



Cobalt Fairy

PUBLISHING



Duke  
of  
Stone

HAZEL LINWOOD

# DUKE OF STONE

A Historical Regency Romance Novel



# HAZEL LINWOOD



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## BEFORE YOU START READING...

Here is a prequel chapter that will help you understand and visualize the story inside my book better.

<https://go.hazellinwood.com/y1lf9jo1>

Most of my readers love it and that's why I know you will too!  
And it's completely FREE!

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

## LOVE TO READ?

Did you know that there's a special place where you can chat with me *and* with thousands of like-minded bookworms all over the globe?!

Group name on Facebook: [Cobalt Fairy's Voracious Readers](#)

Click here <https://go.hazellinwood.com/Q3RnTjoh> to join me and I guarantee you, you'd wish you had joined us sooner!

Let's connect, right NOW!



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*“You are under my protection now. And you will do as I day...”*

Haunted by his past, Duke Caleb has only one goal: avenge his family. But in an unexpected twist of events, he finds his hands full with the most dangerous distraction...

Emma thought she would finally be free when her overbearing brother leaves for a Grand Tour. Until he assigns as her guardian the man she despises the most...

Only Emma is set on breaking Caleb's heartless facade. Yet her plan soon backfires, forcing her to face the cruel truth. She risks losing her heart to a man made of stone...

## CHAPTER I



“E mma!”

The cry came moments before a small blonde woman all but collided with Emma as she raced toward her. Emma Brown, the daughter of Rupert Brown, the Earl of Handleigh, had only just entered the grand hall herself, and blinked in astonishment at her friend’s spirited greeting.

“Ruth.” She chuckled. “Good evening.”

Before she knew what was happening, Ruth was guiding her into the ballroom and chatting happily away. When she came to a halt, she beamed and spread her arms wide. “I am so glad to see you!”

Casting a knowing glance around the room, Emma raised an eyebrow at her friend and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “I am flattered. But I fear your display of enthusiasm has rather little to do with me, and more to do with your desire to attract the attention of certain eligible young men present,” she teased.



Flicking a single, solitary golden curl out of her face, Ruth Wright giggled. Her perfectly pinned locks were a sight to behold. But then, Emma's friend was always very particular about her appearance. Not that Emma could blame her. This was an immensely important night, after all.

"Well, can't a lady accomplish many desired outcomes at the same time?" Ruth giggled.

With much less energy, but no less warmth, a thin and delicate-looking woman crossed to Emma's other side, completing the trio.

Emma smiled and reached out to take one of her frail hands in hers. "You look lovely this evening, Abigail."

"And you, Emma," came the lady's quiet reply.

Emma could see that Abigail was uncomfortable, her senses overwhelmed by the sights, smells, and sounds in the ballroom. She would much rather be at home with an insightful book, Emma knew. But even shy Abigail could not refuse the call of the Season.

Ruth, on the other hand, was nearly giddy. "The first ball," she breathed with delight.

She spun around, her arms open wide, the candlelight in the grand room glancing off her hair and dress as she twirled.

Emma grimaced slightly as a mustached gentleman had to step aside to avoid a collision with the wild, whirling young woman.

Quickly stepping in to take Ruth's hand, Emma guided her friend to the edge of the ballroom. Abigail knowingly followed.

"You are certainly full of energy this evening," Emma remarked, bringing Ruth to a gentle halt. "I hope you will be able to put it to good use," she added, watching as several couples made their way to the center of the ballroom.

"There is a frightful disparity between the ladies and their male counterparts," Abigail mused.

Ruth pouted. "There are not nearly enough men to partner with! How are we to have a chance to show off our figures if we may not even dance?"

Catching sight of two men just a little way away, admiring them, Emma felt a blush creeping up her cheeks. As one of the men's gazes traveled up and down her slim figure, she turned away in embarrassment.

"I suppose, if there is interest, a man may find other ways to admire a woman's beauty," she murmured ruefully.

Ruth followed Emma's gaze and giggled. She turned back to her friends and whispered conspiratorially, "The taller of the two is quite handsome, is he not? If only there was someone to

introduce us. Where is Lord Mulberry? Your brother will surely introduce us to them.”

Emma had no desire to be introduced to those men. Anyone showing such blatant, inelegant interest would most certainly be up to no good. But she glanced around the room in search of her brother all the same. He had arrived with her, but the moment they had set foot inside, someone had whisked him away.

Suddenly, a strange silence fell over the room. The dancing continued, but every other soul was now staring at the tall, imposing figure entering the ballroom. Emma hardly had time to register that the musicians continued to play in the silence, before the entirety of the room broke out in excited, hushed murmurs.

Ruth added her voice to the cacophony. “I can hardly believe it,” she gasped. “He never attends social events. Much less the first ball of the Season.”

“Why, it is the Duke of Terrington,” Abigail breathed, equally as amazed.

A hard, uncomfortable knot twisted in Emma’s stomach as, finally, she recognized the newcomer.

Many others did too, she realized, as she glanced around the room. Or at least they had heard of him. He was infamous in the *ton*. Particularly because he thought himself above such social engagements and rarely attended.

His remarkable figure stood out among the crowd. Emma made note that almost every woman in the room was staring at him in hushed amazement.

“If there were ever a perfect, eligible bachelor,” Ruth whispered to Emma, her grin spreading from ear to ear, “it would be him. Land, wealth, and status. Not to mention his looks. Surely every woman in this room is at once plotting how she may make him hers.”

Emma scoffed. “They are welcome to try. But they will soon find that such a man, blinded by his money and his power, grows to believe himself above the rest of society.”

Before Ruth could ask Emma what she meant with such a scathing comment on his character, another voice joined in on the conversation.

“Now, tell me, what does he have that I do not?” asked a tall, handsome young man, crossing to stand before them. He watched as the Duke’s tall, imposing figure walked a little further into the room, giddy whispers following him. “Surely he is not nearly as handsome as I?”

The corners of Emma’s lips quirked up. “James,” she began, eyeing her brother with bemusement. “Do not tell me that you are jealous.”

Executing a quick bow to both Ruth and Abigail, James Brown, the Viscount Mulberry, cast his sister a knowing grin. “Of course not. I simply wonder how I might capture unabashed interest like the one being bestowed upon His Grace now.”

“You might start with a better title,” Emma replied teasingly.

When James groaned and clutched at his heart in mock agony, Emma giggled. Then, as her heart gave a sad, little thump within her chest, her mirth was interrupted by the reminder that her dear brother, the one person she felt closest to in this whole world, would leave come the morning.

“You are off soon, are you not, My Lord?” Abigail asked, echoing Emma’s thoughts.

James nodded. “Indeed.”

“A Grand Tour,” Ruth breathed, her eyes alight with imagined sights. “You’ll see the world. And come back to us a properly educated, sophisticated man.”

“Am I not already?” James teased.

As Ruth giggled, Emma’s heart squeezed. “Gone so long,” she murmured, almost without thinking.

As her brother’s smile faltered, she regretted speaking. Her brother already knew how much his absence would pain her. She didn’t wish to make him feel guilty. This would be the most incredible experience for him.

“You’ll come and see me off tomorrow?” he asked gently.

Emma did her best to muster up a smile. “Of course.”

“Good. Well, what frivolities do you ladies have planned for tonight? I myself was entertaining the possibility of a good game of whist.”

“I am afraid your cards will have to wait, My Lord,” Abigail countered. She nodded in the direction of the newest arrival, who was, at this moment, walking straight toward them.

“Why, he’s coming this way,” Ruth breathed, clutching excitedly at Emma’s arm.

Glancing at her brother, Emma glimpsed a worrying expression on his face. He looked as if he almost expected the Duke to be here. Not only that, but he looked as though he were anticipating a conversation with him.

As Caleb Gibson, the Duke of Terrington, came to a halt before them, James grinned broadly. “Ah, there you are. Enjoying ourselves already, aren’t we, Terrington?” he teased as everyone took in the man’s dour disposition.

Caleb glanced around the room in thinly veiled disdain. “I do not often find myself forced to mix with such crowds,” he replied. “I avoid it when possible. Those of higher learning may find it difficult to hold a conversation with most of the people in the *ton*.”

Emma raised an eyebrow. Although she might secretly agree that it was difficult to speak to her neighbors about things not pertaining to fashion and the Season, she would never dare to

insult them so publicly. Besides, just because they didn't meet his high standard of intelligence didn't mean that they did not have good hearts. Many here were some of the kindest, most thoughtful people she knew.

"But I am sure present company may be excluded from such an assessment," Caleb added, a thin-lipped smile not quite reaching his eyes as he turned back to the four of them.

James introduced Emma's companions.

Caleb's gaze then fell on Emma herself. He offered her a curt bow. "Lady Emma, good evening."

Still smarting from the man's obvious disdain for the other guests, Emma replied, "Is it a good evening? I fear my brother knows you too well and is right in his assessment of you. The expression on your face might make one think you were attending a funeral, not a ball."

She watched as he glanced over his shoulder, taking in the swirls of skirts and peals of gleeful laughter in the center of the room. "You are already regretting making an appearance here tonight," she added.

"If I am, I trust you will allow me to place blame at the feet of those who would organize such an event. Not my duty to occasionally attend such an event," the Duke countered, his eyes flashing.

"If duty is your focus, Your Grace, then I cannot imagine why you should attend. For if you intend to add to the enjoyment of

the night, as would be any good man's duty, you might well have stayed away. The absence of a sour and disapproving countenance might have relieved the guests somewhat."

"I would be happy to relieve them of any discomfort," he replied, clearly unaffected by her words. "But if I am to leave, then so must you. Surely they do not need another hypercritical gossip added to their ranks."

"Enough the both of you." James chuckled. "You're confusing our friends. My sister," he explained to Abigail and Ruth, who were now staring at Emma in astonishment, "already met His Grace. He and I attended Eton together. And my sister has been introduced to him over the years. They have a certain... er, frank way of speaking to one another."

Sensing that the others were amazed at her condemnatory words—which must have been quite surprising to them, as she was generally the most congenial of the lot—Emma knew she should offer the powerful man an apology. But his gaze was still heavy upon her, his eyes cold and calculating. Emma's face grew hot as Caleb's unwavering stare made her momentarily breathless.

"Indeed," Caleb added, still fixing her with a frosty look, "if one did not know of our acquaintance, they might be greatly astonished by the way you address me, Lady Emma."

He held her there, his eyes boring into hers for just a moment longer, before he turned to James. "I believe there was something you wished to discuss, was there not?"



“Oh, yes, yes, indeed. If you will excuse me, ladies.” James nodded to Emma’s friends. “Miss Right, Miss Duncan, a pleasure, as always.”

Emma watched James and Caleb take their leave as Ruth and Abigail inched closer to her. She could sense their amazed stares on her, but she could not address their inevitable flood of questions just now. She was still watching her brother make his way out of the room, side by side with Caleb Gibson.

She didn’t know why, but she did not like knowing that her brother had planned to speak with the Duke tonight. Particularly when James had looked so serious.

What could he possibly be up to? And why did she have such a bad feeling about it?



With a familiar face at his side, shielding him from the mob of partygoers, Caleb should have felt relief. The crush of people here, eager to make his acquaintance, was nearly overwhelming. And there were very few here whom he cared to address at all.

And yet, following their most recent conversation, James’s company filled Caleb with apprehension.

“Terrington.” James grinned, leading Caleb to a quieter part of the hall. “You truly do look miserable. Do you find no enjoyment in these events whatsoever?”

“There is a reason I do not attend such nonsensical functions.” Caleb sighed.

“Ah, but you will find that the company here can sometimes surprise you,” James countered, nodding in greeting to two women passing by.

James had always had a soft spot when it came to a beautiful face. But Caleb could not be bothered to let his friend carry on with the other guests just now.

Indeed, he cared very little for small pleasantries. He wished to get to the heart of the matter as quickly as possible. “I am sure you will find much more enjoyable company abroad,” he said, redirecting his friend’s attention. “You leave soon, do you not?”

“I do.”

“And in the meantime, I believe there was something you wanted to talk to me about. Regarding your sister, was it?”

“Straight to the point, then?” James laughed. “You were always like that. Even at Eton. You could hardly bear to listen to the other boys at college talk about anything other than the lessons.”

“I simply did not find that kind of talk instrumental in our education.”

“No, indeed. And you benefitted well from such a noble mindset. They don’t lie when they say that you have the greatest eye for business in the country.”

“I work hard. And my work ethic has rewarded me,” Caleb replied simply.

“I suppose working hard is all any man can do.” James sighed, casting a glance over his shoulder.

Caleb followed his gaze. From their spot in the hall, they could still see James’ sister, Lady Emma Brown, in the ballroom. She was speaking with the young women to whom Caleb had just been introduced. Not that many people had taken note of either of Emma’s friends. She was the one turning heads as she smiled and laughed with them. Many men, Caleb could see, were admiring her beauty from across the room.

*James must have his hands full in taking care of her.*

Caleb had heard stories of roguish men taking advantage of pretty, unassuming young ladies. It was very easy for a reputation to be ruined. And almost impossible to rescue it, once the damage was done.

When James turned back to Caleb, there was a question in his eyes. “I will be gone, as you know, for some time,” he began. “My sister will feel my loss greatly. We are close, she and I. We’ve had to be,” he said, a shadow crossing his features.

As Caleb wondered what that might mean, the look faded just as quickly as it had come.

“I trust her, of course,” James added, his jolly demeanor returning. “But I do not trust others. My sister is too caring a soul, too kind. I fear that others will try to take advantage of that in my absence.”

Caleb didn't like where this was going. “Then it is a very good thing that your father will be here, to look out for his remaining child.”

James sighed. He lowered his voice. “You know as well as I do that my father has no real love for his children. He may have once, but the time of his affection has come and gone. He pays no mind to my sister. He cares only for his books and his own company. Emma will be on her own when I am gone.”

There was real sadness in James' eyes. Regret, too. Caleb felt a stirring in his own heart. He did not wish his friend to carry such feelings into his coming journey. A Grand Tour was a time of learning and excitement. It would not do for James to spend the whole time wishing he was somewhere else.

Caleb held back a sigh. “What is it you would ask of me?”

James nodded. “I must be honest with you, and simply come out and say it, mustn't I? Very well, will you look after my sister when I am gone?”

It would be annoying to have another responsibility on his plate. But Caleb could see that James was truly concerned about his sister. “Very well. If she should need anything, she may come to me.”

“No, that’s not exactly what I meant.” James shook his head, shifting his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably. “Will you protect her during the Season? Stay by her side while I am gone?”

Caleb nearly laughed in his friend’s face. It was a jest. It had to be. Stay by Lady Emma’s side? Accompany her during the Season? Surely James was not serious.

“It is important to me,” James hurried to add, seeing Caleb’s evident astonishment. “And it will be gravely important for my sister.”

“Do you imagine her being swept away in the night by bandits?” Caleb could not contain the sarcasm in his voice.

“No, of course not. But I do fear for her future.” James hesitated again, glancing around the hall before lowering his voice and stepping closer. “My sister was... well, she was mistreated last Season.”

Caleb frowned. This was the first time he had heard of anything like this. “What do you mean?”

“Are you familiar with Lord Hayward?”

“I know him, but only through a brief acquaintance,” Caleb replied.

“Then you may be familiar with his... shall we say, *exploits* last Season.”

Caleb shook his head. “I am not. You know I pay no mind to the gossip of the *ton*.”

Hanging his head, James pressed his lips together as if he were trying to contain an angry outburst. He seemed to compose himself for a moment.

Then, lifting his head, he continued, “Lord Hayward was courting Emma. He made it known to my sister that he had great affection for her. My sister, being the kindhearted, trusting woman she is, believed him. But when it was discovered that he had professed his affections to another woman, to whom he had made equally serious declarations, my sister’s heart was broken.”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “I had never seen her like that. She did her best to maintain a stiff upper lip, but in private...” His jaw ticked. “I have done my very best to keep Lord Hayward out of her sight ever since. But it is a task which has proven difficult. Despite everything he has put my sister through, the man continues to pursue her. He claims that his affections for the other woman were false, that his true feelings lie with my sister and her alone.”

“You don’t believe him?”

“Of course not. But I fear that my sister, given time, might. She is too good for this world. If he were somehow able to convince her that his affections were genuine—enough that

she believed him—I do not think she could survive the heartbreak that would inevitably follow.”

“And you wish me—”

“Accompany her during the Season. Keep her away from Lord Hayward. Protect her as I would.” James shook his head, the muscles in his jaw again ticking in anger. “I would have defended her honor against him long before now. I would have challenged him to a duel, the swine. But Emma begged me not to. She beseeched me to show him mercy. It was only for her sake that I did not go through with it.” He fixed Caleb with a pleading gaze. “So, you see, given the circumstances, how a brother may worry for his sister.”

“But I am not her brother,” Caleb cautioned.

His mind raced. He could not deny that there was danger in the events that James relayed. Lady Emma’s reputation must have been tarnished by Lord Hayward’s behavior, not to mention the great embarrassment that inevitably came from such dishonorable behavior. But Caleb was not the man to stand by Lady Emma’s side. He hardly knew the woman. And she, clearly, could not stand him.

“No, but you are the only one I trust to do this. You are one of the most honorable men I know. And,” James added, his eyes twinkling as if he’d just rediscovered something very valuable, “I can make it worth your while.”

Now Caleb’s curiosity was piqued. And he could not deny the desperation in his friend’s demeanor. He considered this for a moment.

Then, he made the mistake of casting another glance in Lady Emma's direction.

She was looking at him. Hauntingly beautiful. Wide, innocent eyes boring into him. Her lips were parted ever so slightly, just on the verge of speech.

The agonizing realization of what he might be about to agree to crept up his spine. He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. Was he going to agree to his friend's outrageous proposal? What could James possibly offer him to make such a thing worthwhile?

Even as he turned away, Caleb could not deny that Emma was a beautiful woman. He himself knew better than to be affected by a pretty face. Still, the woman might make things difficult for him. Very difficult, indeed.



## CHAPTER 2



“Papa, I’m off,” Emma called gently.

A gruff, wearied voice replied from behind the door before her, “I told you, I will not join you.”

“Yes, I recall. I just wondered if there was anything you would like me to say to James. He will be gone for some time. Do you want me to wish him a safe journey on your behalf?”

There was a short grunt. Emma craned her neck to try and make out any words that might follow. But only silence met her ears. She sighed.

Alone and downtrodden, she made her way down the stairs and, finally, out into the open air outside.

It was a beautiful morning. Far too beautiful for such a day. The sun shone far too brightly, and the little birds that sang in the trees on either side of the walkway sounded far too happy. The world around her was at odds with her warring emotions.

Today, James would leave. And she didn't even want to think about how long it would be until she saw him again. His estate was so close by, the neighboring one to her father's. It had brought Emma much comfort and joy over the years. Her life would indeed be cold and lonely if it were not for his close company. And how she would fare without him, she did not know.

But today was not about her. Emma straightened her shoulders and set off, reminding herself that this would be the trip of a lifetime for her brother. She would not be responsible for making him feel guilty about it.

It was a short walk to his estate, and soon she was wishing him a good morning.

"There you are." He smiled warmly as he led her into the drawing room. "Right on time, as usual."

"I wouldn't risk seeing you off this morning for anything," Emma replied, clasping her brother's arm fondly. "Are you all packed?"

"Everything seems to be in order." James cast a quick look over Emma's shoulder toward the door. As his gaze lingered there just a touch too long, Emma turned to see for herself.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, seeing no one there.

She got the strange sensation that her brother was waiting for someone else. But who would be coming?

Her father had made it clear that he did not wish to see his son off this morning. Claiming that the early air hurt his lungs, he had waved Emma off and requested that she close the door to his study behind her.

“Everything is perfect,” James assured her, tearing his gaze away from the door.

Emma watched him gather up a few remaining items, scanning the room for what he might have forgotten to pack. “Where are you off to first?”

“I told you this before.”

“I know, but tell me again. I want to picture where you’ll be and when you’ll be there.” Emma settled onto a comfortable chair and waited for James to paint her a thrilling picture of the adventures that awaited him in Europe.

“Well,” he began, casting another hurried glance at the door, “we are off to France, first. There, I can practice the language. And thence, I believe we are headed to the Alps. Then the Mediterranean, and on to Italy. Then, Rome, Venice...” He waved his hand as if Emma were as familiar as he with the planned itinerary.

“But you are most eager to see Italy, are you not?” she asked, remembering a conversation they had had several weeks prior.

James nodded eagerly. “They say that a man in high society who has never been to Italy may be spotted from miles away. There is something there that brings a man back as he should

be, when he returns home. A certain confidence that cannot be gained unless a man has left his home and set out in search of new experiences and grand adventure.”

“It sounds magical,” Emma mused, trying to picture the all-but-mythical place. But when she turned back to her brother, he was once again staring at the entryway.

“What is it?” she asked, now more than a little annoyed. “Are you expecting someone? Or are you just eager to be rid of my company?”

“Darling sister.” James chuckled, moving to stand beside her. “Do not say such a thing. I could never tire of your company.”

Emma hung her head. “I’m sorry. But what is going on? You’re not yourself today.”

“I may be a little preoccupied. And for that, I apologize.” He crossed the room again. “But it is all for the best.”

Emma raised an eyebrow, not entirely convinced.

He laughed. “Do not fear, little sister. I always have your best interests at heart, do I not?”

Now she was worried. What was he up to?

Just then, the butler, an elderly, kindly fellow by the name of Mr. Burrs, stepped into the room. “His Grace the Duke of

Terrington.”

Emma froze. Mr. Burrs stepped aside, and in swept an all too familiar face.

“Ah, there you are,” James called, crossing the room to meet the Duke. “I was worried there for a minute that you might not come at all.”

Caleb Gibson’s gaze swept over Emma as he gave her a small, curt bow. “I keep my word, once I have made it.”

Emma hurried to her feet to return the gesture. She opened her mouth to speak, but Caleb cut her off.

“If you will excuse us, Lady Emma, I believe your brother has something for me.” He turned to James. “The objects you spoke of? I trust they are worth my while?”

“Oh.” James nodded, grinning. “They are.”

Then, just like that, the Duke swept out of the room once more.

Emma could not help herself as she let out a huff of annoyance. Hardly a word for her, and straight to business. Who did this man think he was?

Emma frowned, remembering her encounters with the Duke over the years. Self-centered and arrogant, the man only cared

about his own fortunes. Such a ruthless man might run anyone's livelihood into the ground if it might better his own situation.

It was a wonder her brother had stayed friends with him all these years.



"I hardly know how I came upon them," James explained as Caleb followed him into the library.

"You are certain they are the right ones?" Caleb asked, wanting to be assured that, if he was truly to do all this, his compensation would be adequate.

"See for yourself." James plucked several books off a nearby table and held them out to Caleb.

Gingerly, Caleb took them. He turned them over in his hands as a deep, long-seated sorrow welled up within him. "These are the ones," he murmured. "I haven't seen anything like them since..."

James nodded. "I'm very glad I stumbled upon them. There is no one more worthy of owning them than you."

"She loved these. It is a miracle you came upon them at all."

"And? Are they worth our bargain?"

Though everything in him told him that he was going to regret this, Caleb nodded. “I am satisfied.” He ran a lingering hand over the cover of one of the books.

“Come, it is almost time I depart,” James said, already making his way back into the hall.

Caleb followed him until they were once more standing in the drawing room. Emma had moved, now stationed near the window, gazing out into the early afternoon. She turned around upon their return.

There were those fascinating eyes of hers again. A deeper blue than her brother’s. While James’s eyes could be compared to frozen lakes and the streaks of blue amongst the grey of a cloudy day, Emma’s eyes were deep pools, bottomless oceans, undisturbed waters.

Clearing his throat, Caleb reminded himself to start off on the right foot. “I hope, Lady Emma—though neither of us would, perhaps, find immediate joy at such an arrangement—I hope that you and I shall be amicable acquaintances.”

Feeling rather pleased with himself, he frowned to see Emma’s look of utter confusion.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace?” she asked, looking between him and her brother.

“I refer only to James’s absence, and his request that I...” Caleb caught himself, seeing that Emma’s expression did not

change. A sneaking suspicion grew in his mind as he turned to James. “Lady Emma is not aware of our arrangement?”

Letting out a guilty chuckle, James ran a hand through his hair. As he did so, the butler appeared in the doorway, and the sounds of horses snorting and stamping drifted into the drawing room from outside.

It was time for James to go.

Crossing to his sister’s side, James placed a kiss on Emma’s cheek. “I’m afraid I have no time left to explain. I must depart.” He grasped her hands. “Take care, dear sister, and do not forget to write.” Then he held out a hand to Caleb. “Thank you, for looking after her.”

After taking his hand, Caleb thought he detected the hint of a grin—a rather mischievous one at that—as James turned toward the door. Emma, just as confused, followed James outside.

Caleb remained where he was, listening to the sounds of their final goodbyes and, eventually, the sound of the carriage as James left the estate.

Only a moment or more later, Emma stepped back inside. She hurriedly swiped away a tear from her cheek as she met Caleb’s gaze. “Well, he is gone.”

They stood there a moment in silence. Caleb was at a loss for words. Had James truly not told her? His own sister had no knowledge of the arrangement he had made for his absence.



Emma glanced around in obvious discomfort. She was stiff, and Caleb could not help but wonder if she felt uncomfortable in his presence.

“I hope your brother will enjoy his time abroad. And I trust he will keep you informed of his mailing address, as it changes throughout his journey.”

Looking at him as though he were the most boring man in the country, Emma shook her head. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, and Caleb could see she was at war with herself over something.

Finally, she took a deep breath and addressed him. “I thank you for your concern for my brother. And it was very kind of you to see him off. But now, I believe there is something that must be addressed, is there not? Something you know that I do not.”

She cast a rueful glance out the window to her right. “Though my brother may not have had the time to do so, I hope you will be kind enough to enlighten me as to what arrangement has been made between the two of you.”

Not comfortable himself, Caleb fumbled for the right words. Already, he regretted his strange new position. He had no right to be here, no right to claim the strange responsibility that had been thrust upon him. But he had made a promise to James. And his word was his vow. No matter how strange this situation might be, he would keep his word, for his friend’s sake.

“Lady Emma,” he began slowly. “As you know, your brother will be gone for some time.”

When he paused, Emma nodded. “Yes, I am well aware, thank you.” She was annoyed with him.

Caleb pressed on. “In his concern for you, he has made a request of me. He wishes me—and I have agreed—to accompany you throughout the Season. I shall be your protector in your brother’s absence. By your side. At all times.”

## CHAPTER 3



Emma was silent for a long time. She was making great efforts to contain her sudden anger, but as soon as she opened her mouth, it all came spilling forth.

“You will stay by my side?” she snapped, her hands shaking at her sides as her fury surged through her body. “You and my brother have what, may I ask? Bartered over my future as if I were a prized cow?”

She spun to the window, her anger half-directed at the man now standing with her in the drawing room, and her brother, who had just made his cowardly exit. “And he did not even concern himself with informing me of this arrangement?” she breathed. When she turned back to Caleb, his face was an unreadable mask of cold disdain. “Do you see nothing wrong with this situation?”

“I have made a promise to your brother. It troubles me not that I shall stay on his estate—”

“Stay on his estate?” Emma could have laughed, so astonished she was. “Why did he not simply invite you to sleep outside my bedroom door, like the watchdog you and he seem to think I need?”

She opened her mouth to continue her tirade, but Caleb held up a hand. Emma thought she caught just the faintest glimmer of annoyance in his eyes, but it was gone before she could be certain.

“I do not dismiss your frustrations, Lady Emma. Indeed, I am not altogether pleased with the situation myself. Far from it. It is a great inconvenience to have to accompany you to such trifling, detestable events as those which are planned for the Season. But I am a man of my word. Your brother is worried about you.”

“I am not a child,” Emma protested, sounding a little too like an indignant little girl.

“Obviously. But your brother would not have made such arrangements if he did not worry about you— if he did not care about your well-being.” Caleb sighed, making no attempt to hide his dissatisfaction. “Though neither of us may like it, we are to remain in close company for some time. I suggest you make your peace with the situation as quickly as you may. There is no need to make this any more painful than it will already be.”

Silenced, but still fuming, Emma hiked up her skirts and spun around, taking her leave of the loathsome man.



“I cannot believe it.” Ruth stopped dead in her tracks as if she needed utter stillness in order to comprehend what Emma had just told her.

The trio of ladies had been promenading together, enjoying the brisk afternoon air. Though they had made the plan to do it prior to James's departure, Emma was now all too grateful for Abigail and Ruth's company. For she had some very upsetting news to share with them.

Seeing Ruth's amazement encouraged Emma to continue her recounting of the morning's events. "I can hardly believe it myself," she admitted, her insides still tightly knotted in resentment. "The actions of the Duke do not surprise me. He believes everyone to be childish and juvenile in comparison to himself. But James? I must admit I am cut to the core by his lack of trust in me. Does he truly believe I cannot look after myself?"

"Lord Mulberry has always cared about you deeply," Abigail gently reminded her. "His actions, I am sure, are merely a product of his love for you."

Ruth nodded eagerly and linked arms with Emma's. "I am of two minds about the matter. I cannot say that I approve of your brother's behavior. It is one thing to be protective, it is another thing to take away a lady's freedom entirely and place her under the control of a near stranger. However," she added, "there may be a way to turn the situation to your own benefit."

The sly grin she shot Emma did nothing to ease her discomfort. In fact, it only added to it.

"What are you plotting?" Emma asked, with more than a hint of trepidation.

“Me? Nothing.” Ruth grinned, batting her eyelashes in mock innocence. “I am simply observing that Lord Mulberry has set his sister up in a position of great opportunity.”

“Opportunity?” Emma exchanged a confused glance with Abigail.

“The Duke of Terrington.” Ruth looked at them as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Then she gestured to several other couples who were promenading around them. “Not a single one of them knows His Grace personally, I’ll wager. But they most certainly know of him.”

“Every woman in the *ton* would happily forsake Society if she might have such access to the man,” she continued. “He is the most eligible bachelor in the *ton*, and he’s landed right on your doorstep.”

Emma had no idea how to reply to her friend. She could not begin to tell Ruth just how abhorrent the idea of spending time with the Duke, let alone seeking to be courted by him, seemed to her.

Thankfully, Abigail spoke up before Emma could. “Perhaps he will listen to logic,” she murmured thoughtfully. “Are you very close with His Grace, Emma?”

“No, I would not say so. We are acquainted through my brother, of course. He and James are good friends. But the only conversations I have had with the Duke have been stilted and uninteresting.” And aggravating.

Somehow the man always made her feel like he was doing her some favor by humbling himself to speak with her. Cold and aloof, always, no matter what Emma might say or do.

There were very few people who got under Emma's skin in such an incorrigible way. And Caleb Gibson was one of them.

“Then he does not know you well enough to judge whether you are capable of looking after yourself,” Abigail continued. “You must simply make him aware that your brother is mistaken about you. Remind him that James still thinks of you as the naïve, little sister you were when you were a child. But now, as you are grown up, and with your father looking after you, you will be perfectly safe.”

“You are right, as usual, Abigail.” Emma smiled in relief. “He may still keep his promise to my brother by living on James's estate. But once he understands the situation, he will be more than happy to step back and leave me to live my life as I see fit.”

Encouraged, she allowed her thoughts to drift elsewhere. “Did you attend the literary assembly, Abigail?” she asked. “The one you spoke of the other day.”

Her friend shook her head. “I was dissuaded from going,” she admitted quietly.

“Whyever did you not go?” Ruth asked.

“I am already regarded poorly when it comes to my learning. I have heard people say that I am ‘unfeminine’ for being so

knowledgeable.” Abigail frowned. “I have been to bluestocking gatherings before. But my father fears that if I continue to attend their literary parties, it will ruin my chances of finding a good match.”

“Is there something wrong with being a bluestocking?” Ruth asked, flipping her luscious curls coyly as they passed several other men and women.

Emma hesitated. While she admired Ruth’s free spirit and her lack of concern for the opinions of others, she was too practical to dismiss public opinion entirely. There was much in this life that could brand a woman as an outsider. And once she was dismissed from polite society, she had precious few options available to her.

“Your learning and knowledge have always been an inspiration to me,” Emma said finally, drawing closer to Abigail. “I am sorry to hear that your father does not value it as we do. I can only hope that you will find a match worthy of your beautiful mind. A husband who will admire you as Ruth and I do.”

“And one who may keep up with you,” Ruth added. “I hardly know what you are going on about half the time.”

Emma chuckled as she exchanged a look with Abigail.

Ruth, seeing their amusement, grinned. “Once Emma is married to the Duke, she is sure to help us both find proper matches.”



Now it was her turn to giggle.

The three continued their promenade side by side. Ruth regaled them with some scandal that had been circulating about the *ton* for the last few days, and Emma let out another sigh of relief. She needed not to be angry with her brother much longer. For she had a plan to set everything right.



“Lady Emma Brown, Sir.” The gray-haired butler stepped aside as he ushered the woman into the room.

Surprised, Caleb stood up, leaving his letter on the desk half-finished. “Lady Emma,” he said, eyeing her cautiously. A scarce few hours had passed since she had last been here. “I had not expected to see you back so soon.”

“Indeed. I felt we didn’t conclude our previous conversation properly.”

“Oh?” He held back a tired sigh. She was back, it would seem, to continue her pointless tirade against him. “Shall we continue it over tea, perhaps?” he asked, with as much civility as he could manage.

She agreed, and soon they were seated, hot cups of tea and small cakes spread out on the table between them.

Emma had been fairly quiet as they took their seats. Which was unexpected. Caleb had prepared himself for another outburst like this morning’s. But as of yet, he could not yet ascertain what her plans for him were.

Taking a delicate sip of her tea, Emma raised her eyes to his. “I wanted to thank you for your consideration for my brother, and for the enormity of the request that he has made of you.”

This was certainly unexpected. Caleb nodded but said nothing.

“It cannot have been an easy commitment to make,” she continued with all the civility of a woman of her rank. “As a man of business—a successful one at that, as my brother has informed me—I trust you are also a reasonable man. Therefore, I have a proposition which I believe will benefit the both of us.”

“Indeed?”

Caleb couldn't help but be strangely amused at Emma's tone, if only for a moment. She was clearly making an effort to sound competent and logical.

Then, as she continued, his amusement faded just as quickly as it had come. “Leave me to my own devices,” she said simply, setting her cup of tea and saucer back on the table. “You will do your duty to James by simply looking after his affairs on the estate. But as I said earlier, I am not a child. Nor do I need anyone to protect me. I should think that my father would be capable enough of looking after his own daughter.”

Caleb sighed. This woman was far too strong-willed for his liking and for her own good. “I can see that you are a capable woman,” he began, deciding how best to counter. “And I am sure you would make a good argument to your brother, were he here. But he is not. And I have given him my word. Your

father is indeed a piece of this puzzle. But I have been made known of his... shall we say, absence in your life.”

He paused, watching as an angry, embarrassed blush spread across Emma’s features.

Caleb felt momentarily guilty for eliciting such a reaction from her. In any other circumstance, he would never have made her business his own. But, because of James and his strange determination to involve him, now Caleb was party to the inner workings of Emma and James’s family.

“Your brother believes that your father is not an adequate guardian for you,” he continued, glancing away. “But he is still the most proper custodian for you, in your current situation. Therefore, I propose a compromise.”

When he turned back to Emma, her blush had faded somewhat. She held herself upright, a determined glint in her gaze. “What do you suggest?”

“If you can be trusted to look after yourself, to be cautious and take no unnecessary risks, then I shall be discreet in fulfilling my duty to your brother. I will not meddle into your life any more than is absolutely necessary. So long as you give me no reason to intervene.”

Emma was quiet for a moment, mulling over what he’d said. It was clear that she was not happy about it, but they now found themselves at an impasse. Emma wanted complete freedom, but Caleb would not rescind the promise he had made to James.

Finally, Emma stood up. As Caleb, too, got to his feet, she held out a hand to him.

“Very well,” she said. “We have an agreement.”

As Caleb took her hand in his, he was momentarily distracted by how warm and delicate it was. There was a strength in it too, however. A determination in her grasp that spoke to a strength of character.

Then, as he let go, he once again caught the look of disdain on her face. “I trust you will keep your side of the bargain,” she said, holding his gaze.

“It is not I who you must worry about, Lady Emma,” he replied grimly. “Worry about your own actions. For I will not hesitate to intervene, should you fail to uphold your own end of our bargain.”

## CHAPTER 4



“Everyone is here,” Ruth breathed, leaning close to Emma as they made their way through the crowd. “Oh, and just look at Lady Lucy’s dress!”

“Abigail?” Glancing over her shoulder to ensure that Abigail was still behind them, Emma shared an excited grin with her other friend.

“It promises to be a particularly intriguing performance,” Abigail said, quickening her steps to match Ruth’s eager pace.

Ruth nodded eagerly. “Oh, it is! Everyone in the *ton* says that it is the best thing they have ever seen. They say, too, that anyone who misses it will be absolutely green with envy when they hear the others discussing *the opera of the century*.”

Chuckling, Emma could not deny that she had been looking forward to this evening’s events. With James’s absence, she had found herself strangely lonely over the last few days. She needed some excitement, a distraction to draw her out of her dour mood.

And a night at the opera was exactly that.

“Come along, we must hurry. We do not want to miss it,” Ruth exclaimed, following her family as they made their way up the stairs to their box.

It had been very kind of Ruth’s family to chaperone the three ladies that evening. It was not an opera that Emma had seen before, and she was ever so excited to find herself transported by a new story.

As they settled into their seats, Emma let her gaze roam over the other theatergoers. Three or four boxes lined each side of the theatre, with numerous seats on the floor below. Emma had to turn in her seat to see the stage, but she had a direct view of the boxes across from her. As she surveyed the other patrons in their seats of honor, she caught sight of a familiar figure and froze.

Broad shoulders. Thick, chestnut hair. Rigid posture, his back ramrod-straight as he settled into a seat in the box on the opposite side of the theatre.

Emma was just beginning to wonder if her eyes were deceiving her when a delighted gasp to her right told her that she wasn’t the only one who saw him.

“It’s His Grace!” Ruth cried.

In the noise of the theatre, her exclamation might have otherwise gone unnoticed. But at that moment, just as Ruth spoke, the lights around them had begun to dim, and the crowd had momentarily gone quiet in eager anticipation of the show to come.

As it was, Ruth's voice carried, clear and distinct. And within moments, the murmur of the crowd grew louder than ever. In his box, on display for the rest of the patrons, Caleb sat tall, wearing his usual cold, unreadable expression. But his gaze was not on the stage as the music began to swell and the performance began.

No, it was on Emma.

And, soon, he was not the only one gazing upon her. Emma watched as numerous heads followed his gaze, turning in her direction. Mortified, and furious that the Duke seemed unable to trust her to attend a simple opera with her friends, Emma forced herself to face the stage. The opera had just begun.

But, try as she might, she could not focus on the story unfolding before her. Murmurs still rose among the crowd. And when she risked a glance back at the audience, more than a few heads were still turned toward her, staring at the object of the Duke's attention.

He had promised her that he would be inconspicuous. Emma pressed her lips together into a tight line. This was not what she would call *discreet*.

"I cannot believe he is here," Ruth whispered to Emma and Abigail. "His Grace never attends the opera."

"No, indeed. I do not believe I have ever seen him here," Abigail agreed.

With a sly grin, Ruth leaned closer to her friends. “He must be here solely to look after you, Emma.”

“He certainly seems attentive,” Abigail admitted. “I have caught him looking our way more than once since he arrived.”

“So has everyone else in attendance.” Ruth giggled. “What must they be thinking?”

Never one to crave the spotlight, Emma now felt as if she were the one on the stage, not the performers. She wished her friends would stop dwelling on the Duke’s presence and let her enjoy the opera.

“There he is again, looking at you” Ruth giggled again not three minutes later. “Everyone sees him, too. Why, they must think he is madly in love with you!”

As Ruth spoke louder to be heard over the soprano’s high-pitched voice, Emma felt her chest grow tight. It was suddenly very hot in the theatre. And she was finding it difficult to breathe.

Before she fainted right then and there, she needed to get some fresh air. “If you will excuse me for a moment,” she murmured, swiftly standing up and exiting the box even as her friends gazed up at her in confusion.

The noise of the opera followed Emma out in the hallway. Only as the door to the box closed did the sound die down a little. Hurrying down the corridor a little way further, she finally put a hand on the wall and stopped to catch her breath.



There was not another soul to be seen in the small side hallway, thankfully, so she was able to clear her head in peace.

She did not understand why she was so flustered. But she was upset with Caleb. Why had he shown up tonight? And why had he brought so much of the *ton's* attention down on her?

Emma sighed and rested her head back against the wall behind her. She had only just closed her eyes, taking note of a mild ache in her head, when she heard a voice. It was calling out from down the hall.

Calling her name.

Her eyes fluttered open in confusion. She recognized that voice.

Then, before she could understand what was happening, she found herself face-to-face with Tobias Wilkington, the Marquess of Hayward.

The man stood before her, looking just as he had the day he had broken her heart. Of medium height, with sandy blonde hair and a proud tilt of his chin, Tobias regarded her with a mix of hesitation and desire.

“Emma,” he said again, a relieved grin playing on his lips. “I was hoping I would find you here.”

“Tob—My Lord.” Emma forced herself to use his title, reminding herself that they no longer shared the close

companionship they once had. “I did not know you would be attending tonight.”

He chuckled, though it sounded somewhat forced. Shifting his weight, Tobias scratched the back of his neck. “I was not certain I would come tonight. Then I heard that you might be here.”

Emma glanced over his shoulder to see that the corridor behind him was still empty. “I... Forgive me, I do not think it is appropriate that we should be alone together. Perhaps we shall speak after the performance.”

She turned to go, but Tobias reached out to catch her, halting her with a strong hand on her upper arm. “Emma, please. Do not dismiss me so quickly. I only want to talk.”

“We may speak after—”

“No.” Tobias gave his head a frustrated shake. “There are things that must be said between us, things that can only be shared in private.” His hand on her arm tightened ever so slightly.

Emma’s head was pounding harder now. Her chest was tight, too. Tobias was the last man she had wanted to see tonight. And to be caught out here, alone with him, was the last place she wanted to be.

“I do not believe we have anything to say to one another,” she managed.

She meant it, too. How long had it taken her to recover from what he had done to her? A part of her was still—perhaps would always be—hurt by his actions. His lies.

Emma was grateful that she had never been in love with Tobias. He had been her friend, a close confidante. And she felt that, with time, she could have grown to love him as a husband and partner in this life. Perhaps it was the fact that his betrayal had not left her utterly heartbroken that she had been able to stop her brother from dueling with him.

Still, it was his betrayal that had cut her to the core. The dishonor of what he had done—witnessed by everyone in the *ton*—had been an almost unforgivable insult.

“Do not say that. You know she meant nothing to me, Emma. Rumors and gossip. That is all there was to it. There was never anyone in my heart but you.”

Emma begged to differ.

“I saw you with her,” she replied, desperately trying to hold back the old hurt and anger. “You forget that I saw your dishonesty with my own eyes. As did many others at that ball. You were not so discrete as you thought. The humiliation you caused me...”

She shook her head as tears threatened to clog her throat.

“It was a mistake.” Tobias placed his free hand on her other arm. His grip made her wince.

“Please, let go of me.”

“Not until you hear me out. I still love you, Emma. Whatever there was between me and her, it is over. You are the one I must be with. I made a terrible mistake, but I see that now. Will you forgive me and allow me to atone for what I have done?”

Emma put her hands against his chest. “You are hurting me, My Lord. I do not wish to speak with you. Stop this!”

Something in his gaze changed. A flicker of fear, of defeat, crossed his features. Then, overcome with emotion, Tobias pulled her into his arms.

Beginning to panic, Emma tried to push him away. But he would not budge. “Let go!” she cried, struggling against his vicelike grasp.

It hurt. She couldn’t breathe.

“We were good together. You cannot deny that there was true affection between us. There still is. You have only to open your eyes and see it! Emma—”

“Enough!” The booming command echoed down the hall.

As Tobias pulled back slightly, Emma had only a moment to register the confusion on his face as a hand clamped down on his shoulder, pulling him off her and sending him staggering several steps down the hall.

In his place, Emma found herself staring up at Caleb.

And he was staring down at her with the same indecipherable expression he always wore.

Before Emma could open her mouth to speak, however, Caleb turned around. His back was to her, as he moved to face Tobias.

“What right have you to lay a hand on me?” Tobias roared, regaining his balance in time to spin toward Caleb.

“The lady did not want your advances. Indeed, your senseless behavior warranted an immediate intervention.”

Caleb’s tone was icy, sending a chill up Emma’s spine. He parceled out each word slowly, as if he loathed the taste of them. Or perhaps it was his current company that he disliked.

“You do not know what the lady does or does not want,” Tobias replied. “I would be willing to bet that you have no knowledge whatsoever of the desires of women.”

He made as if to grab Emma’s arm once more.

In one swift motion, Caleb grabbed him by the collar, pushing him back so that Emma was again out of his reach. “If you will not leave her be, then I shall teach you to respect her wishes,” Caleb threatened, raising a fist into the air.

“Wait!” Emma shot forward, reaching out to catch his arm. “Stop. Don’t hurt him.” When he looked at her, puzzled, she shook her head. “He is not worth it.”

With a sigh, Caleb released Tobias.

Tobias staggered backwards for a second, regaining his balance. Then, shooting the Duke a scathing sneer, he turned and ran off as fast as his legs could carry him.

It was an embarrassment to see him go. To remember his shameful actions. To remember how the whole of Society had watched him discard her like yesterday’s gossip.

But Emma could not find it within herself to hate him. Nor to wish him ill. To hold on to such painful, odious feelings could only hurt one person—herself.

When Tobias was gone, Emma let out a shaky breath. Caleb still stood with his back to her. She searched for something to say. “Your Grace, I—”

Caleb held up a hand, cutting her off. He took a deep breath, as if he were attempting to contain his own rage. Finally, he turned to face her.

His expression was calm, collected. The only hint that things were not as they should be was in his voice. When he spoke, his tone was low, wary. A warning.

“This gives me very little confidence in your ability to stay out of trouble, Lady Emma. Very little confidence, indeed.”

Then, without another word, Caleb turned and stalked off, leaving Emma alone in the hall once more.

## CHAPTER 5



“Ah. I did not realize I would be seeing you so soon.”  
Caleb sighed and leaned back in his chair.

“You wrote that you had news.”

In the dim light of the study, a tall, broad-shouldered figure stepped closer. He turned and closed the study door behind him. As the man’s hand lingered on the handle, Caleb knew what was running through his mind.

“It is all right. We will not be overheard in here. James’s servants know to keep to themselves while I am around.”

“It is no small inconvenience, you staying here at Mulberry Estate,” the man replied, his voice low and rough. Though his brown hair was speckled with grey, as was his beard, it was his voice that revealed his age. But his intelligent light blue eyes were as keen as ever. “I am still perplexed that you would agree to such an arrangement. Even being this close to... My blood boils at the thought of him.”

Caleb stood up, facing the man. He could remember when he used to come up only to his uncle’s shoulder, young and



gangly, still waiting to grow into himself. Now he stood eye to eye with him.

Solomon Gibson, the Earl of Moor, and Caleb's only living relative, shook his head wearily. "But for whatever reason you stay here, I shall make the journey to see you. So long as you have information for me."

The look that Caleb exchanged with his uncle was all that needed to be said between the two of them. Caleb's already dour mood, following the events at the opera earlier that night, sunk lower.

"My men are close," he began, gesturing for his uncle to take a seat. "They've almost found him."

"They have said that before," Solomon warned.

"Yes, but this time, we have a name. I assure you, Uncle, the man is all but ours."

"But it is not enough!" Solomon growled, his fist coming down hard on the arm of his chair. "How long has it taken to track him down? And what if he will not give us the information we need—"

"He will," Caleb assured him. "I have ways to ensure that he talks. He will give us what we are looking for."

Solomon sighed, rubbing his hands over his face. He was quiet for a moment. Then, leaning back, he raised his head toward

the ceiling. “Forgive me, Caleb. I am still angry, after all this time. I have been slow to act. I fear that I have failed them.”

Now it was Caleb’s turn to sit down. He pulled out his chair, turning it so he could face his uncle. Leaning forward, he clenched his hands into fists, his own fury a beast that he struggled to tame.

“You have done the best you could. As have I. And we are closer to the truth now than we have ever been before.” He opened and closed one fist, staring into his palm. “I find myself wondering how it will feel, to stare down the man who killed my parents. To look him in the eye.”

“He may have done the deed, but he was only a hired hand. We will be no closer to justice until we know the name of the man who paid him. Once we *confirm* his name, that is.”

Solomon’s gaze shot to the window. Though it was dark outside, Caleb knew the face his uncle was picturing out there in the night. He and Solomon had not been without their suspicions throughout the years.

And, finally, all their plotting, all their planning, was going to get them the answers they had been so desperately seeking.

“How?” Solomon asked. “How will you be sure he will give up the name of the man who hired him? We must be certain, Caleb. He cannot escape. And your men must not go too far and kill our one living link to your parents’ murderer.”

Caleb hesitated only a moment before he replied, “I have it all in hand.”

Solomon did not look convinced. But Caleb gave him no more information. It was not that he did not trust his uncle. Far from it. Solomon was the last living member of his family and the closest thing to a confidante that he had had over the years. Solomon was the one who had raised him in the absence of his parents.

It was simply for security that Caleb did not divulge any more of his plan than he needed to. Security and, perhaps, the fact that Caleb liked to be the one in control. He liked to have all the details and to distribute them if *and* when necessary. And right now, Solomon did not need to know.

With an irritated sigh, Solomon stood up, turning toward the door. “We must not falter now,” he said, pausing. When he turned back to Caleb, his eyes flashed with fury. “Do not forget what has been taken from us. From you. We are close, but we have not yet succeeded. And if we are to make *him* pay for what he has done, we must hold the course.”

“I will not falter.”

“Good man. You will alert me the moment anything happens.”

It was not a question.

Wordlessly, Solomon opened the door and disappeared into the hall. Caleb listened as his uncle exchanged a quiet word or two with the butler before the front door opened and closed.

Thoughts a muddled jumble, Caleb groaned and turned toward the darkened window in the study. The moon, which had previously been hidden behind clouds, was now peeking out, casting a dim, hesitant light on the land below.

He would not falter. He would find the man responsible for taking his parents from him. It had been the driving force behind his entire adult life. But it had been much easier to focus on the task at hand before Emma Brown came into his life.

And after her behavior this evening, Caleb did not see himself being released from his obligation to her any time soon. Nor did he find he could trust her to safely manage her own affairs. But with pressing matters of his own to attend to, he could not spend all hours of the day keeping an eye on the woman.

Caleb opened the door to his study. “Mr. Burrs?”

The butler appeared in an instant.

Caleb frowned, wondering if the man had heard anything of his conversation with Solomon.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“Send for Mr. Steel.”

The butler merely nodded and disappeared once again. Caleb was grateful that he asked no questions. Though he could not

imagine that Mr. Burrs' previous employer had often sent for strange men in the middle of the night.

Caleb imagined that James's life was far less complicated than his, and therefore did not require such secrecy.

Thankfully, he did not have to wait long for his guest to appear. When he did, he was shown into the study, and the door swung shut after him.

Mr. Steel was not the sort of man Caleb could be seen with in public. A single glance at his outfit and his obvious lack of personal hygiene was a notorious sign of the differences in their positions and circumstances.

Late at night was usually how Caleb preferred to meet with Mr. Steel.

Despite his grim exterior, however, Mr. Steel had the mind and connections that were well-suited to Caleb's needs. Secrecy, tracking, eyes moving unseen in the night. He could gather whatever intelligence a man might seek. He was one of the men that Caleb had assured his uncle was close to tracking down his parents' killer.

But right now, Caleb needed Mr. Steel's help with something else.

"Are you familiar with the residents of Handleigh Manor?" Caleb asked, leaning back in his chair.

Mr. Steel remained standing before him. “The estate just neighboring this one?” he replied.

“Yes.”

“I am familiar with the Earl and his son, on whose estate you now reside, Your Grace.”

“And the Earl’s daughter?”

Mr. Steel frowned.

Caleb could see the man’s mind working, trying to guess what his intentions were. What his next orders might be.

“I have heard of her. But I have never had any business to do with her. She is a woman of good character, from what I know. No one has ever asked me to ruin her good name.”

“Nor will I.” Caleb laced his fingers together, raising his hands up as he rested his elbows on the arms of his chair. “I would ask that you follow Lady Emma. Stay out of sight. Do not interfere with her comings and goings unless she is in peril. But report her activities to me.”

Mr. Steel knew better than to ask about Caleb’s motives. However, something in the Duke did not like the idea of Mr. Steel assuming that he was acting on improper desires.

“Her brother has tasked me with looking after her,” Caleb explained, though Mr. Steel had not asked. “But I cannot always be around to keep her out of trouble. There is one man in particular that Lord Mulberry wishes to keep away from his sister. The Marquess of Hayward. If you or your men should see him, particularly if he appears to be seeking out ways to accost her, inform me immediately.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. Though I hope, given her good nature, Lady Emma will give you no reason to report anything unsavory to me.”

With a nod, Mr. Steel waited for further instruction. But Caleb was satisfied. He dismissed the man.

Once Mr. Steel was gone, Caleb found himself suddenly wearied by the day’s events. He had finally set important plans in motion, but he now found himself drained by it all.

Something else, too, had taken him by surprise today. Something that had taken more out of him than he might have expected.

He still saw it, in the darkness of the study, as he made his way out into the hall with a candle. Lord Hayward in the hallway of the opera house. His arms around Emma, and the frightened expression on her face. The tone of despair in her cries of protest.

An anger that Caleb had not felt in a long time had surged through him at that moment. He had acted almost without thinking. Even now, he did not know why he should be so angered by the situation. It was improper, certainly. And James would have been outraged by the man's behavior toward his sister. But why should Caleb feel so enraged? So protective?

Perhaps he was taking his promise to James too seriously. Taking it too much to heart.

But what else could he do? He had given his word. He would protect Emma in her brother's absence.

And in the meantime, he would find the man who had killed his parents. He would see that justice was finally served. It was only a matter of time.



Emma's tea was growing cold. She had hardly been given a chance to drink it. The morning after the opera, she had gone to see Abigail and Ruth for tea. She had been too shaken last night to tell them what had happened out in the hallway behind the boxes, but now, everything came spilling forth.

And Ruth had a thousand questions. "Do you really think he was going to hit Lord Hayward?"

"I think so." Emma shook her head in amazement. "He raised his fist. I intervened before anything could happen."

"Why did you?" Ruth replied, brushing a curl from her face. "It sounded like Lord Hayward was behaving monstrously."



Perhaps he deserved it.”

“Tobi—Lord Hayward may not be my favorite person in the world, Ruth, but there was no need to resort to violence.” Emma played with the edge of her napkin, thoughtfully running the material between her forefingers.

“I noticed His Grace leave the box,” Abigail added quietly.

Ruth’s eyes went wide. “You did?”

Abigail nodded. “I did not think much of it at the moment. But now that I recall it, he did leave very quickly after Emma left.”

“He was worried about you.” Ruth’s sly grin did not make Emma feel any better about the situation than she already did.

“He was angry with me,” Emma corrected her friend. “He chastised me. He did not ask if I was all right, nor did he ask why Lord Hayward had been speaking with me. His Grace only informed me that he was not confident in my ability to look after myself. No doubt he meant to reference our agreement. I fear he will shadow me all the more now.” She sighed, slumping back into her chair.

“And if he thought he was being discrete at the opera,” she added dolefully, “then however will he behave now that he believes he must stay by my side, as James requested?”

“Again, I must inform you that you are looking at the entire situation the wrong way,” Ruth reasoned. “Here you have a

handsome, well-off man accompanying you to every event of the Season. One who is duty bound to protect you. Which, inevitably, will require spending copious amounts of time with you.”

“But he is intolerable!” Emma protested. “If I were to spend fifteen years with him, I doubt I would see him smile. Did you know, even as he scared Lord Hayward off, he did not so much as raise his voice? His expression never changed, as if he were made of stone. Utterly emotionless.”

“Truly?” Abigail leaned forward, unable to hide her curiosity.

Ruth giggled. “How gallant. He maintains his composure no matter what.”

“Boring is the word I would use. Or Cold. Uncaring, too.” Emma listed the Duke’s attributes on her fingers as Ruth groaned.

“You do not know how lucky you are, Emma. Some of us find it difficult to make a good match. And you have one knocking on your door.”

Something sharp in Ruth’s tone made Emma look up. As she did, she watched her friends quickly exchange knowing looks.

When Ruth sipped her tea, crestfallen, Emma frowned. “What is the matter?”

Ruth said nothing. After a moment, Abigail spoke up. “Ruth’s mother is unhappy with how little interest Ruth has received this Season.”

“But the Season has only just begun,” Emma protested.

“And it will be over just as soon,” Ruth murmured. “Or so she says. It doesn’t help that my dear friend is seemingly pursued by the Duke of Terrington himself. In comparison, I am truly an embarrassment. I have garnered no interest at all.”

“Oh, Ruth, surely that is not true.” Emma reached out to place her hand on Ruth’s. “You are beautiful and lively and everything a man could ask for in a wife. It is only a matter of time before the gentlemen of the *ton* come to see that. And then you will be flooded with admiration.”

Though Ruth’s head still hung low, the corners of her mouth twitched. “Perhaps,” she said. Then, her frown slowly fading, she fixed Emma with a wicked look. “But in the meantime, it would give me great relief to learn that my dear friend is securing a match of her own. And giving her friends a glimpse into the secret life of the Duke of Terrington.”

Emma groaned.

“I have a proposition,” Ruth continued gleefully, her worries forgotten for the moment. “If you cannot convince the Duke to leave you to your freedom, then you shall find a way to entertain yourself—and us—in his company.”

Emma did not like where this was going. “What on earth do you mean?”

“You say that the Duke is without emotion. I say that you must put that theory to the test. See if you can seduce His Grace into displaying some semblance of sentiment— anger, amusement, sadness, anything.”

“Impossible.” Emma looked to Abigail for help. “Even if I were to try—and I am not going to—he would give nothing away. He is as unmovable as stone.”

Strangely, Abigail remained quiet. She did not immediately leap to Emma’s aid, nor did she remind Ruth not to involve herself in other people’s private matters.

Uncowed, Ruth continued. “No,” she gasped, an idea making her grin even wider. “You must see if you can get the man to display every emotion! As many as you can.”

“I will not.” Emma sighed, tired of this conversation. “I will keep as much distance between him and myself as I can, and that will be all.”

Ruth pouted. “What are we to do without entertainment, Emma? Abigail and I have garnered no interest from the gentlemen of the *ton*. And you are stuck at the side of one you can hardly tolerate. If we do not find some way to amuse ourselves in such a situation, we shall go mad.” She cast a strangely serious glance out the far window. “If your brother were here, he would agree with me.”

Emma hesitated. James might oppose making a game out of this arrangement, but then again, he might also find it amusing to test the extent of Caleb's indifference. It could do no harm, she supposed.

From the way Abigail remained silent, Emma wondered, too, if she knew something about Ruth that Emma did not. Ruth's mother was not known to be a particularly compassionate woman. She pressured her children to look and act better than all those around them. It was an impossibly high standard. And, if Ruth was failing to live up to her mother's expectations, she might be enduring more hardship than she was letting on.

Perhaps Ruth truly was in need of a distraction.

And, if Emma was being honest, a secret part of her curiosity was piqued by her friend's proposition. If she was going to be forced to spend time with Caleb, then she might as well try and find some mirth in the tiresome situation. Caleb was certainly going to provide no relief, so she might as well amuse herself.

"If I were to attempt such a task," Emma asked, watching as Ruth's face lit up in excitement, "what sort of emotion would I first try to elicit from His Grace?"

Ruth clapped her hands in glee, but it was Abigail who replied.

"Empathy? Or sadness?" she offered quietly. "He was concerned about you because of Lord Hayward. Perhaps he may be affected by a sad tale."

Emma and Ruth exchanged amazed glances.

“Why, Abigail!” Emma chuckled. “You sly minx. Do not tell me you are eager to join in Ruth’s game?”

Blushing, Abigail allowed herself a sly smile. “I find myself equally curious about His Grace. And perhaps in need of some amusement myself.”

“It is settled, then.” Ruth stood up, addressing the others as if she were making a decree. “Anger, jealousy, happiness, and sadness. These are the emotions Emma will try to elicit from the Duke.”

Emma could hardly believe she was agreeing to this. “And if I succeed? What shall be my reward?”

“A reward?” Ruth paused. “I had not thought that far.”

“What about your lovely new gloves?” Abigail offered. “The ones that Emma was admiring the other day.”

Ruth grinned. “They are yours, Emma. But only if you may sway His Grace to ditch his dour demeanor.”

Something told Emma she was going to regret this. But seeing the look of delight on her friends’ faces, she knew she could not refuse.

“Sadness first,” she mused. “Very well. I do not know how, but I am going to elicit a spark of sympathy in the Duke, one way or another.”

## CHAPTER 6



“No!”

*Something was wrong, but Caleb did not know what. There were unfamiliar noises down the hall. The darkness of his room was closing in around him. Then, he heard it again.*

*“Get back!”*

*His father’s voice. But Caleb had never heard him sound like that before. He’d never heard his father sound... afraid.*

*There was another voice, low and angry. Then Caleb heard his mother cry out.*

*Trembling, he climbed out of bed and tiptoed to the door. His hand was on the doorknob when it swung open before him, the light from the hall spilling into his darkened room.*

*He blinked, his pulse racing. The man who stood before him was not his father. “W-who are you?” he murmured, raising a fist to rub the sleep from his eyes.*



*“Caleb! Get back!” His mother’s voice again. “Stay away from my son!”*

*The man before Caleb sneered.*

*Though he was hardly aware of them, tears began to stream down Caleb’s cheeks. He was frightened. He didn’t understand what was going on, and he did not like it.*

*Then, all at once, several terrible things happened. As Caleb watched, his father lunged at the stranger from behind. But the intruder was too quick. He stepped aside as his father surged forward, and one moment his father was racing forward, the next he was on the ground. Something red and wet was spreading out on the floor beneath him. His father let out a shuddering groan.*

*“Father!” Caleb’s voice was shrill and thin, terror threatening to cut off his breath entirely.*

*The horrible man stumbled slightly as Caleb’s mother shouldered past him and threw her arms around her son. “Don’t hurt him,” she cried. “I beg you.”*

*“Step away from the boy,” the stranger ordered.*

*But the woman did no such thing.*

*The man drew closer. Caleb buried his face in his mother’s arms. He heard a scream, and then—*

Gasping, Caleb sat up in bed. Sweat covered his forehead, matting a lock of chestnut hair to his face. For what felt like an eternity, he could not tell where he was. The room around him was different. Unfamiliar. And the dredges of the dream still had a hold on him.

Rubbing a hand over his face, Caleb forced himself to breathe calmly. He reminded himself that he was on James's estate. He was twenty-six years old. The Duke of Terrington. He was safe. He was in control.

As Caleb finally returned to the waking world, he scolded himself for having allowed the nightmare to take hold of him so. How many times had he had that same dream? How many times had he watched that scene replay, unable to see the face of the killer, or prevent the events of that terrible, fateful night?

But soon, things would change. That was what Caleb told himself as he rose and faced the day. Soon, there would be justice.



“Father?” Emma shifted in her chair uncomfortably.

The older man across the table merely grunted and continued to read his newspaper, hidden from his daughter behind a wall of words.

“Have you had news from James?” she asked, hoping the reminder of his first and favorite child might garner a reaction.

“No.”

“Do you expect we will hear from him soon?”

“He has not been absent for long. Would you have him write to you every day that he is gone?” Her father’s tone was cold. He was displeased at being disturbed.

But Emma couldn’t help it. She was so tired of eating breakfast in silence, as if she were the only one at the table. And she so desperately wanted to prove that her father cared for her. That she did not require her brother to guilt an acquaintance into looking after her because her father cared so little for her that he had no concern for her comings and goings.

“Mother would have loved to hear about James’s adventures,” she murmured, the words spilling out before she could think twice about what she was saying. “She loved tales of travel and far-off places.”

A heavy thud on the table made her cutlery spring into the air. Starting, Emma watched as her father, his fist pressed hard against the surface of the table, slowly lowered his paper.

She caught her breath. “I-I did not mean to—”

“Enough. You disturb my peace.” He rose, leaving his meal half-finished on the plate before him.

“Father,” she called after him, standing up as if to follow.

But even as she rose, she knew there was no use in pleading with the man. The love she so desperately desired from him simply was not there. It had been once, when her mother was alive. But she had not walked these halls for many years, and with her passing, so too had gone the love of her father.

Angry and grieving, he’d managed to provide for his son’s schooling and future. Then he had all but disappeared. A ghost existing alongside a lonely daughter, with Emma now dependent on her brother alone for comfort and care.

But now, James was gone. And the man staying on her brother’s estate was quite possibly the most infuriating man she had ever met.

Even so, Emma would make the journey to see the Duke this afternoon. And she could not arrive empty-handed.

In the interim, Emma occupied herself with reading and writing, penning a letter she hoped to send to James as soon as he sent her a forwarding address for his first stop in France.

But as the hours ticked by, and Emma knew she could bear the afternoon’s duties no longer, she mustered the courage and made her way to the kitchens.

The kindly cook, who had been with her family for as long as she had been alive, was only too happy to supply her with a basket of goods. So, her offerings in hand, Emma began the walk to her brother’s estate.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Burrs.” She smiled as the grey-haired butler opened the door for her.

“Good afternoon, Lady Emma,” he replied, offering her a kindly smile. “A lovely day, is it not?” he added, gesturing to the clear blue sky behind her.

“Indeed. As lovely as one could hope for.” She followed him inside. “How are you finding things in James’s absence?”

“I am sure no one should miss him as much as you do. But I will be content to look after the estate and its guests in Lord Mulberry’s absence, Madam.”

Emma desperately wanted to ask Mr. Burrs how he really felt about serving Caleb in James’s absence, but she knew better than to try and pry gossip from the noble butler. James had once praised the man for having the tightest lips in all of England.

Mr. Burrs guided her into the drawing room. “I shall inform His Grace that you are here.”

“Thank you.”

Emma took a moment to glance around the room. She didn’t know why, but a part of her was worried that Caleb would change things in her brother’s absence. Of course, everything was as it had been before. But Emma still could not resign herself to the idea that the Duke was living on her brother’s estate, walking his halls, being waited on by his servants.

All because of her.

“I thought you wished to see as little of me as possible.”

Emma tried not to grimace as she turned at the sound of Caleb’s voice. Could he not even spare her a “good morning?”

“And I thought you promised me that you would be discrete.”  
Emma held his gaze defiantly.

“I could hardly have removed that man from your presence whilst being ‘discrete.’”

“No, I meant before. You were... My friends saw you watching us. As did the rest of those in attendance at the opera.” Emma felt suddenly flustered, though she hardly knew why. “Heaven knows what they thought. But they immediately assumed there was some connection between us.”

He stared back at her with perfect calm. “There is.”

Frustrated, Emma wanted to throw her basket at him. “Not the agreement with James. I meant—in... in... Oh, never mind.” She sighed heavily. “I doubt you will allow me to have my freedom much longer, anyhow. Though I am greatly worried about how you shall endeavor to behave now that you will no longer be required to be discrete.”

Caleb looked at her for a moment in silence, his eyes searching hers in a strange, curious fashion. Again, she was

struck by the intensity of his gaze. Something in it brought a blush to her cheeks, and she was forced to look away. Her heart began to beat faster. She told herself it was simply because he had vexed her. But her heart thudded nonetheless. So loud in fact that she almost did not hear his next words.

“You have brought something with you?”

When Emma managed to look at him again, his eyes were on the basket in her hand.

“A small offering,” she replied slowly, still attempting to regain her composure. She held out the basket toward him. “To thank you for assisting me with Lord Hayward.”

“I would say that a little more than assistance was required,” he countered, his eyebrow arching ever so slightly.

“For saving me.” Emma sighed. There was no use in pretending that it had not been a compromising, mortifying situation. She stared at the ground as she continued. “If you had not intervened, I do not know what might have happened.”

Caleb was silent for a long moment. When Emma dared to look at him again, he was regarding her with that same strange look. It was not a departure from his usual grave disposition, but there was perhaps a softening in his eyes somehow. His gaze made her want to look away, yet she did not entirely wish for him to turn his gaze away from her.

Then, once again, his directness sent her reeling. “There is tea,” he said simply, turning and stalking out of the room.

Emma stared at him, aghast. She glanced down at the basket still in her hand. Then, with little other choice, she followed after him.

“I trust you will not mind if we enjoy whatever you brought with tea?” Caleb asked as Emma settled across the table from him.

Emma shook her head, a little surprised that he was offering to eat the food she brought with her. Part of her expected him to throw out the basket the moment she stepped out of the manor.

“You are right,” he continued, inspecting the contents of the basket. “You will enjoy less freedom than what we had originally agreed upon. After the events at the opera, I see that I must do as your brother asked. He told me to stay by your side. Perhaps he knows you well enough to see that I must keep an eye on you from a close distance. Lest you fall to similar temptations.”

“Temptations?” Emma nearly choked on her tea. “How dare you? I did not invite Lord Hayward’s advances at the opera.”

“No. But your brother has made me aware of the man’s history — *your* history together, Lady Emma.”

Emma was about to warn Caleb that he should keep his nose out of other people’s affairs when another thought struck her. “Has my brother told you about Lord Hayward’s treatment of me?”



Taking a sip of his own tea, Caleb shook his head. "I only know that there was a broken engagement. And that your brother fears that Lord Hayward will attempt to rekindle past affections." He eyed her frostily. "Evidently, James was right."

"It is a sad tale," Emma began, her objective now set. If anything might evoke some sorrow in the Duke, surely Tobias's mistreatment of her during last year's Season might earn her at least an ounce of his sympathy.

When Caleb did not stop her, Emma continued. "Lord Hayward was one of the first men to make his affections known to me last Season. He was handsome and good-humored. He danced very well. And he seemed to have genuine feelings for me."

The words caught in her throat, making her pause. Perhaps she had not thought this through. Her own emotions were still quite raw. But she had begun her story. And, with any luck, it might do her some good to speak it aloud. Heaven knew she had not had the heart to tell James the whole story. He would have insisted on dueling Tobias if he knew everything.

"He expressed those feelings," she pressed on. "Though I did not love him, I believed that he and I could grow to have a deep affection for one another in time. I found him to be engaging and eloquent, and I suppose I was blinded by his attention. When I was the object of his desire, it felt as though I were the only important person in his world. So, when he proposed, I accepted."

She sighed. "But his declarations were lies. James knows that Tobias was found in the arms of another woman during one of the last balls of the Season. But he does not know that I was the one who found them."

At this, Caleb's eyes widened, but his expression remained unchanged.

“They were hiding in a small corner of the hall. I caught him murmuring words of admiration to her, his arms around her. I cannot tell you how deeply humiliated I was, the moment I saw them together.”

Emma shook her head sadly. “I ended the engagement. Tobias still believes, for some reason, that he might be able to regain my favor. But I fear I will never be able to trust him again. Not after the way he has behaved.” Raising her gaze to the Duke, she offered him a small, sad smile. “Is that not a sad story?”

For a moment, Caleb was silent. Emma waited for his expression to falter, his mouth to turn downwards, or his brow to furrow with sympathy. But nothing happened. He simply regarded her with the same tightlipped grimace that he had worn throughout her entire story.

Finally, looking as though he spoke only because he felt the obligation to say something, he opened his mouth. “The man is obviously a rogue and a scoundrel. You were probably not the first to be taken in by his lies, and you presumably will not be the last.”

Astonished, Emma simply stared back at him. Was that supposed to make her feel better? She had just poured out the story of her saddest, most humiliating trial to him, and all he could offer her was a grim frown? Along with the reminder that Tobias had probably never cared for her at all.

Instead of defeat, however, Emma felt a surge of stubbornness rise to meet the challenge set before her. Now she was not simply curious about whether Caleb was capable of feeling human emotion, now she was determined to prove that the man could be affected enough to feel something—anything—genuine. And she would be the one to be there when he finally showed his true colors.

Narrowing her eyes at the Duke, Emma took another sip of her tea.

## CHAPTER 7



“**L**ady Emma, can I offer you more—”

“I came upon a puppy once,” Emma casually cut him off, setting down her cup of tea.

Caleb blinked at the sudden change in topic. He didn’t know why, but it seemed the woman was desperate to tell him her whole life story.

As she continued to speak, he held back a sigh and helped himself to some more tea and another slice of the delicious cake that she had brought with her. At least the food was enjoyable.

“Are you a great lover of animals?” she asked him.

“I suppose any man may appreciate the innocence of a dog, or the capabilities of a well-trained horse.”

Emma’s eyes narrowed, as if she were unhappy with his reply. “Surely you cannot approve of the abuse that some of these

poor creatures suffer at the hands of men.”

Baffled as to what the woman was trying to get at, Caleb shook his head. “No. Indeed, I cannot.”

“Neither can I.” She shook her head. “The sweet creature I came upon that day... I believe it was some years ago. He was beautiful, with a thick coat and gorgeous, wide eyes. He belonged to a neighboring estate. As I walked past, he ran out to greet me.”

Curious, Caleb watched as Emma seemed to recall the moment. She might not realize it, but it was as if every thought that crossed her mind, every small emotion that welled up within her, was scrawled in broad strokes across her features.

It was not an unattractive quality, Caleb realized. Watching her, he found her to be genuine, and quite unlike the great majority of gossips and social climbers in the *ton*. He watched her, his gaze traveling from her eyes, to her rosy pink cheeks, to her lips.

Emma continued. She wore her heart on her sleeve, and right now, her heart was breaking.

“He was gentle and loving, asking me to pat him. As friendly as any dog could be. Up until I heard someone call for him. And then... well, I had never seen such a thing before. This kind, beautiful puppy began to shake and whimper at the sound.”

Emma sought Caleb's gaze, a strange intensity in her eyes. "He was afraid. And he looked at me as if he were asking me to help him."

Caleb wondered for a brief moment if Emma had lost her mind. It was a disheartening story, to be sure, but at the moment, he was more concerned about her health.

"You can imagine how I felt, can you not?" she pressed, still watching him closely. "I pitied the poor creature at that moment as I had never pitied anything else before."

"You helped the dog, I presume?" Caleb kept his tone even, uncertain as to where this story was headed, and whether or not this was some convoluted cry for help from the Earl's daughter.

"I did. I couldn't simply leave him. After speaking with the owners of the estate, I took him home with me. But he must have been terribly mistreated there. Horrible, is it not..." she trailed off, still watching him with a strange mix of curiosity and—

Was that a hint of annoyance? Caleb did not know.

He opened his mouth and closed it. The woman had baffled him entirely. He couldn't help but feel that there was something he had missed. Something that would explain her strange, erratic conversation.

"Yes. Horrible," he finally managed to utter.

“That is it?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Emma’s eyes widened further. The look in her eyes mirrored his own astonishment. “That is all you have to say?”

“What more is there to say?” Caleb asked.

But, even as the words left his mouth, he saw that he had somehow misspoken.

Emma rose in a huff. “You must either be the most indifferent man in the world, or an absolute villain.”

Now Caleb stood up. His confusion quickly turned into irritation. The woman was being absurd, and somehow managing to insult him at the same time. “I beg your pardon?”

“I am afraid it is time for me to take my leave,” she replied haughtily. Then, offering him a curt nod, she departed.

Caleb stood in silence for a long moment after Emma left. He rubbed a hand over his face, finally sinking into the chair as he wondered, perhaps, if he were the one losing his mind. What had just happened?

If the night at the opera and this afternoon had taught him anything, it was that Emma Brown could not be trusted to be

on her own. No matter how he felt about the situation, he could not allow her to move about the *ton* unaccompanied.

Caleb shook his head in amazement. He had a lot of work ahead of him.



“Insufferable!” Emma muttered, practically stomping all the way back to Handleigh Manor. “The nerve! The gall! He showed not an ounce of feeling. The man must be carved out of ice!”

She had failed entirely in her attempt to make the Duke exhibit sadness. Ruth would never let her live this down when she heard. Emma had been so certain that her story about the puppy would have made him feel something. But he had merely listened to her, eyeing her as if she were an annoying fly buzzing around his head.

How her brother had managed to become friends with such a man, she would never know.

As Emma stormed her way back into the manor, Mr. Cornell, her father’s butler, greeted her. “There is a letter for you, My Lady.”

Taking the proffered object, Emma nodded distractedly. “Thank you.”

Hurrying up to her room, she allowed herself one last exasperated sigh over her failed afternoon. Then, she turned her attention to the letter.



Her immediate hopes of a message from James were crushed as she poured over the contents. The handwriting was unfamiliar, and the way in which the sender addressed her was quite formal.

Curious, she read, her back pressed against her bedroom door. She furrowed her brow as she continued reading it, flipping the paper over hurriedly. Then, once she had finished, she read it again.

As the message finally sank in, her chest grew tight. This would not do. This would not do at all.

It was only a little while later that the physician arrived at Handleigh Manor. He was brought to her immediately.

“Lady Emma,” he said, setting his medical bag on a nearby table, “I am told that you are unwell.”

“Thank you for coming. On such short notice, too.” Emma was sitting on a settee in the drawing room. She stood up at his arrival and, as the butler closed the door behind him, gestured for the doctor to sit.

He did so. “Well, what is the matter?”

Dr. Taylor had known her family for many years. He had been her mother’s physician, and, although he could not save her, he had been a great comfort to Emma and her family after her passing. He was remarkably kind and compassionate, despite his burdensome schedule. The physician of many wealthy

families in the *ton*, he hardly had time to see his own. But his dedication to his work and his altruistic attitude were what gave Emma hope that he might have some sympathy for her current situation.

“I-I am not unwell,” Emma began, unable to lie to him.

He frowned, clearly taken aback. “Then why have you called me here?”

“I assure you that the situation is important. Indeed, I fear it may be dire. And I will compensate you for your time. But I fear I cannot offer you too many details.”

Emma risked a glance at the door. Though her father would be in his study at this time of day, she did not wish to risk any of this coming to his attention.

Seeming to understand her worries, at least in part, the doctor sighed. “Very well. What can you tell me about the matter?”

“If I were to be unwell,” Emma began, desperately trying to find the right words. “If my stomach was rather upset, and I could not seem to keep food down, would you be worried about my condition?”

Dr. Taylor’s frown deepened. “How long, hypothetically, would you have been unable to eat?”

“Four days.”

The physician looked perplexed. “Would you be able to keep down any liquids?”

“A little. But not very much.”

The physician eyed her with uncertainty. “It would be worrying if that were the case. Not immediately dangerous. But things could potentially grow far worse, if this were to be your condition.”

Emma nodded slowly, taking this in.

Then, casting a glance over his shoulder, Dr. Taylor lowered his voice. “Are you in trouble, Lady Emma?”

Her heart ached to cause the man grief. She shook her head. “I am not. I only wish... to be of help.”

“Perhaps I can be of help as well?”

Emma found herself vainly wishing at that moment that Dr. Taylor was her father. Or that her own father had an ounce of care for her that the physician seemed to have for his patients. Perhaps, if her father did, then she might have been able to go to him for help today, instead of fearing he might put a stop to her actions.

“You are already a great help.” Emma hesitated. “If things might not yet be dire, then perhaps your medicine may yet be enough to assist in the matter.” She frowned, allowing herself

to think of the worst. “But I may request your further assistance, doctor, if the matter worsens.”

At that, he sighed and nodded only once. The physician’s jaw twitched as if he were wrestling with a decision. “It is difficult to address the cause of an imbalance of the stomach,” he said after a moment. “But I have a few things I would suggest you take, over the course of several days, to see if they might reinvigorate the appetite.”

Holding back a sigh of relief, Emma nodded. “Thank you, doctor.”

Fishing out several vials from his bag, he offered them to Emma. As her hand closed around one, however, he did not let go. “You will send for me if matters grow worse?” he murmured, raising an eyebrow.

Astonishingly, tears sprang to Emma’s eyes. The man’s kindness had taken her by surprise. She would have gone straight to James with the matter, were he here. He had been her constant source of support. But he was gone, and this was her responsibility. She was grateful for whatever help the busy doctor could offer.

“Of course. Thank you.”

Standing up quickly, Emma grabbed her purse, which held with her monthly allowance, and paid the man handsomely.

Mr. Taylor left then, still looking perplexed, as Emma offered no further explanation to her predicament. She wished she

could, but if word reached her father, he would put an end to everything. And she did not know, were the doctor to be made aware of the full situation, if he would find himself obligated to inform her father of her activities.

So Emma kept her mouth shut and, sinking back onto the settee, tried to keep her tears at bay. She missed James even more than she had imagined she would. She missed the way he could dismiss her fears with an easy jest and a smile.

But her confidante was far away, on a different continent. And Emma's work for the day was not yet over.

## CHAPTER 8



“Lady Emma usually tends to that, Your Grace,” Mr. Burrs replied.

“Indeed?”

Caleb did not pretend that he was not surprised. He raised his head, squinting in the morning sunlight. It promised to be a beautiful day.

“You need not worry. I am sure she will take care of everything, especially in her brother’s absence.”

“Right. Well, speak to me if you require anything else.”

Mr. Burrs nodded and took his leave, hurrying back toward the manor.

Caleb watched the man go, his mind racing. Lady Emma continued to surprise him. He was learning that there were many things that she did on behalf of James and his household, both for his benefit, but also for the benefit of those he employed.

This morning, Caleb had been made aware that James's servants, as well as those who worked for his father at Handleigh Manor, were gifted the afternoon off, once a year, around this time of the Season, for a grand picnic. This, he learned, was orchestrated and organized by Emma.

Caleb had heard some of James's maids whispering about it earlier and had asked Mr. Burrs to explain what was going on. The man had done so, asking him whether he was willing to allow the servants to continue the tradition, and assuring him that the regular chores would still be seen to in a timely manner.

Surprised, Caleb had allowed the tradition to continue. It would mean that Emma would spend the day on the estate, and it would give him a chance to keep an eye on her. He was still worried that she might be under great stress after their latest conversation over tea.

Emma continued to plague his thoughts as he made his way back into the manor. He strode down the hall and into the library.

James had made it clear that his father paid little attention to his sister. He had also told Caleb that he and Emma had lost their mother when they were young and that, presumably, their father's sorrow turned him cold and distant.

As Caleb grabbed one of the books that James had given him, as a reward for looking after Emma, he thought about the strange similarities between himself and his friend's sister.

Caleb had lost both his parents, but the man who had raised him, his uncle Solomon, had been harrowed by the loss of his brother. Solomon was not a particularly loving man, though he did his best to look after his nephew, and now Caleb wondered if the great loss his uncle had suffered had a profound effect on him.

Caleb wondered in what unknown ways the loss had affected himself, too. He knew the obvious—he had worked to be smarter and better than any of the other boys at school. That way, they would have no reason to tease him. That way, he could focus all his energy on his work, rather than on the love and companionship he lacked.

Perhaps he still had that mindset.

He brushed his hand over the book, remembering how much his mother had loved it. He could almost see her now, sitting in her favorite chair by the window, reading with an entranced expression on her face, as if she could not consume the story fast enough.

How many books had she still wanted to read, when her life was cut so horribly short? What plans did she have for her family? Caleb would never know. And that thought filled him with fury.

“Your Grace?” The butler was at the door to the library.

“Yes?”

“There is a letter for you.”



Caleb set the book down with a sigh. As usual, there was never any time for him to be alone with his thoughts. Such a luxury was not afforded to men like him. To a duke. There was always work to be done. Always matters to attend to. An example to be set.

Suppressing a grimace, he nodded. “Thank you.”

He accepted the letter begrudgingly from the butler. He was on his way out of the library when he opened the letter. When his eyes swiftly scanned its contents, he paused. His eyes followed the delicate, sweeping handwriting again as his mood took a sudden, surprising shift.

It was from Lady Emma. And the contents of her letter were most unexpected.



“I can hardly wait. It is rumored to be a beautiful event.”

Emma nodded faintly. As usual, Ruth was entertaining them with the latest gossip about the next event of the Season. But Emma was having trouble focusing today. There were other matters on her mind.

“I am sure it will,” Abigail replied patiently. “You will have to wear your new dress, Ruth. It will be the perfect event to wear such a gown.”

“Ah, but shall I wear my new gloves with it?” Ruth giggled, shooting Emma a sly grin.

But Emma hardly noticed. Her gaze was out the window, watching the clouds drifting in the sky overhead.

“Emma?”

Emma blinked. “I am sorry, I must have been miles away. What did you say?”

“I asked whether you had been successful in your latest conversation with His Grace. Have you been able to evoke some semblance of emotion in the man?” Ruth bit her lip excitedly, waiting for Emma’s reply with bated breath.

Though she was not in the mood for such a conversation, Emma could see that Ruth and Abigail were eager for news. Reminding herself that Ruth could use the amusement, as well as a distraction from her difficult situation at home with her mother, she forced herself to recount her frustrating conversation with the Duke.

“Not an ounce of pity?” Abigail breathed, astounded.

Emma shook her head. “A small frown. That was all he gave me.”

“Perhaps you did not tell the stories in such a way as to make him feel properly unhappy,” Ruth suggested.

“I told him everything. I even told him about Lord Hayward more than I had intended to. And when not even the story of the poor, sweet puppy moved him, I was too amazed to try again.”

The frustration of the afternoon tea with Caleb niggled at Emma once more. He infuriated her more than she cared to admit. Partly because she did not understand why he agitated her so.

Abigail shook her head, her brow furrowed. “The women at the literary assembly yesterday told me of a novel in which a man is depicted as having no concern for others. It was impossible to make him feel any sort of pity or compassion. And such as he was, he was capable of a great many horrible things, for his conscience did not bother him.”

“Do you think His Grace is like the man in the novel?” Ruth whispered, incredulous.

“Surely he has some notion of what’s right and what’s wrong,” Emma protested, hardly believing that she was defending the man. “Otherwise, he would not have intervened when Lord Hayward accosted me at the opera.”

“Indeed. I do not believe the Duke is as awful as all that,” Abigail replied. “I only mean to say that a man who does not feel things as the rest of us may be capable of things that the rest of us would not dare to do.”

Though a part of her wondered if there was some truth in Abigail’s words, Emma dismissed the thought. She reminded

herself to be rational. Caleb could be just as infuriating without being a secret criminal.

“Careful, Abigail,” she warned, shaking her head in mock admonishment. “Or you will have Ruth sharing these opinions with all of the *ton* at the garden party tomorrow.”

“Oh, tomorrow would be the perfect opportunity to try your hand at making His Grace show another emotion!” Ruth exclaimed with delight. “What shall we try this time? Anger? Happiness?”

“I hope His Grace will not be present tomorrow,” Emma admitted, shaking her head with renewed agitation. “If he cannot understand the need for discretion, then his behavior, particularly at a garden party, is sure to draw far more attention than I should like.”

“There is no doubt he has been invited.” Abigail risked a glance at Ruth. It was clear she did not want to be the bearer of bad news. “I am certain he is always invited to such events. Even if he does not regularly attend.”

Ruth frowned. “But if he cannot tolerate a ball, then surely tomorrow’s event will be even more abhorrent to him.” She pouted. “Oh, he might not attend! I will be ever so disappointed. Do you think his obligations to Emma would be strong enough to force him to attend even a garden party?”

“I hope not,” Emma murmured.

She glanced away, once again struggling to make sense of her last conversation with the Duke. When she turned back to her friends, Ruth was helping herself to another cup of tea. But Abigail was watching her with concern.

“Is something the matter?” Emma asked.

Abigail seemed to hesitate, as if she were deciding whether to reveal the truth of her discomfort to her. “You might need to have someone to attend tomorrow’s event with,” she said after a moment.

Emma and Ruth exchanged confused glances.

“What do you mean?” Emma asked.

“I have heard that Lord Hayward will be in attendance tomorrow.” Abigail’s frown deepened. “I am sorry, Emma. I only received word of it today. I was not sure how to tell you.”

Emma was quiet, reflecting on this new information.

“I would not have said anything,” Abigail continued, “so as not to distress you. But after his behavior at the opera, I wonder if you would be better off attending the party with someone who would be able to protect you from him. Should his passions overtake him again and push him beyond the bounds of propriety.”

Emma could feel Ruth’s excitement even before her friend let out a squeal of delight.

“Now His Grace must surely attend!” Ruth beamed at her.

“His Grace would have no way of knowing about Lord Hayward’s attendance,” Emma replied slowly.

She was having difficulty dismissing Abigail’s concerns. Though she desperately wanted to remind her friend that she was quite capable of looking after herself, Tobias’s actions that night at the opera had scared her. She had never seen him so adamant before. And if the Duke had not interfered... she did not know what might have happened.

At any other event, Emma might have been able to dismiss her fears about encountering Tobias on her own. But at a garden party, one might find a way to catch a woman in the secluded corner of a hedge or isolate her on a walk around the estate.

Emma did not know if she could handle being accosted by Tobias again. His actions had shaken her, and even now, as she recalled his behavior, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

“Then you must make him aware of Lord Hayward’s attendance,” Ruth continued excitedly, pulling Emma out of her thoughts.

Emma glanced helplessly at Abigail.

“He may be a difficult companion,” Abigail offered guiltily, “but he would be a better one than Lord Hayward. And, perhaps, if Lord Hayward were to see you again with the

Duke, then he may come to believe that someone else has secured your affections.”

Emma could hardly believe what her friends were suggesting. She could also hardly believe that she was considering what they were saying. But if she were to agree to this, it would show Caleb that she did not believe she could be trusted to be on her own.

Then again, had he not already decided that she needed to be observed more closely following the events at the opera? If he was already of the opinion that she needed to be protected, as James believed, should she not at least make use of the Duke’s duty to her brother?

Once again, Emma felt that she was making a mistake.

She sighed. Then, shaking her head, she met her friend’s eyes. “Very well.”

Ruth clapped excitedly, nearly spilling her tea in her delight, and even Abigail looked relieved.

A little while later, Emma bid her friends goodbye, promising to see them at the following day’s event. Then, before her courage could fail her, she returned to her rooms and sat down to pen a letter to the Duke.

It took her several minutes to decide on how she might articulate such a request, without losing her dignity in the process. Finally, she settled on reminding him that there would be a garden party tomorrow, as part of the Season’s events, and

that, if he were planning to attend, she would allow it, seeing as Lord Hayward was also expected to be in attendance.

Asking one of the footmen to deliver it to James's estate, Emma found herself watching as the man disappeared over the hill on his way to Caleb's temporary home.

Try as she might, she knew that his presence tomorrow might save her from another scandalous encounter with her former fiancé. Even if it would make for another infuriating afternoon with Caleb at her side.

Would he accept her veiled invitation, she wondered? Or would he suddenly change his mind about the importance of his agreement with James? Emma did not know.

She realized then that she knew very little about Caleb Gibson. About his history or his person. She only knew that he infuriated her. And yet, for some strange reason, a small part of her wanted to know more.



## CHAPTER 9



Emma heard voices in the hall.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” the butler greeted.

Caleb was here. She fidgeted anxiously with her dress, hesitating on the top of the stairs, still out of sight.

“I have come to accompany Lady Emma to an event this morning,” she heard Caleb say.

He sounded as he always did, but she strained to hear whether he sounded more or less annoyed than usual at the prospect of the day’s garden party.

“Of course, Your Grace. If you will wait but a moment,” the butler replied, and Emma knew he would show Caleb into the drawing room.

“There is no need,” she called gently from above. “I am ready.”

Then, taking a deep breath, she descended the stairs to join them.

Emma did not know what to expect as she stopped before the Duke. She was wearing her best dress, a lovely delicate green gown that complemented her eyes. She had taken great care to have her maid arrange her hair in the most fashionable of updos. And, to top it all off, she had no idea why she had put so much care into her appearance.

It was not as if today's event was any more important than the Season's other events. She told herself that, if Caleb did arrive to escort her, it would be most beneficial for her to look her best simply to reassure him that she was clearly a woman capable of looking after herself.

But whatever Emma had expected, when Caleb took one look at her and glanced away, her heart sank.

Then, her hurt quickly turning into anger, she pressed her lips together into a thin line. "Your Grace," she greeted coldly.

"Lady Emma."

"I see you received my letter."

"I did. It took me only a moment to decipher your reason for writing to me," he added, shooting her a glance that told her that her vague language had not gone unnoticed.

A hot blush crept up her cheeks. She wondered if he had laughed at her letter. She had refused to ask him outright to attend the garden party with her. Emma couldn't bear the thought of asking him for help. But now it would seem that her stubbornness had only given him another reason to find fault with her.

"Then, when I realized you were asking me to accompany you today," he continued, "I made arrangements to attend the event."

"I would presume that a man like you would have a standing invitation to all of the Season's events," she replied curtly. "Even if you rarely find yourself able to attend," she added pointedly.

But her jab was weak. Caleb immediately dismissed it. "Shall we go?" he asked, already looking bored.

Before Emma could respond, she heard a voice behind her.

"Ah, Your Grace." Rupert Brown, the Earl of Handleigh, stepped off the bottom stair, looking at Caleb in surprise. He had a book in hand and looked as if he had been fully intending to pass through the hall on his way elsewhere. But instead, he had happened upon the Duke.

At her father's appearance, Caleb nodded curtly. Emma was surprised to see the muscles in his jaw tick as he regarded her father.

"Lord Handleigh."

Rupert looked Caleb up and down with a barely disguised look of annoyance. “Forgive me, Your Grace. I hope you have not come to see me. I wasn’t made aware that I have visitors today. Indeed, I had hoped for the opposite.”

Emma had another reason to blush. Now Caleb could see, firsthand, how little her father cared about her. She had told Rupert about the garden party at breakfast this morning, as well as about the possibility of being escorted to the venue by the Duke. But her father, it would seem, had not even been listening. Or rather, he did not care.

“No, indeed, you need not worry,” Caleb replied, his tone even icier than before. “I have come to escort Lady Emma to today’s garden party.”

“Ah. Very well.”

Without so much as a “see that she is looked after,” Rupert nodded to Caleb and Emma and then disappeared into the next room.

For a moment, Emma’s embarrassment would not allow her to look at Caleb. But when she finally did, she found him watching her father’s retreating figure with what she could only describe as disdain.

“We must go,” he informed her then, turning toward the door. “We would not want to arrive late.”

Already regretting having invited him along, Emma sighed and followed him outside.



The estate on which the garden party was being held was not far away. After a short carriage ride, Caleb found himself guiding Emma toward an elaborate event that already seemed to be in full swing.

There were refreshments aplenty. Women wandered the grounds, holding decorative umbrellas, with men at their sides, discussing the state of the gardens and, presumably, the weather.

Caleb tried not to look as nauseated as he felt. This was perhaps the worst of the Season's events that he might have been forced to attend.

But, when he glanced over at the woman at his side, his disdain wavered. Like it had when she had first descended the stairs, wearing that bewitching dress, his chest grew tight at the sight of her. He had not been expecting her to look as... well, as beautiful as she did. At the manor, Caleb had turned away from her before she could catch the admiration in his eyes.

Now, however, he found himself admiring her all over again. How strange that fate had conspired to bring him here today, with her by his side no less.

*James*, Caleb reminded himself. That was why Caleb was here. He was here out of duty to his friend. That was all.

“It is a beautiful day, is it not?” Emma asked after they had a chance to greet their host.

They were now wandering the grounds with the others, taking in the trees, flowers, and elaborately pruned hedges.

Caleb watched as she glanced over her shoulder hurriedly. Was she looking for Tobias? “Indeed.”

Emma glanced up at him as if she expected him to say more. When Caleb did not, she sighed. “Oh, there are Rose and Abigail,” she mused, gesturing to two ladies across the gardens. “I should bid them a good afternoon.”

Caleb nodded, unbothered whether or not she greeted them.

“Is there anyone here with whom you would like to converse?” she asked him, continuing to fill the silence.

Caleb glanced around. He spotted several people that he recognized. Indeed, he was acquainted with most of the people in attendance. But that did not mean he had any desire to speak to a single one of them.

He shook his head.

Once again, Emma shot him an annoyed look. Then, as she continued to watch her friends from afar, a strange expression touched her features. When she turned back to him, she was smiling sweetly.

Caleb blinked in confusion at the change.

“I do not think I have ever seen a garden I did not like,” she informed him. “I feel at peace when I am amidst nature. Do not you?”

Caleb frowned. “I do not see why I should not.”

“You answer cryptically, but I would venture a guess that even you should be filled with a renewed purpose—a renewed hope for life—when you are out on a sunny day like this.”

Before Caleb could answer, she paused to lean over a rosebush, her delicate nose brushing against the soft petals of one of the blossoming flowers. “Smell this,” she breathed, “and tell me that you are not blissfully happy.”

The strangest sensation came over Caleb as he watched her. He wanted to have her likeness painted, just so, with the pink of her cheeks perfectly matching the blooming rose before her. He wanted to freeze the moment and somehow capture her image.

Disturbed by his thoughts, he cleared his throat and turned away. “I am well enough as I am,” he replied coldly.



Emma hurried to catch up with Caleb, though he walked so fast that he looked as if he were trying to lose her.

But Emma would not be dissuaded from her task. “If you could be anywhere in the world, at this very moment, where would it be?” she asked him, spreading her arms wide as if to encompass the whole world.

She beamed up at him, willing him to do the same—willing him to wipe that horribly boring expression off his face for just one moment.

Caleb glanced down at her, furrowing his brow ever so slightly. He narrowed his eyes. “I do not concern myself with such fanciful musings. It is not practical.”

Emma held back a groan. She forced herself to continue to smile up at him. “What about a memory? Surely you must have a happy memory, perhaps in a place like this, that you return to from time to time.”

Caleb said nothing.

But Emma would win this time. She had not been able to persuade him to show sadness the other day at tea. But here, on this lovely day, surely even he might admit to a little joyfulness of spirit.

“Come, Your Grace,” she coaxed. “Tell me a joke or an anecdote. Something to make me laugh.”

When Caleb came to a sudden halt, Emma faltered. He turned to her, his eyes flashing with something she could not



recognize. Then, taking two quick steps, he reached out and placed a hand on her forehead.

Emma could not speak. Her throat and mouth went dry, and she could do nothing but stare up at him in astonishment. They were very near to one another now. Closer than they had ever been before. And her head swam with the unfamiliar but not unappealing scent of him as his warm palm made heat rise to her face.

“Wha—I—Your Grace, whatever are you doing?” she finally breathed, her voice quavering.

Caleb’s gaze found hers. Emma realized she was holding her breath. Then, he answered, “I am checking to see if you have a fever, Lady Emma. That would be the only logical explanation for your strange and perplexing conversation.”

She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

“Are you unwell?” he asked her. “Your outlandish behavior would suggest you are.”

Not for the first time, Emma felt the urge to throw something at him. Shaken by his nearness, and now rattled by his outright insult, she still found herself unable to speak. It was all she could do to shake her head.

Caleb nodded, satisfied. Then, just as quickly as he’d drawn near, he was off again, continuing down the path without her.



“Where is he?”

Caleb paced the study, his candle flickering in the slight draft that his movement created, casting dancing shadows on the walls around him.

Mr. Steel was late, darkness had long since fallen, and Caleb had begun to assume the worst.

Finally, a gentle knock sounded at the study door. “A Mr. Steel here to see you, Your Grace.”

Caleb nodded in relief. He sat down in a nearby chair, leaning back. “Send him in.”

A familiar, scowling face appeared in the doorway.

“Close the door behind you,” Caleb instructed.

Mr. Steel did as he asked and then turned back to him. “Your Grace.”

“You are late.”

“Yes. I apologize.”

“Have you any explanation for your tardiness? Is there anything I should be worried about?”

Mr. Steel hesitated. “The reason for my tardiness tonight, Your Grace, is due to your most recent request. My men and I have been keeping an eye on Lady Emma, as you have asked.” He shook his head. “I am afraid you have much to be concerned about, regarding the young lady.”

Caleb sat up slowly. Dread crept up his spine. “What do you mean?”

“We followed her early this evening. Only a few hours after you returned her to her home, following the garden party, she left again, without escort. She made her way to a nearby market. We followed at a distance, but...” Mr. Steel hesitated. He did not meet Caleb’s eyes. “We lost her.”

“What?” Caleb was on his feet in an instant.

“I do not know how she evaded us, Your Grace. It was light when she first arrived at the market —several hours until nightfall. When we lost sight of her, we searched the market. Searched until dark. I sent a man back to the manor, and only when he returned, informing us that, somehow, Lady Emma had returned to the estate without our notice, did we stop looking for her.”

Caleb did not know what to say.

Mr. Steel sighed. “She is safe at home now. But I fear that this is not the first time she has done such a thing. Her movements

were far too practiced for this to have been a singular occurrence. It is a great feat to elude my men the way she did.”

Multiple emotions warred within Caleb. His first concern had been for Emma’s safety. But now that he knew she had returned home—unharmd as far as he knew—anger rose up within him. Did she care so little for her own safety? And yet she had the impudence to claim that she could be trusted to look after herself when, all this while, she was secreting herself away to goodness knew where, to do goodness knew what.

Making a great effort to control himself, Caleb sank back down into his chair. “Thank you, Mr. Steel, for informing me of Lady Emma’s whereabouts.”

“Shall I continue to monitor her?”

Caleb’s jaw twitched as he raised his eyes to meet the man’s. “The matter must be addressed far more directly, do not you think?”

## CHAPTER 10



The floor creaked. Emma froze, squeezing her eyes shut against the offending noise. But, much to her relief, in the hustle and bustle of the kitchen, her presence was not noticed.

She was no stranger to sneaking out of the manor this way. While the cook had her back turned, Emma quickly crossed the remaining few feet to the door and let herself outside.

Allowing herself a sigh of relief, she gazed gratefully up at the midmorning sun. Her grip on the basket at her side loosened slightly.

Yesterday, her trip into the market had been delayed by the garden party. She knew she probably should not have gone, as close to dusk as it was by the time she returned home. But she had needed to know that everything was all right.

Besides, no one had noticed her absence from the manor anyway. Her heart clenched at the thought. No one took much notice of her around the manor at all.

The servants were kind, but they were occupied with their daily chores. Her father shut himself in his study at all hours. And James was still half a world away, having spared her little more than a short letter informing her that he was well and enjoying his travels.

A strange thought occurred to her. The person who paid the most attention to her at the moment was the Duke of Terrington. If someone had told her, even a month ago, that she would find herself shadowed by the infamous Caleb Gibson, she would have laughed in their face. But now, he seemed to be the only person in her life who cared where she went or what she did.

Telling herself to give up these strange, self-pitying thoughts, Emma hurried on her way. She knew the route. How many times had she come this way? She had lost count.

With practiced steps, she entered the market. She made a show of greeting several stallholders, exchanging polite words and inspecting their wares. Then, when she was satisfied that whoever had noticed her arrival was now occupied, she pulled up the hood of her cloak and, with a quick step to the side, disappeared into a small alley off the corner of the market square.

She kept her head down as the atmosphere around her changed. She did not offer any greetings as she went, though one or two strangers made muffled, vaguely threatening comments as she passed by. Emma clutched her basket closer and hurried toward a large, dilapidated house at the far end of the alley.

She quickly knocked on the door, then waited. A few moments later, it creaked open.

“Lady Emma!” A frail woman, only a few years younger than Emma but carrying the weight of many tiring days, offered her a relieved smile. Her pale blonde hair was pulled back tight, but, as usual, several wisps had escaped throughout the day.

“Miss Mary, how are you?”

“Better now that you are here.”

Mary stepped aside and allowed Emma in. As soon as Emma had closed the door behind her, she heard a little voice cry out with joy, “Lady Emma! Lady Emma!”

A small child, only five or six years of age, rushed toward her and threw her arms around Emma’s waist.

Emma chuckled and returned the embrace. “Miss Lottie, how are you today? I hope you have been behaving for dear Miss Mary.”

The little girl raised her face up to grin at Emma. “Oh, I have! Miss Mary says I have been an angel all day!”

Emma exchanged a knowing smile with Mary. “Indeed?” she said, returning her gaze to Lottie. “Good behavior deserves a reward from time to time, I believe,” she added, reaching out to pull back the cloth that covered her basket.

Lottie’s eyes widened in joyful anticipation.

“Let me see. What do I have here?”

Emma made a show of looking through the contents of her basket as the little girl bounced on her feet in excitement. When little Lottie seemed as though she could hardly contain herself, Emma chuckled and lowered the basket so that the little girl could see inside.

“Thank you, Lady Emma!” the girl cried as Emma handed her one of the special treats she had brought from home. “May I show the others what you’ve brought?”

Emma nodded. “Be sure everyone gets something,” she said, handing the basket over to her.

Lottie nodded and scampered down the hall and into the big room off to the right.

Mary chuckled. “You spoil them, Lady Emma.”

Shaking her head, Emma sighed. “There is much more I wish I could do for them. How is Michael?”

Holding her breath, she searched Mary’s face for some sign of good news. When she had been here yesterday, the little boy’s fate still hung in the balance.

Then, to Emma’s great relief, Mary smiled and nodded. “Much better, thanks to the medicine you provided.”



Overcome, Emma reached out and clasped Mary's hands in hers. "Truly?"

Mary's eyes shone with tears. "He is on the mend."

As Mary led Emma up the stairs and into a small, cramped room, Emma noticed—as she often did—the musty scent that permeated every corner of the orphanage. It was the scent of too many people living in tight quarters.

In the room, a frail, little figure lay atop a bed that could hardly be described as such. Ragged blankets stacked on top of one another were all that separated the boy from the cold hard floor.

At their approach, Michael opened his eyes and offered them a weak smile. "Did you bring us sweets, Lady Emma?"

Emma blinked back tears of joy. "I did. And I saved something very special for you, Michael, since you have been such a brave boy."

Pulling his special treat out of her pocket, she handed it to him. Emma helped him sit up as he nibbled on the cake, his eyes clearer than she had seen them in days.

It was a miracle. He was eating again. And it was all thanks to her physician. Emma would find a way to thank Dr. Taylor the next time she saw him.

She spent as much time as she could spare at Michael's side, telling him stories and listening as he told a few of his own. Then, when it was finally time to leave, she followed Mary back down the stairs to the front door.

"I still do not know how you managed to procure the medicine for Michael," Mary said, squeezing Emma's hands gratefully. "But I thank you. There is no way we can repay you for your kindness."

"There is no need. I am only grateful that the medicine worked such a miracle on him. I-I fear it would have been risky to try and bring the physician here. Time and propriety would not allow him to come here unless it were a matter of life and death. But if it had come to such things, I would not have hesitated to bring him."

Mary nodded in understanding. "I know you come here at great risk to yourself."

Emma offered Mary a warm, genuine smile. "It is a risk I am happy to take."

A little while later, Emma arrived back at the manor. She had intended to go up to her rooms when she was stopped by Mr. Cornell.

"There is a message for you, Lady Emma. From His Grace."

Emma frowned and took the proffered note. It was short and concise, everything she would have expected of the Duke. But between the sparse words, she gleaned his meaning.

He was angry. And he requested that she come and speak with him. Immediately.



Lady Emma arrived at the manor just in time for afternoon tea. But Caleb was in no mood to sit and share a drink with her. He was furious with her. Especially when she swanned into the drawing room as if she were as innocent as a babe.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace,” she greeted, fixing him with a smile, a hint of defiance in those wide eyes of hers.

“Lady Emma. I see you received my note.”

“Indeed. Though I do not understand why you require my presence immediately. There are many other pressing matters that I must see to today.”

Caleb clenched one hand into a fist at his side. It was the only outward sign of his inner turmoil.

With great effort, he maintained his composure, speaking in a slow, calm manner. “Other pressing matters? More pressing than putting yourself and your good name in harm’s way?”

Emma blinked, clearly taken aback. “I beg your pardon?”

“Have you or have you not been sneaking out of your home to go into the market alone *and* unchaperoned?”

She was quiet for a long moment. “How do you know about that?” she finally asked in a low voice.

Now it was Caleb’s turn to fumble for the right words. He realized his mistake. “I... well, I—”

“You could not know that I went into the market unless you followed me there,” she added, her voice rising.

Caleb decided to tell her the truth. “No, I was not the one who followed you. My men did.”

Emma’s eyes widened in evident outrage. “How dare you? What right have you—You had me followed?”

He crossed to her then, his emotions taking control. He drew up close to her, his mouth opening, the truth on the tip of his tongue. He was angry with her because he was worried about her. For some unbelievable reason, his happiness was tied to hers, enough so that putting herself in danger plagued him to no end.

But these words were not for Emma’s ears. Caleb stopped himself before his innermost thoughts could spill out. He paused and, with great effort, found another way to justify his anger toward her.

“For good reason,” he countered, his voice hard but level. “Clearly, you cannot be trusted to look after yourself. Nor do you care about what may happen to you if word about your

unbecoming behavior got out. What am I to tell your brother then? Dare I even ask?”

Words seemed to elude Emma as she opened and closed her mouth several times in an attempt to answer him. Caleb waited, his icy fury continuing to pool somewhere in the center of his chest.

Finally, Emma hung her head. At first, Caleb thought it was in shame. Then, he heard her explanation.

“I have been visiting an orphanage.” Her voice was soft, but her expression was inscrutable. “It is not the *proper* place for a woman like me, I know. But I do not care what others may think. Those children need help, and I do what little I can to care for them.”

She looked down at the ground, not willing to look him in the eye.

In the silence that followed, a myriad of thoughts and emotions roiled within Caleb. He was speechless. Of everything he thought she might say, this was the thing he least expected to hear.

She had been risking her good name and safety to care for poor, orphaned children? It seemed almost too angelic an act to be true. Almost. But for a woman like Emma—a woman he was learning was just about as pure and selfless as a woman could be—he did not doubt that she spoke the truth.

There were many things Caleb could have done at that moment. Many things he knew he should do. But, to his secret shame, he laughed. It was his first impulse. And it sounded cold and arrogant even to his own ears.

“I knew you were naïve,” he said. “Your brother told me as much. And the time I have spent with you has not disproven that particular assertion. But even I could not have imagined how naïve you might truly be.”

For a moment, Caleb thought Emma was hurt by his mockery. But then her eyes flashed with a deep rage, and she squared her shoulders and met his gaze unflinchingly. “I would not expect a man with a heart of ice such as yourself to understand the matter,” she said simply.

Then, turning on her heel, she left him.

Caleb watched her go, his chest tight. He had needed to be callous—to break through all her good intentions—in order to make sure that she understood the danger of her actions. Just because her brother did not know of her secret meetings, and because her father paid her no attention, she could not simply be allowed to make such dangerous trips on her own.

What she was doing was good. Very good. But she was going about it the wrong way. Something very bad might happen to a woman like her, out on her own, in a place like that. His men had told him about the criminals that hung around that market, looking for easy prey. They might steal from her at best. Caleb did not even want to think about what they might do to her if they caught her alone and unprotected.

But he feared that he had reacted to her story unkindly. Perhaps he had been too harsh. And, instead of teaching her a lesson, Emma had met his rebuke with a fire of her own.

Kind and pure as she was, she had a force of will that would outmatch even the most stubborn monarch.

Now Caleb feared that he had only provoked her. What she would do in response to his scolding, he did not know. But he feared it would not be to his benefit.

She would already be thinking of how to reward him for his unkindness, he had no doubt. It would behoove him to stay away. But that was something he could not do. Emma needed to be protected, to be kept within sight, now more than ever. She would not like it, of course. But he could not shirk his duty now.

No, Caleb would keep a close eye on Emma Brown. And she would not thank him for it.

He turned around and started back toward the study. She had long since left. He had no reason to think about her for the time being. So why, then, could he not get the image of her entrancing eyes flashing with anger out of his mind?

## CHAPTER II



“If it is war that the Duke wants, then it is war he shall get,” Emma murmured to Ruth as the carriage rocked them back and forth just a little. She lifted the curtain to glance out the window. They were nearly there.

Ruth risked a glance at her parents, who were sitting opposite them. She, too, spoke in a hushed tone as she leaned toward Emma so that they would not be overheard. “I cannot believe he would be so bold as to rebuke you so.”

“He had no right.”

“No, indeed. I would have a few choice words for him myself if I were to see him tonight.”

Emma nodded. She could not agree more. On the carriage ride, she had given Ruth a quick account of her last meeting with the Duke. She was greatly relieved to have Ruth come to the same conclusion—he was in the wrong. He had overstepped the mark, and Emma had every right to be furious with him.

“Perhaps,” Ruth added, a sly grin tugging at the corner of her mouth, “tonight might be another opportunity to test the limits



of the Duke's cold exterior. You have not yet attempted to evoke in him every emotion we agreed on.”

The two friends exchanged knowing glances. No more needed to be said.

Emma's heart raced at the thought of encountering Caleb tonight. She had not invited him to attend tonight's dinner with her. A large part of her hoped that he would let her attend tonight's event on her own, particularly as it was on the estate of her dear friend Abigail's parents. Surely she would be safe there from Tobias's advances.

Still, a very small part of Emma secretly hoped that Caleb would be there. If only so she could give him a piece of her mind. And, as Ruth had kindly reminded her, she still had a wager to fulfill. Anger seemed like the perfect emotion for tonight. If the Duke was to attend tonight's dinner, then Emma would be certain to see him leave it in a rage.

“Emma! Ruth!” Abigail hurried to greet her friends as they arrived. She looked lovely in a deep blue dress that perfectly complemented her porcelain skin.

Even the flawless hostess, Abigail made sure they were comfortable before rejoining her family as they greeted the rest of their guests. Emma watched her for a moment, admiring her dedication to her duties. She knew Abigail would far prefer to be left alone with a book by a warm fire, but here she was, making the most of the life fate had dealt her. And showing true devotion to her family in the process.

Emma's thoughts were interrupted as Ruth suddenly reached out to squeeze her arm. It was a sharp, anxious squeeze, and even before Emma followed her friend's gaze, she knew whom she would see.

There he was, tall and poised as ever, his face a mask of vague disdain as he entered the room. His eyes flitted over the other guests in attendance before they settled on Emma.

Giving Emma a curt nod, Caleb turned and greeted another guest.

When she glanced back at Ruth, her friend shook her head in disgust. "At least you may count on Abigail to ensure you are not seated anywhere near that horrid man," she murmured.

Indeed, Abigail knew better than to seat Emma and Caleb next to each other at dinner. Her mother, however, did not.

As the guests made their way into the dining room, Abigail's mother shepherded Emma to a seat near the head of the table. Unthinkingly, Emma sat down. Then, a moment later, the older lady returned with Caleb.

"Lady Emma, you are acquainted with His Grace, are you not?" she asked, smiling pleasantly.

Though her stomach was twisted in knots, Emma managed to say, "I am."

“Good.” Abigail’s mother nodded, satisfied. Then, gesturing for the Duke to take his seat, she moved away.

Silently, Caleb sat down beside Emma.

Emma glanced around, looking for an excuse to change seats, but she was devastated to find that both Abigail and Ruth were seated far away from her.

Condemned to endure her insufferable dinner companion, Emma rallied her spirits. Now was her chance to irritate Caleb in the same way he had irritated her.

“Your Grace,” she began, staring ahead as she spoke. “I am surprised to see you here tonight.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

She chuckled, still refusing to look at him. “Surprised is possibly not the right word. Disappointed is a better choice, perhaps.”

Caleb did not respond. Emma was about to turn to him when a man and woman took their seats across from them. She recognized them instantly.

Lady Lucy and her father, the Viscount Welburn, bid Emma and Caleb good evening.

It was as Emma greeted Lady Lucy that an idea began to form at the back of her mind. Lady Lucy was known in the *ton* for her fashionable gowns. She was the woman whom all the young ladies looked up to, to set the styles for each Season. And, her father was a well-respected man.

Any man who was embarrassed in front of such a pair, no matter his social status, might grow angry with the woman who made a fool of him.

At least, that was what Emma was counting on. Her next task, as per her agreement with Ruth and Abigail, was to incite the Duke's anger. An emotion she felt confident she could finally evoke in the man.

"Lady Lucy," Emma began in an exaggerated whisper, casting a pointed glance at Caleb. "Do you not think me lucky? I am seated next to a very eligible bachelor here. In fact, he may be the most eligible bachelor in the *ton*."

At her words, Caleb's eyes darted toward her. She noted as he shifted somewhat uncomfortably in his chair, no doubt taken aback by her tactlessness, and wondering what she might be playing at.

Emma continued. "Surely, Lord Welburn," she added, "you wish your daughter to be in my position."

Lord Welburn cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Er, yes, I suppose."

At that, Emma giggled as loudly and obnoxiously as she could. She could practically feel Caleb stiffen at her side.

But his next words gave no sign of any discomfort. “No doubt Lord Welburn wishes to skip dinner altogether and have the ladies retire so that he might enjoy the true pleasures of life,” he said, effortlessly coaxing a chuckle out of the older man.

“Indeed,” Lord Welburn agreed, still laughing. “You know me very well, Your Grace. A good glass of port and a pipe are a man’s two true loves.”

“Then an eligible bachelor who may turn into a wealthy husband must be a woman’s greatest love!” Emma gushed, then let out another gleeful giggle.

Lady Lucy smiled, looking slightly uncomfortable. She glanced at Caleb. “Your Grace, we did not expect to see you here this evening.”

Emma turned toward him with a pointed, self-satisfied smile. “Indeed, Lady Lucy? Why is that?”

Caleb met her gaze. They stared at one another for the briefest of moments in a silent battle of wills. Then, as if Emma had made the most civil of comments, he turned back to Lady Lucy. “I do not find myself often obligated to attend such events,” he answered. “But tonight is a pleasant diversion from my usual schedule.”

As Lady Lucy giggled, delighted by his attentions, he shot Emma a quick glance. There was a challenge in his gaze. He

might not know what Emma was up to, but it was clear that he would not take her attempts to rile him up lying down. He planned to match her, play for play.

As the first course was served, Emma continued to giggle loudly and make pointed comments about the Duke. Though he sat stiffly beside her, he took each jest and barb in stride.

Until, finally, as the meal drew to a close, she made one last attempt to incite his anger.

Caleb was being questioned by Lord Welburn about his most recent endeavors in business. “I find it easier,” he was saying, “to stick to my own instincts in such matters—”

“Lady Lucy,” Emma interrupted as she leaned forward. “What a beautiful dress you are wearing. You must tell me where you purchased such exquisite fabric.”

Everyone around Emma blinked in surprise at the sudden shift in topic. As Lucy politely, and quickly, answered Emma’s question, the four guests fell silent once more.

Caleb made an attempt to resume his previous conversation. “In business,” he began, but then he was cut off again by Emma.

“You no doubt have great sway in the *ton*.” She giggled obnoxiously. “You must teach me how to hold such influence over men, as you do over the Season’s fashion.”

Before Lucy could respond, Caleb turned to Emma. “If you will allow me, Lady Emma, I believe I was not yet finished answering Lord Welburn’s question.”

His eyes flashed with annoyance, and Emma watched as his hand curled briefly into a fist on the table. When she glanced from his hand back to his eyes, she knew that he was seeing what she had seen.

Finally, she had annoyed him. And annoyed him enough that he dropped his mask of indifference, if only for a brief moment.

Then, to punctuate Emma’s victory further, the women began to adjourn, at that moment, to the drawing room. With one last satisfied toss of her head, she rose from her seat and swanned out of the room.

Emma spent the next half hour chatting politely with her friends. She would tell Abigail and Ruth about her success at another time, when they could be alone. For now, she contented herself with listening to the harmless gossip of the *ton*.

But after some time, she grew tired of the company. She longed for some fresh air, and so, making her excuses, she slipped out onto the darkened veranda.

Grateful for the solitude, she closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the grass swaying in the slight breeze.

“Do you find it entertaining to exasperate meso?”

Emma knew the voice even before she opened her eyes. She heard the door to the veranda click open and shut. Then the slight swish of clothing as someone drew nearer to her.

Despite herself, her heart leaped in her chest. It began to beat faster as she turned to face Caleb.

“I do not know what you mean, Your Grace.”

Caleb raked a hand through his hair. To Emma’s surprise, she could see that he was still irritated. She hid a small, triumphant smile.

“You know exactly what you do,” he countered, taking a step closer, his voice low. “Why you do it, I haven’t the faintest idea.”

Emma jutted her chin in defiance. “Do you not at least admit that you deserve a little of my mockery, after your treatment of me yesterday?”

“My treatment of you? I sought only to protect you.” Caleb turned away, facing the balustrade. “If you had the first clue as to what could have happened to you, out in a place like that on your own—”

“Do not pretend to care,” Emma interrupted, taking a step toward him. “You are here—you do all of this—only to fulfill some strange promise to my brother. Do not pretend that you feel genuine concern for me.”



Suddenly, Caleb spun to face her. He was much closer than she had expected, and she found his face mere inches away from hers. When he next spoke, his breath was warm on her cheeks.

“Do not tell me whom I do and do not care for,” he said, his voice barely above a low, haunted murmur.

Every nerve in Emma’s body sparked as she looked up into those deep, dark eyes. In them was an emotion she had never seen before.

At his side, his hand twitched, and he raised it as if to touch her face. He leaned almost imperceptibly closer, but Emma could not have been more aware of the movement. Then, just as she forgot how to breathe, Caleb spun away from her once more.

He stalked toward the door, then paused, his hand on the handle. “You must be careful, Lady Emma, with whom you keep company. Yet again, I see the need for you to be chaperoned.”

She did not know why, but Emma had to stop Caleb from leaving. She spoke just as he moved to open the door and go back inside. “Perhaps I cannot be alone because I do not know how to defend myself.”

Her words had their intended effect, for Caleb paused, turning back to face her, his brow furrowed. “Defend yourself?”

“If you know so much about how to protect me, then why not teach me how to protect myself?”

For a moment, Caleb simply stared at her. Then, he laughed. “Teach you how to protect yourself?” He turned away again, dismissing her. “You have had too much to drink at dinner, I fear, Lady Emma. You speak nonsense.”

“Are you unable to teach me?” she retorted. “Perhaps you refuse me because you do not know how to protect me, as you have promised my brother you will do.”

Caleb, still facing away from her, stopped once again. “You attempt to vex me once more.”

“Whether I do or not depends on whether my words have hit upon the truth. Only the guilty feel inclined to defend themselves.”

“Now I am certain you’re spouting nonsense.” Caleb flicked a glance over his shoulder at her.

Was that a hint of amusement on his face? In the shadow of night, with the light from inside partially obscuring his features, Emma could not be sure.

He turned slightly, his strong profile now illuminated from behind. “Tomorrow. At dawn. I will meet you at the edge of your father’s estate,” he murmured, opening the door. Then, shutting it behind him, almost cutting off his last words, he left her with a final, haunting warning. “Do not make me regret this.”



The morning air still held a hint of the night's chill. Caleb rubbed his hands together for warmth, eager for the coming dawn as he made his way toward Handleigh Manor.

He still had no notion as to why he was doing this. But he sensed something had changed last night. A line had been crossed, both between him and Emma, but also within his own heart as well. Though he dared not name it, he knew that the damage had been done. There would be no going back.

He waited now, in nervous anticipation, to learn what would follow such an unalterable change.

He did not have to wait long.

At dawn, Emma appeared.

She approached him with the sun haloing her figure, cresting the hill as she came to a halt before him.

Caleb cleared his throat. "I thought perhaps you had not been serious about this."

"You told me not to make you regret making the offer," she replied, her eyes searching his.

Caleb briefly wondered if the sun had suddenly warmed the morning air around him, or if something else was making his

chest and neck grow hot.

“You’ve come. But whether or not I will be disappointed remains to be seen.”

To Caleb’s surprise, Emma’s bright laughter rang in the dewy air between them. Her laugh—her true laugh—was nothing like her horrible, mocking giggles at last night’s dinner. This was genuine and seemed to sparkle in the sunlight, as her eyes crinkled in mirth.

“How you manage to be so cryptic at such an early hour, I may never know,” she finally managed to say, shaking her head as a smile lingered on her lips.

Surprising himself, Caleb allowed himself a small smile. “It takes years of practice.”

As Emma’s eyes widened, he frowned. “Is that a smile?” she breathed in mock horror. “I did not think it possible for the Duke of Terrington to smile.”

Caleb fought off another grin. Something indeed changed between them. They could both feel it. And, Lord help him, he was enjoying it.

“Are you going to waste time mocking me, or do you truly intend to learn to defend yourself?”

Emma, still smiling, nodded.

Caleb forced himself to focus on the task at hand. He reminded himself to be serious. After all, Emma's safety was no laughing matter.

He straightened up. "In defending yourself, you must first have a notion of how a man may try to overpower you," he began.

Nodding again, Emma's smile faded. Her eyes were bright, focused.

"He will try to catch you unawares. Many times, a man may try to attack another from behind. It is cowardly, but it is a possibility."

Aiming to demonstrate, Caleb crossed behind Emma. Understanding his intent, she stayed where she was, facing ahead.

"The attacker will aim to make you defenseless, to prevent you from running away. When they believe that you are subdued, that is your opportunity to strike. Breaking his hold on you must be your first priority."

Emma nodded.

Slowly, Caleb reached around her, drawing close to her as he pressed his hands to her upper arms, pretending to restrain her by pulling both arms back and pinning them behind her back. But as he did, he showed her how to break away from the hold, twisting out of his grasp before he could fully restrain her.

They practiced this movement several times before he moved on to another. Then another. At one point, Caleb introduced the presence of an imaginary weapon—the stand-in, a short stick he'd picked up from the ground—which someone might try to use against her.

Emma took it all in stride. She was a quick learner, he realized. It was not long before she was beginning to guess the next movement that he was about to teach her.

“All right, then.” He chuckled, stepping back. “If you know so much, try to overpower me.”

Emma giggled, watching him with curiosity. “Overpower *you?*”

He nodded. Her amusement was infectious. He was having trouble remaining serious. “If you can guess what I am trying to teach you, then you should know how I will react when you try to subdue me. Think one step ahead. Try to outwit me.”

As he'd hoped, Emma rose to the challenge. “I hope you are prepared to lose to a lady,” she teased.

“I am never prepared to lose,” he replied, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Be it to a man or a woman.”

They circled one another briefly. Then, to her credit, Emma did her best to subdue him. She grasped one of his arms, trying to tug it behind his back. Easily, Caleb stepped out of her grip. But he was surprised when she quickly tried again.

He fought her off a few more times, but as she moved to attack him from behind once more, he spun to face her, letting her get enough of a grip on his hand to push the stick—his fake weapon—out of his hand.

It fell to the ground as Emma lost her balance slightly from the effort and stumbled into him. Caleb instinctively reached out to steady her. She stilled, regaining her balance, but his hand remained on her arm, her body a breath away from his. She made no move to pull away.

She lifted her face, meeting his gaze, her sweet breath fanning his lips as she spoke.

“I win,” she breathed, a smile tugging at her lips, but something more wicked glinted in her eyes.

Caleb looked into them and knew that it was too late for him. She had won in more ways than one. But so had he.

“Who says I have lost?” he murmured, moments before he reached out his other hand and, cradling the back of her neck, kissed her.

## CHAPTER 12



Emma had never felt anything like it. Caleb's lips were gentle as they sought hers, his hold on her both steadying and dizzying.

The world around Emma fell away. All she could feel were Caleb's arms around her. All her awareness was centered on him. Him and the warm, glowing happiness that had begun to wash over her.

Then, all too quickly, he pulled back. He looked down at her, his eyes searching hers. For the briefest of moments, an intriguing smile played on his lips. Emma thought it must have been the most fascinating thing she had ever seen—finally watching Caleb's hard exterior fall away as he struggled with his true emotions.

But, to her disappointment, propriety won out.

He stepped back from her, his mask falling into place once more. "Forgive me, I have overstepped."

Emma shook her head. "No. You have not." She felt a gentle grin spread across her face.



She could not help it. Nor did she care if Caleb saw it. She wanted him to know that he had done nothing wrong. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Caleb's gaze flicked to hers, searching again. Emma watched him war with himself once more. Finally, he turned away from her, facing toward the horizon and the still-rising sun. "I think you had better return home," he murmured.

"Is our lesson finished?" Emma asked cautiously.

He simply nodded.

Confused, Emma remained where she was. "I do not understand. Have I done something wrong?"

When he turned back to her, Emma saw it in his eyes. Try as he might to hide it, she saw his true sentiments. He cared about her. In some secret place, Caleb Gibson had feelings for her. But she knew that, whether she liked it or not, their conversation had come to an end.

He straightened and cleared his throat. "It is time for me to return to my duties. I suggest you do the same."

"I suppose you are right."

She did not want to go, but she could see that she would get no more clarification from Caleb at present.

Tearing herself away from him, Emma began to move in the direction of Handleigh Manor. When she was a little way away, she cast a glance back at him. Caleb was still standing where she had left him, watching her go. Something in her told her that he would watch her until she disappeared from sight.

Her heart was still beating erratically as she reached the manor and slipped inside unnoticed by the servants, who were already preparing for the coming day.

Her mind raced as she made her way to her rooms. She was still giddy as she sank into a chair near the window, which overlooked the very hill where she and Caleb had met what seemed like only minutes ago. He was gone now. On his way back to James's estate.

James. Emma dropped her head into her hands. What would her brother say if he learned that she had feelings for his friend? Feelings that, after this morning's events, Emma had begun to believe were reciprocated. She had suspected, as she gazed up into Caleb's eyes that he had begun to fall for her much in the same way she had begun to fall for him.

Emma thought over these changes as she made a vain attempt to go about her day. But no matter the task which lay before her, her mind was always miles away. Often, it was only a *few* miles away, at Mulberry Manor.

But as the morning faded into the afternoon, and then into the evening, Emma's dizzying thoughts had somewhat soured. She had begun to overthink the morning's events, and she now had questions that she was desperate to have answered. Fears she was eager to have assuaged.

Things were moving quickly, and Emma wanted to be sure that she was not jumping to conclusions. Caleb had indeed kissed her, but moments after, he had acted as if it had never happened. His actions told her that he regretted kissing her, but his eyes had said something completely different.

The more she mulled over the morning's events, the more irritated she grew. She deserved an explanation for his changing moods. And she certainly deserved to know why, if he did share her growing feelings, he refused to acknowledge them.

Emma knew what she had to do. She would not sleep until she had her answers.

So, as night fell and a comfortable silence fell over the manor, Emma decided to do the unthinkable. It was even more dangerous for her reputation than her trips to the orphanage. But, amazingly, she was willing to risk propriety, her good name, and the rest of it.

Gathering her cloak around her, she crept out of her rooms and down the stairs. She took her usual route through the kitchens, remembering to avoid the squeaky floorboard that had nearly given her away the other day.

Outside, she shivered against the cold. Ducking her head and pulling her hood up even further, she hurried deeper into the night, toward Mulberry Manor.

Emma had no worries about how she would enter the manor once she arrived. She had practically lived there before James

went on his Grand Tour, and she knew all his servants' routines and habits.

As expected, Emma found one of the rear windows, near the kitchen door, slightly ajar. Reaching through, she just managed to lift the door's latch off its hook and slip inside.

Once inside, she paused. She had not thought about what she would do next. If Caleb was asleep, would she dare to enter his room and wake him up? It would be infinitely bold—and possibly dangerous—to do so.

Praying that he had not yet retired to bed, she tiptoed through the kitchen and into the hall.

Soft murmurs and the flicker of candlelight drew her toward the study. The door was closed, but Emma could hear what was being said on the other side.

Two voices reached her ears. One was obviously Caleb's. The other, she did not recognize.



“I grow impatient,” Solomon growled.

Caleb held back a sigh. He had not expected a visit from his uncle this evening, and, if he were being honest, the matter that his uncle had come to discuss was the furthest thing from his mind at the moment. His thoughts kept drifting back to Emma, and the kiss.

But he knew better than to interrupt his uncle when he was in such a dark mood.

“It is time he is brought to justice for what he has done. I am almost ready to take the matter into my own hands and punish him myself,” Solomon continued, pacing up and down the study.

“My men are close,” Caleb reminded him. “I suspect we shall hear word in a matter of days.”

“That is what you told me the last time we spoke,” Solomon snapped. “And yet we grow no closer to seeing that villain punished. Sometimes I worry that you forget what he has done. He took your parents from you, Caleb. Murdered them right before your very eyes. Do not forget that.”

At that, Caleb stood up, his anger flaring. “I have not forgotten, Uncle,” he growled, drawing himself up to his full height. “Mind what you insinuate. I am reminded every day of what has transpired. Your life was changed when my father died. But my life was ruined. And nothing will stop me from seeking revenge.”

Solomon took a step back, a little cowed by his outburst. “I am glad then to see you act as if you still want revenge for their deaths,” he muttered. But when he turned away from him and resumed his pacing, his outrage grew once more. “Your men must bring us the man that will name the murderer. So that they may finally name Rupert Brown as the killer we both know him to be!”

“Soon,” Caleb assured his uncle.

He was growing weary of this conversation. He had heard all this before. Though Caleb was still determined to find out the truth about his parents' deaths—particularly to finally make Rupert answer what he had done—his heart was not in it tonight.

Caleb opened his mouth to suggest that his uncle go home and rest, but Solomon plowed on, his fury growing.

Patience thin, Caleb allowed his uncle to continue, reminding himself that Solomon had every right to be angry.

“I will see the Earl ruined for what he has done,” Solomon snarled, his voice growing to a dangerous pitch. “I will see his life ripped apart, just as he ripped ours apart when he took your father and mother from you. I will not rest until he faces retribution. Until Handleigh is taken from him. I will see him with nothing left but the clothes on his back, and then I will fight to have his very life stripped from him!”

Unless Caleb wanted the rest of the household to wake up, he needed to bring this midnight meeting to a close. He stood up, a hand raised to quiet his uncle, when a sound outside the door did it for him.

The squeak of a floorboard. It sounded as if it were just outside the study. Solomon heard it, too. He spun around. “What was that?” he whispered harshly.

Caleb carefully moved to the door. Then he yanked it open. Nothing. He peered out into the darkness, then retrieved the

candle from atop his desk and watched as it illuminated the hall before him.

“It was nothing,” he murmured, turning back to face his uncle. “But I suggest we conclude this business before someone does decide to come and listen at the door.”

“The matter is far from over,” Solomon warned, his voice low and irate.

Caleb reached out to place a hand on the man’s shoulder. “I promise you, Uncle, justice will be served. I am your ally in this. Just as you have always been mine.”

With a nod, Solomon took his leave.

Caleb stayed where he was, listening to his uncle’s retreating footsteps. Then, once he was gone, Caleb continued to listen. He could have sworn he had heard something outside the study door. But perhaps it was simply the house shifting on its own, groaning in protest against the cold of the night.

Reminded that it had indeed grown late, Caleb left the study and climbed up the stairs on his way to bed. He did not know what dreams might visit him tonight, but he worried that they would be of one person—Emma Brown.

She was bad for him. Caleb, a man always in control, a man who rarely let himself be anything but cool and collected around others, found himself losing control in her presence. What spell she had cast over him, he did not know. All he knew was that it spelled trouble.

He should not have given in to his impulses. He should not have kissed her, no matter how much he had enjoyed it. No matter how much the memory still lingered in his mind—her lips brushing against his, the scent of her hair, the tenderness of her touch...

With an aggravated groan, Caleb forced away all thoughts of Emma and made his way to bed.



The bitter cold stung Emma's face as hot tears streamed down her cheeks. She ran against the wind that had picked up, pushing her backward even as she pressed on toward home.

She had to press a hand to her mouth to stifle her sobs as she crept back into the manor and up to her rooms. Only when she was safely in bed, her face buried in her pillow, did she give in to her full grief.

*Is this what heartbreak feels like?*

She had read about it in books. She had thought that she had felt it when she had stumbled upon Tobias and that woman together at the ball. She had assumed that her heart could not contain more than the shame and betrayal she had felt then. But this tearing sensation deep within her chest hurt far worse than anything she could ever have imagined.

The conversation she had overheard replayed in her mind as she wept, adding to her grief. Her father. Caleb believed her



father had killed his parents. He believed that her father was a murderer.

It was almost beyond comprehension.

But the thing that horrified Emma the most was that she could not immediately dismiss the idea as preposterous. She could not argue to the goodness of her father's character because she hardly knew the man. How could she vouch for his innocence, if he had never allowed her to understand who he was or what he stood for?

After the end of her engagement, her father had become even more distant. He wanted nothing to do with her. But that did not make him a murderer, did it?

Emma could not believe that Caleb had kept such suspicions from her. She did not understand what he wanted from her either. Dangerous, shameful suspicions about him began to fill her mind.

Finally, she came to a frightful, glaring conclusion: Caleb was using her. He had to be. He believed her father to be responsible for his parents' deaths, and he was now using her to get close to Rupert to exact some kind of revenge. Perhaps Emma was even a part of that revenge.

She had been used before. She had been lied to by Lord Hayward—told that she was his beloved—and then had discovered that it all had been a lie.

Tobias had used her. She could not deny it, ashamed as she was. But she would be a fool if she allowed another man to hurt her like that again.

So, by the time morning came, in order to protect herself, she made a heartbreaking decision—she needed to stay away from Caleb.

It was not an easy thing to do, she soon learned.



A swirl of activity and noise hit Emma with full force as she stepped through the doors and into the throng of guests mingling in the great hall.

Nervously, she glanced around.

It had only been a few days since they had shared a kiss, but with great effort, she had successfully evaded Caleb in that time. He had sent a note, but she had never responded. He had even arrived at the manor, looking to speak with her, but she had feigned illness.

But here, at the next ball of the Season, Emma feared she would finally encounter the Duke. If he wanted to see her—as it was obvious he did—this would be where he would next look for her.

Then, to her relief, a familiar voice cut through the commotion of the ball, jolting her out of her thoughts of him. At least for now.

“Emma, I am so glad to see you.” Ruth grinned, taking her arm and leading her further into the main room. “I have not yet been able to talk to you about what happened at the dinner party at Abigail’s.”

Emma’s heart sank. “Oh?”

Ruth lowered her voice conspiratorially. “You have not told me what it was like sitting next to His Grace at dinner. Were you successful in making him angry?”

Not knowing where to begin, but feeling no desire to answer the myriad of questions that her friend would bombard her with should she tell her the whole truth about what had happened between her and the Duke, Emma simply shook her head.

“I believe I was the one made angry in the end,” she answered softly.

Ruth sighed. “He is abominable, indeed.”

She was about to say more when a young man approached them. He offered them both a bow and then gave Ruth a smile. “Lady Ruth, may I have the honor of this next dance?”

Ruth, never one to turn down the opportunity to dance—or the chance to flirt with a handsome man—readily agreed. Which left Emma in the dangerous position of being on her own. Something she would have been comfortable with, were she not anticipating Caleb’s appearance at any moment.

Then, as she glanced around the room nervously, her fears came true. Caleb walked into the room, his proud bearing drawing attention as soon as he appeared. As they had at the first ball of the Season, the majority of attendees began to murmur excitedly, many heads turning his way.

Then, to Emma's great horror, Caleb turned to look at her.

"Lady Emma, do you have a partner for this next dance?"

Surprised, she turned to find a young man standing before her. She had been introduced to him earlier in the Season, but in her flustered state, she could not quite remember his name. But she did not need to know his name in order to dance with him.

In fact, a dance was exactly the thing she needed at the moment.

"I do not," she replied with a polite smile.

"Then would you care to join me?"

"I would be delighted."

Risking a glance at Caleb, Emma allowed herself to be led to the center of the ballroom. He was watching her, that infuriatingly unreadable expression on his face.

Emma's partner was fair enough, though lacking somewhat in conversation, and far too soon, the dance ended. As Emma started back to the edge of the room, she spotted Caleb moving toward her.

Panicked, she spun around and spotted the man who had just been dancing with Ruth. Hardly knowing what she was doing, she approached him and offered him a becoming smile. "Are you finished dancing for the evening?"

The man, though momentarily confused, shook his head. "Not if you will let me have this next dance, Lady Emma."

Relieved, Emma accepted and was once more spinning out of Caleb's reach.

For the rest of the evening, Emma somehow managed to evade Caleb by dancing every single dance. Her partners were aplenty, and she danced with several men twice. All the while, she would catch Caleb's eye from afar.

She found her thoughts wandering, too. Once, as she spun out and away from her partner, she spotted Caleb nearby, gesturing with his hands as he conversed with an older man. She watched his hands move, instantly remembering how they had held her that dawn on the hill.

Flushed and embarrassed, she turned away.

Over time, Emma began to suspect that the Duke's patience was running thin. On several occasions, Emma had found herself entranced by his steely gaze, unable to look away.

Once, she had nearly tripped over her feet as she struggled to tear her eyes away from his.

She told herself that she should not care what he did, or even if he watched her. Still, she found herself all too conscious of where he was and what he was doing.

They continued this uneasy exchange late into the night. It was clear that the Duke did not approve of her behavior. By the end of the evening, Caleb was glowering at her from the far corner of the room.

But Emma was not yet finished. Exhausted though she was, she smiled as another man approached her. “Lady Emma—” he began, but he got no further.

All of a sudden, a hand tightened around her arm. She glanced up in surprise to see Caleb beside her. His eyes were hard, his lips pressed into a grim, thin line.

He leaned in, and his warm breath tickled her ear. “Outside. Now.”

Emma gasped in surprise. She glanced around, watching as others observed their close proximity to one another. “Your Grace,” she protested quietly, “I do not believe now is the time. I am in the middle of a conversation.”

Caleb straightened up. The condemnation in his gaze did not fade. “I do not care.”

“But propriety demands—”

“If you do not follow me outside, I will pick you up and throw you over my shoulder. Propriety be damned.”

Emma was at a loss for words. Her face was hot, as everyone around them stared in fascination as the most eligible man in the *ton* towered over her, his attention unwavering.

Unable to refuse him, she nodded.

Caleb turned on his heel and strode out of the room, Emma hurrying to catch up with him. She followed him out into the hall. When they were outside and Caleb climbed into his carriage before her, she paused.

In the moment it took her to hesitate, Caleb had reached out, wrapped his hand around her arm, and all but dragged her inside with him.

Emma plopped into her seat as the carriage lurched into motion. She sat there, stunned, as Caleb silently fumed in the seat across from her.

She glanced out the window, the lights of the ball fading into darkness.

Finally, after several more minutes of baffling quiet, she broke the silence. “What on earth do you think you are doing?” she demanded.

Caleb, whose eyes had not left her face, shook his head. "Taking you home," he said simply.

"You have no right to do so. The night is still young. I am expected to stay at the ball for several more hours. It is only right."

"And I expected you to behave as if you cared about your reputation. But, as it would seem, you care not a whit what the *ton* might think of you."

Emma blinked in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

"You danced with nearly every man in there tonight. With some, you danced multiple times. Even you must see how such flagrant behavior will make you the main object of the *ton's* gossip come morning. You and I both know that the talk will not look favorably upon you."

"I was doing nothing wrong!" Emma protested.

Why on earth did he care so much about her reputation? But it was clear that he did. She searched his face as she spoke. She could not tell whether his indifferent demeanor was beginning to crack, or if she had become better at reading his minute expressions, but she could see that he was angry.

Caleb's jaw ticked as he clenched it tight. "You have been avoiding me," he added after a moment, his gaze burning a hole through her. "If you regret meeting with me that morning, all you need do is say so."



Utterly conflicted, Emma shook her head. She could see the pain in his eyes now, and it cut her to the core to think that she was the cause of it.

She leaned forward. “I do not regret what happened. Though it was clear that you did.”

“I did not—” Caleb cut himself off. He shook his head, wrestling with himself.

When he turned back to her, he shifted forward, drawing closer to her. Emma waited for him to continue, but at that very moment, the carriage ran over a large bump in the road, which sent her flying forward.

Instinctually, Caleb reached out to catch her. In the blur of movement, Emma found herself on the seat beside him, his arms around her, his body pressed against hers. Her breath caught in her throat.

Neither said a word. Neither moved to pull away. As Emma’s eyes raked over the Duke’s face, every thought but one left her head. All she could think of, at that moment, was how his lips had felt on hers the other morning. All she could feel now was the warmth of his body beside hers, the strength of his arms around her.

Caleb was so close to her now. She felt his breath on her face as he spoke, his tone low and dangerous, making it difficult for her to take a full breath.

“May a man not be jealous,” he asked slowly, his gaze caressing her face, “if the woman he cares about dances with every other man in the *ton* but him?”

When he moved even closer, closing the last bit of space between them, Emma’s eyes fluttered shut.

As he kissed her, Emma knew that this kiss was different. Before, he had been gentle, patient. Now, he was demanding.

She gasped as the force of his kiss sent a shiver down her spine. She melted into him, helpless against the heat of his lips. His arm on her waist was like an anchor, holding her in place. Though, she wouldn’t have moved even if she wanted it.

She was breathless when he finally pulled away, and for several moments, she was unable to speak.

Then, a shadow fell over Caleb’s eyes. His face dropped. “Why have you been avoiding me?” His voice was low, but his tone told Emma that he would require an answer. He wanted the truth.

The reality of her situation came crashing down on her. She hung her head. “You hate my father. Y-you think he is a killer.”

Caleb drew back slightly, his brow furrowing in worry and confusion. “How do you know that? What has he told you?”

“Nothing. I heard you, Caleb. I-I know I shouldn’t have tried to visit you so late, but I needed to see you. And I know James’s estate so well. I snuck in while you were speaking with someone. I heard everything.” She fought back tears as she gazed up into his eyes, willing him to correct her, to tell her she was somehow mistaken. “You think my father killed your parents.”

Caleb turned away. He was distancing himself from her. Emma shivered in the sudden cold.

“You overheard my conversation with my uncle.”

It was not a question.

He closed his eyes, yet Emma searched his profile, as if it might reveal to her the answers she sought.

“I do not know what happened to your parents. I-I am so very sorry. But it could not have been my father. He is not capable of such a thing.”

“Is he not?” Caleb turned to her suddenly, that all too familiar sharp, icy look in his eyes. “Are you certain about that?”

“I have never asked him such a thing if that is what you mean,” Emma stammered.

“Why don’t you? It would finally make all of this worthwhile.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them.

Something shifted inside Emma. A frightening notion crept out from the corners of her mind. “What do you mean?”

Caleb hung his head like a man who had been caught in a lie. “The reason I befriended your brother... One of the reasons I agreed to look after you was to get close to your father. For when the time came to confront him.”

If Emma had thought she understood the depth of heartbreak before, now she knew how naïve she had been. As her heart cracked in two, tears spilled down her cheeks in sudden, unfaltering streams.

“You never cared about me?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. She could manage no more.

As the carriage came to a halt, Caleb said nothing. But it was all she needed to hear.

She bolted out of the carriage and raced to Handleigh Manor.



Caleb hung his head in utter self-hatred. He should have known this would happen. Emma was too good, too pure. He should have known that, sooner or later, his inner evil would corrupt such an angel.

He had not told her the whole truth, of course. But he had told her what she needed to hear.

He had not lied when he had said that he befriended James for the purpose of getting close to Rupert. But what had happened after that had been completely unexpected. Caleb had grown fond of James. For so long, his sole focus in life had been avenging his parents' deaths. Then, when he found a friend—a true, funny, genuine friend—he had realized just how much of life he had missed in his pursuit of revenge.

And when Emma had come along...

Caleb dropped his head in his hands as the carriage continued the remainder of the journey back to Mulberry Manor. He had given her hope, that had been his greatest mistake. He had let himself believe that he might just be able to have her and his revenge both. But he had hurt her in his selfish pursuit.

He did care about her. His feelings for her were stronger than he dared to admit. But she did not need to know. The best thing he could do for her would be to push her away. To keep her safe from him and the dangerous world in which he had immersed himself.

Her heart would be broken, but she would recover. She would move on.

As Caleb climbed wearily out of the carriage and made his way into the manor, he took comfort in the knowledge that he had done the right thing for Emma.

How his own heart would recover, however—how he would ever be able to forget her kindness, her purity, and her force of will—he did not know. A small voice at the back of his mind

told him that no matter how much she now hated him, he would always carry her in his heart.

Caleb also told himself that he might yet change her opinion of him. In time, but not now. The most dangerous part of his pursuit for revenge was now before him. Better that Emma was safe and out of harm's way for the time being. If something happened to her because of him, he would never be able to forgive himself.

And there was much that might happen now. He was close, he could feel it. The answers were at his fingertips. Mr. Steel had finally delivered him the news that he had been desperate to hear.

It was time.

## CHAPTER 13



“Lady Emma?”

Pulled out of her bleak thoughts, Emma blinked and looked up. Mr. Cornell stood before her, looking concerned.

She shook her head. “I am sorry, did you say something?”

“I asked if you might not want to finish your breakfast before I cleared it away,” he repeated, glancing down at her untouched plate. “If you don’t like it, I can ask the cook to fix you something else.”

Emma shook her head. “I do not have an appetite this morning, Mr. Cornell. But thank you.”

“Are you unwell, Lady Emma?”

Perhaps she was. Emma felt as if she had been racked with a horrible illness that made her stomach revolt and her mind foggy and unresponsive. But she knew it had nothing to do with the physical world.

“No. Thank you for your concern.”

Mr. Cornell reached to clear away her plate, but he hesitated as he turned away and then turned back to her. “This is the third day you have not touched your breakfast. Forgive me, it is not my place, but can I send for anyone? The physician, perhaps?”

Three days? Emma had not realized it had already been so long. It felt as if only last night Caleb had broken her heart.

“I am all right,” she assured him, though her words sounded false to her own ears.

But what else could she say? There was no one she could speak to about what had happened.

Mr. Cornell did not look convinced, but he left her all the same.

Alone, Emma rose and slowly made her way to the drawing room. She could read, or write another unanswered letter to James. She had written to him several times now but had not received a reply. But she was not in the mood for either activity. She was desirous of nothing. And despite her best efforts, all she could do was replay the evening of the ball in her head, wondering how it all could have gone differently.

When a commotion outside brought her out of another dark reverie, she moved to the window. A carriage had stopped outside the manor. For the briefest of moments, she feared that



it was Caleb. But then, another familiar figure alighted from the carriage.

Emma's heart was in her throat as she raced out of the room and out the front door, straight into her brother's arms.

"James!" she cried, tears flooding her eyes. "Whatever are you doing here?"

James chuckled and hugged her tightly. "Are you sorry that I've returned so soon?"

Emma drew back and searched his face. "No! Of course, I am glad to see you. But is everything all right? Are you unwell? What has happened?"

James laughed again. "All in good time, my dear sister. Right now, I am *ravenous*. Come, let me eat something, and then I shall tell you everything."

Emma followed him inside and instructed Mr. Cornell to inform the cook that another serving was required. Then, she took a seat across from her brother at the table.

Despite her concern, she waited patiently, letting James remark on the length of the journey home and the changes in the house since his absence. Finally, with a plate of food before him, he was ready to speak seriously.

"Forgive me, Emma," he said after shoveling big mouthfuls of eggs and toast in his mouth. "I did not write as I promised I would. There was so much that went wrong, so much was in disarray, that I fear I had very little time to spare for anything."

Emma nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“When we first arrived in Paris, my tutor, Mr. Farrow, fell ill. He was bedridden for weeks, and I feared the worst. I brought him every physician I could find, but none of them knew what was the matter with him. Finally, by the grace of God, he recovered a little. Enough to manage the trip back home to England. But it was obvious he could not continue the journey with me further into Europe.”

James shook his head sadly. “He wrote various letters back home, asking if any of his connections knew someone who might be able to replace him on my Grand Tour. Finally, someone in England recommended a man called Bernard Wight.”

“Do you remember those stories I used to read you?” he then asked, taking another bite of food. “About those frightening creatures? The wights?”

Emma frowned, confused. “I do.”

“His name should have been my first warning.” James sighed. “He seemed nice enough at first. Very knowledgeable about the countries I planned to visit. He assured me he had been a guide on several similar trips in the past. And, well, with Mr. Farrow unable to continue, Mr. Wight was my only option. So, I agreed to hire him to finish the journey with me. Or rather to start it. We were still in Paris back then. Hardly a Grand Tour just yet.”

Emma did not like where this story was headed. “And then?”

“For a time, everything seemed to be going well. Mr. Wight assured me that his preparations for the next stage of our trip were progressing. I helped Mr. Farrow find passage back to England. And then, out of nowhere, Mr. Wight disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

James nodded glumly “Gone. Without a trace. Took the money I had given him for travel, too. I was stranded in Paris, with very little money and no way to get back home.”

Horrified, Emma’s hand flew to her mouth. “James! Whyever did you not write to me? Father could have sent you money. We could have helped you get back home.”

A rueful smile touched James’s lips. “I was too embarrassed, I am ashamed to admit. I had left with big hopes to see the world, and I had not even made it out of France.”

“But that was not your fault.”

“Still, I could not ask our father for any more than he had already given me. So, I stayed in Paris. I tutored the children of French aristocrats in the English language until I finally had earned enough to book passage back home.” He shrugged. “I suppose I did have an adventure of sorts. Just not the one I had expected.” He chuckled.

But Emma could tell that he was disappointed by the outcome of his journey. She could not blame him. “You poor thing. I am so very sorry, James.”

“I will recover,” he said, offering her a sad smile. “Perhaps it was never my fate to journey so far away from England. You, no doubt, would have missed me far too terribly.”

“I truly did,” Emma assured him, “even in the short time you were gone. I do not know what I would have done if you had been gone even longer,” she added softly, remembering the disappointing events that James had missed.

Something in her tone must have struck James as odd. He glanced up from his food. Then, for seemingly the first time since his arrival, he took a good long look at her. His brow slowly furrowed in concern.

“Emma, are you quite well?”

She frowned, trying to plaster on a convincing smile. “Whatever do you mean?”

James studied her with growing unease. “You do not look well. You look as if you have not slept or eaten in days. What is the matter?”

“Nothing is wrong, James. I am only a little tired.”

Unconvinced, James glanced around. “Has all been well here in my absence? Is Father well?”

Emma nodded.

“And you have been looked after?” James pressed. “The Duke has been attentive toward you?”

She should have been expecting such a question. But even as James spoke, Emma was not prepared for her own reaction. Tears welled up in her eyes. She ducked her head to hide her sorrow, but it was too late. Small droplets fell onto the table.

“Emma?” James’s voice was full of concern. “What has happened?”

She stood up, shaking her head. “I-I am sorry James. But I have not the heart to speak about it. Not yet.”

Though he called after her, Emma fled from the room, racing up the stairs to her bedroom. She was acting like a child, she knew, but she could not help it. How could she begin to tell James about what had happened? How could she admit to him her feelings for the man—his friend—who had broken her heart?

Impossible.



It was late. Far too late for anyone of his status to be out and about. Nothing reputable could happen at this late hour. And yet this was the time that Caleb chose to leave the manor and climb into his carriage, cloaked and silent.

It had taken a few more days than he had expected to orchestrate tonight's events. He had agonized over everything—the infuriating slowness of his men, the efforts he had to go to in order to secure tonight's location, and even what he might say once he found himself there.

But finally, the time had come.

Caleb had been plagued, too, by thoughts of Emma. How could he not? His feelings for the woman grew stronger by the day. But there was nothing to be done about it. Not now.

The carriage jostled as it trundled down uneven roads. The posh neighborhoods disappeared as his driver took him deep into unsavory areas that no man of good social status would be caught dead in. But on they went.

Finally, when the carriage drew to a halt and Caleb stepped out into the night, he looked up at the building for the first time. It had stood here for a long time, and it had been owned by him and his uncle for almost as long. Only Caleb and Solomon knew of its existence. And only Caleb knew who would be inside tonight—himself and a man he had waited a very long time to meet.

At the door to the building waited Mr. Steel. He nodded as Caleb passed him and pushed his way inside. Another of Caleb's men stood in the main hall. He then led him into a wide, decaying room where the last of his men waited, a man bound and on his knees between them.

At the sight of him, Caleb stopped dead in his tracks. How long had he waited for this very moment? Now it was here. *He*

was here.

Slowly, Caleb stepped forward. At his approach, the bound man raised his head. His eyes narrowed as he watched Caleb with forced indifference.

Towering over him, Caleb regarded him calmly. "I am told your name is Tom Bentworth. Is this correct?"

Laughing, the man nodded, but said nothing.

"Do you recognize me?" Caleb asked.

Tom spat on the ground at Caleb's feet. "I don't know you. Why should I? Why have you brought me here?"

"Oh, but you do know me. We have met before." Caleb crouched down before him so that he could meet his gaze. So that he could look into the eyes of a cold-blooded killer. "I was younger back then, of course. Only about eight."

Tom's eyes narrowed even more. "They've been asking questions," he said slowly, jerking his head toward Caleb's men. "About some things I've done in the past. Things I was hired to do."

"Murder." Caleb slowly rose and turned away, doing everything he could to control the rage that bubbled up in the deepest parts of him. "Call it what it is."

“You think I killed someone you knew?” Tom asked.

Caleb paused, his back still to him. “I know you did. The Duke and Duchess of Terrington.” Slowly, he turned around to face the man again. “My parents. I watched you kill them.”

The killer’s face grew pale. But then he spat again. “If you’ve come here to kill me, then get it over with already.”

“Oh, I am not here to kill you,” Caleb drawled. “I am here for information. Information that you are going to give me.”

Tom was silent for a moment. He glanced up at the men standing beside him, ready to stop him should he try to run. But when he looked back at Caleb, it was not defeat that the Duke saw in Mr. Bentworth’s eyes. It was an opportunity.

“You need something from me, eh?” Tom mused, sitting back on his heels slightly.

Caleb sighed inwardly. He should have known that this man would have tried to profit off the situation. There were other ways to extract information from such a criminal, but enough blood had already been shed. Caleb was loath to do anything that might make him sink to Tom’s level.

He reached into his coat and withdrew several coins. He tossed them on the floor before the man. “I suppose this will loosen your tongue?”



Tom grinned. “Now we’re speaking the same language. But, tell me, what information is it that you want? My tongue is not as loose as others’. I am paid for my discretion, as well as my convenience. It will take a lot for me to break my word. And my silence.”

Caleb was growing annoyed with him. “You did not kill the Duke and his wife of your own accord. I know that much. You are going to tell me who it was that hired you to kill them.”

Sucking his teeth loudly, Tom shook his head. “That sure was an awful long time ago,” he mused. “My memory is not what it used to be.”

Clenching his fists, Caleb stuck his hand back into his pocket. More coins landed on the ground before the man.

The culprit pressed his lips together, thinking. Finally, he raised his eyes to Caleb’s. “Rupert Brown. The Earl of Handleigh.”

It was exactly what Caleb had been waiting to hear. And he might have been satisfied with the information if it were not for the satisfied smirk on the criminal’s face. There was something wrong. It had been too easy to pry loose Tom’s lips.

Caleb drew close to him again. He reached out and grabbed him by the collar, dragging him to his feet. “Are you lying to me? Why? Who are you protecting?”

Tom remained silent, but his gaze flicked pointedly to the money on the floor.

Caleb had had enough. He shook Tom, his voice booming in the old, empty room. “You forget yourself! You are in no position to bargain with me. You can leave here with what little money you are worth, or you can stay here and rot.”

Tom winced. When he spoke, his voice held a frightening note of amusement. “Are you sure you want to know?” he asked, his eyes shining with malice. “You have made it this far, living in ignorance. Are you sure you want to pull back the curtain on the past? See those events for what they truly were?”

“What are you talking about?” Caleb asked, shaking the man again as dread crept up the nape of his neck, making every hair stand on end. “Enough riddles. Tell me the truth. The man who paid you to kill my parents, what is his name?”

Tom Bentworth grinned.

## CHAPTER 14



“A beautiful day, is it not?” James asked cheerily, smiling at Emma as they stepped outside.

Emma nodded, doing her best to muster a smile. “It certainly is.”

Her brother was not wrong, it *was* a beautiful day. But she was in no mood to appreciate it. Still, she would pretend to, not for her sake, but for the sake of the servants who had worked so dutifully for herself, her father, and her brother the past year.

“I cannot wait to see what you have planned for the morning,” James continued, reaching out to link her arm with his.

“It is not much. And of course, the cooks helped me a great deal. But I hope everyone will enjoy themselves.”

The picnic was an annual tradition between the two estates. And Emma would not let it be ruined by some vain, unfeeling man who just happened to be staying in her brother’s manor. Still, she was loath to see him. There was no way around it, of course, as the picnic would take place at James’s estate.

Emma had not yet told James of what had transpired between herself and Caleb. But she could tell that he had been drawing conclusions of his own. He had not pressed her for information and had avoided speaking of the Duke as much as possible.

James had stayed the night at Handleigh Manor, but this morning, he and Emma would walk to his estate with their father's servants, to join the festivities that she had planned for the residents of the two manors.

Emma knew that Caleb had been informed of the day's events, but she had no idea how he would react to it. Not that he had much say in what was happening. The estate was not his, and the owner of Mulberry Manor has now returned. What that meant for Caleb's situation, Emma did not know.

At the manor, Mr. Burrs was outside, waiting for her. She watched his eyes widen in amazement as he spotted James beside her. Genuine joy spread across his face as he greeted both of them.

"Lord Mulberry, I am very glad to see you," he said, giving James a bow. "I hope all is well. You have returned earlier than I expected."

"Well, I could not have missed today's picnic." James chuckled. "In fact, I seem to have proven that I would not miss it for the world."

Emma smiled sadly. James was making the most of his disappointment. He was certainly managing far better than her. She was still struggling with her own dashed hopes.

James's smile faltered. "Will His Grace be joining us this morning, Burrs?" he asked.

Mr. Burrs seemed to hesitate. "I do not wish to cause any ill will. I am certain His Grace will join you if he may. But I have not seen him at all today. Indeed, his bed was empty by the time the rest of the staff rose this morning."

Emma frowned, conflicted. Part of her wondered if something was amiss. Had Caleb risen earlier than dawn? Was he avoiding her? If so, she would thank him if he stayed away the whole day.

When she looked up and found James watching her with concern, she offered him and Mr. Burrs a small smile. "We shall have to enjoy the festivities with or without him."

As they moved through the manor and outside to join the rest of the servants, where they were setting up several large blankets on the lawn, Emma found herself being greeted by a multitude of smiling faces.

"Lady Emma, I cannot thank you enough for today," Eleanor, one of James's maids said, bobbing a curtsy. "I have been looking forward to it for many months. It has been nearly a year since I was hired by His Lordship, and the rest of the servants have told me that today is the highlight of their year."

Emma found herself strangely moved by Eleanor's words. "I hardly think I deserve such praise. After all, I needed help from the servants to prepare the food for today. So, I didn't do it all on my own. But, hopefully, it is a small token of our gratitude for your hard work this year."

“It is always appreciated,” Rosie Mayweather, James’s cook, added, moving to join them. She smiled and nodded her thanks to Emma.

The older woman had been working for James for many years. She was a pillar of Mulberry Manor.

Comforted by the presence of friendly faces, Emma allowed herself to relax just a little. But every time she glanced back over her shoulder at the manor, she found herself searching for the one face that was missing from the gathering.

Where had the Duke gone to?

At one point, as the morning turned into the afternoon, Emma spotted James and Mr. Burrs deep in hushed conversation. When James frowned and looked up, glancing over at her, she turned away in embarrassment.

Were they speaking about her? Was Mr. Burrs telling James about what he had witnessed between Emma and Caleb? What had the butler witnessed? Could he guess that Emma had feelings for Caleb?

Humiliated, Emma spent the rest of the event hiding away under the shade of one of the nearby trees, listening to the cooks from the two estates compare recipes.

As the afternoon drew to a close, she helped tidy up and then thanked everyone again for attending. She was getting ready to

start back for Handleigh Manor when she spotted a carriage down the road.

Her stomach sank. Even without seeing inside, she knew who it would be.

Suddenly, James was at her side. “Emma, I think you should go home now,” he said, his voice strangely tense.

She glanced at him. “What is the matter?”

“I need to have some words with the Duke. And I do not think you should be present for it.”

Emma opened her mouth to protest but then thought better of it. She had no idea what James wished to speak to Caleb about, but she did not deny that she had no desire to see the Duke.

“Very well,” she murmured.

Then, before Caleb could alight from his carriage, she turned on her heel and hurried back home.



It had been an exhausting day. Caleb had not been back to the manor since he left under the cover of darkness last night. After meeting with the man who had been paid to kill his parents, and after finding out what may or may not have been the truth about the person who had orchestrated their deaths, there were many things to attend to.

All Caleb wanted to do now was return to the manor and go straight to bed.

But as the carriage rolled up the drive, he spotted several servants wandering about the lawns, looking as if they had spent the afternoon outside.

Then it hit him. Had the picnic been today? The one that Emma arranged for the servants at both her father's and James's estates? Despite himself, Caleb glanced around as he stepped out from the carriage, waiting to spot her lithe figure amongst the servants.

Instead, a familiar, albeit unexpected, voice stopped him in his tracks.

Turning, Caleb stared in amazement as James Brown strode toward him.

Opening his mouth, he moved to extend his hand. James, too, raised a hand, but a moment later, he clenched it into a fist.

Before Caleb knew what was happening, James drew his arm back and landed a solid, angry punch squarely on Caleb's left jaw.

The sound of the impact made two nearby servants look at them in amazement and horror. James said nothing, swaying a little as he waited for Caleb's reaction.



In the silence that ensued, Caleb put a hand on his jaw, then let it fall again at his side. He nodded. “Good.”

“Good?” James’s eyes widened in astonishment. “Is that all you have to say?”

“I trust you intended to assault me and did not mistakenly punch me,” Caleb replied simply. “If so, then I trust your anger with me is not misplaced.”

James shook his head. After a moment, he let out a hard, angry laugh. “You truly are a beast. I thought there was more to you. I thought that I was one of the few who had seen through your cold exterior to the kind, honorable man beneath. I counted you as my friend,” he scoffed. “I see now that I was wrong.”

Caleb said nothing. He had a million questions. When had James returned? Where was Emma? What had she told him? But now was not the time to ask.

Looking at him, James waited for him to speak.

Finally, when he was forced to say something, or stay forever trapped in this confrontation, Caleb glanced toward Mulberry Manor. “I trust you wish me to leave?”

“Of course!” James threw up his hands in exasperation. “Though I hardly know why. All I know is that every time I mention you, my sister almost bursts into tears. And Mr. Burrs, a trusted man who has worked for me for many years, tells me that you have been receiving strange visitors at all hours of the night since my departure.”

For a moment, anger seemed to hinder his ability to speak. “I do not know what you have done to my sister,” he continued through gritted teeth. “But if you have wronged her, then you may trust that I will have to demand satisfaction.”

Caleb did not doubt it. Nor did he doubt that James had jumped to the worst of conclusions about him. But he did not blame the man. Caleb had indeed wronged Emma. James, too. It was all in an attempt to protect them from the seedy business in which he now found himself involved, but they did not and would never know that.

They would hate him. And, so long as it kept them safe, Caleb would bear the burden of their hatred.

As James glared at him, waiting for him to defend himself, Caleb started toward the house.

“I will be out within a day,” he said simply, brushing past James without a second glance.

“Do not ever show your face around here!” James shouted after him. “You will never be welcome back on our land again. But if you do ever see me again, you may trust that I will be coming to challenge you to a duel. For Emma’s sake! This assault on her honor will be avenged!”

Something made Caleb turn back to face James. Something in the seedy insinuation of his accusation. “Your sister’s honor is intact,” he replied, his tone hard and unyielding. “But if you think so little of me as to not trust my word on the matter, I will happily accept your challenge.”

Without waiting for James's reply, he turned back around and stormed into the manor. He would not let the man see just how much his words had hurt him.

But James was not wrong. Caleb should never have gotten mixed up with them, nor should he have exposed them to the shame and evil of his past and present. James had every right to banish Caleb from their lives and property.

He was a tainted man. Touched by blood and betrayal. Better that he disappeared from the lives of his friend and the woman he had come to care for deeply. Better he contained the contamination before it spread to others.

Caleb worked quickly. He would not spend another night here at Mulberry Manor. He would not risk crossing paths with James again.

Besides, he was running out of time. With the new information he now held—the key to his past—he needed to take action. There was much to be done, and if he were to have the nerve to do it, he could be distracted by nothing and no one else.

As Caleb packed his things, he hesitated only a moment as he grabbed the books that James had given him in exchange for looking after Emma. He did not deserve them. He had not earned them. In fact, he had done more harm to Emma than if he had never attempted to protect her at all.

Setting the books aside, Caleb took a piece of parchment and began to write a short explanatory note.

*Keep these. Give them to Emma if you wish. She may like them. Or discard them and think nothing more. Do what you like. I have not fulfilled my duty to you. I do not deserve them.*

Heart aching, Caleb tore his gaze away from the books. He had no doubt that Emma would like these books. She was so much like his mother, he realized. At least from what he remembered of her.

If his mother had been alive today, perhaps she would have found a friend in Emma. She could perhaps have been a mentor for James's sister. A confidante.

They were both so kind, Caleb thought. Intelligent, beautiful, and strong. That was the thing he believed that James did not see in Emma. James did not see his sister's strength. Emma was in possession of the strongest will Caleb had ever witnessed. It was one of the things he most respected about her.

But this was something he would never tell her.

Caleb was on his way down the stairs when Mr. Burrs met him halfway. "You are leaving, Your Grace?"

His anger now having turned into cold acceptance, Caleb nodded. "I presume you already knew that. Seeing as you informed Lord Mulberry of the company I have kept in his absence."

Mr. Burrs had the courage to hold Caleb's gaze. "I do not know you very well, Your Grace. And I am duty bound to answer the questions that Lord Mulberry has asked me. I did not give His Lordship my opinion, only what I perceived."

Caleb nodded. He did not blame the man. A strange, perhaps sadistic part of him prompted his next question. "And if you were asked for your opinion?"

Mr. Burrs was quiet for a moment. "I would say that you seem, for all intents and purposes, an honorable man. But Lady Emma is well loved by all who live here. And none of us would thank you if you had hurt her in some way."

With a curt nod, Caleb turned to the door and made his way outside. He did not blame the man. Nor did he tell him that he did not need to worry.

None of them could punish Caleb for hurting Emma nearly as much as he would punish himself. Of that, he was certain.

## CHAPTER 15



“E mma?”

Once again lost in thought, Emma turned around upon hearing the unexpected voice. She was seated on the settee in the drawing room and, as she caught sight of her guests, made to stand up. As she did, however, a wave of dizziness caught her off guard, and she nearly toppled over.

James was the first at her side, reaching out to steady her. “Sit,” he said gently.

She watched as he shot the two young women who were standing in the doorway a worried glance.

Slowly, Ruth and Abigail walked further into the room. James invited them to sit, too.

For a brief moment, Emma caught sight of herself through their eyes. She had not seen her friends in several days. They were now beholding her as if they hardly recognized her. Emma realized she must look quite terrible.

“Forgive me,” she managed to say, glancing between them. “Have I invited you to tea and forgotten? Is it tea time already?”

Ruth and Abigail exchanged even more worried glances.

“You did not invite us, Emma,” Abigail replied after a moment. “Your brother did.”

Emma glanced at James, confused. “Indeed? You wished to see them, no doubt, now that you are back.”

James cleared his throat. “In part.”

The air in the room was thick with apprehension. Finally, Emma could take no more of their hesitation.

“What is the matter?” she asked. “Why are you looking at me so strangely?”

“I am worried about you.” James reached out to take her hand. “You do not eat. You do not leave the house. I have sent His Grace away, but still, you flinch every time his name is mentioned in passing. I know something has happened. You must tell us, Emma.”

She knew she should not be upset with them. She knew they cared about her and were only worried about the change in her behavior. But for some reason, Emma couldn't help but feel that her brother and friends were conspiring against her.

“Nothing needs to be said,” she protested, gently withdrawing her hand. “I will be fine.”

“No, you will not. If you continue on like this, you will blow away in the next strong breeze.” James got to his feet, irritated.

Abigail spoke up now, her voice tentative. “It is a beautiful day. A promenade out in the fresh air would do all of us some good.”

“Thank you, but I do not feel up to going out into Society,” Emma replied. “I fear, given the way you all are looking at me now, I will only attract more unwanted gossip and attention.”

“We shall stay for tea, of course,” Ruth added hopefully. “We may entertain you, no doubt, with news of Lady Lucy. She is engaged, did you know?”

Lady Lucy.

Unbidden, the memories of the dinner at Abigail’s, of Emma teasing Caleb, and how close he had come to kissing her on the veranda, all came crashing down on Emma.

Tears sprang to her eyes. She turned away to hide them, but it was too late. Everyone could see her distress.

“You cannot tell me that something is not gravely amiss,” James cried, gesturing to her tears. “You weep at the mention of marriage, but your friends assure me that you have not



spoken with Lord Hayward in some time. So, it cannot be him who has caused you such grief.”

He was greatly agitated now. His pacing grew quicker, his movements erratic. Finally, with a growl of frustration, he rounded on her. “You must tell me, Emma, once and for all, so that I might seek retribution. Has the Duke compromised you?”

Abigail gasped. Emma pressed her hand to her mouth as fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. Did her brother truly think so little of her? His shame on her behalf hurt more than she could say.

But James took her tears as an answer to his question. He started toward the doorway. “I will speak with you on this matter later, Emma. For now, there is a villain I must seek out.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

The scathing cry of outrage stopped even James in his tracks. When he turned around, Emma followed his gaze to where Ruth slowly rose from her seat, almost shaking with what Emma realized was anger.

“Have you lost your mind, Lord Mulberry?” she repeated, her voice low and stilted this time.

James watched her in astonishment. “I beg your pardon?”

“Are you so obsessed with your good name and your chance to satisfy your falsely wounded pride that you would forget to whom you speak?” Ruth continued, gesturing toward Emma. “This is Emma. The kindest, most honest woman any of us know. If you would assume that she would allow herself to be dishonored in such a manner, then you must assume the same of all the rest of the women in the *ton*. For none are more above reproach than her.”

“Even if such a thing were to happen,” she added, turning to face Emma now, “it would not change how I feel about my dear friend. For I would not blame her, knowing that, as I do, she would never have put herself in a compromising situation if she had any say in the matter.”

James opened his mouth to protest, but Ruth held up a hand. “Abigail and I will stay with Emma. She may share with us what has happened if she desires. But you, Lord Mulberry, have lost the privilege of hearing her story. Perhaps, when you have gone away and mulled over your misdeeds, she may be willing to forgive you. But at the moment, I am not. So, I bid you adieu, and ask that you do not disturb us here for the rest of the afternoon.”

When she had finished, the room fell into a stunned silence. James opened his mouth and closed it, desperately working to find some retort for what she had said. But not a sound came out.

Finally, Abigail stood up and faced him. “Ruth is right, Lord Mulberry. I think you should leave for the time being.”

As James cast a glance in Emma’s direction, she nodded slowly. Then, defeated and ashamed, he strode out of the room like a dog with its tail between its legs.

Once he was gone, Ruth collapsed back into her seat with a huff. “Well, I never,” she breathed, shaking her head in astonishment. “Your brother must have taken in some bad air during his time abroad. I hope he shall sort himself out quickly. His new attitude is most taxing.”

If Emma had been feeling better, she would have leaped to her feet and pulled Ruth into a grateful hug for defending her. But for now, all she could manage was to lift a hand and gesture for Ruth to come and join her on the settee.

Gladly, Ruth settled beside her. Abigail moved to sit in a chair on Emma’s other side. The three women shared a moment of comfortable, though morose, silence.

Then, Emma knew it was time for her to speak. She could see how concerned her friends were about her. If she continued to remain silent, they would no doubt assume the worst, and their outrage would grow all the worse.

“It is nothing like what James thinks,” she said softly.

Beside her, Ruth let out a low sigh of relief. “Does it indeed have something to do with His Grace?”

Emma nodded. How little her friends knew. How quickly things changed between her and Caleb, and then how quickly it had all gone wrong again. They knew nothing of what had transpired.

She decided that it was time to tell them everything.

“I have not been entirely honest with you,” she began, meeting Ruth’s and Abigail’s eyes. “Because I could not be honest with myself. What started as a confounding disdain toward the man became something different altogether.”

Abigail and Ruth exchanged a look but waited for her to continue. Emma took a deep breath and then told her tale.



Abigail’s face was a mask of shock. Amazed, too, Ruth leaned back into the settee and let out a sigh of astonishment. “How could you not have told us, Emma, about the dinner and the self-defense lesson? Why, the ball was only a few days ago!”

Emma hung her head in shame.

“I did not think the Duke would be so bold,” Abigail murmured quietly.

“His actions were not unprovoked. When he kissed me... I must admit that I desired it,” Emma admitted sadly.

“You say that his affections are insincere,” Abigail said tentatively. “But how? Has he told you as much?”

Emma hesitated. She had not told her friends everything. She had spoken of the kiss that fateful morning, and the exchange in the carriage after the ball. But then she had stopped after Caleb had kissed her again, unable to find the words to tell them what had happened next.

Even now, though he had hurt her, and she had every right to speak ill of him, his story was not hers to tell. His past, his secrets, were not hers to bring to the light of day. But neither did she wish to lie to her friends on his behalf.

“I cannot tell you everything,” she began. “I cannot reveal his secrets without becoming ashamed of myself. But I can tell you that something prompted me to question his sincerity. The truth behind his affections. And he admitted...”

Tears closed her throat. She did not know if she could continue. Abigail reached out to place a gentle hand on hers.

“He did not care about me,” Emma finally said, weeping as everything finally poured out of her. “He was only using me for his own selfish purposes. He never truly cared about me at all.”

The women were silent for a long while as Abigail and Ruth let Emma cry her heart out. They seemed to know that she had needed it. She had been trying so hard, since it happened, to bottle up her emotions. She did not want to cry over such a cruel, heartless man. But now she realized that she had no other choice.

“He has not acted improperly toward me,” Emma added after a long while. “He certainly has not wronged me more than Lord Hayward ever did. And I believe he will keep what has transpired between us to himself. But—”

Her voice cracked as she forced herself to say the words out loud for the very first—and perhaps the very last—time. “But I

love him. I do not know how it happened. I have never felt that way about anyone, not even Tobias. But, somehow, I fell in love with him. And now, knowing that I never meant anything to him, it feels as if my heart is shattering.”

Ruth reached out to pull her friend into a tight embrace. She rested her head atop Emma’s. “Now I almost wish that I had not stopped your brother from challenging him,” she murmured. “The Duke deserves to be punished severely for his misdeeds.”

Gently, Emma pulled back. “No. He used me, that is true. But revenge is never the answer. He has not besmirched my good name. He is gone, banished from the estate, and it shall be as if he and I had never known one another.”

That thought made Emma’s chest grow tight with panic and renewed pain, but she forced the sensation down. “I have been feeling sorry for myself for too long,” she admitted. “I cannot be allowed to wallow in self-pity any longer.” She offered her friends a small smile. “Come. Let us have tea, and you may tell me all about Lady Lucy’s engagement.”

Ruth shook her head. “I could not care less about her at the moment. We shall not speak another word about her. But we will have tea. And I expect you to eat everything served to us before we have finished.”

As her friends led her out of the room, Emma felt a surge of true gratitude for their friendship. She might be facing a future of spinsterhood, but at least she had two friends who would stay by her side throughout it.

*At least until they marry and move away.*

She pushed the thought out of her mind. She would not allow herself to wallow in self-pity any longer.

With another guilty realization, Emma remembered that it had been several days since she had visited the orphanage. In her selfishness, she had completely forgotten the children. Ashamed, she cast a quick glance out the window to her right as they moved into the next room.

Could she manage a trip today? It would be late by the time Ruth and Abigail left. If she went to the orphanage after tea time, it might be dark by the time she returned home.

But the children would be waiting for her. They *had* been waiting for her for the last several days. Emma had promised to bring them blankets and fresh bread on her next visit. But then, she had simply failed to appear. She silently berated herself for behaving so childishly and allowing her own problems to overshadow those of people who were truly in need.

No, Emma could not delay the journey any longer. She would go this evening, once her friends had left. She would be quick, stopping only long enough to give the children the items she had promised to bring them.

Then, ruefully, she reminded herself that if she encountered any danger, she did not need to worry— she now knew how to defend herself.

## CHAPTER 16



“**W**hy, Your Grace, I did not know you would be visiting today,” a thin maid stammered as Caleb burst through the front door.

“And yet here I am,” he murmured, brushing past her with ease.

The manor was fairly quiet, just as Caleb had anticipated.

A few feet ahead, the butler appeared. The man looked startled but worked to maintain a semblance of composure. “Your Grace, I am afraid Lord Moor is not at home.”

Caleb nodded. “I had gathered.”

Unbothered, he continued on his way down the hall, the butler hurrying after him.

“Your Grace, if you would care to return later—”



Crossing over the threshold of his uncle's study, Caleb turned around to face the butler. "I only need to collect some documents from my uncle. I shall be finished shortly."

Then, knowing full well that none of Solomon's servants had any power to throw him out, he turned and shut the door behind him.

None of them were aware, of course, that Solomon's absence today was precisely why Caleb had arrived at the manor this afternoon. A terrible, dastardly seed of doubt had been planted in his mind, and he was desperate to have his suspicions proven wrong.

Caleb began with the desk. He searched through everything—papers, ledgers, documents of every kind. Then he moved on to the surrounding bookshelves. He flipped open books, leafing through them, checking for pieces of parchment secreted away within, hoping to find some piece of evidence that might disprove his growing theory. But there was nothing.

He was just about to return to the desk to see if he had missed anything when he spotted something out of the corner of his eye. A trunk. It was small, tucked away in the far corner of the room, and nearly obscured by a low chair.

Wondering why he had never noticed it before, Caleb carefully crossed to it and opened the lid.

It was nearly empty. Only three small, unassuming books sat at the bottom. Astonished, Caleb glanced around. Why would his uncle keep such a thing in his office? Every other surface

of the room was cluttered with papers, writing implements, and books or ledgers.

Caleb returned his gaze to the trunk. He picked up the books, one by one, and found them entirely uninteresting. They were not different from those he had found on the shelves behind him. So, why would his uncle keep these books specifically in this trunk? And why not fill the trunk further?

Caleb pondered this for a moment more. Then, on impulse, he reached down and pressed down on the bottom of the trunk. It shifted. Glancing at its side, he realized that the bottom of the trunk on the inside was much higher than the bottom on the outside.

*A hidden compartment.*

Searching quickly for something to help him pry up the false bottom, Caleb returned to the trunk and carefully attempted to remove the piece of wood. After a moment, it came loose.

Inside—in the true compartment—Caleb gazed down upon a mass of letters in various stages of aging. Most, he guessed, were nearly twenty or thirty years old. Some older, perhaps. And, upon closer inspection, he realized that most of them were written in his uncle's hand.

This was not unsurprising. But the contents of the letters were.

Caleb sank into the nearby chair as he began to read.

The first few were addressed to a man whom Caleb knew all too well. A man with whom Caleb had a long history and yet had only been acquainted a few days ago—Tom Bentworth, the man who had been paid to kill Caleb’s parents. The man whom Caleb had interrogated, the man who had given up the name of the person he claimed had paid him to commit such unspeakable acts.

Solomon Gibson, the Earl of Moor. That was who Tom had named. But Caleb hadn’t believed it.

He still could hardly believe it as he read the letters between Solomon and Tom. The exchanges spelled out every gory detail of what had transpired. The letters went back and forth between them, with Solomon informing Tom of the vague details of his mission, and Tom demanding a higher compensation. Then, to Caleb’s horror, the next letter showed Solomon supplying Tom with information about the location and layout of Caleb’s childhood home, which no one but the family could have known. Descriptions of Caleb and his father followed next.

Caleb’s dismay increased. Solomon described where the two could be found and when the manor was most accessible during the night.

Caleb could only guess what this all meant. But he did not have to make assumptions for long.

Finally, his gaze landed on the final, most incriminating piece of evidence. “Kill my brother and his son,” Solomon had written. “Leave no trace of your presence at the manor. Return my letters to me so that I may ensure they are never discovered.”

The piece of parchment fluttered to the floor as Caleb's hands trembled. Wide-eyed and unblinking, he sank back into the chair, knowing it was the only thing keeping him from collapsing entirely.

His uncle. After all this time. During all the years of anger and outrage, of sorrow and sworn revenge, the real culprit had been right before him the entire time.

Caleb had worked with Solomon for years, the man who *killed his parents*, to try and uncover who was behind the horrible crime. Solomon had been an ally, a partner in grief. He had seemed to grieve with Caleb over his parents with almost as great a broken heart as Caleb's. Solomon had become Caleb's only guardian and family.

And all this time, it had been a lie. All of it. A lie.

Caleb's world crumbled as he closed his eyes against this abhorrent new knowledge.

He had the answer he had come for. Solomon had ordered a man to kill his brother. He had intended for Caleb, his own nephew, to be murdered as well. And the late Duchess, Caleb could only guess, had merely been collateral damage. She had intervened on behalf of her son, and it had gotten her killed.

But why? A hundred reasons flooded Caleb's mind. Jealousy of his father's position as the firstborn son. Hatred of his father's happiness and success. Any of it could have spurred on a horrible man to commit a horrible crime.

Caleb was suddenly impatient to be gone from this place. To have nothing more to do with the evidence of these heartbreaking deeds. But he would not leave the condemning letters here, where they might be destroyed or hidden anew. Folding the correspondence between Solomon and Tom, he pocketed them and stood up.

Then he was struck by another thought. If all the evidence of Solomon's crimes was detailed in the letters that he now possessed, then what was in the letters that remained in the trunk?

Drawing closer, Caleb realized there were still plenty of documents in the chest. Several bundles of letters were tied together with delicate ribbons, just how a young woman might collect notes from a suitor. Reaching down, he grabbed a handful.

To his amazement, the name on the back of the letters was one he recognized—Lilly Gibson. His mother.

The true depth of Solomon's anger and jealousy was revealed as Caleb read the letters. Solomon had been in love with Lilly long before she had ever married the late Duke. The trunk was filled with countless love letters, one after another, professing Solomon's devotion to the woman.

The only reason Solomon still possessed these letters, Caleb discovered, was because his mother had returned them to him, along with a gentle rejection of his affections. In fact, she seemed to have been forced to do this multiple times, as Caleb found several rejections written to Solomon, along with Lilly's pleas that he give up his unrequited love.

Caleb did not know how long he sat there, reading. It might have been hours. But he could not stop. Even in these letters, painful and uncomfortable as they were, Caleb had caught a glimpse of his mother. Her voice had been resurrected from the grave, if only for a few moments.

But, finally, he found himself reading the final piece of correspondence between Solomon and Lilly.

*Dear Lord Moor,*

*I have written to you many times now, in response to your love letters. I have thanked you for your attentions but avowed, ever more adamantly, that I cannot, nor ever will, return these affections.*

*I know the news must still come as a shock to you, for you continue to write to me, despite my rejections. As I have done before, I have enclosed your most recent letters to me. I return them to you because they have no value for me. Furthermore, I do not find it right that I should possess them in light of recent events.*

*It may hurt you to know of my engagement. Indeed, you may have already heard about it before you receive this letter. But I feel I owe it to you to make the situation known to you by my own hand.*

*I am engaged to your brother, the Duke of Terrington. This is in no way a slight to you, nor does it have anything to do with the difference in your fortunes.*

*Indeed, I have rejected you many times before your brother made his affection for me known. I love your brother. I respect him. And I intend to spend the rest of my life by his side as a faithful, loving wife.*

*In order to do that, I beg you to let go of your feelings for me. They are not reciprocated. If you so wish, I will not tell your brother about your letters. I do not wish to cause you shame.*

*But if you continue to pursue me after I am married, then I will tell your brother about your advances and my rejections.*

*I hope we may both endeavor to forget the past and remain as brother and sister-in-law. I shall be happy to count you as a part of my family. I hope you will find peace in it too, soon enough.*

*Respectfully,*

*Lilly Wheaton.*

The silence in the room stretched out as Caleb lowered the letter with shaking hands, staring helplessly at the empty space before him.

He had loved her. Solomon had been in love with his mother. But why then had he ordered the murder of her husband and son, the two great joys of her life? Had it been out of vengeance? A ploy to steal her for himself?

Caleb stood up. On shaky legs, he managed to pluck a random document off his uncle's desk. It would suffice as an excuse for his presence in the manor, should anyone demand proof of why he had come. Then, tucking the rest of his mother's letters into his pocket, he made his way out of the study.

The servants were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had given up on politely shepherding him out of the manor. Better to face Solomon's irritation than the Duke's displeasure. But with the document gone from his study, Solomon would have no reason to be angry at Caleb's intrusion. He would trust that Caleb's excuse was true—he would think Caleb had merely stopped by to collect business documents.

Solomon would never suspect that Caleb knew everything.

The Duke's mind was still reeling as he climbed into his carriage, the proof of his uncle's deeds tucked safely in his pocket. He knew that if he were to reflect on his past—on the years of conducting business with his uncle, and the multitude of times in which he counted himself lucky to have such a relative devoted to avenging his parents' deaths—his resilience would unravel.

So, he did not think about the lies his uncle had told him. Nor did he concern himself with the love he had once had for the man.

No, Solomon meant nothing to him. And all Caleb would think of now was how he might make his uncle pay for what he had done. Finally, after all these years, the villain would face justice.





It was still light as Emma slipped out of the manor and hurried toward the market. But it would soon grow dark. She knew she did not have much time to make her trip to the orphanage today.

Still, she needed to go. Her promised visit was long overdue, and she needed to be sure that little Michael was still recovering from his illness. He had been well enough the last time she had visited, but she knew better than to assume that he would make a full recovery. Sometimes a person could take a turn for the worst just when they seemed to be on the mend.

Emma pondered how she might convince the doctor to join her at the orphanage if indeed Michael needed urgent medical care. She would no doubt have to pay him well. But it was not the money that worried her.

She worried that Dr. Taylor would feel obligated to tell her father what she had been up to. He would see her behavior as dangerous—as Caleb had—and might inform her father of her outings.

If Rupert found out about her trips to the orphanage, there was no telling how he might react. To order her to stop her visits would be the least of what he would do.

And that was something Emma could not risk. Not unless she had to.

Her mind consumed with worries, Emma still found her thoughts drifting back to Caleb. She reflected on the time when he had been made aware of her secret visits to the orphanage. The Duke had all but accosted her when he found out where she had been sneaking off to. She could have sworn that, at that moment, he had looked almost worried about her.

But now she knew differently. Now she knew that he had no care for her. Now she could be certain that she had simply been a means to an end for another cruel, selfish man.

“Oh!” Emma gasped as she walked straight into the broad back of a stranger standing before one of the stalls in the market.

She had not been paying attention to where she was going. Indeed, she had not even realized that she had arrived at the market already.

“Watch where you’re going, will you?” The man turned around in frustration, eyeing her.

“I beg your pardon,” Emma murmured, ducking her head. “My mind was miles away.”

She moved to go, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her. “Hold on there. Don’t go running off so soon. I don’t think that was a proper apology now, was it?”

Emma bit her lip. A part of her screamed in protest at the man’s demeaning tone, but she forced herself to say what he wanted to hear. “I apologize. It will not happen again.”

“Good. That wasn’t so difficult, was it?”

Emma stayed silent. The hand on her shoulder did not move. She fidgeted, eager to be released.

But the man seemed to be in no such hurry. Shifting, he ducked a little to peer under her hood at her face.

As Emma met his gaze, his expression shifted slightly. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

Emma tried to duck her head even further, panic making her heart thud painfully in her chest. She shook it off, staring down at her feet with wide, fearful eyes. “I do not think so.”

“I ought to recognize a pretty face like yours.” The man chuckled, using his grip to wrench her back toward him just painfully enough that she winced. “If you don’t know me, then how about you and I get acquainted with one another? I would count that as a proper apology,” he added, his sinister laugh making her stomach churn.

As the man’s hand moved threateningly down her arm, Emma swallowed down the panic rising in her throat and steadied her breathing. She could do this.

With practiced effort, she stepped toward the man. Crossing over herself as she turned, she angled her other arm and body so that as she moved in a quick, fluid motion, she brought her full weight down onto his forearm, attempting to dislodge his grip on her.

To her great relief, it worked. And as the man glanced down in confusion at his now empty grasp, Emma darted away into the crowd and down a nearby alley.

She hurried down the darkened path for several minutes, heedless of where she was going, until she could be certain that she was not being followed. Then, she collapsed against a wall, her chest rising and falling in rapid succession.

Emma blinked back the tears that threatened to fall. She told herself that she was all right, that she was safe. But the man had shaken her far more than she could have predicted.

If Caleb had not taught her how to defend herself, what would the man have done? Would he have recognized her? Or would he have taken her somewhere private and tried to have his way with her?

She did not want to think about it.

Putting a hand on her chest, Emma tried to slow her breathing. Then, as feeling started to creep back into her hands and toes, she glanced around, trying to get her bearings. But she did not recognize where she was.

She pushed off the wall and took a few hesitant steps further down the alley. Where was the market? She turned around. She had come from this direction, had she not?

She took a step that way, then reconsidered. She turned around.

Nothing looked familiar.

“You look a little lost, my dear,” a low voice said from behind her.

She started, spinning around in an instant. But even as she did—wondering how someone had managed to appear so suddenly when she could have sworn that she was alone—a hand clamped down on her upper arm.

A moment later, another hand covered her mouth.

Emma’s eyes widened. She tried to scream, but the hand muffled nearly all of the sound. Then, as she continued to struggle, a boot kicked hard at the back of one of her knees, sending her staggering to the ground in pain.

“I would not struggle if I were you,” the voice said, now just inches away from her ear. Emma shivered as her attacker continued in a low, smug voice. It was unmistakably male. “For if you do, I will not hesitate to silence you.”

Mind racing, Emma tried to understand how she had gotten to this point. Had the man from the market followed her? Or was this another attacker?

He was threatening her with more violence, should she try to fight him. But even so, at the back of her mind, Emma could hear Caleb’s voice.

*“When they believe that you are subdued, that is your opportunity to strike.”*

Emma paused for just a moment. She knew it was a bad idea, but she still had to try.

She forced herself to be still. As the attacker’s grip loosened ever so slightly, she opened her mouth and bit down hard on his hand.

The stranger cried out, staggering back, and letting go of her as she surged to her feet. A little shaky, she spun around, gathering her bearings, before she took off at full speed in the opposite direction.

She had intended to run long and far, sprinting as fast as her legs could carry her. But, despite her efforts, she only made it ten or so feet away before a shove from behind sent her sprawling back onto the ground.

Emma groaned and tried to force herself back up, but a knee pressed down sharply on her back, pinning her to the ground. She cried out in pain.

A low chuckle from above did nothing to ease her discomfort. “I warned you,” the voice drawled.

A moment later, just as she was wondering what this frightful man had in store for her, she felt a blinding pain in the back of her head. Then everything went dark.

## CHAPTER 17



“**Y**ou may take that up,” Caleb said, climbing out of the carriage. He paused to straighten up and stretch his back.

The footman before him nodded. With the help of another man, he lifted the trunk from the carriage and then started toward the front door.

Caleb watched them for a moment, his exhaustion tinged with regret. He had not thought he would return to his manor in this way—cast out and with a friendship in shambles. He had left this place fully prepared to assist the Viscount Mulberry as best he could.

He had not seen or heard from James since he had confronted him the day of the picnic. But Caleb had left early this afternoon, not doubting that, if he overstayed his quickly dwindling welcome at Mulberry Manor, James would be at the door, ready with more scathing words. And, perhaps, a challenge to a duel.

If he did, Caleb would not blame him. Too many of his thoughts, since that fateful encounter in the carriage, had been filled with Emma. Though it was miniscule in the face of the

harm he had done to her, Caleb still stood by the notion that this was best for her.

That was what he told himself over and over. And he almost believed it.

Unbidden, his stomach rumbled. He sighed. It had been a long day. It would be near dinner time by now.

Looking up at the manor before him, Caleb breathed a sad sigh of relief. Even with the circumstances as they were, it was good to be home.

“Welcome back, Your Grace,” his butler said as he climbed up the stairs to the front door.

“Thank you. It is good to be back. I trust everything has been kept in order while I was away?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Several more servants hurried past Caleb to retrieve what was left of his belongings.

Caleb glanced around, satisfied with his initial inspection of the hall. “Good. I shall take dinner soon,” he said.

The butler nodded and started toward the kitchens, no doubt to inform the cook.



As Caleb was left alone, a strange uneasiness settled over him. He was not a man accustomed to feeling lonely, though he was often alone. But in recent days, he had glimpsed a life where he did not, perhaps, have to be so lonely. A life in which he could let another person into his world. A life in which happiness could be found in another's pleasure.

Shaking his head, he dismissed such a thought. No, he was feeling melancholy because of the loss of his confidante and uncle. He now saw the snake for who he was, though he had not yet decided how he might deal with him.

It was when Caleb turned to climb up the stairs to his rooms when a strange sound drew him back to the front door.

A carriage was rolling up the drive— one that Caleb recognized. Steeling himself for what was to come, he stepped outside to meet it.

As James emerged, he bore an expression that Caleb had not expected. Instead of anger or firm resolve, James looked anxious. Caleb knew in an instant that something was terribly wrong. He stepped closer to him.

“Why are you here?” Caleb asked, glancing into the carriage, finding himself hoping that he might find Emma inside.

He did not, as he knew he should not. She never had to see him ever again if she did not want to. But here he was, searching for her all the same.

“Have you come to challenge me, then?” he pressed, returning his gaze to James.

As his friend shook his head, a grimace of embarrassment crossing his features, Caleb frowned. He waited for James to explain.

“I know it cannot be true. My sister knows better than to do such a thing. But I am running out of options, and therefore I must ask. Is she here? You must tell me. You owe it to me, at the very least, to inform me that she is all right,” James finally said, both shame and outrage warring in his eyes.

This was the farthest thing from what Caleb had expected to hear. “Lady Emma?” he asked, still trying to make sense of James’s question. “Why would she be here?”

James searched Caleb’s face for a moment. Then, cursing under his breath, he rubbed a hand over his face. He seemed to grow more anxious by the moment.

“What is the matter?” Caleb pressed. “What is going on?”

“You need not involve yourself,” James replied, turning back to the carriage.

Reaching out, Caleb placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder. A deep, gnawing fear coiled in his stomach. “James, is your sister in danger?”

Something in his voice must have affected James, for a moment later, he sighed and turned back to him. “Emma has been missing since last night. She did not come home.”

Caleb took a step back, his fear growing sharp and nauseating, its strength taking him by surprise.

James shook his head. “I would not have come to you for help. Not if I could avoid it.”

Caleb winced. He could not deny that his friend’s words hurt.

James continued, “But I am desperate. I do not know where to turn or whom to turn to. I thought perhaps she had come to you for some reason. Or you had manipulated her into coming here.”

He threw his hands up in despair, turning away from Caleb. “But you know nothing, like everyone else. My father is not concerned. He says she has gone to stay with a friend and has simply forgotten to inform us of the matter.”

He spun back, a level of certainty in his worried gaze. “But this is not like Emma. No one knows where she might have gone, or what could have happened to her. I think something is wrong. I feel it,” he added, thumping a fist against his chest.

“When was the last time you saw her?” Caleb asked, trying to keep his own anxiety under control.

James kicked a nearby stone in frustration. “Yesterday afternoon. Emma had guests for tea, then she retired to her room. She sent her maid down to dinner to inform me that she was feeling unwell and would not join my father and me. She might have snuck out of the house then. But I am not certain that she has been missing since last night. She could have snuck out early this morning. Though her bed was empty by the time her maid went to wake her up. And Emma is never up before that hour.”

James was ranting now, his innermost thoughts spilling out as he desperately tried to piece together the events of the previous day.

Caleb nodded, taking all this in. James was not going to like what he had to say, but Emma was in danger. “I think I know where she is.”

James turned to him, his eyes flashing with anger. “You do? How?”

Holding up a hand to stop the onslaught of condemnation that Caleb knew was coming, he explained himself. “When you were gone, I had my men keep an eye on your sister when I could not. They found that she was sneaking out of the house to visit an orphanage near the market.”

“What?” James looked as surprised as Caleb had been when he had first learned of Emma’s secret trips.

“I naturally forbade her from continuing such activities on her own, due to their dangerous nature. But, given her stubbornness, I doubt she paid me any mind.”

“Which market?” James asked, already turning back to the carriage. He was ready to jump into action.

Grimly, Caleb shook his head. “I do not know. I would have to ask my men. I believe there is one nearby. But there is another to the east that is a shorter distance on foot.” Thinking quickly, he glanced at the edge of his estate. “You go north to the market there. I will go east. If we split up, one of us is sure to find her.”

James nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line. It was clear he still did not trust Caleb. But right now, he did not have a choice. He needed the Duke’s help, whether he liked it or not.

“I pray you are right.”



Caleb’s carriage tore down the road. He had instructed the driver to go as fast as he could.

Missing since last night. Caleb’s chest was tight with worry. He knew Emma took a great risk to help the children at the orphanage, but he could not imagine that even she would risk being caught out after dark.

Perhaps she was nowhere near the orphanage. Perhaps that seedy Tobias Wilkington had somehow guilted her into meeting him. Or maybe she had been abducted from the manor, right under James’s nose. All manner of horrible things could have happened to her, and it surprised Caleb how troubled he was at the thought of her in danger.

He had sprung immediately into action. And now the carriage thundered down the road on its way to the market.

Where the orphanage was Caleb did not know. But before he'd left his estate, he had sent one of his men to fetch Mr. Steel and ask him to meet him at the market. Caleb could only hope that he had chosen the right market and that Mr. Steel would be there to meet him, waiting to lead him to the orphanage where he would find Emma safe and sound.

But the journey was taking far too long. Caleb was anxious to be there, trying to imagine Emma walking all this way on foot. Then, when he thought he might leap from the carriage and run the rest of the way to the market, simply to give himself something to do other than sit and worry, they finally arrived at their destination.

With relief, Caleb jumped out of the carriage. He glanced around for Mr. Steel. "Wait for me here," he instructed the driver.

He wandered a little way into the market, still keeping an eye out for Mr. Steel. Where was he? When he still did not spot him, he reached out to catch the nearest man passing by. "The orphanage, where is it?"

The man grumbled something about public decency and shook him off.

Caleb started toward the nearest stall. "I am looking for the orphanage," he explained quickly. "Can you direct me to it?"

A kindly-looking couple, some ten or twenty years older than him, exchanged a look. Then they looked him up and down, taking in his expensive clothes.

“Why would you want to go there, Sir?” the woman asked gently.

“There is no time to explain. But it is urgent. Please,” he insisted, his worries threatening to clog his throat. “I must know. Can you tell me?”

After another agonizing moment, the man nodded. “Watch over things here,” he told his wife. “This way, Sir.”

He motioned Caleb to follow him.

Through a maze of alleys and cramped, dark passageways, Caleb followed the man. As they went, his fears only grew. This was no place for a woman like Emma. He did not want to think of all the terrible things that might have befallen her in such an area.

Finally, Caleb’s guide drew to a halt. He motioned to a building at the end of the alley, which looked to be held together with no more than a few nails and a bit of rotting wood. “There it is.”

“That is the orphanage?” Caleb asked, not wanting to believe that such a horrible place was housing children.

The man nodded. "Yes, Sir."

Caleb pulled a few coins out of his pocket and gave them to the man. "Thank you."

Nodding, the merchant bid him good luck and left. Caleb noted that even he seemed eager to leave this part of the twisting alleyways and dilapidated buildings.

Wasting no time, Caleb crossed to the door and knocked. It was growing dark outside, and he glanced around, guessing that he had maybe an hour or two of sunlight left.

He knocked again. "Is anyone here?" he called out.

There was no answer. Caleb forced himself to try once more.

"I must speak with the person in charge," he called out, trying to sound as civil as he could.

Finally, a minute or two later, the door opened a crack. One fearful eye, at the level of his shoulder, stared up at him.

"Yes?" a soft, feminine voice asked.

Caleb realized how the situation might look to her. A wealthy man banging on her door just before nightfall. Anyone might guess that something was amiss. He reminded himself that he would do Emma no good by alarming this woman. He needed



to communicate clearly with her. She looked frightened of him as it was.

“I am looking for someone.”

“A-a child?” she stammered.

“No. A young woman. A lady. Lady Emma Brown is her name.”

He held his breath. The face disappeared then, and he thought all might be lost. A moment later, the door opened a little wider.

A young lady around Emma’s age looked up at him with concern. “You know Lady Emma?”

Caleb heaved a sigh of relief. “Yes. I have come to collect her. You need not fear, she and I are acquainted with one another. I will take her home.”

The woman shook her head. “She is not here,” she replied, frowning her brow.

In an instant, Caleb’s relief was snatched away. “I beg your pardon?”

“I thought you might know where she would be,” the woman explained. “She promised to come and visit us, but we have not seen her in several days. It is most irregular.”

Angry and confused, and nearly sick at the thought of what could have happened to Emma, Caleb could only offer the woman a nod. He started to turn away.

“You are certain she has not been here?” he asked, wanting to be certain.

“I have not seen her.”

“Might anyone else in the house have seen her? One of the children?”

The woman shook her head sadly. “It is only me here, with the children. If Lady Emma had come to visit, I would have known about it.”

Caleb sighed. “Thank you.” He turned away, barely holding himself together now.

“Is she in trouble?” the woman called after him.

Caleb hesitated but did not respond. What answer could he give the woman when he only knew as much as she did?

He continued back the way he had come, his mind racing. This was indeed the orphanage that Emma visited. They recognized her name. But she was not here, nor had she been here for several days.

As far as Caleb knew, this was the only place Emma would visit in secret. It was an infinitely selfless act. One that only she would think of doing. But if she had not been drawn here, then what else could have possibly prompted her to leave the estate, and then kept her from returning home for so long? Emma would not have left her brother to worry, without word of where she was. Not if she had any say in the matter.

Not unless she were at the mercy of someone else.

Caleb stopped dead in his tracks. Emma was in danger, he was certain of it now. This behavior was not like her. Someone else was in control.

But who?

Again, he thought of the Marquess of Hayward and his obsession with Emma, despite being the cause of their broken engagement. Would he have sunk low enough to steal her away from her friends and family?

Caleb's body grew tight with the intensity of his anger. When he got his hands on the man, there was no telling what he might do to him.

He was back at the market now, pushing his way through the crowd and toward the carriage. Casting another quick glance around for Mr. Steel, a strange notion struck him.

Something he had not considered before. Not until this very moment. A suspicion, far worse than any he had had thus far, began to form at the far corners of his mind.

He told himself it was impossible. Illogical. He told himself it was a suspicion born merely of paranoia.

And yet...

“It can’t be,” he breathed.

But even as he spoke, he knew he had hit upon the truth.

Caleb broke into a run.



When Emma awoke, she was alone. She groaned as her consciousness brought with it a pounding headache. She moved to put a hand to her forehead but then found that she could not.

In fact, she could hardly move. She glanced down, struggling against what she now realized was a rope binding her hands together behind her back.

“Wha—” Emma gasped, blinking against the impossibility of the sight before her.

Though her heart raced in her chest, she fought to remain calm. She took stock of where she was. She was lying on a hard, wooden floor that looked as if it had been left to collect dust for many, many years. Here and there were breaks in the

layer of grime—footprints or long trails—telling her that a few people had been here recently.

When Emma kicked her legs out to try and sit up, she realized that her feet, too, were bound.

She fought back a panicked sob. What was she doing here? Who had brought her to this horrible place? And why?

After a few precarious attempts, she managed to force herself into a painful, though stable, sitting position. She looked around her again.

When she turned her head to glance over her shoulder, she realized that it was daylight outside. The light creeping through the windows, however, was not as strong as it might be near midday, so she guessed it could either be morning or evening. By the tremendous growling of her stomach, she feared it might be the latter.

Other than the windows on the far wall, there was nothing in the room except for a small set of stairs to her left, though she had no idea where they might lead.

Had she been unconscious for nearly a day? She faintly recollected coming to in the darkness and trying to sit up. But the pain in her head had made her faint, and she had lost consciousness once more.

She was still gazing up at the window when low voices made her start and quickly turn around again. There was no one else in the barren room except for her. But she could now hear two

voices, both distinctly male and low, coming from a nearby room or hall.

Her first thought was to call for help. She opened her mouth to cry out, then caught herself. These men might be her captors. And she did not need to alert them to the fact that she was awake. Not yet.

Swallowing hard, Emma realized that, even if she had dared to call out, she would not have been able. Her throat and mouth were parched, her tongue too dry and sluggish to form words.

So, instead, she listened. For a while, she could not understand anything that was being said. Then, finally, she began to pick out a few words here and there.

“... be here soon...” one of the men said.

The other let out a grunt of acknowledgment. “That’s what he says.”

“Well, we’ll have to wait here either way, won’t we?”

Another grunt.

Emma frowned. Who were they talking about? It was clear these men were a part of whatever was going on here, but why kidnap *her*?

She tried to listen in on more of their conversation, but their words were fainter now, and she guessed that they must have moved into a different room.

Emma shifted, wincing against her bonds. She closed her eyes, trying to settle her stomach, which, in combination with her headache and lack of food, was churning madly.

Then, from somewhere behind her, a wooden plank let out a squeak of protest. A chill shot up her spine. Someone was coming down the stairs.

She turned to look, but the newcomer was too fast, and she found herself staring at a pair of legs behind her. As she struggled to look up at the face, a hand took hold of her head and roughly turned it away.

“There will be time for introductions later,” the man said casually.

Emma recognized his voice. It was the same voice she had heard right before she’d lost consciousness in the alley by the market. She realized now that he must have hit her with something to knock her out.

She did not know if it was the headache scrambling her brain or the wooziness from her hunger, but something about the voice struck her as familiar. As if she had heard it before the events of the last day. But how could that be?

She swallowed past the painful lump in her throat. “What do you want with me?” she managed to squeak out, her voice

rough and dry.

“All in good time,” came the relaxed reply.

Emma stared straight ahead, her mind still clouded with pain. Her head was throbbing terribly. She wondered briefly what he had hit her with to make her lose consciousness so quickly.

The floorboard made another squeaking noise as the man shifted behind her. She squeezed her eyes shut against both the pain and fear.

“Why am I here?” she asked again.

The man clicked his tongue in reprimand. He seemed about to speak, but then he was interrupted by a strange sound. The sound came from outside, somewhere near where the men had been speaking before. Was it a carriage? She thought she heard a horse whinny.

The man let out a soft, chilling chuckle. “You will see soon enough. And, just so you do not try to involve yourself in business that does not concern you...”

Emma gagged as something rough and dry was shoved into her mouth. Cloth. She fought as it was tied around the back of her head. She cried out, but her muffled voice faded into the empty room.

She was bound and gagged. And someone was coming. That was what the men outside had said. But whether she was to



fear the approaching doom more than the man here in the room with her, she did not know.

Helpless, all she could do was wait.

There was another voice outside the room now. It was raised, demanding something. The men from before were replying, their words muffled.

Then, the door to the room was flung open.

Coughing against the gag in her mouth, tears sprang to her eyes. She panicked, desperate to blink them away, desperate to see, as a new figure strode into the room. She could make out his figure. A man. Tall and broad-shouldered. He entered, and then, turning, he paused.

Then she heard her name. It was spoken in a low, worried whisper. Emma recognized that voice. She would have recognized it anywhere. She would have known him anywhere.

Caleb.

## CHAPTER 18



“Come out and face me!” Caleb shouted, staring up at the familiar, ramshackle building before him.

Behind him, one of the horses whinnied. They must be tired, he thought distractedly. They had been ridden hard, first to the market and now here.

Caleb still wasn't certain that he would find Emma in this crumbling building. He prayed he would not. But he could not afford to dismiss such a suspicion. If he was right, then she was in terrible danger.

“Do not involve her in this!” he tried again, raising his voice. He moved to pound against the locked door.

Finally, the front door was flung open. Two men he did not recognize stood in the doorway, their arms folded over their chests.

“No need to yell,” one of them said. “We have what you came for.”

“Where is she?” Caleb moved toward them, prepared to fight them to get inside if he needed to. But they stepped aside of their own accord.

“Right this way.” The other grinned, moving to open another door off the entryway. Amused, he gestured for Caleb to follow him inside.

Caleb hesitated just a moment, regretting that he had come alone. Emma’s captor, it would seem, had not.

But there was nothing to be done about it now. Pressing forward, he stormed into the room.

And that was when he saw them. Emma first, bound and gagged, sitting on the floor in the dust and dirt. Her dress was ripped at the hem, and her face was streaked with tears. Then he saw Solomon standing over her with a look of genuine, haunting satisfaction on his face.

“Emma.” Her name was on his lips before he knew it. “What have you done to her?”

Solomon chuckled. “Nothing yet.”

Stepping forward, Solomon moved to place himself between Caleb and Emma. He stood there, eyeing Caleb with all the confidence of a man who knew he had placed a winning bet.

“I thought she might be the one to draw you here,” he mused, casting a glance back at the bound woman on the floor.

Caleb would not provoke his uncle. So he did not reply. He simply waited.

Solomon, it would seem, had more to say.

“My servants told me that you had visited the manor whilst I was out,” he continued. “I would not have thought twice about the matter, if not for a small suspicion that had begun to grow at the back of my mind over the last several days.”

He shifted, pacing casually before Emma, like a caged animal. “You had informed me that we were close to finding the man who killed your parents. That you would have the name of the person who had hired him within a matter of days. And then,” he said lifting his hands, palms up, “you disappeared. I heard nothing from you. No contact. Except for when you suddenly decided to sneak into my manor uninvited.”

Letting out a low, sad chuckle, he shook his head at Caleb. “I knew then that I was betrayed. That the man paid to kill your parents had tattled on me. Instead of naming Rupert as the murderer, like I told him to do,” he added ruefully. “He no doubt accepted your bribe. Not that your money will do him any good now. He won’t be able to spend it now that my men have found him. He is company only for the worms now.”

So, Tom Bentworth was dead. Caleb felt little pity for the man who had made a living from killing others. Tom’s death was not what he was concerned with. There were other murders that Solomon needed to answer for.

“Say it.” Caleb’s hands clenched into fists at his sides. “I want to hear you admit what you have done.”

“You want me to say that I killed your parents? That dear, old Uncle Solomon has been behind their murder this whole time?”

At that, Emma let out a horrified—though muffled—gasp.

Solomon turned to her, grinning. “Indeed, it is true, Lady Emma. Why, do not look so surprised.” He turned back to Caleb and tilted his head ever so slightly. “I suppose I owe you some sort of explanation. It really is the least I can do. And because, once my story is finished, you will better understand what I must do next.”

Caleb did not like the malicious glint of pleasure in his uncle’s eyes. He did not know what Solomon might be capable of or what he might be planning, but he knew better than to provoke the man into doing something rash. Best to keep him talking while he thought up a way out of all of this.

“He was your brother,” Caleb began, taking great pains to keep his voice low and level. “He loved you.”

“He loved my convenience,” Solomon scoffed. “Every unbecoming task or lowly undertaking was delegated to me, the youngest son. I could do nothing but rely on him once our father passed, allowing him to selfishly enjoy the power and luxury afforded to him as the eldest son. He got everything, and I was cast aside, begging for scraps from his table.”

“That is not true,” Caleb countered. “You were provided for. I have seen my father’s ledgers. He made sure that you were given everything you needed. And more.”

“But I was not a duke,” Solomon replied, a sneer tugging at the corner of his lips.

Caleb seethed, allowing himself one last defense of the man who had fathered him. The man who had been taken from him long before his death was due. “My father was the Duke— the best of men.”

“It should have been me,” Solomon grunted, resuming his pacing. “I was better suited to be the Duke. Your father was weak-willed, soft. I would have made our family more powerful in this country than any other! I would have done it if everything had not gone so terribly wrong.” He rubbed a hand over his face.

For the briefest of moments, Caleb glimpsed a hint of sorrow in his uncle’s features. And he knew of whom Solomon now thought.

“You loved my mother,” Caleb said softly. “And you allowed that man to kill her.”

“That was never my intention,” Solomon snapped, spinning back to face him. “She was never meant to die. You should have died in her place. I paid that lowlife to kill you and your father, not her.”

“But she got in the way,” Caleb countered.

He could see that his uncle was becoming more unsettled by the memory. Perhaps if he could rile him enough, Solomon would stop thinking straight. He would make a mistake. Or give Caleb an opportunity to get to Emma.

“She loved you.” Solomon’s words dripped with disdain. “A love I never got from her.”

“But you pursued her,” Caleb continued, keeping Emma always in sight, even as he moved a step closer to his uncle. “Even when she rejected you. Many times. She sent your letters back, and yet you kept them.”

With a growl, Solomon turned away from Caleb. Unnoticed, Caleb took another step to the side, toward Emma.

“I knew she would come around, eventually,” Solomon hissed. “She was blinded by your father’s wealth and status. But once I was the Duke, she would have come running to me. I would have comforted her over the loss of her son and husband. She would have learned to love me. She would have been *mine*.”

Caleb took another small step toward Emma. “But she died saving me. Why did you not simply order Tom Bentworth to return and finish me off? You could have had the duchy all to yourself then.”

“And for what?” Solomon spun back around to face him. “I had lost the woman I loved. Your father had taken her from me by marrying her, and then you took her from me by merely existing. No, I needed more than a duchy and an empty house.

I needed someone to feel my pain. I needed someone to understand what I felt—someone to grieve as I did.”

Hesitating, Caleb frowned. Where was his uncle going with this?

Solomon, who seemed to sense his nephew’s confusion, grinned wickedly. “I raised you. I pretended to care for you as if you were my own child. All the while using the pain of your parents’ deaths—and the satisfaction of revenge—to manipulate you. I let you feel nothing but anger and grief and wrath your entire life.”

He slowly turned away from Caleb again, facing the window. He looked out at the setting sun as Caleb took another step toward Emma. She was so close now, almost within reach.

Letting out a heavy, satisfied sigh, Solomon chuckled. “And then, when you finally allowed something else into your life—someone else—I would be there to make sure you knew the pain that you had caused me. I would be there to repay you, death for death.”

Suddenly, he spun around. In his hand was a pistol. And it was aimed directly at the back of Emma’s head. “I wouldn’t get any closer if I were you,” he warned. “I plan to take my time with this. But if you force my hand, I will kill her here and now.”

Slowly, Caleb took several steps back. From the corner of his eye, he saw Emma struggle against her bonds. But he could not look at her. Would not look at her. He needed to keep a cool head.



“You wish to punish me for something my mother did?” he asked carefully.

“She would not have sacrificed herself if it were not for you,” Solomon snarled. He took a step closer to Emma. “And your father is not here so I can punish him. So, you will have to do. I will see someone suffer as I have suffered. You will feel the pain of losing the woman you love. And I will watch your joy fade away as the life fades from her eyes.”

Emma gave a frightened cry and continued to struggle. Caleb turned away, unable to hide his fear and horror at what his uncle was about to do.

Then, straightening up, he forced himself to do the most difficult thing he had ever done. He laughed.

He heard a slight shuffle from behind him.

“What is this? What are you doing?” Solomon asked, a slight note of hesitation in his voice.

Continuing to laugh, Caleb turned back to his uncle. He forced himself to shrug casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “That is where your plan falls apart, I fear, dear uncle. You see, I am not like you.”

“No?” Solomon frowned.

“No. You allowed yourself the weakness of falling in love. I am not so feeble or softminded. I would never allow myself to be made vulnerable through some attachment to another. There is no one I hold more dear than myself.”

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, Solomon watched Caleb carefully, studying him. “I have seen you with her. I do not think you are the egotistical, unattached man you claim to be. Otherwise, you would not behave as you have with her.”

“Was that not our plan?” Caleb countered, his mind moving a hundred miles a minute. “I was to get close to Lady Emma and her brother in order to get close to their father. I forced myself to spend time with her only because I thought it would give me an opportunity to exact my revenge on the Earl. The closer she felt to me, the more I could use her for our endeavors.”

Solomon hesitated. Caleb could sense that he had almost convinced him. But what would his uncle do, he wondered, now that his assumption turned out wrong?

Then, a soft whimper broke the silence. The noise nearly brought Caleb to his knees. It sent guilt lancing through him, for he knew what it was—a heart breaking. And it was not the first time he had broken Emma’s heart.

Solomon glanced down at Emma and laughed. “Look, Caleb, it would seem this is the first Lady Emma is hearing of this. She thought you were truly in love with her.”

It was not Solomon’s words that made Caleb do it. Nor was it Caleb’s guilt. It was Emma—and the thought of how she must

look, how hurt she must be, and his desperate need to comfort her—that made him finally break down and look at her.

As her teary eyes met his, he willed her to see the truth. He willed her to understand that his words were lies. He willed her to see what he really felt for her.

And, finally, as Emma hurt faded away, her eyes betraying a glimmer of hope, Caleb saw that she understood.

But so, too, did Solomon. The man's laugh sent a chill down Caleb's spine. When Caleb looked up, he could see the realization in his uncle's eyes.

Solomon shook his head. "Ah, you always were a good actor, Caleb. You almost had even me fooled." He cocked the pistol. "It is a shame, though, that she just learned of your love now. A little late to tell her, is it not?"

"Stop, you do not have to do this." Caleb put his hands out, taking a step forward.

He dropped all pretenses. Solomon knew the truth now. He had him cornered. Now, Caleb was appealing to whatever scrap of humanity his uncle still possessed.

"This is between us. Let her go. She has no part in this."

"You made her a part of this the moment you fell for her, Caleb," Solomon corrected him. He was grinning, his eyes flashing with the most evil delight that Caleb had ever seen.

“But I have had my fun. I’m growing weary of your little ploys, nephew. It is time to finish what I started all those years ago. Say goodbye, Caleb, to your dear Lady Emma.”



As Emma looked into Caleb’s eyes, she knew that the love she saw in them would be the last thing she would ever see.

Strange, she thought, feeling the barrel of the pistol against her head. She had not expected her life to end like this. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined a scenario like this.

But it was no small comfort that she was not here alone. Caleb was here. He had come for her.

She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the end.

A shot rang out in the room.

Emma waited to feel the pain, but nothing came. Then, a cry from behind her made her open her eyes. She spun around to see Solomon fall to his knee, clutching his foot as his pistol dropped to the floor.

She spun back around to see Caleb holding a smoking pistol, the weapon trained on his uncle.

The thud of Solomon’s pistol as it hit the ground beside her echoed through the room. Emma had only a moment to see the realization dawn in Solomon’s eyes as she came to the same conclusion.

They both lunged for the weapon, Emma throwing herself in his way. As he struggled to climb over her, she squirmed on the floor, managing to kick the pistol a little way away, the cold metal scraping against the rotting floorboards.

Relieved, Emma shifted to see her handiwork. But it was then that she realized she was not yet out of harm's way. The pistol had been pushed away from Solomon's immediate grasp, but now it sat squarely between Caleb and his uncle.

She watched as they both exchanged a look. Then, in a split second, both men were racing toward the weapon.

Somewhere at the edge of her consciousness, Emma was aware of a commotion out in the hall. There were cries, shouts, and then two solid thuds.

But her attention was drawn back to Solomon, who shoved his nephew out of the way as he made a beeline for the pistol. Caleb scrambled after him but had lost his lead.

Emma cried out, the sound still muffled by the cloth in her mouth as Solomon, lunging forward, wrapped his fingers around the pistol. In a flash, he turned and pointed it at her.

"This ends now," he snarled.

She had only a moment to register her imminent death before another pistol appeared and the hilt of it was brought down hard on the top of Solomon's head.

His eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he collapsed on the ground. Behind him, breathing hard, his clothes disheveled, stood James.

In an instant, Caleb was at her side. “Are you hurt?” he breathed, his hands working to undo her gag, and then to unbind her hands and feet.

“I-I do not think so,” Emma murmured, dizzy as the gag was removed and she was finally able to suck in lungfuls of air. Her limbs shook. Though, whether it was from fear or relief, she did not know.

As Caleb freed her hands, he tossed the rope to James, who wordlessly began to tie up Solomon. Watching her brother, Emma realized that Caleb’s uncle was still alive. He had begun to murmur and groan, slowly regaining consciousness.

Both Caleb and James worked quickly, Caleb to free Emma and James to restrain Solomon.

“The constables will be here soon,” James informed them, ensuring that Solomon was properly restrained.

“How did you find us?” Caleb asked, still at Emma’s side.

She realized one of his hands was pressed to the small of her back, keeping her upright.

“Mr. Steel. He could not find you at the eastern market, so he went to the one north of the estate, where I was. He recognized me and asked after you. We quickly realized that both you and Emma were missing, then he suggested trying to find you here.”

James looked around, his nose scrunched up in disgust. He looked as if he were about to reprimand Caleb for being associated with such a place, but Solomon groaned again and struggled against his bonds.

As James scowled down at the older man, Emma tipped forward dangerously. Her hunger and exhaustion were making her almost faint.

Strong arms wrapped around her, and she found herself suddenly lifted into the air. She was having difficulty understanding what was happening but did not resist as she was carried out of the room and through the hall. Swiftly, she was carried down the steps and toward the two carriages that awaited them outside.

“Everything is going to be all right,” Caleb murmured, carrying her toward what she realized was James’s carriage.

Emma felt the rumble of his words in his chest, as her head was pressed against it.

His grasp was strong, comforting. Emma, dizzy and dazed, leaned into him, her eyes briefly fluttering shut as her head gently bounced against his chest.

Gingerly, he lowered her into the seat. Worry was etched into every inch of his face as he drew back. Emma realized she had never seen him express such a strong emotion before.

“Emma, I,” he stammered, seemingly overcome with feeling. “I must explain—”

“You have done enough, don’t you think?” James snapped, appearing over his shoulder as he pulled him away from the opening of the carriage.

He glanced at Emma, his eyes flashing with rage. Then he turned back to Caleb. “Stay here and see that your uncle is delivered to the constables. And anyone else involved in this seedy business.”

Caleb shook his head. “My uncle is all that is left. He saw to it that all other loose ends were done away with.”

James nodded once. “I dealt with the two men in the hall. They won’t come round for another few hours.”

“James, if you would let me—”

James held up a hand, cutting Caleb off. Then, wordlessly, he climbed into the carriage.

Caleb stepped forward once more as the door swung shut, pulling back the curtain so that Emma could see him. “Emma, please, I have to tell you—”



“How dare you?” James snarled. “You have no right to speak to her so. No right to speak to her ever again. After the danger you have put her in, I will see that you are punished for ever having laid eyes on her.”

He gave an angry shout to the driver, and then the carriage jerked into motion. Caleb followed it, his mouth open but his words lost amidst the crunching of gravel beneath wheels and hooves.

James tugged the curtain out of Caleb’s grasp as the carriage continued to gain speed. Emma was helpless to do anything, denied even the strange solace of watching Caleb slowly disappear into the distance.

Then, as hunger and relief and fatigue finally overwhelmed her, she fell once more into darkness.

## CHAPTER 19



“Gently now, that’s the way.”

Emma smiled ruefully and pushed away the proffered cup of tea. “I am perfectly capable of holding the cup myself.”

James—who was all but kneeling before her, attempting to help her drink her tea as if she were a child—shook his head. “The physician said you were not to overexert yourself.”

“I think he would not care if I lifted a hand to feed myself,” Emma countered, reaching out to take up a small biscuit from the tray on the table before her.

James did not look convinced but, after another look from Emma, he stood up and returned to his seat on the other side of the table. “Your friends will be here shortly,” he added, taking a sip of his tea.

“You have invited Ruth and Abigail?” Emma asked in surprise.

“They are eager to see you, no doubt. I have not told them everything that happened. But they know that you have been unwell.”

Emma relaxed into her chair a little.

James watched as a small smile touched her lips. “I thought you might like the company,” he said, nodding in satisfaction. “You must be sick of seeing only my sorry face around the place.”

Emma chuckled. “I thought I was too fragile to see visitors.”

James shrugged. Then he shot her an approving smile. “You are recovering admirably. I think you deserve some entertainment.”

Her brother had indeed provided her the best of care in the days since her kidnapping. He had allowed only the physician to see to her. And, other than himself, he had forbidden anyone from distracting her from recovering.

For that, Emma was grateful. She had been overwhelmed by the terrifying encounter and confused about what it had all meant. She would not have wanted to speak to anyone even if she had been well enough to hold a conversation.

Now, however, she was warming up to the idea of seeing her friends. She had missed them terribly.

Mr. Cornell appeared and executed a bow. “Someone here to see you, My Lord.”

James stood up and offered Emma another smile. “I’ll go fetch your friends, shall I?”

Emma nodded. She listened as the butler led James through a set of doors and into the drawing room. Then she waited to hear Ruth’s enthusiastic greeting.

Instead, she heard a different, though familiar, voice.

“James, I must speak with her.” Caleb’s voice was low but urgent.

Emma sat up in her chair, a jolt of nervousness shooting through her. She had not heard from or spoken to him since her rescue.

“I will tell you again, as I have told you every time you have come here asking after her, I will not allow you to see her,” James hissed.

Emma frowned. Caleb had been here before? How many times had he tried to speak with her?

Caleb sighed. “What must I do to change your mind?”

“There is nothing that can be done.” Now it was James’s turn to sigh. “I am grateful to you for protecting my sister,” he

relented after a moment. “I understand that you did all you could to keep your uncle from harming her. But I am also led to believe that it was because of you that she ended up in that situation. Am I wrong?”

Caleb’s silence was all the answer James evidently needed. Emma heard a shuffle as James moved closer toward the half-closed door that separated her and the men.

“I will not demand satisfaction, Caleb. But you are not to speak with my sister. Now or ever.”

As James strode back into the room where Emma waited, he caught her gaze. He groaned. As he glanced over his shoulder, she listened to the sound of Caleb’s footsteps as he left.

Assured that the Duke was gone, James flopped back into his seat. “You heard all of that, didn’t you?”

“What did he want?” Emma asked carefully.

“To apologize to you, no doubt. But what more can he say? He used you, Emma. Me, too. And that is all there is to it. Why make yourself feel worse by seeing him only to appease his guilt?”

Was that all he wanted? Emma frowned, ducking her head to hide her conflicted emotions. She should be grateful that Caleb was at least trying to make amends. At least he understood that he had hurt her.

But why could she not shake the feeling that there was something more to it? What had truly transpired between them in that horrible building, with Solomon's gun to her head? Emma had been convinced that, in their silent exchange, Caleb had shown her his true feelings. But now, safe and rested, and the horrible moment behind them, she was not so sure anymore.

"Ah, there they are." James interrupted her musings as he stood up to greet her friends.

Emma made to stand up, but Ruth shook her head. She hurried to pull Emma into a hug.

Abigail followed, taking Emma's hands in hers with a small smile. "It is good to see you," she murmured.

"And you," Emma replied. "Please, sit."

"I am glad your brother has finally allowed us to see you," Ruth said, casting a disapproving glance at James. "I was beginning to think he had shipped you off somewhere to cover up some horrible misdeed."

Emma shot her brother a quick glance.

Ruth frowned. "Has something happened?"

Emma shook her head. "I have been unwell."

It was the truth, or rather a small part of it, but Emma did not feel ready to tell her friends the whole truth of the matter. Nor did she know if she should. Again, she would be sharing the secrets of another, and she did not know if she had that right.

“But now I am on the mend,” she continued, reaching out to take Ruth’s hand from across the table. “And I have missed you both terribly.”

The two women smiled.

James joined them for a little while, but as the conversation moved on to dresses and the Season’s next events, he seemed to grow weary.

“I will leave you ladies to it,” he said, bidding them goodbye.

Emma did not pay him much mind. He sauntered off, and they continued to speak. They drank tea and nibbled on little pastries, and she felt infinitely warmed by their presence.

After a little while, Ruth announced that she needed to relieve herself and left the room as well. Watching her go, Emma inwardly sighed. It was not that she was not grateful to see her friends. Indeed, she was much bolstered by their presence. But, though her body was nearly healed, her heart was not. And she could speak nothing of her heartbreak to her friends. Not for fear of exposing Caleb’s secrets.

She plastered a smile on her face, turning back to Abigail. “It is good to see you both,”

Abigail nodded. “I am very glad to see you, too.”

“Tell me about you,” Emma said, hoping her friend could keep her mind off her more dismal thoughts.

With a shy smile, Abigail obliged her. “My parents are well. My father...well, I suppose our relationship is still a little complicated. But my mother has spoken quite warmly with me as of late. Ever since she attended one of the meetings.”

Emma blinked, shaking her head a little in surprise. “You speak of *your* meetings?”

Abigail nodded.

Eyes wide, Emma leaned forward. “Your mother attended a literary assembly?”

Abigail’s eyes lit up with pride as she continued to nod. “She did. And she found it quite engaging. She spoke to my father, and while he is not entirely convinced, he is now willing to concede that my attendance there does not stand in the way of my making a good match. At least not as much as he had previously believed.”

“Why, Abigail, that is wonderful!” Emma stood up and crossed to embrace her friend. “I cannot tell you how happy I am to hear that.”

Accepting her friend’s congratulations, Abigail gave a big smile—a rarity for her. But then, only a moment later, it



faltered. She gently took Emma's hands in her own.

"Oh, Emma," she sighed.

"What is it?"

Abigail met Emma's gaze with sad eyes. She cast a glance over Emma's shoulder at the door. "You must tell me what has been the matter," she murmured, lowering her voice. "Forgive me for saying so, but your brother looks as if he has not slept in days. And you look even worse. I am worried something terrible has happened."

Emma chuckled ruefully. "I am sure I do not pose a pretty picture at present." Sighing, she sat down beside her friend. "But I am well, I assure you. The danger has passed."

"But there was danger?"

She nodded. "Yes. And I fear, once again, I am not at liberty to share much of what has transpired. But you must trust that I am on the mend."

Abigail was quiet for a moment. "You still look sad, Emma. I fear things are not resolved for you. Does the Duke still trouble you?"

Blushing, Emma wondered how her friend managed to see through her excuses so well. She hung her head in shame.

But she did not have time to formulate an answer, for both she and Abigail turned to the window, hearing at that moment lowered but fervent voices outside.

Carefully, Emma rose and moved to investigate, Abigail beside her.

When they looked out the window, Emma was astonished to see her brother standing just under the shadow of the manor. The person to whom he was speaking was shielded from their view by a hedge.

James looked particularly adamant about something. Not angry, perchance, but passionate. Emma wondered if Caleb had returned.

Aware that she should not eavesdrop, she turned to Abigail. "Come." She smiled, rallying herself once more. "Tell me more about your meetings."



Caleb groaned.

He dropped his head in his hands, his elbows resting on the desk before him. On top sat a blank piece of parchment. He had been trying to fill it for nearly an hour and a half.

This would not be the first letter he had sent to Emma in the days following her kidnapping. And it probably would not be the last. Caleb had been turned away by James every time he had shown up at Mulberry Manor, asking to speak with her. And, he suspected, James was also intercepting his letters.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. What would he say to her that had not already been said? What argument would be powerful enough for her to give him the chance to explain himself? That was if he could ensure she had the chance to read his letter.

Irate, Caleb rose and left the study. He strode outside the manor and took a deep, steadying breath. Though he was glad to be home again, no small part of him wished that he was, at this moment, back at Mulberry Manor so that he might be nearer to Emma.

He could remember standing at the window of James's study and looking out upon the Handleigh estate. Even now, he could almost conjure up the image of Emma striding away from him that day she had met him at dawn.

What would he say to her, if she agreed to see him again?

Anticipation made his chest grow tight. Caleb knew what he needed to tell her. He just did not know what she might say in response.

Reminding himself that Emma deserved to hear what he had to say, he forced himself back into the manor. He would finish the letter. He would somehow find the words to convince her. And then, he would find another way in which to get the letter into her hands. Some way where James would not be able to interfere.

A maid perhaps. Or a friend.

His mind, eager to grab onto the task at hand, began to sort through every option and outcome. He was on his way back to the study when his butler appeared.

“A letter for you, Your Grace.”

Caleb opened his mouth to ask if it was from Handleigh Manor but thought better of it. He took the letter and went to the study.

Once seated, he opened it. It was not from Emma, but it did pertain to her. Solomon Gibson had indeed been arrested, he had seen to that. And now he was being informed that his uncle would be tried for the murder of the late Duke and Duchess of Terrington.

Caleb had given over his uncle’s letters pertaining to the case and had hoped that they would prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Solomon was guilty.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. The betrayal of his uncle had cut deep. It would be a long time before he would be able to heal from it—if that were even possible.

There was much to make amends for. And making amends to Emma, who was still hiding away in her father’s manor, was the only place to start.



Ruth was the first to leave. She had rejoined her friends for a little while and then informed them that she had to make another call that afternoon.

Abigail left next, and Emma accompanied her outside.

“You will take care, will you not?” Abigail asked, still concerned as she glanced over at her friend. “You will write to me if there is anything I can do? Anything at all.”

“You have already done so much for me, my friend.” Emma clasped Abigail’s hands fondly.

Abigail raised her eyebrows, waiting for an answer.

Emma chuckled. “But yes, I will.”

Satisfied, Abigail took her leave.

Emma waved her off. She was making her way through the hall and toward the drawing room when she heard hushed voices from upstairs.

Stepping back, under the shadow of the stairs, she watched as Ruth and James quickly descended and paused before the front door.

Their voices were so low that Emma could not make out what they were saying. Her mind was blank. What was Ruth doing

here? Hadn't she already left? And why was she speaking with James like this?

The pair seemed to agree on something, and then Ruth hurried outside. James motioned for his carriage to be brought around. Then, a moment later, Ruth was off, carried away not in her own carriage—the one in which she had come and had, presumably, left earlier—but in one of the carriages from Mulberry Manor.

Emma was even more perplexed when an agitated-looking James stepped outside himself and started off in the opposite direction. She knew that no one set off that way unless they were prepared for a long, leisurely walk. James, it would seem, would be gone for some time.

A little hurt, Emma racked her brain for a reason as to why James and Ruth might be keeping something from her. Were they worried about her? Planning something she would object to?

But, with a sigh, she reminded herself that she had no right to be angry with them—hadn't she, too, kept secrets from them regarding the Duke?

Emma hesitated in the doorway, wondering if she should go after her brother when a rider appeared at the edge of the estate.

*Mulberry Manor is very busy today.*

With the butler nowhere to be seen, Emma decided she needed some fresh air. Stepping out, she waited for the rider to arrive. Soon, he dismounted and, spotting her, crossed to stand before her.

“Good afternoon, Madam,” he said. “I am under strict instructions to deliver this letter here.”

Emma nodded, curious at his manner of speech. She reached out her hand. “Thank you. You may consider your duty fulfilled.”

But as her fingers brushed the proffered letter, the man withdrew it. He glanced around hesitantly. “I am afraid I am under strict instructions regarding whom I must deliver this letter to.”

“Oh?” Emma was perplexed.

“I am to give this to the maid of Lady Emma Brown.”

“Indeed? Miss Margaret will be glad to know she has a letter.”

“It is not for the maid, Madam. But for her mistress.”

“For Lady Emma?” Emma asked, feeling more and more mystified by the situation.

“Indeed.”

“Then you may give it to me. I am she.”

“You are Lady Emma Brown?” the rider asked, looking her up and down.

Astounded, Emma raised an affronted eyebrow. “I am. Do you doubt it? Shall I call the butler to attest to that fact?”

“No. I am under strict instructions not to give him the letter. Or the master of this manor.”

Now Emma was even more confused. “Do you fear he is not trustworthy?”

The man glanced around once again, clearly unsettled. “I cannot say either way.” He looked her up and down once more.

He was very odd. Very odd, indeed.

“But I am assured that you are the lady of the house. As I am to ensure that this letter falls into your hands, Lady Emma, I shall give it to you.”

Once more reaching out for the letter, Emma tried to refrain from laughing. This was perhaps one of the strangest encounters she had ever had. One might think the letter contained a message to the King regarding the invasion of France.



She stayed where she was, watching the rider mount his horse. Then, opening the letter, she began to read.

All at once, his behavior made sense.

So, too, did James's secretive behavior. The letter was from Caleb. And he said that it was not the first he had sent over the course of the last several days.

Letters that Emma had not received.

She shook her head angrily. She would have words with her brother later, that much was certain. But she continued to read. It was not until she reached the end that one line in particular caught her attention. She read it once. Then again.

*I owe you more than an apology. I owe you an explanation.*

Emma glanced up, thinking. An explanation for why his uncle had done what he had done? Or for something else?

She sighed and folded the letter. Caleb had gone through great efforts to get this delivered into her hands. And it was clear that he would not stop until he finally had the chance to meet with her, face to face.

James had disappeared, but she knew he would return sooner or later. And then, she and her brother would talk.

And all of this, Emma decided—the secrecy and the lies and the hurt—must come to an end. One way or another.

## CHAPTER 20



“Someone is here to see you, Your Grace.”

Caleb glanced up. “Thank you. I shall meet them in the drawing room.”

The butler bowed and exited the study.

Caleb seemed to spend a lot of time here these days. His butler had come straight here when looking for him. Caleb realized he was growing predictable.

Leaving his work, he rose and made his way to the drawing room. He was not prepared, however, for who he saw there.

He stopped dead in his tracks. “Lady Emma.”

A vision in a delicate dress that almost perfectly matched her eyes, Emma stood before him. When her gaze met his, he noted that she still looked a little pale. Still recovering, no doubt, from what his uncle had put her through.

Guilt niggled at him as he offered her a nod. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the silence filling with their shared memories of the last time they had met.

Finally, Caleb cleared his throat. "I see you received my letter."

"Yes. Your messenger should be paid handsomely for his dedication to the task. He was so protective of the letter that he almost refused to give it to its intended recipient."

Caleb watched as a hint of amusement tugged at her lips. She was teasing him. But it was not true mirth. Her eyes were still sad.

"I had to be certain you would receive it," he explained.

"Which I did. Much to my brother's chagrin."

Caleb nodded. His suspicions were confirmed. James had been intercepting his letters to Emma.

"He wishes me to tell you," Emma continued, "that he is outside, waiting in the carriage for me."

"A veiled threat. He trusts me so little, then?"

Emma's gaze dropped to the floor.

Caleb understood at once. He clenched his jaw. “I cannot blame him. I have caused you both great harm.”

This Emma did not refute. But when she raised her eyes to his, Caleb almost convinced himself that he caught a glimmer of hope in them. Hope which fueled his own.

“Why are you so eager to speak with me?”

He glanced out the door, thinking. “May I show you something?” he asked.

Hesitantly, Emma nodded.

Caleb led her out of the room and up the stairs to the second floor. At the top of the stairs, on the far wall, was a large portrait. He stopped before it, watching as Emma took it in.

“These are your parents,” she breathed after a moment.

Caleb nodded.

“The people that your uncle paid to have killed.”

With a sigh, he nodded again.

“Your mother was beautiful.” Her voice was sad. Was that sorrow for him?

Caleb observed the painting. “When they died, I was lost for a while. I had nothing and no one. The world I thought was safe and loving was stripped away from me. And I was desperate for something, someone to cling to.”

The sadness in Emma’s eyes deepened. “Your uncle,” she guessed.

“Yes. He took me in, gave me a purpose. We shared our lust for vengeance like the Gibson blood that runs through our veins.” Caleb shook his head, realizing just how blind he had been. “My uncle was using me. Stoking the anger within me until nothing was more important to me than seeking justice for my parents. And in doing so, in giving up everything else, I began to believe certain things about myself and my life.”

He turned, pacing away as he struggled to find the right words. “I thought I was doing the right thing by hiding myself away from Society, by focusing on the business that funded my revenge, and by not allowing myself to open up to anyone, lest they use me or distract me from my purpose.”

Slowly, he turned to meet Emma’s gaze once more. He was a little farther away from her now, on the other side of the landing. From where he stood, he was struck by the sudden thought that she seemed at home there. As if the manor were somehow designed specifically for her.

*How perfect she would have been as the Duchess, had I not pushed her away.*

Still, he forced himself to continue. He clung to a hope that he had no right to keep. “When I introduced myself to your brother, it was only for the purpose of getting close to your father, whom I thought responsible for my parents’ deaths. That was one of the reasons I agreed to look after you while he was gone.”

Emma hung her head, and there it was, that pain that he had caused her, painted on her face in bold, clean lines.

He took a step toward her. “That was how it began. But, Lady Emma, you have to understand, that is not how it ended. You changed me.”

Emma took a step back, gazing up at him almost fearfully. “I don’t understand.”

It took everything in Caleb not to run to her and take her into his arms, to fall to his knees and profess everything right then and there.

But he stayed where he was, forcing the words out, as difficult as they were to say. “I told myself that I was pushing you away to keep you safe. That, if you got caught up in my pursuit for revenge, you would get hurt.” He let out a sad laugh. “And you did.”

“That was your uncle’s doing,” Emma murmured, coming to his defense even after everything he had done to her.

His heart swelled with gratitude. “I had feelings for you. Even before that morning at the edge of your estate. But I could not

admit them to myself. Revenge, bloodlust, loneliness—they were all I had ever known. That was my world. And what sort of world was it to offer a woman like you? What sort of life could I hope to give you?”

Risking another step toward her, Caleb’s hope surged as she stayed where she was. “What I felt for you was not a lie. My reason for being there, with you, changed. I—you changed me. You made me want to believe that I could have a life outside of my revenge.”

There were tears in Emma’s eyes. Caleb dared to hope that she could hear the truth in his words. He closed the final distance between them, itching to take her hands in his own.

“Emma,” he breathed, daring to use her name like the closest of friends. Like a lover. “Emma, I love you. This is the truest thing I know. It is all a broken, lonely man like me can offer. But if you can return my love, I promise I shall spend every day of the rest of my life trying to make you happy. Trying to give you the life, and the happiness, you deserve.”

“Anything you ask of me, I shall tell you,” he continued, the words tumbling out of him. “Anything you desire of me, you shall have it. Only...”

Slowly, he got down to one knee before her. “Only agree to be my wife. Marry me, Emma. I love you. Let me care for you, protect you, champion you as your husband, and I will be the happiest man on earth.”

Tears now spilled down Emma’s cheeks. Caleb resisted the urge to stand up and wipe them all away.



She said nothing for a moment as he waited, hardly daring to breathe. Then, still weeping, she took a step back. “I-I don’t —” Her words were cut off as she choked back fresh tears.

Slowly, Caleb regained his feet. Feeling defeated, his heart breaking, he waited for her to tell him that he was a fool to hope that he could win her back after rejecting her so terribly. And she would be right. She would have every right to rant and rail at him. She would be right to turn around and leave.

Emma wiped away a tear, shaking her head. Then, to his astonishment, she let out a little laugh. She raised her eyes to his, irritation and mirth mingling in them. “I do not know what has taken you so long to come to your senses.”

Caleb’s heart skipped a beat. He took a hesitant step toward her. Seeing the glimmer of delight in her gaze, a smile began to spread across his face.

“I am a fool,” he agreed. “I know that.”

Emma took a step to meet him halfway. “I am glad you finally admit it.”

“I was a fool to pretend you meant nothing to me, Emma,” he murmured, reaching out to place a hand on her cheek. With his thumb, he brushed a tear away.

Emma closed her eyes, savoring the touch.

He drew closer. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she breathed, the words tickling his lips just before she stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

Caleb drew her into his arms as he kissed her back. He held her tightly as if he intended to never let her go. She melted against him, relaxing into his embrace.

After a moment, he moved his hand from her cheek, gently using it to cup the back of her head in his palm. She was delicate and precious, but he knew, too, that she was stronger than most people he had ever met.

And she was his. By some miracle, she loved him. And he loved her.

Their kiss was beginning to grow more fervent when a shout—and a curse—from downstairs broke them apart.



Emma was still gently weeping as she kissed Caleb. But these tears were of joy. Pure joy.

Then she heard her brother’s shout. She pulled away from Caleb in time to see James storming up the stairs toward them.

Realizing how bad it must look to her brother, she opened her mouth to protest, but Caleb quickly pushed her behind him, protectively placing himself between her and her brother.

“You lousy, ungrateful—” James roared, raising a closed fist as he sprinted up the final steps.

Emma waited for Caleb to protest. But he did not. She stared up at him, wide-eyed, until it was almost too late. Finally, unable to stop herself, she stepped from behind him and held up her hands.

“It is not what it looks like, James,” she reassured her brother.

“Is it?” James thundered, moving to step around her.

Emma grabbed his hands, trying to pull him back to her. He stilled for a moment, still glaring daggers at Caleb.

“We are getting married,” she announced, beaming with delight.

James’s eyes went wide. He looked at her. “Wha—married?” He glanced from her to Caleb, then back again. “I don’t understand.”

Emma giggled and cast a glance back at Caleb. “We understand one another now,” she said simply.

Caleb nodded, the love in his eyes making her giddy.

“B-but I—He—” James sputtered, still struggling to understand.

“It is all right,” Emma said gently, turning back to him. “I love him. And he loves me.”

It was all too much for James. He crossed to sit down in a nearby chair. Emma and Caleb exchanged apprehensive looks. She moved to stand beside him, waiting for her brother to gather his wits.

But it was Caleb who spoke next. “James, I owe you an apology.” James slowly raised his head as Caleb continued. “I befriended you for the sole purpose of using you to exact revenge on your father. I thought he was responsible for the deaths of my parents.”

His brow furrowing in confusion, James eyed Caleb suspiciously.

Caleb let out a short, rueful laugh. “I had no one I really counted as a friend before you. And then, after I decided that I would use you for my own aims, I realized what an honorable man you truly are.”

Emma reached out to take his hand in hers.

“You became a true friend to me, James, the more we got to know one another,” Caleb said, offering her a gentle smile. When he turned back to James, the man no longer bore an expression of distrust. “I count you as my one and only true friend. And I ask your forgiveness for forming our friendship on such a lie. I hope I can regain your trust and, eventually, your good opinion.”

Caleb held out a hand to James.

For a moment, Emma thought that James was going to try and punch him again. Then, slowly, he stood up and took his hand.

“I counted you as a friend, too.” James sighed. “And if my sister is willing to give you a second chance, then so am I.”

“Thank you.”

Emma looked between the two most important men in her life and thought her heart might burst with joy. Then, unable to resist teasing her brother a little, she looped her arm through Caleb’s.

“Now you do not have to worry about intercepting Caleb’s letters. Or about shooing him away from the manor in order to keep him away from me.” She laughed. “Though I am impressed that you even managed to enlist Ruth in your secret endeavors.”

Frowning, James glanced between the two. “Ruth?”

Emma nodded. “I saw you two outside the manor yesterday, conversing in hushed tones.” She frowned. “When you sent her off in your carriage, she looked angry. Was she upset that you were asking her to lie to me?” She tutted reprovingly. “You should not have asked such a thing of her.”

When James fumbled for the right words, Emma's frown deepened. She had expected him to admit defeat and come clean about his endeavors. But now he stayed silent, scratching the back of his neck guiltily.

Then, he glanced up at Caleb, and Emma watched as the two men exchanged knowing looks.

“What is going on?” she asked, growing even more suspicious.

Caleb chuckled and shook his head. “I am sure your brother will tell you when he is good and ready.”

Emma opened her mouth to protest, but Caleb took her hand in his and gently squeezed it. “Come, let us take tea and talk about other things. I think we have all had enough surprises for one day.”

Though she did not understand, Emma waited as Caleb gestured for James to lead them down the stairs. But a few steps down, she drew Caleb to a halt. He paused, stopping two or three steps below her, putting them at equal height.

Emma relished the joy in those dark brown eyes. She had a feeling she was going to see a lot more of it in the coming days. More than she ever had before.

Smiling, she eyed him with mock suspicion. “Back then, when James saw us together, you were just going to let him hit you, weren't you?”

Caleb chuckled. "I was."

"Why?" she asked, amazed.

The wicked grin that spread across his face made heat flood her cheeks.

"I could see how bad it looked from his perspective. It might have done him some good to feel he had punished me for hurting you. I was willing to take the hit."

Emma shook her head. "All for a kiss?"

"Absolutely." Still grinning, Caleb brought his lips to her ear.  
"It was worth it."

## EPILOGUE



“**Y**ou look beautiful.” There were tears in Abigail’s eyes as she looked Emma up and down.

Beside her, Ruth nodded and opened her mouth, but she was so overcome that she could hardly speak. Instead, she pulled Emma into a tight embrace.

Alone with the two friends she treasured most in the world, Emma prepared to make the greatest, most important commitment of her life. And there was no one else she wanted to be here—to witness it—than Abigail and Ruth.

“Are you ready?” Abigail asked gently.

A little emotional herself, Emma nodded.

As her friends bid her goodbye and stepped into the chapel to take their seats, a tall, older man descended the steps of the church and crossed to her.

“An important day,” her father said, then cleared his throat.



“It is.”

Emma did not know what to say. She still did not know how her father felt about her impending wedding. When she and James had informed him of her engagement, he had simply nodded and requested that she not make it a gregarious sort of event.

Now, standing outside the chapel on her wedding day, Emma wished she could tell her father how much she missed her mother. She wished they could shed a tear over her or a laugh over what she might have said about the whole affair.

As she attempted to form the words, Rupert moved closer and took her hand in his. He squeezed it gently. Then, looping her arm through his, he nodded. When she met his gaze, she saw tears shimmering in his eyes.

“Shall we?” he asked gently.

Emma nodded.

Then, together, father and daughter climbed up the steps of the chapel.

Rupert carefully guided Emma past the rows of familiar, friendly faces, but she could not have named a single soul that was there. She hardly noticed them. All her attention was on the man who waited for her at the end of the aisle.

Caleb stood tall and proud, watching her with adoration in his eyes as she made her way to him.

As Rupert came to a halt before the Duke, he looked between him and his daughter. He brought their hands together in customary blessing but did not immediately leave.

“Take care of my daughter,” he said quietly, holding Caleb’s eyes. Then, to Emma’s further astonishment, he turned and pulled her into a tight embrace.

A tear rolled down his cheek as they parted. Then, clearing his throat, he took his seat at the front pew.

Moved beyond words, Emma clung to Caleb, his hand an anchor amidst the overwhelming tide of emotion. When she gazed up at him, she could see that he was as moved as she was.

The ceremony was short and simple, just as Emma and Caleb had wanted it. When they said their vows, she saw no hint of hesitation in his eyes, nor could she feel any tinge of worry in her heart.

She had not thought it possible to love someone as much as she did. But here he was, her *husband*, and she loved him with everything she had in her.

As soon as the ceremony ended, the bride and groom were whisked away to the wedding banquet. There, much to Emma’s disappointment, they found themselves separated by the throngs of well-wishers.

Caleb was abducted by an earl that Emma vaguely recognized, and she herself was whisked off to greet their guests.

There was Lady Lucy and her father, eager to congratulate her. Abigail's family was there too, with Abigail's mother quick to claim that it was she who had had a hand in the union, having seated Emma and Caleb together at her dinner all those months ago.

Then, to Emma's surprise, James and Ruth moved to greet her next, together. After saying their congratulations, James cast a quick glance at Ruth beside him. "I have not been entirely honest with you, Sister," he admitted.

"We did not want to keep it from you," Ruth hurried to add. "But I did not want to trouble you when you were already so burdened. Nor to share my happiness when you were at your lowest. I-I did not know what you might think."

Growing all the more concerned, Emma glanced between the two of them. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"When you saw Lady Ruth and I together that day..." James paused, chuckling ruefully. "It seems like an age ago now. When you saw us, you were right in thinking that she was upset. She was. I had been behaving like a fool, and we were arguing. It was a lovers' quarrel."

Emma was at a loss for words. She turned to Ruth, frantically putting the pieces together.

“Do not be angry with me, Emma,” Ruth begged. “I was going to tell you. But then you and the Duke got engaged, and there were the wedding preparations... I did not want to overshadow your big day. But—” She glanced over at James, wonder in her eyes. “But your brother has asked me to marry him. And we wanted you to be the first to know.”

Emma’s hands flew to her mouth. “When did this happen?”

“I always knew that Lady Ruth was fond of me,” James explained. “But I dismissed her as young and immature. But that day when you were so distraught, and I pressed you so unkindly to tell us what had happened between you and the Duke, she stood up for you.”

Love was plain in his eyes as he gazed at the woman next to him. “Her fervor took me by surprise.” He chuckled. “She protected you like a mother hen might protect her chicks. Later, when I went to apologize to her, we ...” he trailed off.

There was no need to say more.

Emma watched them in astonishment.

“Please say something.” Ruth took Emma’s hands in hers. “Do not be angry with us.”

Still in shock, all Emma could do was laugh. Pure delight spilled out of her as she pulled Ruth into an embrace. Then she turned to her brother. “How can I be upset when two of the people I love most in this world are to be married?”

Ruth squealed in glee as James kissed Emma on the cheek. He took her hands in his. "Thank you," he murmured. Then, glancing over his shoulder, Emma followed his gaze to where Caleb stood, speaking with their father. "No man will ever be good enough to deserve you, Emma," James mused. "But Caleb has certainly come close. And I have his word that he will spend the rest of his days striving to deserve you."

Thrilled at James's approval of her new husband, Emma nodded. "I am glad that you two have begun to make up."

James chuckled. "Indeed. I could never remain angry with the man. Even at college." He turned to Ruth. "Come, we have taken up enough of Emma's time. We must let the others have a chance to congratulate her."

Emma bid them goodbye, promising to find them later. She continued to greet guests until, just as she was beginning to grow weary, she felt a hand on her arm.

Turning, she found herself looking up at her husband.

"I beg your pardon," Caleb told the gentleman who stood before her, "but I am afraid I must steal my wife away for a moment."

Heart fluttering with joy to hear him refer to her as his wife, Emma gave the guest a nod and then allowed Caleb to lead her away. He guided her through the hall and outside.

Emma took a deep breath. The noise of the celebration faded away, and she could finally hear her thoughts once more.

“I thought you and I had earned a little respite,” Caleb murmured, turning to her, his arms encircling her waist.

Emma grinned, remembering how unhappy he had looked when she had seen him at the first ball of the Season. How long ago that felt now. And how much she had learned about him since then.

What had first looked like pride and a disregard for others had simply been Caleb’s discomfort, Emma now knew. He was a private man, and he enjoyed spending time with a select few.

Today’s events were certainly not his preferred activities.

She smiled up at him proudly. “You have done very well. I know you do not like such gatherings.”

Caleb chuckled. “I am learning to like them. You have brought me out of my shell.”

Emma smiled, leaning back to regard him carefully. Her brow furrowed ever so slightly. “And how do you feel, Your Grace?” she asked. “Now that you are no longer a bachelor?”

Caleb gazed down into the eyes of the woman he loved. He thought long and hard about what she was asking him. His arms still around her, he shifted, bringing her to stand before him as they both gazed out at the horizon.

“I never thought I would see myself here,” he admitted. “I assumed I would remain a bachelor always.”

“But now that you are married?” Emma pressed, turning back to face him. There was a slight glimmer of apprehension in her eyes.

Cupping her cheek in his hand, Caleb drew closer, drinking in every inch of her face. “I am happier than I ever imagined I could be.”

Emma smiled, satisfied.

“And you, Duchess?” he asked, fighting a grin. “How do you feel?”

A kiss was his answer.

Caleb savored it, the world fading away, knowing that this was only the beginning. She was his, and he was undoubtedly, wholeheartedly hers.

When she pulled away, Caleb brushed a stray strand of hair from her face. “There is one thing that could make this day better,” he mused.

“Oh?”

He grinned. He seemed to be doing an awful lot of that these days. It was as if Emma had knocked down every wall around his heart, releasing him from the coldness of his past, and inviting him into a world of warmth and affection and love he had never known.

“I do not believe you have ever addressed me informally,” he said.

Emma frowned. “What do you mean?”

Leaning closer, Caleb ran a thumb over her cheek, down to the seam of her perfect lips. “Emma,” he murmured, every defense melting as he gazed into her loving eyes, “when will you call me by my name?”

A gentle blush colored her cheeks. “It feels so strange,” she admitted with a shy smile.

Caleb smiled in return. “Try it.”

“Very well, Caleb.”

Closing his eyes, he savored the sound of his name on her lips. “I hope you will never call me anything else,” he murmured.

“Well, I expect you to call me *Your Grace* from here on out.”

Caleb’s eyes shot open. Emma was making a playful show of moving to survey her new estate, gazing around haughtily.

“I think I shall like the title,” she informed him, the grin on her lips giving her away.



Chuckling, Caleb moved to snatch her back, and she giggled as he pulled her close once more. “Indeed?” he asked.

“But I suppose I shall allow you to speak to me informally,” she teased. “There is a certain loveliness to hearing you speak my name.” She grinned wickedly as she lowered her voice. “Caleb.”

He groaned playfully. “Must we go back?” he asked her. “We could slip away now, and none would be the wiser.”

Still smiling, Emma shook her head. “I am afraid they will notice. We do seem to be the guests of honor.”

Caleb sighed. “You make a fair point.”

“But it will not be much longer before we are home, husband,” she added.

Reaching up, she placed her delicate hand on his cheek, her eyes roaming over his face as if she, too, wished to take in every feature and store it in her memory.

“Home.” Caleb closed his eyes, enjoying her touch. “I do not think that word has meant anything to me until today.” When he opened his eyes again, tears were shimmering in his wife’s eyes. “You are my home,” he added gently. “From this day forward, you will always be.”

Emma nodded. She did not need to say anything. He could see that she felt the same way.

Wordlessly, he leaned down to kiss her again.

A cheer went up from inside, but Caleb paid it no mind. He was content to hold his wife in his arms, and he knew he would always be.

He would love this woman until the day he died. He would love her for who she was and who she had helped him become. They would make a new life together. One where they would both have the love they desired.

When they broke apart, Caleb pressed the gentlest of kisses to her forehead. "Come, darling," he murmured.

And, taking her hand, he led her back inside.

*The End?*

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## EXTENDED EPILOGUE



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# PREVIEW: HIS BROKEN DUCHESS



Can't stop reading? Turn to the next page to read the first chapters of "*His Broken Duchess*". One of my best novels so far!



## CHAPTER ONE



*S*ophia swayed her arms around, desperate to find an opening. She was sinking deeper into the water, barely keeping her head afloat. Her legs kicked into action as she tried to propel herself forward, but something was pulling her down. The water was too dark, and her creamy white skin was covered in goosebumps.

*“Someone... help...me...”* she managed to gasp, the words barely managing to leave her throat. Her head was under water now, and all her kicking was in vain.

*Sophia knew that she was going into the darkness...*

*And then, as though dawn had just broken after a long night of darkness, a hand grabbed her before she could sink to the bottom. She was being pulled out of the water by a pair of strong hands. They were warm against her own skin which had turned icy cold.*

*“You are safe now,”* the voice said to her, pulling her to the shore. She squinted her eyes at the figure, trying helplessly to make out who it was, but only the silhouette was visible to her. She reached out, trying to grasp the shape, but it began to slip away from reach... further and further...

Sophia White sat up in her bed, gasping for air as she clutched her pillow in hopes for something to ground her back to into reality. Beads of sweat had formed on her forehead, and her heart was beating frantically against her chest.

It took her a few moments to calm herself down. Outside her window, the morning sun was already beginning to peak in.

The darkness of night had subsided and so had all the horrors that it brought along with it.

“It was only a dream,” she reminded herself as she slowly hoisted herself out of bed. Her hands were still shaking in the aftermath of her nightmare.

At three and twenty years of age, Sophia White was no stranger to bad dreams. They were a regular visitor in her sleep — so much so that she found herself anticipating their arrival every time she drifted off to sleep each night. They were recurring, always featuring her drowning in water. Sometimes she made it out alive, other times she was not as lucky.

But despite their recurrence, they never failed to leave their impact on Sophia, and she’d be left in a frantic state each time. With shaking hands, Sophia went to open the curtains on her window and soak up the sunlight pouring in through it.

“Sunshine and a meal prepared out of love,” her mother used to always tell her when she was a child. “They have the power to solve almost any problem.”

The warmth of the sunlight served as a feeble but available replacement for the warmth that Sophia sought whenever she woke up from a bad dream, still in a vulnerable state. She let herself bathe in it for a few more moments and then went to sit at her desk.

Sophia began to scribble away inside a small black notebook that looked as though it had seen better days with its torn edges and crumbled papers. She wrote freely about what she had dreamt about, letting it all out.

It was a practice that she had started doing years ago. That little black notebook held all her worst nightmares. In her mind, she thought that if she recorded them on paper, they would not weigh so heavy on her mind.

So far, it had not worked like that, but it did not stop her from recording them anyway, for she needed an outlet for the torture she was subjected to each time she fell asleep.

“There,” she sighed, writing down the last of what she remembered from her latest nightmare. It was not meant for anyone else to read as its pages recorded her at her most vulnerable.

She dashed the notebook away in a drawer underneath her desk and let herself bask in the sunlight for a few more moments.

She had gotten the sunlight. Now all she needed was a meal prepared from love...

“There she comes,” a cheerful voice belonging to a stout lady with blonde hair, kind eyes, and bright smile said out loud. It belonged to Rose White, the Dowager Viscountess of Sawdon and Sophia’s aunt. “I was beginning to worry you would not show up this morning.”

Sophia shook her head, smiling politely as she took her place at the breakfast table.

“You know that I never miss breakfast, dear aunt,” Sophia replied.

“On regular days, that is indeed the case,” Rose noted. “However, today is not a normal day, is it?”

“Is it not?” Sophia raised one of her eyebrow in curiosity as she racked her brain for what her aunt could be referring to. “I am not sure if I follow.”

“My dear, how could you forget?” Aunt Rose clutched her proverbial pearl necklace, feigning offense. “Do you not know what time of the year it is?”

Sophia scrunched up her eyebrows, now straining really hard to remember, and then it occurred to her. Her shoulders slumped, and she sunk back further into the seat.

“Right, of course,” Sophia muttered in a dull voice. “It is the start of London Season.”

“Precisely!” Aunt Rose clapped her hands in delight. “And my dear niece is going to be in attendance for the first time in years.”



“Exciting prospect.” She attempted to feign excitement, but it only came out as dry.

Sophia kept her head down, focusing on her plate instead of opting to look up at her aunt directly. It was safe to say that she did not share the former’s enthusiasm about the Season.

“Have you decided on your dress?” Aunt Rose continued, oblivious to her niece’s blatant disinterest.

Sophia shook her head.

“Sophia!” Aunt Rose reprimanded. “I arranged for Clara to show you the dresses much earlier in the week. At this point, you should have already chosen one for yourself and even tried it on.”

“My apologies, Aunt Rose,” she muttered sheepishly. “I suppose it must have slipped my mind.”

The truth was, it had not slipped her mind. In fact, the rows of dresses that sat neatly at the corner of her dressing room taunted her each time she had made her way in there. To Sophia, balls represented everything that she hoped to avoid — the hordes of people, the implicit judgements that marked every interaction, and the weight of expectations on one’s shoulders to walk out with the most well-suited partner.

“My dear, you are at an age where you must not let these things slip your mind,” Aunt Rose emphasised, “However, I know you better in this world than anyone else and therefore had already anticipated that you would not choose the dress yourself. But not to worry, I already took the liberty of choosing one for you.”

“Is that so?” Sophia’s curiosity was piqued ever so slightly.

“Yes, and I am certain that you will love it just as much as I do,” her aunt reassured. “It belonged to your mother. In fact, it was one of her favorite dresses.”

Sophia stiffened immediately at the mention of her late mother. Aunt Rose noticed the apparent change in her demeanor and touched her hand gently.

“If she were here today, she would have loved to see you in it as you attend your first ball in years,” she noted. “You may think of it as your debut.”

“Can you show me the dress?” Sophia’s voice came out hoarse, as though she had just finished crying. She could not help herself; every time she spoke of her family, she got choked up like this.

“But do you not want to finish your breakfast?”

Sophia shook her head, pushing the plate away from her.

“I have lost my appetite.”

“Very well, then.” Her aunt got up from her place at the table and gestured to Sophia to follow her. The two arrived in Sophia’s dressing room, where an emerald green dress hung in the corner.

“There it is,” her aunt said, nudging her encouragingly.

“I have never seen it before.” Sophia caressed the silky fabric which gilded under her delicate hands effortlessly. “It is beautiful.”

“It was one that your father gave her in the early years of their marriage. He had gotten it made from Paris, especially for her. I remember your mother thought of this dress as one of her most beloved possessions.” Her aunt had a wistful edge to her voice as she recalled the memories.

Sophia tried to imagine what her mother must have looked like in that dress. Despite not having seen her for many years, her mother’s image was sharp in her brain, as though they had seen each other just this morning. Her heart felt heavy, and she exhaled a sigh.

“I am sure that if she was here, she would have wanted to pass it down to her daughter.” Her aunts’ comforting hand landed on her shoulder once again.

“We do not know that,” Sophia’s words came out more jaded than she had intended them to sound. “When the accident took her life, and my father’s and my sister’s... all their thoughts

died with them. We may never know what they truly would have wanted. All we do is ponder and make assumptions.”

It had been eleven years since the accident that turned Sophia’s entire world upside down. Many of those that were around her had told her that it gets easier with time since you learn to accept what happened, but for Sophia, she only grew more jaded as the years passed by. It was unfortunate for someone as young as herself. At her age, she should have been concerning herself with girlish passions and the naivety that comes with youth, but Sophia was filled with cynicism and had bleak prospects for her own future.

“My dear, how many times have I told you to improve your outlook on life?” Her aunt’s tone was soft. “It does you no good to have such a bleak perspective on things.”

Sophia could hear the love in her aunt’s voice. She was the closest thing to a parent that Sophia had left, and the bond that both ladies shared was unlike any other.

“I suppose I don’t know what else to think,” Sophia replied, pursing her lips. “It is difficult to find a silver lining for my grief.”

A small silence hung between the two of them. Sophia could see that her words had impacted her aunt greatly and guilt began to seep in. After all, while Sophia had lost her mother, her aunt had lost her sister.

“I am so sorry, Aunt Rose,” she said, squeezing her aunt’s hand gently. “I will try and fix my mood.”

“I believe that attending the ball tonight will be beneficial for you in many ways,” Aunt Rose suggested. “You must seek new connections as it not right for a young lady like yourself to be shut away at home all day.”

“I do not need any new connections. I already have you and Cecil to keep me company.” She smiled, looking down at her feet where an orange cat was busy purring to grab her attention. She knelt down and began to pet him.

“My dear, I meant connections that lead to companionship,” her aunt emphasized. “I am hopeful that tonight you shall meet

the man who will become your husband.”

Sophia felt a pang of nervousness at her aunt’s words. She had never had a romantic relationship in her entire life, unlike the other girls her age. Sometimes she felt as though she missed out on some important experience, but other times, she felt content with being alone.

“And when you meet him,” her aunt continued, “you will realise that it is one of the most important connections one can have in life. In fact, it is the most important one. Your return to society shall be glorious, and I am sure you will capture many hearts tonight.”

Sophia shrugged her shoulders, focusing her attention instead on the purring cat before her. She knew that the ball was important for her aunt, and therefore, she would not dare strike an objection regarding her attendance at it.

“I shall return to the breakfast table now,” her aunt announced, turning to her heel, “but you may feel free to make yourself comfortable and make any preparations as you wish. It is never too early to start dressing up.”

When her aunt left the room, Sophia finally stood up and went to take the dress off from its hanger. She placed it in front of herself and examined herself in the vanity mirror in front of her.

“What do we think, Cecil?” she asked her feline friend, who was busy grooming his own fur. “Do you think Aunt Rose is right? Will I be capturing any hearts tonight?”

Cecil answered in a dull meow before going back to grooming his fur. Sophia stepped closer to the mirror, turning her face to the side to expose a large scar that extended from the bottom of her earlobe down to the side of her jaw. She traced a finger alongside it, exhaling a deep sigh.

“Will they accept me for who I am?” she muttered to herself, a hint of sadness coloring her voice. “For all my scars? Or will they want a pretty little lady with a perfect little life?”

Just then, a loud knock on her brought her back to reality.

“Come on in,” Sophia called out.

The door swung open to reveal Clara, Sophia's lady's maid, walking in with a tray of food.

"Good morning, My Lady. Your aunt asked me to bring your breakfast up here and assist you with preparations for the ball." The middle-aged woman smiled brightly, putting down the tray on one of the tables behind Sophia.

"I am not hungry." Sophia shrugged, letting down her hair to the side to conceal her scar once again.

"Then, shall we begin preparations for the ball?" Clara asked. "I know that tonight a big occasion for you."

"It is more a big occasion for Aunt Rose than it is for me," Sophia replied earnestly, putting the dress back onto the rack. "You know how I am. Balls have never interested me so much."

"Oh, but My Lady, they are such jovial occasions!" Clara's eyes glimmered with excitement. "You must remember your first ball."

Sophia's pressed her lips together in a tight line. Clara had brought up an unwanted memory.

"I wish to forget it all together," she sighed, taking a seat down on the sofa.

On the insistence of her aunt, Sophia had made her debut at the age of nineteen at one of the grandest balls of that season. She had always been told of the importance of a lady's first ball as it marked her transition from a girl to a woman. She had not been keen on going, but she did not have the heart to decline her aunt's request.

Sophia had immediately regretted her decision as soon as she had walked into the ballroom. The attention had made her nervous, and she had exited before the dances had even began.

That was her only experience of going to a ball. Since then, she had refused to attend one, always coming up with new excuses to avoid going. Her aunt had been understanding so far, but this summer, she had insisted that Sophia must attend the London Season as her youth was beginning to slip away.

“My Lady, then perhaps tonight is the opportunity to re-write some of those memories,” Clara suggested optimistically. “I am sure you would look like a vision in the dress your aunt has picked for you.”

“Did you ever see my mother wearing it?” Sophia asked. Clara had worked for their family for many years now. Beside her aunt, she was one person whom Sophia shared a special bond with.

Clara smiled.

“Yes, and I remember how much she would love to wear it. It was only reserved for very special occasions,” Clara replied. “In fact, she loved it so much that I believe that she must have left a piece of her spirit in there. When you wear it tonight, I am sure you will feel her presence in it.”

“I am not sure if tonight is going to be a special occasion.” Sophia frowned, directing her gaze at the dress. It flowed beautifully, and Sophia could only imagine what a vision her mother would have looked in it.

“Why not? It is your glorious return to society. I am sure that is a cause of the highest celebration,” Clara pointed out as encouraging as always.

“It is a cause,” Sophia replied. “Whether or not it is a cause for celebration is up for debate. For my aunt, surely. For me and the rest of the ton, likely not. I am sure no one is dying to witness the return of the... what was it that they called me... the Scarred Woman?”

Clara put a sympathetic hand on Sophia’s shoulders.

“Now, My Lady, do not be like that...” she sighed. “I am sure that you will be greeted warmly.”

“That depends on if they are as awful as I remember them to be,” Sophia replied. “In my experience, people rarely change.”

Clara seemed to be at a loss for words, and Sophia felt bad that she was subjecting her maid to her negative thoughts. Even though her nerves were brewing up a storm inside of her, she tried to fight back against them.

“My Lady...”

“Forget it,” Sophia sighed. “Let us try on this dress then.”

It was time to do away with her pessimism and give tonight a chance.

## CHAPTER TWO



**D**uncan Swinton, the Duke of Blackmoore, arrived at the ball with his mother, Anna. The atmosphere was alive with the sounds of music, dancing, and shared laughter.

“I am so happy that you decided to attend tonight.” The Dowager smiled warmly at her son, who was dressed smartly in a black suit and towered over her with his tall frame. “It is the beginning step of an important journey.”

“An important journey?” the Duke repeated, amused by his mother’s theatrics. “You make it sound as though I have embarked on some ambitious mission by making an appearance tonight.”

Anna gave him a knowing smile.

“My dear, if you are not the one on a mission, then surely many young women in attendance today will be,” she noted. “You do not have to look too hard to notice that you are one of the most sought-after gentleman here tonight.”

Duncan shrugged. That was nothing new to him. As the Duke, he was used to commanding the attention of a room wherever he went. It had lost its charm early on for him as he thought that people were all the same. Even though he was born into upper society, the people that inhabited it bored him greatly.

“That may be the case,” he replied, “but I am afraid it won’t be met with much success. My stance on the matter is clear, and I do not wish to court any woman I meet tonight.”

Anna heaved a deep sigh, shaking her head.



“I know what your feelings are about marriage, but it is time for you to change them,” she argued in a serious tone. “You are well aware that I am only getting older by the day, and it is my wish for you to give me grandchildren. But even more importantly, you must give yourself an heir. It is your duty as the Duke.”

Duncan could not help but scoff at his mother’s naive statement, but he quickly covered it up to appear as though he was stifling a cough, not wanting to offend her.

“Do you really believe that I should be bringing a child into this world?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “After what I endured during my own childhood?”

Their conversation had suddenly taken on a heavy tone. His mother was an expert in the art of diplomacy, and he noticed how she put a pleasant smile on her face as she started to respond to him. As members of the nobility, they had eyes on them wherever they went. It would be unwise to be seen squabbling in public as rumors travelled fast in the city.

“You know that you are not your father,” she replied in a hushed tone, the smile never leaving her face. “It is pointless to say that your child will endure the same as you as you have the control to decide that.”

“His blood runs through me. I am sure he was not keen on traumatizing his eldest son either when he became a father, and yet...”

His mother narrowed her eyes at him, a silent warning for him to not reveal too much as they were in public and ran the risk of someone overhearing, but the Duke did not care much about that. It was not as though his father’s activities during his life had been a secret from the world.

“Since you brought up the subject of fatherhood, shall we recall of the ways in which father dearest proved he was the best one?” The Duke’s tone dripped with sarcasm. “One of the standout ones for me was how he chose to be a cruel and absent parent to me, opting rather to spend his time gambling instead.”

“We know that he had his demons...”

“I would say that is putting it lightly. By the end, he had fully transformed into those demons, and there was no distinguishing where his personality ended and where his demons’ personality started.”

The Duke had a tumultuous relationship with his father and did not recall it fondly by any means. He wished not to speak ill of the dead but felt he would be dishonest if he did not bring up the ways in which his father ruined his childhood.

“My dear, you must find it in your heart to forgive him,” Anna replied. A mother’s heart was softer than anything else in the world, after all. “It is the only way you will be able to find any peace.”

“Mother, do you remember his last days with us? He nearly emptied out the family’s fortunes with his habits. But even then, he wished to go out to the tracks for the horse races, so he could lose some more money, leaving his sons to be orphaned children and widowed wife with nothing of substance...”

The Duke realized that he had taken things too far when he saw his mother’s polite smile fall and be replaced by a wince.

“I know you have your complaints, and I do not blame you.” The Dowager’s voice was barely above a whisper. “But you are not your father. His failure at being a good father should not have any bearing on your future.”

*The apple does not fall far from the tree*, the Duke wanted to say, but he decided to dial it down, not wanting to upset his mother more. After all, he did love her immensely and did not wish to cause her unneeded anguish.

“For tonight, let us agree to disagree,” Duncan suggested, gesturing over to a waiter that was passing by with a tray of drinks. He picked up a glass of bubbly champagne and took a sip, the cold liquid calming him immediately.

“I am still hopeful you will change your mind,” his mother replied.

“I suppose I cannot stop you there,” he shrugged, throwing his metaphorical hat in the argument.

Just then, a shrill voice caught both their attention. They turned around to see a short woman with blonde hair make her way towards them. It was Lady Barbara Trew, daughter of the Marquess of Thornhill — the most persistent and annoying lady in all of London. She did not waste a second of time before trying to force her way into a conversation with the Duke.

The Duke groaned loudly, unable to hold in his obvious displeasure at her arrival. The Dowager nudged him discreetly.

“Please, be polite,” she pleaded with him right before Barbara approached them.

“Your Graces.” Barbara smiled brightly at them as she greeted them. The Duke could not help but note how artificial it seemed since it did not reach her eyes. “It is so lovely running into you here.”

“Of course,” the Dowager replied sweetly. “How has everything been with you?”

“Oh, everything has just been grand,” she replied in her same sickly-sweet voice. “It is so nice to see everyone here again. The Season is truly one of my favourite times of the year.”

She tried to meet the Duke’s gaze as she said the word ‘everyone’, but he was tactical and knew that she would be trying to force a connection with him once again. He had a bored expression on his face and instead chose to focus on his glass, where the bubbles were forming continuously at the bottom and rising to the top.

“I am well aware,” the Dowager replied. “You have always professed your liking for these events.”

“What is not to like about them?” Barbara asked, throwing her head back in a sultry manner. The Duke wondered if she thought that would be an attractive thing to do and amused himself by thinking about how it had nearly the opposite effect on him.

“Besides, it is a great occasion to meet all manner of people...” she continued, pursing her lips. “In fact, tonight, there is one particular person in attendance who has everyone quite curious.”

The Duke gave no reaction, even though he was listening to the conversation. He simply took out another sip of his drink. The Dowager, however, had a more favourable reaction.

“Who are you referring to?” she asked.

Barbara looked around, as though she was about to divulge an important secret.

“Well, I have heard that the Scarred Lady will be attending tonight.” Her voice was hushed, and her tone was horrified.

“The Scarred Lady?” the Dowager inquired. “Why, I have never heard of such a person, but her name makes her sound as though she has stepped out of the pages of a novel.”

Duncan found his interest piquing ever so slightly. He was so bored of interacting with the same kind of people at every ball that he would welcome an interaction with this lady whose reputation seemed to precede her.

“You do not know?” Barbara turned to face the Dowager. “Your Grace, her story is famous. In fact, it is not unlike a fable. Sometimes older women tell it to their children if they give their mothers grief before sleeping.”

“I am afraid that I do not keep up with the stories as well as I used to,” the Dowager replied.

“No need to worry.” The artificial smile returned to Barbara’s face once again. “I am here and will tell you everything you need to know.”

She looked around once again and then dropped her voice down to a whisper.

“Many years ago, a carriage, carrying six members of the same family, was traveling home after a sojourn to another town. Of course, it was the summer, but the weather had taken a turn for the worst...”

The Dowager was fully engaged in the story by this point, and even the Duke was listening in.

“No one really knows the details of what happened, but people say that as they were about to cross the river, the driver lost control of the carriage. It went crashing down the side of the bridge. The mother, father, sibling, and other members of the staff drowned straight away as it was too late in the night for help to arrive in time.”

The Dowager let out an audible gasp, bringing one of her hands to clasp her mouth that had hung open in shock.

“That is terrible.”

“Indeed,” Barbara noted. “She was the only one that survived the incident but not without incurring ugly scars on her face.”

“I feel for her. That sounds like an awful burden to have to live through.”

“You should not,” Barbara replied, much to their shock. “There have been whispers that it was her fault that the family died in the first place as such accidents are not commonplace that time of the year. She may even be cursed...”

“Enough!” The Duke stepped in, unable to be a quiet bystander any longer. “It is not dignified for anyone to speak about someone who endured such an awful tragedy that way.”

“Your Grace, you know I am only repeating what the others are already saying...”

“Even then,” he said firmly, “you should not be gossiping over such topics.”

Duncan realized that his tone had come out harsher than he had intended in the heat of the moment. Barbara’s cheeks flooded with color, and she looked down to her feet.

“Well... I was just saying...” she muttered, embarrassed. “Oh, I believe I am being summoned. I shall take my leave.”

Barbara scuttled out of there quickly, and Duncan was relieved to be left alone with his mother again.

“The gall of some people...” he muttered, not bothering to hide his disappointment.

“Careful, my dear. She is still the daughter of the Marquess. He was there for our family in times of need.”

“You mean just father,” the Duke replied. “He borrowed money from the Marquess, only to gamble it away. I had to pay off his debts.”

“Oh, stop now.” His mother held him gently by the arm and began to lead him out to the crowd of people. “It is time to start off on the right foot. There are many lovely, young ladies I would like to introduce you to.”

“Of course.”

“Lady Greenwald,” Anna smiled as she greeted an older woman. “Lovely to see you here. That must be your daughter?”

Lady Greenwald nodded. “Why, yes. I would like to introduce you to Lady Elena. Today is her debut, and she is very excited to meet everyone.”

The Duke could feel two inquisitive new pairs of eyes on him. He knew that he was expected to make a polite intervention at this point, perhaps ask the young lady for a dance.

But when he looked at her, he could not help but notice how much younger she appeared to be. The Duke thought she must be about nineteen which was the usual age for a young woman’s debut.

“Good to meet you, My Lady,” he replied in a lackluster manner. Faking his emotions was one thing that the Duke had never learned how to do.

“You know, the young people these days, they have so much to discuss,” Lady Greenwald said. “I am sure these two could find a lot in common with each other.”

“Of course, I think so too,” the Dowager agreed.

“For instance, my Elena is an enthusiastic embroider. She has recently learned many new patterns.”

The Duke found himself tuning out of the conversation. Even if he was looking for a potential lady this evening, he was sure that someone with hobbies as bland as embroidery would never make the cut.

The Dowager noticed the abject lack of interest on her son's part and quickly made an excuse for them to exit the conversation.

"Thank you, mother," the Duke chuckled as they moved away from them. "You are ever so perceptive."

"It is only so we do not waste any time," the Dowager replied, her eagle eyes scanning the room for any familiar faces. "I want you find someone you have an actual interest in."

"I do not think you will have much success in a venue such as this."

"There is Lady Lancelot. I know she had a daughter of marriageable age as well. Come, let me introduce you to her."

"Only just this once, mother," the Duke reminded her. "I do not wish to be held up here for too long."

Yet again, the cycle repeated where he was subject to a round of bland introductions. His initial idea about all people in high society had yet to be challenged as all the women he was being introduced to appeared to be the same person, just in slightly different costumes.

By the time his mother had introduced him to the fifth lady that night, he knew that he could not do this anymore without effectively losing his mind.

"I am sorry, mother, but I need a break," he told her. "I admire your commitment to finding me the woman of my dreams, but I must step out to catch a breath of fresh air."

"Fine," the Dowager replied, "but I hope to see you back here soon."

The Duke did not have the heart to tell her that any efforts on her part were futile. He had no intention of marrying, and it would take some sort of a force majeure for him to even consider changing his mind.

He escaped the noise of the ballroom by slipping away outside. The fresh air hitting his face was a welcome change from the clustered atmosphere inside.

He decided to take a walk around the garden, wanting to clear his mind. As he reached the end of the garden, he heard some female voices coming from behind the fountain.

His first instinct was to ignore them and go on his way. The last thing he needed to do was speak to more women tonight.

But something inside of him beckoned him to stay. He noticed that the voices sounded a little too aggressive for casual conversation. Quietly, he began walking towards them until he could make out what was being said. Behind the fountain, he could make the silhouettes of three ladies cornering someone.

“I am surprised you even had the gall to show your face here,” one of the women said, acid dripping from her tone.

“Do they even let you step out the house?” another one jeered. “It feels like there should be a law prohibiting your movement.”

“I believe she is selfish,” a third voice said. “She knows that she is risking cursing us all by coming here, and yet she chose to do so anyway.”

“Oh, just look at her,” the first voice pointed out. “Truly a face that only a mother could love.”

“I am surprised she even showed up.”

“What an awful scar!”

Duncan realized then that the lady that they must be speaking to must be the same one that Barbara was talking about. He felt his blood boil at the kind of treatment the women were subjecting her to, and yet, she had not seemed to have uttered a single word in her defense so far.

“Are you devoid of language as well?” one of the women taunted. “Do you not understand what we are saying to you?”

“I do not wish to respond to things I do not consider important,” came the reply.



Duncan could not help but feel impressed by the calm manner in which the woman had responded. Surely, it meant that she must have a strong exterior protecting her from the cruelty of others. He had not even met her yet, but this quality of hers immediately set her apart from the rest.

He always had an urge to help a damsel in distress, but surprisingly, just the fact that she seemed to not be asking for help made him want to step in all the more.

“That is enough.” He moved past the fountain, separating himself from the scene unfolding in front of his eyes. “I do not think any of you should be speaking to this young lady like this.”

## CHAPTER THREE



**N**ow that the Duke was in plain sight, the three ladies looked at him in horror as though they had just spotted a ghost.

“Your Grace,” one of them said, turning red from embarrassment, “We did not know you were there.”

“We... we did not mean...”

“You did not mean to be so rude, Madam?” the Duke replied in a sarcastic tone. “Yet here you are, being precisely that.”

“We... had no idea that you would be here.” The lady’s tone was embarrassed.

“Does it make it appropriate to be this rude if I am not here to overhear your conversation?” the Duke challenged, raising his eyebrow slightly.

He could see that the women in front of him were scrambling to find any excuse, but they had been caught in the middle of the act. There was no denying their involvement or cruelty.

“You must understand, Your Grace,” one of the girls mustered up the courage to explain herself, “she is cursed.”

“And you know that... how?”

“Well, everyone knows that,” came the reply. “It is right there on her face.”

“By that logic, I can say that you are cursed too.” The Duke decided to play them at their own game.

“Me?” the girl replied, flushed. “Your Grace, how can you say that? You do not know anything about me to be making a claim as tall as that. I would wager that counts as defamation if anything...”

“So, you agree that it is unfair to make an assessment like that about someone who you do not know anything about?” he countered.

The girls were speechless. They knew that he had a fair point, and they had just been made to look stupid.

“I suppose...”

“We should probably get going. The dances must be about to start again.”

The three women who had been so emboldened in their words just moments ago now shrunk away like little terrified cats, scrambling away back towards the ballroom.

When they finally left, the Duke directed his attention to the woman who had been the subject of those brutal tongue lashings.

“Madam...” He turned to her. She had kept her head down this whole time, so he did not yet get a chance to see her face. “I must apologize for their behavior. It is clear that none of them had an ounce of class in them.”

“It is quite all right, Your Grace,” she replied, finally looking up at him.

Duncan was immediately taken aback by her appearance. She was dressed in an emerald green gown and had her hair pinned to one side, proudly displaying the scars on her face that he had only heard about up until this point.

Even so, he could not help but notice how beautiful she was. Under the pale moonlight, she appeared to be akin to a vision. And though her beauty was not conventional due to her scars, she was stunning in every way.

“I do not think it was all right,” Duncan replied, snapping himself back to the conversation. “I would not have stepped into the conversation otherwise.”

The woman smiled at him.

“I am sure that it must look quite awful to you on the outside, but I have gotten quite used to it by now.”

The Duke could not hide the surprise on his face.

“But... that is awful. No one should have to get used to something of this sort.”

“Well, do you have a better solution?” she shrugged her shoulders. “I cannot control what they have to say about me, only how I react to it.”

Once again, Duncan felt impressed by her maturity — so much that for the first time that night he did not feel the immediate urge to flee the conversation after only a few moments.

“I can say that I admire your strategy.” He nodded in her direction. “I am quite used to having my life being discussed by the ton as well.”

“Is that so?” An amused smile danced on the corner of the woman’s lips. “That must signal that you’re quite the controversial character yourself, are you not? Is it due to the ladies?”

Duncan let out a small chuckle. “The ladies?”

“Yes, what else could a man of your age be notorious for? I assume that you must be a rake.”

“You are quite forward in your assumption, My Lady,” he replied, her boldness making him even more curious about her.

“I am merely just telling you what I am assuming,” she shrugged. “However, I do take your point about not making assumptions about people we know nothing about, so you may attempt to convince me otherwise.”

“Pray tell, My Lady, how is it that I should be convincing you?” he asked.

“Well, for one, I would like to know how many women you have danced with already tonight,” she mused.

“Take a guess?” he chuckled. She seemed to be convinced that he was a rake when in reality he was the exact opposite of one.

It was not as though he did not like women. It was more so that he did not want to deal with the gossip that came with them.

“Well...” She looked at him once over, pushing her eyebrows together as though she was making a really important finding. “I would wager at least four.”

“You are off only by four,” Duncan shook his head, laughing.

“You are not being serious?” The woman was noticeably surprised by his answer. “Do you really expect me to believe that you did not dance with anyone this evening?”

“Yes,” the Duke shrugged. “I have no reason to lie to you, nor is it in my nature to do so.”

“But...” She struggled with her words. “Why? I am sure there are many ladies there who would love to have a chance to dance with you.”

“Are you trying to imply that I am a most eligible bachelor?” the Duke countered. “I must say that I am quite flattered that you have this opinion of me, My Lady.”

The woman rolled her eyes at him. “I did not say that. You are only putting words in my mouth. And I am still curious to know what it is that makes you so controversial. If it is not your habits with the ladies, then what could it be?”

“I assume you do not keep up with the gossip or else you would know already.”

“I am afraid that I do not.”

“I see,” he noted, impressed. “Well, my father was quite notorious during his life for his... less than ideal choices.”

For a brief moment, Duncan noticed that the woman flinched ever so slightly at the mention of the word father, but she composed herself quickly.

“Now, you have me quite curious as to what those choices were,” she replied.

“Oh, just the usual vices.” Duncan chuckled darkly to himself. “Gambling his life away, no regard for his family...”

That elicited a small laugh from her. He was surprised to see that as his humor was usually too dark for the ladies to appreciate.

“Was there an element of alcoholism thrown together in there as well?” she inquired, playfully. “Surely, that would make it into the holy trinity.”

A loud chuckle escaped his lips.

“What an astute observation, My Lady. Indeed, he was quite fond of the drink. And he made sure everyone else knew of his vices too.”

“I am sure that he must have given the people enough gossip fodder to last the entire season,” she chimed in.

“The season? My Lady, you are aiming too low. It has been many years since he has passed now, and whispers about his life still follow us wherever we may go,” he observed.

“I suppose then you could say that he was a man who liked to live large,” she said with a small shrug of her shoulders.

“For all the wrong reasons...”

He surprised himself by how easily he was able to talk to this woman. Talking about his past was not something he did, even to those that were closest to him. But with her, he felt as though words were flowing freely out his mouth.

He wanted to know more about this lady.

But just as he was about to ask her for her name, both of them turned to look behind them as the sound of horrified gasps and footsteps approached them.

“Duncan,” a panicked voice belonging to his mother called out to him. “Is that you?”

“He is alone with the Scarred Lady,” another voice called. “Oh, the shame!”

“Your Grace, please get away from her before she curses you as well,” Barbara said, sounding very concerned.

Duncan looked back the woman, feeling embarrassed on her behalf. He wanted to give the others a piece of his mind. Surely, they were blowing things wildly out of proportion.

“I am sorry,” he mouthed to her. He noticed her calm expression had slipped, and there was a hint of hurt in her eyes. He felt his guilt double in size, and he instinctively stood before her, shielding her from the crowd of women.

“What is your name?” his mother stepped forward. Her tone was not as angry as the rest, but Duncan still felt protective of the lady.

“Sophia,” she replied. Duncan could not help but notice how her voice sounded more unsure than it had previously. Had the jeers finally begun to get to her?

“I see...”

“I hope that you do not have it mixed up,” he explained. “Miss Sophia and I were just talking to each other. In fact, I was quite enjoying my conversation with her. I do not know why you all had to come looking for me.”

The ladies exchanged glances and whispers amongst each other, and Duncan already knew that they were going to spin this into something that it was not.

“Of course, I had to come looking for you son,” his mother replied. “We only have limited time here at the ball, and it worries me when you are gone for long.”

“And you still have to dance with the ladies, Your Grace,” Barbara interjected. Her tone was full of jealousy. “Besides, what pleasure did you even derive from speaking to... her?”

“I do not feel the need to tell you why I do or don’t talk to anyone,” the Duke asserted. “I am not answerable to you.”

“But she is...” one of the ladies replied. “Oh, this is scandalous.”

The Duke was beginning to grow frustrated now. He knew that no matter what he said, it was going to be misconstrued in the wrong way. *That is the problem with people in society*, he

thought. *They always make something where there was nothing.*

“I am sure that Lady Sophia needs to head back to the ball. I propose the rest of you do the same thing,” he suggested.

He resented the ladies showing up out of the blue. He had been having such an interesting conversation with Sophia.

As he walked, he could not escape the judgmental stares of the ladies. They were whispering amongst themselves, and Duncan already knew that he had just landed himself the spot for the most sizzling gossip of the night.

“It is best if we return home now, mother,” he told Anna in a firm tone. “I have no wish to engage with the ridiculous questions that will be hurled my way once we are back inside.”

Anna contemplated her son’s words for a moment but ultimately nodded her head.

“I see, then. You may have a point.”

The two departed in the carriage. Looking out of the window, Duncan saw the venue shrink away as they moved. Once again, his thoughts circled back to the woman he had met.

If the ladies had been so ruthless with her before, he could not even fathom how they would treat her now that she had been caught speaking to a man unchaperoned.

His heart softened for her. Across from him, the Dowager sat with her hands folded onto her lap. Duncan could tell that she was similarly rattled by what had just taken place, but the two did not exchange any conversation about it. Instead, the carriage ride was spent in silence.

When they finally arrived back at the Manor, Duncan decided to retire to his chambers. It had been a long night already, and he just wanted it to end.

“Duncan,” his mother’s voice called him as he walked down the hallway towards his room, “may I have a word with you?”

He turned to face her. She had the same serious and contemplative expression on her face as she did for most of the



carriage ride.

“Yes, mother?”

She looked around to see if there was anyone lurking in the hallways, but it was a late hour, and most of the staff had gone asleep.

“We must discuss what happened tonight,” she said. “While I believe that your title shall protect you from too much of a negative impact of being seen with that lady, it is still not an ideal situation. Oh, what reason was there for you to speak to her in the first place?”

“You should have heard the way that some of the girls there were speaking to her. I merely stepped in. It was the gentlemanly thing to do, and you are aware of that.”

“I am not questioning your intent, son,” she replied. “I am merely telling you how it appears from the outside. It was Barbara’s idea to go out looking for you. I merely accompanied her with some of my friends. Had I known what you were doing... I would have never allowed it.”

Duncan was beginning to grow irked at how dramatic everyone around him was being. It was not as though he had been caught kissing Sophia. They were only talking.

“Of course, this is worse for her than it is for you,” his mother continued. “That poor woman already had little to prospects due to the stories about the curse, but now, even her reputation has been soiled.”

“Surely it is not going to be so bad?” His voice was laced with both curiosity and guilt.

His mother looked at him as though he had uttered something a four-year-old would say.

“You know as well as I do that everyone is going to be talking about this by tomorrow,” she sighed. “They will be embellishing it and making it much worse. I have no delusions regarding that. We must take steps to separate you from the scandal.”

“And what about Sophia?” Duncan asked, appalled “Does she not deserve the same grace?”

The Dowager pursed her lips. “You know the rules of society. It is not the same for her.”

“Well, those rules are ridiculous, and they need to change,” the Duke replied. “One person should not be paying such a big price.”

“I know that you feel sympathetic, my son. You have always had a great sense of duty, but it is not something that you should be worried about.”

“What is the point of duty then?” he questioned. “I do not want her to take the blame for something she did not even do.”

“Then she should have thought about it before talking to you. She is a lady and should know these things. The consequences are for her to bear alone.”

Duncan felt unsettled by his mother’s words. They felt unfairly harsh, but he knew that there was no use speaking to her about the subject any longer. He decided he no longer wished to have this conversation with her.

“It appears that I have gotten a headache,” he said. “I must retire to bed now.”

“But we must...”

“Good night, mother..”

He returned to his chambers without waiting for a response from her.

That night, Duncan could not get himself to fall asleep. He could not help but feel a burden of responsibility on his shoulders.

Had he not intervened when the women were speaking to Sophia, he would not have been caught alone with her. But now, her reputation had been put into jeopardy.

It felt unfair that one of them was going to suffer much worse consequences.

“Poor Lady Sophia,” he muttered to himself. The fact that she was at a ball signaled that she must want a husband for herself. As his mother had already noted, her already bleak prospects must have dwindled down to nothing after this.

“I must do something,” he said, tightening his fingers into a fist. All his life, he had promised himself that he was not going to grow up to become anything like his father.

He knew that if his father was in a situation like this, he would take the easy way out and let the lady suffer the consequences of something that he was responsible for. It filled up him with disgust when he imagined himself doing the same thing.

He had to be better than that. Even though he and his father shared the same blood, he would do everything in his power to make his choices different than his father’s.



“Good morning, my son,” Anna greeted him the next morning at the breakfast table. “I must say, I feel much better than I did last night. A night full of sleep and a steaming cup of tea does wonders.”

“I am happy to hear it, mother,” Duncan said as he took his place on the table in front of her. “I have to tell you that I did some thinking last night.”

“Oh?” Anna raised her eyebrow, setting down her porcelain cup of tea. “Please tell me. You know I am always interested in knowing your thoughts.”

“About the scandal...” he said, leaning over, “I think it is quite unfortunate that everyone will be talking about it.”

“Of course. I agree with you,” Anna noted. “Alas, people have nothing better to do; I cannot blame them, really.”

“I have made a decision that will make the whole scandal go away,” he announced. “I have decided to ask for Sophia’s hand in marriage.”

His mother nearly jumped up at the announcement, causing the cup of tea to knock over from the table and smash itself into smithereens into the floor. Hearing the noise, one of the maids rushed over to clean it, but Anna dismissed her immediately.

“Not now,” she said, waving her hand at her. “Give us a moment alone.”

Duncan waited as the maid left the dining room. All the while, his mother stared back at him with an expression of absolute horror.

“What?” he questioned. “Were you not the one urging me to find a wife for myself just yesterday?”

“Not like this! Duncan, I understand that you are free to make your own choices, but as your mother who cares about you the most in the world, I urge you to please reconsider.”

Duncan’s father’s face flashed into his mind, and he shook his head.

“I have already made up my mind.”

The disappointment on his mother’s face was palpable. She took a deep breath to calm herself down before speaking again.

“I cannot say that I ever truly believed in the curse, but it is not a risk I would be willing to take with my own child,” she explained. “What if what they say about her is true?”

“I suppose we will find out for ourselves.” Duncan shrugged his shoulders casually.

“Please, Duncan,” she beseeched, “I cannot see you do this. It is too big of a risk. A woman like her is not fit to be a duchess. In fact, having her in the family puts your brother Jacob at risk, too. Do you really want that?”

“Well, unfortunately, I am the person who put her into this situation. She was not the one who came to speak to me, rather it was I who did so of my own accord. As a man, I cannot let her take the fall for something that was my responsibility. You should know my principles are stronger than that.”

“But this decision will have real consequences.”

Duncan stood up, not wanting to explain himself any further.

“If we only did the right thing when it was easy to do, then we are nothing but a bunch of hypocritical cowards,” he said before he turned to leave, “and you know full well that you did not raise a coward.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In case you love free books, you will find one that Hazel never published on Amazon. A gift to her followers! You can find it on her real Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/hazellinwoodauthor>.

Influenced by the extraordinary tales of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, Hazel Linwood has always adored the fairy-tale like romances of the past. The youngest of four sisters, she has spent most of her youth lost in the classic historical romances of her favorite authors. Despite her parents' efforts to persuade her to pursue a career in medicine, she found her heart's true calling in English Literature.

After obtaining her degree, Hazel worked as an English teacher. That was until she met her husband and decided to indulge in her secret passion...writing! When she isn't writing, Hazel enjoys spending time with her family, travelling or roaming the Texan countryside.

Embark on this journey of desire, decorum and intense love of Regency England. Let Hazel transport you into an era of pure, sincere love and charming lords that will take your breath away!

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