

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a man with dark, wavy hair and a light beard. He is wearing a white, long-sleeved shirt that is unbuttoned at the top, revealing his chest, and dark-colored pants. He is looking off to the side with a neutral expression. The background behind him is a blurred, stone wall.

THE DUKE'S
UNWANTED
VIRGIN

DAPHNE BYRNE

THE DUKE'S UNWANTED VIRGIN

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

THE UNWANTED WIVES

BOOK THREE



DAPHNE BYRNE



CONTENTS

Before You Start Reading...

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Epilogue

Extended Epilogue

Preview: The Earl's Unwanted Bride

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Also by Daphne Byrne
About the Author


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ABOUT THE BOOK

"I hate to break it to you, Sunshine, but we're going to be stuck together forever."

After she was forced to marry the most notorious Duke of the ton, Helen vows to make his life hell, in hopes he might send her away.

She never expected him to enjoy her shenanigans. Or that he would be so devilishly handsome.

Instead of a timid wife, Duke Jackson's new bride is dressed in the most outlandish outfits and hairstyles, takes on birdwatching as a hobby, and talks to herself.

But when the ghosts of his past threaten to take her away from him, Jackson will blaze a path of fire to keep her close to him...

CHAPTER 1



“So help me, Helen, I am losing my patience with you.”

Helen Smith shifted her attention and stared at her father’s reflection in the mirror as she pretended to fix the tangled mess that was her hair. She glared daggers at the man but kept the emotions off her face.

“And here I thought you wanted me to look my best,” Helen said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of her tone. Throwing his hands up in frustration, Helen wrangled with a smile tugging on her lips. Watching her father’s face turn red and the vein above his left eyebrow bulge delighted her to no ends.

“You have fifteen minutes, understand?” her father, Scott Smith, the Marquess of Valenford, warned as he stormed out of the room. Helen dropped her hands to her lap and contorted her face to silently mock her father. Her stomach twisted knots as she stared at the girl in the mirror.

“I don’t understand,” Helen mumbled to herself and tucked away the last strand of her brown hair up with the rest of it. “Why can’t he just let me be?”

“Because you are my daughter, and you will do as you’re told.” Helen heard Scott’s voice boom from down the hallway. Her chest tightened as she realized Scott wasn’t as far from her door as she had expected. “Now get up—you’re not going to make yourself any prettier by sitting there.”

“You do realize this is the fourth event we’ve gone to this month. Can’t we sit this one out? I already have plenty of suitors and don’t need to be looking for any more,” Helen pleaded. “Besides we don’t even know who invited us.”

The thumping of heavy boots rattled Helen. She rose quickly and grabbed her lacy smock before Scott reached her door. Anger, disappointment, and irritation seemed to burn through him. He folded his arms over his chest. Helen flashed him a bright smile and batted her eyes innocently at him.

“Are you coming?” Helen asked as she squeezed between her father and the wall and made a beeline for the front door. Dread seeped into her as she felt Scott’s glare on her back.

“I was not the one taking so long. And to answer your question, we go because I have an insolent daughter who refuses to make up her mind as to whom she will marry.”

“You cannot force love,” Helen argued, trying to keep the conversation light, but she knew all too well what her father thought about love and matters of the heart. For Scott, it wasn’t a matter of love but the acreage he could get or the money that would fill his bank account. Helen had hoped that since her father forced Theresa to wed Devlin, she would be free to make her own match.

Instead, the new connections and business transactions Scott managed to have, now that her sister, Theresa, was married to a Duke, made him even more power-hungry and greedy.

“Love is but an illusion—one I’m surprised you and your sister still believe in. But it matters not,” Scott replied, corralling Helen closer to the doorway. “You’ve had plenty of time to decide on a husband. So, I tell you this now, daughter, by the time the clock strikes midnight tonight, you will announce your engagement, or I will do it for you.”

“You cannot be serious,” Helen gasped. The warmth drained from her as she stood in front of the carriage doors. Every inch of her felt as if it was going numb. Never in a million years did she expect her father to make such a proclamation and decree over her life. Scott’s words felt like a punch to the gut, and it took all of Helen’s strength to remain upright.

“You are burdensome child who needs to understand the ways of the world. You cannot stay under my roof any longer. It is time for you to marry, or perhaps you’d care to join a nunnery instead?” Scott said as he arched his eyebrow, daring Helen to say another word.

Flustered and angry, Helen planted her feet to the ground refusing to move a muscle. “You cannot mean it.”

Scott stepped closer; his breath hung on the evening air as he towered over Helen. “That, dearest daughter, is where you are sorely mistaken. I mean every word. Now, get in the carriage, so we can be off. We are already behind schedule as it is.”

Scott’s hand flew to Helen’s arm. His grip tightened, causing Helen’s arm to pulse with each pump of her heart. Tears threatened her eyes as she looked at her father with contempt and fury. It was easy for her to see where she had gotten her anger from, for staring into her father’s face was like looking into a mirror.

“Get in that carriage,” Scott growled as he pushed Helen into the seat and quickly climbed in after her. Refusing to meet his glare, Helen whipped her head around and stared out the window of the carriage. The tears burned her eyes as she fought against them. The last thing she wanted was for all of the ton to see her in distress.

The brick buildings passed by in a blur. Rubbing the feeling back into her arm, Helen refused to acknowledge Scott was even in the carriage with her.

She kept her eyes locked on the city as it passed by.

Music drifted through the window causing Helen's heart pound harder. Every muscle in her body twitched as the need to flee overtook her senses. The instant the carriage stopped, Helen's hand was on the door ready to push it open and make her escape.

Scott's hand was on her faster than she could move it. "You will wait for the footman and present yourself properly."

Jerking her hand out from under Scott's, Helen did as she was told. It seemed like an eternity before the door finally opened for her. The evening air was cool on her face, and the fresh air cleared away the dreariness in her heart. She was free, at least for the moment.

"The Marquess of Valenford." Helen flinched at the announcement of her father's title. She scanned the foyer searching for a friendly face, someone who would save her from her father's presence. The girls around her continued their chattering without even a second glance at Helen.

Scott led her through the hallway to the ballroom. In the corner to the left, Helen caught sight of Serena and exhaled with relief.

"Miss Helen," a young, athletic man said, bowing low to her as he stopped. "If your dance card isn't too full, I'd be honored if you would save a dance for me."

"Her card is full," Scott answered before Helen could open her mouth. She arched her eyebrow and tried not to let her irritation show too much. Glancing at the man with an apologetic smile, Scott cleared his throat and leaned closer to the man.

"I do believe, however, we have few things to settle, do we not, Mr. Yorkshire?" Scott asked as he hooked his arm around the man. Helen

watched as the life in Mr. Yorkshire's face drained from him. She wasn't quite sure what business her father had with him, but she could only assume it had to do with her.

"How do you expect me to uphold my end of the deal if you refuse to let me dance with any of the suitors?" Helen leaned in and whispered to her father. She wanted to help Mr. Yorkshire by taking her father's attention off of him for a moment.

Scott turned to face her. She tried not to laugh at the sour face plastered on her father's face and quickly covered her mouth with her hand.

"Mr. Yorkshire is unsuitable for you," Scott answered in such a low tone, Helen wondered if Mr. Yorkshire could hear.

"And how are you so certain you know what kind of husband I prefer?" Helen asked. She tried to smile but knew it didn't reach her eyes. The anger she felt in the carriage only magnified as her father abruptly turned his attention back to Mr. Yorkshire.

"Come, let us find a more suitable place to talk. Preferably one where we won't hear annoying buzzing in our ears," Scott suggested. Relieved her father would be occupied for a while, Helen darted for Serena. With her heart pounding and her anger threatening to unleash the tears swelling in her eyes, Helen snatched Serena and dragged her out the side doors.

"Greetings to you as well," Serena said as Helen gulped the fresh air. Her world felt as if it were growing smaller somehow. The control Scott had on her strangled her. "You don't look so well. Should I fetch a physician?"

Helen glanced over her shoulder and moved deeper into the night. She glanced about the courtyard, hunting for a place to sit. Helen dragged Serena out to the courtyard and to the bench near the orchard.

Helen huffed as she sat down and quickly jumped back up. Her body was too lively for her to sit still and her mind far too troubled to be able to think straight. Serena watched Helen as she paced a few steps before turning and walking back.

The air didn't seem to want to come to her. Helen snatched the fan from Serena's hand and tried forcing some down her throat.

"The audacity of that man," Helen complained with such frustration, she wished she could kick something.

"Why yes, this is a new dress; thank you so much for noticing," Serena said, batting her eyes and smoothing out the wrinkles from her dress. Helen glanced over to her friend to find her sitting as if she were a peacock ruffling her feathers.

"I'm sorry, truly," Helen apologized as she sat beside Serena. "And, yes, you do look stunning. I told you the soft pink would be good with your complexion."

"Do you think it's enough to catch anyone's attention?" Serena asked as she glanced to the ballroom. Helen grabbed Serena's hands and gave them a tight squeeze.

"Any man here would be fortunate to have you. If you'd prefer to go inside, I won't stop you. I just needed to get some air."

"Or an excuse to get away from your father?" Serena observed, flashing Helen a knowing look. It was comforting to Helen how well Serena knew her. It was as if they shared the same mind at times.

"Of course," Serena continued, "I suppose I'd be a bit overwhelmed too if I had five suitors vying for my attention."

"Please don't start," Helen groaned. "I've already been told I'm to find my

husband by midnight tonight, or my father will choose one for me.”

“No!” Serena gasped, sighing with pity and woe. “How are you to find one in such a short amount of time? It seems there’s one in particular your father favors.”

“Why would you think that?” Helen asked.

Serena shrugged. “If there are five wishing to marry you, your father already knows you have no interest with them.”

“How could I?” Helen asked. Five suitors, that was Helen’s curse. Sure, they all had land and titles which made her father swoon. As for Helen, though, none of them stole her heart or captivated her attention.

Scanning the crowd, she easily spotted the first three and rolled her eyes as the men stood in a semi-circle chatting. To Helen, it seemed the only reason they offered their hands was to win a bet on which one she would pick. The thought of being a prize didn’t settle well with her.

Just as quickly as she met their gaze, she turned away. Standing in the far-right corner, Helen spotted her father chatting with a gentleman who looked horrified to be at the party. She could relate and felt pity for the man her father had cornered.

“Who is that man speaking with my father?” Helen asked as she nodded her head to the corner of the room. Serena craned her neck and cupped her hand to her mouth.

“I think that’s the Duke of Stonewill,” Serena said so lowly Helen had to lean closer to hear her.

“Who?” Helen asked, trying to pull her eyes off the man, but there was something intriguing about him. She couldn’t tell if it was because he was new to the ton, or if it was because he was handsome that caused her to notice

him.

“The Duke of Stonewill,” Serena repeated, her voice bending with desire. “And from what I’ve heard, he’s looking for a wife.”

“Well, maybe you’ll get a chance then,” Helen said feeling timid due to the way her father inched closer to the Duke. She could tell by the way Scott’s shoulders were pinched and how he kept nervously scanning the room that there was something more going on.

“Wonder what they could be talking about?” Serena asked as she sat straighter.

“Ah, there you are niece, I was hoping to find you here.”

Serena and Helen glanced over their shoulders to find a regal looking fellow that reminded Helen of a rooster.

“Uncle, I didn’t expect to see you here,” Serena said as she greeted her uncle with a kiss. “Oh, forgive me. Helen, this is my uncle, Lord Edward Smith.”

Helen gave a polite bow and flashed him a smile. The Lord puffed up a bit more and grinned. Serena leaned in closer and cupped her hand over her lips.

“Be mindful of my uncle. He never does anything without purpose. The man schemes all the time. And heaven forbid you dine with him, or you may end up leaving in a hearse.”

Helen’s eyes widened as she tried to keep the shock off her face.

“Yes, well, what can I say? I look forward to these events every year. Sadly, I don’t get to attend them very often,” the man said with a spark to his eye. Helen couldn’t help but get the impression the man was scheming. There was a spark to his eye that Helen had often seen in her father’s eye when he was conducting business.

“Anyone catch your eye?” the Lord asked as Serena scanned the room. “If you’d like an introduction to Lord Pott, I’d be happy to oblige.

Serena glanced over to Helen and gave her a little smile. “I don’t think I would have much in common with the Lord.”

Helen glanced over to Lord Pott and shuddered. There was no way she’d be within two feet of the man, let alone consider his hand. Helen couldn’t help but feel pity for Serena. The man was more than double her age, but the wealth that he brought with him was enough to make him a fine match.

“Perhaps instead you could introduce Serena to Lord Umberg. He’s handsome and charming,” Helen pointed out as Serena swooned over the Lord’s physical attributes.

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Serena cooed.

Helen’s gaze shifted as she noticed all the other single ladies stealing glimpses of him too, and the smug expression on the Lord’s face gave Helen all the information she needed to know about the man.

“Oh, no, you don’t want him,” Lord Smith said with a wave of his hand.

“And why not? He’s everything my family is looking for, wealthy, titled, and he is closer to my age than most of the suitors in the room,” Serena said.

“For starters, he’s cocky, not to mention conceited,” Lord Smith replied, turning his attention back to Serena.

“There’s no way that’s possible. I’ve seen in around the ton. He’s never given me that impression,” Serena said.

“The Lord is right,” Helen said sympathetically. “He’s called on me three times, and each time, all he ever talked about was himself. He stretched like a peacock, prancing about as if he was in Duke or Earl. Every lady at this event

has her eyes on him, and he's soaking up the attention like a parched hound. Which is precisely what he is—a hound and a rake.”

“Helen?” Serena whispered and lifted her finger to get her attention. Turning around, Helen came face-to-face with the tall, muscular man with dark hair and brooding brown eyes who had been talking with her father only moments ago.

He towered over her like a sentinel guarding a treasure. Stoic and unyielding, the man's eyes bore into her, causing her heart to race. Helen knew she should be intimidated by the man, but she found herself more drawn to him than anything. Helen's body tingled with excitement and wonder as the stranger kept his gaze locked on her.

“Ah, Duke Stonewill, what a pleasure it is to meet you,” Lord Smith said, thrusting his hand out to greet the Duke.

The Duke's gaze was direct and focused on Helen. She couldn't help but feel as if the Duke had come specifically to see her. With his steely eyes boring into her, she felt as if he were reading her soul.

“I don't believe we've been properly introduced,” Lord Smith said with a crooked grin. “I'm Lord Edward Smith.”

“Pleasure, I'm sure,” the Duke said in a husky voice that made Helen's body tingle. She stared at him as Serena tried not to fidget.

“May I help you, Your Grace?” Helen asked as she felt compelled to ease back and give the stranger space. There was an air about the Duke and a glossy sheen to his eyes that made Helen feel two feet tall. She swallowed hard and waited patiently for his response.

Helen couldn't ignore the other ladies in the room, all eager and watching her. Their whispers drifted to Helen's ears.

“Of course, he’d go to her first,” Helen heard Serena mumble, her voice laced with jealousy.

“How does she even do it?” another asked in the same hushed tone. Pride pricked her as she focused on the stranger before her. There seemed to be a shadow hovering around him, something dark that seeped out of him. Helen couldn’t help but wonder if it was because she did not know the handsome stranger with his bowed, plump lips. She’d never seen him before at any other event, yet at the same time, she couldn’t shake the feeling they had met before in some past life.

The Duke’s eyebrow arched as his attention shifted from Helen to Serena. He straightened his jacket and cleared his throat.

“Dance with me.” His voice was husky and rough, exciting Helen more than she expected. Helen blinked as she admired his straightforwardness. In all the balls and soirees she’d been to, no one ever approached her with such confidence. Most of the other men who had offered their hand to dance were timid and nervous.

“What a splendid idea,” Lord Smith said as he pushed Serena closer to the Duke. “Serena.” The more Helen stared at the man, the more she wanted to know him. By the way he stood, confidence rolling off him, Helen’s heart pounded.

“I wasn’t asking her,” the Duke said without giving Serena a second glance. Helen couldn’t help but feel bad for Serena; Helen knew a rejection like that had to sting.

“I’m afraid my dance card is full,” Helen teased as she noticed Serena in the corner of her eye covering her mouth to hide her embarrassment.

“I don’t see you dancing now,” he observed, his eyes meeting hers. Helen’s heartbeat quickened as his eyes bore into her. It felt as if he were drawing out

her secrets and exposing her soul to the world.

“Are you denying me a moment to recover, Sir?” Helen asked.

“Not at all. I just don’t see what you have to recover from, seeing as how you’ve just arrived and have been standing in this very spot.”

“Have you been expecting me?” Helen asked as her breathing became a bit erratic. Had he been waiting for her? Her father’s words came rushing back to her. Helen scanned the crowd, hunting for her father in a panic. Standing in the corner, she found him watching her with a crooked grin plastered on his face. The nod of Scott’s head rattled Helen. Slowly, she drew her attention back to the stranger before her.

“Would it surprise you if I were to say yes?” he asked.

“Indeed, it would. Forgive me, but I think I would have remembered you if we were to have met before. I do not know you, and I am confused as to why you have been waiting for me.”

“To dance with you,” he answered as he curled his fingers around her wrist. Helen’s eyes widened as her skin burned from his touch. The heat rushed through her veins, igniting a fire Helen couldn’t put out. Her breath hitched as his grip tightened.

Staring into his eyes, she felt compelled to do as he wished. Her mind scrambled, trying to figure out how he whisked her to the dance floor.

With her senses coming back, Helen stood still as still a statue, pretending feet were rooted to the floor.

“If you do not dance, I will make you,” the Duke vowed in the low, stern voice. Helen’s skin tingled as a sliver of fear cut through her.

“A gentleman asks for a dance; he does not demand,” Helen complained as

she noticed the eyes on her. Tapping her foot, she waited for him to ask her instead of demanding. The music started, and before she could protest, the man grabbed her by the hips and hoisted her up into a spin.

Helen didn't let out a scream, but the suddenness took her breath away. Her heart raced as the world spun around her for a moment. Once on her feet, her senses returned.

"Who do you think you are?" Helen asked as she allowed the stranger to lead. His steps were calculated and precise. Helen had no choice but to follow wherever he went. The grip he had on her hand had a domineering composure that made it difficult for her to slip away.

"Why ask a question you already know the answer to? Clearly, you're aware I'm the Duke of Stonewill; is there anything more that one needs to know?" he answered plainly.

"Well, Your Grace, if you weren't aware, it's rude to drag a lady to the dance floor without her consent. Typically, a gentleman will wait until he is introduced prior to asking a lady to dance," Helen lectured as the man continued to dance with her around the room. "So, I ask again, who do you think you are to drag me out here with no introduction or consent? And what do you want?"

"Your company," he answered, his face as stoic as ever. Helen stared at him, bewildered by his ability to mask his emotions so well. Tilting her head, she felt flustered by his lack of empathy.

"I beg your pardon, but wouldn't you be better suited to my friend Serena? She's a lovely woman with an ear for music and reading. Surely, you would find her far more interesting than I," Helen suggested, wishing she could make eye contact with someone who would be willing to interrupt. Yet, as she scanned the area, the host of suitors she had thought to be fond of her all

turned their eyes away the moment she made eye contact.

“Your friend does not interest me,” the Duke said in a rather monotone and plain voice as he spun her about. She landed in another’s arms as the second half the song picked up in tempo. Pressing her lips into a tight line, Helen glanced over to the Duke only to find his eyes following her as she moved around the dance floor with another.

“He’s so smug,” Helen mumbled under her breath as her new partner curled his fingers around her waist to hoist her up.

“Are you talking about me?” the man asked as he set her back on her feet. Glancing at her new dance partner, Helen’s cheeks flushed from embarrassment.

“No, Lord Steinwell,” Helen said.

“I must say, I’m pleased to see you here tonight. You look amazing,” the Lord said as he wagged his eyebrows. Helen didn’t know which made her more irritated, dancing with Lord Steinwell, who couldn’t seem to stay off her toes, or the fact that the Duke’s face never shifted with shock as their conversation halted so abruptly.

Eager to get back to the Duke, Helen danced as best she could. When the music switched, Helen found herself back in the arms of the Duke.

“Since you want to continue to be mysterious, and not tell me your intentions? Could you at least explain to me why you are here? I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” Helen said. The Duke kept his eyes locked on some distant spot in the room as they danced about.

“You find me mysterious, do you?” the Duke asked, his voice bent with amusement.

“That is not the point,” Helen replied as she came back up from the dip. “But

if you must know, you're more infuriating than anything."

"And what, pray tell, have I done to cause such ire?"

"You're rude," Helen said with a huff. "Why won't you tell me what you want with me?"

"I believe you can walk away from this little interaction whenever you want. You're not shackled to me. Yet, you remain. I think you happen to like me."

Helen's eyes widened from shock. Her heart skipped as she felt her skin tingle. It took every bit of nerves she had left not to slap him.

"You presume too much," Helen snapped as the music stopped. She stepped back from him and shook her head. Without another word, Helen scrambled off the dance floor and back to Serena.

"Well? What did you and the Duke talk about? He's a bit intense don't you think? How fascinating. I wouldn't mind a man with confidence like that," Serena said. Helen's head felt wobbly. It was as if she hadn't had a single gulp of air since he whisked her away. Her mind was reeling. She had never seen him before, and the mystery only made her want to know more.

"By all means, you can have him. I don't like men that are so arrogant and rude," Helen answered a bit flustered and wishing she could leave. She'd spent enough time at the party, but she knew she couldn't leave without a proper farewell to the host.

"Maybe he's a foreigner and doesn't speaking English very well."

"That would explain his lack of manners," Serena considered, bobbing her head in agreement.

Helen glanced around the ballroom, hunting for the mystery man. The sea of faces caught her view, and she felt her heart skip.

“You looked like you were having fun out there,” Serena observed.

“Hardly. The man barely said two words to me. His dancing was far too calculated and precise. And let us not forget his rudeness,” Helen complained.

“But it must’ve been something special to him because he’s talking with your father,” Serena pointed out. Panic shot through Helen as she followed Serena’s pointed finger to the corner of the ballroom.

“I wonder what they could be talking about,” Serena said, wagging her eyebrows.

“No. It couldn’t be,” Helen gasped as it felt as if the air was pulled from her lungs. She shook her head and flexed her jaw.

“I’m not someone to be treated like cattle,” Helen said as she glanced to Serena. Without saying a word, Helen jumped up and stormed over to her father.

“And there she is,” Scott said, embracing Helen as if she were his favorite child. Shrugging out of her father’s embrace, she focused on the broad-shouldered man before her. “My little wallflower.”

“This is such a lovely party, wouldn’t you say?” Helen asked as she refused to let her gaze drop from the mystery man.

“Indeed, it is,” Scott said in agreement. “Helen, may I introduce to you the Duke of Stonewill.”

“Your Grace,” Helen said politely with the bow of her head. “It is nice to finally be formally introduced. Your title does explain a few things.”

“Beg your pardon?” the Duke asked.

“Why you think it’s all right to just take what you want,” Helen answered,

keeping the smile plastered on her face.

“Did I not tell you she was feisty?” Scott remarked with an awkward chuckle.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Helen said as she realized that the Duke was as much of a pompous hind as her father.

“I do hope you have other intentions besides perpetuating the gossip as the other ladies around here seem to be doing,” the Duke said.

Helen forced her smile as she tried to keep up the façade. “I do not recall you being my father or being granted any rights to tell me what I can or cannot do.”

“Well, I may not be your father, but I am your husband. Or at least I will be.”

CHAPTER 2



“*I* beg your pardon?” Helen’s voice cracked as she did all she could to keep her composure. “Father, tell me this is untrue.”

“Don’t look so put out,” Scott replied. “You and I both know you were never going to find a husband, so I took the liberty of finding you one myself.”

Helen’s mouth popped open as she looked at the man before her. How could she ever marry a man she knew nothing about and just met? Shaking her head, Helen tried to see the bright side of the situation. Helen couldn’t believe what was happening, so she rolled her shoulders back and tried to convince herself this was all just a horrible dream, and she would wake up in the moment.

Determined not to believe what was going on around her, Helen stood like a pole. Her attention lingered on man. The shadows played about his face heightening the man’s features. His cupid bow lips were inviting as was the clean line of his jaw. Helen felt heat rush through her as she drew her eyes to meet his. He was handsome and intimidating. For a moment she couldn’t help but wonder if this was all but a prank her father was playing on her. Surely the man before her could get any woman he wanted, so why did he want her? “This is not right. I can’t marry him.”

“And why not?” Scott asked with a hearty chuckle. “He’s in fine health, can provide for you, and is well endowed—by his estate of course.”

“Do you not see that he’s double my age?” Helen complained, exasperated and clearly exaggerating. One look at the Duke and it was clear he was only a few years older than Helen, but his demeanor aged him significantly. Sure, the man was handsome in a ruggish and devil may care sort of way, but the stern expression on his face seemed to age his flawless face. “And what do we know about him?” Helen asked as she kept her eyes locked on the Duke. She couldn’t help but notice that no number of insults she threw at him made him flinch.

“I assure you, that is not going to be an issue,” the Duke stated.

Helen’s entire body was numb. She couldn’t feel the difference between her father’s clammy hand and the stranger’s as they paraded her around the dance floor as the new Duchess. She felt as if she were five again, spinning around in the courtyard as the clouds swirled together until she fell. Only this time, she didn’t expect a soft landing.

The days that followed the announcement were like a fragmented dream she couldn’t quite piece together. Her hopes of finding love fled from her; as much as she tried to find the bright side, all seemed dark under the Duke’s brooding shadow.

Helen rolled her eyes at him every time he came calling. She had nothing in common with him. Even their afternoon tea sessions her father insisted on were dreary with only a handful of words shared between them. It became clear to her the kind of marriage she was being forced into.

“Come now, it can’t be all bad,” Theresa assured as she sat next to Helen in the sitting room enjoying a cup of tea. Helen shook her head in disappointment. It was clear that she was not quite getting the dreariness of

the situation across to her sister.

“It’s a week until the wedding,” Helen whispered, “and I have not shared a single dinner with him. There’s been no flowers or any other tokens of affection. It’s like the man has no soul, no joy, no... love.”

“Everyone has a soul,” Theresa pointed out, rolling her eyes at Helen’s dramatic behavior.

“I know you think I’m being over-the-top here, but I’m not. Stay for the evening, and I’ll prove it to you,” Helen suggested as her voice bent with desperation.

“I once thought I could never love Devlin, but I do. It’s just a matter of adjusting and compromise. Trust me when I say I completely understand you. I’ve been through what you were going through, but unless you find some way to convince the Duke into releasing you from this obligation, I’m afraid you’re just going to have to marry him.”

“Don’t you think I should have a say in the matter though?” Helen asked.

Theresa let out a little chuckle and nearly dropped her teacup. She looked at Helen as if she had never seen her before in her life. “You have met our father, haven’t you?”

“Of course, but still, there must be something more to do. Maybe I should run away. Surely, we have family in France I could stay with for a while? Perhaps I should stay with you,” Helen considered reaching for her sister’s hand.

“You are not going to run away,” Theresa said, rolling her eyes and setting the teacup on the table before it was accidentally broken. “And I’m afraid we have no family in France—trust me I thought about it too. But what if you gave the Duke a chance?”

“I doubt you’d be giving me such advice if you knew the Duke,” Helen grumbled. “Perhaps, we could revisit this conversation after dinner? And maybe then your senses will have returned to you.”

The doorbell jingled a few hours later. Helen’s skin crawled, and her body tingled. She sat her book down and glanced at Theresa. Hesitating to rise, Helen listened for the rushed footsteps of Scott coming to greet their guest.

“Are you ready?” Theresa asked.

“No, but do I have a choice?” Helen mumbled as she followed Theresa out into the foyer. Scott was already there, eagerly shifting his weight as the Duke entered.

“Welcome, Your Grace,” Scott greeted with a bow. Helen and Theresa bowed as well to greet the Duke. Helen’s chest tightened as she dared to steal a glimpse at her sister. She wanted to gauge her sister’s first impression. Without a word or nod to Helen and Theresa, the Duke followed Scott into the hallway and disappeared into Scott’s study.

“Well, that was interesting,” Theresa said, giving Helen an apologetic smile. Helen’s skin tingled as she swallowed hard. It seemed that even in the morning light, the man had an air about him that didn’t settle right with Helen. The Duke was just as intimidating in the daylight hours as he had been in the ball.

“Did I not tell you he was peculiar?” Helen urged, craning her neck to spy down the hallway.

“That would be one way to describe him,” Theresa said as she curled her arm into Helen’s and led her back to the sitting room.

“I told you they’re planning everything, didn’t I?” Helen asked as she plopped down into the plush chair, feeling defeated. “The color theme,

flowers, dinner, all of it. And not once did they ask for my input. I feel like I'm nothing more than one of father's hounds being traded to the highest bidder."

"Oh, Helen. I don't know what to tell you. Maybe it'll be different once you're married. Often times the business side of the marriage is cold and unflattering. But who knows, maybe after a while, you'll find common ground with your husband."

"Aren't you optimistic," Helen huffed with disdain.

"This whole situation is out of your hands, but you have a choice. You can be moody about it or find some kind of joy in it. Remember..." Theresa assured with a loving smile that filled Helen with hope.

"...there are no coincidences," Helen continued, finishing Theresa's sentence. "But the only issue here is father wanting me out of the house. Why can't I stay with you? Father will never know."

"You and I both know that my house would be the first place father would come looking. He'd then drag you back, and the wedding would proceed. You know, once he sets his mind on something, he becomes obsessed."

Helen dropped her shoulders as she glanced at the fireplace. She pulled in a deep breath and bobbed her head. "Well, I suppose it's best this way. I mean, I could ruin my reputation and get caught alone with Umberg."

Theresa tilted her head. "Are you certain that is the path you would want to take? You'd ruin not only your future, but you'd be bringing father's wrath on you as well."

"No," Helen huffed, defeated. "You're right. Even if I managed to get out of the marriage to the Duke, father's ire is not something I'd want to see firsthand."

No matter what plan Helen came up with, none of them panned out. There was only one thing left for Helen to try. She would have to confront her would-be-husband. Steeling her courage, Helen rose from her chair.

“And where are you going?” Theresa asked.

“I shall speak directly with the Duke,” Helen stated boldly. “Perhaps if I plead my case, he’ll take pity and call off the wedding.”

Helen walked over to her father’s study and slipped around the corner. She would stand there all night if she had to. As the hours ticked by, Helen popped her head around the corner, wondering if she’d missed the Duke’s exit.

“I’m leaving,” Theresa called down the hallway. Helen popped her head out and waved to her sister. Although she didn’t want her to leave, she understood that it wouldn’t be right for her sister to stay. Theresa did after all have a husband of her own to tend to.

Leaning against the wall, waiting for Scott and the Duke to finish, Helen wondered how she’d approach the Duke. He was an intimidating man. It wasn’t just the stern lines in his face or his glossy glaze that rattled her. He towered over her and could snap her like a twig if he so desired.

The thumping of boots growing closer pulled Helen from her thoughts. She straightened, and her ears perked. The door moaned as it opened, and through the crack, Helen spotted the Duke. She held her breath, realizing her idea may not have been thought out thoroughly. Her tongue felt rough as it scraped the roof of her mouth. Everything she had planned to say slipped from her mind the moment she saw him.

“Then it’s settled.” Scott’s voice grated on Helen’s nerves, and she focused on the Duke’s stoic expression. In a spark of anger, Helen knew exactly what she wanted to say to him.

“So, it would seem,” the Duke answered as he shook Scott’s hand. Helen waited for the doors to close. Once the Duke was out of the study, she’d approach him.

The clicking of the door echoed in Helen’s ears, and she knew if she wanted the wedding to be canceled, she’d have to find the courage to face the Duke. Stepping out of her hiding place, Helen followed the Duke down the hall.

In a whirl of black, the Duke spun on his heels and drew his blade. Helen stopped dead in her tracks and clutched her chest as terror gripped her. She slowly retreated as the Duke’s eyes filled with remorse. Clearing his throat, the Duke stowed his blade and tugged on the hem of his vest.

“Is that what I get to look forward to once we are married?” Helen asked as she noticed the Duke’s face twitching. “Well, if you’re going to do it, then be done with it. Why wait till after the wedding? You’ll be doing us both a favor.”

The shock on the Duke’s face wore off quickly as his eyes narrowed. “Is death so inviting that you’d rather embrace it than me as your husband?”

“To answer truthfully, yes. I know you don’t care for me, you don’t even know me, and I don’t know you,” Helen replied.

“Jackson Deumond,” he said, dipping his head ever so slightly while keeping his dark eyes on Helen. “And you are Helen Smith, soon to be Duchess of Stonewill.”

“Your Grace,” Helen replied, forging a smile as the tension only made her more aware of his body. She could see the way his chest rose and fell as quickly as hers did. The room felt as if it were too small for the two of them. “I’ve come to ask something of you as it is customary to exchange wedding gifts.”

“There will be no exchange,” Jackson said coldly.

Helen’s heart sank. Her mind raced for another way to approach the subject.

“I see, and that is absolute?”

“Indeed,” Jackson said. “There’s nothing you have that I want. And while I’m certain I have something you want, you’ll get it when we marry.”

“I don’t want this marriage,” Helen blurted out.

“Irrelevant,” Jackson said; what little emotion he had in his eyes vanished.

“My feelings towards you or the marriage?” Helen asked.

Jackson gave a little shrug, “Both. Your feelings in this matter will not change my position. We will marry.”

“But don’t you want someone who will make you happy?” Helen asked.

Jackson shook his head and lifted his chin. His eyes glossed over as his stare drifted to some far away point in the room.

“Silly notions, don’t you think?” Jackson asked. “Emotions. Happy, sad, joyful, or sorrowful. None of that matters when you are presented with the facts. And the fact remains, you and I will be married next week.”

“I see, your joy comes from making others miserable, is that it?” Helen asked as tears burned her eyes. All her hopes were crushed, and she knew there would be nothing more she could say to him to stop the wedding.

“How amusing. I make you miserable even now? And we aren’t even wed yet.”

“Now, I amuse you, do I? You’re insufferable. Clearly, you enjoy hurting others,” Helen huffed.

“And pray tell, how have I hurt you? I’ve not laid a single finger on you, and

I've barely spoken two words to you."

"All the more reason not to marry me," Helen argued, hoping to turn the situation around. "If I'm so quiet, then what's stopping you from accidentally running me through. Surely, you want a wife who is far more outspoken and boisterous."

Jackson's lips tugging at the corner only infuriated Helen. She could tell he was enjoying irritating her more than one should.

"I cannot marry a man like you," Helen said.

Jackson's eyebrows rose. "A man like me?"

"Brooding and lifeless. It's like you live in a world without color. What horrid thing happened to make you so soulless?" Helen watched as Jackson's eyes twitched. His nostrils flared as he glared at her.

"As heartless and soulless as you may perceive me, My Lady, I assure you, no amount of insults will make me change my mind," Jackson said. "We will marry—much to your dismay, I'm sure."

"Nothing I say will change your mind?" Helen whispered as she stumbled back in defeat. Her one shot at getting out of the arrangement crashed and burned around her. Why did he have to be so irritating? If only she would have bit her tongue, but it was far too late to make amends with him. The gleam in his eye was one of a conquering hero who had come back from battle.

"No," he said in a stern, absolute tone. It rattled Helen to her core. "I hate to break it to you, Sunshine, but we're going to be stuck together forever."

CHAPTER 3



“*T*his can’t be happening,” Helen said, pacing the room. She fiddled with the tips of her fingernails as if trying to pull them out from the bed. Her heart raced as she glanced out the small window. The carriages going down the road seemed endless, and she couldn’t help but wonder just how many people her father invited to the ceremony.

“Did he have to invite the whole ton?” Helen grumbled, exasperated, as she turned to face her sister. How Theresa was so calm and composed irked her. She wished she could be as collected as her older sister, but her nerves were getting the better of her.

“I doubt father could afford to invite everyone,” Theresa said with a smirk. “As much as he would like to think he is rich and powerful, you and I both know it is limited.”

“I’ve counted at least fifteen carriages headed towards the church. That’s the least sixty people if there are four people per carriage,” Helen said, doing the quick math in her head. Her chest tightened, and her head felt foggy. A part of her had hoped that she’d find some way to call off the wedding, but no matter what she did, Jackson refused to comply.

“Sister, you’re going to work yourself into a frenzy. You’ve got to calm

down and accept your fate,” Theresa observed as she curled her fingers around Helen’s arms to get her to stand still.

“That’s all the advice you have for me? You seriously want me to accept the fact that I’m going into a loveless marriage?”

“What do you want me to tell you? There isn’t anything I can say to you that will make this better. Yes, you are marrying a man you don’t know, but time changes people. Who knows? In a few years you could grow to love him, and he you.”

Helen pressed her lips into a tight line and shook her head, “And that worked out so well for mother.”

Sarcasm dripped from each syllable as she glared at Theresa. The fact that her sister was no help to her in her time of need pained Helen more than anything else. What Helen needed was an escape, a way out, but with each passing moment, her options were dwindling.

“It may not have worked for mother, but it did for me,” Theresa pointed out. “And who knows? Things could work out between you and Jackson. You don’t know what the future holds.”

“Did I tell you he brandished his sword at me?” Helen asked as the bells of the church rang loudly through the time. “What does that tell you about the man? Clearly, he is unstable.”

Theresa rose from her chair and walked over to Helen. She curled her arms around her sister. “I really wish there was something I could do to help you make this better.”

Helen wanted to fall into Theresa’s embrace and cling to the safety she found within her sister’s arms. Life was safe there in the space of her sister’s bosom.

“I know you’re scared. Every bride is during their wedding. The unknown can be intimidating and unnerving. You will face this challenge with grace and dignity,” Theresa assured in such a loving tone that it made Helen want to cry. She wasn’t ready to marry. Helen had thought she would be able to pick someone that would steal her heart and sweep her off her feet. Instead, she was being forced to marry a man colder than the winter’s chill.

“What is this nonsense?” Scott grumbled as he stepped into the room. Helen refused to leave her sister’s embrace. “You’re not even ready. Theresa, I thought you came in here to get your sister dressed. Instead, I find the two of you dawdling?”

“Father, please don’t make me do this. I don’t love the man,” Helen pleaded, but her cries fell on deaf ears. Scott marched to the small table and snatched the veil off the back of the chair and shoved it into Theresa’s hands.

“Get her dressed,” Scott demanded. “I’ll not have the Duke wait. If you’re going to be a decent wife, you’ll learn to do as you’re told the first time the order is given.”

Helen glanced at Theresa; her heart ached as her body felt numb. Slowly, Theresa released Helen and gave her a timid smile.

“On the bright side, at least once you’re married will no longer have to listen to father’s orders anymore. Your husband will have the final word.”

Helen rolled her eyes, but she realized she should be grateful for the little blessings that came her way. Not being under her father’s thumb would be a good thing, but for all Helen knew, she was merely exchanging one cold hearted man for another.

“You know that doesn’t make me feel any better,” Helen said.

“I’ll give you a moment to collect yourself,” Theresa instructed as she placed

the veil on Helen's head and smoothed out the wrinkles. "When you're ready, I'll be right outside waiting for you. And don't make me have to remind you to come out. We do not want to bring father's wrath on us before the ceremony."

Helen let out a heavy sigh as she watched her sister walk out of the room. Doom lingered around her like a cloud of smoke blotting out the sun. Helen fought the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks.

Staring at the girl in the mirror, Helen tried to muster the courage to leave the room. Sounds of laughter mingled with music as the people outside the house enjoyed the merriment of the occasion, but for Helen, there was nothing merry about what she had to do.

Her eyes widened as her attention drifted to the open window. A burst of hope exploded within her as she walked over and savored the cool spring breeze that flowed into the room. The chirping of the birds perked her ears, and she glanced to the tree.

A plan raced through her mind as she estimated the distance between the window and the bough. Glancing to the ground, Helen realized there was no safe way for her to get out of the tree once she got into it. It was at least a fifteen-foot drop to the ground, and she knew she'd have better luck just jumping from the window. She shuddered at the consequences of such an action; knowing her luck, she'd end up with a broken leg and still be carded to the church to be married.

"I wonder if she knows?" Helen caught a woman's voice and noticed the servants coming out of the side door. Ducking around the corner of the window, Helen's body tingled. Panic drummed against her chest.

"I doubt it. No woman would marry such a man with that kind of reputation," another voice answered. Helen's eyes widened as her knees gave out from

under her. It was bad enough she had reservations about her wedding, but what horrid secret was Jackson keeping from her?

I'm marrying a rake? It would explain why he is so cold and distant. Oh God, I'm just a front for society, and I'm supposed to what? Allow him to have such affairs outside the marriage bed?

Helen's fragile heart quickened. If there was ever a reason to back out, surely this had to be it. There was no way her father would marry her to such man, would he?

"I'm surprised the news of the murder trial didn't reach here."

Helen's mind went wild over the servants chattering.

Trial? Murder? Are they talking about Jackson? No, they can't be; there is no way. Certainly, Jackson wouldn't have killed somebody, would he have?

Terror replaced the panic swirling in her stomach as she leaned in closer to the window. Helen had to know what kind of man she was marrying. Images of Jackson pulling his sword out flickered through her mind. The air in the room seemed thinner and harder for her to take in.

No. No. This cannot be happening.

Helen forced herself up off the ground and raced to the door, her veil flapping behind her. It was bad enough to be marrying a rake but a murderer?

"I was just about to come and get you," Theresa said as Helen fell into her sister's arms. "Oh dear Lord, what have you done? I thought I told you to compose yourself, not have a panic attack."

"I... can't... do this," Helen huffed as she stalked the shadows with her eyes. An icy chill tickled her spine, causing her blood to run cold.

"We've been over this," Theresa said. Helen shook her head.

“Did you know?” Helen asked as she controlled her ragged breathing. Theresa scrunched her eyebrows to the bridge of her nose in confusion.

“What are you going on about?” Theresa could no longer hide her irritation as her patience with her sister grew thinner.

“Did you know Jackson was tried for murder?” Helen’s voice cracked with terror.

“What? Where did you hear such things?”

Helen pointed to the door. “Servants. I heard them talking about it under my window.”

Theresa’s stare vanished and was placed by a cynical glare. “Helen, did you ever think maybe they knew you were listening? Perhaps they just wanted to torment you.”

Helen grabbed Theresa’s shoulders and stared deep into her sister’s eyes. With as much conviction as she could muster, Helen tried to get her sister to understand.

“They did not know I was there,” Helen argued. “Is father marrying me to this man to kill me?”

“No one is trying to kill you,” Theresa assured with a light chuckle.

“You say that now, but how will you feel when you discover my lifeless body come morning?” Helen asked as she arched eyebrow. “The Duke is a powerful man; he could do it and get away with it.”

“You wound me, Miss Helen.”

Helen froze as Jackson’s voice echoed in her ears. She didn’t dare turn around, but she stared at her sister as her fingers tightened around Theresa’s arms.

“Your Grace,” Theresa greeted, bowing her head.

“I was aware from the ball that you were one to gossip,” Jackson said. His voice was frigid and distant, but it rattled Helen to her core. “Seeing that you will be my wife soon, it seems I’ll be the one to correct that habit of yours.”

“My sister is a little overwhelmed at the moment,” Theresa tried to explain as she pulled her arm away from Helen.

“Understandable,” Jackson said, “but Helen should be more careful about spreading rumors. It could end up getting her hurt one of these days.”

Helen’s eyes widened with horror as Theresa forced Helen’s fingers off of her. Suddenly, it felt as if Helen was floating. Somehow gravity wasn’t holding her down. Theresa was her anchor, and now, she was adrift with terror and panic her only companions.

“Our guests are waiting,” Jackson snapped as he grabbed Helen by the hand. She felt dizzy and disconnected from everything she’d known before. Stealing glimpses of Jackson as they walked to the church, Helen tried to silence her troubled thoughts.

“Just tell me now, am I going to die?” Helen asked as she averted her eyes to the ground. In the corner of her eye, Helen noticed Jackson’s eyebrow arching, and his lips twitching at the corner.

“Yes,” he answered much to Helen’s horror. “Unfortunately, it is a rite of passage that we all must go through.”

“You know fully well what I mean,” Helen huffed, trying to control the anger that was bubbling within her.

“Have I not given you my word that no harm will come to you?” Jackson whispered as he kept his eyes locked on the church. Helen didn’t know if it was a rhetorical question or not. All she could do was focus on taking the

next step, so she didn't keel over.

"You have."

"But make no mistake, this marriage is one of convenience and nothing more. I will respect your boundaries and privacy so long as you do the same for me. And I will not tolerate your wagging tongue. I meant what I said before—it will get you into trouble if you do not cease."

"I couldn't help but notice you didn't deny the claims I brought to my sister's attention," Helen observed in such a squeaky tone that it sounded foreign even to her own ears.

"How observant of you," Jackson answered as they walked up the steps to the church doors. Helen's mind was going too fast for her to grab onto a single thought. Her world was crumbling brick by brick around her. The only thing left for her to do was to pray that the church would cave in on them and put her out of her misery.

Helen did everything she could to block out what she was about to do. Her mind just couldn't wrap around the fact that her father was having her married to such a callous and distant man. She focused her attention on the hem of her wedding dress and the way it drifted around her ankles as she strolled up the steps of the church. For a brief moment, Helen wondered if dirt had soiled the hem. She couldn't bear the thought of ruining such an elegant wedding dress, even if it was the one she wore to marry the Duke.

The music from the pipe organ sounded its ominous notes, causing the birds to take flight from the belfry. She looked up and saw how easy it was for them to leave. Rolling her shoulders back, Helen took what solace she could at the fact that after this moment, her father would no longer have any control over her.

The ceremony was a blur. Helen could barely understand the bishop as he

conducted the wedding vows.

“You may now kiss your bride,” the bishop said. Helen’s scalp tingled, and her heart quickened. It was the final seal that would bind her to Jackson forever. Turning to face him, Helen studied the lines in his face. He looked unamused, as if he were somewhere else and not standing before the whole of society and God.

Reluctantly, Jackson leaned closer. Helen didn’t know what to do. She froze and watched as he inched closer. With her eyes wide open, Jackson crushed his lips to hers. He pushed through her and flowed like a wild river throughout her body. The feeling was unexpected and shocked Helen. She pulled back, uncertain if what stirred within her was the accumulation of her nerves or something else.

Standing, she stared at Jackson and waited to see a response from him. To her surprise, she found a mirror image of the shock and uncertainty in Jackson’s face that she clearly had on hers. The kiss had caused her heart to skip and wreaked havoc on her body. Helen noticed Jackson experiencing the same confusion and shock.

“May I introduce the Duke and Duchess of Stonewall,” the bishop announced. In the corner of her eye, she noticed Jackson moving to flee down the aisle. It was strange for her to notice since she had the same eagerness to get away from the prying eyes.

“It’s done,” Jackson mumbled under his breath. Helen didn’t know what to think as he snatched her hand and pulled her down the aisle, eager to flee the church as if he’d burst into flames at any moment.

CHAPTER 4



“Congratulations, Your Grace.”

Jackson rolled his eyes and kept his sights trained on the back wall as he walked toward the banquet hall. He was fully aware of everyone around him and all the little snickers from his guests. None of it mattered to him—he was, after all, quite used to having people talk about him and whisper behind his back. Jackson’s only concern was for Helen, who now had to put up with the rumors and gossip.

Making a sharp left, Jackson dodged the crowd gathering to celebrate and made a beeline for his study. It was the one room in his whole house he knew wouldn’t be bombarded with drunken fools or nosy mother’s inquiring as to why he didn’t choose one of their daughters instead.

Stepping into his fortress of solitude, Jackson meandered to the large red oak desk and plopped down into the leather chair. He exhaled sharply as he leaned back, savoring the silence around him.

Thank God, that’s over with.

Jackson pinched the bridge of his nose, wishing the headache pulsing through his brain to his eyes would cease. At least he wasn’t out in the main dining hall. Just thinking of listening to the raucous made him flinch.

“Go on, drink my food. Eat at my feast, I don’t care,” Jackson mumbled as he let the back of his head hit the seat. Staring at the ceiling, Jackson couldn’t help but wonder if he had made the right decision. In the eyes of his father, he had, and Jackson knew that was all that truly mattered. It wasn’t who he had married, just that he had. Now that his title and his fortune were accounted for, Jackson let the tension in his shoulders ease a bit.

The bang of someone pounding on the door startled him. Catching his breath, Jackson stared at the two men stumbling into his study. Ready to pounce on them for their intrusion, Jackson rose from his seat.

“This room is private,” Jackson stated firmly. All three men laughed as they drew closer. Shaking his head, Jackson lowered himself back into his seat.

“Bit stuffy in here, don’t you think?”

“Liam. And here I thought you wouldn’t make it to the wedding feast,” Jackson greeted as his tall friend with lanky arms and legs meandered over to him. Liam wrapped his arm around Jackson and hoisted his half-empty glass to the sky.

“To Jackson,” Liam shouted with such gusto that it caused the passerby to stop and take stock. “The biggest fool of us all. May his bed never get old, and may he never grow cold.”

“You said that wrong you dolt.” Jackson’s eyes shifted to the athletic man standing near the fireplace.

“Ethan, I wasn’t expecting you,” Jackson observed.

“Yes, well, when we heard you were getting married, we had to see it for ourselves,” Liam teased.

“And what was the bet, huh?” Jackson leaned back in his chair and glared at his friends with a crooked, knowing smirk.

“Don’t have a clue what you are talking about,” Ethan said. There was no way both Ethan and Liam had come all the way from Manchester just to eat food and drink. Folding his arms over his chest, Jackson cocked his head and waited for the truth.

“You really think we were going to leave you high and dry on a day like this?” Liam chimed in. “Was our friendship in school meaningless to you? I’m hurt.”

Liam threw himself over the desk dramatically as if he’d been pierced by an arrow. There was no hiding Jackson’s amusement as Liam peeked through the slant of his eyelid.

“It meant a great deal,” Jackson answered as he shoved Liam off his desk. “Still doesn’t answer the question of the wager. Let me guess, Liam’s wager was for my bride to run, and Ethan, you bet on me bedding another. Did I get it right?”

Liam and Ethan exchanged a glance at each other before both giving the same nonchalant shrug.

“What are you doing in here all by your lonesome? This whole party is to celebrate you, yet here you are. I knew you were a stick in the mud in school, but this is a bit too much,” Liam pointed out as he moved to the small table next to the fireplace. Jackson watched Liam pop the top off one of the pitchers and sniff the contents. Liam’s face lit up instantly, and he snagged three glasses and the bottle.

“Since when have you been so mopey? Don’t you realize that you have the loveliest wife in the ton? And she is out there, looking mighty sad and lonely, while you’re in here doing God knows what,” Liam remonstrated, placing a glass down in front of Jackson.

“I say we give our boy here some liquid courage and point him in the right

direction. Who knows, he might actually get lucky tonight and end up with the right woman come morning,” Ethan teased.

“Hold your tongue,” Jackson snapped. “First off, I don’t need help in that department.”

“Are you sure?” Ethan asked as he batted his eyes like a girl, teasing Jackson even further. “From what I remember, you weren’t all that keen on bedding in your younger years. Perhaps you’ve forgotten the art of seduction?”

Jackson shooed Ethan away from him and watched his friends crash into each other and barrel over with laughter. Seeing them was a sight for sore eyes. It wasn’t that Jackson wasn’t thrilled to have them there to help him celebrate; Jackson just figured there was nothing about this night to celebrate.

“All right, enough,” Jackson grumbled as Ethan and Liam rose to their feet, both gasping for air. “I don’t see what the big deal is. So, I’ve married. It’s not like love is involved in this union.”

“Oh, I see,” Liam teased, pointing his finger. “What did you do? Go to one of the many balls, spin around, and point to the woman you were going to wed?”

Jackson shrugged and flashed Liam a wink. “Maybe.”

Liam and Ethan both glanced at each other before drawing their eyes to Jackson. “What kind of fool are you? You can’t find a wife that way. How do you know she’ll do as you tell her?”

“Or what if she’s a mousy thing that gets under your feet?” Liam asked.

“It didn’t matter what kind of wife I picked as long as I picked one, and I have. My end of the deal is done,” Jackson argued, slipping back down into his seat as his headache started up again.

“This whole ordeal has you stressed,” Ethan said in a low voice as he inched around the desk. “You know what would help you to relieve some of that tension in your body?”

“The lonely bride, sitting out there wondering where her prince could be,” Liam suggested, throwing his hand to his forehead as if to swoon. “You, good sir, could be that prince that saves her from her loneliness and her virtue.”

“If you two don’t stop, I’ll throw you both out of here,” Jackson snapped, getting fed up with Liam and Ethan’s antics.

“Oh, come on,” Liam argued, sitting on Jackson’s desk. “You can’t tell me that you aren’t at least a little bit curious as to who you married?”

“Helen Smith, twenty-two years of age. She is the second born and the diamond of the season. Her father happens to be the Marquess of Valenford,” Jackson rattled off.

Ethan shook his head as he walked over to the fireplace. Jackson watched Ethan as he placed his hand on the mantle and leaned into it. He couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt because of the expression plastered on Liam’s face.

“You don’t know a thing about her, do you?” Liam asked.

“I don’t need to know anything about her,” Jackson replied. “It’ll make it easier later in life.”

“Are you listening to this man?” Ethan asked Liam. “What a load of crock. I think you’re in the study instead of out there because you’re scared.”

“There is nothing that scares me, not even marriage or commitment,” Jackson announced.

“You’re afraid of getting close to her,” Liam stated as he whipped his head

around and glared at Jackson with such wild eyes that it startled Jackson. He couldn't help but turn his eyes down. Of course, it didn't help that his friends knew him better than he thought.

"That is not the case at all," Jackson huffed.

"Really? Then what is her favorite flower?" Liam asked.

"Or how about her favorite color?" Ethan chimed in. "Surely, you know the basics necessities for calming her."

Jackson's eyebrows scrunched to the bridge of his nose as he folded his arms over his chest. Confusion skipped about his brain as he tried to remember any incident where he had asked Helen such things. Shaking his head, Jackson turned his attention back to Ethan.

"Such things are of no importance," Jackson said with a wave of his hand. Ethan's laughter filled the room.

"Is that so? And pray tell, what would you do if your wife caught you with another in your bed? How would you quell the tempest if you don't know what soothes those turbulent waters?" Liam asked.

"You both seem well versed in these things; tell me, what would you do?" Jackson asked, arching his eyebrow.

"Flowers and a cake," Ethan answered. "A chocolate cake and a bouquet of tulips that match the color of whatever dress she wore that day."

"No, a shopping spree is the only way to ease a woman. Giving her free reign of your bank account for the day, that is sure to put her mood at ease," Liam suggested. "Of course, you'd only give her maybe twenty pounds to spend, but I'm sure to her, it would be a fortune."

Jackson couldn't help but laugh as his friends continued their banter of how

they would tame a woman scorned. It got Jackson's mind wandering to what he could do in the future that would require him to dote on a wife he didn't love.

"You both are fools," Jackson finally said. "Neither one of you knows what to do besides throw money at the problem. The way I see it, if you keep things professional and business like, then there will be no expectations to fulfill and no promises to break."

"Then your wife knows you have no plans to bed her? How sad is that? Surely, you wouldn't leave her a maid the rest of her life?" Ethan asked. Pity filled his eyes, and for the first time since they barged into his study, Jackson realized he'd still have some duties to perform as her husband.

Swallowing hard, Jackson calculated a plan around such events. If they were to ever come to that in their marriage, he'd do what needed to be done and nothing more.

"Could you imagine the dishonor that would bring to her and her family?" Ethan's voice bent as he spoke, and Jackson could easily see through the manipulation.

"I'm more concerned with the fact that your wife, the beautiful creature that she is, would never experience the joy and fullness of life itself," Liam urged. "To die without knowing a man's touch. The horror."

Ethan slammed his hands on Jackson's desk and leaned forward. "I will be honored to be your stand in since you are so inclined not to touch her. I'm sure after a few glasses of wine in a dark room, she wouldn't know the difference."

"You are not bedding my wife," Jackson nearly growled. The fact that Ethan even suggested such a thing drew forth an anger inside Jackson that he had never felt before. There was something about the idea of Helen being with

another that angered him. She was his; it was the reason for the ceremony and... the kiss.

Jackson's heart pounded in his chest as images of Helen in her wedding dress filled his mind. His lips burned as he thought of how her kiss sent a shock to his system. Out of everything that transpired, feeling anything as he kissed her was something he hadn't calculated. Lust ignited through him as his eyes shifted to the study door.

"I was just saying what a pity it would be if you left her untouched—especially since she is now officially your wife," Ethan said.

"Maybe there is something to what you've said," Jackson decided as he felt a pull from deep within his bones, luring him to Helen. The need to see her grew within him as he slowly rose to his feet.

Ethan and Liam glanced at each other with wild, wicked grins plastered on their faces.

"Which part?" Liam asked as Jackson started toward the door.

"Maybe I should get to know her a bit better," Jackson replied in a low voice. He tried not to let the desire taint his words, but he couldn't help it. Once Helen had popped into his mind, there was no way to get rid of her. Everything about her enticed him from the way she smelled of heather and honey as she made her vows to him to the way she batted her long lashes. Even the scowl on her face drew him to her.

"That's the spirit," Ethan said, patting Jackson on the shoulder. "I mean, really, if you're going to get married and spend the rest of your life with someone, you should get to know them a bit better. Even if you only spend one night a month with the girl, you should know who you are living with."

Jackson bobbed his head and pulled in a deep breath. He snatched the bottle

of whiskey from the table and took a long swing. With his heart pounding wildly in his chest, Jackson tried not to focus on Ethan and Liam's cheers for joining the party.

"Now, what's your plan?" Liam asked as they walked out of the study and headed for the ballroom.

"Plan? Why do I need a plan?" Jackson asked. "It's not like I have to court her. She's my wife now."

"If you want to get on her good side, which will make life a lot easier for you, you can't just barge over to her and demand her attention. You need to woo her," Liam directed as Jackson scanned the crowd hunting for Helen.

"I don't woo," Jackson scoffed.

"Well, you're going to have to learn," Ethan said, patting Jackson on the shoulder. Jackson's body tensed the moment he found Helen. She sat with her sister in the corner. The pout on her lips almost made him want to rush over and ease her sorrow. Holding himself back, he studied her, watching her as she mingled with her family and other guests.

"Is it just me," Ethan said, "or does she seem to be smiling a lot?"

"That is a bit odd," Liam noted as he tilted his head and stared at Helen. But as Jackson watched her, he could see her smile did not touch her eyes. There was a falseness to the way her lips curled. It didn't surprise him to see her so glum, due to the fact it was her father's choice for them to marry. It pained him to see her so distant from everyone. Last time they were at a gathering, she was friendly and funny, not to mention talkative.

Now, she was a shell of the person he had met before. It dawned on him that Helen was a dutiful wife who had been thrown in with him, not by her wishes but her father's. The reality pricked him like a cacti. Of course, he had his

reasons for hastily marrying Helen. Jackson wanted his inheritance secure, and that was only through marriage.

“Perhaps a dance?” Jackson mumbled.

“Oh, that’s not a bad idea,” Ethan agreed, giving Jackson a hard shove out onto the dance floor. The music stopped as Jackson tried not to feel the eyes boring into him. Turning his attention to Helen, he extended his hand to her.

CHAPTER 5



“*H*elen,” Serena said, nudging her elbow into Helen’s arm, “I think your presence is requested on the dance floor.”

Barely glancing over her shoulder, Helen spied Jackson standing in the center of the ballroom, hand extended and with the same stoic expression she’d come to know so well. Pressing her lips tighter, Helen kept her smile from fading as she pretended not to notice Jackson waiting for her.

“Aren’t you going to join him?” Serena asked, leaning closer to Helen.

“Did he ask? Or is he demanding me to jump just because he says so?” Helen mumbled back to Serena.

“What are you doing?” Scott grumbled as he stormed over to Helen. He stood before her, blocking her view of Jackson. “Your husband has requested your presence, and you must go to him.”

Helen’s eyes narrowed on her father as she rose. “You have no control over what I do anymore. I’m a married woman now, and my husband is my master. Not you.”

Scott’s face pinched with anger as he glanced about, waving at the guests who were clearly watching with hawk eyes. Helen didn’t care what the

people around her thought of her actions. They could all rot for all she cared.

“Get out there,” Scott growled. Helen rolled her shoulders back and started for the dance floor. She pulled in a deep breath and kept her eyes locked on Jackson. A hint of a smile tugged at his lips as she approached him. The smug glimmer in his eyes grated on her nerves. Helen arched her eyebrow and didn’t slow as she came up to Jackson, but she simply kept walking, ignoring him completely.

Before she could get out of range, Jackson snatched her arm and spun her around until she faced him. Dizzy and confused, Helen tried to right the world before the music could start. The stringed instruments began, and Helen found herself once again at the mercy of Jackson.

“Were you really going to pretend I wasn’t asking for you?” Jackson asked as he shuffled Helen across the dance floor.

“You didn’t,” Helen answered coldly as she kept her smile big and bright for all to see. “And you still aren’t.”

“My, my, someone is in a mood. And here I thought weddings were supposed to be happy occasions,” Jackson taunted.

“You aren’t enjoying this any more than I am,” Helen pointed out.

“Forgive me, but I doubt you know me as well as you think you do,” Jackson said.

“I believe that was my argument for not wanting to marry you,” Helen noted as Jackson sped up the pace of the dance. Her feet could barely keep up as he moved about the whole length of the floor. It felt as if her feet were barely touching the ground. If she wasn’t so angry with the whole event, she would have enjoyed it.

“Funny how things can change so quickly, wouldn’t you agree?” Jackson

asked. “However, your rudeness is unbecoming.”

“My rudeness? What of yours? I was not created to be at your beck and call. I’m not a dog you can train to come when they are called or speak when spoken to,” Helen said. “Nor am I a mind reader. If you want something from me, ask.”

“And if I were to have asked for your hand, what then? My guess is you’d turn me down merely because of my age. Or the color of my hair. Well, let me enlighten you about the ways of the world,” Jackson declared as he pinned Helen to his chest. Helen was surprised to notice how much of Jackson surrounded her. He was massive next to her small frame, and he made her feel as if she were nothing but a child standing before him.

“Those boys that caught your eye before would have broken your heart had you married them. They were far too young in age,” Jackson continued.

“They were my age,” Helen countered.

“A boy would never have suited you. You don’t need such things. What you need is a champion,” Jackson argued. Helen’s heart fluttered as she stared into his cold eyes.

“And you think by marrying me out of convenience that you’re the champion I need. Is that it?” Helen asked.

“Precisely. There are no pretenses between us. So, there will be no expectations. With nothing to expect from one another, our lives are better,” Jackson explained.

Repulsed, Helen stepped back from Jackson and shook her head. “Better? Life is not bland. Expectations are what drive goals and dreams. And a marriage is more than some piece of paper.”

“Surely, you can understand that the world doesn’t run on whimsical notions

and ideas,” Jackson said in a hushed tone as he shook his head. Helen sucked in sharp, quick breaths as she tried not to think of the way Jackson’s hot breath on her neck caused little bumps to rise over her skin.

“Fairy tales are for children. We live in the real world, one with rules and obligations. Your obligation to me is to be my wife. And yes, you will be at my beck and call because of who you are to me now.”

Helen’s mouth dropped as she noticed all the eyes on them and prayed no one could hear Jackson’s hushed words that grated on her nerves. Her heart sank into her stomach. Embarrassment flickered through her, but she couldn’t help but feel a bit grateful that their conversation hadn’t been broadcast to their guests. If there was one thing Helen learned from this encounter, it was that Jackson was certainly a private individual. Still, she couldn’t stop the sting of his words that made her eyes tear up. Helen’s lip trembled. Regaining some of her composure, Helen forced the smile back on her face. She bowed to Jackson and without another word, rushed off the dance floor.

Passing Serena outside, Helen kept on walking. She had to get as far away from him and everyone that she could. Tears pooled in her eyes as she thought of how it was only a few months ago that she was the diamond of the season. Everyone wanted her or wanted to be her. And now, they all watched as her husband berated her in front of their very eyes.

The humiliation ran deep, and even though there were some in the garden who hadn’t witnessed her first spat with Jackson, they would soon hear about it.

“Helen, wait up,” Serena called as Helen made a hard right and ducked behind the boxwood.

“I’m ruined no matter what I do,” Helen mumbled as she tried to breathe in deep only to have it blocked.

“There you are,” Serena said, coming around the corner. Helen threw her arms around Serena and tried not to make a sound as she let the tears flow down. “It’ll be all right.”

“How?” Helen asked, jerking away from Serena. “How is any of this going to be all right? Not only did my husband just embarrass me in front of everyone, but he thinks what he did was noble.”

“Maybe you can go to the king and discuss your displeasure with him? Surely, he’d annul the marriage,” Serena suggested. Helen’s eyes widened as hope was restored.

“I can’t go to the king; I’m just a woman,” Helen lamented, “but maybe I can get Jackson to do it.”

Serena cocked her head as Helen pulled her further away from the garden area and into a more private section.

“Maybe I can get Jackson to annul the marriage. He seems to be keen on rules and regulations,” Helen considered, rubbing her chin as she started to pace. “I’ll make him want to never be seen with me. And since he likes to make a spectacle, then perhaps that is what I’ll give him. He thinks I’m naive; well, I can show him just how childish I can be.”

“Do you remember a few years back, you had it in your head to design and make your own dress?” Serena asked as her lips curled into a wicked grin. “What if you started making your own clothes again?”

“Oh, I thought I would die from embarrassment after that ball,” Helen said with distorted enthusiasm. “But if he likes things orderly, then perhaps throwing a little chaos into the mix will get him to back off. So, a makeover. But that’s only good for dinner occasions—if he even has dinner with me at all.”

“Well, what if you picked up a hobby? One that allows you to be aloof?” Serena asked.

“Painting requires too much concentration and has a purpose. Same goes for needle work. I need to find something that will allow me stare out into nothing for hours on end,” Helen considered. The sound of screeching caught her attention. She whipped her head about to find herself peering into the sky to find the source of the sound.

“Perfect,” Serena said with a huge smile. Helen glanced over to Serena, confused, and tilted her head waiting for Serena to elaborate.

“Bird watching,” Serena stated, clapping her hands.

“Brilliant,” Helen cooed. “But I need more.”

“Well, let’s see here, when would you actually see Jackson during the day? And what if he has company over?”

“I’ve got it,” Helen declared, rubbing her hands together. “From what little I’ve gathered about him, he’s a practical man. I’ll simply be over-chatty. He hates gossip, and so that is what I’ll have to do. Every little thing that annoys him, I’ll simply amplify until it gets too much for him, and he’ll be begging to release me.”

“Oh, how I wish I could be a fly on your wall,” Serena said with a little giggle. “But what if it doesn’t work? What if whatever you do, he pays no attention to it?”

“I’ll be so bold and outspoken that he’ll have no choice but to acknowledge me,” Helen declared. “My dresses will be the talk of the ton.”

Helen glanced around the hedge and stared at the manor. The large stone wall house was bigger than the house she grew up in, and like her father’s home, Helen knew no love could blossom in such a place. The shadows in the

windows were too dark.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Helen asked Serena as an idea popped into her mind.

“Nothing that I’m aware of,” Serena replied. “Just a few lessons in the morning, but I’m free in the afternoon, I think.”

“Do you think you could come over for tea?” Helen asked. “I need to bounce some ideas off you as far as decorating.”

“And what are we going to decorate?” Serena asked. Helen pointed to Jackson’s stonewall house. “The place looks dreary and unwelcoming, don’t you think?”

A mischievous grin stretched across Serena’s lips as she bobbed her head. “The place could use a bit of color.”

“What are you two doing out here?” Theresa’s voice startled Helen. She jumped and turned about, trying not to look so guilty.

“Getting some fresh air,” Helen answered as she winked at Serena. “It was getting too stuffy in there with all the guests.”

“Well, some of those guests are now your family,” Theresa scolded. “It’ll be rude of you not to go in there and talk with some of them.”

“A tour of the house would be nice,” Helen suggested, trying to hide her giggle. Theresa arched her eyebrow and folded her arms over her chest.

“What are you two up to? And don’t tell me nothing because I can see you concocting something right now,” Theresa remonstrated.

“We were just making light of the situation,” Serena replied.

“Come with me, Serena. We can explore this place together,” Helen

suggested, snagging Serena's arm and pulling her back to the ballroom.

"Do you think she suspects anything?" Serena whispered as they moved around the back tables to slip out into the hallway.

"Of course, she does; it's Theresa. But I doubt we will have any trouble from her. And even if she did discover our plan, I doubt she'd say anything. My sister only wants my happiness," Helen said as they started down the hallway.

It was just as Helen had predicted. Every room on the bottom floor was dreary and dull. There weren't any colors or flowers, and the tapestries looked like they hadn't been cleaned in centuries. Helen couldn't help but feel pity for Jackson. Of course, he was in a foul mood all the time—she would be too if she had to live with the film of dust over everything.

"When do you think this room was last cleaned?" Helen asked as they stepped into the library. Cobwebs crowded each corner of the room, and the place had a dank stench that made Helen's nose crinkle.

"Never," Serena answered with the same disgusted expression.

"Well, that's going to change," Helen declared. "Just because I have to live here now, doesn't mean I have to endure the way it is."

"What do you think of purple in this room?" Serena suggested with a playful smirk.

"No, it needs to be bold and daring. Something that catches the eye, but not in a stunning way—more in an obnoxious manner. Do you know what I'm saying? Something more like, I don't know... I've got it. What it needs is a splash of yellow," Helen decided. "Yellow tulips and change out those curtains. This place has wonderful natural light, and it's a pity it doesn't come through."

“This room is off limits to the guests,” a loud voice boomed from behind Helen. Serena arched her eyebrow and walked over to the thin man.

“She is no guest,” Serena said in a snooty voice that made Helen want to laugh. Serena certainly knew how to impersonate those with class and wealth. “This is the Duchess.”

The servant’s eyes narrowed as he lifted his head. “And I’m the king of England. Get out before I call my master on you. This wedding was a private affair, and if you’re not on the guest list, then I will kick you out.”

“Go and fetch the master then,” Helen suggested, waving her hand at the servant. “Or better yet, go on and throw us out.”

“Helen,” Serena hissed, “what are you doing?”

Helen cocked her head and flashed her brilliant smile. “Go on. You caught us fair and square. The master of the house will reward your diligence, I’m sure of it.”

“All right, let’s go,” the servant said as he hooked his fingers around Helen’s arm and pulled her from the room. “You too, let’s go.”

Helen winked at Serena as she hobbled along next to the servant.

“Your Grace,” the servant mumbled as he approached Jackson. “I found these two loitering in the library. Will you have me escort them out?”

Jackson’s eyes shifted from the servant to Helen and back again. She fought against the smile playing on her lips.

“I’d thank you to unhand my wife,” Jackson growled. The color in the servant’s face drained as he released Helen. “We are not even married an hour, and you’re already causing issues?”

“I was merely looking about my gilded cage,” Helen answered in a sing-song

voice. “Am I not allowed since this will be my home now?”

Jackson waved the servant away as Helen stepped closer. She could feel the heat of his body rolling off him. The musky scent of whiskey swirled about him as he towered over her. Helen’s eyes met his. Looking as innocent as she could, Helen batted her eyelashes at him.

“Gilded cage, is it?” Jackson asked as Helen watched the men scatter from around them. Even Serena seemed to feel the tension rising between Helen and Jackson.

“How did you put it? I’m stuck with you forever? Then, yes, the term is correct. But may I remind you that you too are stuck with me,” Helen warned.

“Then as my prisoner,” Jackson leaned in closer to her, and his breath tickled her neck as he spoke, “you should know there are rules you will obey.”

Helen smiled as she kept her eyes locked on him. *You’re going to regret marrying me, and you can count on that.*

CHAPTER 6



Jackson leaned over the railing of the second story, watching the guests as they filed out of the front doors. He let out a heavy sigh, glad to be done with the event. Now that he had fulfilled his duty, Jackson didn't feel any better. He had hoped that once he picked the woman, the tension in his shoulders would cease. Yet, as he glanced at the gold ring around his finger, somehow the pressure grew.

"How long do you think it'll last?" Jackson heard Ethan's voice bouncing off the archway. His chest tightened as he watched his friends.

"Less than a year," Liam answered. Jackson pursed his lips into a tight line. The fact that his friends were betting on his marriage irked him. Of course, he couldn't blame them—he once did the same. Tilting his head, Jackson found intrigue in their bet and turned his head to get better acoustics.

"All right, what's the wager?" Ethan asked.

"Jackson will annoy his wife so much that she'll be the one to leave in three to six months," Liam suggested.

"Is it three or six? You can't hedge your bet like that," Ethan grumbled and shoved Liam into the wall.

“Five,” Ethan stated with confidence. “It’ll take her about a month to figure out the man has no personality whatsoever. And then a month or two trying to change him, only to discover he’s too set in his ways. Of course, Jackson, being as stubborn as ever, will instinctively fight for her to stay only to have her leave for her family’s house by month four. And then a month to get the proper paperwork completed before they are separated.”

Jackson stumbled back as he listened to Ethan. It never dawned on him that Ethan and Liam knew him as well as Jackson’s best friend, Will had. Ethan’s words, no matter how true they were, stung Jackson. He pulled in a deep breath to steady himself. Stalking Ethan and Liam with his eyes, Jackson flexed his jaw.

They think they know me so well, don’t they? Well, I’ll show them. They tell me to get to know my wife; well then, that’s what I’ll do, and I’ll prove them wrong.

“All right then, I’ll give him eight months,” Liam countered. “The way I see it, Jackson will keep his distance for the first few months. Sure, he’ll be cordial to the girl—greet her in the hall when they pass. And she seems like the kind of girl who could keep herself entertained. She might even enjoy being the Duchess for awhile. But around month four, they’ll fall into their routines, and because she’s so young, I think she’ll want to branch out, explore a bit if you will. She might have an affair in which case, Jackson will discover it around the six-month mark. He’ll send her away to be with family. It’ll turn out she’s with child, and Jackson will have no choice but to dismiss her.”

“Oh,” Ethan said, bobbing his head. They stopped in the foyer and glanced around before darting to the hallway. Jackson moved with them, following them from the second story. He knew it was rude to listen to others’ conversation, but he didn’t care at the moment. They were discussing his

future, and it irked him.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, though, Jackson wondered why he cared at all to listen. It wasn't like he hadn't been the focus of rumors before. Only this time, he didn't expect them to come from his friends.

"I never considered her in the equation," Ethan pondered, fiddling with the stubble on his chin. "I could see her finding comfort in her new role as Duchess. That might actually bide them some time together. If she gets caught up with her duties and steers clear of him, they could actually make it a year."

"We're talking about Jackson here," Liam argued. "I doubt there is a woman in this whole world that would tolerate him."

Ethan nodded as he glanced around. Jackson stepped back from the rail ensuring he wasn't spotted. He felt the pressure in his chest grow and the ring on his finger tighten.

"Are you switching your answer?" Ethan asked, wagging his eyebrows.

"Twenty pounds says Helen will initiate the annulment in six months," Liam decided, shoving his hand out. Ethan glanced at it and shook it.

"Twenty pounds says Jackson will find cause to release her," Ethan argued. Jackson arched his eyebrow and glared at his friends. The need to defend his honor and dignity rose from the depths of his being.

They don't think I can be a good husband? Well, we will see about that.

Jackson moved swiftly down the hallway. With each step he took, his resolve grew to at least give his marriage a shot. And he knew that the first step in doing so would be to consummate the marriage. A lump of fear lodged into Jackson's throat as he stopped in the middle of the hallway. His palms grew sweaty, and his nerves rattled. It had been some time since he laid with a

woman. It wasn't as if Helen wasn't attractive—there was a beauty to her that he couldn't deny—but he had lines drawn in the sand in his mind—certain walls he put up to protect himself—and he couldn't help but wonder if he'd be strong enough to keep them up.

Kissing Helen popped into his mind and erased all other thoughts. He couldn't deny the fact that pressing his lips to hers aroused something deep within him. It was as if a light had come on in a dark place, but Jackson wasn't about to let that light burn too bright. He wouldn't allow himself.

I will go to her room and say good night. That is what a decent husband would do, right? And then I will leave.

With the plan in place, Jackson marched down the hall. He repeated his plan in his head over and over, ensuring that with each thought of it, the walls he built to protect his heart grew higher.

Stopping at Helen's door, he lifted his fist. With his nerves wrecking havoc on his body, he held his hand up high. No matter what he did, he couldn't bring himself to knock. It was as if there was some invisible force keeping his hand from reaching it.

Frustrated, Jackson dropped his hand. He paced back and forth in front of the door, trying to talk himself into calling on her. All that separated him was two inches of wood. Swallowing the fear down, Jackson rolled his shoulders back and stood taller.

Knock. Say good night. Leave... And do this all again tomorrow.

Mustering his courage, Jackson rapped his knuckles on the door. Helen's voice was muffled through the door, and he couldn't understand a word she said. Not thinking anything of it, Jackson reached for the doorknob and pushed open the door.

“I beg your pardon,” Helen said with a start as she quickly grabbed the thin blanket off the bed to cover herself. Jackson’s eyes widened. He had never seen anything so beautiful in his whole life. Helen’s brown hair draped down her shoulders like a soft, shimmering curtain. The way it framed her face was stunning.

“What are you doing in here?” Helen asked as Jackson stood before her, unable to move. Embarrassment flooded him, and he wasn’t sure if he was embarrassed about walking in on Helen dressing for bed or embarrassed for her that he had.

“I’ve come to bid you a good night,” Jackson replied, unable to turn his eyes from her. The orange glow of the fire dancing about the room gave her a mystic glow about her.

“Well, good night then,” Helen said, a bit irate as she tucked the blanket tighter around her body.

What happened to saying good night and leaving? This isn’t leaving. This is staying.

Jackson stood in the doorway, uncertain if he wanted to leave or not. Watching the way the fire danced along her skin was intoxicating. He’d never before felt such a lure to be anywhere, let alone in his wife’s bed chamber.

“Was there something else you wanted?” Helen asked. Jackson heard the crack in her voice, and it pulled him from the fantasies skipping about in his head. Drawing his eyes up her body, Jackson tried to embed the moment into his memory. He wanted to savor everything.

When his eyes finally reached Helen’s, he sucked in a quick breath. There was a spark in her eye that he hadn’t seen before. Was it lust? Desire? He couldn’t be certain. What he was sure of was the need building within him to go to her. He wanted another chance to press his lips to hers and taste her.

The kiss in the church was but a mere morsel of what was now before him. As her husband, Jackson knew he had every right to be there, to take her the way he wanted to. Inching closer, he felt a pull from the center of his being as if it were tugging at him to go to her.

Helen's eyes were on him, judging every move he made. The last thing he wanted was to scare her away. Moving slowly, he stole a step deeper into the room. Helen sucked in a huge gulp of air, causing it to whistle through her parted lips. Jackson's fingers ached to touch her smooth skin, to see it were as soft as it looked. Her nightgown clung to her collarbone and was so thin that he could see her nipples cutting through the fabric. Not even the blanket she had covering her body could hide her from his prying eyes.

A current flowed through him that he couldn't explain. It was as if the world had stopped, and there was no one else left but her and him. The blanket slipped off Helen's shoulder, exposing even more skin to him. His eyes widened as he admired the length of her neck and the curve of her shoulder.

Keeping his eyes locked on her, he covered the distance between them. The need to have her was far too great for him to ignore any longer.

"How do you take your tea?" Helen blurted out as Jackson's fingers brushed against her delicate skin. He dropped his hand and stared at her for a moment, uncertain as to why she'd ask such a question.

"I don't like tea," Jackson answered, trying hard not to let Helen's nerves stop him from taking what he wanted. And at the moment, he wanted her in every way she'd allow him to have. Even if the night only ended with a kiss, that would suffice.

"Well, I heard on good authority that if a man drinks a certain tea at night, he might be more inclined to see his wife," Helen stated. Her words scrambled together, but the one thing Jackson picked up on made him cringe.

“Good authority?” Pursing his lips together, Jackson glared at Helen. “Gossip? Is that what you are talking about right now? You heard something from someone about something that you can’t be one hundred percent sure about.”

“I’m nervous,” Helen blurted as she snatched the loose bits of the blanket and covered herself once again. “I have never... well... you know.”

Jackson stepped back and curled his hands into fists. He wanted to kick himself as the frustration simmered. Running his fingers through his hair, he stole another glimpse of Helen.

“No,” Jackson said after a few moments. Helen’s eyes turned a darker shade of red as she flashed him a feral look.

“What?” she snapped.

“You asked if there was something else I wanted,” Jackson answered as he pushed down his need to touch her. “And no, there is not. I bid you a good night.”

Without another word, Jackson turned around and closed the door behind him. His mind replayed the moment as he walked down the hall, leaving Helen.

I will not touch her. Not until she is ready for me. No matter how tempting she is, I shall keep that promise. Besides, the longer I can keep her at a distance, the better off I’ll be. Why rush into these things?

And prove Ethan and Liam were right? Not likely.

Jackson stopped at his door as he stole one more glance down the hallway toward Helen’s room. He was so close to falling into his bed and waking up as if nothing had changed. Yet, the longer he stared at the hallway, the stronger his resolve grew.

Well, damn.

What is this woman doing to me? Why am I letting her do this? Wait, this isn't her fault, it's Liam's and Ethan's. Why should I care about anything those two have to say?

Jackson stopped as he came to Helen's door once more. His heartbeat quickened as he thought of surprising her again. Walking to the door, he rapped on it quickly and stepped back. Helen's voice was muffled, but Jackson stood there, waiting as he straightened his shirt.

The door opened but a crack, but it was all Jackson needed in order to see her. The first thing he noticed were her cat-like eyes staring at him as if they could see into his soul.

"Yes, Your Grace?" Helen said in a sing-song voice as she batted her eyes and acted like nothing in the world affected her.

"I've come to invite you join me on the terrace for breakfast," Jackson replied in the most formal tone he could muster. He gave a swift bow to her and rose, keeping his eyes locked on her.

Confusion flashed across her face. "Is this an order?"

Jackson shook his head. "Not an order, a request. Someone told me that marriage is about compromising. And seeing as how we are both stuck here together, I thought maybe it might be beneficial for us to at least get along. So, will you do me the honor?"

CHAPTER 7



*H*elen stared through the sliver of the door. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest as she studied Jackson’s face. There was no malice in his tone or expression, but she couldn’t help but wonder, what made him so interested in her now?

“I was under the impression that this is a marriage of convenience and nothing more,” Helen replied, a bit snooty. “I don’t believe having breakfast would be following your rules.”

She arched an eyebrow as she watched Jackson shift his weight from one leg to the other. Helen didn’t dare look into his eyes—they were far too intense for her, and she knew if she did, she wouldn’t be able to implement her plan.

“Let’s just say that I’ll agree to negotiations. Say, over breakfast?” Jackson asked as he stood like a sentinel at her door. Her ears perked as she heard the clapping of shoes coming down the hallway. Helen’s eyes widened. The thought of having a servant catch her in her night gown with a man at her door sent a chill down her spine. The idea of being married was still foreign to her, and no one told her what to expect on her first night.

“Fine,” Helen answered in a haste, eager to close the door before anyone spied her. “Breakfast.”

Jackson dipped his head and started off down the hallway. Helen quickly closed the door, spun around, and leaned back. Her heart was fluttering in her chest as she found the room growing hotter by the minute.

She pushed off the door and started pacing the length of her room. Helen's mind was just as wild and unpredictable as her body. She wasn't expecting the butterflies in her stomach when Jackson burst through the door. Nor did she anticipate him listening to her.

Pausing in the middle of the room, Helen glanced at the door. The fact Jackson had come back tormented her.

He was so forceful and rude before, demanding a dance. So why did he wait for me to answer the door? Perhaps it was his way of showing he wants to try?

No, I'm not staying married to him. This is all for show. He's the man that gets enjoyment out of inflicting pain.

Well, Duke of Stonewill, you aren't going to hoodwink me. I'll come to your little breakfast. And I promise, you're going to wish you never laid eyes on me.

Helen moved swiftly to her closet and pulled out a robe. She slipped her arms through the sleeves and grabbed the candlestick. Tip toeing to the door, Helen pressed her ear to it, trying to listen for movement. Holding her breath, Helen heard nothing but silence. Carefully, she pulled the door open and popped her head out.

The hallway was empty and quiet—a little too quiet for Helen's tastes. She stepped out of her room as a sliver of fear sprang up within her. She'd never been allowed to roam about her father's house after dark. Once everyone was in their beds, that was where they stayed. For Helen, sneaking out of her room was both a blessing and a curse.

Guilt tugged at her as she slipped down the hallway. She couldn't help but feel a bit grateful for slipping away with Serena earlier. If she hadn't combed through the house already, the place would have given her goosebumps. With the hallways dark and foreign moans from the wood settling, getting to the library was unnerving.

Once she reached her destination, Helen let out the air trapped in her lungs. She looked around the room at all the dusty books and cobwebs. Crossing her fingers, Helen made her way to the shelves.

"Bird watching," Helen mumbled. "Come on. There's got to be a book in here somewhere that explains what kind of birds there are."

Reading the spines of the books, Helen was growing impatient. She knew she couldn't pass up the opportunity with Jackson, but to pull it off, she needed to study, and the night would only last so long.

"Of course, I would pick the one subject this house knows nothing about," Helen grumbled. Steps echoed and broke the silence. Helen froze, hoping that the candle she burned didn't give off too much light. She figured most of the shelving would block the light from escaping the row she was in.

The steps grew louder and shook Helen to her bones. She had no idea what would happen if she was found in the library again. Would she be brought up to Jackson's room where she'd have to face him again?

The clomping of the boots faded, and Helen let out a sigh of relief. She found her heart scrambling to catch up. In a moment of error, Helen's fingers slipped. The candlestick holder slipped from her fingers and clattered to the ground. She cupped her hand over her mouth to stifle the scream as she was left in utter darkness. Quickly, she reached down and snatched the blown-out candle. The steps thundered around her as she hunted for the candlestick holder in the void.

Flickers of light grew brighter, and despite their soft glow, it was enough to calm Helen's nerves. As she started to rise, Helen's eyes widened. On the bottom shelf, she spotted a single book resting on its back. Without hesitating, Helen snatched the book and scrambled to the next row.

"Someone in here? Speak now." The servant's voice trembled. Helen could sympathize. Her knees and legs were so weak, she was surprised she was still able to stand, let alone walk.

"I've locked the doors, and you're in here with me now," the man said. Helen glanced around the bookshelf to find the same man who kicked her out earlier. Her eyes narrowed as a wicked grin curled her lips. Strutting out from her hiding place, Helen stared at the servant.

"Your Grace," the man said, lowering his head, "is everything all right? I heard a noise."

"Yes," Helen replied, "I just dropped my candle."

"Shall I light it for you?" the servant asked, lowering the tip of his candle to Helen's.

"Why, thank you," Helen said with a perky smile. "You be safe tonight."

"Would you like an escort back to your room?" the servant asked, keeping his eyes to the ground.

"No, I'll be fine," Helen answered as she realized the servants answered to her now too. And while her father's house had servants, they were more like family to her. She wondered if any of Jackson's servants would scold her the way her father's servants did.

"Good night then, Your Grace," he said. Helen nodded and walked through the doors with her contraband item. She rushed back to her room and closed the door tightly. The moon was still high in the sky, giving her plenty of time.

Helen threw the book on the bed and plopped down next to it. She brushed her fingers over the dusty cover.

Field Guide to Native Birds

Helen wanted to smile at her victory, but as she stared at the cover, remorse took over.

“Out of all the hobbies in the world, I had to pick this one?” Helen mumbled as she thumbed through the book, gaging the number of pages. “Best get started.”

Helen poured over the book, searing to memory the pictures and as much information as she could about each one. The hours drew on, and her eyes grew dry. No matter how many times she rubbed them, all they wanted to do was close. She leaned back into the pillow, pulling the book to her face, but it was no use. By the time she had snuggled into her spot, she was out.

The sound of chirping in the room rattled her from her dreams. Helen glanced at the window and squinted to shield her eyes from the morning light. Stretching, she hit something hard next to her. Helen tugged at the blankets to reveal a book. Tilting her head, she struggled to remember what happened the night before.

Her heart skipped as the room opened up around her. Slowly, images of yesterday returned to her. Helen grabbed the book and gasped.

“Breakfast on the terrace,” Helen remembered and sprang out of the bed. As she dressed, she retraced the pages she had read the night before. Quizzing herself on the various colors and names, she was determined to at least sound like she was right.

Once dressed, Helen bolted from her room. The moment she stepped outside, she smoothed the wrinkles from her dress and stood taller. A small table was

put out on the terrace along with two chairs. Helen couldn't help but smile at how quaint it looked.

Jackson stepped out around the corner. Helen's heart jumped into her throat. Chewing on her lower lip, she felt the urge to run back to the safety of her room.

"Lovely morning is it not?" Jackson asked as he pulled out a chair for her. Helen mustered her courage and walked over to sit down.

If I'm going to do it, now would be the time.

Helen kept her back straight as a board and let her eyes wander to the blue sky. She tilted her head and just stared out into the void over her head.

"Oh, that is lovely," Helen said as if she were in a dream. She pointed to the sky and felt a burst of pride as she spotted a bird she recognized from the book. Helen was very aware of Jackson's eyes on her. She could sense the questions lingering on the tip of Jackson's tongue.

"Is everything all right with you this morning? If I would have known you were a light drinker, I would haven't allowed you to indulge as much as you did," Jackson remarked as Helen watched Jackson from the corner of her eye pouring her a cup of tea.

"Everything is well, thank you for asking," Helen replied as she let her gaze drift to another section of the sky. As long as she was looking at anything other than Jackson, she was happy.

"I take it you're not a morning person then? I find doing business first thing in the morning keeps me sharp throughout the day," Jackson remarked as Helen tipped her head to the side and stared at the white cloud fast approaching.

"I wonder how they do it," Helen mumbled to herself as she lowered her eyes

and focused on the tea in front of her. The confusion on Jackson's face made her want to giggle. She quickly pushed the laugh down and forced herself to think of something mournful.

"Who do what, pray tell?" Jackson asked as he took a bite from his toast and leaned back in his chair.

"Birds," Helen answered. "It amazes me that a creature so small can reach such heights."

She noticed Jackson sitting straighter in his chair. "Indeed. And you know a lot about birds?"

Helen shook her head and gave a little shrug. "Oh yes. I enjoy watching them. My perfect day would be to find a bench somewhere and just sit there watching them jump from branch to branch."

"I didn't take you for a bird enthusiast, but seeing as how we have nothing else to talk about, amuse me—what kind of bird is that?" Jackson asked as he pointed to the sky. Helen followed the direction of his finger and squinted to find the creature in the tree.

"Magpie," Helen answered. "And by the looks of it, a young one. Did you know that they are actually a part of the raven family? Isn't that fascinating?"

Jackson bobbed his head as he swallowed hard. "I did know that, actually. But in truth, I'm stunned that you did."

Helen shrugged as she took a sip of her tea. She wanted to roll her eyes out of frustration. If Jackson knew of the raven connection with Magpies, surely there were other things he would know.

What if he actually does watch birds? That's going to be a problem. I can't do something that he likes. I've got to find something repulsive. Something that will surely turn him away.

“Well, what can I say?” Helen mumbled as she glanced at the contents of her tea. “I’m just full of surprises. Perhaps if we would have courted before our marriage, we would have found out these sort of things.”

“We are learning about them now,” Jackson said a bit smugly. “Tell me, what bird is your favorite?”

Taken back by the question, Helen stared blankly at him. “My favorite bird? Uh... I suppose that would have to be... the peacock.”

“Is that a question? Or your answer? I didn’t think it was a complicated question.”

“Well,” Helen explained, feeling a bit overwhelmed, “there’s just so many to pick from. There’s sparrows and black birds, toucans, and hummingbirds...”

She rattled off a few of the birds she had read about. Jackson’s eyes widened as he bobbed his head, clearly engaged with their conversation. Before Helen knew it, the sun had drifted high into the sky, and the heat of the day was on them. Jackson sat his napkin on his plate and eased back as if the meal they had was a feast.

“You surprised me today,” Jackson said with a smirk. “Not a lot of people can do that. And I know you’re going to berate me once more about skipping courting, but when you’ve walked in my shoes for a day, you’d understand.”

Helen propped her elbow on the table and rested her head on it. She stared at him and found herself drawn to the hint of a smile playing on the corner of his lips. It intrigued her and taunted her.

“What is your favorite bird? And if you could cage it, where would you put it?” Helen asked.

“I’d want to have a blue footed booby,” Jackson said with a wink.

“A what?” Helen asked, stunned there would even be such a bird by that name.

“Perhaps I’ll tell you another time,” Jackson said as he stood. Helen sat a moment as she watched him walk back inside. She felt conflicted. On one hand, she had hoped that she’d look a bit out of the head, but she never expected it to backfire the way it did. Helen realized if she wanted out of this marriage, she’d have to do something better. Subtle things weren’t going to catch his eye. No, she’d have to be bold and daring.

Helen glanced at her dress and smirked. “Who would have thought he liked watching birds?”

Something in the corner of her eye moved. Helen whipped her head about. It felt as if she’d been punched in the chest, the moment she saw Jackson standing in the window, looking out.

Oh, please tell me he didn’t hear that? He is inside, and I am out. Maybe he didn’t hear me. Would it be so bad if he did?

Helen’s eyes widened as a new plan took shape within her mind. Her smile stretched as she dipped her head to acknowledge Jackson in the window.

All right, so bird watching isn’t as aloof as I thought it would be. But talking to yourself? I wonder how he’ll handle that.

CHAPTER 8



Jackson's fingers dug into the rough, thick curtain of his study as he kept his sights locked on Helen. Jealousy jabbed at him as Helen paced the courtyard, mumbling incoherently to herself. He couldn't help but wonder what other antics she would concoct.

Everyday there was something new and different, and Jackson couldn't help but feel a stirring deep within his core. It was as if Helen pushed open a window to let fresh air come in.

Helen stopped and threw her hands up into the air in frustration. Flexing his jaw, Jackson held in the laugh that was rumbling. He could clearly hear his father's voice in his head urging him to remain silent, but it took all of Jackson's will not to chuckle as she stormed off. The moment she was out of sight, he let the laugh escape. The sound bounced off the walls of his study. Jackson couldn't remember the last time he had laughed so hard.

He admired her bravery and her foolish but funny escapades. She was unlike any woman he had met before, carefree and fun. Her bubbly personality and quirks drew Jackson to her like waves to the shore. He had to be around her. She was the only thing in his dreary world that wasn't tainted by his past.

"Excuse me, Your Grace, a letter has arrived."

Jackson glanced over his shoulder to find the servant holding the letter out to him. Uncurling his fingers from the curtain, Jackson snapped back into reality. The sliver of light that chased the shadows away vanished.

“Set it on the desk,” Jackson said curtly as he turned his attention back to the window. The sound of the door closing echoed in his ears. Jackson didn’t care who was calling on him—he wanted his light back; he wanted Helen.

He spotted movement in the corner of his eye. Hunting for Helen, hope brewed within him. He had hoped she would do another round or maybe come back with another wild and delightful act, but she was gone.

Frustrated, Jackson turned to face the emptiness of his study. He moved swiftly to the desk and sat. The insignia from Eton caught his eye. Jackson’s hands flew to it and ripped it open. After scanning the letter, Jackson leaned back into his chair and ran his fingers through his hair. Contempt filled him as he re-read the letter, ensuring he didn’t misread it the first time.

Jackson,

Ethan tells me married life has made you soft and weak. Between you and me, I think I’ll put my money on you in which case, you’re now invested either way. This weekend, you, me, Ethan, and Gabriel will be in town too. So now you’ve got to come.

Liam

Jackson’s lungs burned for air. It was like being crushed by the sea. He stared at the name—Gabriel. It wasn’t a name he’d heard in a very long time. The memories Jackson thought he had locked away broke free and bombarded his mind. Images of Will flooded through him. Gulping the air, Jackson’s body tingled as he broke out into a cold sweat.

“Gabriel?”

The last time Jackson had thought of Gabriel was when he saw him at the trial. He had a smug expression on his face, one Jackson had seen so often before. The name grieved him and troubled dark bits of his soul. Fifteen years of anguish pounded against Jackson's chest. He closed his eyes, trying to get the images to stop flickering through his mind.

With his head throbbing and heart racing, Jackson scrambled from his desk to the side table. His hands trembled as he poured the whiskey and gulped it down. The hot liquid soothed the turmoil raging within him. Jackson took another shot and waited to regain control of his fingers. Taking long deep breaths, Jackson finally regained himself.

"Are you well, Your Grace?" a servant asked. Her wide eyes exploded with questions Jackson knew she'd never ask. He gripped the edge of the table for support and stood upright.

"Did you not knock?" Jackson asked. His voice was sharp. The servant gestured to the door. Jackson could see her mouth moving, but nothing she said made any sense to him. It was like he was in a dream world, and everything moved in slow motion. The servant bowed before him, keeping her gaze to the floorboards.

Jackson waved his hand about. "You may take your leave now."

The servant rushed out of the room as Jackson tapped on his temples to get his ears to stop ringing. He rolled the stress from his shoulders and straightened his shirt and jacket. The smell of roasted lamb drifted into the room, and Jackson realized what the servant had come in to tell him. His heart jumped into his throat, and for a moment he contemplated eating alone. The letter had put him in a most foul mood, and he didn't want it to affect Helen's day.

Waiting in the study, Jackson's stomach rumbled from the whiffs of

rosemary and freshly baked bread. Unable to hold his resolve to wait, Jackson made his way to the dining room. He stopped at the threshold, shock and amazement pummeling him. His breath hitched as he couldn't make up his mind if he should be horrified by Helen's latest outfit or amazed she was daring enough to put on men's trousers.

Jackson cupped his hand over his mouth, silencing the laugh. He darted to the right of the doorway and leaned back. Never in all his life had he seen such a sight. Jackson had thought Helen's bird's nest hair was extraordinary, but that did not even compare to seeing her with peacock feathers stretching to the chandelier, the silvery blue bodice that looked remarkably similar to the curtains in her room, and men's pants.

Trying to control himself, Jackson cleared his throat and forced his smile back. He walked into the room, commanding attention the moment he entered. Keeping his eyes on a distant point other than Helen's head piece was the only way he was going to get through the night. It didn't help that he had already had three shots of whiskey that were relaxing him.

"Fine day, is it not?" Helen asked as Jackson watched her stretch across the table to reach the butter. Desire rushed through Jackson and pushed all other thoughts from his mind as Helen's breasts smashed against the table, giving him a clear view from her breasts to her navel.

The tips of the peacock feathers tickled Jackson's nose. He leaned back, doing his best to avoid the feathers as she squirmed. Fed up, Jackson stood, grabbed the butter for her, and sat back down.

"Someone is in a cranky mood," Helen observed as she wagged the knife at him.

"Pointing is rude," Jackson corrected as he glared at her. It wasn't anger that burned through him but lust. "Especially with a knife."

“Right,” Helen said, absentmindedly. She quickly set it down and turned her attention back to him. It took all of Jackson’s resolve not to see her for what she wore but who she was to him. Helen was so much more than a pretty face. She was intelligent, clever, and witty, but most importantly, she was fun.

“So, how was your morning?” Helen asked, drawing her words out.

“As any other,” Jackson answered through gritted teeth. “I see you’ve changed your outfit—was the other one not as comfortable?”

Helen batted her eyes and glanced at her outfit. Jackson couldn’t help but notice the embarrassment flushing through her cheeks. It was clear, she was just as troubled to be wearing it as he was to see it.

“This old thing? I’ve had this outfit for ages,” Helen said. Jackson arched his eyebrow. Helen let out a heavy sigh.

“All right, fine, I borrowed some fabric to make the top. What do you think?” Helen asked as she threw her hair back over her shoulders. Jackson’s face turned to stone. It was as if he’d only now seen her true form. The blue fabric highlighted her eyes, and since it was risqué in every shape and form, Jackson couldn’t help but wonder if she was trying to seduce him.

“Borrowed implies the return of an item or good. I don’t see how you can return the fabric to the curtains you took it from,” Jackson observed. “I will see your room is fashioned with new curtains, but next time, please inform me of your dissatisfaction before you make changes, and I will make amends to accommodate your needs and desires.”

Jackson bit down on his fork and slowly pulled the prongs out. Helen’s eyes widened as a flash of shock drifted through them. He wanted to smirk but reined it in, refusing to crack. It didn’t take Helen long to snap back. She flashed him a tender smile and shifted her attention to the meal.

“I can’t say I’ve ever had this dish before.” Jackson’s ears perked as he heard Helen mumbling next to him. He glanced over to her only to watch her lips twitch like a five-year old trying to hide the fact they were back talking.

“I’m sorry, I can’t quite hear you,” Jackson said. Helen’s eyes met his, and he wanted to fall into them. How she managed to steal his breath amazed him. It was as if the world could crumble around them, but as long as he was with her, he’d survive.

“It’s nothing, Your Grace,” Helen replied through clenched teeth. Jackson set his napkin on the table next to his plate and leaned back.

“Surely, something is causing you distress; you are weeping over your food,” Jackson commented. His ears itched to hear one of Helen’s wild stories. He realized he was growing fond of listening to Helen. Her voice was delicate and soft and wrapped around Jackson’s body.

“Is this lamb?” Helen gasped and pushed the plate from her. “I can’t eat that. Do you have any idea what it takes to keep the figure I have?”

“Then what precisely does my wife want?” Jackson asked, eager to hear her speak once more.

Helen fiddled with the tips of her nails. “What I want, you cannot provide.”

“You’d be surprised at what coin can buy,” Jackson said as he noticed the crocodile tears streaking down her cheeks.

“No, it’s fine,” Helen replied, waving Jackson off. He wagged his fingers to the servant who swiftly came with a new napkin for Helen. Helen swiped the cloth out of the servants’ hands and blew into it. After her bout of sniffles, Helen pressed her lips into a tight line to stop her trembling lips. “This is just all so nice. No one has ever done something like this for me before.”

Jackson glanced around the table, wondering what exactly Helen was talking

about. It was the dining room, one she'd been in before. One that he found quite uninteresting. There was nothing special about the room for Jackson. Yet, somehow, as he looked about, he noticed little details he hadn't seen before. The side tables were carved into florals and wreaths.

"The room is lovely," Jackson said, clearly confused. It was a new game he'd never played before and one he delighted in. It was a marvel to watch Helen's emotions shift as violently and randomly as a storm.

It took every ounce of his strength not to laugh at her being so over dramatic. He watched her with raised eyebrows and didn't say a word. Helen wiped the tears from her eyes and sat straight the moment a servant came into the room. How quickly she managed to turn off her tears astonished him. She reminded him of a street performer he'd seen in London a few years back.

"Are you all right?" Jackson asked. Helen glanced at him and batted her eyes as she fanned her hand to her face.

"Fine," Helen answered, her voice in a sing-song tone that only confused Jackson further. Helen rolled her eyes and looked rather put out for a moment as she reached for her glass and took a sip.

There was something about the way she seemed so aggravated by his lack of response to her that Jackson could only assume she was play acting. He pulled in a deep breath and tried to focus on the food before him.

It took every ounce of his resolve not to look at her and let her know he was onto what she was doing. If she was going to act out, then he would refuse to let it bother him.

To anyone else, it was clear Helen would have appeared to be touched in the head. But knowing what Jackson knew, it made for lighthearted entertainment, and he couldn't help but wonder just how far Helen was willing to take her scheme.

“I seem to have lost my appetite,” Jackson said, pushing his plate aside. He stretched his hand to Helen. “Would you care to take a stroll with me? Perhaps the fresh air will sooth you a bit.”

“That would be lovely,” Helen answered, dropping her napkin as her eyes lingered on her plate of food. Jackson wondered if she were just as hungry as he was, but the food could wait. Jackson needed fresh air to clear his thoughts. Helen’s floral scent was intoxicating, and with each breath he took, he found himself struggling to keep his hands off her.

The fresh air was a delight and small reprieve from the torture. He offered his arm to Helen and led her around the side of the manor. The birds were singing their happy songs, and for the first time in a long time, Jackson enjoyed their melody. The urge to shoo them away was dormant within him.

“Tell me about the blue... the blue... oh what was that called,” Helen said, snapping her fingers as if the clicking would improve her memory.

“Blue bird?” Jackson interjected. Helen’s eyebrows scrunched the bridge of her nose. She looked delightful in her frantic frustration.

“No, I would know that one. You mentioned it just this morning,” Helen said. “Surely you must remember what the name of the bird was.”

Jackson didn’t have to guess the name; he knew what Helen was hunting for, but he wasn’t going to cave. One way or another, he’d get her to say the name.

“We talked about a lot of birds,” Jackson replied as Helen’s peacock feathers rustled wildly, distracting Helen from the conversation.

“Perhaps wearing that out here, you were hoping to fly away?” Jackson teased as he helped Helen remove the feathers.

“Are you mocking me?” Helen asked, horror etched into her face.

“I believe you do that well enough yourself,” he answered.

“Why I have never!” Helen snapped as she stepped back from Jackson. He could see a flicker of hurt in her gaze that rattled him. He hadn’t meant to be mean or rude to her, but surely, she must have known she was a walking contradiction.

“Helen, wait,” Jackson said, snatching her by the arm as she turned to storm away. He stared at her and found himself aching for her. Deep within her, he could see the same desire tearing through her. Licking his dry lips, Jackson paused, desperate for the words to keep Helen by his side. The anger on her face returned as Jackson’s grip tightened, refusing to let her go.

CHAPTER 9



*H*elen's heart quickened as she stared deep into Jackson's eyes. A burning desire flickering in Jackson's gaze unnerved her.

"Why? So you can continue to insult me?" Helen asked, anger tainting her tone. She pulled her arm from Jackson's grip and remained planted where she stood. Helen hadn't realized Jackson's true height until her neck started to ache from being tilted upward.

She couldn't help but find it adorable the way breeze played with the tips of his hair around his neck. His tousled hair reminded Helen of a man who had just come home from sea. Jackson stepped closer, refusing to allow Helen any space. She swallowed hard and glared at him, daring Jackson to show his true colors for her.

Jackson's lips twitched, and Helen watched as he warred with himself. She held her breath, waiting for him to say something, anything.

"Well?" Helen said, breaking the silence between them. "Do you have nothing to say for yourself?"

Frustration etched into his brow. Before Helen knew what was happening, Jackson lunged for her. He crushed his lips to hers and tickled her lips with his tongue. Helen didn't know whether to pull away or let herself enjoy the

moment. There was no time for Helen to think.

Instinct would take over, and the moment it did, she knew would be her moment of truth. Helen closed her eyes and pressed the palms of her hands to Jackson's chest. Through her fingertips she could feel his frantically beating heart. It matched her wild and errant beat.

Helen's ears burned as each thump of her heart echoed in her ears, drowning out all other sounds. The world could be falling apart, and she wouldn't have heard it. She had become far too wrapped up in Jackson's to care about anything else.

A little voice screamed for her to push him off and to run and hide in her room, but her body tingled as Jackson's kiss seeped deeper into her soul. It was as if he were speaking directly to her heart. Helen's hands drifted upward and slipped over Jackson's shoulders. Entangling her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck, she found herself pulling Jackson closer to her.

Helen caved to her desires as Jackson's arms ensnared her like a bear trap, holding her in place. Her kiss grew into a hunger she had never felt before. No longer did she want to push him aside, but instead, she needed him to be a part of her.

A clap of thunder rumbled overhead as the sky opened up. Buckets of water poured down on them. Helen didn't want to move. She didn't care that she was about to be standing in mud or whether she was going to catch a cold. She wanted to stay in that moment with Jackson for as long as she could.

Jackson pulled away, severing the bond they shared. His eyes remained locked on her. Helen felt exposed under his intense stare.

"We should get inside," Jackson suggested, his breath lingering on the air before her. Helen felt as if she were outside her own body watching the scene unfold. She bobbed her head in agreement but found herself unable to make

the decision to leave. Jackson stepped closer, forcing her to move back. Together they moved as one until Helen felt the prickly hedge digging into her back.

Her face scrunched from the pain. Jackson grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to the stone pillar. He leaned Helen against it and released his hands from her hips. Jackson planted one hand on each side of Helen's head. There was no escaping him; Jackson was everywhere. Helen tried to regain her breathing, but how could she when Jackson's hands roamed over her body, taunting her with his delicate touch.

"I..." Jackson said, brushing the back of his fingers across Helen's cheek. She pulled in quick bursts of air as he dropped his head. Helen watched as he tried to regain his composure. His breathing was just as erratic as hers, and there was a hint of distress rolling off him. Helen didn't know what to say or do. How was she supposed to comfort a man like Jackson? She barely even knew him.

She cupped her hands to his face and drew his head up to meet her gaze. Pain mingled with regret as the desire burning in Jackson's eyes looked as if he were in hell and not heaven. Helen didn't know what to make of it. She felt pity for Jackson, and she found herself wanting to remove the hurt and scars that he bared.

"What?" Helen asked, her tone as soothing as a babbling brook as the rain poured down, drenching her from head to toe. Jackson balled his hands into fists and shoved off of the pillar.

"I shouldn't have done that," he said, turning his back to her as he ran his fingers through his hair. "I had no right to."

Helen watched as Jackson's shoulders slumped with disappointment. Lightning flashed overhead as the thunder boomed so loud it rattled Helen.

“You should get inside before you catch your death,” he suggested as he turned on his heel and started back to the manor.

No, that is not how this is going to end.

“Jackson, don’t go,” Helen pleaded, reaching out a hand to him. Jackson stopped but didn’t turn to face her.

“I believe that is the first time you’ve ever called me by my first name,” Jackson observed as he glanced over his shoulder. “Usually, you call me by my title or common greeting, but never my name.”

“Surely you are mistaken,” Helen argued as she inched closer to him. She didn’t want him to leave sulking or distressed, not when she could do something to improve his mood.

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time,” Jackson considered as he slowly turned his attention back to the door. Overcome with the need to have him, Helen rushed before him, stood in his direct path, and molded her hands to his face. She pulled him to her and crushed her lips to his.

Jackson’s lips were hard and unmoving. They weren’t like they had been only moments before. Helen realized she was going to have to coax him, just as he had done to her.

Teasing the tip of her tongue to Jackson’s mouth, she hoped he would be as accommodating as she had been. When he didn’t yield to her, Helen let her hands roam. She wanted him to be okay and to not leave her wanting him.

Grazing her fingers over his chest, Jackson shifted. Tenderness returned to him, and she found his mouth moving with hers. A low moan escaped from Jackson, and in a flash, he had her under the awning and out of the rain.

Pinned against the wall, Helen gave her logical mind over to her desires. If there was one thing she could attest, it was the fact that Jackson’s kiss

consumed her. Helen gasped and pulled her head back, trying to gulp the air. She found a smile on her pulsing lips as Jackson's hunger grew. He traced the line of her jaw with kisses and trailed down her neck with his tongue.

Little bumps rose all over her skin as she clawed at him to kiss her again. Jackson didn't disappoint. He crushed his lips once more to hers as his fingertips slipped down the length of her spine. Helen felt a light tug but thought nothing of it. It was only when the pressure in her chest ceased that she realized Jackson had undone her bodice.

"I want you," he growled in her ear. His teeth grazed over her earlobe as his voice was buttery and inviting.

"Am I not your wife?" Helen whispered as she ran her fingers through his wet hair.

"That is not what I mean," Jackson replied as he met her gaze.

"Then what more consent do you want from me? I'm here; I'm willing," Helen said as she found her voice cracking. Jackson arched his eyebrow suspiciously as if questioning Helen's resolve.

"No," Jackson said; frustration laced the word with poison, stinging Helen. "Not like this."

Jackson flexed his jaw as he brushed his fingertips over Helen's jaw and down the length of her neck. The trail Jackson left lingered long after he had dropped his hand.

"I want..." Jackson started before shaking the thought away. "I'll not touch you again unless you want me to."

Stunned, Helen watched as Jackson stood upright, turned, and walked to the side of the garden. The rejection stung her more than she expected. Her mind skipped through the last five minutes, replaying the scene over her mind.

What am I doing?

Helen shoved off the wall, trying to remain upright as she sorted herself out. Jackson's kiss was far more potent than she could have dreamed. Brushing her fingers over her lips, Helen paced the length of the awning as the water poured down and flooded the courtyard.

I don't want Jackson. I'm not supposed to be throwing myself at him.

So why did I? Why couldn't I just let him walk away? Why did I stop him?

And that kiss.

Helen couldn't help but swoon. Everything she set out to do was turning to embers and ash. She had thought her outfits would repel and that her demeanor would be enough to turn him away, yet the kiss changed everything.

"I've got to see Serena. Maybe she might have an idea as to what I should do next," Helen decided as she fiddled with the tips of her fingernails.

Helen marched back inside and stopped the moment she spotted Theresa in the foyer. Her heart stopped.

Not now. She can't see me like this. Theresa will think I've gone mad.

"Helen?" Theresa's voice drifted through the hallway. Out of places to hide, or time to flee, Helen stood before her sister. Embarrassment rushed through her as Theresa approached. Theresa's judgmental gaze drifted over Helen like a dark cloud.

"What on earth are you wearing? Are those men's trousers? Does your husband know you walk around in such a manner? This is a disgrace," Theresa scolded, her tone getting higher and higher.

With water dripping off the tips of her hair, Helen flashed a bright smile at

Theresa, whipped the soggy strands off her shoulder, and marched over to her sister.

“So happy you’ve come,” Helen said through gritted teeth as her eyes shot around, hunting for Jackson. “Why have you come?”

“I’ll not speak to you until you are in proper attire. Seriously, Helen, what are you thinking? Father would be furious to see you like this. It would send him to the grave for certain.”

“Then perhaps we should invite him over,” Helen teased, trying to give her sister a hug, only to have Theresa pull away.

“Helen,” Theresa rebuked.

“Fine, I’ll go change,” Helen relented. “I’ll have the servants bring you some tea while you wait.”

“Oh, don’t bother,” Theresa said, waving her hand. “I came to ensure my sister was doing well. I see that you are alive. Although as to the state of your mind, that’s questionable.”

Helen couldn’t disagree with that. Her thoughts still lingered on Jackson and his kiss. Heat rushed through her just thinking about it, and she tried not to look so suspicious to Theresa.

“Also, there’s the matter of dinner,” Theresa continued, pulling out an invitation from her purse. “Devlin and I would like for you to join us for an evening.”

“Thank you,” Helen said, taking the paper from Theresa.

Theresa arched her eyebrow and gave Helen a once over. “So long as you wear something a bit more modern. I’ll not entertain you looking as you do.”

“I’m sure I can find something that will please you,” Helen replied with a

smirk.

“I would hope so,” Theresa said, rolling her eyes as she turned and walked out. Helen let out a heavy sigh of relief. She had thought Theresa would have a different reaction, one of a more conventional rationality, but Helen could see the amusement in Theresa’s gaze and knew her sister would never gossip about what she saw.

Flustered, Helen started for the stairs and climbed them slowly. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess, and seeing Theresa only added to the confusion already swirling inside her head. Coming to the top of the steps, Helen turned to her room. In the corner of her eye, she noticed movement and stopped. Turning, she spied through the cracked door. Helen’s heart skipped and dropped into her stomach.

Helen knew she should turn away, but she found herself compelled to watch Jackson peel the sopping wet shirt off his body. Desire flooded through her as her sight caught up with her touch. Her fingers tingled as she craved to touch him once again.

She gasped and stepped back as her eyes met Jackson’s. He stood like a gladiator, ready for the challenge. Her heart pounded against her chest as she warred between going to him and leaving. Startled by a servant passing by, Helen dropped her eyes from Jackson and rushed to her room. Closing the door behind her, Helen tried to regain her breathing.

“This can’t be happening. I’m not supposed to be feeling anything for that man. Oh God, what is going on here? I’ve got to talk to Serena. She’ll be able to help me sort all this out. Surely, she’ll know what to do. And what of Theresa? She saw me like this,” Helen glanced to the mirror and was horrified by what she saw. The style she had put her hair in was ruined due to the storm, and now, it was a huge, knotted mess.

She cupped her hand over her mouth as she noticed her bodice dangled off her shoulders. She had forgotten Jackson had unfastened it.

“Theresa saw me like this...” Helen’s chest tightened as panic rippled through her. She wandered to the vanity table and plopped down into the seat. “Maybe this will be a good thing? Maybe she’ll talk to father and get this marriage annulled.”

But is that what I truly want?

CHAPTER 10



The morning air was invigorating. Jackson sucked in a deep breath to help clear out the cobwebs of his mind. He'd been up all night thinking of Helen and the way she felt pressed against his body. Shivers raced throughout his body as Jackson drove the spade into the soil.

In the back of his mind, he couldn't shake the feeling someone was watching him. Turning his head slowly, he glanced over to notice Helen stepping out of the side door. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. Helen was, as usual, outrageously dressed. She was wearing far too many layers for the time of year it was. She swung her arms as she walked around to the other side of the manor.

Curious, Jackson rose and dusted his hands off onto his pants. Craning his neck, he looked around the corner of the hedge to find Helen skipping through the grass. Her dress kicked up just enough for Jackson to see her ankle. He rubbed his eyes, and hoped that by the time he opened them, the desire swelling within him would cease. There was no way he was going to allow his emotions to take over like they had the day before.

Pulling in a deep breath to steady himself, Jackson opened his eyes. Little bursts of color filled his vision. Just as quickly as they appeared, they vanished and left Jackson staring wide-eyed at Helen. Her head was tilted to

one side, and she had her hands planted firmly on her hips. She looked like an old maid with the way the cap covered her hair. Jackson couldn't help but get the impression she was trying to dissuade him from approaching her.

He nodded politely and dropped his eyes to retreat from her threatening gaze. She had every right to be angry with him, and he knew it. A part of him wished the kiss never happened—that he had better control over his actions. But at the same time, he knew deep down, he wouldn't have changed a thing. Kissing Helen was like sipping on honey straight from the comb. His arms ached to hold her just as much as his lips yearned to brush against her silky flesh.

Jackson inhaled, wishing he was inhaling her sweet floral aroma. His chest tightened and his muscles went rigid the moment he heard a scream.

Helen.

Bolting around the hedge, Jackson spied Helen swatting the air. A low buzzing perked his ears, and he realized what had happened.

“Take off your dress,” Jackson ordered.

“Have you lost your mind?” Helen grumbled as the bees darted around her and landed on her dress. “Just get them off.”

“They're attracted to the colors,” Jackson explained as he tried to clear away the bees, only to have more show up.

“Oh, ouch,” Helen whimpered. Jackson didn't have time to argue with her. He started for the strings on her back, and grabbing the blade from his boot, he cut through the bindings. The bodice dropped to Helen's feet as Jackson made quick work of the skirt.

Grabbing Helen, he pulled her to him and scooped her up into his arms. Jackson's chest tightened as Helen's arms tightened around his neck. He had

made a promise not to touch her, but seeing her in nothing but her shift aroused him. The thin fabric left nothing to his imagination. He saw how perky her nipples were and wished to suckle from them. He wanted to race Helen up into his room and have his way with her.

Helen's tears shattered Jackson's fantasies in an instant. He rushed her into his study and sat her on the couch before the fire. Helen shivered as tears streamed down her cheeks. The sight of her caused his heart to ache.

"Are you all right?" Jackson finally asked as he pulled his eyes off Helen's body. "Did you get stung? Do I need to send for a physician?"

Helen didn't say a word and merely shook her head as she stared at him. Jackson pursed his lips together, fighting against his desire to help her and the lust threatening to consume him. He balled his hands into tight fists and released them.

"May I look at you?" he asked. Helen swallowed hard as Jackson's expression softened. "We need to make sure that there are none still on you and that the stingers are out."

"I don't even know how that happened," Helen said, breaking her silence. Her voice was muffled and quiet. Jackson moved slowly and deliberately around Helen, inspecting her perfect skin for any imperfections. It took all his willpower not to reach out and touch her. Even when he had to shift her hair, he did it as delicately as he could.

"Bees truly are extraordinary if you study them," Jackson said, trying to keep his thoughts as pure as he could, but seeing Helen so vulnerable made him stronger.

"I'm sure they are," Helen snapped. "But why did they attack?"

Jackson made a full circle around Helen and found himself relieved to find no

evidence of the bees. Her skin was as smooth and delectable as ever. He drew his eyes to meet Helen's. So entranced by her, he lifted his hand to brush away the tears from her face before restraining himself. Jackson dropped his hand and cleared his throat.

"I don't think they did it on purpose," Jackson answered. "From what I gathered, they were attracted to your outfit. Perhaps the bright colors of that dress blinded them, or they were just so enamored by your presence, they had to come and see you."

"Don't patronize me," Helen said and curled her arms around her chest.

"I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing," Jackson answered as the door creaked open.

"Close the door and wait there," Jackson's voice boomed through the room and startled Helen. He arched his eyebrow, daring the servant to enter after such a command. The last thing he wanted was for Helen to be seen by wandering eyes.

"Am I not allowed to get dressed?" Helen asked as she started for the door. Jackson stepped before her and glanced at her shift.

"Do you really want to walk out of here in what you are wearing?" he asked bluntly.

Helen pressed her lips into a tight line as her cheeks flushed a bright red. She dropped her eyes from his and gasped. Finally realizing why she was so cold, Helen tightened her arms around herself as if trying to hold her broken bits in place.

"Stay here," Jackson ordered. "I'll have the servants bring you something."

"Thank you," Helen said in such a small voice that Jackson couldn't help but wonder if he heard her correctly. He walked over to the door and pulled it

open just enough to get his message out.

“Fetch the Duchess a dress from her wardrobe, and be quick about it,” Jackson ordered through the sliver of space.

“Right away,” the servant said. Jackson closed the door, sealing himself in the room with Helen. Knowing that he was alone with her, thrilled him. It didn’t help knowing he could easily drape her over the couch and make her his. Jackson shook the fantasy from his thoughts and kept his distance from her.

“Your new outfit will be here momentarily. Would you like it if I started a fire for you?” Jackson asked, praying she’d decline, so he wouldn’t be enchanted by her floral scent.

“I should probably thank you,” Helen mumbled as Jackson kept his eyes on her. “For saving me from the bees. Although, your means of saving me seem to have put me in a disadvantage.”

“Please explain,” Jackson said with a huff. If there was anyone in the room who was put out, it certainly wasn’t Helen.

“You undressed me in front of all the servants,” Helen snapped, throwing her arm up with frustration.

“Tell me, would you rather be soaked to the bone right now? I could have just as easily thrown you into the fountain. Then your dress would be ruined, and you’d still be in this situation,” Jackson suggested.

“Well, if those are my only options, then it would seem no matter what happened, you’d get me here like this and alone with you,” Helen observed. The idea made Jackson’s lips curl at the corners. The way she spoke made him sound as if he had planned the whole encounter.

“Trust me,” Jackson said, inching closer to her, “I have thought a great deal

about how I would seduce you and all the various ways I could undress you. However, I was not equipped with such an imagination as to have bees come attack. And besides, there was no way for me to tell if the bees would cause adverse affects on you. I've seen some people swell up and die from such things."

Helen's eyes widened, and at that moment, the servant knocked. Jackson gave a sharp nod before turning to the door. He opened it as before and took the garments from the servant's hands.

"Do you need help dressing?" Jackson asked as he sat the articles of clothing on the desk. He stole a glimpse at Helen.

"Don't you think you've done enough for me for one day?" Helen asked as she grabbed the clothes and used them to shield her body from his wandering eyes.

Jackson bobbed his head and let out a heavy sigh. In the corner of his eye, he spotted the cardinal perched on the branch outside the bay windows. Jealousy and envy jabbed at him.

"Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be a bird," he mumbled. Helen turned to look and shrugged.

"Of course, you'd pick a robin to admire," Helen huffed.

"That's not a robin; it's a cardinal," Jackson corrected without taking his eyes off the bird. He felt the heat rolling off Helen's body as she drew closer to him. Jackson wanted to lose himself, just for a moment.

"It is not; cardinals are far brighter, and they are stuck up birds. That one doesn't seem to have the regal demeanor it takes to be a cardinal," Helen argued.

"Stuck up birds? I never heard such a thing," Jackson said with a snooty huff.

“Birds are merely birds, each designed to catch the eye.”

“And I suppose you’d say a flower is just a flower too, wouldn’t you?” Helen asked, her tone a bit defensive.

“Yes,” Jackson answered plainly. “There is nothing special between one flower and another, just as there is nothing remarkable about one bird from another.”

“And you call yourself a bird watcher,” Helen said with a snort.

“I enjoy watching the creatures and marveling at the way they can take flight. How they seem to see everything, and no one pays them any heed. Sure, there are the crows and blackbirds of the fields that one should be mindful of. But as far as the others...” Jackson let out a sigh as he pressed his fingers to the glass. “They are beautiful creatures worth admiring from a distance.”

Jackson turned to face Helen and noticed that her embarrassment had been replaced by bewilderment. She stared at him with a sort of curiosity that reminded him of the way the jurors looked at the trial. Jackson’s heart stopped a moment as he felt her eyes bore into him.

“I expect to see you for dinner. I had thought to have it out on the terrace, but seeing as how I think we’ve both had enough fresh air for the time being, I’ll have it changed to the dining hall,” Jackson determined as he stole one last glimpse at Helen. He tried to sear the memory into his head as he stepped back from her.

“I’ll see that no one enters until you have left,” Jackson continued as he marched out of the room. He pulled in a long, deep breath as he closed the door behind him. Servants whispered to themselves as they rushed by, giving Jackson sideways glances. It was one thing to have the servants gossiping over Helen’s choice of clothing, but to have them chatting about him, he wouldn’t tolerate. But what was he to expect? He did after all undress Helen

in a most unusual manner. And no matter how Jackson tried to convince himself that what he did was noble, he knew he had enjoyed every minute—although, he'd never consciously admit that to Helen.

A smirk tugged on his lips as he waited for Helen to exit the study. He shifted his attention to the clock and leaned against the door frame, relishing in the memory. The moment the doorknob clicked, Jackson stood up and straightened himself. Helen walked out of the study with her chin up and eyes locked on the stairwell.

“Will I see you at dinner?” Jackson asked as Helen walked by him without even a sideways glance. Helen stopped.

“Don't you think you've seen enough of me for one day?” Helen shot back.

“Not even close to enough,” Jackson said without hesitating. Helen whipped her head and glared at Jackson. Her eyes were full of embarrassment and anger. He wasn't sure if her ire was directed at him or herself. Either way, he found it adorable the way her nose scrunched when she was flustered.

“Fine then,” Helen said. “I'll see you at dinner and not a moment sooner.”

“Then I will take my leave,” Jackson said, bowing to her. Helen stormed to the steps and climbed up them as quickly as she could without running.

“Is the Lady well?” one of the servants asked. Jackson glanced at the servant.

“As well as she's ever been,” Jackson answered. “Although, who can say for sure? I've never met a more fickle and confusing woman before.”

“I take it Your Grace hasn't met very many women then,” the servant said in a hushed tone, regretting having ever spoken up.

“I've met my fair share, but none of them can hold a candle to her,” Jackson confessed as he glanced to the second story to catch Helen as she reached the

top step. She glanced at him a moment, but a moment was all Jackson needed to send his heart soaring.

CHAPTER 11



“O ohh... Why does he have to be so infuriating?” Helen huffed as she paced the length of her room. She’d been in there for hours, yet the embarrassment still hurt. There was no way she was going to be able to walk out that door and face Jackson. Her heart skipped as she ran her fingers through her hair. The horror on the servants’ faces burned her mind. She shook her head, realizing the whole morning had been ruined. There was no way she’d step one foot out of her bedroom door. The whole purpose of wearing that hideous dress was to turn Jackson off.

“Why does nothing work with him?” Helen asked the reflection in the mirror. Tears of embarrassment streamed down her cheeks. Although, she couldn’t help but feel grateful too. Never in her whole life had she been swarmed by so many bees. There was one time when she was younger that a handful of bees went after her tart at a picnic with her father. A few were easy to manage, but the whole hive? She closed her eyes and shivered as she saw the cloud of stingers all vying to get to her. If it hadn’t been for Jackson’s quick thinking, she didn’t know what would have happened.

“He saved me,” she mumbled as her eyes grew wide. “Why would he do that? He wasn’t supposed to do that.”

A knock from the door caused her blood to run cold. She wasn’t ready to face

anyone. For a moment she thought of remaining silent and hoping whoever was at the door would go away.

“Please leave,” Helen said. “I wish to be alone at the moment.”

The door opened anyway, and in walked Jackson. Helen’s body tingled as she darted to hide behind the changing screen in the corner of her room. She dropped her head and kept her eye trained on the doorway through the slant between the panels of the screen.

“Come to gloat?” Helen asked.

“I’ve come to check on you,” Jackson said as he stood at her door as straight as a board.

“Well, I’m fine,” Helen hissed as she fought back the tears that threatened to come pouring out of her. She didn’t know why she wanted to cry, only that the need to do so was overwhelming.

“I wanted to inform you that I’ll be leaving for the day,” Jackson said in a cool tone. Helen couldn’t help but notice that there was no change in the way he spoke to her. It was as if the whole episode had never happened. “And I’m not sure when I will be back.”

“You’ve never announced your departure before,” Helen observed. “Why have you started now?”

Jackson shifted his weight and cupped his hands behind his back. Giving a little shrug, Jackson cocked his head and stared directly at Helen through the slants of the panel.

“You’ve experienced a traumatic event this morning,” Jackson explained. “I wanted to make sure that you were well before I departed. The last thing I want is to receive a letter stating my wife is dead due to an unseen stinger.”

“I wish I could die,” Helen mumbled, more to herself than to Jackson.

“Never say such things in my presence,” Jackson scolded. Helen’s heart stopped. She’d never heard such conviction come from him before, and it peaked her curiosity. “Death is not something to jest about.”

“Forgive me,” Helen said in all sincerity. “It’s just, I don’t think I’ve ever been so humiliated in all my life.”

Jackson arched his eyebrow and tilted his head. “I find that hard to believe.”

The pity and remorse that embedded into her being seemed to have snapped off like a dead branch. Helen folded her arms over her chest and stepped out from behind the changing screen.

“I beg your pardon,” she growled as she glared at Jackson. “How dare you presume to know anything about me.”

“Come now, you can’t seriously make me believe that what happened this morning embarrassed you,” Jackson said, dropping his hands to his side.

“Well, it did,” Helen huffed.

“How is that even possible when you’ve done nothing for the past several weeks but embarrass yourself?” Jackson pointed out. “Those dresses and wild outfits have the whole manor buzzing with whispers and gossip. And just when I think I’ve got the servants to stop, you do something to get them going again. No,” Jackson shook his head, “I don’t believe what you feel is embarrassment. You’ve proved to be a far more courageous woman than you let on.”

Helen’s mouth dropped as she studied Jackson, looking for some hint that he was toying with her or using her for his own amusement. But no matter how she eyed him, there were no cracks in his demeanor. Shame trickled through her as he lifted his chin and eyed her.

“You have an issue with the outfits I wear?” Helen asked, trying to summon the anger she needed to sound intimidating—only her tone was more quizzical than stern.

“If I am to be honest with you, I care not about fashion or trends. Do what you will in that regard. But don’t think for one moment that you are innocent in this matter. What happened this morning was due to your choices. Had you been wearing something a bit more appropriate for outside activities, then I wouldn’t have had to cut the dress off of you,” Jackson said.

Helen opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Jackson was right, but there was no way Helen would admit that out loud. She folded her arms over her chest and pursed her lips into a tight line.

“You humiliated me,” Helen finally stated.

“I did nothing of the sort,” Jackson argued. “If anything, I saved you from a terrible fate.”

“You cut the dress from me and left me in my shift,” Helen said, her voice bending with emotion as the tears on her cheeks betrayed her. “Everyone saw me. And we both know how word spreads. The whole ton will have heard of it by midday. How am I going to face anyone?”

Jackson let out a heavy sigh as the stern expression on his face shifted. “By holding your head up high and not caring what others think or say about you. I’ll do what I can to stop the rumors spreading through the manor, but I would suggest that you show a bit more caution when it comes to your wardrobe. The layers that you put on may have saved you from the stings, but you’re lucky those bees didn’t get inside the layers.”

“Easy for you to say,” Helen said, turning her back to Jackson. “You have no idea what it’s like to be the talk of the ton. Everyone will be whispering behind my back and mocking me.”

“Believe me when I say that there is nothing you can do to change the past. What’s done is done. All you can do is move forward with humility and grace. Sure, others will say what they will, and you can’t stop them from doing so. What you can do, though, is show them that their words have no effect on you,” Jackson told her. Helen could feel Jackson’s presence behind her grow closer, and while he hadn’t touched her, she could still feel where his arms had curled around her body when he brought her inside.

“Now, if you will excuse me,” Jackson said. Helen’s attention lingered on Jackson’s reflection in the window as he bowed to her. “I do have matters to attend to today. I’ll be gone for the day. I’m hoping that when I return, the servants will report to me that you have indeed left the confinements of your room.”

“Not likely,” Helen uttered as she folded her arms over her shoulders.

“That’s your choice,” Jackson replied. Helen couldn’t help but notice the tinge of pain and disappointment in Jackson’s tone as he rose. “You do as you please. I just thought that someone who is courageous enough to push the boundaries of fashion would be used to ridicule and embarrassment. Perhaps you aren’t as strong of character as I had thought.”

Helen whipped around only to catch the door closing behind Jackson. Frustration and irritation coursed through her veins. She stormed over to the door, ready to call out to Jackson and rebuke him for saying such things to her. Yet, as her hand rested on the doorknob, Helen couldn’t bring herself to open the bedroom door. Jackson’s words stung especially since Helen realized he was right about her.

She stumbled away from the door and collapsed on the bed. The tears poured out of her as she clung to the pillow, soaking it as she wept. All her plans to turn him away crumbled around her as she replayed the morning events. After she had cried herself out, Helen allowed the darkness to consume her.

At least in the darkness of sleep, she didn't have to face anyone.

The lark's cry aroused her from her sleep. Helen pulled herself off the pillow and glanced about her room. The sun had drifted across the sky. Helen didn't know how long she'd been out, but the day didn't seem so terrifying anymore. Wiping the crust from her eyes, she looked about the empty room. There was a heaviness that lingered around her as Jackson's words came back to haunt her.

"I'll show you just how strong a character I have," Helen huffed as she slipped off the bed and walked over to her wardrobe. All the wild dresses she had made to repel Jackson no longer interested her. She pushed those aside and reached for a silvery blue one that reminded her of snow at night. Dressing quickly, Helen steeled her nerves as she made the final adjustments to her hair.

"You think I won't face the servants; well, I'll show you," Helen proclaimed as she marched to the door with a new vigor. Helen pulled open the door and walked out into the hallway. It felt as if she'd never been in the manor before. Her eyes darted to and fro, wondering if there was anyone in the manor at all. With her nerves shot, she mustered what courage she could and walked down the steps into the foyer.

Helen's heart raced as she caught a glimpse of the servants dusting the pictures in the hallway. The servants immediately took notice and bowed to her without a word. Walking by them, Helen felt their eyes on her. It was like walking on shards of glass, but Helen was determined not to let them get to her.

"Has His Grace returned yet?" Helen asked one of the servants. The young girl with curly hair and a button nose shook her head.

"No, Your Grace, the Duke has not returned," she answered, daring to steal a

peek at Helen through her long lashes. “And may I say, that color suits you.”

Helen ran her hands over her skirt as if to double check that she was in fact wearing something. She wasn't sure if Jackson had put the servants up to complimenting her or if it was genuine. All Helen could do was give a nod and continue on down the hallway. It seemed as if the morning events were nothing but a dream. None of the servants whispered and snickered at her as she passed by them. They even seemed delighted to serve her a midday meal. But their treatment unnerved Helen.

“All right, that's it,” Helen huffed when the fourth servant had remarked on the dress she wore. Wagging her finger at the servant, Helen rolled her shoulders back.

“Madam?” the servant enquired, looking a bit disarmed and concerned. “Is there something the matter?”

“Yes,” Helen snapped. “Everyone here seems to have a bout of amnesia.”

The servant arched her eyebrow with confusion and glanced to a servant lingering in the corner of the room. “Madam?”

“What did the Duke order before he left this morning?” Helen asked, glaring at the servant. She didn't know if she should be angry with them or Jackson.

“He said nothing to me,” the servant vowed. “I swear it.”

“Calm yourself,” Helen said as she placed her hand on the servant's shoulder. “I'm not going to reprimand you. But ever since I stepped out of my room this afternoon, everyone seems to be extremely quiet whenever I'm in the room. Now tell me truthfully, what did he say to you?”

The servant glanced over her shoulder as if searching for permission to speak honestly. In the corner of Helen's eye, she spotted the footman nodding his head.

“The Duke gave instructions to keep our distance from you, Madam,” the servant announced. “To speak to you only when you spoke to us. He told us that the lady had a terrible headache and wished for the house to be quiet.”

“He said nothing of what happened this morning to you?” Helen asked as the icy barricade around her heart cracked. The servant shook her head.

“Something happened this morning?” the servant asked. Helen’s eyes widened as she studied the servant’s face. Hope flickered through Helen as she realized Jackson had shielded her from prying eyes. As she replayed the event, she felt weak. If she wasn’t sitting already, she would have toppled.

“No, nothing happened out of the ordinary,” Helen mumbled. She couldn’t tell if the servant was being truthful or if she was just being polite due to Jackson’s orders of not bringing up the matter.

“Is there anything else I may do for Madam?” the servant asked. Helen felt the walls closing in around her. She needed fresh air and room to think.

“Yes,” Helen answered. “Would you be so kind as to get the carriage ready for me? There’s someone I need to talk to, and it cannot wait another moment.”

CHAPTER 12



Jackson stepped into the billiard room and glanced around the room. The room was packed, and the chattering voices all mingled into one incoherent jumble. For a moment, Jackson wondered why he had even agreed to come. The place stunk of cigars and musk. It reminded him of his college days at Eton, and Jackson couldn't help but feel a prick of nostalgia as he walked between the tables, watching the people shooting pool.

For a brief moment, Jackson's heart seemed to lift, and the years melted away from him. The last time he'd come to such a place was when Will was alive. It was a happier time then, one that hadn't been tainted by sorrow and death. Jackson let the memories swirl about him but refused to let them touch him. He hadn't come to dredge up the past but to make amends with it.

"Well look what the cat dragged in. See, I told you, Liam, he'd show up." Ethan's voice boomed through the ruckus of other chatter. Everyone in the hall paused a moment to stop as Jackson made his way to the corner of the room. Ethan's face lit up, and he rushed over to Jackson with his arms wide open.

"Good to have you here," Liam said, waiting for his turn to embrace Jackson. "And here I thought married life would have shackled you to the manor."

“Well, I’m here, am I not?” Jackson said, embracing Liam.

“Are you?” Liam asked as he pulled away from Jackson. “From the look in your eye, you’re a million miles away. What did I tell you, Ethan? I told you marriage affects people. All the more reason why I shouldn’t be doing it.”

“What’s this all about now?” Jackson asked as he shifted his sights from Ethan to Liam.

“Turns out Ethan here is to make his announcement tonight,” Liam said with a lighthearted chuckle. “But I think our dear friend here is having reservations about it.”

“What do you expect?” Ethan said, matching Liam’s halfhearted laugh with one of his own. “I’ve been bamboozled, hoodwinked, blackmailed even.”

Jackson turned to Ethan and studied his friend’s face. There was no sign indicating to Jackson that Ethan was in distress over the matter, merely inconvenienced by it.

“I’m sure that you’ll grow to love your new wife,” Jackson said reassuringly. “Marriage is what you make of it.”

“Spoken from a true revolutionist,” Liam laughed. “Tell us then, oh wise sage, what’s the secret to your marriage? What have you done to smooth out the transition from bachelor to husband?”

Jackson rubbed the back of his neck and gave a shrug. He didn’t know what to tell them. After all, his marriage to Helen wasn’t as conventional as he thought it would be. But there was no denying the fact that he was falling hard for Helen the more he interacted with her. Her lighthearted spirit made his want to soar.

“In all honesty,” Jackson confessed after some time, “I’ve left my wife to her own devices.”

Ethan and Liam shared a glance before the whole hall was filled with their boisterous laughter. The others in the room all glared at them as if their dirty looks would silence them.

“Ignoring the problem will not make it go away,” Ethan observed, giving Jackson a pat on the back.

“Come now, everyone deals with such matters in their own way,” Liam teased. “And we all know Jackson has never been the kind of person to be forthright in any shape or manner. He’d rather stick his head in a book than face reality.”

“And I suppose your remedy is to take on a mistress as soon as possible,” Jackson retorted as he arched his eyebrow.

“Let’s just say, I’d rather have my head between a woman’s thighs than dusty old pages of boring literature,” Ethan said. “I think I read enough during my college days, wouldn’t you say?”

Liam shook his head as he walked around the table to re-rack the balls. “Please, we all know the only reason you passed at all was because of Will.”

Will’s name pricked Jackson. It felt as if the very warmth of his being drained out of him and left him frozen in place. Jackson couldn’t stop the memories from bombarding him. Will’s face flickered in his mind like bolts of lightning, growing ever more prominent and defined with each passing moment.

Somewhere in the back of Jackson’s mind, he was aware of some strange voice calling to him, luring him out of his dreary thoughts. Blinking the room back into existence, Jackson pulled in a deep breath.

“What was that?” Jackson mumbled as he tried to regain his senses. As the room steadied, Jackson’s eyes widened. It was as if he’d stepped back into

time. Standing before him was Gabriel, and for a moment, Jackson could have sworn he spotted Will standing beside him.

An icy chill raced up Jackson's spine as he focused on Gabriel. It had been at least a decade since he laid eyes on Gabriel. The last time he'd seen him was at the trial, and Gabriel was on the stand.

"It's been far too many years," Gabriel said, pulling a reluctant Jackson into his embrace. "My word, it's as if time has had no effect on you."

Mustering all the strength he could, Jackson tried to reciprocate Gabriel's welcoming embrace.

"The gang is back together," Liam shouted with glee.

Not all of us.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" Gabriel asked as he pulled away from Jackson. "You look well. Ethan and Liam here have been trying to convince me that you married. Is that true?"

"Yes," Jackson answered shortly as he tried to force a smile.

"Well?" Gabriel asked as he glanced at Ethan and Liam. "How is married life?"

"We were trying to pull wise advice out of him, but it's been futile. Jackson is just as tight lipped as he was during finals. Good luck trying to get anything out of him," Liam teased.

"All right," Ethan grumbled. "We're all reacquainted. Now are we going to play? Or are you going to squawk like old women in a quilting circle?"

Jackson pulled away from Gabriel and moved around the table to grab a stick. His head hurt as he fought back against the memories threatening to ensnare him. And as much as Jackson wanted to turn and leave the moment

he saw Gabriel, he didn't know when he'd next see Liam or Ethan again. Jackson was determined to make the best of the situation.

"What do you say we make this game a bit more interesting?" Jackson asked as he pulled forth a wad of bills from his pocket and placed a few on the rim of the table.

"Now that's the spirit," Ethan said. "What do you say we play teams? Gabriel, you're with Jackson."

"Now wait one moment," Liam argued, shaking his head as he grabbed his pool stick. "I think it's only fair that we make the teams a bit more evenly matched. I say let those who are to be married or who are married be on a team."

"Fine," Ethan grumbled as he moved over to Jackson. "I'm with Jackson. Gabriel, you're with Liam."

"Actually," Gabriel said, beaming with pride as he puffed his chest out. "I'd be on Jackson's team as well."

Ethan, Liam, and Jackson all shared the same bewildered expression as Gabriel snatched the pool stick from Jackson's hand. Out of all the people in their group, Jackson never expected Gabriel to be wed. He was far too wild and blazed his own path. Any woman that was desperate enough to wed Gabriel would need to be in a dire situation to agree to it.

"What's this?" Liam gawked as he leaned over the table. "I know we haven't been in contact in some time, but I thought you'd at least invite your old friends to the wedding."

Gabriel's cheeks burned a brighter red. "Well, nothing is official as of yet, but I've met someone who I think will make a great wife and mother."

"All right, what's the catch?" Liam asked as he leaned against the pool table.

“Oh, let me guess,” Ethan chimed in, “your father won’t give you the fortune unless you settle down; is that it?”

Gabriel glanced over to Jackson and flashed him a look that sent chills racing through him. Gabriel kept his face stoic as he listened intently to the conversation.

“Is that not the main reason why men like us marry?” Gabriel asked with a condescending chuckle. “Seems fathers get together just to concoct ways to get their sons properly placed. Not that marriage seems to stop the wild hair from growing. Am I right, Jackson?”

“Marriage is a sacred bond,” Jackson said as his thoughts shifted to Helen. “One that shouldn’t be taken lightly under any circumstance.”

“You can’t honestly tell us that you don’t have a mistress to keep your bed warm at night?” Gabriel urged.

“I would never disrespect my wife in such a manner,” Jackson vowed as he leaned down, steadied his hand, and shoved the pool stick so hard that the balls scattered in every direction. The sound of the balls clanking together soothed Jackson.

“And this is coming from a man who swore he’d never fall in love with his wife,” Ethan said and clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “What’s changed?”

“Nothing has changed,” Jackson lied. He knew all too well the moment Helen came into his life, it was like the sun had started to shine once more for him. He no longer dreaded the mornings, and the evenings were ever so entertaining that it pushed away the sorrow in his heart. Everything had changed, save for one thing; Jackson still had yet to consummate his marriage.

“You’re lying through your teeth,” Ethan said as he leaned down to take his shot. “But your life is as boring as it always has been. Gabriel, do tell of your latest escapades. Surely that will be far more entertaining.”

Jackson stood with the pool stick in hand as Liam stepped up to take his shot. His chest tightened as Gabriel rambled on about his newest adventures with women from Morocco and Spain.

“I’m telling you, women in different countries are something else,” Gabriel boasted as he leaned over the table. “They aren’t nearly as prudish as the women here.”

Jackson wanted to chuckle. There was nothing prudish about Helen. She was wild and free in every aspect. Jackson’s body yearned for her as he thought of their kiss in the garden—how her body molded to his despite the rain trying to divide them.

“Perhaps you just haven’t met the right woman yet,” Jackson suggested as he walked up to the table.

“Well, I must admit, there isn’t a single one who could compare to Margo,” Gabriel said with a heavy sigh. “But it’s not from my lack of trying.”

“Margo?” Jackson paused and stood straight as the name gonged through him like an earthquake. The image of a young woman in a purple dress with wild, brown hair that flowed down her shoulders popped into Jackson’s mind. “Marjorie Dobris?”

“You know of her?” Gabriel asked. The way Gabriel’s voice hitched a bit perked Jackson’s ears.

“We all do,” Ethan said, glancing at Liam. “Or did you forget that she and Will were to be married all those years ago?”

“That’s right,” Gabriel said with an awkward chuckle. “That completely

slipped my mind.”

Jackson’s lips tightened as he glared at Gabriel. He didn’t understand how Gabriel could forget such a monumental detail about Will. Then again, Jackson couldn’t begrudge Gabriel for forgetting. It wasn’t like Will had been Gabriel’s best friend and closest confidant.

“I ran into the Duchess just last month,” Gabriel mentioned, leaning back over the pool table, and he took his shot.

“She’s a duchess now, is she?” Jackson asked, trying to mask the shock in his voice.

“Margo married my cousin from the north,” Gabriel answered as he rose. “I went to their wedding. It was a small event really, nothing to balk over. Although I will say, she was surprised to see me there. You all should have seen her expression. It was as if she’d seen a ghost.”

Jackson’s body tingled as he tried to recall the memories he had shoved into the back of his mind. In an instant, Jackson could see Will standing before him in their room, beaming with pride as he showed off the ring meant for Margo.

“I’m going to marry her,” Will explained as Jackson admired the diamond studded gold engagement ring with a bright sapphire as the center piece. Will had commissioned the ring specifically for Margo, and Jackson had helped him with the design.

“She’s lucky to have you,” Jackson said, handing the ring back to Will.

“No, I’m the one who’s lucky here. Margo is my match in every way. I never thought I’d ever say that, but it’s true. She completes me, challenges me, and makes me want to be a better man.”

In the blink of an eye, the memory vanished, and it left a bad taste in

Jackson's mouth. He moved into position to take his shot, trying to block out the thoughts. No matter how much he tried, Jackson couldn't get his hands to be steady. Pulling back on the stick, Jackson released it, sending the balls popping over the railing of the pool table.

"Are you trying to make us lose?" Liam scolded.

"Someone must have slicked that part of the table," Jackson said as he rushed around the table to collect the cue ball off the ground.

"Or maybe something is distracting you," Ethan suggested. "Say, Helen?"

Jackson glared at Ethan as he handed him the ball. "I don't get distracted."

"Sure, you don't," Liam said sarcastically, patting Jackson on the shoulder. "But I am going to dock you for that shot."

"Tell me, Gabriel, did Margo seem happy when you saw her?" Jackson asked as he took his spot in the corner. Gabriel shrugged.

"I suppose," he answered. "Aren't all brides happy on their wedding day?"

"And did she say anything to you?" Jackson pressed as he tried not to think of what would have been like if Will had been the one to marry her.

Gabriel chuckled and shook his head. "Nothing more than pleasantries. Why do you ask?"

Jackson could feel Ethan and Liam's eyes on him, and he couldn't help but wonder why he agreed to come. If he had just stayed home, he wouldn't be feeling so out of sorts, nor would he be flooded with memories he wasn't ready to face.

"Do you not remember?" Jackson asked as he studied Gabriel. The expression on Gabriel's face was of confusion.

“What?” Gabriel asked, glancing at Ethan and Liam for the answer.

Ethan’s shoulders dropped as he let out a sigh. “Will was going to marry Margo.”

“That’s right,” Gabriel said completely oblivious. “But it seems all turned out for the best, don’t you think? Margo is now married off to my cousin whose wealth is far greater than Will’s. Then again, that could be the reason she looked so shocked to see me.”

“Turned out for the best?” Jackson growled as his grip tightened around the pool stick, threatening to snap it in two. “Will is dead. How is that for the best?”

“Easy,” Ethan said, placing his hand on Jackson’s shoulder as if that would be able to calm the storm brewing within Jackson. “I’m sure Gabriel didn’t mean anything by that, did you Gabe?”

“I’m just being honest,” Gabriel said.

“Do you have no respect for the dead?” Jackson snapped. Gabriel sat his pool stick on the table and stood straighter.

“What happened to Will was a tragedy, no one is denying that fact. But it’s been years since the incident that took his life. What was a girl like Margo supposed to do? Run to a nunnery? She made her choice to move on, and you should too.”

Jackson had heard enough. He shoved the stick over to Ethan and tugged on the hem of his jacket. All his anger festered within him, but Jackson remained cold and stoic. “Gentlemen, it was a pleasure to see you all again, but I believe I’ve out stayed my welcome.”

“Don’t be like that,” Ethan encouraged. “Surely you can’t find fault with Gabriel or Margo.”

“Gabriel is right,” Liam chimed in. “It was a long time ago, and people do change. And who knows, maybe it is for the best that Margo has found someone. You don’t know what she went through to find her happiness again.”

Don’t I though? Forgive me if I’m not as dismissive of the past as the lot of you seem to be.

“The hour is late, and as you all have been so keen to mock me, I do have a wife waiting for me at home,” Jackson said. “Liam, Ethan, it was a pleasure as always. Gabriel,” Jackson nodded once and started for the door.

“Don’t leave like this,” Gabriel urged as his fingers curled around Jackson’s arm, stopping him from moving forward. Jackson glared at Gabriel’s fingers encircling his arm. A shimmer of light caught his eye, and Jackson’s heart stopped. On Gabriel’s little finger, Jackson noticed a sapphire ring sparkling with bursts of light.

“At least stay for the rest of the game,” Gabriel pleaded.

“Where did you get that ring?” Jackson asked as he grabbed Gabriel’s hand before he could remove it.

“This old thing?” Gabriel answered as he flashed Jackson a smile. “I honestly don’t remember where I got it. I’ve had it for years.”

An icy tingle coursed through Jackson’s body, stealing every ounce of warmth from him. The air in the room felt thick and heavy. Jackson’s eyes flickered to the faces in the room as his suspicions ran amok within him.

“I believe it was a graduation gift from my father,” Gabriel answered as he pulled his hand out from Jackson’s grip.

“You didn’t graduate,” Jackson growled as his eyes narrowed.

“That’s right,” Ethan said, coming up around the other side of Gabriel. “You took off after the trial to travel and never finished your education.”

“I went back after a few months abroad,” Gabriel explained, his tone ever the more stern and cold. Gabriel glanced at Liam and Ethan with pitiful eyes and a sympathetic expression plastered on his face.

“Prove it,” Jackson snarled in a sharp, accusing tone.

“Well, I don’t have the papers with me here,” Gabriel said, chuckling as if that would be enough to dispel the ire and anger brewing within Jackson. “I thought this was supposed to be a happy gathering.”

“As did I,” Jackson agreed. “It would seem we were both mistaken about more than one thing it would seem.”

“Jackson, I know Will was your best friend, and I can’t even begin to imagine what you’ve gone through over the years,” Gabriel said in a sing-song tone that grated on Jackson’s nerves. “But don’t you think it’s time to bury the hatchet? He is gone, and we remain. And I know, he’d want us to be happy.”

Jackson pursed his lips into a tight line and turned to face Liam and Ethan. They shared the same pitiful look they had at the trial. It was one of sorrow mingled with pity.

“Good day, gentlemen,” Jackson said, and without another word, he charged for the doors.

The air swirled about him as he stepped out into the street. Jackson tried to regain his breathing but found his body unresponsive. There was just too much for him to take in. It was bad enough he had to endure Gabriel’s nonchalant manner over Will’s death, but Jackson was certain the ring Gabriel wore belonged to Will.

“Either I will bury the hatchet once and for all, or I will use it to bring forth proper justice.”

CHAPTER 13



“*I* just don’t know what to do anymore,” Helen said as she stared at her dark reflection in the teacup. No matter how many times she swirled the spoon about to scatter her image, when the tea finally settled, she still had the same despondent expression on her face. “Nothing I am doing is working.”

Helen didn’t know whether she should confide in Serena what had transpired earlier that day. The horror of it still lingered, and the last thing Helen wanted to do was admit Jackson was right. It was her fault the bees attacked and in turn, her fault she had been stripped down to practically nothing. Heat rushed through her as she tried not to think of how heroic Jackson had been. Any other man would have left her to be stung, but Jackson had put himself in danger and saved her from the vile creatures.

“Have you tried talking to yourself?” Serena asked, taking a sip of the tea.

“Yes,” Helen said exasperatedly. “I even do it when I don’t think he’s around just in case he shows up.”

“And what about your outfits?” Serena asked, only adding to Helen’s frustration.

“I’ve gone as far as wearing men’s clothing,” Helen said. “Nothing is working. It doesn’t matter what I do. Maybe this whole thing was a mistake,

and I should just give up.”

Serena sat her cup on the table and glared at Helen. “You’ll do no such thing. I’ve never once believed you to be a quitter. Who was it that charged through the mud after their ball had been bumped in croquet?”

Unamused, Helen glared at Serena. “You know I couldn’t let Theresa get away with such a move. She thought she could bump me out of the game, but I showed her.”

“Yes, you did. And what do you think would have happened that day if you simply threw your hands up?” Serena asked. Helen gave a little shrug as she turned her attention back to the brown liquid in her cup.

“I don’t know,” Helen answered dishearteningly. “But that has nothing to do with what I’m facing now. Jackson isn’t like other men. He’s witty and kind. I’ve never met another that will put up with my antics.”

“Speaking of which, how are things going?” Serena asked, her eyebrows arching with anticipation.

Helen pulled in a deep breath. “I’ve done everything I can think of to repel him and nothing. It’s like nothing bothers him. And I’m getting tired of keeping up the charade.”

“You can’t give up now,” Serena said. “You’ve said it yourself, he’s rude and arrogant.”

“I’m not so sure he is, anymore,” Helen confessed as she fiddled with the tips of her fingernails.”

“Don’t tell me you’re starting to like him?” Serena asked, eyes wide with shock. Helen didn’t say a word but merely gave Serena a little shrug.

“Well, if there’s one thing I have noticed, the man has no sense of humor,”

Helen said as she rose and started pacing the room. “No matter how wild the dress I made, or the style of my hair, the man hasn’t once cracked a smile or given me an odd expression. Not even when I had my hair made up like a bird’s nest. And by the way, it took forever to get the knots out of that one, and still, he showed no emotion.”

Serena’s eyes widened as she quickly cupped her hand to her mouth to cover her smile. “Wait, you did what?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Helen said, frustrated and waving her hand at Serena. “The point is, Jackson is cold. I doubt the man has a single funny bone in his body. You know, I haven’t even seen him smile? But I’m getting the impression there’s more to him. It’s like staring at the calmness of a lake, but when you jump in, it’s all turbulent and will pull you under.”

“That is a bit unusual, but we knew he was a strange one before you married him,” Serena pointed out. “Maybe he has smiled, and you just haven’t seen it. Who knows, he could be cracking up in his study wondering what he got himself into when he married you. For all you know, you could be on the verge of a separation.”

Helen shook her head. “I doubt it. Seriously, Serena, I am at my wits end. I don’t think there will be an annulment in my future, and I’ll be stuck with him forever.”

The thought of being with Jackson for the rest of her life was bittersweet. Helen couldn’t help but think of the way his lips moved. Even if there was no humor in Jackson’s life, it was clear there had to be some passion. No man kissed with such hunger tainting his lips unless there was something stirring deep within him.

“No,” Serena said, grabbing Helen by the shoulders. “We’ll figure out something. You can’t give up—not when you’ve come so far.”

“That’s just it; I don’t think there is anything I can do that will get him to agree to let me be,” Helen huffed.

“Have you thought of taking a lover?” Serena suggested. Appalled by Serena’s suggestion, Helen leaned back from her friend and glared at her.

“I would never do such a thing,” Helen snapped. “And I’m astonished that you would even suggest such an act. I don’t want to be banished as an adulteress. Besides, I could never do that, not to any man I marry. There’s still a sacred bond that is shared. And I, for one, would not want to anger God since I made the vow to Him as well.”

Serena’s face flushed from embarrassment as she sat upright and reached for her tea. “It was just a suggestion. And here I thought you were willing to do whatever it took to end your marriage.”

“There are limits to what I will do,” Helen said with such conviction that it rattled her. She never thought she held marriage in such high regards, yet to think of hurting Jackson in such a manner boiled her blood. “Let’s face it, there’s nothing I can do. I must admit defeat.”

“I never thought I’d ever take you for a fool, yet here I am stunned that you’re willing to give up so easily.”

“I’ve been married to Jackson for three months now,” Helen said. “You’d think he’d grow tired of my antics, not grow attached.”

Serena’s back went straight, and she paused mid-sip. “Excuse me? What makes you think he’s grown attached to you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Helen said, turning her attention to the window. She couldn’t help but wonder what Jackson was doing and if he was thinking of her as she thought of him. The idea put a smirk on her face.

“Oh no,” Serena said, tilting her head as her eyes narrowed. “Please don’t tell

me you are falling in love with your husband?”

“Don’t be silly,” Helen said. “Here I am pouring my heart out to you about my plight, and you think I’m in love? Don’t you know the difference between irritation and infatuation?”

Serena arched a suspicious eyebrow and gave a little shrug. “Let’s just say, I’ve never seen you swoon over a man before. There’s been a few times where one of your suitors has piqued your interest, but never has one ensnared your thoughts.”

“Jackson has not ensnared me,” Helen denied as she thought of the way his arms wrapped around her wet body, their kisses growing ever more passionate. The thought was cut short the moment she closed her eyes and saw the swarm of bees buzzing around her.

“You can lie to me all you want, but sooner or later, you’re going to have to come to terms with your feelings about him,” Serena said. “But it makes sense now why you want to stop. You don’t want to leave him.”

“How many ways do I have to explain this to you?” Helen asked, feeling trapped with her irritation growing ever more fierce within her. “Jackson and I are not compatible in any shape or form. I doubt we have a single thing in common. And the only reason why we might was due to me trying to find a hobby that would irk him, only to find out he actually enjoys the hobby too.”

Serena leaned in closer. Helen could feel Serena’s eyes boring into her. “What hobby did you pick again?”

“Bird watching,” Helen answered. “Why?”

“Jackson likes bird watching? Fascinating,” she mumbled. “Who would have thought he’d enjoy such a pastime.”

Helen bobbed her head as she rose from the couch. Her body was far too

jittery to be stationary. She paced the room as she racked her mind, trying to come up with a solution to her problem. But Helen knew deep down Serena was right about one thing—Helen wasn't ready to give Jackson up. Out of all the men she could have been married to, he was the only one who would put up with her. He was the only one she knew would have come to her rescue and the only one who seemed unaffected by her choice of style.

Chewing on her lower lip, Helen's mind raced through all her interactions with Jackson. He was by far more than what she had thought him to be. Jackson was cordial. Never once did he scold or reprimand her. She had absolute freedom in the manor to do and say what she wanted without recourse. As far as her day-to-day life, she couldn't imagine a better life.

“Seems to me that you already know what you have to do,” Serena said as she stood and walked over to Helen. “But I must warn you, the longer you let this go on, the harder it will be for you to walk away.”

“I know,” Helen said with a sigh. There was no doubt she was torn. A huge part of her wanted freedom, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized that was precisely what she had already.

“Here's what you're going to do,” Serena decided. “The next time you are in a public setting, you're going to make a scene. Yes, people will question what is going on, but you must make it seem like Jackson is the one who had wronged you. Maybe by getting others to see flaws in Jackson, he will cave to your demands to save face.”

“And what of my reputation?” Helen asked. “I can't appear to be the neglectful wife. You know how Mrs. Crawly was with her husband, and after—the poor girl had to leave the country just to get remarried after her fallout. I don't want to have to leave the ton. This is my home. Everyone I know is here.”

Serena grabbed Helen's arms and clicked her tongue as if scolding Helen like a child. "I knew you didn't have it in you. You've talked big this whole time, but really, Helen, I think you thrive off drama."

"What?" Helen gasped, confused as to why Serena had suddenly turned on her.

"You heard me," Serena said. "I've been your friend for a long time, and all I've ever heard out of you is a sad woeful story told over and over again. And every time the going gets tough, you forfeit."

"I do not," Helen argued, stepping away from Serena. The betrayal in Serena's tone sliced through Helen like a hot knife through butter. She had come to Serena for help, not to be ridiculed.

"Really?" Serena said with a look of disbelief plastered on her face. "Tell me then, what did you do when your horse went lame? I haven't seen you on the back of a horse lately."

"Shadow was my favorite horse," Helen argued. "I just haven't found another like him."

"Excuses," Serena said, scoffing with a wave of her hand. "That's all I've heard this entire time. You've given me nothing but reasons why you should end this campaign against Jackson. Yet, just last week, you spoke of never giving up no matter how long it took. Something has changed between then and now. And while I have some suspicions as to what might have transpired, I'm going to say this. Where there is a will, there is a way, and I don't believe you have the will to go as far as you need to go. Jackson deserves a woman who will stand her ground. One that won't give up when times get hard. Someone with a bit more backbone."

Heat rushed through Helen as Serena gave her a nonchalant shrug and walked back over to the couch. Serena sat down without even a glance at Helen.

With her lip trembling, Helen's body felt numb. In all the years she'd known Serena, not once had she talked to her like that. It was as if Serena had become a completely different person.

"You're jealous," Helen snapped. "That's where this is coming from. You can't stand the fact that I'm married now, and you still have yet to find someone."

"Don't you dare turn this around on me," Serena said, keeping her eyes locked on her cup. "I'm not the one complaining about how she can't get rid of her husband. You know Helen, some of us aren't as fortunate as you are. We don't have suitors coming to call every day. Some of us don't have the luxury of dismissing husbands as easily as you do."

Stunned into silence, Helen stood a moment to take in Serena's words. They hurt more than she could imagine. Rolling her shoulders back, Helen started for the door. She stopped at the threshold and glanced over her shoulder at Serena.

"A friend would understand my plight," Helen said, "and help—not make me feel worse than what I already do. And as for Jackson, yes, he is my husband—one, may I remind you, who wasn't of my choosing. Unlike other girls, this marriage was forced on me. I didn't get to choose love. But you will be able to, and that's why you haven't picked a husband. You want the same thing I do, a spark that kindles the passions within. Don't you see? I won't get that, but you will, and yes, it eats at me."

Without another word, Helen marched out of the room. It took all her strength not to cry in the carriage on her way back to Stonewill manor. The scenery passed her by in a blur, and all she could think about was Jackson. She couldn't help but think about how different her life would be if she were in Serena's shoes and if she were to love her husband.

As the carriage pulled up to the front gates of the manor, Helen looked at the gray stone blocks that made up the home. A pang of regret and remorse shot through her as the carriage doors opened. Stonewill Manor was a place she had dreaded since she arrived, but the more she studied it, the more she realized the place wasn't a gilded cage as she thought it had been.

"Your Grace," the servant greeted as he extended his hand to her.

"Godrick," Helen said as she grabbed his hand and stepped out of the carriage, "has the Duke returned?"

"He arrived half an hour ago," Godrick answered. "I believe, if you're looking for him, he'll be in his study."

Helen moved swiftly up the steps and through the hallway. She made a beeline for the study as an eagerness swelled within her to see Jackson. Helen's nerves rattled as she stopped at the threshold of his study and peered into the room. Her heart skipped as she spotted Jackson leaning against the mantel with his head down. He looked so sad that it broke Helen's heart to see him in such a state. She found herself yearning to go to him and comfort him as she wondered what could have transpired to put him in such a state of being.

"Your Grace?" Helen spoke, and her hands trembled as she stole a step closer to the door. Jackson looked over his shoulder at her. For a moment, she thought she saw a shimmer of hope in his gaze. But just as soon as she saw it, the shimmer vanished. Jackson straightened himself and walked over to her. There was distance in his eyes as he approached her. With each step he took, her heart kept time. Jackson stopped at the threshold, his face cold and stern with no glimmer of light in his eyes at all.

"Not now," he said and shut the door, blocking himself from her sight. Helen stumbled back from the shock of the door in her face. Rejection flooded

through her, and the tears she had fought back for so long poured from her eyes.

Suddenly, Helen was well aware of the servants watching her. She'd felt their gazes on her before, but it was nothing compared to the humiliation she just experienced. Helen mustered what little courage she could and turned quickly. She darted to her room, wishing she had never got out of bed to begin with.

“First Serena, and now, Jackson? What have I done?” she wept as her tears soaked the pillow.

CHAPTER 14



Jackson stared deep into the flames, watching them lick and consume the wooden log, smoldering and popping with vigor. Guilt wreaked havoc on him as Helen's shocked expression haunted him.

I shouldn't have been so cross with her. Maybe after, I'll go and speak to her. And say what, exactly? It's not like I can tell her I'm starting to obsess over a murder that I was tried for years ago. I don't need her looking at me the way everyone else does.

Squeezing his hands into tight fists, Jackson was left to his troubling thoughts as they shifted back to Gabriel. Jackson knew he had seen the ring on Gabriel's finger before, but he just couldn't be certain of where. But what really irked him was how callous Gabriel was toward Will's memory. Jackson understood the need to move on, but a nagging in the pit of Jackson's stomach wouldn't ease. He needed to know more about Gabriel, more than what he could get out of the man after a few good stouts. No, Jackson needed a way into Gabriel's life without being intrusive. After all, if his suspicions about the man were false, he didn't want to lose a friend.

"You wanted to see me, Your Grace," Paxton said as he entered the room and bowed lowly. Jackson turned and moved over to him. Setting his hand on Paxton's shoulder, he let out a heavy sigh.

“I need to do something,” Jackson explained, “but I need it done with the utmost discretion.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Paxton said as he rose. Jackson studied the man’s face. Jackson had known Paxton his whole life, and he was the one servant Jackson knew that would keep his affairs secret.

“Is there some way you can get me information about someone?” Jackson asked as he moved back to the fire.

“And who are you inquiring about?” Paxton asked. In the corner of Jackson’s eye, he noticed the way Paxton shadow stretched across the floor of his study. It stretched out as it danced about the ground from the fire. Jackson flexed his jaw.

Theresa and Devlin’s party. I nearly forgot that was happening tonight. Perhaps that will mend Helen’s pride?

“Gabriel Westwood,” Jackson answered. Paxton’s eyes widened as he shook his head.

“Did Your Grace not go to Eton with him?” Paxton asked.

“Yes, but I want to reconnect and see if he has any businesses worth investing in,” Jackson explained through clenched teeth. Although he trusted Paxton, there were some secrets Jackson refused to let go. “You see, I just came across Gabriel again recently, and he mentioned he was to be married. I figured I’d gift him with an investment of sorts.”

“That’s very generous of you, Your Grace,” Paxton said. “I’ll look into it right away.”

“Also, I’d like to hear from others who know him, see if Mr. Westwood is a reputable man. A lot changes a man over time, and I need to be sure he is the same as I knew him before.”

“Of course,” Paxton agreed, bowing.

“And ensure you remain discreet. No word about this to anyone. I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise,” Jackson said. Paxton lowered himself once more before rushing out of the room. Jackson took a moment to compose himself. He knew there was no way Paxton would be able to round up any useful information in one night, yet he still felt jittery and unnerved.

“Your Grace,” Jackson heard Paxton’s voice rumble through the hall. Swallowing hard, Jackson knew he was going to have to face Helen sooner or later. As he stepped out of his study, Jackson’s eyes widened. Helen stood at the bottom steps in a lovely blue dress that reminded Jackson of the sky at twilight. Her golden locks were pulled up, exposing her slender neck. The mere sight of her caused all of Jackson’s plans to slip from his mind.

Helen’s attention shifted to him for a moment. He couldn’t help but notice the flicker of anger and hurt still burning in her gaze. Mustering his courage, Jackson walked to her.

“My sister is having a gathering tonight,” Helen said in a cold, emotionless manner. Jackson couldn’t help but feel a sting from her tone. She could have told him she loved him, and it would have still felt the same to him. “I already told her I’d go. I’ll be home later.”

“Give me a moment, and I’ll go with you,” Jackson replied, trying to find some way to make peace with her. He never considered how bright she felt until he stood in the shadow of her anger.

“You really don’t need to,” Helen said as she drew her silk smock around her bare shoulders. Helen paused a moment, admiring the fabric of the smock on her skin. She stole a glimpse in the mirror to find her entire ensemble matching. Her baby blue dress flowed around her ankles, and she knew it was one of the more conservative outfits she’d worn over the past few weeks.

In the corner of her eye, she noticed Jackson's gaze on her. It was clear he was assessing her outfit with approval. She couldn't help but feel a flush of pride coursing through her as she thought she noticed his lips twitching with a smile.

"I'm sure you have more important things to attend to. After all, we both know how much you despise balls. You'll be bored out of your mind if you come."

"Nonetheless," Jackson responded as he wagged his fingers for his jacket, "I'll join you. This will be our first social gathering since we have wed. I'm sure the whole ton will be talking."

"One more reason for you not to come," Helen argued as Jackson shoved his arms into the sleeves and straightened. "You hate gossip."

"I'd like to think my wife might have learned a lesson from earlier today about the value of lies," Jackson said as he glanced down at her. It was clear she wanted nothing to do with him. And he knew that she was right; he was going to hate every moment of the gathering. Still, he couldn't stand the thought of Helen being angry with him—not when he needed her rays of light and cheer to hold him back from his maddening thoughts.

"I never said I would be partaking in such at events," Helen replied as the doors swung open for them. "I merely stating the fact that social events are nothing but gossip centers."

"Still," Jackson said, extending his hand to her, "I haven't spent any time with you today, and I'm going."

The smirk on Helen's lips dropped as her brow hooded her eyes. "Fine. But don't think for a minute that I'll want to leave once we get there. I intend to stay all night."

A small part of Jackson wanted to smile as he watched Helen storm to the carriage and climb in. There was doubt she didn't approve, but Jackson would do anything to hear her laugh. It was the only thing that broke through his melancholy.

"What?" Helen asked as she glared at Jackson, and he realized he never dropped his eyes from her as he climbed in.

"You look stunning tonight," Jackson said, feeling a smile tug on his lips as Helen pretended not to like the complement.

"Thank you," she replied with a shrug as she smoothed the wrinkles from the skirt.

"I must admit, this one looks a bit more in style than the others you've worn," Jackson observed, hoping to keep the conversation going. As long as Helen answered him, he'd keep finding new things to say. The awkwardness in the carriage was killing him, and he knew there was only one thing he'd be able to do to ease the tension.

"Helen," Jackson said, as she deliberately tossed her head to the window to stare at anything but him, "I don't usually say this, but I am sorry."

Keeping her attention on the passing scenery, Helen's eyebrow twitched. "Do you even know why I'm mad at you?"

"I closed the door on you," Jackson said. Helen whipped her head around as her eyes burned.

"You think I haven't had a door slammed in my face before? I grew up with Theresa, who would do that to me as a child. So, no, Jackson, that isn't why I'm mad at you."

Jackson shifted in his seat. He couldn't recall any other misdeed he'd done to provoke her ire. "Well, if you are referring to this morning, I don't know

what to say. I wasn't the one wearing the dress that caused the bees to swarm. That, my dear, was all your doing. My hands are clean of that mess."

"That's not it either," Helen replied. "I came to your study because I needed you, and you didn't even give me the time of day. I got silence and rejection."

Jackson nodded somberly as he dropped his gaze from her. The guilt he felt rumbling inside of him intensified. "You're right. You came to me, and I pushed you away. That was rude. I don't even do that to friends, and it wasn't right of me to do that to you. But we are alone now, so what did you come to speak to me about?"

Irritated, Helen shook her head as the carriage stopped. Helen didn't wait for the footman before she reached for the handle and stepped out. Jackson scrambled to get out and go after Helen, but by the time he stepped out into the night, Helen had vanished into the sea of faces. He let out a heavy sigh as he glanced around at everyone. Helen was right, this was the last place he wanted to be, but since Helen was there, he was going to have to endure.

Jackson slipped through the crowd as he hunted for Helen. He bobbed his head every now and again, greeting those he passed, but he hadn't come to see them. Searching the grounds, Jackson realized there was one place he hadn't gone to yet. The laughter and music tickled his ears. Breathing in deeply, Jackson moved to the ballroom. He stood in the corner, scouring the dance floor. After four songs and an interlude, Jackson was about ready to give up when he spotted Helen in the corner of the room with a small group of men and women surrounded her.

A pang of jealousy jabbed at Jackson as he noticed the way they made Helen laugh. She looked so carefree and happy within the circle of friends. Jackson swallowed his pride and walked over to them, keeping to the shadows as he moved. There was something about Helen's laughter that pulled him to her.

He wanted to be the one to make her laugh, and he knew he would have to make a bigger apology if he was ever to keep her company again.

“If you’ll excuse me.” He heard Helen’s voice the moment the music stopped. Jackson glanced around, trying to keep his eyes on Helen as she moved through the crowd.

“Your Grace, I did not expect you’d be joining us this evening.” Jackson glanced over his shoulder to find Devlin marching toward him with a huge grin plastered on his face. Jackson turned his attention back to the crowd, hoping he hadn’t lost Helen again.

“Your Grace,” Jackson greeted with a tinge of remorse as he realized Helen had slipped from him again. Turning his attention back to Devlin, Jackson bowed.

“What a happy coincidence,” Devlin said, shaking Jackson’s hand.

“How so?” Jackson asked, craning his neck to try and catch another glimpse of Helen.

“I was just telling my wife how I didn’t think you’d show, yet here you are,” Devlin explained as he stepped back and cleared his throat. Of course, Devlin would come to greet Jackson; he was, after all, his brother-in-law now. But Jackson wasn’t in the mood for small talk. In fact, he wasn’t in the best of moods to be anywhere other than at Helen’s side.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Jackson said, “but I’m looking for my wife. You haven’t seen her by chance, have you?”

“Helen? She was chatting with Theresa a few moments ago,” Devlin replied as he joined the hunt for Helen.

“If you find her, please tell her I’m looking for her,” Jackson requested with a nod of his head. Devlin bobbed his head, and before he could say another

word, Jackson turned and left. The music rattled through his ears, but no matter where he turned, he couldn't find her.

Stopping in the middle of the hallway, Jackson spun around. His heart ached, and it felt as if he'd stepped into a kaleidoscope with all the people moving around him in their fine dresses and smiling faces. Running his fingers through his hair, Jackson turned once more and caught a glimpse of Helen's dress flowing beyond the corner of the balcony.

He pulled in a deep breath as relief came over him. Pushing through the people, Jackson made his way to the balcony and stepped out into the night air. Helen was just as stunning as when he'd seen her at the bottom of the steps. It didn't matter to him that she was mad; he wasn't about to let her leave without some resolution between them.

"You are a hard person to keep track of," Jackson observed, causing Helen to jump. She spun around, eyes wild and fierce.

"What are you doing here? I figured you'd have left by now," Helen snapped. Her words were like splinters to his heart.

"I would be happy to leave," Jackson said as he inched closer. "But you see, I have a problem. You see, I've lost my wife in all the commotion, and I was so hoping to dance with someone. Perhaps you'd care to join me?"

Jackson held out his hand as his heart pounded fiercely in his chest. Helen arched her eyebrow, and her lips twitched. He wished he had the ability to read her thoughts, to know what was going on inside her head.

"Not particularly," Helen answered. "You see, my husband might be a jealous man, and I wouldn't want to do anything to provoke his anger."

"If he's jealous, then where is he?" Jackson asked as he kept up the pretense of a stranger. "I'd have to consider your husband a fool to let such a lovely

creature out of his sight.”

“I can’t argue that point. He can be foolish at times,” Helen agreed, slipping her hand into Jackson’s. He felt as if his heart would explode as she stepped closer to him. “But so can most people. I, for one, am an expert on such matters.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Jackson teased as he pulled her to him. The heat of her body pressing against him aroused him. All his troubling thoughts drifted back into the dark recesses of his mind the moment Helen flashed him a smile. It was the smile he’d hoped to see, the one that melted the shadows and chased out the nightmares.

“I doubt anything surprises you, Your Grace,” Helen said as they moved about the balcony. The cool night air kissed his nose and cheeks, but despite the brisk air, Jackson felt like he’d stepped into an inferno.

“There are few things that surprise me,” he answered as he spun her around. Helen giggled as she came to a stop with her hand pressing against his chest.

“Is that so?” she asked, the anger in her eyes was gone and replaced by the light Jackson so desperately craved. The smirk she wore came back, and Jackson felt for a brief moment all was right with the world. “Pray tell, what things have shocked you recently?”

Jackson tilted his head and arched his eyebrow. A smile tugged at the corners of his lips as he thought of all the wild things Helen had done over the course of their short marriage. “I found a strange woman in my garden the other day with the most unique hair style. Can you believe she had her hair fashioned to look like a bird’s nest?”

“Why, Your Grace, I do believe that is gossip and hearsay. It’s so unbecoming of you.”

Jackson couldn't help but chuckle as Helen had turned the tables on him. The smile on her face stretched as she stared at him.

"I think this is the first time I've ever seen you smile," Helen observed as she brushed her fingertips over Jackson's cheeks. "You should do it more often."

"To be honest, I haven't had much of a reason to smile until you came around," Jackson replied as Helen grabbed his hand to cradle her face in his palm. "And I mean what I say, Helen. Every word. And I'm sorry for earlier."

Helen pressed her finger to his lips and shook her head. "Let us not spoil this moment with talking. Just dance with me."

CHAPTER 15



The music still lingered in Helen's ears as she tried to fall to sleep. Clinging to her pillow, Helen pretended it wasn't a sack of feathers she held onto but Jackson. Her body ached for him as her mind tried to flee the other way. Torn, Helen tossed in her bed, searching for the perfect place that would hug her body in the lumpy mattress.

"Ugh!" she moaned, grabbing a pillow and smashing it into her face. She wanted to be back at Theresa's house on the balcony with Jackson, not in her bed alone. Helen threw the pillow to her side and sat up. The room was dark, save for the few burning embers in the fireplace that gave the room a soft orange glow.

She climbed out of the bed and threw on her robe. The house was still as she made her way down the hallway. There didn't seem to be a single person awake which Helen didn't mind. She was certain the servants had seen enough of her for the time being, and she needed time to think.

Her footsteps echoed through the hallway despite how hard she tried to remain silent. Jackson would not get out of her head. It was as if he had etched his face into stone and rolled the boulder into the deepest parts of her being. No matter what she did, Helen couldn't push him out, and she knew she couldn't go on the way she had been.

He deserves better.

A soft flickering glow caught Helen's eye. She leaned around the corner to find the library door wide open. Curious, she stepped into the room and started to thumb through the volumes of books that lined the walls. She'd never seen so many books in all her life. Not even her father's collection which, by her standards, would take a lifetime or more to read. How Jackson had so many astonished her.

Someone clearing their throat startled Helen. Cupping her hand over her mouth to silence the scream, she turned around. Through the spines of the books, she spotted Jackson, lounging on the sofa, book in hand. Her heart fluttered as her stomach flipped. His shirt had been undone, giving Helen just enough view of his chest to tease her.

Jackson had one leg draped over the back of the couch with one arm tucked under his head. She reached out to lean against the bookshelf. Her hand slipped from the corner, and she tumbled out from behind the bookshelves and landed hard on the ground. She jumped up just as fast as she had fallen and patted down her wild hair, trying to find her bearings.

"Are you all right?" Jackson asked, craning his neck to find her. His eyebrow arched as he sat the book down and walked over to her.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you," Helen said, rubbing the pain from her head. "I didn't even know you were in here."

"Come," Jackson ordered, leading Helen to the couch. "Sit."

"I'm not a dog you know," Helen grumbled as she plopped down, trying to ease the pain in her head. In reality though she knew it was her pride that hurt the most.

"I would never presume you were," Jackson said as he was hunting for

further injuries.

“What are you still doing up? You’ve never up this late,” Helen asked, keeping her eyes locked on Jackson.

The smirk on his lips stretched. “What are *you* doing up so late? I would have thought you would have passed out by now.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Helen confessed as Jackson took the empty seat next to Helen. Her heart skipped as she admired the way Jackson propped his elbow on the arm rest and leaned his head into it.

“Seems we have something in common,” Jackson replied as he grabbed his book from the side table. Helen glanced at the cover.

“Frankenstein,” Jackson said.

“Sounds ridiculous,” Helen related, having never heard the title before. The cover image gave her the chills, and she quickly glanced away from it.

“It’s actually quite an interesting tale,” Jackson said as he turned the book over.

“You speak as if you’re familiar with the book,” Helen commented as she noticed the way Jackson looked at the cover in reverence.

“I ought to be, I’ve read it at least twenty times,” Jackson said with a smug grin.

“Why when you have all these others to read? Surely you haven’t read every book in this room,” Helen pondered, stunned by the vast quantity of books that surrounded them.

“When you have no siblings, and no social life, books tend to be your only friends,” Jackson explained. “Besides, there’s a lot one can learn from reading a book.”

“Sure, if they are educational,” Helen admitted.

“And what about morals? Do you not think that there are hidden lessons within the pages of these novels?” Jackson asked as Helen noticed he drew closer to her. He reminded her of a cat ready to pounce. A smirk played on the corners of her lips as she shrugged.

“You cannot expect to find any value in fantasy. The only lesson those books teach is how to avoid brownies, fairies, sprites, and any other mythological creature. Oh, and to always carry a sword.”

“Perhaps,” Jackson said, leaning ever so closer to Helen. There was a playfulness in his eye that excited Helen. “You should have heeded that warning.”

Jackson sprang and threw himself at her, pinning her hands to the arm rest of the couch. Helen laughed as Jackson hovered over her. The playfulness shifted as Jackson’s lips drew ever closer to hers.

“I would very much like to kiss you,” Jackson said in barely a whisper. There was a strain to his tone that rumbled through Helen’s body, sparking the desires she had hidden away within her being.

“I’m your wife, am I not?” Helen asked. “You don’t need my permission to do anything. I’m at your service, Your Grace.”

Helen’s heart quickened as Jackson pressed his lips to hers. It was the sensation she’d been craving all day. It was so easy to fall into Jackson’s kiss, to let the world fade around her and just be. Helen curled her arms around his neck as she tilted her hips to meet his.

Jackson pulled away from her but didn’t stop showering her with his kisses. He caressed the line of her jaw and followed down the length of her neck. Every breath Helen took was stolen as Jackson released his grip on her

wrists, only to wrap his fingers around her breasts.

“Annoyance,” Jackson grumbled as his hand fell from her bosom to her hip.

“If you want to stop, then so do,” Helen suggested.

“Clothes,” Jackson said in a whirl wind. “They are the bane of my existence.”

“Then remove them,” Helen advised. She couldn’t believe the words coming out of her mouth. The desire to have Jackson was all consuming. She’d been lying to herself before about not wanting him, and her lies glared like little beams of light in the darkness of space.

“No,” Jackson said as he panted. He rested on his hands as if trying to do a push-up with Helen under him. Dropping his head, he sighed heavily.

“No,” Helen repeated, scooping his head into her hands to force him to meet her eyes. “Don’t you do this. Don’t stop, I’m begging you.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking me to do,” Jackson said.

“Yes,” Helen answered as she bobbed her head. “I do. And I want you to.”

“It will change everything,” Jackson argued.

“Change isn’t so bad,” Helen said as she leaned closer and kissed his cheek. “Sometimes...” Helen planted another kiss on Jackson’s nose. “...it can be...” Another went on his chin. “...a good thing.”

She crushed her lips to his and parted his mouth with her tongue. There was no resistance from him. She knew deep down he wanted her. A low moan rumbled out of Jackson. It sounded as if he were being tortured. Pulling away, Helen gazed into his eyes, pleading with Jackson’s soul to give into their desires.

“What are you doing?” Helen asked as Jackson took her hands from his face

and sat back. He glanced over to her, and she could see the war raging within him.

“Lean back,” he said, slipping off the couch. Helen did as he commanded and leaned into the nook between the back of the couch and the arm rest. She studied Jackson as he positioned himself on his knees and hitched up her robe and nightgown.

“What are you doing?” Helen inquired once more as Jackson disappeared under the fabric. Light tingles coursed through Helen’s leg as Jackson’s lips brushed against her inner thigh. Helen recoiled as Jackson’s kisses tickled her.

“Be still,” Jackson mumbled. Helen’s chest tightened with anticipation. She stared up at the ceiling, savoring each kiss Jackson planted on her bare thighs.

“Oh,” Helen gasped as she felt something wet and tender grazed over the tender skin between her legs. “Jackson?”

“You said you wanted me to have you; well, this is me, taking what I want,” Jackson said with such a hunger that it made little bumps rise all over Helen’s skin. Helen’s fingernails dug into the cushion of the sofa as she felt the warm wetness of Jackson’s tongue slip inside her. The sensation teased and taunted her. Throwing her head back, Helen closed her eyes. Every flick of his tongue, each push of his finger sent her to new heights.

Her heart raced as she tried to control herself. But no matter what she did, Jackson had something new for her. Her body jolted and trembled as his pace quickened. The pressure within her grew to great heights as Jackson changed the pressure of his tongue and the speed of his finger pushing deeper inside her.

Helen’s fingers ached from clinging to the couch so tightly. She released her grip from the couch only to find the top of Jackson’s head between her

thighs. Pushing down on his head, Helen wanted more. Every inch of her body felt like it was on fire, and she would explode with any more.

“Jackson?” His name scrapped the roof of Helen’s parched mouth as she dug her fingers into her night gown to grab onto Jackson’s head.

“Oh, come for me. I need you to come for me,” he urged. Helen couldn’t wrap her head around what Jackson wanted her to do. All she could do was let the tension that had been building for so long go. Her legs quaked and trembled as she squeezed Jackson’s head. A small squeal of pleasure rippled through her body as every muscle that had been stressed finally relaxed.

Little bursts of light filled Helen’s view as she tried to stare at the ceiling. She didn’t know what had happened, but she liked every bit of it. Jackson slowly removed his finger from her, causing even more spasms, and he pulled her gown off his head.

“How are you feeling now?” Jackson asked as he stood. Helen was spent, and even the thoughts that had kept her up were silenced.

“Amazing. Wonderful. Sleepy,” she said with a little smile.

“Then we should get you to bed,” Jackson suggested. Without another word, Jackson scooped Helen into his strong arms. Helen curled her hands around his neck as her head drifted to the nook of his shoulder. She felt safe in his embrace. It was as if nothing could touch her as long as he was there.

“Will you stay with me?” Helen asked as Jackson carefully lowered her into the bed. He reached out and brushed away the wild strands of hair from her face.

“Not tonight,” he answered. “But soon.”

“When?” Helen asked as she found it harder and harder to stay awake once her head hit the pillow.

“Soon,” she thought she heard Jackson say before the sleep overtook her.

CHAPTER 16



*B*eams of light spilled over the window seal and stretched into the dark room, scattering the shadows to the corners. Jackson stared at the beams of the ceiling contemplating the day. His mind swirled about as he thought of Helen. A smile played on the corners of his lips as he kept his eyes focused on the dust floating in the air. Jackson knew he had things to do, but being swept up in the fantasy of his thoughts, he didn't want to get up just yet.

He envisioned Helen's body draped over him, her head nestled in the nook of his arm. It was so easy to pretend she was next to him, running her fingers through the hairs on his chest. But the fantasy could only go so far before the desire pulled him from his bed. A deep need to see Helen consumed him.

Pulling off the covers, Jackson jumped out of bed and slipped on his pants. He walked over to the window and spied into the garden below his window. To his surprise, he spotted Helen digging into the loose soil as she planted her flowers.

Jackson let out a heavy sigh of relief. Just watching her from his room gave him a thrill. The fact that he was there, watching in secret, thrilled him. He wondered if Helen was thinking about him—if he had, by some miracle of a chance, invaded her dreams the way she had invaded his. A spark of hope pulsed through him, casting off his dreary disposition. Jackson felt as if the

sun had never kissed his cheeks before. That he had been living in perpetual winter, and now that Helen was here, the sun was finally coming out and warming his soul.

His heart quickened as he watched Helen shift, and the smile on his lips stretched and pulled as he watched her glance over her shoulder, hunting around. For a moment, he wondered if she had some gift to sense he was watching her. And as if on command, Helen tilted her head up to find him staring down at her.

The smile on her face was more than he expected. It was like she'd tossed a pebble in his direction and shattered the glass that separated them. He lifted his hand and waved to her as a prick of panic shot through him.

What am I doing? I probably look like a lost puppy to her. But I can't help it. She's so beautiful. I don't care what she wears; it's that smile I crave and to hear her whisper sweet nothings in my ear.

Chills ran through Jackson's body. He turned his back to her, feeling the rush of excitement. Dressing quickly, Jackson had every intention of going downstairs to be with her. He wanted to see what she had planted, wanted to breathe in her sweet delectable floral aroma that had haunted his dreams.

As Jackson made a beeline for the steps and hurried to the side door to step out into the day, he felt lighter than he ever had before. It was as if Helen's smile was all he needed to cast aside the darkness and doubt the plagued him.

"Forgive me, Your Grace."

The servant's weak voice startled Jackson. He paused with his hand on the door, ready to flee to the garden to be with Helen.

"What is it, Lyle?" Jackson asked, pausing to give the servant a moment of his time.

“Paxton has returned and is waiting for you in your study,” Lyle replied, dropping his eyes to the ground. Jackson contemplated a moment. His desires pulled him to the garden and to Helen, but his duty warred for his attention.

“Inform Paxton that I’ll be there momentarily,” Jackson said, feeling a bit defeated. Lyle bowed lowly before darting off down the hall.

Jackson had hoped to spend the morning with Helen, but it seemed that no matter what he did, his past found a way to come back and bite him. Dropping his hand from the doorway, Jackson let out a sorrowful sigh. He wondered if Helen would feel the ripples of his disappointment as he started for his study.

As his thoughts shifted away from Helen, Jackson couldn’t help but wonder what news Paxton brought with him. Jackson was very much aware of the delicate matter he’d sent Paxton to investigate, But he never thought Paxton would have anything worth reporting back on so soon.

Stepping into the study, Jackson’s body tingled. The room was cooler than any other in the manor, and while the study was Jackson’s favorite room, it felt foreign to him—almost like it was his father’s study he was walking into and not his own.

“Your Grace,” Paxton greeted, bowing low the moment he spotted Jackson in the room. Without a word, Jackson walked by and sat in his leather chair. Pressing the tips of his fingers together, Jackson stared at Paxton. He wanted to be irritated with Paxton for ruining his morning with Helen but found it near impossible.

“Paxton, it’s good to see you although I must admit, I’m surprised to see you here so soon,” Jackson said, arching his eyebrow. Paxton stood upright as the corners of his lip twitched.

“It’s been most productive, Your Grace,” Paxton said as he pulled out a

ledger from his side bag. Jackson's heart pounded as his eyes focused on the books Paxton placed on his desk.

"Whose ledgers are these?" Jackson asked, grabbing the top book of the three, and he leaned back.

"Forgive me," Paxton said, reaching for a second time into his bag and pulling forth more leather-bound books. "These are from Lord Brookridge, the Earl of Suthford, and the Duke of Whytemore. They each had dealings with Mr. Westwood."

Jackson's eyes widened. He wasn't expecting such an overwhelming amount to go over. Glancing to Paxton, Jackson thumbed through the pages.

"How did you acquire the journals?" Jackson asked.

"Your Grace did say by any means," Paxton said as Jackson waved his hand to stop Paxton from saying anything more. Jackson knew the less he knew about the how, the better off he would be.

"I must admit, I wasn't expecting you to find so much in such a short amount of time," Jackson said, setting the book down. A sense of dread overwhelmed him as he stared at the books on his desk.

"If I'm being honest, neither did I," Paxton replied. "And there's a lot to go through, especially for Lord Brookridge."

Jackson stared at Paxton as he tilted his head. "Why is that?"

"The Lord was a paranoid man," Paxton explained. "He wrote in code for the better part of his journals and ledgers."

"And we don't have a key to decipher them," Jackson grumbled, pushing the books away from him. "How am I supposed to find what I'm looking for if it's all in code?"

Jackson irritation rose and brewed like a pot of soup bubbling over. Gabriel's words haunted him.

Margo is now married off to my cousin whose wealth is far greater than Will's. Then again, that could be the reason she looked so shocked to see me.

Deep within Jackson's being, he knew that the ledgers would give him the insights he wanted, but there was an urgency growing within him that he couldn't shake or budge.

"I don't have the time to decipher the ledgers," Jackson mumbled as he balled his hands into fists and pounded at the table. The thumping of his ring on the oak wood echoed through the room.

"And to really get to the matter, it would be best to see them face to face," Jackson glanced to the door as he heard the light footsteps bouncing down the hallway.

What would Helen do?

A smile tugged at the corners of his lips. "Paxton, fetch me Godrick and Mrs. Crumbly on your way out. And return these to their owners. They'll do me no good."

Jackson lowered himself into his chair and rubbed the tender points of his temples. Paxton collected the books off the desk and slipped out of the study without a sound.

I must be out of my mind.

"You called, Your Grace?" Mrs. Crumbly said as she entered the room and bowed to him.

"I want to throw a dinner party," Jackson professed as he caught a glimpse of Helen as she strolled by the door. She paused a moment, and Jackson waited

till her eyes met his before he spoke again.

Godrick rushed past Helen and stepped into the room. Jackson found himself delighted to watch her melancholy expression shift to joy as Jackson repeated himself to Mrs. Crumbly and Godrick yet spoke directly to her.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mrs. Crumbly answered as Helen’s eyes widened. “And do you know when you’d like to plan this event?”

“Tomorrow,” Jackson said, and he noticed Mrs. Crumbly fighting the urge to flinch. “Is there something wrong with that day?”

“Mrs. Crumbly’s daughter is to be married,” Helen explained, stepping into the room. Her very presence made Jackson’s body tremble. He found himself drifting closer to Helen as thoughts of the previous night flickered through his mind. Being around her was far too intoxicating.

“She’s been working on it for months,” Helen continued as she bowed to him. “Surely, Your Grace could find it in your heart to accommodate her?”

“A wedding? Well, that is certainly a day to celebrate,” Jackson said, pulling his eyes off Helen for a moment.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Mrs. Crumbly said with a smile. “We never thought it would happen, and yet, here we are.”

“And you’ve given me a notice of time off?” Jackson asked as he glanced around his desk.

“That would be my fault,” Helen replied, stepping closer to his desk. Her floral scent swirled about him, making it difficult for Jackson to focus on anything. He glanced up to stare at Helen a moment, daring himself not to lunge for her.

“Mrs. Crumbly handed me a letter some time ago,” Helen explained as she

played with the tips of her fingernails. Her face was somber with a hint of worry. For a moment, Jackson couldn't help but see her as a child, begging her father for mercy after she'd committed some terrible deed. Helen's eyes shifted to Mrs. Crumbly. The apologetic shimmer in Helen's eyes made Jackson want to pull her close to comfort her.

"Very well," Jackson said as he stared at Helen. Every moment she was in the room with him tormented him. He wanted to push everyone out but her as she continued to taunt and tease him. "It would seem I have no choice but to adjust the date. Let us set it up for Friday then. Unless there's something going on that day as well?"

Jackson arched his eyebrow as Helen's attention shifted back to him. A wild, unhinged jealousy rippled through him. Jackson didn't want Helen to focus on anyone but him. In fact, he wanted her all to himself.

"I don't believe there is," Helen said with a little smirk curling the corner of her lip. Jackson's body tingled. He wanted to reach out and touch her. Thoughts of kissing every inch of her body flashed before him. The air in the room seemed to thin out for him. Tugging on his collar, he wondered if Helen was feeling the same surge of need coursing through her body. The playful shimmer in her eye was all he needed to send him over the edge.

"Good," Jackson said. "Make it so, and I'll provide a list of guests later in the day."

"Very good, Your Grace," Godrick and Mrs. Crumbly replied as they bowed. Helen curtsied slowly. As her body tilted, Jackson's focus shifted to the valley of her bosom. Oh, to suckle on her breasts once more or to graze his fingers over her soft skin—the thought nearly drove him mad.

"Is everything all right, Your Grace?" Helen asked, practically teasing him. "You look a bit distraught."

If only you knew, you're the cause of my distress. Can't you see how badly I want you?

"You're mistaken, Madam," Jackson replied, his words stuck to his throat as he spoke.

"It's not like you to have company," Helen said, inching closer to him. Jackson's eyes shifted. He didn't even recall when Mrs. Crumbly and Godrick had left the room. There was nothing hindering him from taking what he wanted. And at the moment, the need to bury his face into Helen's bosom was overpowering him. He wanted to sink into her embrace and let himself fall away from the troubles of the world.

"And what makes you think that?" Jackson asked as he stood and walked around the desk, refusing to let anything be between his body and hers.

"I've been with you long enough to see a few things," Helen replied. Jackson's interest was piqued. He arched his eyebrow and folded his arms over his chest.

"Is that so? Do tell, what quirks do you think you've unmasked?" Jackson enquired, feeling more playful now that Helen had distracted him from the other things in his life.

"You avoid people, even your servants if you can," Helen replied. Jackson's eyes widened as she inched closer. "Don't give me that look. I've seen you out in the garden before sunrise."

"So, you've been spying on me, have you?" Jackson asked and snatched Helen by the wrist. Luring her to him, Jackson savored the expression on Helen's face.

"Not by choice," she answered as Jackson let out a heavy sigh that made his skin tingle from the top of his scalp to his toes. "And spying sounds so

treacherous. I'd say it was more like showing an interest in my husband."

"Is that so?" Jackson asked as he curled his arms around Helen's body. For a moment he thought he felt her recoil from his touch. Glancing around her, Jackson quickly understood the reason behind her hesitation. The study doors were wide open, and it seemed as if every single servant in the manor was taking turns stealing glimpses of them together. With so many eyes on him, Jackson's nerves rattled.

"Is it not my duty as your wife to ensure you are well?" Helen asked. There was a pain in her tone that caught Jackson off guard. Completely forgetting about the eyes on them, Jackson reached for Helen.

"I'm well," Jackson said a bit too harshly and regretted the moment he answered. "But I do have business to attend to."

"Of course," Helen replied as her eyebrows twitched. She stepped back from him, and it felt as if a huge crevasse had opened up before them. "I'll leave you be."

Jackson knew no matter how hard he tried to control his burning desire for her, he couldn't. However, there was no way he could block out the servant's wandering gazes or their whispers if he took Helen right then and there. It seemed to him that Helen had felt the rejection like a bee's sting and quickly retreated from him.

With the moment fleeting, Jackson ran his fingers through his hair. He wanted Helen, but he couldn't have people talking about him, especially not his servants. And the fact that he had to plan for such a large event made him nervous.

"If Your Grace ever needs anything," Helen said as she paused at the doorway and glanced over her shoulder, "you may find me in the garden. I think I'll paint today."

Her randomness and sunny disposition were contagious. Jackson couldn't help but wonder if there was anything in this world that would get Helen down. She always had a knack for turning dark days into bright opportunities. Jackson sat down and pulled a piece of paper from his desk. He stared at the white sheet a moment before shaking his head.

Too many things were flowing through his mind making it difficult for him to focus on anything, but it was his desire for Helen that was the most distracting.

What was I thinking? I can't plan a dinner party. But maybe Helen can. She's the social butterfly, so maybe she could handle this for me?

CHAPTER 17



“*I* don’t understand,” Helen mumbled to herself as she gathered the paint supplies from the drawing room. Her heart felt heavy as uncertainty seeped through her.

There was no denying she’d seen the glimmer of lust flickering through Jackson’s gaze. It was a look she’d grown fond of, and it caused every fiber of her being to tingle as she thought of the way he balled his hands into fists. He struggled against his desires; she knew it. The only problem was, why didn’t he act on them? The question baffled Helen as she made her way out to the garden.

She walked around the garden with her tools, hunting for the perfect place. Sure, there were several places that seemed promising, but none of them really cried out to her. Feeling flustered, she finally plopped down on the bench near the oak tree and let her supplies drop from her arms. The easel clattered on the ground as the paint brushes fell like twigs around her feet.

A little squirrel shot down from the tree and scampered about as Helen remained still. She watched the curious little squirrel scurry about, sniffing the foreign objects on the ground. For a moment, Helen wished she could be like the squirrel. How carefree the little creature was as it sniffed around the easel and brushes as if hoping they were food.

“I’m sorry little guy,” Helen whispered, hoping not to startle the creature. She found it fascinating how it seemed to pay her no mind. And just as quickly as it had come to check things out, it shot back up the tree as the sound of heavy steps came from behind Helen.

“Oh, don’t go,” Helen pleaded, wishing the creature would keep her amused a while longer.

“Forgive me,” Jackson said from behind Helen. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Helen glanced over her shoulder to find Jackson standing a few feet from her. There was a spark to his eye that gave Helen hope. Maybe her attempts to seduce him hadn’t been ignored after all.

“You didn’t although I can’t say the same for the squirrel,” Helen replied as she glanced up to the bough of the tree to find the squirrel poking its head out of the hole it had claimed as its home.

“They are fascinating creatures, aren’t they? Always so curious and energetic,” Jackson observed as he took a step closer to Helen. She felt her heart flutter in her chest as she watched Jackson make his way around the tree to sit beside her.

“That they are,” Helen agreed, and she ached to reach out and touch Jackson. But Helen kept her hands on her lap, fearful she might startle Jackson and make him bolt like the squirrel had. “Reminds me of a few people I know.”

Jackson’s lips tugged at the corner as he shifted in his seat. He was jittery and gave Helen the impression he was nervous to be there. When she watched him open his mouth only to close it again, Helen arched her eyebrow.

“You look like a man with too many things on your mind,” Helen observed as she turned to give Jackson her undivided attention.

“Perhaps I do,” Jackson said as he drew his eyes to meet hers.

Helen waited for Jackson to speak and watched as he rubbed his hands on his thighs as if to wipe away the moisture from his palms. Jackson’s lips twitched as he shifted nervously beside her.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on? Or did you just want to sit here and trudge through your thoughts alone?” Helen asked. A prick of fear jabbed her as Jackson dropped his eyes to focus on the scattered tools at her feet.

“I was wondering if you’d be willing to host the dinner party here at the house?” Jackson asked after some time.

“Really?” Helen’s eyes widened with joy. “I thought you didn’t like those sorts of events. In fact, it was like pulling teeth to get you to go to Theresa and Devlin’s gathering.”

Jackson pulled in a deep breath as he swallowed hard. Helen watched his Adam’s apple bob in his throat as he raked his hands over his pants.

“True, I don’t like having strangers intrude in my home, but these people won’t be strangers,” Jackson explained. “I wanted to invite my old Eton friends. But seeing as how I’m not as knowledgeable about these sort of things...”

Helen’s eyes narrowed as she studied him. There was a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that made her feel queasy. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt Jackson wasn’t giving her the full truth of the matter.

“All right,” Helen said, flashing him a huge smile. “I’d love to help. In fact, if you want me to take over the whole affair, I can. But if you’ve got a theme in mind, let me know, so I can incorporate it into the decorations.”

“Revenge isn’t a suitable theme, if I must say.” Jackson mumbled.

“Revenge?” Helen craned her neck trying to catch his eye.

“It was a joke,” Jackson said, his voice bending a bit.

“You don’t jest; in fact, you rarely smile.”

“Is it not proper for a duke to have guests over to flaunt his wealth every now and again?” Jackson asked. His eyes remained locked on Helen’s necklace as he spoke.

“Forgive me,” Helen said as she rose from the bench. “But I don’t think you’re being truthful with me.”

Jackson shifted as he drew his attention to her face. There was a shadow lingering in the depths of his gaze that rattled Helen.

“Whatever gave you that impression?” Jackson asked.

“You’re nose wiggles when you’re not truthful,” Helen replied as she arched her eyebrow. “Now, I don’t think you’re lying about having company over. It’s clear that you want to. But the reason behind it—that is something you’re not telling me.”

Jackson’s shoulders tensed. “Can’t a man turn over a new leaf?”

“Sure. Improving oneself is always smiled on, but that’s not what you’re doing,” Helen said.

“And how can you be so sure about that?”

“Because of Theresa and Devlin’s party,” Helen answered. “I saw you keep to the shadows, and the only time you danced was with me out on the balcony. I may have only been married to you for a short amount of time, but I gathered that you don’t do anything without a reason behind it. So, this party you want to throw—what’s the point of it when you’ll just stick to the shadows?”

“I won’t,” Jackson answered a little too quickly for Helen. “And as for me sticking to the shadows, I avoid people that I have no interest in. This party will be for my old friends from Eton.”

“You’ve lost me,” Helen said. “If the people you wish to invite are your old friends, then why have you come to ask me about it at all? I’m just your wife. If you want to throw a ball, then throw it. It’s not like I can say anything to stop you.”

Jackson’s jaw flexed as he rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m not here to ask for your permission. I’ve come to ask for your help in arranging the party.”

“What?” Helen gasped. “You actually do want my help?”

“I’m not very good with these sort of things, and I know that you are. I’ve come to ask if you’d help me plan for a dinner party,” Jackson explained, his eyes full of hope and sincerity. Helen dropped her arms as she studied him. The sinking feeling in her gut remained, but she knew she couldn’t turn down her husband’s request. If she did, she didn’t know if he’d ever ask for her help again.

“All right,” Helen answered after some time, “I’ll help you. But you’re still going to need to tell me why you want this party.”

“Why does it matter so much to you?” Jackson asked in an icy tone that only added to Helen’s suspicions.

“A party is more than just the food, music, and color schemes,” Helen explained.

“Since when?” Jackson asked. Helen shook her head as she let out a soft chuckle.

“Tell me, when we went to Theresa’s, did you notice how many secret nooks there were for people to hide in? Did you notice how she arranged the tables

and drinks? Social events are more than just a time for the women to get dolled up. It's the place where people can discuss things they wouldn't be able to speak about at any other time. It's where secrets are spilled."

"It would seem you are more than just a pretty face," Jackson mumbled.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Helen asked, feeling jaded by Jackson's comment.

"It means that you have a skill I didn't think you possessed," Jackson answered.

"And what skill is that?" Helen asked, trying not to let the irritation in her tone scare Jackson away.

"What if I told you the reason for the party was for me to gather information about someone?" Jackson asked.

"Seriously?" Helen asked, trying to mask her shock. "You sound as if you've never realized that most dinner parties are for that reason."

Jackson's eyes widened as he sat straighter. The sheer shock on his face made her want to giggle. It was as if the idea had never once flickered through Jackson's mind before. To Helen, though, the social gatherings had always been about such things.

"To be honest, I always thought them to be an excuse to flaunt status and money," Jackson answered as he tried to collect himself. Helen shook her head as she let out the laugh that she'd been fighting to silence.

"Sure, that's one reason for them. But for the most part, they provide opportunities for men to make secret dealings behind closed doors. How can you not know this?" Helen asked.

"If you haven't gathered," Jackson said as his tone grew harsher, "I don't

attend such events unless I have to. Now are you going to help me or not?”

“Of course, I’ll help,” Helen answered as she reached out to him and placed her hand on his. Jackson stared at her hand a moment before drawing his eyes to meet hers. “But what information are you trying to discover?”

“Why do you want to know?” Jackson asked. Helen felt his body tense.

“If you’re trying to get people to share their innermost secrets, you need to create an atmosphere where they’ll feel comfortable speaking about such things—which means lots of nooks, well placed for you to listen in and not be discovered.”

“You make it sound as if every party you’ve gone to has been nothing but breeding grounds for conspiracies,” Jackson pointed out. All Helen could do was shrug.

“Unfortunately, that’s precisely what they’ve been,” Helen answered. “How do you think the fathers know who their daughters are interested in? Or why do certain businesses seem to prosper when others don’t? Companies and family fortunes have been shifting and growing because of certain gatherings since the dawn of time. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from my father, it’s that social events are the only time one can get a grasp on the world and current events. Deals are always made behind closed doors at such gatherings. Now, are you going to tell me why you want to throw a party strictly for your Eton friends? Or am I to guess? In which case, you might not get the information you’re after, and it’ll be nothing but a waste of time and money.”

Jackson rose from his seat and started pacing before Helen. She kept a keen eye on him as he rubbed the stubble on his chin.

“What do you know about me?” Jackson asked as he finally stopped before Helen.

“I don’t understand.”

“Don’t play coy,” Jackson warned. “You say parties and events are places for you to gain information. So, tell me, what do you know about me? What gossip have you heard?”

Helen cleared her throat as she wondered where the conversation was going. She studied Jackson for a moment, determining how truthful she was going to be.

“The biggest secret I’ve heard was that you were tried for murder but found not guilty due to lack of evidence,” Helen answered as she dropped her eyes from him. Guilt pummeled through her body as she wondered if perhaps telling him was a bad idea.

“What if I told you that I believe I know who the real murderer was?” Jackson whispered. Helen’s head whipped up as shock flashed through her like a wildfire.

“Do you? Really? Why not go to the authorities and have the man arrested?”

“It’s not that simple, especially since I have no evidence to back up my claim,” Jackson answered. Helen slowly bobbed her head.

“And that’s why you want to throw this dinner party. You’re hoping to get a confession,” Helen considered.

“I doubt I’ll be so lucky as to get that,” Jackson replied, dropping his hands to his sides. “But maybe I’ll get enough information that could lead to another trial.”

Helen fiddled with her fingernails as she noticed the squirrel darting around the limbs of the tree, rushing to and fro as if it had a purpose.

“Can you tell me why you want to rattle these skeletons?” Helen asked.

“Will was my best friend,” Jackson blurted out. “He deserves justice, and the culprit must be punished. Make no mistake, I will have this party. But I know with your talents, I could get the information I’m looking for. Without your help, I may not. So, I’m asking, as your husband and as a friend, will you help me with this?”

Helen rolled her shoulders back and stared at him for a moment. Her heart nearly broke as she rose from her seat. She walked over to Jackson and placed her hand on his arm. There was turmoil in his stance and in his eyes that made Helen want to cry. She’d never seen Jackson so vulnerable before, and it was unnerving to her.

“I’m so very sorry,” Helen said, barely over a whisper. Jackson glanced at her with confusion and uncertainty.

“What could you be sorry for?” he asked as he grabbed her hand and gave it a tight little squeeze.

“I misjudged you,” she answered. “Had I known the weight you carry—”

“What?” Jackson asked with a snap. “What would you have done? I don’t want your pity. I want answers and justice, not woeful tears and sentiments that won’t bring me closure.”

“Pity isn’t such a bad thing,” Helen said as she recoiled from Jackson. “It’s what makes us human. But why have you kept this to yourself for so long?”

“That’s easy for you to say when you’re not the one who has to receive the pity,” Jackson said. “Do you think I want my wife or friends to look at me as if I’m some wounded animal in need of help?”

“No,” Helen answered as she shook her head. “You’re too proud for that. But answer me this, will you be able to accept the consequences? Will you be able to accept the truth once its revealed?”

“Why do you think I wouldn’t be able to?” Jackson asked.

“There are some things like revenge that will eat away at a person’s soul,” Helen explained. “I don’t want to see you become obsessed with this mission or point a faulty finger at someone just so that you can seek your justice.”

“I would never do that,” Jackson answered.

“Then I’ll help you in whatever way I can,” she agreed as she squeezed his hand tightly. “Not because I’m your wife, but because I can see this has been eating at you for far too long. You deserve happiness, Jackson. And if you think this is what will make you happy, then I’ll help.”

CHAPTER 18



Jackson stared at Helen for a moment, his chest constricting as he let her words seep into him. He felt an overwhelming sense of relief come over him. Although there was no way of knowing how Helen would react to his idea, the fact that she was willing to help him meant the world to him.

Reaching his hand out to her, he grabbed her by the wrist and drew her palm to meet his chest. Staring deeply into her eyes, he felt a sense of compassion and understanding flow through him that he hadn't felt since he was a child.

"You're willing to help me? Even after you know that I mean to see a man jailed? Or possibly worse?" Jackson asked, he felt his mouth drying as he spoke. Although he wanted to believe every word she said, doubt still lingered within him.

Helen flashed him a small, compassionate smile that radiated light and love throughout her being. Jackson had never experienced such a thing before. It was like he'd spent his entire life living in a cold, desolate winter, and suddenly the sun came out, beaming a warm, welcoming light all around him.

Jackson let out a heavy sigh as he molded his hand to Helen's face. "Thank you."

"Of course," Helen said, leaning her head into the palm of his hand. Jackson

inched closer; his body ached to hold her tighter. Every fiber of his being yearned to fall into the depths of her soul and hide there. He wanted to let the troubles of the world fade away until there was nothing left but him and Helen.

Deep within Helen's blue eyes, Jackson saw the longing burning ever brighter. There was no doubt in his mind that she craved him as much as he did her. Without warning, Jackson crushed his mouth to Helen's and slipped his tongue between her pressed lips. A small whimper escaped from her. The sound vibrated throughout his being, and it took all of Jackson's willpower not to drop his hand and undress her right then and there.

"Let us go somewhere," Jackson said, reluctantly pulling away from Helen.

"Where did you have in mind?" Helen asked breathlessly.

A crooked grin played on Jackson's lips as he ran his fingertips through Helen's hair. "There's a place I often go to away from the manor that I think you might like. But to get there, you'll need to ride."

Helen bobbed her head as she kept her eyes locked on him. It was clear she wasn't ready to break the connection between them and wanted to stay in the moment for as long as possible. "All right."

"Do you know how to ride a horse?" Jackson asked as he studied the way the sunlight shimmered off Helen's hair. He loved the way the strands of her hair flowed effortlessly through his fingers. It was like silk to him.

"Yes, if the occasion calls for it," she answered, her voice no higher than a whisper.

"I believe it calls for it," Jackson said as he dropped his hand from Helen's hair and entangled his fingers into hers. His smile stretched as he coaxed Helen to follow him to the stables.

With every step, his heart pounded with more vigor and energy. It seemed as if each step he took somehow made him lighter than ever before. Jackson couldn't help but notice how much Helen had changed him. Life no longer felt as if he were trudging through muck and mire. His steps were light and playful.

"Godrick?" Jackson called into the barn as he popped his head through the crack of the barn doors. His eyes darted about, hunting for a servant to help get the horses ready for them to ride.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," a meek voice answered as a young boy stepped out of the last stall with his head down. "Godrick isn't here at the moment. He went looking for truffles for Annabelle. Is there something I may help you with?"

"Do you think you can get two horses ready? I'd like to take my wife out on a ride today," Jackson answered as he glanced to Helen. Nothing would give him more pleasure than to have her to himself away from prying eyes and ears.

"Of course, Your Grace," the boy said with a low bow.

It didn't take long for the stable boy to get the horses saddled and ready for Jackson and Helen. As Jackson helped Helen up into her saddle, his heart raced with a fury of excitement and anticipation. Holding Helen by the waist, Jackson helped her place her foot into the stirrup and hoisted her into the saddle. Only when she was settled did he move to his horse and climb up.

"Are you going to tell me where you are taking me?" Helen asked. There was a spark in her eye that only added to Jackson's excitement. For a moment, he couldn't help but wonder if she was enjoying the anticipation as much as he was.

"It's a surprise," Jackson answered as he dug his heels into the horse's side.

Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed Helen hadn't hesitated; she was right there with him, charging through the courtyard. It surprised Jackson to find Helen was such an expert rider. He'd half expected to have to teach her a thing or two, yet she handled her horse with grace and ease.

Jackson couldn't help but let out a hearty chuckle as Helen pushed her horse faster, overtaking him. He loved her adventurous spirit and how she was probably the bravest person Jackson had ever met. She never seemed to back down from a fight. Her spirit was wild and free in all the ways Jackson wished he was. But it was her lust for life that caused the crack in the wall around his heart.

"I didn't know you knew where we are going," Jackson called to Helen as he overtook her horse and bolted to the left. A narrow pathway cut through dense trees, luring them off the beaten path. Jackson didn't hesitate; he charged into the shadows with Helen riding hard right behind him.

Jackson pulled back on the reins and watched as Helen charged forward. When he wasn't right behind her, Helen turned sharply. Jackson's heart skipped as he watched her slip from the saddle.

"Helen!" Jackson shouted as he jumped off his horse, charging for Helen. He scooped her head into his hand and frantically brushed away the loose strands of hair from her face. "Helen? Oh, Lord, please answer."

Panic and terror coursed through Jackson as Helen remained unresponsive in his arms. Jackson gave her a light shake, hoping to arouse her, but when that didn't work, the fear set in.

"Helen? Please," he begged as he drew her head to his and crushed his lips to hers. His body tingled as the horror of the moment seeped deeper into him. To have finally found a sliver of happiness and to have it slip through his fingers was more than devastating. It was earth shattering. Jackson poured

every ounce of his emotions into his kiss. The hunger to have Helen by his side consumed him, but it was the admiration that he felt for her and the pain of having lost her forever that wasn't something Jackson was ready to deal with.

Tears welled in his eyes as he rocked her slowly, brushing back her hair as he hunted for her wound.

"Ow," Helen mumbled as Jackson's fingers brushed over the tender spot near her temple. Her eyes fluttered open, and it felt as if Jackson had been reborn. His heart skipped and jumped from his throat to his stomach. Curling his arms around her body, Jackson held Helen tighter than ever before.

"You're all right," Jackson said in a flurry as he pulled away from her to examine her once more. "I thought I had lost you."

"Sorry," Helen mumbled as she slowly tried to sit up on her own. Jackson was right there, aiding her as she used his body to steady herself.

"It was my fault," Jackson said as he ran his hands over her, savoring the color of her blue eyes. *Had they always been that angel blue?* Jackson didn't know; for him, it felt as if he were looking at Helen for the first time in his life. She was stunning with locks of her hair draping over her shoulders. "I should have warned you I was stopping."

"But I was being too proud and thought I could handle the turn better," Helen said as she eased herself to her feet. Jackson helped her with every step, offering whatever she needed in order to get better. Nearly losing her shattered Jackson's notions. He had always been drawn to her beauty, but he never expected that she had such an influence on him. Helen was the light in a dark world, and he couldn't even fathom the thought of losing her.

"Do you think you can walk?" he asked as she clung to his arm for support.

“Where’d the horses go?” Helen asked, glancing into the depths of shadows. Jackson looked around expecting to find the horses not far off, but as he hunted for them, they were nowhere to be seen.

“I have no idea,” Jackson replied. Helen’s eyes widened with horror as a loud cackle of laughter rumbled out of her. She slapped her hand on her knee as the birds took flight to escape her boisterous laugh.

“That’s not funny,” Jackson said. “Now, we’re going to have to walk back.”

“Oh, come now, surely you see the humor here,” Helen replied as she tried to gain control of herself. Jackson didn’t know if Helen’s obnoxious laughter came from her injury or if she truly found their situation that humorous.

“There’s nothing funny about this,” Jackson mumbled, trying to mask the smile that was teasing the corner of his lip.

“Well, if you ask me, this is a lovely spot in the woods,” Helen remarked as the creatures started to come back to the boughs of the trees. “Although, I wouldn’t say it’s my favorite.”

“Where are you going?” Jackson asked as he watched Helen march onward, deeper into the forest.

“I thought... We aren’t going back to the manor so soon are we? I mean, we should at least look for the horses. Heaven forbid something happens to them,” Helen answered. Jackson shook his head with disbelief. Any other woman would have wanted to head back to the manor to get out of nature, but Helen seemed as if she were half forest nymph, comfortable charging through the unknown.

“If that is what you want to do, we can still go,” Jackson said. “Although, it’s a bit of a hike.”

Helen glanced at her shoes as her bottom lip dropped into a pout. “Well, I

suppose I can forfeit this outfit since it isn't my favorite."

Jackson glanced over Helen's outfit. The bright yellow dress looked as if a canary had exploded all over her. The fall had caused half the dress to be torn from waist to hem. He had to admit that the dress wasn't something he liked either.

"Does it bother you?" Jackson asked as he offered his hand to Helen. She took it without hesitation as they started their stroll through the woods.

"What's that?" Helen asked.

"Losing such a delightfully colored outfit," Jackson answered. Helen's smirk was playful and sweet.

She gave him a little shrug of her shoulder while keeping her eyes locked on the path before them. "I suppose it does a bit. After all, I took great care in making this outfit."

"Tell me," Jackson said as he gave her a once over, "I've seen you at the banquets, the dinner parties, the social events, and you've never once worn something so... what's the word?"

"Outrageous?" Helen chimed in as she arched a knowing eyebrow.

"To put it so delicately, yes," Jackson replied. Helen's cheeks flushed a dark rouge that made Jackson's heart pound with eagerness within his chest.

"What if I told you that you make me feel comfortable?"

"I doubt that's the reason behind your choices of clothing," Jackson said, fighting the smirk that tugged on his lips.

"And how would you know if I'm lying?" Helen teased and released his arm as if she had been insulted in some shape or fashion.

“Your nose wrinkles when you’re lying,” Jackson answered. “And here I thought you were on a mission to drive me away.”

Helen stopped. Her mouth fell open as she stared at him with shock. “You know?”

“I had my suspicions for a while,” Jackson confirmed. “I wasn’t sure until we went to your sister’s dinner party.”

“And I wore the blue dress,” Helen whispered. Her eyes dropped to the ground, and it nearly broke Jackson’s heart to see them fall from him. He stepped up to her, tucked his knuckles under her chin, and drew her gaze back to him.

“And you wore the blue dress,” Jackson mimicked as his body ached to be closer to her. “I’m curious, though, did you really think you’d be able to get rid of me so easily?”

“I had hoped,” Helen said. “I was certain talking to myself would raise some questions for you.”

“Actually,” Jackson said with a light chuckle, “it was that bird nest hair style that threw me for a loop. How long did it take to get that knot out?”

Helen’s laughter was light but heartfelt. Jackson grabbed her by the hand and kissed it tenderly before tucking it under his arm. He led her through the trees as she explained her reasoning and plot.

“You did all that just so that I would get the marriage annulled? I must say, that takes dedication and determination. So, how did that work for you?”

Helen arched her eyebrow as she glared at him as if he were the dunce of the ton.

“You tell me,” she answered sarcastically. The smugness on her face

vanished as she studied him. Her gaze was direct and startling, yet Jackson knew he wouldn't want her looking at anything other than him.

"Why do you do that?" Helen asked as she pointed to his face. "You always hide your smile. Have you noticed you do that?"

Jackson shook his head, "Can't say I've noticed. But I suppose if a person doesn't smile that often, it could feel strange to them."

"You don't have to cover it, you know. I think you have a lovely smile, and I'd love to see more of it," she said as they stepped out into the clearing. Helen cupped her hands over her mouth as she gazed at the field of wild blue flowers sprinkled with yellow and orange. She glanced over her shoulder to catch a glimpse of him.

"You shouldn't cover yours either," Jackson replied, pulling her hand away from her face so that he could gaze on her lovely face. "You're too beautiful to be hiding in unflattering dresses and colors. And your smile shines far too bright for it to be hidden from the world."

Before Helen could say a single word, Jackson curled his arms around her waist and crushed her body to his. Molding his hand to her face, he leaned into her, and as gentle as a baby's whisper, he kissed her soft lips. "Please, don't hide from me anymore. I need to see you."

CHAPTER 19



*H*elen swooned into Jackson as she curled her arms around his neck. The babbling brook that cut through the lush green clearing was nothing compared to Jackson's mouth. Helen wished for his kisses to drift from her mouth to her neck. She didn't know why it felt so good to have Jackson's mouth there, but it excited and thrilled her. Each time his mouth brushed against that tender stretch of skin, it caused little tingles to shoot across her body as if each kiss was a shooting star bouncing through the cosmos.

"Please," Helen pleaded, curling her fingers into the hair at the nape of Jackson's neck. She held him to her, refusing to let him slip out of her grasp.

"What's the cause for the begging?" Jackson asked as he pulled away from her. She stared at him, uncertain as to what to tell him. Should she explain to him how much she loved the way he looked at her? Or perhaps how she admired the way he masked his confusion when she pouted?

"I don't want you to go anywhere," Helen answered as she savored the way Jackson brushed the tips of his fingers over her cheeks and traced the line of her jaw.

"And who says I'm going anywhere?" Jackson asked. "I certainly have no desire to go back to the manor. Especially not when I have you all alone

without the prying eyes and itching ears.”

Heat rushed through Helen’s face as she thought of the last time they’d been left alone to their own devices. Her heart fluttered as her mind skipped and pranced through the seductive moments and the way Jackson had made her feel then too.

“You know, we could run away from it all,” Helen suggested.

“And where would we live? With the fairies of the woods? Or perhaps the nymphs of the lochs and streams? No, I couldn’t bear the thought of having you subjected to the harsh temperaments of the weather. Mother Nature is cruel and vile. She’d snatch you too quickly from me if we were to flee from the manor.”

“We could find a small hut somewhere to call our own,” Helen suggested as she stepped away from him while still holding on firm to his hand. Leading Jackson out into the field of wildflowers, Helen giggled. She felt alive out in the woods, like nothing could touch her or deter her from being free.

“Is that not what the manor is for? And it is a lot bigger than a hut. Perhaps we should stay where we are? And why would you want to leave such a place when it has all that we need to survive?” Jackson asked. His logical mind grated on Helen. She hadn’t come out there to be bogged down by the rules of society or the logistics of their wellbeing.

“Because,” Helen answered sharply, “you brood in the manor. You seal yourself away from the sunlight and linger in the darkness. And don’t you dare say you don’t do that. Your study has five large windows to let in the natural light, yet each one is covered by either tapestries or curtains. To be honest, I’m surprised you haven’t burst into flames from the sun already.”

Jackson’s hearty chuckle made Helen’s heart light. She couldn’t help but spin around Jackson as if he were her grumpy garden gnome, and she were a

sprite taunting the gnome to play.

“I don’t brood,” Jackson said, forcing his face to become stern and rigid.

“Yes, you do, and you know it,” she countered as she released his hand to frolic in the field. The warm sunlight kissed her face as she threw her arms open and spun around as if she were a child again.

“Then teach me to stop,” Jackson said, grabbing her arm and forcing her to stop. The world spun about as she tried to focus on Jackson’s face. Her smile tasted sour as she studied him.

“Tell me why you brood all the time, and maybe I can help,” she suggested and cupped her hand to his face, trying to lure out his secrets with her eyes. Jackson let out a heavy sigh as he placed his hand on top of hers.

“A long time ago...” Jackson started as his eyes fell from Helen. In an instant, she felt panicked, but she didn’t dare move in fear of startling Jackson. She wasn’t about to squander this moment and remained still as he poured out his heart to her.

“...my dearest and closest friend died,” Jackson continued. Helen’s heart dropped into her stomach. She didn’t want to think if his dearest friend was his first love, but she couldn’t help it. He’d been so closed off from her, from everyone, that it would make sense to her if he was troubled by the loss of a first love.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Helen said. “It’s always hard to lose someone you love.”

Jackson’s eyebrow shot up in a flash of shock. He shook his head as he took Helen by the hands and walked her over to a fallen tree to sit her down.

“I suppose you could say I loved him,” Jackson mumbled. “In a brotherly way. Will was my best friend. I’d known him since I was a child running

amok through the ton.”

Helen inched closer to Jackson, wishing she could take away the sad undertones in his voice. “What happened?”

Jackson let out a heavy, woeful sigh. “I thought it was an accident. At least that was what the judge ruled it as—an accident.”

Helen’s ears burned as the truth poured out of Jackson. She remembered hearing rumors about Jackson, how he’d been tried for murder. Those hushed whispers between Helen and Serena flooded Helen’s thoughts.

“Jackson?” His name stuck in the back of Helen’s throat. She felt planted to the spot—as if her toes had grown roots and kept her next to Jackson despite the desire to move. “What exactly is it you’re trying to tell me?”

His eyes shifted from the ground to Helen’s face for just a moment. In that moment though, Helen could see the guilt and confusion pulling at Jackson’s heart. Her body tingled as she reached out and touched his arm. Jackson put his hand on top of Helen’s as his attention drifted to some place in the distance Helen couldn’t see.

“We were finishing up our second year at Eton,” Jackson started. His words were rough coming out, and Helen shifted closer, ensuring he knew she was still there.

“Will, Ethan, Liam, and... Gabriel,” Jackson said, swallowing down the last name as if it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Helen told him, giving Jackson’s hand a tight squeeze.

“You asked me why I wanted to have a dinner party,” Jackson said as his eyes shifted to Helen. “I want to know if my suspicions are correct.”

Helen tilted her head and stared at Jackson. “I don’t understand.”

“I think Will wasn’t just killed,” Jackson blurted out, “but murdered. And I believe it was by someone who I once called friend.”

“Oh, Jackson, that’s a bold statement. Do you have any proof of your accusation? To give false testimony...”

“I know,” Jackson said, bobbing his head. “But all I have right now is a feeling in my gut and a frayed memory that I can’t trust.”

Jackson startled Helen as he jumped to his feet and started tromping through the wildflowers, crushing them under his feet.

“All right, let’s think this through,” Helen started, uncertain as to what would calm Jackson down. Of course, he had every right to be distraught, but Helen had never seen him so flustered before. She wasn’t sure if she should let him burn off his pent-up energy or try and get him to sit beside her again.

“When did you suspect your friend of being involved?” Helen asked in a clear, calm voice.

“The day I went out to play pool with Ethan and Liam,” Jackson answered. “And before you ask, they aren’t the ones I suspect. It was Gabriel Westwood. He’d come for a visit, and he mentioned how Margo just married his cousin.”

Confusion washed through Helen as she sat straighter. “And who is Margo?”

“She and Will had been courting when the accident happened,” Jackson explained. “The last time I had seen her or Gabriel was during the trial.”

Helen’s chest tightened. There was a part of her that wasn’t sure she wanted to hear anymore. She knew that once Jackson let slip his secret, she’d see him in a different light. The thought of his past shattering her happiness

frightened her.

“Why was there a trial if it was said to be an accident?” Helen asked, wishing she could keep her curiosity in check. But the question was out before she could stop herself from blurting it out.

“Will was found in the river Thames early in the morning,” Jackson replied so low Helen could barely hear him. Sorrow gushed out of him and tainted every word. “We didn’t know if he’d fallen in or been dared to swim through it or what. Will was a lot like you in that regard. He was a risk taker, feared nothing and no man. Since it was unclear if it was suicide, murder, or an accident, there was an investigation. Liam, Ethan, Gabriel, Margo, and I all had to appear before the court.”

“I can see now why you don’t like rumors and gossip,” Helen whispered as a brick of guilt crushed against her heart.

“Words can be damning,” Jackson said as he finally stopped. Helen jumped to her feet the moment she noticed the moisture on his cheeks. Jackson had done a fine job of masking his tears, but it broke Helen’s heart to know he wasn’t confident enough to share that side of himself with her even after confessing bits of his past to her. Helen curled her arms around him as Jackson rested his head on her bosom.

“It’ll be all right,” Helen cooed as she led Jackson back to the stump to sit him down. He plopped down hard and leaned into the valley of her breasts.

“Only when justice is done,” Jackson said in a harsh tone. “I believe Gabriel lied in court, and every fiber in my body tells me he’s the one who killed Will.”

“How so?” Helen asked.

“When we were playing billiards, I saw a ring on his finger. It was the ring

Will had shown to me weeks before his death,” Jackson explained and lifted his head up. “It was the ring Will was going to propose to Margo with. How Gabriel ended up with it, I have no idea. But I helped commission that ring for Will. I didn’t know it at the time, but my ledgers show proof.”

“Maybe Margo offered the ring to Gabriel years after the accident,” Helen suggested. “Or sold to him.”

Jackson shook his head. “When I saw Margo at the trial, she made no mention to me that Will had proposed. I think Gabriel got to him before Will was to meet Margo. That’s why she thought Will had stood her up. He would never do such a thing, not to her or anyone he cared for. Will was too nice of a guy and too loyal.”

“So, you think Gabriel murdered Will for the ring?” Helen asked.

“Not just the ring,” Jackson said. “Gabriel didn’t know about Will’s relationship with Margo. You see, Margo didn’t come from any money. It was to be a marriage of love. That’s why I had to help commission the ring. Will’s father refused to let Will throw his life away by marrying a girl who would drain his coffers.”

“How in the world are you going to prove all that?” Helen asked. “It’s impossible. Not unless you fill him with... oh. Now I see, the dinner party. You’re going to get him drunk and merry before bombarding him with questions. Maybe even extract a confession.”

“Precisely,” Jackson said. “Aren’t you a clever minx? Always so perceptive.”

“Well,” Helen said, jumping to her feet. She wished she could be honest with him and tell him how she felt, but the thought of speaking such things out loud caused her body to burn. “Don’t you worry about anything. I watched my father host many dinner parties in a similar manner. Of course, he wasn’t looking for a confession to murder, but I’m sure there’s something I can whip

up.”

Helen started for the tree line as she felt Jackson’s fingers curl around her arm. Stopping, she glanced at his hand before shifting to his wrist and forearm. Her heart fluttered and pounded wildly in her chest as she drew her gaze to Jackson’s.

“Helen... I...”

She shook her head as she tried to catch her breath. “Please don’t say anything.”

“I was just going to suggest that maybe you stay conservative in your attire for that night,” Jackson said. “As much as I adore the outfits you concoct, I need to have the guest’s undivided attention.”

“Of course,” Helen replied, trying not to let Jackson’s words dig any deeper into her soul, but she couldn’t help it. She thought he was going to say something meaningful, and instead, he made a joke about her clothes. “I’ll be just as fashionable as I was to Theresa’s dinner party. After all, I wouldn’t want your friends to think you’ve married someone touched in the head.”

“Although,” Jackson started, giving her a light tug in which Helen shifted to him without hesitation. She pressed her body up to his and let herself smile. “Maybe having you for a distraction might ease the tension a bit.”

Helen batted her eyes as she seductively tilted her head, “Whatever you want from me, I’m at your beck and call.”

CHAPTER 20



Jackson couldn't help but steal glimpses of Helen as they strolled alone in the twilight hours. His mind was scattered like a bag of marbles tossed mindlessly to the corner of the room. The truth was, he loved Helen, at least in part—the way she listened to him and the fact that she was still willing to help him after his wild outburst, but he certainly couldn't tell her that.

The tension crackled between them, and as they moved closer to the manor. Jackson's chest ached as he spotted the dim lights in the window of the manor.

“So,” Jackson said, finally breaking the awkward silence between them, “how is the planning coming along?”

“I told you not to worry; everything will be ready come Friday as we discussed,” Helen answered as Jackson noticed she barely looked at him. Clearly, she was upset about something he had said, or not said, in their conversation.

“I know, and I trust you with this, I do. But you've got to understand I'm usually the one taking care of things. And I hate living with anticipation. It's like resetting a bone, best to get it over with as quickly and painlessly as

possible,” Jackson said as Helen’s lips curled into a smile.

“Relax, everything will go according to plan,” Helen said as they strolled up the steps and stopped at the large oak door.

“That’s easier said than done, I’m afraid.”

“Im sure it is, but you can’t go worrying yourself sick. What happens if you end up ill on the night of the party? Then all your hard work will be for naught.” Helen said, fiddling with the tips of her fingers. Jackson’s body felt as if the blood was draining slowly from his limbs, causing his fingers to go numb.

“You’re right. I should just let bygones be bygones,” he answered as he stole a glimpse of Helen. How she was so confident all the time astonished him. Flashing her a little smile, Jackson glanced to the door. “Well, I suppose it would be best to bid you good night.”

“Will you not have dinner with me?” Helen asked as Jackson stretched out for the doorknob. He paused for a moment, uncertain if she was reveling in his awkwardness or if she truly craved his company.

The idea of her wanting him near her thrilled him. His heart pounded in his chest as Helen chewed her lower lip. It was clear there was more she wanted to say to him, and he found himself eager to know what was going on inside her mind.

“I would be delighted to dine with you. Is there something you want to tell me? You’re looking rather anxious. Now who is the one who needs to relax and let things fall where they may?” Jackson said, hoping the teasing in his tone was clear for her to hear. “Are you sure?” Helen asked as she batted her long lashes. Shock rippled through him as he pondered her question. Why she would think he didn’t want her company was beyond him. After they had just spent time alone, he wasn’t ready to leave her just yet.

“I wouldn’t have agreed if I didn’t want to spend time with you,” Jackson assured as the sound of their horses romping wild through the courtyard interrupted them.

His voice trailed off, and Helen’s attention shifted to the servants scrambling about the courtyard trying to catch the horses.

“Well, that’s something you don’t see every day,” Helen said with a chuckle. Jackson couldn’t help but flash an amused smile as his servants tried corralling the horses toward the barn.

Turning back to Helen, Jackson realized the fleeting moment had passed. He pulled in a deep breath.

“No,” Jackson said rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s not. But it’s getting chilly, and I believe you wanted to eat?”

Helen bobbed her head as she walked into the foyer with Jackson guiding her by the small of her back. He wished he could read her mind and know what it was she was thinking about. It would at the very least ease his troubled thoughts.

“Forgive me,” Jackson said, dropping his hands to his side and standing like a rod, “I’m afraid I might have offended you earlier. I hope that my words in no way, shape, or form affect you or ruin your day.”

“Why would anything you said ruin my day?” Helen asked as she inched closer to him.

Jackson didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t recoil from her—it would give Helen the wrong impression—but he knew he couldn’t remain standing at the front door of his home without a cause. The servants would be gossiping for the rest of the week, claiming both he and Helen had lost their minds.

“Because the words came from me,” Jackson mumbled. “I’m not sure if

you're aware, but people don't seem to like me very much."

"Well, perhaps if you gave them a reason to think you weren't a cantankerous old man, they wouldn't think that way," Helen teased as she grabbed him by the hand.

"Cantankerous, am I? That's certainly a name I haven't been called before. Moody, angsty, brooding. Those terms are more relevant to me. But cantankerous? Perhaps you are projecting your less desirable traits onto me?"

"There's not a man, woman, or child that would say I'm cantankerous," Helen said with a mock gasp as she clutched her hand to her chest. "I'm a delight, and everyone loves me."

"Do they now? I don't see how if you go out in the outfits that you've created. What is the one you're wearing now?"

"I call it 'the sunrise'," Helen said in a sing-song voice that made Jackson laugh.

"Even though you've mangled it?" Jackson asked as he pushed open the door and allowed Helen to step into the foyer first.

"Improved it," Helen corrected with a smile.

"So, you falling off your horse and nearly giving me a heart attack is how you improve your dresses? Well, Madam, I'd hate to see how you fix other things. Please tell me you don't take a hammer to a clock to get the hands to move?"

"Oh no," Helen said, wagging her hand as Jackson realized she was following him to his study. "I'd just bury it in the garden and have the worms wiggle about the wheels to get it to work again."

Jackson's laughter filled the hallway. In the corner of his eye, he couldn't

help but notice a few of the servants popping their heads out of the rooms to steal a glimpse of him. Of course, his laughter would be foreign to them. Jackson hadn't had a reason to smile or laugh until he met Helen, and now, it seemed he was affected by her in ways he never thought possible.

"Tell me, Your Grace," Helen enquired as they stopped at the study, "do you have much work that you need to get done?"

"There's a few minor things that require my attention," Jackson said as he found himself leaning closer to Helen, pinning her between his body and the doorway.

"Then I suppose I should let you get on with it. I'd hate to have you miss dinner because of work," Helen said as she stretched her hand up and cupped her palm to Jackson's jaw. Jackson's body tingled as it felt like little fires were exploding from his face and racing down to his heels. Every moment with Helen was so intoxicating he could barely handle it.

"Yes, I suppose you should," Jackson muttered under his breath as he gravitated closer to her until he shared the same air as her. Jackson couldn't help but notice Helen's chest rising and falling quickly. It was as if she too were having trouble catching her breath.

"Beg your pardon, Your Grace."

Paxton's voice grated on Jackson's nerves as he lingered in the depths of Helen's gaze. Reluctantly, he pulled away from her and stood straight. Turning to face Paxton, Jackson tried not to be annoyed with the interruption.

"Yes? What is it?" Jackson asked as he watched Helen slip away and stroll down the hallway with a mischievous smirk on her face.

"I've some news for you that I think you might want to hear in private," Paxton replied in a cold tone. Jackson kept his eyes locked on Helen until she

stepped into the open doors of the library. His body ran hotter than ever as his mind jumped to the last time he'd been in that room alone with Helen. It didn't take much for Jackson's thoughts to be consumed by the memory. Growing ever frustrated by the moment, Jackson pushed aside his desires to focus on Paxton.

"Make it quick," Jackson warned. "There are other things that are begging for my attention."

"It's about Gabriel," Paxton said in hushed tones. Just the mere uttering of Gabriel's name sent a cold chill racing through Jackson's body. The fire that seemed to burn so hot just moments before was now nothing more than a week old hearth.

"Go on," Jackson urged, stepping into the study and closing the door behind him. He turned to face Paxton and held his breath.

"I've spoken to a few people in the ton, and they all say that Mr. Westwood's finances aren't what they should be. Either Mr. Westwood has been forging his ledgers, or there's a business partner he's not disclosing on the records."

"That is interesting," Jackson said, rubbing the stubble on his chin. "Did you happen to figure out who is backing Mr. Westwood?"

"No, but I don't think I can continue asking questions about him without raising suspicions. And I believe you told me you rather wanted this situation kept under the rug," Paxton replied in hushed tones as if the books had ears.

"You've done well," Jackson said as he moved swiftly to his desk and pulled out a metal box from the bottom drawer. "Tell me, did you happen to find anything out about commissioning a ring?"

"From what I was told, Mr. Westwood has told a great many people he acquired the ring from a game of poker. It was one of the winnings in the

pot,” Paxton explained. Jackson’s hands balled into little fists, and he wondered if Gabriel was there if he’d have the nerve to strike him.

“Highly doubtful,” Jackson grumbled as he opened the metal box and pulled out a note for Paxton. “Here.”

Paxton’s eyes widened as Jackson handed over the monetary note. “This is too much.”

“You’ve done me a great service,” Jackson replied. “And I would like to ensure that this exchange is never uttered outside this room.”

“If you’re buying my silence, Your Grace, you don’t have to. I wouldn’t speak of this to anyone other than you,” Paxton said, handing the note back to Jackson. Shaking his head and his hand, Jackson leaned back into his chair.

“You need that to take care of your family, do you not?” Jackson asked. It was clear Paxton struggled with the right thing to say. “Just take it. Consider it a gift of sorts, and be cheery about it.”

“I don’t think I can be,” Paxton said, dropping his head as he folded the note and slipped it into his back pocket.

“Why ever not?” Jackson asked.

“Because that isn’t the only news I have for Your Grace, and maybe if you heard the rest, you’ll reconsider your gift,” Paxton replied as he recoiled ever so slightly from Jackson’s desk.

“Out with it then,” Jackson said as he found his body tensing up with anticipation.

“Rodger MacDuff stopped me in the marketplace,” Paxton explained. Jackson’s heart nearly stopped. It was a name he hadn’t heard in years, yet there wasn’t a single day the name hadn’t raced through his mind.

“Are you sure it was Lord MacDuff?” Jackson asked, feeling his throat closing around the name.

“Certain of it,” Paxton said with a lowered head. “He wishes to see you.”

Jackson swallowed hard. The beads of sweat dripping from his brow betrayed his confidence. “Did he say what about?”

“I’m afraid I wasn’t privy to that information,” Paxton said. Jackson leaned back into his seat and stared at the gray streaks of hair cutting through Paxton’s head. “I did tell him though that you’d go and see him at your leisure.”

Bobbing his head, Jackson wondered if he’d be able to muster the courage to do such a task. His heart raced as he thought of standing before Will’s father again. Jackson knew that Lord MacDuff didn’t fault Jackson for his son’s accident, but still, it was going to be hard to face the man again.

“He did mention though he’ll be on his way to Scotland in a fortnight on business, and he mentioned that he didn’t know when he’d be back around these parts again. I’m guessing the Lord is hoping to see you before he leaves town.”

Jackson pursed his lips into a tight line as he stole a glimpse of the closed doors, barring him from Helen. As much as he wanted to spend more time with her, Jackson knew he couldn’t neglect Will’s father.

“Did Lord MacDuff give you word as to where he was staying? It’s not like I have the time to venture to every hotel or residency to find him,” Jackson grumbled. A part of him wished more than anything that Paxton hadn’t gotten an address, but he knew he wasn’t that lucky.

“You’ll find Lord MacDuff at the Prancing Pigs Inn off Everest and Main,” Paxton said with a nod of his head.

“Then see that my horse is made ready,” Jackson replied wearily. “It would seem I have somewhere I need to be.”

“Right away, Your Grace,” Paxton said before rushing from the room. Jackson stood from his desk and moved to the fireplace. Dread swirled violently around him as thoughts of Will invaded his thoughts. He hadn’t expected to see Will’s father, but as he stared at the glowing orange light of the fire, an idea began to stir within him.

Pushing off from the fireplace mantel, Jackson’s heart skipped. His eyes widened. “If there was anyone who would know about that ring, it would be Will’s father. He was so adamant about not letting Will marry Margo. Surely, he’ll have some insight as to what transpired before the accident—maybe something he’d forgotten over the years.”

Jackson moved to the study door in haste, eager now to see Will’s father than ever before. He rushed down the hallway, making a beeline for the front door.

“Are you going somewhere?” Helen’s voice drifted down the hallway and nearly stabbed Jackson with guilt. He stopped with his hand on the doorknob and turned to face her.

“I’m sorry, something has come up, and as much as I’d love to have dinner with you, I’m afraid I can’t,” Jackson said. He found it odd having to explain his actions to Helen. Yet, at the same time he found it comforting. There was no doubt in Jackson’s mind that Helen would have worried about him had he not said anything to her. But as he stood at the threshold, torn between his past and his future, he dropped his shoulders.

“You understand, don’t you?” he asked Helen.

“Of course,” she answered in her lighthearted tone that made everything sound right as rain. “Go and be safe.”

“I swear to you, I’ll make it up to you. What do you say we have breakfast in the courtyard tomorrow?”

“Will you be gone all night then?” Helen asked, her voice straining with worry.

“To be truthful, I don’t know what time I’ll be coming home tonight,” Jackson said as he reached out for her and brushed away the loose hair from her face. “But I’ll be safe. That much you can count on.”

Helen bobbed her head as Jackson leaned in closer and planted a tender kiss on her lips. It wasn’t as passionate as he had wanted to give to her, but he was running out of time.

“Do you want me to come to you when I get home tonight?” Jackson offered, hoping his desire to spend time with her would appease the sadness in her eyes.

“Is that what you want to do?” Helen asked, breathlessly.

“That’s not what I asked,” Jackson replied as he heard the clapping of horse’s hooves down the cobblestone path. “But rest assured, Your Grace, I will see you later tonight.”

Jackson reached for Helen’s hand and left a kiss between her knuckles. He flashed her a quick smile and turned swiftly to his horse. Mounting his steed, Jackson stole one more glimpse at Helen. She waved to him without uttering a single word. He dug his heels into the horse and took off, racing the last rays of the day.

CHAPTER 21



*H*elen stood before the bay window hunting the horizon as flashes of light illuminated the dark sky. Her heart felt heavy and weak with each passing hour. Chewing on her lower lip, Helen tried not to let the worry take over her rational thoughts.

Jackson is fine. He's probably tarrying at his friend's house due to the rain. He'll be home when the rain stops.

Pulling in a long deep breath, Helen realized she didn't have a clue as to when the storm would pass by. It had been raining since dinner and hadn't let up. Worrisome thoughts drifted into Helen's mind. No matter what she did to expel them, nothing worked. Her mind skipped over images of Jackson in a ditch somewhere, nearly drowning due to the water rising. The mere thought of losing Jackson terrified Helen.

"Your Grace," one of the servants said behind Helen. She glanced over her shoulder to find the woman placing a thick shawl over Helen's shoulders.

"Thank you," Helen said as she tugged on the wool shawl, desperate to find warmth within the fabric.

"If I may be so bold, Your Grace," the woman said as she stepped closer to the door, "you needn't worry about the Duke. He often goes out alone and

comes back at the most unexpected moments.”

“Are you saying he’s done this before? Left with no idea when he’d return?” Helen asked as she snuggled into the shawl, wishing it was Jackson’s arms that curled around her.

The servant flashed Helen a meek, apologetic smile, and Helen couldn’t help but take pity on her. After all, it wasn’t the servant’s fault Jackson had disappeared. Helen wouldn’t have minded so much had it not been raining so hard. An icy finger traced her spine as the images of Jackson pinned under his horse popped into her head.

“You have no reason to worry for His Grace,” the servant assured as she inched closer to the door. “You’ll see. He’ll be back before you know it. And then you’ll wonder why you worried so much.”

“Madeline, if this is your attempt at trying to cheer me up, it’s not working,” Helen said over her shoulder. “And telling a person to calm down when they’re upset isn’t the best way to get them to simmer down.”

“All I’m trying to say, Your Grace, is that the Duke has fled before, and he came back weeks later. All we can do is keep the house in order and pretend he’ll be coming back any minute,” Madeline replied as she closed the door behind her. Helen shook her head.

There is no way Jackson would ever leave and come back weeks later. He isn’t that kind of man. I can barely get him out of the house as it is. No. Something is wrong. I can feel it in my bones.

Tossing off the shawl, Helen turned and charged for the foyer. Thunder boomed overhead, rattling the pictures and windows. Pulling open the front door, Helen stood like a siren, determined to tame the turbulent storm. Rain pelted her face. Shielding her eyes, she stood on the porch, hunting for any sign of Jackson on the horizon. A burst of light illuminated the courtyard

before her.

Her heart fluttered as she spied someone trudging through the courtyard, towing something behind him. Helen didn't hesitate; she took off into the storm. The ground was soggy and slippery, but Helen was determined to feel Jackson in her arms once again. As she slogged through the mud, her feet felt as if they were sinking with each step. Struggling to pull her feet from the mud, Helen called out.

"Jackson!" The wind's mighty howl silenced her pitiful plea.

"Helen?" Her heart skipped the moment she recognized Jackson's voice booming over the clapping thunder. "What are you doing out here? Are you mad?"

"I was so worried about you," Helen said as she threw her arms around Jackson's neck. The instant her arms hooked around him, Helen pulled Jackson to her. She crushed her lips and her body against him. Hunger and desperation consumed her as she showered Jackson with kisses.

"There's nothing to worry about," Jackson assured her then he pointed to Helen's feet and started to laugh. "Are you stuck in the mud?"

"Please," Helen grumbled, "don't mock me. I came out to greet you—even in this horrendous storm—and yes, I'm stuck."

"That's funny," Jackson said as he practically keeled over in laughter. Helen glanced at the horse Jackson had been walking to the stable. The horse was soaked to the bone and looked miserable.

"It's not funny that I'm stuck," Helen argued.

"Why do you think I walked the horse in? Because the ground is sloppy," Jackson said as Helen noticed the slur to his words.

“Are you drunk?” Helen asked as she grabbed his arm and pulled herself from the mud. It felt slimy on her legs, and Helen couldn’t help but feel bad for the shoes that had been trapped at least a foot into the earth.

“No,” Jackson said, shaking his head as the rain continued to dump on them.

“You had me worried sick,” Helen grumbled as she slapped Jackson on the arm in frustration. “And yet here you are, happy go lucky, drunk. Serves me right for caring for you.”

Helen turned her back to Jackson and started off for the steps of the manor. The fact she’d lost a pair of shoes in the mud and was soaked to the bone only grated on her nerves. As the winds blew about her, Helen curled her arms around her body, trying hold in all the heat she could. Not only was the weather icy, but so was Jackson.

“Are you angry with me?” Jackson asked from behind Helen. She didn’t look back but kept her focus on the open door. Helen kept moving, putting one numbingly cold leg in front of the other until she stood before a roaring fire hot enough to thaw her wary bones.

“No,” Helen finally answered as Jackson stretched his hands out to the fire.

“Good,” Jackson said with a huff.

“Fine,” Helen snapped back as she glared at him. No, Helen wasn’t angry, she was furious. Not only did Jackson miss dinner with her, but he had been gone till one a.m.

“Well, fine to you as well,” Jackson said, throwing his arms up. “Because if you were angry with me, I’d have to tell you that there was no reason to worry about me.”

“I’m your wife; it is in my job description to worry about you,” Helen replied as she directed her fiery gaze at Jackson, wishing she had the power to burn

him in some way.

“Now, we’re talking,” Jackson said, rolling his shoulders back as he stepped closer to her. Uncertain what just happened, Helen stepped back, trying to keep the distance between them. She could feel the change in the room. Studying Jackson’s eyes, Helen saw what she had suspected all along. Lust burned within Jackson’s eyes, and as he stalked her with his eyes, she knew there was no escaping him.

“What are you doing?” Helen demanded as Jackson reached his hands out and groped her from behind. She slapped at his hand until he recoiled from her. Panic shot through her as she stepped back from his grabbing hands.

“You said it yourself,” Jackson said with a wicked smirk on his face. “You’re my wi... wi... wife. And with that comes certain responsibilities. Now, come over here, and let me have you.”

“I think not,” Helen refused as she pulled her hand back and let it fly. The cracking sound of her hand making contact with Jackson’s face rattled her. She never thought in a million years she would do such a thing. Yet, here she was, having to corral her husband as if he were an ill-fitted suitor.

“You will not lay one finger on me,” Helen ordered. “Not in your current state. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to bed. You can do what you want.”

“Of course, I can,” Helen heard Jackson grumble as she stormed out of the room and rushed up the steps to her room. Her body trembled, but she knew it wasn’t from the cold. Tears pooled in her eyes, and she found herself grateful her hair was still dripping wet.

He’s drunk. That’s the only thing I can think of that would cause him to be so rude, so abrupt. But who was he drinking with? And why didn’t he come home sooner?

Oh, my, I struck my husband.

Helen rubbed her fingers as if the little prickles of pain coursing from her fingertips to her palm still bothered her. Guilt coursed through her as she replayed the event back again and again. Rushing into the safety of her room, Helen quickly closed and locked the door. She stripped out of her wet clothes and slipped on her dry night gown.

I'm not going to feel guilty. He deserved what he got. How dare he come home and be so vulgar to me. That certainly isn't the man I married.

Oh, lord, but what if it is? Madeline said he'd go off. What if she was telling the truth? What if Jackson is having problems, and this is how he deals with his problems? I mean, really, how well do I know him? Three months of marriage isn't enough to gauge a person.

Plopping down on the bed, Helen glanced over to the door. The air in the room was heavy and hard to take in. For a moment, Helen stared at the wooden door, knowing Jackson was on the other side of it in his crazy mad form. It wasn't a side of him she'd like to see again, but as his wife, she couldn't just let the servants care for him.

Mustering all the strength and patience she could, Helen made her way to the door. With her hand on the knob, she leaned in and strained to listen.

“What happened to the horse? I swear I left him right outside the door.”

Helen recoiled the moment she heard Jackson's voice. Her heart skipped as she swallowed hard. All the courage she had mustered flowed out of her like the frozen pond thawing for spring. The loud thumping of Jackson's boots rattled her nerves. She stepped back from the door and held her breath. The knob rattled. Helen couldn't help but feel grateful that she hadn't unlocked the door yet.

“Helen? I need to... I need...” A loud thump rumbled against the door and caused Helen to jump. She cupped her hands over her mouth to silence her scream. At first, Helen wondered if one of the servants had clobbered Jackson, but she pushed that thought aside. The servants at Stonewill were far too loyal to do such a thing.

Lowering herself to the ground, Helen stole a peek from under the door. To her surprise, Jackson was planted on the ground, his face pressing against her bedroom door, and he was passed out.

“Are you serious?” Helen grumbled as she hesitated with her hand on the doorknob. It was clear by the long, loud snores coming from Jackson, he wouldn’t be waking up any time soon. To save her husband embarrassment, Helen unlocked the door and opened it for him. Jackson spilled into her room like a bust bag of potatoes. He stretched out on her floor as if he had jumped into a spring or loch from the deck of a ship.

“Jackson,” Helen said as she patted him on the cheek to arouse him. Jackson stirred a bit and rolled onto his side. “Get up. I know you don’t want to sleep in the hallway tonight. And please, don’t make me get the servants. I don’t want to have to explain to them what’s going on here.”

No matter what Helen said to Jackson, it was clear her pleas went through one ear and out the other. After much struggle, Helen moved around Jackson and snatched him by the arms. Ensuring she had a decent grip on him, she pulled him into her bedroom and dropped him.

“Of course, you wouldn’t make this easy. When do you ever?” Helen asked her inebriated husband. “Now, I can’t pick you up and get you on the bed. The best I can do is give you a blanket.”

Helen stared at Jackson as if she expected him to answer her, but from what she remembered of her father passing out on a few occasions, nothing she

could say or do would get Jackson up.

“Fine,” Helen grumbled, throwing her hand up into the sky. “Stay on the ground. See if I care. Because I don’t. You did this to yourself, and I can’t feel sorry for self-inflicted wounds. But so help me, Jackson, don’t you get any ideas when you wake up. I’m still mad at you.”

CHAPTER 22



The sun's rays cut through the thin slants of Jackson's eyelids and pierced the depths of his dreams. Waving his hands about to ward away the light, Jackson shot up, gulping the air as he tried to get adjusted to the intruding light of day.

"For the love of all that is holy, close the curtains," Jackson ordered as he threw himself back into pillow to calm the raging thumping of his head. Curling the pillow around his head, Jackson tried to block the light as much as he could. Yet, no matter which way he shifted, the light poked and prodded for him to get up.

"Why is there so much light in this room?" Jackson grumbled as he burrowed his head between the mattress and the pillow.

"Perhaps it has something to do with you being in my room, Your Grace."

Jackson froze as he tried to process the familiar voice. It hurt to think or even move. The memories from the previous night were as frail as parchment near an open flame.

"Helen?" Jackson whispered the name as an image came to his mind. Throwing the pillow to the side, he forced himself to hunt for Helen in the blinding light. "What are you doing in my room?"

“I’m not in your room,” Helen replied as Jackson’s eyes slowly adjusted to the light. His dresser wasn’t in the right place, nor was it the right color. The room had a floral scent that sent shock waves coursing through Jackson. Anger flickered across Helen’s face the moment he locked eyes on her. The nagging in his gut only grew as he cautiously sat up. “You’re in mine.”

“What in the world?” Jackson gasped.

“That’s what I would like to know,” Helen said, throwing her hands to her hips. “But let me guess, you don’t remember a thing about yesterday, do you?”

Jackson rubbed the back of his neck, hunting through the vague memories. Guilt pummeled him as he shook his head. “No. I don’t.”

“Well, what do you remember?” Helen asked as she folded her arms over her chest and shifted her weight from foot to foot. Jackson scooted to the headboard as he fought back the thumping of his heartbeat drumming in his ears.

“Kissing you goodbye,” Jackson answered. The memory was frayed, and he couldn’t tell for certain if he could trust the memory at all. “Or maybe, wishing I had kissed you goodbye.”

“Jackson, do you have any idea how worried I was about you? Then you come home drunk, and... well, I’m not going to repeat it, but you weren’t nice.”

Jackson’s heart felt as if it had been turned into glass. One more blow and he knew it would shatter. “What do you mean? And be frank; I’ll not tolerate the wagging tongue.”

“You came home intoxicated well after midnight in the pouring rain. And no one knows what happened to your horse. The servants said you were on foot.

Now, you still want to say you don't have a clue as to what happened last night?" Helen's voice was calm and collected. There was an icy spike to each syllable, and Jackson could only assume just how mad she was.

"I went to see Lord MacDuff," Jackson mumbled as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Who?" Helen asked.

"Will's father," Jackson said, bringing his eyes to meet hers. "I went to see him. I wanted to let him know what I had found out."

"And? What did he have to say? Will he be coming to the party?"

Jackson rubbed the back of his neck as he wearily shook his head. "No, he won't be joining us as far as I know."

"Well, go on. You were about to tell me why you walked home in the rain," Helen finished as she dropped her arms to her side.

"Trust me when I say, I wanted to come back here. There was a point to going, but to be truthful, I wished I hadn't gone at all. But it was too late for me to turn around." Jackson spoke slowly with a soft tone. He couldn't stand the echo from his own voice in his ears. It was clear to Jackson that nothing he could say was going to calm her down. Whatever he had done last night to wake up in Helen's room was not salvageable.

Jackson watched Helen open her mouth and close it just as quickly. It wasn't difficult to see that she was struggling.

"Out with it," Jackson grumbled as he threw his hand up. "I'm sure that whatever you're about to tell me, it can't compare to how loathsome I feel about myself. There's no excuse for my actions or my speech."

"How can you ask for forgiveness if you don't know what you did wrong?"

“Then tell me,” Jackson said in a flicker of anger, “so I can go back to sleep.”

“Never mind,” Helen said as she marched over to the edge of the bed. Jackson punched the pillows to get them soft for his aching head. “But don’t think for one moment I’m going to let you sleep in here. This is my room, not yours. But if you insist on staying, then I will have no choice but to claim your room.”

Jackson shot up as Helen jerked the blankets off the bed. With his nostrils flaring and his body achy and cold, Jackson didn’t have it in him to fight. Getting up and going to his room seemed like a far better idea.

“Leave the pillow,” Helen snapped as Jackson slipped his legs off the bed and stood. His legs wobbled under his weight as he clung to the bed post for support. Turning to Helen, he had hoped to find a smidgen of pity for him. Yet, there was nothing. Not even a crumb of tolerance.

“Fine,” Jackson mumbled as he slowly made his way to the door. “Don’t think for a moment I’m going to forget you kicked me out.”

“If all your memories are so easily erased after a night out, then maybe I don’t have to worry about that,” Helen said. Jackson grumbled under his breath as he marched down the hallway to find his room. The walls stretched out to him, and with similar color patterns, it was hard for him to tell which way was which.

After many failed attempts, Jackson finally found his bedroom door and stepped into the cooler, dark room. His body practically melted as he stepped into the darkness. There was hardly a beam of light cutting through the room.

Shifting through the darkness to find his bed, Jackson moved swiftly. Once his knees bumped into the bed, he turned and plopped down. Everything was so familiar, and before he could get his feet over the edge of the mattress, Jackson was out cold.

“Your Grace?”

Jackson’s eyes fluttered open as he tried to moisten his dried mouth. Glancing around, he couldn’t help but smile as the gentle tones of sunset filled his room.

“How long have I been asleep?” Jackson asked as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“All day, Your Grace,” the servant said as he handed Jackson a robe. “I was told to try and wake you for dinner by the Duchess.”

Jackson’s eyes widened as all the memories came rushing through his head. It was like a tidal wave of images bombarding him.

“She must hate me,” Jackson bemoaned as he ran his fingers through his hair. “Oh, the things I said.”

Guilt warred with embarrassment as his words came back to haunt him. “This isn’t good.”

“Is there something wrong, Your Grace?” the servant asked as the confusion etched deeper into the servant’s brow.

“How is my wife this evening?” Jackson asked, hoping for some insight into Helen’s mood. Surely, she was going to be mad. He didn’t want to think about forcing himself on her. Or the slap he so rightfully deserved. Instinctively, Jackson rubbed the side of his face as if Helen struck him once again.

“She appears to be a bit upset today,” the servant answered. “The Duchess hasn’t come out of her room.”

Jackson’s chest tightened. “Will she be in the dining room?”

“No, Your Grace. The Duchess is having her meal in her room.”

Letting out the pent-up air he trapped in his lungs, Jackson pursed his lips together. He knew he had no right to ask her to come to dinner, to be with him, but Jackson wasn't about to let Helen go, not when he needed her so badly.

Gathering himself, Jackson put on fresh clothes and stepped out into the hallway. He smiled as he noticed Helen's servant coming with her dinner. Jackson rushed to her, hoping to stop her before she entered Helen's room. The shock on her face as he pressed his finger to his lip and shook his head was priceless.

"She doesn't want to see you, Your Grace," the servant with the button nose whispered as she glanced at the doorway suspiciously.

"I must apologize, please. I swear as the master of this manor, I mean her no harm, and I need to make amends."

The servant glanced to the door and rolled her eyes. "Very well. Best be quick about getting in the door. She only leaves it unlocked for a moment or two. You'll hear the lock, and that's when you'll enter."

"Thank you," Jackson said as he collected the tray of food from the servant and stepped up to Helen's door. It took every ounce of his patience not to knock. Waiting for Helen, Jackson strained his ears to listen for her. He needed to hear the sweet tone of her voice. Just knowing the sort of pain he must have caused her felt like someone had gouged his heart from his chest and took a blunt sword to it.

The click of the lock started Jackson. He stood sharp and waited just a moment before turning the knob and entering the room.

"What are you? How dare you come in like this. Get out!" Helen shouted the moment she spotted Jackson in her room. Jackson rushed to set the tray down and bolt the door shut.

“Please, I beg you,” Jackson said as he dropped to his knees before Helen, defeated and spent, “a moment of your time.”

“It’s not like I can stop you,” Helen snapped. “You’re the lord of this manor, and I am nothing but a meager wife.”

“Stop,” Jackson said as he drew his eyes to hers. His heart pounded from the truth he was about to tell her. Never in his life had he wanted to let anyone in. Yet, not having Helen in his life, that was something he couldn’t bear to think about. “You are special to me.”

“Could have fooled me,” Helen stormed, folding her arms as she paced the room.

“I want you to know that I’m proud of you,” Jackson said as he took in a deep breath. “You had every right to hit me. In fact, you should have done it harder. Didn’t your father teach you anything?”

Helen’s stance seemed to shift from hostile to curious. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she chewed on her lower lip. “I learned what I could. Now what’s the point of coming into my room in such a manner?”

“I’m sorry,” Jackson said as he reached out for her. Helen swatted his hands away as Jackson rose from the floor. “I had no right to do what I did. And you had every right to do what you had to do. I’ve broken your trust in me, and for that, I’m sorry. I love you, Helen, and I swear, I never want to do anything that would hurt you.”

“You love me?” Helen asked as she inched closer to him.

“Yes,” Jackson said with such conviction that it rammed into his chest like a bolt of lightning, scarring his heart forever. “And I’d understand if you didn’t want me around you anymore. Or if you didn’t want to help with the dinner party. But I had to tell you at least once so that you would know. Even if you

didn't believe it, you would have at least heard it once from my own lips."

"," Helen moved closer to him. His heart pounded as her soft, tender fingers grazed over his forearm, preventing him from leaving. She pressed the palms of her hands against Jackson's chest, and he let out a delicate moan as the warmth from her hands seeped into him.

"I'm still mad at you," Helen said as she stretched to the tips of her toes. Jackson's mouth parted as the anticipation stewed within his loins.

"You should be. I'm still mad at me too," Jackson whispered as he dared to curl his arms around Helen's waist.

"You scared me, and you hurt me," Helen said as she tried to control the tremors in her lower lip.

"I'm sorry," Jackson said, leaning down to kiss away the hurt he caused. Cupping her face, he gently kissed the tip of her nose and pulled back to kiss her cheek and forehead. Between each kiss, Jackson whispered, *I'm sorry*, until Helen's arms tightened around his neck.

"I'm sorry," he said once more as the desire flickered and sparked in Helen's gaze.

"Prove it."

CHAPTER 23



Jackson arched his eyebrow. Helen found herself trapped within the depths of Jackson's gaze. A fire had been kindled within his eyes, and it made Helen's body quiver with desire.

"Prove it? And how exactly do you want me to do that? Shall I jump from some height? Or perhaps you want me to drop to my knees and beg at your feet?" Jackson suggested, dropping to the ground.

"What are you doing? Get up," Helen said as her eyes shifted to the open door of the library. The last thing she wanted was for the servants to see their master groveling.

"Not until you forgive me," Jackson groveled as he pawed at her dress. Helen gasped as Jackson disappeared under her dress. Her eyes widened as Jackson's fingers grazed up her inner thigh as light as a feather. The delicate touch made her skin tingle and stroked the flames of her desires. It took every ounce of her strength to bat Jackson away.

"Don't move." Jackson's voice was muffled from the layers he had trapped himself under. His hot breath tickled and taunted Helen as it drifted between her legs.

"Jackson." His name lodged into the back of her dry throat as the air was

pulled from the room. Helen pawed at the top of Jackson's head as she focused on the wooden beams holding the ceiling. With every gentle kiss, Helen's anger dissipated. Although she wanted to stay mad, she knew there was no fighting against the pleasure Jackson was stirring within her being.

"Shhh." The heat from his hiss drifted over her skin like a warm blanket. Helen's body trembled with delight. She reached out and clung to the bookshelf for support as it became harder and harder for her to stand.

Gulping down the air, Helen closed her eyes, savoring every touch and flick of Jackson's tongue. Panting, she pulled away, knocking over several books as she tried to steady herself.

"Your Grace," Helen said, her voice bent with lust as she withdrew her dress from off of Jackson, "I don't believe you belong there."

"And where would you like me?" Jackson asked as he rose. His intense gaze held Helen in her place. She was like a deer picking up the threat but couldn't see it.

"I don't think that you understand," Helen started as she hunted for an escape. A small gap on Jackson's left was Helen's only path. Bolting for the hole, Helen squealed as Jackson's arms curled around her waist as she tried to slip by him.

"What's that?" Jackson teased as his fingers skipped and jumped over her ribs. Little tingles raced over her body, overwhelming her. She buckled under the duress of Jackson's prodding fingers.

"Stop, oh, please," Helen said through her laughing fit. Jackson's laughter in her ear made her heart swell. Helen froze and turned to face him. Jackson's eyes widened with confusion and insecurity.

"What?" Jackson asked as he brushed the loose strands from Helen's face.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you laugh so hard before,” Helen observed as a smile tugged the corners of her mouth. It was hard to stay angry at him, especially when he wasn’t the same man.

“I haven’t found anything funny,” Jackson replied as he arched a knowing eyebrow. She slipped out of his embrace and stepped back.

“That’s sad,” Helen said. She started to turn and make her way to the door only to have Jackson’s fingers slip around her arm and hold her there. She gasped at the pressure of his fingers; it was as if they were imploring her not to leave without saying a word. Glancing at his hand, Helen drew her attention to the door.

“It’s late,” she mumbled.

“Is it? I hadn’t noticed,” Jackson said, pulling as his fingertips grazed up her arm and caressed her neck. Helen didn’t know whether to turn and face him or stay still. Every fiber of her being cried out for his affections. She longed to fall into his tender embrace and let the world fall away from her.

“Do you have any idea how much I want you?” Jackson whispered in her ear; his lips brushed over her ear lobe sending little bumps racing along the length of her neck and shoulders. Helen gulped the air, not sure exactly how she wanted to respond. There was no denying the fact she wanted him as well.

“I might have an idea,” Helen said breathlessly as Jackson’s arms closed around her, cocooning her.

“Are you sure about that?” Jackson asked as he started nibbling the length of her neck. Helen curled her arm around his neck and leaned back into his embrace, surrendering herself to him. Jackson’s fingers curled around her neck as he kissed her earlobe. She closed her eyes to immerse herself in Jackson’s affections.

Jackson's breath on her skin was like stepping into a soothing bath. She found her knees growing weak with every tender caress. Helen's body quivered under Jackson's touch. The sudden foreign gasp pulled Helen up short. Her eyes widened as panic shot through her.

A small silhouette stood in the doorway, hands clasped over her mouth. The rush of tiny footsteps echoing down the corridor made Helen start to laugh. She knew there was no reason for her to feel so insecure. After all, Jackson was her husband. Still, the thought of being caught in such a personal manner caused guilt and shame to jab at her ribs.

"It's late," Helen said a bit winded as she pulled away from Jackson. "I think I'll be retiring for the evening."

Helen ran her sweaty palms down her dress as heat coursed through her veins. She didn't dare look back to Jackson in fear of having his smoldering gaze lure her back into his arms. With her heart fluttering in her chest, Helen started for the door; Jackson's footsteps fell behind her, echoing in her ears.

With a little playful giggle, Helen took off down the hallway, keeping distance between them. She didn't have to glance over her shoulder to know Jackson was right behind her. A peel of laughter filled the corridor as Jackson grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into the small nook near the window. Pinned against the wall and Jackson, Helen met his lusty eyes.

"This isn't like you," Helen said as she tried to catch her breath. There was no telling if she was feeling lightheaded due to the running or the way Jackson made her feel. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a little voice cried out for her to stop. It was such a small insignificant voice that Helen barely heard the warning it sounded to her.

"Maybe it is," Jackson argued, leaning in closer to her. He pressed his lips to hers as his hand molded to her face. Helen wanted to swoon into his embrace

and forget about the prying eyes and itching ears. If there was one thing she knew, it was that servants talked, and rumors would be flying around the manor come morning about her rendezvous in the library; Helen wasn't sure she was ready to deal with them. All she wanted was to be able to slip away and not worry about any other matter.

Throwing her arms around Jackson's shoulders, she clawed at the hair at the base of his neck. Jackson's kiss grew into a hunger that she knew she'd never be able to quench. His mouth moved rapidly, devouring everything that it could and stealing the very breath from Helen.

Pulling away, she gulped the air as Jackson released her face and inched closer to her wrists. He snatched her hands and drew them up over her head.

"You're at my mercy now," he growled with such intensity that it made Helen's body shiver from excitement. There was no telling what Jackson was planning once he had her alone. The thrill of it made Helen's cheeks flush and her ears ring. Little tingles started from the crown of her head down her neck.

"And what is it you're going to do to me?" Helen asked as she batted her eyes. Oh, the things she could think of and secretly wished Jackson would do. She thought of how they were tucked away in the nook and how it wasn't big enough for them to do anything. Jackson couldn't even reach to the hem of her dress without exposing Helen to any servant daring to pass by.

"I'm going to take off your clothes layer by layer," Jackson whispered so low as he tucked both of Helen's hands into one of his. She swallowed hard and let her mind wander through Jackson's lusty story.

"I'll have you stand in the middle of the room with no way for you to hide yourself from me," Jackson continued. Helen's heart fluttered as she thought of how chilly the room was, and the idea of standing naked before Jackson

caused little bumps to rise over her skin.

“And then?” Helen dared to ask. She tried swallowing the lump forming in her parched throat. A smile emerged on Jackson’s lips as he tucked the loose strands of hair curtaining Helen’s face behind her ear.

“So eager to hear what awaits you, I see,” Jackson said, tracing the tips of his fingers over her jaw line. She watched as he studied her, as if trying to sear her image into his memory.

“Can you blame me for wanting to know my fate?” Helen asked as the little voice within the back of her mind grew louder.

Helen’s body tingled from the crown of her head to her toes. Her body craved to be next to him, to breathe in his mossy pine scent. If she didn’t know any better, she would have thought Jackson spent more time outside than in by the way the scent of wildflowers and pine clung to his skin. It pulled Helen closer to him. She wished more than anything she could seep into him, be a part of him in some way.

The desires taunted and teased her as much as Jackson’s fingers were doing.

Jackson arched his eyebrow as his hand flew to her dress and started hiking it up. The fabric tickled as it drifted over shins and knees. Without taking her eyes off Jackson, Helen held her breath and waited. The spark in Jackson’s eye was enough to make her go wild. She didn’t want to just stand there with him, she wanted him to kiss her, touch her, make love to her.

“Yes,” Jackson answered after some time. “I can blame you for teasing me as you do. Do you have any idea how hard it’s been for me to concentrate? You drive me wild with desire, and now, well, now I’ll be sharing that frustration with you.”

Helen’s chest tightened. What in the world did he mean? Was he going to

torture her in some cruel way? Tease her until she couldn't stand it anymore. She swallowed hard and opened her mouth. Helen's eyes widened as Jackson rubbed the place between her inner thighs, taunting and teasing her. The way he slipped his fingers into her made her gasp. It wasn't his fingers she wanted though, it was him. She wanted to possess his very soul and hold him hostage. Yet, it was she that was at his mercy just as he proclaimed.

"Do you know how delicate you are?" he whispered, nearly as breathless as Helen was. "How soft and tender your body is? It makes me want to take you right here and now. I don't care who's watching or listening to us. Let them."

"You don't really mean that do you? Please tell me you don't want to share me with the servants," Helen said as her joy slowly drained from her body. The mere thought of having an audience frightened her.

"Share you? Never," Jackson vowed, his teeth grazing her earlobes. "Not unless that's what you want."

Helen shook her head, feeling relief come over her. "That's not exactly my idea of a good time."

"What about this?" he asked as he stretched his fingers and opened Helen up to new sensations. She gasped, feeling the pressure and wondering how much her body could handle. "Does this make you happy?"

Helen bit her lip and bobbed her head, unable to utter a single word. Jackson pumped his fingers in and out of her, making her body squirm with delight. Scared to make a sound in fear of the servants hearing, Helen clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle her moans of pleasure. There wasn't a place on her body that was forbidden to Jackson, and he was more than willing to caress every inch of her.

"Jackson," Helen whimpered. Her voice was husky from want and the need to have him doubled within her.

“Yes?” Jackson answered, seemingly rather proud of the way he made her body twitch with a single touch. “Did you want me to stop?”

“No!” Helen said fast and hard as she clung to him. “Don’t you dare stop.”

A spark of intrigue flickered through his face, and Helen wondered if Jackson understood the power he had over her. All he needed to do was ask, and Helen would bend over backwards to make it happen. She found it nearly impossible to deny Jackson anything while he held her captive.

“What’s the matter?” he cooed into Helen’s ear. Digging her fingers into Jackson’s shirt to hold him in place, Helen’s legs began to wobble under her. There was no telling how much longer she’d be able to hold herself up. The skill and precision of Jackson’s touch was more than she was expecting.

Panting heavily, Helen tried to keep herself upright but failed. She had no choice but to swoon into Jackson and use him as a prop.

“Let go,” Jackson said as he held her upright. “I want to watch you enjoy me.”

“But I want more,” Helen pleaded.

“Is that so?” Jackson mumbled against her neck as he kissed her.

“Would you have me beg?” Helen asked as she mustered every ounce of her strength to keep from slumping into Jackson. The last thing she wanted was for him to stumble back. Strong and true, Jackson kept her pinned to the wall as he stroked and taunted her desires. Every flick of his finger sent a new sensation coursing through her.

With the world fading from her, Helen did as Jackson asked and relaxed her body. She propped her leg up and curled it around his waist, pressing her body next to his as Jackson’s fingers pushed in deeper, exploring her from the inside out. Helen didn’t mind the stone wall scraping her back, nor did

she care about the servants who could be watching them. Exhaling, Helen let herself go.

Jackson moaned in her ear as he pushed her back into the wall. His mouth was all over her as Helen clawed at his shirt as her leg quivered around his waist. A smile stretched across Jackson's face as he held her gaze. The world was wobbly as Helen's ears rang. She felt light yet heavy—almost as if she could melt on the ground at Jackson's feet.

“You are the most exquisite creature I have ever encountered,” Jackson said, brushing the back of his fingers over her cheeks. Helen didn't know how to respond; her head was still swimming as Jackson leaned down and scooped her off her feet.

“You don't have to carry me,” Helen argued although she couldn't hide the sleepiness in her tone. He had unhinged her limbs and made her feel wobbly.

“The hour is late, and I shall see you to bed,” Jackson said as Helen's body twitched. He gave her a sideways glance, and Helen felt the smugness through his eyes.

“My bed or yours?” Helen asked, uncertain if she really wanted to know or cared. As long as she was next to Jackson, she didn't care where she was.

“Yours,” Jackson said, fighting the smile tugging on his lips. “I will see you safely to your room. I am, after all, your husband, am I not?”

CHAPTER 24



Jackson's fingers glided through his hair, his eyes fixated on the journals and ledgers scattered across his desk. A fierce battle raged within him as he tried to suppress the urge to seek out Helen. The events of last night infiltrated every corner of his thoughts, shattering his focus.

To make matters worse, her lingering scent on him stirred a desire far stronger than he had anticipated. He knew he had to resist her, but the pull was almost irresistible.

As an introverted and highly private person, Jackson was not used to being so consumed by someone else. It threw him off balance and made him question his own self-control. But despite these inner struggles, Helen still managed to captivate him in a way that no one else could.

He couldn't help but wonder what it was about her that drew him in so strongly. It wasn't just her physical beauty, though that certainly played a part. No, there was something more to her, something intangible yet undeniable.

Perhaps it was her intelligence and wit or the way she carried herself with confidence and grace. Or maybe it was the hidden vulnerability he glimpsed in her eyes, a vulnerability that only he seemed to have noticed.

Whatever it was, Jackson couldn't deny the growing connection between them. It both exhilarated and terrified him. But deep down, he knew that no matter how hard he tried to resist her, he would eventually succumb to her spell.

As much as he wanted to push her away and maintain his carefully constructed walls, he also longed to let her in and experience the full force of their chemistry.

But for now, he would bury himself in his work and try to push her from his mind. He couldn't afford any distractions or weaknesses if he wanted to achieve his goals.

And yet, even as he attempted to focus on the task at hand, a small voice in the back of his mind whispered her name, reminding him of the unspoken tension between them.

"Sir, you wanted to see me?" Paxton asked, catching Jackson off guard.

"Please, come in," Jackson said, motioning for Paxton to take a seat.

Paxton sat down, feeling uneasy about the news he was about to deliver.

"Well, get on with it," Jackson urged, visibly anxious.

Paxton cleared his throat and began, "There are rumors, Your Grace. It seems Gabriel was overheard confessing to a murder while intoxicated at the pub."

Jackson listened intently, his emotions hidden behind a calm exterior.

"There's no evidence in the ledgers or journals, but Lord Edward Smith was the one Gabriel confided in. Lord Edward initially believed it was about something else but later realized it was murder," Paxton explained. "After Gabriel was found innocent in the trial, Lord Edward didn't pursue his suspicions, but he still holds a grudge against Gabriel."

Jackson absorbed the information, his determination unyielding.

“We can’t convict based on suspicions alone,” Jackson remarked thoughtfully.

As he glanced at the doorway, his attention was captured by a sight that filled him with strength and inspiration.

The doubts that had plagued him moments before vanished as he locked eyes with Helen. With her by his side, he felt capable of conquering anything.

Without a word, Jackson swiftly moved towards her, his passion reignited.

“Your Grace,” Helen greeted him and bowed low. Her voice was sweet and her cheeks flushed a darker rouge that sent Jackson’s heart pounding wildly in his chest.

In that moment, Jackson forgot his initial purpose as Helen’s allure enveloped him.

“I apologize for interrupting, Your Grace,” Helen said in a hushed tone as she craned her neck to spy into the room.

“There’s no need to apologize,” Jackson reassured her, gazing at her with adoration. “It’s only Paxton in there.”

“Is everything all right?” she asked as she inched closer. Her floral scent swirled and assaulted him, making it nearly impossible for him to think of anything other than where the closest nook or empty room was so that he could be alone with her.

With the desire building within him, Jackson reached for Helen’s arm, ready to pull her away from the prying eyes of his servants. Just as his fingers curled around her arm to lead her somewhere more private, the front doors blew open and sent a chilly breeze through the manor sweeping away Helen’s

floral scent.

“Yes, everything is fine,” Jackson said as the fresh air cleared his mind from the foggy of desire.

The confusion on her face pained Jackson.

“Why do I get the impression that you’re lying to me?” Helen asked as Jackson moved her further from the study.

“It’s nothing you need to concern yourself with,” Jackson replied as he glanced over his shoulder. Paxton shifted in his seat impatiently.

“So, there is something going on,” Helen said, arching her eyebrow as she folded her arms over her chest in defiance. “Tell me. Maybe I can help you.”

“I’m not so sure you can,” Jackson answered. “Not unless you have some hidden talent for getting someone to confess their innermost secrets.”

Helen tilted her head and flashed him a devious smile. “I might not be able to, but there’s one thing that can.”

Intrigued, Jackson tilted his head and studied Helen. The wicked grin on her face gave him chills as his instinct fired like a loaded pistol.

“To get a man to talk, one only needs a bit of encouragement. Something that will loosen lips,” Helen said as her eyes shifted to the small round table in Jackson’s study. A smirk stretched across her lips.

“Of course,” Jackson muttered as the brown liquor shimmered from the beam of sunlight cutting through the window. “You’re a little minx, aren’t you?”

Without thinking, Jackson snatched Helen by her waist and drew her lips to his. He pulled in a deep breath, savoring the honeysuckle that lingered on her skin. “You never fail to astonish me.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Helen answered as her cheeks flushed. Jackson rubbed his thumb over the red, wondering if he’d be able to rub it away. He flashed her a smile as his eyes narrowed.

“What?” she asked as confusion stole the joy in her gaze.

“Nothing,” Jackson answered. Helen’s eyes narrowed as she stepped back and brushed the wrinkles from her dress.

“Now I know you’re lying. Your nose twitches. Did you know that?” Helen said, refusing to bring her eyes up to meet his.

Jackson chewed on his lower lip, contemplating whether or not to have Helen get involved in his plan. Although he couldn’t foresee any danger in having her help him, there was still a sliver of uncertainty.

“My nose doesn’t twitch, and I’m not lying to you,” he said still smirking.

“Then why do I feel like you’re not telling me the whole story?” Helen asked as her eyes shifted to Paxton. “You don’t summon Paxton unless you have something for him to do.”

Jackson let out a heavy sigh as he lured Helen to the corner and dropped his voice. “I really don’t want you involved in this. What if something goes wrong? There’s no telling how Gabriel will react. And I don’t want what happened to Will to happen to you.”

Helen shook her head as her eyebrows furrowed. She cupped a hand to his face as his thoughts darkened. “Hey, it’ll be all right. If you don’t want me to know what’s going on, then I’ll not ask any further. But please know, as your wife, I’m obligated to stand by you no matter what. And I’m here to help.”

“Thank you, truly,” Jackson said, taking Helen’s hand and kissing her knuckles. “But unless you can place the right people next to Gabriel to extract the most information out of him, I don’t see how you can.”

Helen's eyes sparkled with realization as a delicate smile stretched across her lips. "I believe I can help with that."

Jackson shook his head and leaned in. He planted a kiss on her forehead and stepped back, trying to restrain the disbelief on his face. "That's sweet of you to think so."

"Jackson, don't you dare dismiss me or underestimate me. You think you're the first person to try and expose secrets? My father is a master at such things, and I paid attention. Just give me all the details you can about the people coming over this Friday, and I promise you, you'll have your confession."

Tilting his head, Jackson studied Helen as he rubbed the stubble on his chin, assessing the situation. Finally, he dropped his shoulders and exhaled sharply.

"Fine," he huffed in defeat. "If you want to help, I'll let you do the seating chart. As for who all is coming, well, you're going to have to study up on that. But just so you're aware, the guests coming are clever."

"And I'll be nothing but a shadow to them," Helen said. "Chances are, they won't even pay me any mind."

For the next few days, Jackson and Helen worked side by side, planning every aspect of the dinner party. Helen had taken care of the menu and had already informed the cooks in the kitchen what dishes to serve and when. As for the decorations, Helen had taken over that as well. In fact, by the time all of it was said and done, Helen had managed to single-handedly handle all of the affairs of the party down to the very last detail. Jackson couldn't help but be impressed with her skills.

By the time Friday night came around, Jackson felt jittery. He knew there was nothing more they could do. Every possible scenario had been mapped out and a counter move was set. He studied himself in the mirror of his

bedroom, trying to muster the courage he needed to face everyone. All he could do now was pray that everything went according to their plan.

Jackson stepped out of the bedroom and walked down the hallway. His steps were heavy as he listened to the doorman announce the guests as they arrived. Standing at the top of the steps, Jackson leaned over the railing, ears perked, waiting for Gabriel's name to be called.

"Has he arrived yet?" Helen asked behind him. Jackson turned to find her in a stunning blue dress. Her hair was pulled up, and little ringlets fell to her shoulders. She had just the right amount of rouge to color her cheeks. For a moment, Jackson couldn't help but wonder if her cheeks were flushed due to her nerves or the makeup.

"You look fantastic," Helen said. His heart raced and bounced in his chest as if someone had dropped a ball, up and down, in his stomach.

"I'll admit, I don't feel fantastic," Jackson replied as he straightened his back. "But thank you. And you are a vision as well. I should thank you for not wearing anything to obscene."

"Obscene? When have I ever worn anything out of fashion?" Helen asked with a spark to her eye. Jackson couldn't help but smile at her as he extended his elbow to her.

"Are you ready to face the wolves?" Jackson asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Helen answered. "The question is, are you?"

Jackson gave a little shrug. "Do you think he'll come? Gabriel, I mean. What if he doesn't show?"

Helen shook her head and flashed him a smile. "He'll be here. I doubt he'd want to miss a chance to boast. And from what you've told me about him, he won't suspect a thing."

CHAPTER 25



*H*elen curled her arm into Jackson's and took in a long deep breath to steady her nerves. She'd been to her fair share of dinner parties, yet for some reason, this one felt different. Panic gripped her heart as she tried to keep up with Jackson long strides as he made his way to the foyer. She couldn't help but wonder if he was as nervous as she was, but she knew it wouldn't be wise to express just how frayed her nerves were.

While Helen knew she was about to walk into a room of strangers, she couldn't shake the sense of dread seeping through her like a dark cloud blocking the sun. Perhaps it was because of the reason for the dinner party. She secretly doubted Jackson's plan to extract a confession from Gabriel, yet as she glanced over to Jackson, he looked calm enough.

Granted, he always looked reasonable and stoic, but as she stole another glimpse of him, she couldn't help but see the cracks in his stone-cold appearance. She didn't understand why he was so nervous though. It wasn't like he was about to walk into a room full of strange people. Helen let out a heavy sigh as it dawned on her there would be no friendly face to greet her. A small voice in the back of her mind scolded her for not inviting Serena, but this was Jackson's affair, and she knew that all efforts were made for one sole purpose.

“There,” Jackson said with a nudge of his head. Helen glanced over her shoulder as she watched a thin man step down from the carriage. To Helen’s eyes, Gabriel didn’t seem like a very handsome man. He had an air about him that put her off. Perhaps it was the way he walked as if he owned the whole world. A cold finger traced down Helen’s spine as Gabriel approached them.

“Ah,” Gabriel said as he opened his arms to embrace Jackson. “It’s been far too long. Last time we met, I do believe you left so early that we never had a chance to catch up. And this must be your lovely wife.”

“Forgive me, Helen, darling, this is Mr. Gabriel Westwood,” Jackson said as he stretched out the ‘mister.’ Helen bit down on her lower lip to stifle the giggle that was brewing within her. It wasn’t the first time Jackson was deliberately rude. Helen was just surprised that he was being rude to someone other than herself.

“How the Duke here loves to rub in the fact that he is titled, and I am still not,” Gabriel observed as he bowed to Helen. “But it matters not. For I soon will be the Lord of Westwood—once certain parties have moved on to other places.”

Helen glanced to Jackson, hoping maybe he’d have the answer she was looking for. She couldn’t believe that Gabriel would be so callous, yet his words stunned her. In the corner of her eye, she noticed Jackson giving a slight shake to his head as the smile on his face faded.

“And here I thought you had not been given the title due to your lack of a wife,” Jackson replied as he lifted Helen’s hand up and kissed it tenderly. The gentleness of Jackson’s kiss melted Helen. She wished that they could blow the dinner off and send everyone home, but she knew that she was there for Jackson to support him in his cause.

“Well, one could argue that point,” Gabriel agreed with a slightly awkward

chuckle that was off putting to Helen. She couldn't tell if it was the way Gabriel styled his hair or the fact he used far too much rouge on his cheeks, but the way Gabriel looked repulsed Helen.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me," Helen said as her eyes widened. Jackson felt Helen's attention shift.

"Is everything all right?" Jackson mumbled to her, trying to keep the worry and concern from his voice.

"Oh, yes," Helen said with a quick smile. "I just thought I saw someone I actually know. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to say hello."

"Don't be long," Jackson said as his grip on her hand tightened. Helen's chest tightened as she noticed the panic in Jackson's gaze. It was only there for a moment, but a moment was all it took to get his message across. Jackson seemed to feel the same way Helen did when it came to being in close proximity to Gabriel. They both seemed to want to flee from his presence.

"I won't," Helen smiled. "But it'll give you two a bit of time to talk alone."

"Nonsense," Gabriel said as he patted Jackson on the shoulder. "We'll have plenty of time after the meal."

Helen felt Jackson's body tremble beside her as if he'd caught a cold chill. She stole a glance over her shoulder, hoping that Jackson would be able to manage on his own.

"Who is she going to see?" Gabriel asked as he craned his neck to see. Jackson couldn't help but notice Gabriel's eyes twitching as Helen approached Lord Smith. A pang of curiosity pricked him. He wondered how Helen knew the man. Jackson knew it was possible for her to know a great many people, seeing as how her family had been in the ton for decades. As he tried to put aside his curiosities and focus on Gabriel, Jackson couldn't shake

the nagging in his gut.

“You invited Lord Smith?” Gabriel’s voice bent with concern. Jackson’s lips twitched with a smile as he noticed how quickly Gabriel’s demeanor shifted. “I wasn’t aware you knew him.”

“Only recently,” Jackson answered with a husky voice. “Thought about doing business with the man and wanted to see what kind of man he happened to be.”

Gabriel leaned in and dropped his voice. “If you’re asking my opinion, I’d suggest you steer clear of him at all costs. He isn’t one that is trustworthy or loyal. I’ve had dealings with him in the past, and believe me when I say, you can’t believe a word that man says.”

“Well, thank goodness you were here to warn me,” Jackson said, and Helen wondered if Gabriel picked up the sarcasm dripping from Jackson’s lips. She had to admit that Jackson had mastered the ability to be stoic. Although she had noticed a few slight shifts, Jackson had remained relatively calm and collected.

“There he is, the man of the hour!”

Helen nearly jumped out of her skin as she twisted her head around to find two men approaching them. She swallowed hard and placed a smile on her face to greet the newcomers.

“Ethan, Liam,” Jackson called to them. He seemed overjoyed that they had come. Helen wondered how Jackson knew the two men. She was fully aware that everyone at the party was an acquaintance to Jackson through his education and his time abroad, but she found it strange how everyone seemed to greet Jackson with bewilderment and shock.

“Look at you being all responsible,” the taller of the two men said as Helen

waited for Jackson to introduce her to them. “I’ve got to admit, I didn’t think you’d actually go through with this tonight.”

Jackson let out a small chuckle as he tugged at the collar of his shirt. Leaning closer to his tall friend, Jackson cleared his throat. “To be honest with you, I almost didn’t.”

“This is news to me,” Helen said, finding herself shocked by Jackson’s confession. “Why would you want to cancel on all your friends?”

“Because if you haven’t figured it out yet, Jackson here is a prude,” the round face man said.

“Helen, this is Liam,” Jackson introduced. Instantly the round face man snatched Helen’s hand and planted a kiss on her knuckles. “And the other is Ethan.”

“Yes, I remember now; you were at the wedding,” Helen said, trying to keep her tone light and airy as she noticed Gabriel’s eyes shift about the room suspiciously searching for something.

“I’ve got to admit, I’m surprised the two of you haven’t ended each other,” Liam said with a chuckle. “The Duke here can be a bit finicky to get along with. In fact, I can remember the first time I met the man. Of course, he was different back then. Not so uptight.”

“Is that so?” Helen asked, arching her eyebrow as she studied Jackson’s expression. Helen couldn’t help but think back on her first meeting with Jackson and how arrogant he appeared to her. But over the course of living with him and seeing his true nature, her thoughts about Jackson had shifted. Of course, Jackson would be a different man. Helen knew she certainly wouldn’t be the same person she was if Serena had been murdered.

“Do you remember Italy?” Ethan said with a snicker. Helen looked around,

and she noticed the four men all shared the same spark of recognition in their eyes. It was as if a light had come on for them but not for her. Feeling a bit out of place, Helen just stood there smiling and waiting patiently for an explanation.

“What happened in Italy?” Helen asked, wondering what other parts of Jackson’s life she didn’t know about. Jackson waved his hand as he let out a hearty, uncomfortable chuckle.

“Let’s not take that stroll down memory lane,” Jackson replied, drawing Helen’s hand to his lips. The look in Jackson’s eyes rattled Helen. She couldn’t tell if he was nervous about his past bombarding his present, or if the mood had shifted without her realizing it.

“Well, nonetheless,” Helen said, rolling her shoulders back, trying to break through the thick cloud of uncertainty that lingered over their heads like a guillotine, “welcome to our home. Please make yourselves comfortable. The other guests are in the courtyard if you’d like to join them. Oh, and dinner will be ready shortly.”

“Now there’s a hostess who knows how to get a man to move along,” Liam teased giving Helen a wink. She nodded as she watched Liam, Ethan, and Gabriel make their way through the house to the back. The moment they were out of view, Jackson let out a heavy sigh.

“I don’t know how I’m going to do this,” he whispered to her. Helen grabbed his arm and gave it a tight, reassuring squeeze.

“One moment at a time,” Helen answered. “There’s nothing to worry about. We’ve thought of every angle.”

“Yes,” Jackson agreed, “but it’s one thing to speak in theory and another to apply it.”

Helen squared off to face Jackson. She placed her hands on his shoulders and stared deep into his eyes. There she noticed the dark cloud of doubt lingering like smoke in Jackson's mind.

"You've got to ask yourself whether you want justice or revenge," Helen said in such a low tone that she wondered if Jackson could hear her at all. "And will you be satisfied with whatever happens?"

"I'll not have satisfaction until Gabriel is either in the gulag or dead for what he did to Will," Jackson growled. Helen nodded as a smile stretched across her face. She bobbed her head, pleased to hear Jackson's conviction within his tone.

"Then you have your answer," Helen said. "Tonight will end, one way or another. The choice is yours and yours alone."

Jackson pulled in a long deep breath. Helen rubbed her hand over Jackson's arm, wishing she had some way to instill courage into him, but she knew this was Jackson's battle, not hers, and no matter the outcome, she'd remain by his side.

"I'm going to go check on the meal and see when we can sit to eat. I'd suggest you go and mingle with your guests so as not to arouse suspicions," Helen suggested.

"You're right," Jackson answered. "I should probably bring Liam and Ethan in on the plan as well. Maybe they would give us the edge we need."

"Remember, we need to get Gabriel to drink a lot tonight before we start questioning," Helen said. "We need Gabriel's lips to be loose, and he needs to feel comfortable. Perhaps before dinner, you might want to offer him a drink in your study?"

Jackson bobbed his head and kissed Helen's hand once more. "Then we

should get on with this. Everyone's here for a reason, right? It would be rude of us to keep our guests waiting."

Helen's chest felt tight as she watched Jackson walk to the back of the house. She couldn't imagine what was going through his mind; all she knew was that everyone here had a role to play tonight, including her, and now was the time.

Moving through the manor, Helen made her way to the kitchen to check on the preparation of dinner. She fiddled with her fingertips as she tried not to let worry consume her, but she couldn't help it. There was no telling how Gabriel would react, nor did she know how the other guests would see them.

"I don't care if you've been invited, you need to leave, now."

The hushed voices caused Helen to pause. Straining her ears, she glanced around, hunting for the source. In the corner of her eye, she noticed long, stretched shadows coming down the corridor. Inching closer to the corner, Helen held her breath and peeked around the nook of the stairway.

"Lord Smith?" she whispered as she noticed Serena's uncle in a heated discussion with Gabriel. Confusion flickered through her. How the Lord knew Gabriel, Helen didn't know.

"Mr. Westwood, I doubt you have the authority to kick me out of the Duke's soiree," Lord Smith said in his nasally high-pitched tone. Chewing on her lower lip, she fought against the urge to step out from her hiding place to greet him. Curiosity ate at her as she wondered why Gabriel would want the Lord to leave. With itching ears, she leaned closer.

"We had a deal as I recall," Gabriel hissed as he moved in closer to Lord Smith, who remained gallant and steadfast, unmovable like a mountain. It was clear the Lord didn't give any heed to Gabriel's boastful warning.

“Yes, yes,” Lord Smith agreed, waving a hand at Gabriel. “I’m well aware. You don’t need to constantly remind me. Rest assured, the liquor is in a safe place, ready to be transported at a moment's notice. And no one knows about our little enterprise. I’m just as eager to keep it between the two of us as you are.”

“Lord Smith, understand that our business thrives because of my connections to the Earl of Seasmooore,” Gabriel pointed out, poking his finger into Lord Smith’s chest. A sharp clank, rolling like thunder down the corridor, caused Helen to jump. She pressed her body to the wall, wishing could melt into the stones and disappear. With her ears ringing and heart pounding against her chest, Helen stayed as still as possible.

“Perhaps this isn’t the best place to speak of such things.” Helen heard Lord Smith’s muffled voice, and their heavy steps drawing closer.

She knew that if she wanted to know more, Helen was going to have to take a chance. “Gentlemen, there you are. I believe dinner is being served.”

“My word,” Lord Smith gasped, clutching his chest as the color in Gabriel’s face drained.

“Duchess Stonewill,” Gabriel said, straightening his tie and rolling his shoulders back. Helen watched as the two men exchanged glances. “We didn’t see you there.”

“I hope I didn’t give you a start,” Helen replied, batting her eyes as her chest tightened. Why she stepped out of her hiding place seemed to become foggy as she stood before the men.

“It’s quite all right,” Lord Smith said, shaking off the shock. Helen walked over to him and hooked her arm around Lord Smith’s arm.

“Tell me, have you any word from Serena?” Helen asked, hoping that Gabriel

would have no interest in hearing about Lord Smith's family. Glancing to Gabriel, he straightened his back and smiled as she guided Lord Smith down the hallway.

"I haven't heard from her in a spell and hoped that she was doing well," Helen continued. Gabriel cleared his throat and quickly hastened ahead, leaving Helen alone with Lord Smith.

"Forgive me, my dear," Lord Smith said with a slight chuckle. "I'm not really in touch with my brother's family. Unfortunately, I wouldn't know how she's doing. But I do hope she is well."

Helen scanned the hallway and swallowed hard. She stole a glimpse of Lord Smith and paused. "Actually, I was hoping to speak to you in private."

Lord Smith's eyebrow rose as he studied her. "You heard about our little enterprise, didn't you?"

"Honestly, I don't care about such matters," Helen whispered. "My concern is with Gabriel."

"Oh?" the Lord asked, arching an eyebrow. "And pray tell, what matter of things do you want to know about Mr. Westwood?"

"Well," Helen asked as she glanced nervously down the hallway, "how long have you known Gabriel?"

The Lord smiled and tilted his head. "Is there trouble in paradise?"

Helen gasped and shook her head. "No, heavens, no. I was more interested in setting Gabriel up with Serena."

Her chest tightened as her heart slowed. She hated lying, but she needed all the information she could get.

"Absolutely not," the Lord scowled. "I'll not have my niece with such a man."

Are you aware of his involvement in a murder trial? I believe your husband was a part of that as well.”

Helen narrowed her eyes as she mustered all her courage. “If you’re trying to imply I don’t know my husband, you’re sorely mistaken. I’m fully aware of what happened. So, if you were looking to blackmail me, you’ve got nothing on me.”

The Lord’s eyes squinted as he chuckled. “I wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing. But you seem to have knowledge over me that puts me in a very dangerous situation.”

Helen licked her lips and let out a heavy sigh. “I’ve no interest in blackmailing you, Sir. I just want to know how you know Gabriel.”

“Why? What do you know about Gabriel?”

“I don’t trust him,” Helen answered honestly. The Lord’s shoulders relaxed.

“That would make two of us,” he said conspiratorially. “He’s outgrown his usefulness to me and has become more of a nuisance as of late. Are you aware he cannot retain his inheritance without a bride? God help the woman he picks.”

“Why do you say that?” Helen asked, feeling very aware of the time passing. Her attention shifted to the corridor, hoping she still had a few more moments alone with him.

“The man is a rake,” the Lord growled. “Apparently, ever since his first love married, he’s become unstable. He’s gambling, drinking, throwing his life away.”

“Who was his first love?” Helen asked.

“My dear, don’t you know? Margo Dobris. It seems she was to marry him

when they were younger, but the trial took place, and her trust in him diminished. Granted, none of the boys that stood trial were found guilty, including your husband.”

“What if I told you, we believe that Gabriel is the one responsible for the murder?” Helen mumbled, hoping the Lord’s hearing was good enough to hear her.

The Lord arched his eyebrow. “That’s a very serious accusation. Do you have any proof?”

Helen bobbed her head in fear that speaking would give away her lie. She knew they had nothing on Gabriel. How tonight was set up to extract a confession from Gabriel.

“Well,” the Lord said, “I see we are on the same side on this matter.”

“What are you talking about?” Helen asked as she found the words clogging her throat.

“Let’s just say there are a few things I would like to extract from Gabriel’s lips as well. My suspicions rest with a matter of finances. I believe he’s been skimming my purse.”

Helen’s eyes widened as her heart fluttered wildly in her chest. The sound of footsteps echoing down the hallway caused her ears to perk. For a moment, she thought she noticed Serena waltzing down the hallway. As her blood ran cold, Helen’s mind drifted to something Serena had once told her.

Be careful, my uncle never does anything without purpose. The man schemes all the time. And heaven forbid you dine with the man, you may end up leaving in a hearse.

“You didn’t come to get into business with my husband, did you?” Helen asked as she studied the Lord’s face.

“What on earth are you implying here?” the Lord said, stunned by Helen’s choice of words.

“Serena is my best-friend; she tells me everything,” Helen answered. “So why have you come if not to speak to my husband about a business deal?”

The Lord mumbled as he pressed his hand to his chest pocket. There was something about the way he was guarding the pocket, testing to ensure something was still there.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about,” the Lord said. Helen’s hand flew to the Lord’s vest pocket. He swatted at her, trying to keep her from reaching the item he was concealing. Helen managed to pluck a small vile out and stared at it.

“What is this?” Helen demanded.

“It’s not poison, if that’s what you’re thinking,” the Lord said with a sneering expression.

“To be honest, I don’t know what to think other than you, Sir, are not a nice man,” Helen said.

“It’s something that will loosen Gabriel’s lips,” the Lord confessed. “And from where I’m standing, I think this little vile could solve both our problems, wouldn’t you say?”

“What do you want for it?” Helen asked, unsure she’d be able to negotiate. Business was never her strong suit. In fact, she had been expecting Jackson to be the one to be handling this sort of situation. She wished with all her might that Jackson was there instead of her.

“Peace of mind,” the Lord said with a snicker. “You know a bit of information about me I’d rather you didn’t.”

“I swear by my life, not a word will slip from my lips,” Helen said. “Do what you came to do, and maybe we will both come out of this on top.”

“Well,” the Lord said with a twinkle to his eye, “I must say, I never expected you to be so cunning from our first meeting. Seems there’s more to you than meets the eye. Of course, you’ll have to learn more tricks if you’re to be a successful duchess. The world is a vile place, Your Grace, and one can never be too careful.”

“Indeed,” Helen said as she took the Lord’s arm and walked down the hallway. Her body tingled as her heart raced. She didn’t have a clue as to how the night was going to play out. All she knew was with Lord Smith in her corner helping, they might have a shot at getting the information they needed to put Gabriel away for life.

“Helen? Where ever have you been?” Jackson asked as Helen crashed into him in the doorway. She looked into Jackson’s eyes feeling overwhelmed as Lord Smith stepped aside.

“I believe I shall be seated, now. My dear, it was a pleasure catching up with you,” Lord Smith said as he flashed Helen a wink. She nodded and returned his wink with a smile as Jackson stood beside Helen with confusion riddling his face.

“Forgive me, husband. The time slipped away from me as I became better acquainted with Lord Smith” she said, running her hands down her skirt as she tried to collect herself.

“Now who’s the liar?” Jackson asked as he arched a knowing eyebrow.

Helen gave a small shrug and smiled at him. She glanced to the dining room where their guests waited for them. “I’ll explain later. As for now, we’ve a dinner to host.”

“Helen,” Jackson said, grabbing her by the arm. He flashed an apologetic smile to his guests as he pulled her away from the door. “You know something; what is it? Gabriel’s lips are tighter than a ship, and I don’t think we’ll be able to get anything out of him tonight. This whole party may be a bust.”

Helen patted Jackson on the chest and smiled at him sympathetically. “Everything is taken care of, my love. You’ve got to trust me.”

“At least, tell me what business you had with Lord Smith,” Jackson exclaimed. Helen could see the nervousness in his gaze, but she knew there was no time to explain things to him.

“Apparently, Lord Smith knows a great deal about Gabriel,” Helen said. “And the Lord isn’t very fond of him either. I suggest we enjoy the dinner and watch how the evening unfolds. You might find yourself a bit surprised by its outcome.”

“I don’t like this,” Jackson said. “Isn’t there anything you can tell me? Did he give you a name we can search? Anything? You know as well as I do that unless we get Gabriel’s confession—”

Helen cupped her hands around Jackson’s face and pressed her thumbs to his mouth to silence him. She tried to pour out the confidence she felt into him. “I know you’re scared, but you’ve got to trust me. Lord Smith has an alternative motive for being here tonight. I suggest, you allow the events to unfold as they will.”

“But—” Jackson started as Helen shook her head.

“Now isn’t the time,” Helen said as she noticed the guests chatting to themselves in little groups. Liam and Ethan were surrounding Gabriel as Lord Smith was standing with other men Helen hadn’t met yet. “Right now, we need to go in there and see what all we can extract before dinner. But

have faith that everything will be sorted tonight.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” Jackson mumbled as he kissed Helen’s forehead. Turning to face the doorway, Jackson straightened his vest and cleared his throat.

“Are you ready to face the wolves?” Helen asked.

“Before we enter, is there anything you can tell me about Lord Smith? I don’t really know the man, and if he’s an ally as you as he is, I’d like to know him better.”

“One of Lord Smith’s businesses comes from some family I’ve never heard of before.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have remembered the name, would you?” Jackson asked as he curled his fingers around Helen’s arms. She felt his grip tightening.

“The Dobris,” Helen answered. “The Lord mentioned how that was Gabriel’s true love’s last name as well.”

Jackson stumbled back as he ran his fingers through his hair. There was no hiding the shock etched into his face.

“Did you say, Dobris?” Jackson asked in such a hushed tone that Helen had to strain to hear him.

“Do you know of them?” Helen asked as Jackson bobbed his head.

“Will’s fiancée. Her family name is Dobris. Gabriel mentioned before that his cousin married her. Maybe there was something more going on between Gabriel and Margo. Maybe he killed Will so that she’d marry him instead.”

“The Lord did mention the name Margo and how Gabriel was tried along with you and a few others for the murder. And how Gabriel hasn’t been the

same man ever since.”

“I need to talk to Ethan and Liam,” Jackson replied over his shoulder. “I think they might know more than what they’re letting on. We’ll be in the study. Call us when dinner is served.”

“Jackson, what about the rest of the guests?” Helen asked, tugging at his arm to stop him from bolting into the room.

“Stall them,” Jackson said. “You’re a lovely lady who likes attention. Use that talent of yours to the best of your abilities.”

“But—” Helen started as Jackson stepped into the room. She swallowed hard as she scanned the faces around her. Pulling in a deep breath, Helen rolled her shoulders back.

“Here goes nothing.”

CHAPTER 26



“*W*hat in the world are you going on about?” Ethan asked as he leaned over the back of the chair. Jackson pulled the ledgers out from the drawers of the desk and dropped them. The bang echoed through the room, startling Liam.

“How well do remember Will?” Jackson asked as he sorted the ledgers and started hunting through them.

“Like you have to ask,” Liam answered as he stepped closer. “We may not have been as close to him as you were, but he was still a good friend, and we miss him too.”

“I’m not doubting your loyalty to him,” Jackson said, thumbing through the pages. “But tell me, do you remember any businesses Gabriel was running while we were in school?”

Liam shook his head. “Why don’t you just ask his father? The man is still alive, much to Gabriel’s dismay. Or ask Gabriel. I don’t understand why he’s here if you’re having an issue with him.”

Jackson swallowed hard as he thumbed through the last few pages and exclaimed, “there” while pointing to the middle of the book. His heart nearly dropped into his stomach as he re-read the entry.

“What’s this?” Liam asked as Jackson shifted the book around for him to see. Ethan strolled over and leaned over the desk. “Did you steal Gabriel’s business ledgers? How did you get these?”

Jackson plopped back into his seat and rubbed the stubble on his chin. His mind was going a million miles a minute, jumping and skipping from one idea to another. Although he was convinced Gabriel had killed his friend, there was nothing he had to prove it other than a few business dealings with Margo’s father.

“No, of course not,” Jackson said as they heard the bell for dinner ringing in the hallway. “But these aren’t Gabriel’s ledgers, they are Lord Dobris’. I went to see the family a few weeks ago after we had gathered at the pool hall.”

“And how are they doing?” Liam asked. “I saw them once after the trial, and I couldn’t bring myself to look him in the eye.”

Jackson rose from his desk and collected the ledgers into a neat little stack. “They are much better off now. Their estate has grown significantly, and Margo has been married off to Gabriel’s cousin. Although, Lord Dobris did mention that his daughter wasn’t fond of her husband and wished to leave him.”

“I don’t blame her; have you met Duncan? He’s a dandy, through and through, and I’m sure every bit of what Gabriel wishes he was,” Ethan said as they made their way. “Then again, I’d be ticked off too if my inheritance was stripped from me.”

Jackson stopped and pulled Ethan to him. “What did you say? How do you know Gabriel’s inheritance has been stripped from him?”

“You don’t remember him coming and going for like a month? Gabriel said he was called back home to take care of his ailing father, but a few years

later, I learned Gabriel was trying to procure himself a wife. He met with Margo for tea three months prior to Will being introduced to her.”

The blood in Jackson’s body ran cold. If there was one thing that seemed to elude him, it was the motive for killing Will. But as Jackson mulled over the new information, it dawned on him exactly what had transpired.

“You all right there? You’re looking a bit pale,” Ethan asked as he grabbed Jackson’s arm.

“I figured it out,” Jackson said, wide eyed and thrilled to have finally pieced together that night. He had thought that Margo was at the trial due to her involvement with Will. He never thought it was because of her ties with Gabriel as well. “I figured it out.”

“What?” Ethan and Liam asked as Jackson’s body tingled from the crown of his head to his toes.

A smile stretched across Jackson’s face as he moved to the door and poked his head out into the hallway. He glanced to the left, half expecting Helen to be there to announce dinner. When she wasn’t around, his chest felt heavy. All he could do was assume she was working on keeping Gabriel’s cup full until Jackson arrived.

“All right,” Jackson said, turning back to Ethan and Liam, “I’m going to tell you something, and I may sound as if I’ve lost all constitution or grip on reality, but I know you two won’t say anything.”

“If you’re going to tell us how you’re about to be a father, well, I can’t speak for Ethan here, but I really don’t need to know,” Liam teased as he folded his arms over his chest.

Jackson glared at Liam with utter confusion. Although there was no way for Ethan to know about his carnal relations with Helen, the thought of being a

father rattled Jackson for a moment. Shaking the thought from his head, Jackson redirected his attention to Ethan.

“I need your help,” Jackson said as he turned to face his friends. “It’s come to my attention that we were wrong about Gabriel. And deep down, I believe he’s the one who killed Will.”

Ethan shook his head, and Liam threw his arms up. “Not this again. Jackson, you’ve got to learn to let it go. We were all there at the trial, even Gabriel, and while it was tragic and meaningless, Will’s death was ruled an accident.”

“What if it wasn’t an accident though?” Jackson pleaded as he clawed at Ethan’s shirt to get him to stay.

The frustration on Ethan and Liam’s face was clear, but Jackson couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong about the whole situation. He wanted to be able to let the past go, to be normal, but no matter what he did, he couldn’t. The nagging sensation pulled and tugged at his very soul, and now that he was so close to getting justice, Jackson wasn’t about to let it slip through his fingers.

“Haven’t we been over this before?” Ethan asked as he started for the door. “Besides, what do you expect us to do about it? It’s not like we can throw him in the cell.”

“True, but you can get him to start drinking,” Jackson suggested, causing Liam to pause midway to the door and turn.

A long mischievous smile stretched across Liam’s lips. “Hold up just a moment. Your big plan for settling the score is to drink Gabriel under the table? Are you sure you don’t want to try something else? You may not be aware, but Gabriel can drink practically anyone under the table. He’s bested me several times in the past, so I woke up not even remembering my name whereas he didn’t seem to care one bit.”

“Getting Gabriel to drink isn’t the hard part,” Ethan chimed in. “It’s getting him drunk enough to spill his secrets.”

“Well, I’m hoping with Lord Edward Smith here, that won’t be a problem,” Jackson replied.

“That reminds me, why did you invite Lord Smith? He’s rather a pompous dandy, and his snooty tone grates on my nerves,” Ethan said as Jackson heard the patter of footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Jackson flashed Ethan a crooked smile as he started for the door. In the back of his mind, he was well aware he was keeping his guests waiting, but he also knew Helen was keeping them all entertained as best she could and keeping Gabriel’s cup full.

“Oh, do you smell that?” Liam asked, taking in a deep breath as if he’d never smelled anything so intoxicating. “I think dinner is being served. We should get into the banquet hall, don’t you think?”

“Can I count on you two to get Gabriel to talk?” Jackson asked, searching Liam and Ethan’s gazes for some bit of hope or encouragement.

“Are crows black?” Ethan asked as a smirk pulled on his lips. “Don’t worry about Gabriel, we’ve got him covered. We’ll have him singing like a canary if you want us to.”

Jackson’s chest felt tight, and while there was no telling how the next few hours would transpire, he knew deep down, tonight, he’d find resolution. Glancing at Liam and Ethan, Jackson nudged his head to the door.

“I’ll have the servants make you both a room for tonight,” Jackson said. “I figure with as much alcohol as will be poured tonight, you’re going to need a place to sleep it off.”

Jackson followed the scent of smoked pork down the hallway. His mouth

watered the stronger the scent grew. With his stomach grumbling and gnawing for food, he made his way to the banquet hall. The u-shaped table filled most of the banquet room, but Jackson found himself pleasantly surprised by how well Helen pulled everything together.

“You’re late,” Helen whispered as Jackson took his seat. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, yes,” Jackson said, waving his hand at Helen. Although he wasn’t entirely sure how everything was or if it would be all right, he found himself hoping. “Tell me, how many cups have you poured for our guest?”

Helen flashed him a fake little smile that made him nervous.

“He hasn’t had anything,” Helen answered so low that Jackson had to strain his ears to hear her.

“I’m sorry, did you say he isn’t drinking?” Jackson whispered as he tried not to glance at Gabriel. Helen bobbed her head as Lord Smith tapped his flute glass with his ring and stood.

“Forgive me gentlemen,” Smith said as he gave a little bow, and a hush fell over the room. All eyes turned to him. Jackson stole a glimpse of Helen as panic shot through his body, rattling his nerves. “I think we all should give thanks to our wonderful host... tess.”

All eyes shifted to Helen, and for a brief moment, Jackson felt a prick of jealousy and one of pride. He was proud to be showing off Helen, but at the same time, he worried why Smith had singled her out.

“Your Grace, you have the most adorable and attentive wife. Surely, you must be proud,” Smith continued, hoisting his glass into the air. Jackson grabbed Helen’s hand and kissed it tenderly.

“She’s something I never knew I wanted,” Jackson said as he gave Helen a

wink. The servants came into the room with large trays.

“I’m sure she’s been a delight,” Smith agreed with a hiccup. “But allow me to take a moment to thank her. She’s done a fine job decorating for tonight. Surely, you must see the details she’s put into the room.”

Jackson glanced over to Helen, curious as to what Smith was talking about. Helen shrugged as she tried to keep her composure. There was an uneasiness in the room that Jackson couldn’t put his finger on it.

“Will you sit down before you make a fool out of yourself?” Gabriel suggested, rapping his knuckle on the edge of the table. Smith glared at Gabriel before he stumbled back. Jackson heard Helen’s gasp as Smith missed his seat while sitting and rolled on the floor. “Too late. You shame yourself, Lord Smith.”

“Come now,” Helen said in her sing song voice. “It was clearly a misjudgment. Anyone could have done such a thing. Is the Lord all right? He hasn’t hurt himself too badly, has he?”

“I’m sure it’s more his pride that’s bruised than his body,” Gabriel assured as he stood to help Jackson pick Smith off the floor. The overwhelming stench of cinnamon lingering around Smith made Jackson’s nose crinkle. A cold breeze flowed through Jackson as if someone had plunged him into the frigid northern waters. The fragrance of the cinnamon threw him for a loop as he watched Smith’s eyes roll back.

“Lord Smith,” Jackson said as he shook Smith vigorously to arouse him, but the man on the floor remained unmoving and unresponsive. Jackson’s heart pounded in his chest as he glanced over his shoulder to Helen. The look on her face was of pure horror.

“Is he...dead?” Helen asked as Jackson tried once more to get Smith to wake up. Hovering over Smith, Jackson strained his ears to listen for any small

sound coming from the man's parted, dry lips. The distinct scent of the cinnamon swirled around Jackson. A low grumble escaped from Smith, and for a split second, Jackson wondered if it was Smith taking his last breath.

"What kind of sick joke are you playing here?" Gabriel asked as he backed away from Jackson as if he had something to do with Smith's situation. "Have you poisoned the food or the drink?"

"How dare you accuse me of such a violent act," Jackson snapped as Liam and Ethan jumped to Jackson's defense.

"And what makes you think poison is involved here?" Helen asked as Jackson turned to find her hovering beside him.

Gabriel stood and took several steps back. "Don't you smell it? The cinnamon lingering on the man?"

Jackson watched as Helen darted to the table and snatched the cup Smith had been using before Gabriel could grab it. She took a quick sniff. By the way her nose crinkled, Jackson already had his answer.

"This is an outrage," Liam exclaimed, throwing his hands up.

"Please, everyone just remain calm while we fetch the physician," Helen said as Jackson noticed her attention shifting to the servants hovering in the corner of the room. Surely, they would be talking about this event for months, but Jackson didn't care. There was something off, and as he racked his mind, Jackson realized it was a memory that plagued him more than anything. He had encountered the scent before but not in the ton. It was in the small apartment just before Will left to see Margo.

"It would seem that Lord Smith will recover," Jackson lied as he watched Lord Smith's eyes roll back, and the light go out from them.

"Impossible," Gabriel snapped. "There was enough hemlock to put down a

horse.”

The collective gasp rattled through Jackson as he rose slowly. “Say that again. How do you know it was hemlock?”

Gabriel’s eyes widened as he fumbled back from the table. There was a panic in his eyes that unnerved Jackson. As Gabriel inched further away from the group, Jackson nudged his head. Immediately the servants barred the exits and stood like sentinels, trapping the evil within the room.

“Everyone knows cinnamon masks the aroma of poison,” Gabriel said as his eyes shifted to and fro. “It’s common knowledge.”

“I didn’t,” Jackson said. “In fact, if I had known that, then maybe Will would still be alive. But you killed him just like you’ve attempted to kill the Lord here.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened as beads of sweat formed on his brow. He quickly snatched a knife from the table and brandished it before Jackson.

“Gabriel, what are you doing?” Liam asked as panic drifted over the crowd like a thick cloud of black, vile smoke. “Put the knife down.”

“You think I don’t know what’s going on here?” Gabriel asked as he waved the knife about. “Or why you invited all of us here tonight? Oh, I know.”

Jackson rose slowly and stalked Gabriel with his eyes. He knew there wasn’t anywhere for Gabriel to go, not with the doorways blocked. If there was ever a time to pounce, Jackson knew he would have to act soon.

“I don’t have a clue as to what you’re talking about,” Jackson said as he circled around Gabriel. “All anyone knows right now is that you claim hemlock was used on Smith, and that’s it.”

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” Gabriel growled as he continued to

move around slowly, keeping his distance from Jackson. “Well, you’re not.”

“Gabriel?” Ethan asked as Jackson watched Ethan stalk Gabriel. “This isn’t like you. Perhaps the poison has affected him as well?”

“Helen, look out,” Jackson warned as terror gripped him. He hadn’t noticed just how close Gabriel was to Helen until Gabriel had snatched Helen by the shoulders and pulled her to him.

“Let me go,” Helen squealed as she thrashed, trying to free herself from Gabriel’s strong arms.

“How is it that no matter what happens, no matter what I do, I can’t ever get ahead?” Gabriel rambled into Helen’s ear as he pushed the knife next to Helen’s throat.

“Gabriel, put the knife down, or I will end you.” Jackson’s threat was fierce and resonated throughout his being. There was no way Jackson was going to let Gabriel escape from him, not with Helen taken captive.

“You can’t,” Gabriel said with a sinister grin. “If you could, I know you would have done so long ago. And here I thought you were the smart one out of the group.”

Jackson couldn’t help but notice the red flush to Gabriel’s cheeks. Sweat shimmered off Gabriel’s forehead as color drained from his face. It was a wonder Gabriel remained standing. Jackson feared Gabriel’s hand would slip, and the blade would cut right into Helen’s neck. Much to his surprise, Helen remained calm and collected as if having her life hang in the balance was an everyday occurrence for her.

Tears welled in Gabriel’s eyes as his eyes shifted about the room. The panic that flickered through him turned to terror as Gabriel slashed at the air as if facing a dragon.

“Gabe,” Helen’s voice was light and airy. It threw Jackson for a loop to hear her speaking so tenderly to Gabriel. “I know you don’t want to hurt me, just like you didn’t want to hurt Will.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened as Jackson stood by helplessly waiting for his moment to pounce. He knew that if he moved too soon, Helen could get hurt, and that was the last thing he wanted to see happen.

“What do you know about that?” Gabriel asked as he leaned closer into Helen. For a moment, it appeared as if Helen was the one who was keeping Gabriel up.

“I know that it was an accident,” Helen whispered. “What happened between you and Will, that is.”

Gabriel shook his head as his breathing started to rapidly increase. He bobbed his head as the tears flowed down his face. “You remind me of her, of my Margo, do you know that?”

“I didn’t,” Helen said, glancing to Jackson.

Gabriel’s eyes glossed over as his shoulders slumped. “It was. I never meant to... but it all happened so fast.”

“What happened that night?” Helen asked as she kept her eyes locked on Jackson. Itching for the chance to rush in and save Helen, Jackson’s ears burned.

“I... no,” Gabriel said, shaking his head as his hand trembled. “You don’t understand. Will was going to take everything from me. Everything.”

“How?” Helen asked in a calm, seductive tone. “What happened?”

“Margo Dobris happened,” Gabriel replied as if his tongue were glued to the roof of his mouth. Jackson’s chest tightened.

“You loved her, didn’t you?” Jackson asked as he dared to steal a step closer. Gabriel’s attention shifted to him.

“Love? You think men like us are capable of such a nonsensical thing?” Gabriel asked, his words slurred as he spoke. “You’re an idiot if you believe that.”

“Then tell us,” Helen said. “Tell us what happened. Why did you kill Will?”

Gabriel placed the knife to Helen’s throat as the rage in his eyes flared like a match against the post. “She was to be mine. Our marriage was supposed to be a political one that would allow me to get my inheritance and secure my future. But she had to fall in love with that buffoon. You know, Will wouldn’t have even met Margo if it hadn’t been for me introducing them. Did you know that? He stole her from me. And now, I’m going to steal you from Jackson.”

“No,” Jackson growled, “you aren’t.”

Before Gabriel could run the blade across Helen’s throat, the knife clamored to the ground along with Gabriel. Jackson stepped back, shocked by the suddenness of Gabriel’s collapse.

“What happened?” Jackson asked as Helen rushed to him the moment she was free. “Is he dead?”

“No,” Helen said as she clung to Jackson, “but I’m sure he’ll wish he was when he wakes up.”

CHAPTER 27



*H*elen wrapped her arms around Jackson and buried her face into the nook of his arm. The confusion and chaos swirled around her as she tried to wrap her head around what transpired. Her blood ran cold, and she couldn't stop herself from shivering. Jackson curled his arms around her and held her to his chest as if trying to hold the pieces of her shattered soul together.

Jackson cupped his hands to Helen's face and drew her eyes to meet his. She didn't want to look at him, knowing that she'd crumble the moment she did.

"Are you all right?" Jackson asked. "He didn't cut you, did he?"

Helen shook her head. "No... I'm fine... I'll be fine."

A soft moan escaped from Lord Smith. Liam and Ethan exchanged glances as the guests all watched in horror as the Lord stirred. Helen pulled away from Jackson.

"You're trembling," Jackson said as he quickly slipped off his jacket and placed it around her. Helen's emotions were all over the place. She was grateful to be in Jackson's arms, comforted by his strong embrace.

"How did I do?" Lord Smith asked in a groggy voice as Ethan and Liam helped him to his feet. The guests all looked stunned and confused by what

had transpired before them.

“How is it you’re alive? We all saw you fall,” Ethan said.

“And your skin grew pale,” Liam chimed in as Lord Smith wobbled precariously over to the table to lean against it. Lord Smith glared at Gabriel on the ground, his beady eyes boring into the back of Gabriel’s skull.

“Serves him right for trying to blackmail me,” Lord Smith grumbled as he rolled his shoulders back and puffed out his chest. Jackson turned his attention back to Helen as he cupped his hand to her face.

“I don’t understand. What just happened?” Jackson asked. “Did we kill Gabriel? Or will he recover just as miraculously as Lord Smith.”

Helen glanced over to Lord Smith and flashed him a little smile.

“Do you remember what I told you about your wife being a most unique creature?” Lord Smith asked as he curled his fingers around the cup to take a sip. His eyes widened as he looked at the contents of the glass and quickly sat it back down.

“You said you didn’t know how to get the confession from Gabriel, and since he refused to drink the wine or whiskey, I had to figure out some other way that would loosen his lips. Unfortunately, I wasn’t counting on the aftereffects of the herbs I put in his drink.”

“You do realize he could have killed you?” Jackson asked in a husky voice. “What were you thinking?”

Helen didn’t know if Jackson was mad at her for altering Gabriel’s drink or if it was the whole situation that caused him so much stress.

“I’m sorry,” Helen said as tears started streaming down her cheeks. “You wanted answers so badly, and I didn’t know what else to do other than get

help. Lord Smith here was kind enough to play along and take the first bit.”

“And I must say, it’s just as dreadful as I remember from taking it last time,” Lord Smith said with a slight chuckle. Liam and Ethan cocked their heads and exchanged confused glances.

“Kill me,” Gabriel moaned on the ground as he writhed in pain from Helen’s concoction.

“Liam, Ethan, go fetch the constable,” Jackson said as Helen’s attention shifted to Gabriel. “Before he comes to. As for the rest of you, I’ll need you all to bear witness to what Gabriel has said this day.”

“Jackson, I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you what I was doing,” Helen whispered, “but there wasn’t any time since you came in late to dinner.”

Helen rested her head on Jackson’s shoulder as she brushed away the tears that blurred her vision. She pulled in a deep breath as Jackson guided her to the table and sat her down. She swallowed hard, running her fingertips over her neck. With the memory still fresh in her mind, Helen wondered if Gabriel would have killed her too. The idea was there as well as the motive, but if Lord Smith’s concoction hadn’t had been so effective, she knew she would have been the one on the ground.

Ethan and Liam rushed off to collect the authorities as Helen kept her eyes locked on Gabriel. She didn’t know how he was going to act once he fully came to, but she knew it wasn’t going to be pretty. And while she knew it was a gamble to trust Lord Smith to help, she couldn’t help but feel grateful that everything was finally out in the open.

“I still don’t understand what happened,” Jackson said, kneeling beside Helen as the servants surrounded Gabriel and carried him to a chair. Gabriel swayed in his seat as he slowly came to.

“If I may, Your Grace,” Lord Smith said.

“By all means,” Jackson replied. Helen could tell there was something shading Jackson’s joy, and she could only assume it was her role in taking down Gabriel for him. Of course, she couldn’t take all the credit. After all it was Lord Smith’s concoction and plan.

“Mr. Westwood has been in the trading business for some time,” Lord Smith started as he drew a chair up next to Gabriel and sat down. Helen watched as he folded his legs over one another and arched his eyebrow. “He was ambitious enough to try and swindle it out from under his father’s nose. About two months ago, I realized Gabriel was strong arming his vendors. When it came my turn, Gabriel had learned about my little secret and threatened to inform my wife about such things.”

Helen glanced at Jackson as Gabriel moaned and slumped to the table, knocking his head hard. If anyone had come into the room, they were certainly going to think he’d had one too many and had passed out.

“Well, I couldn’t allow my wife to find out about my mistress,” Lord Smith said. “It would ruin her as well as my business with her family, so I had to find a way to get rid of the problem. Tonight, your lovely wife came to me with a problem. And due to her relations with my niece, I felt obliged to help. But I must say, I also assumed she wanted to teach you a lesson, and I divulged my recipe for loosening lips. To be honest, I had no idea Mr. Westwood would have such an adverse reaction, but I must admit, I’m pleased to see that he did. Maybe now, he’ll learn not to mess with me ever again. I don’t take kindly to threats, especially those that would have undesirable consequences to my personal life.”

Jackson’s eyes widened with shock as he studied Lord Smith’s face. Helen watched as Jackson processed the information, taking it bit by bit. He let out a heavy sigh as the doors flew open. Standing in the doorway, Ethan escorted

the constable into the room.

“What in the world is going on in here?” the tall man with a long narrow nose asked. Helen couldn’t figure out if she was repulsed by the constable’s mustache or the way he slicked back his dark black hair. “Forgive me, Your Grace, I didn’t see you there. Perhaps you could shed some light on why I’ve been summoned when there clearly doesn’t seem to be any cause.”

Jackson stood up and gave a slight bow of his head. “I’d like for you to arrest this man for murder.”

The constable’s eyes widened as he hunted the room for a body. When there wasn’t one, he tilted his head and arched a suspicious eyebrow.

“And where is the body?” the constable asked. Jackson placed his hand on Helen’s shoulder. She could tell there was far too much to process for him at the moment. After all, he’d been trying to find justice, and now that he was going to get it, he didn’t know what to do or say.

“The murder took place several years ago,” Jackson explained as he walked over to Gabriel. “But this man has just confessed to everything. Every person in this room will testify if you need them to.”

“All in due time,” the constable said as he moved closer to Gabriel and grabbed his arm. With Jackson, Ethan, and Liam’s help, the constable took Gabriel from the room. Helen watched as the four men struggled with the inebriated Gabriel.

While the murmurs and whispers of the guests grew louder, Helen couldn’t help but feel smaller. She couldn’t believe her luck. Although she had thought the whole plan had gone the way it was supposed to with Jackson’s big reveal and fully shaming Gabriel in the process, Helen was pleased for it to all be over. Of course, now that meant she’d be the talk of the ton.

Rolling her eyes, Helen stood as she clung to Jackson's jacket. She walked to the double French doors and stepped out into the courtyard. The fresh air felt amazing on her sweaty face and neck. As she moved closer to the hedge, she let the rest of the world fade away. She didn't care about the commotion from the other guests as they carried on about the chaos. All Helen wanted was to make things better for Jackson. But seeing him so disappointed pained her.

"There you are."

Helen turned to find Jackson coming behind her. He moved slowly as if she were some fragile wild creature who would bolt the second he got too close. There was a timidness to him that she'd never seen before, and deep down, she didn't like it one bit.

"Look," Helen said as she spun around to face him, "I know what you're going to say. You're going to tell me what I did was reckless. Well, I know it was, but you left me no other choice. The plan was for us to confront Gabriel together. To loosen his lips and have him confess to everything."

"Helen," Jackson's voice was barely a whisper, and she wondered if he had even spoken to her in the first place.

"And I know all I was supposed to do was—" Helen continued, barely taking a breath between her sentences. But before she could say another word, Jackson curled his fingers around her waist and spun her about before catching and dipping her. Out of breath and shocked by the suddenness of Jackson's moves, she smiled and found herself a bit relieved to see a smile on his face too.

"You need to stop talking," Jackson said. "There's nothing you can say that will change what happened. I know you did what you thought was the right thing to do. But it put you in danger, and I..."

Helen held her breath, hanging on Jackson's every word. She could see the

pain in his eyes as he looked at her and wished she could make it all go away. Hoisting her back to her feet, Jackson stared deep into her eyes.

“I don’t ever want to lose you,” he mumbled, much to Helen’s surprise. “Seeing Gabriel deranged and out of his wits, I didn’t know what he was going to do. No one has ever seen him like that before. And the reality is, he killed Will because of a woman. A woman. What kind of man gets that possessive and jealous over someone?”

Helen cupped her hand to Jackson’s face and let out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry that you lost your best friend. I’m sure that he’s looking down on all this and is happy to finally be able to rest. And while things didn’t happen like you wanted them to, I’ve got to ask, does anything? Life is full of mystery and chances. You seized your moment.”

“No,” Jackson said, shaking his head. “You seized the moment. You dared to do the impossible, and you followed your instincts. I could have never planned what you did.”

“It was all Lord Smith’s idea really. He was the one hoping to find other like-minded people who wanted to punish Gabriel. But I don’t think he truly knew what he was asking when he was making his inquiries.”

“How did you know you could trust him? Paxton was the only one who spoke to him before, and he seemed like decent and closed lipped person,” Jackson said.

Helen’s lips curled at the corner as she gave a little shrug. “When I heard him in the corridor with Gabriel, it was pretty clear the Lord didn’t like Gabriel and thought he was a bit too cocky. After that, it was just a matter of getting the Lord alone to talk to him. I didn’t have a clue that he was looking to use tonight to his benefit as well. Seems the Lord was considering offing Gabriel himself and making it look like Gabriel choked to death. When I was able to

tell him about your plight, Lord Smith was more than eager to help.”

“Perhaps there’s something I can do for Lord Smith to show my gratitude for all his help,” Jackson said. “For now, though, I need to make sure you are all right.”

“I’m fine, I promise. I just want to make sure you’re all right, and I need you to know that I just want you to be happy,” Helen replied, taking Jackson’s hands and pressing her face into his palm.

“You make me happy,” Jackson said. “Every bit of you. From your quirky outfits to the way your mind works. You, Helen, are what makes me happy, and I love you.”

Helen’s heart fluttered as she stared into his eyes. Every fiber of her being felt as if it were on fire as he pressed her closer to his body. Swallowing hard, the world felt as if it had stopped. Helen exhaled slowly as she mustered every ounce of her strength to stay standing.

“You... you... love me?” she said, forcing the words out of her mouth. Jackson bobbed his head as he tucked the loose strands of hair behind her ear.

“I do, yes. And I want to spend the rest of my life with you,” he answered. “And don’t tell me that we’re married; I know you’re my wife. Only a wife of mine would have what it took to handle such stress. But I want you to know that I don’t want anything to come between us.”

“I love you too,” Helen said, the words scraped against her throat as she forced them from her parched mouth. “I didn’t want to, not at first, but you’ve grown on me. Just like all these flowers out here in the garden, you’ve rooted into my soul, and there isn’t anyone else I’d rather be with.”

“Jackson, you are aware that you still have guests waiting for dinner, right?” Ethan asked as he poked his head out through the doors. Helen couldn’t help

but chuckle as Jackson's face furrowed with irritation.

"Then tell the servants to serve the food," Helen and Jackson said in unison.

"They are more than welcome to eat without us," Helen continued as she curled her arms around Jackson. Food was by far the last thing on her mind. All she wanted was to disappear somewhere quiet with Jackson and let the world drift by.

"Your Grace," Ethan said. Helen couldn't help but smile as she heard the teasing in Ethan's tone as the door closed behind him.

"Suppose we are going to be the talk of the ton from now on," Jackson observed.

"You still opposed to rumors and such?" Helen asked as she ran her fingers through Jackson's hair.

"Absolutely," Jackson answered. "But it's not like I'll correct anyone if they want to make this dinner out to be something more. After all, everyone knows I'm a bit of a recluse and strange. What happened tonight shouldn't really shock anyone."

"And what about Will's family?" Helen asked. "Are you going to tell them the news about Gabriel?"

Jackson bobbed his head as he leaned in closer. "Yes, but as of right now, I think I'll enjoy time with my wife."

CHAPTER 28



Every muscle in Jackson's body ached. There was no telling how long he'd been sitting in the same place. He gathered it had to have been over an hour. Of course, deep down, he knew he'd wait for an eternity if it meant he got a chance to speak before the judge and jury. In the corner of his eye, he knew the people were watching him. He could feel their eyes on his back as if they were battering rams. Feeling a bit uneasy, he shifted his weight in his seat, trying to find a comfortable position.

He knew that once the trial for Gabriel actually started, it wouldn't take long with as many witnesses that had agreed to come forward and testify. But getting through the other cases first ate up most of his time. When it was finally Jackson's turn to stand before the judge and everyone in the room, he felt an icy finger trace his spine. He couldn't tell whether or not it was Will's ghost encouraging him to finish what he had started or the fact that he'd done this before.

Swallowing down his doubt and fear and mustering all the strength that he could, Jackson rose from his seat. The moment his name was called, he moved down the aisle, ensuring he'd pass Gabriel on the way to the witness box. Somewhere in the room, he could hear the whispering, and he moved down the row, walking by people with itching ears waiting to hear his side of

the story.

With his chest heavy and his heart feeling like a sack of rocks, Jackson took the witness stand, placed his hand onto the Bible, and swore against God and country before taking his seat. Rehashing the moments of his past was like opening a festering wound. He knew it needed to be done if he was going to heal properly.

“Your Grace, can you please tell me how you know the defendant?” the lawyer asked as he paced the length of the floor. His voice boomed throughout the room, and Jackson was certain that every ear heard him loud and clear.

Trying to relax his body, Jackson rolled his shoulders back and cleared his throat. “I went to school with Mr. Westwood. We have known each other for over 10 years.”

“I see, and this is not the first time you’ve charged Mr. Westwood with such a gruesome crime, is it?” The lawyer arched his eyebrow and glared at him, but Jackson couldn’t be intimidated. He had been through this before.

Only this time, he was far more encouraged and stronger than he had been before. Life lessons had taught him many things over the years, and he knew very well that Gabriel was guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt.

“I want the court to know,” Jackson started as he made sure to make eye contact with every person that he could, “that when this case was brought before the court before, it was inconclusive. And for ten years, my soul has been scarred. I needed the answer to who killed my best friend. And two weeks ago at my estate, Gabriel confessed while intoxicated that he had murdered Will. I pray and imploring you fine people to exact justice.”

Jackson scanned the crowd, wondering whether or not his words fell on deaf ears or if he had found some compassion within the group of people who

were watching him like a hawk.

“And do you think that you can tell me, in your own words, what transpired the night that Mr. Westwood was taken under arrest?”

“I had thrown a party for friends from Eton,” Jackson said as he made sure to keep his attention on the lawyer. Although he could feel Gabriel’s gaze burning into him, Jackson refused to take the bait. As far as he was concerned, Gabriel was no longer anyone of consequence or importance. In fact, he was lower than dirt.

“This party of yours, was it only friends from Eton?” the lawyer asked.

Jackson shook his head as he ran his fingers through his hair. “No,” he answered. “It was acquaintances as well, but it was a small gathering. It wasn’t a ball or anything important. It was just a few people getting together and maybe sharing some ideas. Perhaps even a game of chess or two. But there was no malice in the event. When dinner had been called, some friends and I started towards the banquet hall where we met the other guests.

“That is when Lord Smith seemed a bit odd and collapsed on the floor. A few moments later, Gabriel was on the floor. My first initial thought was that someone had poisoned the food, but when Lord Smith awoke and regained consciousness, I found it to be a bit peculiar.

“Before he passed out, Gabriel confessed. And due to the new information he admitted, I’m confident that he will be put away this time around.”

“Your Grace, do tell me what do you think would be fit punishment for Mr. Westwood?”

“That is not for me to decide,” Jackson said as he started fiddling with the tips of his fingers and quickly realized he was sweating, raking his palms down his slacks to remove the moisture from his hands. He tried to calm his

frantic nerves. But what was he supposed to say?

That he wanted Gabriel to pay with his life? But what good would that do? Will would still be dead, and another body would be in a grave. Jackson let out a long, heavy sigh, contemplating his choices and his next words very carefully.

For the first time since he entered the courtroom, Jackson's attention drew to Gabriel; dipping emotions flowed through Jackson, all of which popped in and out so quickly that it was like trying to grasp water. He remained stiff and stoic, just glaring at his old friend and trying to erase every memory from his mind.

"If the court would permit, I would suggest you allow Gabriel to keep his life but nothing else. Make an example of him just as Cain had done after killing Abel." Jackson held his breath. As Gabriel's eyes widened with shock, it was clear that Gabriel had expected him to thrash about and protest, claiming his head, but there was no way Jackson could do that.

"Thank you very much for your testimony. Your Honor, I call to dismiss the witness."

Jackson glanced over his shoulder at the judge and his white curls in long black robe. The man looked menacing under his heavy wrinkled eyelids and cold demeanor.

"Motion granted," the judge agreed. Jackson gave a quick nod of his head and rose. He took his time walking around the witness stand and glared at Gabriel as he made his way out of the courtroom.

He wanted to savor every moment. Every step he took out of the court was one more step he took away from his past and was able to move on from the events that took Will's life. He wanted instead to be able to be free and happy with Helen. The moment Helen's name popped into his head, Jackson felt

lighter. It was as if the sun had poured through the open roof and warmed his skin and soul. She was more than just a wild thought. She had single-handedly taken down his biggest enemy, and Jackson knew that there was no way he would ever be able to repay her.

Her quick wit and clever ideas were the only thing that allowed him to step out of that courthouse, feeling as if a ton of bricks had been finally taken off his shoulders. The stress that he had been carrying for most of his life mounted so much that he never realized just how much he had carried until the moment he let it go.

Pulling in a long deep breath, Jackson threw his arms up and turned his face to the sky. The golden rays beamed down on him, and he felt giddy as a child. Although he didn't know what Gabriel's fate would be, he was pretty certain that Gabriel wouldn't be living the life that he had been. And Jackson knew that his life as well as Gabriel's would never be the same again.



“The Duke of Stonewill,” the butler announced from the bottom of the steps as Jackson entered the foyer. He pulled off his hat and glanced around the meager home. It had been far too long since he stepped foot in this house, and he had sworn that he never would again unless he was able to get answers for Will's family. Now that he finally had them, standing here felt surreal, as if he were in a dream somehow, and he would wake up any moment.

“Your Grace, what a surprise.” Will's father's voice pulled Jackson from his thoughts. He whipped his head around to find the heavysset man with a round belly and rosy cheeks hobbling down the hallway. Apparently, time hadn't been kind to Will's father either. Jackson could see the stress etched into every wrinkle on the man's face.

Will had been his only son, and Jackson fully understood the responsibility that was placed on Will's shoulders and the devastation that Will's father had to have gone through during everything with losing his son.

"What brings you by, Your Grace?" Lord MacDuff asked as he ushered Jackson into the sitting room. Jackson sat down adjacent to Will's father and tried to flash him a smile. It wasn't easy being there, and every nerve in Jackson's body felt like it was on fire.

Shifting in a seat, Jackson tried to find a comfortable position but knew that there was no amount of cushioning or feathers that would ease his aching body.

"Sir, it's been a long time," Jackson said as he gave him a little nod.

"That it has; that it has. And what brings you here? I'm an old man, and my time is short. I've got things to do."

Jackson nodded as he ran his hands over his slacks and swallowed the lump of fear that was clogging his throat.

"I don't know if you're aware or not..." Jackson started as he drew his eyes to meet the old man's. It was so easy to see himself becoming what Will's father had become. Had it not been for Helen, Jackson wondered whether or not this was his fate that he was looking at, only somehow, he had managed to divert it thanks to Helen's kindness. It was just one more reason why Jackson knew that he loved her deeply and would never be able to live life without her. She had become a part of him so unexpectedly.

"I'm not sure if you're aware or not," Jackson said, "but Mr. Gabriel Westwood is on trial once again."

Will's father cocked his head and scrunched his face with confusion. "I beg your pardon? Why wasn't I informed on those notices? I thought that trial

was settled years ago.”

Jackson strained his back and stared at the old man with compassion. “You and I both know that case wasn’t done properly. There were far too many holes, but rest assured, Mr. Gabriel Westwood will most likely be found guilty of murdering Will.”

“That’s what we thought last time,” Will’s father said as he threw his hand up to wave Jackson away. “Now, be gone with you. I don’t have any more time to waste. I don’t need to be dredging up the past. It took me forever to piece the broken pieces of my heart back together. I don’t need you coming around here shattering it again.”

Jackson rose slowly and paused. He looked down at Will’s father. “Gabriel is the murderer; he confessed. I suggest you find peace in that.”

Will’s father gave a small snort as if what Jackson was telling him was nothing more than a lie. Jackson knew that there was no reason for Will’s father to believe him, not after everything that had happened in the past and all the false leads and open holes that allowed Gabriel to slip through. Now, Jackson was free from the burden of that stress and guilt, but he knew that Will’s father never would be. He was going to cling to it till the day he died. And Jackson couldn’t begrudge him for that. After all, he was the one who lost his son; Jackson only lost a friend.

“Be at peace,” Jackson said as he turned towards the door and walked out. The day had been stressful, and a small ache behind Jackson’s ear started to cause problems. Although his visit was short, he knew that there was nothing more for him to say.

Jackson made his way home swiftly, riding hard through the fields and allowing every mile between Will’s father’s house and his own to become like a barrier that separated the two worlds. No longer troubled by his past,

Jackson felt free to pursue his future, and he knew exactly who he wanted to be with at that moment.

“We weren’t expecting the home so soon, Your Grace. What did you do? Ride all night?” the servant asked as he grabbed the reins the moment Jackson slipped off the saddle. Jackson smiled at the young man and quickly raced up the steps, eager to find Helen. It was her arms that he craved, her embrace that he wanted. After such a stressful day, he knew that she was the only one that he could turn to. He wanted to be able to slip into her.

Pushing through the front doors, Jackson scanned the foyer and strained his ears to listen, hoping to pick up any sound of her delicate voice. When he couldn’t hear anything, he made a beeline for her room, praying she would be there. When he knocked on the door and received no response, he felt a bit flustered and frustrated.

Where are you?

Jackson made his way to the kitchen as quickly as he could.

“Have any of you seen Helen?” Jackson held his breath as the servants in the kitchen all exchanged glances with one another. The smiles on their faces were all the same, mischievous and sly, like they had a secret they weren’t going to tell.

“The Duchess is out in the gardens,” one of the servants said, pointing towards the side door of the kitchen. Jackson quickly thanked her and rushed out. And there in the center of the garden, surrounded by the flowers that they had planted together, Helen stood with a water pitcher in her hand. Her dress was just as wild as before, but somehow, it looked incredibly charming and elegant. From the way it framed her body, Jackson’s heart pounded in his chest as he rushed towards her. Without saying a word, he scooped her up.

Helen let out a squeal as she pounded her fists against his chest until she

realized it was he who had grabbed her. Jackson didn't give her time to speak. He needed her, and there was only one way for him to show her just how much.

CHAPTER 29



Little bumps rose over Helen's skin as she swooned into Jackson's embrace. Her mouth moved with his as her fingers roamed over the hills of his shoulders and up to the base of his neck. Twirling her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck, Helen savored Jackson's low moans that resonated throughout his body. The sound was feral and spoke to her soul in ways no words ever could.

Helen tilted her head back, desperate for air. Out of breath, she pulled Jackson's head to her bosom, and he claimed it as her own. His kisses tickled her skin as he ran his lips down the length of her neck and back up again.

"I want you," Jackson whispered, his teeth grazing over her earlobe. Little bumps raced from the crown of her head and down the length of her neck. Helen couldn't help but squirm as a light giggle escaped her lips.

"My word, what's gotten into you?" Helen asked as Jackson's hands roamed where they pleased. There wasn't a place on her body where she couldn't feel Jackson. He was everywhere, like a blanket draped over her. She put her hand on Jackson's chest. The drumming of his heart against the palm of her hand made her smile. Heat rushed to her cheeks, but she wasn't going to be baited. So many times, he had whispered those very words into her ear, teasing and taunting her.

Jackson's fingers glided over the edge of her jaw and trailed through her hair. The need in his eyes kindled her desire to touch him. Her lips ached to have his. Helen stepped back from the temptation and giggled as she noticed the dirt covering Jackson's shirt.

"I'm so sorry," she said, hoping that it sounded sincere. Jackson glanced down and dusted off the bits of dirt clinging to his shirt. With each stroke of his hand, dark black marks streaked through the white. Helen pressed her lips together as her eyes widened. It wasn't her intention to get him so messy.

"No, you're not," Jackson replied as he grabbed her and rubbed his body against hers. Helen swatted at him, but she knew she was no match for him. Jackson was stronger than he looked, and it was that strength that drew Helen to him.

She bobbed her head as her laughter filled the garden. There was no salvaging her dress or his shirt now. The stains were there to stay. Jackson tilted his head and caught Helen's eye.

"What?" Helen asked as she stepped back from him, anticipating the mischief he was about to unleash.

"I love you," he said. It sounded as if the words lodged in his throat, but there they were, out in the open once more. Helen's heart fluttered as Jackson's low tone vibrated through her body. Every nerve in her body tingled.

"Do you now? Since when?" Helen asked as she bolted to the hedge, trying to keep her distance from him. Jackson stalked Helen with a playful smirk plastered on his face. He moved as she moved around the hedge.

"You know when," he said with his eyes narrowing. "And don't you dare say you don't remember, or I'll pin you down and tickle you to death."

Helen's eyes widened as she glanced from the door to Jackson, wondering if

she could make the sprint. Jackson was after all much faster than she was, but Helen did have a head start.

“You’ll have to catch me first,” Helen teased as she sprinted for the doorway. Her heart pounded in her chest as she kept her focus on getting through the door. Heavy steps pounded behind her as her fingertips circled the knob of the door.

Yanking it open, Helen darted into the gap. The mud on her shoes made the cobblestone floor slicker than usual. The servants’ heads whipped up the moment Helen barged through with Jackson on her heels. In the corner of her eye, Helen caught glimpses of the smirks on the servants’ faces as she scrambled by them.

“Sorry,” Helen called over her shoulder as she noticed the trail of dirt behind her. Panic rocked her the second she noticed Jackson right behind her. Of course, he’d have no trouble keeping up with her, but it seemed to Helen that his intentions had nothing to do with catching her.

“You can’t run forever,” Jackson warned.

“Neither can you,” Helen replied breathlessly as her leg muscles started to burn. It felt as if they’d give out from under her at any moment. She made a hard right and crashed into an open door. Helen spilled into the dark room and scrambled to get up before Jackson came around.

“Are you all right?” Jackson’s voice rang in Helen’s ears. “You didn’t hurt yourself, did you? Twist an ankle?”

Helen shook her head. The only thing that was wounded was her pride and dignity.

“I’m blaming the mud,” Helen said as she tried to get to her feet.

“If there’s mud on your shoes, you should probably take them off,” Jackson

suggested as lust burned within his gaze. Helen propped herself on her elbows, lifted her right leg, and wagged her shoe at Jackson. There was no hesitation on Jackson's part. He grabbed her ankle, stopping her from taunting him with it. A smirk stretched over her mouth as she watched Jackson remove her shoe.

"There," Jackson said, tossing the shoes over his shoulder. "Is that better?"

Helen batted her eyes as she tilted her head. "A little. But I think I bruised my hip when I fell."

Jackson's eyebrow arched as his lips curled at the corners. "That so? And would you like me to fetch the physician? I'm sure he'd be delighted for the chance to catch you so indisposed."

"If that would ease your conscience," Helen said. "Or..."

Helen's heart quickened as Jackson's fingers tightened around her calf.

"Or?" he whispered back to her.

"Well, why bother the physician when you're here," she answered. "Not unless you don't want to. I'm sure I'll be able to manage alone."

Jackson's eyebrows furrowed with a faux anger. "You really think I wouldn't want the opportunity to see every inch of your body? I would think you didn't know me at all."

Helen shook her head as Jackson's hand slipped to the crook of her knee. His hands were hot on her skin, burning her as they drifted to her inner thighs. Helen's mind went wild. She had no clue whose room they had landed in or even what it was used for. The only thing she could think about was how wonderfully warm Jackson's hands were against her inner thighs.

"Well, we haven't been married for very long," Helen pointed out as if she

had been running for hours. The tingling in her legs was taunting her. She let her eyes roll back for just a moment, allowing herself to savor Jackson's lips caressing her inner thigh.

"I'm sure there are a few things I still need to learn about you," Helen continued, her voice even more ragged than before.

"And I, you." Jackson's husky voice reverberated throughout Helen's soul. Helen gasped the moment Jackson's fingers found their mark. "Like what noises I can make come out of your mouth when I do..."

Jackson's fingers moved in fast tight circles. Helen grabbed his hand as she drew in the air in quick bursts. She shook her head as her eyes fluttered open.

"Too much?" Jackson asked. Helen could hear the smirk in his voice. Helen swallowed, trying to soothe her parched mouth.

"I don't want to be teased anymore," she answered and drew her focus to Jackson.

"Neither do I," Jackson said as he slipped his fingers out of her and tore off his shirt. Helen's heart quickened as she dared to reach up and touch him. Jackson's chest was smooth, and his muscles twitched the moment her fingers drifted over them.

"Are you sure?" Helen asked, drawing her attention from his chest to his eyes. Jackson's hands flew to his trousers. Helen couldn't help but giggle as she watched him struggle to remove them before peeling out of his mud-stained shirt. Chewing on her lower lip, Helen's mind went wild. It felt as if she were in the middle of a storm, being tossed about by the varying emotions pummeling against her reason.

When Jackson reached for her to undo the restrictive bindings of her dress, Helen didn't recoil. She leaned forward and surrendered herself to whatever

Jackson willed. For so long, her body had craved his attention. And finally, they were ready to give themselves over. Helen couldn't help but think of how far she had to go to get to this point, and she wondered if fate had brought them together, for there was no other logical reason for how he managed to steal her heart. But there was no way for her to get it back, and she knew it.

"What are you thinking about?" Helen asked, her body feeling foreign and strange.

"You," Jackson answered as he curled his fingers through the lacing of her dress and pulled off the petticoat. Jackson paused and stared at her as he finished peeling every layer of her clothing off until nothing but her shift remained. Instinctively, Helen's hands flew to her chest to hide her nakedness from him. Jackson's face softened a moment, and he gently shook his head.

Reaching for her wrists, Jackson eased her hands away from her.

"Did I not tell you not to hide away from me?" Jackson asked as he lowered himself to her. Helen kept her eyes locked on him as his mouth opened to receive her hardened nipple.

"Oh," Helen whimpered as Jackson's tongue twirled around the tender bulb of flesh, drawing the little bumps out from their hiding places. Helen curled her arm around Jackson's head and dug her fingernails into his hair. With her body aching for him, Helen twitched and squirmed. She wanted more than mere kisses. She needed him inside her.

As if he were a mind reader, Jackson pushed his fingers into her and let out a deep heavy moan that rumbled through his body like thunder.

"Oh, that's nice," he whispered. Helen's hips moved in time with each pump of his finger. She wanted more, so much more. Yet, she didn't know how to ask him for what she wanted.

“Why?” Helen managed to get out.

“You’re just so wet and tight,” Jackson said, dropping his head to her collarbone. It was clear he was enjoying what he was doing to her as much as Helen enjoyed receiving it. Jackson knew how deep to slip into her and where to touch that made her body twitch uncontrollably.

“What are you afraid of?” Helen asked. A smile stretched across Jackson’s face, and he shook his head.

“Nothing,” Jackson answered. “At least, not as long as I have you by my side.”

“I’m right here,” Helen said, cupping her hand to his face. “I’m yours.”

Jackson’s eyes drifted down her body. He swallowed hard. “I want you to touch me.”

Confusion crashed through Helen as she stared at him. “I am touching you. Can’t you feel my hands on your body?”

“No,” Jackson snickered. “I want you to touch me.”

With her heart skipping within her chest and a heat coursing through her, she slipped her hand between their bodies and curled her fingers around the length of his shaft. He was so delicate in her hand yet so hard. It was a bit shocking to have her fingers touching such an important part of Jackson.

“Now stroke it,” he moaned and closed his eyes. “Not too fast, and don’t squeeze so hard. Just glide your hand over me.”

Helen delighted in watching Jackson twitch under her touch—the way his body moved when she brushed the pad of her thumb over the tip of his manhood. Jackson’s arms wobbled under his weight as she caressed his neck, and she wrapped her fingers tighter around his shaft. Sucking in a quick

breath, Jackson's eyes widened.

"I want you," he groaned.

"Nothing is stopping you," Helen answered. It was enough confirmation for Jackson to grab her waist and shift her over. He slipped effortlessly between her legs and held her gaze. With anticipation running high, Helen didn't know what to think or do. She waited as Jackson's hands guided her hand to where he needed to be.

Jackson eased himself down to her. Helen could feel the tip of his manhood hunting for a place to go. She opened her legs a bit wider for him and closed her eyes as he eased himself into her. The pressure was unexpected. She'd handled his fingers no problem, but this was something entirely different. He stretched her body, and she found it fascinating how her body adapted to him.

"Anytime you want me to stop, you just need to speak up," Jackson said as he brushed his hand over the top of her head. Helen nodded. Slowly, Jackson pushed deeper. Helen had no idea her body could open up so much, and now, it felt that there was still more to explore.

"Are you all right?" Jackson asked, his voice laced with worry. Helen bobbed her head as the stress between her legs eased a bit.

"Yes," Helen gasped as she curled her arms around his body to anchor her to him and the room. It felt as if he had snapped every line that ever connected her to the planet. She felt both weightless and heavy—like she was too full with Jackson so deep inside her.

Helen released herself into Jackson's loving embrace. With each thrust of his body into hers, new sensations arose. She felt tingling rise and fall within her muscles. Clawing at Jackson's back, she wanted more. Wishing there was some way she could seep into him, Helen closed her eyes and let herself feel every inch of him gliding in and out until neither one could bare it any

longer.

“Yes,” Helen cried out as her legs tightened around Jackson’s waist. It was everything she had hoped it to be—the thrill, the anticipation, all of it. Helen knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Jackson was a part of her now. He had left a small bit of his soul buried within her body, and she was certain he had stolen a piece of hers as well.

“God, I love you,” Jackson huffed as he fell to the side of Helen, completely exhausted.

“I love you too,” Helen said as she twisted her body to press into him. He grabbed her hand and kissed the palm of her hand as he flashed her a sleepy smile.

“Will it always be like this?” Helen asked as she played with the hair on Jackson’s chest.

Jackson turned to face her. He brushed away the loose strands of her hair as he stared deep into her eyes. “I certainly hope so.”

EPILOGUE



Jackson paced the length of his study. His body felt as if he'd been set on fire and thrown into a lake with rocks tied to his ankles. The whole manor was in a perpetual state of stress over the past several weeks, and it finally reached its boiling point the moment Helen's labor pains began.

"It'll be all right," Liam said, handing Jackson a dram of whiskey, but he knew no amount of alcohol would help relieve the anxiety building up within his being. Every moan that boomed down the hallway caused Jackson's heart to ache. He would do anything to be in the room with Helen, to support her and show her he was right there with her. For a brief blimp of a moment, he couldn't help but feel the icy jab of guilt driving into his heart.

After all, it was his fault Helen was in such duress. But he knew deep down that he wouldn't change anything. Regrets were long gone, and he knew if he had the chance to do it again, he would in a heartbeat.

Helen let out another painful plea, forcing Jackson to stop dead in his tracks. Each sound that escaped the confinements of the room pummeled him and grew more desperate than the one before it. It was like listening to music and anticipating the rising pitch.

"Helen is in good health and of good age," Ethan chimed in as he pulled out

the box of cigars. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“Easy for you to say,” Jackson chided Ethan. “You’re not the one about to either lose the world or gain an heir.”

Ethan shook his head, and Liam let out a snort. “How odd this is to be here. I mean think about it. When we all first met, we had grand plans to change the world. Yet, here we are doing the same thing we’ve always done since the beginning of time. Perhaps that is our lot in life.”

“Not more of your rhetoric,” Ethan grumbled. “I heard about all I could stand coming up here with you. Did you know that Liam here is thinking of taking the vow?”

Jackson’s eyebrow rose as he glanced over to Liam. Never in a million years did he think his friend would pick such a path in life. But then again, Liam had always been the kindest out of all the friends Jackson had. He could see Liam happy and completely content taking the cloth if it meant helping others.

“Now for some reason, he thinks he’s the pope,” Ethan continued. “Going on and on about morals and higher powers. But if you ask me, what I think he needs is a wife of his own. That would certainly put an end to babbling.”

“It’s not babbling,” Liam argued as he threw his legs off the arm of the couch and sat up. “It’s important to think about such things. It gives one a purpose.”

Helen’s cry caused Jackson’s ears to perk. How she was able to project her cries throughout the manor astonished him. He knew that if the manor was ever under attack, and Helen screamed, he’d be able to hunt her down with no problems.

“How much longer is this going to go on? Surely, she can’t take anymore,” Jackson said as he started nibbling on the tip of his fingernail. His eyes

shifted to the door, expecting someone, anyone, to come rushing in and give him news of his wife. But as the minutes turned to hours, he grew worried and concerned.

The night lingered on, and Jackson found himself too worked up to sleep. He knew that if Helen couldn't get any, he certainly wasn't going to as well. As the hours came and went, Jackson's heart grew heavier. Unable to take the waiting any longer, he charged for Helen's room, demanding to know what was going on. He needed to know that the light of his world would remain burning. Holding on to the bit of hope left within him, Jackson drifted past the various servants, all taking their turns helping with the delivery.

Jackson paused at Helen's doorway, uncertain as to whether he should barge into the room or not. Mustering all his courage, Jackson knew he'd rather have the truth of the matter rather than live in speculation.

The moment his fingers curled around the knob of the door, it flew open. Through the doorway, Jackson saw clearly into the room. Helen was propped against the back wall. Her face was pale as beads of sweat dripped from her brow. She had never looked so terrifying and radiant at the same time.

"Jackson," Helen whimpered as she stretched a hand for him. Her voice was weak and scratchy, but Jackson didn't need to know why. Her cries had filled the manor all night. Without hesitating and throwing out all customs and rules, Jackson rushed to her side. He curled his arm around her fragile body and eased her to his chest.

"Oh, my love," Jackson said as one of the servants handed him a cool washcloth to dab her forehead and face. "I know you're tired, but you must keep fighting. Do you hear me? Our child will need you. I need you."

"I..." Helen started but found her voice scraping against her throat. Jackson pressed his finger to her mouth and shook his head.

“Please, save your strength,” he said.

“I’ve told the Duchess how it isn’t uncommon for the first child to take a while,” the midwife explained, coming into the room with fresh towels and a pale of water. “My mother was in labor for a full day before she popped out my older sister. As long as there is air getting to her lungs and no significant bleeding, she’ll be fine.”

“And how much is too much? Am I going to lose my child?” Jackson asked. He found the words lodging into his throat like briars. He didn’t want to think about losing Helen. They had come too far and gone through far too much for him to lose her now. Giving her a tight little squeeze, Jackson prayed for the first time since Will had died.

“All right, Your Grace,” the midwife said, wagging her hand at Jackson, “I’m guessing it won’t be much longer now. You can see the crown of the baby is right there. Mark my words, you’ll have them both in your arms within the hour.”

“Oh, please,” Helen whimpered as she clawed at Jackson to stay where he was. “Stay.”

“If that is what you want,” Jackson agreed. “You know I’ll do anything for you. Just say the word.”

“Get our baby out of me,” Helen groaned. Her face turned beet red as she strained to push the child from her body. Helen’s scream rattled the windows and rang through Jackson’s ears. It was a surprise the servants and midwife managed to still hear with how piercing Helen’s cry was.

“Hold her,” the midwife said as she knelt between Helen’s legs. Jackson’s eyes widened as he focused on stroking Helen’s hair.

“It’ll be all right,” Jackson cooed as he witnessed firsthand the start of a new

life. The cry of the babe in the midwife's arms was far different than the ones that came from Helen. There was a jiggle to the sound, and for the first time all night, Jackson let out a sigh of relief.

"You've got a boy," the midwife said, holding the child out for Jackson to see. Every ounce of stress fell from his body as he stared down at his son. The child's eyes were fierce blue.

"He's got your eyes," Jackson whispered to Helen as she inhaled and flashed a weary smile. It was clear she was worn out and ragged, but her resilience astonished Jackson.

"Let me hold him," Helen whimpered as she stretched her arms out for the child. The midwife cleaned up the baby with the swaddling blankets before handing the child over to Helen.

"Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" Helen said as she grazed her fingertip ever so lightly over the baby's cheeks. Jackson watched as she counted the fingers and the toes as the child shifted and quieted in her arms.

"Will you be nursing the child yourself? Or shall I call on the wet nurse?" the midwife asked as Jackson found it near impossible to take his eyes off his son. All his hopes and dreams had transitioned to the child Helen bore. And for the first time ever, Jackson's future was bright and clear. He knew it wasn't going to be easy raising a child, but with Helen, anything was possible.

"It's up to Helen," Jackson said. "Whatever what she wants."

Helen snuggled the child to her bosom and sighed. "I'll do it."

"I figured that's what you'd say," Jackson said with a chuckle as he watched her.

"What did you want to name him?" Helen asked as she adjusted her shift to

allow the child to suckle at her breast. Jackson watched in awe as the baby latched onto Helen.

“I thought maybe we could name him after your father,” Jackson answered. “If you wanted to.”

Helen shook her head as her face scrunched. “No. That’s not negotiable. What if we called him William? Do you think that would be so out of sorts?”

Jackson’s chest tightened. He had wanted to propose the name to Helen so many times before, but never found a way to broach the subject. Swallowing the lump of pride and joy lodged in his throat, Jackson bobbed his head.

“Will is a wonderful name. A strong name. But are you sure that’s what you want this child to be called. I don’t want you to name him that if you truly don’t want to,” Jackson said as a secret desire boiled and brewed within his being.

“I think it’s the perfect name,” Helen said. “After all, you lost so much time with your friend—maybe this will be a way to regain some of it?”

“No,” Jackson said, shaking his head. “That part of my life is in the past. If we grant the child the name of Will, it’ll be because that is the name we want etched into our family history and not because we want to salvage something from the past.”

“Then what do you think about the name Christian William Deumond? That way he can determine his own path in this life without having to worry about living up to a name,” Helen said as she glanced to Jackson. There was hope in her eyes but exhaustion as well. Jackson wondered how much longer she’d be able to stay awake after all she had endured.

“Christian William Deumond,” Jackson repeated the name as if trying it out. He bobbed his head as he let the child’s small hand engulf his finger. “I like

it. It'll give him room to grow."

"Welcome to the world, Christian," Helen cooed as she brushed her fingers over the baby's head.

"Your Grace," the midwife said as she cleared her throat, intruding on Jackson's bliss, "I believe there are several people who will be wanting to meet the child as well."

Jackson's chest tightened. He wasn't ready to leave her or Christian just yet and wanted to spend the rest of his life right where he was.

"Jackson, we should invite everyone over and introduce our newest member; what do you think?" Helen asked. He could see the plea in her gaze as she shifted the child over to the other breast.

"I think I have some letters to write," Jackson said. "Will you be all right if I go?"

Helen bobbed her head as the sting of jealousy jabbed at Jackson. It took every ounce of his strength to get out of the bed, but somehow, he managed and walked to the door. Stealing one more glimpse of Helen and Christian, Jackson's heart swelled.

"Well?" Liam asked the moment Jackson came out of the room. "We haven't heard any more cries."

Jackson glanced over to Liam and Ethan. Reality struck Jackson hard as his head started to sway. "I have a son."

"Congratulations!" Ethan and Liam shouted in unison and patted him on the shoulder.

"Have you named him yet? Because if you haven't, I've got the perfect name," Ethan enthused.

“Save it for when you have a child of your own,” Jackson said to Ethan causing Liam to spew the liquid from his mouth.

“Heaven save us if Ethan ever has a child,” Liam teased. “We all know it would end up being a hellion. Besides, he’s not ready for the responsibility.”

“The subject is moot,” Ethan said, waving his hand. “I’d have to have a wife first, and well, that’s not going to happen.”

Jackson shook his head as he made his way down the steps to his study. “You never know what the future holds for you. I certainly didn’t. And look where I am now.”

“Yes, yes,” Liam grumbled. “Go shout your news to the world. I’m telling you, having a child will change everything.”

“Good,” Jackson said as he walked into his study. “I, for one, am looking forward to this new adventure.”

The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Eager to learn how **Helen and Jackson's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple.

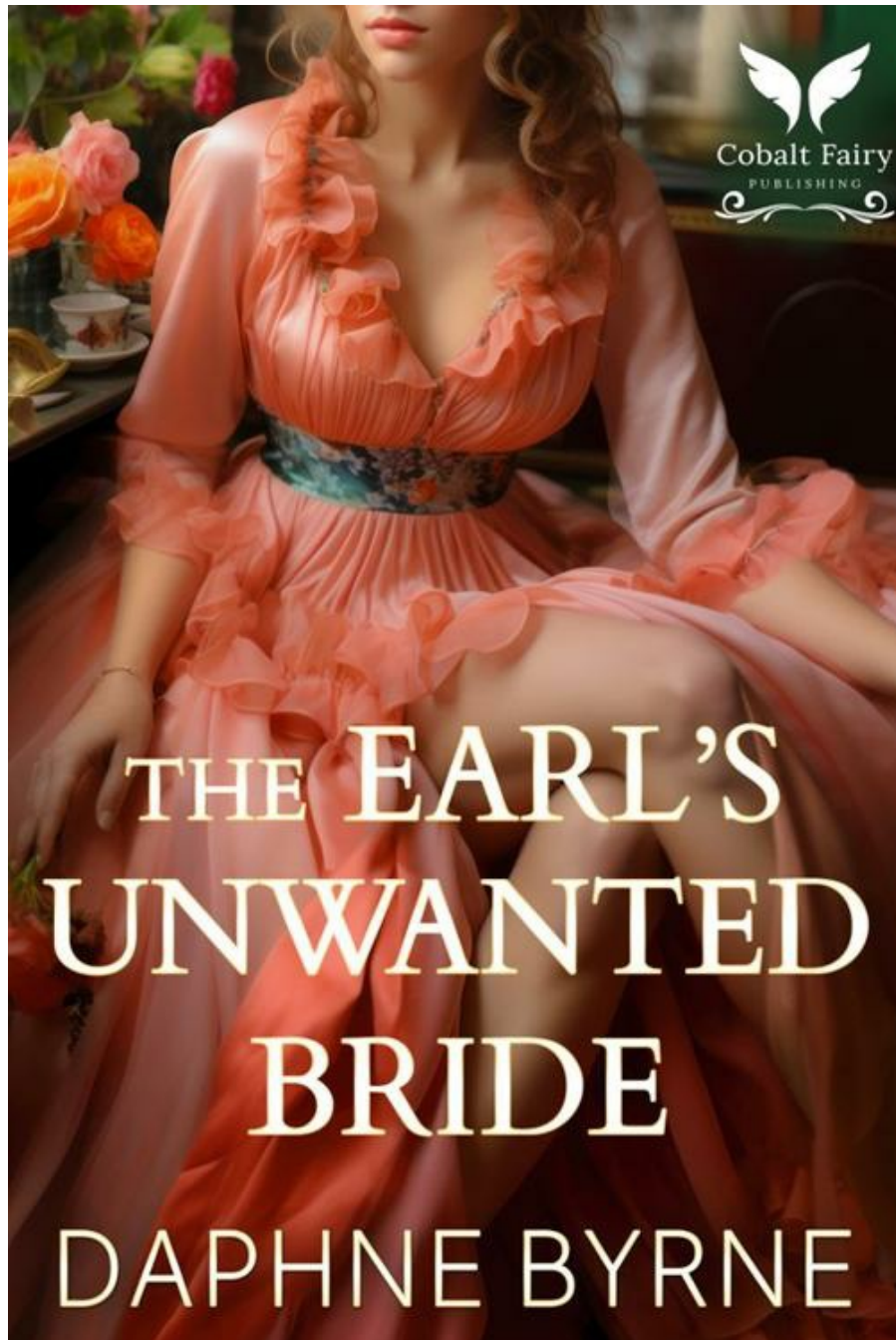
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Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of *The Earl's Unwanted Bride*, one of my best stories so far, and the second standalone in the series!



PREVIEW: THE EARL'S
UNWANTED BRIDE



CHAPTER 1



"*Y*ou wouldn't dare." Mary Jane stood there, voice trembling as much as her body.

Her palms were sweating as her heart pounded fiercely within her bosom. The small, cozy playroom with its bright floral tapestries and lavish furnishing seemed to fade out of focus as Charles Lebrand towered over her. Mary Jane hadn't seen him since the wedding to her late husband and had not thought of him since. Yet, there he stood, gaunt and reserved. His peppered black hair smoothed back as his chocolate brown eyes bore into her. His thin lips stretched out into a devious smirk as Mary Jane tried to keep her posture.

"Oh, my dear, how little you know me," Charles snickered as he stretched his hand out and coiled his finger around a lock of Mary Jane's hair. His gaze was stern and steely, making Mary's heart rate skyrocket even further.

"Rosemary," Mary Jane's voice cracked as she spoke, but she didn't dare glance to her daughter clinging to her waist. "Go see Mrs. Rose."

"Mama?" Rosemary whimpered as her grip around her mother's waist tightened.

"Go on, now," Mary Jane encouraged, trying desperately to keep her tone even and unaffected by Charles's demeaning presence.

Holding her breath, Mary Jane tried to stand tall, and prove to Charles he had no effect on her. The truth of the matter was, the man frightened her, even more so than that of her late husband. She could see the apple didn't fall far from the tree in that family.

"Yes," Charles hissed as his gaze dropped from Mary Jane to Rosemary. "You go on now and leave me with your mother. We have a few things we need to discuss."

Rosemary flashed Mary Jane an apprehensive gaze, wondering if it would be wise to leave her mother with such a man. Mary Jane nodded her head and flashed Rosemary a weary smile. Rosemary bobbed her little head and uncurled her arms from her mother's waist. The child stepped away and made a wide circle to ensure she couldn't be snagged by Charles as she scampered from the room.

"Smart child," Charles said as he stepped closer. Mary Jane moved back from him, hoping to keep at least an arm's length from him. The way he stared at her with such arrogance and malice made her blood run cold. Only when Rosemary was safely through the door and disappeared down the hallway did Mary Jane exhale.

"How dare you make such threats to me, to my daughter," Mary Jane growled. She had been through enough trauma and seeing Charles's eyes flicker with indignation emboldened her. It was one thing to threaten her, but to threaten her daughter... Mary Jane wasn't going to tolerate it any longer.

"I do not make idle threats," Charles said with a gleam to his eye. He stared her down, and somewhere in the back of Mary Jane's mind she felt the lashing of his words.

"What are you even doing here? This is a private event," Mary Jane said through gritted teeth. She had thought of calling for aid, but didn't want to

disturb the celebrations going on downstairs. Mary Jane's eyes shifted to the doorway as she thought of Theresa and Devlin's gathering. They'd come so far to get to this point and to disturb such a happy occasion would break Mary Jane's heart.

"From what I gathered, it's the party of the season," Charles said as he tilted his head. The way the fire light danced on his face caused Mary Jane's blood to run cold. "And I was hoping you'd be here."

"What do you want?" Mary Jane growled.

"Straight to the point," Charles said bemused. "It's come to my attention that my cousin willed you his house."

"What of it?" Mary Jane asked, trying to keep her wits about her.

"I believe you're under the impression you'll be retaining said lands, title, and money. I'm here to inform you, that such things are rightfully mine."

"Your cousin, my late husband, left them to me," Mary Jane announced boldly as she took note of her escape route. Her mind raced through every possible scenario and prepared to counter whatever move he made next.

Charles tapped his bony finger to his lips and shook his head. "It's amusing you think that you have any claim. The truth is, Duchess of Forrester, you have been deceived. And it is within my rights to claim the land as I have the title, now that my cousin is no longer with us. Of course, you could retain your title and the land, if... "

"What?" Mary Jane's eyes narrowed as her skin crawled. She wasn't sure if it was rage that bubbled within her, or fear.

"You were to marry me," he snickered. Mary Jane's mouth popped open as she stared at him with discontent and shock. The sinister smirk on his face grated on her and she quickly regained her composure.

"I would never," Mary Jane seethed as the anger bubbled and brewed within her.

"I don't think you're seeing this in the right light. From where I'm standing, you have no choice. That is, not unless you want to be thrown out, disgraced, and impoverished. By which, I must say would be fine with me. But I'm giving you a choice here."

"A choice? Ha," Mary Jane snorted as she stepped back from him.

"You may not see it now, but I'm doing you a great service here. I'm allowing you to maintain your title, providing you with a roof over your head, and let's not forget your daughter's as well."

Mary Jane's heart dropped as her blood ran cold. Her ears tingled and pricked as her mouth clamped shut. Despite her attempts to remain in control, Charles's words lashed her like a whip. Her thoughts were mangled as she contemplated her fate.

"I am thinking of my daughter," Mary Jane said through her clenched teeth. "And there's no possible reason for me to believe anything you're telling is true. My late husband left a will, one which undoubtedly proves I am exactly where I belong."

"You've misunderstood me," Charles snickered. "I will have his house and lands as it belongs to my family. I'm giving you a chance. Should you refuse, make no mistake Duchess of Forrester, I'll reclaim every blade of grass, stone and withhold every cent that my cousin left you should you refuse me."

"Get out," Mary Jane growled. "Now. I've had enough of your threats and your lies."

Charles arched his eyebrow as he lifted his head. Her hands trembled, giving away her fear. She balled them up quickly and glared daggers at him.

"Perhaps you just need time," he said as he ran his finger across the smooth surface of the table. "I see that my proposal has come unexpectedly. Three days, Your Grace. That is how long I'll wait for you to come to your senses. But may I suggest you think on this matter? I'd hate for anything unbecoming to befall on you or that lovely daughter of yours."

Mary Jane sucked in a deep breath, trying to steel her nerves. She was livid. How dare he come here, disturb the celebrations and demand her hand or risk being impoverished. Her heartbeat drummed in her ears as her mouth went dry. She wanted nothing more than to wipe the smirk off Charles' face, but the seed of doubt he planted in her mind sprang up. Was it possible he could get the house? Did he have the means to carry out his threats of leaving her with nothing?

Mary Jane didn't want to linger on such dreary thoughts. Although her late husband was cruel, she knew she at least had a roof over her head and was able to feed Rosemary. But if that was taken from her, where would she go? What would she do?

"Think on it," Charles said.

"You need to leave," Mary Jane said. "Now."

"Interesting turn of words," Charles said, moving in on her. "You see, my patience is limited, as is your time. In three days, if you dismiss my proposal, I'll see that it is you and not me who will be leaving."

Mary Jane's eyes narrowed as she watched Charles dip his head, turned on his heel and walked out of the room, taking the air with him. Nearly buckling under the pressure, Mary Jane stumbled back. Every nerve in her body tingled as she looked about the room trying to find something to focus on. Charles's words whipped about her head, and it felt as if she were standing in the middle of a torrential storm.

Her thoughts swirled violently around her as her legs grew weaker, threatening to give out from under her. Mary Jane stumbled to the desk and leaned against it for support as she tried to regain her breathing.

"This isn't possible," she mumbled to the empty room as the sounds of music and muffled laughter drifted into the room. She pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to keep her wits about her. Flustered, Mary Jane pushed off the table and rushed from the room. She moved swiftly down the hallway, ignoring the other guests Theresa and Devlin had invited to celebrate their renewing of vows. She kept her chin up, eyes ahead of her, ignoring the other guests as she passed them in the hallway. The last thing she wanted was to draw attention away from her friend by alarming the guests by her distress.

"Mary Jane? Is everything all right?"

The soft buttery voice tickled Mary Jane's ears and she whirled about to find Theresa standing in the doorway of the sitting room. Theresa's eyes were full of concern and stung Mary Jane like a hornet.

"You look positively distraught," Theresa said as she moved delicately over to Mary Jane and curled her arm around Mary Jane's shoulder. "Come sit before you collapse here in the hall."

"I don't know what to do," Mary Jane whispered. Mary Jane's mind scrambled to reconstruct her encounter with Charles, yet it all seemed too surreal. It was like she had dreamed the whole thing up.

"Hush now," Theresa said, guiding Mary Jane into the sitting room and placed her carefully on the plush sofa. Rain streamed down the windows like a gentle waterfall, catching Mary Jane's attention. It was the comforting image she needed to process Charles's threat.

"You look pale, have you had anything to eat?" Theresa asked.

"Yes," Mary Jane answered as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Where's Rosemary? Has something happened to her?" Theresa asked.

"She's in her room, and no, she's fine," Mary answered, shaking her head slowly as her attention remained locked on the streams of water rushing down the glass of the window.

"Are you coming down with something? Do I need to fetch a physician?"

Slowly, Mary glanced to her friend and confidant. "Charles Lebrand."

"Duke of Forrester?" Theresa asked as she slipped into the seat next to Mary Jane and proceeded to rub her back. "What on earth did he want?"

"He... he's threatened to take the house, the money, everything," Mary confessed. It was too much for her to bear. Just allowing the words to spill from her lips rocked her to her core. Tears pooled in her eyes and she dropped her head into her hands, letting the emotions overwhelm her.

"Surely you're mistaken," Theresa said, trying desperately to soothe Mary Jane.

"Oh, he made it quite clear," Mary whimpered. "He's offered his hand in marriage. If I refuse, he'll leave me destitute. I thought his cousin was awful, but this? How could anyone be so cruel?"

"It'll be all right," Theresa cooed, but Mary Jane could hear the tinge of doubt ringing through Theresa's voice. It rattled Mary Jane and started a new torrent of tears.

"No, it won't. I thought... I can't... What will become of my daughter?"

"You'll figure something out," Theresa said as she drew Mary Jane into her arms to comfort her. But there was no comfort to be had in her friend's embrace. Worry mounted within her, threatening to bury her in grief and

despair. "I'm sure it can't be all that bad."

"He said that he'd toss us both out if I refuse him," Mary Jane said as she felt an icy finger rake down her spine. Suddenly, she was aware they were no longer alone in the room. For a moment she thought he had returned to revel in her misery. As Mary Jane turned to glance over her shoulder, her chest tightened.

Standing in the doorway was Devlin. His eyes wide and worried. But it wasn't Theresa's husband that concerned her, it was Harrison Ritchie, leaning casually against the door post, eyebrow arched and stoic.

"What is going on in here?" Devlin asked as his footsteps echoed through the room. Theresa twisted in her place and let out a heavy sigh. "We heard someone crying in here."

Mary Jane swiftly wiped her fingers over her cheeks, hoping to erase all evidence of her tears. She cleared her throat and rolled her shoulders back.

"I need to go check on Rosemary, and I think I shall take her home now," Mary said, refusing to let her voice crack. Mustering every ounce of her strength, Mary Jane rose slowly. She took a moment to smooth out the wrinkles of her skirt and swallowed hard.

"It's so late though," Theresa said as she twisted in her seat. "We have more than enough room here, if you'd like to stay."

"No," Mary Jane said. "I need to go home. I don't want to damper your night more than what I already have."

Mary Jane noticed Devlin and Theresa sharing a look as she walked to the doorway. Harrison remained leaning against the threshold, his eyes tracking her as she moved.

Mary Jane arched her eyebrow and pursed her lips into a tight line. Without

saying a word to Harrison, she glared daggers at him. Deep down she knew if she said one word to the irritating, arrogant man before her, she'd unleash the fury of hell on him. It was bad enough she had to endure Charles's smug expression, but seeing a stoic Harrison leaning against the door frame, blocking her from leaving revealed and stirred her ire.

Harrison didn't budge. He glared at her as if she were nothing but an annoyance. Every muscle in her body tensed as she waited for the cruel words to pour out of Harrison's lips. It didn't surprise her one bit that Harrison was there. After the encounter she had, it made sense for Harrison to want to see her knocked down. Her anger brewed as Harrison remained in the doorway, blocking her escape.

"Are you going to move?" she snapped. Her lips trembled. She wasn't looking for another fight, but she wasn't about to be bowled over by the likes of Harrison Ritchie, the Earl of Lindburg.

Harrison propped himself off the door frame, giving her just enough room to slip by. Mary Jane rolled her shoulders back and narrowed her eyes as she passed by Harrison, daring him to say one word to her.

Stepping out into the hallway, she found herself once again able to breathe. Without looking back, she made a beeline for the playroom in hopes to find Rosemary. Rushing up the grand staircase, Mary Jane had only one thought racing through her mind. She had to see her daughter. She needed to encompass Rosemary in her embrace.

Seeing Rosemary with her nanny filled Mary Jane with both sorrow and relief. Her lips trembled as tears threatened her eyes. Sucking in a deep breath, she entered the room. Rosemary looked up from her doll.

"Mama?" Rosemary's voice was strained, but delicate.

"I'm here," Mary answered as she lowered herself to the floor and took her

child into her loving embrace.

"Who was that man?" Rosemary asked.

"No one you need to concern yourself with," Mary answered, running her fingers through Rosemary's locks.

"But... " Rosemary began, but Mary pressed a finger to Rosemary's bowed lips and shook her head.

"You trust me, don't you?" Mary asked. Rosemary's head bobbed as Mary Jane's gaze bore into her daughter's round face. Vengeance and rage mounted within her, and Mary knew there was no way she'd ever let Charles get his hands on the estate or her.

"I'm scared," Rosemary whimpered into Mary Jane's chest.

"Scared? Nonsense," Mary said, trying to squash the fears that she saw piling into her daughter's eyes. "I've raised you better than that, have I not? Pay no heed to that awful man. Or to the rumors that spread like wildfire."

"I heard him though. He said he was going to be my new father."

"I will never let that happen," Mary growled as she tried to plot and figure out some way not to be made into a liar. It was a promise she knew she had to keep. "Do you understand? Never. Now, gather your belongings. I'm taking you home."

CHAPTER 2



"Don't mind me," Harrison called to Mary Jane. A smirk played at the corner of his lips as he waited for her to turn. When she didn't even give him a sideways glance, he huffed. "Wonder what her problem is this time."

"Honestly, Harrison," Theresa scowled as she moved from her seat to Devlin and curled her arms around him. Harrison shifted his attention, wishing he had just stayed in the library instead of being lured into the drama that unfolded around him. "Do you always have to be so cross with her? She's had a bad enough day as it is."

"When isn't she having a bad day?" he mumbled more to himself as he strolled into the room and plopped down on the couch that was still warm.

"Do you have to be so crass?" Theresa scolded.

"I'm not crass, merely pointing out the obvious. We can all attest that the Duchess isn't one to suppress her emotions, the woman wears them on her sleeve, but I doubt anyone here can say we've seen her so distraught before. And if I'm being truthful, it is a bit dramatic don't you think, even for her?" Harrison said as he replayed seeing Mary Jane so distraught. It was a shocking sight, one he never thought he'd ever see. After all, his relationship with the woman was scorned and prickly to say the least. It was clear from

their first meeting the woman wanted nothing to do with him.

Of course, Harrison didn't mind, not when he had so many other admirers. But he couldn't help but wonder if that was the root cause for his disdain. Mary Jane never once showed him any sort of kind gesture, and yet, she was lovely. Even when the little v formed at the bridge of her nose when she expressed her irritation and directed her anger toward him.

Though Harrison had always thought of himself as a man of his own universe and unfazed by those around him, it struck him deeply to see Mary Jane so dramatic. Images of her pinkish cheeks and smoldering red eyes pierced him. He shifted his weight on the sofa, determined to put aside all thoughts of the woman. Yet, he couldn't. The way her eyes bore into him, as if she could read the pages of his soul and uncover the mysteries of his heart.

"Nonsense," he muttered as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"What was that?" Devlin asked. Harrison's body went rigid as he realized he'd spoken out of turn. "What's nonsense?"

"This whole matter," Harrison huffed. "I swear, the Duchess of Forrester is overly dramatic in everything she does. An attention seeker, if you will."

"You'll be kind to her," Theresa warned. Harrison laughed as he turned to face her.

"Is that so?" he countered. "By what account exactly am I required to do such a thing?"

"Mary Jane is my friend, and she needs help," Theresa explained with a grueling and menacing stare aimed directly at him. Harrison found it amusing that she thought he'd be so easily put in his place by the likes of her.

"Did I ever make a claim that the Duchess of Forrester was a friend of mine? I think not," Harrison said.

"I suppose it would make no difference to you what her affairs are," Theresa said as she stood straighter.

"All right now, the two of you need to calm down," Devlin stated as he guided Theresa to the sitting chair beside the fireplace. "Shall I get you a drink?"

"I'll take whiskey," Harrison chimed in, despite knowing Devlin's question was directed to his wife.

"What pitiful thing has the Duchess of Forrester fallen into now? Has another husband passed?"

"How can you be so cruel?" Theresa gasped. "The woman has been through enough in this life, far more than what you have, I'm sure."

"Oh, I highly doubt that," Harrison said, rolling his eyes as Devlin placed the glass of whiskey in his hand. "But do go on rambling, it's amusing to me you believe I would care."

With the attention now off of his outburst, Harrison leaned back in the chair sipping on the whiskey with the hopes of forgetting Mary Jane all together.

"The new Duke of Forrester is threatening to take everything from her," Theresa explained to Devlin as Harrison noticed the way Devlin doted on his wife. They were so at ease with each other that Harrison couldn't help but be reminded of his parents. It was as if for a brief moment he was sitting with them and watching how the love flowed between his mother and father.

"He wants to marry her." Theresa's voice dragged Harrison from his memory and he blinked the room back into existence. Looking around, he found Theresa's head nuzzled into Devlin's arm. It was as if Mary Jane's pain was Theresa's.

"Who cares if Charles wishes to marry her or not? Not every marriage is

lucky enough to have love as a component. Most of them are merely a matter of convenience and business," Harrison huffed as he wagged his empty cup at Devlin. The sour look on Devlin's face was unexpected. Rising, Harrison moved to the small table and quickly filled his cup.

"I swear, I thought there had been a death or some other tragic event by the way she looked," Harrison said as Mary Jane invaded his thoughts once more. He swallowed hard as he tried to figure out why he was allowing her free rent within his thoughts. She'd never crowded his mind before, in fact, he made it his life's mission never to let anyone linger for too long. Yet, he couldn't shake the image that seemed to burn into his mind.

"Devlin, perhaps you could talk some sense into your friend," Theresa said curtly. "It seems he lacks empathy and compassion."

"Two things, my lady, that is certain to bring a man to his knees if he were so inclined to indulge in those thoughts. Besides, why should I lose any sleep over what happens to the Duchess of Forrester?" Harrison swallowed the whiskey as his question egged at his consciousness.

What was it about seeing Mary Jane so broken that bothered him so much? Perhaps it was the fact she has always come off as such a strong individual, one who was always so in control of her emotions. She was after all a rational, logical person. It was the one trait that he admired about her. Yet, he had seen her broken and fragile. Her look was that of a desperate woman at her wits end.

Harrison had seen the look on many girls, all of whom he'd just released from his company. They looked distraught and devastated. And still, he never let their tears cut into him so deeply.

"Mary Jane and Rosemary don't need the new Duke pestering them," Theresa explained. "What they need is time to heal and to forget that she was ever

married to such a brute of a man. But with the Duke demanding her hand or have her thrown out onto the street, it's cruel."

And there it was, the reason for the nagging in his gut. Rosemary. The sweet little girl who was nothing more than a bystander in the charade of life. Harrison shifted his weight, as an uneasy feeling seeped throughout his being.

"I believe this conversation has grown weary," Harrison said and sat the empty glass down. He glanced to Devlin and Theresa, tugged at the hem of his jacket as if to make himself appear taller. "I think I'll take my leave."

"Get home safely," Devlin said, releasing his wife from his embrace to shake Harrison's hand.

"Yes, well, luckily for me, my horse knows the way," Harrison chuckled dryly. He moved swiftly out of the room as Theresa's and Devlin's voices faded from him. He glanced to the stairs as he walked to the door, wondering why everyone was so concerned for Mary Jane. After all, Harrison knew the woman could handle her own affairs. She was a strong individual with an even stronger personality. If she could handle her late husband, surely she'd be able to endure whatever the new Duke had to throw at her.

Resolved to let the matter pass, Harrison made his way home. He let his mind linger over his to-do list for the next day and even thought on who he'd have in his bed chamber when he got home. A part of him hoped that the lovely Anabelle would be there, snuggled between the furs on his bed. The thought excited him, and he drove his horse faster as his anticipation grew. Harrison knew there was only one way he'd be able to drive out the thoughts that flickered to his mind, and licked his lips as he relished the idea of bedding Anabelle.

"Back so soon?"

Harrison glanced over to find his grandmother shuffling toward him, a scowl

on her face as she glances around him.

"Good evening, Grandmother," Harrison said, walking past her without a second glance. There was only one place he wanted to be, and it certainly wasn't in the foyer with his grandmother.

"We need to talk, Harrison."

"No, we don't. I already am fully aware of the conversation you'd like to have with me, and I've exerted myself enough for one evening on futile babbling."

His grandmother slammed her walking stick down into the stone flooring. The crack sent a chill rushing through Harrison's body causing him to stop.

"You have but one duty to this family, produce an heir."

"I'd need a wife for that," Harrison chuckled wryly.

"Then find one." Her voice bounced off the stone walls of the manor. Harrison wondered if her shrill traveled to the servants' ears. "I'll not see my father's legacy diminished because of a spiteful child."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Harrison turned to face his grandmother. "And I'd burn this house to the ground and everything in it just to see you never get that wish. I don't know how many times I've told you this, I'll not give you what you want. I'll not be coerced into marriage, or into fatherhood."

"Stubborn as ever I see. I had hoped that your outing tonight would have been productive. But from what the servants have told me, I see you have more of your mother in you than you know what's good for you."

Harrison flexed his jaw as his irritation and annoyance with his grandmother grew within him. "Good night, Grandmother. And may I remind you, nothing you say to me will make me change my mind on the matter. You'll die and I'll

let my name die with me."

Harrison stormed up the steps as he tugged the cravat from his neck. There was only one thing he wanted, needed to turn the evening right again. Anabella's sultry eyes burned through him, driving him faster to his bed chambers. Disappointment -and a tiny bit of unexplained relief- flickered throughout his body as he stepped into his bed chambers.

The room was silent with only the soft crackling of the fire that burned in the room. Stripping, he slipped into his cold, empty bed and reminded himself not to let his imagination wander from him, especially when he wasn't certain of its outcome. He'd hoped that he'd find someone to occupy his bed and his dreams as he closed his eyes and there was.

Mary Jane.

The flush in her cheeks, her wild, fiery eyes haunted him. She looked so vulnerable and small despite her fierce gaze. Harrison's eyes popped open as he shot out of bed.

"That was unexpected."

He glanced about the room trying to force away all thoughts of her. Yet, no matter what he did, there she was like a thorn in his side, nagging and paining him with each twist and turn.

"This is getting out of hand," he grumbled as he pounded the pillow to fluff it up and slammed down into it. "She's not my concern."

Harrison squeezed his eyes shut. Little blimps of light speckled his vision as he tried to push aside all thoughts. Letting the tension ease out of his muscles, Harrison focused on his breathing.

It didn't take long for the sleep to come. He found himself not in bed asleep, but sitting in the library, rummaging through a book as Devlin muttered

incoherently to himself. The library was hazy. It was as if a cloud had settled in the room. A soft, delicate sound trickled into the room, catching Harrison's ear. He sat the book down and glanced at Devlin.

"Do you hear that?" Devlin asked, perking his ear to the doorway.

"No," Harrison lied, picking up his book again, trying to shut out the sound. He knew before he was even told what the sound was. It was all too familiar to him. Weeping. It was the sorrowful kind, the kind his heart made when his mother had passed.

"I'll be right back," Devlin said and rushed from the room. Irritated by his friend abandoning him, Harrison stood. The sound grew louder as he passed through the hallway. His chest tightened and his heart skipped. Instinctively, he knew exactly what he was going to find, but despite the fact he didn't want to see it, he was drawn to it.

"It's probably a servant finding out her lover is leaving," Harrison thought to himself. He stopped, dumbstruck at the sight in the sitting room. It wasn't a maid, servant, or mistress weeping, but Mary Jane. It was a sight he never in a million years expected to see. Her head was tilted, resting on Theresa's shoulder.

"This can't be right," Harrison said to himself as he perched against the door frame, taking in the scene. "Mary Jane isn't some weepy little girl. She's bold as brass, stubborn and opinionated. What could have possibly happened for her to weep in such a manner?"

"I don't understand how anyone could be so cruel," Mary whimpered.

I can.

"Yes, you know all too well, don't you boy?" Harrison whipped his head around to find his grandmother hunched over her cane, beady eyes gawking

at him through the dark circles that swallowed her eyes.

"No," Harrison gasped as he shot out of bed, sweat dripping from his brow. He sucked in quick breaths as the fire crackled and popped in the fireplace. Clutching his chest, he felt his rapidly beating heart drumming wildly. Images of his grandmother faded, but the red-eyed Mary Jane etched deeper into his mind, clouding every other aspect.

"This will not do," Harrison mumbled. "Best to lay this to bed right now."

Tossing the blankets off him, Harrison climbed off the bed and dressed quickly. He grabbed the candle by his bedside and stuck a match to light it. With the torch in hand, he made his way through the darkness and shadows. There was no telling what time it was, but he didn't care. He had to see her and to put to rest the nagging in his mind.

"I'll make her see there's nothing to fear," Harrison muttered as he made his way to the stable.

"Sir?" the stable boy shot up from his cot. Straw wove through the boy's ragged hair as he wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"I need a horse made ready, now," Harrison barked.

"What time is it?" the boy implored as he grew accustomed to the dim light from the candle.

"That doesn't matter, I must leave, now," Harrison said, rapping his foot impatiently for the boy to wake up enough to do as Harrison had ordered.

"I'll get right on that," the boy said as he sluggishly made his way to where the saddles were placed for storage.

"Oh for Heaven's sake," Harrison huffed. "Go back to sleep, I'll do it myself." Harrison scrambled to get the saddle in place and the bit into the horse's

mouth.

Harrison pushed the candle into the boy's hand and mounted the steed. Turning the horse about to face the stable doors, he nudged his head to the doors. The boy scrambled to get the doors opened them. As soon as Harrison saw an opening, he charged for it.

"I will have rest, one way or another," Harrison said as he charged through the foggy night on a mission to quell his tormented mind.

CHAPTER 3



*R*usty orange flames danced about the log, sending long dreary shadows flickering around the room. Mary Jane stared intently at the way they moved, so delicately, yet so dangerously. Her mind was a buzz and her body restless. Charles's steely eyes bore into her thoughts, plaguing her with doubt and uncertainty.

She glanced to the clock and watched as the pendulum swung in its glass cage. A part of her couldn't help but feel sorry for it. After all, she too knew what it was like to be trapped, unable to move. Mary hadn't given much thought about what would become of her after her husband passed. She believed she'd be with family, but when he left her the house and a bit of money, it was more than she could ask for. Yet, she knew it wasn't enough to sustain Rosemary's education.

Mary Jane let out a heavy sigh and strolled to the small table to pour herself a drink to steady her nerves. She swallowed hard, as she stared at the crystal glasses. They were a gift on her wedding night, and while she hadn't been much of a drinker while she was married, it seemed being widowed was far more stressful than she anticipated.

"Mama?" Rosemary's sweet voice drifted into the room, pulling Mary Jane from her thoughts. She turned around abruptly to find her daughter standing

in her nightgown clutching the worn out teddy bear with one arm.

"Rosemary, what are you doing up?" Mary Jane asked as she rushed to her daughter's side. "You should be in bed."

"I had a bad dream," Rosemary whispered as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry you had a bad dream. But I promise you, there's nothing to worry about," Mary said, hoisting her daughter up into her arms. Rosemary rested her head on Mary's shoulder. The child was heavy, but Mary didn't mind one bit. She missed the days when she could cuddle her daughter and savored every opportunity to do it again.

"Did you want to tell me about it?" Mary asked as she moved down the hallway with her daughter in her arms. The house was quiet save for a few of the servants still sulking about.

"No," Rosemary mumbled, nearly taken by sleep once more. Mary couldn't help but smile at how innocent her daughter was in this state. Her heart swelled as she brushed aside her long hair to see her plump little face and rosy cheeks.

"Tis all well, my dear," Mary Jane whispered as she brought Rosemary back into her room and laid her on the bed. Rosemary took no time in snuggling up into the pillows as Mary Jane pulled the covers up over her. "Rest and dream of sweet things. I'll see that no harm comes to you while you rest."

Mary Jane stood back and began humming an enchanting lullaby she had heard her nanny sing to her as a child. She rocked back and forth letting the delicate tune fill the room and waited until she heard her daughter's heavy breathing before she slipped out of the room.

Pressing her forehead to the door, Mary Jane gave a sharp sigh, allowing

herself just a moment of reprieve from the madness of her day. When she opened her eyes, her mind was made up. Although she didn't have a clue as to what she was going to do about Charles, she knew that time wasn't on her side. Three days wasn't enough time to make such a brass decision.

"Excuse me," one of the servants gasped as Mary Jane exited her daughter's chambers. She stopped and stared at the man kneeling down as if he was about to be whipped.

"Yes, Simeon, what is it?"

"Lord Lindburg is downstairs," Simeon mumbled. "I told him it was far too late to be calling, but he insisted."

"And where is he now?" Mary Jane seethed. Her lips tightened into a straight line as she tried not to take her anger out on the poor servant. After all, it wasn't his fault Harrison was rude and disregarded boundaries.

"The foyer, ma'am. I wouldn't let him up the steps," Simeon answered as he cowered. Mary Jane rested her hand on his shoulder and flashed him a brief smile.

"Thank you, but please inform Lord Lindburg that it is far too late to be having visitors. I'm not even dressed for the occasion," Mary Jane said, trying to keep her voice down. The last thing she wanted was for Rosemary to wake again. The poor child had experienced enough excitement for one day.

"Yes, ma'am." Simeon scurried down the hallway and rushed quietly down the steps. Curious, Mary Jane stepped the railing and peered down into the foyer. The open space was quiet with very little light save for the few candles Simeon must have lit for the late visitor.

"I don't care if she's indecent, it's not like I haven't seen such things before." Mary Jane gasped as Harrison's voice carried up to her level. "Now tell her

that I'm here, or I shall barge up those stairs and inform her myself."

"Will you please keep your voices down," Mary Jane scolded as she cleaved to her robe and hugged the shadows as she descended to the ground floor. "I have a daughter who's sleeping and I will not have you wake her up. Now, if you'd be so kind as to tell me what on God's green earth you are doing at my house this hour?"

"I must speak with you," Harrison said as his eyes shifted to Simeon with a hint of apprehension and annoyance.

"This is unheard of," Mary Jane said, letting her irritation seethe through her teeth. "If you have something to say, it can wait till morning."

"No, it can't," Harrison said as he reached out and snatched her arm. Mary Jane's eyes widened as Harrison pulled her to the hallway to the left.

"Unhand me," she scowled as she swatted at his fingers. The doors of the sitting room flew open and Harrison charged in as if he owned the place. "Why- I have never!"

"Yes, you have, we both know it," Harrison snapped.

Rage brewed with Mary Jane as she scowled at him. Her thoughts shifted to her late husband. Fear bubbled within her chest as Harrison pulled her into a quiet room. "Is that why you've come? To dole out due punishment? I'll have you tossed out of here so fast."

"No, you won't or you wouldn't have let me drag you in here," Harrison said as he slammed the doors shut, trapping her in the room with him. Her heart fluttered as she studied him. There was a sense of urgency about the way he moved, a wildness to his eyes that caught her off guard. Looking at him both amused her and terrified her.

"Have you come to mock me then?"

"What made you so upset earlier?" Harrison asked as he turned to face. The question was like a slap. Mary Jane's eyebrow arched.

"Why do you care? Are you drunk, is that why you're here at this hour? Go sober up at home and leave me be."

"No, you need to tell me what was wrong earlier."

"That sir, is none of your business." Mary Jane folded her arms over her chest and glared at him. She took deep breaths trying to steady herself at his intrusion.

"Theresa and Devlin mentioned how you are to be married to Charles, is that true?"

Mary Jane shook her head and dropped her shoulders. "Is that why you're here? To tease me? Torment me? Whatever the reason it matters not. I've dealt with far worse than anything you or anyone will ever throw at me. And if you think for one moment I'll marry that nasty man, you're dead wrong."

"It was my understanding that you would lose everything if you don't. But I gather you don't have any affection for Charles?"

"Why on earth would you ask me such a question? I barely know the man. And I'll not lose anything."

"Just answer the question," Harrison growled.

"No, alright, is that what you wanted to hear? I have no feelings for him or any other man. I've already dealt with one cruel husband in my life, and you can best believe I'm in no hurry to be putting myself in that situation again. But I doubt you could understand such a thing."

"What does that mean?" Harrison asked as he tilted his head and glared at Mary.

"I know all about you, sir. You're dead set on ensnaring women's hearts, but never their hands. Don't think for one minute that I don't know who or what you are."

"And what am I?" Harrison snapped as he stepped closer. Mary could feel the heat of his body crash against her, but she refused to be swayed or have her anger quelled by his rugged good looks.

"A rake," Mary hissed. "And there's only one reason a man such as yourself would ever visit a lady at this hour."

Harrison arched his eyebrow, his eyes smoldered as he stared down at her. "Ha. I wouldn't touch you even if I had wax coated gloves."

"Then leave," Mary said. "And go find someone else to harass at this time. I'm spent, Lord Lindburg. Completely wrecked by the events of the day, and you showing up here at this hour is just the topping to my night."

"Of course it is," he said with a glint in his eyes that only added fuel to Mary's ire. "You'll find that I just might be the answer to all your problems."

"You really are that conceited, aren't you? How could you possibly be the answer to my problems, you don't even know what ails me." Anger burned through her. She had heard enough through Theresa what kind of man Harrison was, and any other time, she would have enjoyed poking him. But she was tired.

"I know that you have three days or you'll be out on the streets. What I don't know are the terms to the conditions that were given to you."

Mary Jane pinched the bridge of her nose, fed up with Harrison's questioning.

"Are the terms which Charles gave you set?" Harrison asked again, his tone hardening.

"I don't know," she said with an exasperated huff.

"Then it's possible you could marry another?" Harrison asked.

"Have you not listened to a word I've said? Marriage is not an option for me. I'll not be subjugated to that way of life again. I'll not be..." Mary Jane paused and rolled her shoulders back as images of her previous marriage flickered through her mind. The pain, the torment, all of it came rushing back like a fever threatening to overtake her. She swallowed hard, narrowed her eyes to Harrison and shook her head.

"Married again," she continued as the word marriage clogged in her throat.

Harrison bobbed his head. "You and I both know what looms on the edges of your future if you turn him down."

Mary stumbled back and clutched to the side of the couch. Her fingers dug into the fabric. She wasn't sure if she would ever talk to Theresa again, not after betraying her in such a way. If Theresa was willing to blab her secrets to her worst enemy, then having her as a friend needed to stop right then and there.

"So, that's why you're here, to revel in my misery. Well, my Lord, I have three days to make my mind up and I'll not be bullied, harassed, or coerced into marrying that man."

"I figured you'd say something like that," Harrison said. The smirk on his face only fanned the flames to Mary's anger.

"Go home, Lord Lindburg and leave me be. I'll not stand here one more moment so that you can get your jollies off my duress."

"I'd never revel in another's misery," Harrison said causing Mary Jane to arch her eyebrow in suspicion. Harrison threw his hands up as she tried to dodge him and make a break for the doorway. He grabbed her arm and spun her

around until she was cornered in the room once again.

"Alright, maybe I would, if the occasion called for it," he said as Mary tried to make another break for the door. He matched her move for move. "But that's not why I'm here. What if I told you I can fix your problem?"

"You'd love that wouldn't you?" Mary Jane set her hands on her hips and glared at Harrison. "You'd just love to have me in your servitude, wouldn't you?"

Harrison's eyes narrowed and she hadn't noticed just how plump his lips were until they vanished into the thin line of frustration. Images of him finding out he was wrong at cards flickered through her mind briefly. He cleared his throat and the image vanished from her mind. A new rush of anger turned within her as she remembered why he was there.

"I'll not give you the satisfaction. I've heard of the kind of favors you ask, and I'll not be under your thumb." She darted for the door, trying to flee the room and the conversation only to have him block her path.

"You wouldn't owe me a favor, in fact, if you would just stay put for a moment and listen, you'll find out that this is as much for your benefit as it is for mine," he said, corralling her back from the door.

"Truly, Lord Lindburg you are a troubled man. Why on earth would you think I'd do anything for you? You're rude and conceited. You've only ever thought about yourself and how the world can bend over for you. I have a daughter to think of here and I'll not have her anywhere within ten feet of you." Mary Jane, darted to the left, trying once again for the doorway. It was as if she were five years old again, playing a game of tag. Only this time, it wasn't her intentions to be trapped in a room with a man she loathed.

"Mary Jane Higgins," Harrison's voice rose as she darted to the door and pulled it open. "I'm here to ask you to marry me."

Mary Jane stopped dead in her tracks. Her heart fluttered as his words rang through her ears like a bell. Never in her wildest thoughts did she expect such a phrase to escape from Harrison's lips.

"I beg your pardon?" Mary gasped as she turned to face him. Shocked and disarmed by his statement, she waited for an explanation. Harrison stepped closer to her, filling in the space between them and tilted his head. The smirk on his face stretched deviously as he folded his arms over his chest. He stood so close, that Mary Jane could feel his body heat crashing through her robe. She swallowed hard as the silence deafened her.

"You heard me," he said so low that she shivered from his seductive tone. "I've come to ask for your hand in marriage. And if you'd just try and not antagonize me for one moment, maybe you'll see how it will benefit you as well."

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Daphne Byrne

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A California girl born and raised, Daphne Byrne's ancestry holds from the gloomy English countryside, but she loves the sunny weather that California offers. She can often be found exploring the picturesque hills of nature with her hyperactive puppy dog named Freddie, daydreaming of ghosts of the past.

Hopped on a plane to London to study Creative Writing, Daphne put her imagination to the test. Countless efforts, friends, heartbreaks, tears and laughs, she returned back to California armed with a writing degree and an English husband, to live the rest of her life putting the stories in her head on paper.

Immerse yourself in her heartfelt romances, drawn from her memories of England. Let her take your hand and lead you to London of the 1800s, with wicked Lords and passionate Ladies, thunderous villains and happily ever afters that can only be found in...books.

