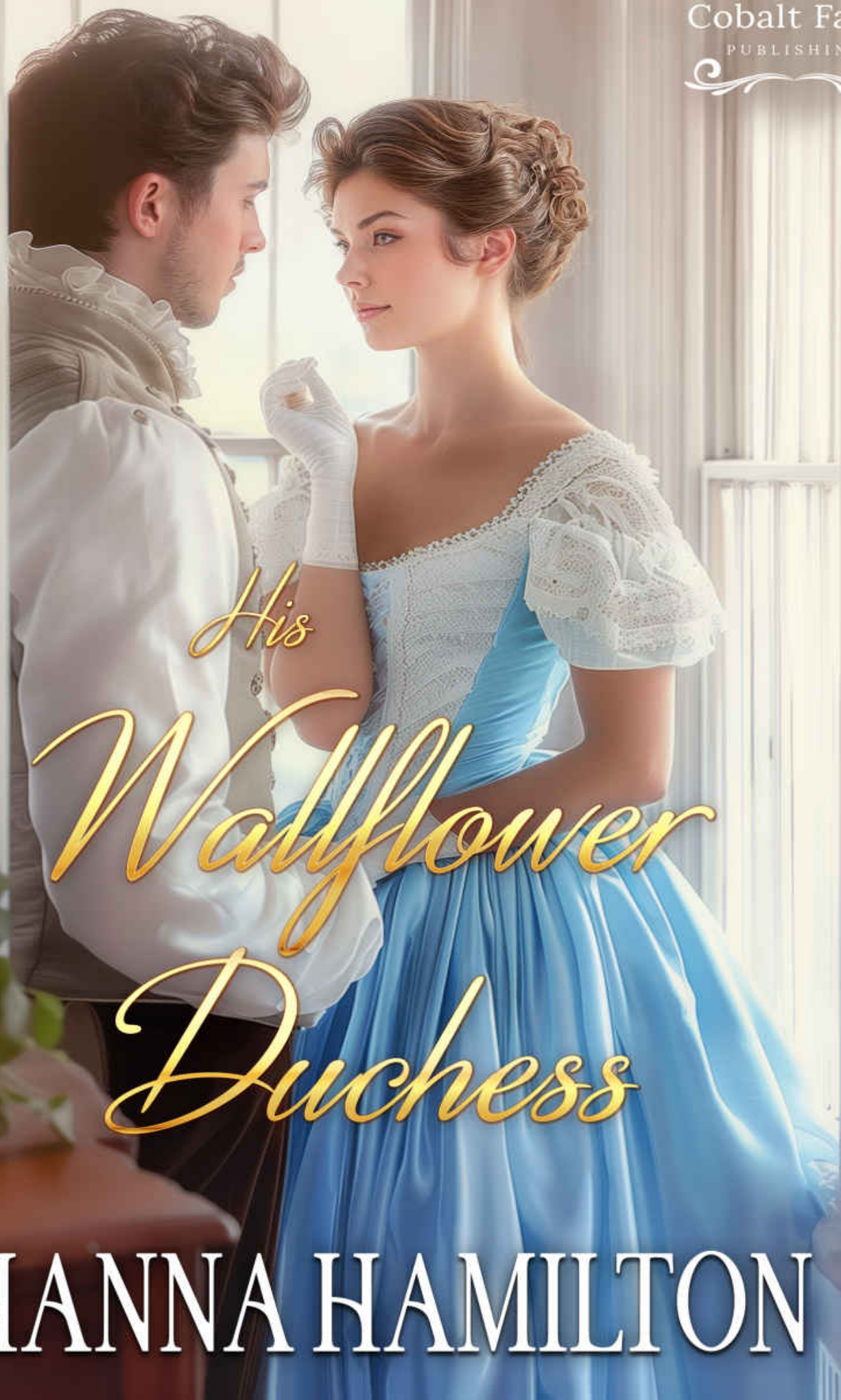




Cobalt Fairy

PUBLISHING



His
Wallflower
Duchess

HANNA HAMILTON

HIS WALLFLOWER DUCHESS

A HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

REGENCY ROSES



HANNA HAMILTON



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ABOUT THE BOOK

“I’ll be your husband for thirty days, then we’ll part ways.”

After Duke Leonard’s return, a scandal threatens to tarnish his already fragile reputation. And the last thing he needs is to leave a woman unwed in the wake of such rumors...

Lady Sally, a wallflower always in search of true love, finds herself trapped in a marriage to a man who seeks everything but affection...

Determined to defy the odds, Sally vows to breathe life into their union. However, as the honeymoon phase is over, Leonard is compelled to protect her from his own demons. Even if it means keeping his distance forever...

CHAPTER 1



Sally

“*P*erdiction,” Sally Blackmore grumbled under her breath as she stood in front of the mirror. Bent at the waist, she stretched her right arm backward to close the clasp on her dress while holding the front up with her left. A grunt escaped her as her fingers fiddled with the knot.

“Just a little more,” she said, willing her arm to stretch. Alas -

“Faith, I’ll never get ready this way.” She breathed deeply, almost tasting the sweet cakes the cook made in the kitchen two floors below.

From the driveway, the sounds of carriage wheels grinding on the gravel and the occasional snicker from a horse drifted through the open window. Their guests were arriving for the ball her mother hosted tonight in honor of her 50th birthday.

Sally should be downstairs already, helping her mother, but instead, she was up there, trying to make the most complicated gown in all of the realm fit.

A knock sounded, and the door creaked open.

“My word, what are you still doing here?” Her younger sister Rosy entered and shook her head, strands of carefully curled brown locks dancing in her pale face.

“I can’t do the dress up,” Sally admitted, shoulders slumped forward.

“Why didn’t you get Hester to do it?” Rosy asked as she stepped behind her.

“I wanted to see what it looked like first on my own,” Sally said, miserably. “I didn’t know these straps would be such a hassle to put up. What was I thinking? Oh, I should not even wear it. It’s far too scandalous.”

She looked at the seafoam green creation in the mirror and sighed. Truthfully, it wasn’t too revealing at all for most people. It did feel quite scandalous on her, but perhaps that was because Sally wasn’t the sort to seek attention. Unlike Rosy, who was always at the center of everything, she was perfectly happy in her more conservative gowns and avoided the spotlight. Indeed, it was a miracle her youngest sister did not have a husband yet, as she had no shortage of admirers. Then again, Rosy was particular about the kind of man she wished to marry.

Not that Sally wasn’t. She had a dream husband in her mind. A man who was considerate, thoughtful, kind, witty - and if he were handsome, she’d not reject that either.

Alas, unlike Rosy, she didn’t easily attract gentlemen. She was too timid, too quiet. And this dress with its flowing fabric

sparkled under the candlelight, with the complicated braided straps that held it up just so - this dress was for someone who enjoyed being looked at. Not for a wallflower like herself.

“What are you muttering?” Rosy asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

“Nothing,” Sally protested, aware she’d whispered to herself - a bad habit she’d picked up in her youth.

“No, you said ‘wallflower’. What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sally turned and tucked a strand of her chestnut-colored hair behind her ear. “A wallflower like me should not wear a dress like this.”

“Nonsense,” Rosy replied, voice vibrating with irritation. “You’re not a wallflower. You’re beautiful. Look at you. I’ve long coveted your lovely eyes and long lashes. Mine are so short you can hardly see them,” she said, blinking to emphasize her shortcomings. In truth, there was nothing wrong with Rosy’s lashes or anything else. She was a true English rose. A diamond of the first water. And herein lay the problem.

“I was not looking for Spanish coin, Rosy. I know I am by no means homely. No child of mother’s could be. But the truth is, compared to your beauty and Joanna’s witty confidence, I am merely ... average. That is why I am in my fourth season, and nobody has made an offer yet. Spinsterhood is knocking on my door with increasing volume.” Her stomach contracted as she realized this was the sad truth. At age three and twenty, she would soon be on the shelf.

“That is not true. You are not married only because you are particular about whom you wish to marry. You could have married Lord Arlet just last year.” Rosy tapped her foot on the hardwood floor.

“It would have been a pitiful match. Even worse than when Father tried to make Joanna marry Lord Worcester two years ago. Lord Arlet doesn’t even have his own teeth! Besides, the whole idea was fleeting the moment Mother suggested it at the dinner table; Father put a stop to it.”

Her mother’s suggestion of this idea told Sally how desperate her mother thought her situation was, but she kept that to herself.

“Whatever the case, I venture to say you will catch a husband tonight because you are radiant. Come, let me close this for you,” Rosy said and lopped the intricate straps together, so her dress stayed up properly. “Just be careful not to get caught on anything. Otherwise, it will be a show for the ages.” Rosy chuckled, but Sally grew a bright red, her cheeks burning at the mere thought. “The scandal sheets would love you, now that Joanna and Kenneth no longer give them ideas.”

At the mention of her sister Joanna, Sally smiled.

“I can’t wait to see her. Is she here yet?”

Rosy shook her head in reply. “She isn’t but we should go down. Guests are arriving already.” She took Sally’s gloved hand in her own and then the sisters stepped into the hall. Joyful voices mingled with the string orchestra and Sally’s

heart thumped. Tonight had to be a success. She had to impress because if she did not, her chances of finding a husband would shrink even further - and her future as an old maid would be assured.

* * *

As Sally and Rosy entered the hall leading to the grand ballroom of Everbright Manor, Sally paused to take in the grandeur of the space. Living in the manor sometimes made her forget just how magnificent it was. Although it could not be denied that tonight the home shone even brighter than usual as her mother had gone to great lengths to make it spectacular indeed.

New beeswax candles had been placed in the crystal chandeliers, casting a warm, golden glow over the room. The walls were adorned with exquisite oil paintings, while the plush carpeting underfoot made them feel as though they were walking on clouds. From within the ballroom music sounded and when they passed it, she saw couples already dancing, smudging the carefully crafted chalk drawing she'd watched the artists apply earlier in the day.

Near the front door, Sally craned her neck, scanning the sea of faces entering in search of Joanna.

“Are you looking for Prince Charming?” Rosy teased beside her.

“No, looking for Joanna - you know that. And I know you want to see her as much as I do. I can't believe it's been three weeks since we saw her,” Sally said and shook her head. She adored her sister Joanna who was also her dearest friend.

It hadn't bothered her that her younger sister was married before her because Sally had known how much her sister loved Kenneth, the Duke of Wells, to whom she'd been wed for almost two years now.

What had bothered her was the separation. They'd always been like birds of a feather, the best of friends as well as sisters. Losing her to marriage had been difficult.

Fortunately, they did not live far apart and even after her wedding Sally had seen her sister regularly - until this month when Joanna and Kenneth had taken in a second child from the orphanage of which they were patrons. Their older son, Peter, was a charming little boy who was cherished by all. A few weeks ago, they had also taken in a little girl, a two-year-old named Louisa - although none of the family had met her yet because she'd arrived rather ill.

"I know," Rosy admitted. "I want to see her too. What poor fortune that Louisa was so ill when she arrived home."

Sally shrugged, "They knew she was ill, it is one of the reasons they took her in. She will be well soon with the help of the physicians Kenneth hired. I am certain we will hear an update today. She must be better, after all, if she was not Joanna would not have agreed to come. Birthday or not." The truth was, Sally needed Joanna to get better because she desperately missed her. There was nobody like Joanna in Sally's life. Nobody understood her and in whom she had full confidence.

"I hope soon we will all be back to normal with them visiting us often. I miss Peter, that little rascal." Rosy smiled and then

winked at Joanna. “And Maisie misses Rudy.”

“Goodness do not tell Mother that, she will forbid you from having Maisie and Rudy in the same room for fear of more puppies,” Sally replied but Rosy only laughed.

“Father will let me have all the puppies I want, you know that.”

Sally couldn't deny this was so. Their father, in his eagerness to please the family, would allow them to have just about anything, which was why he'd refused to entertain their mother's plan for Sally's future. Lady Carlisle rushed over to Sally and Rosy, her eyes widening with concern. “There you are! I've been looking for both of you. The ball is in full swing, and the guests are asking about you.”

Sally, feigning innocence, flashed a charming smile. “Oh, Mother, you know how it is. The dress was a challenge to put on, but it's certainly worth it, isn't it?”

Her mother's eyes sparkled with approval. “Indeed, my dear. You look absolutely stunning. I'm sure you'll catch the eye of a fine gentleman tonight.”

Sally nodded, the corners of her mouth twitching with a hint of wry amusement. Inwardly, she mused about her mother's sudden eagerness to see her settled. It was as if Joanna's marriage had ignited a fervor within Lady Carlisle to ensure the romantic futures of her remaining daughters.

As Rosy voiced her impatience about Joanna's delayed arrival, Lady Carlisle stepped in with a knowing smile. "Joanna is already here, my loves. She went upstairs to the library to return a couple of books."

Sally's surprise was evident. "The library again? I was just there, and I didn't see her."

Before she could inquire further, Rosy grabbed Sally's hand, excitement gleaming in her eyes. "Come on, Sally, let's go see her!"

Their mother, however, had other plans. "Not so fast, Rosy. I need you to come with me. Lady Millstone's son, Gregory, is here, and I must introduce you. He is to inherit the title Marquess of Millstone once his father passed. And he is a keen dancer and excellent in fencing. It's a wonderful opportunity."

Sally rolled her eyes discreetly, exchanging a knowing glance with Rosy. Lady Millstone's incessant gossip had long been a source of amusement and irritation among the ton. However, Rosy's admiration for Gregory seemed to outweigh any concerns.

"Very well, Mother," Sally acquiesced with a resigned tone. "I'll go see Joanna on my own, then."

"Please, do. She asked me to make sure you know where she is. I am so pleased she could make it, what with little Louisa ill," their mother said.

“But she must be better, since she did come,” Rosy said, and their mother nodded quickly.

“Of course, of course. Now, come. Let us not leave him waiting,” she said and placed a hand on Rosy’s back while smiling at Sally. Pleased that her younger sister had taken their mother’s attention for at least a little while, Sally made her way across the ballroom and up the stairs to the library. She scanned the area for Kenneth, her brother-in-law. Usually, he could be found with Sally’s father in the billiards room but Lord Carlisle had been delayed and was forced to miss his wife’s birthday. Thus, Kenneth’s whereabouts were rather more obscure.

Sally hurried up the stairs, her hand gliding along the banister. Upstairs, she made her way down the hall past the portraits of their ancestors before arriving in the library. She paused and inhaled, the way Joanna always did. As usual she did not detect the scent of leather, age, and wisdom that Joanna always claimed she could smell.

Chuckling, she burst into the library. “I always knew your mind was playing tricks on you for I smell not a thing whenever I enter into ...” she stopped in her tracks, for the library before her was empty.

“Jo? Are you here? Joanna?” she called, hands on her hips.

The grandeur of the room, adorned with rich tapestries and polished mahogany, seemed to echo her calls. The grand chandelier overhead cast a warm glow, illuminating the rows of books standing sentinel on the shelves. She made her way past them, peering down each row only to find one as empty as the next.

Where was she?

“Joanna? Please, do not play games with me. I am not in the mood for hide and seek,” she said, assuming her sister was trying to jest as she sometimes did.

Passing the fireplace, where a warm fire crackled, she spotted a selection of books on the table. Curious, she peeked at them. They were poems, along with a few books about the stars. Not Joanna’s usual fare.

Still, clearly, she’d been here. Then, it came to her. The reading nook. In an effort to repair his strained relationship with his daughters, Lord Carlisle had added a new section to the library, giving up his beloved upstairs drawing room for the purpose of creating a reading nook.

Sally approached the reading nook, a secluded portion with a secondary fireplace and a small shelf that served as a resting place for books currently in progress, along with a table for sweetmeats and tea.

“I should have known, the moment you had a chance to get away from your children you’d be in here reading,” she teased as she headed around the corner. “Is that becoming of the Duchess of – Oh!” Sally let out a shriek as she rounded the corner and staggered backward, her back banging into the corner of the bookshelf behind. Pain seared through her, but she hardly noticed it for sitting before her was not her beloved sister but a man. A stranger.

And as he rose to turn his face in her direction, Sally's stomach dropped to her knees for his was the last face she'd expected to see here this night.

CHAPTER 2



Leonard

Leonard rose from his seat, a smile playing on his lips as his eyes fell upon Lady Sally Blackmore. He'd recognized her voice the moment she called out for her sister but now that she stood before him he was reminded of how lovely she looked. It had been almost months since last he'd laid eyes on Sally or any of her sisters and he'd almost forgotten that twinkle in her eyes that always seemed to be there. Although in this very moment she wasn't smiling.

Quite the opposite. She looked flabbergasted. Leonard grinned.

"I have been called many things, Lady Sally, but a Duchess is not one of them," Leonard remarked with a grin, the teasing words hanging in the air. His gaze lingered on Sally's gown for a moment too long. It wasn't because he was taken in by her beauty, he already knew she was a lovely looking woman. No, it was her gown. He didn't know Sally, the sister of his best friend's wife, very well. But he knew her well enough to know such dazzling attire was not something she usually wore. Though it suited her very well indeed.

He looked away when he noted that his stare was driving a rush of color rise to her cheeks.

“Your Grace,” she said, a little breathlessly. “I hadn’t expected you here.”

“Here in the library? Or here in town?” he asked, stopping a few steps away from her. A sweet lemony scent entered his nostrils and he smiled for it invoked memories of the last time he’d seen Sally, a year ago at his godson Peter’s sixth birthday celebration. He’d been in England for a short period before setting off on his travels again and they’d spent a wonderful evening playing games in the garden of Kenneth’s estate.

“Both,” she replied without moving. “You have been rather illusive these last two years or so. Indeed, at times I have to remind myself that you are in fact real and not just a figment of the scandal sheets imagination.”

Leonard grimaced, not keen on the stories he’d read about himself in the broadsheets.

“I assure you, I am quite real and you will be seeing more of me, that is a promise.”

They looked at one another without speaking for a moment and he noted the way she was standing with her back against the wall, as if she had thought him a robber of some sort.

“Is that so?” she replied, head dipped to the side.

“It is so, I assure you.”

“Well, then I will be better prepared next time. Pray, you have not answered my question. What are you doing here?” she asked, licking her lips so that a shimmer remained on them.

Leonard leaned in slightly, narrowing the distance between them. “Why, my dear, I’ve been invited. Isn’t that what people commonly do when graced with an invitation? They show up,” he replied, his tone light and filled with a mischievous charm. “How could I decline an invitation to your mother’s birthday celebration? It would be downright rude not to come. Besides, Kenneth would have given me a hiding.”

Sally blinked, her eyes reflecting a mixture of emotions. “I mean in the library. Guests do not customarily lurk in dark corners to frighten their host’s daughters,” she fired back with a bit more spirit than he was used to from her.

“You did not seem particularly frightened by me,” he replied with a smile.

“How dare you tell me if I am or am not frightened?” she asked and Leonard could not help but find some intriguing amusement in their exchange. This wasn’t how he’d imagined his return to London’s society to go – an odd argument with Lady Sally in the library.

“Well, for one you did not go running out of the room while calling for help. That is typically how one reacts when frightened by an intruder. And number two, there is a perfectly handy weapon right beside you and you did not see fit to use it,” he nodded his chin toward the fireplace poker that leaned against the wall. She looked at it, a lock of hair falling into her face. It grazed her sharp jawline for a moment before she banished it back behind her ear.

“You seem well versed in the ways a lady might fend of unwanted advances, Your Grace,” she replied. Leonard detected a hint of cheerfulness in her voice now. Perhaps he had indeed frightened her. Or perhaps she simply remembered their prior conversations, none of which had been hampered by misunderstandings or animosity. “Perhaps what the scandal sheets say is true and you have turned into a rake.”

This elicited a sarcastic laugh from him. “I am wounded you should think this of me, Lady Sally. I did not think you were so easily swayed by what is written about people, especially when you yourself do not know them well.” He looked at her intently. He wasn’t sure why it bothered him that she’d mentioned the unfortunate rake stories that had been circulating around him, but it did. He didn’t generally like it when people passed judgment without knowing the subject of their ire, but with her it bothered him even more.

“Be that as it may,” she replied and crossed her arms. “You still have not answered my question. Why were you up here in the library instead of downstairs with the guests?”

“I might ask you the same thing as well. Why were *you* not downstairs with the guests? This is your home after all and I was unaware sections of it were declared off limits to visitors,” he replied. There was a strange enjoyment in vexing her, he noted.

“It is my home, my library,” she replied, incredulous now. “And I asked first, in any case. Therefore, you ought to answer me first as well.” Her tone told him she’d brook no argument and he shrugged, raising his shoulders and letting his arms drop.

“Very well. I like to hide away in libraries. I do not much care for the crowds downstairs and I have no desire to dance or be pushed into a dance. I prefer to wait until everyone has had a few drinks and the conversation flows easier without pressure. Besides, your father has a most excellent library that I am rather fond of. Now, your turn,” he said and raised his eyebrows, waiting for her reply.

“I was looking for my sister, as you might be able to comprehend, given I called you a Duchess,” she replied and Leonard smiled at her.

“Point well made. Well, I am not the Duchess of Wells, as has been established. In fact, one of the reasons I escaped to the library was that I arrived before Kenneth and thus sought to hide myself away,” he said. This seemed to puzzle her and she pursed her lips.

“They are not here yet? Kenneth and Joanna?”

“No, not that I saw. I left word with your butler to tell Kenneth where I am so that he can find me when he arrives and he has not. Thus, I argue that your sister is not here either since they seem to be attached at the hip no matter where they go,” he replied.

Just then, a voice sounded outside and Sally frowned as she looked at the door.

“Lady Sally? Duchess? Your mother is looking for you.” The voice faded again then and Sally exhaled.

“It is Lady Millstone, my mother’s friend,” she said quietly. “My mother seeks to have my sister Rosy and Lady Millstone’s son united and it seems she now seeks me as well. And Joanna.” The last part came out with a hint of confusion though Leonard did not understand why.

“Well, you had better make your escape before she finds you. It was good to see you, Lady Sally,” he said and bowed, and she likewise curtsied before turning.

Alas, she made it only two steps before another shout escaped her, this one accompanied by a ripping sound followed by a gasp. Leonard blinked and watched in shock as a fashion calamity unfolded before him. The intricate braided straps that held up her gown had somehow become detached, causing the front of her dress to fall forward.

Sally caught it just as it slipped and pressed it against her chest as her face drained of color. Leonard quickly closed his eyes so as not to embarrass her further.

“Pon rep, this silly gown,” she muttered, and he heard her move before him, feeling the light movement as she turned. She grunted and gasped, apparently trying to affix her gown again when he opened one eye partially, peering at her. She was struggling it was easy to see. The dress, while striking, appeared to take some effort to close up.

“Your Grace!” She called when she saw him looking at her and he raised his hands, now opening his other eyes as well.

“I am only looking to see if I can help. You seem to have a predicament on your hands.” He meant this quite literally because one of the issues seemed to be that she had to hold the front up with one hand while looking to close the dress again with the other.

A two-person job, no doubt.

“I do, Rosy helped me close it earlier,” she said miserably while fiddling with her hands for something behind her. Then, she raised her head at him. His eyes met Sally’s, and without missing a beat, he stepped forward, for it was clear she needed assistance.

“May I?”

Her nod was almost imperceptible, a silent plea for aid in the midst of her mortification.

“Turn around, Lady Sally,” Leonard’s said, ensuring his voice was both soothing and commanding. As she did, he stepped closer to her, the lemon scent from earlier unmistakable in the air now. She complied, though he saw her cheeks which had grown pale were now aflame with embarrassment. The room seemed to pulse as Leonard delicately worked to disentangle the straps. His fingers brushed against her soft exposed skin and an involuntary shiver ran down his spine. This was silly, he knew it. He should not be feeling any sort of excitement at this situation. Shaking his head, he chased away the thoughts clouding his attention and focused on the task at hand.

Lady Sally bit her lip as Leonard fumbled with the intricate knot of her gown, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. The

awkwardness of the situation hung in the air, and to diffuse the tension, Leonard offered a lopsided grin.

“Well, this is where having a sister would have come in handy. I might have been able to practice and would not take such a long time.”

She let out a nervous laugh in reply. “It was difficult for me and Rosy earlier as well. I suppose I ought not to have selected such a challenging gown.”

“It suits you very well, I will say that,” he said through gritted teeth as he looked at the closed loop. It wasn’t right. There was no traction and if she let go, the front of her gown would slip. “I have to undo it again, I am sorry. It isn’t right.”

“Very well,” she said though the strain remained in her voice.

Time seemed to pass impossibly slow as he undid the straps again, retrying them with care. As Leonard finally neared success in retying the gown, the subtle click of approaching footsteps interrupted them. A gasp followed, and both of them looked up to find Lady Millstone standing there, her eyes wide with shock but a glint of amusement beneath the surface.

“Lady Sally!” The woman’s voice boomed and Leonard was certain all of London could hear her. His hands remained frozen in place, one piece of rope still in hand while he stood behind Sally.

This looks most incriminating, there’s no way around that.

“Lady Millstone, this is not at all” Sally started but the woman shook her head and departed, one hand clutching her pearl necklace. “Faith, what are we going to do?” Sally muttered, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment when she looked back at him. “We need to explain before she spreads tales like wildfire.”

Leonard knew this was very possible, but he had to maintain his composure for the sake of Sally. “Do not fret. I’ll make sure it’s understood that this was a completely innocent mishap.”

Sally shook her head, her eyes wide with worry. “I cannot believe it. Why did I wear this foolish dress? Why?” Her shoulder drooped forward, and she let out a puff of air as if it was her very last one on earth, as if this somehow was the end of everything.

“Please, do not worry. I said we will explain, and we will. Nobody Nobody need to know,” he said again but there was no reasoning with her. Lady Sally shook her head.

“You do not understand. Lady Millstone loves nothing more than gossip and she will momentarily spread it all around the ballroom that she saw me with my dress half off and you behind me with the” Her words trailed off as if the true magnitude of the situation finally impressed upon her. Leonard could do nothing but watch as the young woman before him turned from a witty lady who’d kept pace with his challenges to a heap of misery – and all because one nosy woman had walked in on them at the wrong time.

But surely, it could not be as bad as she made it out to be. Could it? From outside, raised voices filled the hall and the

footsteps that followed told him he'd have his question answered sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER 3



Sally

“*R*uined,” Sally stammered. “I’m ruined. What have we done?”

“Lady Sally,” the Duke said beside her. She felt the warm breath brushing against her cheek and his sandalwood oils filled the air. A second ago, she’d thought it pleasant to be so close to him, to be enveloped in the cloud of the comforting scent. Now? Now she wished she’d never stepped foot into this library.

The ton was merciless when it came to gossip, and Lady Millstone was the Queen of the Scandal Sheets. She’d never have admitted it, but most of the most horrifying stories printed came from her. She couldn’t shake the feeling that her reputation, her future, was slipping away from her grasp.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Sally muttered, her eyes wide with panic. “I’ve always tried to be responsible, to live up to the expectations placed on me. Now, it’s all crumbling because of a simple accident.”

“Please do not fret so much.” Leonard placed a hand on her arm, trying to steady her but it only fed her fear and she

stepped away from him.

“What will people say? What will my mother think? I’ve let everyone down.”

Leonard tightened his grip on her arm. “Listen to me. We’ll find a way to explain, to clear up any misconceptions. You are not alone in this. Let us go back to the ball and pretend nothing has happened. Even if Lady Millstone said something, we will act as though it is not true.”

Sally’s eyes welled up with tears, her resolve crumbling under the weight of shame. “I can’t face the ball now. I can’t face anyone.”

“Please, do not panic. Nothing has happened yet. Lady Millstone is known to be a gabster and people might doubt what she said. All we need to do is spread the truth first,” he said as if it were the easiest thing in the world. Sally wanted to inform him that for him, a Duke, a man, this might not be a problem, but it was for her.

Before he could respond, the door swung open, and Sally’s mother’s face appeared in the doorway, Lady Millstone right behind her. The woman’s face had turned into a mask of disdain. Following her was Rosy – and, to Sally’s surprise, Joanna and Kenneth. Panic surged through Sally at the sight of them because their faces told her what they had been informed of

Lady Millstone pointed an accusatory finger at them. “See? They are still standing together like thieves in the night. It is a scandal! A scandal. He disrobed her!”

True to his word, the Duke attempted to explain, “Lady Millstone, it’s not what it seems—”

But before he could finish, Sally found her voice, her determination cutting through the chaos. “It was an accident. I was trying to fix my gown, and His Grace was helping me. Nothing untoward occurred. If anything, he prevented a scandal.”

Lady Millstone scoffed, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. “Nonsense! I saw it with my own eyes. She was half disrobed, and the Duke was taking advantage of her!”

Sally’s cheeks burned with embarrassment and frustration. “That’s not true! I was not half disrobed, and he certainly wasn’t taking advantage of me. It was a simple mistake.”

Joanna looked at Sally with wide eyes, betraying both shock and concern. Sally wished she could run away with her sister, escape the judgmental gaze of the ton, but she was trapped – literally for her family and Lady Millstone were blocking the door.

Then, Joanna’s husband Kenneth stepped forward and commanded attention, his tone firm. “Lady Millstone, I appreciate your concern, but this is a family matter. Please, leave us to deal with it.”

Lady Millstone huffed, offended. “Very well, I shall leave you to it but rest assured I will not let this go. Such behavior is unbecoming of a lady. A scandal, indeed!”

As Lady Millstone stormed out of the room, Sally felt a mixture of relief and gratitude toward Kenneth. She'd had her trouble with her brother-in-law when he first met her sister, but in the last two years he'd become an integral part of the family. Kenneth had been the one to guide the family through the shocking revelation that their father, Lord Carlisle, had stolen funds from a local orphanage – and sought to arrange a marriage for Joanna with a wealthy Marquess to weasel his way out of consequences.

The fallout had been quite terrible, for it had brought more misdeeds to light, chiefly among them her father's infidelity years prior. However, with Kenneth's help and his belief in forgiving and moving forward, they had all found a way to reconcile with Lord Carlisle. In fact, he'd softened over the years and was now a firm champion for his daughters. He was meant to be at the ball, of course, but his carriage had suffered a delay at Brighton on his journey home and he'd been forced to miss it.

How odd it is that in this hour I should wish for my father when I was so angry at him for so long.

“Sally, what in the world were you thinking?” her mother chided her, and Sally realized the situation was far from over. Her cheeks still flushed with embarrassment, turned to face her mother. “Mother, I swear, nothing untoward happened. I do not know how else I can say it. Rosy, you know how hard it is to do this dress up on my own. You helped me. Tell her.”

To her disappointment, Rosy said nothing, only shuffling her foot over the carpet as she looked from Sally to the Duke of Chester and back again.

“It doesn’t matter if it was an accident, Sally. Lady Millstone saw what she saw, and the ton will believe her version of events. We need to think of a solution to salvage your reputation. There are of course few options for us,” she said and looked at the Duke. Suddenly, Sally understood what her mother was implying. But no ... she couldn’t mean ... marriage? She’d heard many tales of girls who’d been made to marry due to a scandal, but this surely would not qualify. Would it?

A horrid thought came to her then as she looked at Joanna who was growing paler by the second.

“Mother, what are you suggesting? You cannot mean ...” Joanna said but while Sally appreciated her sister standing up for her, she had something to ask herself. And it could not wait.

Sally narrowed her eyes, and looked at Joanna, her throat dry. “Joanna, when did you arrive?”

Joanna exchanged a confused glance with Kenneth before answering, “We just got here. Why? What does that have to do with anything?”

Sally’s mind raced, connecting the dots. Lady Millstone had mentioned both her and Joanna. Hadn’t she said their mother was looking for them? And hadn’t her mother sent her to look library to look for Joanna?

“Mother, did you orchestrate this? Did you send Lady Millstone to find us in the library?”

Her mother's eyes grew wide while from the corner of her eye she saw the Duke's shoulders pull back in attention.

Her mother, taken aback by the accusation, feigned innocence. "Sally, how could you even think such a thing? I would never—"

But Sally interrupted, the anger bubbling to the surface. "Don't lie to me! You sent me here saying that Joanna had arrived and was in the library returning books. However, she confirmed she just arrived. And moments before she burst in here, I heard Lady Millstone calling for Joanna and myself, saying you were looking for us."

"Mother?" Joanna demanded, arms crossed while Kenneth's jaw dropped a little at this revelation.

Her mother's eyes flickered with discomfort, but she quickly composed herself. "I was mistaken. I thought Joanna was in the library, but I must have been someone else, someone who reminded me of her. I was mistaken. As for Lady Millstone, I did ask her to look for you only so that ... I do not need to justify myself to you."

"Mistaken? Mother, I know you wanted me to marry, but to go to such lengths? To involve Joanna, to manipulate the situation?"

Her mother, offended, replied, "How dare you accuse me of such things! I only thought you wanted to see Joanna. I had no idea a Duke would be in the library undressing you."

Sally's anger intensified. "He did not disrobe me. Stop saying that!"

The tension in the room crackled as Sally grappled with the betrayal of her mother's actions. She didn't even dare look at the Duke beside her, she could only imagine how he felt. He'd hardly spent any time in town for the last two years, and now that he was back, he was drawn into this mayhem.

Joanna broke the silence. "Please, it does not matter how this all came about or even what really happened. What matters is only what we do now." She looked at Kenneth who appeared rather miserable and tugged on his cravat which appeared too large around his neck.

Kenneth's gaze shifted toward Leonard, his brows furrowed in contemplation. "There's only one thing to do. Leonard needs to marry Sally."

The reply came swiftly – and sharp as a sword. "I'm sorry, my friend, but no. I am very apologetic for what has happened here this night, but I could never marry her."

"Your Grace!" Sally's mother explained and at last even Rosy found her voice although all she managed to mutter was a weak "*What?*" before Leonard Harding, the man who'd appeared as if out of thin air disappeared through the library door, having elbowed his way past a shocked Kenneth.

Even though they were nothing to each other, the rejection cut deeper than she could have imagined. Wounded, Sally wrapped her arms around herself and shook her head. "I didn't

even want to marry him,” she said to herself but evidently loud enough to draw her sister’s attention for Joanna rushed to her side.

Oddly, her arm did not feel comforting as she wrapped it around Sally as her entire body felt twitchy. Her skin burned with mortification and her eyes stung with unshed tears.

“We need to talk to Lady Millstone,” Kenneth’s voice came like a bullhorn through the fog.

“First we need to talk to the Duke,” her mother replied.

“He didn’t seem to want to,” Rosy pointed out and felt her younger sister’s eyes on her.

“He’ll do the right thing,” Joanna whispered to Sally, but her words did not soothe her any more than her touch. Amidst the chaos, Sally couldn’t help but wonder how a situation she never desired had brought about such unexpected pain and upheaval. Humiliation pressed heavily on Sally as she stood in the center of the room, surrounded by expectant gazes. She had to get out of there. Now.

“I must take the air,” Sally declared, freeing herself from her sister’s touch. Without waiting for a response, she swiftly exited the room, the eyes of her family following her every step.

* * *

The night air greeted Sally as she stepped onto the balcony, the cool breeze offering a momentary reprieve from the stifling

atmosphere inside. She leaned against the railing, anger, hurt, and confusion all crashing down on her at once.

Sally tried to make sense of the events that had unfolded so rapidly. The Duke of Chester's rejection echoed in her mind, exacerbating her disgrace. She didn't want to marry him either, but couldn't he not have found a more tactful way to declare his will?

"Lady Sally?" a voice came from the shadows and for the second time today, Leonard Harding appeared from the darkness, sending her heart into palpitations.

"What do you want?" she spat, the intensity of her gaze locking onto Leonard's figure. Under normal circumstances, she might have admired his handsome visage. The moonlight cast a particularly favorable light onto his sharp features and his blue eyes sparkled as they reflected the candle in the lamp above him. Alas, right now there was no such time. Right now, she was livid with him.

"If my presence is unwelcome, I can leave." He shrugged and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his black pantaloons.

Sally's eyes flashed with frustration. "Unwelcome? How could your presence be welcome after what you did?"

"I thought we had established that I did nothing, neither did you," he replied. She noted the change in his demeanor, his face grew harder.

“I mean after refusing to marry me in front of everyone as though I had a case of leprosy?” She had to control her volume, lest she attract more attention but right now she did not care.

“I understand your anger, but marrying you is not a solution. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us. Nor is it something you or I want, or am I wrong?”

Her resentment boiling over, Sally shot back, “Fair? What do you know about fairness? You are a Duke. Everyone will simply chalk this up as another of your rakish conquests, but me? I am ruined. My sister is ruined, nobody will marry her now. And Joanna and Kenneth? They too are implicated.” She curled her hands into fists, grateful for the long satin gloves which protected palms from being bloodied by her nails digging into them.

Leonard’s gaze held a hint of empathy, though his words remained measured. “I rejected the idea of a forced marriage, not you, Lady Sally. Our circumstances are unfortunate, but I did not mean to wound you.”

Sally scoffed, her frustration reaching its peak. “Wound me? Is that how you see it? You’ve shattered any hope I had of a respectable marriage, and now you pretend to be concerned about my feelings?”

Leonard’s response was steady, his tone measured. “That is not fair. I was doing you a favor, nothing more.”

Sally, her anger mingling with hurt, retorted, “Some favor,” she muttered even though she knew that she had been unkind.

He truly was as innocent in all of this as she was. Her words, her rage was born out of hurt and desperation, nothing else. Indeed, she didn't want to marry him either, she'd been shocked by the suggestion as well.

"I know you did not do anything wrong," she said, forcing herself to calm down as she released her fingers. "I never wanted a marriage forced upon me, either, especially not to a man I do not know well."

Leonard's expression remained composed. "I understand and I regret any pain this has caused. But we must find a way forward that preserves what dignity we can salvage."

"There is nothing to salvage. Even if we tell the truth and it is believed, I am afraid my mother is quite right. Ruination will certainly follow." She scoffed. "I suspect she planned all of this, not figuring your reluctance into her actions. Now she's ruined me. It is ironic, is it not?"

He said nothing but looked at her wistfully.

"Do not worry yourself, we will manage. I know it." Sally watched him intently, aware of the sincerity in his tone and yet uncertain that what he was saying would come to pass.

"Your Grace, you are gullible if you believe the ton will be kind to us. To me. You will face certain judgments, I know. But that will pass. With time, they will forget especially since you have a reputation already as a rake –" she raised a hand as he was about to protest. "Deserved or not, it is what people are saying about you. In this case it will help you recover quickly. You will even have gentlemen pat your back and congratulate

you on your conquest of an Earl's daughter. But I? I shall never recover from this.”

His lips parted but he said nothing. He knew it was true, he had to know.

“My family will be affected, my sister and I will have no chance of finding a match. I do not seek validation, Your Grace, I only tell you the truth. Nobody touches a lady who has been scandalized in such a manner. There is no mercy in our society for women, even if they are aristocratic.”

She took a deep breath. It felt good to get this off her chest. He had to understand what she was facing. “I would only ask that if anyone should ask why you would not marry me after this that you do not say ‘I could never marry her’ as you did in that room for it will make things infinitely worse for me. Invent a lover, invent a ... I do not know. Anything but that. Although perhaps it makes no difference.”

As the tension lingered in the air, Sally grappled with the harsh reality before her. She usually liked sitting out here at night to count the stars, alas tonight was different. This night held no promise of solace, only the daunting prospect of navigating a future that was most uncertain.

To think this morning, I worried about becoming a spinster because I could not find a husband – it is now all but a certainty. I will be a spinster but because I was rejected which is even worse.

His voice drew Sally out of her thoughts, gentle and almost undyeable as he spoke her name.

“Very well, I shall marry you,” he said, and she stared at him as if she’d been burned by a flickering candle. It was a searing shock that ran through her, and she could do nothing but allow her mouth to drop open, though she knew she’d likely look like a fish drawn from the waters.

“What in the world do you mean?” she demanded incredulously. “Do not play tricks on me, I beg of you.”

Leonard met her gaze, his tone staunch. “You heard me. I will marry you if that is what you truly want.”

Sally blinked, forcing herself to swallow though she could not reply. The shock was too deep. He’d marry her? But why the sudden change? Why this mercurial behavior?

“I ... I ...” the words refused to exit her mouth for the truth was, Sally did not know what to say, think, or even feel. What she did know was this:

Life as she’d known it was over.

CHAPTER 4



Leonard

Leonard's gaze lingered on Sally, his normally composed demeanor tinged with conflict. He understood that she struggled to grasp the sudden change in his stance. The truth was, he didn't fully comprehend it himself.

In the hasty moments after her family burst into the library, summoned by the notorious gabster who'd caught them, his world had shifted out of focus. Until then, his mission had been clear. After his father's death he'd not only inherited his dukedom, but also his sins. These sins, and his efforts to make up for them, was all he'd cared about – and yet, here he was, his attention diverted.

He hadn't been ready, he hadn't been willing to hear Kenneth's reasoning, he hadn't wanted to consider that all he'd planned for his life was suddenly snatched away due to society's rules. Thus, the moment marriage to Lady Sally was mentioned, he'd shut down. His ears had rung, and his vision narrowed so he could hear nothing but his own thoughts and see nothing but the way out.

His immediate response had been to retreat, to distance himself from a situation that felt uncomfortably close to encroaching upon his carefully guarded emotions. Faced with

a proposal he had never considered, he had done what he always did when confronted with something he wished to avoid—he fled.

As he retreated from the room, Leonard knew he had reacted harshly, and a pang of regret gnawed at him at once. Yet, in that moment, he hadn't been able to retract his abrupt dismissal. He hadn't wanted to take it back when he saw Sally stepping onto the balcony either. Marriage was not something he'd considered. Not for a long while.

“You wish to marry me after all?” she said, her voice drawing him from his trepidations.

“I do not wish to marry you anymore than you wish to marry me,” he said with caution because it was true. He didn't want this. Marriage was the furthest thing from his mind. It hadn't always been like this, of course. Once he'd dreamed of finding love, being with a woman forever, having a family – but the harsh reality he'd uncovered after his father's sudden death had robbed him of such notions.

Despite his apprehension, Leonard understood the gravity of the situation, recognizing that his actions had consequences that extended beyond his own reservations. Leonard took a deep breath, attempting to quell the inner conflict, and turned his attention back to Sally.

“I propose a marriage but in name only. It will not be real, an illusion,” he said bluntly which drove a blush to her face again. He didn't want to mortify her, but things had to be out in the open from the start if his plan was to work.

Sally's head spun, trying to comprehend the implications of his words. "In name only? What are you suggesting?"

Leonard explained. "It is clear that you will be ruined and I might also, at the very least, my reputation will be tarnished. To avoid this, we must do what is expected. But on our own terms." He leaned in and dropped his voice so only she could hear him speak. They were alone, but the ton had eyes and ears everywhere and he was certain they were already being stared at and talked about at this moment.

"This marriage will not be one of love, but a strategic move to fix our reputation. We will put on a show, make it appear as though we are a devoted couple. We'll have a public honeymoon, we will dance, attend plays, and be seen by all as a happy couple. We will play our parts, and then you will have your own life."

Confusion etched Sally's face as she absorbed his proposal. "A show? A fake marriage?"

He had to look away from her because it was clear this option would destroy whatever hopes she'd held for a happy future based on love. Unfortunately, it was the best he could offer her. Love, he'd decided, was not in the cards for him, not anymore. Not after he'd discovered after his father's death that everything he'd believed about his parents' marriage was a lie. He'd thought his mother and father contented if not moon eyed over one another. He'd believed they were a good match and he'd hoped for something like it if not more.

But it had all been lies, illusions. One could not rely on dreams of love. All one could count on was facts, which was the reality. And Sally would have to come to terms with this as well.

“It is what you wanted, a marriage to save your reputation,” he replied with a shrug, knowing he might appear cold.

“I wanted none ...”

“None of this, I know,” he replied. “Neither did I but here we are.” Leonard continued, “The best we can do is this: we will live together but be our own people. You may do as you wish, I will do the same. After the honeymoon period I will resume my travels and my business affairs, and you can do what you like. See Joanna, Rosy, your friends. You can stay in our London home if you like. You can stay at any of our properties. On occasion we will show ourselves together to maintain the illusion of a happy marriage for the world. It will ensure you are not ruined in the eyes of society.”

Sally, taken aback, insisted, “I don’t need your pity.”

He heard the wounded pride in her voice which hurt him all the more. Sally had always been the quietest one among her sisters, he knew this from Kenneth. The one with the steady head on her shoulders, the reserved one. Her tone betrayed another layer beneath all of that. Sally Blackmore was determined, strong – qualities he might have valued in a woman were he still looking for a wife.

Leonard’s gaze remained steady, his tone calm. “It’s not about pity, Lady Sally. It’s about fulfilling my duty to salvage our standings. Our marriage will be purely practical and nothing more. You’ll maintain your independence, and I am committed to ensuring this arrangement is to both our advantages.”

Sally's brows arched "Independence? It is ironic because that is what my sister Joanna always wanted, and now she is the most contented I've ever seen her, secure in a happy union."

Leonard's expression softened with a hint of understanding. "What I propose may seem unconventional, but it's the best solution given the circumstances. I assure you, this is not about compassion, but about finding a way to navigate this unfortunate situation with dignity and practicality."

He saw her rub her lips together, considering his proposal. He knew what this meant. She'd never have children, she'd never be a loved wife but it was the best he could offer.

"I suppose there is nothing to it, we will have to do this your way, Your Grace," she said, resigned to her fate as her visage turned and she looked out over the garden toward the lake beyond. In the distance, dogs barked, and Leonard remembered that the family was fond of pets. Joanna had one, didn't she? Rudy? Odd the things one's mind chose to remember when put into an awkward situation.

"Good, well I will speak to your father when he returns. In the meantime, I'll talk to your mother and Kenneth." At the word 'mother' she looked around, her nostrils aflame and her eyes narrowed with obvious disdain.

"My mother will be happy about this." There was no mistaking the bitterness that dripped from each word. He recalled the sharp exchange between the two women earlier.

Leonard, curious, asked, "Do you truly believe she arranged all of this?"

Sally nodded, a hint of bitterness in her expression. “Yes, I do. She’s been eager for me to find a husband, especially considering my age.”

As Leonard measured Sally’s words, memories of his own mother surfaced—the kindness, sweetness, and love she had showered upon him. The mere thought that she could orchestrate such a situation for him seemed inconceivable. Yet, he quickly chided himself for being unkind. The Countess, in her own way, likely only wanted what was best for Sally. Still, she’d acted recklessly if this was her doing. She’d destroyed not just her daughter’s chance at happiness but Leonard’s future plans as well. And for what?

“I can’t deny that this would be a grave action to take, if indeed she did so,” he said carefully aware that sometimes a child could mistake their parents actions. He’d done it himself many a time.

Sally, with a scoff, expressed her own sentiments. “She did. I know she did. She told me Joanna was in the library and —” She paused, her eyes wide. “Did she know you were in the library?”

Leonard closed his eyes, not wishing to contribute to this familial separation he saw coming. Although he also could not lie. With his eyes cast down he nodded. “Yes, she did. I asked her where it was when I arrived and realized Kenneth was not yet here.”

Sally stomped one foot on the ground. “I knew it. I knew it. What horrid behavior! I’ll not soon forgive her for this.”

“Lady Sally, I know this is upsetting to you but we must focus on what is important now.” Leonard was very aware of the watchful eyes upon them, through the window. Darkness had provided a certain cloak for them – but that wouldn’t last forever. He leaned toward the woman he was now to wed and dropped his voice even further, inhaling her sweet scent. “There will be time to talk about forgiveness and consequences later. For now, we need to give the ton what they want.”

“What they want?” she asked and raised her chin so that he could look into her eyes.

“They will have heard what happened in the library. They’ll speculate about what we are going to do. If we will confess to a long-standing affection or if we will allow the ton to talk more and ruin us. We must show them it is the former, pretended that we long shared a mutual understanding.”

“Pretend this has been long coming?” she asked and dipped her head to one side. “But you were gone for so long.”

“So we will say that we wrote to one another and on the night we were ruined, we could not resist. We will convince them this to so with one simple action—a dance.”

Sally hesitated, her reluctance evident, but Leonard nodded towards the intrigued onlookers and the figure of Lady Millstone, whose face could be seen on the other side of the window, staring shamelessly at them. “Look, Lady Millstone is already watching. We can’t afford to give them more to gossip about,” he adds.

Realizing the truth in his words, Sally took a deep breath.

“Very well, we shall do this. I cannot believe I am following in my sister’s footsteps. Her relationship with Kenneth was a charade from start to finish – or at least until they discovered their feelings for one another. Ours follows a similar pattern, though ...” she didn’t finish the sentence but Leonard knew what she meant. There would be no happy ending for them.

He forced his lips to curl into a smile, knowing the next few minutes would set the tone for their future.

Leonard offered his arm, his tone reassuring. “Follow my lead, Lady Sally.”

She took his arm but at the door, she paused. “I am nervous,” she admitted, her voice small and frightened, robbed entirely of the bravado she’d displayed when they first met that night. Leonard placed a hand on hers.

“We’ll get through this together.”

They entered into the ballroom and Leonard broke out in a sweat because for all the bravery and certainly he displayed for Sally, he felt uncomfortable himself. Lady Millstone whispered to some people around her, not bothering to conceal her lips with a fan. Meanwhile, he spotted Kenneth standing nearby with Joanna their eyes fixed on them. He’d need to explain himself to his friend, he knew this, but that was a problem for another day.

Lady Carlisle meanwhile hovered by the door to the ballroom and hastened their way the second she saw them.

“I do not wish to speak to her,” Sally whispered and he nodded, whisking her past the other guests and to the dancefloor.

“You will have to but not right now,” he promised. As they stepped onto the dance floor, Leonard guided Sally through the intricate movements of the dance. The ton watched, and despite the underlying tension between them, they managed to maintain an appearance of unity.

“Look into my eyes, Lady Sally,” he instructed. “We must look like a couple in love.”

She did as he'd asked but when their eyes met he saw in them only sadness and disappointment. He knew this wasn't because she had to marry him. No, he was a Duke and he knew he was rather handsome. Most ladies would have been happy to have his attention, let alone call themselves his wife. But not Sally. She hadn't chosen. She'd been robbed of her future and she was mourning it. That's what he saw in her eyes.

And in a way, this forged an understanding because he had felt that way not long ago. Robbed of the future he'd envisioned. He'd been on his way to being a great Duke, one who might have made a difference in parliament. Not that he'd been keen to become Duke. He'd loved his father and always hated the fact that he had to die so Leonard could be Duke. Still, when it had happened, he'd willingly taken on the role – his mother had been at his side then, in the early days. Her help and support had helped him take on the burden. Yet, when she'd

died in a riding accident months after Leonard became Duke, he'd been robbed of more than just his support.

He'd been robbed of ... everything. For hidden among his mother's belongings he'd found things that had shattered the world he thought he knew. In one fell swoop he'd lost his past, present, and future.

If only I had not opened her jewelry box. If only I had not read her diary ... Perhaps I would be dancing with a young lady I loved, looking forward to my wedding day.

“Your Grace, you look troubled,” Sally said and he broke free of his thoughts. “Do you regret it? It isn't too late. I could make a scene and get you out of your promise.”

“Make a scene? Would that not make our problems worse?” he asked, allowing a hint of jest back into his voice.

“It would for me. But you might be free once more as everyone would think me befogged.”

He leaned forward so that he could whisper into her ear. “We are in this together, Lady Sally, once and for all. I will speak to Kenneth after this dance, and your mother – in lieu of your father with him I'll converse in the morning. It is done, Lady Sally.”

When he moved back, he saw her visage entirely changed. Shaken almost. Had he said something wrong? Whatever had bothered her disappeared in a moment as she shook her head and raised her eyes at him.

“Very well then, your Grace. Let us give them what they truly want,” she said and to his surprise moved a little closer to him, so that their bodies were closer than was socially acceptable – well, for a couple who were strangers. Not for those already set to be wed. For those couples, this kind of closeness was entirely expected. She was sending a message.

He swung her, ensuring to smile at her as he did and when the time came to twirl her he made sure to pull her closer than necessary, much to the gasps of the crowd. Sally’s face took on a more determined expression, as if she wanted to shout her disdain at the crowd. As if she wanted to tell them they would not break her.

As they danced and he watched her come to life again as she did what he’d asked of her Leonard understood that the woman he was about to marry was not a wallflower, nor someone who’d been placed in the shadows.

She was though, formidable – and possessed the sort of quiet strength he’d always admired in a woman. Sally was making sure their story would hold, she – no, they – were showing the ton exactly what they needed to see. The perfect couple.

It was really too bad, Leonard thought as the dance came to an end, that theirs would never be more than a marriage for show, otherwise –

No! He could not allow such thoughts. There could be nothing between him and Sally. Between him and any woman. Ever. In addition, he could not allow Sally to develop romantic feelings for him either. He was not the sort of man any woman should

love for he knew he would bring nothing but misery upon any woman unfortunate enough to lose her heart to him.

He'd have to make sure Sally never got any such thoughts. Starting now.

As the song came to an end, he bowed to her.

“Should we discuss things in more detail?” she asked as around them other couples left the dancefloor. He wanted to talk to her more, come up with a plausible story but they'd spent too much time together already. The less they were in each other's company the better. This was an arrangement after all, not a love story.

“I will speak to Kenneth as I said, and then call on your home in the morning to speak to your father. For now, I must bid you goodnight,” he said and bowed.

“Good night?” she asked, confused. He couldn't blame her. They'd warmed to one another again, hadn't they? And now he was turning cold again, like a candle blown out. There was no other way. He had to act this way. For her own good. And for his.

CHAPTER 5



Sally

*A*t the breakfast table the following morning, fine porcelain plates adorned with delicate floral patterns were set meticulously alongside polished silverware. A platter of sliced fruits, including succulent peaches and ripe strawberries, greeted Sally as she sat, aware that this was the family's good china. The sort saved for holidays or special occasions.

I suppose my forced marriage is a special occasion for them.

“Good morning, Sally,” her father said with a smile as she sat. Across from her, Rosy cut into a freshly baked roll, the crust crackling as she slid her knife through it. A plume of steam emitted from the middle filling the room with a delicious aroma. Likewise, peppermint tea – usually a favorite of Sally's – stood in the middle of the table, steaming to indicate it was fresh.

Alas, she had no appetite. The events of the previous night sat heavy in her stomach and had robbed her of sleep. She hadn't spoken to Leonard again after their dance as he'd gone to speak with her mother and Kenneth before disappearing. She'd spent some time talking to Joanna, pouring her heart out about the events of the night, while also venting about their mother's

actions. Joanna fully agreed this was all her doing, but at the same time she counseled Sally to be patient and understanding. Being a mother herself had changed her sister's stance regarding forgiveness, something Sally grappled with.

"... in the early afternoon," her father said, drawing her from her thoughts. She looked up and blinked, catching the eye of Rosy who'd been peeling an egg.

"It has been some time since you saw the Duke of Chester, has it not, Father? This afternoon's meeting will be the first time?" Rosy said, eyes fixed on Sally so she'd understand the meaning.

Leonard was coming ... As he said he would. And the fact her father was talking about it meant their mother had filled him in already.

"Yes, at least half a year. The young man has been traveling so much we hardly get to see him. Although I suspect that will change now," he said, beaming at Sally.

"I suspect not. He did not want this marriage any more than I, and I do not expect he will change his life over it," she answered and plunged her spoon into a bowl full of thick porridge.

Her father opened his mouth but before he could utter a word, their mother cleared her throat and placed her napkin down beside her, extending her hand. It was clear she was looking to change the subject.

“Girls, look what your father brought me from Brighton for my birthday,” she said, proudly displaying the new addition to her jewelry collection, a shimmering ruby ring.

Rosy, a lover of all things jewelry, leaned in with wide-eyed admiration, marveling at the gem’s brilliance, as if she’d already forgotten what their mother had done to Sally. “Oh, Mama, it’s positively stunning!”

Attempting to include Sally in the excitement, the Countess turned to her eldest daughter, a hint of concern in her gaze as if she was ready for a rebuke. “Sally, my darling, what do you think of the ring?”

There were many things Sally could have said. All of them cutting. She could have reminded her mother that her father had missed her birthday altogether. Or that he had showered all the family with gifts large and small for years since his misdeeds had been revealed. He’d cheated an orphanage out of money and cheated on his wife with their governess. Both these statements would have been true. Although Sally knew these words would hurt her mother, they’d also harm her father who had worked hard to make amends both within his family and in the community.

Besides, Rosy would be reminded of the worst time of her life, when she’d hardly been able to get out of bed, crushed by the truth. No, she kept her words to herself. Instead, she glanced at the ring and shrugged, returning to her porridge.

The Countess exchanged a glance with her husband, who cleared his throat.

“Sally, I understand that last night’s events may have come as a shock to you,” he began gently, pouring himself a cup of tea. “But you should feel fortunate. Leonard Harding is a fine gentleman—a man of integrity and kindness. I’ve seen firsthand the good work he’s done with the orphanage and other endeavors. I am certain if business did not take him away so often he’d be a compassionate peer at parliament as well.”

Sally glanced up briefly, offering a polite nod before returning her gaze to her plate.

“He may be a wonderful match for some lady but this particular lady would have preferred to make her own choices. Or have you forgotten how difficult it was for Joanna when she was robbed of her choice?” Sally asked, keeping her tone even. Across from her, Rosy’s hand stopped in the air, the egg yolk wobbling on the spoon. Likewise, her parents stared at her.

“Sally, the situation is different,” her father said but the strain had crept into his voice. “I made a mistake putting Joanna in the situation she was in. You on the other hand were caught ...”

“Because Mother arranged it all!”

“I intended for you to be pushed into getting to know the Duke better, that is all. I did not know you’d be half disrobed,” her mother replied. Lord Carlisle closed his eyes and rubbed his eyebrows so furiously, Sally wondered if they might come off entirely.

“I do not need to hear about my daughter’s state of dress or undress as it were. And I do not need this tension at the breakfast table. Sally, it is what it is. You must marry him” he said. “As far as calamities of this nature go, we were lucky. He is Kenneth’s best friend and a Duke. Many young ladies would envy such a match, and you will ascend to the title of Duchess.”

Sally, however, remained unconvinced. “But, Father, do you truly believe he wishes to marry me?” she challenged. “He seemed to enjoy his life with his travels and let us not forget the women.”

“We must not put stock in what the scandal sheets say,” her father replied. “Kenneth always said it was nothing but Banbury tales and I believe that to be so.”

Sally steamed inside. She knew she had no choice but to agree to this marriage, but that didn’t mean she was pleased with it. While she was distressed, she knew she’d have to make the best of this – whatever the circumstances. It wasn’t as if she was blind to the truth in her father’s words. She would be a Duchess, and for the daughter of an Earl that was an achievement. Marrying up was something many ladies dreamed about. Yet, she’d dreamed of more ...Most of all, she’d always wanted children and in an arranged marriage, that would likely never come to pass. Not the way Leonard had reacted.

“He said he wouldn’t marry me at first,” she pointed out, but her father waved his hand, the light reflecting of his fork as he did so.

“It was the shock speaking, surely. You are a paragon of beauty, kindness, and grace. Your accomplishments and

impeccable manners speak volumes. It's a wonder no one has proposed to you before."

Sally's heart softened as she recognized the sincerity in her father's words. She realized then that his fears of her ending up a spinster mirrored her own, perhaps even more intensely than she had imagined. And if her father was so concerned, then her mother's worry had to have been multiple times that – being that she knew how hard it was to make a good match. As she looked at her parents now, she saw the strain of two people who'd thought their daughter's fate sealed lifted from them.

The realization weighed heavily upon her, tempered by the understanding that her parents' concern stemmed from a place of genuine love and care.

Quietly, Sally withdrew into herself, her earlier defiance melting away. She observed her mother's reassured expression, understanding the depth of their shared apprehension about her future. In that moment, the gravity of their unspoken fears spoke volumes, prompting Sally to hold her tongue and retreat into a contemplative silence.

* * *

The garden, bathed in the soft hues of the early afternoon, provided a serene backdrop as Sally sat on a weathered bench, her gaze fixed on the winding road from where Leonard would arrive. She was training her mind to think of him as Leonard rather than the Duke or His Grace, for she'd have to call him by his Christian name once they were wed. She'd waited to see him for she realized they'd not discussed when they be married or where. None of the details had been resolved nor their approach to this. He'd left her so suddenly, she'd still not recovered fully.

As she waited in silence, lost in her thoughts, the sound of approaching footsteps drew her attention. Turning her head, she saw Rosy making her way towards her, her expression a mix of concern and sympathy.

“Hey, Sally,” Rosy greeted softly, taking a seat beside her sister on the bench. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Sally managed a faint smile, grateful for her sister’s company. “I needed some fresh air,” she admitted. “I love the spot under the oak tree, don’t you?”

“I do. Do you remember when we had a swing hanging here? Father took it down when Joanna decided to climb up it,” Rosy giggled and despite herself, Sally joined in.

“I miss those days,” Sally said and stretched her legs out a little as a squirrel leaped from branch to branch above. “I wonder if there will be a tree like this at Leonard’s estate.”

“There is,” Rosy exclaimed. “Do you not remember? We had a picnic there just before he left for his first journey.”

Sally nodded, recalling the afternoon now. “We played shuttlecock with him.”

“Yes, you and he paired up against Kenneth and Joanna. And you won. I thought the two of you were a lovely pair even then,” Rosy paused and turned to her placing a hand on her back. “I still think you could be.”

Surprised by her sister's admission, Sally turned to look at her, curiosity sparking in her eyes. "You do?"

Rosy nodded, her expression solemn. "Faith, yes! I mean, then you and Joanna would be married to best friends. I really thought that if he hadn't left and been gone for such long periods you might have found one another. I wonder where he always goes, he is gone for weeks at a time."

Sally shrugged. "Business. You know his family owns vineyards, and not just here but in Spain and Portugal. Joanna said his father's sudden death left the estate in somewhat of a shambles. He tried to send his steward and representatives, but I suppose he wasn't satisfied and thus went himself. Plus, he visits the vineyards in England as well."

Rosy nodded and then her face lit up. "Perhaps you can go with him on his travels?"

A hint of sadness flickered across Sally's features as she considered her sister's words. He'd made it quite clear he wished for them to lead separate lives after the honeymoon. But had he meant it? She looked at the road again and considered the time. It was so late now, she had to wonder if he'd changed his mind. He did seem to be quite the peculiar man.

The memory of the Duke's sudden change in behavior, and his frequent travels, lingered in her mind like a shadow. "I think not," she simply said. She wetted her lips when another thought came to her. "Rosy, why did you not agree with me last night when I accused our mother? You know she arranged it all she all but admitted it at breakfast."

Rosy reached out, placing a comforting hand on her sister's shoulder. "I must beg your pardon. It is true, I didn't speak up last night," she apologized with a grimace. "I knew what Mama was doing, but I was so shocked I didn't know what to say and then the Duke reacted so harshly and I didn't want to make everything worse."

Sally turned to her sister, offering a reassuring smile. "It's alright, Rosy," she assured her, her resolve shining through despite the turmoil within. "I assumed that was it, but I had to ask. You understand, yes?"

"I am sorry you are stuck in this situation but marrying him is still the best option, is it not?"

"Of course it is. And Father is not wrong. I will be a Duchess. I will be in a position of influence and I do not intend to squander that opportunity. I'll handle it. I always do."

Though her heart ached with uncertainty, Sally forced herself to maintain a facade of acceptance. After all, she was determined to make this marriage work, no matter the challenges that lay ahead. Still, as she looked out at the long, empty road ahead she had to wonder. Was there even going to be a marriage? Or had he changed his mind once more?

CHAPTER 6



Leonard

“*Y*ou see?” Leonard gestured with frustration. “It was an accident, but thanks to Lady Millstone and others like her, it doesn’t matter. We are trapped.”

Aaron Finch, his assistant, shifted his seat and ran a hand through his blond hair, his green eyes wide with shock.

“I do not know what to say, Lenny. When I said it would be beneficial to attend a ball now that you are back in town, I did not think you’d return engaged. But is it truly all bad?”

Leonard looked at his friend and sighed. They had only known one another well for a little under three years, having met when Leonard took over the Dukedom from his father. Aaron’s own father had been Leonard’s father’s business partner in their vineyard venture for many years before passing away of a heart attack at a young age. Ironic, really, given that Leonard had originally believed his own father had died of a heart attack also – though he soon learned that wasn’t the case at all.

Aaron had assumed the title of Viscount, though he had little interest in the peerage, focusing instead on running his estate.

To say he'd been positively surprised when Aaron paid them a visit was an understatement. Though their fathers had been close, he hadn't had an occasion to spend time with Aaron before. They'd see one another passing at a ball but hadn't become friends until after losing their fathers.

They were no longer just good friends; indeed, Aaron was now Leonard's chief assistant who took care of the vineyard business and their merchants while Leonard traveled the world.

"Well?" Aaron asked, prompting Leonard.

"It is if you consider I never wanted to marry at all," he said and shook his head.

"Lady Sally," Aaron mused. "She is the sister of the Duchess of Wells, is she not?"

Leonard nodded. "The very same. Have you met her?"

"No, not that I recall," Aaron said and looked out of the window, "I do not frequent the social scene as you know. However, I have heard the servants speak of her. She seems a woman worthy of respect."

Leonard's brow furrowed as he absorbed Aaron's words. "Do you doubt that I will treat her as such?" he questioned, a hint of defensiveness creeping into his voice.

Aaron shook his head, bewildered by the outburst. Of course he was, his friend had no idea Leonard had an intense fear of somehow mistreating his future wife. The truth was, to anyone on the outside, Leonard would appear a stable, calm, and collected man with a witty sense of humor and buckets of charm. So much like his father people would say, it was almost as if they were one and the same. For a long time, he'd felt this was a compliment. Until he discovered his enigmatic father's kindness and compassion had only been skin deep.

Beneath the mask of a caring husband, father, and landowner someone altogether different had hidden, someone vile and calculating. A manipulator. A man who would cheat on his wife without a second thought and steal from his own employees, knowing they had no way of making it without the funds he withheld. His father had been a monster and he'd been blind to it – until the day he read his mother's diary. Within its withered pages the truth had been revealed, the affairs, the insults, the occasional physical mistreatment of his mother – she'd documented it all.

Had she wanted him to find this truth after her death? Had she tried to tell him that his perfect father was not as she thought him to be? Most importantly, had she known more about his business dealings than she wrote in her diary? She'd hinted at his misdeeds which had inspired him to look deeper, uncovering years of financial discrepancies. Of course, the real truth hadn't been revealed until after he'd spoken to the victims ...

“I never said that,” Aaron spoke up now. “Why would you assume I'd think that of you? In fact, I am confused as to why you are not happier to marry. Your mother said you were eager to find a wife.”

“My mother wished for me to marry, but that was before I knew what sort of man my father was,” he stopped speaking, not wanting to reveal too much.

The only person who knew every detail regarding both his father’s marital behavior and business failings was Kenneth. All Aaron knew was that his father had hidden his philandering, unkind side from everyone including Leonard. He hadn’t told him about the verbal abuse his mother suffered behind closed doors, the humiliations she’d been subjected to by her outwardly loving husband. She’d kept all of that to herself, taking the truth to her grave – and Leonard had sworn to do the same. He didn’t want the world to look at his mother with pity or remember her as a victim. She’d worked hard to preserve her outward grace and regality and he’d keep it that way.

Besides, it would do nobody any good to know what his father was like. Until recently, Leonard hadn’t planned on getting married and even now that he was, he had no intention of having an heir – thus his father’s line and his heritage would die out with Leonard, ensuring no Harding man ever mistreated his wife again.

Aaron had no idea. He still thought of Leonard’s father as the capable businessman who had built an empire on grapes. Nobody knew the truth, only Kenneth and those poor vintners and their helpers who’d been conned by his father.

“I wish I understood why you think being your father’s son will mean you will one day become a horrible husband. Are you not also your mother’s son, who was an exemplary wife and mother?” Aaron asked. He only knew hints about the truth and Leonard wanted to keep it that way.

With a heavy sigh, Leonard raised his hands in a gesture of resignation. “Ever since I found out what a horrible man my father was to my mother,” he confessed, “I’ve feared I’d turn into him.”

Aaron offered a gentle smile. “I do not think you could, Leonard. Besides, now you have no choice. You must marry.”

“I do but I have already made it known to Lady Sally that this will not be a marriage based on love. This is out of necessity and nothing more – and it shall remain that way.”

Aaron watched him carefully. “If you say so. Am I to expect you here more often then?”

Leonard frowned. “No, not at all. Did you not hear what I said? This marriage is to protect her reputation. Nothing else will change other than that we will have a duchess in these halls once more. I will continue to visit the vineyards in Portugal, Spain, and around the country while you will deal with the merchants.”

“Very well. But I do not mind going to the vineyards myself, Lenny. Or we could send someone else. Almost no owner goes on their own to visit each location every year,” Aaron pointed out.

Leonard shrugged and got up, pulling his waistcoat down. “I know that, but I like it. And you like dealing with the merchants, thus it is a perfect arrangement. It is, in addition, the arrangement we made when I hired you as my assistant.”

He didn't want to tell Aaron the real reason he visited vineyards every year. It would have meant exposing his father. The truth was, his father had purchased vineyards around England and the continent, but he'd manipulated the staff who tended to the vines into taking a cut of the proceeds in lieu of payment, telling them they would make much more that way – then, year after year he'd paid them a pittance, keeping the majority for himself. According to his workers, he'd told them that the vineyards were not making much money and that he too made only a meager amount. He'd discovered this thanks to his mother's diary – and after his steward confessed to playing a part in the scheme. The whole truth hadn't come to light until he'd taken it upon himself to speak to the workers – who'd been shocked to find out the wine produced by them was one of the most popular in England.

Since then, he'd taken it upon himself to visit those vineyards to ensure the workers who had slipped into poverty recovered not just their wages but their homes and health – all of which had suffered due to his father.

Alas, no matter how much he repaid, or how many visits he made nothing ever seemed though to extinguish the burning anger in his soul. Discovering his father's actions had changed who he was. Gone was the Leonard of old, the charming, witty young man seeking love.

That man, he thought, would have been a good husband for Sally. But the man he was today? No. he could turn into a monster at any moment – and she deserved better than that. He'd not allow it, he'd now allow her to suffer – even if it meant he had to make her despise him.

He glanced at the grandfather clock and he realized he'd been procrastinating all afternoon to push out the inevitable. The Blackmores had to be waiting for him already. He really didn't

want to go to speak to her father, nor make wedding arrangements but there was no way around it. He had to go, and now.

CHAPTER 7



Sally

*I*n the opulent drawing room of Everbright Manor, a heavy silence hung in the air as the family gathered, the atmosphere weighed down by the uncertainty of the situation. It was late afternoon now and Leonard had yet to arrive.

“Where is he?” Sally’s mother said as she stepped to the window.

“Dear, I am certain he will arrive soon enough,” her father said and turned his newspaper to another page while from the next room, Rosy’s voice rose accompanied by her dog Maisie’s barks.

“What if he has had second thoughts?” Lady Carlisle speculated. “It could ruin our family’s reputation.”

Sally looked up from her place by the fireplace, the book she’d attempted to read on her lap. It had occurred to her this might happen but she hadn’t wanted to say it out loud, especially because she didn’t truly know how she felt.

Sally's father shook his head in disagreement. "I doubt it," he interjected firmly. "He is honorable, just as his father was. The late Duke of Chester was one of my staunchest allies in the House of Lords and he raised his son right. He would not do something like this."

Sally looked up, her expression reflecting the inner turmoil raging within her. She knew deep down that marriage to Leonard was her only salvation, but the prospect filled her with a sense of dread and resignation all the same. She'd hoped to have a chance to speak to him when he arrived, so they might clear the air so to speak, alas it was getting later and later.

Just then, Rosy entered, her usually carefree face marked with a frown, and scanned the room. "He is still not here?"

"He will be," Lord Carlisle replied.

"Or so we hope," added his wife.

Sally wanted to ask her mother if she regretted her choices yet but knew it would only stoke more malcontent within the household.

"If this marriage doesn't go ahead, I'll be ruined too," Rosy lamented, quivering with anxiety.

Sally reached out, offering her sister a comforting embrace after pulling her onto the chaise beside her. "No, Rosy," she reassured her, her voice steady despite the tumult raging within her. "All will be well. You won't be ruined. He will

come, and I will be Duchess and your only problem will be finding a Duke of your own to marry, so that we can be the three merry Duchess,” she said, willing herself to feel the positivity her words hinted at.

Her father offered Sally a reassuring smile, a silent acknowledgment of her strength in the face of adversity. Their subsequent silence was interrupted when Maisie barged into the room, her bark echoing off the tall walls.

“Rosy, will you quiet this dog please? I do not know what it is with you girls and these dogs. First Joanna, now you. Do take her outside,” Lady Carlisle cried as she rubbed her temple. “They will give me a megrim.”

“It is just one dog and she barked only a little,” Rosy complained but did as she was told.

“Dear, why don’t you take the air as well. It isn’t healthy to be indoors all day long,” her father said, addressing his wife. Sally’s eyes narrowed as she watched the two look at one another. Then, her mother’s bright eyes swayed towards Sally and she scrutinized her for a little too long before nodding.

“I suppose you are right,” she said and turned, her gown swaying as she exited the room. The moment she was out of earshot, he got up and joined Sally’s side.

“Well, now that it is just the two of us, why don’t we talk?” he said, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“I am unsure what there is to talk about,” she confessed. “He either comes or he does not. Either way, my fate is sealed, and I shall make the best of it.”

“You always were the most level-headed one. I know that you have the stoic heart of my own mother who managed to muddle through anything. But please, I want you to know that I am certain all will be well, my dear,” he assured her, his gaze filled with determination. “Even when it doesn’t look like it right now.”

Sally pressed her lips together before letting out a heavy sigh. “I just wish Mother had not acted so rashly. I know she was worried I might wind up an old maid but this? Arranging a marriage in such a way?”

“If you truly do not wish to marry him,” he said, his tone steady, “I will find a way to shoulder the responsibility of restoring our family’s name. I’ve done it once before.”

His words surprised her, though she knew it would be impossible. Sally’s mind drifted back to the tumultuous events of the past two years—the scrutiny, the whispers of scandal surrounding her father’s mismanagement of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel orphanage. It had looked as if the family might fall out of favor with society because of his actions for some while. Yet, through sheer determination and with the support of allies like Kenneth and Leonard, her father had managed to redeem himself, albeit partially. Another scandal, another blow to their family’s reputation, would be devastating. They had only just begun to rebuild what had been lost.

“No, Father. You need not worry,” Sally said when as if on cue, the arrival of a carriage outside quickened Sally’s

heartbeat. A knock on the door followed, and Jenkins, their loyal butler, ushered in Leonard.

Sally rose to her feet, her movements graceful as she curtsied in greeting.

“It is good to see you, Your Grace,” she said and rose to her full height.

“And you,” was all Leonard offered in return, along with a bow. “My Lord, I apologize for the delay but I had matters to tend to. I should have sent a note.”

“Never you worry, Your Grace. I knew you’d not let me down. Reliable as oxen, the Hardings are, eh wot?” he winked at Sally but she was focused more on Leonard’s reaction. He seemed to have stiffened at the mention of his family name. Why was that?

“Well, I try,” Leonard replied in so stiff a tone, Sally froze. His coldness unsettled her, leaving her shaken and questioning what had caused this change in him. He’d been cheerful when they first met in the library, and almost warm when he proposed their fake marriage – but now he was changed. He used to be so different—steady, dependable—but now, he seemed so unpredictable.

As the two men left for the study, restlessness consumed Sally. She paced the room, her mind racing with unanswered questions. Why was Leonard behaving this way? What had she done to deserve such indifference? She was trying to do her best but he was entirely uninterested.

Half an hour passed before she was interrupted by a summons to the study. She took a deep breath, swallowed down her apprehension and did as she'd been beckoned to do.

Upon entry into the study, Sally found Leonard standing by the window, his gaze fixed on the world outside, seemingly oblivious to her presence.

“There you are, Sally,” her father greeted her and for a split second, Leonard looked her way and nodded his chin slightly.

“We have come to an agreement that is satisfactory to all involved. His Grace and I have determined that we must make haste to silence the Lady Millstones of this world. Thus, I'm writing to the Archbishop of Canterbury right away to obtain a special license. You will marry next week.”

Sally's eyes darted to Leonard to gauge his reaction but he remained silent, his hands buried in his pockets. One week. In one week she'd be married to this man who might as well have been a statue in her sister Joanna's statue garden.

“Where will we wed, Your Grace?” she asked but he only shrugged.

“Wherever you please, Lady Sally,” he replied.

“We'll have the ceremony here, on our estate,” her father broke in, his tone resolute and a little too eager. “And then we will have a wedding breakfast here and the two of you can leave for your honeymoon. Although His Grace tells me that your honeymoon period will be spent at his home.”

“So you can become accustomed to it,” Leonard said, finally showing any interest although Sally realized almost right away that he was only looking to remind her of their agreement. They’d have their honeymoon together to convince people of the legitimacy of their union – and then they’d go their separate ways. Separate but together. Just how would that look? Would they live together but never see each other? Have separate households? Would she be doomed to go to sleep next to a man who’d always have his back to her?

She inhaled sharply as shot out for their wedding night. They were marrying for show only. So that meant ... An ache went through her as she realized the enormity of it all. They were marrying for others, not for themselves. He’d said she’d have her own life – and the true meaning of this suddenly sat in. She’d never have a child. She’d never be a mother. She’d been so busy trying to convince herself all would be well she’d neglected what she stood to lose. And he? He’d have no heir. Had he realized this? Or had he assumed they would still ensure there was an heir? Her head swirled with the possibility. No, this would not do. She had to speak to him privately. Somehow.

“Your Grace, would you care to take the air with me? So we might discuss our honeymoon?” she asked, eyes fixed on him so he might sense the urgency in her request.

To her great dismay he shook his head, though reluctantly. “I am afraid I cannot, Lady Sally. I must return home. If I am to take a honeymoon, I must ensure my business is taken care of and that requires my attention now.” He bowed again, turned to her father and issued an equally curt farewell to him.

As he left, Sally stood there, watching him go, feeling a profound sense of loss wash over her once more. At that moment, she couldn't help but wonder if the man she was about to marry was still the same person she once knew—or if he had become someone entirely different.

CHAPTER 8



Sally

“*I* can still remember when we were little and we’d play wedding with our stuffed bears as grooms,” Joanna said on the morning of Sally’s wedding as she helped her braid her long chestnut hair into a crown.

Sally smiled and looked at Joanna in the mirror. “With bedsheets as veils. And we’d get the cook to make us little cakes so we could pretend to have a wedding breakfast,” she said with a laugh.

“Yes, it feels like yesterday. Soon Louisa will be the one to play-act as a bride, and then she will be one soon enough,” Joanna replied, then pulled a face. “I hope not too soon.”

“You only just took her in, and already you worry about giving her up again to a husband; you do read too much, Joanna,” Sally teased, grateful for the respite from her thoughts.

“Perhaps,” she said, dropping her arms as she touched Sally’s back. “You do look lovely,” she said.

“Thank you,” Sally replied while placing a hand on Joanna’s. Despite Joanna’s efforts to cheerfully infuse the room, Sally couldn’t shake the overwhelming sense of dread that clung to her like a heavy cloak.

This was supposed to be the happiest day of her life, the day she had always dreamed of—a day filled with love and joy. Instead, it felt like a bleak reminder of the uncertain future that lay ahead. There were many things she could do once she was Duchess. She’d have influence, respect, and wealth beyond what she could imagine now. She could do so much good in the world, which was a blessing. But at what cost?

Marrying a man she hardly knew, who had made it abundantly clear that he wanted nothing to do with her, wasn’t exactly what dreams were made of.

“Sally, are you alright?” Joanna’s concerned voice broke through her thoughts, snapping Sally back to the present. “I mean, as alright as you can be.”

The sisters had met almost daily since the news of her engagement and the hasty wedding had broken. Joanna thus already knew Sally’s feelings, but of course, today was no ordinary day.

Forcing herself to focus, Sally managed to give a weak smile. “I’m fine, Jo. Just a bit nervous, that’s all.”

Joanna’s brow furrowed with worry as she studied her sister’s troubled expression. “You don’t have to be nervous, Sally. Leonard is a wonderful man. You’ll see. This is difficult right now, but in the end you will be alright.”

Sally's smile faltered at Joanna's words. "He may be Jo, but he hasn't shown it," she confessed, her cheeks twitching with nerves. "He hasn't come to see me once since he talked to Father. I sent a message asking to meet to discuss the wedding, but he replied saying he was too busy."

Joanna's eyes widened in surprise. "I saw Leonard twice this week," she exclaimed. "He was with Kenneth, and they played billiards together."

Sally's heart sank. "You see? That is what I meant. He is avoiding me. I suppose that is what it will be from now on."

"No, Sally. Maybe they were talking about the wedding and ..."

"You need not comfort me, Joanna. I am no child. I know how it will be and it will be alright. I will be alright. I always am. I thought hearing about father's infidelity and his actions regarding the orphanage would break me, but neither did. Nor shall this," she said, wishing she were as determined as her words suggested. "I will not make a cake of myself thinking things will be different after we are wed."

"I think you will find it will be. You never know what can happen, nor how things came to pass. I never thought I'd love Kenneth when we first started our deception. Nor did I think I'd be one-and-twenty and a mother of two and a Duchess to boot. But I am. Do not lose faith in miracles," Joanna said and pressed a kiss on Sally's cheek.

“Well, at least we will have a wedding cake, flummery, and cheese and grapes at the wedding, all my favorites. I made Mother get them all,” Sally said, determined not to slip further down her despair.

“First we’ll have to get you married,” Joanna said with a wide smile.

* * *

The wedding breakfast buzzed with lively chatter and the clinking of glasses, the air thick with the scent of freshly cut flowers and the gentle rustle of leaves in the garden. Leonard, however, felt suffocated by the festivities, his chest tight as he weaved his way through the crush of guests.

Who invited all these people? Who are they? I recognize hardly a single face.

He’d allowed the Blackmores to make the preparations, escaping that responsibility along with any unnecessary meetings with Sally. Distance was what they needed, now and in the future. He’d already planned his next trip to Portugal, and as soon as they got through their honeymoon, he’d set off.

For now, he sought refuge in the garden, escaping through the music room door. The sounds of the celebration drifted out behind him. Jovial and merry it stood in stark contrast to his feelings. He could hardly even recall the ceremony not the vows he’d taken. It had all passed in a blur.

It was true, Sally had looked like an angel in her lovely dress and with her chestnut hair braided around her head as though she were a Queen, not a Duchess in the making. His heart had

skipped a beat when she'd raised her veil and her beautiful heart-shaped face came into view. Alas, the sadness in her eyes had robbed him of that feeling – or perhaps it was a good thing. Admiring her beauty would just open a door to much more treacherous thoughts and feelings.

As he paced the garden path, lost in his own thoughts, Leonard was startled by the sound of footsteps approaching. He turned to find Kenneth, his loyal friend and confidant, stepping out to join him. “You look like a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders, Lenny,” Kenneth remarked, his brow furrowed with concern.

“I am, Kenneth,” he admitted. “I can't shake the feeling that I've just robbed Sally of her future.”

Kenneth regarded him with empathy. “Lenny, you saved her from ruination. You didn't rob her of anything.”

Leonard met Kenneth's gaze, his eyes filled with a mixture of anguish and self-reproach. “Of course I have. You know that I cannot be a husband to her, not really. We had this conversation. I can't bear the thought of taking her back with me to the estate,” he confessed. “To have her life there. To be with me.”

Kenneth nodded in understanding, “I know that is how you feel, Lenny but I wish you were not so resistant to the possibility of being happy. You used to want this, marriage, children – and she is the perfect match for you. I always thought so and if you hadn't made it known you didn't want to wed, I'd have encouraged you to court her long ago.”

Leonard shook his head, a bitter scoff escaping his lips. “But you do know better. You are the only one who knows why. So why are you still pushing me?”

“I am not,” Kenneth protested.

“But you want me to fall for her, you want this to be real,” he said and watched him carefully.

“I do, I wish it were. I wish you’d let it be real,” his friend admitted.

“But I can’t. I care for her, that is true. She is a good woman. She deserves all the best. And I will give her what I can financially. She will have the best gowns, the best food, the finest art and books and anything she wants – anything but love or marriage,” Leonard said, feeling the weight increase on his chest.

Kenneth’s expression softened as he regarded his friend. “You know, Leonard,” he began slowly, “I wish you would take your own advice—the advice you once gave me.”

Leonard dipped his head to the side in confusion. “What advice?”

Kenneth offered him a knowing smile. “You once told me that just because my father was a philanderer and a wicked man, it didn’t necessarily mean I would become the same,” he reminded Leonard gently. “You told me I am my own man with my own path to forge.”

Leonard felt his face turn into a smile as he recalled his own words “Those were the words of a fool,” he murmured bitterly, his voice heavy with self-condemnation.

“So, you are saying that I am destined to cheat on Joanna? To mistreat her like my father did my mother? To grow cold toward Peter and Louisa?” Kenneth challenged him.

“Of course not. You would never,” Leonard replied, vexed at this carefully crafted trap his friend had set him. Smiling, Kenneth stepped a little closer.

“Then if this is true for me, why is it not for you? Does it not stand to reason we all make our own path? Doesn’t it stand to reason we all can do what we please regardless of what those that came before us do or want?” Kenneth raised his eyebrow as he posed this challenge – and Leonard had to admit that for once he did not have a witty reply.

He blinked, driving the dryness out of his eyes and looked at Kenneth again. “You are not wrong and if it were only a matter of infidelity, I’d agree. But it is not. My father was much worse. He kept mistresses, he abused my mother horridly with his tongue and sometimes his hands. Your father never did that,” he said sternly. Kenneth’s lips parted but he raised his hand to stop his friend. “My father cheated poor vineyard workers out of their wages by convincing the vintners to take a cut of the proceeds instead of payment. Knowing that he intended to cheat them. Knowing it would ruin these poor people. Knowing that it might cause them to starve to death, to lose their homes – he was a monster.”

“But you are not,” Kenneth said, his tone stern and his eyes piercing.

“Not yet. My father wasn’t either. Outwardly, he was a prince, the pinkest of the pink. Adored by all. Women were charmed and men wanted to be his friend. He blinded everyone with his charming manipulations,” Leonard said, his voice rising. “Mother never thought he’d become the sort of man to keep a mistress in every city, who might harm her in any way. Nobody ever knew. And in business?” He scoffed and kicked a pebble across the garden. “He had everything thinking he was honorable and kind. Lord Finch never once suspected that behind closed door my father abused their workers financially. Aaron told me his father only spoke in the highest tones of my father. He ... he made himself look like an angel when really, he was the devil.”

“What your father did was awful, Leonard, but you are not him. You are making amends. You travel to all these vineyards time and again to pay the people compensation. And not out of the business’ holdings. You pay them out of your personal funds, I know you have been selling valuables from your father’s storage.”

Leonard raised his arms. “It is only right. Their wages paid for my father’s riches. I should hold on to them while they suffer?”

“I didn’t say that,” Kenneth started but Leonard no longer heard him. The moment he’d seen the damage his father had done to his workers he’d vowed to repay them. Not just repay them for their losses but compensate them for their suffering. And suffered they had plenty. One worker had lost his home because he could not pay the landlord, leaving the family homeless. Another had grown ill with a cough which he’d passed on to his children -two of whom had died because they could not afford a physician. The stories went on and on.

Leonard had done all he could to make things right, compensating them all for their lost wages. In many cases, it wasn't enough. Thus, he'd begun to help them onto their feet again. He'd helped those who lost their homes find shelter, those who could not work anymore support, and those who'd lost family – well, he'd offered his ear and accepted their wrath.

Since then, he'd returned several times a year to check on their progress. Many workers remained at the vineyards and business was booming – as it always had. Although in an effort to truly give back, he'd raised funds by selling his father's belongings – his artwork, his precious books, his golden cufflinks – and handed those funds to his workers.

“Kenneth,” he said patiently. “I do what I can to help those my father harmed. But for my mother, I can do nothing. All the years he mistreated her – how I wish I could have taken that from her. But I can't. I couldn't. The only thing I can do is make sure no other woman suffers as she did.”

“You have never had a mean bone in your body, Leonard,” Kenneth replied, his tone now exasperated.

“Maybe not. But how do I know when my father became the great manipulator?”

As the sounds of the wedding celebration drifted out into the garden, Leonard was left grappling with the weight of his own regrets, the echoes of Kenneth's words resonating in the depths of his troubled soul.

CHAPTER 9



Sally

Sally clutched a handkerchief in her sweaty palm as the carriage rumbled along the country road toward Leonard's estate. The wedding ceremony had been as uncomfortable, with her and Leonard avoiding eye contact.

Even during the breakfast, they hadn't spent much time together. Although she hadn't minded, Joanna had brought Peter and Louisa to the celebration, and she'd much rather have spent her time with them than with a man who would eventually rather be anywhere than at her side.

Thus, she'd enjoyed her time with her family one last time. Alas, the hour of their leaving had come all too soon, and now she was, awaiting this new life of a Duchess.

"You can see the house from here," Leonard said, pulling her from her thoughts.

As Leonard guided Sally's attention towards his estate, Sally was momentarily speechless. The quaint Tudor-era dwelling nestled amidst lush greenery. Its intricate timber-framed façade invoked images of days gone by, with leaded windows adorned with colorful stained glass casting playful patterns of

light onto the cobblestone path. She could almost see knights jostling in the courtyard, jesters telling tales and jokes, and the nobility indulging in a feast.

However, as they arrived at the grand estate that would now be her home, Sally's thoughts turned to more pressing matters. Was she expected to greet the servants like Joanna did when she married Kenneth? She recalled Joanna telling her how exhilarating it had been to be introduced as the new Duchess to an entire household.

As the carriage came to a halt, she looked outside - though, to her disappointment, only an older housekeeper stood at the door, awaiting their arrival.

"Here we are, your new home," Leonard said as he hopped out of the vehicle and proffered his hand to assist her out.

"This is Mrs. Farnsworth, my housekeeper," he stopped and pulled his shoulders back, his hair shimmering in the sunshine. "Our housekeeper."

Sally turned to the older woman, who stood half a head shorter than her but exuded warmth and joy as she curtsied.

"Your Grace," she said, and Sally felt a thrill go through her at her new title. "What a pleasure to meet you."

"And you, Mrs. Farnsworth," she replied as the woman beamed at her.

“Is everything ready?” Leonard asked, and the woman, whose hair was still a brilliant auburn despite her age, nodded eagerly.

“Of course, the entire house has been prepared. Your Grace, if you need anything, please you need only ask. I have served in his house for forty years, and I can surely assist you with anything,” she said, but Leonard stiffened a little beside her. Why? The woman had said nothing out of the ordinary.

“Indeed, Mrs. Farnsworth knows this place better than I, and thus I am sure she will show you everything you need to know. Meanwhile, I must excuse ...”

Sally’s eyes grew wide. He was trying to pawn her off on the housekeeper instead of showing her their home. She knew this wasn’t real, but they had an arrangement, and this was not it.

Oh no. Not like this. I will brook no such treatment.

“Leonard,” she began firmly, “I thought you might take the time to show me yourself,” she dropped her voice a little as she added, “as we discussed.”

“Mrs. Farnsworth, would you excuse us?” He said and then took her gently by the elbow. Despite their strain, the sensation of his touch sent a jolt through her. Once they came to a stop, Leonard lowered his voice, his brow furrowing in consternation. “Sally, I have work to do. Mrs. Farnsworth is more than capable of showing you the estate.”

Undeterred, Sally pressed on, reminding him of his commitment to spend their first few weeks together. “I do not doubt her capabilities. However, you said you had to work this whole last week so you could take the time to spend our first few weeks together. That is why none of this was discussed properly between us. I would rather have arranged all of this, but you were unable to meet. Thus, we must make do with it right now.”

“I did have to work,” he protested, but she would not have it.

“You said we’d spend this honeymoon here; we’d be seen together so everyone would believe our story. Do you not think your housekeeper and your staff will find it odd if you do not at least show your wife around? Besides, you gave me your word. I won’t let you go back on your promise,” she asserted.

Her words struck a chord with Leonard, and she could see the flicker of hesitation in his eyes. With a sigh of resignation, he relented.

“Very well,” he said and turned to his housekeeper. “That will be all, Mrs. Farnsworth. I will show the Duchess the estate myself and you can meet with her regarding her preferences at another time.”

The woman curtsied again and then disappeared down the hall. A door opened with a creak and closed once more as she made her way back below the stairs.

Sally couldn’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction at her assertiveness, and she admired the strength she found within

herself to speak her mind. She would make this work, but in order to do so, she could not be timid. Leonard might think he was strong-minded - but he had nothing on her.

* * *

As Leonard led Sally through the labyrinthine halls of the Tudor estate, a palpable tension hung between them. Sally did her best to make polite conversation, wishing to somehow rediscover the young man she'd bantered within the library just a week ago.

That man, while a little too forward, had been good company, and he'd brought out both a playful and witty side in her. Alas, he'd been gone ever since this marriage had been thrust upon them.

"A lot of stairs," she commented. "One will not need to worry about exercising with this man's steps to scale each day."

This earned a little smile, and he nodded. "True indeed. My mother used to climb the stairs up and down before each means in order to allow herself extra indulgences. She'd make her poor maid come along so she'd not be lonely," he said with a small chuckle, though his eyes betrayed a deep longing for the woman of whom he spoke.

Eager to build on this small thawing, she motioned to the tapestries around them. "They are intricate. Your mother's?"

"My grandfather's. He brought them from Spain nearly eighty years ago. I used to sit here and make up stories about them," he said with a smile. Sally was about to follow by asking what

sort of stories he'd make up when her eyes fell on the library they were just passing.

Rows upon rows of leather-bound volumes lined the shelves. "Can we stop here?"

"Are you as eager when it comes to books as your sister?" he asked, almost teasingly.

"Nobody will ever be as enthusiastic about books as Joanna, but I like them also. Can I?"

"Of course," he said and motioned for her to enter. As she did, she inhaled deeply but let out a chuckle.

"Pray, what is funny?" he asked, bemused more than irritated.

"Joanna always tells me that she can smell particular scent when she enters a library, so I like to test this each time I go, though so far I have not smelled anything."

His eyebrows rose then, and he likewise inhaled. "Musky, damp paper - and a hint of leather. You cannot smell it?"

Was he teasing her? Or was he seriously engaging in conversation with her? Whatever it was, Sally was more than pleased by this change. Perhaps being in his own home had inspired a bit of levity in him.

"Can you really?" she asked, and he shrugged.

“I can smell the stew Mrs. Farnsworth is cooking downstairs, which is for certain,” he said and stepped further into the library. With her question unanswered, Sally looked around the grand space when her eyes fell on a book on one of the higher shelves.

“Goodness, I have not read *Miss Goody Two Shoes* since I was a small girl. I adored it. I made my governess read it to me every night,” she said. “Can I read it?”

“Of course, it is your home. Your library, you may read whatever you wish,” he said, although he dipped his head to one side as she hurried toward the spot where her favorite book nestled amongst its companions on a high shelf. She spotted a rickety-looking ladder in the corner and dragged it over.

“Lady Sally... I mean... Sally. You ought to be careful, these ...”

“Do not fret,” she called. “What is the worst that can happen? I fall into your arms, and we are scandalized and forced to marry?”

This stopped him in his tracks as she continued to push the ladder. Pausing briefly, she realized that the air between them was suddenly lighter, as it had been that first night at her own family library.

“Sally, please be careful,” he cautioned, his tone laced with concern. “Those stairs are not very safe.”

Dismissing him, Sally reached for the coveted book, her fingers brushing against its spine as she stretched on tiptoe to grasp it. The steps wobbled beneath her, uneven and more worn than she'd imagined. Should she ask for his help? No. She would not. She'd have to be self-sufficient in his marriage; she already knew this. She would get her book without him.

She stretched one more time, hearing his shoes squeak across the hardwood floor as he walked toward her when - "Oh!" she called, hot pain searing through her right ankle. Then, in a flash, she lost her grip on the book and tumbled backward, her body plummeting toward the hard floor below.

Time seemed to stand still as she awaited the unpleasant landing. However, she felt Leonard's arms closing around her waist just in time to break her fall. They crashed to the ground in a tangled heap, the impact jarring them both as they lay sprawled on the.

For a moment, neither of them moved, the silence broken only by the sound of their ragged breathing.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly. She noticed his arms still around her; her body pressed up against his, and at once, her cheeks flushed. "Y-yes, I think so," she stammered, her breath coming in short gasps as she tried to steady herself.

With Leonard's help, Sally managed to sit up, her eyes meeting his as she offered him a sheepish smile. "Thank you," she murmured gratefully, her cheeks coloring with embarrassment. "I-I suppose I should have listened to you. I

injured my ankle two years ago and it sometimes gives me trouble still.”

“Are you always so ... enthusiastic?” he agreed, his tone gentle as he brushed a stray lock of hair from her face.

Sally couldn't help but laugh at the irony of the situation, the tension between them dissipating as she met Leonard's gaze. “I suppose I am,” she conceded with a rueful smile. “Now, shall we continue our exploration of the estate?”

With a nod, Leonard offered her his arm, the warmth of his touch sending a shiver down her spine as they set off once more. As they wandered through the halls of her new home, Sally wondered if their encounter in the library would help pave the way for a more companionable relationship between them.

She could only hope so. They were married now, and if he continued to be as cold and distant, it would be difficult to get through the honeymoon. Yes, they'd each have their own life, but there was no escaping the facts in many ways. They lived together. They shared their home and their tables. She paused, anxiety coiled in the pit of her stomach as her thoughts were suddenly consumed by the prospect of sharing a bed with a man she hardly knew.

At the top of the stairs, Leonard paused. “Your chamber is just down the hall; mine is around the corner,” he explained, gesturing towards a set of ornate double doors at the end of the corridor. “I've had it prepared for you.”

Sally's heart sank at his words, a wave of disappointment washing over her. "My chamber?" she echoed. "Not our chamber?"

Leonard's expression softened with understanding as he met her gaze. "I beg your pardon. I should have discussed this with you. I know we have an arrangement regarding our honeymoon, and we both recognize the need to convince those around us that we are a true couple," he replied gently. "But the truth is, we're not. This marriage is not something either of us wanted, so I won't pressure you or force you to sleep in one bed with me."

Sally's cheeks flushed with embarrassment at his candid admission, her mind reeling with the implications of his words. "But the servants ..."

"They will not care. The ones who have access to our floor are trusted and loyal. We can always deposit a few of your belongings in my chamber and vice versa, but you will have your own space as will I. Besides, my parents always kept their own chambers. Thus, it will not look unusual," he said.

Sally swallowed hard, unsure if she should be relieved or feel rejected again. This was the arrangement; she knew it. Still - it only made her realize that her life wouldn't be as she'd imagined.

"Sally," he said, his tone now soft. "I do not want to make you uncomfortable."

She gulped down the lump in her throat.

“No, you are not. Not in the least. We will make do, all will be well,” she said, willing herself to believe it. If she said it often enough, would it be so?

Leonard offered her a sympathetic smile, his eyes soft with understanding. “We will,” he agreed. “We’ll make the best of this situation, Sally. Together. And now, I really ought to let you rest. If you like, this evening we can explore the grounds.”

She nodded her head once and then went toward her chamber, a storm of conflicting emotions swirling through her. Would she and Leonard find a way to live together in harmony? Could it be that somewhere beneath that distant, cold exterior the man she used to know still existed?

She glimpsed him in the library, that cheerful person who’d thought him to be. She took a deep breath and wrapped her arms around herself, feeling for a second his arms there instead. She closed her eyes allowing herself to feel that warm sensation that had rushed through her in the library after he’d caught her – but then, she shook her head.

No, it was foolish. She should not take comfort from such an embrace, it had not been romantic after all. He’d caught her to keep her safe, to keep her from coming to harm – and still, their brief embrace gave her a glimmer of hope. Hope that perhaps, with time, she and Leonard would find a way to live in harmony and perhaps find a semblance of happiness along with it.

CHAPTER 10



Sally

*A*s the first light of dawn filtered through the grand windows of her bedchamber, Sally was roused from her slumber by a soft but insistent knock on the door. Blinking away the remnants of sleep, she rose from her large four-poster bed and made her way to the door, the plush carpet beneath her feet muffling her footsteps.

The previous day had passed quickly. She had spent some time in her chamber becoming familiar with everything. Then, her trunks and wedding trousseau had been delivered and she'd set out to make herself comfortable. After a light dinner, which she'd taken alone after Leonard sent his apologies, she'd retired to her bed exhausted from the day.

Indeed, her bones still felt heavy and when she raised her arms to open the door, they felt as if they were weighted down by sand. In addition, her ankle ached more than usual. Suddenly, just as she was about to open the door, it came to her – her tumble down the library steps. No wonder her body hurt so much!

She shuddered as she thought back to her clumsy behavior but pushed the thoughts aside to open the door. On the other side stood a woman, dressed in a neat black dress and an apron.

“Good morning,” Sally said while the woman curtsied deeply.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” the woman greeted her respectfully. “I am Mary, your lady’s maid. I’ve been assigned to assist you with your morning preparations. I know you arrived yesterday but I was away to see my family and wasn’t made aware there was a new mistress of the house until I returned.”

“I was not expecting to be mistress of a grand home myself until recently, so we are even,” Sally returned Mary’s smile with a nod.

“Ah, I heard. Well, you need not worry. I was lady’s maid to the last duchess and I can assure you, I will tend to your every need. I know it can be a lot,” she said as she stepped inside. “Shall I ring for some hot water and a wash ball? I did not want to presume, that is why I did not bring it up with me.”

“Of course,” Sally replied, feeling a sense of relief wash over her at the sight of her capable companion.

As Mary stepped into the room, Sally took a moment to appraise her appearance, noting the meticulous attention to detail evident in her neatly coiffed hair and immaculate attire. Mary’s features were kind and weathered, with laugh lines etched around her eyes that spoke of a life well-lived. Her eyes sparkled with warmth and intelligence.

She knew Leonard’s mother? I wonder if I can learn anything about her from Mary. It might help me understand Leonard better.

“I’ll send for it now. Then I’ll help you get dressed for your first day as Duchess.”

“Thank you, Mary,” Sally replied with gratitude. “I appreciate your assistance.”

A few minutes later, another maid entered with a porcelain bowl and a jug of water, along with towels and a wash ball. While the two maids set up for her morning toilet, Sally glanced around the room. The chamber was elegantly appointed, with intricately carved furniture and sumptuous fabrics that spoke of luxury and opulence. It was certainly grander than her own home, which was by no means shabby either. Still, this was another tier of wealthy.

Once everything was set up, Sally sat on the stool in front of her sideboard upon which an array of patch boxes stood, many to them brought from home.

“I will help you unpack the rest of your things today, Your Grace,” Mary said while letting down Sally’s hair. “My, what a cascade of lovely locks you have. Reminds me of the former Duchess, she had lovely hair like this also.” She smiled as Sally looked at her reflection in the mirror. In what other ways was she like the late Duchess? Or did they share any similarities?

“How long did you work for her?”

“Ten years I did. A lovely woman. Kind, gentle, a true lady. She had a difficult lot in life but she bore it with such grace,” Mary said and Sally squinted. She wanted to ask what she

meant but bit her tongue. It would not look favorably on her to be asking such questions so early on in her tenure as Duchess.

“I aim to be like her, a good Duchess,” she said. “Although I am not sure what that will entail. I imagine it is not unlike the duties of a Countess.”

“Not very different at all,” Mary assured her. “Today, we will go over your usual day. You will tell me what time you like to get up, how you take your meals, what sort of makeup you prefer, how to do your hair and such. Of course, we will unpack and organize your armoires. I suggest one armoire for everyday wear, another for evening attire and ...” Mary continued on listing a variety of tasks they had to attend to. Sally wanted to crawl back into bed just from listening but knew that would not do.

“Then, we’ll need to sit down with the housekeeper and the cook later this morning to discuss the menu for tonight’s dinner, and the rest of the week. The maids go shopping on Mondays and Thursdays. Those are the market days, so you need to let Mrs. Farnsworth know if there’s anything special to get,” Mary explained, her tone brisk but gentle as she smoothed Sally’s hair into place. “And I’ve already taken the liberty of arranging for the florist to visit this afternoon so we can select the flowers for the drawing room.”

Sally nodded thoughtfully, her brow furrowed with concentration as she absorbed the information. The prospect of overseeing the household affairs was daunting, but she was determined to rise to the occasion, to prove herself worthy of the title she now bore. Her mother had done it with ease for years, but then her estate was smaller and she was familiar with all the servants.

“I understand,” she replied, her voice steady despite the flutter of nerves in her chest. “Thank you, Mary. I appreciate your guidance in all of this.”

Mary smiled warmly, her eyes crinkling at the corners with genuine affection. “Of course, Your Grace,” she said. “We’re all here to support you in any way we can. The staff is thrilled to have a Duchess again. Your presence brings a sense of joy and hope to the estate. It has been dreadfully sad here since her Grace died. And her husband, the late Duke of course.”

“I was saddened to hear they passed away in such close succession,” she said, remembering hearing the news of the Duke of Chester’s untimely death from a heart attack some three years ago. She hadn’t known Leonard then, having met him only shortly thereafter. She had met the Duchess, his mother, at a few functions but then she too had passed away suddenly. A riding accident, if she remembered correctly. Her heart swelled with compassion for Leonard when she thought of this. This whole time, she had not truly considered how difficult the last few years had been for Leonard. Perhaps the change in his personality and his odd distance were due to the losses of his beloved parents?

She resolved to be kinder to him and consider his lot whenever she felt herself growing impatient and angry with him.

“Well, all that is left are shoes,” Mary said cheerfully and Sally rose, though at once pain seared through her ankle. She bent down to wrap her hand around it which oddly seemed to help whenever such pain troubled her. “Your Grace, are you hurt?” Mary called with alarm and rushed other side.

“No, there is no need to be alarmed. I twisted my ankle in the library yesterday,” she said, fibbing slightly as she didn’t want

the whole household to know she'd attempted to sail off the steps directly into Leonard's arms ... "Some years ago I suffered an injury to my ankle and it has bothered me ever since."

Mary nodded, and Sally was grateful she accepted her explanation without asking for details regarding the original injury. Sally looked down at her foot, her body stiffening as she remembered just how she'd come about the injury. She gulped down the lump that formed whenever she thought of it. That night had been the most terrifying of her life, so terrifying she'd never told a soul about it in detail. All anyone knew was that she had been running and tripped over a cobblestone sticking up, that was all. And that was all anyone needed to know. They didn't need to know whom she'd been running from ... Besides, she didn't even really know herself...

A rumble from her stomach interrupted the silence and Mary grinned. "It seems Your Grace is ready for breakfast."

Sally smiled and placed a hand on her stomach. It was true. She had not eaten since the night before and was accordingly famished. It was time to leave the past – both hers and Leonard's behind – and focus on the future.

* * *

As Sally descended the grand staircase of the estate, her stomach moaned in anticipation of a hearty breakfast. However, as she entered the dining room, she was surprised to find it unoccupied and devoid of the usual breakfast spread she was used to from home. Confusion furrowed her brow until Mrs. Farnsworth, the head housekeeper, appeared with a warm smile.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Mrs. Farnsworth greeted cheerfully. “I hope you slept well. Are you ready for breakfast?”

Sally blinked, looking once more at the empty table. “I am but if I am too early I will gladly wait.”

The housekeeper dipped her head to one side and then chuckled. “Oh, no we are quite ready. We have everything set up in the breakfast room. Please, follow me.”

Breakfast room. She had heard some noblemen had such a space, dedicated for one meal per day, but they did not have any such room at Everbright Manor. They had their meals as a family in the dining room at all times. On rare occasions, such as her mother’s ball, they would dine in the banquet room next to the ballroom. Having a dedicated breakfast room told her just how grand a place this was.

Sally followed Mrs. Farnsworth through a series of corridors until they reached a spacious breakfast room overlooking the lush garden. Windows adorned every side, allowing the morning light to flood the room with a warm, inviting glow. Sally’s eyes widened in surprise as she took in the sight before her.

The table was laden with a dazzling array of breakfast delicacies, from freshly baked pastries to platters of fruit and steaming pots of tea and coffee. Sally couldn’t help but marvel at the sight, her mouthwatering at the tantalizing aromas that wafted through the air.

“I... I didn’t realize we had a separate breakfast room,” Sally admitted with awe.

Mrs. Farnsworth chuckled warmly. “Yes, it’s one of the estate’s hidden gems,” she explained. “We wanted to make sure you felt at home, Your Grace. Since we don’t yet know your preferences, we prepared a bit of everything.”

Sally felt a pang of guilt at the thought of potentially wasting so much food, but Mrs. Farnsworth quickly reassured her with a wink.

“Don’t worry, Your Grace,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “The Duke always ensures that any leftover food is given to the servants, and whatever remains after that goes to feed the hungry at the church. He’s quite adamant about it.”

Sally’s heart warmed at the mention of Leonard’s generosity. She remembered his dedicated work for the Our Lady of Mount Carmel orphanage, of which Kenneth and Joanna were patrons. It was to be renamed to honor Kenneth’s brother shortly and she recalled Leonard was meant to attend – as was she. She took a gulp of air, wondering if they would go there together. She knew he cared about the orphanage a lot, and she knew he cared about a great many other social subjects. Poverty, the elderly – she’d heard much about his actions in the House of Lords from both Kenneth and her father. Despite the strained nature of their relationship, she couldn’t help but feel a flicker of fondness for the man, encouraged that he retained those desires.

She slipped into her seat and unfolded the silk napkin over her lap and then sat back. Perhaps once Leonard arrived she could ask him questions about his charitable work. It could be something they bonded over. Just because they were going to

have a partial marriage that was never going to be real didn't mean they could not at least be friends ... perhaps one day they might find enough common ground to enjoy one another's company. Indeed, she had enjoyed his company the previous day in the library. And if she wasn't mistaken, so had he.

"Your Grace?" Mrs. Farnsworth asked from the corner where she'd stood at attention. "Is something the matter with your meal?"

Sally looked up. Her plate was still empty but that was by design. She cleared her throat.

"No, everything looks lovely. In fact, I am quite famished. However, I think it is polite to wait for my husband," she said with a smile. At once, the housekeepers visage changed and she looked past Sally, out of the window as if she could not bear to look at her directly. Then she took a deep breath.

"His Grace has already eaten. He had breakfast an hour ago but asked that you not be disturbed," she said and bit her lip, her discomfort obvious.

Sally's heart sank at Mrs. Farnsworth's words, a pang of disappointment washing over her like a cold wave. She had hoped to start the day with her husband, to share a meal together as husband and wife. She'd even imagined they might build on their connection the previous day but Leonard's absence shattered that fleeting dream.

"Oh," Sally replied softly with a hint of resignation. She forced a polite smile, though her stomach churned with a mix

of hurt and frustration. She had looked forward to spending the day with Leonard, to presenting a united front to their tenants and showing them that their new Duchess was happily embraced by her husband's side.

“Where is he now?”

“In his study. It is his custom to spend most of his day there when he is in residence,” Mrs. Farnsworth said quietly. “He asked to have a light meal brought in at lunchtime so I think he plans to spend the day working. His assistant is expected shortly.”

His assistant? Sally felt a surge of indignation rising within her. How could he retreat to his study without so much as a word to her? Didn't he understand the importance of their public image, especially on a day like today? They had to be seen together, otherwise everyone would start to gossip about them again. If she was to claim the title and the respect related to it, everyone had to believe theirs was a real marriage. Hadn't that been the point?

“I see,” Sally replied curtly and composed despite the turmoil raging within her. “Thank you, Mrs. Farnsworth. I'll... I'll go find him in a little while.”

“I am to bring tea once his assistant arrives, I will let him know that you are awake and looking for him, if you like,” the woman suggested.

Sally nodded, grateful for this assistance. Still, as she sat and sliced her roll, she had to wonder – how could she break through to her husband, or was that even a possibility?

CHAPTER 11



Leonard

A sparrow hopped along the windowsill outside, occasionally banging its beak against Leonard's study window. He looked at the small bird, resolving to send the maids to the market on Thursday to collect bird food as he enjoyed feeding the little animals. Seeing their many colors gave him a thrill and he found it relaxing to observe them – a habit he'd picked up from his mother who'd spent hours sitting in the garden observing the bird feeders.

“The flavor profile of the Cabernet Sauvignon is truly exceptional this year, and the grapes from our Shropshire vineyard are especially wonderful,” Aaron remarked, with admiration. “I believe it will be quite well-received by our aristocratic clientele especially.”

Leonard nodded in agreement, focusing his expression back on Aaron's words. The prospect of success for their latest endeavor filled him with a sense of satisfaction, as it would allow him to increase the wages of all their workers to help make up for the shortfalls of his father's mismanagement.

“Good, I am glad to hear it. Perhaps we can raise our pricing as well. It could help with the deficit for the mishap at the

Devon vineyard. We must discuss this in more detail,” he said sternly.

“Surely, we can,” Aaron agreed but then pressed his lips together. “I do have to wonder though, should we really be discussing business on the day after your wedding, Lenny?” Aaron asked. “Shouldn’t you be spending time with your bride?”

Leonard’s gaze flickered with irritation at the interruption, his jaw clenching briefly before he forced himself to relax. He waved a dismissive hand, brushing off Aaron’s concern with a casual shrug.

“Sally and I have an understanding,” Leonard replied tersely. “Besides, she knows how important these matters are to me. There’s no harm in discussing business on such an occasion.”

As Aaron hesitated, it was quite clear he did not really believe Leonard’s proclamation. This only encouraged Leonard to double down. “In fact, I’ve been considering a trip to Portugal next month to check on our operations there,” Leonard added, his thoughts already drifting to the plans he had in mind. “I want to ensure that everything is running smoothly in my absence. We can discuss the details further later.”

“That is a three-week trip if you return directly. Are you certain that is something you’d want to do so soon after getting married? As I said, I’d be happy to go if you really think it is so important,” Aaron said.

“It’s important that I go, Aaron. Now, please. Let us get through our meeting. Now, the Devon vineyard, how bad is the

damage? Can any barrels be saved?"

With that, Leonard returned his attention to the papers before him, effectively signaling the end of the conversation. However, deep down, a part of him couldn't shake the nagging feeling that perhaps Aaron was right to question the propriety of his actions. The truth was, he wanted to stay here and be around Sally because he had made her a promise.

She was a lovely young woman who didn't deserve to be abandoned the day after her marriage. But the truth was, the afternoon before when he'd shown her around the property, he'd felt too comfortable around her. He'd enjoyed the feeling of having her in his arms too much when she'd fallen off the stool. He'd wanted to ask her to spend more time together – and these were dangerous signs. Signs he had to put distance between them, no matter what he'd promised before their wedding.

A knock on the door drew him from his contemplations and he looked up just as Mrs. Farnsworth entered with her tea.

"Good morning, Your Grace, Lord Finch," she said as she placed the tray down.

"Good morning, Mrs. Farnsworth," Leonard replied, forcing a polite smile despite the unease gnawing at him. "Thank you for bringing the tea."

"I always feel so well looked after here," Aaron chimed in and winked at the older woman who blushed a little at the compliment.

“Oh, Lord Finch, you need not flatter me, I only do what I am hired to do.”

“Ah but you do it with such joy and grace, indeed every household in England ought to take your example,” Aaron continued. Leonard chuckled and rolled his eyes. His friend could be charming when he wanted to be. Too charming for his taste because it reeked of falsehood, although it appeared that Mrs. Farnsworth ate up every bit of it.

“Is Her Grace up yet?” Leonard asked then, Sally still at the forefront of his mind after his conversation with Aaron. Mrs. Farnsworth cast a pointed glance at him and then nodded. “Her Grace is awake and asked after you. She’s up and about already, having breakfast. She thought you might join her.”

Leonard felt a twinge of guilt at her words, realizing that he should at the very least have stopped in to say good morning, even if he wasn’t going to share a meal with her. “Ah, yes. Please inform Her Grace that I will join her for dinner this evening,” he said, his tone contrite. He’d preferred to have done away with their honeymoon altogether but saw now that this would not be possible.

Mrs. Farnsworth’s expression softened slightly at his response, though a hint of skepticism lingered in her gaze. “Very well, Your Grace. I’ll relay the message,” she replied before turning to leave the room.

As she departed, Aaron couldn’t resist interjecting with a jest, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Seems you’re in the doghouse already, Your Grace,” he quipped, a teasing smile playing on his lips. “At least with Mrs. Farnsworth. She seems perturbed.”

“Perhaps,” Leonard agreed. “I am supposed to at least pretend to be a loving husband so that the gossip started by Lady Millstone will stop and I am not making a good job of it.” The weight of his promise to Sally bore down on him heavily, his conscience pricking at him for failing to uphold it. He had vowed to spend their honeymoon together, to show a united front to the world, but his actions spoke otherwise. Indeed, he remembered that he’d told her they were to meet the tenants this day, something he’d pushed out of his mind entirely.

If only she had not fallen in the library. If he hadn’t felt that warmth as he caught her, he might not have felt something stirring within him and he might have thus been able to stick by their agreement. Why had everything become so muddled already? And what in the world did this mean for their future? He had to maintain his distance, to keep their marriage purely practical, as they had agreed upon, but he saw now he’d have to speak to Sally, to make sure she understood.

Leonard and Aaron spent the next hour or so going over the various reports from their holdings, ensuring everything ran as it was meant to when another knock on the door drew him back to the present. He glanced at the tea set.

“It’ll be Mrs. Farnsworth to collect the tea,” he remarked and called for the person to enter. However, when the heavy door creaked open it wasn’t the housekeepers face he saw but rather his wife’s. He gulped, his jaw dropping slightly open as she entered, her eyebrows furrowed.

“Sally,” he said and got up.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” she said stiffly as she glanced at Aaron who likewise rose and bowed before her. What did she want here? Had she come to scold him in front of his assistant? Surely not.

“Sally, my dear, I apologize for not joining you for breakfast,” Leonard began, his tone contrite as he approached her. “I am afraid I had a meeting beforehand. With Aaron here.” Leonard felt a flush of embarrassment color his cheeks under Sally’s pointed stare. He cleared his throat awkwardly before gesturing towards Aaron. “Sally, allow me to introduce Aaron Finch, the Viscount of Finch. He and I are old friends; our fathers worked together,” Leonard explained, hoping to alleviate some of the tension in the room. “The former Lord Finch passed away some years ago and ... anyhow we have thrown our lot together now to continue what our fathers started, so to speak. Aaron is my right-hand man so to speak.”

He stopped when Aaron looked at him as though he’d lost his mind. Why was he rambling so much? A simple introduction by name would have done. Why had he recited the entirety of their connection? Then, he realized. He was feeling guilty and somehow wanted to justify himself without telling her the truth. This marriage business was already causing him a megrim that would not end. Fortunately, Aaron took charge of the conversation then.

Aaron inclined his head respectfully, his demeanor polite but reserved. “A pleasure to meet you, Your Grace,” he greeted in a measured tone.

Sally offered a polite nod in return, though her gaze remained guarded. “Likewise,” she replied, her tone clipped as she looked him up and down. If Leonard didn’t know better, he might have thought Sally was judging Aaron somehow. But that couldn’t be right. He didn’t know her well but he knew

enough of her by way of Kenneth to know she was not a judgmental person. Still, she looked at Aaron with some mild derision though Leonard assumed this was because Aaron was the one keeping Leonard from breakfast.

The atmosphere in the room grew palpably awkward, the silence stretching between them like a taut string. Leonard shifted uncomfortably, unsure of how to proceed. Had Sally come here simply to remind him of her presence? The thought nagged at him, a sense of unease settling in the pit of his stomach.

Attempting to diffuse the tension, Leonard cleared his throat. "Sally, I recall we were meant to see the tenants today. I assume that is why you are here?" he was not at all sure why she'd come but to his relief she nodded.

"Indeed, I had hoped to have the horses readied but wanted to see how much longer you might be."

Leonard gulped. He had no desire to see the tenants or anyone else today. Besides, he had another visitor who'd join them soon.

"I am afraid we will have to postpone. I am rather... A matter of urgency has come up. Isn't that so, Aaron?" He stared at Aaron, willing him to back up his ruse. To his relief his friend nodded.

"Yes, Your Grace. I am afraid there has been a terrible incident at the Devon vineyard, the entire batch might be ruined. It is quite concerning," Aaron said and nodded eagerly though the smile around his lips betrayed the truth. This wasn't entirely

wrong. The vine stored at the vineyard had indeed oxidized and much of it would be lost but that wasn't why they were meeting. There had been no emergency besides Leonard's need to procrastinate.

"I see," Sally said, one eye narrowed as she sucked on the inside of her cheeks. Oddly enough, it made her look at once adorable and stern, a combination Leonard had to admit was enticing more than he'd like. There was a seriousness, a quickly keen observant in Sally he admired.

"Well, I shall leave you to your problem then," she nodded before sauntering off. When the door closed behind her, Leonard dropped into his seat, sweat pearls dropping down from his eyebrows.

CHAPTER 12



Sally

Sally spent the next few hours in Leonard's library. No. The library now belonged to her as much as him. Her stomach roiled still as she thought of how Leonard had cast aside their plans without telling her. She'd speak to him the moment Aaron was gone, for she would not be treated in such a way.

She knew he hadn't wanted to marry her, but neither had she. This was not her fairytale any more than it was his. Her anger only began to ease once she lost herself in the many books she'd pulled off the shelf, cross-referencing them as she sought the information she wanted. The sun had begun to dip to the west when a knock came.

"Your Grace?" Mary's voice echoed off of the high walls. "Lord Finch has left."

Sally rose at once with a surge of determination to confront Leonard again.

"Thank you, Mary," she said and rushed out of the library past Mary, whose mouth was open as if she'd meant to say something more. Sally's half-boots clattered down the stairs as

she raced to catch Leonard before he shut himself in his study again. Alas, she had hardly made it to the bottom floor when she stopped in her tracks. For there, sitting on a stone bench in the hall leading to Leonard's study was Kenneth.

Under normal circumstances, she might have been happy to see her brother-in-law, but not today, for she knew that his sudden appearance meant Leonard had scheduled yet another meeting to take time away from their plans. She stopped and narrowed her eyes at him.

“Kenneth?”

“Sally, you look lovely. Just like the regal duchess you were always meant to be,” he greeted her with a smile. “Joanna sends her best. She wanted to come but Peter and Louisa insisted on going to visit my mother at the Dower House today, so I am alone.”

Sally nodded. She hadn't expected to see her sister. Though, neither had she expected Kenneth.

“I take it you are here to see Leonard?” she asked, an edge in her voice.

“Sally, my dear, I am. And I sense from your tone that there is something the matter?” Kenneth inquired, concern etched into his features as he approached her.

Sally sighed, feeling her frustration pressing down on her. “I had hoped to see Leonard. We were meant to see the tenants today and make a bit of a show of our new union, but he's

been shut up in his study all day,” she admitted with disappointment. “It’s as if he’s avoiding me and our obligations despite the plans we made.” She had shared their plans with Joanna and thus assumed Kenneth was well aware, even if Leonard hadn’t told him.

Kenneth’s brow furrowed in understanding as he listened to her concerns. “Perhaps he’s preoccupied with estate matters. I’m sure he didn’t mean to neglect your plans. I do know you decided to be seen together as often as possible these next few weeks.”

“We hardly saw one another before the wedding to make plans because he said he had to work so we could enact our plans during our honeymoon, Kenneth. And now the honeymoon is here, and ... he is not.” Her voice rose as she spoke, exasperation evident to all within earshot. “He can ignore me all he wants after the honeymoon once we are established as a couple, but not now.”

Kenneth offered her a sympathetic smile, attempting to ease her worries. “This has been a shock to him. Leonard always wanted to be married but then his parents died and his objectives changed. This was unexpected for him as well. Give him time to come around. I’m confident things will improve.”

“You sound as though this is hard only for him. This is not my dream either, Kenneth. I am beginning to think that I might have been better of an old maid,” she said and crossed her arms.

“Sally ...” Kenneth said in a tone she knew was meant to appease her but it only upset her.

She raised a hand. “You need not lecture me. I know being a Duchess is something most ladies want desperately. I do not really wish to be an old maid. I am simply frustrated. The point of having a honeymoon at home was to present a united front to the world, to show that we are a happy couple. If he continues to shut himself away, people will continue to talk and my time as Duchess will be marred by idle gossip.”

Kenneth nodded sympathetically, and she knew he had been in a similar situation when he first met Joanna. “I will speak to Leonard on your behalf, Sally. I’m sure he didn’t mean to upset you.”

Sally shook her head, her resolve firm. “No, Kenneth. I don’t need an intermediary. What I need is for Leonard to honor his promises. That’s all.”

As if on cue, the heavy oak door of Leonard’s study swung open, and he emerged, his expression one of confusion as he beheld Sally and Kenneth in conversation.

“Kenneth, I didn’t know you’d arrived. And Sally,” he stopped and looked from one to the other as if uncertain what to do now. Sally’s eyes rested on him, and for a split second, she was taken aback at how handsome he looked as the sunlight cascaded down on him through the stained glass windows. His chin looked sharper and his nose more defined, although what struck her the most was the look in his eyes. There was such darkness in them as if he had seen something horrible that haunted him even in his waking hours.

She’d seen that look in Rosy’s eyes after finding out their parent’s picture-perfect marriage had been a lie. Rosy had cried every night and sat sullenly in the daytime as the truth troubled her. She’d come out of it at last, but would Leonard?

And what was it that troubled him? His parents deaths? Or was there more to it?

“.... Take the air,” Leonard said, drawing her back to the present.

“Yes, I agree,” Kenneth said, then glanced at Sally. “Ordinarily I would, but I am afraid I cannot. I wanted to tell you in person that I must postpone our meeting today. Louisa is a little under the weather.”

Under the weather? Hadn't he told her that Louisa was at the Dower House with Joanna and Peter just earlier? Her eyes widened as she understood – he was creating time for Sally to be alone with Leonard. Sally was at once grateful and upset, for while it was kind, she should not need Kenneth's assistance to spend time with her husband.

Still, she decided to take this opportunity to get off her chest everything that had troubled her – once and for all.

CHAPTER 13



Leonard

“Under the weather?” Leonard parroted, and Kenneth nodded.

“Yes, I would have sent a messenger but I was passing by as I said. In any case, I should be on my way. Good day to you both,” he said and bowed.

Leonard blinked, feeling like he’d just had a rug pulled out from under him. He’d planned on spending the afternoon with Kenneth, a way to avoid Sally - but now that was all taken away. He watched as Kenneth turned and exited the door when his feet sprang into motion.

“Kenny,” he called, perplexed by his friend’s behavior.

“Leonard, please wait. I must speak to you,” he heard Sally call. There was an urgent note in the melody that carried her words that gave him pause. He turned back to her while the front door shut behind his friend. “I’ll be back in a moment, Sally,” he called over his shoulder before hurrying after Kenneth. He had to find out what was truly the matter with his friend because he knew a sick child was not it. He knew Kenneth too well to buy that excuse. And if he were somehow

banking on forcing Leonard to spend more time with Sally, he'd have to set him straight. And now.

"Kenny!" He called outside, catching his friend just as he was about to pull himself into his carriage. "Why are you leaving so suddenly?" he asked with uncertainty.

Kenneth paused one foot on the step already.

"I told you. Louisa is unwell," he said.

"No, no. I doubt that. You'd never have left your home if she was ill and you were not in town. I saw your carriage arrive; it came from your house, not town," he tapped his right foot on the sandy ground. "The truth, Kenny."

He crossed his arms and drummed his fingers on his upper arm, waiting for an answer. Finally, his friend took a deep breath.

"Very well. I think you need to spend some time with Sally," he replied.

Leonard felt a pang of guilt at Kenneth's words, knowing all too well the expectations that rested upon his shoulders. "Kenny, you still harbor hopes that I'll fall in love with her, don't you?" he asked quietly, his gaze searching Kenneth's face for any hint of affirmation.

Kenneth sighed, his expression softening with understanding. "I want what's best for both of you, Leonard," he admitted.

“But ultimately, it’s up to you to decide what that looks like. What I do know is that you ignoring her is not going to benefit either of you.”

“Did she complain to you about me?” he asked, hoping this was so, so he might have a reason to dislike her, for there was nothing he despised more than a tattletale. Alas, Kenneth shook his head.

“She did not. She would never. It was easy to see she was displeased by my presence, given it meant your plans with her had to change. Had I known you had plans, I would not have come at all. As for her complaining, no. It’s rather the opposite. I offered to speak to you, and she refused, telling me she was her own woman and could stand up for herself.”

Leonard paused at this and looked up at his friend. “Did she?”

“Indeed. You do not give Sally enough credit. She is a force to be reckoned with. Like all Blackmore women. You would do well to get to know her, no matter your reasons for not wanting love. Which I think are foolish, still,” Kenneth said.

Not taking the bait, Leonard shook his head, a sense of resolve settling over him. He knew he couldn’t continue to avoid facing his responsibilities. “I’ll do my best,” he promised, meaning it.

As Kenneth bid him farewell and departed, Leonard remained outside the manor. Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself for what lay ahead, knowing that he had to try to bridge the divide between himself and Sally.

It was time to end his procrastination and face the challenges of his new marriage head-on.

As he entered the manor again, he found the parlor empty and briefly exhaled. Perhaps Sally had given up? Oddly, this thought filled him with a little apprehension because some of him had to admit he liked her determination. She was strong-willed and knew what must be done to make their arranged marriage look real. He did also, but he didn't have the strength to truly commit to anything that involved being around her. Sally had a power to her, something almost magnetic that drew him to her even when he knew he had to stay far away.

Sally's footsteps echoed through the corridor then as she suddenly reappeared. Her eyes were irritated, and he saw her hands curled into balls at her side.

"Sa..." he started, but she cut him off, her anger boiling.

"Where have you been all day?" she demanded. "We were supposed to spend our honeymoon together, Leonard. Remember? You already avoided me the entire week before our marriage and now this? How is anyone supposed to believe this arrangement is real?"

Leonard met her gaze, his expression heavy with guilt as he took in her fiery demeanor. He knew he had failed her. "I'm sorry, Sally," he began. "I thought... I thought I was doing what was best for both of us."

Sally's eyes narrowed, her frustration bubbling to the surface. "What's best for us is sticking to the plan we agreed upon," she retorted, her tone sharp with anger. "Not leaving me to

fend for myself while you remain hidden away in your study all day long.”

Leonard felt a pang of remorse pierce his heart at her words. He had been so consumed by his fears and uncertainties that he hadn't considered how his actions impacted Sally. “I know,” he admitted. “I know I've let you down, Sally, and I'm truly sorry for that.”

She paused, looking up at him out of green eyes that were filled with confusion. She hadn't expected him to back down so quickly, had she?

“I know how important it is that we are seen together,” he continued. His gaze shifted to the floor as he struggled to contain the turmoil raging within him. He knew he was hurting Sally with his indifference, but he couldn't risk exposing his vulnerability and couldn't allow himself to become too attached when their marriage was founded on duty rather than desire. Still, he had to stick by his promise. A Duke's word was worth its weight in gold, his mother used to say. He scoffed inwardly. Had she meant this? Or had she meant every Duke's word except for her husband's? For surely she had already known that her husband's word was worth nothing.

“Leonard?” Sally's voice drew him back to the here and now. “I asked what you intend to do now. I see you have settled on ignoring me still.” She crossed her arms.

“I am not. I was considering what to do now. I suppose what we were meant to do from the beginning, was be seen together. I dare say it is getting too late to bring out the horses and ride the estate, but we could walk, if you like. I can show you the estate, and a few of the tenants shall see us,” he shrugged.

She paused and looked at him as if she wasn't quite sure what to make of his proposal. Of course, she had to suspect some kind of ulterior motive, and he almost hated himself for that. He didn't want her to think badly of him.

"I mean it, Sally," he said. "We must be seen together, you are right. I told you we would spend this month together and then go our separate ways, and I will stick by it. I promise."

She wetted her lips, a sheen appearing on them that sent a shiver down his spine. For a moment, he wondered what it might be like to kiss those lovely red lips of hers. Would she taste the strawberries the cook served at breakfast? Or of salt from the porridge? Or would she have her own unique taste?

No! I must stop this foolishness at once. This will not do. Do not get pulled in...

"I will be glad to go with you. Just let me change out of this morning attire and I will get my half-boots. I will meet you outside," she said, her tone different, lighter - as if a load had been lifted off her shoulders. Then, she turned away and rushed up the stairs, her reddish hair bouncing behind her where it had come out of its bun.

Leonard looked after her, his feelings more confused than ever. He wanted to follow her and explain his actions, his words - but he knew he could not. Nobody could ever know how awful a man his father had been, how he had wronged his mother, his workers, and everyone.

As he stood there, he closed his eyes and thought back to the man he'd admired for so long. If only his father had been the man, Leonard thought him to be. If only he hadn't turned out to be such a rotten man ... He would not have had to keep these secrets and would not have had to pretend not to care for Sally. His life would be easier; all their lives would be.

Alas, the late Duke of Chester had been a monster in disguise. A horrid man. And one who had paid for his actions with his life leaving his son to deal with the consequences.

CHAPTER 14



Sally

*I*t had worked. Her harsh words had actually managed to wake him up. Sally could hardly believe it as she rushed out of the house to meet him. Perhaps Kenneth did say something to him, but even if he did, Leonard did not have to agree. But he had. She had to believe her words had had an impact.

She burst out into the sunshine and saw him standing a few paces away, hands in his pockets as he looked out over the expanse before them.

“Ready?” he asked when he saw her.

“Ready,” she replied, and then, he proffered her his arm, a gesture she found so shocking she had to take a moment to regain her composure. He’d been all but hiding from her, and now he was offering his arm? This man was a walking problem. Still, as she took his arm and they set off to stroll through the estate, she noted how the servants looked their way with smiles - as if they believed their ruse. As if to them, they looked like a couple in love indeed.

If only it were true...

A jolt went through Sally. What was she thinking? If only it were true. Had she lost her mind? She and Leonard would never be anything other than ... companions of sorts. Certainly not lovers. Yet, as she walked next to him, she couldn't deny how nice it felt to be with him, to feel his warmth.

If only he would talk a little more...

"The gardens are lovely," she started, not wanting to allow an awkward silence to ruin her progress. Nor did she want to allow her mind to continue her way of thinking.

"They are entirely my mother's work," he said, pointing at the manicured lawns stretched out before them, framed by towering trees whispered in the gentle breeze. Magnificent gardens bloomed with vibrant colors, and in the distance, she could see the shimmering surface of a tranquil lake.

"She spent hours in the garden," he explained. "I think they gave her comfort. I never really noticed how much time she spent in them until she was gone."

Sally drew her eyebrows together. Why would his mother need comfort? She recalled something similar Mary had said earlier in the morning - about the Duchess's harsh fate. Or unfortunate fate? She could not recall the exact words, but she remembered wondering what could have been so hard on the Duchess, whom she'd always heard referred to as a lovely and kind woman. There was but one thing she could think of.

"Your father's death must have been hard for her. It is good she had such a sanctuary," she said but felt at once she'd made

a mistake because Leonard's shoulders tensed.

"She always used to...Perhaps, you are right," he replied, and she felt him withdrawing again as if whatever she'd said had made him want to retreat once more into silence and indifference. Quickly, she changed the subject to something less dangerous.

"So, tell me about Lord Finch," she prompted. "He seemed familiar, but I could not quite place him."

Leonard glanced at her, a hint of surprise flickering in his eyes at the sudden shift in conversation. "Ah, yes, Aaron. I do not think you would have met him. His family resides up north most of the year. He only relocated to town three years ago or so. I myself did not become friendly with him until just after my father died," he began. "Our fathers were business partners until Aaron's father passed away. We lost touch for many years, but he reappeared after my father's death to offer his condolences."

"That was very kind of him," Sally nodded, listening intently as Leonard continued. "We reconnected, and Aaron eventually joined the business," he explained. "It's been a blessing having him on board, especially with all the matters I've had to attend to since my father's passing. Truly, I never was interested much in vineyards, but now it takes up most of my time."

"And Aaron is more familiar with them?" she asked, glad they had found a topic they could discuss without pitfalls.

"No, he is not either, but he knows all the merchants. The wine merchants in town trust him, and he has contacts in all the

large cities.” He glanced at her, the sun reflecting in his lovely eyes, and that feeling from earlier, the wish that this might be real after all, resurfaced before she could push it away. “That is, in part, why I am away so often. I must visit the vineyards.” He said it with such force, almost as if he needed to convince her. No, not her. There was more to it... But what?

Sally furrowed her brow, recalling their earlier conversation in the study about the spoiled wine. “Did you manage to resolve the issue with the wine? You said one of the wines at the vineyard was spoiled.”

Leonard nodded, a hint of relief crossing his features. “Oh, no. Unfortunately, it seems like a loss.”

“A loss? But why? Can’t anything be done to save it? It seems such a shame to waste wine. Pray, what happened exactly?” she asked, eager now to learn more.

Leonard hesitated as if he wasn’t sure if she was truly interested, but then pressed on. “The wine oxidized,” he began, “that means ...”

“... the wine has been exposed to air, causing it to lose its flavor and freshness,” she interjected.

Leonard blinked in surprise, impressed by her knowledge. “You know about wine?” he asked, his eyebrows raised in genuine astonishment.

Sally shrugged modestly. “I did some reading while you were with Aaron,” she admitted. “I wanted to understand more

about your business. You seemed concerned about the matter.” Truthfully, she hadn’t been sure if his concern was due to the wine or her presence in the study, but she’d decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

A small smile tugged at Leonard’s lips as he regarded her with newfound admiration. “Well, I’m impressed,” he confessed. “I tried to tell my mother about the process but she would not hear of it. In fact, she only drank sherry and brandy - never wine.”

“Ah, I am fond of a good sherry also, but I favor wine. Say, couldn’t you try blending the spoiled wine with a younger one, or perhaps decant it?” she suggested, eager to offer a solution.

Leonard’s expression softened as he considered her idea. “We already tried that,” he admitted. “But it didn’t yield the desired results.”

Undeterred, Sally pondered aloud. “What about sweetening it or using herbal additives to salvage it?” she proposed, her mind racing with possibilities. “I read about these methods in one of your books in the library, and I actually remember drinking an infused wine - it tasted like blackcurrant. Rather delicious.”

A spark of intrigue flickered in Leonard’s eyes as he listened to her suggestions. “I’ve heard of vintners experimenting with similar techniques,” he mused. “It might be worth a try. I hate wasting products. We could sell it as a new flavor. Sally Blackmore, you might be a vintner in the making.”

She chuckled at this and maneuvered herself a little closer to him. “Perhaps I am better suited to be a wine tester.”

This elicited a genuine laugh from him that rocked his body beside her - and the sound was like a balm to Sally’s soul. The old Leonard, the one Kenneth always so admired, the one Joanna spoke of in such high tones, the one she’d glimpsed first at her own family library and yesterday at theirs - he was in there somewhere. And she was determined to extract him from whatever dark forces were holding him captive.

CHAPTER 15



Sally

“*S*hall we walk a little more?” Leonard asked once he’d recovered from the unexpected laughter. Delighted to hear his suggestion, Sally nodded.

“I would love to. These gardens are so lovely, much larger than the one at Everbright. Although I shall not tell my mother this since she would be rather envious. She is very proud of her garden,” she said, speaking with ease now that the ice was broken between them.

“My mother truly adored these grounds,” Leonard remarked, a wistful smile gracing his lips. “She always said there was something magical about the way the rays danced through the trees.” He looked up, the sunlight bathing his face and Sally smiled as she watched him. His hair glistened and she spotted a reddish hue in the stubble on his chin. His Adam’s apple stood prominently and when he took a breath she saw his chest rising, noting how broad it was for the first time. He was a truly handsome man. Sometimes, he drove her so mad she forgot such details. “She was always a little envious of your mother’s green thumb,” he added suddenly, turning to her.

“She was? I did not know they were friendly.”

“They were not. She’d always look at your garden when we drove by and mumble under her breath about the way your mother could grow gerbera, I assume it is difficult since it always troubled her.”

Sally grinned. “Mother always gripes about her gerbera, so I think you are right. I must confess, I know nothing about flowers. I cannot keep a houseplant alive for anything.”

His lips curled up. “Neither can I. Mother? She could bring anything back to life, no matter how wilted.”

Sally nodded, absorbing his words with genuine interest. “She must have been quite a remarkable woman.”

Leonard’s expression softened, a hint of sadness lingering in his eyes. “She was. We were close, in our own way. But I’ll admit, I didn’t always understand her. I wish I had appreciated her more when she was alive. Now that she’s gone it’s all too late.”

Sally reached out, her hand brushing against his arm in a gesture of comfort. “It’s not always easy to see things from another’s perspective, especially when it’s someone we love. I’m sure you know the many secrets my father kept from us,” She said. She didn’t want to talk about her father but she felt she had to find a way to relate to Leonard, to make him not feel alone.

“I know. Lord Carlisle kept a great many secrets. I dare say, they piled up on him until he crumbled under their weight.” He glanced at her. “I understand you were very close to him.”

“I was. I am ... not as close as before. When one’s father is found to have not only cheated on one’s mother, but also to have defined a charity and attempted to marry one sister’s off to a man because it was a financial stroke of genius, one must reassess relations,” she said and shrugged. “But I love him. And he is trying his best.”

He offered her a grateful smile, his gaze drifting towards the distant horizon. “You’re right. He approached me not long ago about a bill benefiting the sailors returning from the war unable to work. A relief law, of sorts. I am meant to meet with him about it.”

“He mentioned it. Lord Worcester and Lord Barring are helping him,” she said, mentioning two of their family friends.

“Good. It is a worthy law, and he needs help from those who have influence and time to devote to the cause. I do not, unfortunately. But I had a mind to visit him soon.” His head snapped around and he raised his hands. “After our honeymoon is over, of course. You could accompany me and see your mother and Rosy. I am sure she will wish to see you, it must be difficult for a mother to part with her children.”

“Well, given our parting is her doing, I cannot say I am that eager to see her,” Sally replied. He watched and took a deep breath before pressing on.

“When was the last time you spoke to her? I mean, I know you saw her at the wedding two days ago, but a true conversation,” Leonard asked, turning his attention back to Sally.

Sally hesitated, her gaze falling to the ground as she confessed, “Our conversations lately have been mostly about the wedding... nothing too meaningful. I cannot recall the last time we spoke about anything not entirely superficial.”

“But you used to?”

“Yes, we did. We were very close, especially after Joanna left. Rosy can be a silly girl and I think sometimes Mother is lonely and so was I without Joanna. So, it was natural to become closer. I used to admire her strength and her resolve, especially after I found out about my father’s affair,” Sally admitted. She hadn’t said these things to anyone other than Joanna and oddly enough, it felt natural.

Leonard’s expression softened with understanding. “It’s not too late to mend things, Sally. Do not wait too long, otherwise the gap between the two might become too deep to bridge. And when she is gone, it will be too late – believe me.”

Internally, Sally wrestled with conflicting feelings of resentment and longing for a renewed deep connection with her mother. As she pondered his words, she noted that he only spoke of his mother in such longing tones, yet not his father. Why was that? She recalled always hearing about the Duke of Chester and his son, who were as close as a father and son could be – why did he not speak of him? Or was it simply because the topic hadn’t come up?

But no... they had spoken of Sally’s father ... She dismissed the thought for now as the focus was on their mothers. Besides, Leonard’s vulnerability touched her, indeed, it ignited a flicker of hope that perhaps it wasn’t too late to bridge the gap between them. They had more in common than she’d thought, and she loved this lighter, caring side of him.

“Perhaps I will accompany you,” she said. “It will play to our story, won’t it?”

“It will,” he said but then stopped in his tracks. “Perhaps we could stop here for a spell? Sit under the tree over yonder?” He pointed to an elm tree that loomed large over the lake, its branches stretched out like arms looking to grasp something unseen in the air.

“I think that is a lovely idea, Leonard,” she replied and watched as he took off his great coat and splayed it out beneath the trees for her.

“One never ought to let one’s wife’s gown get dirty,” he said with a chuckle.

Who is this man? One moment he is charismatic and the next withdrawn. Which is the real Leonard? And how can I make this pleasant even charming version stay?

He extended his hand to help her sit and Sally’s heart raced as she settled beneath the sprawling branches of the ancient elm tree. The atmosphere between them was entirely changed. The air charged with something she could not grasp. The gentle lapping of the lake’s waters only added to the sensation. He was about to sit beside her when he paused and straightened up again, eyes narrowed at something in the water.

“Do you see that?” He pointed at something floating nearby. A length of rope or perhaps a scarf bopped on the water’s edge.

“I do, what is it?”

“I think some rope, perhaps a discarded horse’s lead. I will get it before the wildlife gets tangled up. I once had to watch the gamekeeper put a hare out of its misery after it ate a length of rope, part of it still hanging out of its mouth. Dreadful.” He shrugged and set off for the lake, leaving Sally to wish he was always like this, so caring, so kind – this man she knew she could love, this man she wanted to allow herself to love.

Knowing such thoughts were useless given their arrangement she tried to push them aside as she leaned back, but the truth was she could not help herself. She wanted to imagine herself with him as he was now, so easy to talk to, so ... A rustle in a nearby bush interrupted her woolgathering and she whipped around, eyes wide as her body tensed with apprehension.

She scanned the foliage, her breath caught in her throat. What could be lurking in the undergrowth? Or rather who? Had someone followed them and was looking to take advantage of their vulnerable position? No, that was foolish ... And yet, it would not be the first time.

Sally’s heart thundered as memories of the night not long ago when she’d hurt her foot suddenly surfaced, memories she’d thought banished forever. Her mind raced with fearful possibilities as the rustling grew louder, closer. She gripped the rough bark of the tree, her pulse quickening with each passing moment.

Then, with a sudden burst of movement, something emerged from the bushes—a dark shape hurtling towards her.

“Leonard!” she screamed, and she sprang to her feet, stumbling backward in terror. Fear gripped her like icy tendrils, her breaths coming in ragged gasps as she struggled to comprehend the looming threat before her.

“Sally?” Leonard’s voice came from far away and yet from very nearby. Strange how panic could obscure reality. She heard slushing footsteps as he made his way back from the water’s edge and then, leaves crunched again as he made his way to her. Her legs sprang into motion and closed the distance between them.

“Leonard!” She called again and ran straight into his arms. Inhaling his scent calmed her pounding heart. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight. Then, she felt his finger under her chin, gently titling it upward so her eyes fixed on his. His lips were slightly parted, his eyes full of confusion as he looked at her. Her mouth parted, wanting to form words to tell him what had happened but none came.

The momentary closeness was so unexpected, so mesmerizing she didn’t know what to say, do, or feel. The only thing she could do was stand there and stare into his eyes while a feeling of glorious isolation from the world enveloped her. As if the two of them were alone in the world, in a bubble of just the two of them. Alas, Leonard broke the spell, dropping his finger though he kept one arm around her.

“Sally, are you alright?” he asked.

“Yes, there was something in the bushes and for a moment I thought it was a highway robber or some sort of bandit. Silly...” she let out a ragged breath, mortified that she’d screeched like a child. She wanted him to see her as an equal – not as a child who needed his protection. But still, as he stood

in front of her, shoulders wide and his jaw set, she could not deny that she felt safe.

“I do not think we have highway robbers near here,” he said gently. “My father rooted them all out long ago. It might have been a wild animal.” He turned and squinted when the culprit made its presence known again by way of a rustling – this time from another bush.

“There it is, that’s what I heard. Only louder,” she said, feeling silly now that the rustle sounded like nothing more alarming than a breeze. He opened his mouth but before he could, a squirrel leaped out of the bush and sprinted past them and up into a tree.

“Well, there we have the solution to the misery,” Leonard said, the bemusement evident in his voice.

“I ... I do not know what to say. I ...”

“Admit it, are you afraid of squirrels?” he asked, head dipped to the side with a teasing smile on his lips.

“Evidently, I am,” she conceded.

“Well, he does look like a menace to society, that squirrel,” Leonard quipped, his tone light and mischievous.

Sally chuckled in agreement, relieved to see his sense of humor intact. “Yes, menacing indeed. I feel the need to assure you that I’m not usually terrified of wildlife.”

“Is that so? Only squirrels?”

“Only when they hide in bushes,” she retorted.

“And wild bores?”

“I venture to say I could get one, if need be,” she said and crossed her arms, enjoying their banter.

“Brave, very brave. And a stag?”

“A stag? As long as I have a bow and arrow, I would take care of it. Kenneth taught me how to ride and shoot, since my father no longer objects to ladies engaging in such activities.” They looked at one another, each smiling.

“I see. But a bear? Surely a bear frightens you,” He said it in a challenging tone, as if this certainly should scare her.

“Very well. I’d likely have run for my life and climbed the nearest tree if I had ever encountered a bear,” she admitted with a grin.

Leonard nodded in mock seriousness. “A wise choice, indeed.”

“But what of you, are you afraid of no animal at all?” she asked and watched as behind them the sun was beginning its track down from up high.

“By no means. I must confess, I was quite terrified of rats.” He said the word rats quietly as if one might jump out and attach itself to him.

Sally raised an eyebrow, suppressing a giggle. “Rats? Really? But squirrels are just elevated tree rats, aren’t they? So, we are essentially afraid of the same thing.”

Leonard chuckled, conceding her point. “Touché, my dear Duchess. I suppose we did have that in common.”

Their banter continued as they strolled along the lakeside path. The squirrel, seemingly unperturbed by the commotion it had caused, continued to observe them from its lofty perch, its fluffy tail twitching when Sally looked over her shoulder.

Despite the initial fright, Sally found herself grateful for the lighthearted exchange and the newfound ease in Leonard’s company. With a shared chuckle, they continued their leisurely walk, the playful chat serving as a welcome distraction from the lingering tension of earlier.

CHAPTER 16



Leonard

Leonard proffered his arm to Sally and together, they continued their loop around the lake. They continued an easy chatter, covering safe topics such as their pets, their favorite seasons and foods. They were subjects Leonard knew would not lead to anything serious, and for that he was grateful.

He enjoyed her company, which he knew was dangerous but keeping their conversation light meant he did not have to watch what he said too much. The truth was, Sally was so easy to talk to he worried he might mention something he ought not to do. They'd gotten close when they'd been talking about their parents. He'd had the desire to tell her why he and his mother did not know one another well, or why he didn't want to talk about his father but he'd known there were things he could not burden her with.

The truth about his father was too dark, too disturbing for Sally to hear. He still remembered Kenneth's face when he'd told him what he'd discovered... His father, so admired by all, hadn't been the man everyone thought him to be at all. Everything about him had been faked, his entire life a pile of lies – including his death. If even his best friend took the news hard, how would a tender woman like Sally take it?

“... so lovely, I wish I could paint it but I am not skilled,” Sally said beside him and he looked up to see her motioning her free hand toward the sky.

Painting ...she had to be talking about capturing the sky. Leonard chided himself for ignoring her and knew he couldn't let her suspect he'd not paid attention.

“It is lovely, indeed. You are right. I cannot paint either, though I had a tutor. He deemed me hopeless. The rest of my classes were taken by my cousin instead,” he said and she chuckled.

“Another thing we have in common. Pray, are you any good at dancing?” She looked up at him and he nodded.

“I am, but you ought to know that. We danced together the night we ... well, the unfortunate night.”

Sally shuddered. “Ah yes, but the truth is I hardly remember it at all. I was so focused on Lady Millstone and the others looking at us.” She grimaced in the most adorable way. “Did I step on your feet?”

Leonard chuckled. “No, you were a lovely dance partner. Why do you ask? Have you a habit of flattening your dance partners feet?”

She nodded gravely. “I used to be a graceful dancer, but after I sprained my ankle I've never been the same. Well, it is lucky

we are already married, and dancing together is not expected of us.”

He used his left hand to wipe his forehead in a mock show of relief. “My toes are safe, thank the heavens.”

She boxed him in the arm then, but with a grin on her face and a flood of dangerous affection overcame him. This instantly mixed with anger at himself for having let his guard down - a blend he did not know what to do with. Despite his earlier resolve to keep his distance, he couldn't help but feel a growing sense of regard for her. She possessed a charm and grace that he found captivating, and there was a part of him that wished he hadn't made a vow never to love a woman or let her love him. The truth was, if he hadn't made such a vow, Sally would be just the woman he'd like to keep company with or perhaps more.

He knew he could not grow too fond of Sally, given his aversion to marriage. Yet, on the other hand, the undeniable connection between them was there – and it was growing rapidly.

Suddenly, her pace slowed and she squinted at something in the distance. “Pray, do you see that?” He followed her finger and saw a man walking their way, a donkey at his side. He frowned, tilting his head to the side when he recognized the man.

“That is Mr. Keller, he is one of the tenants. His farm is over yonder, about twenty minutes from here.”

The figure slowed and then, one hand shot up into the sky and he waved, shouting something though the wind and distance swallowed his words.

“Do you suppose he is coming to see you?” Sally asked.

“There is but one way to find out,” Leonard replied and set into motion again. Sally hesitated for a second and then appeared to skip a step to keep pace, a flinch flashing across her face.

“Are you okay?” He looked at her up and down but she nodded.

“Yes, my ankle ... I suppose I did not land as gracefully yesterday as I had hoped when I came sailing down from the steps in the library,” she said though he saw that she appeared in discomfort.

Before Leonard could inquire further, Mr. Keller had closed the distance between them. His hands pressed against his knees as he caught his breath.

“Your ... Grace ... I thought ... it was you. Bless the ... Lord,” he gasped.

“Mr. Keller, what in the world is the meaning of this?” Leonard asked, alarmed by the man’s appearance. Sweat pearls clung to his bushy eyebrows and came loose as he straightened up, running down his red face. His usually trimmed beard was overgrown with stubble and his cheeks had sunken in. The man’s hollow eyes fell to Sally and he quickly

bowed low. “Your Grace, I beg your pardon for my rudeness, I did not ... Your Grace, an honor to meet you. I....”

Sally stepped forward and beckoned him to stand straight.

“There is no need for formality just now, Mr. Keller,” she said with resolve that commanded Leonard’s attention. “Are you unwell?”

Mr. Keller, clutching his worn hat, approached them hesitantly. “Oh, Your Grace, forgive the intrusion. I’ve come seeking assistance. It is not I who is unwell. Well, a little purposes but it is my family... they’re the ones who are not well.”

Leonard observed Mr. Keller’s trembling hands and furrowed brow, recognizing the signs of genuine distress. He marveled at Sally’s instinct to address the man’s concerns immediately, her empathy evident in every word she spoke.

“Please, Mr. Keller, tell us what’s wrong.” Sally offered.

“It’s my wife and children, Your Grace. They’ve fallen ill with a terrible cough. We’ve tried everything and the surgeon, Mr. Lucas, has been by but none of his remedies have worked. At first it was just my eldest, Charlie, who was ill but then Bessie caught it and now my Elizabeth,” his voice hitched and he gulped, bottom lip trembling.

“What can I do? It was me you came to see, was it not?” Leonard asked.

“Yes ... I ... I wanted to ask if you might be able to help. I ... and I can't afford to pay the physician Mr. Lucas suggested I consult to tend to them. And with the loss of so many sheep... we're struggling to make ends meet,” Mr. Keller explained, a quiver strangling the words coming out of his throat.

“Loss of sheep?” Sally asked, directing her attention to Leonard.

“There was an illness and Mr. Keller as well as some of the other farmers lost much of their livestock.”

“His Grace was kind enough to allow me and the other sheep farmers on the estate forgo rent until we recover, and also helped us replenish our livestock. It was such a help, but ... the illness ... I asked at the church but their coffers are empty, or so the vicar says and ...” This time, his voice was swallowed by tears and he pressed his lips together.

“Mr. Keller, I wish you'd come to me sooner. You know I stand ready to help,” Leonard said, unable to keep a bit of rebuke out of his words.

“I spoke to Lord Finch last week but he said that you were very busy with your wedding and not to disturb you. He sent around someone with a basket of food, which was kind but ... I didn't want to bother him again or you but last night Bessie and Elizabeth both did not sleep a wink and I am afraid they have a fever now.”

Leonard closed his eyes, wishing Aaron had told him of this situation. He appreciated that Aaron tried his best. But he didn't care for the fact he'd told Mr. Keller he was too busy

with his wedding. Since his father's death, Leonard had made it his mission to always be there for his tenants, no matter what. He didn't want them to feel they could not come to him. Aaron would have to be told – besides, this was not Aaron's responsibility, he was not master over these tenants, Leonard was.

“Lord Finch is my partner in business, regarding the vineyards, Mr. Keller. Not the estate. If you cannot find myself or my steward, you may approach Mr. Barnes, the butler, or Mrs. Farnsworth in future, yes?”

Mr. Keller nodded. “I will. I ... I didn't want to be a bother.”

“You would never,” Sally said quickly. “Any nobleman ought to care for their tenants, and as you can see His Grace certainly does.”

Leonard's lips parted and he smiled at the compliment. Somehow, Sally seemed to see something in him he could not. He knew he tried his best to be a good man, a good landlord – but he never could ignore that nagging feeling deep within that told him he'd turn out just like his father. For now, he pushed that feeling aside, focusing on what was truly important.

“We'll do whatever we can to assist you and your family through this difficult time.” Leonard assured. “Mr. Keller, I'll send my physician to your home right away,” he said quickly.

“That is very kind, Your Grace, but ... I can't pay, that is the trouble,” Mr. Keller said, his hands curled around his hat as he pressed it so hard his knuckles popped white.

“Don’t concern yourself with payment. Your family’s health is my priority.” Leonard hated that this man even had to fret about finances. He had clearly failed as a Duke if his tenants were struggling financially. Here he was, going all around the continent to pay restitutions for his father’s errors and his own tenants at home were struggling.

I should have known the help I gave thus far was not enough. Is this a sign that I am turning into my father? Doing good only to the point where it gratifies me and not truly caring?

“I shall go back to your home with you,” Sally’s words tipped him out of his thoughts. *Go with him?*

“What ... That is not necessary, Yours Grace,” Mr. Keller said at once, beating Leonard to it.

“I insist. My mother and I have helped a great many of our tenants through illness. I might know a few tricks that will help for the time being.”

Her readiness to accompany Mr. Keller to his home, offering her support without hesitation, only deepened Leonard’s admiration for her. Internally, however, a surge of worry gnawed at Leonard’s thoughts. He couldn’t shake the sense of unease at the idea of Sally venturing into a potentially hazardous situation. What if this cough was contagious and she caught it? What if she died? He wanted to protest but before he could, Sally turned to him.

“Please, hurry and send the physician. I will see you this afternoon when I return,” she said and turned to Mr. Keller.

As they prepared to part ways, Leonard's concern spilled over. He called out to Sally, needing to express his apprehension. "Sally, wait," he said, stepping closer to her. Once he was close enough to smell her perfume he lowered his voice. "Please, promise me you'll be careful. This cough could be quite serious."

"I know. Look," she withdrew a scarf from the little reticule and waved it so that the sun reflected off the silk material. "I will tie this around my mouth. I know how to keep myself protected."

Sally's reassurance eased Leonard's worry momentarily, but the fear still lingered. As she tied the scarf securely around her mouth, Leonard couldn't ignore the pang of protectiveness swelling within him. This thin cloth could surely not keep out the dreadful disease he'd born witness to, could it?

"Thank you, Sally," Leonard murmured. He didn't want to show himself as too worried as that might in turn add to Mr. Keller's burden. So, he spoke quietly, only for her to hear. "Please take care of yourself."

With a nod of understanding, Sally bid farewell and departed with Mr. Keller. Leonard stood there, watching her retreating figure with admiration and concern. In that moment, he realized with a start that his feelings for Sally were evolving, deepening into something he hadn't anticipated. As the weight of his attachment settled in, Leonard couldn't help but wonder where this unexpected journey with Sally would lead them.

CHAPTER 17



Sally

*T*wo weeks later ...

Sally's fingers moved neatly across the fabric in her lap, weaving delicate threads into intricate patterns.

"I cannot believe how quickly you can work," Joanna said beside her, placing her own work in her lap with a sigh. "My fingers are already bleeding again!" She held up her right hand which indeed bore wounds from her battle with the embroidery needle.

"You ought to stop, you'll only spoil the fabric," Sally replied, and Joanna raised her eyebrows.

"I see, that is what you really worry about. The material. Not the fact that I might die of an infection from stabbing myself by accident," Joanna replied in jest.

"You have known for years that you are hopeless when it comes to embroidery. Why even bother? It is not as if you do not have anything else to do now that you are Duchess. There is always something that needs tending to," she said and

chuckled as she placed her own embroidery aside. “I sound as though I have been Duchess for years, rather than just over a fortnight.”

“You do, but I dare say you are much better suited to it than I. If I didn’t have my mother-in-law, I am sure the entire household would be in utter chaos and we’d have to eat bread and dry cheese every night for dinner because I forgot to make the menu,” Joanna admitted.

“You do have two children” Sally pointed out and then nodded at her stomach. “And a third on the way.”

Joanna beamed and glanced toward the window from where the joyful laughter of Leonard and Kenneth mingled with the delighted giggles of Joanna’s son Peter, their playful antics echoing through the air. Sally stole a glance through the window, her heart swelling with affection as she watched the scene unfolding in the garden. Leonard, fully immersed in the mock sword fight with Peter, wore a playful grin that tugged at her heartstrings. He’d fashioned his sword out of a branch he’d collected earlier and advanced toward the eight year old Peter who bravely battled back while Kenneth sat on the low stone bench, little Louisa on his lap. She watched as Leonard advanced toward the boy again but then dramatically fell to his side as the boy touched him lightly with his make-belief sword.

As Leonard lay on his back, all four limbs splayed out dramatically, she let out a little laugh. He’d make a wonderful father to their children one day, she knew it already.

No! What am I thinking? This isn’t real. I must not make a cake of myself...

Oblivious to her sudden dark thoughts Joanna looped her arm through her sisters. “You seem much happier lately, Sally,” Joanna observed, her gaze shifting to her sister with a soft, knowing smile.

“We got along quite well these past two weeks,” she admitted, not wanting to allow herself to think of the dark thoughts that had just clouded her contentment. “Leonard took me riding through the estate, showing me all the tenants’ lands. It was quite the adventure, I must say.” She chuckled softly, the memory of Leonard’s patient guidance bringing a fond smile to her lips. “He showed me how to gallop without sliding back and forth.”

“Kenneth had to show me that also,” Joanna chimed in. “If only father had let us learn when we were younger.”

“Indeed. Leonard is quite a good teacher. We even dined together,” Sally continued, hearing the warmth and satisfaction of the memories as she spoke. “It was... pleasant, to say the least.” She paused, a thoughtful gleam in her eyes. “I never imagined our relationship would take such a turn, but I must admit, it is rather enjoyable spending time with him.”

Joanna nodded in understanding, her own smile widening at the genuine contentment radiating from her sister. “It sounded like you found a newfound harmony,” she remarked with quiet happiness. “Who knew, perhaps that unexpected bond between you and Leonard will continue to blossom in the days to come,” Joanna’s beaming smile lit the room. “I always knew there was something special between you and Leonard,” she declared.

Sally's hesitation was palpable as she mulled over Joanna's words, her fingers tracing the delicate patterns of her embroidery. "I am not entirely convinced," she admitted quietly, her gaze drifting to the window where Leonard and Kenneth had moved on to playing a game of hide and seek. "It is rather hard to discern if things truly changed between us, or if this is merely a temporary shift because I confronted him about his neglect. I told you, our agreement was to spend our honeymoon together so that all of the ton would believe our marriage is real. That honeymoon is over in less than a fortnight."

"You should trust in what you're feeling, Sally," Joanna urged gently, her eyes reflecting support. "Leonard seems more like himself lately, and that is a promising sign. Perhaps that is the beginning of something truly wonderful."

Sally wanted to believe her sister, but the more time passed the less certain she became. She knew she'd grasped the tasks of a duchess already, and she knew the ton believed their love was real. The scandal sheets had been writing about them ever since the night of her mother's birthday ball. However, the reports had gone from reveling in the scandal of it all to being downright positive about them. They'd gone to Almack's not a week ago and the following day the papers had raved about how glowing they both were. Likewise, their visits to the theater and the opera had been reported. The world believed they were truly in love – and she couldn't stop herself from wishing it was real.

As she watched Leonard outside, her heart ached for what they had created to be more than a play, an illusion. She wanted him to love her truly, with all his heart. She wanted him to be her husband in more than just name. For the truth was, she had begun to lose her heart to him – but that was a circumstance she could not admit to anyone, not even her sister.

CHAPTER 18



Sally

Later that night, after Joanna and her family had returned to their own home, Sally found herself at the piano forte in Leonard's grand music room. Like everything in Leonard's home, it was grand and consisted of only the finest instruments. A large piano stood by the window while a harp was covered with a cloth on the opposite side of the room. A cloth had also covered the piano but she'd removed it some time ago, longing to play again. Though thus far she hadn't had a chance to. Something always demanded her attention but tonight she found herself with ample time on her hands.

Leonard had gone for a walk alone, which was a custom she'd learned to appreciate as he usually returned calmer and in good spirits. When she found herself alone at this hour, she usually read – her interest in wines and vineyards had only grown since she'd learned it was a topic she and Leonard could bond over. Besides, she found the science behind it rather interesting. However, tonight her mind did not feel like taking in new information, too exhausting had the day been. She adored Joanna but after a long eventful day with the family, a little peace and quiet was appreciated.

She slipped behind the piano and lifted the lid. The keys at once looked inviting and she placed her hands on them with her eyes closed. As if under their own force, they moved

across the keys, eliciting a melody. Her posture was poised, yet there was a subtle tension in her movements, betraying the discomfort she felt from her injured ankle. Ever since her fall on her first day here, her ankle had continued to hurt, some days more than on others. Despite the pain, her passion for music shone through, infusing each note with emotion and expression. Soon, she sat with her eyes closed, her hands moving easily.

By the time she'd finished the song, she sat back and opened her eyes, feeling lighter than before when a slow clap made her head snap around. She gasped when she saw Leonard standing in the doorway, his shoulder casually leaning against the doorway.

“Leonard, I did not know you were here,” she said and got up, suddenly mortified. She hadn't played for anyone in a long time and certainly not Leonard.

“I did not want to interrupt you. You play beautifully,” he said and entered the room.

“Thank you. I am not truly accomplished at playing,” she said, humble as always.

“Of course you are, you could play in an orchestra,” he said early. Sally waved a hand and got up.

“Please, I simply play for ... Oh!” As she rose, her ankle ached because her leg had been in one position for too long.

Leonard was at her side in one second, wrapping his arm around her as she regained her balance. He escorted her to the chaise near the fireplace and settled her. After placing her leg up on a low stool he sat beside her, concern flickering in his eyes. “Should I call the physician?” he inquired, his brow furrowing with concern. “It’s been nearly two weeks since you fell in the library; it shouldn’t still have hurt like this.”

“It is nothing to worry about, really,” she assured him, forcing a smile despite the persistent ache in her ankle. “It will be fine with some rest.” Her words carried a hint of reassurance, but Leonard’s anxious look remained fixed on her, his worry evident in his furrowed brow.

“How did you hurt it in the first place? You mentioned it has troubled you for years now,” he asked.

Sally hesitated, contemplating whether to share her secret with Leonard. Officially, she’d told everyone she’d cracked her ankle during a dance, but of course that wasn’t the truth. Not really. She hadn’t dared tell anyone about the incident that truly led to her injury, not even Joanna. She’d been so mortified, so scared she hadn’t been able to bring herself to say it. Yet, somehow she wanted to tell Leonard everything. A part of her hoped that it might allow him to trust her with whatever troubled him, while another felt genuinely close to him and wanted to be honest with the one person she was to share her life with.

“It happened three years ago,” she started, her words measured. “I was at a ball in town.” Her mind drifted back to that temperate summer night, the strains of music floating on the warm breeze, the laughter of the guests mingling with the rustle of silk skirts. “It was a hot night,” she continued. “I’d been dancing for some while as it was only my second season. I was eager to make a match and my mother encouraged me

not to turn down a single dance.” She scoffed and crumpled her muslin dress between her hands as she spoke.

“After a while, I was so tired and sweaty I needed to get outside. I know it isn’t very glamorous to tell you this,” she said and raised her eyes, but he shook his head.

“I am not one alarmed by natural events such as getting warm while dancing. I have broken a sweat after a vigorous quadrille, as one should when one dances it right,” he winked at her, and Sally relaxed, a little glad he was making it so easy for her to talk.

“Thank you, really. I ... Anyhow, I needed the air and stepped out into the garden. I had to catch my breath and my mother was always adamant about not sweating or panting in front of company.”

This time, Leonard let out a laugh. “How dare you, Sally? Sweating and panting? The disgrace. A truly accomplished lady knows how to keep her body from engaging in such functions. If you do not learn to control such things you will never be Queen,” he clicked his tongue and shook his head while she chuckled, one hand in front of her mouth. He was kind, gentle. He knew already this wasn’t easy for her. If only she could find the key to unlock whatever cage held this gentle version of him for good. Encouraged, she carried on her story.

“I walked a distance because I remember there was a rose bed that I wanted to see and then I sat down for a bit, just enjoying the breeze when I heard something in the bushes. It thought it was an animal,” she said, suddenly thinking back to the day at the lake just recently when this very experience had repeated itself. “I thought nothing of it when suddenly, a man leaped out from behind a bush. How he’d gotten there I do not know.

He rushed toward me and grabbed my hand. I remember the smell on him – he was drunk as a wheelbarrow.” She shuddered and instinctively moved a little closer to Leonard. “His skin around my hand was damp I remember that clear as day and I tried to get away but he would not let me.”

“Perdition,” Leonard gasped beside her. The way the word came out, quick and sharp, told her he truly worried about her.

“He would have, I know. I... I tried to scream,” she stammered, her eyes welling up with tears. “But he... he covered my mouth, and I couldn’t... I couldn’t...”

Her breath caught in her throat as she recalled the feeling of suffocation, the sheer terror of being overpowered by a stranger in the darkness. Leonard moved so that their arms touched and their knees leaned against one another. The warmth from him and his lovely scent gave her strength to carry on. “I knew I had to do something to get out of the situation and so I bit him, I kicked him, but he... he wouldn’t let go. Finally, I broke the skin on his hand by biting hard and I ran,” she uttered over the pounding of her heart.

Leonard listened in stunned silence, his eyes wide with horror as if imagining the terror Sally experienced. “You fought back,” he stammered “You were so brave, Sally.”

She nodded, her tears now flowing freely as she relived the moment she broke free, only to fall and injure herself in the process. “I... I twisted my ankle,” she choked out, her voice hitching with emotion. “I-I fell over a cobblestone and let out a cry. He was behind me, following, but then the garden door opened and someone called to see if there was a disturbance. From the corner of my eye, I saw him leaving, running away and then... and he was gone, but...”

Hot tears spilled from her eyes and ran across her chin. “I was so scared. I couldn’t... I couldn’t tell anyone what happened so instead I said that I fell and ... they brought me inside and tended to my leg. My mother was so angry, thinking I’d been clumsy when really I ...”

“You survived an attack,” he said, incensed now. “Oh, Sally, I am so sorry this happened to you. You didn’t deserve this.” He inhaled sharply. “Is this why you reacted so strongly at the lake?”

She nodded, her cheeks turning red. “Yes, it reminded me of that night. Ever since I have trouble with strange noises like that, and I do not like to go out alone at night. It isn’t as if it haunts me but it did change the way I act.”

“I am so very sorry I made fun of you then. I didn’t know ...” She turned and placed a hand on top of his. “No, please do not worry. I am glad you turned it into something we could laugh about. Really.”

Leonard placed his hand on top of hers and let his thumb run over her glove. She wished she had taken the gloves off so she might have felt his skin against hers but it was too late now. Still, she was happy just for the gesture which was the tenderest affection he’d shown her thus far.

Together, they sat in silence, Sally’s confession hanging heavy in the air. Sally’s gaze met Leonard’s, her eyes reflecting the gratitude she felt for his understanding and compassion. She squeezed his hand gently, taking solace in his comforting presence. “Thank you,” she whispered. “For everything.”

“Of course. I am glad you felt you could trust me with this story and please know that your confidence is not misplaced, I shall not breathe a word of this to anyone,” he promised. “Say, you said you never told anyone about this? Not even Joanna?”

“I... I was ashamed,” she admitted hesitantly. “I blamed myself for putting myself in such a vulnerable position.”

Leonard’s eyes flashed with indignation for the second time that night, his jaw tightening with suppressed anger. “There was nothing for you to be ashamed of,” he insisted firmly, righteous indignation swiftly overtook his senses. “A lady ought to be able to walk around a garden at a private ball without fearing an assault by a drunkard. You did nothing wrong.”

His words pierced through her self-doubt and insecurities, offering her a sense of validation and reassurance she desperately needed. Sally nodded in silent agreement, feeling a flicker of hope ignite within her heart.

“In my heart, I knew that,” Sally replied softly. “But even so, I still couldn’t bring myself to tell anyone. I remember him breathing down my neck...” she shuddered again and he tightened his hold on her hand. “But not his face. So what could it have done to tell anyone? If anything, I might have been ruined.” A bitter laugh escaped her. “Although that happened anyway, if a few years later.”

“You are not ruined,” he replied sternly. “You are a Duchess.”

She raised her head, pride flowing through her. “I am.”

“This stranger did not win, he took nothing from you. Indeed, I venture to say he is nothing if he must act as he did. You ought not to waste a thought on this man,” he said and nodded his head for emphasis.

“I do not want to and most days I do not, but I so badly cracked my ankle I cannot help but think of that night every time it hurts. If I can remember who he was and ensure he is taken to Newgate Prison, I’d feel much better.” She shrugged. “Alas, I cannot. He was likely a vagrant, asleep in the bushes and is long gone but it is the never knowing...”

“I understand, but know this: Nobody will ever hurt you here. Especially not now that you are a Duchess. You are my wife. And nobody touches my wife, do you understand? Nobody would dare, I won’t let them.” Leonard exhaled through his nose and then, he placed one arm around Sally which sent a jolt through her. For the second time in a week, she felt that wonderful warmth surge through her as he held on to her. With his arm around her, she felt truly protected and safe from all the world. This was right, it was where she was meant to be. Beside him, in his arms. To tell one another everything, anything? She let her head slide to the side until it rested against his and then, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes, enjoying his nearness – even though she knew it would not last for long.

CHAPTER 19



Leonard

*A*s Leonard sat beside Sally, her presence enveloped him in a haze of enchantment. Her sweet floral perfume tinged the air, but it wasn't the scent that was so intoxicating. It was her presence, the feeling of her body so close, his arm around her. What drew him in the most, though, was the trust she'd shown him. This tale that had haunted her for years had seen the light of day for the first time - and he'd been the one she'd chosen to confide in.

He didn't quite understand why. Was it by the title 'husband'? Or was it because of him? Whatever it was, it invoked an instinct to shield her from the world's harsh realities.

"Thank you for telling me," he murmured as he felt the softness of her hair against his cheek, igniting a desire to run his fingers through its silky strands. The urge to draw her closer, to feel the warmth of her skin beneath his touch, overwhelmed him, stirring emotions he had long tried to suppress. Yet, he could not move away. Instead, he let her hair tickle his skin when she moved.

"Thank you for letting me talk and making me feel comfortable to do so," she replied, raising her eyes, her lashes shimmering with the remnants of her tears.

“I wish I had had the ability to tell someone before, but I couldn’t bring myself to. I allowed myself to become a captive of my thoughts, thinking I’d be shamed even though I knew it wasn’t my fault.”

Anger simmered beneath his calm facade, ignited as he considered her words. She had been made to feel it was her fault, yet she’d also taken on that burden herself - in a way, she wasn’t so unlike him, for he’d done the same, taking on his father’s past as his own to rectify.

But of course, he had a deeper secret he could not share with her. He wanted to protect her from the outside, that was true - but he also had to remember there was something much closer to home he had to shield her from.

At that moment, Leonard realized the precariousness of his resolve. The line between duty and desire blurred, and he knew that with each passing moment in Sally’s presence, the walls around his heart weakened, threatening to collapse entirely.

Oblivious to the storm she was igniting within him, Sally smiled gently. “I find it easy to talk to you, Leonard. I don’t know why. It shouldn’t be, given how we came to be with one another.”

He returned her smile, though inwardly, he wished he could find the courage to share his struggles with her. “Well, whatever the strange path our journey took, I’m glad I was the one you could talk to,” he replied. “Whatever the future holds, I do hope you will always feel comfortable talking to me.”

“I hope you will feel the same, Leonard. I do not want this to be a one-sided... friendship,” she said, choosing the word carefully. “I want us to be able to confide in one another. I know I am not the only one who has endured something terrible. One could argue that you have undergone much more severe circumstances of late.”

He wetted his lips, knowing she was talking about his parents. He finally removed his arm from her shoulders and tugged his hands between his knees.

“They have been rather difficult years, yes,” he admitted. “I had just begun to manage my new duties when my mother passed. She was young, agile... I never expected it.”

Sally listened, her eyes filled with empathy. “I can’t imagine how horrible that must have been,” she murmured. “And with both so very loved. It must be hard to be reminded of them everywhere and to want to live up to them.”

Live up to them ... his mother, yes, but his father? He dreaded living up to him. Leonard desperately wanted to tell her as much but held back. Instead, he leaned back and folded his hands on his lap.

“It was like my life as I knew it ended twice,” Leonard admitted, for this was not a lie.

“You’ve been incredibly strong, Leonard,” she said sincerely. “To endure such losses and still carry on... I am amazed you were able to. I know how hard Kenneth took his brother’s loss and how long he carried the burden with him.”

He would have loved to explain the difference between Kenneth and himself to her, but he didn't know how without revealing everything to her. He gulped hard, feeling his Adam's apple bob. Should he tell her everything?

Should he tell her he'd discovered his perfect father was an illusion? How he'd made his mother miserable all of her life? Mistreated her? Stole from his workers? Should he tell her that his tragic death from a heart attack had neither been tragic nor a heart attack?

Leonard bit his bottom lip, remembering the day he'd discovered his father hadn't died in his sleep when his heart stopped but rather that he had been murdered - murdered in his own home...

He shuddered with the horror of reliving the moment the truth had been revealed to him and knew he could not tell her such horrid things. She was traumatized, as it was from her past experiences. He couldn't tell her that she lived in the home where a cold-blooded murder had taken place ...

"... a blessing to have the admiration of your tenants," Sally said, and Leonard nodded as if he hadn't just spent the last few minutes lost in his thoughts.

"I do not think that I am admired as such," he said quietly, uncomfortable with the option.

"But you are, You do so much good in the world, Leonard. The tenants, the parish vicar, your fellow lords... they all admire you."

It was wrong to let her believe he was such a good and righteous person, wasn't it? She deserved better... She deserved to know who he was really married to. Leonard felt a megrim knocking as he pondered what he should do. Before he could decide, there was a knock on the front door. She leaped up and stood by the fireplace as if suddenly aware of how close they had been sitting.

An odd sensation of hurt rushed through him, but he did not let it show. He'd told her they were companions and friends, after all... Still, he instantly missed her closeness.

"Enter," he called, and the butler appeared.

"Pardon the interruption, Your Grace," the butler announced, his voice as crisp and formal as his attire. "Mr. Keller and his family have arrived."

Leonard straightened his posture, his mind reluctantly shifting away from the intimate conversation. The Kellers? What in the world had happened now? As far as he was aware the family had recovered.

"Thank you, Barnes. Please show them into the drawing room."

"Shall we see what they might need?" he asked, proffering his arm.

She moved gracefully across the room, the light catching in her lovely hair, and when she took his arm, he sighed relief. It

felt good to be at her side again - though he knew he had to stop yearning for this closeness for both of their sakes.

* * *

The Kellers awaited them in the drawing room, and Leonard smiled when he spotted the little girl, Bessie, marveling at the painting of his mother above the fireplace.

“An angel,” she said.

“You could say so,” he said, and at once, the entire family turned to him. In addition to Mr. Keller - who bowed deeply - Mrs. Keller was there, performing a deep curtsy that might have fitted in at court. Their son likewise bowed but peered up at Leonard from underneath a mop of hair.

“Mrs. Keller, it is so lovely to see you again, and looking so well,” Sally said and stepped to the woman, taking her hand.

Mrs. Keller returned the greeting, her eyes lighting up with appreciation as she clasped Sally’s hand.

The children, sensing the warmth in Sally’s demeanor, dashed towards her, their laughter filling the room. “Your Grace, I could not wait to see you,” Bessie said, and Sally kneeled to be eye-to-eye with the girl. Leonard smiled, proud of how well-loved Sally already was.

“Oh, how you’ve grown since I last saw you!” she exclaimed, her eyes twinkling with genuine delight.

“It was just last week,” Bessie giggled, but Sally shook her head.

“I am certain you have grown; the next time you see me, you might be taller than me,” she pinched the girl’s nose.

She’d make a wonderful mother. What a shame I’ve robbed her of that...

“I must beg your pardon for the late intrusion,” Mr. Keller said, drawing his attention.

“Mr. Keller, it’s a pleasure to have you here. Please, don’t apologize for the intrusion,” he said, gesturing towards the seating area.

Mr. Keller hesitated for a moment before speaking, his expression earnest.

“Thank you, Your Grace, but we are intruding, as it is late. Still, you ought to know we didn’t come empty-handed,” he said, reaching into a basket he’d placed on the ground earlier.

His wife joined his side. “We wanted to express our gratitude for all you’ve done for us. So we went to the market today and had something made for you. It took all afternoon, that is why we are so late.”

Sally stepped beside him and watched Mr. Keller pull out two intricately woven hearts.

“Because you just got married!” The Keller’s son announced, sending a red tinge up Leonard’s cheeks.

“Thank you, Mr. Keller, Mrs. Keller. This means a great deal to both of us,” he said. Sally nodded in agreement, her eyes shining. Sally’s gratitude spilled forth as she thanked the Kellers for their thoughtful gift.

“We truly appreciate your kind gesture,” she said. Leonard noted that both had each used the word ‘we’ as they spoke as if they had become a unit despite his attempts to keep it from happening.

“Your generosity has meant the world to us,” he replied earnestly. “Without your help, I do not know what might have happened to my family.”

Bessie’s innocent voice broke through the conversation. “My friends said that Dukes can be really mean,” she blurted out, her eyes wide with apprehension. “But that’s not true!”

“Bessie, it is impolite to speak without being called on,” Mr. Keller gently chided her.

But Bessie remained resolute. “It’s true!” she insisted. “My friend Grace said her master threw them off their estate because they had a bad time. But you would never.” She turned to her mother. “His Grace is a lovely man, and Her Grace is an angel, just like the lady in the painting,” she added with conviction.

Leonard's heart swelled at Bessie's words, her smile soft and reassuring. "Thank you, Bessie. That's very kind of you to say," he replied, bending so he was eye-to-eye with the child.

Leonard's gaze softened as he listened to Bessie's heartfelt words, a sense of longing for his mother gripping him. Mr. Keller's smile widened as he looked down at his daughter, a glimmer of pride in his eyes.

"Well, you're not wrong, Bessie," he agreed. "We've been fortunate to have such gracious noblemen looking after us."

"Indeed, we have been lucky. Especially since the late Duke passed away. One never knows who will inherit and how things might change but with you, Your Grace, we need not have worried. You are so much like your father it is sometimes as if he was still with us," she said.

"I heard so many wonderful things about His Grace' parents; it is a shame I did not have a chance to get to know them better," Sally said, and then, she and the Kellers slipped into a conversation about the one topic Leonard never wanted to hear about - his father.

As the Kellers reminisced about the late Duke, Leonard's heart sank. Each time they compared him to his father, he felt as though a knife had been plunged into his heart. He took short, sharp breaths, steadying himself as he heard how wonderful his father was and how well loved.

He wanted to tell them they were wrong; they didn't know him. He didn't know him. He wanted to beg them, no order

them, to stop comparing him to his father, but he remained silent.

The smile remained plastered on his face while he listened, knowing he could not allow himself to show his discomfort. However, as they spoke, he understood one thing - he had been wrong to let down his guard. No matter how much he adored Sally now and how comfortable he was in her presence, he had to stick to his original plan, for the Kellers were right.

He was like his father, if he wanted to or not. He carried his father's blood and was almost bound to repeat his mistakes. No, he had to stay away from her for the good of Sally and himself. When the honeymoon was over, he would board a ship to Portugal - and ensure he did not return until necessary. And even then, he'd make it clear to Sally that nothing had changed.

They were not, nor would they ever be, a happy couple in love. No matter how much his heart now ached for it.

He had to protect her - even if this meant protecting her from himself.

CHAPTER 20



Sally

The morning sun streamed through the windows, casting a warm glow over the breakfast table where Sally patiently awaited Leonard's arrival. The sunbeams tickled her nose and she let out a rather undignified sneeze, though quickly recovered. The room was filled with the delightful aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the sweet scent of blooming flowers from the nearby garden, creating a serene atmosphere. A spread of fruits, pastries, and steaming porridge adorned the table.

Sally smiled, feeling much less burdened by her conflicted feelings this morning. Leonard had allowed her to set free emotions and fears she had been forced to hold in for years. She'd let it all out with him, and he hadn't judged her. He hadn't dismissed her or made her feel small. If anything, he'd made her feel protected as if he cared. As if he cared for *her*. Could it be that not only had the ice thawed between them but that something might be blooming?

Dare I dream of such a possibility? Dare I dream that perhaps he and I can have something special yet?

Some part of her wished the Kellers hadn't come the night before. Their visit had changed the air between them

significantly. It had been nice to have them there, and the heart they'd brought them was beautiful.

Yet, it could not be denied that something hadn't been the same after they'd gone. Leonard had excused himself shortly after their departure and gone to his chamber, claiming fatigue. Was he uncomfortable with what had been said? She would understand if that was the case. To be certain, it had been a little strange to be told by people they didn't know well that they were such a lovely couple and that they reminded them of the late Duke and Duchess.... It had to have been hard for Leonard to hear.

As Leonard finally entered the room, she raised her eyes, greeting him warmly. However, it was clear from the second he stepped through the door that something was amiss; something bothered him.

His eyes had dark circles under them, and his skin looked pale, like he hadn't slept well.

"Leonard, good morning," she said with a forced smile. "How did you sleep?" She knew the answer but was still dismayed when he replied.

"Not well," he answered curtly, his tone distant. Sally's heart sank at his abruptness, a sense of unease creeping into her stomach. They had been so close these past few days, and Leonard's sudden coldness caught her off guard. Was this due to the lack of sleep or the previous conversation? Had he perhaps taken the Keller's reminiscences about his parents harder than she'd feared? Or was he bothered by her admission after all? Perhaps quiet reflection had somehow changed his mind, and he no longer blamed her for her attack.

“I am sorry. What kept you up?” she asked as she got up to pour him a cup of tea.

“I am not sure, sometimes I suffer with sleeplessness. It can’t be helped.”

“Perhaps some chamomile or lavender tea could help you relax,” she offered. “We can pick some herbs later when we visit Joanna.” They were indeed due to visit Joanna and Kenneth today at their estate, and she knew that Kenneth’s home had one of the best herb gardens in all of England.

But Leonard’s response was brief, a mere nod that did little to dispel the uneasy air between them.

“Perhaps,” he said, absentmindedly dropping lumps of sugar into his tea, his distant gaze suggesting his mind was elsewhere. Sally noticed his reticence but resolved not to let this sour their interaction.

“So, do you not think the buns look delicious?” she asked, hoping to draw him into conversation. “I always adore them around this time of year. I wish we could have them every morning.

He glanced up briefly, his expression unreadable. “We can. You are Duchess of this manor now,” he replied curtly. “You can have whatever you want.”

Sally felt a pang of anxiety. He was withdrawing from her, but why? Or was she paranoid? Perdition. This man was an

enigma she'd never solve.

“Well, I think hot cross buns are just special because we do not have them so often. Like mince pies at Christmas. I dare say I'd grow tired of them if I had them every day, but that doesn't negate the impulse to wish for it.”

This drew his attention. “Impulses are rather perplexing. We know they are wrong and yet sometimes can't resist them.”

She wetted her lips and gulped, unsure what he meant by that. Determined to salvage their rapport, she pressed on. “The Kellers were such pleasant company yesterday, weren't they? I quite enjoyed their visit,” she remarked, hoping to elicit a more enthusiastic response from Leonard.

He nodded briefly before returning his attention to his food. The heavy silence that followed was punctuated only by the sound of Leonard cutting into his bread roll. The crackling as the knife sliced through the bread filled the air, and then the glass container holding the butter thudded against the table as he dropped it. Desperate to fill the void, Sally brought up the woven heart they had received from the Kellers.

“I hung the hearts up in the library,” she mentioned. “I thought since we both like to go there it would be a good place. What do you think?”

“That's fine,” he replied, lacking the warmth that had characterized their interactions. Sally sat back, her lips pressed together in a slight frown, feeling lost in what else to say. She slid her spoon into the porridge, but instead of eating it, she

stirred it around, replaying the previous evening repeatedly in her head. Then, she raised her chin and pursed her lips.

“Leonard,” she called, and he lowered the paper, squinting at her from over the top out of his mesmerizing eyes.

“Yes?”

“Did my revelation about how I hurt my ankle upset you?” she ventures, unable to hide the apprehension.

Looking up, Leonard’s expression softened, warmth returning to his eyes. “No, Sally, not at all,” he reassured her. “I meant everything I said. None of what happened was your fault. Why would you think otherwise?”

Why, indeed?

“You were quiet and so I thought perhaps you thought about what I said and decided you felt I was in the wrong after all,” she said, figuring telling the truth would not hurt anything now. At once, his face changed. Gone was the serious expression, the coldness. Instead, he leaned forward and placed a hand on hers.

“No, Sally. Not at all. You did nothing wrong. I meant every word I said. I would like to find the man and bring him to justice, in fact. My demeanor this morning is simply because I didn’t sleep well last night, that’s all.”

Feeling a sense of relief wash over her, Sally nodded, trying to shake off her discomforts. Perhaps she was reading too much into Leonard's disposition after all.

"Thank you," she said and picked up her spoon again. This time, she took a mouthful of her porridge, but an uncomfortable burning spread in her throat as she swallowed.

Placing a hand to her throat, she winced slightly, prompting Leonard to notice.

"Are you alright, Sally?" he asked, genuine concern evident.

Sally offered a weak smile. "Just a scratchy throat, probably from the change in the air," she replied dismissively, trying to downplay the discomfort.

"Are you taking ill?" Leonard asked.

"I do not think so. Although..." she paused as she remembered that she'd woken with some stiffness in her bones that morning, a signal that a cold was taking hold. Though she'd dismissed it as having slept awkwardly, she could no longer do so. "Perhaps... I do feel a little odd this morning. I thought it was all because of our conversation last night but it might be a trifling cold after all."

"Right," Leonard said and rose, ringing the bell. A moment later, before she could say anything, Mary entered.

“Mary, have Mrs. Farnsworth bring up a cup of hot lemon water for Her Grace,” he ordered.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mary said, flashing Sally a concerned glance before departing.

“Perhaps we ought to put off the visit today, we can call on Kenneth and Joanna another day. To tell you the truth, Peter wore me out yesterday,” he said, though he knew he was simply being kind.

“No, I want to see my sister. I am sure it is nothing. After the hot lemon water, I shall feel better, I am certain,” she said with a determined look, although she wasn’t as confident as she had sounded.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” Leonard said softly, his reticence evident as he opened the newspaper. Once again, his obvious show of concern made her heart swell with gratitude, reassured by Leonard’s caring gesture. She had to stop doubting it at every turn. So what if it took him a while to open up to her? There was no rush; they had their entire lives ahead of them.

* * *

Alas, it was as she had feared. The heaviness in her bones and the scratchy throat were preludes to an illness coming on. As the afternoon sun cast long shadows through the windows of Sally’s chamber, the air felt heavy and hot. She knew from the breeze and the way the maids were walking with shawls around them that it was cold out, and she ought not to be warm.

Sally sat at her vanity, her reflection a pale imitation of her usual vibrant self. She reached for a handkerchief to dab at her flushed cheeks, the cool cotton providing only momentary relief from the persistent warmth of her rising fever.

“Not now, please. I do not want to be confined to bed,” she mumbled when Mary entered with a tray.

“Your Grace, have tea. You might feel better,” she said, placing it before her.

The porcelain teapot, painted with dainty yellow flowers, steamed before her. As she watched it swirl through the air, her head seemed to twist and turn, engaged in a strange dance only she was witness to. She should pick up the pot to give herself a cup, but somehow her brain felt as if it were filled with all manner of fog she could not break through.

Mary had her back to her and bustled around the armoire, rehung some dresses while bringing out others so Sally could choose one. She chattered as she worked, but Sally caught none of the words, only the melody of her maid’s speech. With each passing moment, Sally’s condition seemed to deteriorate further.

A dull ache settled in her bones, and her limbs felt fatigued. Every breath she took rattled in her chest. It wasn’t until she sneezed repeatedly with such force her head snapped back that Mary turned and gasped.

“Goodness, gracious. Your Grace, you look terrible. You really ought to rest,” Mary urged, her voice laced with concern as she rushed to Sally’s side, her worry carved into her face.

Before Sally knew it, the woman had placed a hand on her head and let out a hiss.

“You’re burning up with fever, and your color is dreadful.”

Sally offered a feeble smile, attempting to downplay the severity of her illness.

“I’ll be fine, Mary, just a touch of the cold, nothing to worry about,” she reassured. “Maybe I will lay down for a little bit before I go to see my sister. Will you tell His Grace I’d like to leave an hour later than planned?”

“Your Grace, I think you are in no condition to go anywhere.”

“Nonsense, I am fine,” she insisted. However, Sally’s body betrayed her despite her best efforts to appear composed.

As she attempted to rise from her seat, a sudden wave of dizziness washed over her, causing the room to sway precariously.

“Oh!” she exclaimed and grabbed onto the back of her bed as Mary rushed to her side, her arms steadying Sally, who fought to regain her balance.

“You mustn’t overexert yourself,” Mary admonished gently.

“I am not. I am only a little weak, that is all. Some rest ...” The word trailed off as her body lost the battle against Sally’s

will.

With Mary's assistance, she made her way across the room, the journey feeling like an arduous trek through a thick fog of exhaustion. Each step seemed to sap little strength, leaving her trembling and breathless.

Sally placed her hands on the mattress, allowing herself to lean on the bed for support.

"Thank you, Mary. I'll take a rest. Would you get my nightgown? I ought not to sleep in my clothing," she said while Mary nodded and rushed away to get the garment.

Sally's feet hurt in her half boots, and she slipped them off, using her toes to shove the shoes off her feet. She needed her slippers, for the floor was cold, and the chill ate right into her bones.

She turned sideways and squatted down. there, beneath the bed, where her slippers. They seemed impossibly far away through the fog that grew only denser by the moment. She let out a puff of air and reached forward when suddenly, the world shifted entirely out of focus and her head spun worse than before. Abandoning her quest for her slippers, she stood, grabbing the bed with her other hand but as she attempted to crawl onto it, something within her snapped and darkness grabbed hold of her, pulling her into an abyss. The last thing she heard was Mary calling out for her from somewhere far away and then a hard thud as her body landed on the ground.

A jolt went through her and for a split second, she wondered what had happened but then the darkness entirely overtook her

- and the world faded away.

CHAPTER 21



Leonard

Leonard sat in his study as the grandfather clock in the corner ticked, slowing toward three in the afternoon. He was due to visit Kenneth and Joanna with Sally. He'd been looking forward to it; he'd envisioned the afternoon already - the four of them together as a family, two couples engaged in an afternoon walk or a light game of shuttlecock.

He'd allowed those thoughts to pool in his mind for a few days; more than that, he'd allowed thoughts of the future to form. He'd known this was wrong, that he had to remember that he had to keep Sally safe, even from himself. Yet, he couldn't keep the onslaught of feelings from overpowering him at times.

Sally had impressed him on the day of their first walk alone with her eagerness to learn about the vineyards. She'd cobbled down his walls with her kindness to the servants, her desire to help the tenants, and her relentless attempts to ensure their union was seen as legitimate for both their sakes.

More than that, he'd grown to crave her company. Sometimes, they'd sit in silence, each pursuing their time, yet it felt good and warm. It felt right. Being with her felt the way he had always imagined a perfect union would feel. Back when he'd

still believed himself capable of being married, loving, and being loved. He'd thought it would be like this, being with someone who understood you even if you didn't talk all the time.

Sharing a life with another person. Two people who belonged together.

He got up and walked to the sideboard where a portrait of his father hung. He curled his hands into a fist and glared up at it.

“Why did you have to be such a rotten man? Why did you have to ruin everything for me?” Then he returned to his mother's portrait and shook his head.

“And you? Why did you have to leave your diaries for me to find? if I'd never known what he was like ...”

No, it's not fair to blame her. The diary was not left for me. She didn't plan to die the day she did...

There was this irrational anger at his mother because of his father - the reason he had to stop fooling himself into thinking he and Sally could ever be anything other than platonic companions.

He'd know this, of course. But it had taken the Keller's visit the day before to truly bring it to his mind. What had he said? That he and Sally reminded him of the late Duke and Duchess?

Or had it been Mrs. Keller who said it? No matter who, they had been the words he needed to hear. The words that reminded him of the uncomfortable truth - he had a monster slumbering inside - and one day it would -

“Your Grace!” Mrs. Farnsworth’s voice ripped through the study, tearing him from his thoughts. A rapid knock came, and she burst in without waiting for him to call her.

“Mrs. Farnsworth, what in the world has happened?” he asked as he spun around and strutted across the room in large strides.

“The Duchess has collapsed!” she exclaimed.

Leonard’s heart lurched, panic seizing him like a vice.

“Collapsed?”

“In her chamber. She’s been unwell, Your Grace. More so than this morning. She’s been getting rapidly worse, Mary says,” the housekeeper informed him.

His mind flashed back to her sore throat that morning - and the illness that had ripped through the Keller household. Had she caught it after all?

Without hesitation, he sprang to his feet, his mind racing with a thousand dire possibilities. “What happened?” he demanded, his voice tight with fear as they hurried up the stairs.

“I am not certain. Mary rang the bell and called for a footman who alerted me.”

Leonard took two steps at once as he ran to her chamber.

As they burst into Sally’s quarters- the same quarters he’d visited the day after his mother died, the space where he found her diary, Leonard’s worst fears were realized.

Mary stood beside Sally, who lay on the bed, gasping with exhaustion. Her face shimmered with sweat, and her eyes were unfocused.

Leonard rushed to her side, his hands shaky as he gently held her hand. Her pulse raced against his skin, and he looked up.

“Mary, what happened? I need to know in detail,” he asked.

“She collapsed while trying to get into her bed. I was just fetching her nightgown when I saw her. She was mumbling for a minute, and then she fainted. Henry helped me get her into bed,” she said, referring to the footman assigned to this floor.

Leonard’s heart clenched at the sight of Sally’s feverish form; his mind awash with a torrent of dread.

“Right, call for Mr. Sterling at once, Mary. Mrs. Farnsworth, fetch me some cold water and a cloth. Make haste, both of you,” he ordered, and the women sprang into action.

“I’m... f..fi...fine,” Sally weakly protested as her eyes focused on him.

Leonard saw the truth written in the fevered flush of her cheeks and the glassy sheen of her eyes. “You’re not okay,” he insisted, vexed by her insistence. “You need rest and medical attention. You must not constantly insist you can manage anything and everything.” He didn’t mean to sound harsh, but he knew he did. Quickly, he placed a hand over hers. “I am worried about you, Sally. Please, do not protest. You need help.”

I... suppose I am ... a little... ill,” she admitted. “Joanna... the visit...”

“I will let them know,” Leonard promised.

She smiled despite her illness and mouthed ‘Thank you’ before closing her eyes.

Leonard could do nothing but watch her while fear gripped his heart like a vice.

The thought that she might have contracted the same illness that had befallen the Kellers sent a shiver of dread coursing through him.

He should not have let her go to their home. It had been a mistake, a terrible one. How could he properly protect her when he couldn’t even stand up to her when she was making a mistake? He hadn’t wanted to stop her, fearing he’d be seen as controlling or worse. He’d remembered the way his mother

described his father in her diary. Abrupt, abusive, controlling - he hadn't wanted to be any of those things. He wanted her to have autonomy over her choices. But now that might cost her ...

“Your Grace?” Mrs. Farnsworth said gently. “Mr. Sterling is here.”

How much time has passed? How long have I been sitting here?

The man entered. His face marked with deep lines and his hair, once black and lush, now thin and mostly white. He carried a leather bag in one hand and walked with determined self-assured steps.

Leonard got up and greeted the physician, sensing an urgency in the man he appreciated.

“Your Grace,” Mr. Sterling said with a small smile. They shook hands immediately and Leonard’s skin crawled. Not because he disliked the physician. No, he admitted his skill. It was a past they shared, a secret only the two of them knew. A secret that changed Leonard’s life.

“Mr. Sterling,” he said and withdrew his hand, breaking the onslaught of memories that had threatened to overtake him.

“I shall examine your wife,” he said. “Mrs. Farnsworth already informed me of everything. You are welcome to stay.”

“I will,” Leonard said without hesitation. There was no way he would leave Sally alone when she was ill, not until he knew there was no danger.

Leonard watched with a mixture of agitation and alarm as the physician examined her, his heart pounding in his chest with every passing moment.

When the examination was finally over, Leonard couldn't contain his anxiety any longer. Stepping outside with the physician, he demanded answers.

“What's wrong with her?” he implored, his eyes searching the doctor's face for any sign of reassurance.

The physician sighed heavily, his expression grave as he delivered his diagnosis. “It appears to be a cold, so far,” he explained, his tone measured yet tinged with concern.

“So far? What does that mean?” Leonard demanded.

The man shrugged. “As you know, a cold can quickly turn into something more serious if not tended to properly. She has a fever which is higher than one normally sees with a common cold. That could be an indicator that something else might be taking hold.”

Something else ... Leonard didn't even want to imagine.

“She needs plenty of rest, fluids, and perhaps a warm poultice to alleviate her symptoms. Mrs. Farnsworth will receive all my

instructions as per usual,” Mr. Sterling explained. “With good care, she will recover swiftly, I venture to say.”

Leonard felt relief wash over him at the news, but his concern lingered like a shadow at the back of his mind. “But could it be the same illness that afflicted the Kellers?” he asked.

The physician shook his head solemnly. “Unlikely,” he replied. “If it were the same illness, she would have fallen ill much sooner. This seems to be a typical cold with a high fever, nothing more.”

“Thank you,” he said but avoided shaking the man’s hand again. To his relief, he did not attempt to extend his hand to Leonard either.

“Of course. Good day, Your Grace,” the physician said and disappeared.

Leonard rushed back to Sally’s side, determined to do whatever it took to ensure her swift recovery. She was pale, exhausted now from the physician’s exam. Pearls of sweat clung to her forehead, and he thought back to their conversation in the music room. They’d jested about her mother’s aversion to perfectly normal human conditions, such as sweating.

A part of him wanted to jest with her about it now, laugh about how mortified her mother would be, but he saw she wasn’t in the condition to do so. Besides, jesting with one’s spouse was something a couple in love did. They were not. They could not be. He had to remember that.

“Leonard?” she murmured when she opened her eyes again, a weary expression marking her face. “I suppose I am ...sick.”

He gently relayed the physician’s diagnosis to her. “The doctor said it’s just a common cold, Sally,” he murmured, trying to offer her some comfort amid her illness.

Sally’s lips curved into a weak smile, but Leonard could see the worry lingering in her eyes. “I’m sorry I can’t accompany you to Joanna and Kenneth’s,” she whispered, her words painted by the telltale hoarseness that came with such an illness.

It took him a moment but then realization dawned on Leonard as he understood her implication. She thought he was still going to visit Kenneth and Joanna.

“I have no intention of leaving you. In fact, I’ll be staying right here by your side.”

Confusion flickered across Sally’s features, but Leonard wasted no time taking charge of the situation.

“Rest. I will send word to them, and I’ll let your parents and Rosy know you are unwell, but I’ll be sure not to alarm them. Now, let me arrange everything.”

He rang for Mary and swiftly instructed her to have everything the physician ordered brought up as soon as Mrs. Farnsworth gathered it along with a pillow from his own chamber.

“Pillow?” Sally muttered as he returned to her side.

“I will be over there, in the wingchair,” he pointed but then shook his head. Sitting over by the fireplace would do no good. He rushed across the room and grabbed a hold of the chair’s back before dragging it across the floor. Once he had it at her side, he dropped into it and smiled at her.

“See? I’ll be right here. I might even get some of my work done, there are ledgers to look at - and before you censure me, it will not be breaking our agreement as you are ill.”

She flashed a small smile but was soon overtaken by a sneeze. This was followed by a grunt and a sniff. Leonard handed her a handkerchief and turned away while she took care of her nose, not wanting to make her uncomfortable.

“I do feel...rather...dreadful,” she admitted at last.

“Take the laudanum, Sally,” he urged softly. “I’ll be here when you wake up. You’re not alone.”

She nodded and allowed him to measure the laudanum Mr. Sterling had left behind. As he helped her drink it down, she placed her warm hand on his, and a jolt almost knocked the glass right out of his hand.

Once she’d drunk the medicine down, Leonard sat beside Sally’s bed while she drifted away to sleep. The sight of her resting form filled him with a sense of protectiveness he had never experienced before. He wanted nothing more than to

shield her from harm and be her guardian in this moment of vulnerability.

But alongside that desire was a nagging sense of guilt and unease. Leonard knew he should maintain some distance that their closeness would complicate matters further. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to leave her side, not when she needed him the most.

As he watched her sleep, a soft sigh escaping her lips, Leonard felt a surge of tenderness wash over him. He reached out and gently brushed a lock of hair away from her forehead, his touch light and tender.

Leonard closed his eyes briefly, allowing himself to bask in her presence.

With a heavy heart, Leonard leaned back in his chair, his gaze fixed on Sally's peaceful face. He wished, not for the first time that he could shed the burden of his heritage, that he could be free to love and protect her without the specter of his father's sins looming over them. But for now, he could only stay by her side, offering whatever comfort and support he could muster in the face of uncertainty.

CHAPTER 22



Sally

*A*s Sally stirred from her fitful slumber, she was enveloped in a fog of discomfort. The room swam before her eyes, and she shivered uncontrollably despite the warmth of her blankets. Every movement felt arduous like she was wading through thick mud.

In the dimly lit room, shadows danced across the walls, casting eerie shapes that seemed to taunt her weakened state. Sally struggled to orient herself, her thoughts muddled. She extracted one hand from beneath a mountain of blankets and felt how cool the air was compared to her hot body. She had to have a fever. As another shiver went through her, she pulled her arm back in and tried to move to her side. However, something weighed her down.

Confused, Sally peered up over the blankets and realized what it was. Leonard. He was fast asleep beside her with one arm over her waist. Was this real? Or was she having some kind of fever-induced hallucination?

“Leonard?” she whispered to herself, she didn’t raise her voice more because she didn’t want to disturb him. Moreover, she worried he would move away if he woke up. What if he hadn’t

meant to hold her like this? What if he'd slung his arm over her in a state of restlessness or deep slumber?

Besides, she liked feeling him close to her. A part of her wanted to turn and sling her arm around him also, but she found her body did not want to move. Instead, she turned her head to the right, inhaling the scent of Leonard's cologne envelope. Blinking through the haze, she tried to focus on his familiar face, her lips parting in a feeble attempt to speak.

How odd to be next to him right now, how odd to be here, close to one another as husband and wife should. Alas, the moment was interrupted when her body was rocked by another sneeze, which seemed to send her entire body into alert. Her mind raced, and her head throbbed once she sealed herself again, a megrim overtaking her.

"Sally?" Leonard said beside her. She'd woken him with her sneeze.

"How are you?" he asked, his voice sweet like honey from a honeycomb in the darkness.

"I am cold, then hot. Right now... so warm," she said, feeling like a wave of hot smoke might pour out of her ears at any moment.

"Would you like me to cool your head?" he asked and sat up.

Sally nodded weakly, her head throbbing with each movement. He moved off the bed then, the mattress shifting as he did so. Instinctively, she reached her hand out and placed it on the

spot where he had laid, the sheets still warm from his body. Somewhere in the dark, she heard water trickling into a bowl. Then, footsteps neared again, and she felt Leonard's gentle touch as he laid her back down. The coolness of the damp cloth he'd fetched against her forehead offered a momentary reprieve from the fever's relentless grip. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift; the boundary between reality and dreams blurred.

"Rest now, Sally," he said from somewhere far away, though she felt his hand on her head as he placed the cloth down again after rubbing her heated face.

In that fleeting moment of respite, Sally surrendered to the comfort of Leonard's presence, finding solace in the knowledge that she was not alone in her ordeal. As she slipped further into the depths of sleep, she clung to the fleeting sense of peace that enveloped her, grateful for the warmth of Leonard's embrace.

* * *

As Sally's eyes fluttered open to the gentle caress of sunlight, she felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her, her nightgown clinging uncomfortably to her skin from the night's feverish sweats. Blinking away the remnants of sleep, she turned her gaze to her side and was met with a heartwarming sight. Leonard was still there.

His form relaxed in slumber; however, he no longer had one arm draped protectively over her body. Instead, he was on his side, legs pulled up to his chest as if to protect himself from some unseen force.

Sally's heart skipped a beat as she took in the peaceful expression on his face, softened by the morning light filtering through the curtains. For a moment, she simply savored the feeling of having him so close, her husband by her side at last.

Beside him was the basin from which he'd got the water, along with a wash cloth. A bottle of laudanum stood there, the reason for her confused state, no doubt. Smaller tincture bottles were also there, along with a plate of uneaten sweetmeats and a slice of bread with cheese, a bite taken out of it. She spotted his shoes and a bottle of wine on the floor, the cork discarded beside the wingchair. How had that gotten to this side of the room? Didn't it always stay on the opposite side by the fireplace?

She recalled hearing a dragging sound. Had Leonard done it?

He'd told her he would be with her until he was better. The words hadn't penetrated the thick fog of illness the night before, but now that she felt a little better, she could remember it.

Memories of the previous night flooded her—how Leonard had looked after her with such care, the concern etched in his features as he tended to her needs. Despite her illness, Sally couldn't help but feel a sense of contentment, knowing that Leonard was here because he cared for her.

A surge of emotion welled inside her as she entertained the possibility that his actions were more than mere obligation—that perhaps, just perhaps, he also harbored feelings for her. The thought filled her with hope, igniting a flicker of warmth in her chest.

Leonard stirred beside her as she was lost in her reverie, his movements slow and languid. Sally's heart raced as she pretended to remain asleep, not wanting to make him uncomfortable, for he certainly would be if he noticed her staring at him.

Her breath caught in anticipation of his next move. Would he draw her closer, or would he retreat, unaware of their intimate proximity?

With bated breath, Sally kept her eyes closed, her senses heightened as she waited for Leonard's next move. Sally felt him move, the mattress sinking slightly as he rose to his feet, the same way it had the night before. How odd it was that it already felt so natural. Blinking her eyes, she met his gaze, finding a hint of worry drawn onto his features.

"Hello," she murmured, husky from sleep and illness.

"Good morning," Leonard replied, his words clouded with sleep. "How are you feeling?"

Sally offered a weak smile. "A little better," she admitted, though the fatigue still weighed heavily upon her.

"Good. I was worried for you last night. I must have changed the cool cloth at least twice. Mrs. Farnsworth came in the night to change your poultice, do you remember?"

Sally looked down at her leg. Poultice? She gingerly lifted her right leg, felt a weight, and smelled the telltale scent of oats and vinegar.

“I don’t remember it at all,” she admitted. She attempted to push herself up, but Leonard moved quickly, propping up a pillow behind her. With Leonard’s help, she managed to sit up, feeling the cool air brush against her skin as she adjusted the blanket around her shoulders.

“Well, now that you are a little better, I think you ought to eat. I’ll ring for the bell,” he announced and made his way to the bell by the door.

As Leonard rang the bell for breakfast, Sally confessed, “I’m not very hungry.”

“You need to eat,” Leonard insisted gently, his tone firm yet caring.

Sally chuckled softly, teasing, “Are you always this demanding?”

His reaction was unexpected—Leonard froze, blinking rapidly as if caught off guard by her words. His hand, which he’d raised to pull the cord on the bell. Sensing his discomfort, Sally quickly apologized, but Leonard beat her. “No, I should apologize,” he finally said. “I didn’t mean to push you into anything you don’t want to do. I just know it’s important to eat when you are sick, that is all.”

There was a shift in the air, a palpable tension between them. Sally couldn’t help but wonder what demons Leonard wrestled that made him so changeable.

“I know, I ... I didn’t mean to imply you were demanding. I was jesting. And I know you are right. if my mother was here now, she’d be bringing tray after tray of food until I ate something.” She placed her hand on her stomach. While it wasn’t rumbling, she knew she should eat as she’d been in bed almost a whole day.

“It is alright. I am not adept at being a husband to anyone, Sally. I sometimes do not know how to act. I will leave if you like,” he said, but she shook her head.

“No, please. Stay. And you are right. I should try to eat a little something. perhaps we could have breakfast together?” she asked, hoping he didn’t feel put on the spot. “You were here all night, you must be hungry. You should eat.”

He smiled then and nodded. “I am. I suppose the two of us are not that different, are we? Both need to be told what to do.”

She beamed at him, and he pulled the rope to summon Mary, who appeared so quickly Sally wondered if she’d been stationed outside the door.

“Your Grace,” she said as she entered and found him standing there. Her eyes went to Sally immediately, and a wide smile of relief appeared.

“Oh, you are awake! And you look so much better, Your Grace,” she said and clasped her hands together. “Thank the Lord!”

“I do feel better, thank you,” she said. “But my husband here suggested I ought to eat,” she said, though as she spoke, she heard her voice croak, making it clear she was not yet well enough to get up.

“He is right,” Mary said. “What shall I bring?” she asked, eyes flittering from Kenneth to Sally and back again.

He motioned to Sally. “Whatever she likes.”

Sally wet her lips and settled on oatmeal with sugar.

“Really? I thought you’d want hot cross buns,” Leonard said, surprised.

“I do, but I feel oatmeal is better for when one is sick,” she said, and he nodded.

“It is. But I shall have a few hot cross buns. With lemon curd,” he requested, and then, Mary disappeared.

Leonard joined her side, a smile on his lips as he settled in the chair again.

“Several hot cross buns?” she asked, unable to keep herself from teasing him. “You must be famished.”

“In case you want some after all,” he said as he settled in.

Sally could not help herself; her stomach leaped with what felt like hundreds of butterflies. Leonard was so... perfect for her. If only he'd see it. If only...

* * *

After Leonard and Sally finished their meal, Sally sighed, contented, and expressed her gratitude. She dabbed the corners of her mouth where lemon curd remnants remained.

“Thank you for spending time with me and taking care of me,” she said. “And for the hot cross bun,” she said and nodded at her now empty plate.

“Good thing I ordered extra,” he said, finishing his tea.

“You do take good care of me, I ... I am very grateful,” she added.

Leonard smiled warmly. “You’re alone in my home, Sally. It’s my duty to look after you,” he replied matter-of-factly.

Sally’s heart sank slightly at his practical response, hoping for something more heartfelt. However, her disappointment was short-lived as Leonard continued, “But we’re a unit now, and I want to look after you.”

Her spirits lifted at this, and she nodded in agreement. “I hope this will be how we conduct ourselves in the future – being there for one another,” she replied, a hint of longing in her voice.

Leonard chuckled, a playful glint in his eyes. “I can agree to that,” he said, his grin widening. “Although, you should know, should I get ill, you will have quite the chore on your hands when it comes to looking after me. I’m a terrible patient.”

Sally couldn’t help but smirk at his admission. “Let me guess, impatient?” she teased, earning a hearty laugh from Leonard.

“Exactly,” he confirmed with a nod. “So, you should rest more, in case I catch whatever it is you have,” he added, his tone becoming more serious.

Feeling a yawn coming on, Sally nodded in agreement. “I hope you do not get ill as well. But I suppose you’re right,” she conceded, stifling the yawn with the back of her hand. “I never knew eating a meal could be so taxing.”

“It is when one is ill.” With a gentle smile, Leonard rose from his seat.

As he turned to go, Sally’s eyes fell on her book, *Little Goody Two Shoes*, and she reached for it. At once, Leonard stopped in his tracks.

“And what in the world are you doing now?” His tone was more perplexed than upset.

“Read,” she said as she stretched her fingers toward the book but only managed to knock it off the table.

He was by her side in a flash, squatted, and lifted the book.

“Are you certain you should strain your eyes? When I have a cold, reading only gives me a headache,” he said, concerned.

“I know. Me too. But I am a little ... bored. So I thought reading will help me rest,” she admitted.

He watched her, his lips puckering and relaxing several times over.

“What if I read to you? How would you like that?” he offered.

“That sounds lovely,” she grimaced.

He glanced at the book and chuckled at the sight of it, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

“Ever since your arrival, this book seems to be haunting me. I saw it in the drawing room just two days ago, and in the garden the day before that,” he remarked with a wry smile.

Sally couldn't help but tease him in return. “Perhaps you're just meant to read it,” she quipped playfully, though it had been in all these places because she'd been reading it from front to back twice now.

With a nod, Leonard accepted her jest. “If that's the case, then the book will get its will,” he agreed, his tone lighthearted.

Settling back against the pillows, Sally watched as Leonard sat beside her and picked up the book. His warm voice filled the room as he began to read, casting a comforting spell over her. Closing her eyes, Sally allowed herself to relax completely, savoring the moment and cherishing the warmth of Leonard's presence by her side.

CHAPTER 23



Leonard

Leonard quietly crept out of Sally's chamber, careful not to disturb her as she slept. He stood in the hallway momentarily, taking in the house's silence. The conflicting feelings that had plagued him for so long resurfaced. It seemed no matter how hard he tried to put distance between the two of them; something always drew him back in. Sleeping next to her had been wonderful, and reading to her had filled him with joy. But he knew he needed to stop calling on her, stop wanting to be near her. It would lead to nothing good.

He had to find a way to strengthen his resolve, to put back the walls Sally had so effortlessly torn down in such a short time. As he walked, his eyes fell on a hall door just beyond Sally's chamber. It was the hall closet where he kept his mother's belongings. He stepped from one foot to the other, looking left and right before stepping to the door.

This is it. This is what I need to remind myself of why I can't allow Sally to be my wife in anything but name.

He wrapped his hand around the doorknob, knowing that if he turned it, he'd be drawn into the past. There, he'd find his strength, the strength to push Sally away for good. Did he want that?

Of course... Of course ... He wanted it. He needed it. They both did, even if Sally didn't understand. Quickly, before he could change his mind, he opened the closet door and rummaged through the trunk on the floor until he found what he was looking for - his mother's diaries.

A selection of them were kept in this box, neatly lined up. He ran his hand over their backs, longing for his mother to settle in his stomach when he saw the one he wanted to read.

He pulled it out, a plume of dust filling the air as he did, and then hurried to his study. Shutting the door, he settled into his chair and looked at the closed diary that held his mother's story - and the key to his future.

As he opened it, his eyes watered at seeing his mother's lovely handwriting. Cursive and full of swirls, it spoke of the young woman she'd been when she wrote it.

May 15th, 1788

My dearest diary, I can hardly believe it - I am now the Duchess of Chester! William and I have just returned from our honeymoon, and I am simply bursting with happiness and excitement. I cannot wait to start this new chapter of my life. Our home is beautiful, and I am so grateful to have such wonderful staff to care for us. Mrs. Hollingsworth, our housekeeper, has been simply marvelous. She's been with the family for years and knows everything there is to know about running this household. And there's her cousin, Fanny Farnsworth, who is my new lady's maid. She's young and eager to please; we shall be very close friends I am sure. To think I, a baron's daughter, have a lady's maid! William has

been so kind and loving since our wedding. He adores me, I can tell, and I couldn't be happier to be his wife. I was initially worried, given we didn't know each other but a month before we were wed. Mother was right; Father made a wonderful choice for me! I can hardly wait to start a family with him and raise our children in this beautiful home. But I know that life isn't always easy. I'm sure there will be challenges and hardships along the way. But for now, I choose to focus on the joy and excitement of this new adventure.

Leonard released a deep puff of air and ran a hand through his thick hair, which stood up in every direction due to the awkward way he'd slept. He knew what would come in this diary yet could not stop reading it. Flicking through the pages, he passed the first year of his parent's marriage, entries becoming increasingly gloomy as he went. Then, he got to the one that gave a glimpse into his mother's future.

The child has died. It was a boy. A boy. An heir. William would have been so happy if the child had only lived. He might have been less ... the way he is. He might have settled, knowing his line would not fall into the hands of his wretched cousin Clark. Oh... but fate was so cruel and took my boy. He did not even take a breath. Of course, it was much too early for him to come into the world, but ... How I wished I could have done better, how I wish the baby would have ... I so wish I had someone who loved me, for I know now that William's caring demeanor was all false, a show for all the world to see. Now that my father is gone, and my brother is Baron Oakley, William has no reason to pretend to care for me. He knows my brother cares little about me...I should have known a girl like me could never be truly valued by a man like William. Yet, I am tired. I tried so hard. I hoped at least once he heard our little one did not live; he'd come to me and hug me. Hold me... Comfort me. But no. Instead, he looked at the child, his heir no more, and then ... he told me it was my fault. That I was useless, could not even give him a living child...

The rest of the page was smudged with his mother's tears, and anger raged inside Leonard. He wanted to throw the diary but knew he had to keep reading on. He had to imagine his young mother, crying and distraught because of her husband.

He flicked toward the end of the diary, his hands already shaking. The last entry was shorter, written in a shaky script as his mother relayed more terrible news.

William struck me. He has never done so, and I did not think he ever would. He is a vile, cruel man once the doors of our home are closed, once the servants can't see. Out in public, he is all charm, a doting husband. Even the servants think he is kingly, a saint. Of course, they do; he pays them more than any other lord, but is that because he wants them to be quiet and ignore everything that happens? Surely they must hear him shout at me, hear him throw things around the room. I am beginning to think so. I know I must play my part; I know I can't escape or hide. I must appear to be his doting wife, for if I do not, I fear what shall be done to me after today.

Oh, I did not see it coming. Truly, I did not. He asked me during a walk if I had my monthly course yet. Regrettably, I had. I know he wants a child badly, as do I, but I didn't know how badly he wanted one. I didn't know the rage he held inside... When I told him, his face changed; it was but a mask of raging anger. Then, he struck me so hard that I tumbled into a bush. I ...

"You horrid man!" Leonard screamed out loud and hurled the diary against the wall, where it knocked down several books, creating an even bigger commotion. "I hate you... I hate you..." he bellowed as he dropped the diary on its face and stemmed his hands on the sideboard. How could his father

treat his mother like this? How did he have this man's blood within him?

It wasn't right. How had he never seen what his father was like? The diary in question ended after this entry, but he knew that other diaries continued this tale of violence, both physical and mental. He had belittled her and treated her awfully all her life. She didn't deserve it; nobody did.

And yet, he was Leonard's father. It was predestined he'd turn out like him, wasn't it? He'd become his father by design if he allowed it to happen.

The clock ticking in the hallway brought him back to reality, and he knew it was time to put the diary away. He carefully placed it back in the trunk and closed the closet door.

Leonard paced back and forth across the creaky wooden floors, his footsteps echoing throughout the empty house. What he needed was air; he needed to breathe. Making his way downstairs again, he turned the corner into the parlor; he was startled by the sudden sound of the door creaking open.

He spun in time to see Mrs. Farnsworth appear through the servant door leading down. How odd it was that he'd just read about her when she was merely Fanny, the maid, not the housekeeper. The woman's eyes settled on him, and she pursed her lips. "Is something the matter with Her Grace?" she asked. "Is she awake?"

Leonard shook his head. "No, she's just sleeping. I covered her up, just as you told me to and made sure she had tea on her

nightstand. It'll be cold by the time she wakes but at least it's something," he replied.

"Well, that is good news. I'm glad she's on the mend. One never knows when a cold can turn into something worse." She dipped her head to the side and paused. "But how are you? You do not look well, Your Grace. Are you getting ill?"

"No, there is nothing wrong with me. I did not sleep very well, that is all. I was reminded of my mother, being in her old chamber for so long," he said, realizing this was, in fact the truth.

"I can imagine. I think of her often still," the housekeeper said with fondness.

"How well did you know my mother?" he asked.

Mrs. Farnsworth looked at him quizzically. "I've worked here for all of your life, Your Grace. I know the family intimately," she replied.

Leonard nodded, but his mind was elsewhere. "I mean did you know her the way a friend might know her," he said, remembering his mother's hopes that she and young Fanny Farnsworth might be friends one day. "Did she ever confide in you? I mean, really confide in you?"

Mrs. Farnsworth shook her head. "Your mother was a private woman, Your Grace. She kept to herself," she replied. "She had a few friends but most of her time was spent out in nature, with her horses. What a tragedy that something that gave her

so much joy should take her life.” She clicked her tongue and tugged on her apron, bunching the fabric up in her hand.

“I see,” he replied and took a breath. Lavender clung to the air, his mother’s favorite scent. Or was that his imagination? “Say, does my wife remind you of her? My mother?”

Mrs. Farnsworth’s brows furrowed. “No, Your Grace. Not at all. I mean, she is beautiful and kind just like your mother, but her personality is quite different.”

This piqued his interest. “How do you mean?”

“Well, your mother was very quiet and reserved. She did not seek confrontation and when it found her, she tried her best to avoid it. Her Grace appears strong minded, determined. Not like someone easily told what to do,” she said with a fond smile.

“That is true, she has a strong mind of her own,” he admitted. “My father had a strong mind of his own,” he added.

“He did. Stubborn he was,” Mrs. Farnsworth replied. “You are not like him in that regard.”

“I am often told that I am exactly like my father,” he said with resignation shining through.

Mrs. Farnsworth shifted from one foot to the other. “You are not. I have been here a long time and I can tell you that much. Your father ...” she stopped. “I have said too much.”

“No,” Leonard burst out, “you have not. What do you mean?”

She shook her head and stepped back, her face growing pale.

“Nothing, Your Grace, let me ... I must tend to dinner. Cook will end up making the hare if I don’t stop her. That’s for Saturday.” She looked at him with pleading eyes, and Leonard realized he had pushed her too far.

“Of course, please,” he said and motioned for her to go.

As Mrs. Farnsworth curtsied and left the room, Leonard was left alone with his thoughts. What had she wanted to say? What did she know? Why hadn’t she wanted to tell him more? Could it be she was right, and he wasn’t like his father? No! Enough. Enough now. His mother’s diary had told him what kind of rotten blood ran through him, and he had to accept that, no matter what anyone said.

After all, Mrs. Farnsworth had admitted she didn’t know his mother initially. How could she say anything about his father?

As he sat down in the chair by the window, Leonard couldn’t help but feel a sense of longing. He longed for his mother’s love and guidance, but she was gone. He was left to navigate life on his own, with only her diary as a guide.

The sound of the clock ticking grew louder, a constant reminder of the time that was slipping away. Leonard took a deep breath and opened his mother’s diary again, determined to find the answers he was searching for.

CHAPTER 24



Sally

Sally rose after two long days in bed. Outside, the sky was tinged in orange and purple, and for a moment, she wasn't sure if it was morning or evening. However, when she saw a sparrow on her windowsill, pecking away at the bird food she'd seen Leonard place there the previous morning, she knew it was early still.

Sally turned, her back aching from lying down for so long. She pushed herself up, amazed she could breathe through her nose with ease. The pain in her throat was gone, and the fever hadn't returned.

Gingerly, she turned and placed her feet on the ground, stretching her toes as she went. Then, she got up, glad the dizziness that had caught hold of her was also no longer a constant companion. She slipped on her morning coat and made her way to the door. Sally shivered as she stepped out into the dimly lit hallway. The candles had long been extinguished, leaving a light scent of beeswax in the air.

This mingled with the scent of fresh bread baking in the kitchen two floors below. Her stomach growled, and she looked forward to eating something other than oats and broth, which was all she'd managed to swallow over the last few

days. Mrs. Farnsworth hadn't been pleased when she learned she'd eaten hot cross buns, deeming them unhealthy for someone recovering from a cold. Thus, Sally had followed her instruction – relayed to her by the physician.

The floorboards creaked underneath her feet, and she enjoyed the sensation of being on her feet on solid ground after lying down for so long. Near the landing, she heard a squeaking sound and stopped. Eyes narrowed, she spotted a door slightly ajar nearby.

What was this door? She hadn't noticed it before, as it blended into the hall with its ornate carvings. Where did it lead?

She stopped and peered inside, realizing it was a closet. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw trunks and dresses wrapped up in cloth. A strong scent of lavender accompanied the dresses. A gown shimmered to her right, only partially covered by its wrapping. She was about to touch it when Mrs. Farnsworth's voice interrupted her.

“Your Grace, you are up,” she said, and Sally turned. “How do you feel?”

“Much better. I was about to go down to see if I could get some hot chocolate and something to eat when I came upon this closet. What is it?” She looked back into the closet, and Mrs. Farnsworth joined her side.

“These used to belong to Her Grace, the Late Duchess of Chester.”

Sally's hand dropped, and she turned to Mrs. Farnsworth, her curiosity piqued. "Why are they in here?" she asked. It seemed like an odd place to keep things. She remembered when her grandparents passed away; her parents had given most everything away, aside from sentimental items that had been passed on to the family members. Her grandmother's best gowns hung in her mother's armoire, and at times, she wore them.

Granted, Leonard had no sisters, but still, why keep things here, hidden away?

Mrs. Farnsworth sighed. "They were not always here. They were in her chamber before. Your chamber. Your husband had all of his mother's things moved in here and to another storage area off the grounds when he announced your marriage. He wanted you to have your own space." She glanced at the dresses and shoes within. "I suppose these are the things he held most dear and didn't want to part with just yet. These were Her Grace's favorite gowns, after all. Her books and her shawls are here as well."

Sally nodded, but a sense of unease washed over her. "Did he keep his mother's chamber as it was when she died until then?" Sally asked. "Until I arrived, I mean."

Mrs. Farnsworth shook her head. "No, my dear. He had a few things given away, like old clothing. He moved some books to the library, but all of Her Grace's personal effects remained in there. Her furnishings as well. He would sometimes go inside and sit there. It was quite sad."

Sally listened intently, feeling sad for Leonard, and understanding how much he must have missed his mother. Then she frowned and dipped her head to one side.

“What about his father? Did he keep his things in his chamber also?”

Mrs. Farnsworth’s visage darkened, and she said, “It was quite different, my dear. Well, not in the beginning. In the early days after the old Duke died, His Grace would often go to his chamber and sit there, just as he did with his mother. But after his mother also died, he had everything in his father’s chambers removed and the space scrubbed from top to bottom. Then he moved himself inside.”

Sally was taken aback by the stark contrast in the way Leonard treated his parents passing. “Where are the old Duke’s belongings now?” she asked.

“They were all donated, my dear, aside from a few personal books and things related to the property,” Mrs. Farnsworth replied.

Sally couldn’t help but feel a sense of sadness and unease at the thought of Leonard’s father being so easily forgotten.

“Why? It seems odd that his mother’s belongings are still here but his father’s discarded.”

“I do not question His Grace’s choices, Your Grace,” Mrs. Farnsworth said, and Sally noticed how reluctant she was to talk about the late Duke’s death. She’d been reluctant to talk about him before, hadn’t she? This time, Sally was determined to get at least some answer. “Can you tell me more about the day the old Duke died? It was sudden, wasn’t it?” she asked, not sure why she had asked the question. Perhaps the

circumstances of the Duke's death could shed light on Leonard's behavior.

Mrs. Farnsworth hesitated for a moment as if trying to decide whether to speak. Finally, she let out a deep sigh and said, "It was a sad day, my dear. His Grace was found slumped over his desk in his study as if he had died suddenly while working."

Sally listened intently, sensing that there was more to the story. "It must have upset his family, I imagine?" she asked.

Mrs. Farnsworth looked away, and Sally could tell that she was ill at ease. "I'm afraid I can't say, my dear. I wasn't present when His Grace passed away, and the family never spoke about their feelings, certainly not with us servants. I heard about his death when I arrived back from the market. I remember I'd gone there because one of the maids was sick." She shook her head, her blue eyes shimmering. "It was a shock. Although in some ways it wasn't."

"What do you mean it wasn't a surprise?" This statement really surprised her, for she'd thought his death had been sudden. So why was it expected? Could something be expected and also not?

Sally's curiosity was thoroughly piqued now. The older woman looked left and right, as if she wanted to make sure nobody had heard them. Then, she lowered her voice.

"The old Duke had returned from a journey to Portugal, where he visited one of his vineyards. He was quite run down already then, but he insisted on going to a meeting in London the next

day. He was gone for a few days, and when he returned, he was rather unwell. He drank more than usual.”

She spoke as if she were sharing a dreadful secret rather than something everyone already knew. Wasn't it common knowledge he'd died of a heart attack? Or did she worry someone might hear her talking about the late Duke's drinking? Had that been a problem? Maybe this was why Leonard was so different when it came to his father. If he was a secret drunkard, it might explain some of Leonard's off behaviors.

“Then, one morning, his wife found him,” she added and all thought about possible scandal disappeared from Sally's thoughts as shock overtook her.

Sally gasped at the mere thought. She couldn't imagine finding Leonard dead and they'd only been married a few weeks, how terrible for the poor woman. “That's dreadful,” she said. “It must have been such a shock for his wife.”

Mrs. Farnsworth nodded. “Yes, it was a terrible shock for everyone. But I have to say, His Grace's wife seemed to recover quickly. It makes me wonder if their marriage wasn't what it seemed.” The woman's eyes grew wide and she slapped a hand in front of her face as if her own words had shocked her. “I did not mean to say that,” she said quickly.

“But you did. What do you mean?” Sally prodded but the older woman waved a hand.

“Please, do not ask me anymore. I recommend you and His Grace speak to one another about ... these things.” She said,

though something in her tone told Sally there was more she wanted to say. "I've said more than enough besides, you ought to go to bed. You're still not fully recovered," she said swiftly and placed hand on Sally's back. "It's chilly out here, and you don't want to catch a cold."

Sally nodded, understanding that Mrs. Farnsworth was not going to say anything else to her today that would be of any use. Besides, she'd already given her much to think about.

As she made her way back to her chamber, she glanced at the woman again. "Thank you for telling me all of this. I know it must be difficult to talk about."

Mrs. Farnsworth smiled warmly. "It's not been easy talking about the past, Your Grace. But I'm always happy to chat with you." With that, she left Sally alone and went about her business. As Sally stood in her chamber she looked around, thinking of the woman who had once occupied this space. What had her life been like, really been like? And what secrets had she taken to her grave with her? For there had to have been something, even if Sally had no idea what.

* * *

Later in the day, Sally, having dressed and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, made her way towards Leonard's study. She hadn't been surprised to find the dining table devoid of his presence; she had been informed by the household staff that he had retired to his study earlier.

Given her recent illness, she understood that Leonard likely took the opportunity to attend to business while she was ill. This would not have violated their agreement, after all. Thus, there was no trace of resentment in her demeanor as she

approached his study door, hoping to entice him to go for a walk.

He'd kept her company for the last few days, but they hadn't been able to leave her chamber due to her illness. Now she was better, she was eager to get some fresh air and to explore the growing connection further.

Knocking lightly, she waited for Leonard's voice to bid her entry before pushing the door open. Inside, the warm ambiance of the study enveloped her, imbued with the scent of old books and polished wood. Leonard sat at his desk, engrossed in some documents, his brows furrowed in concentration.

"Good morning, Leonard," Sally greeted him with a soft smile, stepping into the room. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

Leonard glanced up from his work, a smile spreading across his features as he caught sight of her. "Not at all, Sally. Come in," he replied warmly, gesturing for her to take a seat opposite him. "Mrs. Farnsworth said you were up and had breakfast downstairs. That is good tidings, I hope? You feel better?" He motioned for the chair across from him.

Sally settled into the chair, feeling a sense of calm wash over her in Leonard's presence. "I am much better. Thank you for your concern."

Leonard's eyes softened with relief. "I'm glad to hear that. You had me worried for a moment there."

Before silence could settle between them, she cleared her throat and scooted to the edge of her seat. “Pray, I had wondered. Would you like to go for a walk with me? In the garden? I do not think I can walk very far but a turn about the garden should do me well.”

Leonard started to open his mouth, and Sally thought that he was going to say yes. But then he shook his head and averted his eyes, “I can’t, Sally. I have to meet with Aaron today.”

Sally’s lips parted in surprise. “Lord Finch?” she asked. “But our honeymoon isn’t over yet.”

Leonard’s expression hardened. “I’m a businessman, Sally. I can’t put everything on hold just because we’re on our honeymoon. Besides, I took care of you while you were sick. That has to be enough.”

That has to be enough? What does he mean? Was I nothing but a burden to him?

Sally felt taken aback by Leonard’s manner. She had seen him like this before but she’d thought they were past such cold words and brisk behavior.

“I... I beg your pardon. I did not know it was such a burden to you to look after me. I thought you said we were a unit,” she said, unable to hide the pain she felt.

He looked up, his eyes wide. “I did not mean it like that. But I am busy. I have things to tend to. Please, do try and entertain yourself.”

His apology sounded hollow, as if he meant not a word of it.

She asked if there was something wrong at the vineyard, assuming that his temper change was due to this.

But Leonard shook his head. “No, nothing’s wrong. In fact, we tried your idea to save the wine, and it went well.”

Sally smiled, pleased to hear this. “That’s wonderful,” she said. “I’d love to sit in with you when you talk to Aaron, so I can learn more.”

But Leonard brushed her off. “While I appreciate your ideas, Sally, business is not a place for a woman,” he said.

Sally felt her heart sink at this. She couldn’t believe that he was shutting her out like this. She tried to hide her disappointment, but she knew that Leonard could sense it.

As she left the room, Sally’s spirits were crushed. She couldn’t help but wonder why Leonard was acting like this. Was it something she had done wrong? Or was there something else going on that she didn’t know about?

CHAPTER 25



Sally

Sally couldn't help but feel dejected as she sat alone in her chamber. Their honeymoon had officially ended two days ago, and it was clear nothing had changed in Leonard's mind about their plans. No. His plan for this ludicrous idea had always been his, not hers.

He'd remained civil, but any hint of closeness had evaporated after her illness.

He would sometimes dine with her and engage in civil whisksers, but he would not talk about anything of substance. There wasn't even any banter. Their conversations revolved around the food on the table, the tenants, and their social engagements.

Although now that their honeymoon was over, there would be no further social engagements for some time - if ever.

Even their dinners had grown more and more rare. As of this morning, it had been a week since she and Leonard had last spoken for longer than the amount of time it took to say "Good morning" as one passed another in the hall.

“Mary, where is His Grace?” she asked the lady’s maid who had been helping her get ready for the day.

The maid looked past Sally at the mirror across from them, clearly not wanting to meet her eyes.

“I believe he is waiting for Lord Finch,” she said quietly.

“Lord Finch again,” Sally said, not caring what her maid thought of the outburst. Leonard had been with Lord Finch almost every day. He’d seen Kenneth twice, although they hadn’t spent as much time together as they had in the best, due to Lousia’s arrival and Joanna’s condition.

Whenever he wasn’t with Lord Finch or Kenneth, he had been shut in his study for most of that time, completely ignoring her. When they did happen to cross paths, he was polite enough, exchanging a few pleasantries with her before retreating into his shell. It was a far cry from the man she had fallen in love with, who used to be so warm and affectionate towards her.

“How long is Lord Finch expected to be here?” she asked Mary, who was busy placing a bandeaux in her hair.

“I am unsure, but His Grace has said he may stay through dinner.”

“Dinner?” Sally exclaimed and spun around, causing the bandeau to fall to the floor. “But it is hardly eleven in the morning.”

Mary gulped and looked out of the window. “I know. I suppose it is because of His Grace’s upcoming trip.”

“Trip?” Sally’s eyebrows furrowed. She’d heard of no trip.

“Where is my husband going?”

“To Portugal, to one of the vineyards, he said. He told his valet two days ago. he will depart at the end of the month and not return for about six weeks. He did not tell you?”

“No,” Sally said quietly, the shock of this news reverberating like a lightning bolt through her light. How could he not have told her he was going away? And for so long?

“Portugal?” she said, barely audible.

“Yes, and I think Spain thereafter. To the vineyards, he travels there often. I suppose he likes to keep an eye on things,” Mary said. “perhaps you could ask him to go along? You enjoy travel, do you not?”

Sally forced a smile, but it faltered before it could manage. She wanted to travel with Leonard but knew he’d not allow it. She knew he would not.

Some days ago, he’d mentioned an upcoming visit to the Devon and Shropshire vineyards, a journey he was to undertake in the fall. Excited to see the place where her idea

had saved a batch of wine, she'd asked if she could come - only to be turned down.

Why hadn't he mentioned this long trip to Portugal and Spain then? It seemed excessive that he would not tell her such a thing.

"I am sorry, Your Grace. He has always been a very busy man," Mary said, affixed the hair piece anew.

Not too busy for Kenneth and Lord Finch.

Sally knew these were unkind thoughts. Their marriage had disrupted both their lives, but after everything, she'd hoped he'd adjust to it, even grow to be happy with her. But no...

After Mary had helped her get ready for the day, she'd taken away the wash basin for Sally's morning toilet, leaving her alone. Without Leonard's company, it had been rather lonely in the manor. Rosy had come to visit her once, which had been nice, as had her father, but besides them, she'd been alone.

Her mother had written her a letter, asking her for tea and apologizing for what had happened, but despite Leonard's advice, she hadn't been able to respond favorably. Too deep was the hurt caused by her mother's deception. Perhaps if she and Leonard had found one another, she might have been able to forgive her mother, but as it stood, she could not.

Oddly, I long for Mother's advice despite being so angry at her. Perhaps Joanna will have words of wisdom for me when I see her.

“You are a rake, Aaron Finch,” Leonard’s booming voice came through the window, which had been left ajar to let in the spring air. Curious, Sally stepped to the window and looked down. Sally noticed Lord Finch and Leonard walking in the garden below. Despite her sadness, she couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy as she watched them laughing and joking together. It was odd that he should be chuckling when they were talking about business. Her father never did such a thing when meeting with his partners in business, not even when it was Kenneth, his own son-in-law whom he liked so much.

It was clear that Leonard was still capable of being happy - he just seemed to have lost interest in her. Sally couldn’t resist the temptation to listen in on the conversation below. She stretched, undoing the sash so the window opened further. Then, she pulled herself onto the windowsill but yanked the cream-colored curtain forward so that it was between herself and the glass. She could hear them perfectly, even see their outline, but she’d be hidden from view.

Immediately, Lord Finch’s voice came up to her ear.

“I am no rake, Lenny. It is true, I met this charming young lady at the ball last night,” Lord Finch said, his voice filled with excitement. “But I am genuinely enchanted by her.”

“Are you now? Well, let me hear all about her,” Leonard encouraged as the two sat on a bench nearby.

“Well, I will give you a detailed description, because her beauty is burned into my memory forever. She was wearing a beautiful blue dress and had the most captivating smile.” He paused, then laughed. “that is all I recall.”

Leonard chuckled. “A dress and a smile is all you remember? You seem to have quite a way with the ladies, my friend, if they are all blurring together in your mind and you cannot tell which was which.”

Lord Finch laughed. “Oh, that is not true. I dare say, the whiskey might have played a role in my poor memory. But I must say, I wouldn’t mind seeing her again.”

Sally’s heart sank as she listened to their conversation. Clearly, Leonard was not shutting himself away because of work - he was avoiding her because he didn’t want to be near her.

“Ah the follies of youth and bachelorhood,” he said now, jest lacing his words.

“I dare say, bachelorhood is a chore at times. really, I envy you, Leonard,” Lord Finch continued. “You have a woman at home waiting for you, and a lovely one at that. I do think you ought to appreciate that a bit more.”

Leonard’s tone shifted slightly. “I told you, Sally and I are not a love match. We are... convenient for one another, that is all. That is all it ever will be.”

Sally’s eyes widened in shock. She had never heard Leonard speak with anyone about her before - and she didn’t like what she had heard. She leaned in closer to the window, desperate to hear more.

“What do you mean?” Lord Finch asked. “You sound more contented. Also, the servants are talking about how well suited you are.”

“My servants?” Leonard asked, alarmed.

“Mine, and your friend Kenneth’s. You see, my valet tells me everything he hears and he has heard plenty about you and Sally. I was of the impression you’d changed your mind about her.”

“Well, I suppose it is good they are talking. The point of this was that everyone would believe our marriage was real from the start, so as not to be stained by scandal. The scandal sheets certainly are writing about us,” Leonard said nonchalantly.

“That is what you wanted,” his friend replied. “So now that the honeymoon is over, you are really going back to traveling?”

“It was never going to change,” Leonard replied. “I told her. She knows. We each have our lives, that is that.”

“What did she say when you told her about Portugal,” Lord Finch asked. There was a long silence during which Sally held her breath, and Leonard spoke again.

“I’ve not told her. I will. Soon. But I do not see that it matters one way or the other. It doesn’t affect her, as I said. She can travel as well if she likes. It is up to her. I am not her keeper, nor is she mine,” he said. The words felt like one slap after another, and Sally’s head spun with shock. How could he talk like this?

What had happened to the man who told her they were a unit?
That he'd look after her?

Sally listened in disbelief as Leonard spoke. She had never felt so alone and misunderstood. Tears streamed down her face as she stepped away from the window, having heard enough. How dare this man toy with her as he had?

She'd tried so hard and done everything she could to ensure they had a chance at a real marriage. And he'd sent sign after sign that he wanted the same. He hadn't acted like a man who wished to separate lives when he looked after her as she lay sick when he listened to her story and vowed to always protect her.

She'd tried, yet he ended up pushing her further away every time. Every time her confidence took a hit, her dignity evaporated more and more, bit by bit. Mrs. Farnsworth's words about Leonard's parents and their marriage came back to her mind.

Had their union been like this? A constant back and forth? Why did Mary once imply that the late Duchess didn't have an easy life?

Well, Sally would not stand for it. She rubbed the back of her hand over her face, not caring that her white powder smudged. She knew it would meld with the black from the burnt cork she'd used to darken her lashes. So what? She'd wanted to look nice for a man who cared nothing for her.

Leonard didn't respect or care for or even like her. That much was clear. She'd make no more efforts for this man. It was done. She was a woman in her own right. She was a Duchess. And she would make a life worth living - with or without him.

Leonard would not bring her down with his moods and changeability. Nobody would.

With a newfound strength, Sally stood up straight and pulled her shoulders back. She would be all right. She always had been. And if Leonard could not see what he was missing by ignoring her, then that was his loss. Not hers. Not anymore.

CHAPTER 26



Leonard

The horses' hooves clapped beneath Leonard's mare, Lysander, as he rode beside Kenneth several days later. It was a peaceful afternoon, and from somewhere, the smell of a bonfire wafted into his nose. He would have felt contented if not for the fact that Sally was back at the manor with her sister, no doubt talking about him.

Something had been odd about her this day, for she'd barely spoken to him in the carriage. Just what had upset her, he didn't know. Well... he had an idea. He'd implemented his plan to put distance between them, and he imagined that had something to do with it.

"Do you want to ride along the brook?" Kenneth asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yes, why not? The horses could use a drink anyway. I think the old elm tree that we used to climb when we were boys home from Eton is down the road, isn't it?"

"I think you're right," Kenneth said, and he squinted in the direction of the tree. "I used to race you, remember?"

“In vain, if I might remind you. I beat you every single time.” Leonard grinned as he recalled their childhood days.

“Oh, is that a challenge?” Kenneth’s upbeat tone was infectious, and Leonard shrugged.

“It is if you want it to be.”

He stirred his horse to the left towards the bubbling brook when the elm tree came into view. Leonard smiled as he remembered his childhood days when he and Kenneth would race towards the tree and then scale it to the top. In those days, it had been his friend who suffered with an unspeakable burden, and Leonard had been attempting to free him from it to no avail.

Kenneth had suffered with unbelievable guilt for most of his life, believing himself responsible for the death of his older brother in an unfortunate fire when they were young.

It hadn’t been until he met Joanna that he began to change his thinking and understood that he was not to blame for what had happened, especially as he’d been a mere child.

Leonard remembered how hard it had been to understand why he couldn’t convince his best friend that he was not a horrible person. How odd it was that the roles were reversed.

“By Jove, quit your woolgathering,” Kenneth called, and Leonard realized his friend was several paces ahead of him and had already leaped off his horse. He stopped and

dismounted while his eyes grew wide, for Kenneth was striding alongside the brook towards the tree.

There was no way he could catch up now. Still, Leonard smiled, suddenly feeling the echoes of youth as he sprinted, the water splashing beneath his feet as he chased after his friend. By the time he got close, Kenneth had already stopped underneath the tree and swung himself up on the lowest branch.

Leonard grabbed onto the opposing branch and swung himself up, the bark digging into his fingers as he wrapped his legs around the branch and spun himself around. He made his way up to almost the top when he made the mistake of looking down. The ground seemed impossibly far away, and he let out a gasp. From further up, a whoop came. He raised his eyes again and saw Kenneth sitting at the top of the tree, where the branches were precariously thin. Suddenly, fear gripped him, not for himself but his friend.

Kenneth wasn't a mere lad anymore but a father of soon-to-be three children.

“Kenny, let us get down. This was a foolish idea.”

“You only say that because you lost!” Kenneth called, but to Leonard's relief, he did climb back down.

Once they had solid ground beneath their feet again, Leonard collapsed against the tree, his back leaning against it, while Kenny plopped down beside him, a grin on his face. “Now, do not look so solemn. Next time you shall win. But this time, I claim victory.”

“I should not have suggested it. What if you had fallen? You have two children and one on the way. Can you imagine what Joanna would do if she heard in the news that you had died after falling off a tree?”

He heard the anger in his voice, and Kenneth did not miss it either. His friend dipped his head to his side. “Lenny, what has gotten into you? Are you really just upset about climbing a tree? You know I am quite accomplished, as evident by my victory. I wasn’t going to fall.”

“But if you had, it would be my fault. Just like everything else.”

“What has happened? What’s gotten into you, Lenny?”

“I am a fool. A righteous fool. I...” He dropped his head in his hands, running his fingers through his hair. “I forget myself. Sometimes I just want to be the man I used to be. Someone who is carefree and does not have anything to worry about. The man I was before my father’s lies ruined my life.”

“You can be that man. The only one holding you back from being who you want to be is you. Please tell me what has happened?” Kenneth asked, his eyes on Leonard, who could not bring himself to look at his best friend.

“You seemed much more lighthearted of late. In fact, the way you and Sally were together, I thought you had really overcome your hesitations and decided to give being with her a real chance.”

Leonard said nothing and instead ground his teeth together, the sound filling his ears, drowning out even the bubbling stream. The truth was, he had almost believed it. That maybe he should give them a chance, that maybe they could be happy. He had wanted to believe that he wasn't like his father. He wanted to believe that he and she could have something special. With each increasing day he had spent with her, it had become harder to hold onto the knowledge he had held close like a shield for the last few years since his father's death that he was not capable of loving or worthy of being loved.

Sally had made it almost impossible to remember why he had made these vows to stay single, never set a child into this world, and never make a woman unhappy; why had he given up his dreams of family and love? Because with her, he had wanted all of it.

Until he was reminded how much he was like his father. First by the Kellers, then by her jest that he was demanding when he'd told her to eat breakfast. He knew she hadn't meant it like that, but it had ignited something within him... Worst of all had been the diary entries, but then he'd know this. He'd known they would make him feel terrible. He'd wanted them to.

He'd needed them, too. His conversation with Mrs. Farnsworth had almost undone everything he'd accomplished by making himself read the diary. Her assurances that Sally was nothing like his mother had given him a glimmer of hope that she might withstand even his harshest transformation. But in the end, he'd known he had to give up fooling himself. He was his father's son.

It was a harsh reminder, but one that he had desperately needed. Now, he was back on track. Now he knew what he had to do. Stay away from her.

“Leonard?” He looked at his friend.

“I wanted to. Part of me really wanted to...” he stammered partially trapped in his head still.

“Wanted to what?” Kenneth sounded more and more concerned the more Leonard spoke.

“To believe. To want to be who I used to be. But I have been reminded that I will never be that Leonard again. I am sorry that I was trapped into a marriage with your sister-in-law and that she is now forever robbed of the possibility of being happy unless she engages in an affair of some sort.” He scoffed. “Isn’t it tragic that one’s only chance of happiness should be by way of an illicit affair?”

“Lenny!” Kenneth exclaimed and grabbed his arm. “What? Do you have a carte blanche I didn’t know about?”

“No. Of course not. What is the matter with you? I meant her. Sally’s best chance of happiness of being loved is to find herself some guy with stability. Of course I would not mind it. How can I when I can’t give her what she wants?” These thoughts had lived in the back of his mind for weeks now, and finally, they burst forth.

Leonard pressed his lips together while Kenneth let out an almighty groan.

“What in the world is the matter with you? I do not understand why you are so convinced that you would ruin her if you allowed yourself to love her. Anyway, I never did understand why you think your father’s actions mean you will be a bad husband.”

“I already told you.” Leonard said, although, of course, that wasn’t fully the truth. He’d told his friends some of the story, but the worst part was that he’d kept to himself.

“Your father treated your mother shabbily, I know. But that does not mean you will also. I’ve seen you with Sally. I see that you care for her.”

Leonard looked out at the water, wishing his soul could be as peaceful as the stream before him. He thought back to how good it had felt when Sally had leaned on him and confided in him, yet he knew that those feelings carried danger.

“Kenneth, you do not truly know how badly a man my father was. In fact, there is something I have not told you yet.”

His friend was quiet and looked at him with piercing eyes.

“What do you mean? You have told me that he mistreated your mother. That he would often strike her. You have told me that he mistreated his workers, stole money that wasn’t his. Truly a dishonorable man. What else could there be?” Kenneth’s perplexed visage gave Leonard pause, and he hesitated.

Like Sally, there had been parts of his story that he had never told anyone. Not even Kenneth. However, now he had to. Maybe then his friend would truly understand what demons he was fighting. Maybe then he could help Leonard find a way to convince Sally that separate lives were for the best. Maybe he'd invite Sally to live with him and Joanna.

“Do you truly want to know how bad a man my father was? I will tell you. He was so horrid a man that he was killed. Murdered.” He spat the words out quickly so they would not disappear again before his lips could form them.

He saw Kenneth's face pale, and his lips slowly parted.

“Murdered? What in the world do you mean?”

“I mean what I said. Someone hated my father so much that they murdered him. That is how big a monster he was,” Leonard said, oddly relieved to have finally put out the truth.

“Did you fall on your head? Your father died of a heart attack. Everybody knows that.” Kenneth got up and paced in front of him, staring at Leonard as if seeing him for the first time.

“No, he did not. That is what I let everybody believe, but it is not so. Kenneth, my father was murdered. I have known for a long time...” He wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his head on his knees as he looked at his friend. “I found out shortly after he passed away. A day or two perhaps. I cannot be sure. At that time, I was still a grieving son. I did not yet know what my father was truly like.” He thought back to the day that changed everything, wishing it hadn't happened. “The physician came to see me, and he told me that the furnisher

told him, upon preparing my father for burial, he noticed unusual signs on his body. Signs that spoke of poisoning.”

“Poisoning?” Kenneth said as if he had not heard him right.

“Yes. The physician asked me to perform an autopsy to confirm his suspicions. Naturally, I said no. I did not want my father to be viewed in such a way. But something inside me, I do not know what, told me that I had to do it. I had to let them do it to find out for certain. So, an autopsy was carried out in secret. And the physician’s views were confirmed. It turned out that Mr. Sterling was right. My father had been poisoned. With arsenic. Mr. Sterling said it might have been administered through food or drink, but he could not be certain. I...”

Kenneth dropped onto his knees and sat there, completely pale as he listened. When he spoke again, his voice was drowned out by disbelief.

“But arsenic, are you certain it was murder? It could have been anything. It could have been an accident.”

“That is what I told myself. I could not imagine anyone would have wanted to harm my wonderful, loving father, for at the time that is what I still thought of him. But then I remembered the conversation that took place some weeks before his death. I had come upon him in his study, he reeked of spirits, which was unusual for him. When I woke him, he screamed in terror. He said that they were coming for him, they would kill him. That I had to stop them. I dismissed it as a bad dream, and the following morning when I asked him about it, he did not remember anything.” Leonard shuddered as he thought of the evening.

Kenneth dropped his chin, his fingernails scratching as they rubbed over his stubble. “You think he drank because he was scared someone would come and kill him?”

“I do not know. He always drank a lot... but anyway... I remembered that on that very night, he was drinking one of the bottles from Portugal. He’d been drinking Portuguese wine since he came back, a new badge... I thought perhaps it was in the bottle, so I went to look for it, to see if somehow we could test it - but it was gone.” Leonard pursed his lips and shifted uncomfortably, trying to find the right words to convey the weight of his revelation.

“I can’t explain it any other way. He wasn’t one to drink a lot, and he never got so drunk as to forget himself. Combined with what the physician found, that tells me it had to be true. The circumstances are just too odd. My father was murdered...”

Kenneth gasped, his eyes widening in shock. “Do you have any idea who might have done such a thing?”

Leonard shook his head solemnly. “No, I don’t. I tried ... It is how I first ended up going to Portugal, Spain and the other vineyards after I found my mother’s diaries. I wanted to see if others had seen this ugly side of him.”

“That is why you ended up going there. I thought it was solely because of your mother’s diary. I thought it was odd that you had such an interest in seeing the place for yourself. Now it makes sense.” Kenneth said, recovered somewhat from the shock.

“Yes, that is why. That is also when I discovered just how rotten my father was. Truly, I am not surprised someone sought to kill him,” Leonard said, shocked by his own words.

Kenneth’s brows furrowed with concern. “But shouldn’t you inform the constables? If a nobleman was murdered, surely there must be an investigation.”

A bitter laugh escaped Leonard’s lips. “Of course not. You know what sort of scandal that would have been. Besides, an investigation would only lead to questions, and then my father’s true character would be exposed. His abuse of my mother would also come to light.”

Kenneth nodded slowly, understanding the gravity of the situation. “You wanted to find out who did it on your own, didn’t you? But you were never able to.”

Leonard’s gaze fell to the ground, filled with a mix of frustration and resignation. “Yes. I searched for answers, but they always eluded me. And now, it seems, I may never know the truth. In the end, I have to wonder if it matters.”

Kenneth’s eyes widened with a mix of surprise and concern. “Leonard, all these trips overseas and not one clue?”

Leonard nodded, his expression grave. “No. Nothing. I went there often, spoke to whomever I could. Of course, I could not simply demand to know if they knew who killed my father. They all believe it was a heart attack also.” He groaned as he thought of the tangled web that was his father’s legacy.

“What about your mother? Did you ever ask her about all of this?”

Leonard frowned but then understood Kenneth did not know the timeline of all of this as well as he did.” “No, I couldn’t. I found out he’d been killed just before his funeral, and back then, I didn’t know what a terrible husband he was. I still thought him a wonderful man, remember? When I found out that my father was murdered, I was shaken up. I wanted to ask my mother about it but didn’t want to upset her. So, I traveled to Portugal and Spain to speak to the vintners who knew my father well, only to uncover his misdeeds. The more I learned about him, the more I felt like he was a stranger.”

Kenneth’s brow furrowed in realization. “I remember you were shaken when you first returned from Portugal, but I had no idea this was all connected to your father’s death.”

“When I first returned,” Leonard began, “I resolved to speak to my mother after all. I had found out so much, I knew she had to know more. But then she died before I had a chance. As always, I procrastinated. When I read her diary, it was in part to find out if she suspected anyone of hurting her husband. But instead, I discovered it was her husband who hurt her.”

Kenneth inhaled sharply and patted Leonard on his back. “I wish you had told me the whole story sooner.”

Leonard shrugged, a heavyweight evident in his demeanor. “I didn’t want to admit to anyone just how bad a man my father was... And there’s something else.” He looked at Kenneth, his gaze troubled. “I was worried, and still am, that perhaps the person who murdered my father was my own mother.” It was an admission he’d never before uttered out loud. Part of him could still not believe he was saying it out loud now.

Kenneth remained silent momentarily, absorbing Leonard's words, before finally admitting, "That did cross my mind just now also. If her husband abused her as much as we believe, then maybe she would have done it to free herself."

Leonard nodded solemnly. "Yes, and that is why I also don't want to investigate it further, at least not officially. For at the end of any investigation, either my father or my mother's reputation would be stained forever. So I resolved to live with it."

"But that still doesn't mean you should deprive yourself of love," Kenneth countered gently.

Leonard stood up abruptly and stomped to the water's edge. He turned to face Kenneth, his expression fraught with emotion. "You still don't understand. My father was so horrid that someone killed him. If it was a stranger I don't know about, then it speaks to my father's bad character. And if it was my mother, then it's even worse because it means my father was a crueler monster than I believed. In either case, I have this blood running through me - and I will not subject Sally to this sort of husband, this sort of life. Distancing myself is what is best."

Leonard absentmindedly skipped pebbles across the water, his brow furrowed in deep contemplation, while Kenneth watched him intently, concern etched into the lines of his face.

"Where does that leave Sally?" Kenneth's question hung heavy in the air, breaking the moment's tranquility.

Leonard's gaze remained fixed on the rippling surface of the brook, his thoughts turbulent as he struggled to find the right words. "She doesn't fit into my plans, Kenneth. She never did. She got caught up in all of this, innocent and yet embroiled in it all. I need to ensure she isn't hurt further. That means keeping my distance."

Kenneth's expression darkened with disbelief, his features tight with worry. "By ignoring her? That will hurt her, Leonard. Speak to her. Clarify your intentions and explain why it must be this way."

Leonard's fingers tightened around a smooth stone, his gaze drifting downstream as he grappled with the gravity of his decision. "No, Kenneth. I cannot risk the consequences. What if she persuades me to reconsider? What if... complications arise?" He didn't want to tell his friend that he was afraid he'd allow Sally to convince him, to allow them to try...

Kenneth leaned back against the soft grass, frustration evident in his furrowed brow. "You'll never find resolution without engaging, Leonard. At least owe Sally that courtesy."

Leonard's shoulders slumped under the weight of his uncertainty, his resolve weakening in the face of Kenneth's persistent entreaty.

"I owe Sally the opportunity for happiness," Leonard conceded. "And that does not include me."

A heavy silence settled between them, broken only by the gentle rush of water over stones. Kenneth searched Leonard's

face, seeking reassurance in a truth that was as painful as it was inevitable.

“Is this truly what you desire, Leonard?” Kenneth’s inquiry hung in the air, a quiet plea for clarity amidst the uncertainty.

Leonard’s gaze remained fixed on the dancing currents of the brook, his heart heavy with the burden of his conscience.

“No,” Leonard confessed above the gentle rustle of leaves.
“But it is what must be done.”

CHAPTER 27



Sally

“*H*ow about we swing her this way? Or that? Oh, look at her dance. Do you know what this dance is called?” Sally asked as she sat on a blanket spread out on the lush green grass, engrossed in a playful game with her niece, Louisa.

“Drill Drill!” The little girl giggled with delight, her small hands cradling a doll, while Sally animatedly made the doll dance and twirl in the air, mimicking the graceful movements of a ballerina.

“That’s right. The Quadrille. When you are bigger, I’ll teach you to dance it as well,” she said, and her niece whopped with delight. She was an adorable little girl, an orphan from the orphanage her sister and brother-in-law were actively involved in. Like her brother, Peter, Louisa had been in the orphanage waiting for a home – and found one with Kenneth and Joanna.

As Sally glanced up, her gaze drifted towards Joanna, who stood a few feet away, assisting Peter in his endeavor to fly a kite. Her stomach was round now, and soon, she’d have a baby to add to the family. Peter’s face lit up with excitement as he tugged at the string, his eyes fixed on the colorful kite soaring higher into the bright blue sky.

“Look, Aunt Sally! I’m flying it high!” Peter exclaimed with youthful enthusiasm.

Joanna smiled proudly at her son’s accomplishment. “You’re doing great, Peter! Just be careful not to let it drift too close to the trees,” she advised, her tone gentle yet vigilant.

“We’ll make sure it doesn’t fly away, right son?” Lord Carlise said as he helped Peter straighten the kite. Sally smiled. Her father had joined them for the afternoon, and she’d been pleased to see him. Indeed, she had missed him and Rosy very much these last few weeks but hadn’t gone to visit their home because she hadn’t wanted to see her mother, despite the doubt Leonard had instilled in her regarding this decision. Time was short, and she knew this. Yet, she hadn’t been able to forgive her mother, not after everything.

However, her father’s presence was both towering and comforting as he offered Peter a helping hand with the kite. With his guidance, Peter managed to maneuver the kite with greater ease, his joy evident in every triumphant maneuver.

As Peter’s kite danced gracefully in the breeze, Joanna approached Sally with a warm smile. “Isn’t this a lovely sight, Sally? It’s moments like these that make all the troubles of the world seem so distant,” she remarked, her eyes reflecting a deep sense of contentment.

Sally nodded in agreement, her heart swelling with affection for her family. “Indeed, Joanna. These moments are truly precious,” she replied, her gaze lingering on Peter’s infectious laughter and Louisa’s innocent joy.

Sally found momentary solace, but it was bittersweet as she also knew that this was the only way she'd ever experience family and motherhood. As a bystander, someone looking in through a window.

"You're such a wonderful mother, Joanna," Sally said, a hint of wistfulness swinging with each word.

Joanna turned towards Sally, her smile radiant with maternal pride. "Thank you, Sally. I'm so grateful for moments like these," she replied, her eyes shimmering with affection.

A pang of jealousy gripped Sally's heart again as she watched the tender bond between Joanna and her children. "I wish I could have a family like yours," she admitted softly, her gaze drifting towards Peter and Louisa.

Joanna's expression softened with understanding. "You will, Sally. Soon, with Leonard by your side," she reassured, her tone infused with hope.

Sally's facade crumbled, her voice laced with despair. "No, Joanna. It's never going to happen," she confessed, her words heavy with resignation.

Joanna's brow furrowed in surprise. "But in your last letter, you sounded hopeful about Leonard," she reminded her. "You said he took care of you during your illness and was so kind."

"That was two weeks ago. Since then, Leonard has grown distant. We hardly talk anymore. He avoids me," she

confessed. “It is as if we never got closer at all. He is a different man. I never know what to think of him or make of all of this.”

Joanna’s eyes widened in shock. “I had no idea, Sally. I’m so sorry,” she murmured, her heart aching for her sister’s pain. At that moment, she vowed to stand by Sally’s side, offering her support in her time of need. Joanna furrowed her brow, concern etched into her features.

“I wish I knew what has gotten into him. He hasn’t been the same man he used to be,” Sally said, shaking her head. “What are you going to do now, Sally?” Joanna inquired softly.

Sally’s gaze turned inward for a moment, contemplating her next steps. “I’ll give him what he seems to want—distance,” she replied resolutely. “I’ll refrain from engaging with him too much and keep my distance.”

“But ... Sally. That sounds so solemn and ... sad. I had hoped you and he would find true love between the two of you and now this...” Joanna’s heartbreak for Sally was clear in the way her eyes shimmered with the onset of tears.

A sense of sadness lingered in her words as she continued, “Do not feel pity for me, Joanna. I won’t let this deter me from my original plan. I’ll focus on being the best Duchess I can be and making a difference in people’s lives. Perhaps I’ll join a society for orphans or for wounded soldiers—anything to contribute positively to society.”

Joanna nodded thoughtfully, considering Sally’s words. “Have you thought about talking to Leonard again? Maybe there’s a

reason for his behavior,” she suggested gently, her eyes filled with concern.

Sally’s lips pressed into a thin line. “My dignity won’t allow it anymore, Joanna,” she admitted, her shoulders drooped forward in resignation. “Besides, I overheard Leonard speaking to Lord Finch. He made it abundantly clear that he sees me as nothing more than a burden.”

“What?” Joanna exclaimed, one hand clutching her neck. “What did he say?”

Sally looked out over the garden at their father and her nephew as she reported what had transpired. Her sister listened, her visage darkening with each word. When Sally was done, a heavy silence enveloped them as Joanna processed Sally’s words. Then, without a word, she reached out and took Sally’s hand, a silent support Sally so desperately needed.

Joanna’s brow furrowed with concern as she searched for a solution. “Perhaps we should talk to Father about this,” she suggested tentatively, her gaze drifting towards their father, who was engrossed in chasing the kite alongside Peter.

Sally’s eyes followed her sister’s gaze, watching their father’s joyful laughter mingle with Peter’s infectious giggles. A pang of guilt washed over her as she shook her head firmly. “No, Joanna. I can’t burden Father with this,” she insisted. “He just rebuilt the family after his mistakes, I can’t cause him more things to worry about. Besides, he needs Leonard’s alliance in the House of Lords and if he knows what Leonard said about me, it will make that harder too. Father needs all the friends he can get.”

“I suppose that is true. What about talking to Mother? She misses you terribly, Sally,” she suggested gently. “She always asks about you, wants to know how you are and when she might see you. I know what she did was wrong but she misses you.”

Sally’s expression hardened, her anger simmering beneath the surface. “I refuse to speak to Mother,” she spat out. “She’s the reason this mess even happened in the first place.”

Joanna recoiled slightly at Sally’s outburst, but she pressed on. “I know, but she wants to make amends. Remember how Father attempted to push me into a marriage to Lord Worcester?”

“Of course, I do,” Sally said, shuddering as she thought of the unfortunate match her father had arranged for her sister.

“I was so angry at him but I forgave him. I had to, in order to live without bitterness in my heart. Sally, perhaps it’s time to bury the hatchet with Mother. Holding onto this anger will only continue to hurt you,” she reasoned, her eyes pleading for understanding.

Sally’s jaw clenched, her resolve unyielding. “I know, but you and I are different. Our situations are different. Father’s plot failed, Mother’s set me on a path of loneliness, trapped in an unwanted marriage.”

“But... she is still your mother,” Joanna said quietly.

“Leonard gave me the same advice, but given his word can’t be trusted, I’ll have to go with my gut on this one,” she replied bitterly. “And my gut tells me not to speak to Mother.”

“Very well. I disagree entirely with this but I will not push you further. I know you have never taken that well,” Joanna consented. “I am always here for you, I hope you know that, Sally.”

“I do and I am grateful for it. But right now, I think I need some air. Would you mind if I took a walk before I go home?”

“Home? I thought you were staying for dinner,” Joanna explained.

“I was, but I think perhaps it is best that I go home. I do not want to sit across from Leonard, pretending to be happy when I am not. Not if I do not have to. I would have but now that you know, I think I will make myself the priority and do as myself the favor of not playing happy couple in front of my family. I am sure Kenneth knows everything by now as well.”

“But what about Father?” Joanna asked, looking out over the garden.

“He isn’t staying for dinner away, is he?” Sally replied, and Joanna nodded, giving in to Sally’s wishes again. She knew Joanna wanted what was best for her, but in his case, what Joanna thought was best, and what Sally knew she needed were two different things, seemingly irreconcilable.

* * *

Sally meandered through the woods; the hushed whispers of rustling leaves and the soft crunch of twigs underfoot accompanied her solitary journey. The dappled sunlight filtered through the dense canopy overhead, casting fleeting shadows that danced across the forest floor.

As she walked along the winding forest path, her thoughts consumed by Leonard and the shattered illusions of their relationship, Sally couldn't help but feel a twinge of foolishness for ever entertaining the idea of being his wife. It was painfully evident that Leonard harbored no desire to be with her, yet her heart continued to ache for him despite this realization. Her inexplicable longing seemed incomprehensible, a cruel paradox that tormented her soul.

Lost in her thoughts, Sally was suddenly jolted from her reverie by the sound of horses neighing nearby. Startled, she looked up, her senses heightened as she strained to discern the source of the commotion.

She narrowed her eyes when she spotted Leonard and Kenneth riding through the thicket on horseback.

“My dearest sister-in-law! What a pleasant surprise!” Kenneth's warm greeting drew her attention, and she offered a polite wave in return, deliberately ignoring Leonard's presence as he extended a hesitant wave.

“Kenneth, there you are.” She smiled and stopped, aware of Leonard's eyes on her.

“Are my wife and children with you?” Kenneth asked, but Sally shook her head.

“No, they are playing with our father. It is just me, going for a walk.” She made sure to sound casual while keeping her focus on Kenneth.

“It’s not safe to be alone in the woods like this,” Leonard warned, his brow furrowed with genuine worry.

Sally’s eyes flashed with defiance when she made herself look at him. “This forest is private property, surrounded by Kenneth’s tenants. Therefore, I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself, thank you,” Her voice was laced with a hint of irritation.

Turning back to Kenneth, Sally attempted to steer the conversation away from Leonard’s unwelcome interference. “Peter is flying a kite with my father. You should see it, it is quite the sight.”

Kenneth nodded, his features alight with familial warmth. “Ah, I’ll go join them then,” he replied with a genial smile. “Do enjoy your walk. But you will be back before dinner, yes?”

“I won’t be staying. I’ll be heading home to eat with Mrs. Farnsworth and Mary,” she stated matter-of-factly.

The sound of Leonard’s throat clearing interrupted the silence. “Eating with the housekeeper and the maid?”

“Do you look down on them?” Sally demanded, eyes afire.

“No, of course not, but you never do,” Leonard said, surprised.

“And how would you know? I eat with them whenever you chose not to join me,” she revealed for it was true. “And I wish to dine with them tonight.”

“Why is that?” he inquired. “We were supposed to dine here. Together.”

Sally’s jaw tightened, her resolve unyielding. “Plans change, do they not? Besides, our honeymoon is over and we each live our own lives now. There’s no need for me to explain my choices,” she replied icily, her gaze unwavering as she bid Kenneth farewell and nodded at Leonard.

As she continued, a tumult of emotions churned within her. Yet amidst the turmoil, a flicker of uncertainty gnawed at her conscience. Did Leonard’s expression betray a hint of shock at her departure?

Could it be that asserting her independence inadvertently sparked a moment of doubt within him? As she pondered these questions, the faint sound of branches snapping underfoot echoed through the tranquil woods, a poignant reminder of the fractures in her once-cherished relationship with Leonard.

CHAPTER 28



Leonard

Leonard descended the grand staircase of the estate, his footsteps echoing softly against the polished marble floors when Mrs. Farnsworth passed him on her way up the steps.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” she said with a smile and he nodded in reply, though a smile would not come. He hadn’t slept well, indeed sleep had eluded him for the past week now ever since his encounter with Sally in the woods.

From the corner of his eye he spotted one of his carriages outside, stopping outside the house. He hadn’t ordered one as he had no plans to go anywhere this day. His curiosity piqued by the sudden arrival, Leonard paused in his descent and turned back.

“Mrs. Farnsworth, whose carriage is that?” he inquired. “I didn’t order one.”

Mrs. Farnsworth turned towards him, her expression one of mild surprise. “It’s for Her Grace. She’s going out,” she explained matter-of-factly. Her tone made it clear she didn’t understand why he didn’t already know this.

Leonard's brow furrowed deeper at the revelation. "Where is she going?" he pressed, his curiosity getting the better of him. He knew he'd told her they would lead different lives but somehow, the idea of not knowing troubled him. Was that his father's controlling nature shining through?

Mrs. Farnsworth shook her head, her features clouded with confusion. "I'm not sure, Your Grace. Her Grace only requested the carriage. That's all," she replied, her tone apologetic.

A flicker of annoyance crossed Leonard's features as he realized he had nobody to blame for been left out of the loop than himself. He'd stayed away from her after all. He'd dined alone, shut himself in his study and sometimes he'd gone the other way when he heard her coming. Still, it bothered him.

"I see," he murmured. "Thank you, Mrs. Farnsworth. I wasn't aware."

With a polite nod, Mrs. Farnsworth returned to her tasks, leaving Leonard to ponder the situation. Gripped by curiosity, he crossed the front hall and stepped out onto the gravel driveway, the soft rumble of the carriage wheels filled the air as it came to a halt. The horses, two lovely chestnut mares, neighed as they stopped, awaiting the arrival of Sally.

Behind him, the door opened again and Sally stepped out. The moment Leonard's gaze fell upon Sally, his heart skipped a beat. She stood there, resplendent in a pale-mauve gown that draped elegantly over her figure, her hair aglow in the sunshine. For a fleeting moment, he found himself captivated by her beauty, a pang of regret tugging at his conscience.

Of course, he wasn't the only one who'd kept away. She had too. Whereas before, she'd tried to invite him to eat with her, or offered her help when it came to the business, she now was the opposite. Ever since that fateful day in the forest, when Sally had asserted her independence with such determination, she had maintained a dignified distance from him. Though she remained polite in public and during their obligatory appearances at social functions, she made it clear that their interactions would be limited to those necessary occasions alone.

In the privacy of their home, Sally kept her distance, excusing herself from encounters in the music room or the library, avoiding his attempts at conversation with practiced finesse. This was, of course, precisely what he had wanted. Yet, despite his initial intentions, the reality of Sally's withdrawal left Leonard feeling hollow and disconcerted.

"Leonard," she said and stopped in her tracks.

"Good morning, Sally," he said with genuine warmth.

Her response was polite but distant, her eyes veiling whatever emotions lay beneath the surface. "Good morning," she replied, her tone neutral.

"I saw the carriage arrive and wondered who was going to use it, since I am not going anywhere today. Mrs. Farnsworth informed me you are going out. May I ask where you are off to?" he inquired, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Sally's reply was curt but tinged with a hint of defensiveness. "Into town," she stated simply. She set into motion again then, her sweet perfume wafting into his nose as she passed him.

Eager to prolong their interaction, Leonard pressed further. "Into town? And what might you be doing there?" he asked, displeased with the eagerness he detected in his voice.

Sally's response was terse, her demeanor unyielding. "It doesn't concern you, but if you must know, I'm meeting Rosy for a promenade," she replied, her words coming out clipped.

Undeterred, Leonard suggested joining her, his desire for companionship outweighing his usual reserve. "That sounds lovely. Perhaps I could join you. I could do with a walk," he suggested.

Why am I offering this? I sound like a lovesick boy. What is wrong with me?

"This is time for my sister and me. If you wish to go to town, there are four other carriages at your disposal," she retorted.

Leonard swallowed hard, a pang of disappointment washing over him at her rejection. "Of course, I understand," he said. As Sally reached the bottom of the stairs, Leonard's stepped back not wanting to get in her way.

She made her way to the carriage with her head held high and Leonard was about to turn to walk back into the house when he saw her pause.

“Leonard?”

“Yes?” He turned, waiting for her to speak again.

She paused, her hand resting lightly on the doorknob, and turned back to him. “Leonard, would you mind if I hosted a ball at the house soon? I wish to involve myself in charitable work and I think hosting a ball with all the finest members of the ton and influential peers will help me be respected in that arena.” She inquired, her tone soft but resolute. “I would like to collect donations for Joanna and Kenneth’s orphanage.”

A mixture of surprise and relief washed over Leonard’s features as he nodded eagerly. “Of course, Sally. You’ll be wonderful at it,” he assured her, a genuine smile gracing his lips.

A flash of gratitude flickered in Sally’s eyes, accompanied by the briefest hint of a smile. “Thank you, Leonard,” she replied.

As she turned to leave, Leonard’s heart sank slightly, the weight of their unspoken tension lingering in the air between them. “Sally,” he called out softly, a note of longing in his voice.

She paused, her gaze meeting his for a fleeting moment before she averted her eyes. “Yes?” she responded.

“Take care,” Leonard said quietly, his words carrying a depth of emotion he dared not express aloud.

Sally's lips curved into a small, wistful smile before she turned away, her departure leaving Leonard standing alone in the foyer, his heart heavy with longing and regret.

* * *

The chirp of a bird on the windowsill, pecking away at the seeds tinged the air while seated behind his desk, Leonard sat in silence, his brow furrowed. It was peaceful, this early morning quiet which was interrupted only by the rustling of Aaron's papers as he went through the latest reports from their vineyards.

A low groan came from his companion now and he looked up at Aaron.

"What is the matter?" Leonard asked.

"The matter? Did not you hear me calling your name twice?" Aaron puckered his lips, irritation evident.

Had he? Leonard truly had no idea if this was so or not. "I beg your pardon, I must not have heard you."

"No, evidently not," Aaron replied and got up, gathering his things as he moved to the seat in front of Leonard. "What's troubling you, old friend?" Aaron inquired, head dipped to the side and his thin eyebrows raised up. "You haven't been yourself lately."

Leonard's gaze drifted towards the crackling flames in the fireplace. "It's Sally," he confessed quietly.

“Of course,” Aaron groaned. “It seems to always be Sally that is on your mind. Has she attempted to insert yourself in your affairs again?”

Leonard shook his head, aware that his friend was growing vexed by this constant distraction. So was Leonard, but unlike Aaron, he did not have the luxury of boarding his carriage and driving away each day.

A heavy sigh escaped Leonard’s lips as he shook his head in resignation. “No, quite the opposite, actually,” he admitted. “She seems to have distanced herself from me. She hardly speaks to me anymore.”

Aaron’s eyes widened in surprise, a flicker of relief crossing his features. “Well, that’s good news, isn’t it? You’ve achieved what you wanted,” he remarked.

Leonard’s expression darkened, his turmoil laid bare for Aaron to see. “That’s just it, Aaron. I’m not sure if what I wanted is right,” he confessed. “It feels terrible the way she acts now. She is cold and ... distant and... Yet, I can see a flicker in her eyes when I speak to her, as if she hopes that we will be more again but then she grows cold once more.”

“She is reminding herself to act the way you asked her to, you can’t fault her for that,” Aaron replied. “And I honestly do not understand you. You wanted this, now you don’t want it, it seems to change by the day.”

“I know it, I know! I can’t quite shake these feelings within me that wish things could be different,” Leonard lamented,

already tired of his own grumbles. What did he have to look like to his friends? Someone who could not make up his mind and who complained without end.

Aaron's gaze softened with empathy as he leaned forward slightly. "Even if you're not happy now, Leonard, you can't continue to toy with Sally's emotions like this," he admonished, though there was no malice in his words, simply the truth.

He knew he had inflicted on Sally and it gnawed at his soul, leaving behind a bitter taste of remorse. Despite his inner turmoil, Leonard knew Aaron was right. He had to accept the consequences of his actions. Besides, didn't this just show that he had been right? He was already hurting Sally and he hadn't yet become the worst version of himself.

"You're right, Aaron. I can't keep stringing Sally along. It's not fair to her," he admitted. "It's best that I head to Portugal in a few days anyhow."

"Perhaps it is. Though if you'd rather stay here, I'll go if you need me to," he offered. "I have offered before all you need to say is yes."

Leonard waved off Aaron's offer with a dismissive gesture. "There's no need, Aaron. I can handle it on my own," he replied.

Internally, however, Leonard's thoughts swirled. He knew his trips had started as a way to make up for his father's misdeed, but now the upcoming journey was one that would allow him to escape the tangled web of emotions that bound him to Sally.

As he contemplated his motivations in the solitude of his own mind, Leonard couldn't deny the truth that stared back at him with unforgiving clarity. Yes, he was obsessed—not only with the idea of making amends for his father's actions but also with the need to distance himself from Sally. Although oddly enough, the idea of being away from her was now more pressing because Leonard had come to the painful realization that Sally's indifference cut deeper than any wound he had ever known. Her avoidance—it was a constant reminder of his own shortcomings, a silent rebuke that echoed in the depths of his soul.

He had to leave, though a part of him also wished to be near her.

Isn't it just madness? To want her and to want to be away from her at the same time? Perhaps I am losing my mind entirely.

“Very well, you do as you please. I will take the time you are away to travel myself, perhaps to Scotland, I hear there is a market for wine right now. We might make new connections and ...” As Aaron continued to talk, Leonard leaned back in his chair, grateful for the distraction though he knew it would be but a momentary one – if that.

CHAPTER 29



Sally

Sally felt satisfied as she stepped out of the modiste on Bond Street a week later. Indulging in the latest fashions had always been a preferred pastime of her, though she knew it was frivolous. Still, she enjoyed looking at different materials and selecting just the perfect gown for every occasion. Thus far, she'd never gone wrong when selecting something from Madame Dumont.

Well, aside from that wretched robe dress that catapulted me into this life I never wanted ...

Shaking the unpleasant thought out of her head, she glanced at Rosy. Her little sister's excitement at the new purchases was evident in her eyes.

"Dakah muslin is the best material, don't you agree? So smooth and lovely. I think I will turn every head at your ball," Rosy chirped.

"You always turn heads, Rosy," Joanna said with a grin, one hand over her barely there stomach.

Bond Street was bustling with people, and the three were forced to engage in an awkward dance of getting past passers-by who did not seem to take kindly to the three sisters walking in one line. Sally, however, cared little. She was united with her sisters, and that was all that mattered.

These days, she cherished her close connection to them more than ever before. Seeing either of them always infused her with energy - something she sorely needed.

Beside her, Rosy was practically bouncing with excitement. "I can't wait for your ball, Sally. I hope my new gown will be ready in time!"

Joanna nodded in agreement. "It's going to be a grand event. I'm sure you'll impress all the patronesses."

"I certainly hope so. I want to make a good impression. The patronesses need to see that I can draw the upper crust."

Sally couldn't deny a certain nervousness at the prospect of hosting her first ball as Duchess. Since it was clear she had failed at convincing Leonard they could give their marriage a chance to grow into something real; she'd decided to focus on another goal instead - becoming a patron of charities and improving the lives of others.

To that end, she had invited the patronesses from all her favorite charitable organizations, such as the Wounded Mariners Society, the Child Welfare Society, and, of course, the orphanage Joanna and her husband supported. By pulling a dazzling ball that drew all the finest lords and ladies in their

society, she hoped to impress. Ideally, she wanted to be invited to join one of the organizations by the evening's end.

Joanna put a hand on Sally's arm. "You'll do just fine. You're a natural when it comes to hosting events."

Sally shrugged off the compliment. "I suppose. But I just want everything to be perfect." She sighed deeply, her shoulders rolling forward as they crossed the road toward the milliners to order their new hats and bandeaux.

Joanna looked at her with concern. "Is everything alright, Sally? You seem a bit down."

Sally hesitated for a moment before replying. "It's nothing. Just a little tired, I suppose." She didn't really want to talk about the reason for her solemn feelings, feelings she'd hoped would not be too evident to her sisters. Alas, they weren't fooled. And how could she have thought he might? They, especially Joanna, knew her all too well.

Joanna spoke up. "Is it Leonard? Are things still not going well between you two?"

Sally sighed. "It's just...awkward. He is to go to Portugal in a few days, and I must say I will be glad when he is gone, even though I know it will look badly at the ball if he isn't there. It isn't pleasant always stalking around the house in fear of running into him."

"I wish he weren't so mutton headed? It is vexing. He has a beautiful wife who will go to great lengths for him but he can't

even see it. What a fool.”

Sally smiled at Rosy. Her younger sister didn't know the details of her and Leonard's complicated relationship. However, she knew enough to understand all was not well. Rosy, a romantic at heart, had dreamed of Sally finding love with the man she was forced to marry and was disgruntled. This hadn't come to pass.

Sally gave her sister a small smile. “It's fine. I'll manage. Not everyone gets to have a great love. Some of us just get to be great Duchesses,” she slung her hand around her sister, forcing a smile.

Still, as they walked, Sally couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness as she thought about her marriage. She'd given in to Leonard's desires and stopped trying. There was only so much rejection any one person could take before they were entirely depleted. Instead, she'd acted the way he always had. Distant, quiet, and reserved.

Oddly enough, this seemed to only draw him out, for he would, on occasion, ask her to walk with him, join him for a meal, or ask to listen as she played the pianoforte. She'd always decline, not wanting to be drawn in again. Still, she couldn't help but quietly observe him whenever he didn't know she was looking at him. In those moments, she longed for more because she knew the man he could be. Gently, kind, protective - qualities she'd always wanted in a husband.

If only she could find a way to remove whatever barrier was keeping him from allowing himself to be vulnerable. She hadn't succeeded in finding out any more about his parents and how they might have shaped the complicated man their son had turned out to be, and perhaps she never would.

“And remember when we used to pretend we were hosting balls? You were always the perfect hostess.” Rosy’s voice drew her from her contemplation, and she turned around.

“Yes, Sally was always the one who’d tell us what went where and what we were supposed to wear,” Joanna added.

“And the order of the dances had to be strictly adhered to!” Rosy giggled.

“Order is important,” Sally said with a chuckle when ahead of them, a sudden bell chime drew Sally’s attention. She looked up just as a familiar figure stepped out of the Tea and Spice shop.

Lady Millstone.

Sally stopped in her tracks, her stomach contracting. This dreadful woman had caused all of her troubles. Without her interference, Sally would have been able to court and marry someone who loved her. Or ended up an old maid. Either way, it would have been her choice. Lady Millstone took that from her. Well, Lady Millstone and Sally’s own mother.

Her hands curled into fists, but she told herself she had to stay composed. This woman, dreadful as she was, wielded influence. Sally couldn’t afford to alienate her now, especially with her upcoming ball. She forced a smile as Lady Millstone approached, her heart racing.

“Lady Millstone, how lovely to see you,” Sally greeted her politely. The older woman curtsied before her, a small victory for Sally.

“My dear Duchess, what a pleasure it is to run into you. And Lady Rosemary, and Your Grace,” she acknowledged Rosy and Joanna. “I see you’ve been indulging in some shopping. Anything special for the upcoming season?” Lady Millstone asked, her eyes scanning their purchases.

“New gowns for Sally’s ball,” Rosy said, her tone defiant.

“Ah yes, the grand ball. I heard all about it. I am sure my invitation will soon arrive as well,” Lady Millstone said with a sweet smile that reeked of insincerity. Sally hadn’t invited her, of course. But now, she realized, she had no choice but to do so.

“I am sure it will; I will follow up with the messenger service post haste,” Sally assured her with equal insincerity.

“Please do. I would not want to miss it. I hear all the lady patronesses from London’s best-known charities are coming. What a grand affair. I am, of course, familiar with all of them.”

Sally’s heart skipped a beat. She knew exactly where this was going. Lady Millstone had a way of turning any conversation into a power play. Sally would stand for it, not now.

“Yes, I’ve invited some of the most prominent patronesses in town. I wanted to make sure that the best charities were represented,” Sally replied. “I am keen to bring people

together and see where collaboration might help those in need.”

“I’m sure they’ll be pleased to see you taking such an active role in philanthropy. It’s always nice to see young ladies using their position for the greater good. One must stay occupied, mustn’t one? Especially when one does not yet have a child,” Lady Millstone said, a hint of condescension in her tone.

“When one has children, it is certainly more difficult; that is why I am so glad my sister is so dedicated to doing good now before motherhood forces her to step back,” Joanna said quickly.

Lady Millstone raised an eyebrow, seemingly unimpressed. “I see. Well, the aristocracy can always use more noble-blooded children, certainly,” she said and looked Joanna up and down. Sally’s eyes grew wide, for she knew exactly what she was referring to.

Joanna’s two older children, Peter and Louisa, while well-loved, were orphans she had taken in. Thus, they were not of what Lady Millstone’s considered precious noble blood. She saw her sister’s nostrils flare and quickly placed a hand on hers.

“I, for one, think all children are blessings, which is why this ball is so important to me. If you could find it in your heart to contribute to the greater good, I’d certainly appreciate it,” Sally said to the older woman who puckered her lips, unsure of what to make of Sally’s statement.

“Well, I ... I must go. But I will certainly see you at your ball. Will your husband be there?”

Sally’s eyes widened. Would he? She hadn’t told him much about the ball, and she wasn’t certain if he would be in the country, let alone in town.

“Of course,” Rosy said hastily before Sally had a chance to say anything.

“Lovely, I look forward to seeing you both,” Lady Millstone said, curtsied rather sloppily, and then made her way down the street, leaving Sally seething.

“What a dreadful wench,” Joanna huffed once she was out of earshot.

“A witch, more like,” Rosy said.

“She might be, but she is also a known gabster and a know-it-all. Unfortunately, too many people listen to her, as we know,” Sally said and shrugged.

But Sally knew she couldn’t let Lady Millstone get the best of her. She had a ball to plan and a reputation to uphold. And if there was one thing that Sally was good at, it was rising to a challenge.

* * *

Once she and her sisters had parted, Sally boarded her own carriage to take her home. Left alone with her thoughts, Sally

could not help but think back to the encounter with Lady Millstone and as they approached her home, she grew increasingly angry. Her mind was still consumed with Lady Millstone's words, but her anger was now directed at others, too. Her mother for her part in arranging this marriage without her consent. Leonard, for not even giving things a chance. And herself for being powerless to change any of it.

She felt trapped, suffocated by the expectations of society and the weight of her responsibilities as a Duchess. She was trying her best, but it felt like she would always be reminded that this wasn't what either of them had wanted.

When the carriage finally arrived, she stepped out and walked towards the door, lost in thought. At the front door, she handed her pelisse to the butler and then turned into the drawing room. She needed a moment to herself, a moment to compose herself to –

“Oh!” She exclaimed as she ran directly into Leonard's body. For a split second, being so close to him, inhaling his aftershave, she felt dizzy with a strange desire to hold him and bury her face in his chest. Then, she recovered her senses and stepped back, her anger rising again.

“Leonard,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Sally,” he replied. He looked her up and down, a little startled.

They stood there for a few more seconds, neither of them sure what to say. Sally felt like she should say something, anything, to break the silence, but the words wouldn't come.

Finally, Leonard spoke. "I didn't see you. I beg your pardon but I was in a hurry," he said before moving past her.

"Well, I shall not keep you from going where you need to go," she replied sharply and stepped aside as well. However, he did not move. Instead, he looked at her with a darkness in his eyes that spoke of sadness. She would have asked, but she'd been made aware that her attention wasn't wanted.

Therefore, she simply turned and made her way across the room, leaving him to stand where he was.

"Sally," he called after her. She stopped and dug her fingernails into the palms of her gloved hands. Why could he not let her be? He'd wanted distance and now he kept trying to talk to her. Why?

"Yes?" she said without turning.

"I am about to take a turn about the garden. Would you like to accompany me. I promise I'll protect you from whatever wildlife we encounter."

She wasn't sure what it was but the jest in his tone made her blood boil. She spun and glared at him.

"No, Leonard. I do not want to go into the garden and I do not need your protection. I am perfectly fine on my own," she snapped and then marched out of the room, through the French door and into the music room. She stood there, her heart pounding as she thought of what to do next.

Air. She needed air. Bursting out of the back door she stepped into the garden and ripped her bonnet off, realizing she hadn't done so when she entered. She waved it in front of her face, desperate for some circulation when the garden door swung open. She took a deep breath for she already knew who would be standing there when she turned.

Leonard.

And in this very moment it took all her strength not to yell at him to leave her alone once and for all.

CHAPTER 30



Leonard

*P*alpitations erratically fluttered through Leonard's body as he watched Sally retreat into the garden, her rejection echoing in his ears like a deafening roar. He could not shake the sting of her repeated refusals to at least be civil to him. He didn't mean this when he said he wanted them to lead their lives. Or had he?

The truth was, the more time passed, the more confused he became. How had he imagined things would go? Well, for one, he'd not considered the possibility of having feelings for Sally. Her impact on his life had been more profound than he'd imagined. This would have been much easier if he hadn't fallen for her.

But he had developed feelings, and he couldn't deny them anymore. Now, beneath the layers of hurt and frustration, a profound sense of regret lingered. He hadn't wanted to hurt her.

He knew he had no right to demand her companionship, not after the way he had shut her out repeatedly. But the thought of

Sally treating him like a stranger, of seeing the walls she had erected around herself mirrored in her eyes, ignited a fierce urgency within him that overpowered him like an unexpected wave in the ocean.

As he burst into the garden, Leonard's voice cracked with a raw desperation he could barely contain.

"Sally!" he called again, the sound hanging heavy in the air. He watched as Sally froze, her back rigid, and when she turned, her features were a mask of indifference. Still, even as he felt the heat of her anger radiating off her like a tangible force, Leonard couldn't tear his gaze away from her.

"Yes, Leonard?" she said, arms crossed in front of her chest, which rose and fell quickly, betraying her agitation.

"Why are you avoiding me?" he blurted out, the words tumbling from his lips before he could stop them. He could hear the hypocrisy laced in his voice. But despite this, Leonard couldn't silence the ache in his chest.

Sally's frustration was palpable as she responded. "How can you ask me that? You must know why, Leonard. You've been distant and uninvolved even before our honeymoon period

expired. I've been trying to make things work between us, even just as friends, but you keep pulling away."

Of course, this was the reason he'd suspected as much. How could he blame her for her reaction? "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Sally's expression softened slightly. "I know you did not intend this, Leonard. But our thirty days together are over, and as per our agreement - an agreement you yourself insisted upon - we can return to being strangers, a married couple only when necessary," she said. "You made it clear that's what you want."

"I don't want that," he said.

"Oh no? It seems we are, Leonard. Is this not what you desired? I do not know what it is you want from me. One moment, you are warm and kind and make me think we might ..." She waved a hand to wipe away the mere thought of their togetherness. "Then you turn and become...This. I can't do this. Not for my sake and not for yours."

As Sally stood before him, her defiance palpable in every line of her form, Leonard felt a surge of anguish knotting his stomach. He couldn't bear the thought of losing her.

"Sally, I'm conflicted," Leonard admitted, his voice shaded with a raw vulnerability he rarely allowed himself to display.

Sally's eyes blazed with an intensity that took his breath away. "Then leave me alone, Leonard," she fired back. "I won't be treated like a toy, to be picked up and discarded at your whim. We are strangers now, and that's how it will stay."

"No, we could never be strangers," he burst out. Leonard's stomach tensed with a surge of panic, his heart pounding as he realized the depth of his mistake. He couldn't let her slip away, not when she meant more to him than he dared to admit.

With a sudden surge of purpose, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her toward him, his body crashing into hers as he closed the distance between them. He inhaled her scent, feeling her breath brush over his skin.

His eyes locked on hers, seeing the wonder and surprise. Leonard closed his, and then his lips met hers in a passionate kiss. Her strawberry-scented lips were warm on his, and her

body felt vulnerable in his arms. They fitted together perfectly, like two pieces of a dissected puzzle that had been lost just to finally slip into their slots, completing a picture more beautiful than he'd ever imagined.

Sally wrapped her arms around him and pulled him closer. Leonard felt a rush of tenderness wash over him, momentarily forgetting the doubts that plagued him for so long.

But as quickly as the moment had come, it was gone, shattered by the weight of his guilt and self-doubt. Shocked at his actions, Leonard pulled away, his eyes filled with remorse as he met Sally's gaze.

What am I doing? What is wrong with me?

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I can't do this to you, Sally."

"What?" she muttered as if she'd just been ripped out of a dream.

"I will leave you be," Leonard repeated. He spun around and fled, leaving behind a whirlwind of emotions and a heart heavy with regret.

* * *

I made a cake of myself again. No! He made a cake of me. Again. How did I let this happen?

To kiss her so passionately only to withdraw once again had to be the worst offense yet. Now, on top of having bruised her ego numerous times, he'd robbed her of the chance to have a first kiss that was meaningful and not exchanged in haste - no matter how lovely it had been at the moment.

No! She had to stop thinking like this. Nothing had been pleasant, nothing! Whatever beauty there had been in the view seconds they were united had been sullied by his hasty departure. Hadn't she just told him he couldn't treat her like a doll to be picked up and toyed with when he wanted to? Now he'd done it. What was worse, she'd let him.

What is wrong with me? Why do I lose all control around him?

Sally stormed through the manicured grounds, her anger fueling each step as she made a beeline for the stables. She had to get away from this place, and now.

Reaching the stables, Sally flung open the heavy wooden doors with a force that echoed through the quiet space. She strode towards the nearest groom with urgency.

“Lawrence, gather my horse,” she commanded, her tone brooking no argument.

The groom hesitated, taken aback by the intensity of Sally’s gaze. “But, Your Grace, it’s nearly dusk—”

“I am aware of the time,” Sally cut him off, her frustration boiling over. Remembering that he was not the groom’s fault, she gathered herself. “I beg your pardon. I appreciate your concern. I am aware of the time; please saddle him at once.”

As the groom hurried to obey her orders, Sally’s mind raced with emotions. She couldn’t bear to stay a moment longer in the suffocating presence of Leonard’s indecision. She needed to escape, to feel the wind whipping through her hair and the pounding of hooves beneath her. More than anything, she needed to talk to Joanna. Her sisters were to dine with her parents that night, and even though she didn’t want to see her mother, she had to see Joanna. Thus, the only place she could go was home.

As the groom returned with her horse, Sally wasted no time mounting him. With a sharp kick of her heels, she urged the horse forward, galloping away from the stifling confines of the estate and towards the freedom of the open countryside.

As the wind whipped past her, carrying away the echoes of Leonard's stammered apologies, Sally felt a sense of liberation wash over her. She loved him, it was true. Despite everything, she wanted to be with him because she saw the man everyone else had seen all these years, the man he'd been before whatever had happened changed him. But the truth was that that man might be gone forever.

And the unstable person that had taken his place was not the sort one could build a future with.

When Everbright Manor loomed before her, she slowed the horse and trotted along the more familiar pathways of her former home. Peace settled on her as she looked at the large manor house that rose before her. The windows on the lower levels flickered with candlelight, and she smiled when she saw figures of their servants walking back and forth.

She dismounted at the entrance, handing her horse to one of the footmen, who smiled at her with delight. Making her way up the stairs, she felt like the girl she'd been before she left here six weeks ago to be married, light and at ease.

She knocked and smiled, expecting Jenkins, the family butler, to greet her. However, when the heavy wooden door swung

open, it was an altogether different face that looked at her with a big smile.

“M.. Mother?” she stammered and stepped back. She hadn’t seen her mother since her wedding day. She’d been prepared to see her, of course, but not so suddenly, not at the front door.

“I saw you riding up, Sally. I told Jenkins I’d wait at the door. He thinks me most unorthodox now,” she chuckled and extended her arms to Sally, who flinched back.

“I am not here to see you, I am here for Joanna,” she said, aware of how cold her words sounded. Her mother’s face fell, as did her arms, and she swallowed hard.

“I see ... Well, she and Rosy came home but only briefly before leaving again. Rosy decided to spend a few days with Joanna and your father is out so it is just you and I.” The hopeful look in her eyes was like a dagger in Sally’s heart.

“I should go,” she said and turned, not ready for a conversation with her mother.

“Please don’t,” her mother pleaded and took a step after her, the floorboards emitting creak. “Sally, my dear,” her mother began, “I owe you an apology.”

Sally’s brow furrowed, her heart clenching with apprehension at her mother’s unexpected words. She took a deep breath and

turned to face her but said nothing.

“I spoke with Joanna earlier,” her mother continued, her gaze filled with regret. “She told me how unhappy you’ve been, and I realized... I might have made a mistake.”

“A mistake? By setting me up with a man I hardly knew? You trapped me into this marriage with this man who doesn’t know one moment if he wants to be my friend or my foe, Mother.” She kept her voice quiet, a feat that took all her remaining strength.

Her mother raised her hands as if to placate her. “I thought Leonard would be a wonderful match for you,” her mother confessed. “He was always so jovial and kind and lovely, and I thought I was doing the right thing by encouraging your courtship. I thought you’d complement each other. Joanna and Rosy thought so, too. But I see now that I was mistaken.”

“Yes, you were. You robbed me of my freedom, Mother. Why would you do such a thing?” she had no more patience for discussions or for polite conversation. Leonard had drained her of it all. Her mother looked at her pale-faced but recovered quickly.

“I was worried you would end up ridiculed as an old maid,” her mother confessed. “How could I, as your mother, stand by and let that happen? But I see now that my fears clouded my judgment, and I failed to see the truth that was right in front of me. You are more than capable of making the best of any situation, even if... I am sorry, Sally.”

Sally wasn't sure what it was. The strain of the last few weeks, the loneliness she experienced since Leonard withdrew from her, or the turmoil inside, but Sally found she could not hold on to the old anger anymore. Thus, she reached out to grasp her mother's hand. “Mother, I know you wanted what was best for me and ...” For a moment, she considered telling her mother the truth about her love for Leonard but then thought better of it. The woman felt bad enough as it was; there was no need to add to it. Instead, she settled on the words Leonard had advised her to say weeks ago. “I forgive you.”

“Oh, Sally,” her mother exclaimed and wrapped her arms around her, drawing her in. “I love you.”

As mother and daughter stood locked in a tender embrace, Sally felt a glimmer of hope blossom. Perhaps with her mother at her side, she would manage to get past the hurt Leonard inflicted. And perhaps with her guidance, Sally would manage to navigate this maze she was trapped in after all. Somehow.

CHAPTER 31



Leonard

When Leonard descended the grand staircase, his eyes widened in astonishment at the transformation that had taken place in the house. He'd known Sally had worked on the grand ball most of the week, but he hadn't been involved with the preparations himself.

Instead, he'd gotten out of her away, though he'd quietly helped as much as he could. He'd ensured with messages and personal visits that all the foods were of the finest quality, and when he'd heard that a few of the higher-ranking peers were not looking to come because they did not see a point in visiting a new Duchess's first ball, he'd apply quiet pressure to ensure their attendance.

Of course, he'd understood that he had to be present because without the Duke at his Duchess' ball, there would be talk. Thus, he'd delayed his departure to Portugal by a week. He hadn't told Sally any of this – aside from his trip's date - not wanting her to know he was helping her. This was important to her, especially because she wanted to make a mark on society.

Thus, he hadn't wanted to make her feel as though she needed his help. She wouldn't want it anyway, not after that had happened.

“Isn’t it grand?” Mrs. Farnsworth said as she passed him. “Her Grace has outdone herself.”

She beamed as she carried a box of fresh candles past him.

“Indeed, she has,” he replied. The older woman paused and looked at him with a smile.

“I am glad that you changed your departure date. It is so important for everyone to see both of you together at the reception line,” she said, then walked off. The reception line. Right. He hadn’t thought of that. He should be there, shouldn’t he?

His father, horrid as he was, had always stood beside his mother for this portion of any ball. For appearances sake if for nothing else. He inhaled, almost tasting the food being cooked below stairs and looked around the lower floor, taking care not to get in the way of the servants who darted to and fro, their movements choreographed with practiced precision.

As he made his way towards the music room, Leonard’s gaze was drawn to the buffet spread before him. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of miniature hot cross buns, a nostalgic reminder of the quiet hours they had shared in Sally’s chamber when she took ill.

“Your Grace,” Mary said as she placed a bottle on the sideboard.

“Good evening, Mary. Say, why are we serving hot cross buns? Easter has now passed.”

Mary’s eyes sparkled with amusement as she responded, “Her Grace requested them. She thought they were something you both enjoy, so she wanted to have them available.”

He felt a flicker of warmth at the realization that Sally had considered his preferences, even amidst the chaos that was their relationship.

His hand unconsciously rose to his lips, the memory of their kiss lingering like a bittersweet melody. It had been their first real kiss, a kiss he’d wanted for some time but never thought could come to pass. It shouldn’t have, of course, for it had plunged him further into his inner conflict. And in that moment, Leonard had tasted the sweetness of what could have been, only to be left longing for more due to his convictions.

Before he could dwell further on his thoughts, the sound of approaching footsteps drew his attention.

“Leonard, old chap, you look positively dashing tonight!” Aaron exclaimed, his infectious grin lighting up the room.

Forced to set aside his inner turmoil, Leonard plastered on a smile of his own as he greeted his friend.

“Aaron, you’re early,” Leonard remarked, his eyebrows raised in mild astonishment.

Aaron's grin widened as he shrugged nonchalantly. Then, he held up a bottle of wine. Leonard recognized the label as one from their Spanish vineyard. "Couldn't resist bringing a little something for us to enjoy before the festivities," he replied, waving the bottle of wine in Leonard's direction.

Leonard's gaze flickered to the bottle, his lips pressing into a thin line as he considered Aaron's offer. "Thanks, but I think I'll pass," he declined politely, a sense of fortitude firming his resolve. "I need to be myself tonight. For Sally's sake."

A flicker of disappointment crossed Aaron's features, though he quickly masked it with a casual shrug. Setting the bottle down with a resigned sigh, he turned his attention back to Leonard. "Well, alright then. So, are you ready for your trip?" he asked with anticipation.

Leonard's jaw tightened imperceptibly at the reminder of his impending journey. "Yes," he replied tersely. "Tickets are booked, trunks will be packed tomorrow. Wednesday, I set off for Dover, and Thursday, I'll be gone."

Aaron's eyebrows shot up in surprise, a hint of concern flashing in his eyes. "And how does Sally feel about all this?" he inquired.

Leonard's stomach clenched at the mention of Sally's reaction, a shiver coursing down his spine as he recalled their dinner conversation just two nights prior. "I... I told her at dinner. I started out telling her that I had originally planned to leave sooner but changed it due to her ball but it really did not make a difference. "He admitted reluctantly, his voice trailing off. "She... she only nodded."

“Well, that is what you wanted. I can’t say I blame her. You’ve made it clear what you want out of this marriage. I’ve told you before, you need to let her be. best for you both that you go on your journey. Might be even better if you stay a little longer,” Aaron’s words struck Leonard like a cold gust of wind. He knew, deep down, that his friend was right. Staying away would spare Sally the pain of his indecision, the constant back-and-forth that had come to define them.

But even as he nodded in reluctant agreement, Leonard couldn’t shake the gnawing ache in his heart, the relentless longing that had consumed him in Sally’s absence. He had spent the past week consumed by thoughts of her. What if Kenneth had been right? What if he wasn’t destined to become his father, but was instead set in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy? Was he making all of this happen just by virtue of his own fear?

“What if I made a mistake and threw away my happiness?”

Aaron rubbed his temples wearily, a look of frustration crossing his features as he struggled to find the right words. “Leonard, if you continue down this path, you’ll end up hurting Sally just the same.”

Leonard’s heart constricted at his friend’s words. He knew he had to make a choice, to either confront his fears head-on or risk losing Sally forever. I think it was already too late for them. Why hadn’t he simply spoken to her and revealed his intentions and worries? At least, then she would have understood; Kenneth was right. He owed that to her. After all, he wanted to protect her, but he didn’t want to hurt her, and he certainly didn’t want her to hate him.

As the sound of approaching carriages echoed outside, Leonard felt a surge of resolve coursing through his veins. "I... I must go," he murmured. "I should be with Sally welcoming the guests."

"Do not make a mistake, Leonard. She doesn't deserve your ... whatever it is that makes you so uncertain," Aaron said and whipped out a corkscrew before setting out to open the bottle he'd brought for the both of them.

Ignoring him, Leonard headed for the front door; he had to ask her to give him time to explain. Not tonight, but maybe in the morning. He had to tell her the truth about what had driven him. He knew that a true marriage was not possible between them, not anymore. But at last, he could explain to her why, and there might be a chance she'd give him, or at least understand him.

Leonard made his way towards Sally, his steps filled with quiet determination.

"I'll do what I should have all along," he muttered to himself, the words a silent vow as he prepared to face the woman who had thrown his conviction into turmoil.

CHAPTER 32



Sally

*A*s Sally stood at the front door, her heart aflutter with anticipation, Joanna's warm presence beside her offered a fleeting sense of comfort amidst the swirling sea of emotions. The grandeur of the evening stretched out before her, and as the guests arrived, she hoped her meticulous attention to detail would result in the grand ball she'd hoped to host. Outside, a few carriages stood in line, and she pulled her shoulders back, ready to receive them.

"Everything looks absolutely wonderful, Sally," Joanna remarked, her eyes alight with admiration as they swept over the carefully adorned foyer."

"You've truly outdone yourself. This ball will be talked about for years to come, mark my words."

"I hope so, and for the right reasons. Not like Mother's birthday ball," she said with a cringe, remembering the events that had led to her hasty marriage.

"No, never. It will be wonderful, you'll see," Joanna assured her while Kenneth smiled at her from the doorway to the ballroom, a glass of Leonard's best Spanish wine in hand.

He'd given her crates of his best wines to use at the ball, since most guests would be expecting this. She'd been grateful but still, beneath the facade of festive cheer, a pang of loneliness gnawed at her heart. While his gesture had been kind, his absence by her side, a customary presence at such gatherings, served as a stark reminder of the fractured state of their marriage.

As the first guests began to trickle in, their exclamations of awe and delight echoing through the halls, Sally's attention was drawn to the arrival of her parents.

"Sally, how lovely! I see my advice was not at all needed, for you have done such a wonderful job," her mother's effusive compliments brought a genuine smile to her lips. Sally had seen her mother several times since they'd reconciled. They'd dined together, taken walks, and generally attempted to heal their friction. Their relationship wasn't where it had once been, but it was well on the way to healing.

"Thank you, Mother," Sally replied graciously. "I'm glad you think so. I've put a lot of effort into making tonight special. I just hope the lady patronesses will appreciate it all."

"They will, do not fret one bit, dear. This will be a wonderful ball and before the night's end you'll have many offers from charities to join their ranks," her mother assured her.

"You might become a patroness of Almack's once it is reopened," Rosy chimed in but Sally grimaced.

“I should think not. They are not anywhere near ready to reopen after the fire, and even if they were Almack’s is hardly a charitable organization.”

“Besides, all patronesses must be at least 234 years old,” Kenneth said as he joined them, sending the group into giggles.

“Do not let anyone hear that,” her mother cautioned her.

Her father’s arrival interrupted their conversation, his keen gaze sweeping over the opulent surroundings with a critical eye. “Where’s Leonard?” he inquired.

Sally’s heart sank at the mention of her absent husband, a pang of disappointment coursing through her veins. “I... I’m not sure,” she admitted reluctantly. “He hasn’t arrived yet.”

Internally, Sally couldn’t help but feel a twinge of resentment towards Leonard for his absence, she knew they were keeping their distance and that she’d made sure to stick by her resolve. Still, she’d hoped he would join her due to their agreement to be a couple in the public’s eye only.

There was little more public than a ball like this.

As the guests began to arrive, Sally felt a mixture of excitement and trepidation swirling within her. She watched as her parents and Rosy made their way into the ballroom, their expressions filled with anticipation for the evening ahead.

“Joanna?” Kenneth asked and proffered his arm to her.

Joanna looked at Sally, worry evident in her eyes. “Would you like me to stay? We can do the reception line together.”

Joanna’s offer to stay by her side was tempting, but Sally knew she needed to stand on her own, to show the world that she was a strong, capable woman.

“No. I am capable of doing this on my own. I really am. I will see you in a little while.”

“If you are sure. Do call on me if you need me,” Joanna said and walked away, her taffeta gown crinkling as she went.

As Joanna departed to join Kenneth and her family, Sally’s heart raced with nervous anticipation. But her nerves were quickly replaced by a sinking feeling as Lady Millstone approached, her polite facade barely concealing the sharp barbs hidden beneath. She was clad in a mauve colored gown and a turban that matched in color. Gems were attached to it and dangled as she climbed the stairs to meet Sally.

“Ah, Your Grace, how lovely to see you,” Lady Millstone cooed, her voice dripping with false sweetness as she eyed Sally with thinly veiled disdain. She looked around the space, eyebrows raised. “It certainly looked like a grand event but one cannot help but wonder. Where is His Grace?”

Heat rose in Sally because she’d know this question would be asked. She ensured the smile remained on her lips as she replies.

“He had business to attend to, unfortunately.”

“Ah, such a shame your dear husband couldn’t be bothered to accompany you tonight. My Henry always made time for my balls, people will talk, you know?” She looked around as if she wanted to make sure nobody overheard their conversation but Sally knew it was all for show.

Sally’s smile faltered at the thinly veiled jab, a wave of deflation washing over her as Lady Millstone’s words struck a nerve. The insinuation that her marriage was anything less than perfect cut deep, dredging up insecurities she had long tried to bury.

“Well, he is a businessman as well as a nobleman, so I cannot fault him,” she said with false confidence.

“Business,” Lady Millstone snipped. “I do not know why these modern aristocrats trifle with such things. It is most unbecoming to engage in business. But then again, your father also is involved in such endeavors, so who can blame you to accept such behavior?”

“I do not see anything wrong with wanting to make an honest living,” she replied stoically. Lady Millstone inhaled sharply and Sally could feel the entire evening slip from her control when suddenly, a familiar presence materialized at her side. Leonard’s familiar warm sandalwood scent penetrated her nostrils and then arm wrapped around her waist, his earnest gaze meeting hers with an apologetic smile.

“Forgive me for being late, my dear,” Leonard said with genuine remorse as he addressed Sally. “I wanted to ensure the orchestra had your list of music—I overheard them rehearsing earlier and the order was all wrong.” He looked up at Lady Millstone. “My wife worked so hard on every detail of this ball, it would be such a shame if the orchestra made a mistake and threw it all off, don’t you agree Lady Millstone?”

Sally’s heart swelled with gratitude at Leonard’s unexpected arrival, a surge of relief washing over her like a welcome tide. She couldn’t help but beam up at him, a sense of reassurance settling over her as she leaned into his touch.

Leonard’s words to Lady Millstone were like a balm to Sally’s wounded pride, his support a stark contrast to the subtle blows of her spiteful guest. Lady Millstone’s forced smile faltered at Leonard’s praise and she blinked rapidly.

“Well, Your Grace, it is good of you to make such an effort. Gentlemen usually do not get involved in such things,” she said but Leonard smiled broader.

“Perhaps they should, it will do any marriage good. Do you not agree?” he asked with his head dipped to the side.

“Well, I do not know about that,” the woman replied and quickly made her exit. As Sally watched Lady Millstone retreat into the ballroom, a sense of renewed resolve washed over her. With Leonard by her side, she knew she could get through this with ease. She didn’t like to have to rely on him, but in their society there were certain things that a man’s presence was expected for. No matter how much she wanted to prove herself and stand on her own two feet, his presence here would make her endeavor much easier.

One question remained though. Why? Why was he here?

She had no time to ask or even think about the matter because the reception line swiftly grew longer and longer. With so many people waiting to be greeted and waiting to get into the ballroom, there was no time to chat with either Leonard – or any of the guests – at length.

When they had finally welcomed the last guests and the ball was in full swing, Sally couldn't contain her curiosity any longer. "Leonard, I... I don't understand," she began, her voice laced with a mixture of confusion and gratitude. "I didn't expect you to join me at all yet, here you are. You didn't have to do this."

Leonard's expression softened as he met her gaze, his eyes filled with a sincerity that took her breath away after weeks of cold disinterest. "I know I didn't have to, Sally," he admitted. "But I wanted to. I owe you that much, after everything I've put you through."

Sally's heart clenched at his words, a pang of sadness washing over her at the reminder of their tumultuous past. "Leonard, I... I can't go through another round of you changing who you are. I am grateful that you are here, but you've been so distant, and you wanted me to be the same so I truly didn't think you'd be here. If you intend to simply go back to the way we have been, please tell me now," she confessed. "It's been enough."

Leonard's gaze softened as he reached out to gently caress her arm, his touch sending a shiver down her spine. "I understand, Sally," he murmured. "But there's something I need to talk to

you about. Something that might help you understand why I've been acting the way I have."

Sally's heart skipped a beat at his words, a flicker of hope stirring within her chest. She'd always known there was something he'd kept from her but she hadn't been able to figure out what it was. Despite her reservations, she couldn't deny the earnestness in his voice. "What is it?" she asked.

Leonard's expression grew solemn as he met her gaze. "I can't explain it now, there are too many people here and it would take too long," he admitted, his eyes flitting to the ballroom. "But please, Sally, after the ball, let me talk to you. Give me that chance to explain myself. I promise, once you hear me out, perhaps you'll understand. I will hold back nothing and any decision you take after you hear everything I will respect."

Sally hesitated for a moment, her heart torn between caution and curiosity. But in the end, she couldn't deny the yearning in her soul for some sort of explanation. Besides, the flicker of hope that burned within her own heart and grown since he'd joined her and now it burned brighter than ever. With a silent nod, she agreed, her resolve firm as she prepared to face whatever truths lay hidden in the depths of Leonard's confession.

CHAPTER 33



Sally

*A*s Sally and Leonard joined their guests in the bustling ballroom, she was immediately greeted by a wave of laughter and music that filled the air with infectious energy. This spoke of a successful ball, but it was early yet.

“I shall mingle. I will find you later so we can talk, yes?” Leonard said, his eyes fixed on her.

Sally nodded, though longing to stay beside him flared when he walked away.

Why is it so easy for him to make me hope for another outcome again with a simple word or a promise of a conversation?

It was a reckoning she’d have to confront soon, but for now, she had to play the role she was meant to play. Hostess.

Amidst the sea of dancing couples, Sally’s presence did not go unnoticed. Whispers of admiration rippled through the crowd as guests paused in their revelry to pay homage to the radiant hostess.

“Your Grace, you look positively resplendent tonight,” one guest exclaimed, their eyes aglow with admiration as they took in Sally’s elegant gown and radiant smile.

A tall lady with striking chestnut hair approached her, her eyes filled with genuine warmth. “I must say, your efforts in organizing this ball have not gone unnoticed. It’s truly a magnificent affair.” She blinked, desperately searching for the lady’s name. Again, it was Leonard who saved her.

“Lady Charleston,” he said as he rounded the corner with a glass of wine. “How lovely of you to come.”

“Ah, my husband told me you were very insistent that this is a ball not to be missed,” the woman replied, and Sally raised her eyes at Leonard. He had done what? Had he worked behind the scenes to make this ball succeed? She looked at him, her lips parted, but he swiftly shrugged and set into motion again.

“Well, it is. You will find my wife not only a keen organizer but also a capable fundraiser, a true patroness in the making.” He placed a hand on her arm as he walked past her. “But now I must tend to some of the other guests.” He winked at Sally as he left, and she felt as though she had been swooped up into a wild storm and tossed out again. He’d helped her more than she’d ever suggested, hadn’t he? Why?

“Your Grace, I did hear you are interested in joining a charitable organization,” Lady Charleston said now, and Sally realized just who she was. The lady patroness of a large organization supporting wounded soldiers.

“I am, indeed, I find it very honorable work,” she said quickly, keen to please the woman.

“Well, I think someone who can put together such a splendid ball in just a fortnight is someone we can certainly use in our organization. Now, why don’t we meet at my home in Chelsea for tea, day after tomorrow?”

Sally beamed at the woman, and after confirming, they parted ways. Her eyes swayed over the ballroom in search of Leonard. They were by no means past their struggles, but she wanted to tell him at once. Was it sad that the first person she wanted to tell of her success was the one person who’d caused her the most heartache? Perhaps.... And yet, so it was, and she didn’t know how to change that.

She spotted him across the ballroom with Kenneth, the two deep in conversation with her parents. Not wanting to disturb their gathering, she instead looked out for Joanna, but she was dancing with Lord Worcester. It was odd seeing them talk amicably when it was her father’s attempt to marry Joanna off to Lord Worcester, which had set her on the path to becoming the Duchess of Wells, but such was life. One never knew what to expect.

Rosy likewise danced with a gentleman. As she considered waiting for the dance to be over to share her news with Joanna, she spotted an all too familiar figure slinking away from the ballroom and into the hall leading to Leonard’s study.

“Aaron?” she muttered under her breath.

A pang of concern gripped her heart as she watched him, her mind racing with worry at the sight of his unsteady demeanor amidst the festive atmosphere. Where was he going? It wasn't usually permissible for guests to go wandering around unaccompanied in a home like this. Then again, Leonard had wandered into her family's library, too, hadn't he? Still, she wasn't comfortable with Aaron sneaking the way he did, eyes scanning the room as if he wanted to be sure nobody could see him.

The man had always struck her as odd. They never spent much time together, and yet he was one of Leonard's confidants, almost as close to him as Kenneth.

Sally wasn't quite sure why, but she felt a need to follow him, so she made her way across the ballroom and down the hall. Up ahead, she spotted Leonard's study door open and dipped her head to one side. He usually kept the door shut unless he wanted the maids to clean, in which case it was left open. For a ball, however, he'd certainly not just close it but lock it.

Did Aaron have a key? And why would he want to go inside at this hour?

Sally stepped into the doorway and peered in, watching quietly as Aaron rustled about inside. He'd lit the candle on Leonard's desk; the light cast eerie shadows across Leonard's study as Sally stepped into the room, her heart pounding with a mixture of fear and resolve. She watched as Aaron opened drawers and rifled through papers, cursing under his breath.

Whatever he was doing here, she was certain that he was up to no good – and she was going to find out just what was going on.

CHAPTER 34



Sally

“*W* here is it? It has to be here ...” he grumbled. “Darn you, Leonard. You and your father both.” Leonard and his father? What in the world was he talking about? And what was he looking for? Just then, Aaron made his way to the opposite corner and removed a landscape painting from the wall. Sally gasped when she noted what was behind it - a wall safe.

She’d never seen it before, but then again, she wasn’t in the habit of searching Leonard’s study in the dark of night. She took a step forward, her heart pounding as she did while Aaron fumbled with the lock. From the way he stood and swayed back and forth, she could tell he’d already indulged in more than enough wine. Was that the reason for his behavior? Whatever it was, she had to put a stop to it.

“What are you doing in my husband’s study?” she bellowed, gathering all her courage, and pushed open the door, which let out a loud creak. Aaron spun around, his eyes flashing with a mixture of surprise and hostility.

“Sally! You shouldn’t be here,” Aaron snapped, as he moved swiftly across the room toward her.

“I’ll ask again, what are you doing here?” She was determined not to let her discomfort show. This was her house, and he was merely a guest. He stopped a few steps away and raised his hands.

“I need to look for some papers for ... bus... business,” he replied, the words coming out slurred.

“Why not ask Leonard? Shall I fetch him?” she said and turned, pretending to walk out of the door when he set into motion again.

“No! There is no need. Look, Sally. There is no need to bother him, let us ... just ... I’ll go back to the ball, and you do too, and I’ll speak to him in the morning,” he said, his eyes wide. Somewhere inside Sally, a wave of terror built as she looked at him in the dim light. There was something about him that made her even more uncomfortable than usual. Something about him wasn’t right... Sally’s spine stiffened with resolve as she met his gaze head-on, her own eyes narrowing with suspicion. Her eyes darted around the room, taking in the chaos of scattered papers and open ledgers that littered Leonard’s desk. A sense of dread washed over her as she realized the gravity of the situation.

“What have you been doing?” she demanded.

“Nothing, I told you. It’s business matter. Why are you so difficult?” Aaron spat, his breath hot against her face as he leaned in close. The stench of his breath sent a shudder down her as it added to the wave of panic within. Why did he make her feel this way? In the flickering light of the candle, Sally

caught a glimpse of his face, illuminated by a sliver of moonlight streaming through the window.

But it was the unmistakable scent of wine on his breath that sent a chill down her spine, a sinking feeling settling in the pit of her stomach. She knew that smell, this unique mix of wine, sweat, and lye soap - Suddenly, as if a dam had burst open, memories flooded Sally's mind with overwhelming clarity.

It was him.

The man from three years ago. The man who had jumped out at her in the garden where she'd gone to catch the air. Her ankle panged with pain as if it, too, remembered the initial injury that had caused her trouble ever since. It was him, the man who'd held her down, not some vagrant. She was finally face to face with the drunkard who had tried to assault her. Staring into Aaron's cold, calculating eyes, she was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"You," she whispered. "I remember you."

"Took you long enough," he replied, his laughter echoed off the walls of the study, a chilling sound that sent shivers down Sally's spine. She wasn't going to let him intimidate her. He wasn't getting away with this. Not again.

"So you admit it? You tried to assault me back then."

"Assault you," he said in a snide tone. "I was trying to ... have a good time. But you are so rigid and stiff, and it's no fun at all. It's no wonder Leonard can't stand to be around you."

It was as if he'd run her through with a sword. Had Leonard said this? No, she could not believe a man like this, someone who'd prey on women.

"I dare say Leonard will not be happy when he hears what you did to me. He knows the story, you know," she said, and the surprise of this information was registered on the man's face. He hadn't known. Good. "I always knew there was something wrong with you," she declared boldly. "And now, I'll make sure everyone knows the truth."

Alas, Aaron merely sneered, his lips twisting into a cruel smile. "No one will believe you," he spat with venomous disdain. "Even if you told him, clearly you didn't know it was me. I will make sure they doubt you. Besides, I am a viscount. What are you?"

"I am the Duchess of Chester, I outrank you, everyone will believe me," she fired back and squared her shoulders as she met his icy stare with a steely resolve. "I'll make them believe," she vowed. "I'll make sure Leonard knows exactly who you are, and what you've done."

"You are a woman. A woman in an unhappy marriage willing to do anything for attention," he replied, suddenly sounding a lot more sober than before. "Nobody will care."

"We will see about that," she replied. With that, she turned on her heel and stormed out of the room, leaving Aaron's laughter echoing in her wake. "You go on then, you tell your husband. But let me ask you, what do you really know about Leonard?" He called after her. This stopped her in her tracks, and she looked back, head dipped to the side.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you know nothing about Leonard. Nothing at all.”

Aaron’s voice cut through the silence like a jagged shard of glass, stopping her dead in her tracks. She froze, her heart pounding in her chest as she turned to face him once more, a sense of dread creeping over her like a suffocating fog. Her feet carried her back toward the man she’d wanted to get away from a second before. He was close to Leonard, so he had to know things she did not.

“What do you mean?” she demanded again, struggling to comprehend the gravity of Aaron’s words. Aaron’s expression darkened, his features twisted with bitterness and resentment as he spoke.

“All this back and forth between you and him. One minute he wants to be a husband then he wants you to get away from him... That’s the real Leonard. It’s not indecision. It’s cruelty. He likes playing with people.”

Sally inhaled because she’d feared to hear just this, that there wasn’t a great secret to Leonard’s managerial ways but that it was simply how he was. But this man was a monster who’d assaulted her, so why should she listen to him?

“But there’s so much more,” he said. “Your husband hasn’t been preoccupied with his duties as a Duke, either. And his trip coming up? It’s not to look after the vineyards and the workers. Anyone could do that, surely even you know that.” he began.

This she knew to be true., No noble traveled to vineyards to see his workers. She'd put it down to Leonard being diligent in the wake of his father's passing. Was there more to it?

"Then why would he go?" she asked, fearing the answer.

"He's been continuing his father's illegal activities." Aaron shrugged, a look of disgust crossing his face.

Sally felt her blood run cold at the revelation, her mind reeling with disbelief. "What... what illegal activities?" she stammered. Aaron's gaze bore into hers, his eyes burning with a fierce intensity as he delivered his next words like a sledgehammer blow.

"Leonard's father defrauded his workers," he explained, hardly able to contain the simmering rage this had evidentially evoked in him. "He underpaid them, lied about profits, and caused countless families to lose their homes and livelihoods. The vintner at his Portuguese vineyard had to take out loan after loan to pay his workers because Leonard's father told him the wine was not making any profit."

"Why would he do that?" She could not imagine her father-in-law doing such a thing. Everyone spoke so highly of him and held him in high regard. Although there had been indicators that perhaps he hadn't been the best of husbands, surely that played no role here.

"For profit, of course. Surely even you can see that, Sally. He told the vintners their wines were subpar and he had to sell them at a loss. In reality he was making huge profits but kept

them for himself. The vintners were strung along by him promising a better yield the next year. So they took loans. Eventually, they passed their losses on to their workers, telling them they'd be paid once there was profit - promising it would be soon. He said there'd be bonuses," he said, all signs of his prior inebriation gone. It was as if his rage had replaced his wine-fueled blood with a raging fire that coursed through him. It burned too bright; Sally could almost feel it. "They lost everything," he hissed.

A wave of nausea washed over Sally as she absorbed the full weight of Aaron's accusations. The implications were staggering, the betrayal unfathomable. "But... but what does that have to do with Leonard?" she whispered, her voice barely audible above the pounding of her own heart.

Aaron's gaze never wavered as he delivered the final, devastating blow. "Your husband's actions... they're a continuation of his father's legacy. He gives them a pittance of the income and placates them with occasional visits but he still keeps most of the funds for himself," he confessed, his voice raw with pain and anger. "I suppose it's an improvement but it is still criminal and wrong." Sally's lips parted as her thoughts swirled in her mind. "But your father was Leonard's father's partner..."

Aaron's head snapped around. "And my father... he died because of it. He sought justice and paid for it with his life."

His words were so cold, so harsh, Sally shook. "Died? How?" she didn't even want to imagine what might have happened to the man.

"He uncovered the truth and demanded that Leonard's father repay the workers. He refused. Told my father he was a

sentimental fool for considering repaying them. Still, he tried. He paid them back out of his own pocket, depleting our family's funds to do it," he sneered and looked as if he wanted to spit. "In the end, it killed him.

He had a heart attack. Leonard thought it was funny, he said he died of a broken heart, but he smirked as he said it." Sally stood there in stunned silence, her mind reeling with the magnitude of Aaron's revelation. Her Leonard? She could not imagine it. While he had been infuriating on a personal level, he'd always been determined to be a good Duke, and he cared for his tenants.

The Kellers were a perfect example of this. Still, the words made her world seem to tilt on its axis as she struggled to make sense of the unthinkable truth that had been laid bare before her. Had she been wrong about everything? Everything she thought she knew about Leonard, about their life together, was crumbling around her like a house of cards. And as she stood there, paralyzed by the weight of it all, one question echoed in her mind like a relentless drumbeat: What does this mean?

"I can't believe this," she whispered. "The Leonard I know would never...he is decent to his workers." But before she could finish her sentence, Aaron's laughter cut through the air like a knife.

"Decent?" he scoffed, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Changing his mind every other day, treating you like a pawn in some twisted game... That's what you call decent?" Sally flinched at his words, her heart aching with the sting of truth. Leonard's behavior, his constant indecision, and his disregard for her feelings had left scars that ran deep. But even amidst

the pain, she couldn't bring herself to accept the damning accusations against him. "He's a good man," she insisted. "He's just... lost, confused..."

But Aaron shook his head, his expression hardening with resolve. "Enough excuses, Sally," he said. "You deserve better than this. We all do."

"What were you doing here?" she finally asked.

He shrugged. "Evidence. I'm looking for evidence. My father told me Leonard's father kept a separate ledger. He had one he used for taxation with the records faked and one for his own. I know Leonard has to be doing the same, that's what I was looking for."

Sally's resolve hardened as she met Aaron's gaze head-on.

"This is foolish. I can't believe any of this is real. I would have know... I ...I'm going to confront him," she declared. Aaron nodded in silent agreement, his eyes reflecting a mixture of admiration and sympathy.

"Go ahead," he said. "But remember, Sally... sometimes the hardest truths are the ones we least want to hear." With a heavy heart and a sense of purpose burning in her chest, Sally turned on her heel and strode out of the room, her mind consumed with thoughts of the confrontation that lay ahead. Whatever the outcome, she knew that she couldn't continue to turn a blind eye to the painful realities that had been laid bare before her. It was time to confront Leonard and demand the answers she so desperately sought.

CHAPTER 35



Sally/Leonard

Sally rushed down the narrow hall, the dimly lit passageway echoing with her hurried footsteps. The flickering lights overhead only added to her growing sense of dread.

How much of what Aaron had told her was true? Was he trying to protect himself by making all of this up so she would not tell Leonard and the rest of the ton that he'd attacked her years ago?

But that didn't make any sense. Even if what he'd said was true, she'd still tell all of the realms that he'd come after her - and he'd be punished, certainly. Or did he think that telling her this made him a hero somehow?

He is a disgusting man... and if what he told me is true, so are Leonard and his father.

She burst into the ballroom, her eyes scanning the space for any sign of Leonard. The room was alive with laughter and chatter, but Sally no longer felt the pride in arranging the ball as she did earlier. Instead, her mind was consumed with

thoughts of her husband's possible involvement in shady business.

Finally, she spotted Leonard in the corner, still engrossed in conversation with Kenneth. She stormed across the ballroom, pushing past the other guests, her eyes fixed on Leonard. When she reached him, she grabbed his arm and pulled him aside, her tone brooking no argument.

"Leonard, I need to speak with you right now," she said.

Leonard looked at her with surprise, but Sally could see a hint of concern in his eyes.

"What's the matter, Sally?" he asked.

Sally took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. She knew that she needed to approach this delicately if she wanted to get to the truth.

"I need to speak to you," she repeated.

"Shall I leave the two of you alone?" Kenneth asked, but she spun.

"There is no need for you to leave, Kenneth. We will." She looked back at Leonard, her eyes steadily. From her peripheral, she saw Kenneth walking away anyway, his eyes wide.

“Sally, I told you we would speak later,” Leonard said, perplexed.

“I do not have until later. Leonard, tell me now - Has your father been involved in troubling business dealings?”

Leonard’s expression darkened, and Sally could see the anger and frustration brewing beneath the surface.

“What do you mean?” he asked, eyes flittering around the room.

Sally took another deep breath, trying to steady her nerves.

“I mean that I have heard he defrauded his workers, that he caused the death of Lord Finch. And that you knew and ... Is it true? Did your father defraud his workers?”

“Who told you this?” he demanded, his vocal chords soaring with each word.

Sally hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should reveal her source.

“It doesn’t matter who told me,” she said finally. “What matters is whether it’s true or not.”

She watched him and saw his jaw clench, then his teeth ground back and forth as if he were searching for an answer.

Deny it!

She urged him to deny it with every fiber of her being, but he did not.

“Well?” The word was a quiver more than anything else.

“Sally, I can’t explain ... Not ...I would have told you, but...”

So, it was true. It was true. Everything Aaron had said had been the truth. Her knees shook beneath her, and she stepped back, feeling the color drain from her face. Leonard was an awful man.

“Sally,” he said again, extending his hand, but she pulled back.

“Do not touch me,” she whispered and turned, running out of the room. In the hall, she bumped into Rosy, who looked at her with alarm, but Sally could not stop. She couldn’t talk to anyone, not right now. It took all she had not to allow the tears to fall from her eyes - and she was not going to give Leonard the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

* * *

“Sally!” he called, drawing attention from those around him, but he didn’t care. What had gotten into Sally? How had she heard about his father’s dealings? Had a servant told her? But they didn’t know... Had she come across his mother’s diaries? No, if she had, she would have asked about more than just the business.

Leonard's mind was in a whirlwind as he followed Sally's trail towards the foyer. He had to make sure she was okay, and he had to talk to her to comfort her. But before he could take another step, Aaron stepped in his way and grabbed him by the arm. His friend's skin was tinged red, and his hair oddly disheveled. He didn't look like someone attending an aristocratic ball but rather like someone ... well, someone who'd been in a brawl of some kind.

"Leonard, wait," Aaron said urgently, his hand raised to stop him. "I need you in your study right now."

"Not now, Aaron," he barked. he had no time for this right now. There was a ball going on, and his wife was upset - he had to tend to her and now.

"Yes, now," Aaron growled.

Leonard's eyebrows rose as Aaron's grip tightened on his arm. What was going on? Aaron never usually spoke to him in a commanding tone. Whatever had happened had to be serious for his behavior to change like this.

Leonard scanned the foyer and caught sight of Sally slipping out into the garden, followed by Rosy. Every part of him wanted to run after her, but he knew she wasn't in the condition to talk to him right now.

"What's so important, Aaron?" Leonard asked, his confusion and conflict evident in his voice.

“I got a message from one of the vineyards,” Aaron replied urgently, “it’s an emergency. Please, come now.”

Leonard frowned, torn between his concern for Sally and his loyalty to his business and his partner. “An emergency? Now?”

“I cannot talk about it here in front of people,” Aaron hissed. “But it is bad. Very bad.” A whiff of wine mingled with the beeswax scent, told him Aaron had had a few glasses of wine, but he didn’t act inebriated. He was harried, however. Whatever had happened had unsettled him - and now it was unsettling Leonard in return.

“Fine, I’ll come,” he said reluctantly, “but we must make haste. I need to speak to Sally.”

With a heavy heart, Leonard followed Aaron out of the foyer and towards his study, his mind racing with worry and confusion. What was going on? Why was Aaron so urgent? And most importantly, what had happened to Sally?

* * *

Sally heard a door open behind her and turned to see Rosy following her. She sighed, not wanting to talk to anyone right now, not even her sister.

“Rosy, please. Leave me be.”

“I will not, Sally, what’s going on? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Rosy demanded and closed the distance between

them. Her younger sister had always been stubborn and would not let anything go. “Tell me, what upset you so much?”

Sally took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. “I just discovered something terrible about Leonard,” she said. “He and his father defrauded their workers. They caused so much harm. All this time he hid this from me and I had no idea. I don’t even know who this man is I am married to.” She suppressed a sob and shook her head.

Rosy’s eyes widened in disbelief. “That can’t be possible. Are you sure? You must ask him directly.”

Sally nodded, feeling the tears starting to well up in her eyes. “His business partner told me. He is a scoundrel himself but he has nothing to gain by lying to me about this. Besides, I confronted him about it, and he couldn’t deny it. I feel like such a fool for not seeing it sooner.”

Rosy put a comforting hand on Sally’s shoulder. “Come, let’s go inside. I’ll make you some tea and get you a blanket.”

“I do not want to go inside, Rosy, Please, I want to stay out here for a while,” Sally replied, unable to fathom the mere idea of going back inside.

“I understand but in that case I am getting you a blanket and a tea, I will be right back. Shall I fetch Joanna?”

Sally shook her head. “No, I don’t want anyone else to know right now. I just need some time to process everything.”

“Very well, but if you need anything, you know I’m here for you, right? I’ll go get you the blanket now, don’t go anywhere.”

Sally managed a small smile. “Thank you, Rosy. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Once her sister had gone, Sally rocked herself back and forth and let the long-contained tears flow down her hot cheeks as she sat on a stone bench in the garden. She couldn’t believe what she had just discovered about Leonard and his father. Everything she thought she knew about him was a lie. She’d thought there was something off about Leonard, but this? To take advantage of people who depended on him? And to be just like his father in that regard? It was impossible.

CHAPTER 36



Sally

She sat and replayed moments of their relationship in her mind over and over, wondering if there was anything she could have done to discover this sooner. Then, the truth of Aaron's identity compounded on top of it – he'd attacked her long ago, and she'd never realized it. Well, that wasn't true. She'd felt something off about him, but still, she'd ignored it, dismissing her feelings.

"Sally!" Rosy's voice burst into her thoughts, and she turned to see her sister rushing out of the house.

"What is it?" Sally asked, jumping up from the bench.

"Something is the matter. I went to get a blanket from the cupboard in the hall when I heard raised voices. Aaron and Leonard are in Leonard's study and it sounds like they are fighting. Aaron was shouting... Oh I heard him clear as day saying he'd kill Leonard."

Sally's heart raced with fear and worry. "Kill him? You heard this?"

“Clear as a church bell, Sally. Come quickly.”

Sally leaped up and raced past her sister into the house. Once they had passed the parlor, she paused. “Rosy, go find Papa and Kenneth. I saw them in the ballroom. Tell them there is trouble but do not make a big show of it, please.” The last thing they needed was more attention on themselves.

The sisters parted ways, with Sally racing toward the study, where the door was ajar. From within, thuds and bangs emitted along with grunting. She burst through the door and came to a stop to a truly horrid sight. The study was in utter disarray. The desk, so heavy she’d thought it would take three men to move it at all, lay overturned, papers scattered. Her eyes scanned the room for Leonard, and when she found him, she let out a yelp. He was on the ground, Aaron on top of him, hands wrapped around his throat.

“Let him go!” she screamed and ran toward the two men. Grabbing a paperweight from the floor, she bashed it against Aaron’s back, causing him to let go of Leonard just long enough for her husband to leap to his feet.

Aaron had a wild look in his eyes. “You again. I thought you’d fled. You’re impossible to get rid of,” he barked. “Want to join me? Avenge yourself a bit? He treated you rotten as well.”

“I am not proud of how I treated Sally but I never did anything to you,” Leonard shouted and stood in front of Sally, shielding her from Aaron. “Sally, he lured me to my study and attacked me the moment the door was closed.”

“Never did anything to me? You and your father are both rotten to the core. You’re a thief just like he was a thief! Yes, I know. I know what he did. So did my father. In fact, your corrupt father is at fault for my father’s death. He died of a heart attack when he discovered what sort of crook your father was,” Aaron shouted and gesticulated wildly. “And you are just as bad.”

“What? What are you saying? I do not understand any of this. What do you think I did?” Leonard replied and then looked at Sally, eyes widening with understanding. “Is he the one who told you lies about me?” Leonard asked shaking with anger.

Aaron shouted back, “It wasn’t a lie! You’re just as bad as your father!”

Leonard told him to shut up. “That’s enough, Aaron. You need to stop.”

“He did tell me that your father stole and so do you,” Sally replied, feeling foolish now that she’d said it out loud. “And when I asked you, you ... you reacted as if you were guilty.”

“Because he is,” Aaron shouted; he stood bent at the waist as if ready to charge at any moment. Ignoring him, Leonard turned to Sally again. “Did you really think I would defraud my own workers? Have I treated you so badly that you would believe such things?”

Sally gulped and realized that she knew better all along. She shook her head and said, “No you never mistreated any of your workers and I ... when he told me, it all made sense.

Your secrecy, your strange behaviors but I should have known better.”

Aaron interrupted them. “How? Leonard is an excellent liar,” he said. “He’s been fooling you all along, Sally. His father drove mine into an early grave, and he was going to do the same to you with his constantly changing opinions. I was doing you a favor telling you the truth.”

“A half-truth at best,” Leonard shot back. “Yes, Sally I have been changeable but it was because I wanted to protect you. My father was a horrid man it is true. He lied and cheated and what is more he treated my mother shabbily. He made her life a living hell. I was terrified I’d turn out like him and treat you the same, that is why I kept you away from me.”

Sally’s heart sank. This made sense. All the sense in the world. She recalled Mary’s words about the late Duchess and how unhappy he’d been. How Leonard had changed after the Kellers told him he was just like his father. It was all coming together.

“You would never, not ... You’d never be like your father,” she said quickly, knowing in her soul it was true.

“Please, he already is. He steals as well. Why else would he constantly go to Portugal?” Aaron interrupted. “His father did the same thing.”

“To repay the workers. I am selling my personal holdings, artwork, horses – everything – to ensure they are taken care of and instead of trusting a middleman I go myself.”

Aaron scoffed. “Yes, of course you do, Mr. Wonderful.”

Leonard stood up straight. “Is this why you’re here? Trying to find proof that I am a fraud like my father?”

“Among other things, yes. And I know you hide a second ledger, just like your father did. My father told me all about it. I know where you hide it,” he hissed and pointed at the painting.

“It is true my father had such a ledger, and I found it but I do not have a second ledger. I will show you if that’s what it takes. What where you going to do? Kill me and then smear my name?” he demanded as he walked toward the wall safe.

No, no, no...It is a trap.

She rushed forward and reached out to pull Leonard back. “Don’t. He’ll...”

She could say nothing more because Aaron had moved as quickly as a barn cat away from Leonard and toward her, wrapping an arm around her waist – and something sharp pressed against her throat.

“Aaron, drop that!” Leonard commanded while Sally wrapped her arms around Aaron’s, yanking down with all her might but to no avail.

“Let me go, you maniac,” Sally called, although she had to choke the words out as he was holding her so tight it was

hard to speak. Then, she felt something sharp and cold against her throat and to her horror, saw the glistening in the object's reflection – it was a letter opener. And it was pressing against her jaw.

“Why would I do that? You're my bargaining chip, Your Grace,” Aaron said. She felt his heart hammering into her back as he held her close, and his ragged breathing licked at her skin. Her stomach convulsed, but she knew she had to keep her wits about her now.

Before her, Leonard raised his hands. “Please,” he implored, his voice strained with desperation. “Let her go. She didn't do anything to deserve this.”

“She tried to defame me. She claimed I assaulted her three years ago,” Aaron replied sharply.

“Because you did. You admitted it,” Sally replied, and Leonard's jaw dropped.

“It was him?” The rage was evident in the way Leonard's voice rose.

“Yes, he ...”

“Enough!” Aaron shouted. Her entire body jerked as her head snapped to the side for relief in her eardrum, which echoed with the sound.

“I agree, it is enough! Let her go!” Leonard demanded again.

Aaron's twisted grin widened as he savored Leonard's anguish. "I am surprised you'd plead for her life. Didn't you claim you hated being deceived into marriage?" he mocked, his tone dripping with malice. "Wished it had never happened?"

Sally's body was tense at the words, though she knew now they were spoken not out of a dislike for her but because of something far deeper. Still, it wasn't pleasant to hear. She watched Leonard's hands clench into tight fists, his jaw tensing.

"I said those things out of fear," he confessed, his gaze never wavering from Aaron's chilling stare as Sally observed them both from the corner of her eyes. "My father might have stolen from his workers but he was a far worse man than that. Every time anyone told me I was like him, I fear ... I feared loving anyone as I thought I'd repeat his mistakes. But I love Sally now, with every fiber of my being. No matter how hard I tried to resist, I can't deny it anymore."

Sally's breath caught in her throat at Leonard's confession, her heart aching with longing to be with him. She had never heard him speak with such raw vulnerability before, and in that moment, she felt a surge of love and gratitude wash over her like a wave crashing against the shore.

But Aaron only laughed, a sound that sent shivers down Sally's spine. "Love," he scoffed. "I am to believe you were so noble you not only tried to help your father's victim, but you also sought to shield her from what might be? Your Grace, you have a hero for a husband." He was taunting them both, it was clear.

“That is the truth, you can believe it or not. Besides, it seems you are the one who lied and deceived, not I. What I did was out of a desire to protect those close to me, what is your excuse?”

“My excuse, if you insist on calling it that, is much simpler. Vengeance. Your father drove mine into an early death, so I thought it only fair if I repay the favor. I thought at first it would be enough to find evidence that you are just like him and ruin you but then I got to know you – this false goodness you display to the world while being the spawn of evil sickens me. And then I see the way you are right her,” he said and yanked on Sally’s body, so she had to take a step backward. “Back and forth, unrepentant. Just like your father.”

“That is not true! I did what I did because I cared for her and I love her, Sally, do not listen to him,” he implored, and she wanted nothing more than to run into his arms and reassure him.

“I’m sorry I doubted...”

“Be quiet!” Aaron hissed, and Sally snapped her mouth shut.

“What are you planning to do, Aaron?” Leonard demanded. “Your issue is with me, not her. Let her go!”

“No, I will not. I’ll tell you what I will do. I’ll take care of all of you,” he declared. “First, her, then you. Just like I took care of your father.”

Sally's blood ran cold at Aaron's words, her heart pounding in her chest like a trapped bird. She felt a surge of terror gripped her, threatening to overwhelm her senses, but amidst the fear, she couldn't help but feel a glimmer of hope stir within her.

Leonard's eyes bore into Aaron's, and the shock was evident in them. "My father? What in the world do you mean?"

"Say, Sally. Did ole Leonard ever tell you what happened to his father? That he didn't die of a heart attack at all but was murdered?"

Sally's breath caught in her throat as Aaron's sinister question hung in the air like a heavy fog. She felt a surge of panic coursing through her veins, her heart pounding in her chest as she shook her head, unable to form any words.

Aaron's smirk widened into a cruel grin as he tightened his grip around her, the sharp edge of the letter opener pressing against her neck like a threat. She winced as the cold metal dug into her skin, a sharp reminder of the danger she was in.

"Is that a no?"

"No," she croaked, eyes on Leonard, who looked as though he was ready to topple Aaron if not for Sally's situation.

"What do you know about my father's death?" he demanded.

Aaron's smirk widened into a malevolent grin as he stepped closer, his gaze cold and calculating. "I know everything," he

taunted. "Because I'm the one who killed him."

Sally's heart pounded in her chest as she struggled to process the horrifying truth. The room spun around her, the walls closing in as she grappled with the enormity of Aaron's confession.

Leonard's fists clenched at his sides, his face contorted with a mixture of disbelief and fury. "You're lying," he spat. "You couldn't have..."

But Aaron only laughed, a sound that sent shivers down Sally's spine. "Believe what you want, Leonard," he sneered, his eyes glinting with a twisted satisfaction. "But the truth remains. Your father's blood is on my hands. Do you want to know how I did it?"

The dimly lit room seemed to shrink around them as Aaron's words cut through the tense silence.

Aaron leaned in closer, his eyes glinting with a malevolent gleam as he recounted the events that led to Leonard's father's death. "Before my father died," he began, "he told me everything about your father's despicable actions. I swore to him that I would avenge his honor. When his heart gave out, I knew I had to be true to my promise. And I was."

"After your father's death," Aaron continued, "I confronted him. It was an ugly, he tried to deny it all and in the end, threw me out because he knew I didn't have the evidence to actually take him out. But I knew I had to bring him down, to make him pay for his crimes."

Leonard's hands clenched into fists at his sides as he listened to Aaron, his jaw tight with suppressed rage. Sally wanted to be at his side, to help him through this, but her own life was in peril.

"But I had no evidence," Aaron went on with resentment. "So, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I figured if I could not expose him, I'd do the next best thing. Get rid of him. I sent him a bottle of wine, fine wine from the best winery in France. I pretended it was from a rival looking to make a deal. And I added something a little special to it."

Leonard's eyes widened in shock as he realized the full extent of Aaron's deception, while Sally continued to try her best to put it all together. "You poisoned him," he breathed.

Aaron's lips curled into a cold smirk as he nodded. "With arsenic," he confirmed, his gaze locking with Leonard's. "After that it was easy enough to worm my way into your business. You were so eager for a partner, a friend. It was pathetic."

"But why?" Leonard demanded. "Why did you want to harm me? I told you all I did was try to help my father's victims."

"We both know that's a lie. You are just like him, you always have been. You always will be. I'm doing Sally a favor dispatching her from the world, and you."

Sally knew she had to do something, for this would not end well for any of them if she hadn't found her voice. Gathering her courage, she spoke up. "There is a ball going

on,” she declared. “Everyone will know it was you who did it. My sister knows you two were fighting.”

Where are they anyhow? Rosy went for them so long ago, can she not find them?

Aaron’s eyes narrowed with suspicion as he regarded Sally, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face. “You lie just like he does,” he scoffed, with arrogance.

“I don’t! It’s true. They will be here and they’ll come for you,” Sally said as she desperately scanned her surroundings for any possible means of escape. Her heart hammered, the fear of what Aaron might do next threatening to overwhelm her. But then, her gaze fell upon the fireplace poker nestled in the corner, within Leonard’s reach. That was it. That was the answer!

With a quick glance at Leonard, Sally silently implored him to understand her plan. Raising her eyes wide to catch his attention, she subtly motioned towards the poker with a slight nod of her chin. Leonard’s eyes flickered towards the poker, and though he didn’t dwell on it for long, he gave her an imperceptible nod in return.

Feeling a glimmer of hope ignite within her, Sally turned her attention back to Aaron. “You’re right,” she said, her words carefully chosen to appeal to Aaron’s sense of injustice. The next words were hard to force out, and she could do nothing but pray that Leonard would understand she meant not a word of them. “Leonard is a despicable man.”

Aaron's grip on Sally's arm loosened ever so slightly, his brow furrowing with uncertainty. Sally pressed on. "But what about me?" she continued, her tone filled with feigned vulnerability. "I'm just as much a victim as you are. I didn't choose to be caught up in Leonard's schemes."

As Sally spoke, she saw Aaron's resolve begin to waver, a flicker of doubt crossing his features. She seized the opportunity to push further, her words carefully calculated to sway him to their side.

"We could work together," she suggested "Expose Leonard for who he truly is. Humiliation is better than death, isn't it?"

Aaron hesitated, his grip on Sally faltering as he weighed her words. Sally held her breath, her heart pounding in her chest as she waited for his response. And then, to her immense relief, she saw the tension drain from Aaron's frame, his expression softening ever so slightly.

"What's in it for you?" Aaron asked, his voice low and cautious.

Sally's mind raced as she searched for an answer, her thoughts whirling with possibilities. And then, with a surge of courage, she met Aaron's gaze head-on. "Freedom. I'll be shamed for having been married to a blackmage, but I might have a chance to marry again, willingly this time," she replied. "If we bring Leonard down together, I'll finally be free from his grasp."

A faint smile tugged at the corners of Aaron's lips as he considered her offer. And then, in a moment of decision, he

loosened his grip on Sally's arm, his gaze softening with newfound understanding.

"Alright," he said. "Let's do it."

With a surge of adrenaline coursing through her veins, Sally seized the opportunity to act. "NOW!" she shouted and threw herself forward, slipping out of Aaron's grasp in a blur of motion.

At the same moment, Leonard sprang into action, his hand closing around the fireplace poker with a steely grip. With a swift and decisive motion, he swung the poker towards Aaron, aiming for the man's head with deadly accuracy.

The room erupted into chaos as Sally darted towards safety, her heart pounding in her chest as she watched Leonard's decisive strike unfold before her eyes. And then, the only sound filling the air was a metallic clang and then – a thud followed by silence.

CHAPTER 37



Leonard

Leonard's chest heaved as he dropped the fireplace poker on the ground, the metallic clang echoing through the room. With trembling hands, he turned to Sally, who sat huddled on the floor, her body shaking with fear and relief. Without hesitation, he knelt beside her, pulling her into his arms and cradling her close.

"It's over now," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion as he gently kissed her forehead. "You're safe."

Sally's tears flowed freely as she clung to him, her whole body trembling with the aftershocks of their ordeal. "I'm sorry," she choked out between sobs. "I didn't mean the horrible things I said."

Leonard's heart ached at the sound of her voice, filled with pain and regret. Tenderly, he brushed away her tears, his touch gentle and reassuring. "Even if you had," he murmured, "I'd have deserved it after how I treated you."

Sally looked up at him, her eyes filled with disbelief and longing. "I don't understand," she whispered. "Why didn't you tell me?"

A pang of regret pierced Leonard's heart as he looked into her eyes, seeing the hurt and confusion reflected at him. "I wish I had," he admitted, with sorrow. "But I was so consumed by fear, by the thought that I might turn out like my father and hurt you, that I thought it better to push you away. I heard my mother's diaries and she revealed so much about what kind of man my father was and ... she suffered so much I didn't want you to endure the same."

Sally's breath caught in her throat as she listened to his words, her heart aching with the weight of his confession. "I understand now," she whispered. "I wish you had told me, but I understand. But... you know you're not your father, right?"

He cringed, but then, she wrapped her arms around him. "You are good. I've seen how much you care about others and how kind you are. The only times you've acted in an infuriating manner were when you were ... consumed by guilt and fear, I imagine? Like when the Kellers said you are like your father?"

He let out a puff of air. "Yes, that's true. I hated hearing that. I was coming to a point where I thought that you and I could perhaps be more but then they said the one thing that always gutted me since I discovered what my father was like."

"I wish I had known, then I might have been able to convince you we are not like your parents. From some of the things the servants said, I sensed that your parent's marriage wasn't so happy, but I couldn't ask you, I couldn't help you ..."

"Because I pushed you away," he admitted, and she nodded.

“Yes, but I suspected there was something related to them. Oh, Leonard. You and Kenneth were both convinced you’d turn into bad husbands, and then almost allowed your fears to make it so,” Sally said and shook her head. “Even though I know you could never be a bad person.”

Sally’s words washed over Leonard like a soothing balm, easing the lingering doubts and fears that had plagued his mind for so long. He gazed into her eyes, searching for the truth in her words, and found nothing but sincerity and love reflected in him.

“You know, Mrs. Farnsworth told me not long ago that you’re not like my mother,” he murmured, “That you’re strong and will not let anyone tell you what to do. And she was right. You’re amazing, Sally.”

“Not so amazing when it comes to recognizing people,” Sally said and nodded toward the man still lying on the ground. “He was right under my nose and I didn’t know. If I’d realized who he was, we might have been able to prevent what happened here.”

“We’ve both made mistakes but at least yours was born out of circumstance. It was dark that night he attacked you and you thought him a vagrant. Yet here he is – a nobleman,” he said, kicking one foot out against Aaron’s to see if he would stir. He’d hit him in the back of the head, though not with enough force to cause permanent damage. At least, he didn’t think so.

“What do you think it was that made him decide tonight was the night he’d kill you?” Sally whispered. Leonard took a deep breath.

“I don’t know. I don’t think he planned it, anyway. Perhaps it was a conversation I had with him earlier. I told him that I felt I made a mistake, pushing you away. That I’d wanted to make amends. Sally, the truth is the reason I wanted to speak to you later was because of this. I was going to tell you everything and let you decide what you wanted to do.” He watched as her rosy lips parted and she caressed his cheek with one hand so soft it felt like being touched by a cloud.

“Oh, Leonard. Do you think he might have done it because he didn’t want you to be happy? That he wanted to kill you to prevent that?”

He hadn’t considered it but when he looked at his former friend unconscious on the ground, he realized he didn’t really know much about him at all.

“I suppose. Maybe he also saw an opportunity to search the study for whatever evidence he was looking for. There is none, Sally. None at all,” he said, eager for her to believe him.

“I know, I do believe you. What happened when you followed him here?” she asked, though he heard the dread buried beneath her words.

“He accused me right away of wrongdoing, asked me to open the safe, show him everything... I refused and demanded an explanation. That is when he attacked me. He said’ he’d rather kill me than let me get away with whatever he thought I was doing,” he reported. Then, he paused, reflecting on the past few minutes.

“I wanted to kill him,” he blurted out. “When I found out what he did to you and my father. I... I wanted to kill him with that poker. What does that say about me?” He wondered if that was a sign of what he might become, but Sally cupped his face and pressed her forehead against his.

“Please, Leonard,” she pleaded “Stop thinking you’ll turn into a monster. You won’t. Besides, I wanted to murder him myself, does that make me a monster?”

“No, that makes you human,” he said. Her words were like a lifeline, pulling him back from the edge of his self-doubt. Leonard closed his eyes, allowing her reassurances to wash over him, soothing the wounds of his past and illuminating the path to a brighter future.

And then, with a hesitant breath, Sally broached the question that had been lingering between them, unspoken yet palpable in the air. “Did you mean it?” she asked. “When you said you love me?”

Leonard’s heart swelled with emotion as he looked into her eyes, seeing the vulnerability and hope shining within them. “Yes,” he replied. “It’s true. I love you, Sally.”

“Oh, Leonard, and I love you,” she said.

As their eyes met, Leonard felt a surge of longing and desire course through him, overwhelming any lingering doubts or fears. Without hesitation, he leaned forward, closing the distance between them, and pressed his lips softly against Sally’s.

The kiss was a gentle caress, a testament to the depth of their love and the unspoken bond between them. All the uncertainties and insecurities melted away in that moment, leaving only the warmth of their shared affection.

Sally responded to his kiss with equal enthusiasm, her lips yielding to his touch as she melted into his embrace. It was a moment of pure intimacy, a silent vow exchanged between two souls bound together by love.

EPILOGUE



One month later, Sally found herself at her parents' home, enjoying a peaceful afternoon with her family. The room was filled with the soft chatter of conversation as they gathered together. Kenneth and Joanna sat nearby, each engulfed in a book, while her father was contented with reading a newspaper, and her mother worked on embroidery. From outside, Peter and Louisa's joyful voices drifted in as they played with Jenkins, who'd managed to get the kite up in the air, despite the low wind.

Suddenly, Rosy burst into the room, waving the newspaper excitedly. "Look, everyone!" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Joanna shot her a reproachful look. "Rosy, darling, do try to contain your excitement," she chided gently.

But Rosy paid her no mind, her excitement bubbling over. "But it's important!" she insisted, thrusting the newspaper forward.

Sally exchanged a knowing smile with Leonard, who sat across from her, their fingers intertwined as they played chess. He was by now used to Rosy's outbursts. She could feel the

warmth of his hand against hers, grounding her in the midst of the commotion.

Her mother sighed and shook her head at Rosy's antics. "Let me see that, dear," she said, reaching out to take the newspaper from her.

As her father scanned the headlines, Rosy blurted out the news. "Lord Finch is being sent to Australia!" she exclaimed, unable to contain her excitement.

Sally's heart skipped a beat as she looked up, meeting Leonard's gaze. Relief flooded through her at the news. The threat that had hung over them for so long was finally being addressed.

Sally nodded, her gratitude shining in her eyes. "Thank goodness," she murmured, leaning in closer to him.

Kenneth's voice broke the calm atmosphere of the room, his words drawing everyone's attention. "It's a shame Leonard didn't get rid of the man for good," he remarked.

Lady Carlisle gasped softly, her hand fluttering to her chest in shock, while Joanna nodded in agreement. "Indeed," she said solemnly, her eyes reflecting the gravity of the situation. "You should have dispatched him when you could, Leonard."

Kenneth continued. "If I had been there, I would have put an end to him once and for all," he declared.

Leonard chuckled softly, shaking his head. “It would have been beneficial for all of us if both Kenneth and Walter had arrived sooner,” he remarked, with a hint of wry amusement as he glanced at his father-in-law.

Walter, Sally’s father, cleared his throat, a pained expression crossing his face. “I still feel dreadful that we arrived so late,” he admitted with regret. “If only we hadn’t chosen such an inopportune time to take a stroll outside.”

“I thought I’d suffer apoplexy when I couldn’t find them,” Rosy confessed, her eyes wide with worry.

But Leonard interjected, his tone earnest. “I didn’t take care of the matter all by myself,” he insisted, his gaze turning to Sally. “Sally is the hero here. She spotted the fireplace poker, she distracted Aaron – it was all thanks to her quick thinking.”

“Our Sally has always been witty,” her father said and smiled at her.

“It is a shame Aaron’s sisters now have to pay the price for his actions,” Joanna said then and Sally’s bitterness was palpable as she spoke up in agreement.

“Thanks to Lady Millstone, everyone knows about what Aaron did, and his sisters have to pay the price,” she remarked, unable to hide her resentment. “That woman enjoys ruining young ladies.”

“I know, it isn’t right innocent bystanders have to pay for his crimes,” Leonard agreed. Sally knew Leonard had taken the

news about Aaron's sisters hard, unaware he had any family before then.

"Well, there is some good news on that front," Sally's father said. "I heard there has been a fund established for the sisters by an anonymous donor," He winked at Leonard.

Sally caught his eye and squeezed his hand, aware of who the anonymous donor was. In fact, everyone in the room knew, but she was aware Leonard didn't want to talk about his latest generous act.

Before anyone could press further, Rosy deftly changed the topic, sparing Leonard from any uncomfortable inquiries. "Well, I think it is nice that there are good people in the world, and now that Sally is involved with not just one but three different charities, the ton might yet improve, and we can vanquish Lady Millstone one of these days."

"Vanquish?" Joanna laughed. "I do not think she is that sort of a witch."

Laughter rang through the drawing room and when they had settled once more, it was Kenneth who took charge of the conversation. Sally watched as Kenneth broached the subject of business. "Speaking of vanquished," he began, his eyes flickering with interest, "now that we are rid of Aaron, how is the business going?"

Leonard's response was measured yet optimistic. "We've hit a few bumps along the road," he admitted with a hint of regret, "and we've lost a few merchants we were working with. But I believe we can righten the ship again." His smile was hopeful,

but Sally could sense the weight of responsibility that rested on his shoulders. “I could use a partner,” he added, his gaze drifting towards Sally’s father. “Or maybe two.”

Sally’s heart swelled with pride as Leonard included her father in the conversation. She admired his willingness to seek support and collaboration, even in the face of adversity.

Kenneth hesitated for a moment, his brow furrowing in thought. “I’m not one for traveling by boat,” he confessed, his tone tinged with uncertainty.

But Leonard was quick to offer a solution. “Aaron was right about one thing,” he said with a hint of irony, “we don’t necessarily need to go to the vineyards ourselves. We could hire someone to oversee operations.” His eyes sparkled as he looked back at Kenneth. “If both of you’re interested, we could run the business together,” he proposed with conviction.

Sally held her breath as she waited for her father’s response. She knew that his support could make all the difference in their efforts to rebuild the business.

To her relief, Lord Carlisle’s voice rang out with enthusiasm. “I’m always interested in a good investment,” he declared, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. “Especially one that I know is sound.”

Joanna’s eyes lit up with excitement as she added her own thoughts to the conversation. “This could be a wonderful way to bring the family together,” she remarked with warmth and encouragement.

Sally couldn't help but feel a surge of hope as she listened to the discussion unfold. Despite the challenges they had faced, there was a sense of unity in the air. Together, they would overcome any obstacles that stood in their way, and emerge stronger than ever before. As the conversation came to a close, Sally felt a sense of anticipation bubbling within her. She longed for a moment of solitude, a chance to breathe in the fresh air and collect her thoughts. With a gentle smile, she turned to Leonard and suggested they step outside for a moment.

Leonard nodded in agreement, his hand finding hers as they made their way out into the cool night air. The soft glow of the moon bathed the garden in a gentle light, casting a serene atmosphere over the scene.

Once outside, Sally took a deep breath, relishing the feeling of the cool breeze against her skin. She glanced up at the stars twinkling in the sky above, feeling a sense of peace wash over her.

Turning to Leonard, she spoke softly. "I like the idea of everyone working together," she said, her eyes meeting his with sincerity. "But I'd also like to be more involved."

Leonard's eyes sparkled with excitement as he listened to her words. "Of course, Sally," he replied. "You'll be involved in every aspect of it."

A smile tugged at the corners of Sally's lips as she considered the possibilities that lay ahead. "I'd also like to see the vineyards myself," she confessed.

Leonard's face lit up with delight at the prospect. "I would love to introduce you to my workers," he said, his eyes shining with pride. "They'll be thrilled to meet you."

With a sense of anticipation coursing through her veins, Sally reached out and took Leonard's hand in hers. As their fingers intertwined, she felt a surge of love and gratitude wash over her. In that moment, she knew that together, they could overcome any challenge that came their way.

With a tender smile, Leonard leaned in and pressed his lips to hers in a sweet and lingering kiss. And as they stood there beneath the starlit sky, wrapped in each other's embrace, Sally felt a sense of hope and possibility fill her heart.

For in that moment, she knew that no matter what the future held, they would face it together, hand in hand, united in love and determination. And with that thought, she felt a sense of peace settle over her, knowing that their journey was only just beginning.

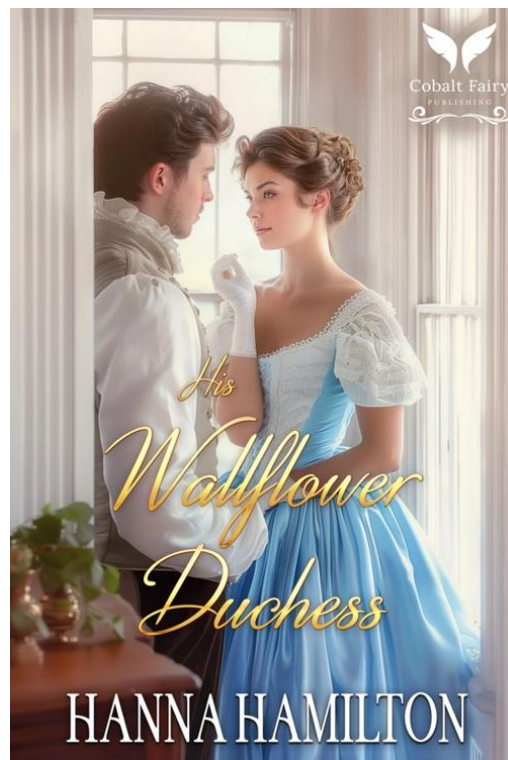
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PREVIEW: HER
MYSTERIOUS DUKE



CHAPTER 1



Although Henrietta Everbright kept tapping her foot in rhythm to the quadrille, her mind was elsewhere. Far elsewhere, like it always was.

She hardly paid any mind to the twinkling lanterns hanging overhead, the rich fabrics draped throughout the halls that created an ambiance of beauty and mystery, or the savory smell of rich foods on the tables in the open room behind her. After all, she wasn't attending the ball.

Not really, not when she was trying to strategize her way through her next essay.

I will have to change my fourth point to my third since my second is rather weak. No one will take me seriously as a philosopher if I cannot offer at least three arguments for my point on Mary Astell's mind-body union. What utter—

"Henrietta, really, we cannot have you glaring at every poor gentleman who dares glance your way," came her mother's tender but clearly aggravated voice. "Must you act as though you don't wish for a husband?"

Turning her head, Henrietta frowned at her mother, the Viscountess Tenbooth, a regal-looking woman in her later years who was fanning herself as they stood near the doorway to the refreshments room. Supper had ended already. They had, at most, an hour to go before the evening would finally end.

The sunrise would soon be peaking through the clouds then. Henrietta didn't care one way or another, since she had paid

little attention to her surroundings.

Since their host's library had been locked—as though knowing she had intended to hide there like she always did at these affairs—she'd had little choice but to join the crowd. Only one of her several siblings was in attendance, and it wasn't as though she was still permitted to play pranks to pass the time. And spending the time with her mother and father would only serve to hear how much she was missing out on as a spinster. Her final option had been to retreat to her thoughts.

What else could I do? I don't think anyone would be particularly happy if I brought a frog inside or pulled out my pistol. What dull lives we ladies live.

“Mother.” Henrietta strived for a kindly tone, since it was only the start of the Season and her parents were overtly anxious due to her father's recent hip injury. “I appreciate your thinking of me. But I'm now six-and-twenty. I'm firmly on the shelf.”

“To most of them, perhaps, but not all of them.” Her mother offered a pointed smile. Her eyes, even bluer than Henrietta's pale ones, gleamed in the candlelight with a certain eagerness that made Henrietta's stomach churn. “You could still find yourself a fine gentleman. How nice it would be to have my four girls well and truly settled, don't you think? I heard Lord Hampton may be looking to marry at last.”

A choked sound escaped Henrietta before she could swallow it. Lord Hampton was older than her father. She'd just attended the engagement party of Lord Hampton's niece, Nancy Crofter, last Season.

“I don't think he will be an option. I don't want anyone, I told you. I wish to make my own way into the world,” she added pointedly.

Or at the very least to be well ignored and do as I like. Is that so hard to believe?

Stepping closer as a few folks passed them by, her mother gave a slight shake of her head. “I know it hasn't been easy, my dear, but I wish you wouldn't give up.”

The smile on her face twisted. Though Henrietta couldn't see it, she certainly felt it. There was a particular message that her mother was attempting to convey, as if she was telling her it was time to recover from the incident of her second Season. But it was easy to say for someone who had not suffered in the actual incident.

"I never gave up. I simply never played," Henrietta countered.

Telling everyone she had never cared to marry was easier than telling people she had once had such hopes, if deeply hidden and uncertain, only to give them up. Not even Madeline, her closest sister, understood.

With her desire for freedom from Society and men, Henrietta had redirected her attention elsewhere. She wished someone else in her life could comprehend this. Didn't anyone aspire to anything more in their lives? Women were meant to be so much more than they were. If only she could convince them to read Wollstonecraft, then surely they would see everything differently.

Although she had come into her own money now, thanks to her parents who made sure she was set for life, Henrietta knew her father regularly voiced how substantial her dowry was. Her older sisters had all married well enough, so it was expected she would do the same.

Except I'm on the shelf. Worse, I'm a bluestocking.

The thought made her snort. Although her mother and Madeline regularly insisted she was stunning, Henrietta wore her spectacles with pride. While they helped her to see better, they had a way of making everyone else think her invisible.

"You really are beautiful," Madeline had been saying just the other day while struggling into one of her normal day dresses that could barely fit, since she was quickly increasing. "Truly, Henrietta. You have the richest and thickest hair I've ever seen. And if you took off your spectacles, everyone would agree. You would have gentlemen lining up at the door for your hand."

Such an idea only made Henrietta queasy. She had laughed instead, saying, “What should I do with so many useless men? Besides, the glasses are not the problem. I am as tall as nearly every man in London. At least, that’s how they act. And a gentleman’s pride cannot suffer such a thing as a tall bride.”

Tonight, in particular, I seem to tower over them. It appears we are missing quite a few in person, but I stand above everyone, besides Mother. Then all of the gentlemen as well, all except for Hillford, my brother-in-law, and...

Any hope of saving the last hours of the ball vanished as Henrietta found herself unfortunately looking at none other than Samuel Brown, the Earl of Sefton.

I am very glad Madeline married her Duke. But blast it all, why did she need to make peace with his friend? Lord Sefton is a miserable hound.

She didn’t like him. She never had. Since the moment she met him upon Madeline’s marrying, Henrietta knew the Earl was trouble. He was handsome, to be certain, and he used it as a weapon. His tongue, especially. Everything had to be his way; anything else was wrong. Among his ridiculous ideals was that young women weren’t to interfere.

In what? Henrietta remembered asking one night at another ball much like this one. *Women are not tools to be pushed aside when they are not needed. We have skills and feelings like any other.*

Then he’d dared to demand she stay behind when her own sister’s life was at risk. Afterward, he’d reminded her that her interfering could have caused more trouble. The two of them had hardly managed to stay in the same room since that evening nearly a year ago.

“Mother, why don’t we try some refreshments? The room is too warm, and you look flushed,” Henrietta said, her eyes still on Lord Sefton.

It was only so she might be careful, of course. That was the only reason she watched him. She had to steer clear of him. If not... Already she felt ire rising hot within her. The hand

clenching her fan balled into a fist as she considered how she might address him if he dared come any closer.

And that was the trouble of it. He *was* coming closer.

“Oh, I do think you’re right. I am rather warm.” Her mother sighed. “You’re not going to dance anymore, are you? I’ll find your father, my dear, and we might as well be on our way. I think we’ve stayed long enough.”

Henrietta reached out. “Perhaps I should come with—”

Her mother had already disappeared into the crowd.

Sighing, Henrietta turned back toward the dancefloor. She had best disappear as well. Though she wasn’t hungry, she could hide by the refreshments table until a particular someone was far away from her.

“There you are.”

Henrietta whirled around to find that particular someone now standing in front of her. It was a small miracle she managed to clamp her mouth shut. She hadn’t realized how close he could appear so quickly.

She jutted up her chin at Lord Sefton. He stood a few good inches taller than her, but she did her best to look down on him. His black hair had recently been trimmed. And those green eyes of his glared at her as if she’d kicked his puppy.

Narrowing her own eyes, Henrietta feigned disappointment. “And tonight was going so well.”

“So well that you weren’t even dancing.”

“Neither were you,” she retorted before belatedly wishing she had asked how he knew that. But she couldn’t ask now. Biting her lip for a second, she huffed. “Why are you seeking me out if you find all women intolerable?”

As a couple jostled by them, Lord Sefton looked over his shoulder in distaste before being forced to come closer. She tried to move back, only to find herself pressed against the wall. This left only a few inches of space between them. Her heart pounded. She rarely spent any time around men, especially if they weren’t in her family.

“Speaking of women,” he said in a biting tone, “I seem to have misplaced mine.”

She blinked. “What?”

“My sister.”

That made much more sense.

Henrietta willed herself to relax. She fiddled with her reticule. Her small notebook and pencil were in there, along with a handkerchief and a few diamond pins, in case her hair needed some fixing. Oh, and her pistol. It was the smallest one she’d ever seen and something she carried with her at all times.

One needs to be careful, after all.

“Then perhaps you should take better care of her, My Lord,” Henrietta replied mockingly. “What, do you think I have her hidden away in my reticule? All I have in here is my weapon, to keep men like you at a distance.”

“You did not bring that—never mind that now. Where’s Winny? I saw the two of you together this evening. Thick as thieves, you were,” he pointed out. He pointed his finger at her before catching himself and crossing his arms over his chest. “You’ve been leading her astray for months now. I won’t have it. Where did she go?”

Mouth dropping open, Henrietta stared at him. “What do you mean, leading her astray? Winny is a bright young lady. The cleverest in her family, in fact.”

He huffed. “You’re not half as funny as you pretend to be.”

“And you’re not half as intimidating as you pretend to be.”

Twisting his head to look away, Samuel inhaled deeply, as if he refused to breathe near her. She watched for some reason she couldn’t explain. It was like her entire body was frozen still, waiting for his next move. Her heart hammered a hundred times in between.

The seconds ticked by until he spoke again.

“I know you know where she is, Miss Henrietta,” he ground out. She wondered whether his jaw would break if she poked

his cheek. “You’re hiding something, I know it. Just tell me where she is, and then I’ll leave.”

“Already I told you that I don’t know, but you should still leave. Don’t curse us to a fate neither of us want,” she told him, before rolling her eyes as dramatically as she could muster. “I mean it when I say I don’t know where Winny is.”

At least, not exactly. Not precisely.

“You...” He stepped forward. There was heat in his gaze, and that twist of his lips. Her stomach made an odd jump when he closed the distance between them. She hastily ignored it. “You are a menace to society, Henrietta.”

Although Henrietta always envisioned herself as calm and collected, she found it nearly impossible when he was around. She leaned forward so that his hand, that finger again pointing at her, nearly touched her chest.

“Am I?” she asked him in a mocking tone. “It’s Miss Henrietta to you. We are not friends. I wouldn’t count us even as acquaintances.”

“Not voluntarily, at least,” he muttered.

She huffed. “You hardly know me, *Lord Sefton*. You most definitely don’t know women. You can’t even keep track of your sister’s whereabouts. Why do you think I would ever tell you anything you wish to hear? It’s you who are the menace. I was having a perfectly pleasant evening until you interrupted. And now? What are you doing, My Lord? Threatening me?”

It wouldn’t be the first time, but now she was prepared. She had something in her reticule to protect herself.

Except she didn’t think she would need to use it with him. Although Henrietta wanted to feel the cool metal of her weapon, she knew every reason why it would be a bad reason to bring it out. But for some reason, she found it rather unlikely for him to actually intend to cause her harm.

All they fought with were words. It was all they needed. No one dared last in an argument with her for more than a minute or two, besides her two nephews. And they only survived

because she couldn't say no to them for long. Not that Samuel was anything like her spoiled nephews.

She waited, but the Earl seemed to be... well, silent. He wasn't saying anything. Unnerved, Henrietta couldn't bring herself to do anything either.

The seconds passed. Her eyes narrowed as he continued staring her down. The more he stared at her, the more she felt she might go cross-eyed. He said nothing as he searched her gaze. All Henrietta could do was hope she wouldn't give away a single secret.

“Trouble. That's what you are.”

He spun on his heel and vanished back into the crowd.

Relaxing against the wall, Henrietta felt the tension in her shoulders ease. She breathed out again. The man was gone. There were no threats, no dares, nothing dangerous had happened. She thought she glimpsed him heading toward the small orchestra as she opened her eyes again.

She supposed that, in his own way, he was a good man if he cared for his sister so deeply. The two of them only had each other now, from what she understood. His care for his younger sister had to be his only redeeming quality, although he could be something of a brat about this.

Had he been about to threaten her? She wasn't certain. If only she could have read his mind. Then she would probably understand more than she truthfully wanted to learn. Winny had tried to tell Henrietta a time or two about her brother. He was overprotective, since they had lost their parents some years ago, and then their grandmother in the summer.

While Henrietta supposed grief could push a person to be cold and stern and rude, she didn't think it was an excuse for his behavior. He was a pest. One that insisted on making an appearance in her life much too often.

And the Season has only just begun. What a bother. But let us not dwell on such grievances. He's off again, and that's all that matters. Winny is... well, she is around here somewhere. She better be. She promised.

Although Winny wasn't quite twenty, and just so happened to be Lord Sefton's sister, she and Henrietta had struck up a friendship since Madeline had wed. It was clear that Winny needed more friends, and Henrietta had found herself surprisingly lonely as the only child still at home.

Living with her parents was slowly driving her mad. Although they adored her and seemed mostly resigned to her independent ways, she was beginning to feel oddly left out in her own home. The feeling aggravated her almost daily.

She and Winny enjoyed long adventures through museums, driving barouches to everyone else's dismay, and riding their horses. They needed someone and had turned to each other with relief and hope.

Until the Season started two weeks ago.

The first ball of the Season was hosted by the Duke and Duchess of Waverley. This year, it had been a masquerade. A fine masquerade where Winny had evidently met a man she had fallen in love with. Patrick something was all Henrietta knew. That, and a shadowy face she'd caught once before the younger girl had run off.

"He promised to meet me this evening. Here, of course. I must search him out. You won't tell Samuel, will you? I shan't be off for long."

Or so Winny had told her sometime before supper.

But supper had long since passed, and there was still no sign of the younger lady.

"Oh bother," Henrietta muttered under her breath. She fixed her grasp on her reticule and fan. Maybe the Earl *had* a reason for his concern.

Where was Winny? The young woman should have returned even before suppertime. But Henrietta had been too lost in thought to think of her fine friend, not until Lord Sefton came to disturb her peace.

She bit the inside of her cheek. Maybe she should have been paying more attention to the time. Or her friend's absence. She

had been too distracted to think about Winny. What was she thinking?

Henrietta knew how dangerous men could be, and yet she'd done nothing to stop her friend.

Hesitating, she hoped that Winny, a woman twice as wild as herself, was wiser than she had been at that age. And then she promptly recalled how her younger friend had been talking about elopement last week and how fantastic that would be.

“Blast it,” she muttered as panic washed over her.

One of the matrons, Lady Herbert, gasped at the sound of her curse. It hardly mattered to Henrietta. If a man could curse, then so could she. And cursing mattered little at a time like this. A young lady needed to be found as quickly as possible.

And it would be best if she were the one to find Winny—not Samuel.

She should be close, shouldn't she? I'll find her and bring her back inside. None will be the wiser. She will be safe without anyone noticing anything out of the ordinary. And there will certainly not be any consequences.

CHAPTER 2



Samuel Brown had both gone too far and not far enough.

He knew this. More than anything in his life, he sought balance. There was a right way and a wrong way to do everything. Most of the time, he had it sorted out perfectly. He fought for justice, cared for others to create peace, and watched over his sister.

When she lets me. Blast it, how have I lost her yet again? Her first Season went fine enough. She fared well enough after losing Grandmama. But this is the third event where I have lost her.

Running a hand through his hair, Samuel remembered how short it was. His valet had made the recommendation two days ago in the hopes it would force him to stop pulling and tugging at it.

He didn't particularly think it was working.

Growling, he ignored the raised eyebrows of a small party of gentlemen in the hall before moving forward. His eyes searched the light and shadows of every room for his little sister.

Winnie was trouble. She always had been. A fussy babe, a demanding toddler, and pure terror in the schoolroom. His father had to hire at least three governesses. Samuel supposed there might be more, but no one had filled him in on the details while he was away. Since he was merely her brother, he'd been able to stand off and laugh at her antics.

Except now he was responsible for her. Which meant she took her frustrations and whims out on him rather than anyone else. It was as though she wished to drive him mad.

Maybe he was going mad, after all.

Though he hated the thought of losing her, there was a large part of him that had prayed she would marry in her first Season so he would finally have her off his hands. Her high spirits and meddlesome ways would no longer be his responsibility.

Except she hadn't married, and he still loved her, so he had cut his plans short for the evening to search her out before she got entangled in one scandal or another.

Samuel reached the end of the hall without finding Winny and soon wound his way back inside the ballroom. Though his gaze landed on the next doorway, where he had last seen the fiery *Miss Henrietta*, she wasn't there any longer.

He found himself torn. Relieved so he wouldn't have to see her again or talk to her, for she truly was a menace to all who encountered her. But troubled because it meant he didn't know where she had gone.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Isn't that what they say?

Just then, her voice drifted into mind, asking him if he was going to threaten her. That was what she'd asked him right over next to the doorway leading to the refreshments room. An odd thought of hers, to be certain.

He recalled the way a thick brown curl had fallen down her cheek, a rich color that complimented her rosy cheeks. They always grew red when he was around, though he strongly suspected it was not due to blushing. She had stood tall with her chin jutting and shoulders squared, reminding him of a warrior.

She would fight him, and gladly. In truth, she was all fierceness. Most of it stemmed from her sharp tongue, a precise weapon that had cut him more than once.

Nothing but a menace, indeed.

“Where did you go, Miss Henrietta?” he mumbled, this time running his hands over his open dark velvet coat.

He and his valet had planned his garments out for the week last Sunday. Though he had been confident of this choice at the time, he regretted it now. It was too warm for velvet. Still, the coloring was nice and complimented the vague theme of tonight’s ball, as he knew it would.

He supposed Miss Henrietta—Henrietta when she wasn’t within hearing distance—might have left for home, for she’d been talking to her mother earlier, though he wasn’t quite convinced.

No, Henrietta had a secret. He had seen that stubbornness in her eyes. She knew something. Certain that she was simply refusing to confide in him, Samuel had struggled to find a way to extract the truth from her. But what more could a man do in public than demand answers?

It was as though she didn’t understand the potential consequences here. The risks. As a lady, she ought to. If Winny were found in anything close to a compromising situation, then he would...

What would he do?

Shaking his head, Samuel tried not to think about that. He couldn’t let that happen. He had promised his parents this. His grandmama, as well. For as long as he could recall, he had been his sister’s keeper. When he was a young boy, the responsibility had been thrilling, since she was twelve years his junior.

It seemed that, lately, Samuel spent more time worrying over Winny than anything else.

He thought he glimpsed stars passing through the back doors leading out to the gardens. Silver stars that had twinkled in the light when he verbally sparred with Henrietta.

It was all they ever did—verbally sparring. The young woman seemed to know nothing else. She was always prepared and never backed down.

She knows something. She must. Since I saw her with Winny at the start of the evening, Henrietta must at least have some sort of clue.

Samuel made for the set of doors nearby. To be certain, the night was already coming to an end, with the sky slowly lighting up with morning. He rarely stayed so long at balls, but it couldn't be helped now. Not until he found Winny.

Just that morning, they had argued when he had reminded her how having too much chocolate to break her fast would only cause her an upset stomach in the afternoon.

Which, of course, it had.

Still, she thinks to call me controlling, when the only thing I ever am is right. She never thinks anything through. I love her to death, but sometimes she really makes me wish I could strangle her.

His anxiety was growing. The itch started at the top of his spine, a light buzzing in his head, until it moved downward and spread through his body. He moved on his toes and couldn't stay still for more than a moment. This was why he needed to be in control. He needed to be prepared.

Which he couldn't do if his sister disappeared at a ball.

The last time someone else had done this, it was his dear friend's wife who had been kidnapped. The Duke and Duchess of Oldham had been married for a short while now, and they couldn't be happier. Still, the night Madeline Hillford had been kidnapped was still a difficult memory for them.

Except for when I think of Henrietta riding on that horse of hers with that foolish pistol in hand. What was she thinking? She could have only gotten someone hurt. She's a reckless young lady, out of control, just like Winny.

Trying to forget the past, Samuel stepped out onto the terrace.

It was a warm evening, since summer refused to end this September. He glanced around at the few stars still twinkling in the heavens before surveying the gardens ahead. At least three paths were open to him, all of which offered shrubbery where anybody could hide.

Though he thought of asking the trio of ladies standing by the trellis on his right, Samuel thought better of it. He had already asked Lady Wentworth, his grandmama's dear friend, and Miss Henrietta. They were the only ones he could trust with Winny's reputation.

If he asked anyone else at the ball, word would surely get out. That could only cause more mayhem. He didn't have the time or desire for a scandal.

She must be around here somewhere. Daydreaming, possibly, or completing a dare given to her by some foolish footman or gentleman or any other fool. It wouldn't be the first time. We need to be on our way. Besides, I can't think about using my pistols at dawn, should I need to call someone out, not when the House of Lords requires my attention in a morning appointment. Already, I'm wasting precious time here.

Most boys didn't want little ones following after them. But he'd taken Winny under his wing in their childhood, teaching her how to fish and climb trees and row boats. He had come home from Eton every summer to spend days outside, racing about and making up stories about knights and danger and all sorts of madness.

But that had been their childhood. There was a time and place for everything. It was something his sister didn't seem to have grasped yet.

Spotting movement on the lefthand trail, Samuel started to move. He ran his hands through his hair while considering everything he might say to his younger sister. If there was a punishment he thought would work on her, he might consider it. But it was hard to cause her any sort of harm when they only had each other now.

"You could always marry," Winny had pointed out over the last couple of years. He had since reached his thirties. Most men his age were beginning to settle down.

But he wasn't interested. There was more to do in this lifetime. Not only did he manage several correspondences with men of science, faith, and philosophy, but he was sitting on at least four committees in Parliament. The House of Lords respected

him, leaving him a sought-out politician who could provide guidance and direct law. He might take a seat if his plans came to fruition in the next couple of years.

He liked to stay busy, and he liked leading change. There was much to be done in this world. A wife would only slow him down.

As do sisters, unfortunately.

He was so lost in thought that he hardly noticed who was and was not there on his path. He passed by a couple who were a blur of faces. It could have been two people or more. All he knew was that they weren't his sister. She was smaller, plump, and never settled.

In the darkness, he marched down the path, confident he would recognize his sister the moment he came upon her.

So, when Samuel collided with another body in the faint light of dawn, he knew it wasn't Winny.

"Oh!" cried a woman's voice in alarm.

An elbow met his gut, and he grunted, grasping the arm. She was twisting while he was stumbling. Then there was a shrub in their way. It was impossible to guess who had fallen off balance first, though he wasn't about to accept the blame.

At least, not while he was falling.

Samuel steered them away from the shrub just as he felt hands grabbing at his jacket. His consciousness must have realized it was a woman, since he twisted to take the brunt of the fall. He landed hard on his shoulder before falling on his back.

And on top of him rested the woman.

"That was—you—" a voice he knew all too well sputtered in his ear.

Perhaps they spent little time together, but there was no forgetting Henrietta Everbright's stammering alto. The bigger shock was hearing her struggle for words before she managed to pull herself up enough so they could look at one another.

He wanted to laugh at how pale she turned upon seeing him beneath her, but he hadn't yet found his breath.

Her coiffure fell apart around them, pins littering the ground. He thought he felt one land on his cravat. Her hair, even curlier than he had anticipated, landed on either side of his face like drapes so that she was all he could see. Shadows covered most of her face, with the few lanterns overhead, though he had long since memorized her features.

One had to if he were to avoid her as much as he did.

A Roman nose, Samuel noted, strong like her personality. But her lips looked sweeter than usual. Too sweet for someone with her sharp tongue. And how had he never noticed those long eyelashes? Her glasses, now askew, hid a beauty she seemed determined not to share with the world.

He didn't dare study those big blue eyes of hers but returned to her eyelashes. They were a few shades darker than her hair, they matched her eyebrows and fluttered against her cheeks.

A warmth of a different sort surged through him as he stared at her. The woman was beautiful. She probably knew it and used it however she liked—a siren determined to best the world.

Don't stare. Stop staring. Look away. They'll call you mad. Weren't you just threatening her? Almost threatening, that is, since I'm not that sort of man. I don't threaten. I charm people. Politicians, women... I wonder if I could charm her.

"I... you grabbed me," Henrietta blurted out suddenly.

Her accusation, soft as it was, snapped Samuel back to reality. He stiffened. Of course, she would blame him for their fall.

Eyes narrowing, he fixed his grip on her. "You weren't looking where you were going," he corrected her.

The scoff that escaped her lips warmed his cheek. Yet she didn't move, almost as though she were content to be lying partially on top of him like this. "Don't be ridiculous, that was you. I always know exactly where I'm going."

"It wasn't my fault. Besides, what are you doing out in the gardens, in the dark? Alone?" he added sharply.

Her sharp intake of breath told him something in the silence. He just wished he understood it. Searching her face, Samuel tried to read the stubborn woman.

Is it about my sister? About her? What is she thinking?

“I was only taking the air,” she told him. Her eyes darted away from him. Though he understood her to be firmly on the shelf, too old to be considered marriageable by the London Society’s standards, for some odd reason, she looked remarkably young to him now. Young and vulnerable.

Her eyes widened, the pale blue darkening from uncertainty. “I have to get off you.”

Realizing he rather liked the sensation of her there, he gritted his teeth in annoyance. Tonight had turned him inside out to imagine things that couldn’t be real. “Yes, you should.”

He stared, waiting for her to act. Except she didn’t move. Though Samuel tried to think of something more to say, suddenly he was lost in her pale blue eyes. They reminded him of something. What could it be? A robin’s egg? The summer sunrise? The wallpaper in his childhood nursery? Perhaps the satin ribbons he often purchased for his sister?

Thinking of Winny pulled him out of his odd reverie. His hands tightened around her waist as he readied himself to be relieved of her. Just not yet. Not until he knew the truth.

“Miss Henrietta, you’re trying to lie to me again.”

She promptly bit her cheek, a tell-tale sign, for certain. He had seen her do that before. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You will tell me—”

“Is that another threat?”

Hesitating, Samuel made yet another attempt to read the young woman. She came from a happy family with two parents still alive, and all of her other siblings cheerfully wed. He knew her sister Madeline better, since the young woman had married his closest friend. But only slightly. He had not been particularly happy about the marriage due to an investigation he had been

conducting with the Duke of Oldham. Everything had come to a happy ending, however, and Parliament had the case in hand. Samuel had since made amends with Madeline. She had called him her friend just last month, during one of his visits to Hillford House.

He had even less to say to Henrietta here, for they couldn't be more dissimilar.

Which, of course, had to explain why he couldn't take his eyes off her.

It was an unconscious action that made his hands on the young woman's waist tighten. He didn't do it on purpose. Or perhaps his subconscious did, ordering him to act. The two of them were begging for a scandal, lying about in the garden in this manner.

"Oh!" Henrietta suddenly jerked to attention.

It broke the magnetic pull between them. Samuel inhaled deeply, wincing when she dug her knee into his thigh to roll off. He hastily rose to his feet once free, attempting to do the gentlemanly thing by helping her up as well.

"No, thank you," she responded tartly. She straightened up, and he found that, even though her coiffure had fallen apart, she hardly looked ruffled at all. A talent. "In fact, I..."

When she trailed off, he raised an eyebrow. Hearing her speechless was a first. Then he followed her gaze and realized why. His stomach plummeted.

They had an audience.

"Sister," she squeaked at his side.

He started to raise his hands to his hair before thinking better of it, instead running his hands over his coat. Hopefully, his garments weren't too wrinkled. And besides, he needed a second to think of something to say to their friends.

The Duke and Duchess of Oldham stared blankly at them.

That wasn't quite true. His friend, Anthony, stared blankly while his wife had clapped a hand over her mouth. Those

pretty blue eyes of hers—darker than Henrietta’s—darted between him and her sister.

She looks excited. Or afraid. It can't be a good sign, can it?

It was obvious that the couple had come upon him and Henrietta before the two of them rose up. A rather compromising look for the two of them to be caught in. What had he been thinking? Samuel didn't dare look around, in case there were others watching. He wasn't confident he could stomach it. How long had he been lying on the ground with Henrietta? That couldn't have been more than a second. Maybe two.

“Whatever happened?” the Duchess asked in a small voice.

“Madeline, I'm certain it's nothing...” her husband trailed off when she left his side to walk over to her sister. Anthony's gaze turned from the women to Samuel. “It was nothing, wasn't it?”

The garden had warmed incredibly in the last five seconds. Samuel fumbled with his coat again, suddenly feeling as though his cravat was choking him. He knew too well what his friend was asking. “Of course, it was nothing.”

“Are you all right?” Madeline asked her sister.

Samuel looked sharply at Henrietta. If she disagreed, then he was done for. And she never agreed with him. Still, she wouldn't dare say anything now, would she?

It was bad enough that they had run into each other. Worse that they had been seen. But surely the couple could be convinced that nothing happened. While he considered himself an honorable gentleman, the thought of being leg-shackled to none other than *Miss Henrietta* herself was enough to turn him grim. Or grimmer than usual.

“Of course, I'm all right. It takes more than a tumble—er, fall—to slow me down. I was only taking the air. Lord Sefton helped me to my feet.” Henrietta met his gaze, the same determination reflecting in her eyes. No one's honor was compromised tonight. “Nothing happened.”

Biting her lip, the young Duchess glanced between them before turning back to her husband. “Well, if you’re certain...”

“They are certain,” Anthony reassured her. “We shouldn’t be too hasty.”

“I saw Lady Riverton walk by. Are you certain she didn’t see you? I don’t know, Anthony. If anyone learns that Henrietta was here alone, why... the gossip...”

“If I were alone, then there’s nothing to worry about,” Henrietta argued. “Maddie, I’m sure that old busybody didn’t see us. She couldn’t have. It’s still dark. And besides, I’m not marrying. Not to save my reputation, not for any reason.” The more she spoke, the faster her lips moved. Samuel could hear the desperation in her voice. It matched the frantic beating of his heart. “I won’t marry. You know that. You know me. I’m telling you, no one knows of this. If we don’t say anything, then... then no one will know. Right?”

She whirled around to fix those bold blue eyes on him. For some reason, he immediately straightened to attention. He felt the need to present his best self, before he caught himself. Horror ripped through him at the notion of what was left unsaid but clearly settled among their small party.

Marriage to her? We’d murder each other before the week is out.

“No one will know. It was only an accident. I helped her to her feet, nothing more,” he announced a little louder than necessary. When Henrietta glared at him, he glared right back.

“Anthony?” Madeline asked her husband again. “You must speak up. What about Henrietta’s reputation? If anyone were to learn...”

The Duke gave his wife a long look. Samuel didn’t understand it, only that his friend wasn’t looking at him. His cravat suddenly felt tight around his neck. Would his only friend force him to commit to a woman he could hardly stand?

“I understand your concern,” Anthony murmured to his wife. “But we must consider this for their sakes as well, beyond their reputations.”

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

It was as though Samuel and Henrietta weren’t even there.

Finally glancing up, the Duke studied all three of them before straightening up. He was making the final decision, it seemed. Whatever he said would be what happened next. Samuel’s mouth dried.

“We won’t do anything at this time. There is no reason to create a scandal if there isn’t one. Perhaps Lady Riverton was on the other path. It would be best to wait this out. Give it a week. If nothing is said, we have avoided disaster. If not...” Anthony met Samuel’s gaze. “He’ll do the honorable thing.”

“No, he won’t,” Henrietta squeaked in obstinance.

Meanwhile, Samuel ignored her as he stared down his closest friend. He battled with his feelings, with the words that he and Anthony knew had to be said. “I will if I must.”

A growl erupted beside him before Madeline started quieting her sister. Samuel avoided Henrietta’s gaze. He couldn’t bear to look at her, as though seeing her again would invite the scandal they dreaded so much. No, the less he put himself near her, the better. Then no one would believe a thing, even if a rumor did come about.

Just so long as nothing happens. We can all forget this ever happened. And I can go back to worrying about—

“There you are!” came a familiar, cheerful voice. Cheerful and rather proud, from the sound of it.

He jerked his head up to see his sister, Lady Wilhelmina Brown, skipping toward them from the direction of the well-lit terrace. He had been there only minutes ago.

Tilting her head, she offered her most innocent-looking smile upon reaching their small party. There she was, in all her glory. Her second Season and she still wore the white of a debutante, glowing in the dim lighting. Here he had been, prowling in the dark in search of her all this time, and she appeared out of nowhere, like nothing had ever happened.

“I was looking all over for you, Samuel,” she announced before yawning. It was a beastly yawn, most likely not feigned. “I thought you would have been ready to go home for ages. What a long night it has been. While I adore the lot of you, I should rather like to climb into my own bed about now. Brother, might we?”

He couldn't very well turn her down. The tension that had been brewing in the garden dissipated into the morning mist.

Part of him was tempted to laugh, for all of this had felt so serious a moment ago. But it was over. It had to be. The ball was ending, there would be no scandal, and he could carry on with his life as he had planned.

Which will include a rather particular scolding of a particular young lady before she retires to her bedroom.

Nodding, Samuel strode forward to take his sister's arm and rest it over his. He cast a quick look at the rest of the party. “Good night. Travel well.”

It wasn't much of a farewell, but it would have to do. He had said enough to everyone else this evening. There would be a thorough discussion on the carriage ride back home, Samuel decided, and some limited activities over the next couple of days for him and his sister.

Tonight will soon be forgotten, just another blur of the Season. That is all it was ever meant to be. In one month, I doubt I'll even recall anything from tonight.

CHAPTER 3



“*I*s something wrong?”

Her father’s voice echoed in the silence of the carriage, making her nearly jump off her bench. At once, Henrietta’s elbow banged against the window, and she winced before settling back down.

Clearing her face of expression so as to not pain him further than he already seemed to be today, she attempted a smile. “Wrong? Whyever would you think such a thing?”

“You’re grumbling under your breath, my dear,” her mother answered, beside her father. The two exchanged troubled looks before turning back to her. As always, they represented a united front. “Are you unwell?”

“I’m perfectly well,” Henrietta replied automatically.

Too late, she should have thought up a lie. It was only that she hated lying. She’d woken up with a small rash on her arm from her lying the night before at the ball. Why she had ever agreed to lie for Winny was beyond her. Everyone knew how much she cared for the truth.

And yet the lies came so easily. I suppose that was because of him. I don’t care about him. I can’t.

Henrietta blinked, immediately pushing the Earl out of her mind. She couldn’t think about him. It worried her too much. There was a fear inside her that if she did think about him, then everyone would know. Then they would know about what happened in the gardens.

Not that anything had really happened. Just a tumble right on top of his chest, nothing more.

And yet even *she* wasn't a fool. One didn't need much of an imagination to know what it would have looked like to anyone nearby when she had collided with and fallen on top of Samuel. What a scandalous image for anyone to see. Which, she felt certain, no one ever had.

"Henrietta?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I am well, Mother, I promise you that." She should have lied, but she didn't want to suffer another rash. This one she could hide with her gloves, but it was perilously close to her elbow, and she couldn't risk another. "I am only... I am only anxious about this morning's party."

There. That was true enough.

Madeline and her husband were preparing to retire to their family estate of Rosewood soon, with the Dowager Duchess, since Maddie was increasing. She was set to give birth by Twelfth Night if all went well. Before they left, it seemed the new Duchess was determined to host a few parties before she disappeared into the country.

Of course, Madeline enjoyed hosting parties, and Henrietta couldn't imagine anyone turning down her beautiful sister with her brilliant ideas. The Duke obviously couldn't.

What a chore it must be to attend to so many people. What if she doesn't like everyone? I may not know everyone in attendance. Then what am I to do? The library was locked the last time I visited, as though it were closed for maintenance.

"Oh, don't worry," her mother said as she leaned forward to pat her knee. "Someday, you'll have a husband and a home of your own."

Forcing a smile at her mother's misunderstanding, Henrietta opened her mouth to correct her before she snapped it shut. Thoughts of a husband meant marriage, and that readily brought back the memory of her tumble with the Earl in the garden.

She suppressed a shudder before clasping her hands together.

“Perhaps, perhaps not. I suppose I don’t see why she insisted on a party so early in the day. People are rarely up, let alone out of the house, at three on a day after a ball,” Henrietta stammered out. The fear had returned, and she tried to swallow it. “What a busy night it was. And yet rather dull, don’t you think? There wasn’t much gossip about last night, was there?”

“Gossip? Oh, you know I don’t care for that. No matter how much everyone tells me, I don’t care for it,” her mother insisted.

Henrietta glanced at her father. He was still frowning at her in concern. “I stayed in the card room. Couldn’t move with my hip bothering me, of course. Are you certain everything is well?”

As much as she adored her parents, and as much as she knew she was fortunate to have two living parents who cared for her, Henrietta couldn’t help but wish they were a little less attentive. They didn’t listen to everything she said, after all, and still didn’t believe how committed she was to having a life of her own. But at the end of the day, they still cared for her.

“I’m sure it will be.” Another not-lie. Henrietta smoothed the wrinkles in her dress as she tried to convince herself all was well.

Once Samuel had left with Winny, Madeline and Anthony had helped her find her parents. They had been returned to their doorstep within the hour. Retiring to bed, Henrietta had laid beneath her blankets and waited for her doom.

They haven’t heard anything. That must be good. Nothing was in the morning papers, then. All is well. No one ever found out. They never will. It was only a tumble.

Relaxing, Henrietta let out a deep breath. Their carriage rolled to a stop, and she told herself she could enjoy this party. Madeline had promised it would be small and short, so they wouldn’t be here for long. If it came down to it, Henrietta could always hide away somewhere in the large house.

She stepped out after her parents, nodding her thanks to her father. They had made it to the Duke and Duchess's preferred residence, a beautiful estate on the outskirts of London. This made for a bit of a drive, to be fair, but it was comfortable and better sized for hosting than their London townhouse.

"Shall we?" Lady Tenbooth beamed. She took her husband's arm. Then he offered his other one to Henrietta.

Accepting it, Henrietta smiled, and together they walked inside. The butler led them through the front door and down the hall to the largest of the three parlors.

Already there were a few guests who had arrived on time. Most of the furniture had been rearranged to allow people to move around and get refreshments. In the middle was Madeline, showing off a new painting hanging on the wall.

"Don't mind me at the refreshments table," Henrietta murmured to her parents.

"Come here, you." Madeline caught her before she could slide by, wrapping her in a warm embrace. Although younger and shorter, she seemed to be stronger, since Henrietta couldn't escape her embrace. "It's always so good to have you here."

Henrietta gave a distracted nod as she felt eyes on her. "Yes, yes. Did you make those pistachio biscuits I like so much? I think I'll grab a cup of tea while you entertain your guests if you don't mind," she said hastily.

"Actually, Sister..."

"Henrietta, dear?" came her mother's voice suddenly. They had just arrived, but she already wore a pinched expression. Her shoulders seemed more tense than usual, no longer squared proudly. "Could you come take a seat with me? If you don't mind?"

Henrietta hesitated before saying, "Well, I suppose, if I can—"

"Madeline, I'll entertain," Anthony interjected as he appeared beside them.

It was the Duke that made Henrietta stop. She shifted her gaze from her sister's furrowed brow over to her mother's anxious

expression. Their looks made her stomach twist uncomfortably.

Something was wrong. The Viscountess kept shifting her balance and looking about. Henrietta wondered if she was worried about her father. She opened her mouth, prepared to go sit with her mother in a quiet corner, before she looked back at Madeline.

Although her sister was still smiling, it grew rather strained.

“Did someone die?” she couldn’t help but ask.

That was when she felt it. The cold shiver down her spine, that familiar sign that eyes were on her. It made her sick to her stomach. She was reminded of her coming out and how anxious she had been.

Maybe I’ve died and I’m the only one who doesn’t know it.

A sickly feeling washed over her, as though she had bathed in nothing but the Thames for years. She felt the same thing during the last ball of her second Season. She felt as though all eyes were on her, but she didn’t dare look up to confirm it.

Back then, her mother had promised her time and again that no one knew a thing about what had happened. That they weren’t staring at her. Although Henrietta expected the Viscountess to reassure her of this yet again, it seemed that her mother couldn’t do it.

But I don’t care. Let them stare for as long as they like. I don’t care, remember? They can say anything they want to...

Something felt different.

Three matrons stood in the corner, all eyes on her while they whispered heatedly behind fans and cups of lemonade. In the middle stood Lady Riverton. Henrietta’s mouth turned dry. She glanced to the other side of the room to see the raised eyebrows of the few men there.

She faintly recalled the relief she had felt upon leaving the carriage only minutes ago. It was already dissolving. Glancing back at her mother, now she knew that even if the Viscountess had heard nothing last night, she certainly knew now.

“Henrietta? There is something... there is something I think I should speak to you about,” Madeline urged in a small voice.

“No.”

If Henrietta left the room, then no one could talk to her. That was sound logic to her. Her heart rate quickened. She stumbled backwards, away from her mother and sister. Perhaps if she left now, they would forget all about her. All she had to do was hide for a little while.

If they know what I think they know, then no one knows anything, except they think they know everything. They don't know anything! They can't. It wasn't a scandal, it was a tumble. It was only an accident. I can't be punished for an accident, can I? Haven't I been punished enough? Especially with the Earl of Sefton! He's controlling and manipulative and a woman-hater, and I'll probably murder him in my sleep on our wedding night. It's not as though I even want to marry!

The panic she had felt last night was nothing compared to the feelings in her chest now. There was an itch in her throat, as if she was holding back a scream. She put a hand over her stomach as though to hold the emotions at bay.

A cup was pushed into that hand. Instinctively, she grabbed it while turning to face whoever had given it to her.

That was surely the biggest mistake of her life. At least, since she had run into him the night before. She stared at the Earl standing before her, wondering what he was doing there. Even as she asked herself the question, however, Henrietta knew the answer.

“My Lord,” she stuttered.

When Henrietta lifted her gaze, she found a sour-faced Earl of Sefton studying her. His expression encouraged her to shed her fear. If he thought he was angry, she was twice that. Her shoulders straightened, unwilling to show her anxiety to the enemy.

“Miss Henrietta,” he said in a calmer voice than she thought she might ever muster during such an event as this one. “I fear we have bound ourselves together for a lifetime.”

A lifetime. Together. I suppose that is the closest thing to a proposal we can afford here. Mother and Father can't expect anything more or less, and nor can I.

She pushed her cup up to her mouth. Sherry, not lemonade. She was grateful for a brief moment before her irritation and bitter sadness took over.

What a fool she had been to think she could escape. London would have its way. The *beau monde* had demands. She'd been thrown into the tiger's lair as another sacrifice. Her freedom had only ever been an illusion. Now, her desired future flashed before her eyes before fading away. This time, it would be for good.

Henrietta replied, since she had no choice in the matter any longer, "I believe you are correct, My Lord."

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hanna Hamilton has been fascinated with the regency era ever since she was a young teen, first discovering historical romance novels by famous authors such as Jane Austen and Lisa Kleypas. She believes that love was just so much more magical back then, more like a fairy tale. She always daydreamed about finding love herself that way, but since that is impossible in the twenty first century, she decided to write about it instead!

Born in Texas, Hanna Hamilton obtained a degree in Creative Writing, and had worked as a literature teacher before becoming a novelist. When she isn't writing, Hanna likes to explore the countryside with her husband and two children, gaining inspiration from the natural world around her.

So, come on a journey into love, confusion, and redemption all within the regency era. Hanna hopes that you will enjoy immersing yourself into her novels, and that you too will find a love for old fashioned romance, just as she has.

Hanna is part of **Cobalt Fairy's** team of authors! Visit **cobaltfairy.com** for new, bargain and free deals for every dedicated bookworm there is out there!

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