tight, and when her eyes, lined with kohl, fluttered at him, temptation surged in his chest. She looked like a nymph, newly risen from the waters and ready to lure men to their peril.

His fingers grasped her chin, and gently, he twisted her head side-to-side.

“You’ll do. Now, let me show you what your esteemed cousin merchandizes.”

It was a dusky afternoon when they stepped foot into the shop, and the main floor was an open display of wooden crates and barrels and stack of boxes and burlap sacks. The air was filled with exotic spices, rum, sugar, and wine. Rounds of cheese were on tables, casks of butter on shelves, and sacks of wheat and coffee on tables.

It all looked like a plain shop and the keepers, in their frock coats, attended to the men and women lingering inside.

“There is nothing untoward here,” Cecilia whispered.

“Not everything that meets the eye is the truth,” Gilbert replied as he walked to a lone salesman, dotting something in a ledger.

The man looked up, and his gaze skittered over Cecilia, “May I help you, My Lord?”

“My companion and I would like to spend an evening with the Muses,” he said.

“Ah, certainly My Lord, to the left and straight down,” he replied while sliding a red key to Gilbert. “Please, enjoy. The games are underway already.”

“Enjoy the games?” Cecilia asked quietly as they took the direction the man gave them. “What does he mean by that?”

“You’ll see,” he promised.

At the end of the hallway, Gilbert slid the key into the lock and opened the doorway, revealing a spiral staircase down that had sconce lights on the walls. He held her hand as they descended the steps while his broad shoulders nearly brushed the walls, and he had to duck his head at points where the ceiling hung low.

“Watch your step,” Gilbert warned as he led the way. The flickering light threw her face into stark relief, flickering over the hollows of her brows and cheekbones.

“Why didn’t you tell him your name or mine?” she asked.

“Because in places like this, anonymity is your friend,” Gilbert replied.

As they got closer, they heard chatter, the clinking of glasses, and bursts of laughter. When they stepped into the room below, Gilbert heard Cecilia’s audible gasp. The room was long, longer than the upstairs portion was, with chandeliers dangling from the ceiling and windows letting in the cool evening air.

Carpet runners were on the ground as women and men lounged at the card tables, veritable fortunes of gems glinting at their necks and ears. Thin

tendrils of smoke rose from men smoking pipes and a predominant feel of lazy indulgence lay over the room.

“Oh, my word,” Cecilia whispered as women wearing thin, transparent gowns, nearly showing *all* their wares, served glasses of wine to anyone who called for it. “This is a—a—”

“Gambling den,” Gilbert replied. “Yes, it is. But as ill-repute as this place is, his other places are worse.”

“How can that be?” she asked, eyes wide and trembling. A light of understanding went on in her eyes, and her hand flew to her mouth. “You cannot say that he is—”

“A flesh peddler?” Gilbert asked coldly. “Why yes, he is.”

“No, I—I cannot believe that...” She turned to run, but Gilbert grabbed her arm and spun her back to him.

Without preamble, he had her up against the wall and slammed his palms on either side of her shoulders, trapping her. Gilbert could feel waves of tension rolling off his powerful frame, making her flush red, her lips part just so, and widening her pupils.

“You a such a naïve, little rabbit. I understand that your genteel parents have shielded you from the wicked vicissitudes of the world, and while I am sorry to rip the view from your eyes, the truth is the truth. Your cousin is a man of

many things, this gabbling den one of them. Why do you not think he would own whores when he tried to have his way with you that night?”

Her face shuttered down, and a gaunt sheen took to her skin. “You know I’m right, Cecilia. If you hadn’t picked up that rock and bashed him in the head, he would have left you there, destitute, robbed of your innocence, and a broken woman.

“His arrogance and conceit from being spoiled his whole life has made him think anything he wishes can and will be his. I am glad you showed him differently,” Gilbert’s tone dipped to a quiet whisper.

Cecilia looked as if she were ready to break apart, and Gilbert hated the sight. His hand slid up the back of her neck and pressed her face into his chest.

“He tried to *assault* you, Cecilia, and believe me, I will not be taking it lightly. The moment he wakes, it will be Newgate for him.”

When she looked up, her gaze skittered over his shoulder, and her eyes grew wide. He saw her panicked expression the instant before she raised herself on tiptoe, crushing her mouth to his.

Gilbert crowded her up against the wall, his big body shielding her from view, his mouth covering hers. The fission of control he had over his urge snapped in half, and he took her mouth with his: consuming, ravishing, all encompassing—the kiss of a practiced seducer. His lips moved over hers, demanding she open. And she did, allowing his tongue to sweep inside.

She hesitated for a heartbeat, but she opened for him and kissed him back. His tongue slipped past the seam of her lips, tangling with hers. Her movements were awkward and unskilled—*it's her first kiss*— but already, she was gaining confidence.

Cecilia cupped the back of his neck, her cool fingertips slipping into hairs at the back of his head before dipping beneath his cravat and stroking his burning skin.

Pulling away, he asked, “Care to tell me what that was about?”

“I—I saw one of Jeffrey’s friends,” she replied. “I didn’t want him to see me.”

“And kissing me was a good stratagem, I suppose?” he asked.

She notched her chin up. “It was all I could think of.”

Gilbert shook his head and rubbed his face. “Then I apologize that your first kiss was under such circumstances.”

“What makes you think it was my first kiss?” she asked defiantly, her cheeks flushing.

“Your reaction,” he replied. “Your kisses were hesitant, unsure, and very timid. You’ve not been kissed before. But I find that refreshing.”

Her eyes went wide with surprise. “Meaning...you want to kiss me again?”

Gilbert slanted a look to her. “If you grant me permission, yes.” This time, when she didn’t speak again, he turned and framed her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Despite your innocence, you have strong curiosity and passions lingering under the surface. You’re sweet, naïve, and brave but wary, so yes, I would like to kiss you again—under better circumstances though.”

Having his fill of the scene around them, Gilbert turned and nodded to the stairwell. “We’ve seen enough. It’s time to go.”

The night air was cool when they left the warehouse and boarded the carriage, still manned by the footmen and the maid. Gilbert closed the door after them, and with a quick rap on the roof, the carriage was off.

Cecilia gently removed the wig and hoped she would get home in time—and with enough secrecy—to remove the paint from her face. While looking down at the wig, she admitted, “You told me that I desire adventure...”

“I did,” he agreed. “And you told me I was wrong.”

“And I...” She sucked in a breath. “...freely admit that you were right. A part of me does want adventure and passion. I want to live without regrets and experience everything I’ve ever dreamed about and... more.”

Gilbert tilted his head, and that meddlesome lock fell over his eye. “And what do you dream about?”

* * *

Her lips slipped open, but the words would not leave them. How could she bare her heart and tell him, a man she hardly knew, the deepest desires held within it?

How could she tell him of romantic kisses under the moonlight or curling up with a book while the summer rain lashed the windows? What about picnics under a spreading elm tree or feeling the sand through her toes while treading a beach’s shoreline. What about operas and plays and poetry readings, luncheon and dinners by candlelight, and being held by warm arms at night?

Even thinking about them made her feel silly.

“To be... seen,” she said finally. “I wish to be seen.”

Gilbert didn’t say another word to her as the carriage ran through the streets to her home, but not once had his gaze moved from Cecilia’s person. It would rest heavy at times, as if she was a puzzle he was trying to put together or a complicated equation he was trying to solve.

When the vehicle came to the estate, Gilbert alighted first and then took her hand to help her down. The stars had already come out, and Cecilia was afraid she would be discovered if she lingered there any longer.

“I must go...” She tried to pull away, but his grip tightened, and she stopped. Her lips slipped open. “What is it?”

Instead of replying, he caged her chin with his free hand. In the flickering dimness, a wild, silver fire lit his jade eyes. Again, he said nothing, just stared before his grip vanished. “Do you want to know more about who Jeffrey is?”

Her attention shifted, and Cecilia felt unsure. Did she truly want to see the depths of Jeffrey’s business? Earlier that night had been somewhat of an eye-opener. “I don’t know.”

“Tell me when you do,” Gilbert said, while turning to the carriage, then he looked over his shoulder. “Good night, *Cecilia*.”

* * *

She wants to be seen.

The haunting words lingered with Gilbert as he headed home in the cool autumn night. The unofficial season was starting officially in six days and would run to Christmas, and while he had been invited to host a ball, Gilbert had politely declined. It was best to let the others carry on, so he could learn more about the *Le Bon Ton* and their pretentious ways.

Cecilia’s shuttered gaze stayed with him through his bath, his supper, and even went with him to his bed. Midnight chimed and found Gilbert still awake on his bed, hands tucked behind his head, staring at the shadows frolicking on the ceiling.

“She wants to be seen, to be understood...”

He had not been in the heights of society for too long, but even he knew that lords—and a lot of women too—tended to favor the thinner, willowy ladies instead of ones like Cecilia, like fools. If they could not see her beyond her body, all the better for him; he would appreciate her sinful curves alone.

Sleep would not come, so he slipped out of bed and donned a silk robe over his naked body and trimmed a lamp. The East Wing was empty; but for the servants who were so adept at being unseen and unheard, Gilbert might as well have been utterly alone.

He refused to ponder the reasons why his home felt so cold and empty, but the thoughts lingered anyhow. His predecessor had never married, had never begotten any children, or been partial to family—that was why the rooms didn’t carry the memory of laughter or life in them.

“I’ll change that,” he murmured while stepping into the music room.

Resting the lamp on the top of the pianoforte, he slid behind the keyboard and gazed over at the keys, numbering them. He always found some comfort in precision; this version had sixty-one keys.

“I’ll have to improvise,” he said while considering one of Mozart’s principal works. The first stanza of *Requiem* rang out in the empty room.

His movements were stilted at first, and then when his body remembered the

motions, his hands flew over the board. His late mother's favorite melodies came back to him as if they'd always been there, waiting to be played again.

I wonder if Cecilia knows this instrument. I think she does. She doesn't strike me as one who would let all the accomplishments these ladies are forced to master slip away.

His hands paused in play as the tumultuous chords felt wrong while thinking about her. Quickly, he changed the direction to a sweeter, softer tune—one light and melodic, more suited to Cecilia's persona.

A part of him was sorry for the shock he had given her earlier, but it couldn't be helped. She needed to know the depths of that jackanape's depravity.

The moment he'd seen Jeffrey attack Cecilia, right there on the edge of his property, would be scored on the forefront of his mind for a long time, and he was not sure what it would take to remove it.

The horrid memory made his throat tight and spurred his hands to move faster and with more urgency, letting the music crash over him. It felt as though all the turbulent emotions from the past decade were trying to come out of him all at once.

The stress from taking over his father's companies and making them better.

The midnights and early mornings.

The emotional parts of him he had locked away.

Then... Mullens and Cecilia.

When the man has grabbed her, Gilbert had sprung into action, running out of his home to stop the attack, but as he came closer and saw her slam that rock into Jeffrey's temple, he had slowed.

Frightened and white as sheet, the lady shoved the unconscious man off her, picked up her skirts, and ran in the opposite direction. Gilbert, out of her eyeshot, had waited for a while, and seeing that the man was not waking, he kicked the bloody rock into the underbrush then traipsed back to his home to call his footmen for help.

"I should have let him rot," Gilbert ground out as the memory ran through his mind. "Let him rot like the flea-bitten dog he is."

Pure horror had been stamped on Cecilia's face, the sort of fear that struck a chill into one's heart and turned warm red blood to ice. The girl had feared for her life, and it was only by chance that she had grabbed that rock and used it.

What if he had succeeded?

What if I had found her body there instead?

What would I have done if I'd been too late to save her?

His hands plunked on the keys, and a horrendous sound blasted through the air. Anger bubbled in his chest, in danger of boiling over, and Gilbert knew he was working himself up into a fine rage over a dozen what-ifs that would not go anywhere. Well, not that night anyway.

In the morning, he would stop at Gentleman Jackson's or the newer Apollo's Academy, and he hoped his friend and business partner, Allan Russel, Earl of Jacksonville, would be there too, ready for a round of boxing.

There was still no hope for sleep, so he left for his study, rested the lamp on the table, and found a ledger of the latest taxes to sort through. While rifling through his drawer, a card dropped, and he fetched it quickly, spinning it open to check what was inside.

"Dear Duke of Pembroke,

The Viscount of Rawlings and his family formally request the honor of your presence at a ball two weeks hence, thrown in honor of the return of their third son, Charles, safely from his voyage with the Royal Navy."

He checked the date.

The invitation had been sent twelve days ago, and he had not even sent back a word to the family. Maybe there was time to do so, and while he was not a betting man, he hedged his bet that Cecilia and her family would be there too.

“Maybe this is my chance to have my official debut...” he pondered. Reaching for a quill and card, he wrote out his reply and signed it with a flourish.

Setting it aside, he went back to the ledger, knowing it would be a good while until his mind was put at ease.

CHAPTER 5



“Call the Times,” a jovial, mischievous voice called the moment Gilbert set foot into Gentleman Jackson. Allan’s twinkling brown eyes met Gilberts. “The newest Duke has emerged from his hideaway.”

Unimpressed, Gilbert eyed his childhood friend from Eton and Cambridge. “And the jester from Jacksonville is dancing around already.”

The Earl laughed then approached Gilbert to punch his arm. “How are you, friend? Has that brilliant brain of yours figured out all the weaknesses in the ton so you can commandeer the Crown?”

“Is that what you lot think of me?” Gilbert’s brows lifted. “That I am a dictatorial depot in the making, bent on usurping the monarchy?”

“To be honest, mate, all of our year thought you would have done it years ago,” Allan laughed.

Dropping his bag in a corner, Gilbert flexed his hand. “Rest assured, I have

no intention of being King. I came here for a match, and I am glad my assumptions were right on you being here. Now, will we have a go?"

"Sure," Allan nodded while taking a stance, and Gilbert took a stance a few feet from him.

The two circled each other and traded light punches. Gilbert was enjoying himself, taking pleasure in his own fitness and strength. They kept this blow light, but the technique was still steady on. When Allan rounded him, Gilbert neatly blocked and deflected the blow, getting in a good punch to his friend's jaw.

"You'll have to be quicker about that," Allan taunted, grinning as he blocked another hit.

Gilbert did need to mention that they both knew he could be as fast as lightning from the village lads he'd grown up roughhousing with, practicing their pugilistic skills simply for fun. His hobby had grown when he had attended Eton and Cambridge.

What would Cecilia say if she saw me now?

A fist whistled by his ear, and Gilbert's eyes flew open as Allan's palm smacked him hard on one cheek. In a heartbeat, Gilbert managed to dodge the other fist before ducking down and slapping his friend on his middle.

"Fifteen to nine," Gilbert called out as he hopped away and began circling

Allan. “Are you getting soft? Are those cushioned seats and coddled eggs in the morning affecting your strength?”

“I despise coddled eggs,” Allan laughed. “What do you take me for? A woman at nuncheon?”

“I take you for a man about to be forced to a few of them,” Gilbert replied while pressing the heel of his hand to his smarting chin. “You are to marry soon.”

“Speaking of marrying...” Allan struck out, and Gilbert feinted to his left as he came in blow on his right forcing Levi to leap away. “...when are you going to find a bride?”

“If that is another trick into an outing with your sister?” Gilbert ducked a blow then delivered one to his friend’s middle. “You needn’t bother.”

Then the two were fighting in earnest, striking, feinting, blocking the other’s punches and shrugging the blows off as if they were nothing, and they went on fighting. At one point, the two were locked in boxing clinch while Gilbert tried to find a way to Allan’s rhythm.

Shifting his foot, Gilbert planted a hand on Allan’s chest and shoved him back onto the edge of the chalk-marked ring. Panting, Gilbert flexed his smarting shoulder.

“What grievances do you have with my sister?” Allan teased. “Is it that she is

not afraid to tell you her thoughts right to your face?”

“It’s one of the concerns, yes,” Gilbert replied while flexing his knuckles.

“You know I’m right though.” Allan reached into his pack and threw a waterskin to Gilbert who snatched it out of the air. “As the newly appointed Duke, an unmarried one at that, with more streams of income than just the ducal tenant tithes, who is handsome, and with no scandals to his name, the matrons and mamas will be hounding you to death.”

“I’m aware,” Gilbert replied while finding a bench and sitting. Tilting the waterskin to his mouth, he drank half.

“And *are* you ready to marry?” Allan asked while he took a place near Gilbert, stretched out his legs, and slumped.

“No.” Gilbert shook his head. “My priority, my good man, is to settle into the ducal role for a good while before I even consider marrying. I’m not ready to pay the pied piper yet.”

I am perfectly fine with waiting a year or two. Let me settle into the role first without sending me off to the marriage market.

Allan cocked a brow while mopping his face with a rag. “Yet...so, you *are* willing to walk around with a target on your back for weeks.”

Liberally rolling his eyes, Gilbert drawled, “Yes, Russell, that is exactly what I plan on doing. I plan on making myself the dandy of London, run my rounds through the ladies in London, and escape through half closed windows when their husbands arrive.”

“Very good,” Allan laughed. “The title Rakehell of London will look good on you.”

Flinging the waterskin at his friend, Gilbert shook his head. “You, sir, are incorrigible.”

“That’s what they ladies will be calling you when you do charm yourself into their beds,” Allan grinned. “Also, please don’t call on me for your second when you have a duel on Rotten Row. My fiancée will never forgive you.”

“I was amiss,” Gilbert reached for a rag himself. “You’re not a jester; you’re a jackanapes.”

Doubling over with laughter, Allan grabbed his side. “I am so honored. Now, do you want a third round?”

* * *

Holding the hand of the footman from the Brook family, Cecilia gently descended from the carriage. The Rawling mansion just outside of Mayfair was a stately new townhouse in London with all the modern conveniences to show they were on board with the industrial advancements.

She smoothed the skirts of her white net gown down with a gloved hand and eyed the large doors above as if they were an opening to a chasm.

Forsake all hope, ye who enter here.

As she handed her invitation to the footman, Cecilia felt deep in her head this was an act of futility. Just like the many balls before this one, no matter the small intimate setting or the number of lords or her delightful dress—this one was a white gown over a pale blush-colored slip that cinched at the waist and left her shoulders bare—she was bound to be looked over.

“Welcome, Lady Cecilia,” the footman bowed.

With a practiced smile, she entered the main room where an ornate bronze chandelier bathed the foyer in a luxurious glow. The twin wings of the mahogany stairwell seemed to float up toward the paneled ceiling, and everything around her was gilt gold and shimmering marble.

Lord and ladies were lingering there, the women boasted family wealth at their ears and necks, and the glittering gems and willowy frames made her feel even more ill at ease. Yet she could not have rejected the invitation.

Now, prepare for an evening sitting on the sidelines.

“Lady Cecilia,” the hostess, Lady Rawlings, approached her. The Viscountess wore a stylish emerald shot silk gown that brought out the unique green of her eyes. “Welcome, dear. I am glad to see you.”

“Thank you, Lady Rawlings,” Cecilia replied as they shared air-kisses. “Thank you for having me.”

“We’re delighted, dear,” the lady replied. “On behalf of my dear Charles, we’re glad you’re here with us, celebrating his return home. Those Navy boys, my word, they have it very hard.”

“I know,” Cecilia replied. “My dearest friend is engaged to a retired Commander of the HMS Dauntless.”

“The Dauntless? Good heavens, I believe Charles served on that ship before he was taken on by the Seafarer. I shall ask him. In the meantime, dear, please enjoy your night.”

With an affable smile, Cecilia went to the refreshment tables and poured a glass of water.

“There you are!” Belle said so suddenly that Cecilia nearly spilled her drink. She turned to see her friend approaching her, her willowy figure draped in a stylish gown of claret taffeta. “I’ve been looking for you all night.”

Resting the glass down before she broke it, Cecilia replied, “All night? I’ve just arrived.”

“Matters not,” Belle waved her hand imperiously. “Wonderful gown, by the

way. So, I did some digging into the newest Duke in London and—”

“No,” Cecilia sighed. “Hadn’t I warned you about that?”

“—I found that His Grace is the single son of Mister and Missus Wilson, his parents are gentry, but he earned a tuition waiver to Cambridge because of his *exceptional* mind,” Belle dipped her tone conspiratorially, her eyes dancing with excitement.

“I heard he can remember anything he reads, and that he once taught a full calculus class at Cambridge when his professor was out sick. One of his schoolmates vividly remembered him saying, *numbers are like my little companions. Some will upset me, and others will fall in line, and the—*”

“...others will be discarded for they have no use,” Gilbert’s smooth, baritone voice had Cecilia’s head snapping up.

He was standing behind Belle, clad in a dark, classic, dinner suit; his elegant midnight jacket clung lovingly to his broad shoulders and lean torso whilst his trousers skimmed his narrow hips and muscular legs. His cravat was a study in precision, and the dark ruby pin in the middle drew her gaze with its bloody shine.

His hair a trifle long for correctness standards, and the thick brown waves gleamed beneath the chandelier’s light and added an erotic touch to his classic bone structure, the strong slant of his cheekbones, and the chiseled jut of his jaw.

Gleaming silvery-jade eyes landed on her while he spoke to Belle. “Perhaps you need to ask my professors about the time I bested one of them in a battle of Latin.”

A healthy flush took Belle’s face as she turned and curtsied. “Your Grace.”

He inclined his head, “Lady Anabelle.”

“Belle?” A rough voice had them all turning as Marcus, her fiancé, approached, his tailored suit stunning enough to hide the fake leg under his trousers. The wooden cane he walked with had a silver lion’s head and tapped on the carpet as he came closer. “Sweetheart, I... Oh. I’m interrupting, my apologies.”

“It’s not needed, Commander.” Gilbert inclined his head. “There was not much of a discussion.”

“Thank you, but *Commander* is not needed anymore. I am simply Marcus Willington now. And you are—”

Cecilia stepped in, “Lord Willington, may I present His Grace, the Duke of Pembroke.”

Two sets of eyes darted to her while ruddiness stained the high ridges of Marcus’s cheekbones at knowing he’d spoken so casually to a duke.

“I—I apologize, Your Grace—” The former navy officer meant to bow, but Gilbert stopped him.

“Please, you needn’t bow,” Gilbert lifted a hand then added, “I am pleased to meet you as well, but may I have a moment of Lady Cecilia’s time?”

This time more than two set of eyes spun to her, and Cecilia’s felt her face redden. The fans were flickering out, and ladies had begun to gawp and whisper behind their fluttering fans; a few even turned their noses into the air.

She had endured it all before by ignoring them; she would not give in to their constant censure and hide at home afraid to venture out or bury herself away in the countryside. She was heading for the spinsterhood anyhow.

“Why in heaven’s name is he speaking to *her*,” one of the matrons lounging in the chaise said, casting a scathing glare at Cecilia. “Surely there are more eligible debutantes for his approval.”

A hollowness carved itself inside Cecille’s stomach. She knew Gilbert had heard the cutting comment as well, but he did not seem to care. “Are you well?”

She clasped her hands before him. “I’ve been better, Your Grace.”

“Have you?” he asked, shifting to rest on his heels while a lock of his hair fell of his eyes.

“Is what my friend said is true?” she asked, diverting the conversation. “Do you have that sort of mind?”

“Yes,” he tugged at his sleeve. “It’s both a blessing and a curse. My mind is like a steel trap, my lady; it holds onto everything I need and things I do not. There are times I cannot sleep because of it and times I must take drastic measures to suppress those thoughts.”

“That sounds horrible,” Cecilia replied.

“It fades eventually, sinking into the murk in the back of my mind,” Gilbert clarified. “But that night will forever be marked onto it until he is brought to justice.”

Her head snapped to the side, and Gilbert reached out as if to turn her chin back to him but stopped halfway. He pivoted a little as a bell tingled, summoning the dancers to the dance floor. Turning, he inclined his head in bow then held his hand out. “May I have this dance?”

Stunned, Cecilia nearly looked over her shoulder to see if he was speaking to someone behind her, but his hand never wavered. Cecilia could feel dozens of eyes piercing the side of her neck and her nape while her hand tentatively rested on his, and he spun her onto the floor.

CHAPTER 6



Cecilia looked like a vision.

Her blonde hair was arranged in ringlets that enhanced her angelic features, and the bodice of her gown was glimmering with the subtle sheen of seed pearls embroidered in a swirling vine pattern.

The waistline followed the current trend, nipping in at her waist and flaring subtly at her hips. It took all his control not to cup her cheek and toy with the curl at her temple.

“Do you waltz often?” he asked while drawing her into his arms.

“Yes,” Cecilia replied, her cheeks still a rosy red. “It’s my favorite dance, and I dance to it as often as possible because lords are lining around the room to have a dance with me.”

Amused, Gilbert shook his head, “You know better than lying, little rabbit.”

“I am not,” she said, her face flaming.

“You have a tell-tale sign when you’re lying. A pretty blush that rises from here...” He brushed his index finger on the bare skin just above the neckline of her gown up just to a spot under her ear—the tenderest spot on her body. “...all the way up here.”

She shivered. “I have few dance partners, Your Grace. I have been overlooked enough that there were times I felt like I had become a part of the wallpaper behind me.”

“A crime,” he murmured while twirling them effortlessly around the room. “I feel insulted for you.”

Around them, other couples whirled laughing and twirling, soaking up the decadence of the ballroom, but Cecilia was mesmerized by his eyes. They were sharp and piercing but days ago when he had pressed on the wall and bemoaned what Jeffrey had done to her—or tried to. Now, they had become wells of emotion and compassion.

“Your eyes...” she whispered as he twirled them around, and she kept up, light on her feet.

“What about them?”

“They never miss anything,” she explained. “Do they?”

His hand slipped from the middle of her shoulder blades to the middle of her back and pressed her a bit closer, closer than traditionally appropriate because her breasts were almost touching his chest.

“I’d like to think so,” Gilbert’s voice dropped to low and husky. “Attention to detail is one of my strengths. But...” They spun, and she twirled as fluidly and as elegantly as if she were dancing upon a cloud. “...does the way I am looking at you now make you feel... *seen*?”

Her lips parted—Gilbert idly considered if he liked them better softly pinked or rouge red—but then closed. Opened a second time and closed again. Finally, she spoke, “Why do I have the constant feeling that you already know what I am going to say before I do it?”

A burst of laughter left him and drew consternating eyes as it went against ballroom etiquette. “Because I usually do. I am excellent at chess, remember?”

“And business, I would wager,” Cecilia replied.

“You would wager rightly,” Gilbert replied as the music grew to its crescendo. “A sharp businessman is always ten steps ahead of the competition. One must know the marketplace, the ebb and flow of trends, and deal your hand in intelligence as well as goods. Secrets, I have found, are the best merchandise.”

“Secrets such as Jeffrey’s... *trading*,” she suggested, unable to find another word for her duplicitous cousin’s business.

“Yes,” he replied. “But that one is the tip of colossal ventures he had not only built but funded with funds from his gambling den. There are more. He is a reprobate, Cecilia, and when he regains consciousness, he will pay for it.”

He shifted their hands, so their fingers entwined, and it was as intimate as a couple could get upon a dance floor without actually kissing. And they were so in harmony that it was not long before a small number of people watched them from the sidelines.

“Everyone is looking at us,” she whispered.

“Let them look,” he said.

“You’ve made a statement tonight, and it will all about town tomorrow,” she warned. “Possibly in the papers.”

“I’ll buy ten,” he teased, spinning her in a graceful arc.

“Because you’ve already gambled on this, haven’t you?” she asked.

“Yes,” Gilbert replied, unafraid to admit it. “I have.”

He swung her, and she twirled, and the heat of his hands on her lower back burned through her gown to where he felt her shifting muscles. Cecilia was at a loss. “Why? Do you want to start a scandal?”

“And what if I do?” he asked.

* * *

To that—Cecilia had no reply and was silent as the violins trembled and faded away. The rest of society faded as they stared in each other’s gazes, never once breaking that connection that had lived through the duration of the dance.

The waves of murmurs that rose through the room surpassed the crowd’s earlier response when Gilbert had claimed her for his first dance. Even those already on the dance floor ogled shamelessly.

Gilbert dipped into a bow, and his lips curved into his satisfied smile as he led her to the maid chaperone and vanished. The stares became intrusive and scalding, cutting under her skin like a surgeon’s scalpel.

Everywhere she looked, eyes skittered away from hers, and oddly, even while being the center of attention, Cecilia could not feel more alone. Being under such scrutiny jarred her nerves in the most horrendous way possible, and she actively sought an escape.

Belle suddenly appeared and pressed a glass of punch into her hand. “Keep smiling, Cecilia,” she said under her breath. “If these priggish hypocrites see you upset, you will never have any peace.”

When she glanced at Belle, her friend was smiling widely behind her fan. Forcing a smile, Cecilia sipped the drink, holding back a grimace at the brandy and dark rum. She had not made a habit of drinking it any ball—but for this upset, it was bracing.

“Do you know where His Grace has gone?” Cecilia asked.

Belle’s left eye narrowed, and the questioning look made Cecilia squirm. “No,” Belle shook her head. “I don’t know where he has gone. Perhaps the billiards room where some of the other men usually retire at times?”

The billiards room was as sacred as a lord’s study or Whites’ Gentleman Club on Bond Street—she had little chance of entering either.

“Lady Cecilia,” a light voice said behind her, and she turned to see two ladies she faintly remembered from the season early in the year, “how good to see you.”

Lavinia Tulloch was that year’s esteemed diamond-of-the-first-water— and for good reason. Her platinum hair was a curtain down her back, her misty green gown bared her slender, creamy shoulders and clung to her high, rounded breasts. Cecilia was flummoxed as to why the lady who had never spoken to her—or even once looked Cecilia’s way— was now approaching her.

“Lady Lavinia,” Cecilia replied calmly. “It’s wonderful to see you as well. What a lovely gown you have. I have never seen anything so beautiful.”

“This old thing?” Lavinia laughed, showing her perfectly white, even teeth before she did a little pirouette, and the skirts flared. “I thought I would give it a final whirl before bestowing it upon my maid.”

Still unsure as to what this odd conversation about, Cecilia asked, “How are you faring this evening?”

“Oh, yes.” Lavinia fluttered her eyes as a memory had come back to her. “I was remiss in the past months, and I failed to invite you to many of my parties and luncheons. Please accept my apologies.”

“I do,” Cecilia replied. “Thank you.”

When a passing footman crossed them, Lavinia smoothly took a glass of champagne off his tray. “That is a delectable dress of yours as well. It wouldn’t have been made by Madam Serrurier, was it?”

“It is one of her creations, yes,” Cecilia affirmed while thinking of her modiste. “You know her work?”

“She had created a few day gowns for me,” Lavinia replied. “Gorgeous, gorgeous things; my word, they are so sublime. T’is a king’s ransom, but only the best for the best of us, isn’t that right?”

“I agree,” Cecilia replied. “I am sorry to ask if this pulls bad emotions, but

weren't you engaged a month ago?"

"He was not the right fit," Lavinia replied with a disparaging sigh. "Some men complain that we women wear too many cosmetics, but it is ironic how some men wear masks heavier than ours. Lord Garret was a jester and a jackanape in an overly righteous sheep's clothing."

"I'm sorry," she said.

Waving a slender hand, Lavinia dismissed the notion. "Your sympathy is wasted," she replied, but then her smile turned sly. "You, however, do not seem to be as ill-fated as I am. Half the room is green with envy of you dancing with the most eligible bachelor of London. If it wouldn't trouble you, I would love an introduction."

The burgeoning hope Cecilia felt collapsed and died. Ah, there it was, the fake cordiality just so the most sought-after lady in London would meet the most desirous bachelor in London. And she was to play the messenger maid.

To hide her grimace, Cecilia took a sip of her drink.

Will it ever end?

* * *

After that first dance, Gilbert knew he had to get away for a moment and found refuge on an empty balcony, a few halls away from the ballroom. He slid a finger under his collar, easing the grip of his fashionable cravat.

A cool breeze was weaving itself around the Mayfair houses and carried the faint scent of autumn rain. His head tilted to the sky and leaned on the balcony railing, and for the first time that evening, he breathed freely.

“Cecilia...”

Her eyes fascinated him.

To be truthful, everything about her drew him, and there were times he felt as if she could see to his core and see the thoughts running through his mind. If only she knew how hard it had been to stop himself from cupping her face and kissing her on the floor.

Not even when he was a green lad, when the intimacy with a woman had been new and a woman's body had been the most sought-after ideal, had he felt such overwhelming desire. It almost made him feel ashamed.

Earlier, anger had sparked in his chest when he'd heard the disrespectful matron insulting Cecilia, but what had hurt him more was that Cecilia didn't seem to notice. If she had, maybe it mattered nothing to her as she had probably heard it before.

He didn't know which one was worse.

Gilbert let out a frustrating breath while his fist came down on the balustrade

hard enough that pain ricocheted up his arm.

She deserves more.

The orchestra suddenly grew in volume, the music telling him it was a Minuet, and he wondered if Cecilia was dancing again. A sudden twist in his chest told him he was in danger of getting jealous.

“Control, man,” he reminded himself. “Get it together. This is not the time nor the place.”

Spinning on his heel, he left to reenter the ball, and from the doorway, he spotted Cecilia speaking to the most spoiled lady in London, the platinum beauty Lady Lavinia. She was the lady every lord in Town had their heart set on and were willing to let themselves be manipulated like a marionette just to be in her company.

Fools.

As far as his facts finders had found, she had snubbed Cecilia for years, so how was it that she was now suddenly speaking to her?

Isn't it plain? She wants to meet the newest Duke in Town after her father rejected her last offer of marriage. Apparently, owning half of the ports in Ireland and Scotland wasn't enough for her father.

Nearing, he bowed, “Lady Cecilia, my apologies.”

She looked flustered and damn if that pink hue on her cheeks stirred his lions. “Your Grace. N-no need to apologize. Er, may I present Lady Lavinia Tulloch?”

“Pleased to meet you,” Gilbert replied with a tilted head. “But if you will excuse me, I’ve come to claim Lady Cecilia for another dance.”

Her lips parted as shock registered on her face. He gently held out his hand while she seemed frozen in place. He gave her an unreadable look.

“Are you going to leave my hand hanging?” he asked tenderly.

“I...” Her hand lifted, but she didn’t place it on his. Her gaze flew to Lady Lavinia. “...I’m sure Lady Lavinia would like a dance with you.”

“Mayhap later on,” Gilbert replied. “Please.”

Her eyes were filled with terrible vulnerability as she lowered her gaze to the hand and placed her hand into his. He spun her onto the floor for the second waltz for the night, and the hand she placed atop his shoulders trembled.

“Why—why did you reject her?” she asked quietly.

“I have no interest in her,” he replied bluntly. “If you want to know, her family is never satisfied with any suitor that shows her attention. Her last suitor was a Viscount and a merchant who owns ports in Scotland and Ireland. I know him because he is a man like me, but her father smelled the stink of *shop* and threw him out.”

“How do you know all this?” Cecilia asked, dumbfounded.

“I told you,” Gilbret replied spinning them, “nothing passes my attention.”

Noting his stare, her lids fluttered, and she flushed prettily; a delicate pink hue spread across her cheeks. “I cherish being so close to you again. Your lips are a hairsbreadth away from mine.”

To her credit, Cecilia didn’t falter in her steps, even with the blunt admission that would have sent any lady stumbling over their feet—or fainting.

“Don’t worry, kitten,” he said in her ear. “I don’t plan on scandalizing you here.”

Her next words were ones he would have never imagined coming out of her lips and so boldly too. Cecilia notched her chin up and met his eyes. “Then where do you plan do so?”

CHAPTER 7



“*M*y, my.” Gilbert’s eyes had darkened, and his voice was low, rough, and husky. “You surprise me, Cecilia.”

Her heart was on the verge of beating itself through her breast, and the bravery she felt was just as strange to her as the words that had left her lips.

“Are you sure I won’t ravish you?”

“You are not a rakehell,” Cecilia replied. “I don’t think *ravishing a lady* is a part your makeup.”

“How sure are you about that?” he asked with a quick turn. “You never know what is on a man’s mind.”

“That’s true,” she replied. “No one can know the depth of the other, but for you, I beg to differ. You are no scoundrel because you truly despise them. Your honor would slay you on the spot if you descended into such despicableness. You fight for what is right, even if it is not a noble, gallant

cause.”

“You paint me as a knight in shining armor,” Gilbert said while a melee of emotions flickered across his face. “Is that how you think of me, Cecilia?”

“Should I think of you any other way?” she asked, tilting her head. “You are dead set on showing me how much of a bounder my cousin is, and you are set on making him pay for his crime when he wakes up...without knowing a thing about me. I will give it that you made some educated guesses, but they are not the whole scope of who I am.”

His head tilted, and his lids dropped to half-mast. “And I do want to know you...all of you.”

The air between then turned to something else, tighter, heated and filled with expectations. A sizzling seductive energy vibrated between them while Gilbert’s hand felt like a searing brand through the layers of her dress.

She could only wonder what *all of you* meant to him.

“What do you want to know?” she asked. “I am an open book. I do not have the charm or the latitude to play coy games. Ask me anything, and I will answer.”

“As refreshing as your candor is,” Gilbert said, spinning again, “I think I will prefer to find out myself without you telling me in words.”

Her thin brows furrowed. “Meaning... you want to find out by actions?”

“They speak more than words,” he replied as the dance began to close. Dipping his mouth to her ear, she felt his lips brush the arch. “You know this house, do you not?”

At her nod, he added, “When the dance is finished, go upstairs and find the music room.”

Her stomach gave a little flip as various ideas ran through her head—and a certain scene in a certain gothic book sent her blood singing. She pulled away to curtsy, and he bowed before he took her hand and pressed it to his lips. His eyes *burned* with promise.

“Get a drink before you go,” he advised—warned—her before rubbing the back of her hand. “See you soon?”

* * *

The music room was a large space with walls of washed ivory, well she assumed that was the color as the moonlight that spilled in from the mullioned windows was not that good of a light source. She spun in place, unsure of what to expect.

Her lips smacked a little as the strong taste of punch rested heavily on her tongue. She had not had anything strong enough to fox her, but her head felt lighter than usual.

Approaching the pianoforte, she lifted the lid and skimmed her fingertips over the ivories. Dotting out a little tune, she pulled her hand away when Gilbert said, "I suspected you could play."

"I had few friends when I was younger and when I went to finishing school," Cecilia replied while circling the instrument. "I spent more time in the music room and the library than anywhere else."

"Really?" he hummed. "Nothing else?"

"I'd take a carriage to the seaside and go romping at midnight in the fields beyond the boarding hours, dressed up in rags, and lurk in dark alleys in the town below the school. Not to mention that time I made three turns through the pleasure gardens seeking gossip fodder," Cecilia said dryly. "Oh, I forgot, I joined a circus one time as well. I had a whopping time balancing a teapot and crockery on my head."

Gilbert's lips twitched, and laughter gleamed in his eyes. "Oh, I have no doubt you did." He laid a hand on the instrument as well and trailed his touch as he slowly circled it. "But I was thinking in the lines of afternoon tea and slivers of cake."

"Cake?" she laughed, disbelieving. "I've learned to stay away from cake a long time ago."

He came to stand by her, brows lowering. A shard of moonlight hit his face just so and rendered his jewel-toned eyes into pools of silver. The hard cast of shadows made him into a mercenary. "Why?"

Cecilia was not sure if he was jesting or not. “Because...well, is it not noticeable?” Her next words emerged as mere whispers. “I am overly plump. Not the sort of woman fully accepted in London these days. A century ago, perhaps, but now...”

Instead of replying, Gilbert rested his hands on her hips and slid them up to circle her waist. “Do you see what is happening here?” he asked.

Stunned by their close proximity, Cecilia shook her head.

“My fingers are touching,” he explained. “I can circle your waist without a problem. You, my dear, are not *overly plump*. Buxom, yes, which in my book is a good thing. I like my ladies well-endowed.”

Fire raced up her spine. They were so close—all she had to do was tilt her head up and inch between the sliver of space between them and kiss him...if she were ever to be so bold.

Canting his head, Gilbert brushed his nose across hers. “What are you thinking about?” his words ghosted over her lips.

“How...close you are,” she replied.

“Aye, I am,” he replied as his hands slid down. “But I want to be closer.”

Without preamble, he lifted her atop the instrument and kissed her with such a desperate, hungry passion. She knew she should stop this, should push him away to deny him—deny them both what was clearly apparent.

Instead, Cecilia threaded her fingers through the thick strands of his hair and melded her mouth to his, kissing him with wild passion. Her arms twined around his neck, holding him close, her nails biting into his scalp as he took ownership of her mouth.

From this angle, her hips were now at the same height, and she could kiss him without strain. Without breaking the kiss, Gilbert slid a hand over the curve of her hips, over the dip in her waist, coming to rest so close to her bodice that the edge of his fingers brushed against the curve of her breasts.

Her nipples budded under her bodice while the pad of his thumb stroked the side of her breast, and her skin tightened in anticipation, yearning for a different touch...but didn't know where she needed it.

With the other hand, he cupped her cheek, peppering soft kisses over her lips then down to her collar. Rollicking in sensation, Cecilia arched her neck, shivering at the emotions spiraling through her.

“Should I stop?” Gilbert murmured.

“No,” she replied. “Just kiss me again.”

Obediently, he laid his mouth on her, and each delicious, drugging kiss

caused an instant reaction of subsequent sparks from her mouth to her core. Her pulse raced for him, her body begged for another touch, and her woman's place was throbbing, aching, and shockingly wet.

“Are you still sure I'm not a rake?” he asked against her collarbone before trailing his lips up again, grazing her cheek with his lips, and pressing a light kiss on her lips. “If you could read my mind now, I'd surely scandalize you.”

“Mama told me to stay away from rakes who would take liberties,” she teased, still trying to recapture her breath. “But you are no rake.”

“Glad you think so.” He pulled away. “We need to return to the others...” His thumb ghosted over her bottom lip. “...but I'm not done with you.”

Cecilia's eyes fluttered. “Should I ask what you mean by that, or is ignorance bliss in this case?”

A low, husky laugh left him as he lifted her to the floor. “You could say that. Now hurry along, your friend is waiting just outside the door.”

“Belle?” Cecilia blinked, and he nodded.

Heading to the door, she stopped and looked over her shoulder, “Gilbert... if I said I would like to see more of Jeffrey's establishments, would you take me there?”

“Are you sure you can stomach what you will see?” he asked quietly.

“I’ll find a way to escape from my chaperone,” Cecilia replied before slipping out of the room.

As soon as she stepped into the hallway, Belle grabbed her arm and steered her down the hall to another room that opened up as a small salon. She stumbled a little as she had to jog to keep up with Belle.

“Belle—”

“Oh, my goodness,” Belle whisper-shouted, her eyes wide and flickering between Cecilia’s. “Are you two... courting?”

“No...?” Cecilia said, her tone heavy with indecision. “I don’t think —”

Slender hands slapped over Belle’s face as she squealed. “I—I don’t know if I could be any happier. All this time, I had hoped some lord would see the true person you are, but now you have captured the attention from the best one of them all.”

Cecilia’s eyes dropped to her lap. “I don’t think I have captured his attention. I think—”

“Oh posh,” Belle waved her away. “Every lady in the room is gnashing their teeth knowing that he has only danced with you—*twice* for that matter—and

never even gifted another lady with a mere glance. You are surly special to him.”

Guilt and shame began eating Cecilia from the inside. As much as she wanted to tell her friend about the true incident that had made her and Gilbert come together, the words would not pass her lips.

She gave her friend a weak smile, “I suppose so. But we aren’t fully courting, and while I love the attention, it will stay with me for the rest of my life. The truth is, Gil—His Grace and I met because he rescued my cousin the other day. You know that I am staying with my aunt while my family is away, do you not?”

“Jeffrey was foxed out of his mind coming home one night, took a wrong path, slipped, and hit his head on a rock. Gilbert found him and took him into his house and is having his people nurse Jeffrey back to health.”

Pressing her hand to her breast, Belle shook her head, “Oh dear.”

“He’s alive but still unconscious,” Cecilia added.

Belle pressed her back to a wall and rubbed her chest. “I am so sorry to hear that, but I’m comforted to know he is alive. Hopefully, he will wake up soon and be as dandy as he was before.”

“We can only hope.” The corner of Cecilia’s lips was ticking up.

* * *

With a glass of champagne at his lips, Gilbert watched as Cecilia and Belle entered the ballroom, arm in arm. No one batted an eyelash to the two bosom friends who might have just gone for a walk around the garden for all they knew.

“Your Grace?” a strange lord called out behind him, and Gilbert turned to see a young man, possibly five or so years younger than his thirty, dark haired, and wearing spectacles. “Pardon my boldness, but may I have a moment of your time?”

Gilbert quirked a brow to the man. “And you are?”

“Solomon Henry, Baron Dalton, Your Grace,” he replied. “I apologize for the brash interruption. I am aware I should have waited for an introduction from someone else, but I found it imperative to speak to you. I’m told you have a few companies in the shipping and trade sector. I would like to invest with you, Your Grace.”

Amused and impressed by the young Lord’s bravery to introduce himself, Gilbert nodded, “Are you seeking wealth building or simply to get a foot in the door?”

“Both, your Grace,” Solomon replied while nudging up his spectacles. “My barony is small, but the methods we have used to keep ourselves afloat are dwindling. I have men who are willing and able to be seafarers or work in warehouses and the docks.”

“So, not only money but human capital too.” Gilbert swirled his drink.

“Yes, Your Grace. I believe every man must have an equal chance to earn his way,” Solomon replied. “It’s only fair, is it not?”

Gilbert prided himself on being a good judge of character, and this man was fully earnest; not a lick of guile was in his words or bodily actions. Despite the wariness he constantly felt about people trying to curry favor with him, he found an instant liking to his man.

“Come to Seton Estate tomorrow evening,” Gilbert directed him. “We’ll talk.”

The man’s eyes widened, and his shoulders slumped as if a massive load had been taken off them. Reaching out a hand, Solomon nodded, “Thank you, Your Grace. If you could only know how much this means to me.”

After a firm shake, Gilbert turned his attention back to the party and briefly considered leaving early—after all, he had gotten what he had gone there for. With this small but influential group of people seeing his preference for Cecilia, word would spread all through Town.

It would not stop the dozens of invites he would get every day or the not-so-subtle entreaties by mamas that their darling little girl would make a perfect duchess. He was certain in what he had told Allan—he had no wish to marry. All he needed was some breathing space to focus on the dukedom.

Perhaps with time the denizens of London would realize that and stop pestering him.

Highly unlikely but anything is worth a try.

“Pardon me,” the hostess said while nearing. “Supper is about to be served, Your Grace. Shall I reserve a seat for you?”

“Actually, I am on my way out,” Gilbert said evenly. “But I do thank you for a lovely evening. If it is not too much trouble, would you point me in the direction of your garden?”

The odd question took the Viscountess off balance, but she replied, “Through the east doors and follow the stone path. You’ll find it.”

With a nod and a thank you, he followed her directions and found a garden full of late blooming roses. Satisfied, he plucked one off the stem and retraced his steps to the ballroom.

Grinning smugly, he caught Cecilia’s hand as she was about to enter the dining room and spun her. True to form, she spun smoothly in place and when her heels hit the ground again, he handed her the rose.

“If I were mistaken, I’d think you were a ballerina,” he murmured, not caring about the dozens of eyes on them.

“I tried once,” she replied holding the rose. “It didn’t take.”

Laughing, he said, “I’m leaving, but please, enjoy the rest of the night. Promise me something.”

“What would that be?”

“That you’ll dance again tonight, but no waltzes,” he replied. “Your waltzes belong to me.”

With a bow, he headed to the door and sent for his carriage while he claimed his coat and hat. That last gesture would give the whole Ton a flutter, and he grinned at hearing the rumors that would follow.

“I just hope I haven’t made it too dire for Cecilia,” he murmured to the air while stepping into the chilly midnight air.

When the vehicle came around, he boarded it, and as he traveled home, his mind shifted to the man laying on a bed in his house. If Cecilia wanted to see all of whom Jeffrey truly was, he would surely show her, but was she really ready to see the next place?

“She’ll likely faint,” he noted. “Luckily, I have no problem catching her. But how darkened will her soul be after it?”

CHAPTER 8



The moment Cecilia opened her eyes at midday the following day, her gaze instantly landed on the single rose, resting in a vase of water on her nightstand.

Sitting up, she plucked it out and touched the still fresh petals. Last night, during supper, she had rested the flower on the side of her plate, knowing it would draw jealous gazes. She studiously ignored Lady Lavinia's pursed lips and soured expression while cutting into her tender veal.

After supper, her dance card had overflowed, and by her fourth dance with a lord whose name she could barely remember, Cecilia began to blame Gilbert.

Mischievous man.

"Cecilia, dear?" Aunt Letitia knocked before entering with a stack of papers in hand. "Good morning. I hope you slept well. You have a number of letters this morning. My goodness, the ball last night must have been something else."

If only she knew.

“Thank you, Aunt,” Cecilia took the letters, noting her aunt’s outfit. “Are you heading out somewhere, Aunt?”

“Yes, dear,” Letitia touched the brooch on her royal blue day gown. “Your uncle and I are going to visit Jeffrey at His Grace’s house, and after that, I shall be having tea with Lady Georgina, my old friend. You shall be all right on your own, shall you?”

“Of course, Aunt,” Cecilia replied. “Have a safe trip.”

“Enjoy your day, dear,” her aunt replied as she left the room.

Shifting the mail to the side, Cecilia went to wash up and donned her wrapper before returning to the letters. They were from the lords she had danced with, but obeying Gilbert’s request, she had only danced the Minuet, Quadrille, and the Scottish Reel.

Privately—she would never admit this to anyone, even under the threat of torture—she did feel that the waltz, such an intimate dance, belonged to Gilbert.

He does make me feel seen.

Sorting the letters, she came on a single card that on the back of it bore

Gilbert's house seal. "Be ready by two." Below it was a slashing signature, but she could read his name.

This had to be about seeing Jeffrey's other establishments, and she felt a tremor run through her. Last night, he had not given her any clue as to what that business would be, but he had left her with the impression it was more horrifying than the gambling den.

"He said Jeffrey was a flesh peddler..." she whispered. "Is he taking me to a...bawdy house?"

The memory of the women from the gambling den, dressed in slips of nothing, made her shiver in repulsion. She sat the letters aside and called for tea before looking at the clock. It was just past noon; she would have no time to dress and reply to the letters before Gilbert came for her.

What does he have in store for me this time?

* * *

Clad in another costume—a robe this time, the red wig in place, and cosmetics on her face, she gazed out at rookeries of Spitalfields as the carriage came to a—butcher shop?

Most of the buildings looked the same with plain brick fronts and hanging signs, and this one blended in perfectly. Links of sausage dangled from behind the window as did a slab of beef, newly butchered flank cuts, loins, and ribs.

What on earth could be sinister inside a butchery?

Gilbert, clad in full black with a cap on top of his head instead of a top hat, descended first and helped her out soon after. Briefly, she wondered what her maid back at her aunt's home would be thinking when she saw the note Cecilia had left. *'Going to Belle's house. Will be back later on.'*

"Watch your step," Gilbert said, pointing to the saws, hooks, and cleavers dangling, ominously, at throat height from a black-lacquered carcass beam. "It's dangerous here."

The cloying smell of burning pennyroyal over the scent of blood and pig's lard, had her pressing a handkerchief to her nose—Gilbert's handkerchief, doused in ethanol, that he had stuffed into her hands moment before the carriage had stopped.

Is there nothing this man cannot predict?

They passed a man slamming a cleaver into a pig's hide and another man handing up another link of sausages, but neither gave them a look as they passed. They came to another set of stairs leading downward, and Cecilia was beginning to notice a pattern. Subterfuge.

Jeffrey made sure all his illegal businesses were nestled in legal ones where no one would look deeper.

They came to the mouth of a tunnel, and Gilbert took a burning lamp of a

hook, and holding her hand, he entered the dark mouth of the tunnel. The dank air was suffocating and smelled like packed earth and oddly...spices.

As they got closer to whatever this place was, Cecilia heard shouting, mostly men voices, and smelled oil and leather. As she entered the room, the stench of sweat, unwashed bodies, greasy meat, and stale ale, amplified by heat, made her nauseated.

A yell rose up from the crowd, and they entered—to see a man flying over the ropes of a boxing ring.

Horrified, Cecilia had no trouble clamping her hand over her mouth as it was already there. The man, bloodied and black-and-blue all over, landed on the sidelines where a crude chalk marked the boxing ring outside of the rope. The man looked battered, his nose was broken, his lips were busted and wet with blood and spit, and his jaw looked out of joint.

“Get up, ye scabby dog,” the man in the rink shouted in a thick Scottish burr. “Are ye a man or a mouse? Git up, ye monger.”

The man, laying half-dead on the ground, shook his head like a wet puppy and struggled to get to his feet. Even with a leg dragging after him, he reentered the ring and hugged the ropes for balance.

From the corner of her eye, Cecilia saw people slapping coins and paper bills into a man’s hand while another, near him, scribbled something in book.

“Wagers,” she observed, pulling her hand away. “They are taking wagers on this fight.”

“They are,” Gilbert said. “And those who bet against the champion are bound to lose. Do you see those wraps around his hands? They are soaked with Plaster of Paris—a concoction known for years and used by sculptors in years gone by. You see, when it comes into contact with moisture—and any fighter will sweat during the course of a fight—it will harden and so give very hard blows to his opponent.”

As he spoke, the opponent slung out a fist, accurately timing the champion’s duck, and his second blow came up with a murderous punch, spinning the other man’s face around. In retaliation, the larger man sent a fist into the other’s belly with every ounce of his weight behind it.

It was the force of a boulder crashing into frail wood, maiming muscle and cracking bone, and a scream of pure agony sounded from the battered man, but the crowd—the crowd cheered with glee, and Cecilia felt sick to her stomach when the man toppled and didn’t move again.

“The house wins again,” Gilbert murmured. “From what I know, the profits are split in fourths: the house champion, the men who manage the fights, the people who pay the bets, and lastly, a sum goes to Mullens.”

She grabbed his arm, “I would like to leave now, please.”

Gilbert turned to her, blocking her sight of the pugilistic arena, and he slid his hand up her arm. “I think you must know it gets worse here. There are times

the matches are to the death. He gets paid more for those.”

Cecilia grabbed her stomach as bitter bile raced up her throat. A dead body? Multiple dead bodies? Jeffrey had allowed murder to happen here. The air changed and she felt completely repulsed. She pressed her hand to her mouth, and Jeffrey rushed her back through the tunnel, through the butchery then they burst outdoors and ran around a corner.

Sickening, Cecilia held on tight while her stomach revolted, and the contents overflowed. Gilbert held her secure until she finished, and he gently wiped her mouth with the fallen handkerchief.

“I think it is time to go,” he said while steering her towards the waiting carriage, and he helped her inside. With the door clocked behind them, he sighed and handed her a bottle of smelling salts, “I did not mean to make you ill, Cecilia, but you must know the sort of man your cousin is.”

She opened the bottle, took a sniff, and felt relief wash through her body. “I am getting to know this.”

In the falling dusk, all the buildings took on a menacing air, and Cecilia sagged into the seat, happy to be leaving the rookeries. “I suppose the next place Jeffrey owns is a flesh house?”

“It is, and you would never guess where it is,” Gilbert replied. “It’s on Regent Street—a building with no sign but only a number. The men are given service only after an existing member has given them an invitation. The women there are French courtesans, not any of gaudy whores who work in the alleys or on

the docks. The men pay through the nose to have an *hour* with women there.”

Cecilia felt her stomach fall, and she hated asking the next question. “Were you one of them?”

“And what if I was?” he questioned.

“I’d...” she paused, “I’d hate to think less of you, but such things are vile.”

Leaning forward, Gilbert held her gaze before he took her hands and caged them between his larger palms. “Cecilia, I am no innocent, but I am truly repulsed by how women are used and exploited in that way. Flesh houses are the representation of how despicable our society is, and while I know it is one of the oldest professions, I still detest the very notion. I have not been there, and I will never participate in such acts. You have my word.”

She gave him a long searching look, but he never faltered, and while his eyes were mostly unreadable and sphinxlike, this time she saw truth in them.

The connection between us is hard to decipher, yet I feel more comfortable around him than anyone else.

When he turned his cool gaze at her and held his eyes on her longer than anyone would find appropriate, she felt pressed to ask, “Gilbert...what do you want with me? I’m not special, and while I thank you for opening my eyes to things that I would never know otherwise...I feel mismatched with you.”

“Mis...matched, how?” he asked.

Her cheeks pinked, “Well you are a duke, and I am, for all purposes, the reject of London. I’ve prepared myself for a life of spinsterhood, but you... you make me feel something I do not want to give myself permission to feel.”

“And what is that?”

“Hope,” she whispered, looking at her lap. Her eyes flickered up, and she cleared her throat, “I feel hope of... something impossible with you.”

“Kitten, I am a normal man, a tradesman and a merchant first and a duke second,” Gilbert replied. “Just because I have a high title does not mean I am partial to high born ladies. I’m not seeking a princess from another country to be my bride or companion. As a matter of fact, I am not seeking either a bride or a companion at all.

“If you want the truth, I feel as much as an outsider to the *ton* as you are. I was not born with this title, Cecilia; it was given to me. I am a makeshift noble, someone taken from the outside, fitted with fine-fitting clothes, and sent to parliament,” he concluded.

Reeling from the shocking statement, Cecilia wondered if what she was hearing was right. “Are you telling me you... you don’t feel as if you belong here?”

“I don’t,” he replied plainly. “A merchant turned into a duke—what an aberration, but I do not spin a Cheltenham tragedy about it. You needn’t feel mismatched, Cecilia. We’re more alike than you know.”

CHAPTER 9



Cecilia had her heels under her, kneeling in her aunt's garden, and plucking up weeds around the rosebush. Her aunt had gardeners, but she loved to tend to the plants as well— it was calming.

The sun was warm enough for her to sweat, but she wasn't expecting anyone to come and see her misty with sweat and grass stains on her skirts.

She brushed the line of her braid from down her back to over her shoulder just as she plucked the hat off and used it to fan her flushed face.

"I should have expected you to be one to get your dainty hands dirty," Gilbert's amused tone had her head whipping to the walkway behind her.

The Duke wore beige riding breeches tucked into tall riding hessians and a shimmering bronze waistcoat that sat on his trim waist, and he was jacketless. Rubies shimmered at his necktie and his cufflinks.

“You...” she blinked. “You’re here?”

“I am.” His lips twitched, amused. “Are roses your favorite flower?”

Turning back to the bush, Cecilia shook her head, “No. I prefer lilies.”

Unbelievably, he crouched and brushed a finger over the petals. “The pure flower.”

“The unassuming flower,” she corrected him while snipping a rouge stem. “It’s like the sun’s sister, the moon. It might not be as celebrated as the rose, but it is just as beautiful in its own way.”

His mouth suddenly formed a hard line as his hand shot up to touch her braid, causing her to tilt her head back. “Cecilia, you do know you are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she said, hesitant at the fairly common compliment.

“No,” he growled. “Not like that.”

“No?” Cecilia gave him a sad smile. “I’m *not* beautiful then?”

He laughed softly. “You’re going to twist my words, aren’t you? You are beautiful, Cecilia. Doubt it if you will, but you are. You are beautiful,

articulate, and full of passion.”

“Passion?” she scoffed before turning back to the bush. “I think you have mistaken me for someone else.”

“No, I mean it,” he replied. “You have feminine passion; it is simply unplumbed. I felt it when we kissed. It’s like a seed needing sunlight and water to nurture it.”

Her gaze fluttered between his, quick and fleeting like a hummingbird. “You say that as if...as if it is some sort of language.”

“It is,” he replied. “Passion is a language, but it does not have words; it speaks by actions. Tell me, when we kissed, did you not feel fire racing through your veins, thick and heated like liquid fire.”

His eyes were hooded and hot. “Your lips awakened the slumbering fire in my belly which made me kiss you harder, deeper.”

Her hand began to shake, and she rested the shears on her lap before they tumbled from her grip. A strangled sound escaped her, and she felt her cheeks flushed with arousal.

“It’s a cycle, Cecilia,” he added. “From you to me and back to you.”

She dared to meet his eyes. “Until?”

Gilbert's fingertips brushed her cheek. "You know the answer to that question in theory."

"As well as you do in practice," she replied, cheekily.

His head tilted, and a sly look transformed his face. "Sassy little one, aren't you?"

Managing to pick her shears again, Cecilia asked, "Why have you come, Gilbert?"

Getting to his feet, he brushed his thighs off even though he had not touched a speck or dirt. "I would like you to accompany me to Lady Buckley's masquerade ball in two days. I have been invited, and I wouldn't dream of attending without you."

"Would you help me up?" she asked, reaching out for him.

He grasped her and gently lifted her to her feet, and Cecilia brushed her dress off before taking the bouquet of roses she had plucked from the plant with her. "Please, come inside."

Stepping through the doorway, Cecilia set the flowers in a vase in the main drawing room then called the family butler to attend to Gilbert. "I'll return as soon as I can."

“Why?”

She pinked. “I cannot possibly be a proper host clad in a dress with grass stains and a drab frock. My etiquette teachers from finishing school would roll in their graves. One might spontaneously appear on my doorstep and smack my knuckles with a ruler.”

“That’s certainly better than my Eton masters with a strap,” Gilbert said. “I’ll wait on you.”

As she curtsied and turned away, Cecilia spotted his jacket thrown over the back of a chair as she headed to the stairs. In her room, she did a quick ablution and changed into a rich blue day frock.

“My lady?” Her aunt’s lady maid, Fannie, stepped into the room. “Do you need any assistance?”

“Yes, please,” Cecilia replied as she undid her braid. “I’d be grateful.”

* * *

With his boots firmly crossed over the other, Gilbert swirled the glass of fine scotch the butler had poured for him and waited. The drink was smooth and gave a burn to his chest, but it paled in comparison to when Cecilia reentered the room.

Her hair was a shining crown, her skin pearl-like in its luminosity, and her figure petite and curvy perfection in her gown of rich blue crepe. It flummoxed him how she couldn't see how breathtakingly gorgeous she was.

Perhaps with enough time, I will show it to her.

There was no point in denying it; he wanted her. Hell, he found himself thinking about the curve of her breasts and the shape of her sinfully rounded behind at the most inconvenient times.

She might be untested, but she was no milk-fed chit who relied on him to take the lead. He could only imagine what Cecilia would become when he finally pulled the confidence he knew she had from its hiding place.

Setting his glass on an end table, he stood and extended his hand to her while noting the maid who had slipped inside the room behind her. "You're a vision."

"Thank you," she replied then rang for tea and requested ginger biscuits if the cook had any. "So, a masquerade?"

"Yes," he nodded, reaching for his glass, then dryly added, "The stark opportunity the prim and proper lord and ladies of London have to break from the tethers or decorum and use their anonymity to let their base desires spring free."

Pressing her lips tight to seal away the mirth glimmering in her eyes, Cecilia

asked, “I would ask if you were jaded, but I do not believe that tone says it is so.”

“Will you come then?” he asked.

“I’d love to,” she replied then paused as another maidservant came in with the kettle of tea and a platter of cookies. After she was served, Cecilia asked, “How is Jeffrey faring?”

“He is still unconscious,” Gilbert replied, “but he is alive. The wound on his temple is healing well with no infection, and his color is returning.”

Her gaze dropped to the delicate cup in her hand. “I—I want to see another place Jeffrey had run to...but I don’t think I have the constitution to see... prostitutes.”

“I wouldn’t subject you to those places at all,” he stated strongly. “If they turn my stomach, I can only imagine what you would do inside one of them. I do have another place of his that is much easier for you to handle.”

“And where is that?” Cecilia asked.

“Somewhere you would never expect,” he replied enigmatically, extending a leg while rubbing the back of his neck. “I’d rather focus on this upcoming ball if you wouldn’t mind.” Cocking his head, Gilbert added, “Have you seen the papers lately?”

“I’ve made it a point to avoid them,” Cecilia replied. “I am sure the deplorable gossip rags have made a dozen false and hurtful rumors about me by now. Even worse, they might be smearing your name as well.”

“They can paint me with any brush they wish,” Gilbert shrugged. “Matters not to me. You see, you give power to what you fear or what you hold superior to yourself. I have no desire to be a part of the *ton*, despite being placed in it. They have not earned my respect, so they have no power over me. Even if they did, my skin is impenetrable. Rumors will not make me run or hide.”

Cecilia felt his words grab her heart with a tight fist, and overwhelmed, she had to set her cup to the side. Wasn’t that the truth of it all? She had given her power to the ladies at finishing schools, the same cohorts that had been her fellow debutantes.

With half of society already biased against her physique, she’d had no shield against social weapons: the hidden—and sometime direct—taunts, gossip, and circles that closed whenever she neared.

Her weak attempts at getting accepted had only led to further exclusion; eventually, she had given up altogether and grown satisfied with having just Belle as her friend.

“I did that,” she confessed. “I gave my power to people who didn’t deserve it. I let their opinions of me determine my actions.”

He leaned forward, his eyes locking with hers. “And I want to show you how

to never let them control you again.”

Mystified, she asked, “How.”

“By breaking you away from them all,” he grinned. “My way. Don’t worry, I won’t have you eschewing the *beau monde*’s rules to live by. But you can bend the rules enough that they will see you are not made to be ruled or cowed.”

“How?”

“By stopping being a shrinking violet,” he advised. “Do not slump your shoulders, do not drop your gaze, and do not try to merge with the wallpaper behind you.”

“It’s too brazen to stare,” she replied.

“I didn’t say that.” He corrected her. “You know what, practice with me. Hold your chin up—”

She did, but he shook his head. “Higher. Not high enough where your nose is in the air, but high enough to make others understand you have a mind of your own and will not be bullied. Mind you there is a thin line between being strongheaded and being a bird-brained chit with thistle and cotton stands between your ears.”

Cecilia inched her chin up a little more, but Gilbert shook his head, reached over, and took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, nudging it up more. “There you go.”

His touch was so casual and gentle, yet heat seared under her skin. Surrounded by his heat and his addictive scent, her pulse fluttered with longing.

Maybe her breath had hitched, maybe her face had flamed, or it could be that the man was simply intuitive as his eyes darkened, and his lid fell half-mast. The approving flicker in his eyes made her heart thump faster.

“This is going to help?” she asked, breathlessly.

“It’s a start.” He pulled away.

* * *

As Gilbert’s carriage trundled to the destination where the masquerade was to be, Cecilia’s mouth dropped. She knew this place—she was never to step foot in this place.

Stunned, she turned to Gilbert. “You forgot to mention this ball is at the notorious Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens.”

“Don’t fret,” he replied. “The patron of this ball is my friend Allan, and he has given me his word that nothing untoward will be in fifty feet of this place. There are enough guards and chaperones that even the Empress of

France would feel comfortable here.”

Cecilia barely held back from reminding him that Joséphine Bonaparte was firmly dead.

“And what about the fifty-first foot?” Cecilia asked quickly.

A wicked grin slashed his face. “Well, I’d venture to say not to wander that far.” He reached for a satchel near him and produced an artfully crafted demi mask of pure white porcelain with gold inlays, pearl beading, and feathers that matched her swan costume perfectly.

Cecilia feared to touch it. “It must worth a fortune.”

“It’s an heirloom,” he replied. “My benefactor, my uncle who handed the dukedom to me, was a man of... eclectic tastes and collected a large number of strange items.”

When he produced a matching mask, as black as the feathered domino gracing his shoulders, Gilbert affixed his cloak to the black feathered mask and was instantly transformed into an ominous raven.

“A dove and a raven,” she said while affixing the mask that matched her feathered cape. “We shall surely be in the papers by the morrow.”

“I shan’t mind,” he shrugged. “At the least, the ton now knows to stop

shunting people to the side and preemptively deciding that they are unmarriageable.”

In the dusk, lamps with colored shades lit their way to the rotunda where the ball was being held, and Cecilia held unto his arm tighter than necessary.

“There, there.” Gilbert patted her gloved hand while his mouth dipped, and his lips skimmed the sensitive shell of her ear. “No blackguard is going to jump from the hushes and demand your hand over your reticule.”

“I’m afraid they might ask for something worse,” she replied. “Vauxhall is known for... deviants. I’m told the gardens are filled with all manner of men, especially after dark.”

“And you believe they can get past me that easily?” Gilbert pressed a hand to his heart. “I am decidedly insulted, my lady.”

They arrived in the middle of a quadrille, and beneath the blazing brilliance of hundreds of candles, the slow dance seemed to go on forever.

While they had to wait, the scenery was enrapturing; the colorful lords and ladies’ costumes snared her attention; goldfish and swans, Grecian goddesses, and Roman heroes.

The guests were twirling around the dance floor, garbed in a variety of costumes, their jewels ranging from priceless diamonds to artfully cut pieces of glass. Some men eschewed costumes entirely, clad in only dark ball suits

and black demi-masks.

“Would you like a drink?” Gilbert asked, extending his arm. “I think I shall need one.”

Carefully, they skirted the dance floor and arrived at the champagne fountain, and Gilbert dipped a flute under the flowing stream and handed her the glass. “Please.”

She sipped the light drink and turned to face the gathering. “Did you say your friend is here? Can you find him in this sea of characters?”

“Easily,” Gilbert replied, nodding a man who was wearing the red and white shroud of a Templar Knight who was lingering at the sideline. “He thinks quite much of himself, and beside him, dressed as Medusa, is his sister, Lady Emily Russel.”

“What an... interesting costume,” Cecilia remarked. “Choosing such a gorgon? Is that how they see her?”

“Very much so,” Gilbert replied, over the rim of his glass. “But I only see her as opinionated and outspoken which is not liked by many men. A spinster by choice, she has dedicated herself to study of Botany.”

“That’s admirable,” Cecilia nodded. “One of the few sciences women are allowed to freely study.”

The strains of a waltz began, and Gilbert rested his glass. “Would you do me the honor?” After she took his hand, and he swept them out to the floor; his cape flaring a bit, he drew her closer. “Remember our agreement, kitten.”

She tipped her chin up, making contact with his golden eyes, and nodded. His arms felt warm and strong wrapped around her as they waltzed across the floor, and Cecilia found it something of a dream.

Months ago, she had resigned herself to a life of loneliness, but now here she was in the arms of the most handsome gentleman in the room, their costumes drawing every eye in the room as they waltzed around the dance floor.

She inhaled deeply as he twirled her around and acutely felt the heat of his hand in the middle of shoulder blades as he held her firmly but gently in the intimate dance.

Desperate for a diversion from his penetrating gaze, she said. “I believe I just saw Lady Ophelia. Jeffrey used to court her, you know, but she’s been missing for the past five months.”

Gilbert twirled her, and when she came back into his hold he said, “There is a reason for that.”

“And what would that be?” Cecilia asked.

CHAPTER 10



Gilbert's eyes took on a somber note. "I should likely refrain from telling you any of this."

"Meaning?" she asked before something cold sunk into her stomach. "He... he didn't compromise her, did he?"

"No," the Duke shook his head. "Which surprised me too. But he had left her in a position where she could have been, but her new husband-to-be stepped in at the right time. They had left the opera, and Mullens had steered the carriage to a very dangerous part of Whitechapel to pay a bet. Hooligans came upon her when she was alone, but Mr. Owens stepped in with his firearm."

"Mr. Owens," Cecilia mused. "Is he gentry or—"

"He's a Bow Street Runner," Gilbert replied. "No ties to the gentry or the upper ten thousand. He's a nice gentleman, and after carrying her home that night, he went to see her the next day. Emotions stepped in, but her family had a problem with him courting her because of the gulf in their status."

Eventually, they gave in, and she is to marry him this winter.”

“But,” she paused, “wouldn’t that have been a massive scandal? How is it that my aunt or uncle do not know?”

“I think that is something you should ask your cousin when he is behind bars at Newgate,” Gilbert replied as the music started to crescendo, and he took them in a series of dizzying spins that had them turning heads.

When it ended, Cecilia lost her footing and tripped right on his chest, but he held her fast. Head tilting, he asked. “Was it the champagne or are you overwhelmed?”

She had to laugh while pulling away. “Do you not know how potent and compelling you are?”

* * *

As she spoke, his gaze was drawn to her mouth. The satin mask molded to her delicate bone structure, and framed by the edge of her disguise, her lips were rosy and plump.

Her dove costume accentuated her angelic nature with the white, feather-trimmed cape as did her cherubic, pale blonde ringlets. Cecilia stared at him with eyes of pure, fragile beauty.

“You might want to clear the dance floor, Your Grace,” Allan’s amused voice said from behind him. “Otherwise, by dawn, they will be asking to see a

marriage license.”

Gilbert blinked and belatedly realized the floor was empty, but the stares were coming from mama’s, matrons, and miffed ladies on the sidelines.

“Lady Cecilia, may I introduce the Earl of Jacksonville, my friend and boxing partner, Allan Russel,” Gilbert said after bowing his head. “And his sister, Lady Emily, the botanist.”

“Why, thank you for the noble introduction,” Lady Emily stepped forward. “I, however, am very interested in meeting the lady the papers have been a-flutter about,” she said, her lip turning up in disdain at seeing Cecilia.

Instantly, Cecilia wanted to shrink away; he could see it in her eyes, and anger burned brightly in his chest. “Now I understand why you chose that costume, my lady.” Gilbert’s tone was cold and scathing. “You’ve truly made an example of the character.”

Lady Emily’s face went red in mortification at Gilbert’s rebuke. “That—that is not how I—”

Unamused, he turned to her and gave her a steely eye. “Then what did you mean?”

Allan’s sister’s face had transformed into a bonfire in the middle of midnight. Her lips parted, but no words came out and her mouth closed. She tried again—but Gilbert had enough. “Would you like a breath of fresh air, my lady?”

The atmosphere in here has gone stale.”

A horrified gasp came from the lady a few feet from them while Cecilia looked more mortified for Lady Emily as a Dowager scowled. “How is it possible that she has charmed the Duke of Pembroke to defend her so?”

Cecilia blushed heatedly but lifted her chin, refusing to show that their words pricked her heart, and it gave Gilbert some balm to his grated soul—at least she was listening to his advice. Not caring about the whispers, he guided her back to find her maid.

“Perhaps,” Cecilia said quietly, “you may need the air more than I do?”

While still feeling the burn of righteous indignation for her, Gilbert nodded, “You’re right. Please, excuse me.”

Stepping from the rotunda, he began to stride through the dark walk, the wide path sparsely lit by lamps every fifteen feet or so the more he delved into the labyrinth. The laughter of the guests and strains of the orchestra floating from the ballroom faded into quiet, and for once, with the bracing cold, Gilbert found a moment to think.

It’s not a simple sexual desire I feel for Cecilia. I am protective over her in a way I’ve never felt over any woman. I’m afraid for her. I physically want to hurt anyone who degrades her.

When he had first seen her, fighting for her life, he felt admiration but now,

the emotion had changed. It disgusted him how the *ton* acted with her, how it seemed like the sweetest souls got harangued, and the meanest ones, who would stab another in the back then go on to have tea, were the ones treated with tender touches.

If only I could give you the life you truly deserve, Cecilia.

Maybe there is a way, a traitorous thought sprung from the back of his mind, but Gilbert brushed it away with the same finesse of removing spider-silk from his clothes.

Rounding a corner, he halted. Bathed in a lantern's glow, a couple was rutting against a hedge. In the flickering shadows, the woman's exposed breasts jiggled over her unlaced bodice, her skirts bunched up on her back. A man stood behind her, fixed between her legs, his trousers down, and he was pumping in and out of her.

They took no notice of him, and unfazed by the vulgarity—it was *Vauxhall*—he turned and retraced his steps intent on finding Cecilia and speaking with her, only to see her and another lord with her on the dance floor.

A twisted and barbed lance of pure jealousy ran through him at the sight—and Gilbert realized she had added another tier to his unfounded possessiveness of her.

He did not like seeing her in the arms of another—even while acutely aware he had no right to be that way.

“Scowl a little harder,” Allan said affably from his side. “It might make the lord she is dancing with combust from the pressure of your glower.”

“I am not glaring,” Gilbert replied.

“And the grass is purple,” the Earl said then sobered. “About earlier, I apologize on my sisters’ behalf. She does get wrapped up in gossip and nonsense more than its worth.”

“It is still not an excuse to look down on another because of the spiteful opinions of others,” he replied. “Your sister is of age and with good training. She should know better.”

“She does,” Allan stepped forward, his usually lighthearted face now grave. “But you *know* why she behaves as she does such things when it comes to you, Pembroke. Your ennui towards her—”

“Is for a reason,” Gilbert bit out. “What she desires of me—”

“Is the same thing you will *need* from her,” Allan replied. “Or someone in her position. You know you will have to choose a young lady of rank and fortune with respectable connections to be your duchess. The whole of London will be looking on at your choice, and they will not take lightly to you choosing the wallflower of all wallflowers to grace that title.”

Gilbert cocked a sardonic brow. “And since when do I give a damn about the opinion of London?”

Allan was getting aggravated, and the tight knot in his brows showed it. “It’s not seemly for you to marry below you.”

“I hope you see the irony in that argument,” Gilbert replied. “You are an earl, and she is the daughter of an earl. Do I need to send you a copy of Debrett’s?”

“I mean in station of societal presence,” Allan replied through gritted teeth. “Lady Cecilia as has all the grace of a moth, not the butterfly you need.”

“You are faulty again,” Gilbert replied. “I, too, am recluse, so why would I need a socialite to partner with me? Besides, lamps have more use to me than bloody flowers.”

“Tell me,” Allan dropped his tone, “what is it about this one that has gotten you so wrapped up in arms? You decimated my sister with one word, and from the gossip going around, you do not take kindly to anyone who says a bad word about Lady Cecilia. What has she done to enchant you so?”

“*That*—” Gilbert gave Allan a steely eye. “—is none of your affair.”

“And to my second question, why not my sister?” Allan asked, undaunted.

Stopping in his stride, Gilbert considered telling him the truth—that Emily did not evoke a fraction of what he felt for Cecilia, nor was he willing to

succumb to Emily's unrequited love for him because of pressure or because it was the sensible reason. He was sure she would make a perfect wife— just not for him.

“This is not the time nor the place for such a conversation,” he replied, striding off to the staircase.

Moving to a balustrade over the ballroom, he rested his elbows on the cold copper and stared down. It seemed his absence had opened the floodgate for other lords to approach Cecilia. He stayed still as she danced three times; all her partners were aristocrats.

She was surrounded by a herd of young bucks this evening, but no one of note and no one he imagined would charm her or take his place in her mind. The idea of Cecilia throwing herself on some lordling or frivolous fop had his blood pounding in his ears.

Her current partner was Marquess Harrington, an older gentleman with silver shot through his hair who still had impeccable form. Once upon a time, he was the Bachelor of the Season.

The orchestra suddenly grew in volume but that did not stop him from hearing soft footsteps rounding the corner. Lady Lavinia Tulloch was a vision in her white sleeveless robe that fell in a straight column, a golden sash around her waist and gold jewelry around her wrists.

The commanding pieces though were the jeweled necklace around her neck and shoulder, all diamond and emeralds, and the gold serpentine crown on

her head. With her eyes lined in kohl and rose-tinted lips, she was the lost queen brought back to life.

“Oh,” she stopped short. “My apologies.”

She was holding a book as if she had left the ball to roam the library. Very strange of her. Shouldn't she be in the middle of the ball, holding court on the gilded pedestal the ladies had placed her on?

He inclined his head. “Lady Lavinia.”

She gestured to the tiny table and chair behind him, “I was just looking for some privacy, but you were here first.” Although her tone was apologetic, her eyes were bright with slyness. “I don't want to intrude.”

His skeptic gaze dropped to the book, “You are absconding the ball...to read?”

“It gets a bit... monotonous at times,” she inclined her delicate chin to the ballroom below. “Surely you know how it can be, so there are times I like to disengage from the melee and have a moment to myself.”

It sounded so false that Gilbert had to ask again. “With a book.”

“Many others do not know I love to read,” she replied with a small shrug. Oh, that he did know—she did love to read, but her favorite subject matter was

not poetry, it was men and their weaknesses. “I must ask, is it that you’re tiring of the evening or is the company not to your liking?”

Starting with the mind games so early, is it? I’ll play.

“The champagne is a bit bland,” he replied.

“I felt the same,” she added with a coy titter. “Watered-down champagne and lackluster company. Such a drab ball. I had hoped for a better night, but sadly, I was mistaken. The Featherhams are feather-wits, after all.”

“And what sort of entertainment would you have preferred?” he asked.

“Not much. Better music, interesting conversation—” Her eyes sharpened on his face as she came closer. “—handsome faces.”

It was Gilbert’s mistake to turn his eyes from her to look down at the ballroom—briefly meeting Cecilia’s eyes—before a flash at the corner of his eyes and his quick reflexes had him grabbing Lavinia as she tripped right into him.

Honeysuckle. The scent that wafted from her skin and hair was soft and sweet, but Gilbert knew he’d been tricked. Her breast were firmly pressed on his chest-in full view of the whole room, but out of sight, she slipped her hand up under his dinner jacket to stroke his side.

Eyes narrowed, Gilbert, as gently as he could, set her on her feet and stepped two paces away.

“Lost your footing?” It was a miracle his tone didn’t hold the irritation burning in his chest. How brazen was the chit?

“A little,” she laughed embarrassedly, but the coy spark in her eye had not left. “I’m all fingers and thumbs today, aren’t I?”

“I’d say more than that.” He gave her a firm look then fixed his jacket. “I must rejoin the party. Enjoy your book, my lady.”

Taking the staircase down, he paused halfway and scanned the room for Cecilia—she was not there. Concerned, he checked the refreshment room and the two balconies, but she was not in any of them. Worried—and irked from the stunt Lavinia had played—he went to check the garden, but she was not there either.

Now, he grew fearful. Hurrying to the front, he found a footman. “Pardon me. Do you know if Lady Cecilia has left already?”

“I just assisted her into her carriage, Your—”

Gilbert was out the door like a shot—only to see the carriage racing off into the middle of the night. His hand gripped his hair, and frustration bloomed aching in his heart.

She had seen Lavinia's ploy—that was clear.

Will she accept my explanation?

That, however, was not so assured.

* * *

Cecilia could hardly hold the grieved tears back from pouring down. Beneath the grief and twisting heart, her soul mocked her; how could she ever have thought Gilbert was not affected by Lady Lavinia? Every man in her presence was enchanted by her stunning face and artless grace.

The most beautiful lady in the ton and the most eligible bachelor. They are perfect for each other.

Turning her face to the open window, she let the cold air contest the heat behind her eyes. Logically, she knew there was no reason to be upset; Gilbert had not promised her anything intimate, had not given her one reason to think the few kisses and tender touches spelled anything more. There was no signed agreement on her uncle's desk nor was there a ring on her finger.

I had imagined there was more to it than there was.

It was the single, bold strain of logic that her face kept dry until the vehicle came to her home, and a footman helped her and her aunt's lady maid to the ground.

“Would you need my assistance disrobing, my lady?” Fannie asked.

“No, thank you, I’ll manage,” Cecilia replied as she headed up to her room, craving her privacy to let her emotions out. “Good night.”

Inside her bedchamber, she closed the door and felt relieved that the fire was still flickering in her grate. She didn’t need anything more, and seated on her couch, she undid her slippers then peeled her stockings away. Instead of removing her gown, she wrapped her arms around her middle and fixed her gaze on the worn boards under her feet.

Why would I even think I meant anything to him? She is willowy and perfection in the eyes of the ton—everything I am not, no matter what he told me.

Pressing the heel of her hands to her eyes, she sighed and stood to disrobe. She shed her dress, undid her stays, and donned her nightgown before slipping into bed.

She gazed at the yellow striped walls, the equally verdant bed hangings, and the eyelet curtains fluttering over the window. A miniature statue of Aphrodite, the goddess of passionate love, watched her through sightless, marble eyes.

Mocking me.

Turning on her side, she replayed the sight a dozen times—Lady Lavinia in

his arms, and Gilbert looking—well, the man was inscrutable most of the time with a stoic demeanor that would challenge a judge—pretty comfortable with her there.

He told me I was beautiful...but then...

She lay there, dazed with tremors of disbelief coursing through her body as her heart crumbled into ashes. The deadening weight of truth that settled on her chest felt too intense to bear, and numbness slid through her limbs as the silence around her deepened.

Lavinia, of course he would want her—everyone does and what she wants, she gets. How could I be such a fool?

A part of her had known this outcome was inevitable, that such a good thing wouldn't last. But that niggling through had not foreseen how quickly it would end.

But now that it had—what was she to do about it?

CHAPTER 11



The brisk knock on Cecilia's door had her eyes fluttering open in the weak midmorning light of late October. She sat up as her aunt came in, dressed in a thick, shapeless peach velvet dress that had Cecilia wincing in horror.

"Aunt?"

"Good morning, dear," Aunt Letitia patted Cecilia's hand. "I'll be off to visit dear Jeffrey today, and Fannie is coming along. She already drew you your bath, but will you be fine by yourself? I hope I won't take too much time today, but—"

"No, it's all right," Cecilia mustered a smile. "I'll find things to keep myself occupied. Have a safe trip."

When her aunt left, she sagged against the pillows as the heartbreaking memories from last night began to trickle in, the worst of them all was Gilbert's hands on Lavinia's waist while she gazed up at him with pure adoration.

Instead of feeling upset—she felt hollow.

My foolish heart went and made assumptions. He never promised me anything, so why should I feel put off?

Moving from the bed, she went to have her bath, chose a nondescript green dress, and twisted her hair into a braid before going downstairs for her breakfast.

“Good morning, my lady.” Cook Ulma smiled while settling a platter of meats, cheeses, butter and apricot buns beside a bowl of coddled eggs and oat cakes. “How are you taking your tea today?”

“Two sugars and a splash of milk, please,” she replied, fighting the temptation of smothering the buns with butter, and she spooned the eggs and oatcakes into her plate. “Thank you.”

“That’s all you’re going to eat, dearie?” Ulma asked, her brows lifting while making the cup. “You’ll be needing a fainting couch by midday.”

“I don’t have much of an appetite,” Cecilia explained weakly, reaching for her tea. “I’ll have more for dinner, I promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Ulma replied, nodding then headed back to the kitchen.

Cecilia stared down at her food with little interest and sipped her tea instead. Forcing herself to eat something, she had half an egg and an oatcake before covering the rest with a napkin. Restless, she left for the garden, ready to let some weeds pay for her frustration, when a footman came in.

“My lady,” he bowed, “the Duke of Pembroke is here to see you.”

Rapidly rising wretched frustration had her scowling. “Tell him I’m not home.”

“My lady—”

“And add that I would rather he sent word before he decides to visit,” she told him then added, “two days in advance.”

“I shall not,” Gilbert said while striding into the room. “And we need to have a serious conversation.”

Cecilia’s jaw dropped. She was not sure what she was more appalled at—how he could stride into her aunt’s home without an invitation or how her heart leaped at his presence, unreasonably handsome, clad in a smoky grey waistcoat and trousers, elegant yet not too formal, his silver cravat tied in a casual knot.

“You cannot walk into my home as you please,” she gaped.

“And allow you to shut me out while the loom in your mind spins yards of a Chatham Tragedy about what happened last night?” he cocked a brow. “I think not.”

“And why would I be dwelling on what happened at the ball?” She crossed her arms under her bosom and gave him a hard stare. “Are you really that arrogant?”

“No, but you are mistaken on what you saw.” His eyes were a glacial shard of amber. “And I will not leave until I explain it to you.”

“I would rather you not,” she replied. “You may leave.”

“I will not,” he replied, coming closer, and Cecilia saw his hair was gleaming damp and curling at his nape. “Since you do not want an explanation, we shall use the time another way. I’ll show you the last *operation* your esteemed cousin has churning away.”

Cecilia paused and bit her lip. Would it be helpful or harmful to be in his presence for another prolonged time? Maybe her foolish heart would trick her into thinking he cared more for her than he truly did.

“I don’t think that will be wise.” She turned away.

He stopped her by grasping her arm, and she spun on her feet and instantly

felt light-headed at his nearness. He was standing so close, she could make out the understated striping on his grey waistcoat, could see small brown fleck in his eyes, and smell his potent spicy citrus cologne.

“Why?” His piercing stare tied the words resting on her tongue into a knot.

“You...” *are dangerous to my senses.* “...must have something more important to attend to?”

“Yes,” he drawled dryly. “I have to resurrect the ashes of my burned invitation, get yarn to knit my winter socks, and ask the King Regent where to source Spider Monkeys from the far east.”

Her chest burned. “Stop mocking me.”

His thumb made warm circles on the back of her hand. “Come with me, *please.*”

Cecilia’s felt her heart shoot into her throat as her gaze trailed upward to his defined jaw, beautiful mouth, and his eyes. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he gave a slow, sensual smile that made her heart pitter-patter as a debutante would instead of spinster on the cusp of singlehood.

She sighed, “You’re not playing fair.”

“I’m not playing at all,” he replied, his smile turning to a satisfied curl. “Go

for your coat. We should leave now.”

* * *

Daring to peek out the window, Cecilia gripped the edge of her seat at the shoddy tenements, almost a mirror image from the other settlements across the dusty street. Her heart clenched at the sight of drunks stumbling along, women toting wicker baskets of laundry, and men playing cards on an overturned crate.

It’s so pitiful to see. The poor children.

The carriage drew looks, and Cecilia shrunk away from the window, having caught the eye of a rough looking man with myriad of scars on his face.

“Where are we going?” she asked, glad she had worn the red wig again and a domino as well.

“A church,” Gilbert replied. “And believe me, this one will shock you more than the rest.”

Highly skeptical that something like that could be possible—what could be worse than the illegal gambling parlor or the boxing ring?

Well, Gilbert did say Jeffrey is in the prostitution business, but even as vile as that is, what could be worse?

The church that sat on the half acre of land was made of brick; the main church building looked to a one-story building but had a belfry arching over the crenelated roof. With them being so close to the Thames, the salt air and faint twinge of tar from the docks rested heavily on the air.

“We’re going to...give alms?” she asked.

His tone was mirthless. “Hold unto that thought.”

Descending first, he grasped her hand and took her down before they took the cobblestone walk and headed to the entrance, but Gilbert took her down a side path, and they circled around to the back. Mounting the steps, he nodded to a man then opened the door there.

“Please,” he gestured.

Hesitant, she did as he said and took the steps to the belfry and entered the floor above...where dozens of crates sat on top of each other. Confused, she waited until Gilbert joined her and shifted the top of a crate, reached inside the straw, and pulled a dark object out.

“Is that...” Cecilia squinted. “A firearm? Are those, are these—” She turned and looked, horrified. “—guns?”

“Remember what I said about paying alms?” he asked grimly. “These guns furnish cutthroats and highwaymen for a trifle, but they must pay twice the cost of the true arms back to Jeffrey before they are free to keep them as

theirs.”

Sickened, Cecilia grabbed for him. “He’s—he’s....”

“A murderer by proxy, yes, but that matters not,” Gilbert replied. “All he cares about is the money.”

“I...” She pressed her face into his chest. “I cannot look anymore.”

With one hand squarely in the middle of her back, he held her tightly to his chest as though he could remove the horrible images in her mind by sheer will alone. Huddling farther into him, she let his warm, strong embrace comfort her.

“Let’s go,” he whispered in her ear. “I don’t want to upset you anymore.”

Gently, he held her as they descended the stairs, and even with the grim reality of her cousin’s life laid bare, Cecilia still noticed Gilbert nod to the strange man.

She kept quiet until they entered the carriage, and only there, she asked, “Who is that man?”

“He is the Bow Street Runner who is going to get the rest of the constables to confiscate those arms,” Gilbert replied. “I hired him to make sure no one tipped the constables off until I showed you the truth.”

Jolted, she removed the wig but considered his implications before asking, “Have you had the constables break up the other two places?”

“And the bawdy house, yes,” Gilbert stretched out a leg. “I couldn’t in good conscience let those place slip by when they are all despicably evil and still funneling money to his cutthroat associates.”

“So, you’re cut him off from all his dealings?” she asked. “Are there anymore?”

“Not as far as I can find.” He shook his head. “But I still have ears and eyes out. The moment he wakes, he will be at Newgate to answer for his crimes.”

Looking down at the wig in her hands, Cecilia rubbed the silky strands. “Why are you doing this? Is it only to make sure I know what kind of man Jeffrey is...or it there more to it?”

“And what would that be?” he asked, his tone coolly detached.

Frustration flared. “Stop playing dense. It does not suit you. I know you’re showing me these things because I would have never accepted or believe it if you had only told me, but—”

“But what?”

“Why kiss me?” she blurted. “Why...*this*.” She gestured to him and then to her. “Why kiss me, make me the target of the ton, but then—”

Gilbert’s demeanor shifted from casual amusement to sharply attentive as he leaned forward and braced his forearms on his thighs. “But then?”

The words scraped painfully from her throat. “Last night, Lady Lavinia. Do you want to be with her?”

“Such a thing sounds grievous to you,” he replied. “Why is it?”

“Because it makes sense,” she replied quietly. “You two made quite a display last night. I am sure her mama is already planning your wedding.”

“Do you wish for me to marry her?”

Her head snapped up, “No. I do not want you to marry her, but that is not my decision, is it? I want to know what you want with me! Am I some amusement for you? A passing fancy? What do you want with me? If you’re going to play with my emotions—”

The rest of what she had been about to say was swallowed by his mouth. He fitted his lips to hers in a sudden, voracious kiss. He kissed her as if he owned her, and his unapologetic possessiveness sent thick sweetness through her blood, and instinctively, she followed his lead, letting him in deeper, meeting his tongue with her own.

A sound tore from his chest as he penetrated her mouth with a stabbing force that bruising, punishing even. Pulling away to gasp in a breath, Gilbert's eyes blazed bright as he sealed his lips to hers again in a kiss sweeter and more passionate than she had ever dreamed. When he lifted his head again, they were both breathless.

"I do not want Lavinia," he said firmly. "Not now, nor will I ever be inclined to do so. I am not inclined to humor a social climber."

Gilbert's hand was fixed on her waist while the other held her jaw and chin. His eyes were pools of honey. "How can you think me to be so fickle to be with one of the worst seductresses in the ton?" he asked.

"Fickle?" she replied, her eyes searching his. "I saw you two. You were holding her."

"After she executed one of the oldest tricks in the seduction book," Gilbert explained. "The trip and fall into the arms of a handsome man nearby is a ploy used on me from time immemorial. What you saw was a featherbrained chit trying to tempt me, but believe me when I say this, I have no desire for her."

It felt too good to believe. "None?"

He slowly shook his head. "Cecilia, have you ever worn spectacles before?"

“Once upon a time, I tried my Papa’s,” she replied. “It distorted my vision.”

“Precisely,” he replied. “The same thing happened when you saw me with Lavinia. If you wear spectacles with blue tint, all you would see is blue, and believe me, because of the ostracization and criticism given to you, you have been seeing blue for many years.

“Not everyone is fixed on the notion that outward beauty reflects the inside. I have known some handsome people who are as wicked as Judas and would willingly play the fiddle as they kicked you into a grave. What I care about is seeing the person on the inside, and I see the sweet, marred soul you have inside you.”

His words were simple but unbelievably genuine and sweet.

“Blue spectacles,” Cecilia repeated after a contemplative moment. The revelation began to truly unfurl within her. “Will you help me take them off then?”

“Gladly,” he murmured against her lips, cupping her bottom and squeezing her against him—against his jutting erection. Her gaze dipped lower, her heart pounding at the sizeable bulge of his manhood.

With a soft cry, she jerked back, but he just laughed and pulled her over, closer against him, whispering. “Desire is nothing to be afraid of. You’ve spurred the emotion inside me, sweetling. You don’t know this, but I am a passionate man, yet I haven’t felt this way in a long time.”

As he kissed her again, desire pooled into her veins, and crept into every secret place, unearthing the arousal smoldering deep inside.

“Come home with me,” he said. “Only for a moment, and I’ll have you home before any suspicion can arise.”

“I’m pretty sure my aunt or our cook has found that I am missing,” Cecilia replied.

Is he going to give me his answer about what he wants with me? He still hasn’t answered that question.

While the questions still lingered on her lips, she didn’t have the strength to ask him. Instead, she simply laid her head on his shoulder while his hand smoothed up and down her back. His scent permeated her senses, a blend of wood spice and soap that was ineffably masculine and comforting.

The carriage soon turned down to his estate, and he gently set her back on her seat to debark first. When he helped her down, he placed a kiss on the back of her knuckles.

With one hand grasping her skirts, she let him guide her into the house, then turned and gestured for a maid. “Please show her to the east sitting—”

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” an older man came forward, his dark cloths, greying hair, and somber mien already announced his station as the butler of the house. “I am sorry to interrupt, but this is about the honorable Jeffrey

Mullens.”

Gilbert turned, “Is he awake?”

“No, Your Grace,” the man said, and an ominous ripple went up Cecilia’s spine. “He is gone.”

CHAPTER 12



*G*one.

Jeffrey Mullens was gone.

How had the ill man managed to slip away from the virtual army of servants Gilbert had roaming the halls of his home?

“When?” Gilbert demanded.

“Footman Potter went to check on him and found his bed empty. This was about half an hour after his mother had come to sit with him,” Rowe replied. “I have directed the staff to search every part of the manor house in case he was lost and collapsed somewhere, but he is not here.

“More men are searching the extensive park grounds in case he is there, but my senses tell me he has managed to extricate himself from the estate and has fled to somewhere he is familiar with.”

Fury and fear mingled in his chest, but Gilbert made sure to wipe his face clean from either. Was it that the bouncer had known he would be strung up the moment he opened his eyes, or was it that he wanted to find Cecilia and finish the job he had started?

“Please keep me appraised of any developments,” Gilbert said, inclining his head to the butler. Turning to Cecilia, he noted the rapid paling in her face and reached out to hold her in case she fainted.

“Come with me,” he said softly. “Focus on my voice, and just walk. Everything will be all right, I promise.”

He led her to the sprawling drawing room and gently held her as she sat on a couch. Instead of releasing her hand, he held it and crouched before her, taking her other hand into his. “Listen to me, Cecilia. There is nothing my men will not do, nor will they stop before they track Jeffrey down. The man is injured, sweet; he cannot have gone far.”

She shook her head, her large green eyes growing panicked. “Before this, I knew Jeffrey was smart, I just had not known how smart. Now, I realize he is nefariously cunning. If he has gotten a whiff of a suspicion that he’s been found out, he will not be anywhere near here. And I doubt he would have gone home either.”

“You’re right,” he agreed. “He wouldn’t have gone home, but...”

Her searching eyes met his. “But what?”

Rising, Gilbert sat beside her, still holding one of her hands; he was not sure if it was only anchoring her anymore. “But my failure is not gathering a complete list of Muller’s compatriots. I knew a few of His Lord’s friends must be in cahoots with him and his business, but I’ve yet to pinpoint where they fall in.”

Worry creased her brow, and her eyes were distant. “I wonder if he remembers any of it.”

“That is a possibility,” Gilbert replied, finally releasing her hand and moving to a cupboard. Pulling out a decanter, he poured two glasses of Tobermory whiskey and carried one back to her. “Drink. It will help.”

Her lush, sable lashes swept up; he was once again struck by the radiance of her gaze before she took a sip. Grimacing, she took another and a third before setting the glass on the table, shivering.

Despite all the gravity of the situation, Gilbert smiled. “Not to your liking, I suppose?”

“Goodness no.” She shook her head. “It’s hideous. Why do you gentlemen drink such vile things?”

“Because some have vile natures,” he teased, but when her lips ticked down, he shook his head. “Did it help though?”

“Yes,” she replied, folding her slender hands on her lap, and she used her forefinger to pick at her thumb. It was one of her few nervous actions Gilbert was beginning to categorize. “It did.”

After taking a sip of his drink, he asked, “Are you afraid to go home? I’m sure I can craft an excuse to send for your aunt if you would rather stay here.”

She drew in a corner of her lips but then shook her head. “No, because I think that is the last place, he would ever show his face. Well, for now, anyway. Should I tell my aunt, or should you?”

Gilbert thought her suggestion over, casting through his mind to find the right cause of action. “I don’t think you should tell anyone yet.” He turned his gaze to her. “I want to make sure of a few things before we let your aunt know. Promise me, you’ll keep it close for now.”

“But what if my aunt decides on stopping by?” Cecilia asked. “It’s become something of her daily routine.”

“Tell her that as much as I appreciate her coming by, I have some personal issues that require my privacy at the moment,” he told her. “But assure her, he is still in good hands. And as for you, I want you to visit your friend and her fiancé. Surely, it might take your mind of things here.”

“I doubt it,” Cecilia replied. “But Belle is still nose deep in planning her wedding. That might distract me for a while.”

A strange yearning twisted inside him—possessiveness, surely, and unable to help himself, he brushed his knuckles against her cheek. “I’ll sort this out. If I must hunt him down to the end of the earth, he will pay for his crimes.”

Relief and trust welled in her eyes, and Cecilia tipped forward to brush his lips with hers—but she was gone in the blink of an eye. “I trust you.”

Satisfied, he nodded, “Now, let’s get you home.”

After seeing her off in his carriage, Gilbert turned to find Rowe, and the moment his eyes landed on his butler, he said, “Send for the Bow Street Runners.”

As if the older man could read Gilbert’s mind, he bowed his head. “A wise call, Your Grace. She needs to be protected, even when she doesn’t know it.”

* * *

Halfway to her home, Cecilia decided to change direction and gave the driver directions to Belle’s home in Grosvenor Square, and soon, she arrived at the circle of posh townhouses.

“I’ll be fine here,” she told the carriage man. “Please tell His Grace where I am, and that he needn’t worry. Belle will see me home.”

“Understood, my lady.” The driver tipped his hat before steering the horses back onto the road.

Mounting the steps, she knocked, and soon a footman came, received her, and replied, “Lady Anabelle is in her drawing room, my lady. Please, follow me.”

“No need,” Cecilia replied. “I’ve been in this house so many times, I know it as surely as I know mine. Would you please ask Cook to send us a pot of tea?”

“Yes, my lady,” the young man bowed and went off while Cecilia headed to the staircase and the first room on the left of the hallway.

She found Belle in her favorite bronze day dress, seated behind her *escritoire* and shuffling papers here and there. One of them fluttered to the floor, and Belle ducked to retrieve it. “Oh bother.”

As her friend’s head popped up, Cecilia said, “Seems like you need some help.”

“You have the best timing,” Belle replied, smiling. “I’m trying to sort out the wedding breakfast. One of my cousins cannot eat eggs, another cousin will break out in hives at the sight of ham, and my uncle cannot be trusted anywhere near wine. Help me.”

Cecilia lifted her shoulders. “*Qu'ils mangent de la brioche.*”

“Let them eat cake?” Belle laughed. “Brilliant idea.”

“Well, it’s not the exact translation, but the idea stays,” Cecilia replied while folding her skirts under her and sitting. “And instead of wine, sherry maybe?”

“I’ll find other options,” Belle replied. “I am so happy you’re here because you are going to be my witness, and we have an appointment with my modiste in five days.”

“Five days?” Cecilia’s jaw dropped. “Belle, that is a very short time. You know I’m working on a slimming diet, and it’s hardly taking effect.”

“Because you do not need it,” Belle said. “I’ve reminded you time and time again.”

Pressing a hand to her belly, she thought about Gilbert’s words from earlier. Maybe it was time to rid herself of those blue glasses. “You might be right.”

The paperweight in Belle’s hand tumbled to the floor, and her friend gaped. “When did this come about?”

“Today,” Cecilia replied, squaring her shoulders, “when the Duke of Pembroke kissed me.”

“*What?*” Belle’s mouth fell, but then she shook her head, and her lips took a wry twist. “I’d hoped he would be different from the others and not overlook you on the base of others’ biases, and thank goodness, I was right. Now—” Belle moved from her writing table and came to join Cecilia on her couch, her eyes glimmering, “—tell me, how does he kiss?”

“I—I cannot.” Cecilia felt her skin heat. “That’s a bit private.”

“I’ll tell you what Marcus’ touch does to me,” Belle grinned. “Let’s trade. See, when he touches me, it’s like holding a match to kindling. He lights me from the inside, and I especially love it when his beard shadow comes in and rubs over my skin.”

Dipping her head, Cecilia thought of how she felt with Gilbert’s lips on hers. “His kisses feel like...hot silk. I’ve never been foxed, but I get so immersed in his presence, I feel... drunk.”

Clapping her hands in delight, Belle’s eyes danced. “As you should be. Have you gotten naughty?”

“Naughty?” Cecilia asked.

Belle leaned in and whispered a few lines of the most carnal, uninhibited, sexual deed she had ever heard—or expected Belle to have experienced. Her friend pulled back and smiled, “Just don’t let a word of that slip to my father, or we’d have the wedding tomorrow.”

“I promise,” Cecilia replied, her brows lowering. “He did that? On his desk?”

“I felt like I was flying,” Belle smiled, her expression that of pure innocence.

While thinking over her friend's admission, after a knock on the door, the footman came in with the tea tray, and after bowing out, he left. Cecilia made her drink then added, "I asked him what he wanted with me, what he wanted from me, and he didn't answer."

With her brows knitting, Belle asked, "Why would you ask him that? Cecilia, men aren't like us. They are more impetuous and act on desire while we women must think things through before we act."

"Because it's not the first time he kissed me," Cecilia admitted, and her friend's head snapped back.

"He's kissed you before?" Belle asked, her eyes narrowing as she made her cup. When Cecilia didn't reply, she huffed then sniffed. "I cannot believe you kept his from me."

Shame curled in her chest, and Cecilia shook her head. "I didn't know how to say it. It surprised me too, and to be honest, I was a bit scared."

Sympathy changed Belle's face. "I am sorry it took you so long to know what such simple pleasures feel like, but I am not sorry it was with him. By all accounts, he is an upstanding fellow, not one of those loutish rakehells plaguing Town and causing all sort of nuisance."

The hairs on the back of Cecilia's head lifted a little at the subtle nuances in Belle's words. "What do you mean?"

Her friend's brows lifted. "You *don't* know? How is it? You are a steadfast reader of the news." Setting her cup down, Belle went back to her table and gathered a few editions of the Times then folded them on the table between her and Cecilia. "It's because of this. The Runners have had their hands full with breaking up some horrible things, an illegal gambling ring, a boxing studio, and even a bawdy house."

Sifting through the papers, Cecilia saw it all—tangible proof that Gilbert had sent the authorities to decimate Jeffrey's immoral businesses.

"Do they know—" She swallowed of the sudden lump in her throat. "—who orchestrated all of this?"

"The bouncer behind the places or the Good Samaritan who had sent the Runners in the right directions?"

"The person who made the bawdy house and the rest," Cecilia replied.

"No," Belle sighed then went back to her tea. "For now, it's a mystery, but I do hope they will find him."

Setting the papers aside, Cecilia asked, "What do I do if he says he doesn't want what I want? What if he only wants a dalliance?"

Belle sobered, "Do you really want me to tell you what I would do?"

“Seeing as you are more adventurous—” *and worldly* “—than I am, yes,” Cecilia replied.

“My mother would rise from the grave if she heard me telling you this but—” Belle made a face. “—life is too short and unpredictable to be living it alone and with regrets. Give all of yourself to this time, even if it is short, you’ll have wonderful memories to savor, and if it does work, you shall be the bell of the ball. I do think, however, you might need to show him.”

“How do I do that?” Cecilia asked.

“Flirt, my dear, you will need to flirt,” Belle grinned. “And I can certainly teach you.”

* * *

It was getting close to midnight, but Gilbert was still awake, seated in his study, playing a game of chess against himself. It was a simple activity he used to clear his mind with repetitive motions while his mind whirled in the background.

Where could Jeffrey have run to?

What is he planning?

Will he try to contact Cecilia?

Will Cecilia find out that I have men trailing her every move?

The problems began spiraling from the nexus, and while the possibilities for each were numbering into the infinite, he knew he had to find the core ones.

Jeffrey was nothing more than a little rat who had to find a hole to hide in, and Gilbert knew he had to find that hole and flush it out quickly. He wondered if he needed to hire an investigator to double his chances of finding the vermin.

“Your Grace?” Rowe knocked and came into the room holding a silver plate with another pile of letters. “I am off to bed, but these came for you.”

“Its past—” Gilbert’s eyes flew to the clock on the mantle. “—eleven. You’re not a young man, Rowe; you need to be in bed.”

“Thank you, but you forget that I was once an infantryman,” Rowe replied, setting the platter down. “Little sleep is normal for me, but I will retire after this.”

“Thank you,” Gilbert replied.

With a bow, his manservant left the room, and Gilbert reached for the pile with a growing hesitation. It was bound to be another slew of invitations and not-so-subtle inquiries from mamas about his marriage status and pushing their eligible daughters on him for him to make a “smart match”.

He sorted the letters, setting the true inquiries from lords to one side and the invitations for balls, stories, singalongs, and whatever nonsense the idle members of the *ton* were up to, another.

“The Marquess of Somsberry, that is Lady Lavinia’s family,” he murmured while opening the letter. The letter was written in a flowery, female hand, and Gilbert groaned.

Skimming over Lavinia’s letter, he read the linchpin in the meandering letter. “Even though it was brief, the conversation we shared was the most insightful one I have had in a long while. I can see that you are an intuitive, insightful, upstanding man first and a responsible Lord second.

“I would love to sit with you and have a deeper conversation with you. All my sensibilities are attuned to my intellect, and when those strings are strummed, I come alive, and I believe you would be the catalyst to awaken my slumbering soul. If you permit, I would love to have you over for such a conversation one day soon.

He snorted, “What a delicate way to tell a man you’re searching for your next conquest.” Dropping the paper, he considered lobbying it into the flickering fireplace. “But I shall not be one of them.”

Lastly, he opened an unmarked card that had one line on it.

She will die and you soon after.

Gilbert ground his teeth as he crushed note in a tight fist. “*Mullens.*”

CHAPTER 13



“*A*re you ready?” Belle asked as she fixed her gloves.

“No,” Cecilia replied with a dry smile. “But let’s do it anyway.”

“Don’t fret, dear; you look fabulous.” Belle unfurled her parasol. “I’ve never seen such intriguing shades of blue and green. You cannot tell one from the other.”

Glancing down at the low-cut bodice of the light blue walking dress, Cecilia asked, “You don’t suppose it’s too much?”

“Nonsense,” Belle sniffed. “You’ll be the envy of everyone there. That gown is sublime.”

Once again, Cecilia looked at the dress; the light silk was cinched beneath her bosom, tucked into her nipped-in waist, and curved over her hips down to her half-boots. “It’s not only the dress that will make others be disdainful, is it?”

“Absolutely not,” Belle smiled viciously. “Now that half the ton knows you are the only one the Duke of Pembroke is interested in, I am sure that will be a tipping factor.”

“The knives will come out,” Cecilia breathed out. “They have no reason to be subtle anymore.”

From the day Cecilia had understood she would never fit in with the others, she found it best to feign ignorance when the subtle—and not so subtle—snubs were directed her way, to simply pretend that she didn’t understand the malicious insults even when they had scored their mark.

It had worked for years—but now her façade was crumbling.

“Why did Lady deSual choose to have a garden party here in Hyde Park though on the edges of the river,” Cecilia asked. “Surely the extensive gardens on her property would have sufficed.”

“It was something about capturing the last of autumn before cold dreaded winter descended on us,” Belle replied as they headed towards the top of the canopies the hostess had had erected on the verdant lawns. They were just around the bend. “T’was either that or scheming to trip her *uncultured* American daughter-in-law into the pond.”

The open secret about the Lady's dislike of her rustic American daughter-in-law never ceased to amuse the ton.

“I hope not,” Cecilia replied as they made their way down the promenade. “Her son would never forgive her.”

“We shall find the hostess, have small talk then find a quiet corner away from all this,” Belle added. “I truly do not want to find some of our old classmates from...” They rounded a corner, and Belle’s face twisted. “Oh lord, I spoke too soon.”

Seated under the tents were three ladies that had made Cecilia’s life a living furnace back at finishing school, two of whom were married, and their children were being herded-in by nannies.

Keep your chin up.

As they passed, Cecilia gave them the slightest incline of her head but walked on, unwilling to stop and parry backhanded compliments like swords.

They found the hostess and dabbled with small talk before escaping to the tents where they grasped cups strawberry ice.

“It seems the Gorgons have not mellowed, even with marriage,” Belle commented, nodding to the trio were sharing mirroring hoity sneers on their faces. “God knows, I feel sympathy for their husbands. They must be an unending horror to live with. Can you imagine waking up to that pug nose in the morning?”

“Fortunately, I cannot,” Cecilia replied, looking around. “It looks more of a womanly gathering here. I cannot spot one lord.”

“They probably congregated at Whites to have a moment of peace,” Belle replied, before her smile turned knowing. “But you wish His Grace was here, do you not?”

“I do,” Cecilie replied.

It had been three days since she had last seen or heard from him, and an odd feeling had burst in the middle of her chest when her mind turned to Gilbert.

“Never fear,” Belle replied. “Your beau will be along soon enough. At the next ball, I presume.”

Cecilia opened her lips to tell Belle that he might be occupied, but that would only prompt Belle to ask why, and that would open the seal of Pandora’s Box that Cecilia had kept so tightly lidded. She didn’t have the strength to tell Belle what Jeffrey had done or what she’d done in return. The shame of it still burned bright in her belly—so she clamped her mouth shut.

“Lady Cecilia,” Lavinia called over, her tone as light as an aria. “You’re here. And what a wonderful dress as well.”

Turning, Cecilia smiled, “Thank you. My compliments on yours as well. There is something very masculine about it.”

“The epaulettes on my Spencer jacket,” Lavinia smiled. “It styled *à la militaire*, but I know you meant masculine in the best way.”

Cecilia blushed, “Of course.”

Lavinia brushed back a platinum tendril, and before Cecilia knew it, the lady had looped arms with her. “Walk with me a little.”

Surprised, Cecilia shot Belle a look over her shoulder before Lavinia swept them down the path. “How have you been?”

“Fairly well,” Cecilia replied, still confused. “And you?”

“Eh, middling,” Lavinia replied. “These balls are so tedious.”

“But you love balls,” Cecilia twisted her head. “If I recall, you once danced the whole night away last season.”

“I had, but they are all the same,” Lavinia replied as they neared a group of matrons. “Nothing ever changes, well, except the company. Speaking of which, have you seen Duke Pembroke as of late? He seems to have vanished from Town.”

Ah, there it was—the true reason Lavinia had singled Cecilia out. The vain hope that the lady wanted to be friends vanished like smoke. “I cannot say, Lady Lavinia. He is a duke, and I assume he has more affairs to attend to than

balls.”

“I understand that, but I sent him a letter days ago, and he still has not responded,” Lavinia said, her lips forming a moue. “Such bad form.”

Astounded by Lavinia’s profound sense of entitlement, Cecilia could only add, “Again, he is probably busy.”

“Lady Lavinia,” Lady Woodley, a lady clad in more ostrich plumes than the poor bird they had been taken from, called over, her fan flapping. “So pleased to see you, and my compliments on your astounding dress.”

“Why thank you,” Lavinia preened under the praise.

Watery blue eyes turned to Cecilia, and already, she could see the judgement in them. “And you, Lady Cecilia, what an... interesting garment you have on.”

“I beg your pardon?” Cecilia asked while steeling herself.

“That dress,” the lady sniffed, her eyes slitted with malice, “it is rather unfortunate for your figure. The neckline is so low its vulgar.”

From the corner of her eye, she spotted disparaging glances and snickers behind fans—and finally, Cecilia had had *enough*. All the taunts, all the sneers, all the social cuts had laid lances in her heart, but she now had balm

to heal them.

“I am surprised to hear you say that,” Cecilia said calmly. “When your granddaughter wore a gown like this to a ball last season, and after that, she wore a costume of made of pure gauze to a masquerade, you found no fault with her.”

Startled glances shot to her person, but Cecilia ignored them. All she could see—all she could feel was Gilbert’s sharp eyes.

The lady turned mottled purple. “That was not—”

“Your meaning?” Cecilia replied, pulling away from Lavinia. “Oh, I am aware. I know I am the outcast of the *ton* looking in—I am the elephant in the China shop, but your blatant favoritism does not become you, my lady, especially at your refined age.”

“My refined—” the lady gaped. “How *dare* you?”

“No,” Cecilia replied, “how dare *you*! I’m ashamed on your behalf, my lady; your sensibilities are very skewed, much like the others who heckled me and painted a target for hate on my back. You may want to reassess the vices lingering in the chambers of your heart; now, please, excuse me.”

In the deafening silence, Cecilia found Belle and said, “Shall we have a glass of punch?”

“After than humbling, I need two,” Belle smiled widely.

* * *

Through the mist permeating St. James’ Street, Gilbert gazed at the entrance of White’s Gentlemen Club. As repulsed as he was to step inside, he was on a hunt to find Jeffrey Mullens, and from the intelligence he had, Mullens had been a steadfast member of the Club for years.

It was a gamble finding any lead there—as he knew it was impossible to expect Mullens to walk inside—but he had to try find something. His new ducal title had come with a complimentary membership to the Club, and while he had not intended to use it, the threat from Mullens was not one he was going to ignore.

As the carriage stopped, he descended and nodded to the footman then entered the front room. Pausing to remove his coat, he looked over the first floor, trying to decipher Lord Pendelton, Mullens’ friend, in the haze of cheroot smoke.

“Your Grace,” the overseer came and bowed, “on behalf of the owner, welcome. Is there anything I can get for you?”

“Is Lord Pendelton present this night?” he asked. “I would like to make an acquaintance.”

“I do believe he is in the card room, Your Grace,” the man replied. “Please, follow me.”

Nicholas entered the gaming parlor where most of the lords milled around the half-dozen occupied card tables while others had quiet conversation over glasses of brandy.

He spotted Pendelton immediately, the Baron clad in a checkered waistcoat, pink cravat, and meticulously styled hair ash as he raked in the winnings of the last game. "Well played, gentlemen. Another hand?"

"I'd like to give it a go," Gilbert announced, and when the men moved to stand and bowed, he waved them off. "Please."

Seated, he asked, "May I have a partner?"

A look went round the table before a man lifted his hand. "Charles Yates, Viscount of Arlington, Your Grace."

"You're the one with the flourishing stud farm out in Bath and merchant ship to the Caribbean," Gilbert nodded. "I'm pleased to put a face to the name."

While the Lord's brows lifted high, he nodded. "As am I," Charles replied. "People have said you are reclusive, Your Grace."

"I am a solitary creature; that is true," Gilbert replied then faced Pendleton. "And your partner is?"

"Westgate, Your Grace," a short, rotund man nodded.

Pendelton nodded, "Shall we sweeten the pot? A wager, Your Grace?"

"And what sum do you have in mind?" Gilbert inclined his head. "A thousand pounds?"

"Surely we can do better than that?" Pendleton laughed. "How about five thousand?"

Westgate's eyes bloomed out of his head, "Have you lost your mind? Against a duke? I don't have a quarter of that sum to brandish about, you fool. My wife would use my innards for garters if wagered that."

"Vingt-et-un then?" Gilbert offered Pendleton. "For the same sum?"

"This hand will be mine. I can feel it in my bones." Pendleton said, his cocky gaze brimming with a fool's confidence. "Please."

Fifteen minutes later when Gilbert laid his trump card down, Pendleton's forehead broke out in sweat so quickly, and his eyes fluttered around like a maddened bird. Gilbert leaned into his seat, his demeanor as calm as the still night air.

Crossing his legs, Gilbert asked for a glass of Tobermory whiskey while his opponent mopped his forehead. A relieved Westgate had left the table five minutes ago, free from paying a king's ransom. Yates had gone to join him

while Gilbert sipped his drink.

“I—” Pendleton reached for a slip to write his promissory note on then handed it over to Gilbert. “I’ll find the money, Your Grace, I—I give you my word.”

Resting the cup to the side, Gilbert said, “Are you open to an alternative to paying that sum?”

“Anything,” Pendleton grabbed at the lifeline. “I will do anything.”

“Tell me where Jeffrey Mullens is, and I will let you be free of your debt,” Gilbert told him. “I know you and he are friends, and if you know where he is, or where he might have gone, I need to know, *now*.”

The man paled and pure panic turned Pendleton’s eyes into saucers. “I—I don’t know where—”

“I’ll have those ten thousand pounds then,” Gilbert said, moving to stand, but Pendleton went deathly pale.

“W-wait, wait, I think I know a place,” the Baron stuttered.

“I’ll need all the places the bounder might run to,” Gilbert said, icily. “Unless you name them all, you will be required to pay that debt.”

“If—if I give you everything I know, will you forgive the debt?” Pendleton asked.

Gilbert lowered his gaze. “I hardly see how you are in a position to negotiate.”

Sweat dripped down Pendleton’s face, and he licked his chapped lips. “Meet me halfway, Your Grace. I—I cannot give up these things so easily. Mullens is wrapped up with some dangerous people. He might come for me when he knows I have sent you after him.”

Picking up on what was *not* said, Gilbert leaned in, pinning the man with a frosty gaze. “When was the last time you spoke to him?”

“I—”

“Do not play with me,” Gilbert said, his tone low and threatening. “If you know where he is and try to pull the wool over my head, I will not only have your vowels, but I will have you in prison for collusion with Mullens.”

“Last night,” Pendleton said, his face bloodless. “He summoned me to a gaming hell in Bluegate Fields to tell me he was ruined, that all his ventures were turned bottoms up, and he needed to borrow some money to tide him over. I gave him fifty pounds, a veritable fortune.”

Gilbert found the irony in that statement.

“Where in Bluegate Fields?”

The Baron’s eyes bugged out. “Are you thinking of going there? Are you *mad*? The men there have no ounce of fear or respect for a toff. They’ll pounce on you and gut you like a fish. You cannot handle the cutthroat there; besides, I doubt he would still be in the same place.”

“With all respect—” Gilbert’s eyes were sharp enough to cut steel. “—you have no notion what I can handle. The name of the gaming hell, *now*.”

CHAPTER 14



The streets of Bluegate Fields were littered with filth, and the air was so rancid, Gilbert felt the stench in the back of his throat. It was a dusky, yellow-fogged night, and for the past half-hour, he and Allan had watched drunken men stagger in and out of the tavern with scantily clad women, most of their faces bright with cosmetics to lure men into dark alleys.

“God knows how you managed to tempt me into doing this,” Allan grumbled while keeping a tight hold onto his firearm. “You must be the Prince of Persuasion.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Gilbert shifted the scrap of cloth that masqueraded for a window shade on the rickety hack they had hired. “You negotiated a dance with your sister in the next ball.”

“That still does not make up for the fact that I could be losing an arm or eye,” Allan grumbled. “Are the runners in place at least?”

“At least you’re smart enough to have reinforcement,” Allan added. “But can you tell me why in bloody hell we’ve been waiting here for so long? It’s

getting cold.”

“This coming from a man who swam half the Serpentine on a frigid March night?” Gilbert teased. “We’re waiting until a certain fellow enters the pub. Pendleton gave me his description and told me he only comes to the place at —” He consulted his timepiece. “—this hour, midnight.”

“Have you seen the blighter yet?” Allan groused. “And more importantly, are you sure you can trust him? Don’t these men band together?”

“They do,” Gilbert replied. “But there is little honor amongst thieves. Give them enough reason to turn on each other, and they will.”

“And what impetus would that be?”

“Coin.”

A flicker of movement had Gilbert looking up to see the heavily bearded man Pendleton had told him about side-stepping a drunk before entering the tavern. “It’s time.”

Slipping the cowl of his cloak over his head, Gilbert slipped from the carriage soundlessly and instantly merged into the night. Dropping their heads, he and Allan entered through the low doorway, and a wave of noxious smells assaulted him: caustic blue ruin, cheap tobacco smoke, and ripe, unwashed bodies.

Pushing their way through the carousing crowd, Gilbert slunk to the side of the room, in a nearby nook, while Allan went to approach the bearded man—the nighttime barkeep. Gilbert was close enough to hear everything the two said but was cloaked enough that no one gave him a second look. For all they cared, he was just another mercenary.

The barkeep, a man called Sal, looked up, whiskers twitching. “What can I do for ye, guv?”

“I’m looking for someone,” Allan said.

Wiping a dirty mug, Sal laughed, “So is ever’body round here. Is it that someone owes ye some blunt, an’ yer ready to collect, or is that yer lookin’ for someone to do ye a job?”

“I’m looking for the gentleman who owned *the Hetaira*,” Allan said. “We were in business together.”

“Is that so.” Sal gave Allan a narrow look. “And you think ye could find that toff here?”

“No,” Allan replied, “I know he’s vanished; I just need you to point me in the right direction to find him.”

Setting the glass aside, Sal filled it with a dram of Blue Ruin then slid it to a man. Turning back to Allan, he folded his beefy arms on the counter and slyly asked, “And what’s in it for me if I do that? I can’t be riskin’ me neck

for something like that without a little incentive.”

“How about...five pounds?”

“Ten,” Sal grinned. “Hand it over, and I’ll tell ye what ye need to know.”

While the two spoke, Gilbert had his eyes on two men, who seemed to be talking with each other, but their attention was solely on Sal and Allan. His suspicion and intuition merged into one, and the horrible realization that they might have been tricked and lured into a trap made the hairs on the back of his head lift high.

His eyes flew to Allan and Sal—they were so close to getting the answers he needed. Eerie awareness broke a wash of gooseflesh over his skin, but he stayed still while Allan handed over the pouch, and Sal jerked his head to the backdoor.

When the two left, the two cutthroats rose and followed. Now, Gilbert was sure they had been tricked. Following them, Gilbert pulled the two firearms tucked in the cloak inner pockets and cocked the pistols. Lingered in the eaves, he watched and listened.

“The man yer looking for is named Jeffrey Mullens, and he’s a scab-festering mongrel who’d take any opportunity to piss on ye. From the night the whorehouse went under, no one has seen hide nor hair of him. He never stays in one place, but he’s got a circuit he follows daily. He goes from Spitalfields to Whitechapel then to here an’ St. Giles. Ye never know where that cove goes.”

“You’re sure those are all the places?” Allan asked.

“He drops into his friends in Mayfair from time-to-time,” Sal shrugged, “but his friends up on those rich places ain’t me affairs. I don’t know ‘em.”

“Thank you,” Allan said. “I’ll be on my way—”

“Not so fast.” Sal’s face split into a wicked sneer. “Yer not getting away from here until ye hand over that purse, all of it. I can hear the coins clinkin’ in it.”

Allan stopped. “We had a deal. Ten pounds was more than fair.”

“I see it differently,” Sal grinned. “The purse or yer life, guv. Choose.”

The two men from the tavern advanced on Allan, but Gilbert didn’t give them a chance; his hands flew up, and he pressed the pistol’s mouth to the back of their men’s head. “Not one more step,” he ordered.

The two stopped, and a tense moment passed; Sal’s head darted up before he flung himself at Allan, and the two men under Gilbert’s guns darted aside. Cursing, Gilbert let out a shot, and it slammed into the shoulder of one while the other blackguard punched Allan in the middle, and Sal ripped the purse away.

Gilbert let off another shot, but it went wide, and he dropped the pistols; there was no time to reload, so he flung himself into the fight. Sal landed a face blow, and stars streaked across Gilbert's vision before landing another on his kidney.

In the time he managed to stagger back and regroup, a flash of silver slipped from Sal's hand, and Allan evaded the swipe of the knife with near inches while Gilbert spun and landed a blow to the second cutthroat's jaw, knocking the man to the ground.

The man with the bullet wound to his shoulder was back on his feet, reached into his boot, pulled out his own blade, and lurched to Gilbert. He blocked the arching blow with his forearm and slammed his fist into the man's bloody patch, making the man scream in pain. Gilbert grabbed the arm, twisted it, and with a sickening crack like a twig being snapped, he snapped the bone.

He spun—and *whoosh*. The blade swept up his face, nicking his eyebrow, but Gilbert didn't let the blood dripping into his face deter him. Sal was forceful, but Gilbert was faster, deadly, and precise. Ducking the blade's arc, he rammed his fist into the man's side ribs, the force loosening the weapon from the man's grip.

Grabbing the man's arm, Gilbert flung him to the ground and twisted his arm, bending it and ramming the knife into Sal's gut. Through the roar in his ears, he heard Allan put the last man to sleep with a wicked punch to his temple.

Panting, Gilbert stood and retrieved his arms while Allan snatched his purse from the ground. The men were strewn on ground, one bleeding and two unconscious.

Allan sagged on the wall of the tavern, his breath a white smoke in the fog. “Wilson, I do believe we were double-crossed.”

“Attempted, at least.” Gilbert pressed a hand to his brow and the stinging cut. “We need to go, Allan. We got what we came for.”

“What about them?” Allan asked, jerking his chin to the men.

“The Runners will take care of them,” Gilbert said. “Or someone will find them.”

With a tired heave, Allan nodded. “I shall sleep like the dead tonight.”

* * *

It had been a hard night for Cecilia; the nightmares of Jeffrey’s attack had once again haunted her mind, but this time, she had not seen him in the dream.

As a matter of fact, she had not seen anyone; all she had seen around her was fog, and she felt fear whispering across her skin. Now, she sat bleary eyed at the breakfast table, nursing a cup of weak tea, considering if it made sense to try and nap.

“I do wish His Grace would let us back in,” Aunt Letitia sighed as she came into the room, her morning robe belted at the waist while she fixed her turban. “I miss speaking to Jeffrey. I know he could not hear me, but it’s a comfort.”

Cecilia could only give her a sympathetic smile. "I'm sure Jeffrey is doing well, though. His Grace is an honorable man, aunt."

"I know," she fixed her tea. "I just want to see my son."

"Where is uncle?" Cecilia asked, unwilling to continue talking about Jeffrey.

"Off to Town for this thing and that," Aunt Letitia waved her hand. "Sometimes, I don't listen too closely when he mentions business."

"Ah," Cecilia nodded.

"How are you dear?" Her aunt buttered her toast. "You told me you went to visit dear Anabella. How is she and the wedding planning going?"

"She's doing well," Cecilia replied. "I might revisit her today as well."

"Give her my best," Aunt Letitia replied. "So many others thought she made a mistake marrying the Commander, that she was marrying down by choosing a retired Navy Captain, but I see how they look at each other, and that is pure love."

"I've seen it too," Cecilia replied, recalling the looks she had seen the two

share. "They are perfect for each other."

The emotion they had shared without uttering a single word had made a pang of longing birth in Cecilia's heart that one day she would share the same with the man who had won her love.

"Will you be going to visit anyone today?" Cecilia asked. "I wouldn't want to commandeer the carriage."

"No," Aunt Letitia replied. "I think I'll have a quiet day here, or maybe I'll send for Lady Georgina and ask her to come here."

"Thank you, Aunt." Cecilia replied, hating that she was lying to her aunt. "I'll tell Belle your best wishes."

* * *

Waking in the dim light, Gilbert groaned at the pulsing pain thrumming in his body. He's been through some bad brawls in his life, but the scrimmage last night had topped all of them. Sitting up, he reached for the bottle of laudanum on this bedside table and dropped a splash into a cup before swallowing.

Resting on the mound of pillows behind him, Gilbert skimmed his fingertips over the cut on his brow Rowe had stitched up that morning. To his credit, the butler had not even asked Gilbert what had happened when he had staggered in at one in the morning. He had only gotten the supplies and given Gilbert a glass of strong whiskey to swallow before running the needle through his skin.

Now, sometime after midday, Gilbert was still reeling with the effect of last night's attack, and with the dulling pain throbbing through his body, he reminded himself to see how Allan was faring.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," Rowe materialized at his side. "Would you like me to draw you a bath?"

"Yes, please." Gilbert replied. "With some of those salts you swear by."

"Very well, Your Grace, and how is that cut?"

"Stinging and tender," Gilbert replied. "But I'll live. It's not the first cut I've gotten, but it's a price I paid to find a way to flush Jeffrey Mullens out of his holes."

"And how do you plan on doing that, Your Grace?" Rowe asked from the annexed bath-chamber.

"By making sure he has only one to run to." Gilbert grinned. "I just need to find the exact places and make them uninhabitable then when he gets to the last, I will have him."

What if one of those men finds Mullens and tips him off?

The stark realization made his stomach turn, but he had to press on, even if the man were able to warn Mullens. Something had to work out; it had to.

“Your water is ready,” Rowe said.

* * *

With his head pillowed on towels behind him, Gilbert let the tight bands of control he wrapped around himself falter, and in a sliver of openness, he allowed himself to dream—and Cecilia filled his mind.

Her sweet face and sweet uncertainty brought out something inside him, and the concern he’d felt had grown into something more, the desire to reassure her, the need to protect her... and the desire to have her.

Dark, erotic fantasies flashed in his head, and his pulse quickened as he imagined her enticingly full breasts filling his hands, her sinfully round bottom jiggling as he took her. Her dark berry nipples tight pomegranate tips calling to his tongue.

With his palm, roughened by hours spent sparring at Gentleman Jackson’s, he fisted his rearing shaft and friggd himself slowly, pre-seed dribbling from his flaring cock.

He imagined the pleasure that would flare on her face as he pleased her, how she would be looking back at him, her big eyes soft and glowing with lust and adoration.

He would take his time teasing her, fingering her silky folds until she shattered with pleasure. Kneeling between her thighs, he would place his mouth on her forbidden flesh and suckle her until she cried out her first release.

As the water rippled with his growing desperate strokes, his fantasies grew baser, deeper, more intense.

How would she react when he entered her with such slow precision that they could both feel every burning inch of him? How he would grip her hips and slam into her from behind, her back bowed to him, milking him and taking all of him. How would she like to be restrained, a slip of silk wrapped around her eyes? How would she like to be vulnerable and under his control?

Her face contorted in bliss had his balls drawing up, his hardness throbbing as a warning sizzle shot up his shaft. Waves of heat boiled up his spine, and his climax roared over him, making him shudder with ecstasy as his seed jetted inside his hand.

Feeling the soothing pleasure thickening his blood, Gilbert closed his eyes, hoping for a moment of peace—but Rowe knocked and came back with a message that got his blood pumping again.

“Your Grace, Lady Cecilia is here to see you.”

CHAPTER 15



*P*acing the study Rowe had let her inside, Cecilia began to double guess her intention for coming there. Had it been because her aunt's words had worried her or was it because she feared Gilbert had seen the comments in the Times' Scandal Sheets?

Or it could be that I want to see him.

"Cecilia," Gilbert's deep tone had her spinning from the window to gaze over at him, and she bit back a gasp at how undressed he was. He looked lethargic and heavy lidded, and the tension she usually saw that kept his person rigid was gone.

He looks better without carrying the world on his shoulders.

Clad in only a black brocade dressing robe, tied low on his waist, the deep vee of his opened lapels gave a revealing glimpse of his bared throat and muscled chest, his midnight hair curling and damp from his bath. But then, her eye travelled to his face, and her stomach plummeted to her feet.

“Good heavens, why are you injured?” she asked.

He waved her concern away as he went to one of his liquor cabinets. “This is not *injured*. Believe me. I have been in some boxing matches and been truly damaged. This is a scrape and a scuffle, nothing more.”

“What happened?” she fretted. “Was it—did you find *him*? Did he do this to you?”

“No,” Gilbert said while pouring out a dram of sherry. “But if you must know, I tracked down some people who gave me an idea of where he could be.”

“Why?” She came around the table to gaze at him, sorrow and fear curling in her heart. “Why would you that?”

Tilting his head, he replied, “Because I need to make sure he will never hurt you again.”

Her heart swelled in her chest—because what could one say to that except, “I would never want you to get hurt for that.”

His lips twisted. “Too late, sweetheart.”

A polite knock on the door had her turning to see Mr. Rowe there. “Is there anything I can bring for you, Your Grace?”

“Could you please bring some ice, Mr. Rowe?” Cecilia asked, while facing Gilbert. “Thank you.”

Resting his back on a paneled wall, he asked, “Ice?”

Instead of replying, she came closer and skimmed her fingertips over bruised his cheek; when Gilbert flinched, she whispered, “That’s why.”

After the ice was delivered, she shook out a handkerchief and filled it then instructed Gilbert to sit, surprised when he did so without argument. Gently, she rested the cold compress on his cheekbone. “It’s going to be black and blue by tomorrow.”

His lids lowered under her tender care.

He has the longest lashes I have ever seen of a gentleman.

“I’m sorry you had to endure that,” she whispered. Tenderly, she covered the damaged cheekbone and lean jaw, experiencing a frisson of guilty pleasure as she did so. “I would never have asked that of you.”

Gilbert sat the glass to the side then caged her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “I take full responsibility for my actions, but...I cannot help it when it comes to you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” he replied, his eyes dropping to her lips. “You’re so innocent in this, and I feel it my duty to protect you, to shield you from any other hurt.”

He lifted his hands to her jaw, tipping her head back. Anticipation shivered through her as she read the intent in his eyes: he was going to kiss her. Gilbert’s thumb stroked under her chin, the pupils in his eyes expanding.

When his tongue swept across her lips, it was only natural to part them. His kiss was warm and firm, dissolving her doubts in a wave of honeyed heat, but his pressure was gone as soon as it came.

“I’d feared you’d distance yourself from me after yesterday,” she blurted then her face went aflame.

His brows lowered, “Why?”

She gestured to the paper on his table. “I’m sure it’s there.”

Curious, Gilbert went to his desk, picked up that morning copy of the Times, and spun to the Scandal Sheets.

This humble reporter has officiated rumors that Lady Cecilia Hawkings,

Daughter of the Earl of Gillingham and Niece of the Viscount of Huntington, firmly called out the hypocrisy on Lady W— on the matter of gowns with low necklines.

It is reported Lady W— said, “The gown is unfortunate for your figure. The neckline is so low its vulgar.”

Lady Cecilia, with all the boldness of a judge, replied, verbatim, “When your granddaughter wore a gown like this to a ball last season, and after that, she wore a costume of made of pure gauze to a masquerade, you found no fault with her.... your blatant favoritism does not become you, my lady, especially at your refined age.”

Many are wondering how it is this wallflower has decided to become so forthright in the face of a scandal and has now shown the hypocrisy of the ton.

“I think her head has flown to the clouds because of the meagre attention the Duke of Pembroke is showing her,” Lady X sniffed. “She will be humbled when his attention turns away.”

Gilbert threw his head back and bellowed out a laugh, dropped the paper, and turned to her. “Why in God’s name would I shy away from you for that? When has the truth become some hateful and lies become so accepted?”

“It’s always been that way,” Cecilia shrugged one shoulder. “But you told me to keep my chin up, and I—I felt sickened about the blatant two-facedness and disdain amongst the ton.”

Still chuckling, Gilbert folded the paper and waved it. “There is absolutely nothing here for you to be ashamed about. Hell, I feel that I ought to give you a reward for this.”

“Your support is enough,” she replied.

Circling the table, Gilbert asked. “Are you sure there is nothing else?” His long-fingered hands circled her wrists, pulling her up from the couch. “There is nothing you would want?”

“No.”

“Liar,” he smirked.

He gave her another fleeting kiss then, and the taste it left her with was sweet sherry, heady and deliciously male. He kissed with absolute authority, and it made her crave more—until he pulled away.

The prickling of her skin and throbbing of her pulse points were in tempo with the flutters and trembles deep inside her heart. Most of all, the dizzying, ground-shifting sensation that undid her knees when he touched her.

He cupped her nape, smirking at her when she shivered which turned into a deeper trembling when his fingers dug into the hairs at the back of her head.

“Are you sure?”

“Stop teasing me,” she replied.

Devilishly, he asked. “And what am I teasing you about?”

Oh Belle, why do your words give me such helpless hope? Why did you tell me what happened between you and Marcus?

“Nothing—” She tried to pull away, but he stopped her.

As if he caught wind of her thoughts, he gave her a sharp, searching look. “What are you thinking about, kitten?”

Cecilia was sure her blush was reaching the top of her ears. “Nothing.”

The reply was habitual, it was the way she always countered when certain embarrassing and unclear circumstances made her unable to sort out what really was going on in her head. The searching gaze Gilbert pinned her with felt like it was pulling the secret out from her, and she would rather die than be expected to say her wicked fantasy aloud.

“Tell me what is making your skin hotter than a furnace?” he asked, holding her face between both hands.

The approval in his eyes made her heart thump faster. “I cannot ever let those words slip through my lips.”

“Why?” His gaze was firm but encouraging.

“Its...its wicked.”

“Tell me.” He slid a hand down her side and cupped her hip while he pulled her face down to his ear. “Whisper it to me if you would like.”

Sucking in a breath, she said, “My friend, Belle, said she and Marcus...” She whispered the tale of the lovemaking Belle had experienced with her husband-to-be on the desk in Marcus’ study. “She said she had never felt such pleasure before.”

Gilbert pulled away with a smirk then went to close the door. The firm slide of the latch made her breath catch, and when he turned to her, pure hungry lust was on his face.

She gasped as he spun her around and pulled her generous backside against his hard, clothed form. With one hand, he swept aside her hair, his lips skimming the graceful curve of her neck, kissing, licking, and nipping her sensitive skin, eliciting soft breathy moans from her.

His hands slid over her side while nosing at the nape of her neck. “Have you never read of such pleasure?”

“No.” she replied. “But I suppose it’s something men are aware of.”

“There are so more than *that*,” Gilbert said, leaning in, and he swept his arm across the desk, flinging everything to the floor. He then grasped Cecilia’s hips and while spinning her, sat her on the desk then planted her hands to the side.

“Brace yourself that like,” he ordered her.

With her body on the cool wood, Cecilia felt her heart race under breastbone. Gilbert lifted her legs, slipped her slipper off, and placed her foot on top of his thigh then repeated the same with the other foot.

His fingertips slid up her sheer stockings, but even with the fabric as a barrier, his touch felt lines of fire on her skin. Gilbert held her eyes while he slid his hands further, shifting her skirts up and up until Cecilia’s eyes clenched tight.

“Open your eyes, Cecilia,” he ordered her, his tone thick with undeniable command. “Look at me, and do not ever close your eyes when I kiss you.”

Her eyes flew open. “K-kiss? She said—”

“He used his fingers, yes.” Gilbert grinned as the material bunched softly on her waist in layers of silk and linen. “But I have something better in mind.”

“But you cannot—you cannot kiss me there!” she gaped.

His hands slid up her bare thighs. “Oh, yes, I can, and I will.”

She shivered at the kiss of the cool air against her legs, and the cool air flicked across her core. His eyes dropped to half-mast as she squirmed against the desk, unsure of what would come next, and she felt strung tight as his unreadable actions made her unsure how to proceed. She had placed herself in this position—but did she want to get out of it?

What Gilbert said sounded wickedly arousing, and would she regret not taking the chance to experience it before it slipped away?

“Please,” she begged.

His brow cocked. “Please what, kitten?”

“Touch me; do something,” she replied. “I feel like I am standing on an edge, and I don’t know where to fall.”

A sudden gush of wetness between her thighs made her squirm, and as she made to yank her skirts down, Gilbert’s nostrils flared and trapped her hands where they were.

“This, perhaps?” Gilbert asked, trailing his fingers up her inner thighs.

When she nodded, he moved his fingers with featherlight caresses, further up.

“And perhaps this?”

Cecilia nodded then squeaked, her short, jerky movements showing her growing excitement. At the touch of his fingertips to her womanhood, she gasped at the sudden flash of sensations that radiated from her center.

She could barely gasp in a breath before a soft, breathy moan left her mouth as his fingers caressed her intimately, touching her like she'd never been touched, creating a desire she'd never experienced.

He stroked her until she was wet with want and filled with a raging desire that had her arching into his hand.

“Gilbert,” she gasped, grabbing at his arms, not fully understanding what was unfurling inside her, but she didn't have the strength to stop and ask questions.

He went to his knees, hands gripping her thighs and pulling her hips to the edge of the desk while his expression was tight, the flesh drawn rigidly over his cheekbones, his eyes heavy with sensuality.

Pressing her hips up, he spread her thighs wide as he lowered his mouth to the swollen, wet curves of her aching quim and sealed his mouth over her bud. The first touch of his tongue to the center of her pleasure sent her mind

flailing.

With his hands firmly trapping her, his mouth worked mayhem on her senses. He licked at her drenched sex, licked her folds, parting them, and then he covered her nub with his lips, sucking it delicately. He paused to spear his tip inside her, piercing her.

She writhed underneath him, twisting, bucking against his mouth as he worked her swollen knot of burning need. Gilbert kept her skirting the line of pleasure and pain, never tipping her over.

He lowered himself back to her splayed legs and engulfed that bundle of pleasure into his mouth. Then he began to lick and suck it with firm destructive strokes.

Her toes clenched in her stockinged feet, draped over his shoulders as Cecilia arched her wet sex against his diabolical tongue. Then he took her clitoris between his teeth and sucked hard. Cecilia let out a broken gasp as she wordlessly begged for relief.

Her orgasm took her by surprise, sweeping over her in a wave of sharp, honeyed bliss, stealing the very breath from her body. She trembled in the aftermath as Gilbert was still pleasuring her.

Pulling away, he dropped kisses on her inner thighs, lowered her legs, and fixed her dress. Eyes dark with hunger, his thumb swept over his glistening lips. "You taste like a summer berry, wickedly delicious."

When he licked his lips, shameless arousal and shame poured through her. “That was...” exhilarating, sinful, exciting “...unexpected.”

“You didn’t know such things existed,” he grinned, eyes lowering. “Just as you didn’t know the reverse was true as well.”

“As in—” her gaze dropped to his groin, and her face flamed. “—my mouth...”

“On me, yes,” he replied while helping her off the desk and going to a cupboard to make two drinks. Handing her one, he leaned on the wall and crossed his ankles. “The art is called fellatio. What I just performed on you is called gamahuche.”

“You know sexual play.” She took a sip of the burning liquid and his lips quirked.

“You can say that.”

She looked up. “I want to ask how you do know all these things, but I think its best that I not ask questions I am not ready to hear the answers to. But I do want to know, who injured you.” Her gaze tightened. “Was it *him*?”

CHAPTER 16



*W*ith pleasure still humming through his veins, Gilbert sipped his drink. He didn't want to tell her what happened, but she needed to know.

"I found a way to track down Mullens through his convoluted mix of associates. Allan, Lord Jacksonville, was there with me, and we went to a tavern. There was a fight—"

"Where you got hurt," she said.

He inclined his head. "—and while we didn't find Mullens, I now know where he might be, and I am formulating a plan to fetter him out, like a rat from its nest."

She slid from her seat, set the drink aside and approached him. Her heart-shaped face was mired with worry, her big green eyes dark. Cecilia hesitated before touching his face and turning it to the left. "I don't like you putting yourself in danger."

Gilbert allowed her to manipulate his face anyway she wanted then held back the shiver when she traced over his jaw and his stubble. When her fingers traced over the shell of his ear, the most sensitive part of his body, he let out a soft moan.

“You didn’t ask, but I had to do it,” he replied. “We need to find Mullens before he decides to come for you, Cecilia. He probably remembers what happened, and he will do anything to keep it a secret.”

She pulled her finger away. “You think he will try to...”

“Silence you, yes, in the most final way,” Gilbert replied. “He might kill you to keep his foul act from being known.”

Wrapping her arms around her middle, Cecilia asked, “So your plan is to get to him first and then send him to Newgate.”

“If I can restrain myself and not put a bullet in him,” he replied, caging her chin with a thumb and forefinger. “That was my first instinct when I saw how he assaulted you.”

Tilting her head up, she asked, “First means there is a second, so what was you second?”

“Drawn and quartered,” he said, swiping his thumb over her bottom lip. “Tared and feathered or nailed to a cross and dangling from a tree limb. He is the scum of the earth, a mange-ridden dog who profits on the weakness of

others, be it a lust for blood, as you saw in the boxing ring, or well, lust for flesh, like at the bawdy house.”

Nibbling her lip, Cecilia turned from him and began to pick up the letters on the ground he had swept away. One of them was open, and she read an invitation to a ball in two days. “Will you be attending?”

“No,” he swept up the rest of them and dumped them on the table. Popping one open, he read, “Please attend this musicale; my daughter, Lady Ameilia Huntington, is hoping to meet you.”

He dropped that one then pulled another, “My niece, Lady Patricia, is newly widowed and would love to meet your acquaintance. You are formally invited for tea at—” He dropped that one too and picked up another. “Our daughter Honora is a day old, but we do believe you are a virtuous man willing to wait—”

Disgusted, he dropped the invitation and rubbed his temple. “And now, they are putting me on the marriage market for a child, Cecilia, a *babe*. No matter how polite the rejection is, they keep coming. I do not know how to deter these people.”

Picking up a card, she read a sentence that was nothing short of selling a young lady to Gilbert for marriage, and her stomach lurched in repulsion. An idea began to spin itself in her mind, one thread knitting the other like spider silk.

“What if there was a way for us to save each other,” Cecilia proposed. “What

if...what if we marry or pretend to at least. If it is known that we are engaged, it might deter Jeffrey from coming at me, will give you time to make a better plan on finding him, and it will stop the myriad of mamas from selling their daughters to you.”

His brows shot up, but soon, his golden gaze darkened with thought. His eyes shifted side to side as Gilbert considered the advantages and the ramifications of doing as she suggested. A line of positives outweighed the small list of negatives, and soon, he raked his hand through his hair.

Pulling away, Gilbert nodded, “That is a very sound stratagem.”

A puffing laugh left her, “You could have a bit more enthusiasm for it, you know. I may not be a mastermind in planning, but—”

He pulled her in slide his hands up her back and around nape before he locked their lips. The kiss was not soft and insistent, it was rough and hard. His tongue pushed into her mouth; her heart surrounded him.

With the press of his hand against her back urging her closer, she couldn't refuse. The hot spear of his tongue clashed with hers, intensifying her groans which then softened into tender mewls. It was enough for him, and he pulled away.

Gilbert brushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “I'm enthused.”

Her lips ticked down, but humor danced in her eyes. “If you say so.”

Taking her hand, he spun her a little, and she twirled. “Are you sure you were never a ballerina?”

“I tried,” she replied. “I never made it past the third position.”

“Speaking of positions,” he leaved in, “a friend of mine is putting on horserace in Newmarket. I would like you to attend with me.”

“A horserace?” she asked askance. “That is very...masculine pastime. I am not sure I would be comfortable there.”

His grin was wicked. “How much would you want to wager that when the ton knows I shall be attending, the number of ladies who will attend will be innumerable.”

Cecilia shook her head, “You, sir, are diabolical.”

“It’s one of my best qualities.”

* * *

Firmly holding her parasol, Cecilia kept her eyes on the grandstand overlooking the field and refrained from rolling her eyes. Gilbert’s assumption was right, and even though the guests for the private race had limits, an even number of pastel-clad ladies were in appearance as lords.

“I did not know women patronized races,” Belle blinked.

“They do not,” Cecilia replied while they passed the rowdy betting station, her half boots barely missing a pile of questionable green mud. “Gilbert told me that the moment it is known he will attend, half the eligible ladies vying for his hand would appear.”

“I doubt he would see anyone but you.” Belle smiled slyly. “In that dress, you’ll draw the eye of a hundred-year-old celibate monk.”

While half covered by her dove gray coat, the gown of bronze Gros de Naples silk taffeta had V-neckline decorated with pleated silk organza and showed her bosom at an advantage.

Cecilia brushed a gloved hand down her skirts, “You think so?”

“I know so,” Belle said, her ivory skirts swaying as they took the steps to the main building that had a wide veranda to the north of the main floor and a huge balcony above.

Square tables were lined at the front viewing windows, at the far left stood a table filled with refreshment items and hot kettles, and below were twelve or more concession booths.

After a quick look around the room and not seeing Gilbert, concern became a lump in her stomach. “He’s not here.”

“I’m sure he’ll be along shortly,” Belle replied. “He is a busy man after all.”

“I’m sure you’re right.” Cecilia conceded.

“Pardon me,” a quiet voice said behind them. “Lady Cecilia?”

Turning, she found the Earl of Jacksonville’s sister, Emily, Cecilia believed her name was, staring at them from the threshold, very fetching in a day gown of plum and mauve with gown. She looked like a queen, regal and perfect, her dark hair piled high on her crown and curling tendrils framing her face.

“I am,” she replied. “Lady Emily, correct?”

“The very same,” the outspoken lady replied. “Lady Anabelle, I believe. Allan has told me you two are fast friends. My good wishes on your marriage.”

“Thank you,” Belle replied. “Are you seated? If not, we’d be happy to share a table.”

“No, thank you,” Lady Emily replied. “I’m here with a few friends of mine as well. Lady Cecilia, I’m asking you to please pass this message along to His Grace. My brother needs to see him as soon as he is able. I would give him the message myself, but I fear that the Duke is not pleased with me at the moment. He’s taken up a profoundly protective stance when it comes to you.”

For good reason. And even now, you've not apologized for your snub.

“I’ll give him the message,” Cecilia replied with a faint smile.

When they parted, Belle dropped her voice, “I do believe I just saw ice begin to form on the door—”

“Shh,” Cecilia hushed her as they took their places. “She’s not a witch.”

“Not from where I’m standing.” Belle’s lips had ticked down. “She’s clearly like others, hating you for who you naturally are and even more, envious that you have so artlessly have secured the attention of the most eligible bachelor of the year while they cannot.”

His attention has come because of something I dare not tell you...

Guilt and sorrow crawled its way up Cecilia’s chest as she swallowed the words she longed to tell her friend, but doing so would cause more problems than she could stand. She comforted herself with the thought that it wouldn’t be too long now before she told Belle the truth. They had to find and capture Jeffrey first then with him behind bars at Newgate, she would be free to spill her secrets.

“I suppose so,” she replied while retrieving her fan from her reticule and secretly praying for Gilbert to appear.

The races started, and a party of four men grumbled with dissatisfaction when the first run ended. She kept looking for Gilbert to appear, but as the minutes ticked by, tension crept up the back of her neck. Fear began to spin its jagged strands into her heart as well, and Cecilia began to secretly look around to find Jeffrey hiding in the shadows.

She dearly wished Gilbert was there, watching with possessive pride. His presence gave her confidence, calmed her, made her trust that she was safe.

Maybe they should have taken the army of footmen and maids Marcus sent with Belle wherever she went instead of the sole carriage man and Belle's lady's maid.

"Are you all, right?" Belle asked. "You seem agitated."

"I'm worried about Gi—His Grace," Cecilia replied as a light rain began to fall. "He's never tardy."

"Do you think something has happened to him?" Belle asked, her lips pressing tight in concern. "I have the impression that he can handle himself."

"He can," Cecilia replied. "But that doesn't stop any anomalies from happening. He hasn't told me, but I imagine not a lot of others are happy a businessman from Gentry is now over their heads."

The rain grew harder, but that didn't stop the jockeys from spurring their mounts down the track—until a fierce crack sounded in the air and a horse, mid leap, was propelled into another horse, taking both animals and riders down in a flurry of rain and mud.

Another gunshot rang out, and mayhem ensued with another horse screaming as it went down and caused three more horses and riders to spin off course, crash into the ground, and another five went down with them.

Stunned motionless, Cecilia gasped, “I—” A bullet ricochet off the beam behind them, and she sprung into motion, grabbing Belle and rushing to the interior of the tower, as was everyone else, fleeing from the wild gunshot.

“We'll rush to my carriage,” Belle called as they hurried down the stairs, set on dashing to the carriage while the deluge continued. “Come.”

By the time they got through the door, anarchy was on the ground; the horses had left the raceway, jockeys were trying to catch their reins, and lords were running through the rain, some slipping, others flailing.

Frightened, Cecilia turned to find Belle and realized with a sudden shock that her friend was nowhere to be seen.

Spinning, Cecilia tried to find her friend, but through the pouring rain, spotted—was that *Jeffrey*? Gasping, she stumbled away and looked again, but he was gone, if he had been there at all.

Another gunshot sent the people into fervor to get away. Cecilia felt as if she were spinning in place all around her, and all she could see was Jeffrey's face. She felt herself being pushed this way and that, and with the rain and mud, it was a miracle she was still upright.

She was barely aware of getting drenched to the bone as the fear of getting attacked by Jeffrey trumped every other sensation. The odor of horseflesh, leather, and unwashed skin made her nauseated, and the shouts around her too loud.

No one seemed to be looking at her, yet she could feel something—or someone—frightening her in the sea of facelessness of the crowd and the pouring rain. Raw panic clawed her insides as she struggled desperately to get free.

Where was Belle?

Where was Gilbert?

Someone grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the way, and before she knew who it was, she screamed at the sudden motion and her heel, her ankle gave a horrid wrench.

The man was undeterred, pulling her under the eaves of the betting room and then turned to block the rain from her with his body. The lapels of his coat showed the rumpled uniform of a Bow Street Runner.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said quietly. “His Grace, the Duke of Pembroke, has retained my and three other runners service to protect you in his absence,” the man explained. “My name is David Healy, my lady.”

She sucked in a breath. “M-my thanks, Mr. Healy. I—I—” Her teeth were starting to chatter, and the cold deluge had made her coat sodden and her dress plastered to her body. “My friend,” she managed to blurt, “where is she?”

“I do not know, my lady,” he replied. “But my post is to protect you.”

Sickening worry twisted her heart at the fear Belle was injured and that she was incapable of helping her. Her eyes turned the raceway, unsure of what to do next when like Moses before the Red Sea, the crowd seemed to part as one man strode through it.

Gilbert—and he looked livid.

His hair was plastered to his head and neck, and his cravat was a sodden lump below his neck, but he didn’t seem to care. His head was swiveling to and fro, searching, hopefully for Cecillia.

“Sir!” Healy shouted, and Gilbert’s head snapped to them then he took off sprinting.

The moment he came to her side, his arm wrapped around her waist, and she drew from the comfort he gave her.

“God above,” he swore, “I thought you were hurt.”

“Belle,” Cecilia uttered thickly. “Belle is missing. She got torn away from us when the melee started.”

“Go find her, and send us word when you do, Healy,” Gilbert ordered the runner. “And thank you for protecting Lady Cecilia.”

The man tipped his hat and took off in the rain while Gilbert turned to her, removed his coat, and draped it over her head. “Are you all right, sweetheart?” When she nodded, he added, “Come. We’re leaving this place, now.”

“I think—” She winced as they moved off. “I think I turned my ankle the wrong way.”

“I’ve got you. Hold on.” Without another word, his powerful arms lifted her from the ground in a bridal carry, and pressing her against his firm chest, Gilbert strode off to his waiting carriage.

The rain had picked up by the time they were safely ensconced in the vehicle. Inside, he gently removed his jacket and peeled her sodden coat off before wrapping her up in his jacket once more. True sorrow and regret rested in his gaze as he dropped the window shade and pulled her into his lap.

“I’m sorry,” he said, removing a wet tendril from her eyes. “I should have been there.”

“W-what kept y-you?” she shivered.

“A sudden emergency at the docks while I was showing Baron Dalton around,” Gilbert replied tenderly. “I apologize.”

“D-don’t be.” She burrowed into his heat. “You sent the r-runners to p-protect me.”

“I did,” he replied. “But I wished I were there instead.”

She shook her head, “T-there was a gunshot down b-below, but it was only when one was aimed at the grandstand that I k-knew we had to run. Belle and I ran, and the rain came...” she swallowed. “...I think I saw Jeffrey in the crowd...but I—I’m not sure it was him.”

“*What?*” Gilbert snapped.

CHAPTER 17



*H*is question reverberated in the air, and anger unfurled like the first eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. The first rumble rocked his chest, and the rage began to bubble. He had no doubt that if Mullens had been there, he had started the mayhem.

“I should have been there,” he replied tightly. “I would have stopped him.”

Cecilia shook her head while pink bloomed on her cheeks. “I’m not sure it was him. The rain was falling so hard, I was panicked and with the fear of J-Jeffery still lingering in my m-mind, I-I... it could have been anyone I—”

“Shh, sweetheart. It’s all right.”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, feeling comforted that she was alive and uninjured. A smile curved at his lips as she nestled deeper into his side. Gilbert had seen cats preening at the warmth of the fireplace or in a patch of sun, and Cecilia looked exactly like one.

“Comfortable?” he asked, dryly.

“You’re so warm,” she replied softly. “You’re practically radiating heat. It is impossible not to crave it. I want to burrow into your side and never move again.” She peeked up from him with her thick, water matted lashes. “Where are we going? My home.”

She had warmed up enough to keep her voice stable. “No, we’re going to mine.”

With no protest from her, Gilbert kept her close to him, right above his heart, not caring that the wetness from her dress seeped into his chest. It mattered nothing to him; clothes were replaceable, but Cecilia was not.

The low-cut dress she wore had slipped and bared more of her breast than he knew she was aware of. The bodice was so wet, the silk was almost transparent, and he saw the outline of her pert nipple through it. The sudden urge to suckle on it made another surge of heat tighten his belly.

“I think we’re already halfway there,” he murmured then realized Cecilia was asleep.

God, she was beautiful when she was slept, her lips were rosy and plump, and his gaze roamed over her delicate bone structure; her skin was as smooth and flawless as porcelain.

He ached to see the rest of her.

Tucking her face into the crook of his neck, he loved to feel her soft breaths on his skin. In her sleep, she sighed with pleasure as he ran a possessive hand through her hair.

The carriage came to his doorway, and while a footman rushed to open the door with an umbrella, Gilbert briefly ordered him to take the carriage and go get the physician, explaining the Cecilia might have injured her ankle.

He also ordered him to fetch the inspector from Bow Street before he gathered her into his arms and stepped out quickly. He strode through the foyer, calling a maid to his side.

“We have a guest room ready, do we not?” he asked.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she replied.

“Prepare a bath for Miss Cecilia when she wakes,” he ordered. “Then assist her with the bath and a light meal. I’ll be busy in the meantime.”

“I understand, Your Grace,” the maid bowed her head.

In the guest room, he asked for towels to be brought, and when they were laid on the bed, he gently rested Cecilia there. Pausing to brush her damp hair away, he added, “The physician is coming to see her. Please attend to her during that as well.”

“I will, Your Grace,” she replied.

When Cecilia was settled, he left for his room, changed into dry clothes, then made it to his study just in time for Rowe to admit the head constable, Mr. Irving, and Mr. David Healy, the man who had saved Cecilia hours before.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” Gilbert started. “Earlier today, there was mayhem at the racetrack, and I believe I know why. The same man we’ve been hunting, Jeffrey Mullens, might have been there. I suspect it might have been he who fired the guns, causing the horse to revolt.”

“Why would he have done that?” Irving asked.

“Because the lady he nearly assaulted was there,” Gilbert replied. “And he is trying to scare her.”

“But to go such lengths?” Healy asked.

Gilbert eyed him. “Mullens is not to be underestimated or trifled with. He has connections all through the *ton* and in the underworld. I have given you the locations he will frequent. Will you find him, or will I have to drive him out myself?”

His demanding tone made the runner's back snap even straighter, and his eyes narrowed in determination. “We will find him, Your Garce.”

“Sir,” the Constable nodded.

“I found that Lady Anabelle was separated from you and taken by her driver and footman when the crowd descended on the two,” Healy explained. “She was afraid for your when I managed to tell Cecilia she was safe with you, Your Garce.”

“Thank you, Healy,” Gilbert replied. “Now, about Mullens. Find him before I do,” Gilbert ordered them, his warning tone hinting that Jeffrey would not make it out alive if Gilbert found him first.

* * *

Later that evening, while the rains were still pouring down the window at dusk and the thick rivulets made thick streaks down the panes, Gilbert lounged by the window, one hand stuck in his pocket and the other holding a glass of sherry. He glanced back to the letter resting on his desk, a report from Constable Healey about the races.

He had sent notice to Cecilia’s aunt about her injury and explained that he didn’t want to exasperate it while promising to return her the next day.

A low fire was flickering in the marble fireplace above which hung portraits of the late Duke, the man who had given Gilbert his estate and title, Maximillian Weatherby. The man’s fierce eyes were beacons in the hazy night.

Depending on the angle, sometimes, Gilbert felt the look was approving but

other times, judging but all around, completely regal and dignified. From this angle, the man's painted face looked indifferent.

“Of all the days, this is the sole night you have no opinions?” Gilbert asked wryly after shipping the drink. “I suppose you think I am playing with fire.”

His words were doorways to his inner thoughts.

Cecilia had asked him, more times than he wanted to count, what his intentions for her were...and Gilbert had failed to answer her because—and this was rare—for once, he didn't know his mind.

She was not one of those worldly women who were only interested in pleasure or feeding their fancy. Cecilia was the sort that deserved marriage and love, care, commitment, and a husband, but... all he could offer her was his (undue) possessiveness, protection, and every smoldering desire.

His temples throbbed with frustration and undecidedness. He couldn't deny that his attraction to Cecilia and his commitment to keeping her safe were muddying his thinking.

While this fake courtship—one to protect her and give him some time to settled into ducal duties without the constant barrage of women throwing themselves at him—could do some good, it also could do more harm that they expected.

I know she has more feelings for me than we accounted for... and that might

be my fault. Would a fake courtship make it harder for us to remember this is only fake?

We're mainly doing this to make sure Jeffrey is out of her life and will never torment her again. We need to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

As he'd contemplated the best way to get their plans back on track, Gilbert still wrestled with his conscience. When they parted ways, would he lose her forever? He knew her chances for marriage would increase exponentially when their 'courtship' faded away.

Will I break her heart irreparably?

He dragged a hand through his hair, his eyes closing for a brief instant. The warring inside him was driving him mad. He didn't even know who he was anymore.

His gaze trailed over the room, lingering on the tall bookcases that lined the opposite end of the room. If only there was a manual there to solve his predicament.

"Gilbert?" Cecilia's soft voice came from the doorway, and he looked up.

She was clad in a dark silken robe, and he saw peeks of her white chemise peeking out under edge of the silken edge. Her hair was down around her shoulders, and she looked sleep ruffled.

He sat the glass down and rounded the table. “Are you feeling better?”

“The physician said, there was no harm done and an hour or so of rest would fix the tense muscle. I’ve had three,” she replied, coming closer. “I wanted to share dinner with you.”

Resting his hands on her shoulders, he explained, “I was busy with the Runners, and I didn’t want to disturb you. I know you’ve had a very distressful day.”

“Well, it’s over now, and I would rather your company than staring at the walls of your nicely appointed guest chamber.” Cecilia looked up through her lashes, naturally seductively. “Can you spare some time with me?”

“You don’t have to ask,” Gilbert said, gesturing to his couch. “Would you like some tea, something to eat?”

She nodded to his glass. “I’d like some sherry.”

Wordlessly, he poured her a glass, and he sat beside her but angled his body so their eyes could meet. “I don’t want to bring up any distress, but earlier, were you sure you saw Jeffrey there?”

With her elbows on her knees—a decidedly unladylike pose—Cecilia held the glass, and her eyes went shadowed. “It was all in a blur to be honest. I was panicking with the gunshot and the rain, and I thought I saw his bright blond hair and figure.

“You know how tall Jeffrey is; he is easy to see over a crowd of people, and I—I truly believe I saw him there, smirking at me. Not leering or trying to undress me with his eyes, just...sadistically smirking at me as if he knew how it would make me fret and throw me off kilter. But mayhap I was wrong,” she explained.

He felt the old helpless anger surge inside him again. “I wish I had been there. But Constable Healy had reported that by all accounts, no one was harmed, and no horse was shot either. The perpetrator must have let out a round into the air to start the mayhem.”

She looked up, a lock of her hair turned burnished gold by the firelight. “You know the old adage, *when you fear a foe, fear crushes your strength, and this weakness gives strength to your opponents*. The bard knew all this to be true, and I cannot help but feel helpless when it comes to Jeffrey. I feel as if I am sitting still with a blindfold on, just waiting for him to strike—but not knowing what I’ll do when he does.”

Pain lanced it doubled-edge sword right through Gilberts heat; no one should have to feel that way about anyone, much less a pissant like Jeffrey Mullens.

Gilbert gently pried the glass from her, set it on the end table, then pulled her into his arms. He didn’t know why—perhaps to comfort her or to comfort himself? He wasn’t entirely sure.

He’d been so caught up in his own troubles and frustration with Mullens constantly slipping out of his grasp that he had selfishly not considered such an obvious dilemma for Cecilia.

He couldn't, in good conscience, keep her trapped up in a cage like a bird with a broken wing...but the fear of getting blindsided by that scapegrace turned his stomach on its end. Now, he felt helpless.

“Ceilia, I wish—”

“If it's all right with you, I don't want to talk about him anymore.” She pulled away and reached for the glass, drinking half its contents. “I don't want to make you worry more than you have to.”

Gently, he reached for her face. “What would you like to do instead?”

She shifted. “Kiss me...please?”

There was still a separation between their bodies, so he reached over for her, pulling her into his lap, shifting her body a little so it would be easy for them to touch. He slid a knee between her legs, and she half straddled him; the intimacy of it had heat flushing through her entire body.

Gilbert felt the heat of it through his clothes, and he buried his face in the crook of her neck, her cheek resting against the side of his jaw. He pressed a soft kiss to the exposed arch of her throat then trailed kisses up to her jaw and then pressed his lips on hers.

He kissed her lightly and tenderly until the fire smoldering in his chest flared

awake, and he kissed her hard and deeply; Cecilia responded with shameless eagerness and intense lust.

Undaunted, he held her hips, stood with her in her arms, left the study, crossed the deserted halls, carried her into her guest room, and kicked the door closed with his heel. Spinning, he pressed her against the wall and slid his hands up her bodice and cupped her unfettered breasts.

“Gil-bert—”

He cupped her cheek with his other hand, peppering soft kisses over her lips then down to her collar. She arched her neck, shivering as her skin became warm and flushed. Clutching his shoulder, Cecilia held fast.

“Cecilia,” he murmured, “may I undress you?”

“Yes,” she replied.

Pulling from the door, he sat her on her feet, held her gaze, and peeled her robe apart. Dressed in her thin chemise, he turned her towards the floor length brass mirror and shifted her hair to the side. Running his nose up the side of her neck, he whispered, “Keep your eyes on the mirror.”

He gently unfastened the strings of her chemise, and with it loose, he trailed his fingers down the bodice, feeling the quick, shallow surges of her breath. Smiling, he peeled the fabric from her shoulders and removed it from her bodice, baring the swell of her plump breasts.

Deliberately slow, he slid his arms under hers and placed his hands flat on her belly; the heat of his hands on her bare skin made her shiver. When he ran a long finger over the trembling hills of white flesh, she had to bite her lip to keep from moaning; he slowly cupped both breasts and heard her gasp with pleasure.

Her breasts were firm, and he savored the luxurious weight in his palms, found her nipples, and played with them. Cecilia shuddered as his fingers teased her erect nipples making his belly tighten in need. Gilbert's lips trailed kisses down her throat, and her skin tasted like lavender and lily oil.

Cecilia's left hand slid up his shoulder, skimmed over his neck, and speared her fingers into his hair. Her wet lips parted, a soft, sinful moan left her lips, and she arched her back, pressing into him.

Pressing his prominent harness into her rounded backside, Gilbert sealed his mouth on the crook of the back of her neck and sucked. God, he wanted this woman so much; it felt like a power out of his control.

"Cecilia." He bit her ear. "Do you want more?"

CHAPTER 18



“*M*ore,” she moaned.

The tips of her breasts were as tight and hard as diamond shards, and a shocking wetness coated her core. Gilbert’s hands were diabolical, and everywhere he touched, fire laced right through her body, searing right through her veins, and setting her blood alight.

His callused hands rubbed against her soft skin, sending shivers up her spine; everywhere he touched felt hot and thrumming with sweet fire.

“Look at your reflection,” Gilbert ordered her softly. “See how stunning you are.”

Peeling her eyes opened, the lady she saw in the mirror was not the woman she saw in the daytime. The flickering shadows showed a woman, her skin flushed, her eyes alight with desire, and her mouth kiss-plump and open in longing.

Her hair was mussed, falling in tangled tumbles over her shoulder, and Gilbert's long fingers were covering her breasts, his thumbs and forefingers teasing her to madness.

"You're beautiful, Cecilia," he murmured, his sharp golden eyes meeting hers in the mirror. "You are a beautiful, passionate, brilliant, sensual woman who deserves pleasure and protection. Do you believe me?"

"I..." she gasped as his hands stroked down her belly. Cecilia found it hard to concentrate when pleasure she had never felt before possessed every nerve in her body. "I... believe you."

Gently, he pulled the chemise up, pooling at her waist, and over her head, and gently, he dipped, slid his arms under her knees, lifted her, and with three large steps, he rested her on the bed behind them.

The flickering fire changed his face into a study of severity, the shadows carved his jaw in a slab of flint, his eyes glittered gold, and the light shimmered over his hair. Mesmerized, Cecilia cupped his cheek and ran her thumb over his cheekbone.

Rain had picked up on the panes again, but it all felt like a dull, unnecessary noise in the background as she felt absorbed by his eyes. The emotions flickering in his eyes were changing so quickly, she could not read them.

"Gilbert," she paused, "have you ever loved a lady?"

He twisted his head to kiss her palm. “No. I have had boyish infatuations, but I have not loved a lady. To be fair, I haven’t given myself the time or reason to form a bond with a lady. You are the first.”

His words made her breath hitch. “I am?”

Pulling away from her, Gilbert drew his hand through the soft valley of her breast before his mouth followed the path. Varying from the path, he took her nipple into his mouth and began to suckle. His mouth tugged at her nipple as a moan of sweet ecstasy escaped from her lips, driving his hand lower.

Slowly his hand moved over her hips, slid it under her knee, and gently popped her leg up. She shifted to the side to give him more access to her, and Gilbert’s hand traveled over the inside of her firm thighs. Cecilia hesitated before parting her legs, giving him access to her core.

He shifted his lips to her other breast, and she tensed a little at his touch but slowly relaxed, and when his fingers swept up her core, Cecilia bit back a cry at how shockingly wet she was for him.

She wrapped her arms around him as his fingers found her soft folds and began to lightly rub up and down her cleft; Cecilia squirmed and pushed back with an unspoken demand for more.

Her breath came more quickly, and her pulse pounded in her ears as Gilbert’s fingers delved into the pool of gathered moisture between the swollen inner lips of her puss until they were coated in it and glided intimately over, bringing fierce pleasure as he lightly stroked her nub.

“You feel like the softest silk.” Braced on an elbow to the side of her, Gilbert suckled on her earlobe. “And I know for sure you taste like heaven.”

Cecilia couldn't feel embarrassed as he touched her again, and this time his fingers dipped into her opening. The breach felt...odd.

“This won't hurt, sweeting,” he murmured. “If you let me, I can make you feel so very good. Do you believe me?”

Giving him a trusting look, Cecilia replied, “Always,” then the hard press on her nub made her clench the sheets.

“Good girl.” His firm hold on the center of her pleasure had her breath hitching, and when he slowly diddled the plump bud, her hips canted up.

He slid a finger down her folds again with tender care, he fingered her, and she relaxed enough for him to sink one inside.

“Are you all right, darling?”

“Yes... I think so.”

When she gave him no signs of discomfort, he drove deeper, and her hips began to move, her sheath taking his penetration with lush abandon. While

the new sensation spiraled through her body, Cecilia could feel Gilbert's intent eye watching as he continued to plunge into her hole.

"God's blood, you're sinfully tight," he growled tightly.

While stroking her bold clit, their mouths collided in a hot, hungry tangle of tongues. She felt him nudge deeper, deeper yet, and her muscles clenched as a familiar sensation spilled through her veins.

"Oh... oh my..." she panted. "*More.*"

With an obliging growl, his finger thrust deeper and deeper, and she panted as the tension in her coiled tighter and tighter. The noises that left her mouth increased in volume, but she had little control over it.

"Come for me, darling," he said.

Then his thumb circled her pearl as he simultaneously caressed her inner walls, and Cecilia sucked in a breath as heat seared through her veins. She arched her back and grabbed his hand to hold him in place.

Her entire body shook, and her eyes sprang open as she tried to come to grips with what was happening to her, her mouth opened to scream, and Gilbert quickly covered her mouth with his as she exploded in his arms.

He pulled her naked form to his chest while his lips sealed over hers. The kiss

was soft and comforting, but while the waves of pleasure ebbed and flowed inside her, Cecilia could feel his prominent erection on her hip.

Pulling away from his kiss, she whispered, "I know you're still aroused, Gilbert. Would you...would you teach me how to pleasure you as well?"

Gilbert peered at her, his eyes dark with desire, and after a searching moment, he took her hand and placed it atop his length. Though clothed, she could feel the length and thickness and heat of him. He kept her hand there even while her face flamed with unease.

"While I would love nothing more," he said huskily and pressed her hand down a little more, "it's not the time yet."

Her gaze dimmed with confusion. "Why not?"

"Because," he said, "if I ever get your hand or mouth on me, I won't stop. I would want to have all of you, Cecilia. *All of you.*"

She sucked her lip in. "I see."

Levering up, he pinned her with a look. "Do you? The man who shall claim you must be in love with you for him to make love to you."

A tendril of hurt spiraled out and wrapped tightly around her heart. She kept her tone civil while wrapping her arms around her exposed breasts.

“Meaning, you’re not in love with me.”

He sat up and wrapped the sheets around her, expression tight. “I care for you, Cecilia, I truly do, and I am more protective of you than I have the right to be. If I had the power, I would hide you away and make sure you were protected day and night, but I can’t.”

Gripping her chin, he added, “Do not ever doubt that I desire you. I crave your touch, and your eyes have me under a spell. Kissing you is like setting a match to the powder keg of my suppressed desires. The lust I feel for you has been kept in check by sheer force of will. I cannot let my emotions rule me, not now when I need to keep my focus on the ducal post.”

Cecilia knew she should not be hurt—Gilbert had not promised her anything—but her heart still chilled with dull pain. “I understand.”

His face twisted. “I’ve hurt you, haven’t I?”

She shook her head, “No, you haven’t. You’ve never promised me anything except protecting me from my treacherous cousin, Gilbert. It is not your fault my foolish heart tripped over itself and decided otherwise.”

This time, he caged her face in both hands. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She mustered her courage and common sense. Maybe she had read too many romance novels, and the vain ideals were twisting this moment into something it wasn’t. Slipping out from the sheets, she dressed in her

discarded chemise. “Are you staying with me tonight?”

“No,” Gilbert moved away. “I have some work to finish, so I will be back in my study.”

Dressed, Cecilia got back between the sheets. “Good night then.”

Gilbert lingered in the doorway. “I am sorry for disappointing you.”

“You haven’t,” she said kindly. “Good night, Gilbert.”

His expression was tormented and uneasy, but he nodded and slipped away from the room like a shadow. Turning away, Cecilia fought back the turmoil in her heart, determined not to let her throat and eyes burn with the realization that she was falling in love with Gilbert... and that he would likely never love her back.

* * *

“Cecilia, dear,” Aunt Letitia asked, stepping into her room two hours after Gilbert’s carriage man had dropped her home, “a moment?”

Looking up from her book, trying to forget that she was attending a ball that evening, one that Gilbert may or may not be present at, she replied, “Sure, Aunt. Is there a problem?”

“I hope not.” Her aunt’s spidery hands fluttered up to nervously tap at the brooch on her lapel. “It’s about His Grace and banning us from his home. It’s been a week, and I feel very...concerned about Jeffrey.”

“You shouldn’t, aunt,” Cecilia held her tone light. “Jeffrey is in the best place he could ever be. I know he is getting the best treatment from His Grace's physician. The Duke of Pembroke gave you his word, remember.”

“I know, but that does not make me worry less.” Aunt Letitia sighed while now fiddling with her pearls. “He is my son, Cecilia, my innocent boy who got marauded by wicked blackguards and miscreants. I worry.”

“He is not that innocent, aunt,” Cecilia said suddenly. Her suddenly brash words had bubbled up from a well of frustration. “Surely, you have heard the rumors about him.”

“All unfounded poppycock.” Aunt Letitia waved her hand. “Lady Ophelia was a liar and a flirt. This is all her fault, you know; she was a beautiful, shallow flirt and had all the gentlemen trotting after her that Season. She played Jeffrey like a marionette, had him dancing for her like a fool, then spouted malicious lies about him leaving her on a deserted street before she upped and married that other man.”

So, her aunt had heard about Lady Ophelia, but her blind faith in Jeffrey had made her dismiss the lady’s claims; this was the first time Cecilia had heard this.

“Beg your pardon Aunt? You knew Jeffrey did such a thing? He left her on

the street to pay a bet, and hooligans came upon her. The policeman she is married to now rescued her in the nick of time.”

“Jeffrey told me, she ran off, and he had to chase her,” Aunt Letitia replied. “But that is not the matter here; I am wondering why we cannot see our son. Barnard tells me not to worry, but that only makes me worry more—”

Absolutely galled about her aunts’ blind trust in a man who had no scruples in trying to violate her, Cecilia mouth dropped open.

“—and I can only imagine the worst of the worst happening to my dear boy.” Letitia was spinning a full-on Cheltenham Tragedy while Cecilia could not believe her ears.

Gilbert was right when he’d told Cecilia how spoiled and entitled Jeffrey was, and the only way he could have grown to such impudence was because he had parents who had willingly woven wool around their eyes. She was lost for words but was fortunately saved from saying something she would regret when a footman came in bearing a small package.

“Please forgive my interruption, My Ladies,” he bowed. “This package was delivered for you, Lady Cecilia. It’s from the Duke of Pembroke.”

“Thank you,” Cecili replied taking the small wooden box. There was a delicate silver ribbon wrapped around it and tied off with a bow. She set it aside for later.

“Aunt—”

“You were there last night, were you not?” Aunt Letitia asked. “Were you able to see him? Please tell me you saw Jeffrey.”

“I...” Cecilia paused. “I did. He’s still unconscious, Aunt, but I think I overheard the doctor telling His Grace that Jeffrey moved his hand once.”

Her aunt’s entire frame deflated as the worry she carried left her, and Aunt Letitia pressed her hand to her heart. “Oh, my goodness. You don’t know how much that comforts me. You’ve given me such relief, my dear.”

Forcing a smile, Cecilia replied, “He’ll be fine, Aunt.”

“Thank you, dear.” The matron stood and patted Cecilia’s hand. She made to leave but stopped. “When you were at his home, did anything untoward happen because—”

“No, Aunt,” Cecilia shook her head. “He had his maid and a doctor attend to me. He only came to say good night—” in the best, sensual way “—and from what I know, he stayed in his study all night with work.”

“Good, good.” Her aunt nodded. “I’ll send Fanny up when you’re ready to prepare for the ball.”

“Thank you, Aunt,” she replied.

Deciding not to agonize over how delusional her aunt was, Cecilia reached for the box and fingered the ribbon. It was so soft and silky, and she didn't want to undo the perfect bow, but she untied it and lifted the latch on the small box.

There, on a bed of white satin, lay a ring of unimaginable splendor—a five-stone ring set with natural emeralds and old mine cut diamonds. The craftsmanship was exceptional with filigree detailing and graduated pommels around the band.

“Is this...” Her fingers trembled reaching for the band, but her fingers felt a card under the silk bed. Plucking it out, she read, “If we are engaged, we should look the part. Keep this until I speak to your uncle.”

Stunned, Cecilia wondered what to do and eventually threaded the ribbon through the ring and made a necklace out of it. She wanted to keep it close and dear to her heart and decided to wear it under her dress for the ball that evening.

“Now...about the dress....”

CHAPTER 19



Guilt and shame rested on Gilbert's heart, as cold as winter's ice and heavy as lead. He had not slept a wink the night before because he knew—simply knew—that his frank words had broken something inside Cecilia.

The emotions had clawed his insides to shreds, and at some point, past midnight, he'd given up on the idea of sleep entirely and returned to his study to work. Rowe had found him there at sunrise with a cup of coffee and a sympathetic smile.

Now, hours later, he was heading to a ball he had no intention of enjoying. The only damned reason he was stepping foot into the place was to find Cecilia and try to explain his blunder last night.

“But what do I saw to mend a broken heart....” he grumbled. “I know she sees more of me than I see of myself, but what do I say? Assurance that the next man who comes after me will be the love of her life is paltry comfort.”

But why...why so rigid? Why so adamant on not feeling anything...or is it

that I am not allowing myself to feel anything?

Arriving at the Mayfair mansion, Gilbert belatedly realized the ball was a crush. Mirrored walls amplified the seemingly endless throng of people, all dressed in ornate finery; washed ivory covered the walls. The mock ruined gilded columns—that were supposed to mirror the ruins of the Athenian temple—gave the guests nooks to hide in.

“Where the devil am I going to find her... if she is here at all,” he muttered.

“Your Grace,” Lady Lavinia approached him, her hair a rippling platinum river to her waist, “so pleased to see you. Would you be interested in picking up the conversation where we left off?”

“No,” Gilbert said curtly. He did not have the time—or patience—for niceties. “Have you seen Lady Cecilia tonight? I need to speak with her.”

Lavina’s face twisted in displeasure, but the expression vanished a moment later. “I believe I saw her heading to the garden.”

With a quick nod, Gilbert headed out, past a door, and into the dark walk, the lamps lighting his way with a weak amber sheen. He peered through the bushes and shadowed nooks with growing trepidation until he realized he might have circled the garden twofold—with no Cecilia—and that Lavina had taken him for a fool.

Fury spiked in his veins, and he spun back to the house, determined to find

the one person he had gone there to meet. As he entered the main room, from the corner of his eyes he spotted Lavinia gesturing to two other ladies, and they headed towards the deserted refreshment rooms.

Following them, he lingered away from the doorway while the three approached Cecilia who was having a drink of water in the corner. Gilbert paused to appreciate her embroidered gown of pale blue net over a white satin underdress.

His eyes swept up to the tiny pearls threaded through her flaxen hair which was swept into a high topknot with tendrils curling down her neck.

“What bewitchment have you put the Duke of Pembroke under?” Lavinia snapped. “He is here, asking for *you* of all people.”

Cecilia rested the cup, and it did not pass Gilbert’s attention how her hand trembled. “I didn’t do anything. His Grace and I have a—”

“A what?” Lavinia sneered. “Certainly not a romance because who would wish to touch *you*?”

The poor girl reached up around her neck but dropped her hand, but Lavinia grabbed Cecilia’s wrist and gripped it tightly enough that Cecilia winced. “What do you have there—a ring?”

Fury made Gilbert’s blood molten lava. “Unhand my *fiancée*.”

His furious roar echoed back into the ballroom and had the three women jumping in fear. Without preamble, and not caring a whit for the bystanders, he pushed them aside, pulled Cecilia into his arms, and kissed her temple.

“Are you all right?” he asked; the glittering ring he had sent over that afternoon dangled from a white ribbon around her neck. Cecilia hid her face in his shoulder, and he angled his body to shield her. “I thought you would have worn the ring on your hand not around your neck.”

“Marrying her?” Lavinia scoffed under her breath, tossing back her mane. “You’ll tire of your little mouse soon enough.”

Turing, Gilbert gave her a steely eye. “Lady Lavinia, I believe it is past time someone exposed the vulgar gorgon you truly are. How the *ton* has turned a blind eye to your despicable acts is beyond my comprehension. You may have a beautiful face, but that streak of vanity inside you will be your own demise.”

Even while her face paled, she faced him boldly. “I know nothing of what you speak.”

“Do you?” His tone was cold and cutting and enhanced by the silence around them. “So, it was not you who instructed your father to disgrace Lord Chambers’ name and ruin his reputation because he failed to give you a compliment? Or when you had your father use his influence to make half of the *ton* buy into Eastlakes’ stud farm, leaving the Baron Burke’s business destitute because he fancied another lady?”

Whispers were starting to flurry around them, but Gilbert did not care. It was high time someone had the nerve—and ammunition—to dress this jezebel down.

“How about that time you ruined Lady Upton’s life by sending two prostitutes into her newlywed’s bedchamber when he had just come from sea, and she arrived to visit him?” Gilbert’s words were like double-edged swords, each cut drawing more blood from Lavinia’s face.

“You have no care for who you destroy or what beautiful thing you will smear because you think you are the most beautiful person in the room, and you deserve anything you want,” Gilbert spat. “The only person you love, Lady Lavinia, is yourself, and you will become another Narcissus. Simply wait, the pool of water will find you.”

His words echoed like a curse, and while the crash of a glass exploded in the background and the cry of a fainting matron followed it, he still fixed Lavinia with a look.

“Lies.” She notched her head up boldly, even while her hands trembled. “Pure, utter lies.”

“Do not force my hand, my lady,” Gilbert snapped. “What you few of the privileged *ton* do not know or care to think is that everything one does creates a trail, and I will happily publish the trail of your wrongdoings to every paper in this country if you press me.”

“Gilbert.” Cecilia came around and held his arm. “Please don’t. You needn’t

do such a thing. It's not worth it."

"Perhaps," he replied, taking her hand. "Is your maid with you?"

"My aunt's maid, yes," she replied. "Why?"

"Go get her but tell her when we get to the garden, she will have to wait past the first bench. We need to speak in private," Gilbert replied, taking her hand and walking out of the room, not casting a look at anyone else.

After she had secured her maid to follow them, Gilbert took her arm, and they left for the garden. The moon was high, the silvery light faint and ghostly.

Faint fog was trailing through the dark trees and slithering along the damp cobblestones. Lanterns lit the paths that split in two at the middle of the park, and moonlight shimmered over the gurgling stone fountain standing at the center.

As he continued navigating them along the garden path—the maid obediently stayed behind—the peace out there spurred him on to tell her what was resting on his heart. "Cecilia, about last night. I didn't mean to—"

"You don't need to explain yourself," she cut in softly, her head tilting to the sky. "Truly, you don't." She angled her head to him, her smile soft and understanding. "I understand; I do. Before this, I didn't understand why mamas are so stringent on keeping their daughters from falling in the web of

sexual desire.

“Now, I understand, intellectually, there is a difference between love and sexual pleasure. But as long as I hold it in my mind that this rendezvous is only a physical thing with no expectation of anything more, no harm will come of it.”

Gilbert was not sure of what he was hearing. Holding her forearms, he slid his hold up to her frame her face, the softness of her skin a sensual lure. He searched for her gaze. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she replied. “You needn’t explain that marriage is not one for you. As much as I suspect you might be a perfectly taciturn husband...”

His lips twitched.

“...I think I’ll enjoy what we have now until it is time to break our agreement,” she finished, her lashes sweeping up. “I think I’ve grown accustomed to kissing you.”

“Just accustomed?” Gilbert’s brow arched. “I suppose I’m not doing my job right.”

“What do you mean—”

His lips sealed over hers, and he took her mouth with a sensual ferocity that

shocked him. The maid's cry to stop went unheeded, and he slid his hand right up her spine to hold her nape in place. Emotions spiraled through his heart and bombarded the wall he's wrapped around it.

Pulling away, Gilbert reached around her neck, pulled the cord with the ring, and slid the dazzling jewelry off it. Taking her hand, he pressed a kiss to the back of it and then slid the ring on her fourth finger.

"This is where it should be," he said firmly. "Keep it there."

* * *

As they entered the ballroom, Gilbert swept her onto the floor for a waltz, the light from the chandelier reflecting off the ring like a beacon.

"Have I told you how beautiful you are?" His mouth was near her ear. "You do not need silk and diamonds to enhance what fate has so abundantly given you."

"Was that a poem?" Cecilia teased him. "A quatrain of a sinnet, perhaps?"

"I have neither a bard's heart nor the mind to have one," Gilbert replied as he led them flawlessly, and she followed with equal grace. "Flowery language is not my forte."

Amused, Cecilia replied, "Hence my assertion of taciturn."

“I’ve never been one to enjoy frivolous amusement,” Gilbert shrugged.

“And what do you consider to be such things?”

“Musicales, plays, operas, balls, luncheons, hunting, masquerade balls, boating, poem reading, stargazing, horse-riding, sashaying up and down Mayfair, carriage rides at Hyde Park, painting, embroidering, glassmaking...”

Cecilia burst out laughing, a musical sound that drew eyes, but she didn’t care. Gilbert spun them, and she giggled, “You have exempted yourself from every pastime the ton has.”

“No,” he replied, “I must add puppeteering, archery, foot-racing, gambling, and fencing as well.”

“Everything but boxing,” she replied.

“Pugilism teaches you defense,” he replied. “It can save your life.”

“When did you start learning?” Cecilia asked.

“At Eton where I was a spectacle for having the audacity of being a Gentry instead of upper ten thousand and muddying up their hallowed halls with the scent of shop,” he answered. “There were nights I would wake from a bucket for winter water dashed on my bed or even better, have my supper suddenly

change from shepherd pie to a hunk or bread and old cheese.”

“That’s horrible,” she sympathized.

“It is, or, well, it was,” he replied “Time has made a remarkable change. Its why I understand you, Cecilia, and it why I have no tolerance for tormenters and pretenders.”

“Those things you said about Lavinia,” she asked, “were they all—”

“True? Every word,” he replied. “I can show you the proof if you’d like.”

“No thank you.” Cecilia shook her head as the music grew to its crescendo, Gilbert spun them in dizzying turns until she had to grab at his arm when the ended.

Pressed together so tightly, it reminded her of acutely of how well they moved together in bed or against his desk or in his carriage...

“I only came here to find you,” he said after bowing and escorting them off the floor. “Would you like to leave this earlier than planned? I would like to speak to you tomorrow on some...important matters.”

“That reminds me,” Cecilia went grim. “My aunt is concerned about Jeffrey. I had to tell her I’d seen him that night, and that he was still unconscious. What do I say is she asks again?”

His lips pressed tight. “That is another thing we need to discuss.”

She smiled then brushed his hair from his eyes. “Are you going to drop me at my door like a proper gentleman?”

“Whoever said I was one?” he smirked.

After saying their goodbyes to the patroness of the house, Gilbert assisted her into his carriage, and they went off.

“Are you prepared for the scandal sheets tomorrow?” Cecilia asked lightly. “If your name isn’t banded about on the front page of the Times, that is.”

With his elbow cocked on the windowpane and his chin perched on his fist, Gilbert asked, “And since when do I give a whit about what the gossipmongers say? I’m sure they’ll have more to say about Lady Lavinia than the most eligible bachelor in marrying London’s wallflower.”

“You never know,” Cecilia replied while looking down at her ring and turning it with the fingers of her other hand.

Soft silence lingered around them until Gilbert said, “It was my paternal grandmothers. She had handed it down to my father to gift to my mother, and when she passed, he gave it to me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Cecilia said. “How long ago did she pass?”

“Twelve years ago,” he replied. “When I was at Cambridge. She went to Bath one winter to visit a friend and caught consumption. Even when she was little, mother had weak lungs, and the infection made it worse. I was at her bedside when she slipped away, but she gave me her blessing.”

Suddenly, the ring seemed to double in brilliance. “Can...would you tell me more about her? Your mother?”

All along the way to her aunt’s home, he regaled her with stories about his mother, a governess by profession, a paid lady’s companion in the off seasons, and Cecilia finally saw the ever-present knot in Gilbert’s brows smooth out as he delved into his memories.

He told her about the times she had caught him sneaking sugar buns from the pantry, and he’d constantly ruin his clothes climbing trees. He told her about the time he’d given himself a goose egg with a ricocheting slingshot and how he’d tried to tie a cravat at six and nearly strangled himself.

“My father was the one who found out about my memory when I was eight,” he said. “I was playing under his desk while he repeated a long string of numbers to himself and forgot halfway. I repeated them words for word and ran to my mother, and we started on Latin.”

The carriage had taken her to her aunt’s house, and when he helped her down, the light from the carriage lamps cast shadows over his form. Gilbert

canted his head, and the expression on his face made her want to tip forward and kiss him, but she stopped.

As he went to knock, the door was pulled in, and her aunt stood there in her house coat, her expression alight with happiness. “Cecilia, dear, I am so glad you’re home. It’s a magical night, my dear; it’s a miraculous night.”

Cecilia looked to Gilbert, her face alight with shock. “I know rumors are quick to go around town, but how did you know about my enga—”

“Jeffrey is home!” Aunt Letitia sang. “My boy is home.”

Then, before she had a chance to reply, from over her aunt’s shoulder, Jeffrey appeared, his handsome face clean, happy, and carefree.

Dear God, does he remember what happened?

“Cousin,” he called out pleasantly, expression light as a feather, “is that you?”

CHAPTER 20



Fear paralyzed Cecilia. Her heart was beating so fast, she feared it might burst from her chest altogether, and dread quivered in the pit of Cecilia's stomach.

She shot a panicked look at Gilbert, who had gone stone-faced, his jaw clenched, brows lowered, and fists tightening at his side. Jeffrey's wide blue eye landed on Gilbert, and he frowned, "I'm sorry. Are you Cecilia's... suitor?"

"This is not a conversation to be held on your doorstep," Gilbert said calmly. "May we come inside?"

"Oh yes, yes," Aunt Letitia nodded, her expression excited. "My apologies, Your Grace, please come inside."

Gilbert rested his hand on the small of Cecilia's back, his touch a bastion of strength and reassurance for her to stay unruffled when all she wanted was to turn the other way and run.

They found places in the main drawing room, and she appreciated how Gilbert directed her to sit while he stood, his intimidating form drawing attention to him rather than to her.

Jeffrey stood behind an armchair, and while her aunt spread her skirts on a settee, his eyes were set on Gilbert. He circled the chair and extended his hand, “I suppose you are the Duke Mother told me saved my life. Thank you, Your Grace.”

Taking his hand, Gilbert shook it strongly enough to make Jeffrey wince, only a little, but in the next moment, the expression was gone. “You’re welcome. If I may ask, how did you come to be here? The last time I checked, you were still unconscious.”

“I may not remember much, but there is a park between our homes,” Jeffrey replied. “I walked.”

Aunt Letitia’s lips pinched. “And that was dangerous of you, Jeffrey. Who knows what could have happened to you. You could have fallen and hit your head again, or blackguards could have set on you again.”

“I know, Mother,” Jeffrey sighed. “I just had this deep-set feeling that I needed to get home. Its only when I stepped out of the His Grace’s mansion that I realized where I was.”

Cecilia felt a rush of emotion burst into her chest, and she nearly shouted that he was a liar, but Gilbert’s hand landed on her should in the nick of time, stopping her outburst. She looked to him, and his steady gaze was a silent

promise that he would take care of the matter.

“How are you feeling?” he asked Jeffrey. “Do you have any memory of what happened?”

Shaking his head slowly, Jeffrey replied, “I have little remembrance of that night. I do remember drinking at White’s, I believe, but when I try to recall what happened after that, all I feel is a blistering pain in my temple.”

“I see,” Gilbert replied. “Do you feel it now?”

“No.” Jeffrey lifted his hair from his temple and showed the scar. “No pain. I suppose I have your physician to thank for that.”

“No need,” Gilbert said then turned to her aunt. “Lady Huntington, I will formally speak to your husband as soon as possible because he is Cecilia’s primary guardian, but you should know, I have asked Lady Cecilia to be my wife, and she has accepted.”

Letitia’s hand flew to her breast, “Oh, dear heart! My happiness cannot grow any more this night. I am overjoyed for you, Cecilia. All these years I knew you longed for a moment like this, and now, you have it.”

Before she replied, Cecilia glanced at Jeffrey, but his expression was mildly surprised, not in any way horrified, jealous, or angry. “Thank you, Aunt.”

“May we have a moment?” Gilbert asked, nodding the balcony, closed off by double doors with frosted glass. They would be in full sight of her aunt but far away enough to have some privacy.

Her aunt, who was dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief, nodded, “You may.”

As they stepped into the cold wintery night, Cecilia gripped his arms and whispered, “I don’t want to stay here. I want to go home with you. Please, don’t make me stay.”

War raged in his eyes, but his tone was calm, “I know, Cecilia, I can understand your fear, so at midnight, I will need you to find a way to come to me.”

Her eyes shot to the doorway and the two people there before returning to Gilbert. “But...how? I—I can’t—”

Holding her gaze, he said, “You’re brave and brilliant, Cecilia. I know you’ll find a way.”

“I’m scared,” her voice warbled.

“Midnight is an hour away,” he replied. “Be strong for me, Cecilia. You may doubt your strength, but I know it’s there, lingering under the surface. You can do this.”

Stepping away, she covered her eyes with a trembling hand but then peeled it away. “Your men will be there?”

“The same man who protected you at the races will see you to my home,” Gilbert assured her. “Constable David Healy will be there.” Wrapping one arm around her shoulder and the other hand resting on the back of her head, he pulled her in for a reassuring hug. “You’ll be safe, I promise you.”

Cecilia didn’t reply; instead, she pressed her face into his chest.

* * *

Sleeping was out the question for Cecilia; she did not even dare venture close to the bed. Ever since Gilbert had left, she’d gone to her room, changed into a plain, brown dress, and was gripping the fire-poker as a makeshift weapon in case Jeffrey dared come into her rooms.

Her eyes kept flickering to the ormolu clock on the mantle, every single tiny stroke felt like a lifetime passing by until it chimed midnight. Her fingers hurt when she peeled them apart and sat the iron brand down.

Pulling the door open, she peeked her head out and listened closely, but the only sounds she heard were the normal creaks of the house settling, and she eyed the landing that led to the main stairs. However, to get there, she would have to pass Jeffrey’s room, and that terrified her.

Turning back to the room, she tried to find another way around it when a hairbrained idea sprung into her mind. Ripping the bedsheets off the mattress, she knotted the sheets tighter and added more knots for her feet to touch

before she went to her balcony and double tied one length around a balustrade.

Climbing over the sill and ready to take the precarious descent from some twenty-five feet off the ground, a mental image of Gilbert's stricken face made her pause—but she dared do this rather than walk near Jeffrey's room.

A part of her felt she was being ridiculous—the man was probably dead to the world by then—but the fear of being held prisoner in his clutches stirred her to move. Inch by inch, foot by foot, she lowered herself down. The cold air and the smell of rain on the wind pricked her skin.

“A little lower, a little more, just a little—”

Warm hands grabbed her, and Cecilia shrieked, only for Gilbert to hush her. “It's me, Cecilia. I've got you; don't worry.”

Clinging to him while he walked them away from the backend of the house, she sucked in deep breath to calm her heartbeat.

“Why did you decide to become an acrobat?” he asked. “I thought you would have walked out the front door.”

“I couldn't stomach the thought of passing Jeffrey's chamber,” she replied as a footman opened the door for the hackney carriage parked a way down the drive.

“So, you decided to something that might’ve broken your neck?” His tone was calm, but she heard the censure—and worry—behind it.

“Fear makes one irrational, I suppose,” she replied. “But the thought of him grabbing me again made me... blue with terror. I guess I am not as strong as you believe me to be.”

“Incorrect,” he replied while setting her on her feet so she could enter the vehicle. They stepped in, and he closed the door. “You are. It’s my fault for not truly understanding how deeply that hurt had sunk inside you.”

“I—” she started then she remembered, “—the bedsheets, Gilbert. Someone must discover them by morning light!”

“Mr. Healy and his men are taking care of that,” he replied. “Tell me, how did you spend the hour?”

“With my hands wrapped around an iron poker for protection while staring at the clock, believing that it had started to turn time backward.” Cecilia didn’t feel it necessary to lie. He had seen the drastic action she had taken to avoid Jeffrey.

His lips turned into a flat line. “My plan to fetter Jeffrey out of his hiding places has been upturned, Cecilia. I do not know how it is that he found it safe to return home while he must know that all of London’s officials and those on its outskirts are looking for him, but the twist in my gut tells me it is not a good reason.”

Cecilia blinked. “I—I hadn’t thought that either. Could it be because his ventures have all gone belly up, and he had no one to turn to but his parents?”

“It could be,” Gilbert replied as the carriage cantered down the empty lanes, his fingers drumming on the windowsill. “But I hardly think it is as simple as that. By morning, I will have my answer. The men at Bow Steet must have an explanation why one of London’s most flagrant criminals is walking around as free as a jaybird.”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Stay with me tonight, please?”

He twisted to find her eyes. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

“Nothing...” she fought to find the words, “...nothing intimate, Gilbert. I just need you to be there with me. I feel comforted and safe around you.”

His fingertips slid up her nape and touched the soft hairs at the back of her head, and he pressed a kiss to her temple. “Sure.”

Arriving at the ducal manor, Rowe met them at the door, his silvery brows knitted tight with concern, but when his eyes landed on Cecilia, the worry vanished.

“Welcome, Lady Cecilia. I am relieved to know you’re safe,” he greeted her with a bow.

“Please prepare a bath for her, Rowe,” Gilbert requested, “In my chambers.”

Rowe didn't bat an eye. “Understood, Your Grace. I'll have it for you shortly.”

Cecilia followed him up another flight to a bedroom on the east wing, set aside from two smaller room on the floor.

The moonlight had the room in shadow, but from what she could make of it, the walls were covered in subtle damask and a rich dark, Aubusson rug covered the floor. Handsome but modest mahogany furnishings were scattered around the room, giving a stark feel because of their clean, classical lines.

A large four-poster bed sat against the far wall, covered in a blanket over crisp linen sheets, but what drew her attention was the wall of windows that gave a wide view over the extensive parklands, spanning farther into the countryside than she could fathom.

A wind ruffled the trees just as Gilbert handed her a silk robe. “Here, use this.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

In the background, quiet footmen had filled the tub in the annexed room, and when they left, he asked, “Would you like me to call a maid for you?”

“No, it’s fine,” Cecilia replied, slipping into the bathing room. “I’ll manage.”

She neared the door of the bathing chamber, which was partially closed, and slipped inside. The copper tub was filled, and a small table stood cozily by the tub, covered with crisp linen and bottles. Plucking one up, she smelled citrus, the same heady scent that permeated Gilbert’s skin and clothes.

She tipped the oil into the water, sat the robe on the table, removed her clothes, and stepped into the tub. The warmth permeated her tense muscles, and the water lapped against her shoulders in a lulling tide. Wisps of citrus-scented steam swirled around her, and she drifted off into a doze.

It was only when a warm hand touched her cheek, and she heard the clink of a lamp resting on the table that she blinked awake. A beeswax candle showed Gilbert’s amusement. “You fell asleep, sweetling.”

“Oh...” She went to sit up but remembered her nakedness and sunk back. “... I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing for you to be sorry about,” he smiled tenderly. “You’ve had shock after dastardly shock this night. Its only logical that you would be exhausted.”

“I...” She wrapped her arms around her middle. “...need some help.”

Gilbert cocked a brow. “I’ve seen you naked before sweetheart. If you’re wondering if I’ll succumb to temptation, you needn’t worry.”

“You’re sure?” she blushed.

“Yes, Cecilia,” he replied reaching for a towel on the table. “I’m not a savage, lustful, troglodyte. Now, stand.”

* * *

After helping her from the cooled bath, his body immediately reacted to the sight of her dripping in water, a nubile nymph rising under the sensual touch of the moonlight. Her pale skin was alabaster, and her full breasts, covered behind her crisscrossing arms, drew his gaze with each nervous rise and fall.

He wrapped a towel around her, and through the cloth, he smoothed his hand over her generous curves, hiding a smile as her breaths turned fitful. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Already dressed in another robe and a pair of loose trousers, he slipped between the sheets and checked the time on a watch resting on his end table. From the corner of his eye, he saw Cecilia enter, and he felt his heart tighten at how his clothes molded to her luscious form.

It was half an hour to three in the morning.

Silently, he lifted the sheets for her, and she joined him, her unbound flaxen hair splayed over the pillows.

“Sleep, Cecilia,” he told her. “It’ll be all right.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, and when her lids fluttered close, it didn’t take long for her to fall into deep sleep.

Gilbert, however, could not follow her. Instead, he tucked the sheets tight around her, and before he left for the study, his gaze trailed over her face, tracing the long line of her lashes against her cheek. Her lips were parted in sleep too, the plump bottom one his favorite to suckle on.

He knew she thought she could control her emotions, but that would have to be put to the test—and he hated himself for leading her down a path that could verily break her heart.

Seated in his study, Gilbert trimmed the lamps, took out sheets of paper, and drew up a courtship agreement, his thoughts resting on a similar contract Allan had drawn up for his beloved, and he mirrored the terms.

By dawn, when it was finished, Rowe came inside with his cup of coffee and asked, “How is Miss Cecilia?”

“Troubled.” Gilbert looked up from the drying sheets. “But I let her have her rest for a little longer. Last night was very troubling for her.”

“I suppose today will not be any better, not with half of London hating her at the moment.” Rowe nodded to that morning’s paper. “Jealousy is such an ugly thing.”

Though he wouldn't normally read the gossip rags, Gilbert took the paper and read.

“Weeping, moaning, and gnashing of teeth amongst the Ladies of London this morning. By all accounts, most of them confirmed, the Duke of Pembroke is off to pay the pied piper as the announcement of his engagement to Lady Cecilia Hawkings makes its rounds in the morning tables and supper ones as well.”

Shaking his head, Gilbert pivoted on his feet and dropped the paper into the smoldering fire then watched as it blacked and curled into cinders.

“Do me a favor, Rowe, and burn whatever copies might come around later on. If she sees it, she'll get more upset, and I don't want anything to add more grief on the top of the worry she is already battling with.”

“I will make sure of it,” Rowe replied then he said, “I must ask you an important question, Your Grace.”

Gilbert looked up. “And what's that?”

CHAPTER 21



“*I*t’s more of a question I need you to ask yourself. You do not need to tell me.” Rowe replied. “What do you truly feel for this girl? Is it pure sympathy or something else?”

The words, *what else could it be*, were on the tip of Gilbert’s tongue, but he swallowed them back. He knew what Rowe was asking, and it made no sense to pretend he didn’t. In truth, it was something he’d been dancing around the maypole for quite a while.

Funny enough how he’d be been asking himself if Cecilia could keep her feelings out of their amorous affairs... when he knew a part of himself could not do the same. From the moment he had seen the assault, he’d felt responsible for her, even though he knew nothing of her.

The feeling had grown to protectiveness, protectiveness had evolved to possessiveness, and now he felt... there was not a word to describe the emotion locked under his breastbone. Resting his cup on his desk, Gilbert sighed and leaned over on his forearms.

“This is very rare,” he said then snorted derisively at himself, “but it seems to happen when it pertains to Cecilia. My plans go awry every time, and I will admit that there are moments when I don’t know my mind as well.”

“That is an indication that there is more to what you feel than you believe there is,” Rowe replied.

Gilbert quirked a brow. “How are you telling me this? Aren’t you a bachelor?”

Rowe’s brows lifted, and his tone was dry while handing a report over. “I have lived three times your life, Your Grace. I know what it is like to fall in love.”

Laughing at Rowe’s statement about living three lives—the man was not a day over sixty, Gilbert finished his drink.

Love.

Gilbert had no offence at the notion—but it was not what he was looking for. All his attention was on making sure the ducal responsibility given to him started off on a solid footing. Romance, a relationship, marriage, all those could wait.

“Just for curiosity’s sake, how did that work out?” he asked.

“It went well until she passed away taking our first child with her,” Rowe replied. “It tore my heart in half, but I was a better man when I’d met Hannah.”

His heart lurched. “I am so sorry.”

“Thank you,” Rowe replied. “But what I am asking of you, Your Grace, is not to let yourself get so caught up in the fine details that you miss the grand image as it unfurls before you.”

“Image? What image? And since when have you’ve turned into Aristotle?”

“Aristotle? *Pah*,” Rowe snorted. “I prefer the teacher to the student.”

While reading over the report, one sent over by the runners stationed at Cecilia’s home last night, Gilbert said, “I should wake her. We need to go speak to her aunt and uncle this morning because heaven will crash into the sea, and the sun will turn black before I let her go back to that house.”

“For our dear sakes, I pray it doesn’t.”

* * *

In her slumber, Cecilia felt the bed dip and a hand shift her hair from the pillow to over her shoulder. “It’s time to wake up, sweeting. We have an appointment to speak with your aunt and uncle.”

Sluggishly, she stirred, “What time is it?”

“Seven thirty,” he replied. “I wish I could have given you more time to rest, but I’m sorry. This is important, and you can rest when we return.”

“Return?” Cecilia sat up, staring at Gilbert in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“You’re not going to stay at that house,” he said.

“How can you say that?” she asked. “As a matter of fact, I think my aunt must be sick with worry for me by now.”

“Your aunt rises at nine, and your uncle chose to stay in his townhome because of business,” Gilbert replied. “And before you ask, remember when I told you I deal in intelligence? The runners have been keeping an eye on your house, so we know what time we have. We have as short sliver of time for get you back in the house before your aunt rises and your uncle comes along.”

“Gilbert,” she said softly, “thank you for all this.”

He held her cheek and swept his thumb over her cheekbone. “No thanks needed, Cecilia. Should I get a maid to help you?”

“No. I’ll manage,” she replied.

When he left, Cecilia rubbed sleep from her eyes, slid from the bed, collected her clothes from last night, and went to the washroom to do a quick ablution. She had not realized it last night, but a bronze mirror was hanging on the wall, and the reflection it showed her was not one she admired.

Her skin was pale, and dark circles were under her eyes. She twisted her hair over her shoulder to plait it. She shed the soft silk robe and dressed in her chemise and her drab dress, slid her shoes on, and went to find Gilbert, but he found her first with a cup of tea in hand.

“Here,” he handed the cup. “We don’t have time for breakfast, but this might help for a while.”

Taking it, she admired his suit; his dark brown waistcoat with bronze embroidery and charcoal trousers fitted superbly to his virile form. A ruby stick pin winked in the folds of his cravat. The strengthening sunlight kissed the chiseled contours of his face, even managing to change the jaded lines around his mouth into a strange form of masculine beauty.

“Thank you,” she replied, sipping the honeyed brew.

She drank enough to warm her stomach then indicated for them to go. The morning air still held the incoming winter chill, and when they arrived at her home, it was still early enough for her to slip inside.

But as she entered her room, Fanny knocked on her door. The maid’s

questioning eyes made Cecilia's heart lodge in her heart in fright. "Pardon me, my lady. Are you just... arriving home?"

"I—" she scrambled for a plausible lie. "I was up early, and I took a walk to clear my head. I suppose you've heard about my engagement."

Fanny's face cleared. "Oh, yes, dear, I have, and my best wishes for you. I can understand the need to clear your head for a while. Do you need help in bathing?"

"Please," she replied. "Gilbert is coming this morning, and I don't think this dress is suitable enough."

"Surely not," Fanny gasped. "It has stains. No future duchess should look so unkempt. We must hurry."

* * *

Gilbert didn't like dropping Cecilia at the lane of her home, but she had insisted on it, and he trusted her to know her family. Now, as he waited for an acceptable time to come around, he tried to keep his mind from fearing if Jeffrey would try something with Cecilia.

The time ticked by until he couldn't bear it anymore and instructed his driver to go to her home. When the footman admitted him in, he asked, "Is Viscount Huntington home?"

"He's just arrived, Your Grace," the footman replied. "I will see if he shall

see you.”

Gilbert turned to look at the portrait in the foyer, a painting of the Viscount, his wife, and young Jeffrey. The boy looked so innocent; it was a marvel he turned out to be a deviant.

“Your Grace,” Cecilia’s uncle sounded dead on his feet but had mustered up the strength to see him anyway. “How may I be of assistance?”

Turning, Gilbert inclined his head. “I won’t take much of your time but I’m here to formally ask your permission to court Cecilia. She has agreed to marry me, but I think a reasonable courtship period should be there as well.”

The Viscount blinked. “I think... we should discuss this in my study. Please, follow me.”

Taking the stairs, Gilbert passed a short corridor and entered a medium, serviceable room with a plain desk and padded armchairs scattered around it. While the Viscount sat, Gilbert extended the leather folio to him and went to stand by a window, his hand clasped behind him.

“You’ll see that all is in order. And one more thing,” Gilbert added, pivoting, “I will require that Cecilia stays with me during the courtship period. She shall have an army of maids at her disposal, anything she desires will be at her beck and call, and all propriety rules will be adhered to as well.”

“Your Grace, I—I must say this agreement is very generous, but I hardly

think I have the power to agree. I am her uncle, not her father,” Barnard said. “The Earl will not be back on our shores for another three months.”

“Even better.” Gilbert grinned to himself. He had calculated on the man saying exactly that. “We shall keep the courtship up until he arrives and give the final say. I am sure you can authorize such a thing on the temporary basis.”

“I—I could,” Barnard replied. “But I would like to hear from Cecilia as well. Please, excuse me for a moment.”

While he went off, Gilbert began to plan the rest of his day and hoped the meeting at the Bow Street Magistrate would pay off because he had to know how it was that Jeffrey was walking around a free man.

“Father, I wanted to—oh,” Jeffrey jerked to a stop while entering the study. In his hand was a thick book. “Your Grace, what a marvelous surprise.” He bowed. “Are you here to talk business with father?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m here—”

“To see me,” Cecilia replied for him as she entered the room. Far removed from the drab frock from earlier, Cecilia wore an ivory day dress, her hair up in twisted updo. He was a businessman not a poet, but to him she resembled a fae creature, clothed in mist and morning dew.

She curtsied. “Your Grace.”

“None of that,” Gilbert replied, taking her hand, and kissing the back of it. “How are you this morning?”

“Quite well. Uncle has told me you’re here to whisk me away to your glittering castle?” she smiled.

“In a manner of speaking,” he replied. “But your esteemed uncle had to agree first. I know it’s an unconventional arrangement and many will find it, odd or distasteful, but I desire to keep the majority of our courtship out of the public eye.”

“Complete understandable,” Barnard circled his desk, sat, and picked up a pen then turned to Cecilia. “That’s why I asked you here, dear. If this is what you want, say the word, and I will sign, but when your father returns, he will have the last say. Do you agree?”

Turning to take Gilbert’s hand, Cecilia smiled up at him. “Yes, Uncle, it is always yes.”

While the two spoke, Gilbert kept a keen eye on Jeffrey who was looking at the proceedings with nothing more than mild curiosity. There was no hint of jealousy or anger, not even that much interest. Could it be that the man didn’t truly remember anything from that night?

“Wonderful.” Barnard signed his signature with a flourish. “You have my hearty felicitations, dear.”

Jeffrey shrugged and came around to hug Cecilia; it did not pass Gilbert attention how she stiffened with his touch, and he feel the urge to rip he odious man away.

“I’ll miss you, cousin,” Jeffrey said jovially while stepping away. “Invite me over for the holidays.”

“S-sure,” Cecilia held back her nervous stutter then looked at Gilbert. “Are we starting today then?”

“Yes,” Gilbert drew her to his side and shifted her away from Jeffrey to shake Barnard’s hand. “I will send for her things, but in the meantime, could you have her maid pack a few essentials?”

Half an hour later with two trunks stored away in his carriage, they were off back to the Seton Estate. While they were on the main street, Gilbert pulled the window shade and cupped her cold hands in his. “There now. You’re free.”

She looked down at their clasped hands, “I... I wanted to scratch his eyes out when he embraced me,” she admitted. “I had night terrors for days on end, some of the dreams taunting me that I hadn’t truly escaped his attack, and others less subtle but just as frightening. I couldn’t see him, but I felt him around me. It was—it was hard living in that house. It was only after meeting you, the *real* you, that I felt I could be at ease.”

His thumbs traced small circles in the backs of her hands. “I am sorry you

had to suffer that. But you are free from him now, and when I am done, you will be free from him forever.”

“Thank you.”

Sitting back, Gilbert added, “After you’re situated back in the manor, I have some business to take care of in the city. I promise, I will be back as soon as I am done there.”

“You don’t need to hurry back,” Cecilia replied. “Tak all the time you need.”

* * *

“*Beg your pardon?*” Gilbert asked through the ringing in his ears. He was sure he had not heard the man across the table properly. “What did you just tell me?”

The head officer at the Bow Street officers at the Magistrates’ Court in the City of Westminster mopped his sweating brow with a rag. “I said, we couldn’t arrest Jeffrey Mullens because there is no evidence he committed any of those heinous crimes.”

“But I told you he had a hand in every one of them!” Gilbert’s blood was roaring in his ears.

“Yes, yes we know, Your Garce,” Magistrate Hollins bobbed his head fast enough that his weak chin bounced off his chest. “We found records in the gambling parlor and the flesh house and have traced the ammunition from

gunsmiths around London, even traced a crate to Bath.

“Most of those arms were marked as missing or defective, but we know the smiths supply these guns to the underworld for continuous income. The suppliers have given over every name of those who had a managing stake in their businesses. With these records combined, we have found three of Mullen’s friends and indicted them on all charges related to their connected illegal activity, but one is one run.

“However, not once have we found the name Jeffrey Mullens, and so without a clear connection to any of these places, we cannot arrest him, and not one of his friend have given any details about his activity,” Magistrate Hollins explained. “Our hands are tied, Your Grace.”

The situation unfolded like a splitting onion, and Gilbert found his gut churning at how he had underestimated Mullens—again. The man had made sure to keep his hands clean but had made sure that his friends would be crushed under the carriage wheels if their activities were made public.

No wonder he had the bravery to walk right back into his mother’s house.

“Who is the one on the run?” Gilbert asked through a stiff jaw.

“Lord Pendelton,” Hollins replied. “He must have gotten word about his compatriots’ arrest and slipped the noose were making for him. We have no solid lead on his whereabouts, but we are looking for him.”

A fine headache was working its way up the back of Gilbert's neck. "I need a copy of all those records. I may be able to find a connection you have not seen."

"It will take some time, Your Grace," Hollins replied. "Would you like us to deliver them to you or—"

"I'll wait," Gilbert replied, "in the records room as well. I would prefer to oversee the process."

Christ above...this was not the news he had wanted to hear. How on earth was he going to fix *this*?

CHAPTER 22



Warm rays from the late afternoon sun prompted Cecilia to wake, but even before she did, she could sense that she was alone in the room. Gilbert's room.

Even though she had her perfectly good quarters two corridors down, Cecilia had dared to go to his, donned the robe he had lent her last night, and slept in his bed. All against the rules of propriety, she knew, but she felt most at ease being near him, and last night was the one night she'd had an uninterrupted sleep.

Stretching out a hand, she felt that the sheets had gone cold, but her fingers touched his pillows, and on a whim, she brought it to her face and buried her nose in his pillow. The familiar scent of his spice and musk reassured her that he had been there and had held her throughout the night.

Sitting up, the soft silk of her robe-turned-nightgown slithered over her skin; she looked down on the lapel and saw the ducal seal was embroidered in it with gold thread, G.A.W.

“Gilbert Wilson,” she noted. “I wonder what the A stands for.”

A knock on the door startled her, and she slid out of bed, refastened the robe’s belt, and tucked in the lapels before answering. Rowe was there, holding a silver tray with a morning feast spread out on it—if the many cloches were an indication.

“Mr. Rowe,” she greeted, then stepped aside. “Please, come in.”

“Thank you, my lady.” He inclined his head. “And good afternoon to you.”

“After—good gracious, I slept that long?” Her cheeks pinked. “I apologize.”

“Why?” He sat the tray on a sideboard. “From what His Grace told me, you’ve had a very distressing night. From time immemorial, a good night’s rest will help such things.”

Going around to the trays, Cecilia lifted one and saw coddled eggs and oat cakes but closed it again. “Thank you, but this isn’t necessary.”

“I beg to differ, it *is* necessary when His Grace asked me to look after you,” Rowe replied. “I do not think you know how drastically your presence in his life has affected him.”

Her gaze dipped. “I brought trouble to his doorstep, I know.”

“No, you brought him a reason to become whole,” Rowe replied. “I served His Grace's family since I was a young man relieved from the army, and the similarities his predecessor had with His Grace were eerily striking. Both of them are brilliant, brooding, and prone to scathing responses, and both of them liked to have their finger on the pulse of what was happening around them.

“Just like the late Duke, His Grace is a creature of self-isolation and reserve. I spotted the trait the moment I met the young man and feared he would go to his grave alone and unloved like the man before him—until he found you.”

As much as Cecilia wanted to take his words the way they sounded, her logic prevented her from doing so. “Gilbert is doing me the favor, not the other way around.”

The expression she received, an odd mix of humor and sadness, made her want to hide. “If only you knew the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is looking,” Rowe replied, “I am sure you would change your mind. Alas, my few moments of being philosophical have expired, and I must now return to polishing the silver. Please, ring for assistance if you need anything, but before I go, may I make your tea?”

An hour after Rowe left and a maid helped her with her bath and dressing, Cecilia had finished her breakfast and was curled up in a window seat, mulling over the words the butler had left her with.

“How he looks at me when no one else is looking,” she whispered. “Fanciful me would think he had a fondness for me deeper than he’s already expressed, but that cannot be. Even this *marriage* is just to protect me from Jeffrey and

to save him from unwanted proposals. Love had no part in this...”

Why not simply ask him what he feels?

Before she could make heads or tails of the idea, the door was shoved in so violently, Cecilia startled and made to scream—but Gilbert walked in.

He dropped something on a chair and started tearing at his jacket with vengeance. She had never seen him so irate before, not even when he had dressed down Lavinia.

He threw the jacket in the direction of the chaise—it missed by a mile—then tugged at his cravat until it came free and dropped it behind him.

Finally, he hunched over and grabbed at the back of a chair until his knuckles went white and bloodless. Frozen in place, Cecilia did not know what to say or do. Could she approach him? Was he angry that she was there?

Storm clouds seemed to brew and blister over his face as his jaw worked, and before the lightning came crackling in, he broke the tense silence.

“The reason your damned cousin is walking as a free man is because he made it so that everyone in the grand scheme of his plots and plans is guilty *but* him,” Gilbert growled. “His name is not on any records, his accounts not on any books, and there is nothing to tie him to any wrongdoing.”

Cecilia's heart sank to her feet.

Gently, she stood and went to his side, dropped her hand on his, and replied, "I'm sorry."

"I just..." He shook his head, and his lips pressed tight before he grasped his drink and swallowed the lot. Rubbing his forehead, Gilbert sighed. "I underestimated him...again. I thought it would all be so easy, a direct line to ensure he would never see the light of day again. Now, I'm thrown into a tangle, and I don't know where to start unraveling it."

Unable to answer that for him, Cecilia looked at the thing he had dropped on the couch, a folio with papers spilling out. Taking it, she asked. "What are these?"

"Hand written copies of transactions from the businesses Jeffrey ran," Gilbert replied. "Like I said, he made sure to keep his friends names in there but left his out."

"That—" Cecilia looked down at the papers. "—wouldn't make any sense. How would he profit from his business if he left everything to his friends? He would not go through all that trouble to be left out of the profits. He is not a charity."

"What are you hinting at?" he asked, brows furrowing.

"He must have—" She turned a page. "—given his friends orders to send him

proceeds after they take theirs or...or used a pseudonym. He would never leave himself out.”

In three steps, Gilbert was at her side and lifted the folio from her, his eyes raking over the list. “By your logic, there must be a common alias in these records.”

“That must tie to a bank somewhere,” Cecilia added. “Jeffrey used to boast about buying rounds of drinks for his friends, buying and selling phaetons, and gambling at Whites or on hounds. He could not have done so without a steady stream of income.”

Nodding, Gilbert closed the folio and set it aside before his gaze dropped on her, and she believed, for the first time since he had entered, he truly saw what she was wearing. His lips twitched. “Have you stolen my robe then?”

“Borrowed,” she replied.

He slid a long finger under a lapel, and the back of his forefinger brushed her unfettered breast. “For an extended period, I assume?”

“As long as you’ll lend it to me,” she replied, holding back a shiver.

“No, it’s yours.” Gilbert’s expression tuned sly. “I like seeing you in my clothes.”

“And what about me entering your chamber without permission?” she asked.

His brows lifted. “Permission? I didn’t think my home was an autocracy where you needed to ask. Feel free to go anywhere you please.”

“Even your bed?”

“Especially my bed,” he replied.

Looking at the files, Cecilia asked, “Are you going to examine those straightaway?”

“No,” he shook his head. “You and I need to talk about this purported courtship and marriage. People will ask questions, and I would feel comforted if we had the same tale to tell them. Please, let’s sit over there.”

When she arrived at the table, half hidden by a curtain, she found a small table set with an ornate chess set and two chairs. Taking one, she touched fingertip to the White Knight.

“Are we to play a game?”

“And make sure we understand each other,” Gilbert replied. “I am glad about the length of time we have to play this courtship. It’ll surely give me time to trap Jeffrey. But until then, I assume we’ll have dozens of engagements to follow through with. The first question they’ll ask is how did we meet.”

Cecilia looked down on the board and nudged a piece forward. “Can we simply say that we met when my aunt and uncle came to pay you their respects?”

“Sure,” Gilbert nodded, moving his piece as well. “But after that?”

“We were discreet in meeting each other,” Cecilia shrugged. “Took walks in your garden, played chess. We talked about our families, your childhood at Eton, my days at Miss Easton’s—”

“Tell me about them,” he urged her. “I told you about the atrocities I faced. It’s only fair to reciprocate.”

“It was...unpleasant.” She moved a pawn and captured his piece. “The girls looked at me with unhidden contempt, and I got so used to the snubs, I grew numb. My only solace was the library and the tea garden where I would hide with a book and free myself from the reality around me.

“Bell came as a late admission the third month I was there, and she took to me instantly,” she added. “Despite her best efforts to make me believe I was worthy of attention and love, the damage had been done. By my introduction, I had made myself a pariah.”

“When I came to the age of maturation, keeping friends didn’t matter to me anymore.” Gilbert slid his Rook forward, and he shrugged. “I did have a companion though.”

“Allan?”

“No, a dog named Billy,” Gilbert replied. “He was like a big babe, always playful and rambunctious. He didn’t ask questions, he didn’t judge, he didn’t care that I was from a different sect than others, he just loved me.”

“What happened to him?”

“He died of old age when I was twenty-one,” he replied, his brows flying up as she took his Rook with her Bishop. “Ah, you’re a cunning opponent.”

“You're not so bad yourself,” she replied. “I wanted a pet when I younger, but mother is deathly afraid of pet hair.”

“I see.” Gilbert took her Knight. “Couldn’t you have compromised with a fish?”

She laughed. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Cecilia,” he asked. “What is your favorite story? Romeo and Juliet? Tristan and Isolde? King Arthur and Guinevere?”

“It’s a Thousand and one Nights, the tales of Arabia,” she replied, leaning forward and as Gilbert made a move. “I daresay my king is in check again.”

“It is,” he replied.

Silently, she moved her Queen to knock over Gilbert’s Rook. “Not anymore.”

“What do you love about that tale so much?” he asked.

Pausing before moving the next piece, she said, “I suppose it is about determination and sacrifice. The honorable themes and morals the story tells you about. It makes you want to think that even the greatest evils can be made right if you decided to stay on the righteous paths.”

“And of the romance in there?” he asked quietly.

“I...” She bit her lip. “I felt that one day I would be as fortunate to feel as they did. Prince Qamar Al-Zaman, poem was my favorite.

“The one where he says, *Long, long have I bewailed the sev’rance of our loves, with tears that from my lids streamed down like burning rain and vowed that, if the days deign reunite us two. My lips should never speak of severance again.*”

“*Joy hath o’erwhelmed me so that, for the very stress Of that which gladdens me to weeping I am fain. Tears are become to you a habit, O my eyes, So that ye weep as well for gladness as for pain.*” Cecilia finished. “The very one?”

“Do you believe in the sort of love they say one should have?” Gilbert asked.
“Do you think it exists?”

She quickly focused her attention on the chessboard. “I know that the concept of passionate love is mostly brought on by the fantasies written in books and in plays and whatnot, but I would like to think it does exist, even if it is rare.

“I’d like to think it perfectly acceptable for a one’s heart to beat to another rhythm when you see the object of your affection or feel layers of affection pile themselves on the other when you consider the nature of the one you love.

“They might be taciturn but have a soft touch. They might be silent but fiercely protective. See, I don’t think a person falls in love with another just like that. They fall in love with the other because of the smaller parts instead of the whole,” she finished.

“My parent’s marriage was based on mutual understanding, respect, and shared goals,” Gilbert said quietly. “Mother once told me she wanted a spouse who was loyal, and worthy of trust. I do believe that along the way affection slipped into the mix, but overall, their partnership was more efficient than romantic.”

Something...something wasn't right.

“W-what are you trying to tell me?” Cecilia asked, swallowing tightly.

He reached over and toppled his King, succeeding the match, then pinned her with a bright, glimmering golden stare. “I’m not sure which one I will ever want.”

CHAPTER 23



Stunned, Cecilia battled for an answer. “I don’t think there must be one or the other, that if you want practicality, you must give up passion, or if you want romance, you must give up reason. It is wholly possible to have both.”

Gilbert sat back and stretched out a leg, the heel of his Hessian’s tapping on the carpet. With his arms folded across his chest, he sunk deep into thought, and the air went still between them.

“I think...” His shoulders sunk before he stood. “I need to go through these papers for a while. Be free to call Rowe if you need anything.”

When he left, the hope in her heart deflated, and she looked at her lap. “Why did I have to say all that? Now he might think that I am in love with him when that is not the case.”

The lie rang hollow and carved a pit into her chest, and all she could do was laugh and admit to the lie. “I suppose the horse has bolted from the carriage. I am already falling in love with him... but does he even want love?”

* * *

A knock on his door drew Gilbert's attention from the papers he had been studying for half an hour now.

It was painstaking work to go through the lines one by one and try to find repeated names. So far, he had a list of three, any which one could have been Jeffrey's alias—and with a look to the pile on his desk, he had a long way to go.

"Allan?" he asked. "Why are you lingering in the hallway like a vagrant?"

"I've come to see if the battle lines have been withdrawn and the guns have been put away." Allan came in. "The metaphorical flaying you handed Lady Lavinia still has her grandmother in the sickbed."

"It was deserved," Gilbert replied, returning to his work. "I despise silly chits with nothing between their ears other than vanity and despicable behavior."

"Still, you might have dismantled every chance she has of marrying. Even with the buckets of money her family has, your comment will dissuade any respectable lord from taking up with her."

"Well, fortunately for her there are a number of disreputable lords that will," Gilbert replied. "Or she can go aboard and find the foreign prince she has always bene looking for. Either way, it matters not to me. All I care about is that she and others like her leave Cecilia alone."

“And there is it, the guns have come right back out,” Allan laughed. “Good for you, Wilson. I’m happy she has you in her corner.”

As much as he tried to focus on the words and figures on the sheets, the lines seemed to blur into each other, forcing him to drop the paper. “Allan—”

“Oh, good wishes on the marriage by the way,” Allan cut in. “I am glad you haven’t chosen a featherbrained ninny.”

A deep sigh left Gilbert, and he twiddled the pencil in his hands. “Thank you. I need to ask you a hypothetical question. Have you ever pretended to be something hard enough that one day you find yourself believing it?”

“I can’t say I have,” Allan replied, his brows knitting tight. “Why though?”

“It’s just... a muddle I’ve made for myself.” Gilbert shrugged.

“A muddle? You?” Allan laughed. “Call the press; this is a shocker. When is it that you haven’t formulated a plan to either escape or avoid whatever mess you might be walking into? The Wilson I know had layers of strategies piled on top of each other, so as one does not work, he implements the other.”

“There is first time for everything,” Gilbert replied. “But don’t mind me. I’ll find a way out.”

“I’ll leave you to it then.” Allan tipped his head then left the study.

Earlier, when Cecilia had mentioned how people fell in love with pieces of another person until they became a whole, he knew she had been talking about him.

“They might be taciturn but have a soft touch. They might be silent but fiercely protective...” he parroted her words. If—*if*—he truly did want consider marriage with her, would his affection, protection, and care be enough?

Another headache was blooming, but not because of the blasted papers or Jeffrey or how to trap him. Deep down, he knew that his attachment to Cecilia had passed mere protection and craving to have justice done for her. He felt attached, possessive, and he struck without a care at whoever looked at Cecilia wrongly.

Call him foolish—but those factors a marriage did not make.

The most striking puzzle was, how had he gone from opposing marriage to considering it?

He looked up as Rowe came inside the room, deposited his dinner on the table, and left without a word. Amused, Gilbert dug into his meal, a lovely roasted pheasant, before he went back to his work. It was past ten when he went back to his room, wondering if Cecilia would be there, and to his delight, her body was tucked under the sheets.

Carefully disrobing, he set his clothes to the side, donned another robe, and joined her. As he gazed at her, he wondered how much of him she could accept or refuse. Deliberately, he turned away from her, and eventually, he slipped to sleep.

* * *

Cecilia woke in the middle of the night, feeling Gilbert's arm wrapped around her middle like a vice, his arm a band just under her breasts, and his hard body circling her back. His familiar scent washed over her, and she filled her lungs with the soft spice... only to feel a turgid harness against her backside.

Her breasts felt full and sensitive, the stiff tips chafing against her thin silk, setting off tingles of delight, and she rubbed herself against him, trying to get closer.

Her hand trailed over his arm, and his hot breath surged over her ear, "You're playing with fire, sweetheart."

Trapped in a cocoon of his making, his hardness, his heat, and his scent, Cecilia knew she would regret this decision when cold daylight came, but future worries were for future days, and she wanted to live now.

"Touch me." She twisted her neck to meet his eyes. "Please. "

He brushed his lips against the side of her neck, teasing her heated skin. She let out a shuddering sigh, raising her arm so it curved over his head, her head tilting back for his kiss.

He bent his head, and her entire being quivered at the hot demand of his kiss. His lips were hard and commanding, and his mouth met her, his tongue sweeping into her mouth without preamble, and she sucked eagerly on his offering, and he growled against her lips, thrusting in deeper, his length pressing against her backside.

His hand stole under the folds of her robe and found her breast and cupped it, the fullness spilling over his hand as he thumbed over her straining red nipples, the spark of pleasure causing her to gasp and squirm. He pulled his mouth away to seal hot brand the back of her shoulder while his hips rolled just so into her backside.

A needy pulse started at her core, spreading to the taut tips of her breasts and the aching place between her thighs, and all too soon she was slick with want. Titling Cicilia on her back, he sealed his mouth over the tight bud, suckling as she caned her hips up.

“Are you wet for me, sweet?” he rasped in her ear.

His question made core pulse, and she nodded bashfully. “Is your little pearl throbbing? Does it want to be stroked or licked?”

She gasped, “Filled. I want you to fill me, please.”

His gaze sharpened, “Cecilia—”

“I know,” she replied, sitting up, and the lapels fell free, baring her body. “I know, I’ll lose my innocence; I know it might make me illegible for marriage, but I only want you. No one else. I want you inside me,” she whispered.

A muscle jumped in Gilbert’s neck, his chest heaving. While his eyes were dark with lust, something hindered him. “Cecilia, no, I cannot take what you’re offering, not like this....”

“What do you mean?”

He framed her face with his hands, his features stiff with restrained passion. “You deserve the marriage bed. All I can offer you now is my protection and my lust. I do not think it's enough and certainly not what you deserve.”

“It is,” she replied, covering his hands with her. “Believe me, it is.”

He asked once again, “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Cecilia replied, laying back and taking him with her. “It is. I want to be with you completely.”

Seated between her legs, Gilbert unlaced her robe and peeled the lapels apart, baring her body to him. His gaze, as hot as his touch, drew a line over her heavy breasts, over her stomach, and her hips, and the trimmed thatch of hair over her core.

“God,” his voice was thick, “you are perfection.”

Sliding to the foot of the bed, Gilbert’s hands curved over her shin, and his mouth followed. His slow, teasing, torturing touch trailed up her body, under her backside, over her waist, and his mouth kissed a trail up her belly, between the valley of her breast to claim her mouth. Then down again. He sucked on her skin, teased with butterfly touches, and his hair tickled her tight nipples as he sucked on her collarbone.

She began squirming, her hands clutching his shoulders. “Gilbert, please,” she said, her voice breathless and sweet.

He shifted and traced the rosy perimeter of her areola with the tip of his tongue. “What do you want, sweetheart?”

“To touch you,” she replied. “Teach me how to pleasure you.”

His head lifted, eyes dark. “Undo my robe,” he ordered.

In the soft glimmer of the fireplace, she did as he asked, unveiling miles of hard, lean muscle. Inch by inch as the garment fell away, she greedily took in his flexing shoulders and the defined blocks of his chest. A strip of dark hair slashed over his chest, a trail bisecting the corrugated muscles of his abdomen.

He lifted his arms, so the garment fell away and sat on his haunches with just his tented smallclothes on. Sitting against the headboard, he beckoned her

over, took her hand, and pressed it right over himself. The turgid head she felt there had her shivering.

Keeping her eyes locked on his, Gilbert eased up and rid himself of the last clothing barrier, and he took her hand once again, curling it around his thick length. Her heart beat rapidly against her breastbone as she watched him manipulate her fist into slow pumping around the thick and veiny shaft.

The feel of him was... strange. The best she could liken it was steel encased in smooth velvet. Gilbert had his hand over hers, tightening her fingers at times and loosening them, fluctuating the pressure of her grip, teaching her how to pleasure him.

His potent masculinity made her breath catch in her throat and more dew seeping between her thighs. Despite her recent climax, viscous need trickled from her core.

Angling her body, Cecilia kissed his neck while stroking him from root to tip. His laugh was strangled. "You're a quick study."

"The last time you said women could place their mouths on men," she whispered. "Shall I try?"

"I'm at your mercy," Gilbert replied, his breath hot in her ear.

Bending, Cecilia shifted her hair over her other shoulder, studied the tip of him where a bead glistened, bent...and licked it off. Gilbert cursed. He held

her hair away from her eyes as she dared to wrap her lips around him and suckled.

The muscles in his neck strained as she took more of him. “Easy, sweet. Don’t over exert yourself.”

Cecilia kept on with her delicate licks and suckles over his engorged crown until a groan tore from his chest. “Enough.” He pulled her away, eyes wide and bright like wildfire. “You’re driving me to madness.”

Pulling away, he leaned to the end table and rifled in its drawer, pulled out a small white box, and pulled something out. “It’s made from sheepgut and cured in a solution of rosewater. It used to keep a man’s seed from finding fertile ground if you catch my meaning.”

She pinked. “I do.”

“Good girl.” The rough rasp in his voice strummed over her nerve endings, increasing her sensitivity to his words and touch.

Nestled in the cradle of her legs once more, Gilbert’s mouth teased her skin while his hand found her heated core and began to stroke her. With a tinge of shame, she could hear how wet she was, and the slick sounds his fingers made as they pleased her. She gave herself up to the sensations—to Gilbert’s masterful touch that gave her such pleasure.

The sensation built and stacked on each other, and she knew she was close to

shattering, but no—not until he was inside her.

“Please.” Her hands fixed around his arms. “I’m so very close.”

His mouth brushed hers. “It will hurt for a while, but it gets better.”

“I know,” she replied.

Gently, he pressed her back on the pillows, positioned himself at her entrance, and gently pressed forward. Despite her wetness, her small, snug intimate muscles resisted him.

He paused, not wanting to hurt her. “All right?”

Cecilia sucked her bottom lips into her mouth. “I think so. Just go slow...”

Sweat prickled his forehead as he eased forward another inch, and her body clenched down on the intrusion, but still he went deeper until he stopped. Slipping a hand under her neck, he sealed her lips to his, and with a quick snap of his hips, breached her maidenhead.

Her nails bit into his skin, and her gasp of pain was quick and bitter, but he soothed her with small, soft kisses. Pulling away he kissed the side of her mouth. “How are you feeling.”

“You’re...” she swallowed, “...big inside me. You’ve pressed me from the inside out.”

“Don’t fret.” He kissed under her ear. “You’ll adjust too.”

His hand slid up her thigh and massaged her tense muscles, coaxing them to loosen, and soon she murmured, “The pain is gone now.”

He needed no further urging; finding her lips for a kiss, he began to move, withdrawing and returning in slow, tentative strokes, watching her face the whole while. The sensation inside her was breathtaking, the feel of him inside her, the press of his body against hers.

Her breasts bobbed, and her neck arched as she pushed back to meet his thrusts, and on a whim, she circled his hips with her legs. It must have been the feather that broke the stranglehold on his restraint as he instantly plunged inside her with greater force, his hips snapping harder, his length reaching deeper, taking everything she offered.

With Gilbert filling her so completely, the sensations doubled up on each other and pushed the air from her lungs. She shattered around him, and the waves that rocked her were unending.

Bliss inundated her, more and more ecstasy pouring through her veins as Gilbert took her body in primal rush. His hard hips slammed against her bottom and strangled growls rumbled from his throat as he drove his big shaft into her, over and over, harder and deeper until the impossible happened, and she climaxed again.

“You’re mine,” he said in her ear. “You belong to me. Say it.”

“I’m yours,” she moaned as pleasure thickened her veins. “All of me. I’m yours.”

He pounded into her, his thickness straining the limits of her passage, his fingers biting into the divot of her hips. With a roar, she felt him swell, and liquid heat stained the thin covering between their bodies. Gilbert was braced on a hand as his body shuddered, and his tense muscles vibrated with the force of his climax.

“I love you,” she whispered, and the sleep pulled her right into his clutches.

CHAPTER 24



Gilbert could not let her go—not after she had shared her body with him and certainly not after that admission. He was not entirely sure she was cognizant of what had left her mouth before exhaustion had claimed her.

She lay on top of Gilbert's chest, her tangled hair splayed over her skin while the cool air from the window cooled their bodies. His hand rested on the back of her neck, fingertips playing with the soft hairs on her nape.

Love—she loved him.

The bracing thought pulled him out of his stupor. He couldn't think about love; at this juncture, he couldn't afford to think about it. He would not fall in love with Cecilia.

I could claim her body, plunder her senses, and pleasure her body, but... love.

His eyes closed, and potent memories surged forward; all he could feel was

her hands on him, all he could hear were her lovely breathy moans, all he could see was her, kneeling in front of him, holding him as if he were a treasure.

What do I have to say to that?

Shadows played on Cecilia's skin, flickering from the candles and the smoldering fire, and Gilbert's finger traced the shifting lines on her skin, sending soft, unconscious, shivers down her spine. With her rounded, flushed cheeks and kiss-swollen lips, she looked like an adorable yet annoyed faerie.

This woman whose shy exterior hid a pure, kind, and fiercely loyal heart, a *scarred* heart. She was regaining her bravery, her strength, and confidence, and she looked at him as if he made the sun rise for her... just by being who he was. On a deeper level, he was heartened by her increasing willingness to speak her mind in front of him.

But she loved him...

Gilbert pressed his lips tightly. Would she accept affection, protection, and care in trade for her love? Was that enough?

While rain picked up on the window, Gilbert forced the circling thought to cease and allowed himself to savor the moment. Feeling her body on his, her soft breaths on his skin, and the new level of trust Cecilia had handed him... and that felt heavier—a more fragile—than anything he had carried before.

* * *

It was the bed dipping and a familiar sensation washing over her that woke Cecilia. Waking, she blinked the haze from her eyes, and the ethereal threads of her dream faded away.

Gilbert was gazing down at her, clad in a loose shirt that made him look like a moored pirate, his hair was damp and curling at the collar—and he was holding a cup of tea for her.

“Good morning,” he smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“How am I—” Oh, last night, she surrendered her virginity to him. Heat stained her face as she sat up and took the sheets with her. “I feel fine, Gilbert. I’m not in pain.”

Something flickered in his eyes. “And regrets?”

“No.” She met his gaze and held it. “I wanted this, I wanted you, and I would not have asked, I would not have trusted you with my body if I did not have all the certainty that you would do right by me.” Her gaze dipped a little, and her hand tightened to don the sheet before meeting his gaze again. “Do you regret it?”

“Absolutely not.” Gilbert’s tone was firm and broke no compromises while he rested the cup on the end table. Reaching over, he held her chin and tipped it up. “And I will never devalue the gift you gave me.”

She smiled. “Could you arrange for a bath for me?”

“Sure,” he replied then nodded to the cup. “Drink that while I arrange the bath, and then after that, we need to reconvene the discussion from before. There is a ball tonight, and I am sure some of the ladies will be asking you pointed questions.”

“We’re creating stories then?” she asked.

He tilted his head, and his eyes shifted to the left. “More like... embellishing the narrative.”

“I understand,” she replied, reaching for the cup. “Well, let’s get started then?”

* * *

Dressed in a light blue day dress and her dressing gown, Cecile nursed a glass of juice in the cozy breakfast room, and Gilbert sat with a coffee in hand.

“You said you would tell them that we met when your family came to give me a courtesy call,” he began. “But there must be more of a catalyst.”

She listened, but her attention was held by an intriguing glimpse of his muscled chest, peeking through two unbuttoned clasps. Gilbert canted his head to the side then smiled, reached up and undid another clasp. Realizing that she had been caught, Cecilia rolled her eyes and blushed.

“And what cataclysm event did you have in mind?” she asked. “You resumed me from a highwayman, fished me out of a canal, or rescued me from a mine?”

“Why not all three?” he teased.

“In one day?” she smiled.

“All before luncheon too,” Gilbert sipped his drink.

Considering his proposal, Cecilia said, “We’ll say we argued and continued to argue for days. Bit of a *Much Ado* business.”

“And arguing led to an engagement?”

“It worked for Benedick and Beatrice,” Cecilia tucked a loose lock behind an ear. “Why not?”

“Fair enough,” he conceded. “But there are deeper questions we would need to know. Tell me, what were you like as a girl? What amusement did you prefer? What was your family like? Favorite hobbies, perhaps?”

At first, Cecilia was hesitant but then spoke candidly of being the only child to parents who spent most of her majority travelling. She was reluctant to talk about herself, but once she got into the flow of conversation, she lost her self-consciousness bit by bit.

“I lost myself in books,” she said shyly. “But you already know that. The letters they sent back made me immerse myself in their stories as well. They were my saving grace at finishing school. I was never the most...liked girl; they called me all sorts of names. I remember once when I walked into a room, they whispered, *sow* and *fussock*...”

She spotted his hand clenched on the table, and anger flashed in his eyes; her heart fluttered at his defensive fury. Gilbert led her from one tale to another, letting her spin every tale into another like Scheherazade before the King. He listened attentively, laughing dryly at her acute, dry observations.

Fingers drumming on the table, Gilbert let the silence lull between them. “I think I understand more about you now,” he paused. “Beneath your sweet nature and self-effacing tendencies, there is a core aching insecurity. As intelligent as you are, I know there is a disconnect between logic and emotions. As much as you tell yourself not to believe what they said, it still lingering in the back of your heart.”

She gave him a shy smile. “That’s true. They—they broke me down so much I stared to believe them.”

“And now?” He leaned in, holding her gaze. “What do you believe now?”

“That... I’m perfect as I am,” she replied. “That no matter what they say, I am who I am, and I will not change for anyone. Not anymore.”

His hand covered hers. “Good.”

Rowe knocked and came in. “Pardon me, Your Grace. Lady Emily Rusell is here—” Gilbert’s face twisted. “—to speak with Lady Cecilia.”

Astonished, Cecilia turned on her seat. “Me?”

“Yes, my lady,” Rowe replied. “She’s here to see you.”

“But—how does she know I’m here?” Cecilia questioned, brows furrowing. “I am sure my aunt would not have breathed a word about the unconventional circumstances I’ve taken.”

“Ah, Lady Emily said you would ask that, and for her answer, I quote, knowing how possessive Pembroke is, it is my calculated guess that she might be here.”

Gilbert’s lips ticked down. “This is one of those times that I must remind myself to stop underestimating that woman’s intelligence.” Facing Cecilia, he added, “Would you like me to be here with you? I’ve seen how... unfriendly she can be.”

She considered it. “No. Thank you, but I’ll be fine.”

To his credit. He didn’t press the issue, only stood, dropped a kiss on her forehead, and said, “I’ll be in my study.”

Rowe had disappeared to fetch the lady, and Cecilia twisted Gilbert's ring in nervous anticipation. What on earth was the lady there for? When the Earl's sister entered the room, Cecilia stood. Lady Emily looked rough. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her dress was rumpled.

"Lady Emily," Cecilia greeted her. "How are you?"

"Truthfully, Lacy Cecilia, middling to very bothered," she replied.

"Oh..." Cecilia paused. "Would you like some tea—"

"I don't think I can stomach a mere sip without saying what I came to say—" Cecilia tensed, braced for a deluge of hate, but Lady Emily's face crumpled. "—and that is, I am sorry for the animosity I showed you. It is not because I dislike you. I disliked what you represented, and that was the loss of any chance I had with Gilbert.

"For years I had wanted... just a speck of attention from him, but not once has he given me a... fraction of what he's shown you." Emily's face was grey with grief. "I did not want to admit it. In fact, I strictly denied it, telling myself that you were only a passing fancy, but he demolished Lady Lavinia for you, and I knew, it was time to give in with grace."

Cecilia's heart twisted with empathy. She didn't know what it was to want attention from the person you were in love with, but she knew what it was like to be invisible, to be so overlooked and disregarded that at one point she

had started to believe she would be so for the rest of her life.

“The stupidity of youth and unrequited love, I suppose.” Lady Emily’s shoulders gave a half-hearted shrug before she met Cecilia’s eyes. “I am sorry; please overlook my foolishness.”

Softened with understanding, Cecilia smiled, “I do.” A moment later she asked, “What do you plan to do now?”

“At five-and-twenty, I have no hope of marrying,” Lady Emily replied, her lips slanted. “I suppose I’ll waltz into the glorious life of spinsterhood with grace and poise, hold supper parties in the countryside with my growing army of cats, and sleep with a pillow as company.”

“No one has shown you any interest?” Cecilia asked.

“Well, when I three and twenty, there was this young man once said I had interesting eyes,” Emily replied. “No one uses epithets such as ‘pretty’ or ‘sought-after’ at all. God forbid, Diamond-of-the-First-Water. I’ve had a ‘she’s tolerable’ once.”

Shaking her head, Cecilia replied, “I never even got that. I would have swooned if someone even looked at me and much less told me I was *tolerable*.”

Emily frowned. “What?”

“I was the wallflower of all wallflowers,” Cecilia replied. “Lords looked *through* me instead of at me. My quiet demeanor and plain frock had made me blend into the cushions. Not a single compliment, no flowers, no notes, nothing, not until Gilbert. He—he showed me that I didn’t need attribution from other people and that their unfriendliness the girls gave me during finishing school should not equal my self-worth.”

“Ah,” Lady Emily nodded. “If there is one thing that he’ll do, it is make you understand that the only one who can define your worth is you. He was an outsider for most of his life and most of his peers from Eton were sure he would fail.

“A year ago, they had all but tripped over themselves in their eagerness to shake his hand in private. but then he was only a trader could only greet them with the tiniest shake of the head. Now, as a duke, the scandal of associating with a *shopkeeper* is gone, and they are coming out of the woodwork in droves. The ton’s second name shouldn’t be the upper ten thousand—it should be the ten thousand hypocrites.”

As much as she’d been hurt by the lady’s actions, Cecilia understood Emily’s stance. It had to be hard to see the one you love to choose another. Despite all their differences, Cecilia wanted to befriend her.

“Would you join me for tea now?” she asked.

Lady Emily’s eyes landed on the table. “If it’s not an imposition.”

“No, it’s not,” Cecilia replied. “Please, I’d love to get to know you.”

“Thank you,” Emily replied. “I’d love to.”

* * *

“You do know that eavesdropping is never the answer, Your Grace,” Rowe said while passing Gilbert, bearing a tray of tea and finger foods.

Rolling his eyes, Gilbert stepped away from the shadowy nook he had been hiding in after Emily had stepped into the breakfast room. He had set out to his study but had double-backed because he did not know what trick—if any—Emily had up her sleeve.

He had not expected a heartfelt apology from her, and pity dampened his heart at hearing her expectations from him. He did blame himself, though; he had known her feelings towards him, but his misstep was expecting that time passing would disabuse her of the notion of a romance between them.

“I should have sat her down and told her that we would never be together,” he murmured to himself while heading to the study this time. “Now, it’s my time to apologize.”

Shelving that for another day, Gilbert sat, opened the copied files, and began going down the copious rows of names and numbers. He jotted down a few names that were repeating from one report to the other and gazed at the five other files he needed to go through.

Rubbing his forehead, Gilbert had to remind himself that this was imperative; he had to find what alias Jeffrey was hiding behind.

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” Rowe said while setting a cup of coffee down. “By all accounts, the ladies have passed their differences and are finding some common ground without you as the basis of their new friendship.”

“I’d hope so,” Gilbert replied. “But I am to blame for this muck-up.”

“You are,” Rowe nodded agreeably.

Giving his butler an eye, Gilbert added, “I should have told her years ago, even when I was just a merchandiser, that we would have never fit. She is too opinionated—not that there is anything wrong with that, well for *others*—and I’m as stubborn as a bull. We would hardly have a have a compatible day.”

“I am glad you’ve found self-retrospection and realized you are tenacious, but you must know that opposites do not always repel each other,” Rowe replied.

“They do not always attract either,” Gilbert jotted another name. “But honestly, I’ve never had an attraction towards her, just admiration for her intelligence.”

“I see,” Rowe nodded. “I’ll prepare your suit for this evening.”

“Thank you,” Gilbert replied. “Silver this evening, Rowe.”

“Yes, Sir.”

CHAPTER 25



For years, Cecilia had dreaded crushes because the amount of people around her—some of them would undoubtedly be girls she had known from finishing school—made her nervous. The withering glances and sneers behind fans had always struck an unpleasant chord, plucking up memories she had done her best to bury.

Being in the public eye put her on edge, yet tonight was different: Cecilia’s was actually enjoying the ball, even though it was a crush. The “winter wonderland” theme that created a romantic atmosphere in the mirrored ballroom was done up so well that it flowed seamlessly into the very English garden just beyond the terrace doors, now dusted with snow.

Her silver dress, gathered beneath her bosom, flowed in a sleek column to her dark jeweled slippers. Simple diamonds glittered at her ears, but the one that mattered the most to Cecilia was the one on her hand.

“Have I told you how fetching your updo is?” Gilbert murmured. “It’s a shame you had to cover up that pretty mark I left under your ear last night.”

“It’s enough that we’re the talk of the town.” Cecilia replied. “I’d rather not be a feature in the scandal papers too. Or be forced to explain a rather large insect bite.”

“Insect? I am *highly* offended.” Gilbert slanted a look at her.

She turned and touched her fingertip to the diamond winking in the folds of his cravat. “Would you have preferred a trip to the chapel?”

His brow arched. “Little lamb, stop teasing the wolf.”

Laughing, she turned to the crowd, “I’ll be looking for Belle.”

As she turned, Gilbert’s hand slid down her arm and gently turned her back to him, easily threading their fingers together. “Remember our waltz. Be back in time for it.”

“I shall be back in time,” she promised. “Don’t worry.”

He pressed the back of her hand to his lips before letting her go, and she began to wind her way through the guests, searching for her best friend. She spotted Belle, her slender elegant figure clad in a misty green gown that bared her creamy shoulders.

Belle looked a bit unsettled, and Cecilia grew concerned. “Belle, is everything all right?”

Her friend mustered a smile, but Cecilia could still see the upset in her eyes. “It’s Marcus. He’s not feeling well when the cold time comes around. It hurts his amputated knee, and I tried to stay behind, but he told me to come here to show you the support you’ll need.”

Cecilia didn’t know if she felt touched or concerned. “Thank you, Belle, but... I wish you would have stayed with Marcus.”

“He’ll be all right,” Belle squared her shoulder. “Marcus can handle himself.”

A twinge of guilt threaded itself through her breastbone, and Cecilia wanted to tell her friend to go home and stay with the man she loved, but she knew Belle wouldn’t do it.

Instead, she hugged Belle. “I hope you’ll enjoy the night.”

A single bell indicated the first dance, and Gilbert came to claim her hand. Belle wandered off to the refreshment table.

“Is she all right?” he asked, his gaze flickering up to Belle.

“No,” Cecilia replied. “She’s worried about Marcus; he’s under the weather.”

“I think you should check on her after this dance,” Gilbert replied, pulling her indecently close, cause all thoughts about Belle to flitter from her mind.

His cologne, that subtle alchemy of musk and spice, fed into her hunger, and the memories of the night before took over. She could almost feel the firm pressure of his mouth on hers, the taste of him upon her tongue...

As if reading the thoughts in her head, his eyes sharpened. “What are you thinking?”

Her face pinked, but her lids lowered coyly. “I don’t think you want to know.”

“I’ll pretend that you were just thinking about crochet and midday tea,” he replied, even though his lips curled in a knowing smirk.

“Yes, let’s do that,” she replied while tangible memories of his lips tracing over her skin, suckling kisses into secret places, and the thickness of him inside her made her skin prickle with gooseflesh.

His hand took on a possessive grip while they danced in sensual synchronicity that would have tongues wagging all through the night—only this time, Cecilia did not care.

As the music swelled, Gilbert murmured, “I can’t wait to get out of here.”

She blinked, noting the stiff edge of his jaw above his crisp cravat. Her eyes flickered to her maid waiting at the sidelines. “Already? Won’t you give me a chance to enjoy the rest of the evening.”

“I was. But dancing with you is enough to make a monk hard. And believe me, I’m no monk.” He slanted her a meaningful look then blurted, “I want to take you back home.”

“Now? It’ll be rude to leave so early,” Cecilia pointed out while the music faded. “Lady Rawlings would be insulted.”

“Or I could take us somewhere else and fulfill that desire I see brimming in your eyes,” he said. “We’re engaged now; we’re allowed some privacy.”

Resting his hand on the small of her back and without preamble or a look at anyone, he guided her to the stairs and away from the ballroom. Resolutely, he marched them up to another floor and a third, looking this way and that for what she could only assume was a shadowed corner or an empty room.

Suddenly, Gilbert spun on his heels, retraced his steps down the corridor and yanked a window curtain away. In an instant, he had her up against the wall while moonlight streamed in through the glass pane. His fingers found her nipples through the bodice, and his thumbs strummed the buds until her moans became breathy, desperate.

Dropping his head, Gilbert rucked up her skirts, chemise included, grabbed her hips, and locked her stocking-clad legs around his waist. Desire and caution warred in her head.

“Gilbert, what if we g—”

He ran his finger reverently down her wet slit, and Cecilia lost her train of thought. She chomped down on the back of her hand and barely muffled shriek as his hand teased her softness.

“Shh, sweetheart. Any louder and you’ll invite others to our *rendezvous*.” Gilbert bit her ears then hotly whispered, “You would not want that, would you?”

“No,” her voice was breathy and needful. “God no.”

“Good,” he bit her pulse point. “I’m sorry. I knew we’d prefer a bed, but this will be quick and hard.”

With a free hand, he unbuttoned the fold of his breeches, and his turgid flesh sprang free, and he kissed under her ear, “Reach into my jacket and take out the French letter, sweetheart.”

Quickly, she fished the packet out, and he grinned, “Now, put it on me.”

Laughing softly, Cecilia said, “I’d ask why you came prepared, but I suppose you calculated all the odds, did you not?”

He kissed her in response. By the sense of touch alone, Cecile reached below them and hesitantly circled his girth; the pulsing heat of him made her heart do a triple beat.

“You’re so big,” she blurted while covering him and tightening the red strings.

“That’s because of you.” He kissed down her neck and notched at her opening. “You’re a goddess of sensuality, and I am simply an acolyte willing to—*serve*.”

He’d surged in, his hands filled with her plump bottom; he held her hips and slammed his length all the way into her. Instantly, pleasure exploded inside her body, pure flame searing through her veins as he moved within her.

His hands gripped her slim hips, and he nearly lifted her full of his turgid length before slamming her down again. He drove in deeper and deeper, and Cecilia felt her tight sheath rippling around him, pleasure racing up her spine. Mad with lust, he pounded into her as she chanted his name wantonly.

Her hands speared into his hair, and she pressed her mouth to his, kissing and kissing him as she took him deep inside. Ethereal moonlight threw planes of his beautiful face into savage contrast, light on one side, shadow on the other while both eyes held a lustful glow.

Sharp whimpers fell from her lips as familiar sensations wreaked havoc through her body; her heart hammered, and the heat burning through her entire body had sweat trickling down her breasts.

He did not have to touch her pearl to spark the streaks of forked pleasure that jabbed through her body. A weak cry tore from her as the violent sensations crested, and she pressed her mouth to his to muffle the scream that left her mouth.

He kissed her hard and deeply, and not too soon after, with his face buried in her neck, shudder after soul-wrecking shudder took him, and he pulled within her body.

Stunned at the enormity of what they had done, Cecilia whispered, “Now I understand how one could be carried away by passion.”

Laughing huskily, he gently pulled from her body and kissed her again before gently resting her on the ground. He fixed his trousers then buttoned his jacket.

“I think some fresh air would do a lot to calm the heat under my skin,” he suggested then opened the windows wide. Resting his forearms on the sill, the wintery wind fluttered through his damp hair.

Cecilia silently joined him, “What are you thinking about?”

“Mostly...what it is going to take to stop all this mess with Mullens,” he replied. “And what, if any, choices you’ll have after we dissolve this faux courtship.”

“I don’t mind walking off into the sunset as the lady who once courted the Duke of Pembroke,” Cecilia replied. “The emotions and sensations I’ve felt with you will last me a lifetime.”

“You deserve better than memories,” Gilbert replied.

“I know,” she replied. “I want the love spoken about in fairy tales, the all-encompassing, soul-searing love that spans through decades and is written down in annals of history. The one that makes you swoon and sigh and makes your heart beat triple time when you see the object of your attention, but that love is rare, I think, perhaps nigh impossible to find.

“Not everyone loves the same way, and I suppose there is something for romantic love, but I’ve realized the love you’ve shown me is equally comparable,” Cecilia said calmly while watching the wind play toss-about with his hair. “And it is completely fine with me.”

By degrees, Gilbert turned to her, his eyes clouded, but then something... *shifted*. Cecilia studied his gaze, and she’d never seen it so clear and intense, kindling with the depth of his emotion.

What has changed...I wonder.

Gilbert reached over, his hands sliding up her jaw as he his lips molded to hers in the slowest, sweetest kiss that somehow still sent sparks bursting into her heart, groaning as her tongue rubbed his in a kitten lick.

He pulled back and brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. “We should rejoin the party.”

She wanted to question his sudden mood change but didn’t think it best to spoil such a special moment. “Yes, I think so too.”

They held an amicable silence as they made their way down the stairs leading to the heart of the ball; thankfully, they arrived in the middle of another dance. Lords and ladies twirled across the dance floor, and chatter and laughter floated in the air while the champagne flowed freely.

A few matrons gave them a scowling eye, but Cecilia ignored them and looked around the ballroom for Belle. She spotted her at the champagne fountain, holding a glass of punch.

“I’ll go and see how Belle is doing,” Cecilia replied. “We can rejoin the dancing after this.”

“Sure,” Gilbert nodded, and his tone was still off. Cecilia really needed to ask him what was bothering him when they had a quiet moment.

She went off to her friend and found Belle—looking peaky. She filled a glass of water then asked, “Belle? Are you all right? You look a bit... overwhelmed, or possibly ill.”

“I—I don’t know,” Belle replied.

Cecilia's eyes dropped to the glass in her friends' hand, "How many of those have you had?"

"A—" Belle blinked. "—few."

As she reached for her friend's glass, mayhem erupted, and a lady doubled over in the middle of the dance floor, spewing the contents of her stomach on the floor while a matron gasped and swooned. She almost hit the floor, but a footman grabbed her.

What was happening?

More cries came from the room with more ladies falling ill, fainting and getting sick. Cecilia barely looked back to Belle before the glasses in her hand crashed to the ground, and Belle collapsed, vomiting harder than any of them.

CHAPTER 26



*I*t took Gilbert a hair longer than he should have to react to the mayhem in the room, but the moment it registered, his mind made the connections in a hairsbreadth, the punch or the champagne.

Fear for Cecilia's life had him charging through the room like a bull in a China shop. He had to find her and hoped she was not one of the casualties popping up all around the room.

Running to her side, he found her holding a sick Belle in her arms, looking completely petrified. He pried Belle from her arms and lifted her. "We're leaving—now. Did you drink anything?" he demanded.

"No—no, just water, a sip," she replied, her face as white as a sheet. "Nothing more, I promise."

"Was it cloudy?"

"No," she said hurrying after him.

“Did it taste funny?”

“No,” she said as they burst into the cool night air.

Carriages were screeching up the road, and guests were launching into them in droves. It was madness, but instead of waiting for the Gilbert’s carriage to pick them up, they rushed over to it. Cecilia’s held her gown up as she ran while her eyes were on Belle’s paling face and fluttering eyes.

Gilbert’s driver spotted them, launched from his seat, and wrenched the door open. “The doctor, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” Gilbert replied while resting Belle inside and helping Cecilia inside. “And hurry.”

The moment the door closed, the vehicle flew off, and Cecilia cradled Belle to her side. Guilt seared her insides with the knowledge that while she had been getting pleased, Belle was being poisoned.

“Cecilia, it’s not your fault,” Gilbert said clairvoyantly. “You could have never known something like this would happen, and as much as I am worried for Anabelle, forgive me for being selfish, but I am relieved it was not you.”

She knew not to take his words the other way, but it was hard to do so when her best friend was ill and wavering in and out of unconsciousness on her

shoulder.

“I—” She didn’t know what to say, and instead looked at Belle. “—am afraid.”

“She’ll be all right,” Gilbert replied. “Dr. Paulson is brilliant medic, and he will heal Anabelle of whatever happened to her.”

Biting her lip, Cecilia reached up, pulled the pins that held her hair together, and dug her fingers into her tense scalp. “She didn’t want to come tonight, you know, but Marcus made her come to support me. And now...”

Gilbert wiped her free hand and held it tight. “She will be fine, Cecilia, I will make sure she gets the best care available, whatever it takes. I’ll send for Marcus to be by her side as long as he needs to be.”

Her lips pressed tight. “Jeffrey did this, didn’t he? It’s another ploy in his tit for tat game. But—but is he so cruel to hurt fifty people to get to me to scare me?”

“That occurred to me but if it is him, the man is a pissant and a heartless bastard,” Gilbert said through grit teeth, his twitching hand tempted to form a fist on his thigh. “I will find out if it was him, and I will bring him to justice for all of his crimes—every single one of them—and he’ll be shut away in the deepest, darkest hole imaginable to rot away like the garbage he is.”

She tilted her head and rested her temple on his shoulder. “Gilbert...” she

paused, and something tender and shockingly vulnerable settled on her face. "...I know you've prided yourself on taking on the burdens of everyone you care about, but you cannot be there for everyone and do everything. I appreciate what you are doing, but... I'm afraid for you. You might take on more than you can handle."

The care and consideration in her words held an emotion that was almost painful to receive, but it battered his chest anyway. These words—paired with her words from the balcony—were chipping away a wall around his heart he had never truly known was there.

Clarity struck like lightning in a pitch-dark sky; all the rejections from his childhood to adolescence had made him averse to the opposite—affection.

Upfront dismissal he could handle, but to believe a kind word or action and not be ready for the secret backhanded blow rankled his logic so much, he would rather accept the negative, to know that holding hope and faith were not worth the pain they would cause in the end after being broken.

He realized, finally, that he hadn't been protecting her from his affection—he'd been protecting himself from *hers*.

All along, I've been falling in love with her and terrified of my own heart. I've been afraid of opening that last part of me completely, of exposing myself to the risk of a pain greater than any broken bone could give me.

The revelation was numbing—but not a word of it left his mouth. Cecilia was already feeling too much, and he wouldn't dare encumber her with any more

emotions. It was best to have that conversation another time; besides, he had a more pressing issue to resolve.

Leaning in, he kissed the top of her head. “Thank you for your concern, sweetheart, but I can take care of myself.”

The carriage screeched to a stop at a house in Grosvenor square, and Gilbert motioned for Cecilia to open the door for him as he gathered Anabelle in his arms. She stood aside while Gilbert ran up the steps with a fitful Anabelle, and following him, Cecilia banged on the door.

“Help!” she shouted. “Please, it’s an urgent situation! Come, please!”

A rumble in the air heralded rain, and a cold wind washed over the three; just as Gilbert went to add his voice, hurried footsteps thundered down what sounded like stairs and soon, the door was pulled in. The man standing there was tightening his robe while holding an oil lamp.

He was fiddling with a pair of spectacles. “Your Grace?”

“We need to come in,” Gilbert said. “I think this a case of lily of the valley poisoning or possibly nightshade. I do not believe it is hemlock, belladonna, yew, or monkshood. They do not make one vomit or become disorientated.”

“I see,” Dr. Paulson nodded. “Please, carry her to my patient room. Follow me.”

By the light of the man's lamp, they went to a medium-sized room on the same floor. Gilbert rested Anabelle on the already made bed while the doctor began busying himself around the room mixing something.

"Anabelle?" Gilbert asked. "Can you hear me?"

She blinked her eyes open, moments before she lurched up and lost her accounts on the side of the bed. Gilbert didn't shift, even with fluid on his boots.

"How did she ingest the poison?" the physician asked.

"In the punch," Cecilia replied. "She had a good number of drinks before I'd gone to speak with her. She was distressed already when we arrived, but I do not know why she turned to drinking because Belle is not a... lush. She hates profusive drinking with a passion as her uncle was a drunk."

"Well, certain distresses can change a person's mind at times," Dr. Paulson replied. "Your Grace, please lift her head and open her mouth for me in way that clear her airways."

Gilbert did so, and the doctor poured concoction down Belle's throat and gently massaged her throat, so she could swallow.

"It an anti-poison," Dr. Paulson explained. "Until I can devise a precise treatment for her, this will have to do. It's a strong concoction I have used on a hemlock patient who was close to dying, and it has worked, so I have little

doubt it will rid her of whatever is in her blood.”

A long breath left Anabelle, and by-the-by, color infused her cheeks; her breathing was starting to even out as well.

“I’ll send a maid to stay with her—”

“No,” Cecilia stopped him. “I’ll stay. You can send my maid to keep me company and a change of clothes, that will be fine, but she is my dearest friend. I’m *staying*.”

He didn’t question her. “I’ll send her back with your things, but Cecilia, I will be gone from home tomorrow. Stay will Belle.”

“I will,” she replied.

Looking at the physician, he said, “Thank you for accommodating us so late, Dr. Paulson, and whenever she is better, send me the bill.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the older man bowed his head.

Wrapping an arm around Cecilia, he said, “You’ll be safe, tonight. The runners will be watching.”

She leaned into him and whispered, “thank you for saving her.”

“My pleasure,” he replied.

With a heavy heart, and heavier steps, Gilbert left the house and hopped back into the carriage. A somber air wrapped around him as he went home, and he sent Cecilia’s maid back to her with a change of clothes that he tucked a purse of money with.

He didn’t sleep that night; instead, he worked through the ledgers again, trying to find the common factor. So far, he has narrowed the list down to three names, and he had two more thick ledgers to go. By seven, he had bathed, dressed, and was back at Lady Rawling’s home.

The house was in shambles even with the footmen still cleaning broken glass and bodily fluids. As the lady of the house was ill, he quickly found the butler and told him to send missives to every guest about what the poison came from and how to counteract it.

“I will, Your Grace,” the butler replied.

“Did...did any of your staff not present themselves this morning?” Gilbert asked, calculatedly.

He’d reasoned that whoever might have dunked the poison into the punch would not dare show their face the next morning. Any respectable criminal would have taken their money paid to them and ran... but there was a chance

that the perpetrator could still be there.

The butler's brows furrowed, "Owens did not report for duty this morning at five, and he is still absent."

"What was his station last night?" Gilbert asked.

"He was washing glasses," the butler replied. "He is a youth, Your Grace, seven-and-ten, and very challenging. He was sent here from the workhouses and was once a mudlark. He is not one to speak about himself, and no one had heard a thing about his past."

Very amenable to be paid off to betray anyone.

"I see," Gilbert replied. "Did he ever mention any accomplices, anyone at all?"

"Not that I can recall," the older man replied.

"Pardon me, Sir and Yer Grace," a young lad, probably a hall-boy or a chimney sweep, bowed until his nose touched his knees. "Rupert Owens said to tell you he must run out of town."

Gilbert spun on his feet, "Where is he?"

“Cleaning out ‘is cupboard in servant ‘ouses,” the lad replied, rubbing his drab brown breeches.

“Which way?” Gavin demanded then decided not to lose precious moments and darted out the backdoor, sprinting to the rows of cottages at the far end of the property.

A lanky lad just exited one at the end with a sack thrown over his shoulder, looked around, and spotted Gilbert barreling down on him—and took off.

If the man was not guilty before, he surely looked guilty now, and his long legs ate up the space between the housing and the wall. Suddenly, the boy turned, and a pistol cracked off, and Gilbert launched to the side as a bullet whizzed by his ear.

Undeterred, he ran; his muscles strained, and his lungs burned while single imperative drove him on—he had to protect Cecilia. If this boy was a link between the poisoning and Mullens, there was no way he would let this one escape.

The boy lobbed his sack over the wall and jumped, grabbed a hold of the ledge, and began to scramble over it—but Gilbert gripped the flapping tails of his shirt and yanked him back. Spinning the lad around, Gilbert had him by the lapels in one hand and slammed the one with the pistol on the wall hard enough that he dropped it.

“Do not try to run anymore,” Gilbert’s voice frosted over. “And unless you want to be hanged at Tyburn tomorrow then drawn and quartered for

attempting to *kill* a duke, you *will* answer every question I have.”

Panic seared the lad’s eyes, and his face went as white as death. “Y-Y-Yes, Y-your Grace.”

* * *

The idea had come to Cecilia in the middle of the night, and while she knew the talk would be risky, she had to do something. It was not fair for Gilbert to do all the work while she stood by with her hands folded like a hapless damsel.

She had a unique way in; if she could do something, hopefully, even the little to help hers—and Gilbert’s—case against Jeffrey, she would do it. She dressed that morning in a gown her maid had carried for her and then went to see how Belle was doing.

Her friend was still asleep, but her condition had improved incredibly from last night; her color had returned, and her breathing was steady.

“I attended her twice during the night,” Dr. Paulson said. “She is reacting well to the treatment.”

“That’s wonderful,” Cecilia replied. “Thank you, but I must take a trip to my home to speak with my aunt for an hour or two. I will leave my maid here to attend to Belle if she does waken.”

“Are you sure this is wi—” Dr. Paulson made to ask but thought the better of

it, nodding agreeably. “Safe journey, my lady.”

While donning her outerwear, she called for Gilbert’s carriage and headed off to her home while snow started fluttering in. The winter was late, which was not a good sign; it was probably going to be bitterly cold and icy for months ahead.

Just thinking of what she was about to do made her want to succumb to hysterics and turn the carriage around, but no—if she could do something, she would do it, no matter how much it terrified her.

When the carriage came to her aunt’s home, Cecilia headed to her aunt’s drawing room, hoping her aunt would be there to be a buffer, but her aunt was asleep.

“Cecilia?” Jeffrey’s light voice from the doorway behind her made an icy sheen of dread encase her chest. “Welcome home, dear cousin.”

Jeffrey was smiling wildly, not an ounce of guilt or shame in his eyes. His golden hair gleaming like a newly minted guinea and not a wrinkle was to be found on his plum waistcoat and grey trousers.

“Well, it won’t be your home for much longer, will it,” he added ruefully while leaning on the door jamb, legs crossed. “Pray tell, what is it like living in the lap of pure luxury?”

Swallowing over the bile surging into her mouth, Cecilia forced a smile. “It’s

wonderful, no cut-rate champagne, and bed is a downy as a cloud. H—how are you, Jeffrey?”

“Middling,” he shrugged. “Would you like to have some tea with me?”

“I would like some, yes,” Cecilia agreed.

“The breakfast room then,” Jeffrey replied sprightly. It was only when he turned, she realized he was holding a folio and sat it down on the table.

She paid it little mind; instead, she gathered her thoughts by gazing out the window. Would Jeffrey give her any clue to the leading questions she was going to ask?

Wondering back to the table, Cecilia idly flickered the cover open and read, *“Lloyds Banking Company Limited, authorized promissory note from L. Mellus J. N. Reffery to Rubert Owens, promised in the amount of fifty pounds has been disbursed.”*

Who is Rubert Owens? Jeffrey never mentioned him before.

“Ahem,” Jeffrey said from the doorway. “Are you spying on me, dear cousin?”

CHAPTER 27



*A*s sickened as she felt with him nearby, Cecilia calmly closed the folio and turned. “I wanted to see if it was a love note from a lady you’re charming. You are an unashamed dandy after all, and I am aware that women with little self-respect see you as a good match.”

Throwing his head back and laughing jovially, Jeffrey set the tea set on the table. “Why, thank you for the compliment, but I am not offering myself on the marriage mart at the moment. I still have a lot of recovering to do.”

Her heart hammered in her breastbones. “You still do not remember anything from that night, do you?”

His lips ticked down, and he gave a slow headshake before his shoulders lifted in a wry shrug. “The best I can conjure is a blistering feeling blasting through my temple, and black spots peppering my vision right before I faded away. Before that though, I cannot tell you one from the other.”

She made her cup. “Did you hear about what happened last night at Viscountess Rawlings home?”

“No.” His brows knotted in the middle. “Should I have? What happened?”

“The punch was tampered with,” Cecilia replied. “Belle got severely ill, and Gilbert had to take her to a physician. Luckily, she will recover.”

“And you?” Jeffrey rested his hand over hers.

Instantly, Cecilia felt as if her skin was crawling with a hundred stinging ants. Her stomach lurched, and the sweet tea she had just sipped turned sour in the back of her throat. She wanted to rip her hand away and smack him in his face, but she sucked down her unease.

“I only had water,” she replied. “I’m perfectly fine, but not so for many others. I’m surprised through that you were not out with your friends.”

“Sadly, my friends are fickle,” he replied. “Even my friend Pendleton has disappeared without a trace because he owes me a fair sum of money.”

“Have you gone to see the warehouse?” she asked.

He drummed his fingers on the table. “Sadly, I had to close that venture. My overseers were sifting funds from the books, and we lost a lot of revenue.”

“That’s horrible,” Cecilia replied.

“That overseer has also vanished,” Jeffrey added. “My life is a bit topsy-turvy at the moment.”

“What do you plan on doing then?” Cecilia asked. “Another business? You know your dandy lifestyle needs to be financed.”

“There is an apothecary for sale,” Jeffrey replied. “I’m looking into it.”

“What the name of it?” she asked.

“McCutcheon and Sons,” Jeffrey told her. “It’s in SoHo.”

“Ah, I see.” Cecilia replied, unhappy about how massively she was failing at fettering information from him, but she had two maybe leads that hopefully Gilbert would work with. “So, how do you—”

“Cecilia, dear,” Aunt Letitia came into the room, tightening her robe. “I heard your voice, and I wondered if it was you. How are you? And you’re here with Jeffrey; how sweet.”

Hardly.

Her aunt sat and made her cup, “Now, sweetheart, tell me everything.”

* * *

The poor boy looked so ill—his face, beading profusely with sweat, was white as chalk—that Gilbert was tempted to have mercy on him, but on the other hand, the lad had not had any qualms on pulling a pistol and shooting at him.

“Tell me who hired you, and you might scrape by with a hanging,” Gilbert demanded while a Bow Street constable took notes. “Speak, now!”

Owen’s foot was bouncing like a ball on the floor, and he swallowed. “Why do I think you already know the answer to that, Y-Your Grace?”

“What I know or what I do not know is inconsequential,” Gilbert snarled. “Tell me who hired you.”

“I don’t know who he is,” Owens’s voice dimmed with him seeming to have to come to terms with his fate. “He contacted me through another contact. I do not know his name, only initials, M, J, and... and a R, I believe. I was instructed to collect a package from a mudlark and add the contents to the punch. That’s—that’s all.”

“How much did he pay you and from where?”

“Fifty p-pounds, Sir,” Owens replied, the sickly look on his face showing how he was growing progressively ill.

His throat was working, swallowing profusely, and when his pale sheen turned to a yellow pallor, Gilbert had just enough time to toe a bucket to Owen's side before the boy lost his stomach contents into it.

"A veritable fortune, well, for some of us," the constable murmured.

"And what were you planning to do after this?" Gilbert asked.

"Vanish," Owens muttered. "Go the countryside for a while, possibly leave altogether. I should ha' run last night, guv, but I decided against it as it looked too suspicious. Lookin' back, I should have kept to me mind."

"Which bank was the payment from?" Gilbert pressed, hoping that this would give him the details he needed to trace the records back to Jeffrey.

"I can't help you," Owens shrugged. "I don't take much notice of things like that, and I burnt the missive as well."

Gilbert ground his teeth in frustration, but at least they would have someone to add to their case when they did corral Jeffrey. He rubbed his face, "Keep him in custody until I track down the sender of this message."

"He will be imprisoned," the constable replied. "Unless you decide to pardon him, he will be sent to Tyburn."

Tired, Gilbert ordered that the boy be shipped off to a workhouse outside of

London and made sure that the constables would contact him if any more developments came to light before he headed home.

He arrived in a flurry of snow and had to hold back a smile. Few people knew that winter was his favorite season, and fond memories of sledding in Hyde Park with his father trickled up from his memories.

Secretly, he wanted to do the same with his future child.

He waved the footman off when he came with an umbrella and stepped out into the flurry unbothered.

“Lady Cecilia is here, Your Grace,” the footman bowed.

“Oh, wonderful.” Gilbert headed up to his room where she assumed she would be, but she was not there.

After peeling his damp jacket off and releasing his cravat, he padded to her room and found her curled up in a window seat, clad in her silk robe nursing a cup of tea. Her hair was a tangle over her shoulders, and Gilbert fought the urge to thread his fingers through them.

“You’re back from the doctor's then?”

She turned, her smile flickering, “Marcus came for Belle and took her home. He says he is immeasurably thankful to you for saving her life.”

Pulling up a seat, Gilbert said, “We found the servant who laced the punch with the poison, but he didn’t give us much to go on after that. ”

“Another broken lead,” she sighed. “I’m sorry.”

He motioned for her cup, and she handed it over; he took a sip, and his mouth twisted, “Are you drinking pure honey?”

Cecilia giggled, “I may have added more than needed.”

“I’ll be scraping my tongue off for a week,” he jested while handing the cup back to her. He slouched in his seat, cocked an elbow on the arm, and propped his fist on it. “What have you done today?”

“I went to see my aunt,” Cecilia replied then dropped her gaze. “Jeffrey was there.”

Gilbert launched upright instantly, the protectiveness and possessiveness he felt for her roaring as loudly as lion trapped in his den for weeks.

“Tell me you left immediately,” he demanded.

“No, I stayed for a while—”

“Cecilia!” he barely held back a shout. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed not to react to the weakest excuse to stay in the presence of a predator. “How could you put yourself back in any position to get hurt again?”

While her cheeks bloomed red, Cecilia notched her chin up. “My aunt was mere feet away from the room, and Jeffrey would be unhinged to try...to try an assault me with her so close.”

He launched to his feet and started pacing, “Not everyone is as upfront and honest as you think they would be. There are many underhanded ways he could have gone about, there are certain chemicals that could easily render you unconscious, and this time, you mightn’t have the chanced to overpower him. He could have whisked you away without anyone being the wiser.”

“I knew it was a risk, but I took it anyway,” she explained. “If anyone could get closer to Jeffrey and fetter out his secrets, it would be me, and as unpalatable as that is, it is the truth.”

He frowned, “Did you find anything important?”

“Sadly no, not *per se*,” Cecilia replied. “But he admitted to me that he had closed the warehouse which we know was not done voluntarily, and that he was looking for his friend, Pendleton, and that he was looking to into a purchasing an apothecary in SoHo.”

“Why would he tell you all this?” Gilbert’s brows furrowed.

“Because he seems to not have any remembrance of the night, and I suppose he trusts me to some degree,” Cecilia replied.

“Or he could be playing a game,” he snapped. “One where he is pretending not to remember, so he can lure you back into his clutches.”

He kept pacing, the soles of his polished Hessians slapping against the floor. When he stopped in front of her, Cecilia’s breath hitched so fierce was the possessiveness in his gaze. “You are not to do that again, even if half the Prince Regent’s royal guards are with you, armed to the teeth, you shall not be anywhere near him. Am I understood?”

“Yes,” her tone dipped. “I understand.”

Upset, Gilbert turned to the door. “I—I need a moment by myself.”

Striding away, he got to his study, and his anger flared white-hot. How dare Cecilia put herself in such a dangerous position? He poured a glass of whiskey and swallowed the lot in one gulp. In perplexed and perturbed him how Cecilia could have thought, on any stretch of the imagination, that being anywhere near Jeffrey was a safe thing to do.

Falling into his seat, he flung his leg up on his desk and pressed the heavy crystal to his throbbing temple. He felt deeply bothered—and a bit helpless—at knowing how reckless she had been. His heart hurt while his mind kept spinning wider circles of fear; he couldn’t help but envision how much

Jeffrey could have hurt her, broken her, even killed her.

How would he feel if she had gone missing, and her body floated up on the Thames some weeks after. If they found her at all.

He sat the cup down and heard the clock chime eleven, and his head snapped to the hallway. Cecilia could already be asleep, but he had to talk to her. Swallowing over the emotions roiling in his chest, he retraced his steps to her room and gently opened the door.

She was curled on her side, facing the opposite wall, and Gilbert silently approached her, sat at the edge of the bed, then gently turned her to him. Cecilia's eyes were open, and they didn't hold a blur of sleep.

She had been awake all this time.

"I'm sorry I stormed off like a possessed man." He reached for her jaw, his fingertips coasting over her cheekbones. "You must understand how upset I am."

"I know," she sighed, eyes fluttering. "But in truth, I should have been more mindful. Jeffrey is a danger, and it would only be prudent to be mindful of the peril."

"I simply cannot fathom the idea of you jeopardizing yourself, not for me, not for anyone," he admitted, swallowing audibly. "I don't want to see you hurt. You believe me, don't you?"

“I do,” she replied, her smile soft.

“Good,” he kissed her. “I’ll take my leave.”

“I would rather you stayed.” Cecilia sat up and reached for him. “Please, stay.”

Her nightgown slipped up, and as the sheets shifted, he spotted sheer stockings, embroidered with delicate vines and tiny flowers and glimpsed the matching garters above her knees.

She laced her fingers with his and gently pulled him down, “*Stay.*”

Gilbert lifted his head, and she slid her hand into his hair, guiding him down for a kiss. This time his mouth met hers, and his tongue flickered out into her mouth, tangling with hers. The momentum pushed her back, and he followed, bracing one knee on the mattress while he moved the sheets from between them.

With no barrier between them, he melded her mouth to his, kissing him with slow passion and sensual desire. They kissed passionately, and her arms twined around his neck, her nails biting into his scalp as sanity slipped further and further away.

He cupped her cheek with his other hand, peppering soft kisses over her lips

then down to her collar. She arched her neck as he unfastened the strings of her nightgown and pushed it from her shoulders then tugged down her chemise, baring her breasts to his gaze.

The cold night air kissed her skin, making her shiver.

“Your body never fails to amaze me,” Gilbert murmured in awe while trailing his hands down; he cupped her breasts which felt so heavy and swollen with desire.

He picked up the ring, nestled between her breasts, with his teeth then dropped it. “Why did you put it back on the ribbon?”

“Because I like to have it over my heart at night,” Cecilia replied, brushing his hair from his eyes. “Its... comforting.”

His emotions began slanting into hidden territory while he rolled her nipples between his fingers, pinching and then soothing them with tender caresses of his suckling lips.

“Stay where you are,” he commanded tenderly, brushing a kiss over her forehead. Then he stood and stripped off his boots and clothes until he was gloriously naked.

While dropping his shirt at the foot of the bed, he could feel her gaze tracing over every delineated inch of his body. Turning back to her, fully aroused, his erection curved to his belly.

Gilbert gently removed the rest of her clothes, leaving her in her white stockings. Then, wanting to feel her skin on his, he covered her body with his. Nudging her head to the side, he tenderly kissed under her ear. Her hand, soft as silk, slid up his spine to anchor her fingers in his hair.

“Tonight, I want it all,” she whispered achingly.

He lowered his lips and licked along the plump flesh of her breast, his tongue flicked over her aching nipple, laving it over and again before he enveloped it in his mouth and gave a hard suck.

“Gilbert!” she gasped at the raw heat coursing through her body.

“I’m here, sweetheart,” he whispered, kissing her jaw. “I’m aching to be inside you.”

His mouth trailed across her cheek, pausing to nibble at the lobe of her ear and below, taking soft bites where her blood throbbed close to the surface. Gilbert shifted and traced his hand from the middle of her breasts, over her sternum, and over her trembling belly.

“I want you inside me.” Her voice sounded as breathless as if she’d run for miles.

“How do you want me? Like this?” With his free hand, he cupped her rubbed her core, alternating feather-light caresses with sinuous circles upon her sensitive nub when her thighs began to quiver.

“Or like this?” He drove two fingers into her tight passage. Her dewy passage clamped down over his fingers, fierce hungry pulls that set his teeth on edge. She whimpered, squirming delightfully against him while her hands grabbed his arms.

“Is that what you want, Cecilia?” he prodded while this thumb made torturous circles over her swollen nub. His eyes sharpened on her rapturous face. “Or is it more?”

“More,” she arched a little. “You, I want you.”

His hand shifted against her inner thigh, prying open her legs and hooking one knee over his hip, all the while his fingers kept thrusting in and out, but he pulled them away. Fisting his length, Cecilia moaned as he ran the fat head up and down her cleft.

“Is this what you want then?”

Her hips arched. “Yes, God yes.”

Gilbert gripped her hips and entered her in a swift, hard thrust; her body gripped him tight before he withdrew. Holding her, he pulled her into his pounding thrusts, plunging again, deeper and deeper still.

Jaw taut, he demanded, “Then take me. All of me.”

Her calves clung to the notches of his hips, his muscular buttocks flexing beneath her heels. He thrust harder, deeper, his balls grinding against her folds. Muscles bunching, sweat pouring down his brow, Gilbert swallowed the euphoric look on her face as if it was nectar—and slowed his motions.

His lips went to her ear, and she shuddered as he suckled on the tender lobe. He trailed hot kisses down her throat while his thrusts slowed and his sure, strong strokes made her sigh and shudder with tender delight.

No interaction before had ever felt like this; not one had ever come close, and he felt drunk with pleasure. With each slow plunge, he sank deeper into her loving heat, but yet still, he needed to be closer, even though it was not physically possible.

Each movement had his shaft grazing her sensitive peak, and Cecilia was moaning with ecstasy. The sight of her full breasts bouncing with each thrust and the perfect clench of her body had another variation of pleasure threading through his body.

“Gilbert...”

“Take your pleasure,” he commanded her. “And take me with you.”

As if on command, a steady pulse rippled through her body and ricocheted deep in her belly. Her body fluttered around him, and when they peaked with her cry, the tight vice of her body wrenched a shout from his throat.

While her blissful voice echoed in his ears, he slammed into her again, and heat sizzled up his spine. Ecstasy shot through him like an arrow but branched out at its zenith, zinging through Gilbert's veins and tightening the muscles of his chest and throat.

With the last vestiges of his control, he pulled himself from her with a growl, and while holding her hot gaze with his, he roared her name as he exploded in his hand.

CHAPTER 28



*D*azed, Gilbert sucked in a breath before wiping his hand on the sheets and crawling to join Cecilia.

“That was...that was...” She was struggling to find the exact word.

“Everything,” he added while dropping a kiss in her collarbone. “It was everything.”

She rested her head on his chest and carded her fingers through his chest hair. “You didn’t use the letters this time. Why?”

He shifted to hold her eyes. “It was still careless of me, and I should have asked your permission first, but it’s because I feel that I don’t need to hide behind my fears anymore. I want to marry you. In truth, Cecilia, I want to make you my wife. Not a pretend courtship, not a fake marriage. I want to have the real of each with you because I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Her mouth fell, open, and he stared at her with mist covering his eyes, and

Cecilia used her free hand to touch his left eye. She traced her thumb across the droplet, wicking it away.

“Oh, Gilbert, I never expected a proposal.”

“It is no less than you deserve.” She smiled. Truly, the woman he loved had never looked more beautiful. “I love you.”

“Not nearly as much as I love you.” He kissed her forehead, and Cecilia lifted her head to kiss his upturned lips.

“In that case... I’d be a fool not to make you my husband,” she replied.

“That is a, yes?” he asked.

She laughed. “Yes, my sweet man.”

“You’ll never be alone again,” he promised, holding her close. “Never doubt that, and no matter what happens, I love you, and I would give my life for you if I needed to. I just need to stop the main threat from hampering our happiness.”

The mention of Jeffrey dimmed the atmosphere in the room, but he soothed the chafed riff with constant sweet kisses that lulled her to sleep. She slipped off, wrapped up in the heat of his body, and the scent of his skin with the lingering hint of musk from their activities a comforting blanket around her.

* * *

Cecilia didn't want to wake up from the beautiful dream she found herself in the next morning. She'd dreamed of children—a happy, pink-cheeked boy and girl, skipping ahead of their nanny, laughing as they played on the estate lawn.

A warm arm wrapped around her middle and a smiling mouth pressed on her ear. “Do you want another one, love?”

She turned to him. “That’s a ploy, isn’t it?”

His eyes glimmered. “Remember what I said about me being an acolyte worshipping at your temple? I meant every word.”

Turning on her side, she drew in a breath and shifted from her side, but before she opened her eyes, she could feel that Gilbert was gone. She closed her eyes and tried to savor the feel of Gilbert spooning her from behind. She reveled in the memory of Gilbert’s naked body against hers, the heat and softness of his skin.

How wonderful will it be when this is the rest of my life?

But it couldn't... not until Jeffrey and the threat he presented were eliminated. She turned to stretch out her hand over the place Gilbert had vacated, and she sighed at how cold the spot was.

There had to be a way to defeat Jeffrey at whatever game he was playing, but she didn't know what game was or how to trump him at it. Had he truly been there on the race-day? Had he had a hand in the poisoning? What was Jeffrey aiming to do? Drive her out of her mind?

He claims not to remember but...

Moving from the bed, she reached for her nightgown and her wrapper then went to her washing room and did a quick ablution then went to find Gilbert. She bet on finding him in his study—and she was right. He was behind his desk, a pile of folios open, a cup of coffee near his left elbow while he scribbled over a piece of paper with his right.

Dressed in his robe—as far as she could see—his hair was tousled as if he had run his hand through it a hundred times.

What was bothering him so much?

“Gilbert?” she asked while going closer. “What’s the matter?”

He looked up then waved at the folios. “These contain the aliases Jeffrey might be using, and I’m having a devil of a time trying to figure out which one it is. By the way, Healey has reported that while ill, thankfully, no one died from the concoction, so there’s that. Somehow, Jeffery was able to get the right amount to get them ill, but not kill them.”

She smiled. “That’s good then. What about those folios?”

“I’ve gone through most of them with a few names overlapping but it will take me another few days to find out who is who.” He dropped the quill to the blotter and motioned for her to join him. Obediently, Cecilia sat on his lap, and he kissed her cheek.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there with you when you woke this morning,” he apologized. “I would have preferred to be there but this…” He looked at the books and his notes, and Cecilia’s eyes followed him.

“...was most important,” she finished while looking over the names, and when her eyes landed on L. Reffery, she startled. Jabbing a finger to that name, she said, “I recognize this one.”

His eyes narrowed. “How?”

“I saw it yesterday,” she replied. “Jeffrey was holding a note from the bank saying the promissory sum of fifty pounds was paid to a Rubert Owens.”

Gilbert’s jaw dropped. “Are you sure that was the name on the note?”

“Very sure,” she replied. “My mind is like a steel trap with what I read. I— should I assume that this Owens is related to Jeffrey somehow?”

“He was the man who put the poison into the punch, and I had no way of connecting the two until you just told that nugget of gold,” he replied. “That

note would have given me the perfect proof to show the connection, but there might be ways to get around it.”

She bit her lip. “What if I get it for you?”

This time both his gaze and his hold on her body tightened, “No. Cecilia, it’s too risky. Besides, he might have already destroyed that note. It’s easier for me to get it from the bank.”

“Do you have the power to pull records for a civilian’s banking history?” she asked pointedly. At his grimace, she added, “It would be faster and easier this way, and I doubt Jeffrey would suspect anything of me going back to visit again. It is my temporary home, after all.”

“What if he tried something again?”

“What if he disappears again, and we can’t find him until he decided to wreak terror on us from the shadows?” she asked pointedly. “I don’t know about you, but I am tired of seeing his face on the backs of my eyelids every night.”

He held her face. “You never told me that,” Gilbert said quietly.

Ducking her head, Cecilia added, “It...the night terrors came following his attack.” Her chest heaved a little. “I barely got four hours a night, and that was after double-latching my bedroom door and hiding a fire poker under my pillow.”

Anger turned Gilbert's placid face into flint. "This is precisely why I do not want you within a mile of him."

Shirting on his lap, Cecilia held his shoulders. "You've done so much to remove him from our lives already. Let me do this one thing to finish it. I was the one to inadvertently drag you into my mess, so give me the chance to make it right. I want to do this, Gilbert. As a matter of fact, I must do this."

"It's dangerous," he pressed. "If Jeffrey can order the poisoning of fifty-three people without batting an eyelash, what is to say he won't use whatever other tricks he has up his sleeve on you?"

"I don't know, but we have to try," she replied.

He didn't look pleased, but Cecilia held her determination. It was time to put this behind them once and for all. If they kept dancing around the issue, Jeffrey would wiggle free again.

"If this the is the last piece to the puzzle, let me get it for us," she said.

His jaw worked while his eyes flickered in thought. "If you're going back into that house, you are not going unarmed."

Cecilia's lips thinned. "I do not know how to use a firearm."

He gently pushed her to stand then went to a cupboard, swiftly opened it with

a key, and pulled out a dainty gun with a glimmering mother-of-pearl handle. “You don’t need to know how to use it. Acting like you do should be enough to give Jeffrey pause, so you can run to me or scream for help.”

“You’ll be there?”

“I am not going to let you walk in there alone and without protection,” he said. “Besides, it is about time I give your relatives another formal visit, is it not?”

* * *

“Cecilia,” Uncle Barnard greeted her with a wide smile. “Welcome home, darling. I thought you had forgotten about us.”

She laughed quietly. “No Uncle, nothing of the sort. We’re here to share the wedding plans. Is Aunt here?”

“No, she and Jeffrey went out to luncheon or what-have-you hours ago, but they should be back soon,” her uncle replied then bowed. “Your Grace, a pleasure to have you in our humble home. Please, let’s have tea, and you can tell me all about your plans. Oh, by the by, your father sent you a letter dear. I suppose the one I send him weeks ago was received quickly.”

“You told father about my engagement then?” She smiled, giddy with the chance to go and search Jeffrey’s room unbothered.

“How could I not,” Barnard replied. “It is the most glorious day of our lives.”

Refraining from touching the pistol in her reticule, Cecilia turned. “I’ll go see to something in my old bedchamber. I’ll return soon.”

Heading upstairs, she bypassed her room entirely and slipped into Jeffrey’s quarters. For a man as obsessed with pomp and posturing as Jeffrey was, his room was astounding austere. Aside from the bed, chest of drawers, trunks at the foot of his bed, three painting on the walls, and his writing table, she found nothing out of the ordinary to draw her eye.

Heading to the table, she carefully but quickly rifled through the papers there, trying to recall the color of the folio Jeffrey had held yesterday. The papers—a mass of invitations and newspapers—yielded nothing, so she checked the drawers instead.

To her surprise, the top one slid open as did the second and the third. A quick rummage through each revealed why they were not guarded; there was nothing out of the ordinary inside, no scrap of paper with a nefarious note or page with a list of large purchases.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, she inspected the room while wracking her brain. Where would Jeffrey hide his secrets?

The dour thought that he might have hundreds of places to keep his records—if he had not set them on fire that was—made her stomach sink to her feet. This may very well be a wild goose chase.

He told me his friend abandoned him—which is more likely a case of him deserting them. If that is the case, he would want to have something to prove their guilt to shore up his innocence. He would not leave himself unarmed.

She went to the pair of large portraits hanging on the wall and lifted an edge to see if there was a mechanism guarding a secret cache behind them—but no, there was nothing behind them.

There has to be a clue somewhere, even hiding in plain sight...

“Or... perhaps not,” she whispered to herself, going back to the drawers.

She was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that the answers to everything were hidden somewhere there, and the information needed to end her nightmare by throwing Jeffrey off his game was merely feet away from here — but where?

Kneeling, she examined the desk and slid under the foot space and examined the backing. Nothing seemed to bulge or was out of the norm, and she moved away, stifling a grimace of frustration.

Time was slipping away, and she knew it, could feel it. Turning on her feet, she felt the crawling, sickening feeling that she was missing something obvious.

Desperate, she turned to the trunks and opened them, hauling the contents out, looking for a folio, paper, an engraving—anything, not nothing. Finally,

she fell on the last option—the bed.

With desperation clawing at her breastbone, she ran her hands over everything, the headboards, the carving on the base, the feet, and back to the headboard, her hand brushing the lionhead carving— and it twisted.

Her heart leaped into her throat. Clambering over the bed, she twisted the mirror carving and something—*popped*. Peering over the edge, she saw a fraction of the baseboard had popped out, and inside it were stacks of dark folios.

Not having the time to marvel at the genius inventions, she scrambled off the bed and grabbed the first one. Spinning it open, she saw the same heading from the bank as yesterday and nearly cried in relief.

As she got to her feet—the door pulled in, and Jeffrey spoke, “Now, isn’t this a surprise.”

She hugged the folio to her chest as he neared, his unbothered blue eyes dropping to her treasure. “And what are you planning to do with that?”

“Stay away from me,” she said tightly. “I mean it, step back.”

“No,” he came closer. “I want to know what you’re doing with my property.”

“It’s proof,” she told him. “Proof of all your dirty work, your lies, your

treachery.”

“Treachery.” His brows lifted. “About what?”

Digging into her reticule, she pulled out the pistol and aimed it at him. “S-stay away.”

His lips pressed tight right before he shook his head and closed the door behind him, “See, I wish you had not gone and done *that*. Now, I’ve got to take matters into my own hands. Oh, how I hate getting my hands dirty. Blood is such a nasty thing to wash away.”

CHAPTER 29



While Gilbert waited for Cecilia and fielded the Viscount's questions, the passing moments felt like eternities stretching on end instead of the fleeting minutes they truly were.

It was risky doing this in Jeffrey's home, but Gilbert took comfort in knowing that the house was surrounded with runners, and he was inside, ready to lend a hand—or a fist—where it might be needed.

Jeffrey would be a madcap to try something there—then again, who knew what he would do if he felt cornered. With one eye on the mantel clock and the other on the Viscount, Gilbert knew the time was passing too quickly and without any quick outcomes. Had Cecilia found something? Was Jeffrey belying her?

His gut twisted unnaturally. He didn't like this feeling.

"Would you pardon me?" He got to his feet. "I need to see what's keeping Cecilia."

“You needn’t bother,” Jeffrey said amiably as he walked into the room with Cecilia—held a gunpoint to her temple. The girl was as white as a sheet, but she still held her composure and allowed Jeffrey to manhandle her. “How unwise of your, Your Grace, sending my poor cousin in to do your dirty work.”

Barnard’s jaw was slack while his eyes bugged out of his sockets. “Jeffrey! What in God’s name has possessed you? Release Cecilia this moment!”

“I am afraid I cannot do that,” he replied affably.

“Do it, or I will kill you,” Gilbert warned.

“No, I don’t think you will. Not while I’m holding your darling at gunpoint anyhow,” Jeffrey replied.

Before Gilbert could answer, Letitia came into the room, trying off her robe. “What is with all the shouting? I am trying to…” Her eyes landed on her son, and they went as wide as dinner plates. “J-Jeffrey! What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry you had to see this, mother,” Jeffrey replied calmly.

“I-I—I don’t understand,” the older woman said faintly, and her husband shot up from his chair to guide her to his seat before she collapsed. With her breath quickening, Letitia asked, “W-what is happening?”

“I’ll tell you,” Gilbert explained. “You’re extremely spoiled and entitled son is a criminal mastermind on the edge of desperation. His crimes have been found out, and now he’s grasping at straws to save himself.”

Jeffreys lips twisted into a sneer, “When you say it like that, I sound deplorable.”

“You *are* deplorable,” Cecilia hissed. “If I had the power, I would open the gates of hell and throw you inside the fiery chambers myself.”

Letitia looked ill, but her husband was stone faced while holding her at his side. “What do you mean? W-h-hy is he holding you at g-gunpoint?”

“Your son once tried and failed to rape your niece, and now, he is holding her at gunpoint to sway me to let him go. Your son was not mugged by blackguards when he ended up in my sickbed, my lady; he was there because she rendered him unconscious with a rock to save her life and her virtue.”

“Lies!” Letitia doubled over, her hand on her heart. “Oh, my heart, such lies!”

“What?” Barnard roared. “Jeffrey, is this true?”

“He’s not lying, Aunt,” Cecilia said to her moaning aunt. “It happened, and I am sorry you had to find out this way.”

“I refuse to believe my son would do something like that,” Barnard said. He then turned accusatory eyes on Cecilia. “You tempted him out his good senses.”

Enraged, Gilbert turned to the Viscount, and his tone was as frigid as a winter’s night. “Are you that blinded by the illusion your son has given you all these years that you would believe in his incorruptibility and boyish charm so much that you would believe an innocent girl would seduce him?”

The man’s face went ruddy. “My son—”

“Your son is a degenerate,” Gilbert snarled. “And I am disgusted by you thinking otherwise.”

“Oh no, Father, Cecilia didn’t seduce me,” Jeffrey confessed. “The truth is, I have desired her for years, and when she came to live with us, it was as if I was gifted the one thing I had longed for in my life. For years, she gazed at me with innocent desire, such guileless love and unspoken longing that I knew this was my chance to show her what she was unwilling to speak.”

Cecilia’s went ashen. “What? Jeffrey, no! Never, I never—”

“Shh, darling,” he said in her ear. “It’s all right now; you needn’t hide. We can be together now as long as you refuse to let that dastardly duke steal you from me, we can be free to love each other as we desire.”

She looked physically ill and tried to move away. “No, Jeffrey, I cannot—I

cannot be with you. I love Gilbert; he is going to be my husband.”

Jeffrey let out a braying laugh. “That fake courtship? Please, anyone with eyes can see it’s nothing. You truly do love me, don’t you?”

“No,” she replied. “I don’t.”

It took a few moments, but when the truth started to sink in, Jeffrey’s face contorted to manic spite. “You mean it. You do love that bastard.”

“Don’t call him that,” she said. “And it’s not too late for you to do what’s right, Jeffrey. Put the gun down, and we can sort this out.”

His face had gone mulish. “No, no. You mean it, and I—I cannot—How can you betray me like this? All this time, I’ve given you nothing, but love and affection, and you decided to do this to me?”

“Jeffrey!” Cecilia cried out in fear. “Please stop. Listen to sense!”

But his eyes had steeled off. “If you won’t be with me, you won’t be with anyone else either—” He cocked the gun. “—I’m sorry, Cecilia, I did love you—”

Cecilia spun on her feet, eyes fixed with determination and slapped Jeffrey across the face, and Gilbert sprang into action, smacking the gun out of Jeffrey’s hand and barreling into him. They crashed into the ground, rolling,

wrestling for the upper hand.

Rage surged through Gilbert as he held Jeffrey down. “You want to assault someone, do you? Pick on someone your own size.”

He plowed his fist into Jeffrey’s face then he did it again and again until the sounds of flesh hitting flesh grew sickening and brutal. Hauling Jeffrey up, he shoved him into the wall, one hand around his throat.

“I’ll make sure you pay for all the atrocities you’ve committed,” Gilbert swore.

Despite the blood raining down his face, the bruised jaw, and the broken nose, Jeffrey still managed to give a ghastly grin, blood staining his teeth. “We’ll see about that.”

* * *

Jeffrey’s trial was in chamber by a judge who was notably unmoved by peers and their hefty influences or their large purses. In his late fifties, Lord Maximillian Drowe wore his age well. His iron-grey hair was coiffed above a noble forehead, and his tall, thick figure clad in somber clothing was the picture of authority.

Clad in a dapper grey suit, Jeffrey was seated at one chair, his mother and father behind him while Gilbert and Cecilia were opposite Jeffrey. While Jeffrey should be shaking in his boots at the threat of death, he wore an unbothered smile and was tapping his fingertips to his thigh as if drumming a beat to a musical thread in his head.

At one point, he even pulled out a time piece, and the judge gruffly demanded if he was keeping Jeffrey from something.

“I have a few engagements this evening,” Jeffrey replied. “But I apologize for the affront to your office.”

Drowe pulled off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. “You do understand that you are summoned here on multiple charges of spearheading an illegal gambling ring, whoremongering, and arms dealing, not to mention, bodily harm with the intent to... assault a lady.”

“I do,” Jeffrey replied. “I am innocent on the last one though.”

“That will be for me to decide,” Rowe said stiffly. “Not you, boy.”

While Jeffrey nodded and went silent, the judge paged through the papers before him, the tension in the room as tight as a rope pulled between two enraged bulls. Finally, Rowe closed the folio, and Gilbert could feel his heart tumbling to his feet.

“What about this Pendleton,” the Magistrate asked, “Where is he?”

“At this time, unknown,” Gilbert replied. “It is my belief he may have secured private passage to America or the West Indies. He may never be found.”

“Well, I have gone over these matters a dozen fold, trying to make sense of what was presented to me. I have read the statements by the runners and this Owens, who I hardly find credible, but considering the circumstance and reports from multiple doctors across the ton, I have no other choice but to find Mr. Mullens guilty of conspiracy to afflict bodily harm and public mischief.

“If he had committed the act, that would be another matter, but as for now, that is as far as the law can stretch. On account of the assault on the lady, as testified by His Grace, I also find Mullens culpable of the charge—”

“You don’t understand,” Jeffrey interjected. “The two of us are in love. What His Grace saw was a misunderstanding.”

The judge slowly turned to Gilbert, his gaze now dawning with understanding. He then asked Jeffrey, “Is that so?”

“It is,” Jeffrey replied.

Cecilia turned her face from them but gripped Gilbert’s hand in distress. Gilbert knew the judge saw right through Jeffrey’s delusion, so he did not dig into it and went on with his ruling,

“But as for the rest, the unsavory businesses and the supply of arms to the underworld, I cannot find a credible link in the two, nor do I find a link between Mullens and any profits those ventures would have supplied him with. The bank has shown me proof of another man who is the owner of the

account such profits were deposited in, after being run through other accounts admittedly held by Mr. Mullens' associates.”

Jeffrey’s lips curled into a smile.

“However, even with that direct proof, I have been on this land long enough to see collusion when it is before me, and while there is no direct way to prove this involvement is true, I heartily believe you, Mullens, did organize every one of them. Sadly, I cannot punish you on those, but the crimes I have found you guilty for are enough to imprison you and exile you to New Holland for the rest of your natural days.”

Letitia stifled a sob behind them, but Gilbert didn’t care to look.

“My judgement heretofore is that you will serve a month at Newgate until passage to the colony can be secured,” Rowe said. “It is only on the persistent plea from your mother that you are not sentenced to hang, Mullens, because in truth you do deserve such a reward, but a lifetime of paying for your deed in blood and sweat will be enough. You are dismissed, and a constable will take you to the prison.”

It was not what Gilbert had hoped for, but at least the man would not be around to terrorize them.

As Jeffrey stood, Cecilia did the same. He didn’t know what she was doing but trusted that she knew what she was doing.

“That afternoon at the races in Newmarket, were you there?” she demanded. “Were you the one who scared the horses into that stampede?”

“I was,” he replied in passing. “You looked so delightfully befuddled in the rain.”

While he went to embrace his mother, Gilbert went to her side and dropped a comforting hand on the small of her back. Her jaw was tight. “Something more should have been done.”

“I know,” he replied, “But we’ve gotten enough for today. At least, now, we know he will never be able to meddle in our or anyone else’s life anymore.”

“If you had tried the case—”

He gave a rueful laugh, “As much as I would have liked to, I am too involved to have done so. I could never have done it without the watchdogs in London calling for my head. But its finished now, sweetheart. Justice had been served.”

She turned into him. “Take me home, Gilbert, please.”

“With pleasure,” he nodded then escorted her out of the judge’s chambers. He noted how she studiously kept her eyes away from Jeffrey while they left the lobby. While they waited for his carriage to come around, a woman, covered in a cloak, passed by.

Gilbert didn't think too much of it until Jeffrey came out with the constables herding him to a hackney when the lady flung cloak off.

"Die, you bastard!" the lady screamed while the bullet shot off and hit the center of Jeffrey's forehead, propelling him back into the wall.

Gilbert had barely managed to pulled Cecilia away from the frightening scene, pressing her face into his chest, when horrified shouts and cries rang out around them in the wake of the gunshot. The men rushed to Jeffrey's side to help him, but Gilbert had no doubt the man was already dead.

It would have taken a miracle for him to have dodged that blow. While Cecilia gripped his jacket, he watched as constables pried the pistol from the lady's shaking hand and escorted her away then his gaze skittered over to Barnard, who lifted his wife who had fainted away from the melee.

One of the men at Jeffrey's side stood and shook his head, silently pronouncing what Gilbert already knew, that he was undoubtedly dead.

"W-who was that woman?" Cecilia asked in a hushed tone.

"Lady Ophelia's mother," he replied while rubbing her back. "I suppose she thought it was time to avenge her daughter's honor."

Cecilia turned just as three men were carrying Jeffrey's body away, and she looked on grimly. "I suppose that is one way of serving justice."

“It’s not the outcome I had wanted, but I cannot say I am unhappy about it,” Gilbert added. “At least he won’t be around to cook up more schemes or hurt anyone else even while half a world away.”

“Will she hang for that?” Cecilia asked. “Killing a peer is a hefty crime.”

“I’ll intervene on her behalf,” Gilbert said while the carriage came around. “For now, let’s go home.”

Safely ensconced in the carriage, Gilbert held Cecilia’s cold hands. “It’s over, Cecilia. It’s over.”

“I know it is, but it still feels... odd—as if I’m looking at it from above my body,” she replied. “It’s all so...surreal.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that I love you,” he assured her. “Or that I will marry you. I will love and protect you until the day I die,” he said fiercely.

Her eyes misted over while she cupped his face, “I know, and I love you just as much,” then she pulled him in for a kiss.

EPILOGUE



SIX WEEKS LATER

The wedding at St. James went off without a hitch with two dozen peers invited, Allan as Gilbert's witness, and Belle as Cecilia's. Her father had been overjoyed at meeting Gilbert, and her mother had not held back her tears. Barnard had attended alone as Letitia had gone off to the countryside, still mourning her son.

That was a week ago, now, they were in Verona, Italy, a beautiful city at night...if only she could see it.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, holding back a giggle at the press of Gilbert's hand over her eyes.

"We're nearly there, I promise," Gilbert said. "Step up."

As she did so, the soft susurrations of...water met her ears? What was the devious man doing? The silky feel of mist caressed her face, and the ebb and flow of water was stronger.

“Gilbert, if you don’t let me see what nefarious plans you have up your sleeves, I shall be dumping sugar in your coffee pot at random hours of the day,” she threatened.

He snorted, “That’s not much of a threat, love.”

“I’ll add honey too,” she said.

“You are a devious woman,” he said while pulling his hand away from her eyes.

She found herself on a pier, the stretch of wood arching into the river beyond, and by the lamps along the shore, she spotted the rowboat bobbing just a few feet away. It was not an ordinary boat though as the seat was modified with padding and a basket was on the floor.

“Our chariot awaits, love,” he said. “Please.”

She took his hand and stepped into the boat, folding her skirts under her while gazing at the full moon and the glimmering stars. Gilbert had shucked his jacket and stepped into to the boat, his weight barely shifting the vessel.

He cast off the mooring line, grasped the oars, and off they went, rowing into the middle of the river, his arms flexing and releasing easily.

“I’ve never had this before,” she smiled.

“Open the basket,” he said.

Shifting carefully, she opened the lid and found a bottle of wine, a bowl of strawberries and cream, slivers of cake, tarts, and sweet buns. Gilbert let go of the oars and smiled. “A picnic under the stars.”

“I love it,” she smiled, gently pouring a glass and handing it to him. “Have you been reading one of my novels again? This is highly unlike you?”

“I am deeply offended,” Gilbert laughed. “I know how to be romantic—”

“In theory,” she giggled.

He gave her a wicked eye. “Remember that tonight when we’re in bed.”

She leaned in to kiss his cheek then turned to look at the water, the shimmering moonlight turning the tranquil surface into faceted shards. “Three months ago, I was prepared to swan off into a life of spinsterhood with little hope for meeting anyone to turn me away from that path. I felt like such an outcast, a pariah, unworthy of love until you came into my life, and I realized, I was also overdue for a snarky, wiseacre to fence with me in a battle of semantics.”

Gilbert snorted, “Now that you say it, I realize, I’d been waiting for the same.”

“I mean that my journey was once a bland one, but then you waltzed into my life, and while we got off to the wrong foot at first, I regret none of it. I treasure your love every day, and my heart is yours until it stops beating and beyond.”

With the boat drifting on the water, Gilbert gently maneuvered her to his side and wrapped an arm around her, stroking her hair. “No talk about that. We’re both here, alive, happy, and carefree, together as we’re meant to be.”

She lifted her head to look at her husband and noted that the usual tight lines had eased from his handsome face, his eyes warm and intent as he regarded her. Still, she lifted her hand and used her forefinger and middle to smooth the slight knot in his brow.

“I know,” Cecilia pressed her nose into his collarbone. “This is something out of my dreams, Gilbert, a fantasy I never thought would come true. The stars are so much brighter here.”

“They hardly compare to the ones in your eyes,” he murmured.

“Flatterer,” she sniffed.

“It’s one of my best qualities,” he replied. “Aside from my business sense, that is.”

“Oh, and here I thought it was your ability to recall romantic sonnets and whisper them into my ear in the mornings,” Cecilia teased.

“I have never once...” he paused then slanted a look at her. “Are you trying to tell me something, sweetheart?”

She kissed his cheek, “Use your prodigious powers of deduction to figure it out. As for now, may we go home? The spring air is still quite chilly.”

“Of course,” he replied.

* * *

Inside their rented home for the month, while she did away with her shawl, Gilbert pulled his boots off then went to Cecilia, embracing her from behind.

“Sigh no more, lady, sigh no more. Men were deceivers ever, one foot in sea, one on shore. To one thing constant—’

Cecilia burst out laughing, while turning in his arms. “That is not the sonnet I was alluding to, Your Grace. As a matter of fact, that was not a sonnet at all, but good on you for trying.”

He gently peeled the shoulder of her dress to bare her porcelain shoulder and dropped a kiss on it. “You might have to educate me about these things, darling. I am as a novice to them as you would be to trade laws.”

“Well, you are an apt pupil,” she replied as she undid the strings of her dress. “I am sure you’ll score high marks when I give you the lessons.”

“Mm hm,” he replied while gently lowering her dress. He stopped where her bare shoulders gave the hint of cleavage between her breasts, a sensual tease. “I shall soak up every word you have to say like a sponge.”

He turned her back to him, pressing her body to his while he gently removed her clothing. When the dress and chemise pooled at her waist, she slid her palms upward, cradling the full curves of her breasts, feeling their sensual weight. Canting her head to his shoulder, she rolled her thumbs over her straining red nipples, her mounting desire intensified by his avid stare.

“Careful, sweetheart,” he bit her ear. “I may be tempted to ravage you.”

“What is stopping you?” she moaned, lost in her own pleasure.

“Stop playing with fire, darling,” he warned her while sucking a mark on her shoulder. Tugging the rest of her clothes away, he lifted her to the bed and stopped at the foot of it to gaze over her bared body. “You’re my Venus, sweetheart. So proudly gorgeous and delectable.”

“Delectable?” she quirked a brow. “I’m a sliver of cake then?”

“No, you’re all of it,” Gilbert said, grasping her knees and pulling her to the foot of the bed; he flung her legs over his shoulder, and she tensed in anticipation of his touch.

With the first swipe of his tongue, she cried out; he licked her folds with teasing, licking strokes that drove her to the edge of madness. Parting them, he covered her nub with his lips, sucking it delicately. Cecilia bucked against his mouth as sensations raced through her, and the soft lash of his tongue circling her bundle of pleasure made her ache. When he drove his tongue hard into the very center of her body, she gave up on holding her cries back.

“Gilbert! St-op, stop, I—” He sucked harder, and when two long fingers thrust hard inside her, she splintered, and wetness gushed from her. Her head lolled back. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I know.” Gilbert shucked his shirt, and as he went for his trousers, she stopped him.

“Let me.”

At his nod, she went to work, pulling the buttons from the claps, and she dropped the fall with trembling eagerness. As she tugged the garment down, her thumbs tracing the steely muscle on his hips, the fabric caught on his turgid erection.

Cecilia could feel his heated gaze coasting over her skin as she freed the material from his jutting member. She worked the trousers over his knees and down to his large, bare feet, and when he stepped out of them, she was treated to an erotic view of his desire.

Her thumb and forefinger struggled to meet where she encircled him, and

when she dipped her head to lick him, he groaned. Gathering her hair from her face, he stood still as she took him deeper into her mouth.

Even though she was well aware of his size, the feel of him inside her mouth was rather astonishing. His girth stretched her lips, his big hand cupping the back of her head as he slid in deeper.

“Seal your lips for me, sweetheart,” he said then softly began thrusting, overwhelming her senses.

Gilbert threw his head back, his face rippling with emotions, red with arousal as he took his pleasure in her. Eager to do more, she experimented with her tongue on the backside of him as he took her mouth. His groan urged her on when she licked the tender skin under his crown.

“Enough.” Gilbert gently pulled away.

She pouted, “But, I wanted to—”

“You can taste me another time love,” he replied while joining her on the bed. “I have other plans for you this time.”

“Like what?”

He laid on his back. “Ride me. Take a seat on my lap; it’s your saddle.”

Heart trembling, Cecilia straddled him, and his hands gripped her hips, holding her aloft while he positioned himself at her opening. Gently, he guided her down and gripped her hips when she started to rock.

Bracing her hands on his legs behind her, she took an experimental lift and gasped at the sensation. Gilbert held her hips tight as she started to rise and fall over his hardness.

Their gazes collided, and she found the new position—like the one on her hands and knees—unbearably erotic and intimately connected. Their fit was tight, lush perfection. As he drilled upward on her downward glide, desire gushed between them.

“God, I’ll never get enough of you,” he growled.

“You’re so deep inside me....”

“I never want to leave,” he groaned, fixing his knees and hitting a spot inside her that sent her into a frenzy.

Soon she was riding him like a contestant in the Derby, rocking herself over him while he rubbed her bold little nub with his thumb. With a breathless cry, she soared over the peak, blissful shock sizzling into her limbs, making them boneless.

Then, he was driving inside her, his massive girth opening her, slamming into

her again and again, prolonging the rapturous tremors and setting off new ones. She soared over the peak again, the two climaxes wringing every drop of strength from her, and she collapsed on his chest.

He caught her against him, holding her close with soft words of love and soothing words of comfort and praise. Kissing over her wet skin, he moved to her mouth and took it tenderly. "I love you. You have my heart in your hands."

"You had mine first," she whispered.

They kissed softly, celebrating the soft emotion that seemed to double between them with every passing hour and the shining promise of all the days ahead.

"Gilbert," she added, "there is one more thing..."

"Yes?"

Feeling unaccountably nervous, she said, "I'm positively sure that I... am increasing."

He stared at her. "We are having a babe?"

"I believe so," she replied. "He or she might be here late next summer. Are you pleased?" she blurted.

“Christ above.” He cradled her face in his palms. “And here I thought I had everything I could have ever asked for, yet still you’ve found a way to give me more.”

Her smile was a bit watery. “Why do you keep stealing the words from my lips?”

Gilbert leaned closer and slanted his mouth over hers in a tender kiss—sweet, loving, and filled with the promise that the two of them could be happy together with the fixed reminder that she was exactly in the place where she belonged...finally.

The End?

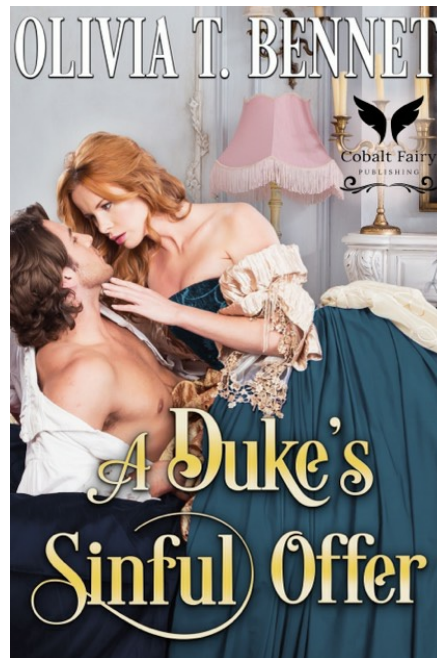
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PREVIEW: THREE PROPOSALS
AND A DUKE



CHAPTER 1



“*Y*ou really are the most desirable woman I’ve ever bedded, Sally. I could take you again and again...”

Harry Grisham, the Duke of Rivenhall, kissed his way up the shapely arm of his lover and along her shoulder and neck before planting a final light kiss on her laughing mouth.

“You so often do, Harry,” said Sarah Gibbon, known to her friends as Sally, and to the world at large as the Dowager Countess of Hawkridge.

She stretched lazily in the large bed at Rivenhall House, where they had already spent several heated hours of that summer evening sating their animalistic needs. Sally’s long, dark blonde hair pooled on the pillows around her shoulders, her generous breasts unashamedly bare and her golden-green, cat-like eyes regarding him with unwavering interest.

“Mmmm, true. I only intended to have you once when you turned up this afternoon, and here we still are. So much for attending the first ball of the London Season with Laurence. I must send my apologies to Lady Griggs first thing in the morning.”

“Oh, hush, Harry,” Sally urged him, pulling him back down to her in the bed as he began to sit up. “It was just another ball like all the others. Who cares? We’ve both been to a thousand balls in the past, and we’ll go to a thousand more in the future.”

Harry resisted her further kisses and did sit up fully a moment later, his deep

brown eyes frowning thoughtfully beneath his shock of wavy dark hair. Tall and well-built, there was an intensity to the twenty-nine-year-old Duke of Rivenhall that men often found intimidating and women irresistible.

“I’m never comfortable letting my younger brother gallivant around the great houses of London without me. He’s not bad-intentioned, only young. There was going to be a lively crowd at Lord and Lady Griggs’ ball this evening, including some men from Laurence’s club, whose example I should be sorry for him to take.”

“Damn Lady Griggs and her guest list of dissipated young men,” Sally said forcefully, rising from the pillows now and sliding her arms around Harry’s muscled shoulders, her warm breasts pressing against his back. “Let us host our very own ball for Laurence, here or at Hawkridge Manor. I will invite only the most beautiful young ladies and men of intelligence, wealth, and good taste to match your own.”

“Well, it would have to be either your ball or mine, not both,” Harry pointed out automatically.

“Not necessarily,” Sarah said somewhat archly. “You have no attachments, and I have been widowed almost a decade. Why should we not look to the future together?”

Harry sighed and shrugged off her embrace. He stood now and picked up his dark green silk robe from a dressing stand.

“It isn’t a future where we host balls together, Sally,” he told her. “I’ve never led you to think otherwise. I shall never marry you, or anyone else, come to that. I did think you understood.”

“I do understand,” Sally assured him, her voice low and knowing. “But that doesn’t mean I have to like it, or I can’t hope that I might one day persuade you...”

“Sally, do you remember the first time we met?”

She raised an eyebrow and laughed aloud, a low, sensuous sound that made something vibrate inside him, even while he tied the belt of his robe and kept his distance.

“The first time you tumbled me in a coach after a chance encounter at the theatre? How could I forget that?”

“We agreed from the start that marriage was out of the question. I was so happy to find a woman like you—a kindred spirit. You told me that you were determined to enjoy your life just as I was, without the heavy responsibilities of marriage and children. Nothing has changed.”

“Nothing has changed *yet...*” Sally corrected him.

As on one or two other occasions recently, Harry wondered if he had been mistaken about Sally. Married young to the elderly Lord Hawkridge, more to fulfill her father’s aspirations than her own, her husband’s death had only ever been a relief to her.

While the widowed young Lady Hawkridge had been discreet in her subsequent adventures, she had certainly lived a full life since the old man’s passing, including brief liaisons with several men of Harry’s acquaintance. The Duke was no rake out to seduce innocent young women or lead other men’s wives astray, and he had felt safe in taking Sally to his bed.

They had been established, if careful, lovers for several years now, and their pairing was tacitly accepted if never publicly referred to. Most Society hostesses would quietly add Sally’s name to a guest list if Harry’s appeared and would regard the Duke of Rivenhall only as a dancing partner for the young ladies of their families rather than a marital prospect.

None of this bothered Harry. In fact, it was a relief that Society mothers no longer pushed their pale-faced schoolgirlish daughters at him, as they had during his early Seasons in London. With Sally beside him, he moved in a parallel more-adult sphere of sophistication and unspoken sexuality, his private life invisible to these young girls and studiously ignored by their mothers.

Their attachment was good for Sally too. With her money, her title, and her discretion, she was safer than most women from tattling tongues. Still, it was better that she was associated only with the Duke of Rivenhall, a confirmed bachelor of good behavior and independent means, rather than a succession of men who might include other women’s sons or, God forbid, husbands.

“I am serious, Sally. I will never marry you. I never intend to marry at all...”

The idea ran through Harry’s mind that he should end things with Sally, sooner rather than later, if she were getting the wrong idea about where their relationship was heading. It was not something he really wanted to do, but perhaps it was for the best.

“Don’t be such a bore, Harry.” His lover sighed, interrupting his unhappy train of thought. “Don’t let us waste our time arguing. Come back to bed.”

As Sally spoke, she lay back once more on the pillows, arching her back and displaying all her physical charms to him in deliberate enticement. She was easily one of the most beautiful women in Society, and Harry generally counted himself lucky that a woman like Lady Hawkrige should be so interested and available to him.

This evening, however, his involuntary physical response to Sally’s invitation irked him. Harry wanted to be sure that his lover still understood and accepted the basis of their long-term liaison.

“If you want something I can never give you, we should end this now, Sally,” he forced himself to say.

The next step would be simply to tell her that it was over, to dress and say farewell in a civilized way, and to agree that they would henceforth be only friends...

In response to Harry’s words, Sally only moaned slightly and raised her hips towards him, a gesture that undid all resolution and temporarily banished any serious thought from his mind.

With a low growl of lust, the Duke pulled off the robe he had just donned and pounced once more on the seductive siren lounging on his sheets.

* * *

The knock on the bedroom door sounded again, clear and definite.

It was now well after one o’clock in the morning and certainly no time for social calls. At the first knock a few moments earlier, distracted by Sally’s

hands and lips, Harry had blearily wondered if he had misheard a sound from elsewhere in the house. Now, he knew he had not.

“Your Grace?” said the voice of Reeves, Rivenhall House’s stalwart butler, on the other side of the door. “I have an urgent message for you.”

“Damn it all!” Harry muttered to himself.

With some irritation, he peeled himself away from Sally and scooped up his robe from the floor. Looking back at Sally, he gestured to the dressing room through an adjoining door of his bedroom on the other side.

With an expression of pouting displeasure at being hidden away like this, Sally gathered up her scattered clothes from the floor around the bed and followed his direction silently. While Reeves and the other servants no doubt knew that Lady Hawkrige was here in the Duke’s suite—her carriage, after all, was still in his coach house—acknowledging it openly was a step too far for any of them.

With the door to the dressing room firmly closed and satisfied that he had maintained at least the loose impression of propriety, Harry unlocked and opened his bedroom door.

“Yes, Reeves. What is it?” he asked sharply, thinking that the reason for this intrusion had better be a good one.

Reeves was in his own nightgown and robe, a small candelabra in one hand and a handwritten note in the other. Calm as ever, he held out the note to his master.

“The note is from Your Grace’s brother. The Marquess of Perrin is also waiting downstairs for you. I gather that there was some trouble at Lady Griggs’ ball this evening.”

“Is Laurence downstairs with Lord Perrin?” Harry asked quickly, scanning his younger brother’s few scrawled lines.

“No, Your Grace. I understand from Lord Perrin that young Mr. Grisham has returned to his lodgings in London for the night.”

“He didn’t want to face me tonight,” said Harry grimly, crumpling the note in

his hand.

The cryptic message was written in Laurence's usual insouciant style, communicating the gist of the matter without any enlightening details.

Dear Harry,

I'm afraid I've caused a bit of a fuss here tonight. I put it down to too much champagne and the confusing layout of the Griggs' house. Robert says you'll be very angry, and I'll have to face the consequences. So, I thought it was better that I go home now and speak to you in the morning when my head is clearer.

Yours ever in brotherly affection,

Laurence.

"Will you be going out tonight, Your Grace?"

"Yes, I'll probably have to, Reeves, although I'll speak to Lord Perrin first and see what he has to say."

"Shall I send your valet up?"

"No," Harry said quickly, thinking of Sally in the dressing room. "That won't be necessary. I will only be seeing my brother and can dress myself easily for that."

Once Reeves' footsteps had died away in the corridor, Harry opened the dressing room door.

"You have to go, Sally. Laurence has got himself into trouble again, and Robert is downstairs, waiting for me. I'll have to go to London tonight."

"Laurence is five and twenty," Sally said, shaking her head in consternation. "Why do you have to look after him like he is still a little boy?"

"He does not behave as a man of five and twenty, and I am his older brother. That is why," Harry answered her shortly, not wishing to think too deeply about her question. "I'll have your carriage prepared now, and you can leave while I'm speaking to Robert. I wouldn't want to compromise you by bringing you into his presence at this hour."

“You think I would care?” Sally asked him, her eyes once more becoming teasing. “All our friends already know that we are bed partners, surely.”

“There’s a difference between having them know and flaunting it,” Harry told her, her attitude once again disturbing his peace. “Please, get dressed and leave quietly.”

Sally nodded soberly, gathering now that the late-night message had perhaps been serious and choosing not to push him too hard.

* * *

Downstairs in the library, Robert, the Marquess of Perrin, was waiting. Still in evening dress, his usually smoothly-combed blonde hair slightly disheveled, presumably from hours of dancing. The look in his steady blue eyes was what really communicated the disaster of the night to Harry before he even opened his mouth.

“How bad is it?” Harry asked immediately while offering Robert a drink from the crystal decanters on the sideboard.

Robert shook his head, rejecting the whiskey, brandy and sherry displayed. “It’s bad,” he replied. “Laurence has really taken things too far this time.”

“What happened?”

“At the ball tonight, Laurence had too much to drink and ended up in the ladies’ powder room.”

“Did Lady Griggs throw him out? Should I call on Lord and Lady Griggs in person tomorrow to apologize?”

“It’s worse than that, Harry. It was the smaller of the ladies’ retiring rooms, and there was only one woman in there—an unmarried young lady without her chaperone. It sounds as though Laurence took a fancy to her and actually followed her inside to introduce himself. They were discovered together soon after.”

“Good God!” Harry exclaimed. “I’ll wring his damned neck. What was he thinking?”

“The news was around the whole gathering in minutes and probably all across London by now. The young woman went home with her family, but I dare say that after this, she won’t be able to show her face for the rest of the Season, or perhaps in the ton ever again. The saddest thing is that she is entirely blameless in the whole affair.”

“Who is she?”

“A young lady called Edith Clark, niece to the Viscount of Birchester. She’s a sweet girl who has been out for a few Seasons now but seems to have no interest in either flirting or securing a husband. She only goes to balls to enjoy the dancing, I think.”

“I don’t know her, but I do know Lord Birchester. Not the sharpest man but good-hearted and honorable. At least he’s unlikely to call Laurence out for a duel, I suppose. Still, the matter must be properly resolved. I will not have our family’s honor besmirched, nor that of an innocent girl.”

Robert nodded, having clearly expected this reaction from his friend. “My carriage is ready and waiting to take us to Laurence’s lodgings in Piccadilly. It’s past time for that young man to do his duty instead of letting you clear up his mess, Harry.”

Harry nodded absently, and the two men headed out to Robert’s coach.

* * *

“Champagne, Brother?” offered Laurence as Harry and Robert filed silently into the hallway of his apartment in the grand mansion where so many young bachelors had their lodgings.

The manservant who had opened the door to them had quickly made himself scarce, probably knowing to expect an unpleasant scene. Laurence, however, seemed in good humor, a fact that only annoyed his disapproving older brother all the more.

“No, I don’t want any champagne,” Harry told Laurence as the door to the sitting room closed under Robert’s firm hand.

“Was that a no? Sorry, you were speaking on my bad side. I’m deaf in the left

ear, you know,” Laurence said blithely, offering the latter explanation to Lord Perrin while turning his right ear to his brother.

“It was a no,” Harry confirmed, feeling his usual surge of guilt at the mention of Laurence’s permanent infirmity and the memory of the accident that had caused it.

Outside the window, the dawn chorus was beginning to sound in the trees of nearby park squares. Laurence seemed not to have made any attempt to go to bed and was still in his evening clothes with an open bottle of champagne in his hand. Harry believed that he had actually been drinking from the bottle before they had arrived.

“Did Robert tell you that I met the loveliest woman in the world tonight?” Laurence asked dreamily.

While he had the same brown eyes and thick black hair as his older brother, Laurence’s features had a softness and flexibility that Harry’s lacked. His eyes and the lines of his face always seemed to radiate laughter rather than some intense inner feeling.

Harry might claim that he wanted only to enjoy a simple life without ties and obligations, but Laurence lived this ethos in practice.

“You compromised an innocent young lady in a place where she should have been safe and caused a scandal around the ton. Is that what you’re referring to?” Harry replied harshly.

“I’m offended by that interpretation,” his younger brother retorted. “I only wanted to talk to her. That’s all I intended. I didn’t know that she was going to be alone, or that everyone was going to come in and start screaming and shouting a few minutes later.”

“It doesn’t matter what you intended. It matters what you did, and more than that, it matters what the rest of the world thinks you did.”

“Oh, to hell with the rest of the world.” Laurence laughed. “She has chestnut ringlets, an angelic smile, and the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen. Her figure was ___”

“Very good,” Harry interrupted him. “You can see all this loveliness again in

a few hours' time when you call at Lord Birchester's house with me and make his niece an offer of marriage."

"Marriage?" Laurence questioned, leaning against the wall and glugging champagne. "Is it really that serious? I didn't lay a finger on the girl, you know."

Harry was sorely tempted to haul Laurence up by the lapels and slap him across the face in the hope of sobering him up, but Robert stepped between them.

"Your brother is right, Laurence, and you must realize that. Miss Clark's reputation and your family's honor have both been compromised by your foolish behavior. You must do your duty."

"I insist upon it," Harry added. "Do you understand, Laurence? There must be a marriage after this. There is no alternative that will preserve the good name of both families."

"Oh, very well," Laurence grumbled, apparently dropping his resistance. "Although I do think you and all those old biddies at the ball are making a mountain out of a molehill. What if Miss Clark doesn't even want to marry me?"

"She has no more choice in the matter than you," said Harry flatly. "I'm sure Miss Clark is aware of that. I will go to Robert's house now for a few hours' rest and send a note to Lord Birchester, telling him to expect us at ten o'clock. I'll collect you from here half an hour earlier. Be ready."

As they walked away from the mansion building a few minutes later, Harry looked back and saw Laurence watching them anxiously from the window of the sitting room of his ground-floor apartment. Had his attitude a few minutes earlier been more bravado than anything else?

His brother's face looked so very young and forlorn that for a moment Laurence could have been ten years old again, lying stunned and bleeding in the wreckage of a smashed coach while his older brother and passersby fought desperately to save their father and sister...

CHAPTER 2



“*I*’m so very sorry, Marina. You must believe me. I know that my behavior must reflect also on you. It is not only my reputation and future prospects damaged, but your own too.”

“Tush! I never had any great prospects, and we both know it, Edith,” Marina tried to console Edith. “I’m not beautiful like you, nor do I have your cheerful disposition and sense of fun. I can’t even dance or play an instrument. I’m three and twenty now and will be five and twenty before I know it, and then thirty... Who would ever want to marry me?”

“That’s all nonsense,” Edith objected. “You’re the kindest, most understanding person I know, and I think you’re very pretty. You deserve a good husband. As it is, I always said I’d never marry until you are settled with the best of men. Not that anyone will ever want to marry me now, anyway...”

Marina shook her head and put an arm around her younger sister’s shoulders as Edith stifled a sob. In truth, Marina was not uncomely with thick wavy chestnut hair, a good complexion, and kind blue eyes. It was only that her younger sister’s hair was glossier, her face brighter, and her eyes strikingly bluer.

Edith was the beauty of the family, and Marina paled beside her. Not that Marina had ever resented her for this. In fact, she celebrated her younger sister’s good looks and accomplishments, often talking her up to their friends and acquaintances.

“Don’t take on so, Edith. You could have married ten times these past few Seasons, and maybe you should have. There was never any need to wait for me. Do you know that most of the young men who dance with me only do so in the hope of being introduced to you? Maybe next year, things will be different for both of us.”

Across the drawing room, their uncle Baldwin, the Viscount of Birchester, gave a long involuntary sigh as he sifted through the various messages that had been delivered to their home over the course of the night and early morning.

“Dear, oh, dear...” he murmured to himself, putting one piece of paper aside and opening another.

Marina and Edith had made their home with their bumbling, good-hearted uncle ever since their father had died in a hunting accident twenty years earlier, their mother already having died during Edith’s birth. A handsome but devil-may-care character, the previous Viscount of Birchester’s luck had run out when he had tried a new stallion at a notoriously difficult jump, being thrown and breaking his neck.

As well as two small girls, a title, and the rather dilapidated Featherstone Manor, just outside London, Baldwin’s older brother had also handed down to him a collection of gambling debts and mortgages which ate up almost all of the family’s capital. While still part of a high social caste, Baldwin and his nieces had always, by necessity, lived frugally.

The Birchester household kept as few servants as possible, and both young women were able to sew and cook as well as manage household accounts. Baldwin himself did much of the gardening and even took care of the few horses they possessed with the help of a stable lad who was the housekeeper’s son. It was not a luxurious existence, but they had been content and secure.

Now, Baldwin looked worried as he looked across at his nieces. The clock was striking seven. All of them sleepless, they had risen early with little appetite for breakfast beyond tea.

“I’m afraid that Lady Hopeney and her daughters have canceled their engagement to have tea with you both on Thursday, my girls. Nor can Lady

Charlotte Greene join you for a ramble at the botanic gardens on Saturday.”

“Never mind,” said Marina bravely. “With Lord and Lady Stevington also going out of town suddenly and canceling their dinner invitation, it seems we have a clear week to ourselves to rest and recuperate from all the drama last night. We will be quiet at home with you, Uncle Baldwin.”

He nodded to her and went back to the notes on the tray.

“I should have asked you or Lady Godey, our mother’s cousin, to come to the retiring room with me last night. I should have gone to the main room, not the small one down the corridor. But it was so loud, and I wanted a little peace...” Edith continued to upbraid herself. “I never wanted to bring such scandal on you, Marina, or on Uncle Baldwin.”

“It was not your fault,” Marina repeated for the tenth time that morning. “You did nothing wrong. Laurence Grisham is a known drunkard and a rake. You couldn’t have known that he would follow you in there. How can anyone blame you for his stupid behavior?”

“Unfortunately, they will,” said Baldwin, his voice kind but heavy. “The world is full of those who enjoy judging and condemning others whether innocent or guilty of any crime. I do not doubt Edith’s blamelessness in this matter, but I must still think carefully about how we respond to this mess.”

“I’ve heard that Laurence Grisham is part of a drinking society at his club. The elder members are sick and tired of their loud parties. Helena Burbanks heard from her brother that Laurence Grisham is the worst rake of all of them —”

“Let’s not hear more about Laurence Grisham right now,” Baldwin interrupted Marina. “Edith is upset enough already, and frankly, so am I.”

Now, Edith burst out crying openly, going to her uncle’s side and taking his hand. He had always been so kind to her and Marina, even when he had struggled himself, both financially and in terms of understanding and meeting the needs of two young girls after being a solitary bachelor until their arrival.

“I’m so sorry, Uncle Baldwin. I wish I could do something to change last night, but it feels like everything has spun out of my control.”

“There, there, Edith, take my handkerchief and sit down. Don’t worry yourself more than you have to. I’ll find some way to solve all this. I just don’t know what it is yet.”

She sat down on the arm of his chair and wiped her eyes with the proffered handkerchief. It occurred to her now that she would feel better if Marina and Baldwin had been angry with her for her naivety and foolishness. Their gentle understanding was unbearable.

“I could try to convince him to marry me even though I have no dowry,” she suggested. “Laurence Grisham, I mean. Or I could perhaps still marry an older man—a widower, perhaps. I wouldn’t care if he were old, as long as he is kind. You must know such men, Uncle Baldwin?”

“There’s no need for such talk,” her uncle told her, looking sadly between the two sisters for whom he had had such high hopes. “Not yet, anyway.”

After knocking lightly on the sitting room door, their housekeeper, Mrs. Prinn, bustled in with another letter in her hand, somewhat thicker than the other short notes they had already received.

“Another one for you, Your Lordship. Should I keep bringing them in as they arrive, or maybe keep them together until later in the day?”

“As you think best, Mrs. Prinn. I know you have other work to be getting on with.”

“Well, it is laundry day on top of everything else.” The stout older woman sighed. “So much to do! I must get on, Your Lordship.”

As the housekeeper left the room, Edith managed to smile a little at the fact that the laundry evidently ranked as a greater burden to Mrs. Prinn than the scandal she had brought home with her last night. It might have been the worst thing in the world to Edith, but to Mrs. Prinn, it was a mere inconvenience that interrupted the regular schedule of cleaning and mending.

“My word!” said Baldwin, looking up at his two nieces in slightly owlish surprise, his glasses balanced on the tip of his nose. “This one is from the Duke of Rivenhall, Laurence Grisham’s brother.”

“The Duke of Rivenhall? What does he say?” Marina gasped, quickly

moving to the other arm of Baldwin's chair so that his nieces were on either side of him.

"You'd better read it yourself, girls," said Baldwin. "I scarcely know what to think or hope."

"He says he will not allow Edith to remain unmarried with a tarnished reputation due to his brother's poor behavior. They will call on us this morning!" Marina paraphrased and then looked at her sister and uncle questioningly.

"Doesn't that sound like he's going to make Laurence Grisham marry Edith? His Grace must have convinced his brother that this is the best way to make things right. That's how I read it."

Lord Birchester stood, still clutching the letter and blinking. "That's how I read it also. The Duke of Rivenhall is a good man, I believe, like his father before him. He may well have prevailed over his brother. I must write back straight away to say that we are home and awaiting their call. Go and put on your best day dress, Edith. Marina can help do something with your hair. We will salvage what we can."

"Doesn't that sound wonderful, Edith?" Marina asked with great relief which only told Edith that her sister was more worried than she wanted to show.

"I cannot dare to hope," said Edith quietly, also rising and going to look out the window into the slightly overgrown gardens beyond.

On the one hand, the letter did sound too good to be true. On the other hand, if it were sincere, her rescue from disgrace would be at the expense of marrying a rowdy, drunken young man like Laurence Grisham.

Truly, she found it hard to muster hope of anything but deliverance for her family.

CHAPTER 3



“*I*s Mr. Grisham ready?” the Duke of Rivenhall asked the man who answered the door at the mansion apartments where Laurence kept his lodgings.

It was the same manservant who had answered the door last night, although he now looked rather more worried than last night, perhaps knowing he was unable to escape the line of fire as easily.

In the street behind them, a carriage and horses were parked, ready to take Harry and his brother out to Featherstone Manor in the direction of Highgate. Harry understood that Lord Birchester and his nieces had returned there last night, rather than staying with friends in London as previously planned.

“Mr. Grisham said I should give you this,” stammered the manservant then, passing Harry a letter addressed to him in Laurence’s hand.

“What is this?” Harry demanded, but the man only shrugged helplessly. “Where is Mr. Grisham?”

Pushing past the nervous servant who was either unable or unwilling to answer him, Harry stormed through the empty bedroom, bathroom, sitting room, and study. An awful suspicion was arising in the back of his mind. He even made his way into the servants’ quarters to ensure Laurence wasn’t hiding in the kitchen, scullery, or small bedroom there.

Eventually, it was obvious that Laurence was not anywhere in the apartment.

Scowling at the manservant, Harry finally tore open the letter and read the

words it contained incredulously. Several passages stood out and caused him to curse aloud.

... I have thought over your words and Robert's, and it does seem to me that you are both greatly exaggerating the gravity of my offense...

... Given that I do not wish to marry yet and doubt Edith Clark has any great desire to wed me, it seems best that I absent myself from the present situation and let the fires die down before I return...

... As you know, I have long intended to go on another European tour... I will write to you from Italy...

... There must be a thousand men in London willing to marry such a beauty, so let one of them step up, and may they both be happy, as I could not be."

"Laurence, you damned, irresponsible, little fool!" Harry exploded furiously, making the manservant jump.

"Mr. Grisham did say that you might not take it well," the man conceded. "That was why he decided to write rather than call on you."

"What time did he leave?"

"He went to the docks not long after you and Lord Perrin departed, Your Grace, with only a wash bag. He said he planned to get on the first ship that would take him. I didn't think he was serious at first, but he's gone all right."

Harry swore again. Laurence could easily be halfway across the English Channel by now, and this scandal could grow a hundredfold by the time his errant younger brother could be discovered. It was unfortunately not only Laurence's reputation at stake here but his own as head of the family.

Producing a handful of coins from a pocket, Harry gave two gold pieces to the servant. "Do not mention Mr. Grisham's departure to anyone but me until I return to deal with his effects. Is that clear?"

The man took the money and nodded without asking any further questions.

Striding angrily from the apartment and back to his carriage, Harry instructed the driver to head straight for Featherstone Manor. An alternative plan was needed to resolve this infernal mess, and he would have only an hour to come

up with one *en route*.

* * *

On the roads out to Featherstone Manor, Harry had ample time to think, both about potential solutions and the problem itself.

As his fury died down, his natural affection for his younger brother reasserted itself. Laurence was naturally of a high-spirited and rather madcap disposition. Inexcusable though it was, his vanishing act was likely to have been impulsive more than intentionally wicked.

The more he thought about it, the more Harry regretted leaving Laurence alone last night, first at the ball and then in his lodgings. With his older brother's steadying presence, Laurence would no doubt have made better decisions on both occasions.

It also occurred to Harry that he had perhaps been unreasonable in demanding that his brother marry when he himself had set such a poor example in that area. Everyone knew that the Duke of Rivenhall had sworn off marriage, so why would Laurence choose to put himself under the same yoke that Harry rejected?

"I blame myself." Harry sighed aloud.

At the back of his mind, he could hear Robert's voice chiding him for this remark, as he had chided him for similar statements in the past.

"It's time that young man stood on his own two feet, Harry. You had no one playing nursemaid to you at that age, nor did I."

"But you're not Laurence, Robert," Harry murmured, defending himself against his absent friend. "You don't understand what he's been through and how much he needs me."

Deciding not to request Robert's company for this morning's errand had been a deliberate decision on Harry's part. He knew that Lord Perrin was right to some extent, but still, his love for his brother overruled the rational part of his mind and prevented him from stepping back too far.

At last, the carriage was winding its way up the long and bumpy driveway to Featherstone Manor. Glancing out of the window, Harry took in the disrepair of the path surface and the patchy state of the gardens. Aside from one elderly man slowly weeding a flower bed, he saw no grounds staff.

At the front door, a pink-faced and rather busy-looking middle-aged woman was waiting to receive him, introducing herself as Mrs. Prinn, the housekeeper, and explaining that Orpington, the butler, had gone into town to purchase some goods and settle some trade accounts.

“Lord Birchester and his nieces are waiting for you in the main drawing room, Your Grace. If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you through and then fetch you all some tea.”

“Thank you,” Harry said uncertainly, allowing her to take his hat and hang it on the rack in the hallway.

As they walked through the house and towards the drawing room, he puzzled over the many hats both Mrs. Prinn and the butler appeared to wear as well as her easy familiarity with the family and its guests.

He spotted peeling wallpaper and loose tiles as they walked and saw only one other servant despite the size of the house. This time, it was a young girl carrying a dustpan and brush, evidently having been cleaning somewhere.

“Betsy,” Mrs. Prinn called cheerfully, “could you put the kettle on in the kitchen for me? I’m coming back to make tea after I’ve taken His Grace to the family.”

More awed by the presence of a duke than the older woman showed any sign of being, Betsy only nodded nervously and bobbed a curtsey in Harry’s direction before scuttling away.

A moment later they were at the drawing room, and Mrs. Prinn opened the door, announcing him to the room’s three occupants.

“Your Grace,” said Baldwin Clark, rising from his seat and taking off the small, steel-rimmed glasses that he wore only for reading. “I’m glad that you were willing to make this journey and to welcome you here at Featherstone Manor. It’s not a grand house by any means...”

The older man's voice trailed off as he shook Harry's hand, looking over his shoulder as though expecting to see someone else and disappointed by the empty space. Of course, they were expecting Laurence too.

"It's not a grand house, but it's our home, and we love it," one of the two young women spoke up vehemently then, completing her uncle's sentence and squeezing his arm affectionately.

"This is my niece, Edith," Lord Birchester introduced her before beckoning her sister over for the same purpose.

The second sister made some pleasantries and enquired about Harry's journey, but Harry could barely force out the words of a polite response. His eyes were still fixed on the first young woman who had just declared her love so fiercely for this rambling estate which had certainly seen better days.

In a low-cut blue silk day dress with matching slippers, Edith Clark was every bit as beautiful as Laurence had claimed. Sometimes, his younger brother had been known to get carried away in his attribution of female charms, but in Edith's case, nothing had been exaggerated.

From her chestnut ringlets to her bow-shaped lips and curvaceous figure swelling above the neckline of her gown, Edith was truly captivating. He could even understand Laurence's urge to follow this young woman into the ladies' retiring room, although the urge itself should have been quashed.

There was also something in the directness of her gaze that enchanted Harry. Those striking blue eyes struck him almost dumb, sparking a surge of desire almost as intense as that on his passionate first encounter in that coach with Lady Hawkrige.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance," he said with as much composure as he could project. "All of you."

"Do take a seat, Your Grace," urged Lord Birchester, gesturing to a smart leather seat near the window.

Looking at Lord Birchester's hand, Harry could see dirt under his fingernails, although the rest of him seemed clean and wholesome enough. Perhaps the man's hobby was growing orchids or some other exotic flowers in a greenhouse somewhere on the estate, although considering the state of the

house and garden, this seemed unlikely.

Taking the indicated chair, Harry noticed that it was the best seat in the room and that the sofa nearby looked like it needed both re-stuffing and reupholstering. Following his gaze, Edith quickly tugged a highly decorative throw across the worst-worn areas of fabric and sat down there. Marina followed her.

Soon, all three sets of blue eyes were fixed expectantly on Harry.

He cleared his throat and took a deep breath. "I'm conscious that you expected my brother, Laurence, to accompany me this morning. However, this was not possible."

"Why not?" asked Lord Birchester, confused. "If you could come all this way, why not Mr. Grisham?"

"I'm afraid that Laurence has run away to Europe. I will not easily be able to find him."

Lord Birchester managed to change his groan into a sigh, the lines of worry deepening on his face even while he was trying to keep calm and collected for his nieces' sake. The older sister, Marina, looked down at her hands to hide the disappointment in her eyes.

When Harry looked at Edith's face, it was flushed and angry rather than worried or disappointed.

"If he has run away, then why have you even come here? I understood that he was to take responsibility for his actions."

"I am here to take responsibility for my brother's actions, Miss Clark," he heard himself say aloud, voicing an idea that had occurred to him in passing in the carriage but had not been accepted until this moment.

"Do I understand you correctly, Your Grace? This is a very delicate matter, and I am a simple man who cares only about my nieces' well-being and future prospects. Are you saying..."

"I will marry your niece, Edith," Harry said decidedly as Lord Birchester faltered, searching for the right words. "If she will have me, of course."

Lord Birchester and Marina were both stunned into silence at this announcement, so far beyond their expectations and understanding.

“What do you mean, you’ll marry me?!” Edith protested, sitting up straight and looking straight at Harry again with blue eyes like steel weapons.

“We should speak alone privately for a few minutes, Miss Clark,” Harry said authoritatively, leaving little room for disagreement from anyone in the room.

Bewildered at this suggestion, Baldwin Clark looked at his younger niece for guidance, and she gave him a terse nod.

“It can hardly hurt now, can it?” she said, her voice fiercer than the vulnerability implied by the trembling in her jaw.

“Why don’t you take His Grace into the small drawing room, Edith? You can speak privately there about this proposal, and I’ll have Mrs. Prinn bring your tea through.”

“Thank you, Lord Birchester,” said Harry.

Looking rather angry and cornered, Edith Clark nodded in silent acquiescence to her uncle’s suggestion.

“Follow me, Your Grace,” she uttered with cool dignity, rising from her seat and opening the door.

In the corridor, she looked back over her shoulder as he closed the door behind them, and Harry saw the hunted and timorous expression in her eyes.

“Miss Clark,” he said gently, wanting to reassure her of his intentions and protection, “you have nothing to fear from me.”

For a long moment, their gaze locked, and Harry felt as though he could happily drown in the blue of this young woman’s eyes. Her fear seemed to fade with whatever she detected in his features but then sadness rose in its place.

Edith Clark broke away sharply, walking swiftly ahead of him once more without looking back.

“This way, Your Grace.”

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

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Thank you very much!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Having obtained a degree in Journalism, but with an affinity for literature and creative writing, **Olivia T. Bennet** knew from a young age that her future lay in the romantic ideals of the past. With a fascination for the Regency era and a good romance, she started her career as a historical romance author the old-fashioned way: with pen and paper.

Born in rural Devon, Olivia draws inspiration from the vast farmlands of the British countryside and the people living in the surrounding villages. An avid artist, she takes her sketchbook everywhere with her and captures the beauty of nature, which she then incorporates into her books.

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