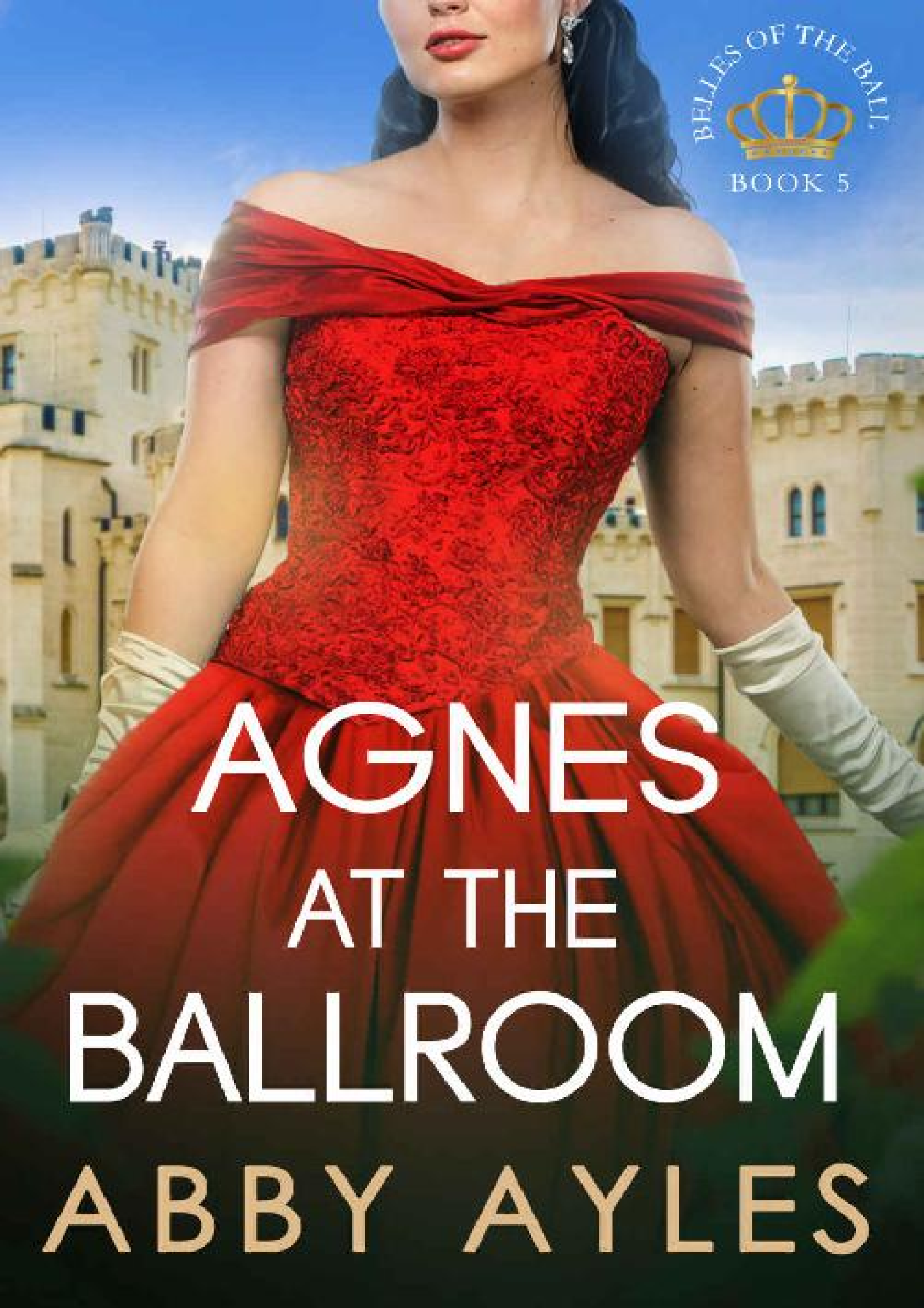


BELLES OF THE BALL

BOOK 5



AGNES
AT THE
BALLROOM
ABBY AYLES

AGNES AT THE BALLROOM

HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE

BELLES OF THE BALL

BOOK FIVE

ABBY AYLES



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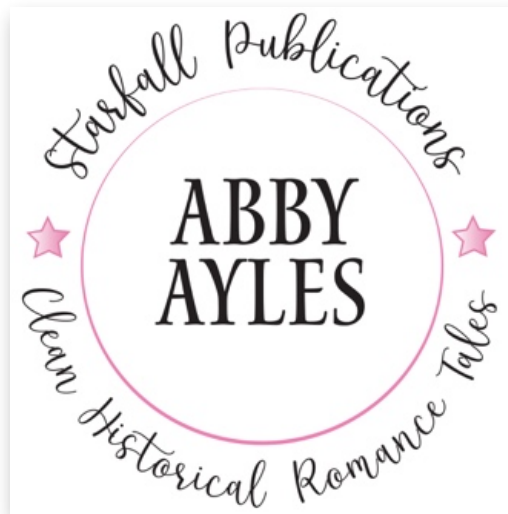
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PRAISE FOR ABBY AYLES

Abby Ayles has been such an inspiration for me! I haven't missed any of her novels and she has never failed my expectations!

-Edith Byrd

The characters in this novel have surely touched my heart.

Linda C - "Melting a Duke's Winter Heart" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on December 21, 2019

This book kept me on the edge of my seat and I could not put it down.

Wendy Ferreira - "The Odd Mystery of the Cursed Duke" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on April 13, 2019

Oh this was a wonderful story and Abby has done it again! This storyline was perfect and the characters were developed and just had you reading to see if they get their happily ever after!

- Marilyn Smith - "Inconveniently Betrothed to an Earl" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on April 8, 2020

The sweetest story, with we rest abounding! I especially liked the bonus scene - totally unexpected engagements. Well written with realistic characters. Thank you!

Janet Tonole - "The Lady Of the Lighthouse" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on December 27, 2022

I just finished reading Abby Ayles' The Lady's Gamble and its bonus scene, and I wanted to tell other readers about this great story. I love regency romances and I believe Abby is one of the best regency writers out there!

Carolynn Padgett - "The Lady's Gamble" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on March 16, 2018

Such a great Book! So enjoyed the characters...they felt so "real"...and loved the "deleted" scene. Thanks Abby, for your gift of writing the best stories!

Marcia Reckard - "Entangled with the Duke" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on May 22, 2021

I loved this story. It took you through all of the exciting ups and downs. The characters were so honest. I could read it again and again.

Peggy Murphy - "The Duke's Rebellious Daughter" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on December 3, 2022

I am never disappointed when reading one of Ms. Ayles stories. They have strong characters, engaging storylines, and all-around wonderful stories.

Donna L - "A Loving Duke for the Shy Duchess" 5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on December 23, 2019

A thoroughly enjoyable read! Love the complexity of the intelligent characters! They have the ability to feel emotions deeply! Their backstories help to explain why they behave as they do! The subplots and various interactions between characters add to the wonderful richness of the story! Well done!

Terry Rose Bailey - "A Cinderella for the Duke"
5.0 out of 5 stars Reviewed in the United States on
October 8, 2022

AGNES AT THE
BALLROOM

CHAPTER I

Agnes

Agnes Jarvis could hear the huffing and puffing of the maid behind her, winded as she walked arm in arm with Earl Benedict Hampton. A bit of worry flitted through her, and she turned her head to cast a glance over her shoulder to the struggling woman.

Her maid, Helena, was heavily pregnant, and wasn't getting around quite as well as she used to. Agnes' brow furrowed in worry when she realized that the woman was straining to continue walking, her hand on her round protruding belly.

"One moment, please," she said to Benedict, dropping his arm and taking a step toward her maid. "Helena, are you quite alright?"

"Just a bit of difficulty," the woman grunted.

Spotting a bench set into a break in the flower garden wall, Helena's face lit up. She wobbled over toward it, and plopped herself down, relief instantly filling the woman's face.

"I'll just have a sit here for a bit," Helena said, some of the redness fading from her face as she caught her breath and she shot Agnes an apologetic look. "I know I'm supposed to be your chaperone, but you all can go on a bit while I rest."

Agnes glanced from her maid back to Benedict, her heart pounding at the notion that she was about to spend

unchaperoned time with the man who was courting her.

“If you insist, but are you sure you’ll be alright?” Agnes asked. But, when Helena waved a dismissive hand at her mistress.

“I will be just fine, miss. Don’t you worry about me.” Helena patted her belly fondly, and Agnes gave her a swift nod and an encouraging smile before turning her attention back to Benedict.

“Is everything alright?” He asked, his handsome face creased with worry.

“She’s just going to sit for a moment. But she said that we can continue on without her.”

Benedict’s face lit up when he realized the same thing that Agnes had just moments later. A smooth, beautiful smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and he extended his arm to her again.

“Then continue we shall.”

The tone of his voice had dropped a bit, making it rasp. When Agnes placed her arm in his, she suddenly found herself unable to focus on much else than the spaces where her arm touched his.

They continued their walk down the gravel paved garden walkway, looking at the beautiful blooms and towering hedges that filled both sides of the path.

“I know I told you before,” Benedict said as they turned a corner, completely obscuring them from sight of the maid. “But you truly do look lovely.”

Benedict looked at her sidelong, and Agnes felt color rise into her cheeks. She dipped her gaze, looking at where her boots stepped across the pathway through her long, dark lashes.

“Thank you, Earl Hampton.” She kept her voice low and coy.

“Please,” he argued. “When it is just you and I, call me Benedict.”

She stopped walking and Benedict came to a halt as well. She gazed up at him, eyes roving over his beautiful face. His blond hair gleamed in the sun, and his bright blue eyes regarded her with obvious affection. As she peered up at his handsome features, one of her pin curls came loose, sending a tendril of raven hair tumbling down into her face.

Benedict reached up with a gloved hand, brushing the hair back into its place. As he did so, something stirred low within Agnes belly, and she found herself suddenly quite short of breath. Her cheeks warmed as blood rushed to her face.

“Perhaps we should continue our walk,” Agnes said, her voice breathy.

“Perhaps.” Benedict’s sumptuous lips ticked up in the corner, pulling up into a small, tantalizing grin before he diverted his attention back to the path and began walking again.

Agnes focused as hard as she could on her breathing, wondering what on earth had gotten into her as she also tried to keep up with the conversation and not alert Benedict to her inner turmoil. She had been alone with men before, but not many. Only those that were close to her family, and those that she considered friends. Never with one that she had desired and had such affections for.

As such, the sensations currently running through Agnes’ body were utterly foreign to her. She had no idea what to make of her racing heart, of the sweat she could feel along the palms of her hands, nestled neatly into her white lace gloves, or of the sensation of actually noticing the fabric of her gown being pressed to her skin.

They continued on their walk, all the while the Earl seemed oblivious to the raucous thoughts and feelings waging war within Agnes. When finally, they turned another corner, spotting Helena still perched on the bench they had left her on, Agnes had to fight not to sag with relief.

“Back already?” Helena huffed, pushing herself back up to standing.

Agnes couldn't help but chuckle. Because the woman had no idea that for Agnes, the walk had felt like an eternity. Back within the company of a chaperone, she and Benedict fell into more casual conversation.

Discussing the comings and goings of the ton or of things that their respective families were working on. All the while, Agnes had one thought and one thought only twirling through the back of her mind.

She desperately needed to talk to her cousin, Esther.

CHAPTER 2

Agnes

The carriage jolted over the cobblestones on its way to Bolton Manor, sending Agnes bouncing and flying across the bench seat. Her arm bolted out, bracing herself against the door in an attempt to keep herself from hurtling much further.

“Careful dear,” her mother, Dorothy, drawled in her perpetually bored sounding tone.

“It’s the carriage, Mother.” Agnes smoothed down her hair, making sure that everything was still firmly in its place as the carriage turned off the road and trundled down the drive.

Her cousin Esther had lived with them for a while, acting as a ward to the Jarvis family prior to her betrothal to Agnes’ childhood friend, Laurence Bolton. They had been married for about six months now, and in that time, Agnes had watched her cousin blossom into a happy, confident young woman. Every time she thought of the strained relationship, they had had the first year that Esther had resided with them, and the time that she and her cousin had lost in developing a friendship, a pang of sadness and regret washed through her.

But now, they were closer than ever. In fact, Agnes considered Esther to be her closest and most trusted friend. And that’s why she knew that her cousin would be the perfect woman to help Agnes make sense of the feelings and sensations that were plaguing her when she was around Benedict.

After what felt like ages, the carriage finally rolled to a stop in front of the house. The footmen pulled open the door and extended a hand to Agnes, helping her down the stairs. The moment that Agnes' foot touched down on the gravel, the large wooden doors to the manor were pulled open.

Agnes glanced up, dark eyes lighting with joy when she found Esther grinning at her from the threshold of the home.

"Cousin," Esther said, voice dripping with fondness as she rushed down the stairs to greet her.

Esther's golden red hair flashed in the sun the moment she stepped out from under the shadow of the house, her pale cheeks flushed with excitement. The moment they were close enough, Esther threw her arms out, wrapping them around Agnes and pulling her into a tight, affectionate hug. Agnes laughed as she squeezed her cousin back.

"It's been too long," Esther gushed when their embrace broke apart.

They held each other at arm's length, eyes roving over each other to look for any sign of harm or fatigue.

"Far too long," Agnes echoed, her own voice rampant with joy at the sight of her cousin and her friend.

"That's quite enough, Agnes." Her mother's voice snapped behind her, admonishing the blatant display of affection and what she would consider frivolity.

Quickly schooling her features into a mask of casual disinterest, Agnes dropped her arms back down to her side. Esther did the same, before shooting her cousin a wink as they turned and walked arm and arm through the door of the manor.

Laurence, Esther's husband, was standing just in the entry way to receive them. Looking resplendent in a blue waistcoat and white breeches, his dark eyes lighting with love as he looked at his beautiful wife. Agnes beamed at her childhood friend, extending her hand in greeting.

"Agnes," Laurence said with a fond, friendly smile as he took her hand and bowed his head to her in greeting. "Lovely to see you, as always."

“It is quite good to see you as well.” Agnes returned his warm grin, glad to see that he was looking as well as Esther was.

“Laurence, dear,” Dorothy’s voice boomed from behind them all, and Agnes had to grit her teeth against the onslaught. “Where exactly are your parents?”

“They’re in the drawing room, Lady Jarvis.” Laurence dipped his head to her in a kind greeting. “It would be my pleasure to escort you to them.”

“Quite right,” Agnes’ mother huffed, wrapping the stole she had thrown across her shoulders a little tighter as she strode past Laurence into the hallway.

He glanced at Agnes and Esther, the latter mouthing an exaggerated ‘thank you’ as Laurence shot them both a wuthering look and followed after Dorothy.

Now that they were alone, out from underneath the prying eyes of one Dorothy Jarvis, Agnes turned to her cousin, excited grin fixed firmly back in place.

“It is so very good to see you,” Agnes gushed.

It had been a few months since she had been able to see Esther. Her cousin and Laurence lived farther away now, residing in her childhood home in Sussex. So, Agnes did not get the chance to visit quite as often as she would have liked. But they had written to each other at least once a week, sometimes multiple if the letters were able to be delivered quickly enough.

They were back in Surrey for at least a month, deciding to stay between Bolton Manor and Laurence’s estate that he was gifted when he was named Baronet. So, for the time being, at least, Agnes was ecstatic to be able to see her cousin whenever she would like. Something that she was fully prepared to take advantage of all the way up until they returned home to Sussex.

“It truly has,” Esther said in her lovely, high-pitched voice. “Come, let’s retire to the parlor.”

Esther grabbed Agnes' hand, and Agnes allowed herself to be towed behind her cousin through the maze of rooms that was the lushly furnished Bolton Manor. Agnes tried not to gape at the ornate furnishings she passed along the way. But it was hard not to.

Ever since the passing of her father, the Jarvis' funds have been running quite dry and the estate was slowly but surely falling into disrepair. She knew that her mother had taken to selling off some of the luxuries, art, and collectibles that had previously furnished the home just to keep the property afloat. Any dowry that Agnes had once had was long since gone. A fact that weighed heavy on her the longer she courted the earl.

When they reach the parlor, she and Esther cross the room and both settle themselves into beautiful, stuffed reading chairs nestled by a large bay window that overlooked the manicured, rolling grounds. A maid hustled into the room as soon as they were situated, bowing to each of them in turn and asking if they would like tea or biscuits.

"Both, please." Esther said, giving the young girl a kind, affectionate smile. "Take your time. And take some for yourself."

The maid blushed at Esther, giving her a polite 'thank you, ma'am,' before turning and rushing from the room. Esther understood more than most what it was to act as a servant to a household such as this.

It was another fact that Agnes regretted deeply. The Jarvis' finances had already been horribly tarnished by the time that Esther had resided with them. As such, Dorothy had fired quite a bit of the staff, leaving only those absolutely necessary. Esther had been ordered to keep up the slack as payment to Dorothy for taking her in after the tragic carriage accident that had claimed the lives of the girl's parents.

Agnes wished with all her might that she could go back in time and stand up to her mother sooner when it came to her cousin. And once she had begun to mend things with the girl that now sat across from her, she had made a promise to herself to do whatever she could for the rest of her days to

make up for the unkindness that had been showed to Esther during the time when she had needed family and companionship the most.

Agnes opened her mouth to speak, ready to launch right into what had occurred between she and Benedict Hampton, but she was brought up short by a loud, demanding meow. Her eyes darted in the direction of the sound, immediately spotting a beautiful grey cat with startling blue eyes.

“Abby,” Esther cooed, her delicate features lighting with affection as they eyed the feline. “Hello you silly, demanding thing.”

Agnes watched as Esther lowered her hand, snapping her fingers together and clicking her tongue, calling for the creature to come to her. It did so excitedly, trotting over to her with another, excited meow, before jumping up into her lap.

“Is this the same kitten from when you lived with us?” Agnes asked, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

“It is,” Esther smiled down at the creature that had immediately curled itself up atop her legs. “Isn’t she gorgeous?”

The cat gave a large, lazy yawn before closing its eyes and promptly falling into a contented, restful sleep.

“She has gotten so big,” Agnes mused, astonished that the creature now snoozing atop Esther was the same, small kitten that had attached itself to Esther almost two years prior.

“Well, that’s because she eats every mouse or small creature in sight. Disgusting habit, really.” Esther’s tone held no bite as she gazed down at the feline.

She gave one final, affectionate huff before pulling her eyes away from the cat and landing them solidly back on Agnes.

“Now,” Esther said, leaning toward her cousin. “Tell me everything. In your last letter you mentioned that Earl Hampton was coming to call upon you. Did it happen?”

Agnes blushed as she nodded her head, watching as the other woman's face lit up with delight.

"It did. He came yesterday, actually." She began recounting the story. Explaining to Esther how the maid had sat down and told her and Benedict to go on, as well as the rush of feeling that she had experienced when she and the earl were alone.

"That wasn't the only time, though," Agnes explained as she finished the story. "He has come to call on me a few times. And each time, it's much of the same. The way he speaks to me, when he touches me. Once, one of my curls had come loose from where it had pinned and had fallen into my face. Benedict reached up to brush it away. It wasn't much, just a moment of his fingertips running across the skin of my cheek, but still I thought I might combust."

She dipped her eyes away from her cousin for a moment, unable to look at Esther while she was overcome with a rush of shame. Agnes may not be able to identify exactly what it was that she was feeling, but she felt certain that as an unmarried woman, what she was experiencing was not proper. And while she knew that Esther would not judge her, it did not stop her from feeling nervous about simply speaking about what had occurred with Benedict.

"In all my years," Agnes continued, working up enough courage to meet her cousin's eyes once more. "I have never experienced anything quite like this. His mere presence is enough to make my body feel too warm, and like my skin is too tight against my bones. I have fancied plenty of men before, but nothing like this. Do you know what this is?"

Her cheeks heated, and the entire time she spoke, Agnes watched her cousin's face closely. At first, Esther's beautiful features had been alight with nothing more than interest. But by the time Agnes finished, the more the sides of her cousin's pouty lips pulled up into a knowing, sly grin.

Esther chuckled, shaking her head lightly, causing Agnes to blow out a breath of frustration.

“So? What were those feelings?” Agnes demanded, hoping that her cousin could help her make sense of everything. “I know that you know what they are. How do I handle them?”

“My dear,” Esther blushed prettily, reaching up a hand to her mouth, using it to hide her smile. “What you’re feeling is true affection and dare I say it... desire.”

“Desire?” Agnes parroted, her eyebrows shooting up. “Well, that can’t be right. I am unmarried. It would not be proper for me to desire anyone.”

“Cousin, I assure you. It’s quite natural.” Esther shook her head at her cousin. “I cannot tell you everything, for that is not my duty. Your mother would have my head if she found out I took the right of preparing you for your wedding night. But I assure you, that everything you’re feeling, it is exactly what a woman who is beginning to fancy a man *should* feel. It is quite a blessing, to desire the man to which you are hoping to be betrothed. Many women are not so lucky. And I am quite happy that you seem to have found that.”

Agnes held her cousin’s stare, letting the words wash over her as she considered them. All her life she had been told that ladies did not desire men that they were not married to. That they can have affections for them, they can even like them. But desire? That was strictly reserved for marriage. And until now, she had believed it.

She blew out a frustrated breath, working as hard as she could to wrap her mind around everything.

“But what of the wedding night? You know my mother won’t prepare me for that, the only thing she seems to be worried about is securing an advantageous marriage to a man that will overlook my lack of a dowry.” Agnes blushed at the mention. “I assure you, she will tell me nothing.”

Esther stared hard at her cousin, seeming to weigh what she might be able to tell her. Finally, Esther blew out a breath and leaned forward, staring at Agnes intently.

“My wedding night was one of the most magical nights of my life,” Esther began. “When a man and a woman come

together as husband and wife, they perform an act to... solidify...their love.”

Esther’s words were slow and careful, and Agnes’ brow creased as she tried to work out their meeting.

“But how do they come together?” Agnes asked, shaking her head.

“Well, the man, he,” Esther’s cheeks flamed red as she stammered nervously over her words. “On the night of your wedding, you will share your love. Your body will know what to do. That’s what it’s trying to tell you now, with the way that it heats and react to Benedict. In the same way that you know how to kiss just from the desire to do it alone, you will know what to do when it comes to your wedding night. And it will be the most glorious thing that you have ever felt.”

Agnes still did not fully understand, but she felt as if she was beginning to.

“All I am saying,” Esther said when she noticed the still confused look on her cousin’s face, “is that come your wedding night, whether that be to Earl Benedict or to whomever, if you are feeling even a fraction of what you are feeling right now, you will be in for a very happy marriage, indeed.”

Agnes’ cheeks warmed again, but she was saved from having to reply when the maid from earlier returned to the parlor carrying a tray of drinks. She set up a small, spindly table between the two women, placing the tea and the biscuits down atop it.

“Did you eat?” Esther asked the girl, shooting her a kind but pointed look.

“Yes ma’am, I promise that I did.” The maid smiled at Esther, bowing her head before taking her leave.

They each picked up a teacup and filled it, before selecting one of the biscuits that the young woman had brought in. Agnes was grateful when the conversation didn’t turn back to Benedict, unsure that she could take much more of the confusion. The only thing that Agnes was sure about, in fact,

was that proper or not, Esther had been right in her assessment that Agnes desired the earl.

CHAPTER 3

William

William could hear the birds chirping loudly from the tree outside his window, and he paused for a moment in the book that he was reading to take a deep, steadying breath. He had only just returned from traveling a few hours ago, and he was glad to finally have a moment to himself to rest and relax.

A knock sounded at the door of his chambers, and he threw his head back, barely stifling a groan. William ran his large hand through his dark brown hair, ruffling it as he blew out a frustrated breath.

“You may enter,” he called as he leaned forward to set his book on the table in front of his reading chair.

The large wooden door cracked open, and a moment later Jonas, his family’s steward, walked through the door. The man cleared his throat, eyeing William wearily.

“So sorry to bother you, my Lord,” Jonas said, his voice shaky and nervous.

William knew that he could be in quite a foul mood whenever he returned home from a long time travelling, but he didn’t think it warranted the nervousness currently rolling off the man in front of him.

“Your father is asking for you,” Jonas explained. “He is in his study, and he wishes for you to come immediately.”

Ah, William thought, that explains it.

His father, while not a cruel man by nature, was also not overtly kind. He tended to speak candidly, his voice booming out of him with commands that were best to be heeded. Both William and his brother, Laurence, towered over their father. Their large statures dwarfing the man. But what Lord Rippon Bolton lacked in size, he made up for in sheer force of will.

With a resigned sigh, William pushed himself up from his reading chair and strode across the room.

“Lead the way, please,” he said to Jonas as he approached.

The man nodded before turning and making his way through the halls of Bolton Manor. Somewhere within the depths of the house, William could hear the sound of a piano being played, and a faint bit of singing in the air.

“Are Laurence and Esther here?” He asked Jonas as they walked.

“Yes sir. They arrived just yesterday and are staying in the Eastern wing of the manor. I believe they’ll be here a month.”

The corner of Williams mouth tugged up into a smile, glad that he’d have a couple companions in the house for a little bit of time, at least.

They arrived at the door that led to his father’s study in no time at all, and while Jarvis knocked and announced William’s arrival, William took the time to take a deep, steadying breath.

“Well, send him in.”

He heard his father’s voice from the other side of the door a moment before Jonas’ worried face appeared in front of him once more. He knew his father’s mood must be quite stormy, indeed, to be affecting Jonas so much. The man had worked for the family for most of William’s life, and William knew that he was more than able to handle everything that Baron Rippon Bolton threw at him. So, for the usually unflappable Jonas to be as affected as he was, William could only guess that he was in for quite the treat indeed.

“He’s ready for you,” Jonas said unnecessarily as he stepped out of the office and gestured for William to enter.

William pushed open the door, immediately spotting his father sitting behind his large, carved oak desk.

“William,” Lord Rippon boomed the moment he laid eyes on his son. “Have a seat.”

William did as he was told, taking the time as he crossed the room to study his father. The apples of the man’s cheeks were red, as were the tips of his ears, and William had to stifle a groan. Those were the tell-tale signs that his father was balancing on the knife’s edge of anger, and was very close to teetering off of it.

Knowing better than to interrupt his father when he was in such a terrible mood, William sat in silence while Rippon’s eyes raked over him. He was sure to raise his chin and meet his father’s brown eyes, careful not to shy away in the slightest under the weight of the man’s gaze.

“I’ll be frank, boy,” Rippon began after his assessment of his son was complete.

William tried not to react to being called ‘boy’. As a man of thirty, he did not take kindly to his father speaking down to him, but he also knew that now was not the time to wage that particular battle yet again.

“I’m not pleased with you. Not pleased at all.”

“And what,” William said, unable to keep a small bit of his ire from leaking into his words as he spoke, “pray tell have I done this time? What transgression have I committed?”

Rippon’s eyes narrowed on William. “You would do well to mind your tone.”

There was a brief pause, one where he could tell his father was waiting for a retort, but William had none to provide.

“You are how old, twenty-nine now?”

“Thirty,” William corrected immediately, and again Rippon glared at him.

“As I was saying,” his father continued. “Much like your brother, you spend too much of your time galivanting around the country and not enough time focusing on your duties here

at home. Unlike your brother, however, you have no wife. Nor do you seem to have any prospects that would allow you to find one soon.”

His father paused, as if waiting for William to argue that point. But he couldn't. In that, at least, his father was correct. William did spend quite a lot of time away from the manor. Of course, most of it was to do his father's business and to help him manage the family's properties, but he did not feel like arguing that particular fact at the moment.

“I am done footing the bill while you run off to God only knows where, getting up to God only knows what, with God only knows whom. You will begin to search for a wife, and you will begin to do so seriously. I will give you until the end of the season to find someone, to court her, and to get engaged.”

William's mouth popped open in shock. “Father, the end of the season is only three months away. There is no way...”

“There is a way,” Rippon cut him off. “Your brother was able to do it, and now you will do so as well. So, help me, I will not allow what happened to my brother, Thomas, to happen to any of my sons. You will not die without an heir, leaving the rest of your family to clean up your mess and handle the transfer of your titles. So, you will find a suitable bride, or I will find some way to ensure that Laurence is named my official heir and that it is *he* who takes over the title of Baron when I am dead and gone. Do I make myself clear?”

The entire time his father was speaking the man's voice had been rising. So much in fact that the when the last sentence ended, Rippon had been yelling. William regarded his father as his mind worked overtime to process what he had been commanded to do.

He did not think it feasible for him to find a fiancé in only a few months. But as his father's hardened gaze roved over William, he was forced to accept that for right now, at least, this was a topic that Rippon did not consider up for discussion.

“Alright,” William said finally, dipping his head in reluctant acceptance.

“Now, go on and think about who you might pursue at the upcoming ball. You won’t have a lot of time, so you ought to spend it wisely.” Rippon waved his hand in dismissal, and William pushed himself out of the chair and cross the room.

Jonas was standing just outside the door, and when William stepped out into the hallway, the other man’s face lit with concern.

“Lord William,” Jonas said, his voice laced with kindness. “Your father told me what he was planning. And well, I know it won’t be easy, and it is not a fair ask. But if there is anything I can do to help with your endeavors, please do let me know.”

William was touched by the man’s offer of kindness, and he opened his mouth to tell him so, but Jonas just shook his head and walked away. Mind reeling from the odd interaction with the steward, as well as the demands that were just thrust upon him by his father, William couldn’t imagine going back to his chambers to stew alone.

So instead, he just kept walking through the house. The sound of the piano was no longer floating through the air, and he couldn’t hear any sound or sign for where everyone might be. Deciding that what he needed in that moment was a spot of fresh air, William decided to go out into the gardens.

Striding through the house, William stewed on the demand from his father. He hadn’t thought it was fair when Rippon had attempted to pull the same thing with Laurence, and he did not think it was a fair request now.

William knew that as the eldest son and the heir to Lord Bolton’s titles that he held a load of responsibility upon his shoulders. He had always known it. And while he loved his brother, Laurence had never considered what his role within the family was until he had to.

But William had always known. The responsibility and the duty that he had been born into had weighed on him heavily for his entire life. And William had no plans to shirk those responsibilities.

He did not particularly want a wife. It was something that he had been thinking about while he was away in London over the course of the past fortnight. William had no desire for love, and if he were to be honest with himself, no use for it either. He was a practical man, and try as he might he could not find a practical use for love. Not that he had tried particularly hard.

But he had known that his time for when his father would demand he find a wife was dwindling. And with that responsibility dangling over his head, he had even considered bringing it up to his father soon, just to get it over and done with. But what he had not expected was for Lord Rippon to issue an ultimatum.

Had his father come to him and posed it as a negotiation, or even just said that he'd like to talk about William's plans to find a wife, William likely would have been in reluctant agreeance. But now that the choice had been completely taken out of his hands, he wanted nothing more than to rebel against it.

William arrived at the large doors at the back of the house that led to the patio and to the beautifully sculpted gardens beyond and pushed them open. Rays of sun beamed down upon him, immediately warming his skin as he stepped out from the comfort of the manor house.

A laugh like tinkling bells caught his attention, and he turned toward the sound, finding Esther and Laurence sitting at one of the wrought iron tables at the edge of the patio, sharing a plate of grapes. At the sound of the door shutting with a clatter, Laurence and Esther's gazes turned toward him.

The moment his brother took in the set of William's shoulder, his gaze immediately darkened.

"What happened?" Laurence asked, waving William over to the empty seat at their table.

Crossing the patio in a few, quick strides, William took a seat and glanced at the couple sitting before him. He paused for a moment, weighing his words and how he wanted to approach this with his brother. Finally, blowing out a breath,

he placed his elbows on the table and rested his forehead in his hands.

“Father has demanded that I find a wife by the end of the season.”

William was staring at the ground through the bars of the table, but he didn't need to be looking at Laurence or Esther to know that their mouths were wide open with shock.

“He told me,” William continued. “That if I was not engaged, he would take my title and all of the responsibilities that I am set to inherit and pass them to you.”

There was a sharp intake of breath, but whether the gasp came from Esther or from Laurence, William did not know.

He raked his fingers through his dark brown trusses, tugging at the roots nervously as he finally worked up the will to turn his gaze to his brother. As William had accepted, Laurence's mouth and eyes were wide with shock.

“He can't do that,” Laurence muttered.

“We both know that he can.” William huffed out a laugh. “And we both know that he will. Have you met our father?”

“But finding a wife would not be such a bad thing, would it?” Esther's voice was low and kind when she spoke, and William turned his gaze to his sister-in-law.

He regarded her fondly, eyes roving from Esther's face to Laurence's. Watching the romance unfold between Esther and Laurence had been a true treat. Originally, Laurence had been set to marry Esther's cousin, Agnes. A girl that his brother had been friends with since they were quite young. But, through a series of odd but not unfortunate events, he had ended up with Esther instead.

And the two were madly in love. Anyone with eyes or sight could tell it was so. Every time they looked at one another their eyes clouded over with it, and they frequently could be caught sharing doe-eyed looks across a room.

And even if William had no desire for love himself, he was truly glad that his brother had found it. Laurence had always

been the more fanciful of the two of them, and it made William glad to see his brother happy.

“I know that it is my duty to find a wife,” William answered, making sure to keep his tone measured as to not betray his anger towards his father’s decision. “And it is something that I have thought about for a while now. I merely wish that he would have given me more time.”

“But it’s possible to fall in love quite quickly,” Esther said with another kind smile, and William fought the urge to scoff. “Just look at Laurence and I. I fell in love with him before I even knew it was him.”

Laurence blushed a bit at Esther’s words, and William recalled that their courtship began with a misdelivered letter. ‘An intervening of fate’ Laurence had once called it.

“I have no requirements of love for myself and my wife,” William explained. “I simply require that she’s a suitable match. But that’s the problem. Most of the ladies of the ton that Father will approve of are already spoken for. So, I do have my work cut out for me.”

“No requirements of love?” Laurence’s eyebrows shot up in astonishment. “Well, that’s quite a miserable outlook, isn’t it?”

William shook his head. “I have no need for love, Brother. You were lucky. But that is not often the case for people like us. So no, it is not love that I need. It is an heir.”

He knew that the words sounded callous the moment that he spoke them, but he didn’t dare attempt to backpedal and take them back. Additionally, it did not matter if they were callous, because William knew that they were true.

“There is more to marriage than producing an heir.” Laurence said, regarding his brother with worry.

“That is all marriage is for noble men. You know this.”

William held his brother’s gaze, the other man narrowing his eyes at him as Laurence scrutinized William’s demeanor. He did not shrink away under the weight of his brother’s stare. He had almost folded in front of his father, and he would not

do that here. Not before his brother, and not when they were having such an important conversation.

“We just want more for you, William.” Esther said, taking his attention away from Laurence.

“I don’t need more,” William corrected. “But if you’d like to help me look for a suitable wife, by all means.”

The words fell between them, and the husband and wife shared a quick, conspiring look. Leaving William to wonder if perhaps he had just tempted fate.

CHAPTER 4

Agnes

“Close your eyes,” Benedict said, his deep rich voice dripping over Agnes like honey.

She threw a hurried glance around the room, where Helena was nodding off in the corner. Agnes watched as the woman gave a slight snore, her chin dipping down to her chest, once again leaving her practically alone with the earl. Agnes eyes flitted toward the door of the room, both excited to be alone with Benedict once more, and nervous that her mother would catch Helena sleeping when she should be acting as a chaperone. She did not want the maid to lose her position, not only because the woman was with child, but because Agnes genuinely enjoyed her company. But ultimately, her desire for alone time with the earl won out.

“What do you mean?” Agnes asked, turning her gaze back to his handsome face.

His stormy blue eyes stared back at her, reminding her of the first thing she noticed about the man. The way they danced when he smiled or when he laughed, always giving away what he was thinking. And right now, they were lit with excitement.

“I mean I have a surprise for you,” he explained as an amused smile lit up his face. “And I would like for you to close your eyes.”

The command was barely a whisper, causing Agnes to lean in closer to Benedict to hear him. The gentle command brushed over her, causing her skin to erupt in goosebumps and making it impossible to refuse.

With a blush creeping into her cheeks, Agnes did as she was asked and shut her eyes tight. She listened intently as the fabric of Benedict's clothing swished as he moved, trying to use those cues to identify what he was doing, but she could not.

All that she knew was that one moment she could hear the fabric of his beautiful waistcoat shuffling, and the next moment there was the shuffle of feet across the hardwood floor. A small puff of wind from the movement combined from the direction of the sound told her that he was now standing in front of her, but what he could possibly be doing, she could not fathom a guess.

The smell of him drifted up to her, a deep, heady scent like that of cedar or spice. It made her want to lean into him. With her sense of sight shut down, it magnified everything else around her tenfold. She could hear the rapid beating of her own heart at his closeness, could feel the stirring of the air rising up to brush her cheek due to his movements. And it was lighting everything within her on fire.

"Alright," Benedict said, his voice coming from closer than she anticipated, causing her to give a slight jump. "Open your eyes."

Agnes' lashes fluttered open, and the first thing her eyes landed on was Benedict's face. It was mere inches from hers, so close that she was able to make out flecks of gold within the depths of his bright blue eyes that matched the gold of his shining hair. He was even more beautiful up close. And when he smiled at her, showing all of his stunning, white teeth, Agnes' pulse skyrocketed.

"Look," Benedict said, dropping his gaze downward.

Agnes followed the line of his eyes, realizing what she had missed when she was distracted by his beauty. In Benedict's hands was nestled a beautiful, green velvet box. He held it

open, and on the inside, lying atop a folded square of silk, lay an astonishing silver, diamond, and ruby necklace.

Agnes' eyes went wide, flickering from the necklace, up to his face and then back again.

“Benedict,” she breathed, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Her hand fluttered up to her chest, resting directly over her pounding heart as she gazed at the gift, trying to soak up the magnitude.

“Do you like it?” His voice was laced with worry, and her eyes immediately snapped up to his.

“Yes,” she answered immediately, so forcefully the sound of it caused Helena to give a grunted snore in her sleep, almost waking her.

“Yes,” she said again, lowering her volume but not the earnestness in which she spoke. “It is absolutely beautiful.”

“Brilliant,” Benedict said, reaching into the box and plucking the necklace delicately from its resting place. “If you don't mind, I would like to help you put it on.”

Agnes felt a flush rise immediately to her cheeks, and the only answer that she gave was a quick nod of her head. A wide grin tugged at the corner of Benedict's lips as he moved to stand behind her.

She heard him behind her, working to unclasp the delicate piece of jewelry. And then, he stepped closer to her. He was close enough that she could feel the heat radiating off his body, and for a moment she yearned to lean into him.

Esther's words from the day prior floated into her mind, telling Agnes that what she was feeling was desire. She had scoffed and been embarrassed by her cousin's words. But now, being in the moment with those feelings coursing through her, she knew that her cousin had been right. And Esther had also been right when she had said that it was natural. Because the feeling that Agnes had, the stirring deep in the depths of her belly and the goosebumps dancing along her flesh, she knew that it was as natural as breathing.

The necklace drifted into her line of sight as Benedict draped it around her throat. His fingertips danced along her collarbone, and then along the nape of her neck, causing her nerves to begin their cacophonous firing.

“You have a lovely neck,” Benedict purred, leaning down to whisper the words in her ear.

His breath stirred the small tendrils of hair that spiraled by her face, causing them to tickle. And the feel of his breath dancing along her skin sent shockwaves rocketing through her. Agnes’ breath began coming in short, tiny gasps, and her heart was beating so quickly that she thought it might pop out of her chest.

The sound of someone clearing their throat sent both of them snapping to attention. Agnes’ dark eyes flitted around the room until they landed on her mother, standing by the door with her hands on her hips, regarding them with careful disapproval.

Realizing what the scene must have looked like when Dorothy had walked in, Agnes blood heated and she felt the color rise into her porcelain cheeks. Benedict, however, seemed entirely unphased.

“Lady Jarvis,” he said amiably with a respectful incline of his head. “I was presenting Agnes with a gift.”

He gestured toward the necklace, and Agnes stayed still as her mother walked forward. Dorothy’s small, dark eyes roved over the jewelry, and Agnes could all but see the ideas churning within her mother’s mind.

“That is quite a lovely gift,” Dorothy said finally, her tone harsh as her gaze danced from the necklace around Agnes’ neck up to the earl.

“I thought of her immediately when I saw it. It was so beautiful that it reminded me of her, and I knew that she must have it.” Benedict’s voice was sweet as he spoke.

He moved out from behind Agnes, walking around and positioning himself to where she could see him. She had expected his face to be the same as hers, flushed with color

due to the shame of having been caught so close to one another. But his beautiful features were as nonplussed and angelic as ever. There was not a single line of stress or worry on his regal features, and she envied him for his steadiness in that moment.

“Quite a gift indeed,” Dorothy murmured as she took a step closer. “I assume that his means a formal proposal is on the horizon?”

“Mother!” Agnes snapped, terrified that her mother’s brazen comment would be seen as offensive by the earl.

Agnes’ eyes darted from her mother’s face to Benedict’s, and she was relieved to see that his expression had not changed.

“I assure you; it is on the horizon. My intentions with your daughter are nothing but pure.” He turned his gaze to Agnes, his blue eyes shining with affection as he regarded her, and it made her heart stir to life and begin it’s fluttering once more.

“Then there is no reason to delay,” Dorothy chided. “If you are so well intentioned.”

“I am simply waiting for the correct moment,” Benedict dipped his head. “But there is nothing for you to worry about.”

He glanced at the grandfather clock that sat in the far corner of the room, giving a quick start when he realized the time.

“Lady Agnes, Lady Dorothy,” he turned his gaze to each of them in turn. “I am so sorry to rush out on you, but the time got away from me. As it always does, where Agnes is concerned. But alas, I must be going.”

He turned to Agnes, extending his hand to her. She placed her palm delicately in his, the warmth of his palm radiating through her with ferocity. They gazed at each other as Benedict dipped his head, brushing his lips faintly across her satin gloved knuckles.

“Until next time, lovely Agnes.” His voice came out in a purr, and it made Agnes’ center turn molten.

Benedict let go of her hand, the absence of his warmth rushing in on her instantly, and then he turned to face Agnes' mother.

"It was a pleasure to see you, as always," Benedict said, dropping himself into a bow as Lady Jarvis inclined her head at him.

"Lovely to see you," Dorothy returned, but the steel in her eyes negated the kindness of the words.

Benedict walked past her mother, and Agnes watched him the entire way. When they heard the front door open and shut with a loud bang, Dorothy whirled to face the room.

"Helena," she snapped loudly, causing the pregnant maid to jolt awake. "Wake up and fetch us some tea."

Helena pushed herself up with a grunt of effort, eager to get out of the room and complete the order that had been barked at her. Agnes watched with a pit in her stomach as the other woman waddled from the room, her last line of defense between her and the inquisition she knew that was impending from her mother.

The moment the parlor door closed behind Helena; Dorothy whirled on Agnes.

"What were you thinking?" She hissed, stepping closer to her daughter.

"What do you mean?" Agnes' brow furrowed in confusion.

"Allowing him so close to you. To touch you!" Dorothy's voice was high and shrill. "If word got out how close the two of you were when I walked in, it could ruin you, girl. And if you are ruined, we *all* are ruined."

Dorothy's mean dark stare narrowed on her daughter. "You have to be more careful," she commanded, and Agnes dipped her head as shame began to unfurl in her chest. "You cannot allow people to see the liberties you allowed him to take in that one small moment, do you understand me? That must be the last of it. We cannot risk the potential engagement with a scandal."

Dorothy gestured around her, indicating the walls that were now all but bare of the beautiful paintings that once adorned them. Her cheeks flushed crimson, marking them with the guilt that rocketed through her.

“The fate of this family and our entire estate rests on your shoulders, do you understand me?”

Her mother’s words were harsh, and Agnes bowed her shoulders under the weight of them. But she also knew that they were true. The Jarvis’ financial situation, and subsequent lack of a dowry, was something known only by Dorothy, Esther, the Boltons’ and, of course, Agnes herself. And without the financial incentive a dowry would provide, Agnes had been worried that she would have trouble finding a husband. She was quite aware that she was lucky to have found a man that was not only rich and could save her family’s finances, but that seemed to adore her enough that she believed he would overlook the lack of the dowry when the time came.

The way that Benedict had looked at her when he unveiled the necklace, it had been so eager and so full of love and caring. She had never imagined that someone would ever have looked at her like that.

Agnes knew that she was beautiful. One did not spend their entire life being treated the way that she had and end up unaware of the reason that doors are opened for you when they are not for others. She was of a high-born, and as far as the rest of the ton knew, rich family.

If she had a dowry, she knew that she would have a pick from any suitor that she could possibly desire. But without one? It was incredibly important that her betrothed be someone who loved her enough that it did not matter. And the way that Benedict had looked at her, well it led her to believe that she may have finally found exactly what she needed.

Her hand fluttered to the hollow of her throat, dancing along the metal of the necklace that now hung there. She gripped one of the blood red rubies beneath her finger, feeling

it warm under her touch as she clung to it, imagining it as the warmth of the man who had fastened it around her neck.

“I understand, Mother.” Agnes said, and she hoped that her mother heard the truth in her words.

CHAPTER 5

Esther

Esther padded though Bolton Manor on stockinged feet, the sound of her steps muffled against the carpet as she headed toward the parlor where she knew her husband to be. All she wanted to do was to kiss his cheek and bid him goodnight before she retired to their chambers for bed.

But as Esther got closer to the door, the sound of voices on the other end brought her up short. Esther paused for a moment, listening intently. She knew that it wasn't the proper thing to do. Eavesdropping was considered quite unladylike, indeed. But, with the sentence that grabbed her attention, she couldn't bring herself to care very much.

"I just don't know how to proceed," a voice she quickly identified as William said.

He sounded distressed and Esther's heart gave a small thrum of sympathy at what her brother-in-law was going through.

"Well, what are your thoughts?" that voice belonged to her husband.

"I think the best place to start would be to make a list of the eligible ladies of the ton that we know will be attending the season," William offered.

There was a dark chuckle from Laurence, followed by "don't you believe that to be a little harsh?"

“Harsh is what it will take to find a wife in three months.” William’s words weren’t tense, or even unkind. They were said in a matter-of-fact manner that suddenly reminded Esther of Agnes.

William continued speaking, and as Esther continued to listen, she heard him talk to her husband about the weight of the family responsibility and how he will not allow himself to fail. In fact, the more that he talked the more that the comparison to Agnes stood out clear in Esther’s mind.

“Hmmm,” she muttered to herself, quiet enough that only she could hear.

An idea was beginning to take shape in her mind, and she gave herself a moment to work through it. Agnes was titled. She was close to the Bolton family, and she already knew that Lord and Lady Bolton would approve of her, since they had previously tried to betroth her to one of their sons already.

Of course, Agnes had always been more Laurence’s friend than she had been William’s, so she wouldn’t have as much to work with to plant the seed in William’s mind. But she was sure that she could do it.

Esther knew that her cousin had affections for Earl Benedict Hampton, and from everything Agnes had told her, those affections were very much reciprocated. However, would it be so bad if Esther helped drum up a little competition for the hand of her cousin? At the very worst, perhaps it would spur the earl into proposing to her. And, at the very best, she would end up with Agnes as her sister-in-law. She smiled to herself at the thought.

With the idea now fully formed, Esther stepped forward, pushing open the door. The conversation between the two brothers stopped short as she strode in, staring at her husband with a smile.

“I’m going to bed, dear,” she said, approaching him to kiss his cheek. “I just wanted to let you know.”

Laurence gazed at his wife lovingly, and Esther’s heart swelled at the sight.

“I will be up shortly,” Laurence said. “I’ll be finishing up my conversation with my brother.”

Esther nodded, turning her gaze to William. She regarded William for only a moment, thinking that if she were to try to sway him toward Agnes, she would have to do so carefully. He already felt cornered by his father pushing him to find a wife so quickly, and she did not believe that William would take kindly to feeling like someone else was trying to control his actions.

Determined not to linger, Esther wished him goodnight before she turned and strode out the door. She had gotten to know William well in the time that she and Laurence had been married, and she knew that he did not fancy himself a romantic or wishful man. But still, she could not stop herself from turning the notion of he and Agnes being together over and over in her mind. And with every moment that the idea inside sat, the more that kernel of hope continued to grow.

CHAPTER 6

William

“William?” The sound of his name brought him out of the book that he had been reading and back into reality. He blinked rapidly, casting a quick glance around the room as he tried to take in his surrounding and look for the source of the voice.

Eventually his eyes homed in on Esther. She was standing in the doorway of the reading room, regarding him with something like amusement on her delicate features.

“You were really wrapped up in that book, weren’t you?” She asked, cocking her head and giving him a kind smile. “I had been calling your name for ages and you only just now heard me.”

“My apologies,” William said, straightening his back and setting the book down on the arm of the reading chair that he was occupying.

“No apologies necessary,” Esther assured him, waving a dismissive hand in front of her face. “It was amusing, that’s all.”

She crossed her slender arms across her chest, blinking at him for a moment.

“Will you be at dinner tonight, by chance?” She cocked her head at him in question.

“I should be,” William answered with a quick, swift nod.
“Why?”

Esther shook her head. “I was merely curious. We are having a family dinner tonight, all of us together. And as such, I’ve invited my family to come, so Agnes will be here.”

William furrowed his brow. He wasn’t sure why she was bringing this up to him. He did not care if Lady Dorothy Jarvis and her daughter were attending dinner. They were a frequent enough fixture, with how closely aligned their families were.

The last time William had really seen either woman had been at his brother’s and Esther’s wedding.

For a very long time, William had only thought of Agnes as his younger brother’s childhood friend. But when he had first laid eyes on her as his brother was reciting his vows, he hadn’t been able to stop himself from being in awe of how beautiful she had become.

Of course, there was a time when he had believed it would be Agnes and Laurence getting engaged. And out of respect for that once ill-held belief, he had not given much consideration to her beauty. But now? With Laurence happily married, it seemed to William that perhaps that respect was no longer warranted.

His eyes darted back up to Esther, who was watching him with amusement as his mind wandered over the imminent arrival of Agnes.

“She’ll be there tonight?” He asked and nodded her confirmation.

“Both she and my aunt. Alas, they will be our only guests, since Agnes is yet to be married. I just didn’t want you to be surprised by their arrival this evening.” Esther raised one shoulder and let it drop, before turning on her heels and striding from the room.

William watched after her idly until she completely faded from his view, all the while his mind began turning over the idea of Agnes.

As the time for dinner approached, William retired to his rooms for a few moments to change out of the clothes he had been wearing all day, and into something more appropriate for dinner.

As he shrugged his waistcoat on, the sound of a horse neighing from the drive caught his attention, and he rushed over to the window. Pulling back the curtain and peering down the driveway that wrapped in front of the manor, William spotted the Jarvis' carriage rolling to a stop.

With curiosity unfurling in his belly, he stayed put, gazing down in interest as the footman pulled open the door. At this distance, he could barely make out the slender arm that reached from within the carriage and placed a dainty hand within that of the footman.

A slender form appeared next, and he looked down atop her raven hair as she descended the few stairs into the gravel below.

"Perhaps," he muttered to himself absentmindedly as he dropped his curtain, letting it fall back into place.

He wasn't entirely sure what his idea concerning Agnes was, but he knew that he would allow it the space that it needed to grow throughout the remainder of the night.

He finished readying himself for dinner and then turned to exit his chambers. William paused for a moment, allowing himself to gaze at his reflection in the looking glass before turning and striding from the room.

As he came to the top of the stairs that overlook the large atrium at the front of the manor, he realized that the Jarvis women had already made their way inside.

His eyes immediately latched onto Agnes, and he noted that she was resplendent in a dress of a light, beautiful pink. The contrast of the color against her dark hair and eyes only accentuated her stunning features, and immediately the thought that he had earlier popped back into his mind.

William descended the stairs carefully, eyes roving over the two families milling about as they greeted each other.

William's movements must have registered in Laurence's periphery, because he glanced in his brother's direction, eyes lighting up the moment that they fell upon William.

"Ah," Laurence said. "There you are. I was wondering where you had gotten off too."

"I was readying for dinner," William explained simply, shrugging one of his shoulders.

Lord Rippon clapped his hands together, his loud voice booming out over the small group of people.

"That is quite enough of the greetings," Rippon said. "Let us move this to the dining hall."

Everyone nodded and followed along after him as he turned and strode down the corridor.

"And where is your wife this evening?" Dorothy asked loudly, her voice easily carrying over the small group.

"Away to visit her sister in Sussex," Rippon explained. "She will be back on the 'morrow."

William was at the tail end of the group, which meant he was also the last to enter the dining room. By the time he walked through the threshold, most everyone was already seated. And those who weren't, were standing by the chairs that they had claimed for their own. The only chair that had not yet been claimed, sat directly to the right of Agnes.

What luck, William thought as he strode confidently across the room.

He watched her as he approached. Agnes was locked in excited conversation with Esther, who sat to her left. Her hands moved animatedly as she spoke to her cousin, and he found himself curious about what could have gotten her so excited. Unfortunately, though, he was unable to make out her words over the muffled sounds of everyone else at the table talking.

William took his seat quietly before picking up the cloth napkin on display on the table and draping it across his lap. His movement must have caught Esther's attention, because

her eyes flickered to him and the corner of her mouth pulled up in a grin.

Following the line of her cousin's gaze, Agnes turned toward him. A small look of shock danced across her lovely features when she found him sitting next to her.

"Oh, Lord William," she said in her beautiful, raspy voice. "I am so sorry. I hadn't seen you enter."

"Quite alright," William said dismissively.

"How have you been?" She asked him in a friendly tone.

"I've been quite well," William answered. "I hope you have also."

"Yes, quite."

Agnes looked at him awkwardly for a moment, the silence between them stretching out until it was almost unbearable. Eventually, she pulled her gaze away from him, blowing out a quick breath. But, when her attention turned back to her cousin, she found her locked in an engaging conversation with Laurence.

William couldn't hear what the two of them were saying, but the way that they were gazing at each other was enough to make him feel ill.

"They're ridiculously in love, aren't they?" Agnes asked, amusement lacing her words.

"It is nauseating." William answered shortly.

"I think it's nice."

William arched an eyebrow at her. "Nice?"

She nodded at him.

They were interrupted momentarily by a flurry of servants bustling into the room carrying platters of their food. The beautiful, ornate plates were set between them on the table, and the intoxicating aroma floated through the air, making William's mouth water.

Once the servants had cleared out and Rippon had begun to serve himself, everyone else was free to begin filling their plates as well. Dishes were passed around amongst them, and the talking died down while people filled their dishes to the brim.

He grabbed a bowl of peas from his brother, who was passed it across the table to him, and he began shoveling a spoonful onto his plate.

“You truly find their love nauseating?” Agnes asked him again as he passed her the serving bowl.

“And you do not?”

“No.” She shook her head, the pin curls that framed her face shaking slightly with the movement. “I told you; I think it’s rather nice. It’s a blessing, to love the person you’re married to, is it not?”

She arched a graceful eyebrow at him, and he was struck all over again by just how beautiful she had become.

“Marriage is not about love, though. Not for people who are bound to their duty. People like you and I.”

Agnes’ brow creased at his words. “But surely you find the notion of love romantic.”

“I find the entire idea of love and romance to be pedantic and foolish. Why fill your mind with things that have no standing in your life?”

She scoffed openly at him, her mouth popping open in shock at his brazen words. “No standing? You truly believe that it is better to be paired with someone that you do not love.”

“Marriage is to produce an heir and form strong alliances. That is all.” William shrugged one shoulder.

“Now that,” Agnes fired back, “is what I would call foolish.”

William opened his mouth to rebuttal, finding that he quite liked the way that they were sparring back and forth. He was used to Agnes appearing bored, with a mask of indifference

permanently affixed to her delicate features. But in that moment, she seemed more alive and filled with more fire than he had ever witnessed.

The moment his mouth shaped the words of his reply, he was cut off.

“Agnes,” Dorothy Jarvis’ sharp, shrill voice made him snap his mouth closed. “Mind yourself.”

William glanced between the two women, noticing that Dorothy was shooting her daughter a reproachful look. William wondered what that could be about, but when he turned his attention back to Agnes to inquire, he let out a huff of disappointment.

All of the fire and light that had just been on her beautiful features was gone. Her face was stony, filled with no expression but a casual, friendly disinterest in everything that was going on around her. Like shutters had been pulled over the light within her eyes.

“To ensure I’m understanding you, putting silly ideas out of your mind and focusing on duty is foolishness?” William asked, trying to get Agnes to meet his eyes once more.

He had hoped that by continuing his line of questioning he would be able to goad that fire back out of her. But she was locked up tight.

“Many things are foolish, Lord William.” Agnes dipped her head respectfully before averting her eyes to her food.

He watched her with interest as she pushed bits of her food around her plate, pausing occasionally to take a dainty bite.

“Like what, then?” William continued, feeling unable to let their conversation die right as it was getting interesting. “What does the great Agnes Jarvis deem foolish.”

“For starters, this conversation.” She bit the words off at him, seeming to forget that she was supposed to be minding herself.

He couldn’t help the small, triumphant grin that tugged at the corners of his lips, glad to have gotten a rise out of her.

“Oh, is it?” William arched a brow at her, still smiling. “What, pray tell, would you rather be discussing?”

“Absolutely anything.” Agnes gave him a pointed glance, her eyes lighting with mirth.

“Taxes, perhaps?”

“Agnes.” Another hissed command flew from Dorothy Jarvis’ lips, and William watched as Agnes’ face fell all over again.

He glanced at Agnes’ mother, finding that the woman was shooting him a glare as well. William straightened his spine, unwilling to wither under her stare.

“That is quite a beautiful necklace, Agnes.” Esther complimented her cousin, pointing to the large, rubies that dangled around Agnes’ dainty throat. “Where did that come from? A gift from the Earl, perhaps?”

William leaned forward at the table so that he could get a glimpse of Esther. The woman was looking at her cousin with what appeared to be fondness, but when she caught William looking at the necklace in question with obvious interest, he could have sworn that the corner of her mouth ticked up in amusement.

“Oh yes,” Agnes replied, her hand floating up to touch the large gems. “Just the other day he came to call on me and brought me this as a gift.”

“Which earl?” William interjected before he could stop himself.

Laurence, Esther, and Agnes all turned to look at him with curiosity, but William merely lifted his chin.

“Earl Benedict of Hampton,” Agnes explained, her mask of disinterest still firmly in place.

William’s brow creased with confusion as he looked between the other dinner guests. Dorothy Jarvis was still in conversation with his father, but he did not miss the glances that she was throwing toward her daughter out of the corner of her eye.

“Why would the Earl of Hampton be giving you gifts?” William asked, unable to keep the incredulity out of his tone.

“He has expressed interest in my Agnes, and has come to call upon her multiple times,” Dorothy drawled, now fully turning her attention to their conversation as she puffed out her chest with obvious pride. “He has had his eye on her since the season last year. And now he has been calling on her for quite some time. I expect the official proposal to come any day now.”

A smug smile flitted across Dorothy’s face, while Lord Rippon made noises of approval.

“What a fine match that will be,” William’s father muttered, and the other members of the table nodded their agreement.

William’s mind began to turn. He had known Earl Benedict Hampton for quite some time. They had attended school together, and even frequented some of the same gentleman’s clubs. And he could not quite reconcile the man that he knew with someone who would pursue Agnes.

“I don’t understand,” William said, cutting off the din of conversation that was happening around him. “Why would Benedict be interested in Agnes? She has no dowry and...”

“William!”

Lord Rippon’s voice boomed out over the table, causing William’s mouth to shut with a snap. He blinked wearily, realizing too late what he had just said. His gaze flicked to Agnes, finding her staring down at her hands as a flush slowly crept up her neck and into her cheeks.

“How dare you.” The hissed voice of Dorothy Jarvis floated up to him, grabbing his attention.

William pulled his gaze away from Agnes, his heart hammering in his chest as his mind began to scramble on what he could do to make up for what he just said. But, before he could act, Dorothy pushed her chair back and away from the table.

The large woman stood, brushing down the front of her gown and raising her chin defiantly into the air.

“I’ll have you know that the Earl is quite fond of my daughter. And he gave her that necklace to prove it,” Dorothy’s voice boomed out over them.

“A necklace isn’t exactly a sign of true love, Aunt Dorothy.” Esther offered.

Agnes winced at her cousin’s words, and William watched as she quickly tried to recover. But, that did not prevent Esther from noticing.

“That does not mean that the love isn’t there,” she said in a rush, as she tried to meet Agnes’ gaze. “But all gestures, grand and small, should always be from the heart.”

Esther’s tone was polite, and the two women shared a quick glance, one that William was able to read as forgiveness. Agnes opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off by her mother. Lady Jarvis’ already beady eyes narrowed further as her focus turned to her niece.

“We did not come here to be insulted,” the woman hissed. “Come, Agnes. We will be going.”

“Lady Jarvis,” Lord Rippon said, pushing out his chair as well as speaking to the woman in a placating tone. “I apologize for my son’s impropriety. I think some of the wine must have gone to his head.”

William gaped at his father as he was shot a withering look, but he did not interject. Instead, he turned his attention back to Agnes. The woman was studying her elegant, gloved hands where they rested on her lap, making a show of keeping her eyes downcast.

He knew that he had overstepped, and he wished that he could apologize, but it was not something that he wanted to do in a room full of people.

“Enough of that, Rippon,” Dorothy said. “You do not need to apologize for your grown son.” She shot him another scathing glare. “But we also will not remain here to be further insulted. Agnes.”

At her name being barked once more, Agnes pushed her chair back from the table and stood. William tried to move himself to catch her gaze, but she would not meet his eye no matter how hard he tried.

Dorothy stood near the threshold that led to the dining room, tapping her foot in impatience as she waited for her daughter to join her. When Agnes reached her side, Dorothy did not say another word as she huffed, turned on her heel, and stomped toward the front door.

Agnes paused for only a moment to glance over her shoulder. He followed her gaze to Esther. The two women held each other's stare for a moment, and he could have sworn he could read an apology bouncing through the air between the two of them. But before William could consider it for much longer, Agnes turned and strode forward, disappearing from his view.

A pregnant silence fell over the room while everyone remaining stared down at their plates. No one dared to eat, or even so much as move, as Lord Rippon glared at the three people remaining at the table. The next sound that fell over them, was the sound of the front door slamming shut behind Dorothy and Agnes Jarvis.

CHAPTER 7

Laurence

Laurence paced the length of the drawing room while the fire in the hearth crackled merrily. It was still early enough in the year that while the days could grow warm, the nights were often cool. And the merriment in the sound was at direct odds with the annoyance curdling within Laurence.

“You cannot say things like that to people,” he said frustratingly for what he felt was the thousandth time. “You have to think before you speak, William. Especially with your station and even more especially with my wife’s family.”

“Do not lecture me on my station, Brother.” William bit off the words, gritting his teeth.

“It is not a lecture.” He raked his hands through his dark hair before turning to glance at his brother.

They were so alike on the outside. Both of them with dark, lightly curling hair and brown eyes. People frequently commented on how much they looked alike, but Laurence knew that was where the similarities ended.

He was not surprised, per se, that his brother had ended up insulting Agnes and Dorothy. While he adored William, he knew that the man often spoke first and thought about it later. He had always been that way, going back as far as Laurence could remember. William’s brusque manner typically ranged wildly from being endearing and entertaining, to being

inappropriate and offensive. Unfortunately, that evening it had been the latter.

“It sounds like a lecture,” William grumbled, leaning back further in the wing backed chair he was sitting in.

“I just don’t want you to offend people that matter, that’s all.” Laurence blew out another hard breath as he walked across the room and plopped into the chair directly across from his brother.

“And you think Dorothy Jarvis is important?” William arched an eyebrow at him, and Laurence couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Not particularly, no. But Agnes is. She is my wife’s cousin, and now her closest friend. Plus, she is a close friend of my own. And what you said tonight was harmful, in more ways than one.”

William’s eyes turned pensive for a moment. “I didn’t mean them to be.”

“I know.” Laurence nodded.

“But I need you to understand, I know Earl Benedict Hampton. Rather well, actually.”

Laurence cocked his head at his brother in question. “What are you getting at?”

“I saw him win that necklace in a bet.” William held his brother’s stare, and Laurence got the sense that he was imploring him to hear the truth in his words. “He gambles all the time at the gentleman’s club I’m a part of. I *saw* him win the very necklace she was wearing this evening during a card game. And it does not make sense that he is buying all of these things for Agnes if she has no dowry. He has always wanted...”

Laurence raised a hand to cut his brother off. “Careful Brother, you are beginning to sound quite jealous. Benedict Hampton has been nothing but kind and warm to Agnes. I’ve spoken to her about this myself, and by all accounts he has been nothing but a gentleman. And one that seems to be truly besotted by her. So, whatever you’re getting at, I suggest you

stop. Your line of questioning has already caused offense to her, and I don't want it going any further. Not when it has the ability to affect Esther and her relationship with her cousin, as well."

"Affect Esther?" William furrowed his brow.

"You know as well as I do that Dorothy will look for any reason to keep Agnes away from her. The only reason she is even remotely accepting of their friendship these days is because she's now a Bolton and she wants to honor our families long time friendship."

William nodded, and Laurence let out a heavy sigh.

"Look," he said, meeting William's dark gaze once more. "I appreciate that you think you were looking out for her. But consider that an apology would go a long way."

"I just didn't want her to be taken advantage of by a rake."

"I know," Laurence gave his brother a soft smile. "I don't want that either. But from everything I've heard, we have nothing to fear from Benedict Hampton."

William nodded once more, and he allowed the subject to be dropped. But Laurence couldn't help but wonder if his brother didn't entirely accept what Laurence had to say.

CHAPTER 8

Agnes

“**S**top fidgeting,” Dorothy commanded, reaching forward in the carriage to slap at the hands Agnes had fisted in her gown.

“I’m sorry.” Agnes kept her gaze focused on her lap as she answered her mother. “I just have a spot of nerves, that’s all.”

“Whatever are you nervous for?” Her mother’s tone is harsh.

“People will notice the gown.”

She raises her eyes then, focusing them on her mother’s steely gaze. From the moment that she had realized there was not enough money for a new gown to start the season, she had been anxious about it. Agnes and her mother had had many a conversation over the recent weeks on the looming danger of the ton finding out the truth of their finances.

And now that Agnes sat in the carriage on the way to the very first ball of the season, she couldn’t help but wonder if the time was now upon them.

“Well, they will surely notice if you continuously draw attention to it by fidgeting.” Dorothy narrowed her eyes on her daughter. “Now, keep your chin high and remember your role this evening.”

Agnes nodded before turning her attention out the window, focusing as hard as she could on keeping her hands still. After

dinner the night prior, Agnes was especially anxious about the ball she would be attending. Benedict would be there, and she hoped that she could push William's and Laurence's words out of her mind when she saw him.

He will love me regardless of the dowry, she assured herself, taking a deep, steadying breath as the carriage finally rolled to a stop before Gallagher Manor.

As always, the large, brick manor house was resplendent. The windows glowed warmly as the light tumbled down across the gravel of the drive. The servants that waited at the front door were impeccably dressed, and when they rushed forward to pull open the carriage door, Agnes reminded herself all over again of the role she was intending to play.

It was more important than ever that she impress the Earl of Hampton. She and her mother had talked about it late into the night the evening prior, with Dorothy drilling Agnes on what she was to say and the way she was to act when Benedict was around. They needed the money, and they needed it before anyone else could find out that the Jarvis' were flat broke.

The footman pulled open the door of the carriage, and Agnes extended a gloved hand to be helped down the stairs. The sound of the gravel shifting under her weight when she stepped onto it grated against her nerves, and she couldn't stop herself from running a nervous hand over the front of her dress.

While she waited for her mother to exit the carriage, she glanced down at the gown she had chosen for that evening. It was made of a soft, dark blue velvet that was accented with white lace at the neckline and the sleeves. And Agnes had to admit that it was absolutely beautiful.

But Agnes thought that perhaps a part of her nervousness was due to the perfection of the gown. Had it been plain or of a slightly lower quality, there was more of a chance that people would not have noticed it the first time that she had worn it. Or they would not remember enough of the details to draw the comparison. But Sarah had performed her role of

making the dress both stunning and unique a little too well, and now Agnes felt sure that at least someone would notice.

And if they noticed, what would they think?

The sound of Dorothy huffing out a breath as she came to stand beside her daughter drew Agnes out of the depths of her thoughts and back into the present. The two women walked side by side up the stairs and into the glowing mansion before them.

The moment they stepped through the doors, the smell of a thousand roses floated up to greet them, and Agnes sniffed the air appreciatively. As always, there were vases on every available surface that were full to the bursting with the delicate blooms. And as the lanterns around the space flickered merrily, Agnes allowed herself to be carried away by all of the finery.

A delicate melody drifted through the air to them, and the closer they got to the ballroom, the louder the music became. The sound of the people inside, losing themselves to the revelry, grew in volume as well, and despite all of her earlier worries, Agnes found herself excited for what the night would hold.

Agnes descended the stairs with her mother, and as heads began to turn her way, she raised her chin into the air, securing her features into their typical, aloof expression.

Her eyes roved over the crowd, finding a few people smiling at her in welcome. But, when they landed on one woman, someone that Agnes vaguely remembered as being a baroness but whom she could not recall the name of, dipped her head behind a gloved hand and whispered something to the woman beside her. The two women eyed Agnes up and down, before breaking out into a fit of giggles, and Agnes had to strain herself to ensure her fear did not begin to show on her face.

As she and Dorothy walked further into the crowd, Agnes began to hear the murmurs, and her blood ran cold.

“All that blue velvet, same as last season.” One voice said, it’s tone high and cruel, just as another one chimed in.

“What do you think this means?”

And another, “Could their coffers be *that* dry?”

A lump secured itself in Agnes’ throat and she felt the pressure of tears welling up behind her eyes, but she bid them not to well up. Her mother’s grip tightened on Agnes’ arm, becoming vice like. And the small pricks of pain from where Dorothy’s talon like fingers dug into her gave Agnes something else to focus on then the shame that was attempting to crash over her in waves.

“Lady Agnes,” came a deep, warm voice behind her, and Agnes’ heart leapt with joy the moment she identified it.

Delicately extracting her arm from her mother’s embrace, she turned to find Benedict standing behind her. His blue eyes glowed with happiness as they fell upon her, and a smile that made the room become brighter dashed across his face.

“We match,” he said with a wink, causing Agnes to look down at his attire.

A smile that mirrored Benedict’s painted itself across her lips as she took in all of him, realizing that he was right. His waistcoat was made of the deepest, royal blue, almost the exact shade as her gown. His breeches, pocket square, and shirt were all of the purest white, with small pearl buttons that matched the ones secured at Agnes’ own wrists.

Benedict stepped forward, and Agnes extended her hand to him, allowing him to press his lips to her knuckles in the briefest of kisses as he bowed. His blue eyes held hers as he did so, lighting her up from the inside out when she felt the pressure of his mouth through the gloves.

She worked to keep her breathing under control, thankful when he dropped her hand and gave her mother the same greeting, but without the lingering stare.

“You both are looking absolutely lovely this evening,” Benedict said, grinning at the two women.

“Thank you, Earl.” Dorothy batted her eyelashes at the man, and Agnes had to fight to not snort with laughter.

“The first dance will be beginning soon,” the earl continued as if Dorothy had not spoken, his attention wholly fixed on Agnes. “Perhaps I may steal the line for it on your dance card.”

“Perhaps,” Agnes teased a smile, and paused for just long enough that Benedict’s brow creased with worry, wondering if she might be about to turn him down.

Agnes chuckled lightly as she extended her wrist to him where her dance card was secured, pulling a small pencil from the small pocket sown into her gown. She handed it to him, and their fingers grazed for the slightest of moments, causing heat to flare in her cheeks once more.

“The dance is all yours,” Agnes purred, and for once her mother did not admonish her for showing more than just casual interest.

Benedict scrawled his name on the first line of her card, but when he did not stop at just that one line and began writing his name on the second and then the third, Agnes’ eyebrows shot up in surprise. The earl did not stop until every line on her dance card were filled with his name.

Grinning at her, he handed Agnes the pencil once more, just as the beginning chords of the first dance began to fill the air around them. Benedict extended his hand to her, and Agnes gladly took it. He led her through the crowd, and Agnes couldn’t help but notice that the whispers about her dress seemed to have stopped.

With a jolt, she realized that it must be due to the fact that she and Benedict matched so seamlessly, and that her fellow members of the ton must assume that they had done it on purpose. Without even knowing it, the Earl of Hampton had saved her from a night of embarrassment.

At the thought, Agnes smiled at him softly, falling into step with him as they pushed through the final bit of the crowd and made their way onto the dance floor. And while matching

Benedict was not a permanent solution, tonight, at least, it had bought her a little more time to woo him before everyone could figure out the truth.

Benedict spun Agnes as the music began to pick up, a smile lighting her face that she couldn't help but get lost in. As the colorfully clad lords and ladies pushed in around them, Agnes couldn't focus on anything other than the small spaces where her body met with Benedict's.

Grinning down at her, the Earl seemed all too aware at the affect he was having on her.

"The necklace looks even lovelier on you than I had thought it would," he said, dipping his head to where his mouth hovered just beside the shell of her ear.

His breath stirred against her skin, causing Agnes to shiver with what she now knew to be desire.

"I'm glad you like it." Her voice came out breathier than she had anticipated, and she was struggling to pull air into her lungs.

"I could like anything, so long as you were wearing it."

He pulled back to look at her face, and she did not miss the fact that his eyes raked lower. They followed the path of her nose, to her lips, down the column of her throat, lingering briefly on the necklace, before continuing their trajectory down. Heat flooded her cheeks once more, and all of a sudden, the noise of the music, the press of the people crowded onto the dance floor around her, his body in such close proximity – it was all entirely too much.

As the final notes of the song drifted through the air, Agnes exhaled a sigh of relief.

"I apologize, Benedict," she said, dipping her head in reverence. "I require a bit of fresh air."

She dropped his hand and stepped back out of his embrace, already feeling marginally better just by creating a bit of distance between them. But still she needed more.

“Would you like me to accompany you?” Benedict asked, his lip pulling up in a knowing smirk.

“No.” The word flew from her lips quick and harsh, and Agnes drew in a steadying breath before she tried again. “No, thank you. I should only be a moment.”

She did not give Benedict time to answer, sure that if he asked to accompany her again, she would likely give in, just to have a moment or two alone with him. And she knew that with the way she was feeling right now, being alone with Benedict would lead her to nothing good. It was a dangerous line of desire and attraction that she was toeing, and no matter how tempting, Agnes knew she had to not tread too far before she made him her husband.

Agnes pushed her way through the crowd, the flashing colors and sounds of loud laughter floating up around her as the world seemed to press in. She had never been more grateful than the moment that she finally reached the large French doors at the back of the ballroom that led to the gardens and heaved them open.

Immediately upon stepping through the doorway the cool night air licked at her skin, causing a sigh of relief to pull itself from Agnes’ lips. She glanced around the brick laid patio, the lanterns flickering merrily, and found herself beautifully, graciously, alone.

Alone, that is, until a deep male voice says her name from behind her.



William

“Agnes,” William said as he pushed through the doors that lead to the patio and then the beautifully manicured gardens beyond.

His eyes landed on her, standing in the center of the patio, arms wrapped around herself as she stared out into the

deserted grounds. The cool night air rushed up to greet him, and he was happy to step out into it for a moment, a perfect contrast to the hot air and the smell of too many people pressed into a space that pervaded the ballroom.

Agnes whirled to face him at the sound of her name, her lovely face alight with surprise to find him standing there. Just moments before, William had seen her dancing with Benedict. The pair had been so close as they moved through the crowd that it had almost bordered on inappropriate. Almost...but not quite.

When he had seen her step away from him and began making her way toward the gardens, he had known that it was his moment to speak to her alone. After his conversation with Laurence the night before, William knew that he needed to apologize to her and to also explain where he was coming from when he made the comment he did. But there was also something else he wanted to discuss with her, something that had him nervous for the first time in a very long time.

“William,” Agnes said, blowing out a shaky laugh as recognition washed over her. “What are you doing out here?”

She cocked her head at him, and he took a step closer. His eyes roved over her face, and he noticed that despite the cool temperatures of the air around them, her cheeks were still flushed, and her dark eyes were bright.

That’s because of Benedict, a voice inside him said, but he quickly stuffed the thought down. There was no jealousy behind the words, no emotion at all, really. Just a simple, matter-of-fact realization that he had to remind himself had no bearing on the request he was about to make of her.

“I would like to apologize for the other night,” William began, giving her what he hoped was a friendly smile.

Agnes eyed him wearily. “Yes, well. Your words were quite hurtful.”

William watched as her hands fluttered up to the necklace that adorned her dainty throat. Her fingers stroked the large

ruby at the center as if she used it to calm herself, and a bolt of worry flashed through him.

“I was merely trying to warn you about the Earl.” He said, trying to consider his words carefully, so as to not cause further offense.

“Warn me?” Her brow furrowed. “Warn me about what? About Benedict being kind and having affections for me?” Her voice began dripping in sarcasm. “Oh heavens, what ever will I do with that?”

“No,” William shook his head as he took a step closer to Agnes. “I am sure that he is kind to you, but it may not be for the reasons that you believe.”

Her eyes narrowed on him, and he immediately knew that he had misstepped. He raked a hand through his dark hair, blowing out a breath of frustration. How had things gone so awry so quickly? William knew that he needed to consider how he moved forward very, very carefully.

“I know Benedict Hampton. Both from school and from our club, Barnley’s,” William explained. “I have seen him behave in rather un-gentlemanly ways throughout the years, and know him to be a habitual gambler, and even possibly a rake. What I said last night was only out of shock as I tried to reconcile the man that I know with the one who would give you such beautiful gifts. Out of respect for the friendship between our families, I do not want to see you hurt or made a fool of.”

Agnes’ eyes widened as he spoke, seeming surprised that he was speaking with her so frankly. While he had known the woman for a very long time, they have never been close. William never would have even called Agnes a friend of his own, only one of the family’s. But he did mean it when he said he did not want her to end up hurt. He had no ill will towards her, and she had always been a good friend to his brother, something William would always be appreciative of.

“I do not need your worry,” Agnes said, raising her chin defiantly after a moment’s consideration. “While I appreciate your concern, who I am willing to court is, simply put, none of

your business. I will not concern myself with the opinions of a man who does not even believe in love.”

“Oh, I believe in love,” William corrected her quickly. “I simply have no use for it.”

He shrugged, and Agnes rolled her eyes at him.

“There you go again.” Her voice raised in frustration. “Dismissing the feelings of those around you and acting so superior to it all. Can’t you see how irritating that is?”

“*I’m* irritating,” William scoffed, unable to stop himself. “Not everyone around us who is lying to each other. Noble men who espouse pretty words just so that they appear to be gentleman in front of everyone else, but behind closed doors there is not a proper thing about them. Would you rather me give you poetry in public only to damn you in private? Is it not better that I give you the truth, no matter how ugly you may find it?”

“It is not only your words that are horrendous,” Agnes argued. “But your delivery. You throw out insults and accusations as if it were candy to a child and you expect others to be grateful for it. You do so without regard to how the information you are providing will hurt the person standing before you. It is not the truth that I find displeasing, William. It is you.”

He was unable to stop the laugh that pulled itself from him. He was not hurt by her words, far from it, actually. No, William admired the tenacity with which she delivered the blow, with her beautifully dark eyes narrowed on him, and her plump mouth pursed with irritation. She had meant for the words to cut, and it was so very refreshing.

“Why are you laughing?” She asked incredulously.

“Now who is the one with no regards to how their words will hurt?” He arched an eyebrow at her, but he made sure to smile at her, so she knew that while she had intended for her words to have been harmful, they were not.

William knew that his brusque manner and matter-of-fact ways often rubbed people the wrong way. But he had meant

what he said to Agnes about finding the ugly truth to be so much better than a beautiful lie. He would not mince his words, and while it caused people to back down from him more often than not, seeing Agnes fight back with him had intrigued him more than he cared to admit. It indicated to him that the plan he had concocted the night prior, after she had stormed out of dinner with her mother, was the right one, indeed.

“All this nastiness aside,” William said in an amused tone. “I do have an offer for you. One that I will not coat with sugar or pretty words, which I’m sure you’ll understand.”

He approached her carefully, stepping closely enough that should someone walk out onto the patio they would not be overheard.

“My father is demanding that I find a wife before the end of the season. You and I both know how hard the man is to please, but there is one woman of the ton I am sure he would approve of, because he has approved of her before when he thought she was going to marry my brother.”

He gave her a long, pointed look and her brown eyes grew large with realization of what he was implying. This was the closest he had ever been to her, and as the lantern light flickered, he realized that her eyes, which he had always believed were so dark brown they would appear to be black, had small flecks of gold and green within them that shone beautifully when you got close enough. Shaking the thought from his mind, he continued on.

“I am offering to marry you. I will not care about your dowry, and as you will be my wife, I will solve all of your family’s debts as well as provide your mother with the funds that she needs to restore the Jarvis fortune. I will even provide her with the assistance to ensure that her finances remain in good standing going forward. All you have to do is agree.”

Agnes’ eyed him with disbelief, her full lips gaping open and then closed and he could tell she was working to make sense of what he had just thrown at her.

“You needn’t decide tonight,” William advised, taking a step back from her. “You don’t even have to answer tomorrow. Take a few days to consider it. It is a generous offer. And it is one that is assured, unlike your proposal from the Earl. You say the word, and it is done.”

William did not wait for her to answer, because he was sure if he did that, she would turn him down outright. No, he wanted to give her the time to weigh his words. He was positive that if he did, she would see that his offer was the best one she would receive. Because while Agnes believed that the Earl loved her and that the proposal was imminent, they both knew that both life and people were often fickle. And until that ring was on your finger and the vows had been uttered before God and country, nothing was assured.

And what both he and Agnes knew that the rest of the ton did not, was that the Jarvis family did not have much time to waste. Which was a fact that William was very much banking on.

CHAPTER 9

Agnes

The sunlight streamed through the window of Agnes' room, and she glared at it before throwing her large, down filled duvet over her head to block out the sun's merry rays. All night she had tossed and turned, agonizing over what had occurred the night before.

She had spent an entire night pondering it, and still she was no closer to a decision on the offer that William had given her. After he had left her standing on the patio, open mouthed and staring after him, she had gone for a walk into the gardens to clear her mind. She had been unsure of how long she had walked amongst the hedges, but by the time she had arrived back to the ball, Earl Benedict had been nowhere to be found.

When her mother had spotted her, Dorothy had rushed over and gripped Agnes arm, demanding to know where she had been. She had considered for a moment on telling her mother about the offer from William but had almost immediately stifled the thought. She knew what Dorothy would have her do.

Accepting William's offer was the safe thing to do. Not only was it a sure-fire way to fix her family's finances, but it would further solidify their alliance with a very powerful family. It was one of the reasons why her mother had been so keen on Agnes marrying Laurence all that time ago, despite Agnes' own protests and feelings on the matter.

No, Agnes could not tell her mother just yet. She wanted time to consider the proposition for herself. And perhaps, if she bided her time just a little longer the proposal from the earl would come and she would no longer be in this predicament.

A knock sounded at her door, and Agnes threw back the covers with a huff.

“Yes, come in.” She called out, her voice harsher than she had intended but her exhaustion was making her irritable.

The large wooden door that led to her chambers opened with a creak, and a moment later Helena’s head popped through it.

“Apologies for waking you, Miss,” the woman said, giving Agnes a knowing grin. “But the Earl is here to see you.”

Agnes heart immediately began to flutter wildly. When she had returned to the ball from the garden the night before, finding Benedict had left had struck her with fear. She was worried that he would take her sudden disappearance as a rejection, and Agnes had worried that she had ruined everything. But now he was here, and she would have a chance to explain.

She threw the covers off of her, stepping onto the cool wooden floor and crossing the room to her armoire. While Agnes’ family no longer had much money, she was thankful that there had been a time where they could afford beautifully crafted gowns, and that they had not had to resort to selling them just yet. It left her with plenty of options to choose from when she needed to dress to impress, even if they had been worn before.

Carefully selecting a sage green gown, one that she knew complimented her dark features, she waved Helena over to begin helping her dress. The two women worked quickly, their well-practiced fingers draping the layers of fabric over Agnes body before nimbly tightening and lacing her corset.

Plaiting her hair took no time at all, and they finished it by wrapping her long, dark locks around the crown of her head and pinning it in place. And finally, with Agnes running shaky

hands over the bodice of her gown to give it a final smoothing, she stepped out into the hallway and began making her way toward the drawing room where Helena told her Benedict was waiting.

The sound of her heels hitting the tiled floor echoed off the now mostly empty walls, and she thought for sure that it would announce her arrival. But, when voices floated out into the hall from the cracked door of the drawing room, she couldn't stop herself from pausing to listen.

"I assure you, Lady Jarvis, the official proposal is coming soon." Benedict's voice was a low purr, and Agnes was sure that if she closed her eyes, she could imagine the sly smile that was painted across his features. "I am waiting for the right time, is all."

"Well do not wait too long." Her mother's voice was harsh when she answered him, and Agnes cringed at the sound. "There are plenty of suitors vying for my daughter's hand in marriage. As of right now, her sights are set on you. But if you dawdle much longer, someone might be able to sway her affections."

"I will keep that in mind," Benedict said, his voice dripping with barely concealed amusement.

Agnes knew her mother, and as such she was well aware that Dorothy was likely gearing up with another round of retorts. Not wanting to give her mother the opportunity to further berate the man Agnes wished to marry, she exaggeratedly stomped her feet against the tiled floor, making sure that her steps echoed loudly off the walls to catch their attention before pushing open the doors.

She affixed a sweet, unassuming smile on her face the moment she entered the room, her eyes sweeping over her mother to land on Benedict. His blue eyes met hers, and from the moment they did electricity darted over her skin. Her attraction to him was such that the very moment Agnes stepped into a room with Benedict Hampton, she was robbed of the very breath within her lungs.

She focused on her breathing as she walked over to him, smiling as she held his eyes. He watched her every move, not even trying to hide it as his bright blue gaze swept over her from head to toe. She did not think it was possible, and yet as his eyes raked over her, she felt herself warm even more as her blush deepened.

“You are looking lovely, as always,” Benedict greeted her, dipping into a low bow as she approached.

“As are you.” Agnes kept her voice low, in what she hoped was an alluring purr.

The sound of boots on tile caused Agnes to throw a quick glance over her shoulder, spotting Helena stepping into the room with a hand on her large belly. The woman gave her a brief smile, and Dorothy whirled on the maid.

“I have work to attend to,” her mother said in a waspish tone. “Do *not* doze off on them again, do you hear me.”

“Yes ma’am,” Helena responded, her tone light and polite, but Agnes noticed the woman’s hand shaking as she removed it from her pregnant stomach and dropped it to her side.

She wished that she could admonish her mother from treating Helena so poorly, for treating most of their staff so poorly. But she knew that to intervene with Dorothy Jarvis would only serve to make the woman even more mercurial. Where her mother was concerned, it was best to keep your head down and do as you were told.

Her mother strode from the room, and when the large, ornate door snapped shut behind her, Benedict turned to Agnes with a smile.

“Come, my darling,” he said as he extended an arm to her.

The term of endearment on his lips made her flush but still she draped her arm through his. He pulled her in closer as they walked to the small seating area near the window, and the proximity of his body made Agnes struggle to focus.

They each took chairs across from one another, Agnes taking a little extra time to rearrange her skirts before delicately perching herself on the edge of the seat. Benedict

leaned forward, taking hold of one of Agnes' hands and holding it, clasped in both of his.

The feeling of her hand dwarfed by both of his palms, encompassed by his warm skin, mixed with the heady feeling of his bright blue eyes gazing at her made Agnes feel faint. She worked to control herself and the rush of desire that was coursing through her as Benedict began speaking.

"I wanted to speak to you about this last night," he began, and Agnes gulped past the emotion clogging her throat. She had just overheard him telling her mother that he is not proposing today, so she couldn't fathom a guess at what he was going to discuss. And the unknown had anxiety coursing through her.

"But you disappeared for a while," he continued, oblivious to the turmoil roiling inside of her. "And I got called away on business."

"I am very sorry for leaving you for so long," Agnes gushed, unabashedly interrupting him. "I got distracted in the hedge maze and lost my way. By the time I returned, you were gone."

She had come up with the lie as she had tossed and turned the night before. And in that moment, it dripped from her lips like honey.

"It is no bother," Benedict said, waving off her apologies. "It gave me an excuse to see you again today, when you look so very lovely." She blushed. "But I wanted to let you know that I will be travelling for a fortnight to attend to business. So, I will not see you for some time. I did not want you to think that I no longer wished to pursue you."

Disappointment unfurled in Agnes' chest, followed by quite a bit of panic. She had hoped that there would be at least a proposal, if not a wedding, before the other members of the ton began to catch on to her family's financial situation. At the ball the night before, the only thing that has stopped the murmurings was the fact that she and Benedict had matched so seamlessly that others assumed it had to be a coincidence.

But what would occur when she showed up to the next ball, this time without the earl, in a gown that she had worn before. How would she circumvent the whispers then? What would happen when the rumors began to abound, and she had no way to stop them?

Agnes used her years of practice at controlling her features and not allowing them to betray her emotions as she looked at Benedict. Affixing a demure smile to her lips, she gave him the briefest of nods.

“That is quite alright, I understand.”

“I knew you would,” he returned her smile as he ran a thumb back and forth across her knuckles. “But I did not want to announce such a thing and leave you empty handed. And I wish to make the news at least a little worth your while.”

He winked at her, and Agnes eyebrows shot up.

“A surprise?”

“Oh yes, my darling. A surprise.” He parroted with his grin widening, and Agnes forgot that for a moment that she was worried at all.

CHAPTER 10

Agnes

“Do I need to close my eyes this time?” Agnes asked, cocking her head coyly at the man before her.

“Only if you desire?” He flashed her another wink, which forced her to chuckle.

Benedict took one of his hands that was still wrapped around hers and reached into the lining of his waistcoat. He fished around inside the swaths of regal fabric for only a moment, before taking out a large, thick piece of parchment sealed with a bright red bit of wax.

From where she was sitting, Agnes could not make out the crest that was pressed upon it, and she wondered who on earth the parchment could be from. Benedict shot her an apologetic look before extracting his other hand, and quickly he broke the wax seal before passing the parchment to her.

Agnes took it, allowing her eyes to rake over the words, her mouth popping open with surprise as she realized what it was, she held in her hand.

“Is this what I believe it to be?” She asked, unable to hide the awe in her voice.

“If you believe it to be an invitation to the most sought-after event of the winter’s season, the Twelfth of Christmas ball at Welwick Estate, then yes. You are absolutely correct.”

He smiled widely at her, and Agnes felt a rush of joy as she looked once more at the paper in her hands.

The Twelfth of Christmas ball was hosted every year by the Duke of Cornwall, and Agnes had never been able to go. Even the Bolton's had never been invited, so they had all only heard rumors of the splendor and the revelry that took place there.

Agnes had been rather young when she had first heard of it, with her and Laurence hiding out in a study as they listened in to their parent's conversation. They snickered between themselves as they heard their typically stuffy parents gossiping about the going-ons at the party. And after that one night, she had collected rumors about the ball as if they were precious gems.

She had heard many things, that there were beautifully decorated Christmas Trees in every corner of the manor, that at precisely midnight they let out an entire host of beautiful white doves that were trained to fly over the party-goers and drop small presents. The rumors were endless, and each on more fanciful than the last.

But now, because of the piece of parchment that she had in her hands, the one that had been given to her by a beautiful, kind, and considerate man, she would finally get to see for herself if the mutterings were true.

"Thank you so very much," Agnes whispered almost reverently.

Benedict reached forward brushing a stray strand of hair that had fallen loose from her braids back behind her ear. For once the touch did not light her skin on fire, it did not send a rush of need coursing through her. Instead, she felt the stirrings of something softer. Something that unfurled its wings low in her belly and stretched them. Something that very much felt like it could turn into love.

"I am glad that it pleases you." Benedict's voice is sweet when he speaks. "I have this vision in my head of you wearing a gown of the deepest, most resplendent red the night of the

ball. It will match the rubies of your necklace, and you will outshine everyone and everything.”

The notion is so sweet that Agnes does not know how to respond. She keeps her eyes focused on the invitation in her hands, running her fingers softly over the delicate scrawl. She wished that she could explain to him how much this one simple gesture meant to her, but she wasn't certain that he would understand.

Benedict blew out a breath and patted his strong thighs before pushing himself to standing.

“I am so sorry to drop all of this on you and then rush off,” he said, pulling a pocket watch out from the pocket of his waistcoat. “But I do have business to attend to.”

He glanced down at her, his eyes shining with affection.

“Keep the invitation,” he said with a soft smile, reaching down to stroke her cheek softly.

Agnes' eyes glanced to the corner of the room where Helena sat. The maid was awake, but she was deliberately looking anywhere in the room that was not at them, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips. Agnes allowed herself the smallest of luxuries as she leaned into his touch.

She knew that her desires for him constantly had her wanting to toe the line of impropriety. But in that moment, she was so happy with Benedict and so thankful for the gift that he had given her, that she did not care. She did not want to pull away from his touch, and so she allowed herself to linger.

“Goodbye, dear one.” He said, his voice filled with softness. “Until we see each other again.”

Benedict's hand dropped from her cheek, and she felt the loss of it immediately. As she walked him turn and stride from the room, her heartbeat sped up. She wished that she could talk to Esther in that moment, wished that she could recount to her cousin all of the feelings warring through her body because of the handsome man that was now leaving her for the next two weeks.

Instead, her eyes flicked to the maid in the corner, the one who was now looking at her with raised eyebrows and a knowing expression.

“I did not see a thing, Miss,” Helena said, a coy smile playing around her mouth.

A soft chuckle pulled itself from Agnes’ lips, dispelling the feelings of desire and admiration that were flooding her. Her mother walked through the door a moment later, blinking in astonishment to find only the women in the room.

“Where did the Earl go?” She asked, her brow furrowing.

“He had to leave to attend business, and he’ll be gone for two weeks.” Agnes explained, pushing herself to standing. She held out a shaking hand, showing her mother the piece of parchment, she still gripped. “But he gave me this before he left.”

Dorothy’s eyes narrowed on her daughter before she stalked forward. Quick as an asp, the woman snatched the paper from Agnes’ hands and began to read it, her beady eyes raking back and forth before her eyes widened in surprise.

“Is this....”

Dorothy’s words were interrupted by the sound of a loud knocking coming from the door. Assuming that it was Benedict and that he had forgotten something, Agnes heart began to hammer. The prospect of seeing him again, even though it had only been a few short moments since he had left, had her feeling excited and anxious all at once.

“Stay right here,” her mother commanded before she turned and stalked toward the door.

There was a long pause, where the silence in the room was only broken by the sound of Dorothy’s footsteps heading to the front of the manor. Agnes waited with bated breath, hoping for the moment that her mother returned with Benedict in tow. But that moment did not come.

She heard the loud creak from the door when it was pulled open, followed by the murmuring of voices. One was most definitely her mother’s, and while the other was male, she did

not think that it belonged to Benedict. The tenor and the tone were all wrong.

Agnes paused for only a moment before curiosity got the better of her and she began creeping from the drawing room and toward the front door. When she reached the corner that led to the atrium, she peered around it cautiously, taking in the scene before her.

Her mother's back was to Agnes, and she was talking heatedly with a man that stood in the threshold. He was short and paunchy, with a shock of white hair and a frazzled looking demeanor.

"What happens if we cannot pay?" Dorothy asked, and Agnes noticed that her mother's tone was more cautious than she had ever heard it.

"The bank will seize the house, ma'am," the man said in a sure tone that did not match his bedraggled appearance.

Her mother let out a long sigh, and Agnes' palms began to sweat as she pieced together who the man was and what he was there for.

"My daughter is courting an incredibly wealthy man. If we secure an engagement, do you think it could buy us some time?"

The man considered the words for a moment before giving her mother a frank look.

"Possibly," he said. "But there is no way to know for sure until that were to happen. We would do what we could."

Dorothy nodded before the man said his goodbyes. Ever so slowly, her mother closed the door on his retreating form. Agnes was frozen in place as her mind raked over everything she had just heard. And when Dorothy turned around, she spotted Agnes there, still peering around the counter.

A large, exasperated sigh pulled itself from her mother's chest before the woman crossed the atrium to stand by Agnes side.

“It would appear that if we want to save our home, we have quite a bit of work to do.”

Her mother’s words settled over her, the weight of them making Agnes feel as if she could not breathe.

CHAPTER II

William

A genuine smile lit up William's face as he looked at the woman standing in front of him.

"I can't tell you how much this means, Lord William," Ruth said, bowing her head to him in reverence. "Every time you come here, it seems you get more and more generous."

He was standing on the front steps of a manor home that a few years prior had been transformed into an orphanage after having made his quarterly, sizeable donation and visit to the children. As always, a complicated feeling of both melancholy and gratitude filled him.

"It truly is not something you have to thank me for," William tried to wave off Ruth's thanks, but she would not hear any of it.

"It will always be something I have to thank you for." She met and held his gaze, the portly older woman not backing down from him.

He liked that about Ruth. While she had a round, kind, open face, she also was not one who suffered fools lightly. She always treated him with respect, but he never got the feeling that she was tiptoeing around him due to his station. The respect that she gave him was that of simply being human, and he liked that when he came here, he was just a man doing a good deed. Nothing more, nothing less.

Word that the orphanage had been built had gotten around Surrey quickly. And the same day that the children had moved in, William had made it a point to stop by. It had been his very first donation. And as he had seen the way the children were living, their threadbare clothes and broken toys due to their coffers running dry from purchasing the manor, he had made a vow to do whatever he could to ensure they were kept afloat.

Ever since that day he had made it his mission to return every three months. He would meet with Ruth, find out what they needed and where their finances were, and then do what he could to make sure all of their needs were met. Although, recently he had not been able to come by as often, and had missed his previous visit entirely. It was a fact that troubled him terribly, and as such, his current visit felt even more important.

Knowing that he would not be able to dismiss Ruth that easily, he gave her another, soft smile, one that he knew he did not give to others often and accepted her words of gratitude.

“Fine then,” he said, feeling an uncharacteristic blush rise into his cheeks. “You’re very welcome. And I will be back in three months.”

Ruth grinned at him as William turned to leave. His boots crunched across the gravel, but as he pulled open the door of the carriage, he turned back to her.

“And please do not forget, if you need something between now and my next visit....”

“To write to you with exactly what we need, yes, yes.” Ruth finished his sentence, waving off his concerns as she shot him a sweet, understanding smile. “Now off with ‘ya. We love it when you’re here, but I know you have work to do. And it won’t serve anyone for us to keep you here, no matter how much we love your visits.”

William shot the woman another genuine smile before climbing into the carriage. The footman that attended him shut the door behind William with a quick snap, and as they pulled away from the manor, William leaned forward to look out the window and watch it fade into the distance.

With the orphanage now entirely out of sight, William settled back into his seat with a sigh. He loved visiting the house, loved seeing the children there, and it was always such a pleasure to see Ruth. But being there always made him realize the true gravity of his privilege. He was thankful for it, thankful for the opportunities the station he had been born into afforded him, thankful for the security and so much more. But the weight of the gratitude and the conflicting emotions of guilt and shame after one of his visits, always left him feeling tired.

William leaned his head back as the carriage rocked to and from, making its journey from the orphanage back to the Bolton Manor house. It wasn't long before the gentle swaying of the cab, the comfortable cushion below him, and the rhythmic clapping of the horses' hooves against the tightly packed earth all melded together, causing William to begin nodding off.

One moment, he was staring up at the carriage ceiling, thinking about the ball two nights prior when he approached Agnes with his offer, wondering if she had yet to make a decision. He had hardly slept for two nights as he worried about whether or not his efforts to secure a suitable match that his father would approve of were in vain. And the next thing he knew, there was a hand on his shoulder, shaking him awake.

"Sire," said the hushed voice of his footman as William's eyes opened with a start. "Sire, we've arrived."

He blinked rapidly, trying to clear the fog of sleep from his eyes before they settled on the man before him and made sense of the words he had just spoken.

"Home, yes," William said, his voice thick with exhaustion. "I'm so sorry."

He pushed himself off of the lush bench seat in the carriage and moved toward the door. He hopped from the final stair, his boots landing on the gravel with a satisfying crunch as he looked around at his surroundings. He meant only to give himself another second to collect his thoughts before he

walked inside and was, in all likelihood, set upon by one of his parents to accost him about the ball the other evening. But, when he spotted a familiar carriage waiting not far in front of his own, his brow creased in confusion.

“Is that the Jarvis’ carriage?” William asked, pointing a finger at it.

“It would appear so, Lord William,” the footman confirmed.

His heart began to pound wildly, and his mind began to turn wondering what one of the Jarvis’ could possibly be doing at his home. William tried not to rush as he walked up the stairs, worked to keep his steps even and unhurried. When he pulled open the large front door to the manor home, Jonas was standing on the other side of it, with his hand raised as if to grab the doorknob himself.

“Lord William,” the steward’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “I was just coming out to greet you. You have a visitor.”

“Who is it?” William asked, his voice coming out more harshly than he intended due to the mix of tiredness and confusion warring within him.

“Lady Agnes Jarvis, sir.” Jonas bowed his head slightly with the answer, and William’s pulse leapt even higher.

His palms began to sweat as he motioned for Jonas to lead the way, and then followed after the steward when he did. With every step that he took, William had to swallow past the nerves roaring inside of him.

He did not want to be this affected by the potential of Agnes’ decision, but he couldn’t quite help it. She was the perfect fit for his needs, and if she said ‘yes’, he did not need to go through the hubbub of truly getting to know someone else from scratch. William hated the idea of finding and trying to court a complete and total stranger.

He recognized that he did not know Agnes well, but he at least did know her. And for right now, that would have to be enough.

Jonas led William to the large, ornate library at the rear of the house. It was one of his favorite rooms, with three of the walls holding sprawling, floor to ceiling shelves full to the bursting with books. And the rear and final wall was nothing but an oversized, massive window that overlooked the hedge maze and the Bolton's meticulously curated gardens.

As soon as he stepped through the threshold, Jonas closed the door behind William, leaving him alone in the room with, he assumed, Agnes. But she was nowhere to be found.

He took a few steps farther into the large room, listening for any sound. After a few seconds, there was the tell-tale whisper of a page being turned from one of the high-backed chairs to his right that faced the massive, fireplace.

With a grin, William crept forward. Quiet as he could, he approached the chair and peered over the top of it, looking down upon the top of Agnes' raven head. Her legs were crossed, and she had a book propped on one of her knees as she read it in absolute silence.

He cleared his throat, loudly and Agnes' body jolted. The book slammed shut with a snap and fell to the floor as she jumped to her feet, whirling around to face him.

Her dark eyes were wide with fear and her full lips were open in an "O" of surprise, and William could not stop the chuckle of amusement that pulled itself from his chest.

"William!" Agnes yelled when her eyes finally focused on him. "You scared me to high heavens. Why would you sneak up on me like that?"

"To be fair," he explained as he shook his head and smiled at her. "I did not enter quietly. When Jonas opened and closed the door to let me in, it was quite loud. You were just so absorbed in your book."

He walked around to her side of the chair, eyes darting down to the cover of the book. He noticed the title immediately; it was one of his mother's favorites.

"A romance?" He asked, arching an eyebrow at her as his tone dripped with mirth.

“Let me guess, you find them ridiculous?” She raised her chin at him defiantly as she held his gaze, and another bolt of amusement shot through him.

William closed the distance between them and then bent to pick the book up from the ground.

“Would you be surprised to find that I don’t think any form of reading is ridiculous? Even if it’s a romance?”

She reached out with a dainty, gloved hand and plucked the book from his grasp before turning it over and looking down at the cover.

“Yes,” she said, not removing her eyes from the novel in her hands. “It would surprise me quite a lot.”

There was a beat of silence between them, but William was shocked to find that he would not describe it as awkward. Finally, she moved her eyes from the book up to his face.

“I came to give you an answer,” Agnes said, her tone brusque and matter of fact.

She stepped around William, walking toward the center of the room where the light streamed in through the large window. She came to a stop in front of it, peering out toward the grounds.

“And what did you decide?” He asked as he followed after her, careful not to make his voice sound more eager.

“I accept.” Agnes raised one shoulder and let it drop. “But I have conditions.”

William snorted a laugh. “Conditions?”

She nodded and then turned her dark gaze on him once more.

“If we are to do this, no one must have reason to suspect that you are courting me due to my family’s finances.” Her voice was strong and sure, and William realized that she had thought quite a lot about this. “When we are in public, you will appear for all intent and purpose, as if you are in love with me.”

“In love with you?” He parroted, his eyebrows raising in surprise. “And you think people would believe that I would hold such romantic notions?”

“I think that people want to believe in love,” Agnes explained as she held his gaze. “And with practice, you will be able to make it believable. I will not be made a fool of and looked down upon by the members of the ton. No one must know the truth about my financial situation, and so that there is no speculation, they must believe that we both desire one another.”

She walked toward him, the light blue gown that she wore swishing around her ankles as she did so. Agnes only came to a stop when she was inches away from him, and he felt inclined to shy away from the forceful power of her presence in that moment.

“Our families have been friends for quite a long time, William. It is not out of the realm of possibility that we would fall in love. Now all we have to do is make people believe. And if I am to be your wife, it will serve you well also, if people do not think of me as a charity case.”

The words fell between them, and William paused to consider. She was offering him everything he wanted, and he should have anticipated that she would want to ensure she got everything she wanted out of the deal as well. He didn't necessarily like the idea of pretending before the ton, especially not when it came to matters like this. But her words did make sense. And he figured it was the least that he could do.

“Alright,” he acquiesced, and the corner of her mouth ticked up in the briefest of smiles.

“Alright.” Agnes echoed. “Then you have yourself a fiancé.”

Agnes

The snap of the carriage door behind her rang through Agnes' ears as she sank into the bench seat, exhaling a sigh of

relief. She rested her hand on her stomach, where her corset felt like it pulled too tight against her skin and her heart pounded so wildly, she feared that the footman might hear it over the creaking of the carriage wheels as they began their journey back toward her home.

A smile tugged up the corner of Agnes' lips as she thought of how seamlessly she had executed her plan. She did not feel good about lying to William, but the banker that had visited their house the day prior had made it incredibly clear. Agnes had to secure an engagement to a man of high standing and wealth to delay the seizure of their estate. And with Benedict away on his travels, William had been her only option.

She had sat down with her mother the day before and come clean about William's proposal, and as Agnes had expected, her mother had urged her vehemently to accept. Feeling as if she had no other choice, Agnes had agreed.

But as she had laid in bed the night before, tossing and turning under the weight of her decision and her responsibility, she realized that all the bankers had said they needed to delay the proceedings was an *engagement*, not a wedding. And thus, Agnes had decided to accept William's proposal and use it to her advantage.

She would utilize her public relationship with William to buy her time to secure what she really wanted, a proposal from Earl Benedict. It was her hope that outside of the benefits of delaying the sale of her home and ceasing the rumors she knew were flying about the ton, it may also serve to make the earl jealous. And if Benedict feared he was losing her to another man, it might spur him into asking for her hand.

Agnes knew that it was cruel, and she did not enjoy the thought of betraying a family friend in this manner. But her choices if she did not want herself and her mother to become destitute were incredibly slim.

And should she regale herself to a lifelong, loveless marriage just because her family finances were poor? She did not think so. She had seen so many high-born women throughout the years with eyes filled with sadness due to their

mean or aloof husbands. And Agnes would fight as hard as she could to ensure that was not her fate.

She sank further back into the seat, trying to get used to the discomfort that had settled in her chest from her duplicity. For Agnes was well aware that it was something she was going to have to learn to live with.

CHAPTER 12

Agnes

“**Y**ou are doing it all wrong,” Agnes laughed, mimicking the glaringly false doe-eyed look upon William’s face. “You have to be believable. But right now, you merely look like you need to go to the privy.”

William guffawed, and Agnes was sure he had never heard a high-born lady use such language. But she found that she didn’t particularly care. She was not trying to woo or charm him, not really.

They had met twice already to go over William’s lessons in romantics. And the third time was appearing to be even more abysmal than the last.

A brisk, cold wind stirred around them, and Agnes pulled the large shawl she wore tighter around her shoulders as leaves danced around their ankles. They were out in the gardens at Bolton Manor, away from the prying eyes of the help or their families as Helena dozed peacefully in one of the corners under a soft, woolen blanket.

To hear William tell it, when he had informed Lord and Lady Bolton about their engagement, they had been over the moon with excitement. William had told her that his father, who had not expected him to find a suitable fiancé so quickly, had ranted for twenty minutes about how this level of success was why he had no worries about William inheriting his titles and lands.

The story had tugged at Agnes' heart when she realized that his success would be short lived if everything from her end went according to plan. But she had had to force herself past it.

“Like this,” Agnes said, batting her eyelashes as she looked up at him and showing him how to soften his gaze. “It’s in the way you flex your ears.”

“Flex my ears? Do you understand how daft you sound?” William laughed, and she hit him lightly in the shoulder as she grinned at him.

She had been surprised when she realized that she didn't mind spending time with William. The first time they had practiced, it had been quite a shock when he had first made her laugh. But by now, there was an easy comradery developing between them that she found she quite liked.

“I don't care if it sounds daft as long as it works.” Agnes rolled her eyes at him. “If you don't want to try that, then let's try this.”

She reached up behind her neck, her fingers dancing delicately with the clasp of her necklace until it came undone. With an exaggerated gasp, she let go of the metal and one side of it dangled down over the front of her dress.

“Oh no,” she said, forcing her eyes to widen and staring at him with pointedly. “My necklace came undone. Whatever will I do.”

“You look ridiculous, are you aware of that?”

“No,” Agnes argued. “I look beautiful and like a woman in need of help. So, help me.”

William grinned as he stepped closer to her, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating off of his body.

“Take your hand,” Agnes instructed. “And grab the part that has fallen.”

He did as he was told.

“Good,” she nodded. “Now when you place it back around my neck, make sure to graze me with your fingers. Right along

the nape of my neck. As if you find yourself so besotted and overcome with your feeling with me that you simply can't refrain from touching me."

"I truly cannot believe you think anyone is going to be deceived by this," William huffed out a laugh, and his breath danced along the delicate skin of her throat and ear.

Goosebumps erupted across her skin as shivers ran down her spine. She was suddenly hyper aware of his proximity, and when he did as she had instructed, reaching up to touch her bare skin with the faintest brush of his fingertips, Agnes had to force herself not to react.

When the necklace was once more secured around her throat, she shook herself internally, stepping back from him to create space. He was smiling down at her, proud of himself for how well he had done and wholly unaware of whatever feeling had just rocked through her entire being.

It's merely because I had him enacting what Benedict had done when he had given me the necklace, she thought to herself, trying her best to explain it away.

"Very good," Agnes said as she smiled at William, glad that her voice still sounded sure and strong. "For you, anyways."

"What next, oh fearless teacher?" William's mouth quirked up in a smile, and the tension furling inside of Agnes dispelled.

"How about you brush away my hair?"

"Why would I do that?"

Agnes rolled her eyes at him again. "Clearly because one of my pin curls has fallen loose. Honestly, William. It is not your face that has kept you without a wife all these years."

The moment the words left her lips she wished that she could take them back. She had meant them as a joke, but she hadn't realized until she had spoken how harsh they sounded. Agnes glanced at William hesitantly. But when he let out a deep, throaty laugh with no sign of hurt or tension, she exhaled in relief.

It was strange for her to be around William in this capacity. For the entire time that she had known him, which had been for the overwhelming majority of her life, she had found him to be solemn. His words often too brash and he was never someone that Agnes thought of as polite. His brusque manner and blunt words were much too honest and open for that.

But like this, with him laughing and joking and not judging her when she said whatever it was that came to her mind, she found she quite enjoyed his company. His humor was biting, and his wit was sharp, and since she had no real need to impress him, Agnes found that she could simply be herself, without all the pomp, pretense, and expectations of society. It was for the first time in a very, very long time, Agnes felt like she could fully breathe in the presence of another person. In fact, the only person that she could recall feeling like that around, ever, was Esther.

She shook that thought from her mind before she reached up to her hair, pulling one of the pins from it so that a tendril of raven hair could escape and tumble down to the side of her face. She couldn't help but recall the moment that Benedict had done this exact thing, and so when William reached forward and his fingertips glided across her cheeks, it was Benedict's face that she saw.

Or at least, that was what she told herself when once again her breath began to come too quickly, and her skin suddenly felt much too tight. William's soft brown eyes grew dark and heavy lidded, and this time she was certain that as his breaths became slightly more ragged the longer his skin lingered against hers.

"Like this?" William asked, his voice rough and low.

"Quite like that." Agnes gulped past the lump that had risen in her throat and her cheeks burned.

She was saved from having to respond further when Helena gave a sudden, loud snort that woke her up. The woman blinked around blearily as she tried to make sense of her surroundings, her hand fluttering up to her ever-growing belly.

Before Helena could realize just how closely they were standing, Agnes took a step back. The cool air rushing in to fill the new space between them, and she was grateful for it as it rose up to dart across her heated cheeks.

Her gaze fell on William once more, and the corner of his mouth was ticked up in a grin as he openly regarded her.

“Well?” He asked, raising his eyebrows. “Am I getting better? Do you think that the people of the ton will find our love story believable?”

Agnes snorted a laugh as her heart rate slowly began to return to normal. “We are getting closer, but not there quite yet.”

“Closer is better than we were yesterday,” William said with a shrug. “So, I guess it will have to be acceptable.”

Agnes nodded but didn’t immediately respond, allowing them to just have a moment of silence. The dying leaves rustled in the trees that surrounded the garden, causing Agnes to shiver once more.

“Let’s get you both inside,” William said, noticing Agnes tightening her stole around her shoulders and Helena pulling her blanket higher toward her chin. “We don’t need either of you getting sick.”

He extended his arm to Agnes, and she took it gladly. All of the tension from earlier had completely dispelled, replaced by an easy sense of comfort as they walked toward the door that would lead them back into Bolton Manor, Helena following closely behind them.

The moment they were through the large French doors and back into the warmth of the house, their parents’ laughter drifted out from the parlor. Agnes nodded her head in that direction, wordlessly indicating to William that they should join them, to which he gave her a quick, affirming nod.

She felt comfort in William’s presence, which was something she had not expected when she first agreed to this. And it wasn’t until much later, when she was lying in bed that night with the darkness dancing around her that she finally felt

as if she could revisit the rush of emotions she had experienced when he had touched her skin.

It was another thing that Agnes had not expected, but the more she looked at it, the more she felt certain that it had only been her body's response to something so close to what Benedict had done to her. It had been because she was imagining the earl when William had touched her. It was the only thing that Agnes could tell herself that would make it all make sense.

The only problem was that in the cold light of the moon, with nothing but her own presence to answer to, she wasn't sure if it was a lie or not.

CHAPTER 13

William

Agnes skin was the softest of porcelain underneath his touch, and William fought not to react to it as he brushed his fingertips over her cheek once more.

“You’re getting quite good at that,” Agnes said with a soft smile that sent a shiver down his spine, one that William promptly ignored.

“Thank you,” William said, grinning back at her. “I would say that I am learning from the best, but that would be a lie.”

“Ah,” Agnes laughed as she hit his arm playfully. “And who, pray tell, is the best.”

“Me, obviously.”

Agnes rolled her eyes. “William, please be reasonable. You can hardly flirt with a woman without insulting her.”

“I don’t insult you.”

“Firstly, yes you do.” She narrowed her eyes at him, and he could not stop himself from smiling widely at her. “Secondly, you are not actually flirting with me. I am having to teach you everything. When it comes to matters of the heart, you are as useless as an infant.”

“I don’t think that’s fair.” William protested as he puffed out his chest.

“You’re right.” Agnes gave a quick nod. “A baby would be much better at listening to their instincts.”

He must have made a face at her response, because she broke out into a fit of giggles. William found himself in awe at the sound, something that he didn’t frequently hear from her. He had been shocked, to say the least, when he had first begun spending time with Agnes and found that her presence was not only tolerable, but rather enjoyable. And the more time he spent with her, the more he was beginning to think that they might actually be friends.

Without the watchful eyes of her mother, a woman who demanded the utmost propriety during even the most mundane moments, Agnes seemed to come alive. Her retorts were quick, and aimed to cut, but without the bite behind them to make them truly hurt. He liked the way that they joked with one another, with no hesitancy or insecurity.

When she had first accepted his proposal, William had thought that Agnes would be a very convenient means to an end. But the more he was around her, the more he thought that perhaps he might even enjoy their marriage.

Not the way that Laurence and Esther did, William would never go quite that far. The two were so deliriously in love that he often found it difficult to share a room with them. But what he and Agnes might have would develop into a genuine fondness for each other, at the very least. And he thought that it was quite practical, to be fond of one’s spouse.

Agnes swiped the back of her hand over her cheeks, where a few tears had bubbled over from her bout of laughter. And her face was so radiant in that moment, with the joy pouring out of her, that he had no trouble believing that someone could fall in love with her. Not him, obviously, but someone.

“What are you looking at?” She asked, her brows knitting together as he realized that he’d been staring.

“You don’t laugh like that often,” he told her honestly, and Agnes seemed taken aback. “It’s nice.”

The apples of her cheeks blushed, and she looked down, her dark lashes brushing against her cheeks as she averted her gaze. Just as he opened his mouth to say something else, a sharp, grating voice rang out through the room.

“Agnes,” Dorothy Jarvis barked from the doorway, and William had to fight not to grit his teeth.

Ever since he was young, he had not much cared for the countess. Even for William’s own practical, blunt manner, the woman was often too much. Her presence tending to overpower any room that she was in. And over the last few days, during the time that he had spent with Agnes, he had begun to resent the affect that the woman had on her daughter.

“Yes, Mother?” Agnes asked, her face that just seconds before had been glowing with joy was now a cool, calculated mask of disinterest.

“What was all that racket I heard in here?” Dorothy narrowed her small, mean eyes on the two of them, her gaze roving from William, to Agnes, and then back again.

“William merely told a joke, that’s all, Mother.” Agnes said carefully.

William leaned forward, trying to catch her gaze, hoping that he could portray to her that she did not need to do that. Did not need to shutter herself up tight merely because her mother was around. He was to be her husband, was he not? And so, it would be beneficial to all of them if they were enjoying each other’s company. It was not a bad thing, to laugh with the man to whom you will be marrying.

William glanced back to Dorothy, wondering if perhaps it would be best if he spoke up for Agnes. Maybe she had lived under her mother’s thumb for so long that she had forgotten what it was like to come out from under it. Maybe he could help her in that matter.

He cast a quick glance at Agnes, and she seemed to read his thoughts easily. With a quick shake of her head, she doused every one of those notions that he had been entertaining moments before.

“It is time for us to be going.” Dorothy puffed out her chest, pride radiating off of her as she continued to glare between the young couple. “Come, Agnes.”

At the command, Agnes stood. Her hands smoothed down her skirts, and William did not miss the fact that they were shaking. Esther had told him a story once, about how Agnes had been integral in thwarting their parents’ plans for Laurence and Agnes to wed, and that she had stood up to her mother with brazenness. What he wouldn’t give to see that woman before him now.

The heels of Agnes’ shoes echoed off of the marble floor as she walked to stand beside her mother, and William watched her all the way.

“It was good to see you, Lord William,” Agnes said as she turned to throw one last glance at him.

Her voice low and quiet, ice threading through the words and it was such a stark contrast to the woman that he had come to know over the last few days that it made him want to recoil as if struck.

“It is always lovely to see you, Agnes.” He answered her, but she did not seem to register his response.

The moment that Dorothy turned and stalked from the room, Agnes followed after her with her chin held high. Never once did she turn to look back at William.

CHAPTER 14

Agnes

The carriage jostled them about, and Agnes reached out a hand to stabilize herself against the wall of the cab. Helena set beside her, the woman giving a grunt with the effort it took to keep her belly from toppling her over. And directly across from the two women, fully clad in a white waistcoat with lilac and silver filigree that perfectly matched Agnes' gown, sat William.

The moment that she had seen him, she hadn't been able to deny that he looked handsome. The combination of colors complimented his dark hair and eyes so beautifully, and when he had seen her, the smile he had broken into had been radiant.

"You look lovely," William had said when she'd approached, taking her offered hand and bending low to kiss her hands.

"Be careful," Agnes had laughed. "People may actually think that you mean that."

And as they had climbed in the carriage after that, the way that William had looked at her, she herself had begun to wonder if perhaps he had meant it after all.

The sun outside the carriage shone brightly, and the lack of a breeze meant it was an unseasonably warm day as they swiftly approached the winter season. As such, many members

of the ton were heading to promenade, and to enjoy the many tea rooms and greenhouses that Surrey had to offer.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of their destination. The stunning, brick building with large windows beckoning to them as they climbed from the carriage to the street packed with pedestrians. While the front of the building was beautiful, Agnes knew it was what's behind it that was the true treat.

William offered her his arm, and she draped hers in it delicately. She recognized a few of the women that passed her, and when they spotted her with William, standing so close and familiarly, she saw their eyes light with surprise.

She raised her chin a little higher, not allowing anyone, not even William, to see how nervous she was about what was to come.

Ever since the day that her mother had admonished her in the parlor, she and William had been able to meet two additional times to practice what he would need to know to make the ton believe he loved her. Although, those two times had been a much more subdued affair than the times they had met prior.

Agnes was so nervous that if her mother found her having too grand of a time with William, she might use how well they were getting along to argue for speeding up the wedding. And while she was truly enjoying getting to know William, and would now even include him amongst her friends, she had not lost sight of her plans for Earl Benedict of Hampton.

“Shall we?” William asked, drawing Agnes out of her thoughts.

“We shall,” she grinned up at him, careful to ensure that her face not betray any emotion beside adoration as she looked at him.

They began their walk forward, pushing open the door and stepping into the warm, beautifully decorated tea shop. The smell of the tea floated up to greet her, the floral, bitter, and sweetness of the various kinds all lingering together. She

sniffed at it delicately, loving the way the intoxicating fumes danced around them.

“What are you doing?” William asked, amusement lacing his words.

“Sniffing the tea,” Agnes said with a hum of pleasure.

“Why wouldn’t you just but tea to smell?”

Agnes shook her head at him. “You do know that you’re allowed to enjoy simple things, don’t you? Even pretty scents in the air.”

“Ridiculous.” William shook his head, but when the corner of his mouth twitched up in a smile, she knew that he was joking.

She tugged on his arm, and they walked further into the shop. William motioned for Helena to walk in front of them, and he instructed her to choose whatever she wanted for food and a drink, and the woman shot him a grateful look.

That was another thing that Agnes had not expected. How William treated those around him that could do nothing for him. So often, Agnes had noticed people of her station or higher treating those that made their lives easier so poorly. It sickened her to know that there was a time where she had been so terrified of her mother that she had allowed herself to be one of those people.

But ever since then, she had made a vow to herself to never do anything of the sort again. It was something she had never voiced to anyone, not even Esther. And it warmed something within her to see another person do it so easily, without any kind of second thought. It made her feel as if it was the right thing to do, or at the very least she would not be alone.

As they made their way through the tearoom toward their true destination, Helena waddled in front of them. Her large belly making people move out of the way and leaving plenty of space for William and Agnes to fit through.

They approached the doors that lead out of the building and pushed them open, the cold air darting back around them.

But, once Agnes stepped out into the yard and saw the massive, glass structure, her face lit up in an excited grin.

The Greenhouse Tea Room was famous in Surrey. Their prices were quite dear, so she had not been able to attend in quite some time as they did not have the extra funds for such a frivolous expense. So, when William had offered to take her there as their first public outing, Agnes had been overjoyed to accept.

The ornate glass structure towered over them, spanning behind several buildings and taking up almost a full block's worth of garden space. A steward stood at the door, pulling it open for them as they approached, allowing them to walk in.

The heat of the place was cathartic, the kind of warmth that wrapped around you like an embrace. Everywhere you looked there were roses, with cobbled walkways leading to alcoves where small, delicate wrought iron tables sat.

They were led by a sharply dressed man through the space to a table, where he took their order for tea, biscuits and sandwiches before darting off to gather their requests.

"I have never been somewhere this grand, Miss," Helena said, unable to keep the awe from her voice as she looked around.

"Many people haven't. It is nothing to be ashamed of," William answered her with a genuine smile, and Helena blushed.

He turned his attention back to Agnes, and she gave him a soft, appreciative smile. She was careful as she interacted with him, well aware of the eyes that would surely find her as people walked about the gardens.

During the colder months, The Greenhouse Tea Room was the place that members of the ton would come when they needed a spot of fresh air and a bit of time with the flowers. Where there weren't tables, there was more than enough space within the sprawling building to use as a walkway. And many did, providing themselves with the luxury of stretching their legs without the inconvenience of getting cold.

The server who had taken tended them earlier returned with their offerings and placed them on the table in front of them. Helena gave an appreciative sigh at the sight of the food, and they all began to eat.

“How are you feeling about what we must do today?” Agnes asked William, careful to keep her voice low so they would not be overheard by those passing by.

William glanced once at Helena, but Agnes waved off his worries. She would fill him in later that the woman was just excited to see Agnes happy, and that she would not care in the slightest that she was coaching him through how to seem in love. She trusted Helena implicitly.

“I think we’ve made enough progress in our lessons that I will at least appear passably in love,” William joked, lifting a biscuit to his mouth and taking a bite.

“Just passable?” Agnes raised her brows. “Do you think I will allow us to seem just passable?”

William chuckled. “No, I don’t believe you would.”

“Well, I’m glad you figured out that much, at least.” She beamed at him and then glanced at their surroundings once more.

They made idle chit chat as they finished their tea and treats, with William filling her in on some of the things he had been working on for his father recently. She didn’t find talk of work terribly fascinating as a rule, but the way that William explained things to her, not like most men who seemed to speak down to women when it came to matters of business, she found that she quite enjoyed it. The content may have been dulled, but Agnes thought the company made up for it.

When they were finished with their food and drink, they pushed themselves to standing. Helena announced that she would remain at their table, and Agnes gave her a smile of thanks. There were enough people walking in the hot house gardens that they were not in true need of a chaperone. There would be nowhere for them to be alone even if they desired to. Which is exactly what they had planned for.

Draping her arm through William's arm once more, they began walking. Agnes trailed her fingertips over the velvet petals of the blooms as she passed them.

"How should we do this?" he asked, right as a waiter with a tray full of filled wine glasses for those on their promenade walked past.

Inspiration struck Agnes, and she reached forward, grabbing a glass for each of them before thanking the waiter.

"Take this," Agnes handed him one of the glasses before the next group of people approached.

She looked at William, making sure to rearrange her features into one filled with adoration as she laughed prettily. His brow furrowed.

"What are you laughing at?" He asked. "I didn't say anything."

"William, please," Agnes huffed, a real laugh pulling itself from her. "It is a part of the act."

"Oh, I guess I should have been able to figure that out for myself."

Agnes nodded at him, grinning up into his handsome face. As the group of people got closer, she noticed more than a few titled ladies nestled within their ranks, and she knew that now would be her perfect moment.

She moved so that William's arm bumped against hers, sending the wine in her glass tumbling over the side and spilling down onto her white kid gloves.

"Oh no," she exclaimed, looking at the ruined bit of fabric.

"Allow me," William said on cue as he reached forward to set his wine glass down on a nearby bench.

Agnes watched with wide eyes as his large, deft hands plucked the glove from her fingers one by one, the smooth fabric sliding over her skin as he took it off. He held her hand in his, bending his face to press a warm, lingering kiss to her knuckles while his lovely brown eyes never once left hers.

Agnes' heart fluttered wildly as she held his gaze. She hadn't anticipated this reaction when she had improvised the spilling of the wine, and now she felt as if she couldn't breathe.

"Lovely," William murmured, eyes still locked on hers.

He helped her take off her other glove, nestling it in his pocket with the other before turning away from her, facing the nearest rose bush. He reached into it, careful to avoid the thorns as he found the most beautiful, bright red rose and picked it.

William turned toward her, glancing from the rose delicately held in his fingers up to Agnes face. She was sure that her features were a mask of both shock and awe as he passed the delicate bloom to her.

"It is a stunning flower," William said, his voice reverent and just loud enough to carry to the group of women who had stopped approaching and instead were standing only a few feet away, watching the exchange with rapt attention. "But it does not come close to comparing to your beauty."

Agnes could have sworn she heard one of the women let out a sigh of longing as her hands wrapped around the stem, careful to avoid the one, solitary thorn that still clung to it.

"William," Agnes breathed, glancing down to the flower in her hands. She did not have to fake the awe and the wander in her voice. "It is beautiful, thank you."

He smiled at her, and for a moment she found herself so caught up in the moment that she felt as if it was real. As if this man before her was truly her fiancé and that she would marry him soon. She could see a life of friendship and beauty unfolding before them.

She thought of the moments they had shared over the past few days, and how easily they had fallen in step with one another. How easily she had shed the years of instruction and oversight from her mother to allow her true nature to shine through.

With William she could cast off the burden of society and be herself. He already knew everything, and Agnes couldn't help but think how lovely it would be to not have to worry anymore about securing a beneficial marriage that would save her family. Wouldn't it be better to just lean into what was occurring with William?

He had learned so much during their lessons together, to the point that now, this small instance where he had completely improvised a romantic moment during their very first public outing, had entirely stolen her breath. Perhaps if she did marry William, she would not have to give up romance after all.

Agnes had to admit that she had felt more confident and more like herself the past few days with William than she had any of the times she had spent with Benedict.

As his name echoed in her mind, an image of him flashed before her eyes. Benedict's yellow hair glistening in the sun and his blue eyes crinkling as he smiled at her with fondness and her heart gave a swift and sudden tug.

This is all an act, she reminded herself with an internal shake.

She repeated it to herself over and over again, until the words began to blend together. She repeated them while they walked, while they continued their conversation, and when they finished with their promenade. They repeated in her mind as she and William loaded themselves into the carriage and began their journey home, and then repeated for hours after that.

And even with all of that, with the hundreds if not thousands of times she chanted the words to herself, she still was not sure if she could find any truth within them.

CHAPTER 15

William

William chuckled to himself from where he sat beside Laurence, the two of them watching as Esther and Agnes attempted to outmaneuver each other in a tension filled game of chess. Discarded pieces littered the table, only a handful remaining on the board for either woman.

Agnes' brow was furrowed as she studied the game before her, a wrinkle forming in the middle of them as she concentrated with all her might. William wanted nothing more than to walk across the room and smooth the crease out with his thumb.

"So, you're happy?" Laurence asked William under his breath, not loud enough for his words to carry over to the two women on the other side of the room. "With the pending engagement?"

"I believe I am," William said with an honest nod, surprised by the truth in his words.

He was well aware that it had been his idea to offer the engagement to Agnes. But never, not in his wildest dreams, did he think that he would come to care for her the way he had over the course of the last week. And now, he thought that not only had he gained a wife, but he had gained a friend. The least that he could do was gladly keep up his end of the bargain. She was promising him her life, after all.

Agnes reached forward, grabbing one of her pieces and moving it across the board. From where William was sitting, he could not make out which one she had moved. But when she leaned back in her chair, a wide, triumphant grin pulling up the corners of her lips and lighting her face, he knew what the next words out of her mouth would be.

“Checkmate.”

The word came out loud and filled with pride, and Esther grinned at her cousin.

“Well played,” the other woman said, leaning forward to shake Agnes’ hands.

Laurence let out a long, exaggerated yawn as his wife pushed back her chair and stood. She glanced over at him, turning her smile to her husband.

“I believe we’re going to retire for the evening,” she said, glancing at the clock.

Their parents had decided on another dinner party three days after he’d taken her to The Greenhouse Tea Room. And he had been so busy over those three days that he had not seen her at all. Until she and Dorothy had arrived at Bolton Manor, William had not realized just how much he had missed their daily meetings.

After dinner, their parents had retired to the drawing room for a night cap, while William, Agnes, Laurence and Esther had split off to the parlor. But now, as he glanced at the clock, he realized that it was getting rather late. And he found himself surprised that Dorothy had lingered. Not that it was something he would voice for he did not want Agnes to leave. But it still struck him as odd.

Esther crossed the room and extended her hand to Laurence, helping to pull him to his feet. The two began walking toward the door before Esther threw a glance over her shoulder.

“Would you like me to send in a maid?” She asked, looking from Agnes to William.

And when Agnes told her cousin yes, William swelled with joy, taking it as a sign that she wished to spend more time with him. Agnes crossed the room, coming to rest in the chair directly across from him while Esther ran out to send in one of their servants to chaperone. Laurence stood at the door, pointedly turning his gaze out toward the hallway to give them privacy, all while not technically leaving them alone.

“Are you having a good time this evening?” William asked her, and when she nodded, he let out a sigh of relief.

“It’s been quite lovely, to spend such uninterrupted time with Laurence and Esther,” Agnes paused for a moment, seeming to weigh her words before meeting William’s gaze. “And with you.”

A blush rose in her cheeks when the words left her mouth, and he could not stop himself from smiling.

“I am enjoying myself with you here, as well.” William reassured her, and the soft, tentative smile that curled the edges of her plump mouth made him glad.

The maid walked in then, taking a seat at the far end of the room while William and Agnes waved their goodbyes to the other couple. Once they were alone, or as alone as one could get with a chaperone, he turned his attention back to her.

He swirled the glass in his hand, the amber liquid sloshing merrily before he brought it to his lips to take a sip of the whiskey. He winced past the burn as it traced its path down his throat.

Perhaps it was the whiskey in his system, or perhaps it was just something about Agnes and the friendship they had formed over the last week. Regardless of the reason, he found himself wanting to talk to her about every topic the world had to offer.

He leaned back in his chair, regarding her. Agnes narrowed her beautiful, dark eyes at him.

“What?” She asked, her smile still affixed in place.

“What are you thinking?” He asked, cocking his head.

“I’m thinking that you have been quite the surprise,” she admitted, catching him off guard.

“How so?”

“You just aren’t what I expected,” Agnes shrugged.

“How so?” He asked again, unable to let it go.

She blew out a breath, and he allowed her all the time she needed to collect her thoughts.

“We are similar in ways that I had not anticipated,” she said finally, her words hesitant, as if testing them out.

William nodded. “I agree.”

“In what ways do you find us to be similar?” Agnes raised her wine glass, taking a sip of the ruby liquid.

“Well, my relationship with my father, to begin.” William said, meeting her gaze and holding it, refusing to shy away from the importance of this conversation. “Being the eldest son, there were responsibilities placed on me the moment I left the womb. And those burdens will carry me for the rest of my life. It had meant that while Laurence is able to do things on a whim, marry who he wants, was able to travel the world without worry about how it would affect the family. Those were not luxuries I was ever afforded. I always had to behave in ways befitting my station and the title that I was born to inherit.”

He paused for a moment to study Agnes, to see the way his admissions were affecting her. But she did not shy away from him, did not bulk from the weight of his words at all. And so, emboldened, he carried on.

“It has meant that I have always had to worry why people befriend me. Every day I feel the burden of my birth right resting heavy on my shoulders, and it is something that I will never get to take off.”

Agnes nodded before taking another sip of her wine. Her dark eyes glimmered when they found his again.

“I understand,” Agnes said. “My own mother...well...you know her. Her will can be quite imposing. And she has a very

rigid set of ideas about what it means to be a lady of the ton. Granted, they aren't all her ideas, many of the standards set upon ladies of a certain station are decided upon society. But my mother takes them to a new extreme. And since I am the only child, it is up to me to solve the problems that she has created."

A bitter laugh falls from Agnes' lips, and the sound of it caused the hair on William's arm to stand on end.

"I do not resent the privileges I have been given," she continued, holding William's gaze. "But I do resent the way in which my mother has demanded I act as a result of that privilege. I believe that I could have been so much more, had she not demanded so much of me."

William nodded, the words falling between them without any additional need for comment. They both understood the other, probably more than anyone else ever could, because of the families and positions that they were born into. He was beginning to think that he and Agnes might be more similar than he could comprehend, even now. Two sides of the same coin.

And William found he quite liked that thought. He liked it a lot.

CHAPTER 16

Agnes

The whinny of a horse outside the manor startled Agnes. She blinked rapidly as she pulled herself out of the story she had been reading and placed herself firmly back in the present. She glanced at the clock on the mantel of the drawing room, and realizing what time it was, shut the book with a quick snap before pushing herself to standing.

She shot one final glance at the book and gave it a soft, warm smile. It was the same romance novel that William had caught her reading the day she'd gone to his manor and accepted his proposal. It had shown up the day prior, delivered by one of the Bolton's servants. And she had hardly been able to put the book down since.

The sound of someone knocking at the front door rang out through the manor, startling her once more as she snapped into action. She spared only a moment to smooth down her skirts, hoping they had not become too ruffled from the way she had been sitting in the reading chair, before making her way to greet their guests.

Along with the book, she had received a note yesterday, telling her to be ready for William to call upon her at three in the afternoon. And he had arrived precisely on time.

She smiled as she reached forward to pull the large, wooden door open, finding herself excited to see him despite

herself. On the other side, standing tall and handsome and grinning at her, stood William, just as she had expected.

“Lady Agnes,” William said, the corner of his mouth ticking up even further. “You are looking lovely this afternoon.”

And even though there was no one but the footman that had arrived with William to observe them, Agnes still extended her hand to him, a coy smile playing across her lips. He grinned at her as he bent, taking her hand and brushing his mouth across her knuckles in the faintest whisper of a kiss that sent shivers racing through her.

“You’re a fast learner,” Agnes said, pulling her hand back and thanking God that her voice did not quiver when she spoke.

“I had a wonderful teacher.”

William continued to smile at her, stepping past her into the house. But before she could say anything else to him, the sound of footsteps echoed from the corridor that led to the atrium, and a moment later, her mother appeared.

“Good afternoon, Lord William.” Dorothy greeted him with a quick bow of acknowledgement as she approached. “Agnes’ maid should be ready in just a moment.”

“Thank you, Lady Dorothy,” William said, his tone losing the luster it had held when he was speaking to Agnes. “You’re looking well.”

Dorothy just nodded at him, and Agnes shifted her weight between each foot uncomfortably while an awkward silence descended upon the trio. She wrang her hands together absentmindedly while she waited for Helena, doing whatever she could to not let her mind wander toward William and toward what he could possibly have planned for the rest of the afternoon.

“Agnes.” Her mother’s whispered admonishment sliced through her thoughts, and her hands stopped moving immediately.

Agnes straightened her spine, focusing on arranging her features into the pleasant but disinterested expression her mother had demanded she wear since childhood. When Agnes' father had passed away, she had appreciated her mother's demands. With Dorothy's rigid set of rules, Agnes had not had to worry about how to act, or what others would think.

She did not have to ponder how to react to certain things, or how to navigate conversations. Everything that Dorothy had instructed her to do had allowed her to withdrawal further and further into herself, until she forgot that underneath all of that she had a personality of her own.

But over the last few years, the expectations of her mother had begun to chafe. And now, with her mother glaring daggers at her while Agnes fought the urge to pick at the skin of her fingers, she got the same urge she had gotten the season prior when helping Laurence and Esther.

She recalled her mother's face in those moments, when Dorothy had realized that her own daughter had been a part of the plot to undo her courtship to the youngest Bolton, and a small giggle fell unbidden from her lips.

"Compose yourself." Her mother hissed, narrowing her eyes on Agnes.

William shot her a curious glance, cocking his head to the side as he regarded her. She pressed a hand to her lips, hiding her smile behind her fingers and shook her head at the question in William's eyes.

She was saved from further admonishment by the sound of Helena huffing as she entered the room.

"My apologies miss," she said, her hand fluttering up to her belly. "I'm not getting around as quickly these days."

Out of the corner of Agnes' eye, she saw her mother open her mouth to speak. But the mean glint in the woman's eyes let Agnes know that whatever she was planning to say would not be kind.

"It's alright." Agnes cut in before her mother could start harping on the young woman. "You're here now and that's all

that matters.”

Her mother shot her another glare, but Agnes was surprised when she remained quiet and did not comment further. They said their goodbyes to Dorothy before Agnes, William and Helena exited the home and climbed into the carriage.

It lurched forward, the tires rolling over the gravel of the drive and jostling them about in the carriage.

“So, are you going to tell me where you’re taking us?” Agnes asked as she met William’s gaze. “Your note yesterday only told me to be ready, but not what we would be doing.”

“Unfortunately, you’re going to have to wait.” William’s smile grew large at Agnes’ clear displeasure at his answer. “Have you never heard of a surprise?”

“Of course I’ve heard of a surprise.” Agnes quipped, narrowing her eyes at him. “I just like to know where I’m going so I can prepare myself.”

“Well, there’s nothing to prepare yourself for here, I assure you. It’s better if you go into this with an open mind.”

Agnes brow furrowed as she glanced at him. She couldn’t help but draw the comparison of the last time she’d received a gift from a suitor. Her hands almost fluttered up to her throat to touch the place where the ruby necklace from Benedict would rest. She had not worn it, however, out of respect for William. The necklace had been beautiful, and it had absolutely delighted her. But what William had in store for her seemed much more intimate, much more special. And a thrill ran through her at the thought.

Agnes’ mind turned over every possibility that she could think of for where William would be taking her. But, when the carriage finally rolled to a stop and she glanced out the window, her mouth popped open at the unexpected sight.

They were sitting before a large, dark blue manor house, a black, wrought iron gate spanning a small front yard that led to the street. There was a wooden plaque on the gate that read “Surrey Home for Orphaned Children”.

“You’ve taken me to an orphanage?” Agnes asked, trying to make sense of the development.

“I have.” William gave her a quick nod of acknowledgement before the door to the cab was pulled open. “This place is quite special to me, and I wanted you to see it.”

William climbed down the stairs of the carriage before she could respond. He extended his hand for Agnes, helping her down onto the gravel before turning to look at Helena, who was still sitting on the bench inside.

“I will leave it up to you on if you join us,” William said to her. “Your presence is always welcome. But there will be a fair deal of walking.”

“I could do with a bit of a rest,” Helena said, blowing out a quick breath. “You all go on.”

“If you get hungry or need anything at all, please ask James to take you anywhere you’d like. He knows what time to be back.” William gestured at the footman, who dipped his head in acknowledgement. “Any food or tea that you require will be paid for.”

“Thank you kindly, Lord William.” Helena blushed as William nodded and shut the door to the carriage.

“Shall we?”

He extended an arm to Agnes, and she draped hers through it, mind still whirring with the reality of where they were.

“You said this place is important to you?” Agnes asked in a hushed tone as they walked through the gate and approached the door.

“Very,” William answered. “I’ve been coming here to spend time with the children and donate money and other items as often as I can since the day it opened.”

Agnes gawked at him, but she did not have time to voice or share her impressed disbelief before the door was pulled open. A stout woman stood on the other end, wearing a plain gown and an apron that had seen better days. She had a round

face, and kind blue eyes, and her salt and pepper hair was piled on top of her head in a tight bun.

The woman broke into a wide, affectionate smile at the sight of them walking up the stairs to the manor, and she whipped her hands on her apron.

“Lord William,” the woman gushed. “Two visits so close together. What did we do to deserve this?”

“I have someone I’d like for you all to meet, and thought that it would be a good idea to bring her by and get all of your approval.” William joked, and there was a lightness in his voice that Agnes had not heard before. “Ruth, this is Agnes. She is the woman that I plan to marry.”

Ruth’s mouth gaped in surprise as William continued.

“And Agnes, this is Ruth. She is the governess of the orphanage. And don’t let her kind face fool you, she won’t let us get away with anything.” He threw her a quick wink as Ruth stepped onto the landing of the stairs and dipped into a small, low bow.

“Hello Lady Agnes,” Ruth said, giving her a bright, warm smile when she rose back to standing. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

She waved them past her into the house, and the moment they stepped through the threshold noise rose up to greet them. The sounds of children talking and playing came from all around her, floating out of rooms and down the stairs, making Agnes smile.

A little girl with golden red hair sprinted out of the room to her right, a small kitten chasing after her as the girl squealed with delight. A laugh bubbled out of Agnes, and William shot her a questioning glance.

“Doesn’t she look like Esther and the kitten like Abby?” Agnes pointed out the little girl, and when William looked at her he gave a chuckle of his own.

“You know? You’re absolutely right.”

“That’s Louise,” Ruth explained as she walked beside them. “She keeps me busy, that’s the truth. But she’s one of the sweetest.”

A cacophony of laughter exploded in front of them as they advanced through the house, and when they made it to the kitchen, a group of young boys of varying ages sat around it, yelling and laughing as they threw small handfuls of dice on the table. The three adults paused for a moment, William and Agnes taking in the scene before them while Ruth smiled fondly at the children.

It took a moment for the boys at the table to realize they had visitors. But when a dark-haired boy, one that seemed to be a little bit older than the rest, looked up, his eyes lit with confusion that faded to recognition, and then joy.

“Lord William!” He exclaimed, jumping up from the table and bowing low.

The other boys blinked quickly as they tried to figure out what was going on, before copying the older boy’s movements.

“I’ve told you before, none of that.” William admonished with a slight chuckle.

He glanced at Agnes and nodded his head toward the table. They walked over, pulling out the two empty chairs and taking a seat.

“This is Agnes,” William told them. “We are to be betrothed.”

The boys blinked at her, eyes roving over her face. All of her life she had felt the weight of stares upon her, whether it was for her beauty, to admire her gowns, or simply the general, watchful eyes of the ton. But never had she felt quite as strongly that she had stepped underneath a magnifying glass as that moment.

“She’s rather pretty,” one boy said.

Agnes blushed, meeting the youngsters gaze. He was the youngest of the group. She would guess perhaps five. He had sandy blond hair and dark brown eyes. His cheeks were round

and pink, begging to be pinched. She smiled at him, and dipped her head respectfully.

“Thank you. May I ask your name?”

“It’s Thomas.” The boy answered quickly, extending his hand to her. “A pleasure to meet you miss.”

He spoke so formally and properly, like a tiny gentleman with a smear of dirt on his cheeks, that Agnes couldn’t help but chuckle as she placed her hand in his. She gave it a quick shake and when she cast a glance toward William, his eyes were filled with an emotion that she could not place.

“I would love to know all of your names,” Agnes announced, glancing at each of the boys in turn.

Their names were rattled off, and Agnes tried to commit each one to memory. And, before she knew it, she was caught up in the game that they had been playing.

The oldest boy, the one who had first noticed she and William, named Louis, filled her in on the rules of the game as she played. Her mind swam with the clearly made-up rules, but after a few tries she got it down.

She took the dice in her hands once more, shaking them vigorously before pouring them out onto the table before her. The boys groaned while Agnes whooped with pleasure, the dice all showing the same number.

“I’ve got Sames!” She yelled, her arms going over her head in celebration.

There was a light tug on the skirt of her gown, and Agnes dropped her arms, looking down to find the golden red haired little girl from earlier standing before her. She was looking at her with wide, perceptive eyes.

“Well, hello there,” Agnes said, looking at the girl with what she hoped was a welcoming smile. “I’m Agnes, and who are you?”

“Imogene,” the girl answered. “Did you beat Louis?”

“I absolutely did. Would you like to help me do it again?”

The girl's mouth tugged up in a wide, excited grin as she nodded. Before Agnes could think differently of it, she scooted her chair back slightly, letting the small girl climb onto her lap.

She could feel the weight of William's eyes on her and she glanced at him. The approval in his soft brown eyes made her cheeks flush with joy.

She instructed Imogene to reach forward and grab the dice, helping her to roll them and then throw them out onto the table. Agnes walked the girl through her process on which ones to select to hold back, and which ones to shake next, the boys all cheering on the small child when she came close to getting a winning throw.

Agnes lost all track of time sitting at that table playing with the children. All she knew was that between their infectious joy and the way that William was watching her with such emotion in her eyes, she could not recall the last time she had felt this content and this much like herself.

As the game came to an end, Ruth announced that it was time for her to get started on supper. William and Agnes tried to say that they would take their leave, but the woman would hear none of it.

"The least I can do for you two keeping all of them busy for the day is feed you," she waved them toward the parlor with the group of children. "It should be ready soon."

As soon as Agnes stepped into the room, her eyes fell upon it. Like everything else in the house, it appeared to be in slight disrepair, with small scratches in the wood and chips in the paint. But the keys of the pianoforte gleamed merrily, inviting her over and her fingers twitched with the need to touch it.

"Do you all like music?" Agnes asked, looking around at the smiling faces of the children.

They nodded vigorously and then Agnes turned her gaze back to William.

"I love music." He said, and his voice was a low purr, sending heat rushing through her all over again.

“As do I,” she answered in barely a whisper before walking over to the instrument.

She pulled out the bench and folded her skirts underneath her before plopping down delicately. It wasn't a surprise when a moment later the tiny bodies of Imogene and Thomas pressed in on either side of her.

Agnes stretched out her fingers, giving herself a moment to steel herself before bringing her hands to the keys and placing them expertly. As her fingers started to dance over the keys, music filled the air.

Movement caught her attention from the corner of her eye, and she turned to find William leaning against the small bookcase, watching her with obvious approval, and dare she say it, affection. She did not move her gaze from him as she continued to play, feeling all of a sudden that the moment they were sharing was quite private, despite all of the people pressed in around them.

The song shifted as if on its own, moving from the lilting happy tone that she was playing just a moment earlier and taking on a softer, lovelier note. The sounds of spring, of hope, of new love floated through the air as they held each other's gaze.

“Dinner is ready!” Ruth's voice called from the kitchen, snapping both Agnes and William out of the moment they had found themselves lost in.

Agnes shook her head to try and clear it as she stood, lifting Imogene and Thomas from the bench and helping William round up the other children toward the kitchen. They sat at the table across from each other, and served themselves as the dishes were passed around.

Chatter erupted around them as the kids talked to each other and to Ruth, but Agnes could not pull her mind firmly into the moment. With a startling clarity she realized that things were beginning to shift for her. She had developed feelings for William, affections that could no longer be denied.

With a shock, Agnes realized that not once in the last two days had she thought of the earl. Instead, in the small moments where she had found herself happy or smiling, it had been due to a thought about William. The thought of seeing him again, the thought of something he had said while they were together; always her thoughts were about him.

Agnes thought of her plan, where she used her public courting of William to garner an official betrothal to Benedict, and a stab of shame rushed through her. When this all first began, she thought that it would be simple. That walking away from William in favor of the earl would be easy. But she was beginning to understand that would not be the case.

Benedict was still away, but the two weeks that he had said he would be gone for were almost up, and Agnes knew he would be returning any day now. What would happen when he did? She couldn't help but wonder how she would feel when he returned. And it terrified her that she did not know.

CHAPTER 17

William

William stared absentmindedly at the candle flickering across the room, his thoughts on Agnes and how she had behaved with the children the day prior. He had never taken anyone to the orphanage, not even his family. And the way that the children had taken to her, and she to them, it had been everything he had needed to see to know that his decision to court and then marry Agnes had been the right one. In fact, he thought as a smile tugged up the corners of his lips, it was shaping up to be better than he had even imagined.

“William!”

His brother’s voice cut through the din of his thoughts and William blinked rapidly, pushing all thoughts of Agnes out of his mind as he turned his gaze to Laurence. There was a peculiar look on his brother’s face, and Laurence’s head cocked to the side. William racked his brain, trying to recall what they had just been talking about moments before, but he could come up with nothing.

“Where did you go, just now? In your head?” Laurence asked, staring at his brother in disbelief.

“I was just distracted, that’s all.”

“Mhmm,” Laurence nodded and a small, smug smile darted across his face. “You’ve been distracted quite a lot

lately. Would it have anything to do with a certain, perspective fiancé?”

“Don’t be absurd,” William scoffed, but even to his own ears the words did not sound convincing.

“And what’s so absurd about it, Brother? Finding love?”

“I have not found love.” William shook his head, but the word echoed around it, bouncing off all of the corners of his mind.

Love, love, love. It would not stop. And more so, there was a ring of truth to it. In the past, any time William had so much as thought the word, it had caused a visceral reaction. He had been quite vocal in the fact that he found the entire notion preposterous and downright silly. And yet, now, with Agnes, it did not seem so absurd. In fact, it seemed kind of...nice.

William pictured Agnes, her dark raven hair and pale skin, her dark eyes that danced when she smiled. He thought of the way he’d slowly gotten glimpses of the woman behind the mask she had spent years carefully curating, and how the woman she truly was, was even more beautiful than the one she pretended to be.

At one time, he had thought he was lucky to think that the woman he would marry might be a friend. But as he had gotten to know Agnes more over the last two weeks, he couldn’t help but think he was even luckier than he could have imagined then.

He blinked at his brother, who was giving him a knowing look.

“She’s having a pleasant effect on you, you know,” Laurence said, holding his brother’s gaze. “You’re softer around the edges these days. It suits you.”

William gaped at him, his immediate reaction to reject the idea. And yet, he could not. He wouldn’t admit it to Laurence. Not now. Not when everything still felt so fresh and new, and especially not when he could not put it all into words even to himself.

So, William gave a slight shake of his head to clear it and glanced at the clock on the mantel. The afternoon was slowly fading into evening, and an idea occurred to him, one that would hopefully divert Laurence's attention.

"How about a trip to Barnley's this evening?" William asked, throwing out the name of the gentleman's club both he and Laurence frequented. "We haven't been in quite some time."

"I know what you're doing," Laurence rolled his eyes at his brother. "Trying to distract me. But, luckily for you Esther is busy this evening and I could use a bit of distracting. So Barnley's it is."

The two men rose, walking through the dimly lit house to find Charles, Laurence's valet, and closest friend. When William and Laurence told him what the plan was for the evening, the young man immediately broke into a wide, excited smile and ran off to ready the carriage. And it felt like no time at all that the two brothers were in the cab of the jostling vehicle, well on their way to the club.

When they pulled up, Charles parked the carriage along with the others, and the three men strode inside. The man at the front of the building recognized William and Laurence immediately, bowing his head in a quick show of respect before opening the door for them and allowing the men to pass by.

The entire building was lushly furnished. All of the furniture of a deep, rich mahogany, and the fabric a bold, deep red complimented with specs of gold. The smell of cigars and the sound of laughing and gambling was the first thing to greet them, and William breathed in the smoke, feeling something inside of him unclench.

They walked into one of the parlors where a bar was on the far side, a man behind it making drinks and serving them to the other men on stools dotted around it. They approached and the man greeted them warmly.

They all ordered whiskey, and the glasses were before them in a flash.

“It looks like there’s a card game about to start, shall we join?” Laurence asked, pointing to one of the tables in the corner.

Both William and Charles nodded, and the three men approached. The patrons already at the table looked up as they got closer, and the one holding the deck of cards began shuffling them.

“Are you gentleman thinking of joining?” He asked, the cards flying deftly between his fingers.

“If you’ll have us,” Charles answered with a grin of challenge.

The four men at the table nodded, and one of them waved their hands in front of them, inviting them to take one of the other four, empty seats. When Charles, Laurence and William were all settled, the game began.

For the first time in what felt like much longer than a fortnight, William was able to pull his mind away from Agnes. He threw himself fully into the game, winning hand after hand as they all continued to drink.

At one point, the man across from him who William had learned was named James, offered him a large, fragrant cigar and William had taken it with gusto. Just as he grabbed the proffered lighter and raised it to the cigar dangling from his lips, a loud, boisterous voice rose above the din and a spark of recognition flitted through him.

A pit of dread lodged itself in his stomach, and William set the still unlit cigar on the table. Knowing exactly who he would see and yet, still hoping that he was wrong, William turned slowly in his chair, his eyes raking over every single person until they landed on a man sitting at the bar.

His blond hair glinted in the flickering light, and his cheeks were ruddy and red from drink. He guffawed as he clapped the man standing beside him on the shoulder. Earl Benedict of Hampton, it seemed, had returned to Surrey at last.

CHAPTER 18

William

William's heart gave a small lurch as the reality settled over him. He knew that Agnes likely still had affections for the man, he had seen the way her face had lit up when she had spoken about him at that disastrous dinner when William had accidentally insulted her. He was not sure how that had changed for her over the course of the last two weeks, and he did not like the thought that she may still be harboring those affections towards the other man.

William had known Benedict had left on business, and he had worked diligently to drive all thoughts of his return from his mind and focus on building his future with Agnes without distractions. Now that the man had returned, however, he couldn't help the nerves that threatened to overwhelm him. He did not think that it would change things for he and Agnes. William did not believe her emotions were as folly as that. But, he didn't want the presence of the earl to cause her any discomfort or strife. And least of all he did not want Benedict Hampton to show up at the Jarvis' manor still intent on courting Agnes.

Benedict had already been gone when William and Agnes had first began making their public appearances, and as such he doubted that the man would have heard about them yet. He thought that perhaps it would be better if Benedict found out about their impending engagement from him.

He picked up his whiskey glass off the table, downing its contents with a swallow. The amber liquid burned its way down his throat, and William was momentarily grateful for the heady rush that flooded him as the contents made its way to his belly.

“What is it?” Laurence asked, noticing his brother’s sudden change in mood.

William nodded his head in Benedict’s direction. “It appears someone has returned to Surrey.”

Laurence followed William’s gaze and then winced. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t want him bothering Agnes and causing her any anguish. It’s best if I tell him about the betrothal.”

Laurence nodded. “Would you like me to go with you?”

“No,” William shook his head. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Just as he pushed himself to standing, a large man in a tailored waistcoat approached the earl. At the sight of the man, William could have sworn that Benedict blanched slightly, before fixing his face back into an expression of amusement.

The man bent his face low to Benedict’s ears and said something to him. Whatever words the man uttered made color rise into the earl’s cheeks, and William couldn’t help but wonder what they could be talking about. Benedict tried to shake his head, but the man’s large, beefy hand came down to clamp on Benedict’s shoulder. William saw the muscle in Benedict’s cheek tick as he clenched his jaw before giving a quick, terse nod.

The earl turned to his companions and gave them a smile and William guessed he dismissed himself, because a moment later Benedict turned back to the large man and nodded to him before the two turned and strode from the room.

Curiosity unfurled inside of him, and William hurriedly pushed himself to standing.

“I’ll only be a moment,” he said to the other men at the table before he began weaving his way through the parlor and

out into the corridor beyond.

At first, he thought that the earl and the large man had already disappeared entirely, but when he heard raised voices coming from behind the door of one of the coat closets, William immediately knew where they had gone to. He approached carefully, noticing that the door was slightly ajar, which allowed their words to float out to him clearly.

There was a small passageway just to the right of the closet, and William ducked into it. Had it not been for the whiskey, William never would have partaken in such duplicitous behavior as eavesdropping. But in his current state, with the whiskey gently buzzing in his mind, he could not bring himself to care enough to stop.

“...a large sum of money. It isn’t something that we’re willing to overlook.”

A deep, rumbling voice drifted through the door. William didn’t recognize it, so he assumed that it was the large man’s. That was confirmed a split second later when a familiar voice chimed in.

“I assure you, Richard, it is all taken care of.” Benedict’s voice echoed.

“We both know you weren’t away on business, boy. You were hiding, sniveling in some far-off corner to avoid payment. What’s so different now? Hm?”

The large man, Richard’s, voice was low and menacing, causing even William to flinch from where he stood, hiding in the shadows of the passageway.

“I have a pending engagement to Countess Jarvis’ daughter. Her dowry should more than cover my debts. I just needed time to make her miss me, and ensure that when the proposal came, that she would accept it gladly.”

William’s heart stuttered, the words ricocheting through him. From the moment that Agnes and Dorothy had told him at the family dinner that Agnes was set to be betrothed to the Earl of Hampton, he had suspected with every fiber of his

being that the man was lying to them. But to have it confirmed felt like another matter entirely.

“And why would a woman of such high standing be interested in the likes of you? Just a lecherous prat of a man with debts all over the country that he can’t even begin to cure?”

“She does not know, Richard. When I left Surrey a fortnight ago, she was all but besotted. Her mother had nearly begged for me to ask for her hand. I just needed to bide my time.”

“Well, do not bide too much longer. Your time is about to run out very, very soon.”

The sound of footsteps brushing over the carpet and the creak of the door opening had William pressing himself hard into the wall. He flattened himself as much as he could, praying that whoever was exiting the coat closet did not look down the passageway where he was hiding when they walked past. A moment later, Richard strode down the hallway, never once glancing in William’s direction, and he let out a sigh of relief.

He pushed himself off the wall and stepped out into the corridor just as Benedict walked out of the coat closet. He was looking down, oblivious to William’s presence as he smoothed down the lapels of his waistcoat and ran a hand over his hair to smooth back a few pieces that had slipped out of place.

William knew that now was his moment. The earl was clearly distracted by the conversation with Richard, and William felt it would be best to bring up Agnes with him when the earl was still so clearly off kilter.

“Benedict,” William said as he stepped toward the man.

The Earl of Hampton’s blue gaze flicked up to him, brow creasing for only a moment as he regarded the newcomer before relaxing into the faux jovial expression the man so often wore.

“Ah, William,” Benedict said, straightening the front of his waistcoat one final time before facing William head on. “What

a surprise to find you here. How may I help you?"

"It's about Lady Agnes Jarvis," William said, narrowing his eyes on the man. "She and I are to be married. I know that that was not the case when you left a fortnight ago, but it is now. And I thought that you should know."

Benedict's face contorted for a moment as he took in the new information before relaxing again.

"So, you are officially betrothed? You have provided her with her engagement ring and made your intentions public?"

William's brow furrowed. "Well, not precisely. Not yet, but she and I..."

Benedict's dark, low chuckle interrupted him. "If the ton does not know, then whatever notion that you have is merely in your head. You know as well as I do that until the promised union is public, there is any manner of things that can go wrong to derail the engagement."

"We have been making our appearances in public. Courting each other." William argued, but Benedict was shaking his head.

"Courting is not engaged, my friend."

Benedict walked forward, pushing past him as he made his way toward the front of the gentleman's club.

"I have her word!" William yelled after him.

Benedict turned to face him once more, and the corner of his mouth had ticked up in a satisfied smile.

"Oh, do you?" Benedict's pale eyebrows arched. "Well, so do I. I have her word that she will be attending the Twelfth of Christmas Ball with me in only a week. I have received no notice of the cancellation. And as such, I believe she'll still be going. Agnes Jarvis would never turn down such an event."

William thought about telling the man right then and there that the thing he was after did not exist. That Agnes had no dowry to speak of, and as such, marrying her would not solve any of Benedict's problems. But William also knew that the moment that information was in the earl's hands he would

spread it around the ton. And then everything that William and Agnes had worked for to preserve her family's reputation would be for nothing. He would not do that to her.

After the last couple of weeks, and the ways that their courtship had blossomed, he felt confident that the moment Benedict showed up at Surrey Manor, Agnes would confront the earl and let him know that their courtship was off. He was so sure of it, that William simply raised his chin and held the man's stare.

"Then by all means," William said, as his voice dropped low and he straightened his spine. "Try to take her to the ball. Allow her to be the one to reject you. I was merely trying to spare your feelings."

Benedict snorted a laugh. "It is not *my* feelings that need to be spared. You truly believe that she would marry a man such as you?" The earl arched a brow. "Someone who is so brazen and brusque? Who is constantly toeing the line of impropriety in the way that they speak and offending everyone around him? No." He shook his head and a bit of doubt crept into William's mind. "We both know that the opinions of the ton matter quite a lot to a woman like Agnes. And let's just say that my reputation is a fair bit better than yours. Quite a bit better indeed."

He did not spare William another glance as he turned and strode back down the corridor. William stood, his jaw gritting together in frustration as he watched Benedict stroll out the front door and into the night beyond. His mind turned over what Benedict had said, and he knew about many things the earl hadn't been wrong.

His blunt manner and his general state of not caring about the opinions of others often rubbed members of society in the wrong way. People were typically not in the middle when it came to their opinions of William. They were either incredibly fond of him, or disliked him greatly, without much in between. But about one thing, he was sure Benedict was mistaken.

Over the past few weeks William was sure that he and Agnes had formed a bond. One that would not be swayed by

the earl's pretty words and empty promises. And so, as William huffed out a breath to dispel the tension coiling inside of him before going back to the parlor to join his brother and Charles, he decided that there was really only one thing that he could do. He was going to trust Agnes.

CHAPTER 19

Agnes

Agnes sat in her bedchambers, staring out the window as a soft snow had begun to fall. This morning when she had woken up, the temperature had taken quite a drop and she found herself shivering despite the fire currently crackling in the hearth. A log popped, causing Agnes to give a quick jolt of surprise.

All day her mind had been turning over her feelings for William and Benedict. She knew that the earl was due to return at any moment. And when he had first announced that he was leaving, it was a moment that she had been pining for, certain that his return would bring with it the proposal she desired. But now she was not so sure.

After her day at the orphanage with William, she had not been able to stop thinking of him. She was doubting everything that she thought she knew, about what she wanted, both in matters of the heart and for her future.

Agnes exhaled a frustrated sigh, pushing herself up off the chair as she decided to go to the drawing room and try to lose herself in either a book or in the pianoforte. But before she could make it to the front door a knock rang out from it, echoing through the house.

As Agnes got to the bottom of the stairs, she heard Helena in the entryway, huffing as she pulled open the heavy, wooden door.

“Lord William!” Helena’s voice rang out loud and clear, and at the sound of the man’s name Agnes heart began to pound.

“Good afternoon, Helena,” Williams silken voice poured through the door, and Agnes paused to run her hands over her hair and gown to try to rearrange herself as best she could.

“Please come in. I believe Lady Agnes is just in her chambers, so I’ll go retrieve her.”

“No need, Helena,” Agnes called loudly, spurring herself into action as she climbed the rest of the way down the stairs and made her way to the front door.

At the sight of William in the doorway, heat flooded her cheeks. His gaze roved over her, and her skin flushed under the weight of his stare.

“Hello, William.” Agnes said breathily as she dipped her head in a low, respectful bow.

“Agnes,” he answered in greeting, his voice caressing her name as he held her gaze, making Agnes want to melt. “I know that it is quite cool, but I wondered if you might have a cloak and would like to walk about outside for a while.”

He gave her a pointed look, and Agnes picked up his meaning with ease. With the cold temperature, Helena would stay inside and chaperone them from the window. It would be the closest thing to true privacy that they could be awarded.

“Absolutely,” Agnes agreed.

She walked through the house until she came to one of the closets, pulling a thick, wool cloak out of it and draping it over her slender frame. When she and William reached the back of the house, he grabbed a chair and pulled it over to the large window, creating a space for Helena to comfortably sit and watch them.

“For you, Helena,” William said, gesturing to the chair.

“You are too kind to me, Lord William,” Helena said with a smile, rubbing her belly as she wobbled over to the wooden seat.

Agnes draped her arm through William's, and they walked through the large back doors out into the cold. The sky was a drab, slate grey, but it had looked colder than it actually felt.

"So, what did you come to see me about?" Agnes asked.

"What makes you think I have a reason for wanting to see you other than just the pleasure of your company?" William cocked an eyebrow at her.

"You do not seek out privacy often." Agnes waved her arms out, gesturing to the quiet, rolling grounds around them as the small snowflakes fell around them.

One of the snowflakes caught on William's eyelash, and Agnes had to fight off the sudden urge to reach up and brush it away with her fingertips.

"You're right," William gave a light chuckle. "I do have my reasons for coming to see you."

Agnes glanced at him sidelong, noticing that suddenly his face looked worried and drawn.

"What's the matter?" Agnes asked, her brow furrowing.

"I ran into someone yesterday evening at Barnley's," William's voice was soft and hesitant, and suddenly Agnes knew what he was about to tell her. "It appears that Earl Benedict has returned at last."

Agnes' steps faltered and she came to a stop, causing William to do the same. He turned to look at her, holding her gaze as her mind began to race. She thought she would have more time to figure out what it was she wanted. But now, it appeared, time had run out.

"And while I know that this will not change things between you and I," William continued to explain. "I thought that you should hear the news from me. There was...well... quite the altercation between he and I, if I'm to be frank. And I suspect he will arrive to see you any day now."

"He came back to Surrey and went straight to the gentleman's club?" Agnes brow furrowed, hurt by the fact that Benedict had not come to see her immediately upon his return.

But then, another part of what William had said registered.

“An altercation? What do you mean?”

“It did not come to blows or anything,” he said in a rush. “We merely exchanged words. But he seemed rather adamant that you would be going to the Twelfth of Christmas ball with him, and I told him that you would not be, as you were to be my wife.”

Agnes jolted, a small kernel of anger beginning to form in her belly at his words.

“You told him about our arrangement?” Agnes asked, and William, seemingly oblivious to the shift in her tone, continued to blather on.

“Why, yes, I did. I thought it was the honorable thing to do.”

“Why would you not allow me to have that discussion with him?”

William studied her face, and he now seemed to notice the subtle changes in it. The creases in her brow and the hard set of her eyes betraying her newfound aggravation.

“I thought it would be easier for you.” A look of confusion crossed William’s face. “Would it not be? To not have to reject the fellow forthright but to have your fiancé do it for you?”

“You are not yet my fiancé,” Agnes corrected, the words flying from her lips before she could stop them.

William recoiled, hurt flashing across his handsome face.

“But we have an agreement,” he argued, his tone rising in agitation to match hers.

“An agreement is not an engagement, William. And you did not have a right to discuss me with Benedict without my express permission to do so.” Agnes’ cheeks burned with frustration. “I would like to discuss this with Benedict on my own. And in regards to the ball...”

“You are not still going.” William interrupted her, his words coming out as a statement, and not as a question.

Her mouth popped open in surprise. Despite her aggravation at the man before her, when William had first started talking, she had made the decision to tread lightly and keep her feelings about the matter closer to her chest. She had resigned herself to not providing any information that would seem definitive or absolute.

But now, with his words floating between them, ones that attempted to control her actions, she found she could not hold her tongue.

“That is a decision that I will make for myself, William.” She raised her chin high, meeting his gaze with a steely resolve. “I had agreed to go with him. I gave him my word, and it is fitting for a lady to keep her word.”

William’s brow furrowed deeper, his stare boring into her.

“Surely you don’t mean that.” His voice rose and he took a step toward her, anger making color rise into his cheeks. “Surely you do not mean to go to a ball such as this with another man, one who merely a fortnight ago you had been courting and talking to anyone who would listen about him being due to propose to you. I will not allow it.”

“I am not yours to command!”

“You will be!” William exclaimed, his voice rising into a tone Agnes had never heard him use before. “And it would behoove you to remember that. To remember the way that your actions will reflect upon me once word is out that we are to wed. I am willing to overlook your lack of a dowry and do whatever I can to save your family from ruination. But I cannot condone you behaving like anything less than a proper lady. Your actions will not besmirch my reputation. Do I make myself clear?”

He advanced on her, so that merely an inch separated them. His words sent a hot flash of anger through her, her cheeks growing pink with the force of it. Agnes’ breath was coming in short, shallow pants as she stared up into his brown eyes.

They were typically so soft when he looked at her, but now there was none of that softness to be found. She watched as he clenched his jaw, sending it flexing.

As she studied his face, Agnes felt sure that his vitriol was coming from a place of hurt or even fear. And, even with her own rage, she had the urge to reach up and run her hand over the ticking muscle by his mouth. She wanted to begin talking, telling him anything that would put the softness and affection back into his eyes. But she could not. Not with Agnes knowing what she had planned to do from the start of their courtship.

Confusion unfurled within her, and she felt the prick of tears at the corners of her eyes as the barrage of emotions threatened to overwhelm her.

“I need to think.” She muttered, shaking her head and taking a step away from him.

Agnes took a moment to steel herself, taking a large, calming breath before glancing back up to meet his eyes. She held them as she spoke, glad when her voice did not betray the waves of emotion that were crashing through her.

“Whether I go to the ball with Benedict or not is *my* decision. Not yours. And if I go, I get to decide how I will be presented, even if it is just as his friend. I will not resign myself to a life with a husband that will control my every move, so please consider that before we speak again.”

Agnes gave him a hard, pointed glare before turning and walking back toward the house. He did not follow after her, and Agnes was glad for it. She pulled her cloak tighter around her, a shiver creeping over her skin as a winter wind whipped a tendril of black hair loose from the pins she had used to secure it.

She pulled open the door that would let her back into the house, finding Helena standing there gaping at her, clearly having seen the entire altercation between her and William. Agnes was thankful that the woman would have been unable to hear their exchange. She did not want anyone else to know about her feelings and her doubts until she had time to sort them for herself.

Agnes threw one last glance through the large window that overlooked the grounds, and her eyes landed on William. He was still standing exactly where she had left him, rooted to the spot with a look of confusion on his face. Something inside of Agnes squeezed tightly, and she once more had to fight down the urge to go to him, to tell him that everything would be alright.

Because the hard truth of it all was that she wasn't sure if it would be. As she shed the cloak from her slender shoulders and hung it back in the closet, she traipsed through the house back towards her rooms and the crackling fire she knew awaited her. She wanted nothing more than to sit before it, surrounded by the comfort of the few luxuries her mother had not yet sold, and contemplate all of her choices.

Now that Benedict had returned, Agnes knew that she had a decision to make. There was a part of her that still ached for him. That part had been slumbering while he was away, quiet and hidden deep within her. But now, with her knowing it was only a matter of time before she saw him again and with William's harsh words fresh in her mind, she desired Benedict more than ever. She craved his quick laugh and his beautiful words. She longed for the simplicity that he brought, and that being around him felt so easy.

But there was another part of her, one that threatened to overwhelm her entirely, that yearned to reach out to William. Agnes could not deny that he had hurt her with his commands. His words had been awful and controlling, and completely at odds with the man she had come to know over the fortnight of spending time with him. Had he shown that type of behavior at the beginning of their courtship, the moment she now found herself in would have been much simpler. But now she had seen an entirely different side of him, and she could not help but wonder which William was the real one.

If Benedict had returned and not backed down from William when confronted with their public courtship, she had no doubt that meant his promises of a proposal were about to come to fruition. And it made Agnes feel more confused than ever.

A suffering sigh pulled itself from her lips as she made it to her collection of rooms and walked to the small seating area that was arranged before the fire place. She draped herself into one of the stuffed chairs, pulling her legs underneath her as she stared into the flames.

The fire crackled merrily at her, the sounds completely at odds with the tumult of emotions coursing through her. She thought of William's face just before she had turned and walked away from him. The way that despite his anger, there was hurt lingering in his gaze as well. She thought of Benedict's eyes and the way they danced with light when they roved over her. And as Agnes sat, with nothing but the flames to keep her company, she had no idea how she would ever make a decision on which path to choose.

CHAPTER 20

Agnes

“**Y**ou must be careful,” Dorothy’s voice droned over the music that Agnes played softly. “You know the Boltons will not take lightly should we snub one of their sons again.”

Agnes gently tickled the ivory keys, wishing that her mother would leave the room so she could spill her emotions out onto the pianoforte. Apparently another one of their servants had seen her and William arguing in the gardens the day prior and informed Dorothy of what had occurred.

That morning, when Agnes had woken, her mother had berated her while they had eaten breakfast. The woman had demanded every detail of what had been said, and Agnes, exhausted from a night of tossing and turning, did not have the energy to lie to her. And so, she had told her mother everything.

Well, almost everything. She had left out the part that she had been planning on this from the beginning and that she had only accepted William’s proposal as a means to this end. Not only did she know her mother would either berate her or, worse, figure out a way to use William further, but she did not want to try to explain to the woman how complicated her feelings about the matter had become.

Agnes kept her face arranged in an impassive mask, just as her mother had taught her as she continued to play the music softly.

“I know, Mother.” Agnes said, careful to keep all emotion from leaking into her tone. “I am simply trying to make the best decision for our family.”

“The best decision for our family is one that does not end with us destitute, child.” Her mother’s voice was harsh, but Agnes could hear the tiny note of fear laced within it. “If you play too much with the emotions of both men, you will end up with neither. And then where will we be? You would do well to reject Benedict Hampton and marry William as quickly as you can. The bank will not wait much longer.”

Her mother said nothing more as she turned and stalked from the room, her heavy footfalls echoing through the space. When she was finally alone again, her hands dropped from the keys and came to a rest on the wooden bench to either side of her. She had toiled with her emotions all night, and yet she had not come any closer to arriving at a decision. And ultimately, her mother was right. If she did not choose either man, Agnes would end up losing them both, and she knew that would be disastrous, indeed.

There was a part of her that wondered if she would find this decision so difficult if she and William had not argued in the way that they had the day before. Had he not made demands of her, had he not overstepped and tried to make decisions for her, had her own anger not burned so brightly – would she still be considering choosing Benedict? She did not know, and that terrified her.

The way that William had spoken to her the day prior had been terrible, yes. And Agnes knew that if that was a glimpse at what marriage to him would be like, she wanted no part of it. She had lived too long under her mother’s thumb, constantly bending and breaking herself to the whims of the mercurial woman who had raised her.

Her mother’s demands had chipped away at small parts of Agnes throughout her life. Parts so small that she did not know they were missing until she began to look back over the years to see the gaping hole they had carved. She was only just beginning to feel some semblance of who she was returning to her, and now that it was within her grasp, she did not want to

sacrifice it again. Not even for the man who, unbeknownst to him, had spent the last two weeks lighting the small fires of Agnes' soul that she had long since thought dimmed.

But she had no way of knowing which version of William was the one that she would get once she said her vows. And she wasn't sure if she could take that risk. Not when Benedict was before her. Funny, kind, handsome Benedict who seemed to adore her. Her stomach tied itself in knots as she toiled over her two options.

A knock at the front door snapped Agnes out of her stewing thoughts, and she paused for a moment to listen for one of the staff. But, when after a few seconds she was met with only silence, she pushed herself off of the bench and made her way toward the entryway of the house. Agnes had no idea who would be calling on her home at this time of day, and just in case it was Benedict or William, she drew in a quick, steadying breath before wrapping her hands around the doorknob and giving it a sharp tug.

But it was not either of her suitors standing before her. Instead, she was greeted with a bouquet of bright, vibrant red roses so large they entirely obscured the face of the courier trying to hold them.

"Delivery for a Lady Agnes Jarvis," the man's voice came from the other side of the roses, slightly muffled from all of the petals pressing in on him.

"Yes, that is me."

Agnes stepped to the side and she barely caught sight of the man's eyes as he peered around the blooms and made his way into the home. There was a sturdy, round antique table in the center of the atrium, and she motioned for him to set the flowers there. With a grunt of effort, he placed the flowers atop the table, dipped his head in a bow of respect and then rushed out the door toward his next delivery.

Agnes just stared at the flowers, mouth slightly ajar in awe as she took in the vibrant, stunning petals, immediately reminded of the gorgeous blooms she and William had walked amongst in the greenhouse tearoom.

“William,” Agnes said, his name leaving her mouth on the softest whisper.

He must have sent them to her as an apology for their argument the day before. A smile tugged up the corners of her lips, and she walked around the table, wanting to take them in. A flash of white nestled in the center of the flowers caught her attention, and on closer inspection she saw that it was a folded up piece of parchment, sealed with wax.

She reached for it, plucking it out delicately as to not disturb the roses. Agnes broke the seal and opened the paper, her eyes raking over the words as her mouth popped open with surprise.

Agnes,

I apologize that I have not come to call upon you yet. There were many things that required my attention upon my return to Surrey, but I assure you that you have been on my mind since the moment I said goodbye to you. My thoughts have been consumed with visions of you in a dress the exact color of these roses the night we attend the Twelfth of Christmas ball, and I know that you will outshine them with your beauty. I know the fact that I have not yet proposed to you causes you strife, and I assure you that was never my intent. I merely wanted to ensure that you and I cared for each other deeply and truly before that commitment was made. And I promise you that my feelings have developed truly, and I wait earnestly for the day I get to call you my fiancé and then my wife. I hope you will accept these roses as both a symbol of my apology and of my affection for you, and I assure you that the very moment I am able, I will be there to see you.

Missing you terribly,

Earl Benedict of Hampton

Agnes pressed her fingers to her lips, hiding her smile behind it as she read the note a second time, and then a third. Her heart was racing, along with her mind.

“How could I have doubted him?” She whispered to herself, the question hanging in the air and begging to be answered.

It was so clear to Agnes now, how easily she had been distracted by William’s proximity and Benedict’s distance. But her heart, the one that was currently filled with joy at the beautiful words scrawled on the page she held in her shaking hand, it belonged to Benedict. It had for quite some time, and she could not allow any amount of familiarity or family friendship to step in the way of that.

“Lady Agnes?” Helena’s voice came from behind her, and Agnes spins to find the woman just walking out of the corridor. “What is all of this?”

“They’re from the Earl,” Agnes explained, still smiling even though Helena’s brows creased with confusion.

A thought occurred to Agnes, one that sent a tug of sadness spiraling into her belly. But it was quickly snuffed out by her joy as she looked back at the letter.

“Helena, would you do me a favor and have someone bring the carriage around?”

Agnes glanced at the maid, seeing the woman nod before waddling back into the depths of the house to find one of the servants to do as Agnes had asked. She could not allow William to think that they were alright, to be filled with hope, now that Agnes felt sure of her decision. She may be angry with him now, but allowing him to continue thinking that their agreement was in good standing would be too cruel. And even though she knew that what she was about to do would hurt him, she understood that it was the kinder option.

As the carriage was pulled around to the front of the house and Agnes climbed inside, the small spiral of sadness began to grow. She may have been sure that it was the kinder thing to do, but that did not mean that ending her arrangement with William was not going to hurt her. And as the wheels of the carriage rumbled over the dirt and the gravel, she tried to steel herself for what she knew was about to come.

CHAPTER 21

William

William raked his eyes over the line in the ledger he'd been working on for what felt like the thousandth time. He'd gone into his study early that morning, adamant that he would get his mind off of Agnes, but his efforts thus far had been unsuccessful.

No matter how hard he tried, he could not stop picturing and replaying the events of the day before. He was not sure how things had gone so terribly awry. When he had first shown up at the Jarvis' estate, he had been sure that he would tell Agnes about Benedict's return and his confrontation with him, and she would thank him. He had imagined her assuring him that she would talk to Benedict about the ball and inform him that she would not be going, and that would have been the end of it.

But that was not how things had played out. Somewhere along the way, as she had insisted that she uphold her word to the earl, insecurities had begun to bubble up inside of him. He hadn't even been entirely aware of his words as they came rushing out of him, grasping at anything he could to help him feel better about his standing with her, suddenly terrified that he would lose her.

Instead, he had allowed his terror to get the best of him. And now, he did not know where he stood with Agnes at all. Late in the night, as he had tossed and turned in his bed, he

had decided that he would do whatever it took to make up for the things that he had said. She had asked for time and space to think, and he would give her that. But the very moment that she seemed ready, he would take all of the things he had learned about romance, and he would figure out a way to make her love him.

“Love,” William scoffed to himself with the shake of his head.

He never thought he would find himself in this predicament, and now here he was – a fool, entirely besotted.

There was a knock at the study door and William raised his head to look just as Jonas appeared in the doorway.

“Apologize for the intrusion, Lord William,” the man began, giving him a quick bow of his head. “But Lady Agnes Jarvis is here to see you.”

William jumped to his feet, pushing his chair back a little more violently than he had intended, and it almost upended and toppled but he caught it at the last second. He righted the thing, not pausing to push it back under his desk as he strode from the room.

“She’s in the parlor,” Jonas called after him, but William didn’t spare the man a backwards glance as he made his way through the large house.

His heart was hammering in time with his rushed footsteps, and he smoothed down the lapels of his waistcoat, trying to calm his nerves as he approached. William had not expected Agnes to want to speak this soon after the prior day’s events. He had assumed, apparently wrongfully so, that she would need more time to process everything that had occurred.

He had not blamed her for that. In fact, he had understood quite well. Had she hurled things at him the way that he had done, William would not have been in a place to forgive so easily. But he could not hide his elation at the fact that he would not have to wait to see her.

The doors to the parlor were open, and his eyes landed on her immediately when he stepped through the threshold. She

was seated in one of the large, overly stuffed, high-backed chairs that she had sat in a million times before. He thought of just the past week, when she and Esther had sat in almost the exact spot as they had tried to outmaneuver each other in chess and a small smile tugged up the corner of his lips. He could not wait for many more of those evenings to come.

Despite how hurried his approach had been, she must not have heard his footsteps, because Agnes remained seated. Her hands were placed delicately in her lap, and she had her face turned toward the fireplace, watching as the flames danced.

William cleared his throat, not loudly, just enough to announce his presence as he took a few additional steps into the room. Agnes' beautiful face snapped to him. He had expected to see some of her guarded expression fade, for the woman that he had come to know and love over the course of a fortnight to rise to the surface. But she did not.

Her dark eyes remained impassive as they landed on him, her posture stiffening even more, and a weight of apprehension dropped into his stomach. William searched her gaze, trying to find any hint of the warm, kind, funny, sarcastic Agnes, imploring her to make an appearance.

But Agnes just gritted her teeth as her dark gaze raked him up and down. Suddenly, William knew exactly how this conversation was going to go, and all he could do was try to figure out a way to stop it.

With his heart hammering in his chest, William crossed the room and took a seat in the large chair directly across from her. She regarded him wearily, making him feel like he was standing beneath a magnifying glass.

“Agnes,” he began, her name both a plea and a prayer as it fell from his lips. “I am incredibly sorry for the way that I spoke to you yesterday. I was rude, I was crass, and I had no right to make demands of you.”

Her brows creased slightly, only for a second, just the briefest flash that his words had registered, before they smoothed back down.

“Thank you,” Agnes said, but there was no feeling or emotion in her voice. It was nothing but her general air of careful politeness, the one that he knew now for the make believe that it was. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

“It’s the truth.” William tried to lace as much feeling into his words as he could, wanting to provide enough emotion for the two of them. “Please believe me, Agnes. I would never cause you strife or pain on purpose. When we wed, I will not control you, I will not dictate...”

“But you did.” Her words cut through his like a knife, effectively silencing him. “You did cause me strife. You did cause me pain. You controlled, you dictated, and you did quite a bit more.”

She held his gaze as she spoke, never once flinching or shifting her expression at all.

“You’re right.” William blew out a breath, trying to keep his composure, to keep his tone calm and even. “It may not have been what I intended to do when I came to speak with you yesterday, but I was merely caught off guard by you still wanting to go to the ball with Benedict. If you wish to keep your word to him, I understand. I...”

“William, please stop.” Agnes’ voice broke slightly on the last word, her cheeks flushing pink, the first sign of emotion since he had sat down in front of her.

“I did not come here for an apology,” she continued. He opened his mouth to speak, but she held up a hand to stop him. “I came here because we need to discuss our arrangement.”

The way she said the word “arrangement”, with no feeling, as if it hadn’t been something that had turned his world on its axis. He had entered into it because Agnes was a convenience, but along the way he had fallen in love with her. And he had a feeling in the pit of his stomach that he was about to lose it all.

“I no longer believe our agreement is something that I can move forward with.”

The sentence fell between them, leaden and heavy. It rang through William’s skull, bouncing around as he tried to make

sense of it.

“What do you mean?” William asked, his brow furrowing. “I promised to clear your family’s debt. We’ve been courting publicly. You promised to...”

“I did give you my word, and I apologize that I am going back on it.” Agnes cut him off.

Her carefully crafted façade was beginning to break, her words coming out shaky and when he glanced down at her hands that were still resting in her lap, she was wringing her fingers together anxiously. This was upsetting her as well. But when he glanced back up at her face, along with the pain that danced in her eyes, there was also resolution. And William knew that even if this was hurting her, she would see it through to the end.

“Don’t do this.” His words came out lower than he intended, and he didn’t much care for the pleading tone in his voice. But he couldn’t take it back.

Agnes’ eyebrows furrowed in pain, and her bottom lip quivered as she looked at him. He could see her fighting, see her struggling to slip her mask back into place, but it wasn’t working.

“We have felt something over these last few weeks,” William continued, emboldened by the crack in her defenses. “I know I’m not alone in that. I can’t be.”

Agnes shook her head. “What about all those things you’ve said?”

“I was not in my right mind yesterday. I was terrified that you...”

“No, not just yesterday. At the dinner. About love and not believing in it. About it being silly and folly and only for fools. About all of the times that you and I were together and practicing for the eyes of the ton and you scoffed at romance.”

“I was wrong.” William implored. “I was so foolishly and terribly wrong.”

The chips he'd seen in Agnes' demeanor finally cracked entirely. Tears welled beneath her eyes, but still, she did not stop shaking her head.

"It isn't enough." Her words were low enough that he had to strain to hear her. "I wish that it were. But it is not."

A pang of hurt flared through him, and he felt his throat grow thick with emotion. William reached forward to take one of her hands. She did not wear gloves today, and when the skin of her palm touched his, it lit him on fire. He wanted to lean into its warmth, wanted to bask in it, while the pain of this moment made him so very, very cold.

"It could be," he pled. "If we decided that it were enough, then it simply would be. Wouldn't it be easy? For us to be together? Our lives would blend so seamlessly. Not only because of the friendship that we share, but the one that our family does as well."

She did not stop shaking her head. "But Benedict..."

Her words died off, but that did not stop William from catching them. Since he realized that the earl had returned he had been terrified of this moment. Terrified that her affections for the man would return and that she would choose him over William. And now, that fear was coming true.

"He is only after your dowry," William blurted, using the last thing he had in his line of defense.

A glimmer of doubt danced across her beautiful face, her brow creasing with confusion as she regarded him.

"What do you mean?"

He blew out a breath, knowing that now that the words were out he would not be able to take them back. He had not wanted it to come to this, had not wanted to use this knowledge that he had gained to stay her hand. But it was the only thing that he hadn't tried. A last-ditch effort of desperation.

"The night he returned, when I saw him at Barnley's. When we quarreled. It all began because I overheard him talking to someone who he owed money to. They were trying

to shake him down for it, and he insinuated that he didn't have it but would come into the money soon...when he was officially engaged to you.”

Agnes' eyes roved over him, looking for any sign of a lie. He kept his features carefully arranged, trying to implore her to see his honesty.

“You are lying.” She said simply, stating it as a fact.

“I am not lying. I promise you Agnes, I heard it all with my own ears. He even said to me...”

“Did anyone else hear him say this?”

William shook his head.

“Of course not,” Agnes scoffed. “Because it did not happen. If this were all true, why did you not bring it up yesterday? Why did you merely tell me that he was back before demanding that I not see him? It would have been simple enough for you to tell me the truth then, would it not have?”

William swallowed past the lump in his throat, his palms breaking out in a slight sweat.

“I did not want to hurt you.”

“Well, we both know that isn't true. Because that is exactly what you did.” Agnes argued.

William sighed and gave her the truth. “I wanted you to choose me because it was *me*. Not because I forced your hand.”

Still, she would not hear it. The tears that just moments ago had been threatening to spill down her cheeks had cleared, fading back into the recesses of her eyes. And she was still shaking her head slightly, as if doing so would keep the honesty of his words from seeping into her. Like it would allow her to continue to operate within the realm of denial.

“No. You are jealous, William. You are jealous and you are embarrassed and you are trying to take it out on me again.”

Agnes' cheeks flushed with what William could only assume was frustration, and she pushed herself off of the chair so that she was standing before him.

"I will not let you do that. I will not let you tarnish the name of a man who has been nothing but kind to me."

"He is after your money," William fired back, pushing himself to stand before her.

"I have no money." She glared at him.

"He does not know that."

Agnes huffed out a breath. "This is absurd. I do not have to deal with this. William, thank you for your kindness and your generosity these past few weeks. I appreciate your friendship, and I hope that you remain well. But I must be going."

She turned to stride away from him, but William reached out and grabbed her hand. He did not apply any pressure, and Agnes easily could have removed herself. And yet, she did not.

"Please do not do this," he repeated once more.

He was terrified. William was sure that if Agnes walked out the door it would all have been for naught. He could not imagine himself finding not only another wife before his father's deadline, but now finding one that he could actually care about and build a life with.

"If you leave, you leave me ruined." He said, pouring his heart out for her and hoping that it would be enough. "I told you of my father's deal, and at first, I thought that it would be simple. That I could marry anyone, and it would be alright because I did not need love, did not even believe in it. But you have changed all of that. I will not be happy with someone I cannot love. And I do not believe that I will love anyone else. Especially not in the time frame that my father has given me. I will lose everything, along with losing you."

He could see Agnes' chest heaving. She did not look at him, instead she kept her gaze fixed toward the door. But she did not try to hide that the tears were once again back, and this time they had spilled over. William could feel her hand

shaking in his, and he sent out a quick prayer that it was enough.

“Goodbye, William.”

There was a note of finality in Agnes’ voice. It was not devoid of emotion or wrought with anger. It was somewhere in between, and somehow that made it all the worse for William when she delicately removed her hand from his grasp and walked forward. Agnes made her way toward the door and stepped out into the hall, and still William did not move. He stared after her, marking her path as she did so.

He waited, praying against all odds that she would come back. That she would rush into the room and declare that it had all been a mistake. But eventually, when the tell-tale sound of the large front doors to the manor house creaking open and then shutting with a hard, final slam, William knew that she was gone.

He crumpled back into the chair, placing his head in his hands. And without worry or embarrassment, he let himself cry.

CHAPTER 22

Agnes

Helena ran the brush through Agnes hair once more, the feel of the bristles against her scalp making her close her eyes and appreciate the luxury for only a moment. It had been three days since Agnes had returned from calling off her arrangement with William. And for the entirety of those days she had hardly slept, had not been able to eat, and had cried more than she had cared to admit.

When Agnes had first made the decision to break off her arrangement with William, she had not anticipated that it would be this difficult. She hadn't imagined that days after, she would still be feeling the shockwaves of leaving him.

Helena, concerned by Agnes' melancholy, had taken to tending to her in ways she typically did not. Which led her to this moment, with the woman running the brush soothingly through Agnes' hair while she tried to relax and take her mind off of things.

"You should be seeing the Earl soon," Helena said cheerfully, and Agnes could tell that she was trying to brighten her mood.

"I should," she gave her maid a small smile in the mirror before them, but even Agnes noticed that it did not reach her eyes.

Since receiving the roses, Benedict had not called on her. Agnes had felt so sure that the proposal was imminent after the flowers had arrived. But as the days had passed and there had been no additional word from him, she couldn't help but worry that she had messed everything up entirely.

The sound of gravel crunching outside the manor, followed by the whinny of a horse grabbed both her and Helena's attention. The maid sat down the brush, and Agnes helped the woman to her feet from the stool that she had been sitting on behind Agnes. They walked to the window and peered out, immediately spotting a carriage filled with boxes and packages.

"A courier," Helena surmised, and Agnes nodded.

They watched as the man grabbed a large, white box that Agnes immediately recognized as one from Sarah's shop. She was the best modiste in town. And once upon a time, Agnes had been a frequent patron. More than half of the gowns that hung in her armoire were made by Sarah, it is why that even now, with her having to re-wear items to attend the various balls of the season, her gowns still outshone almost everyone in attendance.

But due to her family's financial situation, she had not been able to visit the shop in quite some time. So, she watched with wide eyed fascination as the courier delivered the package from the Jarvis family's one remaining suitor and then left.

"Shall we?" Helena asked, wagging her eyebrows at Agnes and prompting her to laugh for the first time in days.

"We shall," she nodded.

The two women started their journey from Agnes' chambers to the atrium where she knew the box would be sat. Just as she expected, as they descended the stairs, it was there, waiting for her.

Her heart fluttered with excitement, and it felt like the first positive emotion that she had experienced since breaking off her arrangement with William. Hands shaking with

anticipation, Agnes reached forward and flipped over the card nestled in the bright red ribbon secured around the box. As she had expected, it was for her.

“Who could it be from?” Helena asked.

“There’s only one way to find out.” Agnes shot the woman a smile as she tugged on the ribbon, allowing it to unwind and fall to the floor.

She opened the box and they both peered down inside of it. Swaths and swaths of bright red fabric greeted her, and Agnes began to smile.

Helena helped her pull the gown from the box, and with each inch that was revealed Agnes excitement and joy grew. By the time it was fully extracted, both her and Helena’s mouths were dropped open in surprise.

The gown was beautiful. A bright, vibrant red, one that she knew would complement her dark hair and eyes, and play off of her pale, milky skin.

“Benedict,” Agnes whispered as she ran her hands over the fabric.

She recalled how he had talked of imagining her wearing a gown exactly like this one when they attended the Twelfth of Christmas ball, and now it appears that he had made that fantasy come true.

“Is that who you think this is from?” Helena asked, cocking her head in question as she admired the gown as well.

“There’s no one else who could have sent it,” Agnes answered with a shrug.

The two women smiled at each other, before darting upstairs. Well, Agnes darted. Helena waddled at a moderate pace while talking to her swollen belly. Once they were back in Agnes’ chambers, Helena helped Agnes begin to undress and try on the new one.

It took quite a bit of maneuvering, what with Helena’s belly and the yards of fabric that they were dealing with. But when they finished, both of them breathing heavily, they step

back and look at it in the full-length looking glass across the room.

Agnes' mouth gapes in awe as she stares at it. She had been right about the way the color would play off of her own skin and hair. She looked radiant, even with her eyes and face still slightly swollen from her lack of sleep and frequent tears.

Appreciation rushed through her, swift and hard, as she thought of Benedict and what he had done for her by gifting her this gown. She had known that nothing she owned would have been grand enough for the Twelfth of Christmas ball, and it had been a bit of a stressor for her to think of what he would wear when she accompanied Benedict to it. And not only had he assuaged that worry for her, but he had picked out a gown so beautiful and so lovely, that it would silence any rumors going about the ton surrounding Agnes' financial status.

There wasn't any way that someone would look at this gown and not see it for what it was – an absolute luxury.

“You look stunning, Miss,” Helena said, her voice low and reverent.

“Thank you,” Agnes replied, her cheeks flushing pink. “Now, let's go ahead and take this back off before I end up messing it up.”

The two women chuckled slightly as Helena began to work over the buttons on her back before loosening Agnes' corset. As the two of them worked to undress her, Agnes couldn't help but send out a silent prayer of thanks for Benedict.

Over the past few days, she had toiled over her decision to choose him. After not hearing from him since she received the roses, she had worried that he had, perhaps, changed his mind. And that meant she would have chased William away and broken her own heart in the process, all for nothing.

But now, as Agnes stepped out of the beautiful red gown, she assured herself that those worries had been folly. Of course, she had made the right decision in picking Benedict, the gown proved that. Because, while it had been his fantasy that she wear a dress like that to the ball, he had paid enough

attention to her and to the styles of gowns that she liked to choose one that not only fulfilled his vision but suited her as well. Every last bit of the gown was perfect, every minor detail crafted just for her.

And with a fluttering heart, Agnes closed her eyes and breathed deep. Glad to finally be able to have confidence in the decisions that she had made thus far, and finally feeling like she was on the right track.

CHAPTER 23

Agnes

“**B**ut are you sure?” Esther asked Agnes as they climbed into the carriage, the door snapping shut behind them as the footman closed it. “Really and truly sure?”

Agnes folded down her skirts as she took her seat upon the bench in the carriage, preparing herself for the jolt that she knew would come when the horses began to trot, and the wheels sprang to life.

“I’ve told you, Cousin,” Agnes said fondly. “Of course, I’m sure. Benedict was the right choice.”

Just as she anticipated, the carriage lurched forward with a quick jolt before it began rocking as it made its way over the gravel lined drive, pulling away from Bolton Manor. Agnes had been terrified when she arrived to retrieve Esther that she would run into William. But as she had waited in the receiving hall for Esther to come downstairs, Jonas had leaned toward her and whispered under his breath that Lord William was away on business. She was positive that the man saw the set of her shoulders relax a bit at the news, and she still found herself thankful for the kindness he had showed her in pretending not to notice.

She and Esther were on their way to Sarah’s shop. She knew that she would need a pair of gloves to match the red gown. She had gone through all of her drawers the night prior after the gown had arrived, and yet she had found nothing

within them that could come close to matching the splendor of what Benedict had bought. And so, she had approached her mother.

Agnes had expected Dorothy to kick up a fuss about the fact that she was asking her for money. She knew that the state of their finances was more dire than ever, and with Agnes' courting of William now over, Dorothy had tightened her purse strings even further. But Agnes had been surprised when she had approached her mother and explained to her what she needed and why, and Dorothy had handed over a few coins without much fanfare. It appeared even her mother had seen the necessity in appearing nothing short of perfect when she arrived at the Twelfth Night Ball with Benedict.

“But surely you have to have some doubt,” Esther's voice stirred Agnes from her thoughts, her cousin not noticing that her mind had been elsewhere. “William told us some of the things that he overheard the Earl say at Barnley's...”

“William is merely jealous to have not been chosen over Benedict,” Agnes argued, wishing that this particular line of questioning would end swiftly. “We both know that he has never handled rejection well. And this is just another example of that.”

“I don't think that's true,” Esther insisted.

Had the words come from anyone else, Agnes would have bristled. But she could see the concern written so plainly on her cousin's face, and she could hear it lacing her words. Agnes leaned forward, grabbing Esther's hand from where it rested on her lap and held it gently. She stared into her cousin's grey eyes, imploring her to understand.

“I assure you, this is the right decision. It is not one that I arrived at lightly. And it is not one that did not also cause me pain. I cared for William, but it does not supersede the affections that I have for Benedict, and that he has for me. I wish to be happy, Esther. And the Earl makes me happy.”

“Your happiness is all I want as well; you have to know that.”

“I do. Which is why I need you to be alright with this decision. I know that William is your family now, too. But in the end, he was not the right match for me.”

She could see Esther chewing the inside of her cheeks as she considered Agnes’ words before finally nodding. Agnes gave her cousin’s hand a quick, grateful squeeze before dropping it and resettling back into the seat.

The topic switched, for which Agnes was grateful, and the two women chatted excitedly about the upcoming Twelfth of Christmas Ball. Esther and Laurence, unfortunately, had not been invited. And since Agnes’ own invitation had come from Benedict, there was no one else in her small circle that would be there. She felt a pang as she thought about it, wishing that she could experience the grandeur that this ball was rumored to provide with her cousin, but she knew that the very first moment she got she would recount all the details to Esther in its entirety.

“Do you believe there’s really a Christmas tree in every hall?” Esther asked, her eyebrows raising in disbelief.

“There is only one way to find out.” Agnes grinned.

The carriage jolted to a stop before Sarah’s shop, and Agnes peered out the window. It had been a few months since she had been there, but as always, the storefront remained unchanged. The brick of the building and the windows within it were gleaming in the sunlight. The gowns on display in the window promised luxury and grandeur and skill. And Agnes exhaled a sigh of relief at the familiar sight.

The footman pulled open the door and extended his hand to help them both out of the carriage. Esther exited first, followed closely by Agnes. When both women had their feet planted firmly on the ground, Agnes extended her arm to her cousin, who took the offer with a smile before they both walked forward.

When they pushed open the door, the bell above it chimed merrily, announcing their arrival. The smell of the place had nostalgia flooding through her. The scent of the fabric and

cinnamon floating through the air, and Agnes stopped for a moment to inhale it.

She heard the swooshing of Sarah's skirts, and the sound of the older woman muttering to herself about visitors as she made her way toward them through the shop, and Agnes grinned. The moment the woman turned the corner and her bright blue eyes landed on the two women, they lit up with recognition and joy.

"Lady Agnes, Lady Esther," the woman cooed as she pushed herself forward to wrap each of them in a quick embrace. "It is such a pleasure to see you both. And I'm glad to see you looking so well, Lady Agnes. It's been far too long."

"Thank you, Sarah," Agnes blushed. "It's lovely to see you as well."

The old woman waved them through the shop, escorting them to the back of the large space where she had chairs set up around her workstation. There was a half-constructed gown on one of the model bodices she used. And Agnes admired it while Sarah busied herself with pouring them a cup of tea.

When each woman had a teacup held securely in their hands, the woman sat down across from them. Her white hair glinted in the light pouring in through the windows, and her eyes sparkled as she smiled at Esther and Agnes.

"So, how have you both been? Agnes, I hear that there is a suitor you are considering." The old woman winked at her, forcing Agnes to chuckle.

"There is," she dipped her head in acknowledgement before taking a sip of her tea. "How did you know?"

"Well, the dress, of course." Sarah furrowed her brow at Agnes, as if that should have been obvious. "He came in just the other day to order it for you. He had proclaimed that the woman he was courting was the most beautiful on earth, and he wanted the gown made to rival that beauty. So, of course, I had to oblige."

“Of course,” Agnes and Esther chimed at the same time, prompting all three of them to laugh.

Sarah had always been a woman who had loved romance. It had been the old woman, herself, who had given Laurence the idea for the letters that caused Esther to fall in love with him. And Sarah had also been the one to help Charles retrieve her from Surrey Manor and bring her to the ball while Agnes and Laurence had worked to stall both their parents for her to make it there in enough time to announce their intentions to marry. She had always been one for big gestures, and so Agnes was not the slightest bit shocked that the old woman had been excited to help with the dress crafting.

Agnes took another sip of her tea, loving the explosion of flavor that danced along her tongue, as she thought of the words Sarah had just spoken. She could not believe that Benedict had called her the most beautiful woman on earth. The thought filled her with such joy, such pleasure, that she felt full to the bursting. She had glanced at Esther briefly as Sarah had been talking, and she'd seen her cousin's gaze growing softer as well. And Agnes now knew that that gesture had banished some of her cousin's worry about the situation. Surely a man who was not pursuing her because of love, and love alone, would not utter such words if he knew that they would likely never get back to her. There would be no incentive to say them, other than the fact that they were true.

Agnes looked at Sarah, smiling. “The gown is actually why I came today.”

“Did you not like it?” Sarah's brows creased with concern.

“No,” Agnes answered in a rush. “No, I loved it. It is one of the most beautiful gowns I have ever seen, even for your skill it was remarkable.”

Sarah flushed at Agnes' praise as Agnes continued speaking.

“I just don't have any gloves that complement the gown, and I was wondering if you had a pair that would suit it.”

“Oh yes.” Sarah set down her teacup on the small table that sat beside her and pushed herself to standing. “I know just the pair. Give me one moment.”

She disappeared into the rows of fabric, and Esther and Agnes shared a glance as they listened to the old woman bustling about in search of the gloves in question. It was several moments before the woman returned, cradling a thin but long white box to her chest.

“How are these?” She asked, extending the box to Agnes with a hopeful expression.

Agnes took the box from Sarah’s hands and pulled the lid off of it. Nestled inside was the most beautiful pair of gloves she had ever seen. They were the exact color as her dress, slender, and long. At the end of them, right where they would rest before her elbow, was a ring of pearls and rubies dotting along the seam.

“Sarah,” Agnes breathed, her voice dripping with awe. “These are exquisite.”

She ran her fingertips over the delicate fabric, reveling in the softness of it. Agnes could imagine the feel of it as she rested her palm in Benedict’s while they danced, she could imagine the way they would glide over his skin should she find a stolen moment to brush his cheek or hold his hand. Her cheeks flushed with the thought and her breaths came a little quicker.

“How much are they?” She asked, her eyes darting from the gloves and up to Sarah.

She tried to stop her hope from rising in the seconds before Sarah spoke, praying the funds that her mother had passed to her would be enough. But when Sarah rattled off the price, her hopes were dashed, and she could feel herself deflate. They were too dear.

Agnes paused for a moment, wondering how she could handle the situation. She did not want the modiste to know of their troubles, did not want to risk additional people being aware that she could not even afford a pair of fine gloves. She

tried to control her face and hide her disappointment as she considered, but she must not have done a sufficient job.

Sarah stepped forward, holding Agnes gaze with a soft look of affection and sympathy.

“But,” Sarah said, her voice kind. “I would like to give them to you at no charge.”

Agnes shook her head, opening her mouth to protest, but Sarah raised a wrinkled hand to silence her.

“I will hear no arguments. The gloves are made of the same fabric as your gown. They will not match or compliment any other the way that they would the dress that I have made for you. And I will not have my work looking less than its best, it would be bad for business. I’m sure you understand.”

Agnes swallowed past the lump that had formed in her throat. She knew what the old woman was doing, and she saw her words for what they were – a way for Agnes to save her pride. But still, Sarah was looking at her with such a hardened fondness, and the gesture was so incredibly kind that she could not find it within herself to turn it down. And so, she nodded.

“Good,” Sarah said with a smile, clapping her hands together. “Now, for payment, I simply want you to promise me something, hm?”

Agnes held the old woman’s gaze, and since she did not trust her voice not to crack with the gratitude and emotion welling inside of her, she just nodded once more, encouraging Sarah to continue.

“The dress I made is beautiful, yes. But please remember that you should be in love with the *man*, dear Agnes. Not the gesture. Love his heart, not the things that he has showered you with.”

“I know,” Agnes said, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Thank you, Sarah. I don’t think you understand quite how much all of this means.”

But as she looked again at the woman’s eyes, the way they shone with emotion that matched Agnes’ own, she got the feeling that the modiste did know how she felt. And she

decided right then and there to trust in that kindness, and to trust in Sarah's words. She could be grateful for the gifts, but she would love the man.

CHAPTER 24

Agnes

“O h, Lady Agnes,” Helena breathed, her hands clasped together in front of her mouth as she regarded the woman before her.

Agnes’ hands fluttered over the skirt of the gown, glancing down at her body and then up to the large mirror before her to take in the entirety of the look. When she had originally received the red dress, she had thought it perfect. She could not have imagined in that moment any way for it to be made more so. But now, with the gloves and the way that Helena had done her hair, Agnes did not believe she had ever felt so beautiful.

Her long dark hair had been curled. It was not as tightly wound as Helena typically curled it, but instead with looser, more elegant spirals. And while they were pinned atop her head, enough of the strands were left loose so that they cascaded down to also frame her face.

The contrast between the gown, her skin and her hair made her dark eyes seem to glow. Her already plump lips seemed to reflect the color of the gown, looking more red than normal, and she kept biting at them in the hopes of preserving some of their color.

She had received a letter from Benedict the day prior, confirming the time of his arrival for the ball, and as she

glanced at the clock, she realized that he was due to arrive any minute.

“We should go downstairs and wait for the Earl,” Agnes said to Helena, and the woman nodded.

They walked down the stairs together, and Agnes found her mother waiting for her in the foyer. Dorothy’s eyes roved over her daughter, taking all of her in as she scrutinized her daughter’s appearance.

When Agnes had returned home from Sarah’s shop and gave the coins back to her mother, Dorothy had been furious with her. She had claimed that by Agnes accepting the gloves without paying for them, she all but confirmed to Sarah that they could not afford them. She assured her mother that that hadn’t been the case, even if Agnes knew that it was. But Dorothy’s frustration had not abated.

“The gown is beautiful, at least,” Dorothy said when Agnes made it to the bottom of the staircase. “And it compliments you well.”

Agnes stood still as her mother walked around her, making small tweaks to where her hair fell or the way the fabric draped over her body. She did not flinch as her mother pinched at her cheeks, forcing color to rise within them.

“Everything is riding on you tonight,” Dorothy said, her dark eyes boring into Agnes. “I have done all I can to stall the bank. Since I can no longer assure them that William will be paying their debts, and without you having another public suitor just yet, their patience has run thin. You must secure this with the Earl this evening. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Mother.” Agnes said, her voice monotone.

Of course, she wanted to argue back with Dorothy. Agnes wanted to tell her that as a widow, she was more than within her rights to take up a husband, one that could help with their finances as well. Agnes was so very tired of everything coming to rest on her shoulders. But she also knew that her mother had done everything she could to keep their family afloat without a man to lead the house. And she reminded

herself that she should be thankful, before her tongue began threatening to pour out the words, she so desperately wanted to say.

“You will woo him this evening, do you understand? You will have to be more charming than you have ever been in your entire life. You will laugh at his jokes, even if they are not funny. You will answer everything with politeness and decorum, and you will make him believe that you are wholly besotted by him.”

“I already know all of this, Mother. I assure you; I am well prepared.”

“Let us hope that is true,” Dorothy hissed. “Because we are out of time for you to figure it out.”

There was a knock at the door, as if the world itself had conspired to solidify her words. A moment later, the steward stepped into the atrium, Benedict standing directly behind him.

Agnes eyes fell on him immediately. His golden hair glinted in the soft evening light that was filtering in through the windows. His blue eyes sparkled as they raked over her, lighting her skin on fire with every inch that they canvassed. His large, sumptuous mouth ticked up at the corner in a smile.

“You are looking positively splendid, Lady Agnes,” he said, his voice practically a purr.

She cast a quick, hurried glance at her mother. His tone was bordering on inappropriate, but Dorothy showed no reaction at all.

“Thank you. That is quite kind.”

“You look as beautiful in that color as I had imagined.” He took a few steps closer to her, his eyes raking over her body again.

“Sarah informed me that it was very well picked,” Agnes answered coyly, hoping that he caught her meaning.

She wanted him to know that she had gone to the shop, that she knew of the things he had said about her to the modiste and that she approved. But Benedict did not react to

her words. He merely continued regarding her with blatant appreciation.

“You should be going,” Dorothy said, her voice waspish. “It would not serve to be late to an event such as this.”

“No, it certainly would not.” Benedict answered, pausing only a moment to straighten his lapels. “Lady Jarvis, I assure you I will have her back at a proper hour.”

“And there is a chaperone for the ride?” She asked, her eyebrows stitching together in concern.

Benedict’s voice was as sweet as honey when he answered her. “Of course. It is a maid from my estate, she is waiting in the carriage.”

Agnes expected her mother to insist on sending one of their own maids as a chaperone, or at the very least checking the carriage herself to ensure that one was truly there. But when Dorothy just nodded, accepting Benedict’s words as they were, Agnes had to fight off a flurry of surprise. As she thought about it a moment longer, she realized why her mother had not protested. Helena was so heavily pregnant now that the woman was likely to give birth any day, so she would not be able to accompany them. And outside of Helena, there really was no one else they could send that would be appropriate. Dorothy had since let go of most of their staff to help alleviate some of the financial strain. Her mother had no choice but to allow Benedict to provide a chaperone. With that, they said their goodbyes to each other, and then she and Benedict descended the stairs and climbed into the carriage.

Sure enough, there was a maid sitting inside, but she clearly had been instructed to not pay them any mind. The woman looked out the window pointedly, her gaze never once shifting to them as they climbed into the carriage and took their seats, with Agnes nestled in next to the maid.

“You truly do look ravishing,” Benedict said, giving her a wide, broad smile. “I have missed you so.”

Agnes studied his face as he spoke, and while they were the words that she so desperately wanted to hear, there was

something about them that seemed off kilter. Like they were not coming naturally to him. She shook herself internally, wanting to move past that brief moment of doubt as she returned his grin with one of her own.

“And as I stated earlier, Sarah told me all about the gown and how it was picked. So, I cannot take the credit.”

He gave her a peculiar look, as if he did not entirely know what she was talking about. But perhaps the thought of her knowing the words that he had spoken to Sarah was something that caused him strife. Not wanting to make the man embarrassed, she decided to drop the subject for the time being.

“I am rather glad you’re back.” She gave him a soft smile.

“I am so very glad as well.”

Benedict leaned forward, grabbing her hand from her lap. A small gasp of surprise left her lips, and she cast a hurried glance at the maid. But the woman’s stance had not changed. She still watched pensively out the window; her face so controlled it was if there were no other people in the carriage with her.

Through the delicate fabric of the gloves, she could feel the warmth of Benedict’s skin. It felt exactly as she had imagined it would, and she shivered at the contact. She did not remove her hand, wanting so badly to lean into this intimate, almost private moment between the two of them.

“I cannot wait to marry you,” Benedict breathed, and Agnes sighed with relief.

She had wondered how she would be able to bring the subject up, terrified that he would find her too eager and that it would chase him away. But now, it was he who had mentioned it, and she could not be gladder.

“And I cannot wait to marry you.” Agnes returned his words, smiling at him with affection. “We should marry quickly, I think.”

Her mother’s words rang out through her mind, reminding her of their dire predicament and how important it was that she

successfully navigate her relationship with Benedict.

“I agree.”

Benedict’s face lit up with pleasure at her words, and Agnes felt her soul climb at his confirmation. *Of course he feels the same way*, she thought, *I knew that he loves me. I just knew it.*

She wished for a moment that both Esther and William could hear Benedict, could hear that he wanted to marry her as immediately as she did him. Possibly then it would erase her cousins’ fears that Agnes was not going to marry the right man. And it would prove to William that he had been entirely wrong about the earl’s character and his intention. But Agnes quickly banished the thought, admonishing herself for thinking of William at all while in Benedict’s company.

“Just as soon as we get the matter of your dowry squared away,” Benedict said with a smile.

Agnes’ mood rapidly deflated, and it became harder to control her facial expressions as a wave of panic rocked through her. Her mind scrambled, wondering for a way that she could dismiss his words, or divert them. She knew Benedict did not know of their financial situation, and she trusted in their love enough that she believed he would still marry her, even without a dowry. Or at least, that was what she told herself.

But as she opened her mouth to tell him that, to lay it all bare for him, there was a small voice in the back of her head that stopped her. It was Esther’s voice, not her mother’s, like Agnes would have guessed, that brought her up short.

She recalled the way her cousin had seemed to believe what William had said about Benedict. Esther had seemed so confident that the altercation between the two men at Barnley’s had happened exactly as William had described. And if there was one thing that Agnes knew of her cousin, it was that the woman was not a fool.

Esther may be a kind and compassionate person, but she did not trust blindly. And if she believed William, Agnes knew

there was a reason. Even if Agnes herself believed the recounting of the events to be wrong, she knew it would be best if she proceeded with caution.

“Of course our love means more than a dowry,” Agnes tried to take on a joking manner, but her voice sounded more strained than she would have liked.

“A dowry is no joking matter.” Benedict’s voice was serious, his face grave, and the coquettish look Agnes had painted across her own features fell.

It made her worry that even when she was attempting to joke, he was so insistent upon the dowry. What if she was wrong?

The thought flit through her mind unbidden, and she tried to stamp it down as quickly as she could, but it would not leave her mind.

Benedict let go of her hand, sitting back in his seat and glancing out the window.

“I am excited for our marriage,” he began, and she watched the side profile of his face while he spoke. “But we must abide by our customs. It is the proper thing to do.”

Agnes nodded as a rush of emotion flooded her. There would be a time in which she would need to bring up their finances and the fact that there was no dowry to speak of. But she feared if she did it that night it would only serve to push him away. And that was not something that she was willing to risk. Not yet.

As the drive continued on, their conversation grew stale. She tried probing him on details from his travels, wanting to hear everything about where he had been, what he had done, and the people that he had met. But all of the details he provided had been vague at best.

The things and events that he described could have taken place in Surrey, for all the enthusiasm that he showed for it. The man who had sent her the dress, who had given her the necklace of rubies that dangled from her throat, and who had

made her start to feel seen and awoken true desire within her, that man was not in the carriage with her now.

There was no sign of anything other than boredom in his gaze as he looked out the window, the landscape passing them by as they approached the manor where the Twelfth Day ball would occur. Agnes found herself uncomfortable in his presence for the first time. She had been nervous around him, sure. Anxiety had wracked her body when he appeared more often than she could count. But she had never been uncomfortable. And it was a feeling, she found, that she did not care for at all.

Agnes searched back through her mind, trying to figure out exactly when that switch had taken place. Because surely only a carriage ride could not fill her with such doubt for the man she had wanted to marry so badly mere weeks before. She peeled back the layers of her memories, letting her mind rove over the time she had spent with him. But almost of their own accord, they began conjuring images of how she had been with William, instead. She had been so carefree with him, able to shed the mask that her mother and society demanded that she wore. And it was that, the fact that she had seen sparks of herself come back to life, that lit her memories of Benedict with a stark clarity, and it was a clarity that she did not like. Because now that she had tasted something different, it was so plain to see that while she had desired Benedict, she had never been able to be herself around him. Not really. Not in the way that she had with William.

Finally, the carriage rolled up to the palatial manor house, pulling Agnes from her spiraling thought and back into the presence. She leaned forward, pressing her hand to the side of the carriage to steady herself as she peered out the window, mouth popping open in awe as she took in the sight before her.

Even the house was impressive. The windows lit with a soft, gold light due to the candles, the fireplaces, and the lanterns. She could not wait to see the way the light reflected off her gown.

As they climbed from the carriage, she gaped at the place. Everywhere she looked she found something new about the

estate to admire, or even to adore. She found herself dreaming that her family's finances had been sorted, because if they had, she could see her trying to convince her mother to refurbish quite a lot of their home to match this one.

The moment they stepped through the threshold and into the receiving hall, Agnes heaved a sigh of relief. Glad to be distracted by the finery of the place. It had been quite some time that Agnes had been exposed to this level of affluence, even back when she had what felt like all of the money in the world.

She spotted the first Christmas Tree, smiling softly to herself. Benedict glanced at her sidelong, his brow furrowing in question.

“What has you smiling so?” He asked, a portion of his old emotion shining behind his eyes.

“I was just thinking about Esther,” Agnes answered honestly. “She asked if they truly had a Christmas tree in every hall. I’ll have to take count and let her know.”

“Fascinating,” Benedict responded, but the tone of his voice betrayed him, letting her know that he would rather be almost anywhere else in the world.

She banished the thought as they made their way toward the ballroom. Agnes imagined the moment she stepped in, the heads that would turn to admire the new gown. She decided right then and there that she would revel in it, revel in everything that the night had to offer her. As far as she was concerned, Benedict had given her no reason to doubt him. And it was time that she began trusting in that. All she could do was hope that she was not making a terrible mistake.

CHAPTER 25

William

William paced the length of the study in his brother's and Esther's manor home, unable to sit still for even a moment as his mind continued to toil over Agnes.

"You know that you can sit down, don't you?" Laurence asked from his seat across the room.

"Yes Brother, I believe I have sat down a time or two in my life. So, I'm well aware of my capabilities." William snapped, immediately regretting his waspish tone, although he did not apologize for it.

He had been agitated for days, longer, even. Ever since Agnes had showed up at his home to call off their agreement. He had tried again after it all occurred. Tried to figure out a way to make amends, but her continuing silence only served to remind him that his affections were not reciprocated, and he could not bear to be humiliated a third time.

"I was merely pointing out that continuing to pace to the point where you wear a hole in the floor is not going to do you any good. And it is going to cost me quite a bit of money to replace the floorboards." Laurence said, his tone jovial, as if his only brother wasn't currently experiencing a crisis.

William turned toward Laurence, glaring at him, when a cheery voice rang out from the other side of the room.

"What are we replacing, dear?"

Esther sauntered in from the hallway, golden red hair piled high atop her head, and she took a seat beside her husband.

“The floor,” Laurence replied, leaning over to give his wife a quick, sweet kiss on the cheek. “It appears William is hell bent on wearing it down with his feet.”

Esther glanced at William, taking in his bedraggled appearance. The day that Agnes had left him, William had stormed back into his father’s manor, heartbroken and in need of something to distract himself from what had occurred. Thankfully, Laurence had come upon him almost immediately and noticed that something was wrong.

He had whisked his brother away to Barnley’s swiftly, allowing William to lament all he needed and drown his sorrows in the bottom of a whiskey bottle. William had woken the next day with a pounding head to match his hurting heart.

Later that afternoon, he had gone into Surrey, adamant that he send Agnes one final token of his affections. And he had. And then he had waited. As time had gone on and he continued to not hear from her, his condition had begun to spiral.

He had not cared for his appearance in days, opting to merely roll out of bed and throw on the first thing he could find, regardless of if it was clean or wrinkled. Claiming that they couldn’t watch William continue to haunt the halls of their father’s manor like a ghost, Laurence and Esther had packed a trunk for him the day before and loaded him into a carriage; all of them heading for the manor that Laurence had been gifted when he’d been awarded his Baronet title.

And now, Esther was staring at him with such pity, and all William could think about was the fact that he deserved it. He had not looked in a mirror in days, but he could only imagine what she was seeing as she gazed upon him.

William drew his spine up tall, bringing his hands up to smooth down his hair, but he could tell by the look on Esther’s face that it did little to help.

“Are you still fretting over Agnes?” Esther asked, her brow creasing with concern.

“Of course he is,” Laurence answered, and William assumed that he was trying to keep his wife from interacting with him too much, lest William snap at her as well.

The thought filled him with shame, that he had behaved so poorly over the last few days that Laurence thought he would stoop to abuse Esther, who was perhaps the kindest person that William had ever met. It was that thought, the first one that he’d had in days that was not consumed with self-pity and loathing, that had him trying once more to rearrange his clothes into some semblance of tidiness.

“She’s at the ball, you know.” Esther supplied; eyes filled with worry. “The Twelfth of Christmas Ball.”

“Is that tonight?” William asked, aghast as his head snapped up to peer at her.

“It is, I’m afraid.” Esther nodded, her look of sympathy still dancing in her grey eyes.

“Why would you tell him that, dearest?” Laurence tried to whisper the words to Esther, and William was sure that he wasn’t meant to hear them. But they set his nerves on edge all the same.

“Because she is not the one adamant on treating me like I am a delicate thing that might break.” The words fell from William’s lips quickly, but they did not contain any bite.

“Well then perhaps you should stop behaving as if you’re a child, teetering on the edge of oblivion every waking moment.” Laurence shot him a glare, his patience finally wearing thin.

“And what would you have me do, Brother?” William stalked across the room; shoulders set as he collapsed onto an ottoman across from Laurence.

He leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees so that he was eye level with his brother, and their brown eyes met and held each other’s.

William had found it quite odd, over the last few days, that the person who had come to his aid in his time of need had been his brother. He and Laurence had never been close, not until recently. As he looked back on the way that their relationship had begun to develop, he realized that he owed quite a lot of that to Esther. The woman had come into their lives and single handedly charmed the two brothers into finally tolerating each other. And that tolerating had turned into a bond – a true brotherly bond for the first time in their lives.

And their new brotherly bond gave William the right to tell Laurence when he believed he was behaving like a fool, which William had every intention of doing right that very moment.

He opened his mouth to speak, an insult rising up to his tongue and darting toward the end of it. But Esther, sensing what was about to occur, began speaking first.

“Perhaps what Laurence was trying to say,” she began in a rushed tone, shooting a glare at her husband. “Was that we know you have been hurting this past week. We saw the way you were with Agnes, and we saw the way that she was with you as well. And, while we understand how you must be feeling, we also don’t want to see you do something that you might regret because of your pain.”

Esther held his gaze as she reached out a hand, resting it on William’s shoulder.

“I only wanted you to know that Agnes was at the ball because I do not want you to be caught off guard by any news that may come out of their evening there, that is all.”

“News like...an engagement?” William asked, successfully piecing together what Esther was attempting to say.

His sister-in-law paused for a moment, chewing the inside of her cheek as she regarded William with weary eyes. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she nodded.

“You think it will happen tonight, then?”

The fire that had been raging inside of William for days sputtered, its ferocity dimming as he took in the gravity of

what Esther was indicating.

“I think that it would make sense for him to do it tonight,” Esther explained. “Especially after sending Agnes the gown the other day.”

“Gown?” William asked, pushing himself up a little straighter as his brow furrowed in confusion.

Esther nodded. “Agnes received a beautiful red gown only a few days ago. The most stunning gown I’ve ever seen, actually. She recognized it immediately as one that was made by Sarah. We went to the modiste so that Agnes could buy matching gloves, and Sarah told her all about the nice things Benedict said about her while purchasing the dress.”

Esther’s cheeks flushed as she recounted the memory, and still William’s mind was whirring.

“It was all completely romantic. And William, I know that you have your doubts about the Earl, and I do as well. But perhaps we should hope for the best, for Agnes’ sake?”

“What do you mean the things that the Earl said to Sarah?” William insisted, causing Esther to cock her head to the side in confusion.

“Well, she said that the man who bought the gown said it was for the most beautiful woman in the world.”

She blinked at William, suddenly seeming to realize that something was wrong, that he was not taking the news quite like she would have expected.

“William?” her voice was soft and hesitant. “What is going on? Why are you so upset by this? We knew the engagement was coming, we should be happy that he is...”

“He didn’t buy the dress,” William revealed, pushing himself up off the ottoman so that he was standing.

He resumed his pacing while Laurence and Esther gaped at him.

“What do you mean?” Laurence probed hesitantly.

“I mean Benedict was not the one that sent Agnes the red gown. He was not the one who went into Surrey and went to her favorite modiste, working with her to find fabric that would be perfectly suited for a Christmas Ball so that she would not have to worry about using one from her closet. So that it would not cause her stress, because he knew that she did not have the funds to purchase one. It was not Benedict who told Sarah that he wanted the dress to be the most beautiful thing that she had ever crafted, because it was going to be worn by the most beautiful woman that he had ever seen. It was not Benedict who did any of it.”

The words left him in a rush, and his chest was heaving by the time he finished speaking. Both Laurence and Esther continued to stare at him, trying to work out what he meant.

“It wasn’t Benedict,” he repeated, looking at one and then to the other. “I know this because it was me.”

He had sent the dress to Agnes as a gift to her, hoping to use it as an olive branch. There had been a part of him that had hoped that she would come to him after receiving it, and when she had not, he had been forced to accept that it was well and truly over. She had seen his gift, had seen the thing that he had bought for her to rival those that had been given to her by the earl, and still, she did not return. But now, knowing that she thought the dress had come from Benedict...

His train of thought stopped short.

“I have to get to her,” he said.

William turned on his heel, facing the door with a racing heart.

“I have to go to the ball, and I have to speak to her.”

He strode forward, long legs carrying him at a rapid pace.

“Wait,” Esther called out from behind him, and he turned to face her.

“If you want to go to the Twelfth Night Ball to proclaim your love for Agnes, I support you fully,” Esther said. “But please, for the love of God, straighten yourself first.”

Otherwise, you will arrive there and you will embarrass the both of you.”

William glanced down at his clothes, for the first time taking in the full severity of just how much he had let his appearance fall over the last few days. He threw a glance back at Esther, nodding. He strode from the parlor, making his way quickly to the room that he'd confiscated as his own while staying in his brother's manor.

He made quick work of changing, selecting a white waistcoat with red lapels and detailing. A red that he knew would match Agnes' gown perfectly. He glanced at himself in the looking glass above his wash basin, wincing at the dark circles under his eyes.

“Nothing that can be done about that,” he said to himself as he splashed some of the water on his face and then used it to dampen his hair and rake it hastily into submission.

Satisfied that he looked as good as he was able under current circumstances, he turned and walked back out of the room. William all but ran down the stairs, finding Laurence and Esther standing by the door, both of them already wearing cloaks.

“What are you doing?” William asked as he stalked by them, grabbing his own winter cloak from the steward who extended it to him and draping it over his shoulders.

“You didn't think we'd let you have all the fun, did you?” Laurence replied, grinning at his brother with a wicked glint in his eyes while Esther clapped her hands together.

“Oh, I can't believe it,” she chimed. “This is marvelous. So romantic.”

“Can we not dawdle?” William grumbled, staring at the two of them.

There was a part of him that wanted to tell them to stay, to tell them that their presence was not required for what he was about to do. But, if he was about to show up and be honest with Agnes, he knew that it was time he was honest with

himself as well. And the truth was that he didn't want to do this alone.

“Alright,” he nodded to the two of them. “Let's go.”

They filed out of the house, the carriage already waiting for them in the drive, and William assumed that Laurence had advised the servants to ready it while he was changing. They climbed into it quickly, ordering the driver to go as fast as he could as they traveled to Welwick Hall.

They heard the driver snap the reins, spurring the horses on until they were going as fast as they could, the carriage jostling them about violently. And the entire time, while all three of their bodies bounced back and forth, hitting one another as well as the walls of the cabin, William hoped that it would prove to be fast enough.

CHAPTER 26

Agnes

Dresses of every color swirled around Agnes, making her world explode in a festive, bright cacophony of fabric. From the moment she and Benedict had descended the stairs into the ballroom, she had been overcome by the luxury of it all. Even with her recent financial circumstances, Agnes was aware that she had lived a charmed life for most of her time on this earth. But all the finery and the jewels and the beautiful gowns that she had seen combined, paled in comparison to what she had witnessed that night at the Twelfth of Christmas Ball.

She found herself incredibly glad that Benedict had paid for a gown as fine as the one that she was wearing. Because even the best gown from her closet would have stood out like a sore thumb and would have appeared drab next to the ones being worn that night.

Agnes' grip tightened on Benedict's arm as he led her through the crowd, making their way toward someone he had spotted a little while earlier that he wanted to introduce her to.

"You will be meeting Duchess Vera Atkins," Benedict whispered in her ear as they approached two women. "And Lady Olive Burke."

"Who are they?" She asked, glad that Benedict's previous sour mood seemed to have lifted slightly due to the revelry around them.

“I’ll allow them to tell you their stories. They’re quite chatty.”

Agnes nodded, rearranging her face into one of pleasant interest as they approached. The women had their heads dipped low as they spoke to each other, their eyes lit with mischief, and even from a distance it was rather easy to tell the two women were good friends.

“Is that Earl Benedict Hampton, I see?” One woman called. She had dark brown hair, and eyes to match, with a round, pretty face.

Her plump lips broke into a smile as they approached, and Benedict dropped his head in a swift bow.

“It most certainly is. A pleasure to see you again, Duchess.”

Benedict took her hand gently, brushing his lips to her knuckles while Agnes watched.

“Lady Olive,” Benedict said, turning to the other woman and repeating the process.

“We’re quite happy you’ve made your way to us. Your companion has kicked up quite the stir.” Lady Olive glanced at Agnes, giving her a broad smile.

The woman had blond hair that she wore piled atop her head loosely, not in accordance with the tight pin curls that were in fashion. But the look suited her, as it allowed pieces to slip loose and come down to frame her narrow, waifish face, making her vivid green eyes pop.

“Has she now?” Benedict asked, his tone jovial. “What have they been saying?”

“Well before we start talking about her like she isn’t here, why don’t you introduce us, first.” Duchess Vera nodded toward Agnes, who’s cheeks flushed pink.

“A pleasure to meet you both,” Agnes said demurely, making sure to keep her manners and lessons that had been drilled into her throughout the years close to her chest. “I am

Lady Agnes Jarvis, daughter of Countess Dorothy Jarvis of Surrey.”

“You can drop the pleasantries, my dear,” Lady Olive waved a dismissive hand. “We don’t care about titles, here.”

Agnes’ mouth popped open with a quick “O” of surprise. The only person that she had ever met that spoke this frankly was William, and the thought made her warm to the women immediately.

“Thank you, Lady Olive,” Agnes said, bowing her head in respect to the woman.

Olive’s cheeks turned red as she fought off a laugh. “Please, just call me Olive. I haven’t been a Lady in quite some time, not in any way that matters. I designed it as such.”

“But Benedict?” Agnes began, her question being cut off by the duchess chiming in.

“Do not misunderstand,” she said, looking from Olive and then to Agnes. “She still retains her title, but only by technicality.”

“And I would do it all over again,” Olive chimed. “My Julius is well worth it.”

Vera beamed at her friend. “It was quite the scandal when she met her husband, and dear Benedict loved the thrill of it all. So, he’s never let her forget it. Even though he knows she prefers to not use her title, as it has no bearing on the life that she has chosen.”

“What scandal?” Agnes asked before she had a chance to think better of it.

“Oh, you haven’t heard?” Olive jested, humor glinting in her eyes. “I am high-born, and a widow. Everyone expected me to marry another high-born and well titled gentleman. But I, being the ever-wise woman that I am, decided to marry a veterinary surgeon instead. It was all the ton talked about for weeks.”

The two women shared a glance before bursting out in giggles. The story tickled something in Agnes’ memory.

Rumors that she had heard about something similar. But she didn't believe she had ever heard the woman's name. The thought did, however, jostle another memory of a rumor, and suddenly Duchess Vera Atkins' name seemed all too familiar.

"Ah, you've realized who I am, then?" The woman in question asked, eyes shining with mirth.

"I believe I have." Agnes couldn't stop the flush of embarrassment from spreading through her cheeks.

If Olive's marriage to a veterinary surgeon had been a scandal, then she had no words to describe the way the ton had reacted to Vera. Her mother had been a cook, serving in the kitchen to the Duke and Duchess of Wald. She had grown up with their son Oscar, and the two had fallen in love.

Their story was all but legend for the Twelfth Night of Christmas Ball. Because during the very first one, a masquerade at that time, the two had professed their love for one another in front of the entire ton. Oscar had declared his love for her proudly, and Vera, once a servant in his household, was now his wife.

The two women before her were the types of women that little girls whispered about as they told their stories, stories of maidens falling in love with handsome princes who did not care if they had wealth or status. Their stories were ones about love overcoming any and all obstacles.

"I hope this is all a positive reaction that you're having," the duchess said, waving her hand to indicate the flicker of emotions crossing Agnes' face.

Agnes blinked rapidly, shaking her head to clear it of her awe as she stared at the two women before her.

"Yes, Duchess," she corrected herself quickly. "I apologize, it is just a little bit of a shock to meet someone in person that you have already heard so much about."

"If she gets to be just Olive," the duchess pointed her finger at her companion, "then I get to be just Vera, please."

"Vera," Agnes echoed, dipping her head in acknowledgement of the request.

“Now that that’s all out of the way, why don’t you tell us about how you and our dear Benedict met,” Olive asked, reaching forward, and pressing a soothing hand to Agnes’ arms.

She cast a glance to her right, where Benedict had been standing mere moments before, and was shocked to find him gone. Agnes looked through the crowd, hoping to catch sight of him, but he was nowhere to be found. Telling herself that he likely just excused himself to grab a bit of refreshments and he would be back any moment, Agnes turned her attention back to the two women.

“It began at a ball during last year’s season,” she began, and the words started to pour out of her.

She recounted how Benedict had caught her eye while another man was trying to ask for a dance, and how they had locked eyes. She told them of how he had called upon her the next day, and though the line of suitors that had appeared at her home had been long, Benedict had been the only one to make her smile, to make her laugh.

Olive and Vera sighed at that, sharing a look with each other.

“That sounds like him,” Olive gushed. “We’ve heard he can be quite the romancer, when he puts his mind to it.”

“Heard?” Agnes asked, brow furrowing slightly. “From whom?”

“Just a few of our friends,” Vera cut in. “You know men and their dalliances.”

Agnes’ mood soured slightly at that, and she worked to recover it, reminding herself of all the amazing things that Benedict had done for her. Two men showed up then, one walking up behind each woman.

The way that Vera and Olive leaned into them, she knew that they had to be their husbands and that was confirmed when each of them leaned down to kiss their wives’ cheeks.

“Darling,” Vera said, diverting the duke’s attention with a finger pointed at Agnes. “This is Agnes, she is who arrived

with Benedict and the one causing such a stir.”

“I’m quite glad to see he’s finally found a beautiful woman to settle down with,” the duke said, giving Agnes a knowing wink.

“Even if he’s been quite the scoundrel,” the man behind Olive who Agnes was forced to assume was none other than Julius, famed veterinary surgeon said with a smile. “We will be so very happy to see him shed some of his roguish ways and marry a lovely woman, as we both have.”

Olive and Vera glanced at each other, and it did not go without Agnes’ notice that concern seemed to be lingering behind each woman’s gaze.

“We’re very sorry to put a stopper to your conversation,” the duke said hastily, showing his friend a pointed glance that set Agnes’ nerves on edge. “But would you mind if we steal our wives for the next dance?”

“Not at all,” Agnes said with a smile, happy to see two couples who were so clearly in love with one another.

The woman said goodbye to Agnes, embracing her fondly and filling her with promises to find her later so that they could continue their conversation. And Agnes watched with true joy as Vera and Olive’s husbands led the two women to the dance floor, looking at them with such love in their eyes that it made her heart feel as if it were swelling.

The sound of the orchestra filled the air, floating over the crowd and slowly, couples began to form on the dance floor. Agnes stayed rooted to her spot for a moment, toiling over whether to stay there where Benedict could find her, or to go and try to find him. She had not seen when he had disappeared into the crowd, and as such, she did not know how long he had been gone. But her conversation with Vera and Olive had lasted quite a while, so she would have expected him to be back by now.

She turned back to face the dance floor, catching glimpses of Olive and Vera dancing with their husbands. Agnes found it a bit hard to believe that she had met them, two women who

proved without a shadow of a doubt that her hope that Benedict would overlook her lack of a dowry was not outlandish. Olive had married an untitled, working man for the sake of love, not the expectations of the ton. And Oscar, the Duke, had not cared at all about Vera's lack of a title of her own. All they had cared about was the love that they had shared with one another. A love that, if the way that the couples still looked at each other was any indication, still rang true to that very day.

Agnes felt hope flaring inside of her at the thought, emboldening her. She turned on her heel, marching toward the crowd as a plan began to take shape. She was going to find Benedict, and she was going to tell him the truth about her dowry. Agnes felt confident that he would tell her that he did not matter, that their love could overcome that small obstacle, and then he would propose. She was sure of it.

CHAPTER 27

William

The carriage creaked and groaned beneath them, and William heaved a sigh of relief when Welwick Hall came into view through the window. He barely allowed time for the carriage to come to a stop before throwing the door open and jumping down to the gravel below.

He swung the door shut behind him, hearing an “ooff” sound out when it hit Laurence, who was trying to exit the carriage behind his brother. William did not look back to wait for Laurence and Esther, fueled entirely by his need to get inside and to find the woman that he loved before it was too late.

William bounded up the stairs, heading for the door as quickly as possible, when suddenly there was a large, muscular arm barring his way. William glanced down at it, following the line of the arm to where it connected to a torso, and then to a head. A steward stood before him, wearing a scowl as he regarded William with open disdain.

“Good evening, sir,” the man droned, filled with an air of self-importance. “But entry is not permitted unless your name is on the list.”

He held aloft a plank of wood, to which a bundle of parchment was secured. From where William was standing, he could just make out line after line of carefully penned names.

Although he was too far back to be able to read any of them clearly.

“Lord William Bolton,” he answered the man. “Son of Baron Rippon Bolton.”

William watched impatiently, tapping his foot on the ground as the man used his finger to scroll down the list of names written on the parchment. His heart was beating rapidly, knowing that the man would not find his name written amongst those that should be permitted entry. But at the very least, the man searching provided him with a little more time to come up with a plan to get inside that ball.

“Sincerest apologies, sire,” the man droned, taking his eyes off the parchment, and moving them back to William. “But your name is not on the list.”

“What do you mean?” William asked, putting on a mask of feigned offense. “Of course, I am on the list.”

“No sire,” the man said, shaking his head. “You are not.”

“What is this?” Esther’s voice rang out from behind him, and William glanced over his shoulder to see her and his brother walking across the gravel and up the stairs.

Esther had her chin held high, looking for all intents and purposes, like a queen without a crown.

“Our name is not on the list,” William informed her, widening his eyes at her in a silent gesture for her to play along. “But I told him there must be a mistake.”

Esther gave him the slightest nod, and William knew that she had gotten the message, especially when she whirled on the steward before them.

“Of course, there has been a mistake,” she said, puffing out her chest with righteous indignation. “We were supposed to be on the list.”

“I’m sorry madam,” the man turned his droning tenor on Esther. “But I have already checked the list, and there is no Lord William Bolton there.”

“Then check under Lord Laurence Bolton and Lady Esther Bolton, our names are there.” Esther demanded, sounding so haughty and so sure, that William had to fight to hide just how impressed he was at her acting.

The man ran his fingers along the page again, but Esther did not spare him the time to continue his search that they all knew would be fruitless.

“My cousin is inside,” she said, her voice filled with demand. “My *unmarried* cousin. We were to be her chaperones and had been added to the guest list by the Duke himself, assured that we would be allowed to attend to ensure that nothing untoward happened to my dear cousin, Agnes Jarvis.”

Esther began to pace in front of the man, working herself into a noticeable frenzy.

“And yet here *you* are,” Esther whirled on the steward, pointing an accusatory finger. “Telling us that we will not gain entry to this home because we are not on a list. A LIST!”

She threw her hands up in the air as if it was the most absurd thing she had ever heard. William’s eyes dipped toward his brother, who was watching Esther with nothing short of awe lighting his features. The woman resumed her pacing, ranting like a madwoman.

“This *list*,” she hurled the word as if it was the most improper thing she had ever heard, “of yours is going to keep us from chaperoning my dear, sweet, innocent Agnes. Well, innocent for now, that is. Because we all know what happens to unchaperoned women.”

Esther looked at William and Laurence, shooting them an expectant glare, but all the two men did was look at her with confusion. She moved to the side, stepping on Laurence’s toe to spur him into action.

“Ow!” Laurence stammered, before recovering his wits. “Yes! We all know about what happens in these types of establishments to young women who are unwatched.”

“Too right!” Esther held her finger in the air. “And it will be all your fault good sir. My cousin’s virtue is on the line. And should she lose her virtue, she will lose everything. You are standing between a woman and her virtue, all because of a paltry little list.”

She glared at the man, shaking her head in obvious disappointment.

“I am so sorry, Lady...uhm...” the man began, trying to apologize but failing when he realized that he forgot her name.

“Bolton!” Esther screeched. “Lady Esther Bolton, cousin to Lady Agnes Jarvis. Who is inside, likely getting defiled and having her good name besmirched right this very moment all because you—” she marched forward, bringing her pointer finger directly in contact with the man’s chest, causing him to take a step back. “-are so incompetent you could not find three measly little names on your oh-so-important-list.”

The man who had looked so confident when William had strode up now had doubt flitting across his features. He glanced from the parchment in his hands to Esther and then back again, his brow furrowing with worry. Whether it was worry that he was wrong, and they were truly supposed to be let in or worry over what Esther would do if he did not let them pass, William could not be sure.

“Bring me the Duke,” Esther demanded, and William shot her a worried glance.

“Esther,” Laurence hissed under his breath so the man could not hear, but she quickly shushed him.

“Bring me. The Duke.” She repeated, emphasizing the words. “Because once he is here and once he can assure you that we were supposed to be let in, I would like to have a word with him over the exact terms of your employ. One of us is quite important here, my good sir, and the other one is you. So let us hear it from the Duke’s lips, that your all-powerful list is wrong.”

She raised her chin defiantly, grey eyes glinting with steel as she stared down the steward in front of her. The man was

visibly sweating, his hands shaking.

“Alright,” the man said quietly, almost reluctantly.

“What was that? I’m sorry I couldn’t quite hear you.” Esther asked, cupping her hand by her ear as she regarded the steward pointedly.

“I said, alright, my Lady. I am sure that it is merely a mistake, and you were to be on the list as you said.”

He stepped to the side, giving them passage to the massive house beyond.

“You may enter.”

Laurence and William shared a shocked glance, unable to believe that Esther’s antics had truly worked. But Esther, for what it was worth, merely gave the man a quick nod before striding past him and into the house, leaving the two men to scramble after her.

“That was brilliant,” William said under his breath once he and Laurence caught up to Esther’s side.

“I didn’t know you had that in you.” Laurence chimed; his voice filled with awe for his wife.

“I simply asked myself how my Aunt Dorothy would behave in that situation,” Esther said with a shrug, but she was not trying to hide the satisfied smile that painted her lips. “The rest was all quite simple.”

They followed the curve of the hall going toward the sound of an orchestra beginning to play and trusting that it would bring them to the ballroom. The three of them were moving as fast as their legs would allow without breaking into a run that would surely only serve to garner unwanted attention.

When finally, they came to two large, ornate, golden doors, they stopped. The sound of the music was coming from behind them, as was the sound of lots of voices talking all at once, and William knew that they had found it.

He turned to look at his brother and his sister-in-law, suddenly overcome with gratitude. William knew that he

would not have been able to make it to this point had they not come with him. He opened his mouth to say so, but Esther shot him an impatient glare.

“Yes, yes,” she waved her hand dismissively. “You’re quite welcome, and all that. There will be time for that later. Now go find my cousin and tell her that you’re in love with her!”

William gaped at Esther for only a moment more before turning to pull open the doors to the ballroom. Before he stepped inside, he heard his brother whisper, “your Dorothy impression might be a little *too* good”, before William began his descent down, and into the crowd.

CHAPTER 28

Agnes

Agnes turned to and fro, lost in a sea of fabric and finery as she continued her search for Benedict. She had no way to know how long it had been since she had left the spot where she had been conversing with Vera and Olive. It could have been minutes; it could have been mere seconds. All that Agnes knew was that it felt like an eternity.

The longer she looked, the more she felt a small seed of panic taking root in her chest. What if she could not find him? What if something had come up and he had to leave, forgetting that she was there? How would she get home? She had no money to pay a hackney....

Her thoughts cut off as there was a break in the crowd, and a flash of golden hair and a bright blue waistcoat caught her attention. Agnes' eyes landed on Benedict, and for a moment she felt the anxiety in her chest began to dissipate. That was, until she began to fully register the scene before her.

Benedict was standing with his back slightly to her, so that all she could see was the smallest bit of his side profile. A woman stood before him, fluttering a fan made of feathers as she batted her eyelashes at him. She moved the fan, and Agnes was able to get a full glimpse of her face, and she realized that the woman was quite beautiful, with bright red hair, full lips, and coquettish glint in her eyes as she stared up at the man before her.

Jealousy unfurled, mean and nasty, in the pit of Agnes' stomach as she watched them. The way that Benedict was leaning over her, the movement of his body as he used his hands while he spoke, it all hinted at something much more intimate than a moment being shared at a ball.

The woman's eyes flicked to Agnes, lighting with surprise when she saw her watching. Benedict must have seen the shifting in her expression, because he followed the line of the woman's gaze, seeing Agnes standing behind them.

She had expected for him to pale, or to look like he had been caught doing something nefarious. But instead, he gave her a slow, easy smile. Turning back to the woman he dipped his head, whispering something in her ear and she nodded. She shot Agnes one more look, one that Agnes was unable to read, before turning and disappearing into the crowd.

Benedict faced her again, looking cool and relaxed.

"Hello, my dear," he said as he approached her, a beautiful grin fixing itself upon his face. "Did you enjoy your conversation with Vera and Olive? Quite the pair, those two."

He chuckled and shook his head slightly. Agnes' brow furrowed, confusion rocketing through her. The scene she had stumbled upon between Benedict and that woman had seemed so scandalous at first, but if it had been, wouldn't he be seemingly affected by getting caught?

Her confusion was replaced with doubt as she peered up at his handsome face. She was taking too long to answer, and Benedict cocked his head at her.

"Agnes? Are you alright?"

"Yes," she said, blowing out a shaky laugh and trying to dismiss her concerns. Surely, she was overreacting. "And yes, I enjoyed getting to know them very much. I'm also glad you allowed them to tell their own stories. They were quite... illuminating."

"They have that effect," Benedict said with a grin.

The orchestra switched music, the first chords of a new song filling the air, and Benedict extended his arm to her.

“Come,” he said confidently. “Let’s dance. I want to show you off.”

He winked at her, and Agnes blushed as she looped her arm through his. They made their way through the crowd, and Agnes chastised herself for doubting him. They stepped onto the dance floor, hands pressing together as they began to twirl to the music.

She tried to curb her curiosity, but it was eating at her. And finally, she gave in.

“Who was that you were speaking to?” Agnes asked, tilting her head up so that she could gaze upon Benedict’s face. “When I walked up behind you?”

“Just a family friend,” he answered, as if it was the easiest response in the world. Which Agnes guessed it should be if it were the truth. “She motioned me over while you were talking to Vera and Olive, and I didn’t want to interrupt your conversation, so I slipped away. I figured it would only take a moment, but it turns out she had quite a lot to say.”

“About what?”

Benedict chuckled good naturedly. “You’re a curious one this evening.”

He smiled down at her face, and Agnes wondered how she had ever doubted him. The red of her glove that was placed in his hand caught her eye, and she looked at it, keeping her eyes fixed on the beautiful, deep fabric as Benedict spun her to the music. Then, her gaze moved to the gown. The one that he had made especially for her, conjured from his fantasies of her on this very night. Agnes suddenly felt embarrassed that she had thought Benedict capable of being up to anything improper with the red-headed woman.

“What are you thinking?” He asked, his blue eyes shining as they roved over her face.

“I’m thinking that I’m grateful.” Agnes answered honestly.

She recalled Vera and Olive, and their stories of love. When they had left her on the dance floor, she had been overcome with the hope of it all, and she reminded herself of

why she had gone to find Benedict in the first place. She steeled her spine and harkened her courage before continuing.

“I am grateful for this night, and for you. For all that you’ve done for me.” Agnes’ voice was low and reverent, and Benedict bent his head slightly to bring them closer, allowing him to hear her better. “The necklace, the gown. It is all so incredibly perfect, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to sufficiently express my gratitude.”

“The gown?” Benedict asked, leaning back, and staring at her as confusion roved over her face. “You mean the color? Yes, I told you that the red would look stunning on you, and I was very glad to see that I was right. You’ve been the talk of the ball.”

Benedict gave a self-satisfied chuckle, and a pang of unease wound itself around her, but Agnes ignored it. She was determined to finally get her truths out in the open.

“Not just the color,” Agnes continued with the shake of her head. “But all of it. Going to Sarah to have it made, telling her all those kind words and having it gifted to me. It was a lovely gesture. And after talking to Vera and Olive tonight, I know what I need to do.”

She paused to gulp past the emotion that was growing thick in her throat, and Benedict cut in.

“Agnes,” his brow was deeply furrowed, his confusion from a moment before having grown exponentially. “What are you talking about?”

“How you gifted me this dress.” She supplied. “It all made me see the truth. That we love each other, and that love will be enough. Will be enough to overcome the fact that I have no dowry, that I....”

“You what?” Benedict hissed, and he stopped moving entirely.

His arms, which just seconds before were wrapped around her, dropped to his side as he took a step back.

“What do you mean that you do not have a dowry?”

It was Agnes' turn to be confused.

"My family, we are in quite a bit of trouble with our finances," she spoke as low as she could, terrified that someone would overhear. She took a step closer to Benedict, wanting to close the distance, but he took another step back as she advanced.

A pang of hurt rang out through Agnes as she regarded the man before her.

"When my father died, my mother mismanaged our estate. She's been selling some of our things for years to try to keep us afloat. But now there is nothing left to sell. We may have titles, but we have little else."

The earl continued to gape at her, not saying anything as Agnes continued. She spoke quickly, terrified that if she stopped speaking, if she let herself consider for just a moment the way that Benedict was looking at her, or the way his entire demeanor had changed the moment she mentioned the lack of a dowry, her resolve would crumble entirely.

"But I know that it's all going to be alright. I know that we will figure this out together, exactly as it should be. And when we're engaged, the bank..."

"Engaged?" Benedict barked a laugh, shaking his head.

He didn't say anything else, just turned and strode into the crowd, shaking his head as he went. Agnes stood for only a second, staring after his retreating form, watching as the blue of his waistcoat was swallowed up by the crowd. He was making his way toward the back part of the ballroom, where a set of stairs led up to a mezzanine that also connected to balconies that overlooked the gardens.

She watched as he reached the bottom step, beginning to climb. And Agnes was suddenly overcome with the fear that if she let him disappear, if she let him push his way out those doors, then everything that she had worked for to secure the engagement would be lost.

Agnes surged forward, pushing her way through the crowd as she followed the path that Benedict had taken. At one point,

she could have sworn that she heard someone behind her calling out her name, but she did not have time to turn to see who it was. She was too determined to get to Benedict, to the man that she had risked everything, including William, for.

CHAPTER 29

William

William turned in a circle, desperation racking him as he searched for Agnes. He had been looking for what had felt like hours but could have only actually been minutes. The only thing that William knew was that Agnes was wearing red. But that was of no use, because red was apparently a popular color for a Christmas Ball.

A flash of a bright red gown and dark hair caught his eye, and he whirled toward it, pushing through the crowd in pursuit of a clear glimpse. But when he got it, his heart began to deflate – it was not Agnes.

William stopped in his tracks, beginning to wonder if perhaps he had set himself out on a fool's journey. The ballroom was too crowded, and there was no way he would be able to find her unless he was given a miracle. Instead of the people, William raked his eyes over his surroundings.

On the far side of the room, there were stairs that led to the mezzanine, and the indoor balcony overlooked the entire crowd. He wondered if perhaps getting a higher vantage point would assist his searching, and he began to push his way toward it. William had only gone a few steps when the crowd in front of him parted, making a clear path between him and the dance floor.

Once again, his attention was drawn by something red, and when his eyes focused on it, he could not believe it. There was

Agnes. Resplendent in the gown that he'd had Sarah design.

He had been specific when he'd spoken to her, telling her the ways he imagined it falling from her body. But he hadn't gotten to see the final product. But now, seeing it draped over her, the way the red contrasted beautifully against her pale skin, making her hair stand out and her dark eyes gleam, he could not believe the perfection of it all.

William's moment of awe was wrecked when he took in the rest of the scene before him. Agnes was spun around as she danced with Benedict, and she smiled up at him, lips moving as she spoke. She positively glowed as she was talking, radiating warmth and light as she moved across the dance floor with him. It stopped William in his tracks.

Doubt began to wash over him, wondering if being here was the right thing to do. She looked so happy in that moment he felt as if it would be cruel to ruin it.

But just as that thought crossed William's mind, the smile on Agnes' face began to falter. She was looking at Benedict now with confusion and then hurt lighting her features.

It was that final expression, the one that was filled with a sense of betrayal that had him seeing more than just the red of her gown as pushed forward once more. Or, tried to, rather.

Just as he went to take an anger fueled step, a large, strong arm snaked around his body, holding him in place.

"Don't do anything stupid, Brother," Laurence's voice hissed in his ear. "You look murderous."

"I am." William said as he struggled against his brother's grip.

He was sure that in any other circumstance he would have been able to overpower his brother. But with the close press of the bodies around him, and the narrow stance he was forced to hold, he couldn't get the purchase he needed to throw his full weight into it. And as such, Laurence just continued to hold him steady.

"You have to think about this," Laurence said, voice low and fervent. "She helped me win my happy ending, and I'm

going to help her get hers. And I won't have your temper ruining this for any of us. So, I'm going to let you go, and then we're going to come up with a plan. Alright?"

William paused, considering his options. But the people around them were starting to take notice, hurried glances were being thrown their way, and the last thing that William wanted on him at that moment was attention. So, he nodded.

He could feel his brother considering if William's agreement was genuine, but Laurence also must have noticed the people beginning to stare at them because he heaved a frustrated sigh and then loosened his grip.

William used that moment to explode forward, pushing his way through the crowd without slowing. Benedict had stepped away from Agnes now, and she was staring at him with a wide-eyed expression as she spoke to him. The earl shook his head and mumbled something, but William was too far away to hear it, nor could he read the man's lips. But after that, the earl turned and began striding through the crowd.

Just as he thought he had made it through and was about to step onto the dance floor, a couple danced in front of him, knocking William off balance and causing him to spin away from them to avoid falling. He lost sight of Agnes for only a second, but that was, apparently, all it took for her to disappear once more.

Once he righted himself, the spot that she had been standing was empty. No longer caring about decorum, William brought his hands to his mouth, cupping it as he yelled her name, praying to God that she would hear him. But, after a few tries of shouting her name, he was forced to push forward and try to find her once more.

He could only assume that she had gone in the same direction as Benedict, chasing after him through the crowd. And, if she had not, William knew he still needed to get to higher ground so that he could use it to look for her within the crowd. And Benedict had been heading in the direction of the mezzanine stairs.

If William had thought his initial search for Agnes had taken hours, then this final push toward the far side of the ballroom and the balcony beyond felt like it was taking years. Every time William felt like he was gaining any ground, the crowd would surge around him, knocking him back a few feet.

A couple of times he caught sight of Agnes, seeing her in front of him, heading for the same stairs, filled him with hope. At least he was going in the right direction, now all he had to do was get to her. Seeing no other choice, William abandoned the last bit of propriety he had been clinging to and began shifting his elbows as he made his way through the crowd.

He felt the pointed part of his arm come in contact with corsets, with waistcoats, with backs, and with rib cages. Yelled curses of outrage followed him as he made his way through the crowd, and still, he did not care. He was relentless in his pursuit of her, of Agnes, of the woman that he loved.

He had been foolish to give up so easily the day that she had arrived at his house. He could see that now. It was so blatantly obvious all the ways that he should have fought for her. And it might be late, but William was fully prepared to do that fighting now.

Agnes came into clear view, having cleared the crowd she began climbing the stairs. He watched as she hoisted her gown around her ankles to allow her to move more quickly. Spurred on by the sight of her, William pushed forward even more viciously, eliciting more shouts of protests as he made his way through.

But finally, with one finally surge of energy and violence, the crowd fell away from him, and he was in the clear at the foot of the stairs. William glanced up them, seeing Agnes disappear around the corner, and William took off at a sprint.

He took the stairs two at a time, yelling out Agnes' name without caring that he was causing a scene, but still, she did not hear him. By the time he reached the top of the landing, he was out of breath and sweating. The exertion of fighting the crowd and running up the stairs causing him to take a few seconds to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his brow.

He turned in the direction he had seen her take, walking forward with purpose, knowing that at any moment he would see her.

But he did not see her first. Instead, it was Agnes' voice that rose up to greet William as he got close to the indoor balcony that overlooked the dance floor. It was high pitched and filled with worry and confusion. The sound of it, the understanding of her pain that it brought with it, caused another surge of anger to wash through him.

“Don't you love me?” Agnes' voice said.

And there was so much doubt in those words that William did not think. He stepped forward onto the balcony with them, in full view of both Agnes and Benedict.

Agnes whirled on him, her dark eyes lighting with recognition. And then, finally, William began to speak.

CHAPTER 30

Agnes

Agnes stared at the man who had just stepped out onto the balcony in confusion as she tried to make sense of it all. She had no idea how William had gotten here, but at the mere sight of him she felt something inside of her unclench.

“He doesn’t love you,” William said simply as he stalked forward, his brown eyes finding hers and holding them. “He doesn’t. But I do.”

His voice was soft, softer than she had ever heard it. William reached forward and grabbed her hands, holding them in his as he continued speaking. Agnes, for what it was worth, could only stare at him, feeling a thousand emotions coursing through her at once.

“He never loved you, Agnes. I wanted to tell you the truth so many times, but I didn’t want to hurt you.” William continued on in a rush, as if he was terrified of what would happen if he stopped talking. “But when we were at Barnley’s I overheard him confirming that he was only after you for your dowry. I heard him say it. I heard the argument that he got in over the money that he owed.”

William glanced from Agnes to Benedict, where he stood behind her, leaning against the railing.

“He is a coward, he is a liar, and he is a swindler. All he wanted was your money. But he didn’t know....”

“He didn’t know that I don’t have any,” Agnes finished, speaking for the first time since William stepped onto the balcony.

He nodded, an apologetic smile tugging up one corner of his mouth.

“I am so sorry,” William breathed. “Sorry that I lied. Sorry that I let you walk away from me without fighting for you and that I didn’t tell you the truth about just how much this man did not deserve you.”

“You’re a liar,” Benedict’s voice rang out behind them, loud enough to be heard over the din of the crowd and the music.

William dropped Agnes’ hands, and she felt the absence of their warmth immediately. She turned to the side so that she could keep an eye on both men, turning her head this way and that as she looked between Benedict and William.

“I am not, and we both know it,” William hissed.

He took a step forward, but Agnes held out a hand to stop him.

“Agnes,” William pled, turning his gaze back on her as his brow furrowed. “Please, you have to believe me. The man is broke. Anyone that attends Barnley’s could confirm it. He’s been gambling there for years. Poorly, might I add.”

It was only then that something began to tickle at the edges of Agnes’ mind. Or rather, the absence of something. She dropped her hand from where it pressed against William’s chest, keeping him from walking further onto the balcony, and she stepped forward herself.

She peered over the edge and out at the crowd. Somewhere in the last few moments, the music flitting from the orchestra had stopped. And the attention of the ton had been pulled to them by the sound of the two men’s raised voices. Far below them, hundreds of faces were turned toward them, staring up at them in horrified interest.

The two men, however, seemed to be entirely oblivious to the attention of the crowd below them. Their raised voices

carried out, and Agnes watched in abject horror as the members of the ton stared up at the indoor balcony with rabid interest.

“You are an awful and vicious liar,” Benedict’s voice rang from behind her. “Your jealousy does not become you, William. You knew that Agnes had affections for me, and yet you pursued her anyway. And now that she has denied you, *for me* might I add, you are lashing out. It is truly unbecoming of a gentleman.”

“What would you know of being a gentleman?” William roared, and Agnes finally turned to face the two men again.

She needed to find a way to stop this argument, needed to ensure that somehow, they did not continue. All of their reputations and good standing within society was hanging in the balance after such a display, and she knew that very soon there would likely be irreparable damage.

“Gentleman,” Agnes said as she approached, trying to interject, but the two men did not hear her.

“I will not take insults from someone who has gambled what I am sure to be their family’s entire fortune, behaving rather untoward, and if rumors are true, is the absolute worst kind of rake.” William hurled the words at the other man, his dark eyes glinting with malice as he did so.

Benedict’s hand fluttered up to his chest. Prior to that moment, while he had seemed angry and frustrated with William’s onslaught, he had not appeared to be particularly offended by anything the man had said. But apparently, calling him a rake was a step too far.

“How dare you,” Benedict hissed loudly, taking a step in William’s direction. “How dare you attempt to besmirch my good name all because you fell for a woman such as Agnes. You should be ashamed of yourself, stooping to such levels.”

A ringing began in Agnes’ ears at Benedict’s words, something finally snapping into place. The comments from Vera and Olive’s husbands about Benedict finally settling down, the shared look between the two women when that had

been mentioned, the way that Benedict had chosen to hastily change the subject in the carriage when her dowry had come up, how he had stormed away when she had finally told him that there was no dowry to speak of. And now this. It all came crashing down around her, casting everything about the scene before her in a stark, vicious new light.

Why would he react so offended to William's accusation of being a rake, if he was not afraid that it was true? '*A woman such as Agnes*'. Those words echoed again and again in her mind as she stared between the two men.

William's dark eyes were glaring at Benedict in anger, his mouth opening for another retort. But Benedict? Now that Agnes looked more closely, there was something about his righteous indignation that seemed false. A glint in his blue eyes that did not match the situation, at least, not the situation of a man defending his honor against lies. What it did resemble, however, was a man terrified that he was about to be caught by the truth.

Agnes took another step forward, placing herself firmly between the two men as she glanced back and forth. Before William could say whatever it was he was about to, something that Agnes was sure would only continue this feud, she held up her hand to stop him. William's brown eyes flicked to her, and immediately his mouth closed with a snap, the anger in his eyes dulling and turning to affection as he regarded her. He looked at her hopefully, expectantly. But Agnes looked away from him; turning, instead, to glare at Benedict.

"Is that why you ran when I told you about my dowry?" Agnes asked simply.

Her voice was low, all thoughts of the ton that she knew was still watching driven from her mind as she stared at the man before her, waiting for him to answer. There was the sound of footsteps behind them, someone approached the mezzanine with hasty, hurried strides and then came to a stop just beyond the confines of the balcony. Agnes did not turn to look at whoever the newcomer was. Instead, she kept her gaze focused on Benedict. She watched as his eyes widened with

horror and a blush rose high and fast into his cheeks. Whoever had just joined them complicated matters for him quite a lot.

“Why did you run away when I told you about my dowry, Benedict?” Agnes insisted, making her words loud and hard, letting him know that she was in no mood to be lied to or led astray.

Benedict turned his attention back to her, gaping like a fish. But it was not his voice that she heard next. No, a high-pitched woman’s voice rang out from behind them all.

“You’ve promised to marry her, too?”

CHAPTER 31

William

William turned to glance at the newcomer, spotting a woman with bright red hair piled atop her head who was looking at Benedict with imploring eyes.

“Have you promised to marry this woman, Benny?” She asked again, stepping further onto the balcony with them.

The woman using the familiar, short nickname for him brought them all up short. It betrayed a deep intimacy and comfort that had many explanations, but none of them painted the earl in a good light. The red-haired woman pointed to Agnes, who still stood between William and Benedict, and William turned his gaze back to the woman that he loved. Her mouth was open in shock as she looked between the other woman and the earl.

“What do you mean ‘too’?” Agnes asked, her gaze narrowing on the woman before glancing back to Benedict. “Are you promised to this woman?”

“My father gave him money!” The lady insisted, walking forward to stand beside Agnes. “‘I love you, Eleanor. You are the only woman for me, Eleanor.’ That is what you said to me, was it not?”

The woman, who William now assumed was named Eleanor, stepped toward Benedict. She raised a finger to point at his chest accusingly as she hurled the words at him. “You

told me incessantly to wait just a little while longer, that you had business ventures to work out before you could issue an official proposal. Which is why my father gave you money in the first place, to help make the timeline not as long before we could wed. Was that all a lie, Benny?"

The earl gaped at the woman, apparently at a loss for words. Eleanor seemed to not care if he answered or not. She turned instead to Agnes.

"Do you know that he left the first ball of the season to be with me?" Eleanor asked, causing Agnes to blanch. "He showed up with you, and I got jealous. He assured me that you were merely a friend of the family and was with you to help you navigate the season while you searched for a husband. We had had plans that night, to slip away together regardless. So, I did not think much of it. But was that true? Is he merely your friend or is there something more between the two of you?"

She was looking at Agnes with hope filled eyes, and William's heart went out to the woman. What Benedict had told her was very clearly a lie, anyone should have been able to see it. But he guessed that a mind addled by love will excuse all manner of things. It was a lesson he, himself, had recently been forced to learn.

"It is not true," Agnes said, glancing between Eleanor, to Benedict, and then to William before repeating the cycle. "He claimed every dance on my dance card, speaking for my time for the entire evening before I went out to the garden. But when I came back, he was gone." Agnes glared at Benedict. "Was that your plan all along? And even before then, all of the beautiful promises, the gifts and the jewels, that was all clearly untrue. You were going to what? Defraud my family of a dowry, pay your debts and then disappear into the ether? String myself and Eleanor along for as long as you could to ensure you got all the money you could before you broke our hearts and left our reputations in ruin?"

Benedict, finally seeming to find his voice stepped forward. His hands were raised in front of his torso in a placating manner as he approached the two women cautiously.

“Ladies, I assure you this has all been a rather large misunderstanding.” The earl’s voice was low and placating, his charm turned on full force, and William found that he could not blame either woman for believing his lies. Not now that he was seeing the man in action. “I think we should all take a moment to cool ourselves...”

“Cool ourselves?” Eleanor demanded, her tone high and shrill. “How dare you! You lie to me, to both of us,” she gestured between herself and Agnes, “you take money from my father, and now you attempt to use pretty words and charming smiles to get yourself out of this? I will not have it.”

Eleanor stomped her foot on the ground, and a worried, fearful expression crossed Benedict’s face. William had to assume the man was now realizing that absolving himself of the situation was proving to be more difficult than he had imagined, and Benedict began to throw glances all around the space. William knew that look, had seen it in the eyes of game and beasts on the occasions where he had joined his father for a hunt.

The earl was a cornered animal, and he was about to do all that he could to find a way out of the trap before him. Anger, pure and unbridled, rose up in William when he realized with a start that Benedict was going to attempt to flee. The coward! The scoundrel!

And so, when the man began to move, jolting forward in a rush, William was all too prepared to catch him. In one long, fast stride, he made it to the earl before he could push his way past Agnes and Eleanor. The two women let out small screeches of alarm as William gathered Benedict by the lapels, shoving hard so the man’s back hit the railing of the balcony.

Gasps and cries of outrage rang out from the crowd below them, and he realized that they must have garnered the attention of the ton with their yelled words and dramatics. But William did not care. Instead, he bared his teeth at the man he held tightly in his grasp.

“You will not flee,” he snarled in Benedict’s face.

He had not expected what had happened next. The earl reared back his arm, sending his fist flying toward William's face. He moved his head at the last moment, so that only the man's knuckles grazed his cheek. And still, William did not let go of the hold that he had on the other man's shirt.

"Unhand me," Benedict yelled as the two of them began to tussle.

William held fast as Benedict's hands scraped and scrounged, trying to find purchase around William's grip to pry his fingers back. William loosened one hand, drawing back to punch the earl as the man had done to him, but right as he was about to send his fist flying forward, a large, strong hand descended on his own.

"Brother," Laurence's voice said from behind him, "this is not the way."

Laurence's grip was hard on William's hand and one of his shoulders, pulling him off of the earl. The other man surged forward, but was quickly caught by someone else. A rather large man who was finely dressed, and who William vaguely recognized as a member of the ton, but whose name he could not recall in that moment. Either way, the barrel-chested gentleman assisting his brother secured his arm around Benedict, keeping him from moving any further despite how much the earl tried to wiggle his way out of it.

Eleanor was screeching behind him, wailing with the flurry of activity going on around her. But in the din of it all, there was one voice that William did not hear.

He whirled, casting a hurried glance around the mezzanine for the one person he wished to find above all others. But Agnes was nowhere to be found. William shrugged out from under his brother's grip.

"I am fine." He murmured as he stepped away from the earl.

He walked a few paces into the crowd now collecting on the mezzanine, others having rushed up the stairs to help ensure a true and proper row didn't break out. But William no

longer cared about Benedict or what would happen to him, his thoughts were solely concerned with Agnes and what she must be feeling.

His eyes roved wildly around the space, searching for any sign of her at all. And the longer that went by without him seeing her the more the anxiety rose, wild and unbidden, in the very center of his chest.

What must she think of him? Surely, she now believed him to be some sort of brute who would rather solve problems with his fist instead of his words. And after that display....

There. The briefest flash of crimson caught his eye and he turned toward it. A dark head of hair disappeared through one of the doors that led outdoors to the gardens, and it fluttered softly behind her as she faded from his sight.

He pushed forward, moving himself with purpose as even more people pushed their way into the already crowded space. He could vaguely hear Benedict in the background, pleading with whoever held him to let him go. But now there were the sounds of more voices, more female voices, filling the air with wild accusations.

Had William not been so desperate in his pursuit of Agnes, he would have stopped to admire the man's downfall. But as such, he knew he didn't have a moment to spare if he wanted to persuade her that he was not the man that she had just witnessed. And he wanted to tell her the truth, all of it. About how much he loved her. Not the person that she pretended to be in front of her mother and in front of society. But *her*.

And he knew that if he did not hurry, he would not get the chance. So, William pushed harder, shoving people out of the way as they continued to pour up the stairs and onto the landing, all propriety thrown to the wind as they struggled to get a better view of the drama unfolding behind him with Earl Benedict.

He spotted Esther, standing at the edge of the crowd, teetering on the tips of her toes in search of her husband. Her eyes landed on William instead. In a final burst forward, he made his way to her.

“He’s alright,” he assured her, but he did not stop. “Agnes. The garden. I have to go.”

Esther just nodded at him, turning her attention back in the direction of where he last saw his brother as William finally reached the door. He pushed it open, the cool air rushing out to greet him as he ran out onto the patio to the railing that overlooked the grounds below. And there he saw her, disappearing into the hedge maze. Without a second thought, William ran after her.

CHAPTER 32

Agnes

Agnes limped through the bushes as their branches reached out menacingly, scraping and scrounging at her hair, her skin, her clothes. Her panted breaths rose and fell from her chest wildly, and her head began to rush with the exertion of it all.

She had long since lost one of her shoes. She could not recall if it was behind her in the maze, or in the yard, or even, perhaps, still in the ballroom. All she had known was that one moment both had been planted firmly on her feet, and the next the gravel and the mud of the maze was biting and seeping into her stockings. But Agnes did not dare slow her pace.

Instead, she continued her push forward, her mind whirling in a thousand different directions. She did not know how she had gotten it all so wrong. Benedict had been lying to her the entire time. He had never intended to marry her; she could see that now. And she felt such shame over not seeing it then. Overlooking his smiles and not seeing them for what they truly were – sneers.

She had believed his lies when he had promised to propose to her, believed him when he said that Eleanor was merely a family friend, she had believed it all. And as such, that believing had caused her to hurt and leave a man for whom she had begun to develop true affections for. All the while breaking her own heart in the process.

When she thought of how she had betrayed William when she broke off their arrangement, she became overwhelmed with grief and feeling. It was something she had not experienced since the days immediately following her goodbye to William, when she had been overcome and bereft. Now all that Agnes could think of was that she had to find some way to make it right, but she had no idea how.

How do you apologize to someone you love for breaking their heart? That word, *love*, brought her up short. It made her head ring with the truth of it, the way that it echoed throughout her entire being and settled into her bones. She loved William. Believed she had loved him since the moment he plucked that rose for her in the tearoom and gave it to her, causing all the ladies around them to swoon. And yet, she had still left him.

She could not bear the thought of it, the shame of it. And so, she ran again; faster and harder than she had before.

The stones bit into the bottom of her foot as she pushed farther into the maze, not paying the slightest bit of attention to the directions she was turning, but it was not long before her ribs and her chest began to burn. When she was a child, she had been able to run at full speed for what had felt like an entire day. But those days were long since passed, and now her steps began to slow, becoming sluggish, and she realized that she did not know where she was in the slightest.

The air around her was crisp and cold, but not cold enough to freeze the ground. Still, it sent a chill through her, and Agnes wrapped her arms around her own shoulders as she began to shiver. Thinking of something one of the heroines in her books had done when lost, she glanced upward at the night sky.

Small stars glittered down at her, shining merrily as she stared up at them. Agnes turned this way and that as she tried to figure out which direction was which, but no matter how hard she focused she could not recall the map of the night sky to help orient herself.

She let out a sigh of frustration, her breath leaving her in a puff of smoke, and distress washed through her. She raked a

hand through her hair, causing her previously perfectly pinned curls to come undone and tumble down along her back and shoulders.

Agnes turned again, looking for any hint at which way she could go, but she found none.

“Well, it has to end eventually,” she said aloud in an attempt to reassure herself as she began walking deeper into the maze.

With no gauge on how much time was passing, she felt as if she had been trapped within those tall, terrifying bushes for hours. And the longer she wandered the more she began to panic.

Thoughts of William and fears that she would be trapped in the maze forever plagued her. And when each new turn did not reveal the exit, her panic and anxiety grew. Eventually, deciding that she could no longer stand to walk, she kicked off her other shoe and began to run again.

Agnes threw herself forward with reckless abandon, praying all the while that the next turn would bring about her freedom. Her vision began to wane, growing cloudy at the edges, and still she pushed forward, running as quickly as her legs would carry her.

She knew that if anyone from the party were to see her in such a state, there would be quite a lot of talk. But after the events of the evening, she could not quite bring herself to care. All she cared about was getting out of the maze and finding her way to William at long last.

She turned a corner, and there, in the distance, at the far end of what appeared to be a long corridor lined with bushes, was the exit to the maze. The soft moonlight painted the grass beyond the opening silver, and it looked so welcoming and beautiful that Agnes actually cried out in relief.

She put on another burst of speed, encouraged by the nearness of what she had been searching for, but the dark haziness converged on the sides of her vision, causing the end

of the tunnel of bushes to turn into merely a prick in the distance.

She could feel her strength waning, her steps slowing, and with one final, heaving step, Agnes felt everything within her give out, her strength finally leaving her in its entirety. She felt the mud squelch beneath her weight. Overcome by the exertion of her run through the tall hedges and the stress of the evening, Agnes could not coax her limbs into moving again. And she realized that she was well and truly trapped within her own body, and the panic flooded her again. Her breaths were hurried and panted, causing her vision to fade even more.

Her body sank to the ground, the cold of it settling into her. Her thoughts were of William, of how she wished that he was there, how she wished she could tell him that she was sorry. But soon, Agnes had no thoughts at all, as her vision turned to black.

CHAPTER 33

William

William darted to the edge of the patio, the door to the ballroom snapping shut behind him and causing the noise and the chaos inside to fade into the background. The silence of the cool night air was fractured only by the sound of rustling branches drifting across the grounds as Agnes, *his Agnes*, pushed her way deeper into the maze.

He ran down the stairs as quickly as possible, making it to the bottom in no time at all before sprinting across the rolling lawn toward the start of the hedge maze, hoping all the while that he did not fall.

“Agnes!”

He called as he ran, his voice breaking in the final syllable as he pushed himself harder. He reached the entryway to the maze, and something caught his eye on the ground. He almost didn’t stop, but the color of it is what brought him up short. He glanced down, finding a shoe of brightest crimson with its heel stuck in the mud.

“Agnes,” he said again, but this time her name was whispered reverently as he stooped to extract the shoe from the earth it was trapped in.

He glanced from it to the path, and then back again. The ground was soft, and he could see Agnes’ tracks as they disappeared into the depths of the maze. He could see the

imprint of her feet, one just the ball of her foot and a heel, the other was a clear impression of a foot. He wondered if she had even noticed that she lost it.

He clutched the shoe tightly, starting off in the direction of the footprints, but he was unable to move as quickly as he liked. He cursed himself for not grabbing a torch on his way out of the ballroom. And with only the moon to light his way, barely illuminating the ground of the maze, he had to tread carefully to ensure he did not miss her tracks and make a wrong turn.

William tried to call her name again, but the sound of it seemed to be swallowed up by the hedges surrounding him. This way and that, he turned, astonished by how far she had gotten into the maze with only one shoe. But then, it was not long before he came across another.

This one was not imbedded in the earth as the other had been, but rather toppled on its side, as if kicked off deliberately. He bent to pick up that one as well, holding the pair of them delicately as he forged his way through to Agnes.

He could not help but wonder why she had run. William understood if the mayhem inside the manor had been too much for her to bear, but surely stepping outside onto the veranda would have been sufficient if she merely required air. No. Agnes had run because she needed to move. And he could not imagine the types of thoughts that would have carried her forward in such a frenzy. But William could only hope that they were not about him.

Ahead of him, a cry of anguish echoed out into the night, high and distinctive, and he knew immediately who it belonged to.

“Agnes!”

He roared again, surging forward now, trying his best to pay attention to the ground and the tracks that she had left. The moon was watching all the while, and he could not tell if it was mocking or encouraging him.

After what felt like ages, he turned a final corner and stopped in his tracks. Not far off, he saw an opening in the maze, spilling out into the rolling yards of the rest of the estate. But there, in the center of the pathway, crumpled on the ground in a mess of black hair and red fabric, lay Agnes.

William's heart began pumping in a wild panic as he bolted forward again, dropping to his knees mere inches from her. The cold of the ground seeped through his breeches, and when he touched the skin of her cheek, he found it cold.

Without thinking, he ripped his waistcoat from his shoulders, leaving him in his long-sleeved undershirt, but he did not care. He reached his strong, capable hands under Agnes' arms and hoisted her onto his lap.

"Agnes," he cooed as he rested her torso across his legs and draped his waistcoat over her to try to provide warmth. "Agnes my darling, please wake up."

He ran his hands over her arms and skin, hoping that the contact would help breathe warmth back into her, but still her eyes remained closed.

"I love you," he whispered to her unconscious form, panic running unbridled through his entire being. "I love you."

He glanced at her chest, noting the gentle rise and fall of it and found comfort in the fact that at least she was breathing. William knew that he should lift her, that he should pick her up and hoist her over his shoulders, carry her inside and demand for a doctor. But he could not bring himself to move her any more for fear that it would cause more damage.

He did not know what had caused her to collapse, and he would never be able to live with himself if he made the conditions worse by trying to get her inside. So, instead, he continued to press her against him, praying for his warmth to leech through the layers of fabric and find its way to her skin. He continued rubbing his hands hard over the jacket to create friction, because he knew that friction brought heat. And he never stopped talking to her.

“I’ve known I loved you for a while, I think,” he continued to whisper, gazing down at her beautiful face. “Maybe even since the night of that dinner, when I had goaded you so much that you retorted back at me without care that the people around us would hear and disapprove. I have loved getting to know you, the *real* you, that you keep hidden under all the layers of manners and propriety. The one that loves a good jest, and who wants to find passion in all the small moments of life. I want to create that life with you.”

He stopped, taking another breath as his emotions threatened to overwhelm him. He swallowed past the large lump that was rising in his throat, pushing it down so that he could keep going. He did not want to stop, convinced that if he spoke his true feelings aloud it would be just the thing that she needed to wake back up.

“I can see it all. How happy we would be.”

He reached up a shaking hand to brush a clump of hair from where it had fallen across her face, allowing himself to revel in the feel of her skin beneath his fingertips.

“I can see us with children, and a loud household. I told you once that I thought love was foolish, but I can see now that isn’t true. It was I who was the fool, for having tried so hard to resist it all these years.”

If William did not know any better, he would swear that she was sleeping. Her long, dark lashes rested on her pale cheek, and he longed to lean down and press a kiss to her forehead. He had heard about it in a story once about a knight who helped his love back to life with a kiss, and he wondered if perhaps that would work now.

William bowed his head ever so slowly, brushing his lips over her forehead before pulling back to look down at her face once more. Her eyelashes fluttered slightly, but then stilled again. Emboldened by the new movement, he bent again, pressing his lips to her cheeks.

When he sat back up, she remained unchanged, and his breath left him in a huff.

“I want to start that beautiful, passionate, love filled life with you,” William whispered. “But in order for us to do that, you have to wake up. Please wake up, sweet girl. Please wake up.”

He closed his eyes, turning his face up to the heavens as he whispered “please, wake up,” again and again, saying it as a prayer. William wished it with every fiber of his being, feeling the want and the need for it rushing through him with such ferocity that it threatened to knock him off kilter. With one final prayer, he glanced down at the woman still lying in his lap and his heart leapt.

Her dark eyes were open and fixed on him, and a beautiful, wonderful, love filled smile painted her face. Gratitude, raw and fierce, rushed through him at the sight of her laying alert across his legs. And he could not imagine anything that could dull it.

Not even when she opened her mouth and said with a wild grin, “that was quite a speech, Lord William.”

CHAPTER 34

Agnes

Agnes had woken almost immediately after William had pulled her onto his lap. She had been just aware enough to register his very first ‘I love you’ but had been so startled by all of it that she had found herself unable to move or open her eyes. Then, as William continued to speak and the words warmed her heart so much, she had not been able to bring herself to interrupt him.

And so, she had lain in his lap, comforted by the warmth of his body and his jacket, and feeling alive with the emotion of his words as William had poured his heart out. It was only when he seemed to be able to pray for her to wake up, all other words failing him entirely, that she had finally allowed her eyelids to flutter open.

Agnes had watched him with his handsome face upturned, the moon shining down on him and making him seem to glow, as he told her over and over again to wake up. She had been perfectly content to lie there and admire him for as long as it took for him to look down on her again.

His lovely brown eyes shone with embarrassment and love as he looked at her. His hand shook as he brushed his fingertips across her cheek, sending a warmth and fire coursing through her that she had never before experienced, not even with Benedict.

Begrudgingly, Agnes pushed herself off of his lap, bringing herself up to sitting, but she did not give him his jacket. It smelled of him, cloying and musky and sweet all at the same time, and she found herself not wanting to let go of its warmth. She held his gaze, beaming at him.

“You love me?” She asked, cocking her head at him in question.

William nodded and under the light of the moon she could just see the blush creep into his cheeks.

“I do. A terrible inconvenience for us both, I’m afraid.” He gave her a soft, joking smile. “Because now we have to figure out what to do with all this love between you and I.”

“You think that I love you as well?” Her eyebrows shot up and she gave him a cloying look.

“I’m afraid I think you might. Why else would you have run from the ball so upset that you threw yourself upon the ground. You were so overcome by the weight of all this love.”

Agnes couldn’t help it; she threw her head back and laughed. When she brought her gaze back to William’s though, a thought crept into her mind, and her merriment was brought up short and her smile began to fade.

William watched her, and as her expression shifted, so did his. A look of worry tugged across his brows, but he did not inquire. Instead, he allowed Agnes a moment to collect her thoughts.

He reached across the space that separated them and took her hand, and she did not care that it was improper, she allowed him to do so. She knew that if anyone stumbled upon them now, the scene would be quite the scandal indeed. They were both on the ground, William’s breeches muddied, and Agnes’ entire gown soiled, the crimson fabric now covered in swaths of brown.

“I am sorry,” she said finally, her voice barely more than a rasped whisper. “Truly sorry, for everything that occurred when I broke off our arrangement. I was so blinded by everything, by what Benedict had promised me and what I

thought he could do for my family. And I was terrified, so truly terrified of what my affections for you might mean.”

William began shaking his head. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I do,” Agnes insisted. “I was a fool. A fool who allowed myself to be lied to and almost swindled. A fool who listened to the expectations of others instead of what I desired. A fool in so many other ways they are too numerous to count. And for that, I am well and truly sorry.”

William never ceased shaking his head. “That is not true at all, my love. The fool was never you, but that absolute cad inside. He was the one that lied. He was the one that nearly swindled you, not realizing the true gift that he had been given. Only a fool could look at the love offered to him by the most beautiful woman on this earth and not see it for the blessing that it truly is.”

The most beautiful woman on this earth. The words tickled at something within the recesses of Agnes’ mind, and she blinked up at William. He regarded her with obvious interest, seemingly waiting with bated breath as her brain scrambled to make sense of what she had just heard.

The most beautiful woman on this earth. The last time she had heard those words, they had been uttered not by a man, but by a short, kind, romantic modiste who was recounting the words of the one who had ordered the gown. The one that Agnes was wearing right at that very moment.

Agnes moved William’s waistcoat that still rested around her slender shoulders and glanced down at it, covered in mud as it was with cracks of crimson fabric still peeking through and it all clicked into place.

“It was you,” Agnes whispered, and she brought her gaze up to meet William’s, who was smiling at her warmly.

CHAPTER 35

Agnes

William was watching Agnes with barely concealed amusement as she muttered the words, “it was you” for a second time. His grin widened as he nodded.

“Did you really think the great swindler Earl Benedict of Hampton could have come up with something as romantic as that?” He wagged his eyebrows at her, forcing Agnes to laugh.

“I should have known,” she said. “I guess I am sorry for that, as well.”

A silence fell between them, but it was not an awkward one. Agnes was content to just bask in his presence for a moment longer before they begin the journey back inside. William was still holding her hand, still using his thumb to trace circles on the back of her palm as he did so.

“I guess I’ll have to figure out what to do about my home.” Agnes said eventually with a huffed breath.

William cocked his head at her in question. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t believe I’ve told you the whole truth of it before.” A blush crept into Agnes’ cheeks and she found that she could no longer meet his eye.

She averted her gaze, glancing down at their entwined hands instead as she continued.

“Someone from the bank came to speak to my Mother right before we entered into our agreement. He told her that we are too far in arrears on our debts, and soon the bank would be coming to take everything that we own. When she told him about the promises from the duke, he said that perhaps an engagement would help stall them, if they could show good faith that the debts would be satisfied soon. But now...”

She let her words draw out, unsure of how to continue. She didn't dare look up at William, terrified to see if he was piecing it all together.

“Is that why you agreed to my offer?” He finally asked, and Agnes heard the hesitancy in his tone and it sliced her to her core.

Steeling herself and praying for bravery, she moved her eyes to his. She was thankful when she found no judgement there, and no pain. Only a staunch and stark acceptance. Slowly, Agnes nodded.

William blew out a breath, taking the hand not holding hers and running it through his hair.

“Well,” he said, reaching into the pockets of his breeches. “If that is what's the matter, I believe it is a good thing I came prepared.”

Agnes' brow furrowed in confusion as William extracted his hand from his pocket and extended it to her. When he opened it up, a gasp of surprise wrenched itself from Agnes' lips.

Without thinking, she dropped William's hand as both of hers flew up to her mouth in shock. She glanced from the delicate, gold ring inlaid with rubies and diamonds before turning her gaze back to William.

“Agnes Jarvis,” William said, his voice shaking. “I would like nothing more than to re-instate our arrangement. I will solve all of your debts if you will do me the supreme honor of being my wife.”

His dark eyes shone as he regarded her, and something inside Agnes snapped. Slowly, she took the waistcoat off from

her shoulders and laid it in William's lap before pushing herself to standing.

"I'm so sorry," Agnes said. "But no."

She did not wait for a response as she turned, and she strode away.

CHAPTER 36

William

William's mouth gaped open as Agnes began walking away, and his mind worked to process what had just happened. He thought for sure that after all they had been through that evening, the things that they had professed to one another....

His thoughts stopped short. It was only then that he realized that while *he* had professed his love, *she* had not. He had poured his heart out to her, telling her and the stars all the deep, inner workings of his feelings for her, and the most that Agnes had done was admit that she had been afraid at the implications of her affections. But not love. She had never mentioned love.

Dread unwound low in his belly, thick and nauseating, as he pushed himself up off the ground and began to follow after her. With the way the rest of the night had gone, he knew that he would not be able to rest or allow himself to move on until he heard it from her. Even if she did not love him, he needed to know why she was rejecting him yet again.

When he stood up, he tripped over her shoes, the ones that he hadn't even realized that he had dropped on the ground in his haste to pick her up from where she had fallen prone. If her shoes were on the ground, he realized that meant she was currently marching back toward the ball without her shoes. He huffed a sigh as he bent to retrieve them, gripping them once again as he set off across the grounds.

He turned out of the maze, and spotted Agnes almost immediately.

“Agnes,” William called as he trotted toward her.

She hadn’t gotten far, and as such he caught up to her very quickly. When he reached her, he grabbed her arm and spun her to face him.

“Agnes,” he said again, finding her brown eyes and holding her gaze. “Why?”

Hurt crossed her face and she was chewing the inside of her lip as she gazed at him. He was not sure why she appeared so affected by the rejection *she* had given *him*, but it was rather clear that she was hurting. And immediately he wanted to make it better.

“I don’t want your pity,” Agnes said with a shake of her head bringing him up short.

“What do you mean my pity?” He furrowed his brow at her, confusion coursing through him.

“I do not want our arrangement. I don’t want a proposal from you just because you want to help me solve my family’s finances. Things might be dire, yes, but I want you to propose to me out of love. Nothing more, and nothing less.”

William gaped at her as he tried to make sense of her words. “Agnes,” he began in astonishment. “Do you think that I proposed to you just now merely because I want to keep your family from being destitute?”

A look of doubt flitted across her beautiful features as she took a moment to consider.

“Is it not?” She asked finally, cocking her head at him. “I told you the truth of it all, recounted exactly how terrified I was at my family losing everything, and here you come like some knight with a ring and an offer of marriage. What else was I to think?”

“Did you not listen to anything I said earlier?” William scoffed, taking a step closer to her.

He moved the hand that was still holding her arm downward, bringing it to her hand and grabbing it. He moved it to his chest, directly over his heart, his eyes never once moving from hers.

His heart was pounding wildly, so hard that he knew she could feel it underneath her warm, dainty palm. He wanted her to feel it, feel the way that his heart raced while he looked at her. He wanted to do anything he could to make her understand the depth of what he felt for her.

“I did not make the offer out of pity, or a need to be your knight riding in to save the day,” he said reverently. “I have all the faith that you and your mother would have found some way to figure it out. I asked you to marry me, Agnes, because I love you and I wish you to be my wife. I know that you may not harbor the exact same affections. But I believe that you do care for me, at least...”

“You believe I don’t love you?” She interrupted him, blinking at him rapidly. A barrage of emotions flickered across her face as she continued speaking. “After I ended our arrangement, I could hardly get out of bed for three whole days. I was inconsolable. Helena had to do everything for me, including brushing my hair. And after, I would try to force myself to think of Benedict, to daydream about the man that I had worked to convince myself I was intended to marry. But still, my thoughts would always slide to you.”

She paused for a moment, and he allowed her to collect her thoughts. Her cheeks flushed a crimson that almost matched her gown when she continued. “I thought because I desired him, that I must also love him. But I have learned that those two things are not the same, and it is very easy for desire to exist without love. I only know that, however, because of how I feel for you. How much I love you.”

He watched her throat bob as she swallowed once, hard. His heart was still hammering, and she was looking at him with a question lingering in her gaze.

“I do not want to marry you because you think that you owe me or my family anything. I do not want to marry you

because you are a family friend. I do not want to marry you to save my home. But if what you're offering is to marry out of love," she gave him a soft smile, and his pulse, which he did not think could get any more erratic, positively sky rocketed. "If you're offering to marry to create a life together, then, if you'll allow me, I'd like to change my answer."

William beamed at her and nodded. "That is what I'm offering."

"And can I change my response?" Her lips ticked up in a coquettish grin that had heat flushing William's cheeks.

"I would love nothing more."

"Then yes. I would love to marry you."

William could not help it. He knew that it was not proper, knew that it was not something that would be looked well upon by the ton. But he could not stop himself as he reached forward and pulled Agnes to him.

He felt her breath leave her in a rush, and he gazed down on her beautiful face. Her dark eyes were shining, and he bent his face to hers. The moment their lips touch, electricity jolted through him.

Agnes' mouth moved against his, and love, raw and unbidden rose up within him as he lost himself to her entirely. He did not know how long they stayed locked in each other's arms, but when they finally parted they were both flushed and panting. Agnes' lips were swollen with the force of their kiss, and it somehow made her look all the more beautiful.

"I guess I should claim my ring now," she said with a smile, forcing William to chuckle.

He reached into his pocket and grabbed the ring again, presenting it to her as she took off her gloves to allow him to place the ring on her finger, where it belonged. Once it was secure, she raised her hand in front of her face, turning her hand to watch the gemstones glint under the light of the moon.

"It is perfect," she whispered. "And it matches my dress wonderfully."

She glanced down at the muddied fabric before shooting him a sheepish look. “Or, rather, it did.”

“I bought it right after I met with Sarah to discuss your gown.” William admitted, giving her a quick shrug.

Agnes gaped at him in astonishment. “I had already broken our agreement then.”

“I know.” William nodded. “But I also knew that, given the opportunity, I would be proposing to you. And not because my father wanted me to choose a wife, but because I wanted to choose you. And I didn’t want to find the perfect moment and not have the ring present.”

“Have you been carrying it around with you?” Agnes’ eyebrows show up, and then it was William’s turn to look sheepish.

“Perhaps,” he admitted.

She did not answer, opting instead to just smile at him, before they both turned to face the house.

“What do you believe is happening in there?” Agnes asked, inclining her head toward the back of the manor.

“There is only one way to find out,” William grinned at her. “But first.”

He dropped to his knees before her, extending the shoes that he still kept in his grip. Agnes blinked at him in confusion before realizing what was occurring, and she lifted her skirt slightly to allow him to help her back into her shoes.

When he was finished, he extended his arm to her and they strode across the sprawling, rolling lawn toward the house beyond. And William could only hope that the rest of the evening had not entirely devolved in their absence.

CHAPTER 37

Agnes

Agnes noticed two figures on the outside veranda as she and William approached, and as they got closer, she was able to make out both Esther and Laurence huddled under their cloaks. The moment her cousin's eyes landed on her, her entire face lit up. She slapped at her husband's arm and began pointing in Agnes and William's direction.

The couple rushed down the stairs to meet them but stopped short when Agnes and William stepped into the pools of light cast by the glow of the torches around the porch. Agnes looked at herself and at William, and she blanched.

The moon and the darkness had not allowed them to fully see just how unsightly they had become. Her dress, which she already knew was dirty, she could now see it was irreparably so. In the light, she could see that William was now sporting a knot and a small cut on his cheek where the earl's fist grazed him. His white breeches had dirt caked on the legs. And Agnes knew that her hair had come unbound, and was curling, wild and unruly, around her face.

"What on earth happened to the two of you?" Laurence asked, aghast.

"I fainted," Agnes said with a shrug.

She was hoping that by taking an air of unimportance about the matter her cousin would not begin to fret. But the

moment the words had left Agnes' mouth, she realized that had been a mistake. Esther blanched at Agnes, running down the final few steps before launching herself at her cousin and wrapping Agnes in a strong, firm embrace.

"You fainted?" She asked when she reeled back, holding Agnes at arm's length and her eyes roving over her, as if checking for any sign of injury. "Are you alright? Why did you faint? Are you hurt? Do you need a doctor?"

Agnes shook her head. "No doctor necessary. I'm sure that it was only the stress of the evening."

"And the fact that she had ran all the way through the hedge maze." William interjected, shooting her an amused look.

Esther glanced between the two of them as Laurence finally joined them at the foot of the stairs. Esther raked her eyes over her cousin, then they landed on the ring nestled on Agnes' finger, and then they widened.

"Are you...is that...are you..." Esther stammered, getting more and more excited with each attempt at speech.

"We are," William answered with a grin and a nod, turning to gaze adoringly at Agnes.

Laurence glanced between his companions in confusion as he tried to figure out exactly what had just been uncovered. Agnes noticed his struggle and smiled at him as she extracted her arm from where it had been draped in William's and extended her hand, along with the ring, to her soon to be brother-in-law.

Recognition washed over his face, and it was quickly replaced by excitement.

"You're engaged!" He boomed before launching himself forward to pull William into a tight, brotherly embrace.

William laughed jovially at his brother's outright display of affection, allowing Laurence to clap him on the back before the two let go of each other.

“Benedict was arrested,” Esther gushed, bouncing on the balls of her feet excitedly as she glanced between William and Agnes.

“What?!” Agnes exclaimed, mouth popping open in surprise.

Her cousin nodded. “Yes. Not long after you left. Many more women other than Eleanor came forward, telling stories of how he had defrauded their families of money as well, and that he had promised himself to all of them. But clearly, he had no intention of ever making good on any of those promises. It has been quite the exciting night indeed.”

Agnes worked to try to understand the very complicated feelings that were warring inside of her. On the one hand, Benedict had been a rake and a scoundrel. She had not loved him, so he did not have the ability to break *her* heart, but she couldn’t help but feel pity for the other woman who had their hearts broken by the night’s events. For them, she was glad that justice was being served. But Benedict was still someone that she had cared for once. And she did not necessarily enjoy the idea of him being carted off to jail.

Agnes shook herself, clearing the thoughts from her mind as she focused once more on her cousin. She opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the sound of the door to the patio opening and then snapping shut.

The entire group turned their attention to the top of the stairs, waiting and listening as what sounded like more than one pairs of footsteps approached. It took only a moment before the duke and his wife, Vera, appeared at the top of the stairs, followed shortly by Mr. Julius and Lady Olive.

“We thought we’d find you out here,” Vera called, glancing at all of them.

Agnes felt another pang of pity as she looked at the two women at the top of the stairs. Signs of distress were evident in the crinkles by both of their eyes, but she could tell they were trying their best not to show it. They had been friends with Benedict, and Agnes could not imagine how devastating

it would be to have one of your friends accused of the things Benedict had been accused of.

Agnes, William, Laurence and Esther all walked forward, taking the stairs slowly until they were on the landing with the newcomers.

“I am sorry,” Agnes said to the other two women, meeting each of their eyes in turn.

Vera raised her chin high, while Olive flushed with gratitude, but neither of them provided her with a response. But that was alright with Agnes. She did not need them to respond, because she knew the ladies were aware of what she was referencing. And they could process the events of the night on their own time.

Just as Esther had, Olive’s eyes dipped down and landed immediately on the ring now gleaming from Agnes’ finger.

“It appears the night was a success after all,” the woman said, and there was genuine kindness and congratulations in her voice.

Olive’s companions all followed the woman’s line of sight, and Agnes held out her hand for all to see.

“The Twelfth of Christmas ball has always been a night designed for love,” the duke said, glancing from William and Agnes before turning his gaze on his wife. “I am rather glad that tonight kept up that tradition.”

He and Vera shared an open, intimate look and Agnes found it made her excited for her future with William. She could picture so clearly what it would be like when she was finally able to ogle him so openly in public, when she would be able to love him in front of everyone.

“I am quite sorry to have ruined your ball,” William interjected, stepping forward and extending his hand to the duke. “I had not intended for things to get so terribly out of control when I confronted him.”

The duke shook his head. “There is nothing to apologize for. You were defending the woman you love. There is nothing more admirable than that.”

Agnes glanced between the two men as they shared a look of understanding. She glanced toward the windows at the back of the house, noticing that the crowd had finally moved off of the mezzanine and back down to the dance floor.

“If you don’t mind,” Agnes said, shooting a pointed look down at her and William’s ruined clothing. “I think we will likely walk around the house to get to our carriage rather than go inside.”

The duke laughed and nodded. “I suppose that would make the most sense.”

They began saying their goodbyes, all formalities thrown out the window after the events of the evening, before Agnes, William, Laurence, and Esther began their walk around the outside of the house.

They found their carriage in the sea of waiting vehicles before the manor, and the four of them climbed inside. It was a relatively tight fit, but they made it work. And as the carriage jolted to life, slowly carting them away toward both Bolton and Surrey Manor, Agnes could not stop herself from grabbing William’s hand from where he sat beside her and holding it tightly. And she made a silent vow to herself not to let go again.

CHAPTER 38

Esther

Esther sat straight backed in the wooden chair, trying her best not to glance at the woman sitting beside her. She kept her eyes fixed on Agnes, who was standing in the center of Sarah's work area on a pedestal, as the modiste continued to flit around her pinning bolts of gorgeous white fabric.

Esther fidgeted with the skin beside her nails as Agnes turned, her cousin's eyes flitting to her for only a moment. A look of worry crossed her face as she saw Esther and Dorothy both sitting ram rod straight and not speaking, but she was quickly distracted by Sarah once more.

Esther exhaled a quick sigh, realizing that she needed at the very least speak to her aunt before Agnes' wedding. She knew her cousin wanted her to make amends with her aunt. And she was also well aware that Dorothy had been making massive strides toward bettering her relationship with Agnes in the months since her engagement to William. But Esther still was not able to fully forgive the woman for how she had treated her when she had gone to live with them after her family's passing.

She had thought about it time and time again; about climbing in the carriage and riding to the Jarvis estate and demanding her Aunt Dorothy sit down with her over tea while they begin to resolve their issues. But she had never been able to work up the courage to actually do it.

A small sound from her right flickered through her thoughts, dragging her out of the depths that she was beginning to spiral into. It took her a moment to realize what it was. But when she did, a spark of shock flitted through her.

Her Aunt Dorothy cleared her throat again, a little more loudly this time, and Esther turned her head to look at her.

The portly woman was once again dressed in finery. After Agnes and William had gotten engaged, William had satisfied all of Dorothy's debts. Afterwards, Agnes had told Esther that she and William had tried to convince Dorothy to find an advantageous marriage of her own, but the woman would hear no talk of it. So, to ensure that she did not fall into arrears again, William had provided Dorothy with a large sum of money and had begun teaching her the proper ways to manage it.

As Esther's eyes roved over her aunt's attire, it seemed that at the very least the woman was now buying luxurious clothing again.

When Esther's eyes met her aunt, she expected the woman to be glaring at her as she usually was. But she was shocked to find that there was no animosity in the woman's gaze at all. Instead, there was something that seemed like an apology lingering in the depths of her dark gaze.

"I think it's time that you and I talk," Dorothy said out of the side of her mouth, and Esther could tell the woman was deliberately trying to keep Agnes and Sarah from overhearing them.

"I think you might be right," Esther answered, also keeping her voice low.

She regarded her aunt for a moment, and she watched as the woman worked to formulate her words. Naturally, Esther felt suspicious of what the woman might say. But she knew that she at least owed it to Agnes to hear her out.

"I guess I should apologize," Dorothy began, the words falling from her lips awkwardly. "For the way that I treated you when you came to live with us."

It did not escape Esther's notice that the words did not contain an actual apology. And for a moment, she wanted to double down on that fact. But she held her tongue, knowing that this was likely the best she was going to get.

If she was being quite honest, it was more than she had ever dared hope for. So, at least there was that.

"It's alright, Aunt Dorothy," Esther responded. "I know that you were under a great deal of stress. And I forgave you a long time ago."

It might not have been the entire truth. Esther had let go of the things that had occurred to her while she had lived at Jarvis Manor. She had long since cast aside the feelings of inadequacy, the insecurities, and the terror of not being loved during the time in that household had bred within her. But she had not been able to forgive the woman who had been at the forefront of all of those feelings. At least, not yet. She did have to admit that forgiveness sounded quite nice, though.

"That's very kind, but it is also unnecessary," her aunt continued, and Esther was surprised when she noticed sincerity in the other woman's voice. "I know that there is no way that you could have forgiven me yet, not when I haven't truly apologized."

Esther opened her mouth to protest, but the countess held up a hand to stop her.

"I don't blame you for that," Dorothy continued on. "You might be right that I was under a lot of stress, but it doesn't excuse what I did to you. It also doesn't excuse what I forced Agnes to do to you. I know that you and she have been able to overcome your differences. And I am grateful for that, do you hear me?"

Dorothy's gaze held Esther's, her dark eyes imploring her to hear the honesty in her voice. Esther nodded, suddenly off kilter by her aunt's uncharacteristic vulnerability.

"I am very grateful for how much of a friend you have been to her," her aunt continued on, and Esther was glad. She was not sure she would be able to speak right then even if she

wanted to. “I know how much your friendship has meant to her these past few months. And I may not have shown it, but it has meant a lot to me as well. I don’t hold any fancies that you and I will ever be close. I think there might be too much that has happened between us to allow for that. But it is my sincere hope that perhaps we can be amenable. With time, that is?”

Dorothy looked at her expectantly, and Esther tried her hardest not to stare at her aunt and gape. If anyone would have asked her how she envisioned the dress fitting for Agnes going, she likely would have told them that she thought it would be awkward at the very best.

She would have imagined ‘ooh-ing’ and ‘ahh-ing’ over the work that Sarah was doing to craft Agnes’ wedding gown, and then she would have imagined she and her aunt sitting rigidly next to each other, avoiding any and all conversation as best they could. And it had been exactly like that until just a few moments ago, and Esther did not know how to wrap her mind around it.

Not knowing what to say, she threw a quick glance in Agnes’ direction. Her cousin’s back was to her, but Esther could still see Agnes’ reflection in the looking glass before her. Her dark brown eyes were watching them, and it wasn’t hard for Esther to see the hope lingering in Agnes’ gaze.

A hardness that had lodged itself in Esther’s chest began to soften. There had been a time when she could not have imagined she would be close with Agnes, either. In fact, if someone would have told her that Agnes would become not only one of her friends, but the very best friend that she had ever had, Esther would have laughed at them. But now, she could not imagine it any other way.

And while Dorothy might be correct, and Esther also didn’t believe they would ever be as close as she and Agnes were, they also would never know if they didn’t try. Stuffing her pride deep down into her belly, Esther met her aunt’s eyes again.

There was a raw and open hesitancy there, one that was so at odds with anything she had ever seen from Dorothy that it

shook her to her very core.

Tentatively, Esther gave her aunt a slow, soft smile and began to nod her head.

“I think I would like that,” Esther said. “How about we try for amiable, and we see where we go from there?”

Dorothy smiled at her. Not a grimace, not a sneer. But a real and true smile, the first that Esther could remember ever seeing from her aunt, and she felt a warming in her chest.

Of their own accord, Esther’s eyes flickered to the looking glass again. Agnes was still watching them, and Esther couldn’t help but notice that her cousin was smiling along with them.

Agnes

Agnes tried to keep her features controlled as she watched her cousin and her mother begin mending the bridges that had long since burned, but she could not help herself. After the engagement to William, she and Dorothy had had a stern and honest talk with one another.

Agnes had come clean to her mother about how, now that she was to be a married woman, she would no longer tolerate her mother’s quips and comments about how she should behave. She had explained that she understood why her mother had done the thing she did, but it had not stopped those things from hurting Agnes deeply.

“Hold your leg right here, dear,” Sarah said, snapping Agnes from her thoughts as she adjusted the white silk and lace that was being draped over her body.

Agnes glanced down at herself as she began to envision what the dress was going to look like once it was finished. It was beginning to take shape, so she had no problem bringing the vision to her mind. And as the vision of the gown began to form, so did her vision of the wedding itself.

She pictured William standing at the end of the aisle, waiting for her, flanked on either side by Esther, who was her

only bridesmaid, and Laurence, who was to be the groomsman. She envisioned the tailed jacket he was having made for the occasion. The black would look striking against his dark hair and eyes, and she could not wait to see that image come to light.

Agnes' eyes darted back up to the looking glass, and her eyes locked on Esther and her mother. The two were still locked in a forced but casual conversation, and Agnes' heart fluttered all over again.

Outside of her marrying William, she did not know what the future held. She did not know if Esther and Dorothy would ever be able to truly put aside their differences. Did not know how each of their lives were going to grow and change.

The only thing that Agnes did know, and it was with a certainty that rocked her to her very core, was that no matter what happened her life would be filled with love. Love for William. Love for Esther. Love for her mother. And love for all of the silly, mundane moments that she would create with all of them. And she was just fine with that.

EPILOGUE

Laurence

Laurence stood in the groom's room at the back of the church while his brother paced the floor. William raked his hands through his dark hair, mussing it again and causing Laurence to laugh.

“Calm down, Brother,” Laurence commanded. “You are about to marry the woman of your dreams. What do you have to fret about?”

“It is not nerves that has me in knots,” William fired back, his dark eyes glinting at his brother. “I want to see her. I want to talk to her. I want to touch her. I am ready for her to be my wife.”

Laurence laughed, arching an eyebrow at William. “Do you remember the day of my wedding?” His brother nodded, and Laurence continued on. “I was an absolute mess, much like you are right now. I could not wait to see Esther, was fighting tooth and nail to get out of these doors and to her.”

“Trust me, I remember. You reminded me of a wild boar cornered on the hunt.” William joked and Laurence shot him a pointed look.

“Exactly.”

Recognition for what Laurence was trying to say crossed his brother's face, and he wanted to laugh again. He was afraid that if he laughed again, William might begin to suspect that

Laurence was actually laughing *at* him, and not just the situation.

But he couldn't help it. Laurence had never seen his brother in such a state. And it wasn't just that day, either. From the moment that he and Agnes had gotten engaged five months prior, there was little else that William could talk about.

"You were right you know," William said, finally huffing out a breath and walking over to sit beside his brother. "All those years I scoffed at you; I told you you were a fool for believing in love the way you did. I laughed at you for yearning for it. And now look at me."

"Can you say that again?" Laurence grinned, bringing one of his hands up to cup his ear. "The part about me being right?"

William rolled his eyes at his brother, but it didn't stop the smile from spreading across his lips.

"You were, *little* Brother." William bumped his shoulder against Laurence's. "But don't let it go to your head. This is the last time you will ever hear those words from me."

A companionable silence fell between the two of them, and Laurence allowed himself just a moment to revel in it. Growing up, he and William had never been particularly close. He had always found his older brother a bit stuffy, and too serious for Laurence's liking. But, over the course of the past six months, a change had come over him, one that had brought William to life.

His dry, biting words now turned into cunning wit that often left Laurence in stitches. He had never expected that his brother was funny underneath all the layers of pompous responsibility. But Agnes had brought it out in him, and Laurence would be forever grateful to her.

It was strange for him to now think of his brother as one of his closest friends. But it was a strangeness that Laurence rather thought that he could get used to.

"I'm happy for you," Laurence said, breaking their silence and causing William to glance at him.

He turned his face so that he could hold his brother's gaze.

"Truly," Laurence continued. "I'm glad that you've found love. Even if you fought against it like a knight slaying a dragon."

"I'm glad, too." William admitted, and there was a softness within him that Laurence only ever saw when he was thinking about Agnes.

The door to the room opened and the priest poked his head through it. The old man was bald on the top of his head and had a fringe of hair wrapping around from ear to ear. His forehead was wrinkled, but his bright blue eyes were kind.

Laurence racked his brain for the man's name, but he was coming up blank. He knew that he should know it. His family had been coming to this church for Mass for as long as he could remember. But for the life of him the priest's name would not come to mind.

"Father John," William said, sparing Laurence the embarrassment of having to greet the man and not knowing his name. "Is it time?"

Father John nodded, giving them both a wide, eager smile. "It is. If you'll follow me."

The man took a step back to allow Laurence and William to pass by him as they made their way to the cathedral. Laurence could hear the din of the crowd growing louder the closer they got. Laurence's own wedding had been a relatively small affair. But, since William was the eldest son and the heir to Lord Baron Rippon's title, most of the ton had been invited to celebrate the new couple.

Lord Bolton himself was standing just outside the door that would leave to the knave of the church, where William was to step out to stand before the altar. Their father was wearing a beaming smile as his brown eyes roved between his two sons.

"May I have a moment with my boys, Father?" Rippon asked.

Father John ducked his head in acknowledgement. "Of course. Just come through here when you're ready."

The priest walked past them, disappearing through the door. And when it shut behind him, Rippon turned his attention back to Laurence and William.

“I’m proud of you both,” Rippon said, uncharacteristically emotional as he regarded his two sons. “You’ve made fine matches. And I just wanted you to know that. I don’t say it often, but I am proud.”

A lump rose into Laurence’s throat at his father’s words, words that he had longed to hear for a very, very long time. He glanced at his brother sidelong, and he saw William’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed, confirming that he was feeling the same way.

“Thank you, Father.” Laurence said, choking past the words so that his brother would not have to speak.

Rippon stepped forward, clapping both of them on the shoulders before he pulled open the door and allowed the two brothers to walk past him.

The pews were packed, filled to the bursting with lords and ladies dressed in swaths of expensive fabric. There were flowers dotted all around the space, filling it with their scent and making the air sweet. The three of them walked toward the altar, the sound of their footsteps falling hard on the polished wooden floor as they took their places.

Laurence felt the eyes of the ton upon him, and he tried not to squirm underneath it. He felt suddenly rather hot underneath all of his clothes, and he fought the urge to loosen the collar of his undershirt.

William turned and glanced back at him over his shoulder, giving him an anxious and questioning look. Laurence shot his brother what he hoped was an encouraging smile, but then they were both distracted by the sound of the organ filling the air.

He watched his brother as the music began, watched him as William’s breath, which at first were panted and quick, began to slow the closer he got to seeing Agnes.

The doors at the back of the cathedral opened, revealing Esther in a beautiful, light pink gown that complimented her fair skin, golden red hair, and grey eyes, and that concealed her growing belly that carried his child. His eyes fell on his wife, and all of his other worries washed away. Laurence no longer cared about the eyes of the ton, the only care that he had was on the beautiful woman walking down the aisle.

Esther's eyes found his and she smiled, and a love so fierce ripped through him that it was all he could do not to go to her. She took her spot across the altar from him, and it was all he could do to pull his eyes away from her as the music swelled even higher, announcing the arrival of the bride.

Laurence glanced back at the doors, and they were pulled open, revealing Agnes standing with her arm draped through Lady Dorothy's. Her dark hair was pinned atop her head, with curls tumbling down loosely on either side of her face where it was obscured behind a delicate veil. And even Laurence had to admit that she looked lovely.

He glanced at William, and his brother was beaming. The man's face was transformed as he watched his bride, with love all but bursting out of him as he watched Agnes approach like a hawk. His cheeks were tugged tight with the force of his smile, and William watched every movement from his wife to be.

Agnes and Dorothy made it to the altar, and when Father John asked who was giving her away, Dorothy proclaimed that she was proudly. Laurence watched as William reached out with shaking hands to take hold of Agnes', leading her to stand across from him.

And as the two of them began to go through the ceremony that would bind them forever, before the ton, before their family, and before God, Laurence felt his heart grow warm.

For all his life, his brother had been incredibly loud about his belief that love was a farce. And while Laurence did love to watch his brother being proven wrong, he couldn't help but think that he might enjoy watching William live out his life with a woman he was madly in love with even more.

William

Agnes looked resplendent as she walked toward him, covered in white silk and lace, a thin veil draping in front of the lovely, beautiful face. Her arm was draped through Dorothy's and as she grew ever closer, he found himself impatient for the moment to arrive when he could touch her.

The two women reached the end of the aisle and the organ music died out, leaving nothing but the rustling of the crowd to fill the silence before Father John began his speech.

"Who here gives this woman to this man?" The priest asked in a loud clear voice.

"I do," Dorothy replied on cue, and for the first time ever that William could recall, her eyes met his and the woman gave him what he thought was an affectionate smile.

He stepped forward, holding out a hand as Agnes placed one of her hands in his, and he guided her before the altar.

The rest of the ceremony was a blur to William. The many prayers, the vows, the communion. He did it all without ever once actually feeling present, unable to focus or think of anything but the fact that in a few short moments, Agnes would be his wife.

And then that moment was upon him.

"You may now kiss your bride," Father John advised, giving them both a warm and open smile.

William reached forward, his hands shaking as he lifted the thin slip of tulle that covered Agnes face. Her dark eyes sparkled with love as he draped it away from her face, and the smile that danced across her mouth threatened to melt his very heart.

He saw her breath hitch as he leaned forward, his own heart hammering so loudly he felt sure that she could hear it. They had kissed before, stolen kisses in any small moment that they could find. But this might as well have been their first with the nerves that were coursing through him. And in some regards, he supposed it was the first.

Their first kiss as man and wife. The first kiss of the new life that they would be creating together. The first kiss that would be the beginning of everything for them.

And with his hammering heart and his shaky hands, William leaned forward and brought his mouth to his wife's. The crowd applauded around them, but he barely heard it. He did not care. The only thing he cared about was this little beginning for him and Agnes, and this one kiss that would lead to a thousand more like it, and then to the rest of their lives. And William found that he could not wait for everything that it would bring.



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A MESSAGE FROM ABBY

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed every page and I would love to hear your thoughts whether it be a review online or you contact me via my website. I am eternally grateful for you and none of this would be possible without our shared love of romance.

I pray that someday I will get to meet each of you and thank you in person, but in the meantime, all I can do is tell you how amazing you are.

As I prepare my next love story for you, keep believing in your dreams and know that mine would not be possible without you.

With Love, Abby Ayles

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ABOUT ABBY AYLES

Abby Ayles was born in the northern city of Manchester, England, but currently lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with her husband and their three cats. She holds a Master's degree in History and Arts and worked as a history teacher in middle school.

Her greatest interest lies in the era of Regency and Victorian England and Abby shares her love and knowledge of these periods with many readers in her newsletter.

In addition to this, she has also written her first romantic novel, *The Duke's Secrets*, which is set in the era and is available for free on her website. As one reader commented, "*Abby's writing makes you travel back in time!*"

When she has time to herself, Abby enjoys going to the theatre, reading, and watching documentaries about Regency and Victorian England.

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