



Cobalt Fairy
PUBLISHING

A SINFUL
VIRGIN FOR THE
DUKE

DAPHNE BYRNE

A SINFUL VIRGIN FOR THE
DUKE

A STEAMY HISTORICAL
REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

VOWS OF SIN

BOOK FOUR



DAPHNE BYRNE



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ABOUT THE BOOK

“I am a spinster, trapped here with you. So go ahead. Ruin me, Your Grace.”

Duke Frederick wants nothing to do with society. So the last thing he needs is a feisty runaway knocking on his door during a storm.

Cast off to a convent by her own mother, Lady Gemma decides to escape—only to end up in the lair of a most fearsome Duke.

He wants her gone. She wants her freedom. Yet as the storm rages, a darker desire brews between them. Now, Frederick is determined to claim her... even if their passion can only last until the storm ends...

BEFORE YOU START READING...

Here is Frederick's prequel chapter, which will help you visualize the story in the book better.

Many of my readers have requested it and that's why I am giving it away for FREE! I know you'll love it!

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

Read **the beginning of his story** [here](#).



Just click on the image above! ↑

CHAPTER 1



ST. CATHERINE'S NUNNERY, ENGLAND- SCOTLAND BORDER

“*B*y the end of this, I hope you will have learned your lesson,” Sister Agnes said, her tone frosty. “I doubt you have been reading your prayer book as we have instructed you many, many times.”

Even though the rough stone bit at her flesh, Gemma Bradford remained on her knees. Her body ached from the rigid posture and the cold that seeped from the floor into her bones.

She was repentant, or so it seemed. It appeared as though she had accepted her punishment without complaint, but her heart was nowhere near acquiescence.

In the sixteen years she had been in the convent she had learned how to give the nuns what they demanded while hiding her real self in her heart.

Gemma had been reciting the *Adoro te Devote* prayer since half past dawn and it was now midday.

“*Jesu, quem velatum nunc aspicio, Oro, fiat illud quod tam sitio; Ut te revelata cernens facie, Visu sim beátus tuæ gloriæ. Amen.*” She took a breath and readied herself to repeat the prayer when Sister Agnes stopped her.

“That is enough for today,” the nun said, her expression stern with tight lines around her eyes that nearly made Gemma narrow her own reflexively. She did not trust the woman. Once upon a time, when she had been a naïve girl of seven she had, but not now.

“You may return to the dormitory to rest for now. You are excused from the remainder of the prayers until vespers,”

Sister Agnes fingered her rosary. “I hope you have learned your lesson and will not be making the same mistake again.”

Gemma bit her tongue.

It would not help her to ask Sister Agnes if forgetting a line in the Eucharistic Prayer, the longest prayer they had, was worthy of being punished for six hours *after* she had already attended matins in the middle of the night and lauds at sunrise.

“Yes, Sister Agnes,” she said, while carefully getting up from the stone floor. She was starved and exhausted and nearly swayed on her feet. She was eager to eat and rest.

“The time is ticking, Gemma,” the nun added. “It is about time you become a novice and begin your life in the order. You are old enough. Other girls have come here after you and are already postulants. You must choose.”

I would rather swim the channel to the continent.

“I don’t think—” she sucked in a breath. “—I don’t think I am ready yet.”

“You have said that for five years since the day you reached the age of majority.” Sister Agnes said. “You are three-and-twenty, Gemma. When are you going to accept that this is your home and your future? Accept your destiny or continue to resent being here. You have a choice; only you can make it.”

Once again, she bit her tongue.

“We have told you time and time again, forgiveness is the only way to heaven,” Sister Agnes said. “And so is piety. Your rebellious spirit is pulling you further and further away from His holy spirit. You have tried to run away twice before, despite knowing there is nothing out there for you and nowhere to go.”

“I was young and foolish,” Gemma replied.

And I would do it again.

“I can see why your mother left you with us,” Sister Agnes said. “You are a troubled one.”

All of the nuns were aware of how her mother, the widowed Countess Anna Bradford—now Anna Clarke, the Marchioness of Treston—had abandoned Gemma at the priory when she had been only seven years old, and it was certainly not because Gemma had been troubled. It was because her mother had resented her very existence almost as much as she hated her late father.

“Excuse me,” she hobbled out of the room and padded down the empty, austere corridors to the dormitories. The walls vibrated as the bells tolled for yet another Mass. Soon she would be able to hear the hymns.

As she made her way to the Great Hall—a rectangular building filled with long trestle tables, now empty—her stomach turned sour. Skirting the tables, she walked into the kitchen for her missed meal and made herself a bowl of warm stew and bread before returning to her room and stretching out on her cot in exhaustion.

All I seem to do these days is pray, but is God still listening? Despite my constant requests for rescue, I am still imprisoned in this priory.

She drifted off into a fitful sleep and awoke at the sounds of the three o’clock bells. She had been excused until the sunset prayer, which gave her time to wash, dress and put herself into a semblance of tidiness. As she splashed her face with freezing water from the washbasin, Gemma glumly reminded herself that endless days of the same dull and lifeless routine were all she had ahead of her.

Now dressed in a fresh tunic, she dropped to her cot’s edge and lifted the simple straw mattress to tug out a book. Last year, the Duchess of Islington had sent a parcel of books to the nunnery for the girls to enjoy.

Initially, the books were freely distributed, but once the nuns realized that the books promoted worldly themes such as greed, betrayal and romance they had swiftly taken them back.

Gemma had hidden away her copy of *One Thousand and One Nights* for weeks until the nuns had given up searching for it. It was now her only source of comfort.

“She comes, a torch in the shadows, and it is day; Her light more brightly lights the dawn. Suns leap from out her beauty and moons are born in the smiling of her eyes. Ah, that the veils of her mystery might be rent, and the folk of the world lie ravished at her feet,” she read aloud softly.

In her wildest dreams Gemma could barely imagine someone saying those words to her. In truth, she wanted less than love. She craved genuine affection, protection, and care. She wanted to exist in someone’s eyes and heart and not be treated by people like a rag that her mother had discarded.

Hiding the book once more, she got to her feet and glanced out of the narrow window that was set high in the wall. Gemma thought that the ancient masons who’d build the priory must have designed it so the women could not escape. The weak and gloomy sunlight matched her mood.

“Where do I go?” She heard someone call out. “The cart is laden!”

Attention piqued, she returned to the window, stood on her tiptoes and spotted a cart entering the courtyard. Its thick cover concealed a load of goods and fruits that the nuns could not grow themselves.

A madcap idea birthed abruptly in her mind. If there was any chance she could leave this wretched place she would take it. She was forgotten for now, excused, and could get several hours’ head start hidden in the back of such a cart. She grasped her cloak, the one she wore on cold wintery nights during mass, balled it up and snuck down the corridor.

Gemma glanced over her shoulder as she closed the chamber door behind her and peered down either side of the passageway.

With no one in sight and nothing stirring, Gemma gathered her skirts in both hands to ensure she made no sound and padded her way as silently as possible down the corridor.

She wound through the dim passageways of the convent, familiar with nearly every nook and cranny after years of living within its walls.

She kept her head down as two nuns, chatting with each other, passed her by. One of the nuns eyed her but she kept walking, making it appear as if she were late for mass. The punishment would be severe and cruel if she were to be caught yet again. She hesitated only briefly at the thought but the beckoning song of freedom, of a future far away from the stone walls of the convent, was too compelling for her to ignore.

Gemma shivered as she doubled back and headed to a side door that led into the inner courtyard. Despite the warm summer air that existed during the daytime, the nights were always unpleasantly chilly.

In a dark corner of the corridor that opened into the courtyard, Gemma quickly donned her cloak and tugged her cowl high around her neck. She laced her hood tightly to keep herself warm and to maintain her disguise. The door groaned softly as she pushed it and cracked open the large wooden barrier a fraction of the way. Although it had required a lot of her strength, it was now open just enough to allow her to slip through the thin space.

No one seemed to notice her as she turned her back to the cart that was being unpacked in the courtyard. She tried to blend into the shadows but watched the unloading out of the corner of her eye.

“Only the crates to the left,” the driver instructed the kitchen boys who were unloading the wares. “The rest are for another.”

As the driver excused himself to use the facilities and the boys finished unloading the crates, Gemma saw a window of opportunity present itself. With her heart lodged in her throat, she climbed into the cart and scurried to the back and under the cover within a few seconds, making sure the thick cloth hid her completely. The rattle of the cart was masked as the last of the crates were pulled from around her.

“Holy Father, please help me leave this place and find happiness,” she whispered, clutching at the small wooden cross that always hung around her neck. Her eyes were squeezed tightly as anxiousness and dread flowed through her.

The cart smelled musty and the boards were rough against her skin, but she would take it all if it meant getting away from St. Catherine's. The cart was preferable to the smell of dried blood, rotten food, and the cold muskiness of a cell floor.

It felt like an eternity had passed before the cart began to move, but when it did, her heart grew even tighter in her chest, as if it was a caged bird, desperate to slip through its bars.

When the cart began to descend the hill without anyone stopping to search it, Gemma finally took a breath and involuntarily uttered a sob of relief.

The bleakness of her future in that wretched, colorless place slowly faded into obscurity as the cart put distance between her and the nunnery. She dearly hoped that whatever lay ahead was much brighter than what she had left behind.

She just prayed that she could get away far enough and fast enough.

CHAPTER 2



“*W*hoa! Easy there,” the driver’s voice echoed as the cart rattled along.

Gemma’s muscles ached from the cramped position she had held for what had seemed like hours, nestled between sacks of grain and barrels of who-knows-what at the rear of the cart.

The air was musty and heavy, and the jostling of the wooden wheels over the bumpy road had shaken her body until she felt sore in places she didn’t know existed. However, despite the discomfort, the thrill of freedom hummed in her veins as the weight of the convent finally started to lift from her shoulders.

Gemma froze and her heart leaped into her throat as the cart slowed down. With careful, cautious movements, Gemma shifted just enough to peek through a tiny gap between two sacks. Her breath hitched as she caught sight of the sprawling estate that lay before her.

This was not the humble village that she had imagined. No, this was grand; a vast mansion of grey stone with towering windows that gleamed in the dying light of the afternoon sun. Rolling hills and manicured gardens stretched out around it like a scene from a fairy tale.

Where have I ended up?

But there was no time to dwell on that.

This will have to do.

As the cart came to a stop she watched as the driver climbed down from his seat. She knew she only had a few moments to

get out of the cart without being spotted.

Gemma's heart pounded in her ears as she gathered up her skirts and readied herself to move stealthily. With one quick breath she slipped from her hiding place, dropped down from the cart's edge and landed lightly on the gravel pathway. She winced as her bruised knees protested, but there was no time to falter.

Darting toward a tree, she moved as silently as she could manage, and hid behind the thick trunk.

Her gaze scanned the grand building for a point of entry.

"There!" she whispered as she spotted a narrow door at the side of the house that was partly concealed by a large hedge.

That is no doubt the servant's entrance.

She peeked from the side of the trunk, seeing that the supplier had his back to her, still unloading the goods he'd delivered to the estate.

This is my chance, she thought.

Wasting no more time, she ducked and scurried on quivering legs towards the servant's entrance, constantly checking behind her for the supplier. Thankfully, he was still unloading.

As she neared the door, it appeared that her luck would hold. A footman dressed in simple livery was slouched against the wall, fast asleep. He remained completely oblivious to her presence as his soft snores rose and fell in the quiet of the evening.

Perfect.

She glanced behind her one last time. The driver was returning to the front of the cart for some reason. She breathed a sigh of relief.

At last, she moved past the sleeping footman carefully, holding her breath as she grasped the handle and slipped inside.

The estate's interior was just as grand as its exterior. Gemma found herself in a narrow corridor, the scent of roasting meats and bread wafting towards her from somewhere nearby.

Her stomach rumbled in response. How long had it been since she had eaten properly? She could not remember, but knew she had no time at the moment to satisfy her hunger.

Stay focused, Gemma.

Voices echoed from further down the corridor. A quick glance revealed that several servants were busy scuttling about, carrying trays of food and drink, their movements hurried and purposeful.

Judging from their hushed conversations, there was some kind of event taking place; a dinner party, perhaps. Gemma's eyes widened. If the entire household was currently so preoccupied, it might give her the chance she needed to hide.

She crept along the shadowy edge of the corridor, keeping her footsteps as quiet as possible. Her breath came in shallow bursts as she prayed no one would notice her. She glanced around frantically for somewhere to hide and spotted a set of double doors that were standing slightly ajar at the end of the hall.

Without thinking, she slipped through them and gently pushed the doors closed behind her.

It's a library.

Gemma exhaled a soft sigh of relief, her eyes darting around the large room. Book-lined shelves covered nearly every inch of the library's walls and heavy velvet drapes blocked out most of the remaining light from the setting sun. A large fireplace sat cold and unlit at the far end of the room, and plush armchairs were scattered about, which added a sense of comfort to the otherwise formal space.

It was quiet, serene, and—most importantly—empty.

She crossed the room cautiously, her shoes sinking into the thick rug beneath her feet. Her mind raced, trying to make sense of everything.

What have I done? What must I do next?

She did not know where she was or to whom the estate belonged, but none of that mattered for the moment. She had

escaped St. Catherine's. She was finally *free*.

Free... and utterly terrified.

Gemma's heart sank as reality set in. She had no plan. No destination. No idea what she would do next. What if the people in this grand estate discovered her? What would they do with her? What if they sent her back to the convent? She could not go back. She *would not* go back.

She walked over to one of the armchairs and sat down gingerly, trying to think through her situation. She had not planned this far ahead; she hadn't imagined what she would happen after she had escaped.

I will just hide for a little while. I know that I will come up with a plan.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of approaching voices. Gemma's body became rigid as the conversation outside the library doors grew louder. Her eyes darted around the room as panic flooded her.

Before she could react, the door creaked open. Gemma's breath caught and she pressed herself into the armchair's backrest, hoping against hope that whoever entered would not notice her.

Two men walked into the room, deep in conversation. Their voices were low, but there was an unmistakable air of authority in them.

One, a tall man with dark hair and a severe expression, appeared to be leading the discussion, while the other—a shorter, somewhat pudgy man—nodded along enthusiastically.

"...and the Duke insists on keeping the matter quiet," the dark-haired man said as he strode over to the fireplace and lit a small fire in the grate. His voice was crisp and commanding. "He does not want the ton gossiping about it. You know how they can be."

The other man laughed, a short, nervous chuckle. "Indeed, indeed. Best to keep such things within the estate."

Gemma's heart leapt.

The Duke?

She was in a duke's estate? She swallowed hard, her mind racing.

What if this duke is cruel and callous, with no compassion for a stray woman hiding in his library?

The men continued their conversation, oblivious to her presence. Gemma slowly inched behind the armchair and tried to make herself as small as possible. The last thing she needed was to be discovered by these men, especially now, when her escape was so fresh.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the two men left the library, their voices fading down the hallway.

Gemma let out a shaky breath and leaned against the chair, her body trembling. She was safe for now, but how long could she hide in this majestic estate before someone found her?

Gemma crouched low in the shadows of the library, her breath shallow as she listened intently to another muffled conversation just outside the door. Her pulse raced and her muscles tensed in anticipation of being discovered. The heavy wood of the door functioned as a buffer, distorting the voices, but she could still make out snippets of their discussion.

"...the Duke will not tolerate any more delays," one of the voices remarked in a deep and commanding tone. "If these families desire his favor, they will have no choice but to send over their daughters. He has already turned away three prospective ladies this season alone."

A nervous laugh followed. "Can you blame them? Who would willingly offer their daughter up to marry *him*? The rumors alone would frighten any sensible girl into finding another match."

Gemma's heart thudded in her chest.

Who is this duke of whom they speak?

Gemma pressed herself against a desk behind her, its wooden edge biting into her shoulder blades as she strained to listen.

The voices continued, growing quieter as they moved further away from the corridor behind the door. She could only make out fragments of their conversation as they talked about the Duke's wealth, his dealings with powerful families, and the endless string of potential brides he had rejected.

"...the last one ran back to her father in tears after meeting him," the second man said, his tone filled with disdain. "Cannot say I blame her. They say he is cold, unfeeling, and insufferable. No one knows what he is looking for, but they are all desperate enough to try. The title, the wealth... to many of them it is worth the risk."

Their conversation slowly faded into silence, but the atmosphere of unease they had left behind lingered in Gemma's mind. She let out a slow, shaky breath, her heart still racing as she tried to make sense of what she had just heard.

A duke, here in this estate... cold and unfeeling, with desperate brides flocking to him? What kind of place have I stumbled into?

Gemma realized that she needed to leave the premises immediately. Hiding in the Duke's library was only a temporary solution. She needed to find somewhere safe, perhaps the stables or a shed on the grounds, anywhere that would offer her shelter for the night.

But the library... it was warm, comforting, and so much cozier than the cold, barren cell in which she had been confined for so long at the convent.

Her muscles ached from her journey and her body screamed for rest. Her eyes darted toward the low fire still burning in the large stone fireplace. The flames had dwindled to mere embers that cast a faint orange glow across the room.

It was so peaceful, so inviting.

Maybe I can just rest here for a short while. I will be careful. I will not remain here long, just enough to regain my strength.

Gemma crept noiselessly toward the fireplace. Her knees ached and her legs wobbled slightly as the exhaustion from her journey caught up with her.

She reached the hearth and sank into the chair that sat beside it, the cushions soft and welcoming beneath her. A wave of relief washed over her as the warmth of the fire seeped into her chilled skin.

For a moment she allowed herself not to think about the dangers lurking outside the door, the mysterious Duke, and the men who were plotting to marry off unwilling brides.

Here, in the stillness of the library, she could almost pretend that she was just another guest at the estate, resting after a long day.

Gemma reached for a book on the side table, its cover worn from years of use. She opened it and began to read by the faint light of the fire, her eyes scanning the delicate print. The words blurred together and although she tried to focus, her mind kept drifting back to the conversations she had overheard.

Gemma was too tired to dwell on it for long. Her body sagged more deeply into the chair as her eyelids grew heavy. She fought to stay awake by reminding herself that falling asleep would be unsafe. As she turned the pages of the book, the fire's warmth and the comfortable chair lulled her into a sense of peace she hadn't felt in years.

Just a little longer... just a few minutes more...

She reached for another book, her fingers trembling slightly from fatigue, and nestled it in her lap. She tried to immerse herself in the story, but the words swam before her tired eyes.

It had been so long since she'd had the luxury of reading for pleasure, of simply sitting in peace without fear of punishment.

Gemma allowed herself to dream for a moment and imagine a life beyond the convent, away from the constant dread of punishment. She imagined a life where she could be free to read, to explore and to live without the walls closing in around her.

Her thoughts were abruptly shattered by a deep, commanding voice that cut through the quiet of the library like a knife.

“Who are you, and what are you doing in here?”

Gemma jumped with shock, her heart leaping into her throat as she spun around in her chair. The book slipped from her lap and hit the floor with a soft thud.

Standing in the doorway was a tall and broad-shouldered man, his dark hair framing a face that was both striking and intimidating. His cold and piercing eyes bore into her with an intensity that made her breath catch.

He took a step forward, his expression unreadable as he scrutinized her with deep suspicion.

“I asked you a question. Who are you?”

Gemma’s pulse raced and she scrambled to her feet, instinctively backing away from the imposing figure. She tried to find the right words, any explanation that might save her from whatever wrath this man might unleash upon her.

“I—I am sorry,” she stammered, her voice barely a whisper. “I did not mean to—”

His gaze swept over her, taking in her disheveled appearance, the bruises on her knees and the exhaustion etched into her features. For a second, something like pity flickered in his eyes, but it was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

“You should not be here,” he said in a voice filled with disapproval. “This is the Duke’s library.”

Gemma swallowed hard, her throat dry.

What can I possibly say to save myself?

CHAPTER 3



BLACKRIDGE HALL, CUMBRIA

*Y*ou will pay for this, Grandmother,” Frederick Wyndham, the Duke of Blackridge, muttered under his breath. “Mark my words.”

Frederick glared at the person responsible for his current misery—his grandmother, the Dowager Duchess Vivian Wyndham.

She stood with perfect poise, smiling sweetly at the collection of guests as if she had not just orchestrated this elaborate charade to trap him into finding a wife. Her snowy hair was arranged in a neat, regal bun, and her gown was a touch too lavish for her age, but she was every bit the image of a noble matriarch.

“I am sure I do not understand what you mean, my boy,” she whispered back, unfazed by his dark mood, then turned back to the guests with a soft chuckle.

She raised her glass to one of the eligible young ladies, nodding in approval as the girl stammered through her conversation with an older gentleman beside her.

Frederick ground his teeth together, his fingers tightening into fists. He had expressly told his grandmother that he wanted no part of these matchmaking schemes, yet here he was again, surrounded by the most eligible ladies from across the north of England.

Conversation buzzed around him, ladies tittering behind fans, and gentlemen discussing matters of little interest to him.

His patience, thin as it was to begin with, was quickly unraveling.

“I thought I would find you here,” Andrew Gulliver, the Earl of Newfield, said to Frederick while approaching him. “Skulking in the shadows like a veritable gargoyle.”

Frederick stood against a wall in the ballroom and watched couples dance past him, his narrowed eyes skipping over every unmarried woman in the room. If it was not for the damned obligation of being part of the ton, of being a duke, he would have refused to open his doors to these fifty guests.

The past two hours following dinner had been excruciating. He had danced with nearly all the unattached women, debutantes, spinsters and widows alike, all of them marriage-minded, all of them irksome.

Whether it was the sound of their voices, their incessant chattiness, their beguiling fluttering lashes, or their evident wheedling to learn if he was looking for a bride, it all irritated him.

Frederick’s eyes swept the crowd once more. Despite the constant demands from the ton, from his friend and from his grandmother, he neither needed nor desired a wife.

“You must pass down the line.”

“The Dukedom cannot die.”

“You will be better off with a wife. She would steady you.”

“Leave me to it then,” Frederick scowled. “Don’t you need to get on with that plan you have up your sleeve to lure an innocent woman into your lair?” Snorting, Frederick sipped his whiskey, knowing light champagne would not be enough to settle his nerves.

“Me?” Andrew pressed a hand to his chest in mock chagrin. “Your unfounded accusation has hurt me, sir; you have wounded me deeply.”

He cocked a brow, “You are telling me that you have repented your rakish ways and are now a reformed man who has been

bitten by the matrimonial bug at last? Are you now marriage-minded?"

"*Marriage?*" Andrew choked out the word as though it was sour on his tongue. "Now you insult me even further. I know you have not been down my path, but a rake is as likely to change its ways as soon as a leopard can change its spots. However, I was about to ask you that same question. Have you not yet found your bride? One you can love and cherish until the end of eternity?"

"I think you have forgotten how ton marriages work," Frederick said dryly. "I do not need to fall in love with the woman. I just need her to be decent enough to sire me an heir."

Besides, I doubt that any gently bred woman would take to my tastes in the bedroom. It would send any virgin into a dead faint.

Frederick extracted himself from his shadowy corner and aimed to escape to the balcony, only to have his plan foiled as an older lady wearing a dark sage green gown and her greying blonde hair in a high chignon, nearly collided with him.

She stepped back, her eyes hardly opening as one would if it had been an unintentional collision. Frederick was tired of these games, and well-rehearsed tactics, but he could not call her out on it.

"Oh, I am so terribly sorry, Your Grace," she curtsied. "I hope I have not caused you to spill your drink."

"No, it is perfectly untouched," he said. "But thank you for your consideration, Miss..."

"I am certainly older than a miss, but I appreciate your compliment," the lady said. "I am Anna Clarke, Marchioness of Treston at your service."

Frederick inclined his head, hoping to escape the interaction before her daughter, niece or charge appeared "Pleased to make your acquaintance, my lady. Now, if you will excuse me—"

"Mama," a young woman came forward bearing two glasses of champagne.

Clad in a gown of white silk, he decidedly ignored how the glow of the candelabra slid over her décolletage, the neckline of the gown low enough to tease, but not low enough to be condemned for a debutante. “I have your drink.”

Frederick wondered dryly how long she had been waiting with those drinks in hand.

The girl was pretty as pretty went, with dark blonde hair, softly rounded cheeks tapered to a piquant little chin and big blue eyes.

“Oh,” she blinked at him. “I am so sorry, Your Grace.”

And now we begin to play the cat and mouse game, where I am the mouse.

“No harm done,” Frederick said, “And you are?”

“My daughter, Elizabeth Clarke,” the marchioness said proudly. “She just completed Dame Chandler’s Finishing School with outstanding marks.”

I wonder how far removed this is from parading the girl around the market like a cow, shouting, hear ye, hear ye, she is to be sold to the highest bidder. Cast your bids now.

“Ah, from what I heard that lady is a harsh taskmaster. My felicitations to you on leaving unscathed,” Frederick replied, lifting his glass. “I do hope you enjoy the evening but please, do excuse me.”

Without waiting a polite moment for her reply he walked away, leaving Andrew to jog after him. “That was very cold of you.”

“I would have been much colder if I was forced to endure inane chit-chat over the weather or, god forbid, cures for colic,” Frederick said.

“Wait,” Andrew halted, one brow lifted over his brown eye. “A lady spoke to you about *colic*?”

“Colic, cross stitching, the ingredients in turtle soup, the many variations of houndstooth, and why it is a cardinal sin to wear silk and satin together,” Frederick shuddered. “I understand

your need to be a rake, Andrew, all the pleasure and none of the pain of listening to such nonsensical chatter.”

The dance broke and as the women and men left the floor to obtain refreshments, Andrew said, “Is that your way of saying you wish to be inducted into the hall of the brotherhood of rakes?”

“I will tell you when I am ready to jump out of windows on threat of discovery,” Fredrick replied as he seated himself at the table.

Just as he contemplated excusing himself with some made-up errand, his grandmother let out a small yawn, only half-concealed behind her gloved hand. He shot her a glare.

“I need to check something with the staff,” he announced abruptly, pushing his chair back and rising to his full, towering height. The conversation at the table barely faltered as he left, but his sudden departure did not go unnoticed by the guests. Eyes followed him with curiosity, particularly those belonging to the young women who had been so eager to catch the Duke’s attention.

As Frederick made his way out of the room he was quickly joined by Andrew, whose eyes sparkled with amusement as he fell into step with the Duke.

“Checking something with the staff, hmm?” Andrew’s voice was laced with barely concealed laughter. “Quite the excuse, my friend.”

Frederick cast him a sidelong glance, his lips pressed into a thin line. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be? Like charming one of those women my grandmother lured here?”

Andrew chuckled. “Ah, but this is far more entertaining. Your face alone, Frederick, was worth the trip.” He gestured back toward the dining room with a flourish. “All those lovely ladies, and yet not one of them has managed to capture the great Duke’s attention.”

Frederick scowled, quickening his pace. “They are here because my grandmother forced them to come. This is not some game to me, Andrew.”

“Not a game?” Andrew quirked an eyebrow. “What do you call a room full of desperate ladies all vying for your favor? Sounds like a game to me.”

Frederick growled low in his throat. “These women are neither here for pleasure nor are they here because they want me. They have come here because they want the title. They want the Blackridge name and everything that comes along with it.”

Andrew shrugged, the casual movement making him look every bit the rake he was. “Well, you cannot deny that they are all quite beautiful. I am certain that more than one of them could be persuaded to...”

“Enough,” Frederick interrupted, rolling his eyes. “You know damn well I am not interested in your persuasion. This entire evening is a farce and I will not participate in it.”

Andrew sighed dramatically, shaking his head sadly and placing a heavy hand over his heart. “You are a difficult man to please, my friend. But if you insist on being unsociable, I suppose I can go back in there and distract the guests while you slink off to hide.”

“Thank you,” Frederick said dryly. “Do try not to embarrass me while you are at it.”

Andrew grinned. “With pleasure, my unsociable friend.” He gave a deep, exaggerated bow before turning back toward the dining room, leaving Frederick alone in the corridor.

Frederick allowed himself a long, annoyed exhale as he watched Andrew disappear through the door. He would finally have a moment of peace.

He made his way down the hall to the library, seeking the quiet solitude of the room that always managed to calm his frayed nerves.

The library had always been his sanctuary; a place where he could escape from the pressures of the world, and from people who wanted things from him—people like his grandmother and her endless parade of eligible women.

But the moment he pushed open the library door and stepped inside, he stopped dead in his tracks.

There, sitting in his favorite armchair by the fire, was a stranger—a young woman he had never seen before.

Her legs were curled beneath her and a book was opened on her lap as she read and basked in the soft glow of the fire's fading embers. She looked utterly at peace, as though she belonged there.

The firelight also revealed the disheveled state of her clothes, the bruises on both of her knees and the smudges of dirt on her face.

Frederick's eyes narrowed as his mind quickly shifted from surprise to suspicion. How had this woman come to be in his library? Who was she? And, more importantly, what was she doing here, alone, in his private sanctuary?

He quietly shut the door behind him and took a few measured steps toward her, his boots tapping softly on the hardwood floor.

The woman didn't notice him at first, her attention entirely absorbed by the book in her hands.

"Who are you," Frederick asked, his voice low and commanding, "and what are you doing here?"

The woman jumped at the sound of his voice, her head snapping up to meet his gaze. Her wide, startled eyes locked onto his own and for a brief moment neither of them moved. The book she had been holding slipped from her hands and fell to the floor with a soft thud, the noise echoing in the quiet room.

"I—I am sorry" she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper. "I did not mean to—"

He did not yet need her to explain herself. He wanted an answer to his question.

He took another step forward, his gaze sharp and unwavering as he studied her more closely.

She was young, perhaps in her early twenties, with chocolate brown hair, delicate features and an air of exhaustion clinging to her like a second skin.

Her simple clothes were torn and stained and there were dark smudges of dirt on her knuckles and the palms of her hands. Her knees were bruised as though she had fallen or been forced to remain on her knees for a duration. She appeared to have recently endured a difficult journey.

“You should not be here,” Frederick said, his voice low and clipped. “This is a private estate, and this is the Duke’s library.”

“I—” she swallowed hard, her eyes darting toward the door as if considering an escape. “I did not mean to intrude. I—I just needed—”

Frederick crossed his arms and glared at the woman in his chair. “I demand an explanation.”

CHAPTER 4



Gemma's heart pounded as she looked up at the tall man who had entered the library.

His imposing figure, broad shoulders and stern features made her feel small and suffocated. She had been caught—and by someone who clearly didn't take kindly to trespassers. But she couldn't let him know she was nothing more than a runaway hiding in his home.

Summoning all the arrogance she could muster, she straightened herself up in the chair and raised her chin.

“How dare you barge in here without knocking!” she snapped. “I am a guest in this house, and I demand that you treat me with respect.”

The man raised an eyebrow, clearly taken aback by her tone, but the flicker of amusement in his eyes made Gemma's pulse quicken. He stepped closer, his footsteps now heavy against the wooden floor, and she realized just how charged the room had suddenly become with his presence.

“A guest?” His voice was deep and smooth with a hint of mockery. He again crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at her with an expression that bordered on entertained disbelief. “And what kind of guest sneaks into the master's private library without his express invitation?”

Gemma's stomach clenched. Master's library? This was not going to be as easy as she thought, but she could not falter now, not when she had already committed herself to the lie.

“Well,” she said, feigning haughtiness, “perhaps if the servants had been more attentive, I wouldn’t have had to find my own way.”

His lips twitched as if they were suppressing a smile. “I see,” he said, his tone laced with amusement. “And how exactly did you... find your way onto the estate?”

Gemma hesitated for a fraction of a second, but quickly regained her composure. “I arrived with one of the other guests,” she said airily, brushing invisible dust from her skirts. “I expect your staff failed to inform you of my arrival. I shall have a word with the host about that.”

The man took another step toward her, closing the distance between them. His dark eyes never left hers, and though she tried to maintain her bravado, something about his presence made her feel unsettled.

He leaned forward slightly, his gaze intense.

“I would love to know who, exactly, invited you,” he said, his voice low and dangerous. “Because I am certain I would remember if the Duke had extended an invitation to such a... memorable guest.” His hand moved up and down in front of her in silent criticism of her attire and appearance.

Gemma’s breath caught in her throat, but she forced herself to keep up the charade. She couldn’t let him see the panic rising inside her. She had to bluff her way through this.

“Lady Margaret Cartwright,” she lied, the name rolling off her tongue with practiced ease. “Daughter of the Viscount of Kentbridge.”

The man raised an eyebrow again, the hint of a smirk playing at the corners of his lips.

“Lady Margaret Cartwright?” he repeated, his voice dripping with skepticism. “How interesting. The Viscount of Kentbridge has a daughter?”

Gemma blinked, her mind scrambling for a response. “He does,” she stammered, trying to recover. “I have recently returned from abroad.”

“Is that so?” The man’s eyes gleamed with mirth as he took a step closer, now towering over her. “And tell me, Miss Cartwright, what brings you to this part of the country? It is rare for the daughter of a Viscount to travel alone, especially to an estate such as this.”

Gemma’s pulse quickened. She could feel the trap tightening around her, but she refused to back down.

“I...was invited, of course,” she said, her voice wavering slightly. “By... the Duke himself.”

The man chuckled softly, a deep, rich sound that sent a shiver down her spine. “The *Duke* invited you, did he?”

“Yes,” she said, her chin lifting defiantly. “I have a personal connection with him. He and my father are close friends.”

He tilted his head, his gaze studying her with an unsettling intensity. “And yet, I find it curious that you are hiding in here. An eligible young woman, dressed in rags, pretending to read a book... Tell me, Miss Cartwright, why is that?”

Gemma gulped. The lie was unraveling faster than she could weave it back together, and the man’s piercing gaze was making it impossible for her to think straight.

She was about to respond when the door to the library creaked open and a servant stepped inside, bowing deeply.

“Your Grace,” the servant said, his voice trembling slightly, “I apologize for interrupting, but I was sent to inform you that the dinner party continues, and the Dowager Duchess is asking after you.”

Your Grace?

Gemma’s blood ran cold and she thought she would faint.

She turned slowly, her eyes widening in horror as the realization hit her like a blow to the chest.

I have just insulted and lied to the Duke of Blackridge, the very Duke who owns the estate onto which I have trespassed.

The Duke looked down at her blankly though his eyes gleamed with satisfaction at exposing her lies.

“Thank you,” he said to the servant, his voice calm and measured. “Inform the guests that I have been called away on urgent business. The dinner party is over.”

The servant bowed again and left the room, closing the door behind him. The silence that followed was deafening.

Gemma sat frozen in the chair, her heart pounding in her chest. She had just tried to deceive the Duke of Blackridge himself—one of the most powerful men in the country—and now he was standing in front of her, fully aware of her attempts to deceive him.

The Duke’s eyes never left hers as he leaned forward, his face now merely inches away from hers.

“So,” he said softly, “Miss Cartwright. You claim that your father and I are close friends, but I have never heard of you.”

Gemma’s pulse raced and her hands grew sweaty as she tried to think of a way out of the situation, but no words or ideas sprang to her mind.

The Duke was too close, his presence overwhelming, his scent intoxicating. She could feel the heat radiating from his body and her mind betrayed her for a fleeting moment by wondering what it would be like to have him even closer.

“You,” she managed to choke out, “you should have told me who you were!”

The Duke raised an eyebrow and his lips curled into a half-smile. “And you should have told me who you were, Miss Margaret Cartwright,” he said, the sarcasm in his voice unmistakable.

She bristled, embarrassment and frustration rising within her. “I did not think it was necessary to reveal my true identity to the man who barged in here without so much as an introduction!”

He chuckled softly, his dark eyes gleaming with amusement. “You are in *my* home, sitting in *my* chair, by *my* fireplace,” he said, his voice dangerously low. “If anyone here has failed to introduce themselves, it is *you*, my dear intruder.”

Gemma's hands clenched into fists at her sides, her defiance warring with her overwhelming attraction to this man.

She couldn't let him have the upper hand, not when she had already lost so much.

"You may be the Duke," she said, her voice shaking with anger, "but that does not grant you the right to interrogate me as though I were nothing more than a common criminal."

He leaned forward until his lips were less than an inch away from hers, and Gemma's breath hitched audibly in her throat. The air between them crackled with tension, and for an instant she thought he intended to kiss her. It was an insane, impossible thought, given the circumstances, but one she couldn't shake.

"You are not a criminal, Miss Cartwright," he murmured, his voice sending a shiver down her spine. "But you are, most certainly, no guest of mine."

Just as the space between them began to disappear, the door to the library flew open and a regal figure swept into the room.

"Frederick!" The Dowager Duchess' voice was sharp, her eyes narrowing at her grandson. "What on earth do you think you are doing, ending the dinner party so abruptly?"

Gemma jumped in her seat, her heart pounding as she realized how close she and the Duke had been.

Frederick.

So, that was his name.



Frederick gritted his teeth and stepped away from the stranger as the sudden interruption cut through the charged air between them.

He straightened his posture and turned to face the Dowager Duchess, who stood in the doorway, her sharp eyes darting from him to the woman he had cornered.

She raised a perfectly arched brow, her gaze lingering on the young woman in a way that made Frederick's irritation flare

even more.

“And who is this?” his grandmother asked, her voice laced with amusement and a hint of curiosity.

“This—” Frederick began in a tight voice with a vague wave towards Gemma “is an intruder.”

The Dowager’s eyes sparkled, though she remained composed. “An intruder?” she repeated, glancing back at the woman with renewed interest. “How intriguing. It is not often we get uninvited guests here at Blackridge.”

Frederick shot his grandmother a look, annoyed by her amusement in the face of such a serious matter.

“She has somehow found her way onto the estate,” he said, his tone as hard as stone. “And now she is going to be escorted from the premises.”

He turned sharply toward the stranger, his eyes narrowing. “You need to leave. *Now.*”

The defiant glimmer in the unknown woman’s eyes faltered, and for the first time, Frederick saw the panic setting in. Her posture stiffened and her earlier bravado vanished, replaced by something far more vulnerable.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out at first. Then, her voice broke through the silence, trembling and desperate.

“Please,” she said, her eyes wide and filled with fear. “I have nowhere to go.”

Frederick frowned, unmoved by her plea. “That is not my concern. You have trespassed in my home—”

“I promise that I will not cause you any trouble,” she pleaded, her voice adopting a frantic edge. “I—I will leave in the morning. Just—just let me stay the night. Please.”

His irritation deepened. He was not accustomed to being interrupted, especially by someone who had the audacity to break into his home.

His gaze hardened and he opened his mouth to dismiss her again, but something in her expression stopped him cold.

He could see her genuine fear at the possibility of being turned out into the night, cold, alone and vulnerable. It gnawed at the edge of his resolve and caused him to hesitate.

“I cannot go out there tonight,” the woman continued, her voice breaking slightly as she gestured toward the windows, where the dark night pressed against the glass. “It is so very dark out. I am not asking you for much. Just a few hours... until the dawn breaks.”

Frederick’s jaw worked as his frustration mounted. He didn’t know what game this woman was playing, but her desperation seemed real. Still, he had no intention of letting her manipulate him, no matter how pitiful she looked.

“Frederick,” came his grandmother’s soft voice, breaking into his thoughts.

He turned to see her stepping forward, her eyes now more thoughtful than amused. She studied the intruder carefully, her lips pursed in consideration. There was a calculating glint in her eyes that told Frederick she was far from indifferent to the situation.

“The girl is clearly in distress,” the Dowager said, her tone gentle but firm. “It would be unkind to send her out into the night, especially without knowing the full story.”

Frederick’s gaze darkened. “I do not care a whit about her story. She does not belong here.”

The Dowager’s lips curled slightly and Frederick could see she was gearing up to challenge him in her own way. “I understand your frustration, but you are being rather harsh, do you not think? Look at her—she is clearly frightened. Surely we can offer her a bit of shelter, just until the morning.”

Frederick stared at his grandmother, his hands balling into fists at his sides.

“You are interfering as usual,” he hissed through gritted teeth.

His grandmother gave him a pointed look. “Oh, perhaps I have meddled enough tonight, have I not?” Her voice held a playful hint of regret. “I should have told you about the dinner party, but—”

“That is a gross understatement,” Frederick snapped, glaring at her.

His irritation toward his grandmother’s unsanctioned dinner party, the unwanted guests roaming his estate, and now this intruder standing in his library, simmered within him.

“None of this would have happened if you had told me what was going on in my own house,” he added.

His grandmother sighed, her amusement fading as she softened her tone. “Be that as it may, this girl does not deserve your ire, Frederick. Look at her—she is clearly desperate, and there is more to this than meets the eye. Why not give her the benefit of the doubt, at least for tonight?”

Frederick scowled, turning his attention back to the woman, who stood trembling slightly, her hands gripping the back of the armchair for support.

Her earlier arrogance had crumbled, leaving behind only fear and uncertainty in its wake.

“I promise I will... I will—oh!” she began to say, but she swayed on her feet, her breath quickening.

“Are you all right, dear?” his grandmother asked.

“I—”

Before Frederick could react, she let out a soft gasp and collapsed.

“Good heavens!” the Dowager exclaimed, rushing forward.

Frederick moved quickly, catching the woman before she hit the floor. Her body was limp in his arms and her face was ashen. He knelt, and lowered her gently onto the rug, his pulse quickening with frustration and something else he didn’t care to examine.

“Is she all right?” she asked, her voice tinged with genuine concern.

Frederick checked her pulse, finding it steady but weak.

“She has fainted,” he muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

Vivian stood beside him, brushing a hand over Gemma’s forehead with surprising tenderness. “Poor thing. She must be exhausted. We cannot possibly throw her out now.”

Frederick bit back a retort, his mind whirling. He had intended to have this woman escorted off his property immediately, but now she lay unconscious in his arms, and his grandmother was looking at him with reproach and expectation.

He carried her towards the chaise longue nearby and lowered her on the sofa cushions gently, making sure to put a pillow behind her head to keep it elevated.

“This is absurd,” Frederick muttered as he was crouched over the unconscious woman.

Then, he rose to his feet and stepped away from her.

He ran a hand through his hair, glaring at the situation as though it was a personal affront.

His grandmother stood as well and gave him a look that was half-amused, half-serious.

“I know you dislike complications, Frederick, but this girl needs help. Send her out now, and who knows what will become of her? Let her stay the night. You will learn more about who she is in the morning. Perhaps she has quite an interesting story to tell.”

Frederick shot his grandmother a withering look. “You think this is some kind of game, do you?”

Her lips twitched. “Life often is.”

Frederick let out an exasperated breath, knowing he had lost the battle. He couldn’t, in good conscience, turn a woman out into the night when she was in such a state, no matter how much she irritated him.

“Fine,” he said, his voice taut with annoyance. “She stays. But only for tonight.”

Her eyes sparkled with satisfaction, though she merely nodded. “Thank you, dear. I will see to it that she causes no trouble.”

Frederick turned sharply to one of the nearby servants who had entered the room at his earlier call.

“Prepare a guest room,” he ordered, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Make sure she is comfortable but remember—this is a temporary arrangement. She will leave in the morning.”

The servant nodded and hurried off to fulfill the command.

Frederick glanced back at Gemma, now lying unconscious at his feet, and shook his head. How had this evening gone so utterly off course? He was used to being in control and matters running smoothly under his command. But this woman—this mysterious, infuriating woman—had turned everything upside down.

As he looked down at her pale face, a strange mix of frustration and curiosity gnawed at him.

Who was she?

CHAPTER 5



“Where am I?” Gemma whispered to herself.

She’d woken up stiff but warm. Now, she looked around the simple but comfortable room.

The walls were pale grey-on-grey damask and a rich navy Aubusson rug graced the floor. Turning her face, she pressed her nose into the clean, crisp linen sheets of the heavy bed.

Moving, she felt bandages looping across her back where the nuns had flagellated her with whips. She felt clean, her hair felt washed and even the dirt under her fingernails was gone.

“Have they bathed me?” she wondered, sitting up.

The shabby shift she had worn under her cloak had been replaced with a luminous blue nightgown. Whoever had brought her here had taken loving care of her. She could not be more grateful or more scared.

“You are awake, I see,” a woman entered the bedroom, her diminutive figure dressed in a heavy brown velvet. A pair of bright blue eyes latched onto Gemma.

The lady’s face was powdered and spidery fingers clutched a cane, as her brows inched upwards toward her fringed, beige turban.

“How are you, my dear? My name is Vivian Wyndham. I am Frederick’s grandmother, and I have come to see how you are faring.”

Gemma's throat constricted and she clutched the bed sheets tightly, incapable of uttering a word. The lady smiled sympathetically as she folded her skirts and sat down in an armchair beside the bed.

"You are mute then?" the lady said. "Matters to me not, my dear. What does matter is firstly making sure you are healed and then determining a way to return you to wherever you came from, and—"

"No! Please!" The agonized cry came out without forethought. "Please, Your Grace. I implore you, do not send me back there. I...I cannot go back there. If you do, they will never, ever, let me see the light of day again. Please! Please. I will do anything!"

The lady was unflappable. "You need not do a thing, my child. Doctor Somerson has documented your injuries and from what I am told, they are quite grievous. Where did you come from, dear? Who hurt you so terribly?"

Gemma dropped her head, afraid that whatever she said—if she said it—would not be well received. An unspoken culture of compliance existed within the convent. The silence of the severely abused girls guaranteed that no one would know about the torture that took place within its walls. Therefore, nothing was ever done about it.

Maybe it is time to change that.

Gemma lifted her head and swallowed nervously. "St. Catherine's Convent, my lady."

"Pardon?" the lady leaned in. "You whispered that dear and my hearing is not as it used to be."

She cleared her throat, "I said, St Cath—" The door pushed open, and a man entered, the same one from last night. "—erine's Convent, ma'am."

"What?"

The man's thunderous expression caused Gemma to spring backwards and strike her back on the headboard in fear. He slowly moved towards her, his gait like a panther's as it stalked a rabbit.

“What did you say?”

“Frederick, for heaven’s sake, you are scaring the poor girl to death,” the lady chided him. “Give her a moment to breathe so you don’t send her to an early grave.”

Pressed against the cold board, she noted the taut ridges of muscle that strained against his tailored waistcoat and trousers. The morning light cast shadows over the sculpted angles of his face. He had rescued her last night, so surely he was a good man.

“I am sorry,” he said more calmly. “But did you say St. Catherine’s?”

“Yes,” she took in a breath, “Yes, my lord.”

“He is the Duke of Blackridge, my dear,” the lady said kindly. “You are in his house.”

Her mouth parted. “I am so sorry, Your Grace...” she made to get off the bed to curtsy, but he stopped her.

“You are injured. Stay where you are,” he said, his left hand held up. “How did you get here? We are many miles away from that horrid place.”

Looking at her lap, she said. “A cart with goods came into the convent and I took the chance to sneak inside. I...I cannot abide that place, Your Grace. It is—it is not... a place one could ever call a home.”

The Duke folded his arms and rested his back against the wall, his face set in stone, and the muscles of his neck corded with tension. The proximity of his tall, muscled form set loose a swarm of butterflies in her belly... of another kind. The thin line of the watch chain’s gold links contrasted with the indigo color of his waistcoat but matched the gold buttons going down to his buff trousers.

“Doctor Somerson made sure to give me a detailed report of your injuries,” he said. “You are hurt. Now that you have told me where you came from, the hounds of hell would have to drag me away before I let you return to that wretched hellhole. You may remain here longer, Miss...”

His pause was noted. “Gemma. My name is Gemma Bradford, Your Grace.”

“You are welcome to stay, Miss Bradford,” he said, combing his hair from his eyes, “As a matter of fact, you may have given me more than you realize.”

Her brows knitted in the middle. “What do you mean?”

Instead of looking at her, he looked to the lady, “Stay with her. I need to reopen that file and now, after all these years, I finally have good reason.” This time he did look at her, “Miss Bradford, the punishments you suffered. Are they commonplace at that convent?”

She nodded. “Yes, but they are primarily inflicted upon the girls who do not align themselves to the ideology they force down our throats. They brand us rebellious, and the nuns do not like anyone who questions their authority.”

“Frederick,” the Dowager said in a warning tone.

He looked at Vivian and his shoulders slumped an inch. Gemma marveled as she watched the two of them engage in a wordless conversation, at the end of which the Duke sighed.

“I am getting ahead of myself. This can wait.”

“I must admit,” his grandmother said, “it is refreshing *not* having someone bend over backward to curry favor with a lady whose grandson is one of the most powerful people in the land. If I asked, he would have ten thousand men storming Normandy for their Calvados.”

The Duke’s lips twitched, “You would not.”

“I would,” she said. “I would like some for dinner tonight, as a matter of fact. Please send for your men.”

Despite her present circumstances, Gemma giggled, humored by the light-hearted banter between the two.

“Luckily, we have some in the winery,” Frederick replied, before turning to Gemma. “Have you eaten?”

“Not yet, Your Grace,” she told him.

“I will have something light sent up,” he said. “Grandmother?”

Vivian sighed and rose to stand. “Fine, fine, I will take my leave. Take care my dear and get some rest. You certainly deserve it.”



Frederick had to temper his step to stop him from running to his study and yanking out the old file that stated, to the letter, the injuries his sister Helen had suffered. He wanted—needed to—compare the two reports from both doctors and see where they overlapped.

If this was his chance to get those nuns and have that horrid priory shut down, he would take it.

He poured himself a glass of Tobermory whiskey, then opened both folios; the old one about his sister that he had memorized, and the new folio that detailed Doctor Somerson’s findings in respect of Gemma’s injuries. Frederick grimaced at the seamless similarities in their injuries.

The timing is right. I can feel it. She did not end up here by accident.

Frederick was not a man who believed in fate, but he could not deny that Gemma’s sudden appearance felt like it had been a deliberate nudge to advance his pursuit and obtain justice for Helen, and now Gemma. He would not let this go unpunished.

His grandmother pushed the door open gently and entered the room.

“I know that face,” she said as she closed the door behind her. He thought she had retired to her room after such a draining morning. “You have convinced yourself that she is your push to get that place reduced to rubble, but I ask you to wait a while before you send your missive off to the archbishop.”

“Why?” His brows met in the middle.

She settled into the chair across from him, set her cane to one side and folded her thin fingers on the table. “I do not want you to use Miss Bradford as if she were a tool to further your cause. I know you still harbor deep resentment towards those nuns at St Catherine’s. I am also aware that the pain of losing

Helen remains a burden upon your heart, but this time, see Miss Bradford as a human instead of a vehicle for your fury.”

Dropping his pen, he rubbed his eyes. “I do not wish to lose this chance, Grandmother. For all I know, she might be the only person with the proof I need to get them investigated and shut down.”

“I know, my boy,” her eyes held sympathy. “But Miss Bradford is not the first, and she is unlikely to be the last. I want you to give it time, Frederick.”

His eyes dropped to the folios on his table and to the comparison he had written up; with Miss Bradford’s testimony he would finally be able to get somewhere with his long-standing mission.

Leaning forward, he dropped his elbows on the table, his eyes lodged on the papers. “How long do you suggest that I wait?”

“A month or two,” she replied. “Nothing will return Helen to us, Frederick, but healing this poor girl might assuage some of the hurt in your heart. I know most of the pain comes from the frustration you feel that you were not able to help Helen. This time, you do that with Gemma.”

“No, absolutely not. I am not waiting.”

“Are you that vengeful?”

“Have you forgotten what they did to Helen?”

“Frederick...”

“NO!” he boomed, standing now. “Absolutely not. I have a witness, a victim, and I have the necessary power and influence. I will destroy them for destroying her!”

He was furious, his heart pounding loudly in his ears as he looked into his grandmother’s wide blue eyes. She was afraid for him. He could also see the hurt and pity that lingered in her unshed tears. Her stern look and folded arms were enough to make him pause and reconsider.

He slumped into his chair and let out a long breath through his nostrils. She was making a valid point. A large part of his pain came from his belief that he had not been able to stop his

father from sending Helen there. If he had known, he would have stepped in—somehow.

“No, Frederick,” his grandmother seemed to sense his thoughts. “Neither you nor poor Peter would have stayed Darius’s hand. He would have sent her there in any event, because he was afraid of the shame that would land on his doorstep, not hers.”

He knew she was right again.

“What you *can* do is save this girl,” she reached for her cane. “The best revenge you can ever have is to save others from a similar fate.”

Sighing, he closed the two folios and set them aside. It stung his soul that justice for Helen was repeatedly pushed back.

Frederick left the room and strode outside, knowing that, at this time of the day, his dog Remus would be out near the kennels guarding the horses. He would be ready for a run and Frederick was ready to give him one.

He entered the stable yard; a large rectangle corded off by fences that stretched back with enough space to exercise the horses.

A few stable hands were bushing some horses that basked in the sunshine. They bowed to him and he nodded back before walking into the stable and locating his gelding; a massive, thoroughbred grey horse from mane to tail.

“Mason,” he rubbed the horse’s velvety nose. “Are you ready for a run?”

As he mounted, completely at home in the saddle, he promised himself to find out everything he could about St. Catherine’s.

He would once again speak with Miss Bradford and hopefully keep his temper in check during the process.

CHAPTER 6



Gemma sat on the edge of the bed, running her fingers through her tangled hair as the morning sun streamed through the window.

It felt strange to be in a bed so soft, with blankets so warm. The previous night's events came rushing back—the Duke's commanding presence, the Dowager Duchess' keen gaze, and the overwhelming realization that she was once again trapped. She hadn't escaped the convent only to find herself under the roof of another controlling man, no matter what his title or status.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Dowager Duchess entered the room, moving with an elegance that only age and authority could impart.

"Good morning, my dear," the Dowager greeted her with a warm smile, though her sharp eyes were scrutinizing. "I trust you slept well?"

Gemma nodded. "Yes, thank you," she replied, though her voice lacked conviction.

She hadn't really slept, not fully or deeply. Her mind had been restless, caught between the relief she felt at being away from the convent and her trepidation about the uncertain future that lay ahead.

The lady approached the window and gazed at the estate's grounds. "Frederick and I have discussed your situation. I understand you may not feel particularly inclined to stay, given my grandson's... less than welcoming demeanor," she

said with a small chuckle, “but I think it would be unwise for you to leave just yet.”

“I do not plan to stay, Your Grace,” Gemma said, her voice firmer now. “I need to keep moving. I have already wasted enough time.”

The Dowager looked at her quizzically, her brow arching. “And where, exactly, do you plan to go, child?”

Gemma hesitated. She hadn’t thought that far ahead but she wasn’t about to admit it.

“Anywhere but here,” she answered vaguely. “I cannot stay where I am not wanted.”

Before the Dowager could respond, the door opened again. Frederick entered, his broad figure casting a shadow over the room. His expression was as hard as the night before, but there was something else in his eyes; an intensity that unnerved her.

“We need to talk,” he said brusquely, ignoring the Dowager Duchess, his gaze fixed on Gemma.

His grandmother offered him a knowing smile and stepped toward the door.

“I will leave the two of you to sort this out,” she said, and with a wink in Gemma’s direction she quietly left the room.

The air between them became tense as the door closed. Frederick folded his arms across his chest, his voice cold and precise.

“You are not leaving, Miss Bradford.”

Gemma stood up, squaring her shoulders and refusing to be intimidated. “I have no reason to stay, Your Grace.”

“I shall be the person who decides,” he said flatly. “I am not finished with you.”

Her heart pounded, a mixture of frustration and anger bubbling to the surface. “You cannot keep me here,” she shot back. “I am not your prisoner.”

Frederick’s jaw clenched. “No, but you are involved in something far more dangerous than you realize. I know all

about St. Catherine's and what goes on there."

Gemma blinked, her mind racing. "How are you involved? And what does it have to do with me?"

"Everything," he said, his eyes narrowing. "You think you have escaped that place? You think leaving solves the problem?" He took a step closer, his voice lowering. "There is more to that convent than you know. And I am not letting you leave until I figure out exactly what."

Gemma's anger flared. "So, I have traded one prison for another? Is that it?" She let out a bitter laugh. "I have escaped the walls of St. Catherine's just to end up in another cage, this time gilded, perhaps, but a cage all the same."

Frederick's eyes darkened, his patience thinning. "Do not be melodramatic."

"I am not being melodramatic," Gemma snapped. "I have spent years under the control of those nuns, and now *you* think you can control me? Tell me where I can and cannot go?" She rose from the bed and took a step toward him, her voice sharp. "I am profoundly grateful for your hospitality, Your Grace, but keeping me here... it makes you no better than them."

Frederick's expression turned icy, but there was a flicker of something raw beneath the surface. He was not used to being challenged, especially not by someone like her.

"You have no idea what you are talking about," he growled.

"Oh, do I not? I have lived a life of confined hell there, Your Grace. Trust me when I said I know." Gemma crossed her arms defiantly. "You may be a duke, but that does not give you the right to decide my fate."

Frederick's anger was palpable now, but it wasn't the blustering rage she had expected. It was cold and controlled, dangerous in its quiet intensity.

"You are lucky to be safe in this house," he said, his voice low and deliberate. "I could have thrown you out the moment I found you."

Gemma's breath caught in her throat, but she refused to let him see her fear.

"But you did not," she challenged. "We both know you would never do that."

For a long moment neither of them spoke. The tension between them was thick and suffocating. Frederick unflinchingly held her gaze, and Gemma saw something behind his cold exterior; a flicker of vulnerability and a shadow of pain.

Before either of them could say another word, the door creaked open. The Duke's grandmother reappeared, her eyes dancing with amusement as she took in the sight of them standing so close, the heat of their argument still crackling in the air.

"Well, well," she said, her voice teasing. "I see you two are getting along swimmingly."

Frederick stepped back, the spell between them broken. He shot his grandmother an irritated look. "You are meddling again."

The Dowager shrugged, clearly unbothered by his tone. "I would not call it meddling, dear. I would call it... encouragement." She glanced at Gemma, her smile warm but her eyes sharp with understanding. "You have spirit, my dear. I like that. But perhaps we could all do with a bit of fresh air, hmm? Clear our heads."

Gemma's cheeks burned with frustration, but the Dowager's lightheartedness eased the sting of the Duke's words. She still felt trapped, but there was no denying the older woman's charm.

Frederick, however, was less amused. He glared at his grandmother, then at Gemma.

"This is far from over," he muttered, his voice like a dark promise.

As he turned to leave the room, Gemma's heart raced, her defiance still simmering just beneath the surface. She wasn't

going to give him the reins, neither him nor anyone else; not after all those years under Sister Agnes's foot.

Vivian's knowing smile lingered in the air as she followed her grandson, leaving Gemma alone.

She felt the weight of the Duke's words press down on her, but she wouldn't let them crush her.



“Come along, dear,” the Dowager said with a smile, glancing over her shoulder. “The gardens are quite lovely this time of year. I think some fresh air will do us both good.”

They stepped outside into the crisp morning air. The sun was bright, but there was a coolness to the air that hinted at the change of seasons. The chilly breeze brushed past her the hem of dress—one of the modest gowns left for her by the staff. It was indeed quite plain, but far more presentable than the clothes she'd arrived in.

Vivian looped her arm through Gemma's as they began a leisurely stroll along the gravel path that wound through the gardens.

Gemma was quiet at first, taking in the sprawling grounds of Blackridge Estate. The gardens were vast, filled with late-blooming flowers and neatly trimmed hedges. The scent of roses and lavender mingled in the air, a stark contrast to the austere and plain courtyard of St. Catherine's. It felt strangely freeing, yet the memory of her heated exchange with the Duke still lingered.

The lady seemed content to let the silence stretch for a while, her gaze sweeping over the landscape. When she finally spoke, her tone was light, as if they were merely discussing the weather.

“Did you know, my dear, that these gardens were designed by my late husband?” she said, her voice tinged with fondness. “He spent years planning every inch, planting the roses himself. It was his pride and joy.”

Gemma glanced at her, surprised by the sudden turn in conversation. “He must have loved this place very much.”

“Oh, he did,” the lady agreed with a wistful smile. “As do I. There is a certain peace here, wouldn’t you agree?”

Gemma nodded slowly, feeling a bit of the tension ease from her shoulders. “Yes, it is beautiful. I have never seen a garden quite like it.”

“Blackridge is full of surprises,” the Dowager said, giving Gemma a sidelong glance. “Just when you think you have seen everything, it shows you something new.” Her words were pointed but delivered with a smile. “And it’s a place where one might find unexpected shelter from the storm.”

Gemma’s steps faltered for a moment as she caught the implied meaning behind the Dowager’s words. She had thought of this estate as another form of entrapment, another gilded cage. But now, there was a suggestion that perhaps it could be something else entirely—if she allowed it.

Then, just as quickly, the Dowager Duchess’ expression brightened. “Oh! Look at that cheeky little fellow.”

Gemma followed her gaze and spotted a squirrel darting across the path, its bushy tail flicking behind it as it scurried up a nearby oak. The tiny creature paused on a low branch, chattering indignantly at them as if they had trespassed on its territory.

“That one has been causing all sorts of trouble,” the Dowager Duchess said with a playful smirk. “Last week, I caught him sneaking into the kitchen to steal nuts left out for a pie. Scared the cook half to death when he popped his head out from behind the flour tin.”

Gemma laughed, the tension easing from her shoulders. “I can hardly blame him. I’d imagine the pies here are worth the risk.”

“They certainly are,” the Dowager agreed with a conspiratorial wink. “But now the cook swears the entire squirrel family is plotting an uprising. She’s taken to calling him Lord Nutterly.”

Gemma's laughter came freely then, the absurdity of it lifting the heavy cloud that had settled over her earlier conversation with the Duke.

The two women continued down the path, their steps lighter.

As the squirrel darted off, disappearing into the dense foliage, the Dowager gave Gemma a gentle squeeze on the arm. "You see, dear? Even the smallest creatures here at Blackridge make their own rules. And I have a feeling you will, too."

Her words, though spoken in a jesting tone, carried a weight of understanding beneath them. It was a subtle reassurance, one that Gemma found herself clinging to, even if she wasn't quite ready to admit it.

Vivian gave her a final pat before letting go of her arm. "Come now," she said brightly, "let us head back inside before Frederick comes searching for us. He does so hate when I take liberties with his guests."

Gemma couldn't help but smile at that.

And for the first time since her arrival, she allowed herself to hope that maybe—just *maybe*—she could find a way forward here.

CHAPTER 7



“Good morning, Miss. Can I help you with anything?” a maid asked when she noticed Gemma lingering at the door of the breakfast hall.

Gemma glanced around. “Where is everyone?” she asked, her tone laced with uncertainty. “The Duke and the Dowager Duchess?”

The large room was silent, the long table set with an extravagant spread, yet there was not a soul in sight. She had stood in the entrance, unsure of whether she should sit and eat alone or wait for someone to join her.

The maid gave a polite smile. “His Grace always takes his breakfast in his study, miss. He prefers to dine in silence. As for the Dowager, she is not an early riser, and likes to take her tea in her chambers.”

“Oh,” Gemma muttered, nodding as the information sank in. “Thank you.”

The maid curtsied and continued on her way, leaving Gemma standing in the stillness of the grand hall.

She frowned as a knot tightened in her stomach. If she wanted to stay longer—if she *needed* to stay longer—Frederick would have to soften towards her.

Her mind was still racing from the quarrel with Frederick the night before. The tension between them had simmered to the point of near combustion, and she knew she couldn’t afford to antagonize him any further. If she was going to survive here, at least for now, she would need to tread carefully.

Last night's argument, while invigorating in its own way, hadn't done her any favors. She had to find a way to make amends, or, at the very least, get in his good graces for now.

A decision formed in her mind. Before she could second-guess herself she walked purposefully toward Frederick's study.

The corridors of the house were quiet, except for the occasional sound of servants' footsteps as they went about their morning duties. Gemma's heart quickened as she approached the heavy oak door of the Duke's domain at the end of the hall. She paused for a moment, gathering her courage.

Then, with a sharp intake of breath, she knocked.

There was a brief silence before a low, steady voice beckoned from within, "Enter."

Gemma turned the handle and stepped inside. The study was dimly lit by the morning light that streamed in through the tall windows, casting long shadows over the shelves of books and the large desk that dominated the room.

Frederick sat behind it, his brow furrowed in concentration as he scanned a document. His dark hair was slightly disheveled and the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up to his elbows, giving him an air of casual authority.

He glanced up as she entered, his expression unreadable, though a flicker of surprise crossed his face when he saw her.

Gemma felt a self-conscious warmth spread across her cheeks as he scanned her from head to toe.

"Miss Bradford," the Duke greeted her, his voice calm but cool. "What brings you to my study so early?"

Gemma straightened her back, determined not to let her nerves show. "I wanted to thank you, Your Grace," she began, her voice steady despite the tension in the air. "For allowing me to stay the night, despite... the circumstances."

Frederick leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing slightly as he listened.

“I was not about to throw you out into the night,” he said, his tone guarded. “But that does not mean you are free to stay as long as you wish.”

“I understand,” Gemma replied quickly, her heart sinking a little at his words.

She wasn’t expecting a warm welcome, but his bluntness stung more than she’d anticipated.

Unfazed, she continued. “I have no intention of overstaying my welcome.” She paused, then added, “I also wanted to apologize. I realize I may have come across as... difficult last night.”

Frederick raised an eyebrow, clearly amused by her choice of words. “Difficult is one way of putting it.”

Gemma felt a spark of irritation at his tone but repressed it.

“After the convent... I mean, well, I do not revel in being told what to do,” she admitted, a hint of defiance slipping into her voice. “But I am not here to cause trouble. I am only requesting safe and temporary shelter. I’m grateful for your kindness, truly.”

Frederick inclined his head slightly, accepting her words without comment. The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken thoughts.

Gemma took a deep breath, determined to take another step forward.

“There is something else I need to tell you,” she said, her voice quieter now. “The name I gave you—Miss Gemma Bradford—that was not entirely true.”

Frederick’s gaze sharpened. “Oh?”

“My father was an earl,” she explained quickly. “But I have not used my title in years. I have been away from society for so long that it feels foreign to me now.” She hesitated, then added, “I did not want you to think I was trying to deceive you.”

Frederick remained silent for a moment, considering her words. Finally, he nodded.

“If that is the case, then I must address you as Lady Gemma,” he said.

Gemma shook her head, “No. That is not needed. As I said, it feels foreign to me. Please continue to call me Miss Bradford, Your Grace.”

“Noted,” he said, though his expression remained inscrutable.

Gemma shifted her weight as the awkwardness of the moment settled over her. She glanced around the room, her eyes landing on the plate of food sitting on a side table. He had not touched his breakfast.

“You prefer to take your breakfast here?” she asked, more out of curiosity than anything else.

Frederick’s eyes flicked to the plate before returning to her.

“I do,” he said simply.

“Why not in the breakfast hall?” Gemma pressed, her curiosity getting the better of her. “My father always took breakfast in the breakfast hall, with the family. Is that not what most people do?”

Frederick’s mouth tightened slightly. “I am not most people,” he replied, his tone clipped.

Gemma could sense his irritation growing, but something in her wouldn’t let her drop the subject.

“Do you prefer avoiding your guests?” she asked, her voice light but her question pointed. “Or do you just dislike the formality?”

Frederick’s eyes darkened, and for a moment she thought she’d overstepped. He leaned forward, and rested his elbows on the desk.

“I dislike distractions,” he said evenly. “And breakfast with guests is often just that—a distraction.”

Gemma raised an eyebrow, feeling a small smile tug at her lips. “A distraction from what, exactly?”

Frederick’s gaze locked onto hers, and the intensity of his stare made her pulse quicken.

“From work,” he said softly. “From what matters.”

Gemma felt a strange flutter in her chest at his words. There was something about the way he spoke—so controlled, so focused—that made her wonder what truly lay beneath that cold exterior. She was curious, more than she cared to admit, about the man sitting in front of her.

“And what is it that matters to you, Your Grace?” she asked, her voice dropping to match his quiet tone.



Frederick leaned back in his chair, his fingers loosely intertwined as he observed Gemma standing in his study, her posture resolute, but he could see the fearlessness that shimmered in her eyes.

Her curiosity had caught him off guard, but instead of becoming irritated he found himself intrigued by her nerve.

“Distractions do not matter to me,” he mused, letting the words slowly roll off his tongue. “I prefer the peace and quiet of my study. Especially when compared to the tedious conversations that often accompany breakfast in the dining hall.”

His voice was dry, but there was a subtle glimmer in his eyes.

Gemma raised an eyebrow, her lips curving slightly as she replied, “Tedious conversations, you say? You mean you do not enjoy hearing about the weather or who married whom?”

Frederick’s mouth twitched into a half-smile. “I find it difficult to muster enthusiasm for idle gossip. Small talk has always been a tiresome endeavor, especially when it is usually only intended to curry favor or flatter me.”

“Well, I imagine being a duke invites all sorts of unnecessary flattery,” she teased lightly. “I suppose you are accustomed to everyone fawning over you, eager to gain your favor.”

Frederick’s smile deepened, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You would be surprised how often people mistake civility for sincerity. Their motives are usually transparent.”

“I see,” Gemma said, taking a small step forward, her gaze never wavering. “So, you hide away in your study to avoid all the sycophants?”

Frederick chuckled softly, the sound low and almost reluctant, as though he wasn’t used to such conversations. “Not exactly. I have little patience for inane chatter, especially from those who seek to manipulate me. And believe me, there are many who try.”

Gemma crossed her arms over her chest, an impish grin playing at the corners of her mouth. “And do you think I am here now in order to manipulate you? Is that it?”

Frederick’s eyes darkened slightly as he studied her. “You are certainly not here out of the goodness of your heart, *Miss Bradford*. But I will admit... I am intrigued to learn what your reasons are.”

Her defiance flickered again, but there was something vulnerable tucked underneath it, though she hid it well.

“If you must know, Your Grace, I am not interested in manipulating you.”

“Then what *are* you interested in?” His question came quickly, his tone sharper now.

He wanted to see if she would give him an honest answer, or if she would sidestep it as she had before.

Gemma didn’t flinch, though he noticed a brief hesitation in her eyes.

“Freedom,” she said softly, the word carrying more weight than he had expected. “That is all I want.”

Frederick felt something akin to a pang of understanding. He, too, had once sought freedom, though his circumstances had been vastly different. His freedom had been stolen by duty, by the expectations placed upon him as a duke. Hers had been taken by something else.

Someone else.

Frederick stood up slowly, rounding his desk and reducing the space between them. “So, you think staying here will give you

what you are looking for?”

He was unsure why he continued to press her so hard, but her defiance, her vulnerability, and her desire to escape the chains that bound her struck a chord deep within him.

Gemma lifted her chin, her eyes meeting his unflinchingly. “Not exactly. I do not plan to stay here forever, Your Grace. Only long enough to find a way forward. To get somewhere safe, on my own terms.”

Frederick’s eyes narrowed, a slow smirk forming on his lips. “You should be careful with that sharp tongue of yours,” he murmured, leaning in just a fraction closer. “It might get you into trouble.”

He stood before her now, close enough to see the tension in her shoulders, the way her chest rose and fell a little quicker than it had earlier. Frederick tilted his head slightly, intrigued by the fire that burned so brightly within her.

Gemma’s breath hitched, her pulse quickening as she looked up at him. They stood like that for a moment, the air crackling with an intensity that neither of them could deny. He felt the pull between them that hummed like a taut string ready to snap.

Her gaze didn’t falter, but there was now something softer in her eyes that made him wonder if, despite her bravado, she was as uncertain about this moment as he was.

Just as the tension reached its peak, a knock sounded at the door, shattering the stillness of the room.

Frederick blinked, the spell between them once again broken as he straightened, his expression hardening once more.

He turned his head sharply toward the door. “What is it?” he called gruffly.

The door creaked open and the butler stepped inside, bowing slightly. “Apologies, Your Grace, but there is a matter which requires your attention.”

Frederick clenched his jaw in frustration. He glanced at Gemma, her expression once again guarded, before turning to

the butler. “Very well,” he said tersely.

The butler nodded and waited in the room, leaving the door ajar.

Frederick exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair as he turned back to Gemma. The moment between them had evaporated, replaced by the cold reality of his responsibilities and the reminder that she was still a guest in his home; an enigma, yes, but a complication he wasn’t sure he needed.

“We shall continue this conversation another time,” he said, his voice clipped but kind.

Gemma nodded, though the tension in her frame hadn’t fully eased. “Of course,” she replied in a measured tone.

Despite his dismissal of her she made no move to leave, which intrigued him all the more.

Frederick remained where he stood for a moment longer, feeling a lingering sense of unfinished business. He had thought she would be like the rest—easy to read, easy to predict—but Gemma Bradford was anything but. That, he realized, made her far more dangerous than he had originally anticipated.

“What is it?” Frederick finally replied, glancing at the butler standing across the room.

“Your Grace, you have a visitor who insists upon seeing you.”

“Who is it?”

“A nun from St. Catherine’s, Your Grace,” he said. “She said her name was Sister Agnes.”

Frederick saw Gemma’s reaction immediately. The panic in her face indicated that Gemma’s first instinct was to turn tail and run, but she was frozen in place with fear. Her wide, terrified eyes flicked to the door and she looked like she was about to be devoured.

Frederick’s eyes latched onto hers as she stood deathly still, his gaze sharp like a physician’s scalpel.

When he spoke to the butler the command in his voice brooked no argument. “Simmonds, take Miss Bradford to her room. *Now.*”

The butler gently but firmly guided Gemma out of the study, her feet moving as though they had been fashioned from lead.

She shot Frederick a deeply worried look over her shoulder one second before she vanished around the corner.

CHAPTER 8



“*M*a’am?” Frederick greeted. “You asked to see me?”

Tugging down his jacket, Frederick strode into the sitting room and watched the nun pacing and fingering her rosary. Her face was placid under her wimple and as she moved her head, he spotted a grey curl.

She curtsied, then tucked her hands into the opposite sleeves of her habit and spoke. “You may call me Sister Agnes, Your Grace. I am sorry to bother you, but I have a particularly important matter which I must share with you.”

She wants to know if Miss Bradford is here.

“Please come with me to my study,” he offered. “Such important matters should not be discussed here.”

She nodded. “Indeed. Please, lead the way.”

He led her into his study, then gestured to a chair across from his desk. “Would you like some tea or a refreshing glass of lemonade?”

“Thank you but no, I am comfortable,” Sister Agnes replied as she sat down, looking around the room.

He wondered if she judged the clean grandeur of his Hellenistic-themed private sanctuary as vain because, surely, wealth and influence saturated every bit of gilt and stone in the antique furnishing.

“How may I be of service?” he asked, sitting on his chair across from her.

“Recently there was a girl, Gemma Bradford, who cunningly escaped our priory school and is somewhere in these parts, as far as we can discern. I need to make you aware that this girl is trouble. She will lie, deceive and try to trick you, if she comes across you, that is, into believing the many *tribulations* and *trials* she endured at our convent.”

They are far from lies. I have seen and recorded the suffering she has endured at your hands.

“Is that so?” he asked while wondering if this nun also had a hand in his sister’s death. “Is there a reason she would state such a thing? Do these girls indeed suffer there?”

“No,” the nun said, her face straight while she lied.

“Then why would you state your words in that way?” he pressed.

“We are strict on policy and ensuring these girls lean the demure and humble way of life through prayer and penitence—”

“Penitence for what?” Frederick asked with one brow raised. “These girls are orphans and cast-offs of peasants, poor farmers and outcasted mistresses, are they not? For what are they atoning? The sins of their birth?”

“Well, no,” Sister Agnes flattened her lips. “Some of these girls come to us after a rather squalid life on the streets. They are pickpockets, mud larks, and some of the older ones have dabbled in...the oldest profession in the world, if you understand my meaning. They have carried such worldly traits with them and are bad influences on the others.”

“Is Miss Bradford a bad influence?” he asked.

“She is a disobedient wench,” the nun’s disdain came out in a venomous sneer. “Her mother placed her in our care from the day she was seven years old, telling us that she was a stubborn child, and to this day she has never lost that trait. She had no regard for piousness or the transformation of prayer.”

Frederick leaned towards Sister Agnes, interlaced his fingers under his chin and held her eyes with his. “How old is she?”

“Three and twenty,” the nun replied.

“Who is her mother, and why did she leave her there?” he pressed.

Sister Agnes’s face twisted with displeasure at being pressed. “As much as I can see your interest, Your Grace, her mother has no bearing on this matter, and neither does the reason she was left at the convent. What matters here is that the girl is a skilled manipulator and she is not to be believed.”

“I see,” Frederick sat back in his chair, the quill in his hand a mere distraction to quell the rising storm within him. “Were you at St. Catherine’s when Lady Helen Wyndham was sent there?”

Recognition flickered in Sister Agnes’s eyes before she concealed it behind a mask of indifference. “No, Your Grace. I do not recall the name.”

An obvious lie.

“Helen Wyndham was my sister,” Frederick said, his voice laced with restrained anger. “She was sent to your convent sixteen years ago after falling in love with a man deemed unsuitable by my father. She carried his child.”

Sister Agnes’s lips thinned. “A scandal indeed. How unfortunate for your family to have been burdened by such impropriety.”

His fingers tightened around the quill, nearly snapping it in two. “Impropriety?” he repeated icily. “My sister sought refuge and understanding, but instead, she was met with neglect, cruelty, and a death that should never have occurred. When we came for her, we found her body cold on a cot—and not a word of explanation from your convent.”

The nun offered a slight shrug, her tone dismissive. “Women like her are weak, Your Grace. Perhaps the weight of her sin hastened her end.”

Frederick rose from his chair so swiftly that it scraped against the floor.

“My sister was not weak,” he growled, his voice low and cutting, “She was failed—by the nuns who should have cared for her, by the father who sent her to that wretched place, and by a system that denied her happiness. And you, Sister Agnes, have the audacity to speak of her sin? I tell you now, the only sin greater than hers was the cruelty she suffered at your hands.”

Sister Agnes adjusted her skirts, her rosary clutched in her hands like a shield.

“I am sorry you feel that way, Your Grace, but my concern is for the living, not the past. If this Bradford girl crosses your path, I urge you to return her to us. Jezebels like her have no place in society,” she said.

Hell will freeze over before I send anyone back to that place.

Frederick’s jaw clenched as fury surged through him.

“You are no longer welcome here,” he responded, each word precise and venomous. “Consider this your last visit to Blackridge. If you or anyone from St. Catherine’s sets foot on my land again, you will find yourselves escorted off by force.”

Her cheeks flushed red, but she held her head high as she stood. “May God have mercy on your soul, Your Grace,” she said, her tone dripping with false piety.

Frederick stepped aside, his gaze cold as ice. “I will not need it, Sister. Not from the likes of you.”

He watched as she descended the stairs, her unmarked carriage waiting outside. The door slammed shut behind her, and he stood at the window, ensuring her departure.

The moment the carriage disappeared from sight, he turned away, his fists clenched.

He would never allow another soul to endure what Helen had suffered—not while he lived.



“Are you comfortable here, my dear?” the Dowager asked gently, her voice breaking the silence.

Gemma could feel the Dowager Duchess' eyes on her as they sat across from each other in the breakfast hall.

The clatter of silverware against porcelain had been the only sound between them, the atmosphere calm but laced with unspoken questions.

The Dowager reached for her tea, taking a small sip, her gaze never leaving Gemma's face.

Gemma hesitated, her fork hovering over her plate as she offered a polite but distant smile. "Yes, thank you. It is... it is a vast improvement on where I used to be."

Vivian nodded and set down her cup. "I imagine so. My grandson has a habit of taking in strays, though I must say, none have been quite as interesting as you."

Gemma looked up, her brows furrowing slightly. "Interesting?"

"Yes," the Dowager replied with a knowing smile. "You have a certain fire about you. Most women in your position would be cowering by now, but not you. You are stronger than you know."

Gemma's fingers tightened around her fork, her eyes dropping back to her plate as she absently pushed her food around.

"I do not feel strong, Your Grace," she muttered, her voice barely audible.

Vivian watched her for a moment. "Strength does not always feel like strength, dear. Sometimes it is simply surviving that which would destroy others."

Gemma's grip on the fork slackened but she didn't say anything, her silence speaking volumes.

The lady decided to shift the conversation gently, "Tell me," she began, her tone light, "what brought you to St. Catherine's? I gather it was not by choice."

Gemma froze, her body becoming rigid as the Dowager Duchess' words hung in the air. For a moment, she didn't move, and didn't speak. Her eyes darted to the window, as if searching for an escape route.

“With all due respect, my lady, I... I would rather not talk about it,” she finally whispered, her voice strained.

Vivian set down her knife and fork and folded her hands in her lap.

“Of course,” she said softly, her sharp eyes catching the subtle shift in Gemma’s posture, and the way her breath quickened ever so slightly. “You needn’t share anything if you are not ready.”

Gemma gave a small, barely perceptible nod, but the tension in her frame didn’t ease. She stabbed at a piece of food on her plate, though she made no move to actually eat it.

“I must confess,” the Dowager said quietly, “our family does not have the best history with nunneries.”

Gemma’s head snapped up, and her eyes became wide with curiosity. She opened her mouth as if to ask something but quickly closed it again, her expression wary.

Vivian smiled gently. “You need not be afraid to ask questions, Miss Bradford. I know your time at St. Catherine’s must have been... unpleasant. But you should know that you are safe here. No harm will come to you within these walls.”

Gemma blinked, her hands still fidgeting with her fork. “What did you mean when you said that you do not have a good history with nunneries?”

The Dowager Duchess of Blackridge sighed, leaning back in her chair as her gaze drifted to the window. Dark clouds were beginning to gather in the distance, casting a faint shadow over the room.

“My granddaughter Helen was sent by her father to St. Catherine’s convent. She... never came back.”

Gemma’s eyes widened and her mouth parted in a small gasp.

“I... I am so sorry,” she said softly, her voice filled with genuine empathy.

Vivian gave a sad smile. “Thank you, dear. It was a long time ago, but some wounds never truly heal.” She paused, her gaze softening as she looked at Gemma. “That is the reason

Frederick is so... persistent. He does not want what happened to Helen to happen to anyone else. Especially not someone like you.”

Gemma’s brow furrowed, confusion clouding her expression. “Someone like me?”

Vivian tilted her head slightly, her eyes twinkling with both amusement and empathy. “You have spirit, my dear. You remind me of our Helen in many ways. She, too, had a fire that could not be extinguished, no matter how much the world tried to snuff it out.”

Gemma swallowed hard, her throat tight as she processed Vivian’s words.

She had never thought of herself as either strong or brave, but hearing the Dowager speak of her granddaughter in such a way made her wonder if perhaps she had underestimated herself.

The room grew quieter as the wind began to pick up outside, the dark clouds now looming larger in the sky, and casting a noticeable shadow over the formerly bright breakfast table.

The lighthearted conversation had taken a turn into deeper, darker waters, but there was something comforting about it. Gemma felt less alone in her struggle, knowing that this family—despite their power and wealth—had faced their own demons.

Vivian reached out and placed a gentle hand over Gemma’s. “You do not have to face this alone, you know. Frederick may seem harsh, but his heart is in the right place. He only wants to protect you.”

Gemma stared at the Dowager’s hand, her heart pounding in her chest. She did not know how to respond to her kind words or make sense of the emotions that had suddenly erupted within her in the aftermath of her caring touch.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Her voice was barely audible, but filled with gratitude.

Vivian smiled softly and gave Gemma’s hand a reassuring squeeze before withdrawing.

“Now, enough of such dark topics,” she said, her tone brightening as she glanced back toward the window. “It seems we might be in for a storm.”

Gemma followed her gaze, watching as the dark grey clouds continued to gather, casting a foreboding shadow over the estate.

She nodded slowly, her thoughts still lingering on the conversation they had just shared, but grateful for the change in subject.

The storm, it seemed, was only just beginning.

CHAPTER 9



Gemma once again found herself hesitating outside Frederick's study, her heart pounding in her chest.

This time she had genuinely come to thank him, to express her gratitude for his intervention with Sister Agnes, but there was another feeling that niggled at her mind which she had been unable to shake and made her yearn to see him again.

Taking a deep breath, Gemma knocked softly on the door.

There was a brief pause before she heard Frederick's deep voice beckoning her inside. She pushed the door open and found him seated behind his desk, the same way he had been the other morning before everything had changed.

Frederick looked up from his papers, his dark blue eyes meeting hers with that same intense, unreadable gaze. His presence filled the room and temporarily overcame Gemma, who nearly lost her nerve, but she silently reminded herself of the purpose of her visit.

"Your Grace," she began, her voice quieter than she had intended. "I wanted to thank you for what you did earlier... with Sister Agnes. You did not have to do that."

Frederick leaned back, observing her with a neutral expression. "It was nothing," he said, his voice calm and a touch dismissive.

Gemma's brow furrowed. His nonchalant response was frustrating her.

She pressed her lips together, considering her next words carefully. She hadn't planned to stay long, but something in his demeanor kept her rooted to the spot.

"I shall be leaving soon," she added, hoping to prompt something more genuine. "I do not wish to overstay my welcome."

Frederick only nodded. "As you wish."

She turned to leave but something stopped her. After everything that he had done, she couldn't simply leave like this. She just couldn't.

She glanced back, gathering her courage to speak her mind.

"Your Grace... I am deeply sorry about Helen," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

The moment the words left her lips, she saw Frederick's shoulders tense and his gaze darken in a way she'd never before seen.

He didn't respond, but the flash of pain that crossed his face told her everything.

"I..." she hesitated, stepping closer. "I do not mean to pry. I only... I do not understand why you do not speak of her. She was your sister."

Frederick's eyes narrowed and the room seemed to become colder.

"What right do you have to speak of her?" His voice was low and rough, a warning she would be a fool to ignore.

Gemma's heart thudded painfully. She hadn't expected this reaction, but she couldn't back down now.

"Because she mattered. And the way she was treated, the way the ton simply forgot about her... is wrong."

Frederick stood up abruptly, towering over her, his frame taut with barely contained fury.

"You think I do not know that?" he questioned in a harsh voice. "You think I do not remember how easily they

discarded her? How they erased her as if she had never existed?”

The passion in his words made her heart race but she refused to look away, her own ire bubbling to the surface.

“Then why do you push everyone away, as if they all deserve to be discarded, too?” Her voice rose, her words trembling with emotion. “Why do you keep punishing everyone around you, even those who—”

Frederick’s jaw tightened, his eyes flashing. “Careful, Miss Bradford.”

But Gemma pressed on as her emotions spilled over. “I do not understand you at all! You help me, even protect me, but then act as though it means nothing. Is this some cruel game you enjoy playing?”

“Game?” He laughed bitterly, a sound devoid of mirth. “You think I am enjoying this? Think again.”

“Then explain it to me!” she shot back, stepping closer to him, her hands clenched at her sides. “Explain why you feel the need to protect me when you hardly know me.”

He stared down at her, his expression unreadable, although something raw and vulnerable flashed across his eyes. But, just as quickly, it vanished behind his steely mask.

“I owe you no explanations,” he said coldly, his voice barely above a whisper. “You are safe from St. Catherine’s now. That is all that matters.”

“But that is not enough for me,” she countered. “You cannot simply swoop in and out of people’s lives without ever letting anyone see who you really are.”

Frederick’s face hardened, his jaw clenched so tightly that she believed it might shatter. “You know nothing of who I am, Miss Bradford, nor what I have endured. Helen...”

His voice broke slightly, before he quickly composed himself. “She was pure of heart. But that is not enough for this world. It never is.”

The crack in his tone, though brief, was enough to make her breath hitch, and for a fleeting second, she again witnessed the grief and anguish he carried beneath his icy facade.

Without thinking, she took a step closer and lifted her hand towards his face, but he caught her wrist in mid-reach and held it in place. His searching gaze bore into her eyes.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

The tension between them crackled like a live wire. Before Gemma could think, her hands were on his chest pushing him away from her. But instead of moving away, Frederick’s hands gripped her wrists, his touch firm but not painful.

She had only intended to get something genuine out of him, to speak to the man beyond the daily facade. But now, as their faces were so close together, she could feel the heat radiating from him. Her breath caught in her throat.

She had been caught in some type of spell and drawn into him and did not wish that spell to break this time.

“Tell me to stop,” Gemma murmured, her eyes locked on his.

For a long, heart-stopping moment, neither of them moved. Then, almost as if pulled together by some invisible force, their lips met in a heated, desperate kiss.

Gemma gasped against his mouth, her hands gripping his shirt as she pulled him closer. Frederick’s grip on her wrists tightened briefly before his hands let go and slid down to her waist, pulling her flush against him.

Their kiss deepened slowly, and all her thoughts of confusion, frustration and anger melted away, leaving only the distilled essence of the moment. Gemma’s heart pounded in her chest as she pressed herself closer to him, her body yearning for more of him.

Without warning, a deafening crack of thunder shook the room, startling them both.

The suddenness of the storm jarred them back to reality. Frederick was the first to pull away, his breathing ragged as he stepped back, his eyes wide with shock and interrupted desire.

Gemma stood there, her lips still tingling from their passionate kiss, and her mind racing. The storm outside raged on as the wind howled around the mansion and rain began to pelt the glass in heavy sheets.

Frederick ran a hand through his hair as his composure slowly returned.

“You shall stay until the storm passes,” he said, his voice strained but controlled. “But no longer than that.”

Gemma swallowed hard and nodded, although her mind was far from calm.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she only muttered in response.

She turned her back on him and opened the door, her emotions in a whirlwind as she left the room.

The storm outside would eventually pass, but the storm between them was far from over.

CHAPTER 10



“What is wrong with me?” Gemma whispered to herself, feeling both angry at Frederick and confused by her own feelings.

She’d stormed out of Frederick’s study, her heart pounding and her mind racing, trying to make sense of the conflicting emotions swirling inside her.

The kiss had been intense, unexpected, and electric. But what followed had been like a cold slap to her face. Frederick’s sudden detachment and his swift order for her to leave as if nothing had happened had left her raw and humiliated.

As she walked down the corridor her steps quickened with each stride, frustration building in her chest. She clenched her fists, fighting the painful sting of tears that threatened to spill.

Why had he kissed her if he was going to shut her out immediately thereafter? The way he had looked at her—those moments of vulnerability in his eyes—it had felt real. But then, just as quickly, he had retreated behind his cold, impenetrable wall.

She reached the end of the hall and paused, pressing her hands against her temples.

She barely knew him, and yet he had an uncanny ability to get under her skin, and make her feel things she hadn’t allowed herself to feel in years.

Gemma took a deep breath and leaned against the wall, her mind full of conflicting thoughts.

No, I will not let him get to me like this.

She had her own future and survival to consider, and she wasn't about to let some brooding, infuriating Duke distract her from that.

As the storm outside raged on, she resolved to push aside what had happened between them.

It was a mistake; a brief moment of weakness.

But even as she completed the thought, the memory of his lips on hers and how his hands had pulled her close refused to fade from her mind.



By the time dinnertime arrived, Gemma had managed to calm herself, though her unresolved questions from earlier still lingered in her mind.

The dining hall was warm and lit by flickering candlelight, a contrast to the cold, tempestuous weather outside. Dark grey clouds loomed heavily over the estate, and the sound of rain hammering against the windows echoed throughout the room.

Vivian was already seated at the head of the table, looking as elegant and sharp as ever. When Gemma walked in she offered her a polite nod, but her eyes betrayed her curiosity, as if she sensed something was amiss.

Gemma took her seat beside her, silently grateful for the presence of someone who wasn't Frederick. She hadn't seen him since their charged encounter in his study and she wasn't sure she wanted to face him yet. Her emotions were still too raw and too tangled, but her hope of avoiding him was short-lived.

Only moments later Frederick entered the dining hall, his tall frame casting a shadow across the room. His expression was, as always, cool and composed, though there was something in the way his eyes flicked toward her—brief but unmistakable—that made her stomach flip.

“Good evening,” he greeted both women curtly.

He sat down at the opposite end of the table, his silence as weighty as the storm outside. The air between them was thick with unspoken words.

Vivian, as perceptive as ever, immediately detected the uncomfortable silence between them. She glanced from Gemma to Frederick, her sharp eyes narrowing slightly as she scrutinized their body language and expressions.

“Well,” she said, breaking the silence with her usual cutting tone. “It seems this storm has no intention of relenting tonight.”

Frederick merely nodded, his gaze fixed firmly on his plate, though Gemma could feel his imposing presence from across the table.

Vivian continued, her voice measured as she placed her fork down and regarded her grandson with a raised brow. “Given the weather, it would be foolish for Gemma to attempt to leave tonight.”

Frederick’s jaw tightened slightly, though he didn’t lift his gaze. “I have already made that clear to her,” he said in that same detached, almost dismissive tone he had used earlier.

Gemma looked up at him and their gazes locked across the table like lovers’ hands.

The air hummed with static. She thought she detected something raw and conflicted beneath his stoic facade, but it was gone just as quickly as it had appeared.

She nodded in response, her voice quiet but firm. “Yes, Your Grace. I’ll stay.”

Gemma held his gaze, her breath catching in her throat as she tried to decipher the thoughts behind his dark blue eyes. But just as quickly, they both looked away, as if the moment was too much to bear.

Vivian, ever the keen observer, raised a brow at their synchronized reaction.

“Has something happened?” she asked, her voice dripping with innocent curiosity, though the glint in her eyes suggested

she already knew the answer.

“No,” Frederick and Gemma said in unison, their voices overlapping.

The immediate and identical response caused Vivian’s smile to widen in amusement.

Frederick shot his grandmother a warning glare. He was clearly not in the mood for her games. But Vivian merely smirked, the cogs in her brain turning as she pieced together what had transpired.

“Hmm,” she murmured, feigning innocence as she turned back to her plate. “Interesting.”

Gemma shifted uncomfortably in her seat, her cheeks heating with embarrassment. She glanced down at her plate and pushed her food around without much interest..

She tried to focus on the food in front of her, but her mind kept drifting back to Frederick, to the kiss, to the way he had pulled away as if he had regretted it. She could still feel his lips lingering on hers. The unexpected and sudden coldness that followed had taken her by surprise and unnerved her.

She stole another glance at him from across the table. He was quietly composed and distant as though nothing had happened.

How does he do that? How does he simply shut everything off like that?

She wanted to push him, to demand answers, but she knew now wasn’t the time. Not with Vivian watching them so closely.

The violent storm continued to rage outside; a perfect metaphor for the storm that was tearing up her heart.



When dessert was finally served, Frederick noticed that the mood in the room had altered slightly.

The servants brought out a platter of delicate pastries and a rich, decadent, dark chocolate cake. Gemma produced a

blinding smile as she gasped with delight at the treats that lay before her.

“Oh,” she breathed, her voice ripe with childlike glee. Frederick was startled by how much he liked the sound of her voice. “Chocolate cake was always my *favorite*.”

Her excitement was innocent, pure, and infectious, for it dispelled the negative energy in the room.

Gemma picked up her fork and took a small bite, closing her eyes as she savored the thick, sweet chocolate that melted sublimely on her tongue.

Frederick swallowed hard.

He had pointedly avoided looking at her during the meal, but finally glanced up at the sound of her rapture. His gaze lingered on her face. He was drawn to the way her eyes sparkled with happiness and the way her lips curved into a bright, genuine smile as she delicately consumed the generous slice of cake.

As she licked a trickle of chocolate from the corner of her mouth, something primal stirred within him. His eyes darkened as they traced the movement of her tongue, watching it as it flicked over her lower lip, catching the last traces of the dessert.

A slow heat began to build in his chest and spread through his veins like wildfire. He was mesmerized by her mouth and how her lips parted as she savored each bite. His thoughts betrayed him, flooding his mind with images of her lips against his and how it had felt to kiss her and taste her.

The memory of their passionate kiss earlier that day returned to him in vivid detail. He had tried to block it out, to bury the desire that had sprung up inside him. Watching her now, his desire suddenly returned tenfold and became impossible to ignore.

He shifted in his seat and forced himself to look away, but it was too late. The thoughts were already in motion, consuming him. He wanted her. He wanted her in a way that was entirely

inappropriate; in ways he knew he shouldn't allow himself to indulge.

But, God help him, the way she looked, the way she smiled, the way she had felt in his arms was driving him mad.

He clenched his fists under the table in a vain effort to maintain control and keep his stoic facade intact. But his mind was already filled with lustful thoughts of Gemma, of her body pressed against him, of her lips on his skin.

His pulse quickened, the taste of her lips on his vivid in his mind, the hunger that simmered beneath his controlled exterior now threatening to break through. He shook his head in disbelief. She was so genuinely happy over something as simple as a piece of cake. Other women would have sneered and dismissed such a joyous reaction as pure folly. As he watched her, Frederick sunk into a delighted daze filled with the warmth of her laughter and eyes that sparkled with unchecked pleasure.

But then, with one simple phrase, Gemma shattered the spell.

"Heavens, I have not had this in sixteen years," she said in a soft, wistful voice, as though the dessert in front of her was not just a sweet treat but a memory of something long lost.

Frederick's heart skipped a beat.

Sixteen years?

The number rang in his ears, and the fog of lust and desire that had enveloped him lifted in an instant, replaced by a cold clarity. He looked at her sharply. Vivian observed the sudden change in Frederick's demeanor and frowned worriedly.

Vivian had always been acutely perceptive. She rarely let such details slip by unnoticed.

"Sixteen years?" she echoed, her voice calm but laced with intrigue. She tilted her head, studying Gemma with refreshed intensity. "You must be younger than five and twenty. If you have not eaten something like that in sixteen years, that would mean... the last time you tasted it was when you were a small child."

The dessert itself had been nothing extravagant; it was one that any household would serve. The impact of Gemma's statement gnawed at both Frederick and his grandmother.

Frederick noticed the immediate shift in Gemma's posture. Her back, which had been straight and confident moments earlier, slumped ever so slightly. The light that had brightened her face just seconds ago drained away when she realized that she had said too much.

She lowered her gaze, focusing intently on the table, her fingers gripping the edge of her plate.

"My mother... she sent me away," Gemma finally murmured, her voice quiet, almost hollow. "After my father died."

Vivian's expression softened, her brows furrowing in sympathy. "How old were you when this happened?"

Gemma swallowed, her throat bobbing as if she was trying to push down a lump of ice. Her fingers twitched nervously at the table's edge.

"Seven," she whispered. "I was seven."

Frederick felt a sharp, cold anger rising in his chest. He had seen that look before; the haunted, hollow gaze of someone who had been abandoned.

His jaw clenched, the image of Helen flashing in his mind, her wide eyes filled with sorrow, her fragile body taken away to that wretched place. It was all too strikingly similar and painful.

His eyes turned to Vivian, who was now fully invested in Gemma's story, her tone softening even further.

"And your mother?" she pressed, though not unkindly. "She sent you to live in the convent after your father's death?"

Gemma nodded, her face still downcast, clearly reluctant to share more. She was holding back and Frederick knew why. She didn't trust them enough yet to reveal everything.

And so she should. Too many must have disappointed her and caused her pain by abusing her trust before she met us.

The people in their neck of society could be ruthless. Gemma knew better than to reveal all of her vulnerabilities to two strangers she had only just met.

Taking notice of the direction in which their conversation was heading, Vivian was about to ask Gemma more questions, but before she could speak again the thin thread holding Frederick's self-control frayed and snapped.

He stood abruptly, his chair scraping harshly against the wooden floor, the sound loud and jarring in the deep silence of the dining hall. The abruptness of his movement caught both women off guard.

Vivian's eyes widened in surprise and Gemma's head shot up, her expression both confused and startled.

"I am tired," Frederick said coldly, his voice betraying none of the turmoil that churned inside him. "I shall now take my leave and retire for the evening."

Without waiting for a response he turned sharply on his heel and marched out of the dining hall, his long strides echoing in the quiet corridor. He could feel Gemma's bewildered eyes on him but he didn't turn back. He couldn't.

The moment he was out of sight, Frederick's mind raced with conflicting thoughts, his emotions swirling together in a cloud of anger, desire and frustration.

How could someone like Gemma, so strong and vibrant, have endured such pain and hardship? And why did he care so much?

He reached his study and slammed the door behind him, his chest heaving with barely restrained rage.

He didn't want to feel this way.

He didn't want to care about her past, about her suffering, or about her. He especially didn't want to care about *her*.

Frederick leaned heavily against his desk, his hands gripping its edge so tightly that his knuckles turned white with effort. Images of Gemma flooded his mind. Her glossy brown hair and sparkling smile, her laughter, and how small and

vulnerable she had looked a few moments earlier when she confessed to being sent away and cast aside at such a tender age.

A glow of protectiveness bloomed in his heart. It was a feeling he hadn't experienced in many years.

And then, just as quickly, another image replaced it—of her mouth, and the way her lips had tasted earlier that day when they had kissed. The memory of her soft skin under his fingers and the way her body had pressed against his consumed him.

His breath quickened and he cursed under his breath, hating how much control she had over him without even trying. His realization of her power only made her more dangerously appealing, because the more he learned about her, the more he found himself drawn to her.

Frederick took a deep breath, trying to regain control of his emotions. He couldn't afford to care for Gemma in this way. He had seen what caring for someone—what love—could do. It destroyed lives. It had destroyed his sister and it had ruined her beloved Peter.

No. He wouldn't let himself fall into that trap again.

Despite his resolution, Gemma's lips against his continued to haunt him. Frederick knew that no matter how hard he tried to fight it, he was already losing control.

CHAPTER 11



“Miss,” Daisy whispered to Gemma, rousing her from sleep. “Her Grace would like to speak with you over breakfast. Fortunately, she wakes late, but we must make haste.”

“Oh,” she rubbed her eyes. “I suppose we will have to hurry then.”

By twenty past the hour, she had braided her hair into a neat bun and was dressed in a plain blue gown that the Duke had procured for her. She entered the small breakfast room where she had been informed that the Dowager Duchess was already waiting for her.

The parlor was medium sized with a wide bow window that let in copious amount of cheerful light that warmed the light blue damask on the walls.

The Dowager was seated at the far end of an oval breakfast table, sipping tea from a delicate Sèvres cup and eating small, flat biscuits that lay on a nearby plate.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Gemma curtsied. “How are you?”

“Hmm?” the older lady smiled. “Appreciating the benefits of aging and using such advantages to gently guide my grandson into greener pastures.”

Gemma laughed softly as she seated herself. “Forgive my forwardness, but I do not think His Grace would appreciate anyone meddling in his affairs.”

“Oh no, it is quite the contrary. It is the job of a grandmother to interfere,” the Dowager smiled slyly. “By a certain age we have all developed a sixth sense that turns us into oracles.”

Gemma smiled, and looked around. “Does His Grace eat breakfast?”

“When he remembers,” she replied, while topping up her tea.

“I think you mean when he is summoned,” the Duke said dryly as he entered the parlor.

His hair was a damp, dark mane around his collar, and he was in shirt sleeves, his white cravat tied in an elegant knot beneath his chin. His navy waistcoat hugged his lean torso and the dark trousers he wore followed the sinewy lines of his legs, and were tucked into tall, polished boots.

She ducked her head away, trying to smother the surge of butterflies that had awoken in her chest.

Gemma rose from her chair and curtsied. “Good morning, Your Grace.”

He nodded. “And to you too, Miss Bradford. How are you faring this morning?”

“Very well,” she replied. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Dusting her fingers off, the Dowager inclined her head. “I have been told that a nun from St. Catherine’s came by yestermorn. What happened there?”

“A travesty of human construct,” the Duke replied while reaching for his cup of coffee. “And that is all I shall say about that.”

Gemma bit her lip. She did not know what to say about the convent and its nuns that hadn’t already been said.

The Dowager buttered a croissant and nibbled at it, then added, “you have heeded my words on that, have you not?”

“Yes, Grandmother, I have,” Frederick said, and his curt enigmatic words had Gemma wondering what they meant.

Gemma shook her head, “I hope she does not come back. Sister Agnes is not... she is not a genial woman by any stretch

of the term.”

“How harsh was she?” Frederick asked.

Withholding the urge to touch her shoulder where the healing welt of the lashes still burned, Gemma sipped her tea. “She was unrelenting.”

Frederick set his cup down a bit too firmly, causing it to rattle in its saucer. “She will never come by here again. If she tries, I will physically show her the door myself.” He clenched his fist at the thought of that woman returning to his halls.

The Duke ate his coddled eggs, grilled kidney and cornmeal cakes, tender rounds brushed with a buttered rum sauce and dotted with currants. Gemma nibbled on a cold collation of pickled meats, cheeses and sweet apricot buns.

“This is delicious,” Gemma said, then promptly bit her lip before taking a bite out of the bun. “We certainly did not get anything like this at the convent aside from Christmastide or Michaelmas. If the nuns saw me now, they would certainly accuse me of indulgence, greed, and a host of other unsavory things.”

“Indulgence is good for the soul,” the Dowager replied. “Speaking of indulgence, what do you like to do, Gemma dear?”

“Well, I do like to read,” she replied. “It was the one thing that took away the mundane drudgery of life at St. Catherine’s. A few months ago the Duchess of Islington gifted the convent a lovely parcel of books for the girls, but the nuns took them away, saying they were secular material.

The day I escaped I accidentally left behind my precious book, *A Thousand and One Nights*, which I had tucked underneath my mattress for safekeeping.”

“Oh, dear me.” The Duchess selected a juicy blackberry tart and took a bite. “Then you should take full advantage of Frederick’s library. His mother was a voracious reader herself. I am sure you can find a copy of that book in there.”

Her head snapped to the Duke, her eyes widening in hope. Frederick snorted over his cup. “You have free rein of the

library, Miss Bradford.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “That is... quite generous of you, to be sure.”

Frederick, seated at the head of the table, gave her a curt nod. “You may stay until I have arranged better circumstances for you.”

Gemma blinked, momentarily taken aback. “Better circumstances?”

He met her gaze, his expression firm. “You are unmarried. Staying here indefinitely would be inappropriate and would invite speculation. I shall see to it that you have a more suitable place to live.”

Her heart sank a little at his words, although she couldn’t quite pinpoint why. She understood the reality of her situation, but somehow the idea of leaving Blackridge Hall—of leaving *him*—left her unsettled.

She nodded, forcing a smile. “I understand. Thank you, Your Grace. I... appreciate your kindness.”

His sharp blue eyes softened for the briefest moment before his usual aloof mask fell back into place. “I shall ensure that your transition is handled discreetly.”

Vivian watched their exchange from across the table with her usual keen eyes and smiled warmly. “You need not worry, dear. Everything will be taken care of.”

She then reached into her small handbag and pulled out a finely embossed card, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Speaking of discretion,” she said, placing the card delicately in front of Gemma, “I think this might be of interest to you.”

Gemma stared at the elegant card, her curiosity piqued.

The Dowager Duchess slid the card over to Frederick. “Out of the many invitations you have received today, I think you might wish to attend this one.”

Rubbing his forehead, Frederick asked. “Another invitation to have insipid conversations about the weather over dry

cucumber sandwiches?”

“It is a rendezvous of businessmen about upcoming investment opportunities at the Marquess of Treston’s estate,” the Duchess said. “I believe his wife is hosting as well.

Upon hearing the name of the host, Gemma stiffened with shock and recognition. Shaking fiercely from a rush of adrenaline brought on by her alarm, she knocked over her teacup and leapt from her chair in shame.

“Oh, oh, I am—I am sorry. Gemma’s head snapped rapidly from left to right. She was distressed and momentarily at a loss for words. “I will clean it up right away. Please forgive my clumsiness, I—”

A warm hand grabbed her left wrist and instantly, her worries and fright vanished, “Miss Bradford,” Frederick said firmly, his tone low, powerful and even. “Take a breath. Calm down.”

Her chest was heaving with anxiety but his hold on her was firm.

I cannot tell him. He—they cannot find out that she is my mother.

“Is your dress stained?” he asked.

She numbly shook her head.

“Sit,” he ordered, and his tone had never held more authority. “We will have someone take care of it. Sit and breathe.”

Silently, she did as he asked and sat back as a footman cleared the table and replaced the tablecloth with a fresh one. All the while she kept her eyes down on her lap, unable to look at anyone.

She hoped they did not realize that hearing her mother’s name had been the cause of her clumsy episode.

If they did, Gemma had no idea what she would tell them.



While keeping his eyes on Miss Bradford, Frederick silently berated himself for how easily he had allowed the other side of his personality to slip to the forefront. The voice he had used

on her was a voice he only used in private, away from the house, in certain clubs, with women who were part of the same type of carnal lifestyle he preferred.

Usually, it was disobedience and defiance that stirred the need to dominate that lay coiled up and waiting inside of him, but with Gemma, it was her vulnerability that had set off the domineering drumbeat in his blood.

Something had scared her... but what?

Decidedly, he moved the attention from her accident to something else. Taking the invitation, he asked, “will you be coming, Grandmother?”

“Sadly, I have a previous engagement with Lady Donahue and Dame Yardly complete with knitting needles and yards of yarn. Oh, along with gratuitous glasses of Madeira wine.”

“I see,” Frederick replied dryly. From the corner of his vision he spotted the tight line in Miss Bradford’s shoulder began to relax and hoped she was not still overly concerned about her mishap.

“At my age, one must ration one’s excitement,” Vivian replied. “I am sure you will have enough delight at the meeting for everyone here. Dear Gemma will be in the library reading and I will be knitting.”

Turning the gilt invitation over, he read out, “*On behalf of Marquess and Marchioness of Treston, you are cordially invited to a gentleman’s summit to meet new investors impacting London. We begin at two-thirty in the afternoon. Guests are invited to stay the night if so desired.*”

Gemma picked at her bun. “Will you...stay there, I mean?”

“Not even if a herd of rabid bulls besieged the manor house and a sudden river carved its way through its middle,” Frederick replied, while easing from the table. “I suppose I should prepare to leave. Miss Bradford, will you let me show you where the library is?”

Pink crept up her cheeks. “You needn’t do so.”

“I know,” he extended his hand.

Still hesitant, she slid her hand into his and stood, then took her leave from the Dowager. Over Miss Bradford's shoulder, Frederick wordlessly warned his grandmother not to ask Gemma the questions he clearly saw rippling across her face.

With a nod to his grandmother, Frederick pulled his hand away as they left the breakfast room. Fortunately, the parlor was on the same level as the library, two corridors down and along a hallway filled with gold-framed portraits of Wyndham predecessors spanning back to the era of Henry the Fifth.

"One day, I might tell you who all these men are," Frederick said, while pausing to nod to a man clad fully in black. "Especially him; they called him the Beast of Blackridge Hall."

The man's contorted face made her eyes widen; an expected reaction when anyone who was not related to his family saw the beastly scar that mangled half of his face.

"Oh my," she said. "What happened there?"

"A horse, a river and moonless night," Frederick abridged the explanation. "I will expound on it another time."

They crossed the stretch of the hallway until they reached the library. The faint, familiar smell of leather and firewood greeted his nose as he opened the door and allowed Gemma to enter ahead of him.

It was a cavernous room which stretched to the very back of the manor and unlike the spaces he knew she had seen thus far, this one was more old-fashioned, with dark paneled walls and a massive, smoothly planed, Indian marble hearth.

The room boasted wide mullioned windows that offered an expansive view of the courtyard below, a small gazebo and a garden beautifully designed with animal statues, manicured hedges and cobblestone walking paths.

A labyrinth of bookshelves occupied most of the room. The only empty spaces consisted of a large oval in the middle of the room that held couches, a coffee table and a thick Aubusson rug. Comfortable window seats were scattered around the perimeter of the room.

Gemma walked over to the windows and rested her palms on the sill and gazed at the surroundings. She was so slight, and the cut of her simple gown accentuated her tiny waist, petite figure and eye-drawing curves. Her lustrous brown hair was knotted at the base of her skull and simple wisps trailed alongside her temples. She looked so much healthier than the pale disheveled girl he had first met in the library.

Objectively, she is as pretty as some of the lovely ladies of the ton.

Turning away from her, he padded down a row of shelves. “Did you say the book you left behind was *A Thousand and One Nights*?”

“I did,” she came to his side and looked up, possibly spotting the familiar spine in the shelves. “Do you have a copy?”

“Actually, I have three for some reason,” his brows lowered.

As she reached up for the book she came a few inches short. Amused, he plucked the volume from the shelf. As he handed it to her, his hand moved at the same time hers did and their fingers collided. A sharp spark crackled between them on contact, and it danced over his skin, jolting his nerve endings.

Gemma jerked her hand away and her lips parted in surprise before she quickly snapped her head away and sighed.

Still holding the book out to her, he waited until she grasped it before asking. “Did something scare you earlier and cause you to knock over the teacup?”

“No,” her eyes dipped down, a clear sign of a lie. “But I do know why I was so terrified afterwards. It...it was a due to a recollection of doing the same thing when I was at the nunnery. The nuns had *not* been pleased.”

A muscled ticked in his jaw. “How old were you then?”

“Eight,” she replied.

“You do not have to worry about being taken to task here,” Frederick promised her. Looking around, he added, “You may stay here as long as you like, or take the book to your room, if you so desire.”

“Thank you,” she replied quietly.

Nodding, he added. “If you need refreshments you may send a footman or a maid to get them for you.”

She hugged the book to her chest and smiled, “Thank you.”

Frederick reached out to touch her but quickly came to his senses and dropped his hand at the last moment. He nodded curtly and exited the library before he could do anything to further embarrass himself.

Frederick strode quickly to his room, closed the door and selected a fresh set of clothes before calling in his valet.

What are you not telling me, Miss Bradford?

CHAPTER 12



“Welcome, Your Grace,” a footman bowed as he took the invitation. “Lord and Lady Treston are eager to meet you upon your arrival. May I bring you to them?”

He had expected as much. Holding back an exasperated sigh he nodded. “I would enjoy meeting the hosts.”

They passed through the grand foyer of the Treston country house, up the polished grand staircase and into an elegant cameo blue drawing room.

The overabundance of grey marble and ash wood lent the room an unwelcome coldness, but Frederick overlooked it and trained his gaze on the people milling about with glasses of champagne in their hands.

A lady, somewhere in her late forties, rose from her chair. She was tall, statuesque and familiar. It was the same woman who had tried to machinate a dance between him and her daughter. She wore a stylish emerald shot-silk gown that complemented her hair as it cascaded across her shoulders.

“Your Grace,” she curtsied. “Welcome to my home. I am so thankful that you are here.”

“Why would I not be?” he asked.

She paused to take two flutes of champagne from a passing waiter and handed him one. “According to the latest *on-dit*, well, rumor has it that you are one of the hardest men to get hold of. Some say you are mercurial while others say you are

reclusive, but I continued to hope that you would attend this evening.”

Over his shoulder, she gestured for someone to approach them. The lord who joined them was a short fellow with wire-rimmed spectacles and brown hair that was beginning to turn grey at the temples. His waistcoat, patterned in loud stripes, strained at the buttons.

“My husband, Samuel Clarke, Marquess Treston,” she introduced him. “My love, His Grace, the Duke of Blackridge.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Your Grace,” the man said, enthusiastically shaking his hand. “I regret not meeting you at your ball earlier in the month. My dear wife and daughter have told me all about you; only good things, I assure you. Welcome to my home.”

“Thank you, Lord Treston,” Frederick replied, before sipping his drink. “Would you excuse me? I see an acquaintance I have been meaning to meet for months.”

“Oh, oh, please, of course,” the Marquess bobbed his head and shook Frederick’s hand again before he stepped aside.

Moving away from his hosts, Frederick hailed a man who was as slippery and untrustworthy as an eel. Upon hearing his name, the man’s head popped up from the crowd of guests much like a weasel’s would do from a pile of rubble.

“Portsgate. You and I need to have a long discussion.”

The man, who had conned one of Frederick’s tenants out of their worldly wealth, went as pale and yellow as seaman sick. “Your Grace, I must—”

“Stay right here before I send for the constables,” Frederick said coldly. “You dared to steal from my tenants? You might as well have stolen directly from me. Now, let us find a seat, hmm?”



“The business venture with Treston sounds interesting,” Lord Drayton said. “I am surprised that he is willing to risk that

much on a new investment, with his wife being as she is.”

Frederick frowned, “What do you mean?”

“Well, she had been married to another earl before. When the poor man died, she dumped him into a pauper’s coffin, and waited the bare minimum of eleven months and twenty-nine days before she swanned off to marry Treston. Might I also add that, during those months, not a stitch of a widow’s black garb ever graced her person.”

“Highly inappropriate, but not unusual for the ton,” Frederick replied. “We like to lie to ourselves that we marry for love when the truth is we marry for rank, fortune, and political connections, only to live a life of scheduled intimacy and discussions of weather over the breakfast table.”

While righting his onyx cufflink, Drayton added, “you may say that now, but rumor has it that she had a daughter with the man that no one has heard from or seen since the man passed.”

“Sent the girl to live with relatives,” Frederick scoffed. “Another commonality.”

“I suppose,” Drayton replied. “Her current daughter is sly, obnoxious and as much of a fortune-hunter as her mother is.”

“Fortune-hunter?” Frederick’s left brow lifted in feigned shock. “How callous of you.”

Laughing, the viscount added, “you have known me from Eton and Cambridge. When was I ever a ball of levity and optimism?”

“*Touché*,” Frederick grinned at Drayton and turned, wondering if the girl had managed to slip inside the billiards room; a bastion of male seclusion.

“However, I am hardly interested in their family dynamics. I already know that her daughter has set her cap to try and sway me, but I regret to say... well, no, I am confident when I say that she will be sorely disappointed.”

Drayton’s eyes lowered. “When was the last time you were at the club?”

He stuck a hand into his pocket and sighed regrettably while swirling his drink. "It has been far too long."

"You should drop by one night soon," Drayton replied. "I know you desire women who have the same proclivities as you, but the average woman will not understand unless she holds the same desires as you have and craves the guidance you can give. I have not had much luck myself."

Frederick hadn't exposed the depth of his proclivities to many. Who knew who was a friend and who was a foe?

Lately, his stint of celibacy had not bothered him much, but now that he realized how long it had been, he felt the need to acquire a partner begin to prickle under his skin.

"I think it is time I leave," Frederick said. "I will see you around."

"And I know exactly where," Drayton grinned.

Laughing under his breath, Frederick handed his glass off and left the room, nodding to the few men he had made connections with before exiting the room entirely.

It did not take him long to get to the foyer, request his coat and call for his carriage. He had nearly gotten away when Lady Trenton called out to him. This time she had her daughter with her.

The girl was pretty but had the look of a spoiled, over-pampered, petulant child in her large blue eyes.

"Your Grace," Lady Trenton said. "Are you leaving already? Heavens, no. I would love for you to stay for dinner."

Her daughter had changed into what could only be described as a ballgown of blue silk, her hair artfully pinned into a fetching updo.

"I do apologize," he said unapologetically. "But I have a prior engagement that I must attend. Good day, ladies."

The clip-clop of hooves on a gravel drive told him the carriage had arrived, and with a nod, Frederick left for the vehicle, pausing to rub his hand over the side of one of the four dappled greys before hopping inside.

Once inside, he trained his gaze out the window and wondered if he should attend Drayton's club that evening and stay at his London townhouse overnight rather than return to the estate.

His palm itched to deliver well-regulated slaps to a trained woman's behind, while she was rendered motionless by the red rope he would artfully twine around her body.

He envisioned Gemma's sweet face contorted in pleasure as his hand squeezed her backside. He groaned hungrily as he fantasized slapping the supple mounds and reddening the skin. He inhaled sharply as he saw her wrists bound in red rope and her full breasts surrounded by the red satin cord.

Heavens, Blackridge. Compose yourself.

Rubbing his face, he reluctantly packed away his burgeoning urges and vowed to unleash them another day.

For now he had to return to the estate.



By the time he returned to the manor it was still reasonably bright outside, but the air was once again becoming charged; the electrical current from an impending storm raising the hairs on the back of his head and arms.

He made a quick stop in his bedchamber to change into fresh clothes before seeking out Gemma.

Although he checked her room and looked in the library, where he had expected to see her, she was nowhere to be found in the manor. Frederick stopped one of his footman in the corridor to ask whether he or any of the other staff had seen her leave.

“No, Your Grace, she did not leave,” the man said, frowning. “Matter of fact, I think I saw her earlier, helping some of the grounds men plant a new section of the garden.”

Surprised, he strode to the gardens to search her out. As he rounded the gazebo, he saw her sitting in the shade of a majestic old tree, a large sunhat on her head and her gown covered in soil and grass stains. Beside her on the grass lay a small spade, a pitchfork and a hand-rake.

“Your Grace,” she looked up, startled by his sudden appearance

He waved away her attempt to get to her feet, then crouched near her for a while and shifted the rake, sparing a look at the sky.

“You have been occupied, I see.”

“I was never one to lie in bed for long, despite what the nuns thought.”

Sitting on the blanket beside her, he bent his knees and rested his arms on top of them.

“Do you have a favorite flower, Your Grace?” she began, “Mine have always been roses. I would see them in drawings, effigies, the stained glass in the chapel, at the town church and at times in books.

I asked a nun why Mary, depicted in a beautiful painting in the church, was holding a rose because I did not imagine they had such roses in those times. She told me that the rose was mentioned in Solomon’s love poem, the Song of Songs.

“So, it was natural that Christian devotion should use the rose as a symbol of the beauty and the attractive power of the mother of God,” she added. “I still feel it was inaccurate and that, during the translation, they could not find the true word for that flower and chose roses instead.”

He chuckled. “Please tell me you said that to the nuns.”

“I did,” she replied then paused. “In my dreams.”

Shaking his head, he added, “it is abominable that you were not allowed to speak your mind.”

She fiddled with a seedling near her and trained her gaze away. “How did you fare today?”

His attention sharpened at her question. “At the meeting? It went well. The men there have some interesting options for earning money that I will consider, but I find the lady and the lord of the house are a curious pair.”

Gemma craned her head to him, her brows lowered. “Why would you say that?”

“I cannot say,” he shrugged. “I get the feeling that she is guiding him by the leading strings, like a parent would a child.”

“Oh,” she mumbled.

When she bit a corner of her lip, clearly to stop herself from speaking her mind, he found himself adding another question to his growing list.

A rumble in the air made him aware that the sky was becoming dimmer and darker as the minutes passed by.

The sun was setting and another storm was brewing. The clouds were heavy and rolling over the hills, dark with threat. His concern shifted from their conversation to ensuring they had enough time to get out of the incoming storm.

Gemma’s head tilted and she must have realized the same, as she set the tools and seedlings into her basket and stood up.

“I think we need to go inside,” she said.

“So do I,” he said, getting to his feet and taking the basket from her. “And we need to hurry.”

They hastened to the nearest entrance to the manor house, knowing that the grounds men were also hurrying to safety. They made it inside just before the thunder began to roll and crash like a cannon ball. The rain had not yet begun, but it was only a matter of time.

Hall boys and maids rushed to pull drapes and shutter windows as the pair headed into the warmer parts of the manor. The moment they entered the drawing room, they could see lightning cascading across the sky and hear the thunder as it reverberated from the heavens.

Gemma jumped.

“Scared of storms?” he asked.

She gave him a half smile as she swatted a loose curl out of her eyes. “I am not very fond of them.”

With an enormous crack, the skies opened up with a jagged fork of blue–white lightning that lit the entirety of the room in which they were standing. After several seconds of thunderous, rumbling sounds, the deluge began to pelt the earth with icy lancets of rain.

“Let us have dinner,” he suggested.

She took another look out of the window, then nodded. Frederick remembered Remus and told Gemma to stay where she was. As fearless as the dog was, he became quite nervous during thunderstorms and usually hid under Frederick’s bed or under his desk when they made an appearance.

Frederick could not leave him alone in his room to quiver with fear. The moment he opened his door, Remus came to him gratefully and sniffed his hand in thanks.

“Come on, old boy,” he said, and headed back to meet Gemma.

As the pair rounded the corner, Gemma’s eyes widened in surprise as she noticed the dog padding beside him. He anticipated her thoughts. “He is not aggressive.”

Gemma tucked in her skirts and crouched to reach for Remus. The dog sniffed her hands, then cautiously approached her to sniff her face. His tail began to wag with approval and Frederick smiled, pleased that Gemma had passed the test. As she rubbed his head and neck, Remus’s mouth hung open, his tail thumped with joy and his body wriggled with delight.

Remus launched forward, almost knocking Gemma off her feet while nosing at her hands, licking her fingertips and slobbering on her chin. Gemma giggled. “Friendly boy, are you not?”

“Remus, down,” Frederick ordered, and the dog’s rump hit the floor instantly.

The delight on her face; the simple pleasure she experienced from doing something he took for granted, warmed his heart.

She stood, pink-cheeked and brimming with happiness. “I believe I should wash my hands before we sit down for dinner. Where are we eating this time?”

“The same breakfast room,” he replied. “It makes no sense to use the formal dining room when it will only be the two of us, plus Remus of course. Grandmother is taking dinner in her rooms this evening.”

“I will be there shortly.” Gemma promised as she walked away to cleanse her fur-coated fingers.

Fredrick’s eyes followed her until she was out of sight.

CHAPTER 13



After washing her hands, Gemma changed into a clean gown; she did not think a dress covered in grass stains would be appropriate attire during dinner.

She silently sent the Dowager Duchess her thanks as she looked over the embroidered, pale lilac dress. The lady had ordered two dresses for her. They were soft and silky and fitted her perfectly. Gemma hadn't worn anything so fine in her entire life.

She paused to examine her hands, smiling at the memory of the Duke's dog. The last time she had touched one was eighteen years ago when her father, the late Earl of Carrington, had bought her a dog for companionship.

Gemma had named the puppy Tilly. She had been a ball of fur with big brown eyes that Gemma had loved like a sibling until her mother had given her away to a neighbor. That very same day she had packed up Gemma and driven her to St. Catherine's.

She rested her hands against the rim of the washbasin and gazed blindly at the water in the bowl.

Now I know why Mother did not respond to my letters begging her to take me out of the convent.

She'd heard whispers that her mother had remarried, but it was only after she had seen an article years ago announcing that her mother had taken the name Treston, that Gemma realized she'd never come for her. Her mother had started another family and forgotten her.

Shaking her head as if to dislodge her dour thoughts, Gemma walked to the breakfast room, where the Duke was waiting for her with his dog, which sat quietly by his side.

Taking a seat across from him, she reached out to pet the dog. “What did you say his name was?”

“Remus,” he replied. “If you believe the myths, Remus, along with his twin brother Romulus, was one of the men who founded the city of Rome.”

Gemma briefly considered his choice of name.

“Why did you not name him Romulus?”

Frederick grinned and chuckled. “Romulus eventually killed his twin brother, so my sympathies lay with Remus and not him.”

She laughed at his unexpected reasoning and shook her head as she smiled to herself.

They both looked up in anticipation as steaming, aromatic plates of pheasant pie were placed in front of them and their glasses were filled with ruby red wine.

The storm rattled the manor’s windows and made the chandelier tremble, but did not affect the light and warmth that emanated from both of them.

“If you wish to keep gardening and caring for the roses, you are free to do so,” he said cutting into his pie. “It might give you better memories of planting than the ones the convent provided.”

After spearing a good-sized chunk of meat, he held it out to Remus and rubbed his ears after he gobbled it up. “Miss Bradford, you were quite young when your mother sent you to the convent. I must ask, what became of your parents?”

I cannot tell him.

“It was so long ago that I hardly remember my father,” she said quietly.

“Why were you sent there?” he asked. “I find it hard to believe that a seven-year-old child could do anything serious enough

to cause them to be interned there.”

“My father... He was not particularly good with financial matters,” she replied looking down at the plate. “After he passed, there was no one to take care of me. I suppose it was to make sure I stayed alive.”

A large rumble made him turn his head to the window before he turned back to her. “Do you remember where you lived before the nunnery?”

“No,” she shook her head, her voice small. “Can we please not speak of it any longer? I...I would rather we did not continue this line of conversation, Your Grace.”

Acceding to her request, Frederick set the remainder of his questions aside for the time being. He could not shake the feeling that he was only getting half-truths from her, but the girl had gone through hell for years; he could allow her to keep some of her secrets.

“I apologize for pushing you,” he said.

She gave him a slight smile, then ate her meal as the storm raged on.

Gemma put down her fork. “Tell me more about your work. How do you go about making investments?”

His brows lifted at the unexpected question. “It starts with determining whether or not they are offering something that has value to the general public. Let me see if I can put it into simpler terms. What if someone offered up one hundred boats so that farmers could ship their produce down a river to a neighboring town. Would you think that is an innovative idea?”

“I would,” she replied. “It would be easier than using animals.”

“It would be, indeed,” he replied, setting his utensils down and moving his empty plate away from him.. “One hundred boats are good, but what if another provider says *he* can offer a ship which can carry *more* produce than one hundred boats combined *and* arrive sooner? Would you see that as a better choice?”

Gemma nodded, “Yes.”

“Then you think of the other factors, such as how easily a fleet of one hundred boats can become damaged, and the cost of repairs versus how much it would cost to repair a single ship. You also have to consider labor, upkeep cost, the constant flow of business from the farms, and other factors.”

She considered his words. “Farmers have seasons. In the off season, could that ship not be used to transport other goods... perhaps products from stone masons or iron workers and the mines?”

He felt oddly pleased at her deductions. “Exactly. That way you are still earning money from your investment in the ship.”

Sitting back, he rubbed Remus’s ears. “You have not touched your wine.”

“I am not used to it,” she admitted reaching for the glass and taking a sip. “It is very strong.”

“I will admit, it is an acquired taste,” Frederick agreed. “You do not have to drink it all now.”

She took another mouthful and then set the glass back on the table. Her gaze turned to the windows. “It does not appear as though the storm will stop tonight, does it?”

“I do not believe that it will,” Frederick turned to the window.

“I think I would like to retire early this evening,” Gemma said.

With a soft nudge, Frederick urged Remus to go over to Gemma. He padded over to her and nosed her hand, his tail wagging in anticipation of being petted. She giggled and rubbed his face before he placed his paws on her knees and nosed at her chin.

“You are a loving boy, are you not?” She rubbed him under his chin and spoke softly to Remus. “They say that pets take their mannerisms from their masters. You know, your master may have a stoic disposition—” her eyes flickered to the Duke “—but you are nothing like that, are you, Remus?”

Cocking an elbow on the back of his chair, Frederick sipped his wine and smirked. “I do not know whether I should be

amused or insulted.”

“Somewhere in the middle, perhaps?” Gemma proposed, and noticed the hint of a smile dancing on the Duke’s lips.

She stood and gave Remus one last rub of his ears, then curtsied. “I shall see you in the morrow, Your Grace.”

“Goodnight, Miss Bradford,” he replied.



The first storm had set the tone of things to come.

Gemma entered the breakfast room cautiously, hoping to enjoy a quiet meal with Vivian, only to find Frederick already seated at the table, his gaze fixed on the sheets of rain as they hammered upon the windows. He barely glanced at her when she walked in.

“Good morning,” Gemma said softly, sliding into her seat. She took notice of the unusual tension in the air, although the storm seemed sufficient reason for it.

Frederick gave her a curt nod. “Morning.”

Just as she began to help herself to the pastries, Vivian swept in, her face alight with enthusiasm.

“Oh, I see you have both started without me! How rude,” she teased. “Frederick, dear, it is lovely to have you join us for breakfast. You have hardly left that study of yours all week.”

Frederick’s eyes flickered toward his grandmother. “I prefer the solitude,” he replied dryly.

“Nonsense,” Vivian waved her hand dismissively. “It is far more enjoyable with the right company.”

Gemma smiled awkwardly, aware of the undercurrent of tension that flowed between the two.

“Gemma, you must make good use of the library today,” Vivian said brightly. “There are so many wonderful books in there. Why, Frederick spent most of his childhood in that library, did you not, dear?”

Frederick’s brow furrowed. “I suppose.”

“You know, Gemma,” Vivian continued, ignoring her grandson’s lackluster response, “Frederick is quite the expert on estate management. You should ask him for advice if you find anything interesting. Perhaps he could help you locate some old records or historical documents.”

Gemma shot Vivian a suspicious glance, her instincts telling her that the suggestion was merely the tip of the iceberg of a larger scheme. “I will keep that in mind.”

Frederick’s eyes darkened at the mention of reviewing old records, and Gemma instantly realized that Vivian was once again trying to find ways to push them together.



Later that day, Gemma wandered into the library. It was a stunning room, lined with shelves of well-worn books that smelled of old parchment and ink. She ran her fingers along the spines, trying to lose herself in the quiet comfort of the place.

A creak of the door interrupted her thoughts.

She turned to see Frederick standing in the doorway, his expression hardened by irritation and something else that she could not quite place.

“Miss Bradford. I did not expect to see you here,” he said in a clipped voice.

“Nor did I expect you, Your Grace,” Gemma shot back, her heartbeat quickening as she met his gaze. “Her Grace suggested I explore the library.”

“She would,” he muttered under his breath, stepping further into the room. “What are you looking for?”

Gemma shrugged, her fingers brushing across an old volume on the shelf. “Nothing in particular. Just...passing the time.”

He regarded her for a moment before moving to the opposite side of the room, pretending to inspect a set of ledgers. The silence between them was thick with unspoken words and Gemma could feel the tension building in the room.

“You do not seem like the type to waste time,” Frederick remarked, his tone sharp.

“Neither do you,” Gemma replied, turning to face him fully. “Yet here we both are.”

For a moment their eyes met and Gemma felt her pulse quicken. The atmosphere between them was as electric as the storm raging outside. They were close, too close, and Gemma knew if she didn’t say something to break the moment, she might do something she couldn’t take back.

Frederick stepped back before she could speak, his mask of cold detachment fixed firmly in place.

“I shall leave you to it,” he said abruptly as he turned on his heel and departed the library without uttering another word.

CHAPTER 14



“Where is Her Grace?” Gemma asked, her heart pounding.

Several rainy days later, Gemma was summoned to one of the sitting rooms by a footman, his message vague but urgent.

She had rushed down the hallway, her mind racing, imagining the worst. Had something happened to Vivian? Had the storm caused some damage to the estate?

When she arrived at the sitting room she found Frederick already there, his face a mask of concern. He was standing by the door, glancing around the room as if looking for someone.

“I was told she fainted,” Frederick replied, his voice tight.

He glanced at the door again as though expecting his grandmother to appear at any moment.

Just as they were about to leave and search for her there came a resounding *click*.

Frederick’s expression immediately grew dark. He stormed to the door and rattled the handle but the door did not budge.

It was locked.

“She has locked us in,” Frederick growled, and he slammed his fist against the heavy oak. “Grandmother!”

Gemma couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped from her mouth. It was absurd, really, the lengths to which the Dowager Duchess was going to keep them together. She looked around

the room, spotting a tray of fine treats and a blanket spread before the roaring fire.

“Well, even though she has locked us in, I must admit that she did it with style,” Gemma remarked dryly, gesturing to the cozy set up.

Frederick shot her a withering look, but she could see the corner of his mouth twitching, as though he was trying not to smile. “This is *not* funny.”

“No, it is not,” she agreed, while straining to suppress her growing mirth at the situation. “But it *is* clever.”

Frederick muttered something under his breath and resumed banging on the door, his frustration growing with every unanswered pound.

Gemma began searching for another way out, but it was clear that Vivian had thought of everything. The windows were locked and the key was nowhere to be found.

After a few moments, Frederick gave up on the door and sank into one of the chairs by the fire, his jaw tight with barely contained anger.

Gemma sat across from him, still smiling despite the ridiculousness of their dilemma.

“You have to admit,” she said, leaning forward slightly, “she is quite determined.”

Frederick glared at her darkly. “She does not know when to stop,” he muttered.

Gemma held his gaze, feeling the tension between them rising once again.

As she sat down in the armchair beside him, Frederick turned toward her, his eyes narrowing.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his tone sharp.

Gemma shrugged, trying to keep her voice light, though she felt her own irritation creeping in. “What does it look like I am doing? I am sitting. We are clearly not getting out of this room anytime soon, so we may as well make the best of it.”

Frederick's brow furrowed. "The best of it?" he said incredulously.

"Yes," she replied with a small smile, gesturing to the luxurious room. "Look around. We are locked in a room with a roaring fire, a tray of the finest sweets, and velvet armchairs that are probably more comfortable than anything you have in your study. We could be stuck in far worse places."

Frederick's jaw tightened, but there was a flicker of something else in his eyes—an acknowledgment, perhaps, that she had a point.

He stalked toward the fire, still bristling with anger, but eventually returned and sat down in the chair opposite hers.

For a moment they sat in silence. The only sounds in the room came from the crackling fire and the more distant howling storm.

Gemma sighed softly and looked over at the tray of treats. "You know," she said, trying to ease the tension, "I think your grandmother might have planned this down to the very last detail. She did not simply lock us in here. She has set the perfect scene. Fine pastries, soft blankets, and just enough warmth from the fire to make us feel cozy."

Frederick scowled, though his gaze flickered to the tray of sweets. "This is absurd," he muttered, but the edge in his voice had dulled.

Gemma raised an eyebrow. "Absurd, yes. But she is persistent, I will give her that."

He didn't bother to respond and merely crossed his arms and stared into the fire, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. Gemma briefly wondered if she should stop trying to make conversation, but sitting in silence with Frederick wasn't any more appealing than talking to him when he was in one of his moods.

She reached for one of the delicate pastries, taking a small bite and savoring the sweetness. "At least the food is good," she said with a grin, trying again to lighten the mood.

Frederick glanced at her, his expression unreadable. “You are remarkably calm for someone who has just been locked in a room.”

Gemma shrugged. “What good would panicking do? It is not as if banging on the door is going to get us anywhere. Besides, I have had worse things happen to me.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, and she could tell he was curious but did not want to pry. He instead turned his attention back to the fire, his fingers tapping rhythmically on the arm of the chair.

After a long pause, Gemma finally spoke again. “Does your grandmother do this sort of thing often?”

“I would not know anything about locking people in rooms, but meddling? Oh, absolutely. She has been setting us up since the day you arrived. She is relentless,” he muttered.

Gemma nodded. “In my limited experience, people who interfere tend to care, in their own way...”

She trailed off, her thoughts turning inward. Her mother had never interfered. Not once.

Frederick’s gaze sharpened at her words. “What do you mean?”

Gemma hesitated, feeling like she’d said too much. But there was something about the quiet intimacy of the moment, the crackling fire, the fact that they were locked in this little room together, that made her feel like she could be somewhat forthcoming.

“My father,” she said softly, staring into the flames, “used to interfere all the time. He was always getting involved in things, especially when it came to my education or my future. I remember once, he had this grand idea that I should learn Latin of all things. He insisted on hiring a tutor, even though I had no interest in it. But he cared, you know? He thought he was doing what was best for me.”

Frederick’s eyes softened slightly as he listened, the hard lines of his face relaxing just a bit. “And your mother?” he asked quietly.

Gemma's smile faded. "She never interfered."

A thick silence developed as the weight of her words settled between them. She could feel Frederick watching her closely, but she didn't look up. Instead, she reached for another pastry, trying to shift the conversation away from her past.

"Here," she said, offering a tart to him. "You should try one. They are really quite good."

Frederick hesitated for a moment, clearly uncomfortable with the sudden change in tone. After a brief pause he leaned forward and took the pastry from her hand, his fingers brushing against hers.

He pulled back quickly as if the contact had startled him, and Gemma caught the way his gaze briefly flicked to her lips before he looked away, his expression unreadable once more.

She pretended not to notice, biting into her own pastry and smiling to herself. "See?" she said, her tone light again. "Her Grace might be a meddler, but at least she knows how to spoil us."

Frederick offered a low grunt of agreement, biting into the pastry with a grudging acceptance. For a while they ate in silence, the discomfort between them easing as they both focused on the food. Gemma could feel the mood beginning to improve, becoming less fraught and more comfortable, if that was possible under the circumstances.

"I have to admit," Gemma said after a while, her eyes twinkling with mischief, "your grandmother does have impeccable taste when it comes to sweets."

Frederick's lips twitched and Gemma thought he might actually smile. "Indeed she does," he agreed, his voice low.

They sat in companionable silence for a few more moments before Gemma couldn't resist teasing him again.

"So, tell me, Your Grace," she said, leaning forward slightly, "what is your favorite sweet?"

Frederick shot her a look, clearly not used to such casual conversation, but there was now a hint of amusement in his

eyes. "I do not indulge often," he said gruffly.

Gemma smirked. "Oh, come now. Everyone has a favorite. Even you."

Frederick sighed as though indulging her curiosity was a great burden. "Very well. Lemon tarts."

"Lemon tarts?" Gemma echoed, surprised. "I would not have guessed that."

"Why not?"

She grinned, biting into another pastry. "Because you always seem so... serious. I would have thought something dark and bitter, something with coffee or dark chocolate."

Frederick's gaze flicked to her, his dark blue eyes narrowing slightly. "Do I really seem so severe?"

Gemma raised an eyebrow. "Yes," she said plainly, though there was a teasing note in her voice. "But lemon tarts? That's... almost sweet."

Frederick gave a low chuckle, a sound so rare that it made Gemma's heart skip a beat. "I have my moments," he said, his voice softer now.

As Gemma nibbled on another pastry she glanced up at Frederick, who was still lounging in his chair, his eyes steadily fixed upon her. His earlier frustration had melted away, leaving behind an air of quiet intrigue. For the first time since they'd been locked in together, his deportment seemed softer and more approachable.

"You know," he began, his voice low, "you have questionable taste in sweets."

Gemma raised her eyebrows in mock offense and laughed softly. "Questionable? You wound me, Your Grace. These pastries are delightful, and I happen to think that I have excellent taste."

Frederick gave a slow, teasing smirk. "You are choosing the ones with the most sugar and cream. You will be bouncing off the walls by the end of the evening."

“And you are only selecting the lemon tarts,” Gemma retorted, her eyes gleaming with mischief. “The most serious dessert for the most serious man. How fitting.”

Frederick shook his head, his lips twitching as if he was trying to suppress a smile. “Serious? Perhaps. But at least I do not consume half a tray of sweets like a child.”

Gemma leaned forward, narrowing her eyes playfully. “I will have you know, Your Grace, that I take my sweets very seriously.”

Frederick chuckled, a rich, deep sound that sent a ripple of warmth through the room.

It was the first time she had heard him laugh freely, and it surprised her. She was not used to seeing him relaxed and enjoying himself. His usual brooding and imposing demeanor had faded, revealing a man capable of humor and lightness.

“And here I was thinking you did not know how to smile, let alone laugh,” Gemma teased, her voice lilting as she leaned a little closer. “I did not think it was possible.”

Frederick’s eyes sparkled with amusement, a hint of challenge. “Careful, Miss Bradford. You are dangerously close to mockery.”

She laughed, her heart racing a little faster as their banter became more intimate.

“Oh, I would not *dare* to mock a duke,” she replied, her tone filled with faux innocence. “That would be *terribly* improper.”

Frederick tilted his head, his smirk deepening. “You are *already* terribly improper, Gemma.”

She felt a jolt of surprise at hearing him use her first name so casually. He had never called her that before; not with such ease and familiarity. It felt intimate and personal, and sent a flush of warmth through her body.

She swallowed, her playful demeanor faltering as the mood between them altered.

“Well, I have been accused of worse,” she said lightly, trying to keep the ambience playful, although her voice came out a

little more breathless than she had intended.

Frederick's gaze darkened, his eyes trailing over her face and lingering on her lips for a fraction of a second too long. Their teasing began to develop a sensual, more dangerous edge.

Gemma's heart thudded in her chest as the space between them seemed to shrink, even though neither one of them had moved.

She smiled, trying to regain some control of the situation, though her pulse was racing. "You should smile more often," she said softly. "It suits you."

Frederick's eyes remained locked on hers, the corner of his mouth curving up ever so slightly.

"And you should be more careful when teasing me," he murmured, his voice dropping to a low, velvety tone.

He moved with surprising speed as he leaned forward and grabbed her wrist. She let out a soft gasp of surprise as he pulled her from her chair and, in one swift motion, rolled her onto the floor and pinned her body gently but firmly beneath his own on the plush rug.

Gemma's breath hitched as her body pressed against his, their faces mere inches apart. The heat from the fire was nothing compared to the warmth that flowed from him, the weight of his body sending a rush of sensation through her. She could feel the hardness of his chest against her, and could hear the rapid rise and fall of his breath that matched her own.

The earthy, clean scent of him flooded her senses. Her world had shrunk down to this moment, this charged space where every inch of her skin tingled with awareness.

"Frederick..." she whispered, her voice barely audible over the pounding of her heart.

His name on her lips seemed to release something in him. As he hovered above her his gaze moved to her mouth and his breath caressed her cheek. Gemma could feel his fervor seeping into her. His hand slid up her arm, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. He curled his fingers around her wrist and gently pinned her arm above her head.

“Say my name again,” he said, his eyes glistening with desire.

Her heart thundered in her chest and her lips parted slightly as he leaned closer and brushed his lips like a butterfly’s wing across her mouth.

“Frederick...” she whispered, unable to deny him anything, not when he was holding her like that.

The anticipation was unbearable, every nerve in her body alight with the possibility of what would happen next. His dark blue eyes bored into hers, filled with a raw intensity that made her pulse race even faster.

Just as their lips were about to meet, the door suddenly creaked open and a familiar voice echoed through the room.

“Frederick! Gemma! Oh, thank goodness, I found you!”

Both of them froze. Frederick’s body went rigid above her, his head snapping toward the door.

Gemma’s heart plummeted, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps as reality crashed back into focus.

The Dowager Duchess stood in the doorway, her cane clutched in one hand, looking around the room with a concerned expression on her face.

“Are you two all right?” Vivian called out, oblivious to the fact that they were hidden from view behind the sofa.

Frederick pushed himself off Gemma with a growl, standing up quickly and brushing off his coat. He shot her a quick glance, his expression one of frustration, embarrassment and unfinished business.

Gemma scrambled to her feet, smoothing down her dress while her heart continued to pound from the ardor of the moment they’d just shared.

Vivian’s footsteps echoed across the room as she stepped further inside, clearly not noticing the state of disarray they had been in only moments earlier.

“I have been looking everywhere for you,” she said, her tone exasperated. “I thought you might have gotten lost, or worse.”

Frederick stormed over to her, his face a mask of controlled anger. “Never do that again, Grandmother,” he said in a menacing tone. “This ridiculous meddling has gone far enough.”

Vivian blinked and stared up at him with wide eyes. “Meddling? What are you talking about?”

Frederick’s jaw clenched. “You locked us in here. You have been pushing and scheming for days. This ends now, or I will have no choice but to send you back to London.”

Vivian’s eyes widened, and for a moment she looked genuinely taken aback. But then her expression softened and she gave him a knowing smile.

“Oh, Frederick,” she said softly, “you are not nearly as hard to read as you think you are.”

With that, Frederick stormed out of the room, leaving Gemma standing in stunned silence. Vivian turned to her, her expression sly and conspiratorial.

“Well, dear,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes, “that went much better than I had expected.”

Gemma stared at Vivian, her mind still reeling from the intensity of the moment that had just passed between herself and Frederick. She didn’t know whether to laugh or scream with frustration.

Vivian patted her hand gently. “He will come around, my dear. He just needs a little more... persuasion.”

Gemma could only nod, her thoughts still spinning as she tried to make sense of the sudden change between them, and the irrefutable connection that had been simmering between them since the storm had begun.

CHAPTER 15



After the maid had helped Gemma into her nightgown, she slipped under the sheets and hugged a pillow to her chest.

She had not met many men before, but she could wager that the Duke was unique. He made her feel in ways that sparked opposing frissons of delight and alarm.

For so long she had been the sole master of her emotions; she hadn't recognized how hard it had been to hold them in. Now, simply letting go of the tight rein had lightened her heart. With his persistence and tenderness, he was slowly teaching her to trust.

It doesn't harm his cause that he is as handsome as a prince..

As she tried to drift off to sleep, the constant rumbles and crashes of thunder kept her awake until she gave up on the possibility, donned her robe, picked up a lamp, and headed to the library.

The room was dark and cloaked in shadows that danced across the ceiling. Before she found a bookshelf to inspect, or took a chosen book to the reading nook, she stopped in front of a large glass-paned window.

Trees were bowing under the force of the wind, their leaves dark against the inky sky. Each time the lightning flashed and lit up the sky, she could see the silver edges of the storm clouds and the sliver of moon behind them.

Gemma turned away from the spectacle and began to search the shelves for a book that would be of interest to her. She

spotted *Troilus and Criseyde, A Poem, and Tragic Love Story*.

That sounded interesting, but as was the case with *A Thousand and One Nights*, the book was several inches above her reach.

“Oh, fiddlesticks,” she grumbled, while looking around. “What should I do?”

There were some ottomans nearby, but they appeared too heavy to lift, and she would never desecrate books by piling them up and standing on them.

“Remind me to get a step ladder made for you,” the Duke’s smoky voice caused her to leap a foot into the air.

Pressing a hand to her pounding heart, Gemma stuttered. “Y-you scared me, Your Grace.”

Silently, he plucked the book from the shelf and handed it to her. “I suppose you are unable to sleep?”

“I cannot,” she fingered the book’s spine. “I assume you could not rest either?” Her eyes dipped to his feet. “And neither could Remus.”

“He becomes very nervous around loud noises,” Frederick dropped a hand to his dog’s head. “Now, find a seat for us. I will be a moment.”

Surprised that he wanted to sit with her, she moved to one of the couches near the coffee table and sat the lamp on an end table. She cracked open the first page and squinted at the lines.

Troilus’s double sorrow for to tell, he that was son of Priam King of Troy, and how, in loving, his adventures fell from grief to good, and after out of joy, my purpose is, before I make envoy.

Tisiphone, do you help me, so I might pen these sad lines, that weep now as I write.

“I may have made a mistake by choosing this,” Gemma said, debating whether to return it and find something lighter.

Frederick sat down beside her and asked, “what do you mean by that?”

“It seems to be a sad tale,” she said. “I would rather not read something that might make me cry.”

His laugh was low and almost sardonic as he flipped through the pages. “True love does not always end happily.”

She met his gaze, curiosity sparking. “What makes you say that?”

He hesitated, the corners of his mouth twitching in a wry smile. “Experience, I suppose. I have seen the power of what true love can do, but I have also seen how easily it can fade.”

“How—how did you come to know that?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

He paused, his expression inscrutable. “Let us just say that I have been around long enough to know that happy endings belong in books. Forgive me if I sound a bit jaded, but I assure you, I am not.”

Lips tight, she retracted her hand. “Have you... have you ever fallen in love?”

“No,” he said. “Finding someone to love seems to be in poor quantity these days. In my station, all they see is unimaginable wealth and luxury.”

A blistering thunderstroke caused her to jump. Frederick wrapped one arm around her shoulder.

His voice was as soothing as it had been when he’d calmed her down at the table. “Easy there. No need to jump out of your skin.”

Surrounded by his warmth, she felt the same security she’d felt before. “It is just thunder. We are fine.”

Still apprehensive, she looked over her shoulder but found that she came too close to his cheek for comfort.

Swallowing, she said, “you are a good man. How is it that you have not found someone to love?”

“I am not overly obsessed with finding such a thing,” he said. “What about you? I know you have lived in a place where

such desires are forbidden, but you are still of the fairer sex. Do you want a husband?"

"You tease me, sir," she shook her head. "I will not deny I have thought about it, but I doubt I will ever marry. What sort of lady would you like to be your wife?"

"Someone thoughtful and kind," he said. "I would rather settle for a marriage of peaceful cohabitation than one of wild emotions. Unfortunately, the ladies I have met and kissed are only after a title and not much else."

Hearing him mention kissing other women tempted Gemma to pull away but she did not, and pressed closer to his side. Maybe it was the darkness, maybe it was the closeness and intimacy, but she could not definitively answer why she asked, "have you ever kissed someone who was not after a title?"

"No."

Her heart hammered and the boldness in her took over. "Would you like to?"

"Miss Bradford," his tone was commanding, and it sent tremors down her spine. "Are you asking me to kiss you?"

Yes, dear God. I so desperately want you to kiss me again.

Yet, upon hearing it from his lips, Gemma felt completely mortified and pulled away, her skin burning from the tips of her hair to the bottom of her slippers.

Although she herself was a lady—or at least she used to be, before her mother abandoned her—she realized that, indeed, she was indirectly referring to herself.

Unable to look at him, she stood up and tried to run from the room, but his hand wrapped around her wrist and held her back.

She kept her eyes turned away from him, praying that a hole in the floor would open and swallow her whole.

"Gemma," his tone was firm and unrelenting. When he spoke her name she could not refuse him. She turned around but kept her eyes focused on the floor. "There you are, darling. Look at me."

“I cannot,” she whispered.

“Yes, you can and you will,” he ordered. “Look at me, Gemma.”

When she did, everything except Frederick faded away into nothingness. She was captivated by the heat of his muscular body, the enticing scent of his skin, the smoothness of his clothes and his proximity to her.

All the hairs on her skin rose and tingled and a swarm of razor-tipped butterflies flooded her belly.

Do it. Look at him.

With her decision made, she tipped her head back. His deep blue eyes gleamed in the dimness as he touched her face and held her chin between his index finger and thumb.

“Good girl,” his breath skittered over her skin.

Without warning his lips sealed hers. His passionate kiss was both a shock and a revelation.

In the lamp-lit darkness, his hard, firm lips kindled a dormant need within her. A hunger for something she’d never known came roaring to life inside her, and the feeling was astonishing.

Tingles of explosive pleasure shot down her body, every sensation heightened, and Gemma whimpered with delight as Frederick tilted her head, his tongue exploring her mouth and teasing her tongue into play, filling her with bliss.

As untried as she was in the art of kissing, she knew well enough to mimic his movements and eked out a deep groan from him. It sounded as if he was starving and someone had suddenly sat him in front of a buffet.

A responsive moan escaped from Gemma. He swallowed the sound, tilting her head back further as their lips caught fire. He tasted like coffee and rich whisky, both flavors dark and addictive. Her primal instincts took over and all thoughts but one abandoned her.

More. I want more.

Senses aflame, she eagerly accepted the hot, invasive thrust of his tongue, and twirled her tongue around his as Frederick's low growl sent shivers through her.

The blast of another thunderbolt caused her to jerk away from him, shattering the deeply intimate moment.

Frederick caught his breath, "Gemma..."

She watched as his eyes slowly lost their beckoning darkness and became filled with reason.

Disappointment rose in her chest as Frederick spoke.

"I-I must go," he lurched to his feet.

She was on her feet the moment he reached the door.

"Frederick, I—"

Gemma's plaintive words echoed uselessly in the wake of his footsteps.

CHAPTER 16



Dawn found Frederick urging his horse over fallen trees and mounds of rocks until he came to the stream that ran parallel through his lands. Only then did he pause.

Last night he had let things go too far with Gem—Miss Bradford. Once he had finally broken free from his haze of arousal and regained his senses, he had been angry and appalled at his lack of self-control.

He had blown apart his iron-clad rule not to toy with innocents. Frederick was keenly aware and ashamed that he had started something he knew he could not bring to an honorable conclusion.

What was I thinking? Gemma is not a woman for me, she is not one for my world. I am a deviant and she is an innocent.

Her innocence had inflamed his need as nothing ever had before, and that was a stretch for him. He was doubly disgusted at himself for trespassing on territory he'd known was forbidden.

One did not kiss virgins without harsh consequences.

However, the prohibition, did not undermine the fact that a simple kiss with her had been more titillating than an orgy with a throng of courtesans.

Things hadn't ended well last night and he knew that he had to take steps to prevent himself from seducing her again. He was still a gentleman, and the role dictated that he had no choice but to do the right thing. He would apologize, patch up any

damage, and make sure he stayed away from her while she was under his protection.

Alighting from the horse, his boots sunk an inch into the sodden earth as he walked to the edge of the tributary. He gazed into the distance as his horse and Remus refreshed themselves at its banks.

Innocents must not play with devils.

She would not understand his need to maintain control in everything he did, nor would she understand his need to blindfold his partners, restrain them with rope and stir their arousal to the point they abandoned all of their inhibitions.

In relationships, like everything else, it was a simple matter of taking control or being controlled. He would never again allow anyone to parade him around like a puppet on a string as his parents had done. He always made sure that he was the one in control of any given situation.

Do I dare hope that she could ever understand me...?

He scoffed at the possibility. "Pigs will fly and bears will jump over rainbows, and I will fetch dry dirt from the bottom of the sea."

It was impossible to even contemplate that Gemma, *sweet, innocent Gemma*, would understand his debauched ways, or want to unravel the twisted knots in his head and soul.

Remus shook his muzzle and trotted around the horse, while Frederick steeled himself to return to the manor and speak with Gemma.

He spurred the horse towards the stables, retracing the route he had taken to the far edge of the property. The entire estate had become heavily water-logged, but little damage had been done to the main building or the outlying structures.

Handing his horse off to a stable hand with instructions to also bathe Remus, he trudged to the main house and headed inside after pausing to scrape the mud from his Hessians.

After changing his clothes he strolled into the breakfast room and jerked to a stop. Gemma, whom he had thought would

avoid him like the plague, was sharing tea and crumpets with his grandmother.

“Oh, there you are,” his grandmother said, brushing off her fingers. “I thought you had gone off to the West Indies.”

His head snapped back. “Why would I do that?”

“Your ribald wanderlust,” she said while topping up her tea. “I know how unpredictable you are, so it is only predictable to predict your unpredictability.”

Frederick snorted. “Your whimsy knows no bounds. Good morning, Miss Bradford. I hope you enjoyed a somewhat decent sleep, what with the thunderstorm last night.”

To his continued surprise she met his eyes. “There were some rather tense moments but I persevered. How did you fare, Your Grace?”

He sat and reached for the folded newspaper. “Never slept a wink. I spent my time with a book and solitude.”

“What book?” Gemma asked.

“*Troilus and Criseyde*,” he said, meeting her eyes again. His gaze locked with hers until they both turned away. “It seems the worst tragedies have the most romantic heroes.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw his grandmother’s shrewd rheumy gaze shifting between them. “Did something happen last night of which I am not aware?”

“No,” they both blurted out simultaneously.

She reached for the milk boat. “I see. You two seem committed to playing tricks on an old woman and sending her to her grave with an unsolved mystery.”

“Please,” Frederick shook out the paper and ran his eyes over the words in front of him. “You are no closer to your grave than you were twenty years ago. And there is no mystery of which you are not aware, Grandmother. You are the Oracle of Delphi.”

“If only I were so fortunate,” she said. “I would rather gain knowledge through foresight instead of rumors, whispers, and

tidbits of this and that. That would make it so much easier on my poor brain.”

“Once again, your brain is sharper than a two-edged dagger,” he said. “Why else do I hoard your nuggets of time-earned wisdom like a dragon hoards its gold?”

“Good, good,” Vivian replied. “Which is why I must insist that you apologize for whatever dunderheaded thing you did last night and promise not to do it again.”

Hands stalled, Frederick asked, “why do you think I did something wrong?”

The elderly woman reached for her cane and rose to her feet. Before excusing herself she tapped his shoulder and added, “because I have known you from before you knew yourself, son. Your emotions are not as hidden as you think they are. Now, sort this out quickly because I want to have lunch with Lady Donahue and Dame Yardly in peace.”

Before leaving, the Dowager eyed them knowingly with a tart smirk.

When her footsteps stopped echoing, Frederick sighed, dropped the paper and rubbed his eyes.

“She is right about last night. I wronged you. I should not have touched you, knowing what I know about you.”

Gemma kept her eyes down, and he wondered if her earlier bravery had begun to dwindle.

“I do not...” she bit her lip. “I do not blame you. Can we put it behind us and pretend it did not happen?”

For some reason, he *despised* that suggestion.

He took a careful sip of the scorching coffee and set the cup down as his mind spun in a dozen different directions. “Miss Bradford—”

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” a footman bowed. “The nun has returned. She says is it urgent.”

Not moving his eyes from Gemma, he ordered, “send her away.”

“I have tried, Your Grace,” the footman replied, “But she will not leave of her own accord.”

“Devil and damn, I do not have time for this.” Frederick groaned while pushing away from the table. “Send her to my study. I will try to send her away as quickly as she arrived.”

Striding away from the breakfast room he entered his study. His prior irritation only grew when he saw the nun there, her lined face placid.

“Sister Agnes,” he said curtly. “May I ask why are you here when I explicitly told you to never again set foot on my property?”

She did not seem fazed. “I wish I could apologize without guile, Your Grace, but I cannot. I know you have Gemma Bradford here, so I ask you to return the problem child to the nunnery and I will never come by your house again.”

“She is not here,” Frederick said tightly. “As I told you when you came the first time. Please leave, and if you dare return, I will have you arrested.”

Her lips flattened into a thin bloodless line, “You would have a nun arrested?”

“If I had my choice, I would have had your whole convent arrested and your priory shut down for the death of my sister,” Frederick’s voice was a snarl. “You have a lot of self-righteous pomposity for someone whose godly house murdered an innocent girl.”

Sister Agnes paled. “I do not know what you mean, Your Grace.”

“Of course you do not,” Frederick rounded his desk, “And even if that poor girl was here, the hounds of hell would have to drag me away before I would agree to return her to your Satan’s den of horrors. Now, for the last time, leave my home or I will have you carried out by force.”

The nun scowled. “I will leave but I must warn you, that girl will lead you to your grave. She is not to be trusted.”

“I find it ironic how you see the devil in others, but you do not see it in yourselves,” Frederick replied. “You caused an innocent girl, who made one mistake, to die under your *tender* care without explanation to the family. Yet, you still have the gall to hold your head above others. Let me ask you, Sister Agnes, what did the good Lord mean when he said, *he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone?*”

The nun’s expression turned even more mulish. “I will see myself out.”

“And do not come by again.” Frederick warned.

CHAPTER 17



The following morning sunlight streamed through the tall windows of Blackridge Manor and cast soft, golden light across its sprawling grounds. The storm had passed, leaving the air crisp and the sky clear.

Gemma descended the grand staircase, her footsteps echoing softly against the polished wood. Despite the beauty of the day, a pang of sadness was lodged in her heart.

Today would be her last day at Blackridge Manor.

Gemma slowed as she neared the breakfast hall and took a deep, ragged breath to compose herself. She did not know what to expect after the charged moment she and Frederick had recently shared in the library.

The memory of his body pressed against hers, the warmth of his breath, and the intense way in which he had regarded her flashed through her mind.

Stepping into the room, Gemma paused. Frederick was already there, sitting at the long dining table with a newspaper in his hands.

He glanced up briefly as she entered the room, then wordlessly returned his attention to the paper.

The looming silence was thick and awkward.

Gemma swallowed uncomfortably, her fingers brushing against the fabric of her dress as she moved toward the table. She took a seat across from him, trying not to fidget.

The awkward silence stretched and grew heavier with each passing second. She sensed his every movement, every rustle of the newspaper and each breath he took but neither of them spoke.

Just when the silence had become nearly unbearable, the door opened and Vivian entered, her cane tapping lightly against the floor as she made her way to the table.

“Good morning, my dears!” Vivian greeted them cheerily, her eyes sparkling with her usual mischief. “What a lovely day it is after all that dreadful weather. I trust you both slept well?”

Gemma offered a polite smile. “Yes, thank you, Your Grace.”

Frederick merely grunted in response, lowering his newspaper but keeping his gaze fixed on it. The Dowager, as always, seemed unbothered by his cold demeanor.

“Well,” Vivian continued, taking her seat with a soft sigh, “since the storm has passed, I imagine the time has come to discuss what will happen next.”

Gemma’s heart sank slightly at the reminder. She’d known this moment was coming. It was improper for her to remain a guest of Blackridge Manor now that the storm had cleared. She wasn’t family, nor was she engaged to Frederick. Staying any longer would raise eyebrows amongst the ton, even if nothing untoward had taken place between them.

But still, the thought of leaving left her feeling strangely empty. She had enjoyed her time here, despite everything. Even the tension with Frederick had felt... alive, waking something in her she hadn’t felt in a long time.

As if sensing her thoughts, Vivian turned her sharp gaze on Gemma. “I have been thinking, dear,” she began, her tone casual but with an air of authority. “It would, of course, not be proper for you to remain here much longer. A young lady staying in a bachelor’s home for no particular reason tends to stir up needless gossip.”

Frederick’s jaw tightened slightly, though he remained silent.

“However,” Vivian continued, her eyes gleaming with an idea, “I would like to offer you a place at my own estate as my

lady's companion. It is a perfectly respectable arrangement, and I could use some bright company. Besides, it is closer to several northern estates and villages, so you will not be too far away from society."

Gemma blinked in surprise, unprepared to receive such a kind offer. The Dowager's estate was about two hours away from Blackridge Manor. It was a generous proposition, and it would save her from having to return to her former life. Still, something about it felt... orchestrated.

Vivian smiled kindly at Gemma. "I see enormous potential in you, my dear. You would be a welcome addition to my household."

Frederick frowned deeply at this, his dark eyes moving from Vivian to Gemma. His lips pressed into a tight line, as if he disapproved of the idea but couldn't quite find the words to object.

After a long, tense pause, he finally nodded stiffly.

"It is the proper thing to do," he said quietly, though there was no warmth in his tone.

Gemma hesitated, unsure how to feel. The idea of staying with the Dowager was tempting. She had grown fond of the older woman's sharp wit and keen intelligence, and it would give her a chance to remain close to Blackridge, even if Frederick wasn't particularly thrilled by the arrangement. But the uncertainty of it all—the unclear dynamics between her and Frederick, the potential for more tension—made her feel uneasy.

"I would be honored, Your Grace," Gemma said finally, forcing a smile. "Thank you."

Vivian beamed at her. "Wonderful! It is settled, then. We shall leave tomorrow. I will have the carriage prepared."

There was a pause, and then Vivian's eyes twinkled mischievously as she added, "Of course, Frederick, you are welcome to visit us anytime. I have no doubt that you will check on us regularly."

Gemma felt a flicker of hope at her suggestion, her heart quickening slightly.

Would Frederick visit? Was there a chance that this strange, simmering connection between them could develop into something more?

Frederick, however, only nodded curtly, his expression as closed off as ever.

“I am sure I will,” he said, though his voice lacked any real conviction.

With that, he stood up abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor.

“I have work to deal with,” he muttered, his tone dismissive.

Without another glance in Gemma’s direction, he strode out of the room, his boots echoing down the hallway as he disappeared from sight.

Gemma remained seated as emotions churned inside of her. Disappointment, frustration and longing took turns invading her heart. It was all quite exhausting.

She had hoped... well, she wasn’t sure what she had hoped for. Perhaps a sign from him, a hint that he felt something for her, even if he wouldn’t admit it outright.

But instead, he had simply left.

Vivian, sensing Gemma’s mood, reached out and patted her hand gently. “Do not fret, dear,” she said softly. “Frederick is... complicated. He needs time to sort through his emotions.”

Gemma forced another smile, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “I am not sure he has any emotions to sort through.”

Vivian chuckled softly. “Oh, he does, trust me. He just keeps them deeply buried. But I know my grandson. He is more affected by you than he lets on.”

Gemma glanced at the door where Frederick had disappeared, her heart heavy with uncertainty.

“I hope you are right,” she said quietly.

Vivian's eyes twinkled again and she graced Gemma with a reassuring smile. "I am always right, my dear. Now, why do we not make the most of our last day here before we head to my estate? There is nothing like a good walk through the gardens to clear the mind."

Gemma nodded, although her thoughts were far from clear. She couldn't shake the feeling that her time with Frederick was not over, even if he was determined to push her away.

As she stood up to follow the Dowager out of the dining room, Gemma glanced one last time at Frederick's empty chair, her heart whispering a quiet hope that this wouldn't be the end.



The Dowager Duchess' estate, Greenwood Hall, was a sprawling, elegant manor with ivy-clad walls and large windows that allowed sunlight to stream into its vast rooms. The gardens were breathtaking, full of winding paths, rose bushes and perfectly trimmed hedges.

Life at Greenwood Hall was a welcome change for Gemma. Unlike the strict confines of the convent or the stifling formality of other households, Greenwood Hall felt like a place where she could breathe. Every day was filled with leisurely breakfasts in the sunlit dining room, afternoon walks in the gardens, and evenings spent by the fire with a book or engaged in lively conversations with Vivian.

There was an ease in the daily routine, a rhythm Gemma found comforting, even as the uncertainty of what her future held lingered in the back of her mind.

Vivian, as always, was full of energy and plans. One week after they'd settled in, she announced over tea that they were to attend a prestigious ball at the nearby estate of the Duke and Duchess of Islington.

"A ball?" Gemma asked, her teacup pausing halfway to her lips. The very idea of attending such a grand event both thrilled and unnerved her. She had never been to a ball. "Do you think it is a good idea, Your Grace? I am not sure that I am prepared for something so grand."

“Nonsense, my dear,” Vivian replied, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “You will fit in perfectly. You have grace, wit, and charm in abundance. And besides...” she paused, her tone growing even more playful, “...Frederick will also be there.”

At the mention of Frederick’s name, Gemma’s heart skipped a beat. She hadn’t seen him since the day they left Blackridge Manor. Despite the awkwardness between them, she could not help feeling a pull in his direction. The memory of their heated moments still lingered in her mind, making her both nervous and excited at the prospect of seeing him again.

Gemma’s reverie broke as Vivian clapped her hands together. “I have a surprise for you, dear.” With a sly smile, she motioned for a servant to bring something to her.

Moments later, a maid entered carrying a stunning gown. It was a light blue silk dress, with delicate lace embellishments and a flattering silhouette that seemed to shimmer in the light. Gemma’s breath caught in her throat.

“This...” Gemma gasped, running her fingers over the sleek fabric, “this is beautiful.”

“I had it tailored just for you,” Vivian said with a satisfied smile. “You will look like an angel in it, my dear. Perfect for your grand debut.”

Gemma’s heart swelled with gratitude, although her nerves still gnawed at her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her eyes misting slightly.

She had never had someone do something so kind for her before; it felt overwhelming in the best possible way.

Vivian patted her hand. “You deserve it, Gemma. Now, do not fret. You will be the most dazzling lady at that ball, I am certain of it.”



The evening of the ball had arrived, and Gemma stood before the mirror in her room at Greenwood Hall, barely recognizing the woman staring back at her.

The light blue gown fit her perfectly, accentuating her curves while still being modest. Her hair was pinned in soft curls, and a small silver necklace adorned her neck; a finishing touch that infused her appearance with a sense of elegance she had never known before.

As the carriage pulled up to the grand estate of the Duke and Duchess of Islington, Gemma felt her heart race. The mansion was glowing with light, laughter and music that floated on the night air as carriages lined the drive. In the tall windows she could see silhouettes of couples enjoying themselves on the dance floor, and her stomach fluttered with nervous excitement

“Remember,” Vivian whispered as they stepped out of the carriage, “you belong here, Gemma. Hold your head high.”

Gemma nodded, though her palms were damp with anxiety. She followed Vivian inside, her senses immediately overwhelmed by the grandeur of the ballroom.

The ceiling was high and domed, with glittering chandeliers casting a warm glow over the elegantly dressed crowd. Soft music was being played by a small orchestra in the corner, while couples glided across the floor in perfect synchronization.

For a moment, Gemma felt like she had stepped into another world.

As they moved through the crowd, exchanging pleasantries and nods, Gemma’s searching gaze swept across the room.

And then she saw him. Frederick.

He stood near the edge of the dance floor, his tall, muscular frame impossible to miss. He looked as serious and brooding as ever, dressed in a sharp black coat and waistcoat, his dark hair elegantly styled. But she spotted a change in his eyes as he registered her presence that made her heart skip a beat.

She quickly looked away, feeling a flush of warmth rise on her cheeks. But before she could dwell on it, a tall, handsome man approached her with a charming smile.

“Miss Bradford, I presume?” he asked, bowing slightly. “I am Andrew Gulliver, Earl of Newfield. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Gemma blinked, momentarily taken aback by his sudden approach, but managed to offer a polite smile. “The pleasure is mine, Lord Newfield.”

Andrew was strikingly handsome, with sandy blond hair, warm hazel eyes and a boyish charm that instantly put her at ease. His smile was wide and his eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief that suggested he was accustomed to charming everyone in the room.

“I must say,” he continued, glancing at her dress appreciatively, “you look absolutely ravishing this evening.”

Gemma blushed, a little taken aback by his boldness, but there was something light-hearted in his tone that made her smile. “Thank you, my lord.”

“Please, call me Andrew,” he said, grinning. “After all, we are practically neighbors, now that you’re living with Her Grace.”

Before Gemma could respond, he offered her his hand, “Would you do me the honor of sharing a dance?”

Gemma hesitated only for a moment to glance at Vivian, who gave her a discreet nod of approval and encouragement.

“It would be my pleasure, my lord,” she responded.

She placed her hand in Andrew’s and allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor. The music was soft and lilting, and as they moved together she felt herself relaxing and enjoying the ease of his company.

Andrew was charming, easygoing and full of playful compliments that made her laugh. He twirled her gracefully across the floor, his light-hearted conversation soothing her nerves.

But even as she smiled and laughed with him she could feel Frederick’s eyes on her. Every now and then she caught a glimpse of him watching them, his jaw clenched and his brow furrowed in that familiar, brooding way.

The sight of him, standing so rigid and stern in the corner, made her pulse quicken. She couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking; whether he cared at all that another man was showing her attention.

"Tell me, Miss Bradford," Andrew said, pulling her attention back to him. "How are you finding northern society? We are not nearly as stiff as the London crowd, are we?"

Gemma chuckled softly. "No, you are not. It has been... refreshing, to say the least."

"And I hope we have been treating you well?" Andrew asked, his eyes twinkling as he spun her gently. "You seem to be fitting in perfectly."

"Everyone has been very kind," Gemma replied, smiling. "It has been more than I could have hoped for."

Andrew's smile grew, and for a moment, his gaze flickered to the side, toward Frederick. "It seems you have caught the attention of more than just me this evening," he said, his voice low and teasing.

Gemma followed his gaze and her heart skipped a beat when she saw Frederick watching them, his dark eyes smoldering with intense possessiveness.

"Shall we make him even more jealous?" Andrew whispered playfully, his tone light.

Gemma laughed softly, but there was a thrill in the suggestion, and she found herself nodding.

"I like you even more now, my dear," Andrew said with a playful smirk.

They danced a little closer and a little slower, and she couldn't help but enjoy the attention, both from Andrew and from the way Frederick's gaze burned upon her from across the room.

For the first time in her life she felt seen. Not as an obligation or a burden, but as someone worthy of attention.

And it felt good.

CHAPTER 18



“Stop glaring, Frederick, you are going to burn a hole through the poor girl,” came the amused voice of his grandmother, who sidled up next to him with an ever-present twinkle in her eye. She followed his sight line to the dance floor and gave a knowing chuckle. “You look as though you are about to murder the earl.”

Frederick watched the dance floor with narrowed eyes, his gaze locked on Gemma and Andrew as they twirled across the floor.

The soft music floated through the air, but to Frederick, it sounded like nails on glass.

He was standing near the far end of the ballroom, trying his best to ignore the gnawing band of jealousy that tightened around his chest as he watched Gemma laugh at something Andrew had said.

Her face was illuminated by the chandelier light, her lips parted in a smile that had Frederick’s blood boiling. Not because she was smiling, no, it was because she was smiling at Andrew—a man who had never known a serious day in his life.

And the way her eyes sparkled when she looked at him only made it worse.

“I do not know what you are talking about, Grandmother,” Frederick muttered, folding his arms crossly over his chest.

His posture was stiff and his jaw was tightly clenched as his gaze returned to Gemma, who was once again laughing at

another one of Andrew's witticisms.

"Of course you do, Grandson," Vivian said breezily, as though his mood was of little consequence. "You are jealous."

Frederick shot her a sharp look, his frown deepening. "Nonsense."

Vivian raised an eyebrow, her expression one of mocking disbelief. "Oh, please. You have been glaring at them like a hawk all evening, and now you are going to try and convince me that it is 'nonsense'?"

He gritted his teeth in a silent refusal to entertain his grandmother's accusation.

He knew that there was no point in denying what was patently obvious, at least where Vivian was concerned.

He glanced back at Gemma and Andrew, seeing the latter lean in closer to whisper something into her ear. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, fighting the urge to march over there and pull her away from him.

Vivian's voice interrupted his thoughts once more. "You could always go and cut in, you know. It is what men do when they are interested."

Frederick shot her a glare. "I am not interested."

Vivian's laugh was soft but teasing. "Of course not. That is why you look like you are going to throttle poor Andrew."

As the music continued, Frederick found himself unable to stay still. The sight of Andrew's hand on Gemma's waist, and the way her laugh carried across the room gnawed at him mercilessly. His stomach knotted as he seethed with jealousy.

When he saw Gemma walk away from the crowded ballroom, her face slightly flushed as she made her way down a quiet corridor, Frederick couldn't resist following.

He didn't know what had spurred her departure, but he had seen enough for tonight.

He needed answers.



As Gemma made her way through the throngs of elegantly dressed guests, she felt the sharp glances and heard the faint whispers that followed her.

She was used to curious stares and a few sidelong looks. Accompanying the Dowager Duchess of Blackridge, who rarely took on companions, gave her a certain mystique. But tonight, the whispers seemed to reach her ears with peculiar clarity, and she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her a little too closely for comfort.

“Oh, it is Miss Bradford, is it not?” A tall, poised lady with a delicate smile caught her arm, her voice as smooth as cream but with an edge that made Gemma's stomach tighten. “You must tell us all! How did you come to be in Her Grace's favor?”

Gemma managed a polite smile, though her fingers suddenly felt cold. “I am fortunate to have met Her Grace,” she replied evenly, hoping to end the conversation there.

But the lady's smile only widened.

Another voice chimed in, that of a young woman with bright eyes and an all-too-keen interest.

“Yes, how curious. We have heard that you are not from these parts. What an unusual choice for Her Grace to make a companion of someone... unknown to society. Are you from London, perhaps?”

The question felt like a probe, and Gemma swallowed. “No, not from London,” she replied, trying to keep her tone light.

“Oh, how fascinating! Then where, pray tell?”

Gemma hesitated, memories of St. Catherine's prickling at the edge of her mind. She wished the Dowager was with her to intervene or whisk her away, but she was across the room, deep in conversation with an old friend.

“I grew up in the countryside,” she said softly, trying to steer the conversation away. “It was... a quiet life.”

“And what of your family?” a third woman asked, her head tilted in a way that suggested she was aware of just how

unsettling her question was. “I would imagine they must miss you dreadfully, what with you now residing here in the north.”

A pang of loneliness shot through Gemma, the sting of her mother’s rejection and the endless years at the convent pressing against her heart.

She forced a smile. “They... they are dead.”

“Oh, how tragic,” one of them murmured, though her expression held no trace of genuine sympathy. Instead, she leaned in closer. “So no family to speak of, then?”

Gemma’s throat tightened and she could feel her face growing warm.

She didn’t dare let her discomfort show, even as her mind reeled with memories she tried so hard to suppress; the empty convent hallways, the letters that went unanswered, the nuns’ cold voices telling her she was *alone*.

“No,” she managed to say, her voice steadier than she felt. “No family at all.”

The trio exchanged looks, their curiosity evidently piqued.

“Poor dear,” one of them said with a faint, pitying smile that somehow felt worse than scorn. “You are lucky indeed to have found a benefactor in the Duchess. How... providential.”

“Yes,” Gemma replied quietly, her smile fading as the words seemed to echo in her mind.

She needed air, needed to escape their cold, prying eyes and sharp tongues.

“If you will excuse me...”

She walked away, her steps quickening as she wove through the crowded ballroom, heart pounding as she finally slipped down a quiet corridor and opened the first door she could find.

After she had entered the room and shut the door behind her, she leaned against it and took a deep breath. The walls felt as if they were closing in and her past clawed at her with cruel insistence.

She looked around and realized that she was in a small library, its shelves lined with leather-bound books that slept in the long shadows cast upon them by the candlelight.

Gemma walked to the window, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as she looked out into the darkened garden, her thoughts whirling in a storm of memories and questions.

Then she sensed it. The familiar, magnetic presence behind her.

She didn't need to turn around to know it was him.

The moment Frederick entered, she felt her body instinctively tense.

"Your Grace. Why are you here?" Her voice came out softer than she had intended, weary and vulnerable.

She heard the door's latch click shut and his heavy footsteps drawing closer.

"I could ask you the same thing," he replied, his tone clipped, almost accusing.

Gemma turned to face him and was startled by the force that emanated from his eyes.

"A small group of ladies asked one too many inquisitive questions about my past," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "I needed a few moments to myself."

She could feel his unrelenting gaze searing into her. His eyes glimmered with pain and repressed jealousy.

"Is that all?" he asked, his words carrying a weight she didn't understand.

He took a step closer, towering over her in the dim light.

"What do you mean?" She frowned, taken aback by the harsh, accusatory tone of his voice.

His jaw tightened. "You have been flirting with Lord Newfield all night."

Gemma's eyes widened. "*Flirting* with him?" she repeated, incredulous. "What are you talking about?"

“Do you truly think I could not see the way you looked at him?” he questioned, his words sharp and scathing. “The way you smiled and laughed at everything he said...?”

She took a step forward, her own frustration boiling over. “What on *earth* are you talking about, Your Grace? Why do you care if I smile or laugh?”

Her question seemed to stop him in his tracks, leaving him speechless, and his expression became momentarily confused. He opened his mouth as though he had intended to offer a sharp retort, but had instead thought better of it.

Her heart ached as she watched him struggle to communicate.

Then, with his voice in the lowest octave she had ever heard him speak, he whispered, “because you are mine. And *no one* touches what belongs to me.”

Before she could fully comprehend his words, Frederick’s arm circled her waist and he pulled her against him, his lips crashing down on hers with a hunger that caught her completely off guard.

Gemma gasped, her body stiffening and her senses reeling. As his lips moved over hers, and his fingers gripped her tightly, she felt herself begin to yield to the wild need that rose up inside of her. Without further thought, her hands instinctively reached up and wrapped themselves around his neck.

The world around them faded, her senses narrowing to nothing but the feel of his body against hers, and the rough desperation of his kiss. He pulled back just enough to rest his forehead against hers, his breath warm and ragged.

“You drive me mad, Gemma,” he whispered, his voice strained with longing. “You awaken something in me; something dark, wild and completely beyond my control.”

She shivered at his words, at the raw intensity in his gaze, but before she could speak, his lips claimed hers again, softer this time, but still commanding.

His hands moved with a steady, unyielding purpose, guiding her towards the desk behind them. She felt its edge press into

her back as he lifted her onto it, his hands cradling her face with surprising tenderness.

A tremor ran through her as his fingers slipped down her arms, raised them above her head and pinned them together with one hand. She arched involuntarily, her breath catching as his mouth found her neck and his teeth grazed her skin. Her body responded automatically, her legs tightening around him as a moan escaped her lips.

“Say it,” he murmured, his voice a velvet caress against her skin. “Say you are mine.”

Gemma felt her cheeks flush and her pulse pound in her ears. She tried to look away, but his fingers lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“I... I am... yours,” she managed, her voice breathless.

A satisfied smile played on his lips and he pressed another searing kiss to her mouth as his hands wandered over her curves. He leaned over and trailed his lips down her neck to the delicate hollow of her throat and the soft swell of her chest.

The sensation made her shudder and her head fell back in bliss as his lips found the sensitive skin between her collarbones.

She hardly recognized herself as she responded so freely and so full of need under his electric touch. His hand slid under her skirt, and when his fingers touched the gap between her thighs, Gemma felt herself freeze, her heart pounding with fear and desire.

“I... I have never...” she whispered, her cheeks blazing with embarrassment and thrill.

“Good,” he murmured against her lips, his voice thick with desire. “This means you are mine in every way.”

“Oh...” she breathed.

He kissed her deeply again, his hand roaming higher, exploring and teasing her with a tenderness that left her weak and trembling.

“Tell me you want this too, Gemma,” he urged, his voice a low growl.

“I... I do. I want you, Frederick.”

A deep, satisfied sound escaped him then, and he kissed her with renewed passion, his touch bold and assured as he explored her, pushing her toward sensations that were both thrilling and alarming in their intensity.

She lost herself in his breathtakingly sensual touch, her body alive to every caress, every whispered word.

A loud noise suddenly sounded from outside the library doors, abruptly breaking the spell.

Frederick groaned with frustration, pulled away from her with obvious reluctance and gently helped her down from the desk. She clutched at his coat, still breathless, unsteadied by the magnitude of her desire.

“Come... my Lady Gemma,” he whispered, a mischievous glint in his eye as he guided her toward the door. “We should return to the ballroom.”

“Y-yes... all right...” She could barely catch her breath, but before she could leave he pulled her close to him again, his lips meeting hers in one final, consuming kiss.

“Do not think this is over,” he murmured, his lips brushing her ear and sending another shiver through her. “We have only just begun, my lady.”

CHAPTER 19



That night, Gemma lay awake in her chambers, her mind restless and buzzing with thoughts she could barely understand.

Her body still tingled from Frederick's kiss, the intensity in his words and caresses, and the way he had looked at her as though no one else in the world mattered.

She'd never imagined that someone would look at her with such desire and passion that it made her tingle to even recall it. She turned over in her bed, clutching the sheets tightly.

What are you thinking, Gemma?

She chided herself and pressed her face firmly into her pillow, as if that could somehow muffle her wild thoughts.

But the memory of Frederick was seared into her mind. His rough grip, the warmth of his breath mingling with hers, the possessive way he had pulled her close. Her skin still felt as if it burned where his hands had touched her.

"Maybe I am not so lost to the idea of affection after all," she murmured to herself, a soft, almost mischievous smile playing on her lips.

The thought lingered. She, a spinster by all accounts, had never seriously considered marriage; the structure and obligations of a typical union had always seemed stifling. She knew that Frederick also had no desire to marry.

Perhaps they could... arrange something. Just something for themselves, away from the eyes and expectations of society. It

would be wild, improper, and surely risky. Yet, the thought sent an excited rush through her that left her cheeks flushed despite the cool night.

She tried to shake the thought away, telling herself she was being reckless. Yet, as she lay there, a shiver of delicious anticipation filled her as she imagined what it would be like to feel his hands on her again, to lose herself in his embrace and forget the rest of the world.

Eventually, with her heart still pounding, she drifted off into sleep, her dreams filled with images of Frederick, his intense gaze, his strong hands and the press of his lips.



The next morning, Gemma found herself grateful for Vivian's company, which kept her distracted from her thoughts.

They spent the day together, with Vivian introducing her to the staff and the inner workings of the estate, her presence as lively and cheerful as ever.

Over the following days, Vivian continued to welcome Gemma into her world with warmth and kindness, and Gemma found herself growing quite fond of the older woman.

But just as she felt she was finding some semblance of peace, the Dowager threw her off balance once again.

"Frederick will be joining us tomorrow," she announced casually as they sipped tea in the drawing room.

Gemma's heart skipped a beat. "Frederick?" she asked, trying to keep her tone calm, though she was sure her voice gave her away.

"Yes," Vivian replied, her eyes twinkling delightedly at Gemma's feigned attempt at neutrality. "The estate needs a little more work than I thought, and Frederick has a far better eye for those types of things than I do."

"Oh, I see," Gemma replied, attempting to maintain her composure as she set her teacup down, but her hands betrayed her by trembling slightly. The thought of seeing him again so

soon, after the intensity of their most recent encounter, sent a ripple of impatient eagerness through her.

Vivian watched her with a raised eyebrow. “I do hope you will keep him company when I cannot, Gemma. You are good at lightening his serious moods.”

Gemma managed a nod, though inwardly her mind was racing.

Keep him company?

Just the thought of being alone with him again made her stomach jolt and twist.

The mere thought that she would see him the following day made her feel like a foolish schoolgirl, desperate to catch even a glimpse of him.



The next day dawned bright, with a slight chill in the air. By mid-morning, Gemma and Vivian found themselves in the estate’s gardens, plucking herbs and vegetables with the servants, the sunlight casting a warm glow across the vibrant greens of the plants and the neatly laid paths between the beds.

Gemma relished the chance to be outdoors, her hands busy with the cool touch and heady aroma of fresh herbs as she worked alongside Vivian.

“Here, try some of this,” Vivian handed her a sprig of mint, freshly picked. “It has such a lovely smell, does it not?”

Gemma took the sprig and breathed in its fresh, sharp scent. “Oh, it does. It reminds me of summers with my father. He used to take me to the fields where mint grew wild.”

Vivian smiled warmly, a hint of nostalgia in her eyes. “You know, I used to sneak out to the gardens when I was much younger,” she confessed, glancing at Gemma with a conspiratorial wink. “There were things I was not supposed to do, and plants I was told not to touch, but of course, that just made them all the more inviting.”

Gemma laughed softly, amused by the thought of a young Vivian sneaking about the gardens, likely to raise havoc

wherever she went. “I think I can see that. You do not strike me as someone who likes to be told what to do.”

“Oh, indeed not,” Vivian said with a chuckle, a gleam of defiance evident in her eyes. “Age may have slowed me down, but it certainly has not dampened my spirit. And for that, I am grateful every single day.”

Gemma’s smile softened as she watched the older woman. Vivian had been a source of unexpected kindness in her life, and though they had not met that long ago, Gemma felt a deep connection with her.

“You know, I have lived quite a life, dear,” Vivian continued, her gaze distant. “I have known joy, pain and everything in between. And if I have learned one thing, it is that life should never be lived half-heartedly.”

Gemma nodded, her thoughts trailing back to her own recent revelations.

“I think I am just beginning to understand that.” she admitted, her voice quieter.

She thought wistfully of her father and of all the years she had spent locked away in the convent being denied the freedom for which she so desperately longed.

Vivian reached out, patting Gemma’s hand gently. “It is never too late to start, my dear. You have such spirit, such fire. I saw that the moment I met you.”

Gemma looked down at the Dowager. A warm, peaceful happiness spread through her chest as she digested Vivian’s words.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she replied softly. “That means more than I can say, and more than you know.”

Vivian simply smiled and returned her attention to the garden. “There is nothing wrong with embracing what you feel, Gemma. Sometimes we hold back for fear of what others may think, or for fear of being hurt. But life is not meant to be *safe*. It is meant to be *lived*.”

Her words hung in the air, carrying a weight of importance that Gemma could feel settling within her. She glanced at the Dowager, wondering if the older woman knew of the emotions that had recently stirred within her, or if this was simply the wisdom of a lifetime, shared in passing.

With a small sigh, Vivian straightened and brushed off her hands. “Now then, shall we gather these and head back? I am sure you need some time to prepare for our guest,” she said with a knowing smile.

Gemma felt her cheeks warm but managed to nod. “Yes, that would be lovely.”

As they gathered the herbs and vegetables, Gemma found her thoughts turning once more to Frederick. The anticipation of seeing him again grew with every step she took and her thoughts jumped around excitedly in her head at the prospect.

She wasn’t sure what would happen when she saw him, but one thing was certain. After her conversation with the Dowager, she was no longer willing to let fear dictate her choices.

With a small, determined smile, she followed Vivian back to the house, feeling the tendrils of excitement taking root in her heart.

Tomorrow, when Frederick arrived, she would be ready.



Gemma carefully chose her clothing that morning, opting for something simple. A high-necked, pale linen dress with a small sash tied at the waist. The look was both sweet and practical, and she told herself that she had chosen it for comfort.

In truth, she wasn’t ready to show how eager she was to see Frederick again, and how his presence seemed to churn up something deep within her.

She took a breath, trying to still the fluttering in her chest, and joined Vivian for breakfast, determined to keep her thoughts collected.

“Good morning, Gemma.” The Dowager greeted her with a warm smile as she sat down. “You look quite refreshed. I imagine you are eager to get to work with me on the estate today.”

Gemma smiled, grateful for Vivian’s ever-steady presence. “Yes, I would love to be of whatever assistance I can offer. Despite my appearance, I am no stranger to demanding work.”

“Indeed?” Vivian asked, arching a brow with interest.

“Oh yes,” Gemma replied with a laugh. “I do not know how it might help here, but I also know how to care for sheep, geese and chickens, for a start.”

“Now that, my dear, I would never have guessed!” Vivian said, her eyes twinkling with amusement as she sipped her tea.

“Well, it is true,” Gemma continued, smiling at the memory. “Whenever I misbehaved at the abbey—and that was often—I was sent to help the farm hands. I mucked out the stalls, herded flocks, even tried my hand at milking cows once.” She wrinkled her nose. “That one... was not exactly a success.”

Vivian let out a soft chuckle. “Sounds like quite the punishment for a lady of rank! But clearly, you learned more than they had intended.”

“I did,” Gemma replied with a faint note of pride. “I suppose they meant to make me feel ashamed about having to do the work, but instead I learned the importance of it. Besides, I never had anyone else to do things for me, and I found I did not mind in the slightest.” She smiled, glancing at Vivian with a hint of mischief. “I could even help you with the sheep if you needed.”

Vivian laughed heartily and it rang across the room. “Oh, Gemma, I think I would pay good money to see that! Frederick would be positively scandalized if he saw you trying to wrangle sheep on my estate.”

Gemma’s smile faltered for just a moment as she thought about Frederick’s probable reaction. “Yes... I have a feeling he might not see it in quite the same light.”

Vivian waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, nonsense. He might seem gruff, but do not let his disposition fool you. He knows the value of challenging work.” She gave her a knowing look, one that made Gemma feel slightly exposed, as if Vivian could read her every thought.

“Still, I wonder if he would see it as fitting for a lady,” Gemma murmured, but Vivian only chuckled, clearly unfazed.

“You may be surprised, dear. Frederick is astute; he recognizes quality when he sees it.” Vivian said with a wink, her words layered with a subtle hint of encouragement. “Besides, any man who cannot appreciate a practical woman with real skills is simply not worth worrying over.”

Gemma let the warmth of Vivian’s words settle in, feeling a sense of acceptance that she had not experienced for many long years. The quiet understanding that passed between them soothed her nerves, and she found herself relaxing, her laughter blending with Vivian’s as they spoke.

When breakfast had concluded, the Dowager suggested they take a stroll in the garden. Gemma agreed gladly, and they set off along the path leading to the rose garden, the morning air fresh and slightly crisp, promising the coming warmth of the afternoon.

As they walked, the two of them chatted about art and literature, delighting in shared opinions on authors and painters alike. Gemma was grateful that Vivian took her opinions seriously and even debated her on the finer points of some pieces, never patronizing or judging her point of view, even when it differed from her own. It was refreshing to be treated as an intellectual equal, and she found herself talking more freely, laughing and enjoying their rich conversation.

They passed by a row of vibrant blooms. Roses in varying shades of blush, cream and ruby red lined the walkway their deep, sweet fragrance permeating the air. Gemma stopped to admire them and brushed her fingers reverently along one delicate petal.

“They are exquisite, are they not?” she murmured, almost to herself.

“Yes,” Vivian replied softly. “It is one of the many things I have grown to love about Blackridge. Its beauty is not limited to the grandeur of the house. The land itself is a marvel.”

Gemma nodded, her gaze still on the roses. “I can see that. There is something about the countryside that feels... liberating. It is real, soothing and unpretentious. You can lose yourself in it.”

Vivian’s voice softened, her tone wistful. “Indeed. It has given me so much peace over the years. When one grows older, there is a different beauty one appreciates; a beauty in simplicity, in nature.” She placed a gentle hand on Gemma’s arm, her smile tender. “It is one of the reasons I am glad to have you here, my dear. You remind me of myself at your age, eager for the world, yet still finding your place in it.”

“I am so grateful you have allowed me to be a part of it all,” she said softly, sincerity filling her voice. “I never imagined finding this; such warmth, such kindness, after so long.”

Vivian’s eyes softened and she reached out to take Gemma’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “It is my pleasure, Gemma. You deserve this and so much more.”

As they walked, a soft breeze rustled through the hedges, carrying with it the faint sounds of life on the estate—voices, laughter, and the distant whinny of horses from the stable yard. Gemma was so immersed in the tranquility of the moment that she almost didn’t hear the approaching footsteps.

The chamberlain’s voice broke into their quiet. “Pardon me, Your Grace,” he said, bowing. “The Duke has arrived.”

A thrill of nerves shot through Gemma and her heart skipped a beat at the announcement. She met Vivian’s gaze, trying to keep her expression composed, though she could feel the rising flush in her cheeks.

“Ah, perfect timing,” Vivian replied, casting a quick, amused glance at Gemma. “Please inform His Grace that we shall be with him shortly.”

The chamberlain nodded and disappeared along the path back to the house. Gemma watched him go, her pulse quickening

despite herself. She straightened her dress, brushing off invisible flecks of dust as if it might somehow steady her.

Vivian tilted her head, watching her with a knowing smile. “Nervous, are we?”

Gemma laughed, though it was breathless. “I... I suppose I am. It is just...” She paused, casting her gaze to the house in the distance. “He always seems to unsettle me in ways I cannot quite explain.”

Vivian’s eyes sparkled. “The best ones often do, my dear.” She gestured toward the path with a nod. “Shall we go and welcome him?”

Gemma took a deep breath and nodded. Together, they made their way back to the house, her steps steady yet quickening with each passing moment.

The thought of seeing Frederick again—of facing him after their last encounter—sent a warm thrill coursing through her.

She knew she had to keep her composure, to be practical, calm and reserved. Yet, as they drew nearer, she could feel her restless heart betraying her, its beats thumping so loudly in her chest that she feared the Dowager would hear it.

Vivian seemed to sense Gemma’s inner turmoil and gave her one last reassuring smile before they reached the grand entryway.

“Remember, Gemma. Confidence,” she murmured softly. “Let him see the woman you are.”

Gemma met her gaze, the older woman’s encouragement lending her strength. “Thank you, Your Grace. I will keep that at the forefront of my mind.”

As they crossed the threshold, Gemma felt both exhilaration and nerves, all of them heightened by the anticipation that had been simmering within her since the ball. She hadn’t known what to expect from him then, and she knew even less now.

But, ready or not, she was determined to face the Duke, to meet his eyes and find out what lay beneath his composed exterior, even if it left her breathless all over again.

CHAPTER 20



“Frederick, dear, it is so lovely of you to come,” Vivian said, a heartfelt smile spreading across her face as her gaze jumped from the Duke to Gemma and back again. “I am quite pleased to see you two here together. I thought some tea might be just the thing to start the day off right.”

Frederick had been on edge for days now, the cause of which he could trace directly back to the ball and, more specifically, to Gemma. Every time he thought of her—the way she had danced with Andrew, how her lips had parted as they’d argued in the quiet of the library—he became overcome by a fierce, possessive longing that bordered on insanity.

When his grandmother’s invitation had arrived, claiming she needed help with ‘estate matters,’ he’d barely paused before accepting. He knew full well that she didn’t actually need his assistance; she’d been managing her own affairs for decades, long before he’d inherited his title.

No, this was another scheme of hers, likely involving one particular dark-haired woman who haunted his thoughts. His grandmother, he suspected, was meddling once again.

And now, here he was, sitting in her parlor, his body tense with anticipation. His mind replayed fragments of his last encounter with Gemma. Her breathless anger, the way she’d stared at him with such confusion, and a challenge in her gaze that had only spurred him further. He wondered if he’d taken things too far, too fast.

Maybe he had scared her off. Maybe she'd want nothing more to do with him.

Frederick scowled at his own thoughts, frustrated by the mere idea of never seeing Gemma again.

“Good afternoon, Grandmother, Miss Bradford,” he greeted as he stood up and offered them a bow.

Gemma was still standing in the doorway beside his grandmother, a small bundle of freshly cut roses in her hand. She was smiling softly, her cheeks flushed from the garden air.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace. I trust that your journey here was comfortable,” she responded.

He fought to maintain his composure as he entered the room, but despite his best efforts, his gaze was unwillingly drawn to her. It took every bit of restraint to keep himself from staring outright.

Gemma moved gracefully into the room, placing the roses in a small vase on the table. Her fingers brushed over the petals and he found himself envying those delicate blooms, wishing he could reach out and she would touch him in the same way.

Instead, he forced himself to sit rigidly as his grandmother settled into her chair and began pouring the tea, her eyes bright with what he instantly recognized as another devious plot unfolding.

“Um, yes. It was all right, Miss Bradford,” he finally mustered a reply.

Gemma took a seat beside Vivian, glancing at him before she quickly looked away to focus on the scones set before them.

Frederick clenched his jaw, feeling the weight of their unfinished business lingering between them.

“You know, Gemma has proven herself to be quite the asset here on the estate,” Vivian began conversationally, passing her a plate. “She has shared some of her skills in gardening and animal husbandry, which I must say, Frederick, could be rather useful to you today.”

Frederick's brow rose in surprise. "Oh?" he asked, trying to keep his voice neutral. "And how, precisely, could Miss Bradford be useful?"

He caught a flicker of amusement in his grandmother's eyes as she took a sip of her tea. "Well, as I mentioned in my letter, I would like you to introduce yourself to some of my tenants. It is time they knew you better, and I thought it prudent that they feel comfortable with you before any inheritance matters arise. And as for Gemma, she has an easy charm and a keen understanding of the land and its workings—qualities I believe would serve you well in making a positive impression."

"Are you implying I do not possess the knowledge of the land and its workings?" Frederick raised an eyebrow.

"Not at all my boy. I meant to imply you have no easy charm," she replied matter-of-factly, sipping her tea once more.

Frederick heard Gemma cough lightly into her tea. It wasn't a cough exactly—rather a stifled chuckle.

Gemma sipped from her tea. He raised an eyebrow at her.

"I'm all right," she merely said.

Frederick scoffed. He knew he wasn't the most charming of lords but he could handle meeting some tenants on his own.

Before he could respond, his grandmother went on, "The tenant will see Miss Bradford as someone who understands their lives and their challenges—a trait they might find refreshingly approachable. It would make the visit feel less... transactional."

"I wasn't aware this was to be a group endeavor," Frederick replied, his voice edged with dry humor.

Vivian's expression remained serene. "Consider it an exercise in partnership. After all, every good landlord needs someone to remind him of the human element."

"Very well," Frederick replied, feeling a faint tug of suspicion. "Still, you have managed this estate splendidly for years, Grandmother. Why the sudden urgency?"

The Dowager raised an eyebrow, setting her teacup down with a gentle clink. “The future is uncertain, Frederick. It is wise to make provisions while one is still able. I want to be sure my tenants feel acquainted with you, not just as the Duke of Blackridge, but as my grandson. Now is as good a time as any.”

Frederick’s gaze narrowed, still unconvinced. “You are faring quite well, are you not?”

“Perfectly,” Vivian answered smoothly. “But I have always been the sort to plan ahead. And besides, with Gemma here, I imagine she might make the task a bit... more enjoyable.”

He cast a glance toward Gemma, who sat quietly beside Vivian, meeting his gaze with a faint smile that he couldn’t quite decipher.

He felt a sudden urge to test her to see if that fire he’d glimpsed in her was still there. But instead, he tempered his expression, knowing his grandmother would notice any unusual reaction.

“Well then,” he said slowly, “if you wish for me to play the charming Duke, I shall certainly oblige.” He turned his attention to Gemma, who was watching him intently. “It seems, Miss Bradford, that you and I will be spending the day together.”

She gave a little nod, her gaze steady. “I shall do my best not to be in your way, Your Grace.”

There was something teasing in her tone and he felt the corners of his mouth involuntarily move upward.

His grandmother, ever observant, chuckled softly, seemingly pleased with herself.

“Ah, I see you two are getting on splendidly,” Vivian remarked, reaching for another scone. “It is as I had hoped.”

Frederick raised a brow. “Oh? And what exactly did you hope for, Grandmother?”

She merely shrugged, an enigmatic smile playing on her lips. “Oh, that you might enjoy a pleasant day together. It seems to

me that both of you could do with a bit of fresh air. Frederick, you have been much too serious of late. I believe some light company might be just the thing.”

Gemma glanced down at her tea, trying to hide a smile, but he caught it and felt his own mirth rising in spite of himself. His grandmother was every bit the cunning orchestrator, he realized, and her matchmaking was almost laughably obvious.

“Well, as usual, your wisdom knows no bounds,” Frederick replied with a trace of dry amusement, though he was careful not to let his gaze linger on Gemma for too long. “Perhaps I have underestimated you.”

Vivian merely chuckled. “My dear grandson. You have *always* underestimated me.”

The Dowager turned to Gemma. “He was a lively child, always testing the boundaries of propriety,” she said fondly. “I recall he once tried to catch a fox in the gardens simply because he thought it would make a fine companion. His grandfather nearly had a fit.”

Frederick’s lips quirked in a smile, picturing the scene. “That sounds like him,” he admitted. “He always did have a tendency to, ah, take matters into his own hands.”

Vivian nodded, her eyes twinkling. “He did indeed. I see much of him in you, Frederick. You have the same passion, even if you are more controlled about it.”

He snorted lightly, glancing over at Gemma. “Control has its uses.”

Gemma met his gaze with a mildly challenging expression. “I suppose it does. But sometimes a little recklessness can lead to unexpected opportunities.”

Frederick felt his pulse quicken at her words, his mind flashing back to the library, where recklessness had indeed created a charged, and unforgettable opportunity.

As they had finished their tea, Vivian looked at them both with a touch of pride, clearly satisfied.

“Well, I suppose I should leave you two to your day. Frederick, remember to be gracious to the tenants; they are loyal to me, and I would wish for them to be as loyal to you.”

Frederick nodded, already anticipating the day ahead with curiosity and intrigue.

“I shall do my best, Grandmother,” he said.

Gemma rose, smoothing her skirts, and offered Vivian a gentle smile. “Thank you for the tea, Your Grace. And for the lovely roses.”

As he made his way out of the room with Gemma, Frederick felt a thrill of anticipation, wondering just what the day held in store for them.

The boundaries between them were still unclear, but for once, he didn't feel the urge to keep his distance.



After a short carriage ride they arrived in the village, a quaint collection of thatched-roof cottages clustered around a small green, with a stone church at its center.

Frederick noticed Gemma take it all in with a keen eye, her gaze settling appreciatively on the sturdy little buildings and the rows of homespun goods displayed by local vendors.

“It is beautiful,” she murmured, her eyes gleaming as she looked around. “There is life here...a sense of community that feels... rare.”

“It is a good village,” Frederick agreed, glancing around with quiet pride. “The people here are loyal to my family. Most have been tenants for generations.”

They walked further down the street, nodding to villagers who greeted them with polite deference.

Near the edge of the green, a woman in a worn but clean apron and tired eyes stepped forward, balancing a toddler on her hip. She curtsied awkwardly before Frederick, her face both hesitant and hopeful at once.

“Your Grace,” she began, her voice quivering slightly. “My name is Mary Winslow. I do not mean to be bold, but I heard you might be visiting today, and I hoped...well, I prayed...I might have a chance to speak with you.”

Frederick gestured for her to continue, noticing Gemma watching the woman with an encouraging smile.

“It is my boys, sir,” Mary explained, her gaze shifting between Frederick and Gemma. “My husband passed last winter, and I have done what I can to keep us all together. But there were two orphans from the village, boys who lost their parents to the fever, and...well, I could not bear to leave them. I have taken them in, but—” Her voice faltered. “I have three little ones of my own, and space is getting tight.”

Gemma’s expression softened and she stepped closer to the woman. “How old are the boys?”

“Seven and eight, Miss,” Mary replied, her face brightening slightly at Gemma’s interest. “They are good lads, hardworking, and eager to help. But it has been hard to feed everyone properly, and I am afraid they might have to go to the poorhouse.”

Frederick’s brow furrowed at the thought. He glanced at Gemma, who was already nodding thoughtfully.

“We could find work for them,” Gemma said, looking at him directly. “I am certain that there are tasks around the manor, and even here in the village, which would benefit from a few extra hands.”

Mary’s face lit up with hope. “Oh, Miss, that would be wonderful. They are truly good boys, I promise. And they are so eager to learn. They would be so grateful.”

Frederick felt an unexpected swell of pride as he watched Gemma’s compassion towards the woman.

“Perhaps we could find something for them,” he agreed, keeping his tone even but aware that he was as captivated by her generosity as Mary clearly was. “Miss Bradford, would you be able to oversee any arrangements?”

“Of course,” Gemma replied immediately, her eyes sparkling. “I would be happy to assist.”

Mary bobbed another curtsy, her voice full of gratitude. “Thank you, Miss. Thank you, Your Grace. I know they will be so grateful.”

They continued on through the village, Gemma’s smile lingering as she watched a cluster of village children laughing as they chased one another around the green.

“You did well back there,” Frederick said after a moment, glancing at her sidelong. “Not everyone would have stepped in so readily.”

Gemma shrugged lightly, a trace of shyness in her smile. “I have seen enough people abandoned to the poorhouse. They deserve a chance to build something better for themselves, especially if they are willing to work for it.”

Frederick felt a pang of admiration. There was no pretense in her response, only a quiet resolve that seemed deeply rooted in her character.

He respected that, perhaps more than he was ready to admit.



Their final stop took them to a large farm just outside the village, a sprawling estate bordered by stone walls and fields that stretched into the distance.

The farmhouse itself was sturdy but showed signs of wear, and a gruff-looking man, well into his sixties, approached them with an expression that was less than welcoming.

“Your Grace,” he greeted Frederick curtly, with a shallow nod. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

Frederick straightened, a touch of authority seeping into his tone. “Mr. Redding, I wanted to discuss the state of your farm. I noticed you are managing the fields with fewer hands than in years past. Given the scale of your operation, I would imagine you need assistance.”

The farmer’s face fell. “That is the truth. But the lads either go off to make their fortunes or...well, they are no longer here, in

any event.”

“How can you keep up with your workload without proper help?”

Redding’s mouth thinned in a defiant line. “This land’s been in my family for generations, Your Grace. I will not let it go to waste, with or without help.”

Frederick felt frustration bubbling up at the man’s stubbornness, but before he could respond, Gemma stepped forward with a gentle smile.

“Mr. Redding, might I suggest a solution?” she interjected, her voice calm and respectful. “We met a woman in the village who is caring for two orphaned boys. They are young but eager to work, and they could certainly use a place where they would be of value. Perhaps they could help you here and learn the trade.”

The old man’s gruff exterior softened as he considered her words, his gaze shifting to Gemma with a newfound respect. “Orphans, you say?”

“Yes,” Gemma continued, her tone soothing. “They are hardworking boys, only seven and eight, but with guidance I think they would be a fine help to you. And perhaps you would also enjoy the company.”

A small smile creased the edges of Redding’s mouth. “Well, I would not say no to a bit of help, and it would be good to have some young ones about. Been quiet since my boys left.”

Frederick watched with growing admiration as Gemma held Redding’s gaze, her expression warm and genuine.

“Then it is settled,” she said, her voice tinged with satisfaction. “I will bring them by tomorrow morning to get them acquainted with the place, and if you need any extra help, I will come down myself and assist you with the work.”

Redding’s gruffness melted away entirely, and he nodded gratefully. “I appreciate it, Miss. You are welcome here any time.”

They bid him farewell, and as they walked back toward the village, Frederick remained silent, his thoughts swirling. He had never expected her to be so adept at handling people, much less someone as ornery as old Redding. Watching her in action had stirred up a measure of respect and a deepening curiosity to know more about her that he had not anticipated.

“You surprise me,” he said at last, breaking the silence between them.

Gemma tilted her head, looking up at him with a faint smile. “Why? Because I care about the tenants?”

He shook his head. “No, because you manage people with such ease. It is as though you have been doing it all your life.”

She gave a small laugh, glancing down. “It is something I learned by necessity, I suppose. When you have little control over your own life, you learn to make the most of what you can influence.”

Frederick’s gaze lingered on her, his admiration deepening. “Well, Redding seems to think highly of you now. He is not easily swayed.”

Gemma smiled, her eyes meeting his. “Everyone has something they need, Your Grace. Even the toughest of men.” She paused. “Perhaps, especially the toughest of men.”

CHAPTER 21



“Ah, here you both are. I trust the day was productive?” the Dowager Duchess greeted Gemma and Frederick as she left the library and carefully scrutinized the two of them.

Gemma felt a glow of quiet satisfaction. The day had gone better than she could have wished. Her suggestions regarding the orphaned boys and Redding’s farm had been remarkably well received and even praised by Frederick.

Gemma was inwardly thrilled by his compliments, and she smiled to herself as they walked inside. His soft and thoughtful gaze had lingered on her for a beat longer than expected as they had crossed the threshold, making her cheeks flush with self-consciousness.

Frederick turned to his grandmother with a light in his eyes that Gemma hadn’t seen before.

“Productive is an understatement, Grandmother. Miss Bradford managed to solve a rather delicate issue in the village. Thanks to her, Redding now has the help he has been needing, and the orphaned boys have found a home.”

Vivian’s eyes shone with pride and she turned to Gemma, her smile warm and admiring. “My dear, that is remarkable. I have heard that Mrs. Winslow took in those boys, but I had no idea things had become so difficult for her.”

Gemma’s blush deepened, her head dropping slightly. “It was a small thing. I only suggested it because it made sense to try.” She looked up, her cheeks still heated. “Mr. Redding needs the

help and the boys needed somewhere to go. But it truly was nothing. Anyone could have seen the solution.”

Frederick raised an eyebrow, his tone gentle but firm. “I do not think *anyone* would have thought of it.”

Vivian clasped her hands together, her face beaming with genuine approval. “I must agree with my grandson, Miss Bradford.”

“Well, that would be a first,” Frederick muttered under his breath.

Vivian waved her hand at him, dismissing his remark. “As I said, it is this sort of... kindness, and quick thinking that I seek in my companions, my dear. Well done, I say.”

Gemma smiled back, feeling a warmth in her chest that was almost overwhelming. It had been so long since anyone had taken note of her efforts or valued them. To receive such praise from both Frederick and the Dowager was more than she’d expected.

“Well, I certainly believe this is a cause for celebration,” Vivian declared as she clapped her hands with elation, her voice rising with delight. “My boy, you must stay for dinner. It would make the evening all the brighter.”

Frederick paused, his hesitation momentarily dimming his expression. “I have responsibilities at Blackridge, Grandmother. I had planned to return this evening.”

Vivian fixed him with a look that brooked no refusal, one eyebrow arching in gentle reprimand. “Come now, Frederick. There is no harm in taking one evening off. Besides, I have already sent word to the kitchen to prepare something special.” Her gaze softened as she spoke, and she added lightly, “you are already here, dear. Stay and enjoy yourself for once.”

Gemma held her breath. She was far too invested in his answer to move or breathe. She willed him to agree to stay.

The thought of spending a relaxing evening with him in the warmth of the manor’s dining hall made her heart soar to an altitude she couldn’t ignore.

Finally, Frederick relented, his expression relaxing as he glanced at Gemma and back to his grandmother. “Very well. If you insist, Grandmother. But I shall return to Blackridge tomorrow at first light.”

Vivian’s eyes sparkled with triumph, and she motioned for them both to follow her deeper into the library as she rang for a maid to bring some refreshments. “It is settled then! Let us sit for a drink and enjoy a few moments together before we dress for dinner.”

When the maid returned with glasses of rich, fragrant port, Vivian lifted hers in a toast, her eyes and smile both warm and appreciative. “To Gemma for her kindness, her quick thinking, and the gift she has shared with our village today.”

Frederick raised his glass, his gaze resting on Gemma with an intensity that made her feel both delighted and bashful.

“To Gemma,” he echoed.

Gemma’s smile grew, her heart swelling as she lifted her own glass. “Thank you both. It means the world to me to be here with both of you.”

They drank, and Gemma let the port’s warmth spread through her, adding to the lovely sense of contentment the day had provided. As the conversation drifted to lighter topics, Vivian’s stories took on a lively tone, her eyes sparkling as she regaled them with tales from her youth.

“Did you know, Frederick,” she began, chuckling, “your grandfather used to warn the entire neighborhood when I let loose on one of our midnight horse rides?” She winked at Gemma. “He told them to watch out for a wild lady riding like the wind.”

Frederick laughed, shaking his head. “That sounds entirely like you, Grandmother. And entirely unlike him.”

“Oh, indeed,” she replied, undaunted. “I always felt he should have loosened up a bit more. That man did not know the meaning of the word relaxation.”

The time passed quickly and Vivian glanced up at the clock with a start. “My, look at the hour,” she said, placing her

empty glass aside. “Dinner will be ready soon and I have not even *begun* to get myself ready.” She looked over to Gemma with a kind smile. “Perhaps we should all take a moment to freshen up.”

Gemma stood, feeling a bit reluctant to leave the warm confines of the library, but excited at the prospect of the evening to come. “That sounds perfect, Your Grace.”

Frederick, who had also risen, gave his grandmother a slight nod. “Shall we meet in the dining hall in an hour?”

Vivian offered an impish grin and nodded approvingly. “Indeed. And Frederick, do try to look as dashing as I know you can.”

Frederick rolled his eyes in playful exasperation. “I shall do my best for you, Grandmother.”

As they left the library, Frederick’s gaze briefly lingered on Gemma.

It was enough, however, to set her pulse racing all over again.



Gemma ran her hands over the skirt of her gown, taking in her reflection with a mix of trepidation and quiet pride.

The dress was a rich, deep blue that brought out the color of her eyes, and the delicate lace edging at the neckline framed her neck and shoulders in an unexpectedly flattering way. The Dowager had insisted on the alterations last week, and though Gemma had been reluctant to let the seamstress do too much, she had to admit the result was striking.

She dabbed a touch of rouge on her cheeks, something she almost never did, and now, seeing the slight flush it added, hoped it was enough to conceal her own nervousness.

Finally ready, she breathed deeply, exhaled and made her way down the corridor. She had taken longer than she had originally planned, repeatedly fussing over her hair and gown, and expected to find both Vivian and Frederick waiting for her to make an appearance. When she opened the door her eyes widened in surprise. Frederick was alone and stood by the

hearth with a glass of whisky captured between the tips of his fingers.

He looked up as she entered, and the room seemed to settle. Frederick was dressed in the same dark attire he'd worn to the ball. A sharp black, finely tailored coat and a pristine white shirt underneath. His hair was combed back, though a few unruly strands fell forward, and his gaze held a warm affection for which she hadn't quite been prepared.

"Good evening," she managed, hoping that she was not imagining the tenderness in his expression as he looked at her.

"Good evening, Miss Bradford." His voice was steady and welcoming and she felt a spark of pleasure at the sound. "You look... lovely."

Gemma's cheeks warmed and she took a moment to collect herself, offering him a small smile in the process. "Thank you. It was Her Grace's choice. She has quite an eye for choosing the right color."

"Seems my grandmother has an eye for many things," he replied, his eyes glancing up to meet hers with a focused energy that made her breath catch in her throat. "Though it seems she is not present at the moment."

Gemma tilted her head in surprise, glancing around the room. "Oh—she is not? I had assumed she would be here with us."

Frederick shook his head, gesturing for her to join him. "She does enjoy making dramatic entrances, but I suspect we may have come down too early."

Gemma nodded and made her way over to the armchair opposite him.

When Frederick offered her a glass of whiskey, she accepted it with a grateful nod, taking a sip to calm her nerves. The whiskey was warm, smoother than she expected, and it lent her a touch of courage.

She glanced at Frederick, only to find him already watching her.

“Was your first day of introductions to the tenants as taxing as you feared?” she asked, trying to sound casual despite vibrating on the inside.

Frederick let out a short chuckle that was surprisingly warm. “Taxing, perhaps, but mostly humbling. Many of them remember my father, and the comparisons... well, they do not always feel fair.”

Gemma gave him an understanding smile. “I believe that the tenants we met with were rather impressed, Your Grace. You listened to them and you let them know that their troubles and opinions mattered. That is not something every Duke would do.”

Frederick swirled his whiskey thoughtfully. “Perhaps not every Duke has such a resourceful companion,” he replied.

Gemma felt her cheeks grow warm again and took another sip of whiskey, feeling a pleasant glow starting to settle over her.

She hoped the slight tremble of her hand wasn't noticeable. “You give me far too much credit. I was only trying to help where I could.”

“Perhaps,” he mused, his gaze steady on her. “But your innate kindness is not something you can or should downplay.”

They fell silent, sipping their drinks, and Gemma found herself taking a larger gulp to calm her nerves than she had intended. The electricity she had felt when they were together last had returned. She wondered if he also felt it, or if she was simply imagining it in her own racing thoughts.

After a few more moments the door opened and the butler stepped in, offering a slight bow. “My apologies, Your Grace, Miss Bradford. The Dowager Duchess is not feeling well and has requested a tray in her rooms. She bids you both enjoy dinner without her.”

“Of course she did,” Frederick muttered with a shake of his head, and then he nodded. “Thank you, Jennings. Please tell her we hope she feels better soon.”

As the butler closed the door, Frederick turned to Gemma, offering his arm. “Shall we, then?”

She smiled, sliding her hand into the crook of his elbow. “Thank you. I suppose it would be silly to let a wonderful meal go to waste.”

The warmth of his sinewy forearm beneath her hand and the quiet strength of his presence sent an electric thrill throughout her body. She was both anxious and exhilarated, and realized with a sudden jolt that she wanted him to be as affected by this moment as she was.

They entered the dining room together, and Frederick pulled her chair out for her. She sank into it.

“Thank you,” she murmured, her pulse quickening as he took the seat beside her rather than across, a subtle choice that made the space between them feel pleasantly close.

Frederick poured them each a fresh glass of wine. Just as she took her first sip he leaned forward, his voice low and casual.

“So, tell me, how did you come to be so adept at solving problems like these? I cannot imagine convent life provided much opportunity for managing farms or orphaned children.”

Gemma laughed softly, surprised by the gentle teasing in his tone. “Oh, you would be surprised. The convent seemed to believe that keeping me busy with hard labor would eventually tame me into submission, so I was quite often assigned to tasks in the field or tending to livestock. Eventually, I learned to enjoy it.”

Frederick’s eyebrows raised slightly and a shine of admiration entered his eyes. “I would not have expected you’d develop such a skill to that extend from convent training.”

She shrugged, taking a modest sip of her wine. “I suppose I have learned to make the best of situations. That, and the fact that the sheep were often far better conversationalists than the nuns.”

Frederick laughed—a rich, genuine sound that made Gemma’s heart flutter.

“I cannot argue with that,” he said.

Their first course arrived, and as they picked at their meals, Gemma glanced up at Frederick, watching the way he placed each morsel into his mouth and how his tongue brushed over his lips after each bite. Her mind wandered back to how that same tongue had felt on her skin as it coursed over the hollows of her neck and shoulder.

“Is something the matter?” Frederick asked, snapping her out of her brief fantasy.

“No, no. I am fine,” she mumbled, and decided to cover up her staring by asking a question, “So... have you ever left Blackridge, Your Grace?”

Frederick arched an eyebrow at Gemma to let her know he had indeed noticed her gawking at him, then leaned back in his chair, his gaze drifting to the candles on the table as though they brought back memories from distant lands.

“I was young when I left Blackridge,” he began, his voice quieter than before, as though he was speaking less to her and more to himself. “Barely twenty, eager to see something beyond these familiar lands. I traveled to Edinburgh first, then farther north, into the Highlands of Scotland. It is wild country up there, rugged and unyielding.” He gave a slight, wry smile. “Beautiful, but not easy to live in.”

Gemma watched him, fascinated by the way his face softened with the memory.

“What drew you to Scotland?” she asked.

He considered her question, his fingers brushing the stem of his wineglass thoughtfully.

“I suppose it was the mystery of it. It seemed untouched, unconquered. And the people there, well...” he chuckled, “they are as fierce as the land. I spent months there, listening to old tales from villagers as I explored their towns. I even climbed the hills to ruins of castles no one has cared for in centuries. At the time I thought I might find some kind of calling in it all.”

“And... did you?” Gemma asked, genuinely curious.

Frederick shook his head as a measure of self-deprecation occupied his thoughts. “No. But it taught me something important, all the same. Home is less about a place than about a sense of belonging.”

Have I ever belonged anywhere?

Gemma gulped as the thought popped into her head.

No, now is not the time to ponder that.

He took a sip of wine before continuing. “After Scotland I turned south towards France and then traveled across the continent. Paris was... well, everything they say of it. Every corner seemed steeped in art and extravagance. But even there I found myself feeling strangely restless. I was the same in Italy. The cities were vibrant and the people were intriguing, but they did not belong to me. It was like passing through someone else’s life.”

Gemma tilted her head, her gaze never leaving his distant one. “Is that why you came back?”

He met her eyes with a serious gleam in his own. “Yes. For all its faults, Blackridge is my home. There is a stubborn pride to this land, a weight of history that belongs to me and my family. For better or worse, I am bound to it. There is something to be said for cultivating one’s own ground, rather than merely passing through the fields of others.”

She smiled at his words, seeing a part of him that went deeper than the walls he so carefully kept around himself. “It sounds like Blackridge holds more than just history for you. You are as much a part of it, as it is of you.”

Frederick’s mouth curved in a faint, reluctant smile. “Perhaps. It is strange how a place can tie itself to you. The longer I was away, the more I found myself thinking of it. The hills, the fields, even the storms that batter the old stones of Blackridge.” He paused, “Blackridge is flawed, as am I. But it is mine to care for and, I hope, to pass down one day.”

She was enraptured by his words and his voice, which was infused with a nostalgic warmth.

“You have seen so much of the world,” she mused, cutting into her food but not really tasting it. “Still, I assume you never wished to leave Blackridge for good, is that correct?”

Frederick shook his head, a serious gleam in his eyes. “No, I have not, and I never will.”

Gemma nodded, their eyes meeting across the table. “I believe I understand. It is a beautiful thing to help people, to find a way to pass a treasure to the generations that will follow. I felt that way in the village today, talking with the people who lived there and had invested so much of themselves in their land and their families. It is heartwarming to see that even a small gesture could mean so much.”

The second course was brought in, though neither of them seemed to pay much attention to it. They continued talking, debating the merits of books they both loved, discussing the few paintings in the room and laughing over tales about Vivian’s mischievous youth.

It was well into the meal before Gemma realized she’d barely touched her food, but the warmth in her chest—whether from the wine or from Frederick’s attention—made her feel fuller than any meal could. As he recounted a tale about a raucous masquerade ball in Venice, she laughed so freely it almost startled her.

It was, she realized, the happiest she’d been in a very long time.

CHAPTER 22



“What are you thinking?” Frederick asked Gemma, his voice low and his tone intimate.

The warmth of the wine buzzed softly in Gemma’s veins. His voice was a deep, rich, and comforting presence. She found herself captivated by him; the way he leaned forward as he spoke, his hands strong yet graceful, the slight curve of his lips...

She could feel his gaze like a ray of sunlight each time it passed over her skin. When his dark blue eyes met hers, she felt the ignition of another dormant ember in her heart that she could not ignore.

Her fingers lightly traced the rim of her wine glass as she tried to focus, but her eyes were far more interested in wandering over the sharp line of his jaw and his broad shoulders, and her nose was too eager to inhale the faint, masculine scent of leather and whiskey that drifted her way whenever he moved.

The five senses of her body had become tuned to respond to him.

He caught her staring at him again and his eyes crinkled as he smiled at her.

She hastily tried to compose herself. “I was just thinking that... perhaps you are not as intimidating as you let on.”

His eyebrows arched and he leaned a bit closer to her to ascertain what she had meant by her remark. “Is that so?”

Her breath caught but she returned his stare, feeling bolder than she had before. “Yes. Maybe you are secretly even... charming.”

His quizzical expression quickly changed into a smile. The way he studied her made her feel completely exposed, but she didn't look away.

“Is that so?” he half-asked, half-chuckled.

Another sip of wine emboldened her further and she deliberately moved ever so slightly, watching as his eyes traced each of her movements.

“Yes. *Quite* charming, actually,” she replied.

The air felt charged, every glance a touch, every word a caress, and Gemma found herself longing for something more, something she had no experience with, yet instinctively wanted.

She watched him, her gaze lowering to his lips as he took another sip of wine. She ached to reach out, to touch him, to feel his hands upon her skin. The urge was maddening, and she felt herself trembling slightly as she looked his way, unable to mask the longing in her eyes.

Frederick set down his glass, his movements deliberate and rose from his seat at the same time she did.

“Miss Brad—Gemma,” he murmured, his tone like a command and a plea all at once. “I cannot... I need to... I do not think I can hold back any longer.”

She could barely breathe, her heart pounding as he took a step toward her.

“Then do not,” she simply said.

Without any more hesitation, he closed the distance between them and captured her lips in a fierce and consuming kiss.

His hands were firm, one slipping around her waist, drawing her closer until there was nothing between them. She melted into his embrace, feeling as if she had been waiting for this moment her entire life.

When he finally pulled back his gaze was intense and his breathing was heavy with want.

He held out his hand, his eyes never leaving hers. “Come.”

Gemma’s heart raced as she took his hand, feeling the steady strength of his grip as he led her from the dining room, through the hallways and up the stairs toward his chambers.

The anticipation was electric, each step sending a quiver of elation through her until they reached his room.

Once inside, he turned to her, his gaze burning as he pulled her close again, his lips finding hers with renewed urgency. His hands roamed over her back while she clung to him, his touch leaving an electrically charged trail. Gemma believed that she would burst from the intensity of it all.

Frederick’s voice was infused with a degree of need that she had never heard before. “I have wanted you, Gemma... from the moment I first laid eyes on you.”

She shivered, her breath catching as she looked up at him, the weight of his words settling over her.

He began to trace his fingers over the line of her collarbone, his hand lingering on the edge of her dress, but he paused, searching her face for an answer.

“You must be certain,” he said, his tone gentle. “I would never do anything you did not also wish to do.”

Gemma smiled, her voice soft but resolute as she looked up at him. “I am already a spinster, Your G—*Frederick*. I do not care to wait for a husband to tell me what I can and cannot feel. Go ahead,” she whispered, her gaze daring, “*Ruin me.*”

Her offer ignited something within him. He held her close, his hands beginning to move with a degree of confidence and tenderness that set her skin aflame. In that moment Gemma knew she was exactly where she was meant to be, with no thought to tomorrow or to the world beyond the room they now shared.

“Take off your clothes,” he ordered, sitting on the edge of the bed.

The intensity of his eyes as he looked over her face and body sent heat rushing through her veins.

“Yes, my lord,” she nodded, loosening the string from around her waist before unlacing the top half of her dress.

The sleeves fell over her shoulders, and she pulled down the petticoat to reveal her underdress.

He watched silently and intently as she continued, eventually stripping down to nothing but her corset and her linen shift.

“I need your help, my lord,” she said, turning slowly and pulling her hair over her shoulder towards the front. “The corset, the ribbon, my lord...”

He didn’t hesitate and strode to cover the short distance between them to untie the strings of her corset.

The corset came loose as his deft fingers unlaced it and slid it down her spine. It caught around her hips and he roughly shoved it down so it fell to her ankles.

She turned to look up at him, his hands going to his own neck as he pulled the tie and kerchief away before unbuttoning his waistcoat.

She stood silently, watching him eagerly as he pulled off the fine clothes to reveal his clean white undershirt.

“Take off my shirt,” he ordered, putting his hands on her hips.

“Yes...”

She untied the string and pulled open the shirt to reveal the downy black nest of hair that covered his chest. She ran her fingers through the tiny curls and smiled as she pulled his shirt off him, throwing it over her head and onto the floor.

“You’re so good for me, following my orders,” he said, his words delivering delicious shivers from the back of her neck down to the base of her spine and into her buttocks.

She looked down at his bare torso and slowly ran her right thumb from the hollow in his neck, down the ripples of his muscled abdomen, across his belly button and down to the place where his breeches interrupted her travels. He was built

like a live version of the Greek statue of Adonis—all sinew, bones, taut muscles under soft, smooth skin, and downy expanses of soft fur.

Frederick lifted her in his arms, her legs wrapping around his hips as he moved them both to the bed. He lay her down in front of him and untied the string around his hips as he opened the front of his breeches.

Glimpsing the hair around his navel, her only desire was to see more of him. He smirked down at her, his hair wild and his eyes filled with lust as he leaned over her, his hands at either side of her hips.

“Open your legs.”

She complied as he slipped his breeches off and kneeled between her legs. She could feel him now, his hands slipping the hem of her gown over her knees and thighs. His rough hands made her shiver and he smirked again, pressing roughly between her legs.

“Mmm, very good.”

She whimpered as he placed the length of his body over hers. She could feel the rigidity of his member as it pushed against her inner thigh. Frederick repositioned himself. Gemma was shocked at the size and warmth of his erection as it pressed eagerly upon her most private and sensitive area.

She bit her lip when his fingers roamed up her hips and over her curves. He pulled down the collar of her gown, ardently kissing and licking her collarbone and shoulder before he plunged his face between the swell of her breasts. The roughness of his facial stubble electrified her as she combed her fingers impatiently through his thick, black hair.

“Touch me,” he demanded, leaning away from her breasts to stare into her eyes.

She was hesitant, unsure how to touch him, but he guided her, his eyes dark with want as her fingers roamed over his bare shoulders, through the hair on his chest, and over his stomach as he moaned lowly.

“Hurts?” she asked, surprised by the groan in his throat.

“No. It is good. Touch me...”

“I am...”

“There... touch me *there*.”

He pressed between her legs and pushed her hand down to his throbbing staff and she understood, seeing his full body now as he leaned back to allow her to take all of him in.

It was beautiful, her fingers tracing the swollen and rigid muscle and flesh. As her hand wrapped around him he bucked involuntarily, his face creased with unrestrained pleasure.

“Stroke, slowly.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good girl.”

She grasped his thick girth lightly at first, realizing that its size was increasing as she stroked him more quickly and firmly.

She wondered if it would hurt her down there but was deeply aroused by the thought of having him inside her.

Gemma increased the grip on his engorged member as his hips gyrated with pleasure. Frederick’s lips captured hers in a rough kiss, then lowered his head to suckle at her nipples.

“Ah...”

“Does it feel good?”

“Y-yes.”

“Brace yourself, darling,” he ordered, his fingers slipping down over her hips as she stroked him.

He pulled her hands together, then curled his fingers around both of her wrists and pinned her arms above her head with one strong hand.

With an expectant sigh he slowly spread the lips of her waiting cavern, parting them gently and circling her outer folds. Gemma bucked and moaned with the shock of unexpected pleasure, the space between her legs growing moister with every circle of his fingers.

He moved to the center of her thighs and stroked lazy circles within them until his fingers touched her precious nub. He rubbed it with his thumb, slowly increasing his speed as Gemma cried out and writhed her hips forward to drive herself more firmly into his hand. The speed of his thumb increased again, rotating quickly across her nub as she let out a scream of ecstasy.

Gemma's back arched at his touch, her breath coming from her in rough gasps, her heart racing and a coil of fire burning inside of her as she wrapped her legs around Frederick's back and begged him not to stop.

Upon her demand to continue, he suddenly stopped and pulled away his fingers. Gemma howled inside at the sudden cessation of pleasure and looked at him imploringly, but Frederick remained still.

"Such a good girl, Gemma."

"Frederick..."

"Yes... say my name again."

"*Frederick.*"

"I am going to take you now."

Her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs encircled his hips, pulling him closer to feel his manhood and will it inside of her. He paused, his eyes searching hers, his face mere inches away as he spoke with surprising gentleness.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No. Please... do not stop."

"It will hurt."

"Do *not* stop."

He positioned himself between her thighs, slowly entering her wet tunnel. Gemma immediately felt his girth fill her as he drove himself more deeply inside of her. As he touched the final entrance into her depth, he hesitated and looked at her.

"Are you certain?"

“Yes. I am yours, take me.”

Frederick braced his hips against hers and slid into her recesses. His throbbing shaft met the resistance of her maidenhood and he breached its walls as Gemma cried out from the sharp but brief pain.

He pulled out, then plunged himself into her again, this time more forcefully as the pleasure enveloped them both.

Gemma’s breath had become a frenetic rasp as her fingers dug into Frederick’s shoulder blades and her legs repeatedly pulled him into her.

The smell of him, the sound of his sighs, and the feel of his body surrounding her spurred her on. It was relentless but wonderful, a sensation she never imagined.

And she couldn’t get enough of it.

His every exhale, every low groan in her ear, sent tremors through her body, urging her to move faster, to match his pace.

Frederick’s hands roamed over her, memorizing her curves, as if he wanted to claim every part of her. The way his body pressed against hers, powerful yet controlled, was a sensation that bordered on overwhelming.

Her own nails dug lightly into his back as she wrapped herself around him, pulling him even closer, as though she feared he might drift away if she loosened her grip.

“Gemma...” he groaned, his voice heavy with desire, his eyes clouded yet focused intently on her face.

“Frederick,” she whispered, breathless, feeling a spark of fire that kept building inside her, urging her to go faster, deeper, her body lost in the tidal wave of sensation.

The friction, the heat, the sheer intensity of it—all of it sent her spiraling higher, her breath hitching with each thrust.

“Frederick, I... I...”

“Yes, darling. That’s it. Come for me,” he said, a wicked smile forming on his lips.

A tidal wave had gathered in her body and was slowly pulsing forward and gathering strength, threatening to sweep her away with its monumental force. She felt herself fall into the burgeoning tide and ride the uppermost wave of ecstasy until she exploded in rapture and cried out his name.

“Frederick,” she gasped his name as waves of pleasure crashed through her, leaving her trembling in his arms.

He soon followed her, groaning with the power of his climax, his entire body shuddering as he buried himself inside her and released his seed, his face pressed into the crook of her neck.

Panting and slick with sweat, he kissed Gemma fervently, carefully removed himself from her and rolled on his side next to her. Gemma lay on her back, spent and fulfilled beside him, her racing breath slowing as she savored the remaining moments of their passionate exchange.

Frederick turned his head and grinned at Gemma, who gazed at him with a satiated smile. “Get some rest, darling. Because I am not done with you.”

CHAPTER 23



“Good morning, Miss Bradford. You slept quite late—is all well?” the chambermaid said lightly.

A gentle knock at the door brought Gemma back from the depths of her slumber.

She sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as the chambermaid entered, looking mildly concerned.

Gemma had crept back into her own chamber during the earliest hours of the morning, carefully avoiding any servants who might be about that early.

“Oh, yes, perfectly fine,” Gemma smiled reassuringly. “Just a little too much wine at dinner, I think. And, well... His Grace and I stayed up far too late talking.”

It had been... an unforgettable night.

Her thoughts drifted to the way he had touched her, as though she was something precious and fierce all at once. Though she knew a shadow of guilt should be hovering over her—it had been drilled into her mind that only a husband should know her in such a way—she felt nothing of the sort. Instead, there was a quiet satisfaction in knowing she had tasted life on her own terms.

A small, daring smile crept over her lips.

She had made her choice, and Frederick had seemed to understand that without her saying a word.

She only hoped he understood what that meant going forward, for she was not looking for promises, only for the feeling of

freedom.

The chambermaid nodded knowingly, her brow clearing. “It is no surprise, then. His Grace woke late too and had just a quick breakfast before he took his leave.”

Gemma’s stomach fluttered in disappointment, but she gave a casual nod, hoping it didn’t show on her face. “Ah, I see. Did he mention where he was off to?”

“Back to Blackridge, miss. I believe there was a bit of business needing his attention.” The maid stoked the fire, making the room a little warmer as Gemma swallowed her sadness.

Of course he has responsibilities.

Perhaps it was best that he had left. She didn’t want him to think she was expecting anything in the wake of their tryst. She’d wanted a night of freedom and passion and that was precisely what she had received.

With a sigh she rose from her bed, allowing the maid to help her into one of her simpler dresses. She smoothed the fabric, giving herself a final look in the mirror before heading down to the dining room, her stomach reminding her that she’d skipped dinner the previous evening.

The dining room was empty, but there were fresh rolls, fruit and a pot of tea waiting. Gemma selected a piece of bread and a bit of fruit, savoring the sweetness as she let her mind wander.

Last night’s kisses, the way Frederick’s hands had felt warm and sure on her skin, and the unfamiliar soreness that lay deep within her heightened the memory. Gemma blushed and smiled to herself.

The room’s quiet was interrupted by the sound of the Dowager Duchess’ footsteps as she swept into the room. The lady looked pleased, her eyes brightening as she caught sight of Gemma.

“There you are, my dear,” she greeted, settling into the chair beside her. “I was hoping you were feeling well enough this morning. I had not wanted to wake you.”

Gemma swallowed, smiling warmly. “Oh, I am perfectly fine, truly. I just... slept a bit late.”

Vivian chuckled. “A sign of a pleasant evening, I would say. And good because I was hoping you would agree to accompany me to a ball tonight.”

“Another ball?” Gemma’s brows lifted.

Although the recollection of the ladies who had interrogated her made her stomach clench, the possibility that Frederick would be there lessened her anxiety.

“Of course, I would be happy to go. Is it nearby?” she added.

“Yes, just a half-hour’s ride.” Vivian chuckled. “The earl hosting it has been very eager to curry favor with Frederick, and though my grandson detests balls, the nobility around here never seems to tire of inviting him. Now, do not misunderstand me. I am sure that he enjoys them well enough, but the prospect of eager mothers and debutantes tends to send him into a sour mood.”

Gemma laughed. “I can imagine. In my opinion, balls are not at all tedious. Meeting new people can be... distracting, even entertaining.”

Vivian nodded, her eyes twinkling. “Yes, there is much to see when people are at their most polished. And you, my dear, are exactly the breath of fresh air they need. You will bring something new and genuine to the affair.”

Gemma felt herself blushing and concealed her smile by nibbling on a roll. Her thoughts kept slipping back to Frederick and the possibility that she would see him again that evening.

It would be one thing to see him among the members of the ton, but quite another to act as though she didn’t remember every detail of the night they’d just spent together.

“Are you sure you have had enough breakfast?” Vivian’s voice pulled her back to the present, her brows knitted with concern as she looked at Gemma’s nearly untouched plate.

“Oh, yes,” Gemma replied, covering her amusement with a sip of tea. “I have had plenty, truly.”

Vivian nodded with a slight smile on her lips as she regarded Gemma. “Well then, I thought we might go for a little walk around the grounds. It is a lovely morning, and I was hoping to check on the gardens.”

“I would like that very much,” Gemma replied, feeling her spirits lift.

She took a final sip of tea, grabbed a fresh roll to bring with her on their walk, and linked her arm with Vivian’s as they left the dining room.

Outside, the morning was crisp, the sun soft and bright over the dewy grass. They strolled along the gravel paths, passing rows of late-blooming flowers in shades of amber, blush and violet. Gemma inhaled the aroma of the earth and the flowers, the pureness of their scents cleansing her mind and brightening her mood.

“I must say, Gemma,” Vivian began, watching her with an approving gaze, “you have adapted well to life here. It is as if you have always been one with our northern parts.”

“It feels like home,” Gemma admitted, smiling down at the gravel path. She hesitated, then added, “Your kindness and... understanding have made all the difference. I cannot say that I expected to feel so welcome.”

Vivian’s expression softened. “You are always welcome here, Gemma. And I have to say... you and my grandson make an interesting pair.”

Gemma’s cheeks reddened but she kept her tone light. “I imagine Frederick does not consider himself the type to be paired with anyone.”

Vivian laughed softly. “Indeed, but he might surprise himself. Just as he might surprise others. And that is something worth waiting to see.”

They walked a while longer, talking about the flowers and the season, but Gemma’s mind kept drifting to the evening ahead. She tried to quiet her bubbling anticipation and reminded

herself to be patient, but she couldn't help but hope Frederick would be there, and that their next meeting would carry the same thrill as their last.



The carriage jostled slightly as it wound along the narrow road and the twilight deepened around them.

Gemma adjusted the folds of her dress as the warm glow of lanterns from the carriage lit the soft green and golden hues woven into her gown. Delicate embroidery traced leaf-like patterns along the bodice and trailed down her sleeves, adding an air of understated elegance to the dress. Small, fragrant flowers had been woven into her hair by her maid, creating a halo of blooms nestled among her dark curls.

Vivian, sitting across from her, smiled approvingly. "You look enchanting, my dear. The flowers in your hair are a beautiful touch."

Vivian wore a deep forest green dress, her own nod to the evening's theme, while Gemma's was a lighter, almost ethereal shade, blending soft olive and ivory tones.

Gemma's cheeks colored and she glanced down, brushing a finger over one of the leaf patterns on her sleeve. "Thank you. It was a rather... whimsical decision," she admitted with a soft laugh. "Though I do wonder why they chose such a broad theme as nature."

Vivian chuckled. "The countess has always favored the outdoors and felt it fitting for the season. It may be a rather generic theme, but it is charming in its own way. And tonight, everyone will be part of the décor. Living, breathing art."

As they swayed with the rhythm of the carriage, the landscape opened up before them and a small bridge loomed ahead.

Gemma could see the lantern-lit pathway beyond the bridge casting a gentle glow on the aged stone walls of the manor that awaited them. Shadows danced over ivy-covered arches and windowsills, giving the structure a timeless, almost enchanted feel. Light spilled from tall, mullioned windows, hinting at the

lively scene within. As the carriage rolled closer, the soft murmur of music floated out to greet them.

“Enchanting,” Gemma murmured, unable to take her eyes off the ivy-wreathed manor that seemed both stately and welcoming.

“I thought you would appreciate it,” Vivian replied, a satisfied smile touching her lips. “The earl’s family has been here for generations, and he is quite proud of the estate’s history. In his younger years, he was an avid traveler, but he always claimed there was nowhere he loved more than his home.”

The carriage drew to a halt and the footmen helped them step down, adjusting their cloaks as the cool evening air drifted over them.

She felt as though she’d stepped into another world, one where she could both blend into the scene and stand out as a singular part of it.

Inside, the sound of laughter, music and mingling voices grew louder. The ballroom awaited them at the end of a short, elegantly decorated corridor. When they reached it, an attendant announced their arrival, and all eyes turned toward them.

Gemma straightened, heart fluttering at the sudden attention. She felt the familiar surge of discomfort as whispers and glances settled on her.

However, Vivian’s presence at her side was steadying, and Gemma found herself taking a calming breath, her shoulders easing as she surveyed the room.

A servant passed by, offering her a glass of champagne from a silver tray. She accepted it gratefully, hoping it might lend her an added touch of courage for the evening that lay ahead.

As she sipped her drink a handsome couple approached, their expressions radiating warmth and hospitality.

“Gemma,” the Dowager Duchess said, turning with a gracious smile, “allow me to introduce the Earl and Countess of Atherton, our hosts for the evening.”

The countess, an elegant woman in her early fifties, reached out to clasp Gemma's hand warmly. "Miss Bradford, we are honored to finally meet you. The Dowager Duchess has spoken of you with such fondness."

Gemma felt herself blush. "Thank you, Lady Atherton. It is a pleasure to be here, and I am grateful for your hospitality."

The earl, a silver-haired gentleman with a dignified but kind expression, inclined his head. "Miss Bradford, your dress is absolutely perfect. The detail is remarkable," he noted, gesturing to the finely embroidered leaves and blossoms. "I see that you have embraced the theme beautifully and I commend you on your exquisite taste."

"It was too lovely an opportunity to resist," Gemma replied, smiling. "Nature has always been close to my heart, and I could not help but indulge for the occasion."

"And we are all the better for it," the countess interjected, her eyes warm as she admired Gemma's attire.

As Vivian and the countess engaged in conversation, Gemma took the opportunity to admire the lively scene before her. She felt a rush of excitement for the night ahead as a flicker of anticipation curled in her chest.

She wondered if Frederick would make an appearance. It had been only one day since their last, passionate encounter, but he had a way of lingering in her thoughts.

The countess caught her thoughtful look, mistaking it for admiration of the decor.

"Ah, a beautiful scene, is it not?" she said, smiling. "The natural beauty of the world around us has always been a source of comfort to me, and I hoped it might provide the same for our guests tonight."

"It is enchanting," Gemma agreed, her tone sincere. "I feel as though I have stepped into a woodland dream."

The count chuckled, raising his glass in agreement. "Then my wife has achieved precisely what she had hoped for. I do hope you will make yourself at home here tonight, Miss Bradford."

Gemma's heart warmed at his words, and as she smiled, she knew she would carry this evening with her.

Tonight, she felt both a part of this world and separate from it, free to be an observer and a participant in her own right.

And as she took another sip of her drink she wondered how the evening would unfold, the possibilities glimmering before her as brightly as the lights that surrounded her.

CHAPTER 24



“Frederick! I was beginning to think you were avoiding us altogether, dear boy. Imagine my surprise,” Vivian teased, “to see you attend a social function of your own accord.”

After being forced to listen to the Earl of Atherton drone on about trade and recent developments in the county’s crop yields he had extricated himself from the conversation and made his way over to his grandmother and Gemma.

Frederick couldn’t help but grin. “And disappoint you, Grandmother? Impossible,” he replied, leaning down to kiss her hand. “Besides, I believe you said it was my duty to enjoy the company of my peers more frequently.”

“That I did,” she agreed with a pleased nod. “And do you not think it is high time you took to the dance floor? Far too many ladies in this room could use a decent partner.”

Frederick hesitated, but before he could respond the earl joined them and immediately seconded the Dowager’s suggestion with a glint in his eye. “Dancing always loosens one’s nerves, Your Grace. I am sure my young wife would be delighted.”

Frederick cringed inwardly, but his grandmother, quick as ever, interrupted. “Nonsense! You have dragged Frederick here against his will, Atherton—let him dance with someone he actually enjoys.” She looked pointedly at Gemma.

Gemma.

The golden light from the chandeliers fell upon her like a spotlight, illuminating the soft greens and delicate floral designs on her gown, making her appear as though she was part of a woodland fantasy.

Her wide, bright eyes met his for only the briefest of moments, but a surge of primal need immediately drew him to her.

He'd barely thought of anything else since their last night together. He had been too occupied replaying each moment, each heated glance and every touch.

He wanted her so fiercely that he wondered if he was losing his mind.

That was precisely the problem. He didn't need or want any part of the constant distraction.

Wanting her meant being vulnerable, tethered and bound to a society he'd learned to detest since his sister's death.

Yet here he was, at the earl's blasted ball.

"Would you care to dance, Miss Bradford?" Frederick asked. As he extended his hand towards her, he was surprised by how right the prospect of dancing with her felt.

"I would be honored, Your Grace," she said. Her soft smile grew as she placed her hand in his.

As the music began and they stepped onto the dance floor, Frederick felt the resurrection of the chemistry between them.

The dance forced him to draw her close, his hand resting just above her waist as he effortlessly guided her through the steps. They moved in silence at first, his eyes on her face while she carefully watched her feet.

"Frederick," she murmured, breaking the stillness, her voice barely louder than a whisper. "You do not need to be so... cautious, you know. Just because we... the other night." A hearty blush spread from Gemma's chest to her face.

"Gemma... I want you to know that I do not regret it. In fact, I have thought of little else. But I do not wish to see you placed into an uncomfortable position."

Gemma chuckled softly, meeting his gaze with an arch of her brow. “An uncomfortable position? Frederick, I am a spinster with little regard for society’s expectations. I have no reputation left to save, only my life to live as I choose. What we do in private,” she said, her gaze playful and direct, “is between us alone.”

Her forthrightness sent a wave of exhilaration through him, as if a dam had broken. Although he seldom did in these settings, he found himself smiling with relief.

Gemma was different from every other woman he knew; fearless, candid and fiercely independent. Her words were a refreshing reminder that there were still people willing to defy convention, willing to do as they pleased, despite the watchful eyes of society.

The dance continued, the initial tension between them softening as they moved together with an ease that surprised and inspired him.

“You are remarkably unbothered by these gatherings,” he said, with genuine curiosity. “I have spent most of my life finding them unbearably tedious.”

Gemma laughed, a quiet sound just for him. “Oh, they *are* tedious, believe me. But they are also... illuminating, in their own way. The ton may be superficial, but it also has its purpose. Traditions like these may be frivolous, but they help hold the entire fabric of society together, especially for those who care for such things.”

He nodded, hearing the sense in her words. “Perhaps. I will admit, I do not have much patience for all of this after... after what happened to Helen.”

“I completely understand,” she said gently as she looked at him with genuine empathy.

Her acknowledgment of the ton’s behavior in the aftermath of his sister’s death forced him to look away while he struggled to compose himself, but Gemma’s gaze remained firm and grounded him to a degree that he hadn’t expected.

They continued to dance, this time in comfortable silence, their earlier awkwardness replaced with a soothing sense of companionship.

As the music drew to a close, Frederick found himself reluctant to release her hand. He guided her to the edge of the dance floor and they lingered there, watching the other dancers twirl and glide in their decorative splendor.

“Would you care for a walk, Miss Bradford?” he asked quietly.

She smiled at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I would be delighted, Your Grace.”

They wandered away from the ballroom and into the adjoining rooms, which held smaller gatherings of guests in quiet conversation or observing paintings and decor.

As they passed a young lord engrossed in boasting about his latest hunting exploits, Gemma leaned in with a grin, her voice low.

“I daresay the rabbits had little chance escaping his prowess,” she whispered, her eyes alight with amusement.

Frederick snorted and bit back a laugh, marveling at her ability to balance humor with kindness. It was rare to find someone who could poke fun without malice, who was charming without pretense.

As they strolled through the manor, Frederick found himself wondering if he could ever truly be satisfied by anyone else after her.

When they returned to the main hall, Frederick felt a twinge of disappointment. He’d spent much of the evening getting lost in their conversations and the way she seemed to light up the dim corridors through which they had strolled.

“Thank you for the dance, Frederick,” Gemma said, her tone light but her eyes reflecting the depth of their exchange.

Frederick took her hand and briefly brushed his thumb across her fingers in a subtle but heartfelt gesture of appreciation.

“And thank you, Gemma,” he replied, his voice quieter. “For... seeing things differently. I believe I needed that

tonight.”

Her smile was soft, as if she understood more than he could ever say.



Over the next few weeks Frederick found himself attending ball after ball, dinner after dinner, and enduring the endless parade of social events his grandmother had insisted upon.

At first, he'd bristled at the mere thought of playing the dutiful grandson, parading around in his finest attire, listening to tedious conversations about weather, prospects and inheritance.

But beneath the layers of his reluctance lay a reason that had lessened his irritation; a reason that wore a soft, beguiling smile and laughed at his dry humor as though he were the cleverest person in the world.

Gemma Bradford.

With each event he caught more glimpses of her vibrant personality as she accompanied his grandmother. They would drift towards each other, bound by the subtle pull of familiarity, a natural rhythm that neither one of them felt the need to question.

For the first time in what felt like years, Frederick found himself enjoying the gatherings. He'd grown fond of their quiet talks, their stolen moments on the fringes of crowded ballrooms and during hushed dinners.

During one evening of celebration at a baron's estate not far from his own, he once again surrendered himself to their chemistry.

They had managed to slip away from the crowded ballroom into a secluded side garden.

Frederick's heart beat with the thrill of their rebellion as he led Gemma through the lantern-lit paths and away from curious eyes. He paused beside a stone bench hidden by hedges and turned to face her with a small smile.

“Gemma,” he murmured, reaching for her hand.

She glanced back toward the house, her eyes alight with excitement. “Are we allowed out here, do you think?”

He grinned. “Only if you keep your voice down.”

She laughed softly and breathlessly, and before he could overthink it, he pulled her close, his lips meeting hers.

The world around them dissolved as they became wrapped up in each other, her arms winding around his neck, pulling him closer. His hands pressed gently against her back, then moved lower as he lifted her and settled the two of them onto the bench and drew her onto his lap.

He looked up at her, his gaze steady, both longing and surprise at her readiness.

“Undo your corset,” he whispered, his voice low and intimate.

Her hands found his shoulders, grounding herself as she met his eyes.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she murmured seductively.

Slowly, with quiet precision, she loosened the laces of her bodice, letting the cool night air graze her skin.

Frederick’s breath caught as he ran a hand lightly over her bare shoulder, then lower, his fingers tracing delicate lines across her collarbone before lowering his mouth to meet her skin.

She sighed as his lips met her skin, closing her eyes as he pressed gentle, possessive kisses along her shoulders. Gemma moved herself closer to him, creating a warmth between them that thawed the coolness of the night.

“Frederick,” she whispered, her eyes wide and vulnerable, her voice catching in a half plea, half challenge.

The sound of her voice struck him mute. He could only respond by pulling her closer, his hands roaming over and discovering her dewy skin, until they lost themselves in one another.

With quick motions he undid the lacings of his trousers and lowered her down on his throbbing manhood. She cried out a bit too loudly as his hardness filled her.

“Easy there, darling. Do you want us to be discovered?” he mumbled as he placed a hand over her mouth to quieten her.

Gemma blinked, and her eyes sparkled as she rolled her hips against his.

Frederick’s hand was still clamped on her lips, but Gemma’s eyes seemed to say that she didn’t want him to take it off.

His suspicions were confirmed when she gripped his wrist, not to pull his hand away, but to hold herself steady.

He reveled in her obvious enjoyment as she rode him, watching her flushed face and her wide eyes, which rolled skyward in pleasure as he suckled her nipples.

It felt incredible to be engulfed in her warmth. Pleasure continued to build inside him as she quickened her pace.

Her muffled moans grew louder, and bliss shot through him as he felt her tighten around his throbbing shaft.

Frederick could tell that she was very close to her release.

He slithered his free hand under her skirt and between her thighs, his thumb finding the sensitive nub amidst her wetness.

Gemma whimpered as he rubbed firm circles upon it, her channel gripping more tightly around him.

“Yes, yes. Come undone for me, my sweet,” he whispered in her ear. His velvety words pushed Gemma over the edge. She grabbed hold of him and gasped into the crook of his neck.

Her whole body spasmed and trembled in his lap, intensifying his sensation of warmth as her muscles contracted in tight waves around his rod.

Gemma pulled back slightly, her lids half-closed as she rode the waves of her orgasm.

“Your turn now,” she breathed and gripped his shoulders tightly.

“Yes,” he said and grabbed her thighs, keeping them fast against him as he stood up and lay her on the bench.

Now on top of her, he pinned her hands over her head and she gasped, her smile widening.

“Take me, Frederick. Take me until you find your release,” she whispered to him.

And take her he did.

Frederick drove in and out of her with ever-increasing speed, overcome by his own powerful, ecstatic need. He quaked as he quickly withdrew from her and released his seed.

It took him several minutes before he was able to catch his breath again and calm his racing heart.

She smiled and giggled as he helped her to refasten the corset and adjust her dress. They gasped simultaneously as they realized they had been missing from the ball for more than half an hour and rushed back inside to find Vivian.

As they entered the crowded ballroom, Frederick made sure Gemma made her way to his grandmother first to avoid raising suspicions. After waiting five minutes, he walked over to join them.

His grandmother, who was watching the festivities with a keen eye, raised an eyebrow as they approached, her watchful eyes moving from her grandson’s slightly tousled hair to Gemma’s flushed cheeks.

“Well, there you are, my boy. Gemma has also only just returned,” she said, her voice laced with amusement. “I was beginning to wonder if you had fallen into the punch bowl.”

Frederick offered her a polished smile, although a faint blush betrayed him. “Nothing of the sort, Grandmother. Just taking some air.”

The Dowager’s eyes sparkled knowingly. “Is that so? It seems this ballroom is quite lacking in air, as Gemma dear has also just returned from the gardens,” she remarked, casting an appraising glance at Gemma’s still-reddened cheeks. “Perhaps I should advise the other young ladies here to similarly refresh themselves in the gardens.”

No one could fool Vivian.

Despite her burning cheeks, Gemma managed a polite smile. "It was quite... invigorating, Your Grace."

"Ahh," his grandmother murmured, a glint of humor in her eyes. "Well, let us hope the evening continues to invigorate both of you. I should hate for anything to...dampen your spirits."

Frederick cleared his throat and held his grandmother's gaze. "I assure you we are indeed in high spirits."

"Good," she said, patting his arm affectionately. "Then perhaps you would care to stay in the ballroom for a song or two, if only to keep an old woman company. I imagine Miss Bradford could use a rest after... all that fresh air."

He had to bite his lip to stifle a chuckle. Gemma was not as entertained as he was, in light of the deathly glare she sent his way.

He could hardly wait to taste her again.

CHAPTER 25



“Thank you for indulging my need for quiet,” Frederick murmured to Gemma a bit sheepishly. “It seems I can only tolerate these events in small doses.”

She gave him a playful smile, settling onto a leather armchair by the dimly lit window. “I think you might surprise yourself. You have managed four balls now without a single attempted escape. That is remarkable in itself.”

Tonight, at yet another ball, Gemma and Frederick found themselves engaged in conversation with a group of lords and ladies, the talk drifting from weather to politics and finally to the latest gossip.

After a while, Frederick had caught her eye and offered her a slight nod toward the doors. It was his signal to let her know that the crowd had grown too stifling for him.

She had only hesitated for a moment before she gracefully excused herself and slipped away from the conversation with Frederick by her side.

They had meandered through the manor’s candlelit hallways, and her shoulders had gradually relaxed once they’d left the din of voices behind.

They had found a quiet, tucked-away library lined with dark mahogany shelves, a refuge from the evening’s noises and demands.

Frederick laughed softly as he rubbed the back of his neck. “It is only because you make it bearable.”

“Well, I am happy to hear that,” she said, her gaze turning briefly to the shelves around them.

After a beat, Frederick cleared his throat, his voice quiet and slightly hesitant. “Gemma... I realize I have learned far too little about you and I regret that.”

She tilted her head, studying him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean... all this time, and I have hardly asked you anything about your life before... before all this. I would like to know more about you.”

Gemma bit her lip. When questions came from others it felt stifling, like a massive rock pressing on her chest, crushing her ribs. Yet, when they came from Frederick, the same questions felt like a warm breeze, and she realized that she liked it when he asked her questions, even if they were about her past.

“It a strange story,” she said, looking down at her hands. “And probably not the most cheerful selection on such a lovely evening.”

“Then all the more reason to tell me,” he insisted, leaning forward in his chair. “No one needs a cheerful story all the time.”

God, how does he always know the perfect thing to say?

“My father... he was my entire world,” she began, her voice soft. “He was the Earl of Carrington, and... well, to put it simply, he adored me. He would take me out on adventures, teach me about constellations at night, tell me all the stories from the history books that he thought I would find interesting. He let me dream, he let me be free, even in my thoughts, despite all the rules I was supposed to follow.”

Frederick watched her intently and patiently.

“But my mother...”

Her face fell, a hint of bitterness creeping into her tone. “She wanted nothing to do with me. I was merely an obligation... a duty she would have rather not fulfilled had the choice been left up to her.” She paused, swallowing. “When my father

passed, she... she was the one who sent me away to St. Catherine's when I was seven."

"That is... inconceivably cruel."

"She thought of it as a kindness, but she never clarified to whom that kindness was directed," Gemma replied, her voice laden with irony. "She always reminded me that I was not 'fit' for society. In truth, it was her way of discarding me, of ridding herself of any ties to my father. She never answered a single letter I wrote to her. Eventually, I stopped writing altogether."

A silence fell between them, one that Frederick felt almost compelled to break.

"I understand the ache that comes from that kind of loss," he said softly, and Gemma was reminded that his own heart was burdened by the loss of his sister Helen. "And I know firsthand what being cast aside by those who are supposed to love you can do to a person."

Gemma looked at him. "You mean your sister, do you not?"

He nodded, exhaling slowly. "Helen... she was everything good in my life, and when she fell in love with the wrong man—at least, in my father's eyes—he sent her away. She died in that convent, alone and frightened, carrying a child that had no chance of being born."

She reached across the space between them, resting one hand over his. "I am so sorry, Frederick. I cannot imagine how that must have felt."

He gazed down at her hand upon his and felt a degree of comfort that he hadn't experienced in years.

"Thank you," he murmured, his voice almost breaking. "It was as if... as if the world had lost all its color. I left London and stayed at Blackridge, no longer able to tolerate society's shallow talk and its hypocritical judgments."

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of their shared confessions hanging between them like a fragile bridge.

Then, Gemma laughed softly, clearing the somber air. “Frederick... is it not strange how the two of us ended up here, after all that we have endured?”

He raised an eyebrow, curious. “What do you mean?”

“Here we are, playing the parts we once scorned, attending balls and making polite conversation. And yet... somehow, this no longer feels as unbearable as before.”

Frederick chuckled, nodding in agreement. “Perhaps not. But I think that is only because of the company,” he said, his voice warm as he gazed at her. “I never expected to find anyone here who truly understood.”

Her heart swelled with an unfamiliar tenderness. She too had never expected to feel so comfortable or be so open with anyone.

Gemma smiled. “Neither did I. And yet... here we are. Two souls with burdens to carry.”

“Gemma,” he murmured, his tone serious. “I may not believe in much of what society stands for... but... I have come to respect you greatly, and, more than that... I care for you.”

Her breath caught. “Frederick... I—”

“I know, you wish to remain unattached and free... but I cannot help how I feel.”

“I appreciate that... I...I am just saying that... that... well, our paths will ultimately separate. I do not know when exactly, but they will, Frederick. And although it is wonderful to be in your company, I do not belong in your world. Perhaps we ought to be more careful about what we say to each other from now on.”

Frederick opened his mouth to respond but then closed it.

He knew she was right.

Finally, he nodded. “All right then.”

Without warning he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her deeply.

His kiss was heated but gentle, and when he finally pulled away she sighed softly, unhappy by the disconnect.

“Come,” he demanded, pulling her with him into a small storage room that the servants used to move between the larger lounges and the sitting rooms.

“F-Frederick.”

“I want you.”

With those words all reason melted away and all she could think about was how much she also wanted him.

She let him set her upon a small shelf in the room, lifting her skirts as he knelt down and draped her legs over his shoulders.

“Oh,” she let out as his tongue ran up and down her center, sending thunderous shivers all over her body.

God, that mouth of his. He knows exactly what to do with it.

“Please do not stop,” she panted, running her hands through his hair.

Her entire body tensed, the pleasure building at a terrifyingly quick speed—he had figured out how to push her over the edge in a matter of minutes.

He growled against her soft mound, the vibration of his voice reverberating inside her as stars exploded in her eyes.

Her thighs trembled as the delicious sensation pulsed all over her, turning her limbs into liquid honey.

Frederick licked his lips as he stood up wearing a triumphant smile, and hastily unbuttoned his breeches.

Oh, he knows how good he is and he revels in it.

“Yes,” she whispered in his ear as he entered her, his lips meeting hers once again.

The kiss was raw and slow and packed with more emotion than she cared to acknowledge.

The way he felt inside her, the way his smell surrounded her, and the way his low moans echoed in her ear only encouraged her.

It was heaven, even if it only lasted a few minutes.

They were soon holding one another and breathing heavily as they tried to compose themselves.

It is maddening how much I always want him.

Even as they emerged from the storage room to rejoin the party, all she could think about was the next time she could be in his arms.

CHAPTER 26



“Newfield, you’ll be useful yet!” Frederick quipped, handing Andrew the fishing rods.

Andrew Newfield set about unloading baskets and blankets. The earl raised an eyebrow at Frederick’s words, feigning insult.

The warmth of the late afternoon sun spilled across the glen, lighting up the greenery and casting a gentle glow over the brook that wound through their picnic spot.

Gemma, settled comfortably on a plaid blanket, smiled at Frederick as Vivian, watching from her cushioned seat, offered guidance to them with an air of authority.

Gemma had carefully planned the day, which included a picnic, fishing, and a spot of hunting. The gentlemen were as visibly excited as children with new toys.

“Useful? My dear Blackridge, I am nothing if not the glue that holds this entire outing together,” Andrew replied, his tone light and his eyes twinkling. “Besides, without my charming company, how would you survive your grandmother’s meticulous scheming?”

Vivian chuckled at this, barely hiding her amusement. “If I am a schemer, Lord Newfield, it is only because I can recognize a good match when I see one.”

Gemma’s cheeks warmed, though she hid her blush with a polite smile, finding herself entirely entertained by the trio’s banter.

She had grown to appreciate Andrew's presence. He had a way of keeping Frederick lighthearted and bringing out a side of him she hadn't often seen. Frederick was serious by nature, and that only dissipated when Andrew was around.

Andrew gave Gemma a sidelong grin as he set the rods in place by the stream. "Tell me, Miss Bradford, have you ever fished before?"

"Once or twice," Gemma replied, settling next to him with an interested look. "But I do not think I was very successful."

"Then we will remedy that today," he declared confidently, preparing the bait with exaggerated skill. "Fishing is really about patience, calmness... and, of course, the ability to distract the fish by talking their ears off."

"Scaring them away entirely," Frederick chimed in dryly, earning an amused eye roll from his friend.

Vivian reclined in her seat, clearly content. "I cannot think of a better way to spend a day. Nature, good company, and sunshine...what more could we ask for?"

Andrew cast a wink in Gemma's direction as he tossed his line into the water. "I am clearly the main attraction here. Imagine for a moment if you would, Miss Bradford, how dull this would all be without me."

"Oh, indeed, Lord Newfield," Gemma played along, her laughter ringing through the glen. "We would be mired in His Grace's solemn silence, and I do not believe that we would be able to endure it."

Frederick scoffed, though his lips curved into a small smile. "Let it be known that my silence is a choice; one I rarely make around you, I might add."

"See?" Andrew grinned, gesturing toward Frederick. "There is hope for him yet. Though tomorrow, Miss Bradford, we shall really see if he is any good out in nature. I have roped him into a hunt."

"Oh, have you?" Gemma's curiosity was piqued as she looked to Frederick. "I did not know that you hunted."

Frederick gave a slight nod. "I have been known to go hunting every now and then, though only when I can convince myself that it is worth the early rise."

Andrew laughed. "He tries to sound noble, but the truth is, Blackridge can barely stand to rise before noon. But, as he has been dutifully attending these social events as of late, I felt he owed me the pleasure of his company and a hunt."

"It is the least I can do after watching you suffer through four balls in two weeks," Frederick said, casting his line into the brook. "If it was not for Grandmother's plotting, I doubt I would have been in attendance and could have saved you from the same fate."

"Oh, do not be so dramatic, Freddie," Vivian teased, her smile warm. "Your friend Andrew is a dear for putting up with you at all."

"Freddie?" Gemma echoed, and Frederick glared at her.

Do not even think of calling me that, Frederick silently communicated to Gemma.

Gemma merely smirked at him, which told him all he needed to know.

As they settled by the brook, each casting a line, Andrew grinned, clearly in his element as he launched into his tales.

"So, you will love this one," he said, leaning slightly toward Gemma and Frederick. "Just last month, I was out riding near Sedgewood, minding my own business, when I came across a very cross-looking sheep in the middle of the road. I had never seen a creature more displeased with the world. So, naturally, I tried to guide it off the path, but the thing charged at me like a bull!"

Frederick raised an eyebrow. "A charging sheep, Newfield? I am sure it was all of a mild trot."

"No, I swear! It was like the spirit of a bull had entered its woolly body." Andrew clutched his chest dramatically. "I barely escaped with my life. My horse got a fright, tossed me off, and bolted back down the road, leaving me to fend for myself."

Gemma laughed, a hand to her mouth. “And here I was thinking hunting would be the only danger you faced in the countryside.”

“Oh, hunting has its own hazards,” Andrew replied with a grin. “There was the incident with the pheasant, if you will recall, Blackridge.”

Frederick chuckled, nodding. “Ah, yes, the infamous pheasant.”

Andrew leaned in, casting a sly glance towards Gemma and Vivian. “Picture this. I am poised, ready to fire at a fine bird perched in the trees, waiting for the perfect shot. I aim and I fire, only for the wretched creature to swoop down and, I swear, aim right for my head as though seeking revenge!”

The Dowager gasped, half-laughing. “Did it strike you?”

“It was close!” Andrew replied, eyes wide with mock horror. “Feathers everywhere. I may have let out a rather unmanly squeal, which our dear Freddie here has never let me live down.”

Frederick shook his head, a bemused smile playing on his lips. “If I remember correctly, you shouted something about being ‘pursued by a feathered beast of vengeance.’”

Gemma laughed heartily, her eyes gleaming with mirth. “I do not think I have ever heard of such brave and daring hunts, Lord Newfield.”

Andrew shrugged, a grin spreading across his face.

“What can I say? Some men face bears and wolves. I face cantankerous sheep and furious pheasants. No one ever warned me about the hazards of the English countryside!”

Frederick shook his head, stifling another laugh. “One day I am certain you will be famous, Newfield. The man who defended England from the invasion of the poultry.”

Andrew joined in the laughter, feigning offense. “Well, when I am a hero in the annals of country lore, you will all be begging me to tell these stories again!”

They continued fishing, laughter filling the quiet air as Andrew recounted even more of his *misadventures*. From the incident where he nearly fell off a cliff trying to save a lost hat to the time he convinced a neighboring lord's prized hound to follow him home, only to be chased half a mile when the owner came looking for it. Each story grew wilder, prompting fresh rounds of laughter from his friends.

"Ah, close calls make the best memories," he declared, attempting to pull his line in only to wobble dangerously at the edge of the bank.

"Steady there, Newfield," Frederick said, unable to suppress a grin. "This is not the first time I have had to keep you from tumbling headfirst into a river."

Andrew only chuckled, shrugging. "A close call is all the more memorable, my friend."

Vivian sighed, her gaze settling contentedly on the scene playing out before her. "Fishing or hunting, I do wish the two of you could enjoy your time together more often. It is clear you are both happiest when in one another's company."

"I am afraid Frederick only tolerates me, Your Grace," Andrew replied, feigning a look of distress. "But I like to think I bring out the best in him."

Frederick gave a small chuckle. "You most certainly bring out something," he replied, his voice warmed by his obvious affection for his friend.

They passed the rest of the afternoon in pleasant conversation and laughter, occasionally catching small fish that they released back into the stream.



The sunlight grew softer, casting a golden hue across the glen as they finally set aside their fishing rods and opened the baskets of food.

Gemma's stomach growled.

Thankfully, the Dowager had instructed the maids to pack them a delightful array of treats. They had small sandwiches,

fresh berries and sweet pastries, all carefully chosen for their outing.

As they ate, Lord Newfield leaned back, his gaze thoughtful.

“Miss Bradford, I do not suppose you will be joining the marriage mart this year?” he asked, his tone curious rather than teasing.

Gemma shook her head with a faint smile. “I am afraid marriage is not in my plans, my lord. I would much rather focus on building something of my own, perhaps a life of purpose... much like what Her Grace has created here.”

“A wise choice,” Frederick murmured, his gaze meeting hers with quiet understanding.

“Indeed,” Vivian added approvingly, her voice kind. “Marriage is not the only path open to a woman. If it is a life of purpose that you desire, Gemma, I can see you doing remarkable things.”

Touched by the Dowager’s words, Gemma nodded thoughtfully. She could see herself someday becoming a woman like Vivian; strong, independent and committed to helping those in need.

As the sun dropped lower in the sky, Frederick turned to Andrew with a wicked glint in his eyes. “And you, Newfield, are you truly planning to join me tomorrow morning for hunting?”

“Oh, without question,” Andrew replied, clapping a hand on Frederick’s shoulder. “Provided you manage to drag yourself out of bed, that is.”

“I think you will find me a rather competent hunter,” Frederick said, rising to the challenge, a rare playful light in his eyes.

“Ah, we shall see about that,” Andrew replied, smirking.

The two exchanged a look of camaraderie, their shared laughter echoing through the glen.

As they packed up to begin the walk back to the manor, Gemma looked around the glen one last time.

It was truly a place of quiet freedom; a memory she would cherish. She knew that she would leave here with not only warm memories, but a new sense of purpose. One that she hoped would lead her toward a future as bright as the sunlight filtering through the trees.

However, it would be a future without Frederick, and her heart sank at the thought.

CHAPTER 27



“*I* quite enjoyed that,” Vivian remarked, smiling as she looked out the carriage window. “Lady Somerville never disappoints with her gatherings.”

“She certainly has a talent for bringing people together,” Gemma agreed, still savoring the lightheartedness of the afternoon. “It was lovely. And it is always good to become familiar with the local society.”

Vivian gave her a knowing smile. “And you managed quite well with all the attention, Gemma. I must say, you handled Lord Cunningham with grace. But I could not help noticing that someone else seemed quite captivated with you.”

“Who do you mean?” Gemma asked, playing coy even as a knowing smile tugged at her lips.

“Frederick, of course.” Vivian chuckled softly. “My dear, he may try to hide it, but everyone could see how he watched you today.”

A soft blush colored Gemma’s cheeks as she shook her head. “Vivian, I think you are reading into things. He was simply being polite.”

“Oh, I know Frederick well enough to recognize that particular look. It is not out of politeness, Gemma. There is something genuine there, whether he admits to it or not.”

Gemma hesitated as her thoughts tangled together.

There was no denying that Frederick’s attention stirred something in her, something she tried extremely hard to

ignore, but she was aware of the reality of their situation. Soon, they would each return to their respective paths, and the connection they had shared—whatever it was—would come to a rest in the quiet arms of Vivian’s estate.

“Perhaps,” Gemma replied softly. “But His Grace has his own plans, as do I.”

Vivian’s eyes softened and she reached over, gently patting Gemma’s hand. “Perhaps. But life often has plans for us that we cannot foresee. For now, enjoy this moment, my dear. You have a rare companionship with him.”

They rode the rest of the way in comfortable silence, the sun lowering toward the horizon as they finally approached Vivian’s estate.

As they arrived, the sky was painted in soft hues of orange and pink, the perfect evening glow casting a golden light over the garden’s blooming flowers.

With a smile, Vivian suggested a sunset walk through the grounds, and they strolled quietly along the garden paths, taking in the colors and scents around them.

“You know, Gemma,” Vivian said, her tone thoughtful, “it gives me such joy to have you here with me. You have brought so much light to this place.”

Gemma smiled, feeling the warmth of Vivian’s words. “It has been more of a home than I ever expected to find, Vivian. I cannot thank you often enough for that.”

They paused near the fountain, watching the ripples of water that sparkled in the evening light. It was a rare, serene moment, one that Gemma knew she would always cherish.

Their collective peace was broken by the sound of approaching footsteps on the gravel path. Both women turned to see Frederick and Andrew walking from the house, each looking slightly windblown from the evening air.

“Ah, just in time for dinner,” Vivian said with a pleased smile, raising an eyebrow at her grandson. “Frederick, I was not expecting you *and* Lord Newfield.”

Frederick inclined his head with a faint smile, his gaze flicking to Gemma briefly before he responded. “We thought we might join you, Grandmother, if you do not mind. And of course, Miss Bradford.”

Andrew gave them both a warm smile. “What can I say? Frederick promised a fine meal, and I am here to make sure he lives up to that promise.”

Gemma, surprised but pleased, returned his smile. “Well, I certainly hope he does.”

Frederick’s gaze lingered on her, and his expression softened. “Only the best for our guests.”

As they all made their way inside, Gemma felt her heart lift. The gentle companionship of the day had left her feeling at peace and Gemma’s thoughts circled back to what Vivian had said.

For the first time she wondered if, between the laughter and the friendship, there could be more to come if she allowed it.



The dining room of the Duchess’ estate was filled with laughter and conversation, the firelight casting a warm glow over the table as the evening progressed.

Yet Frederick barely noticed any of it.

He nodded absently at his grandmother and Andrew, making polite conversation when required, but his attention kept straying to Gemma, seated across the table next to his grandmother. Her laughter, and her smile. Each gesture seemed more magnetic than the last, and his attention felt inescapably drawn to her.

Every so often Gemma would look his way, and when their eyes met, there was a fleeting, charged connection, an understanding they both seemed reluctant to acknowledge in words.

To Vivian’s delight, Frederick had insisted on joining them for dinner that evening. The previous day’s luncheon had been

tense and Gemma had kept to herself, surrounded as she was by the attentions of others.

She now seemed equally absorbed in her conversation with Vivian and her occasional exchanges with Andrew.

As if sensing his silent frustration, Andrew grinned over his glass of wine.

“Frederick,” Andrew said, leaning closer, “you have been very pensive this evening. Is something weighing on your mind?”

Frederick shook his head, trying to pull himself back to the present.

“Not at all,” he replied smoothly, though he caught the quirk of Andrew’s brow and the unspoken disbelief in his friend’s eyes.

From across the table, Gemma turned her amused gaze to him.

“Perhaps, Your Grace,” she began, her voice holding a playful edge, “you are simply in need of some fresh company. Perhaps your present circle has become stale to you.”

Frederick chuckled, masking his surprise. “I am quite content with the company,” he replied, meeting her gaze.

The words were evasive, but he could see the understanding in her eyes. There was so much left unsaid between them; a pull that neither one of them appeared ready to explore.

Vivian caught their exchange and a pleased, knowing smile washed across her features as she sipped her wine.

“Content with the company, indeed,” she murmured with a satisfied smile. “Why, I do not know what you two would have done this summer without each other. A distraction is essential in a season of such... idle pursuits, after all.”

Gemma laughed and her gaze lightened. “Your companionship has certainly made this time memorable,” she replied, her words directed to Vivian, although her gaze briefly lingered on Frederick.

The dinner continued, although Frederick’s uncertain, undefined, and confused thoughts continued to complicate his

feelings for her.

He had known from the beginning that they both wanted freedom and independence. However, in spite of that knowledge, a steady, insistent worry had developed inside of him that grew larger with each passing day.

What would she do once the season was over? Where did she intend to go? Would she be forced to return to the confines of a world that had already treated her so unjustly?

The ceaseless worries gnawed at him. The thought of her uncertain future—that the joy she had finally found could be snatched away from her in an instant, and she would once again become lost. He knew he had to do something, but he couldn't bring himself to discuss it with her, not yet. He wasn't even sure what he would say if he tried.

As dinner ended, Vivian suggested moving into the drawing room for a drink, and everyone rose, chatting and laughing as they moved to the adjoining room. The low firelight in the drawing room emitted a cozy and comforting warmth as they all settled into their chosen seats.

Frederick found himself beside Gemma, their proximity both a relief and a source of silent torment.

Vivian leaned forward, smiling at them both.

“Now, Gemma,” she began, “I hope you are making the most of this rare freedom, indulging in as many experiences as you can. Soon enough, you will have to make plans and decide what you want for yourself.”

Frederick's focus sharpened on Gemma as she responded, her voice carrying an undercurrent of determination. “That is precisely what I intend, Your Grace. I cannot imagine settling for less than a life that I shape myself. I will not let anyone decide that for me.”

Frederick was filled with a quiet sense of pride and respect for her fortitude.

He knew that her independence meant everything to her, that the time she spent here, the choices she made now, all mattered immensely. It only deepened his desire to ensure she

was truly free in her decisions and unburdened by the shadows of her past.

Andrew, who had been listening with a smile, leaned back. “Well, Miss Bradford,” he said with a charming grin, “it seems you are one of the few who truly understands the luxury of choice. Many find it quite difficult to comprehend.”

She smiled in response, her gaze lingering on Frederick briefly. “I am just determined to make up for lost time. After all, none of us knows what tomorrow brings.”

The words struck Frederick more sharply than he anticipated. She was right; they didn’t know what the future held, and the thought of her fading from his life, and drifting away as the seasons changed, unsettled him deeply.

When the evening finally wound to a close, Frederick slowly made his farewells. Gemma seemed equally hesitant to say goodbye, but there was no way around it.

She would remain safe under his grandmother’s roof, while he and Andrew returned to his estate.

It was with a reluctant heart that he bid her goodnight.



Once they were in the carriage, Andrew glanced at Frederick with a knowing expression.

“You are far more attached to her than you would like to admit,” he observed.

Frederick exhaled a long, steady sigh, his gaze fixed on the road. “It is not that simple.”

“Is it not?” Andrew challenged, a glint of humor and disagreement in his eyes. “There is a difference between keeping your distance and pretending you do not care.”

Frederick remained silent, absorbing the truth of Andrew’s words. Andrew continued, his tone more thoughtful. “She is... remarkable, Frederick. I can see it, and so can everyone else who spends even a moment in her company. But it is more than that. She does not yet see herself the way we do.”

Frederick nodded, his voice low. “That is why I have taken it upon myself to contact her mother to see if there might be some closure, some answers for her. I have not told her and I do not intend to. If she does not wish to pursue it, so be it, but I...I believe she deserves to have the opportunity.”

Andrew considered this, then nodded approvingly. “You are giving her the chance to overcome the hurt from which she has been running. That is far more than anyone else has done for her.”

“It is the least I can do,” Frederick murmured, his gaze dark. “If she is ever to move forward, she must confront the past that is keeping her shackled. I shall search for the widow of the late Earl of Carrington. Surely I’ll be able to locate her, even if she has remarried.”

“Gemma is the daughter of the late Earl of Carrington?”

“Yes.”

“Well then,” Andrew clasped a hand on his shoulder. “You are doing right by her, old friend. But do not lose sight of what is best for you, either. You are more alike than you realize.”

Frederick didn’t answer, but his resolve grew stronger. He would keep the arrangement with her mother to himself until he was certain Gemma was ready.

There was something else there, too, a need to protect her, to offer her a foundation that no one else had.

When he returned to Blackridge that evening, the shadowed halls felt empty without her, and he couldn’t help but feel a sense of loss.

For all their insistence that this was temporary, he feared that when the time came for her to move on, he would struggle to let her go.

CHAPTER 28



As the carriage rumbled along the path to Blackridge, Gemma gazed out of the window, feeling a quiet thrill building within her.

It was rare for Frederick to invite her anywhere directly, let alone to his estate. She was unsure of his reasons, but her heart couldn't help but race with anticipation. A fluttering desire sparked within her; a wild hope that he might have invited her for something more intimate than tea.

She couldn't deny the pull she felt towards him, or the way her mind constantly returned to their stolen moments.

Her cheeks warmed at the thought and she was glad for the distraction when Vivian chuckled beside her.

"Well, my dear, is this not unexpected?" Vivian mused, eyeing Gemma knowingly. "Frederick is not one to extend invitations so casually. I wonder what he is up to."

Gemma shrugged, keeping her voice casual. "Perhaps he is finally becoming more sociable?"

Vivian's chuckle deepened, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Sociable? I daresay my grandson would never pursue that for himself. No, I suspect his motives lie closer to home." She gave Gemma a pointed look. "Ever since you arrived, Gemma, there has been something different about him."

Gemma let out a small laugh, trying to deflect. "That would be a miracle, Your Grace. I assure you, I have done nothing to change him."

“Nonsense,” Vivian said firmly, a proud smile on her lips. “You have done more than you realize. The man was practically a ghost before you came along; brooding and distant, without a shred of animation. But now!” She lifted an eyebrow knowingly. “Now he is coming back to life, and that is all thanks to you, my dear.”

Vivian’s words warmed Gemma’s heart, even as a flicker of doubt surfaced. She thought she understood Frederick’s feelings, but his decision to invite her to Blackridge felt strangely formal, as if he was finally allowing her to enter a deeper layer of his life that he had always kept well-guarded. She hoped, foolishly perhaps, that it was a sign of something more.

The carriage finally came to a halt, and as they stepped out, Gemma took in the grand entrance of Blackridge, its austere beauty simultaneously imposing and welcoming.

She felt a small pang of disappointment when she realized Frederick was not there to greet them. But she brushed it aside as she and Vivian made their way indoors, where a footman guided them to the sitting room.

Vivian was as gracious as ever, but Gemma felt a strange sense of foreboding, a tightening in her chest as they reached the door.

The footman held it open for them, and as they stepped inside, Gemma froze. Sitting stiffly on the edge of an armchair, with an expression of unmistakable disdain, was Lady Treston. Next to her was a younger girl, and Gemma wondered if she was Lady Elizabeth—her mother’s second daughter from her marriage to Lord Treston, which Gemma had learned from the gossip sheets that the other oblates smuggled into St. Catherine’s. The girl looked out of place but curious, her gaze flitting nervously between Gemma and their mother.

The air felt thick and cold. Gemma’s heart dropped as she realized the truth. Frederick had contacted her mother without her knowledge or consent.

“Gemma?” Lady Treston’s voice cut sharply through the silence.

She looked Gemma over with a critical eye, her gaze as indifferent as it had been sixteen years ago, as though Gemma was a complete stranger to her.

“Yes, Mother,” Gemma replied, keeping her tone rigid and formal. She felt her back straighten and her heart harden.

Lady Treston’s brow creased with barely concealed contempt, as though she had been brought here under duress. Beside her, Lady Elizabeth started to rise, her expression one of genuine warmth, but as she took a step towards Gemma, Lady Treston’s hand shot out, gripping her daughter’s wrist firmly.

“Stay where you are, Elizabeth,” Lady Treston commanded, her voice low and firm. She looked at Gemma with something akin to disdain, as though afraid that her younger daughter might somehow be tainted by her proximity.

Gemma felt the weight of her mother’s rejection settle over her like a cold shroud, but she masked it with a calm, unreadable expression, her eyes locked onto Lady Treston’s. “I did not realize I would have the pleasure of family company,” she said, her voice controlled, betraying none of the anger and hurt simmering beneath.

From the corner of her eye she saw Frederick enter the room. His gaze met hers, and though he looked resolute, she felt an undeniable spark of betrayal. He had not bothered to warn her, hadn’t even thought to ask if she wanted this. Her anger flared, sharp and piercing.

“Thank you for joining us, Lady Treston,” Frederick said, nodding respectfully to her mother before turning to Elizabeth. “It is a pleasure to see you as well, Lady Elizabeth.”

Lady Treston barely acknowledged him with a nod, her eyes returning to Gemma, scrutinizing her with the same coldness she’d always shown. Elizabeth shot Frederick a shy smile, though her gaze quickly darted back to Gemma.

Vivian, always quick to sense unease, placed a gentle hand on Gemma’s arm and gave her a reassuring squeeze, her gaze narrowing slightly at her grandson. “Frederick, I think perhaps

some tea would be in order?” Her words held a subtle edge, her smile tight.

Frederick nodded and gestured for them all to sit. Gemma, still tense and unyielding, took a seat across from her mother and half-sister, while Vivian positioned herself between them, a silent pillar of stability.

As they settled, Lady Treston’s gaze moved to Vivian, her voice laced with politeness but edged with contempt. “Thank you for hosting, Your Grace. Though I must admit, I was surprised by the invitation.”

Vivian inclined her head. “The pleasure is mine, Lady Treston. It is always beneficial for family to be united, do you agree?”

The words seemed to sting Lady Treston and she glanced at Gemma with a faint sneer. “Of course,” she replied icily. “Family is of utmost importance. That is why I had hoped to see my daughter sooner than this.” She shot Gemma a look filled with accusation.

Gemma’s expression hardened, her tone cool and steady. “I wrote to you for years, Mother. Every letter I sent went unanswered.”

Lady Treston pursed her lips, feigning offense. “Circumstances were different then. You know very well that you were placed where you belonged, at St. Catherine’s, where you could grow up properly.”

The anger and hurt that Gemma had kept at bay for all those years rushed up her body like a geyser, threatening to break through her controlled exterior. She willed herself to remain calm. “I was hardly given a choice in the matter.”

Frederick’s presence felt closer now, his gaze trained on her, but she avoided meeting his eyes, choosing to keep her focus entirely on her mother. His silence only intensified her anger.

Elizabeth, her face pale, reached forward tentatively, her eyes filled with emotion. “Gemma,” she whispered, almost pleading, “I have always wanted to meet you, to know my sister.”

Lady Treston's hand clamped down on Elizabeth's arm, her expression venomous.

"You need not concern yourself, Elizabeth. Your sister and I —" she paused, her lip curling in distaste. "It is not as though we move in the same circles."

"Of course," Gemma replied icily, her voice as sharp as glass. "I would never wish to intrude upon such illustrious company."

Vivian's gaze shifted between the two women, her lips pressed tightly together as she assessed the situation. Finally, she turned to Frederick, her voice steely. "Well, Frederick, perhaps we should proceed with tea."

Frederick straightened, his expression cautious as he beckoned to the staff, who promptly brought in the tea service. He approached Gemma, his gaze imploring, but she met his eyes with a look of unadulterated anger. The magnitude of his betrayal crackled in her chest as the bond between them cracked under the weight of his actions.

Vivian poured the tea while maintaining her calm outward appearance, although her glance at Frederick held a distinct warning. Lady Treston, her mouth puckered into a thin line, accepted her cup without a word, her gaze briefly alighting on Gemma before turning back to Vivian.

"So," Lady Treston began, her voice carrying an air of icy dismissal, "this is the life you have chosen for yourself, Gemma?"

Frederick's jaw tightened, and Gemma's lips pressed into a thin line. "I have chosen to live my life on my own terms," she replied coolly. "Something you would never understand."

The hostility in the room was palpable, and a heavy and unyielding silence descended upon its occupants.

Gemma's hands gripped her teacup tightly as Lady Treston droned on, her words barbed with thinly veiled insults. Each comment she made felt like needles poking into Gemma's skin.

“Of course, dear Elizabeth would make an excellent match for a man of standing,” Lady Treston said smoothly, a genteel smile plastered across her face as her gaze drifted dismissively over Gemma. “Such poise, such grace...and so naturally inclined to the life of the ton. I dare say she would suit a man of Frederick’s standing quite well.”

Gemma’s grip on her teacup tightened as her mother’s words snaked through her mind. She could feel the sting of the tears that were threatening to surface but blinked them back, forcing herself to appear indifferent to her caustic remarks.

“Elizabeth has a remarkable way with people,” Lady Treston continued, her tone oozing false pride. “She is adaptable and graceful, exactly what a man of Frederick’s station requires.” She shifted, directing her next comment squarely toward Frederick with a saccharine smile. “A gentlewoman who is ready for society’s eye, don’t you agree, Your Grace?”

Frederick’s expression was inscrutable, but he gave Lady Treston a short, polite nod. “Elizabeth is indeed very amiable,” he said evenly, his gaze resting on Elizabeth, who blushed under his attention.

The comment stung and Gemma looked away, unable to bear the scene unfolding before her. It was as if she had once again become invisible, a mere shadow in the corner of the room. Every word her mother spoke drove the wedge deeper, leaving her both isolated and lost.

Sensing Gemma’s discomfort, Vivian cast Lady Treston a look that was equal parts steel and elegance. “It is true that Gemma has always had a mind of her own,” she said calmly, her tone supportive as she glanced over at her future granddaughter-in-law with obvious warmth. “It is one of her many qualities that I have come to admire greatly.”

“Oh, naturally,” Lady Treston replied with a dismissive wave, her voice dripping with forced sympathy. “But one must acknowledge that certain... qualities are better suited to the quieter corners of life, do you not think?” She looked at Gemma as though she was nothing better than a simple peasant.

Gemma could feel the hateful words sinking into her. She looked over at Frederick, her heart heavy when she suddenly saw that he had deliberately invited her mother as a way to finally be rid of her. A cold wave of understanding washed over her, and she felt herself withdrawing and protectively encasing her heart in steel.

Her mother's voice floated over the room once more. "Perhaps," Lady Treston mused, her gaze alight with the false care she often used when pretending to be considerate, "it would be wise to bring Gemma back into the family fold. A quiet country estate, perhaps. That way, Elizabeth and I could prepare for her future appropriately. I am only thinking of her benefit, naturally."

The implication was clear. Lady Treston wanted Gemma hidden, out of sight, and out of the way. Gemma ground her teeth and kept her eyes fixed on the tea in her lap, her heart thudding painfully in her chest. Her breathing was tight and shallow as she listened to the echoes of her mother's manipulative words.

Lady Treston's gaze landed on Frederick again. "And, Your Grace, you have already been exceedingly kind to Gemma. I am certain your assistance will be remembered in the highest esteem. Perhaps we can discuss it further?"

Gemma fought to maintain her self-control. She felt Vivian's supportive hand wrap around her forearm but was incapable of looking at her without losing her composure.

Gemma stood, measuring her words. "I think... I think I need some air," she said with barely disguised strain.

Vivian reached out, her face etched with concern. "Gemma, darling..."

"No," Gemma said softly, gently pulling her arm out of Vivian's grasp. "I will be fine, truly. I just need... a moment." She managed a tight smile, but her voice broke just enough to betray the turmoil beneath.

Vivian nodded although she was clearly concerned. "Very well, my dear," she said gently.

Without waiting for further objections, Gemma slipped out of the room, her steps quick and determined. She held herself together until she was beyond the stifling walls, finally reaching the gardens where she could breathe freely. The cool air brushed against her skin but did little to soothe the anger and heartache writhing within her.

She wandered the garden paths, her heart aching painfully, each step weighted with sadness. She hadn't thought it possible to feel so alone once again. She had foolishly allowed herself to believe that she had found some semblance of happiness and a place where she belonged. But it was now clear to her that Frederick only saw her as a problem to be dealt with, another burden he'd taken upon himself to resolve.

I have been so terribly naïve.

Gemma sank onto a bench, wrapping her arms around herself in an effort to hold herself together. Her mother's cruel, loveless words still echoed in her mind, reminding her of the woman's constant rejections, and each attempt she had made to keep her hidden away like a shameful secret. And now Frederick had also deceived her. She had dared to think he had developed feelings for her, but his actions spoke volumes.

She closed her eyes, letting the anger and despair wash over her. She had fought so hard to be free, to carve out her own place in the world, but despite her efforts, it seemed she was destined to always be someone else's unpleasant afterthought; something inconvenient to be discarded.

The sound of approaching footsteps jarred her from her thoughts. She looked up, her gaze hardening as she saw Frederick standing a few paces away, watching her with a deeply conflicted expression on his face.

"Gemma," he murmured, taking a cautious step closer, his voice low and tentative.

She met his gaze with an icy, silent stare.

He hesitated, his hand reaching out to her, but she recoiled and slapped away his outstretched hand.

“Do *not*,” she said sharply, her voice brittle. “*Do not dare* touch me.”

His hand dropped to his side, his expression wounded but resolute.

“I... I wanted to help you, Gemma,” he said, his tone quiet but firm. “I thought bringing your family here...”

“You *thought*?” she interrupted, her voice growing sharper. “What did you think, Frederick? That inviting my *mother*, the *one* person who has done nothing but belittle me and cast me aside, would *help me*? That seeing her look at me as though I was something vile would somehow bring me *comfort*?”

Frederick’s face filled with regret, guilt and shame. “I thought you deserved the chance to face her. To have closure.”

“Closure?” Her voice trembled, a bitter laugh escaping her lips. “This is not closure, Frederick. This is a summary of how deeply she has always despised me; confirmation of every single reason she abandoned me. You have only made it painfully clear to me that I do not belong here with you or with anyone.”

He took a step forward, regret embedded in his face and speech. “You cannot believe that, Gemma. You belong here with us, with me. You belong more than you could ever know.”

She shook her head, bitterness choking her words. “Stop pretending that you care, Frederick. I have seen enough to know what this was. A convenient way to be rid of me. Well, congratulations. You have succeeded.”

Frederick looked at her, his jaw tight, but his gaze softened as he absorbed the depth of her pain.

“Gemma,” he started again, his voice gentler, though the strain was evident. “I did not intend for it to turn out like this. I did not...”

“Save your words,” she interrupted. “I do not need nor want your pity or your guilt.”

Her voice wavered, betraying the depth of her hurt, but she held his gaze with unyielding strength.

The ferocity of her stare held him in place, silencing him.

Finally, she pointedly turned her back to him and walked away.

CHAPTER 29



Gemma's steps echoed down the silent hallway as she made her way back to the house, her heart a confusing blend of anger, shame, and bitter disappointment.

She felt the walls closing in on her, suffocating her with reminders of her mistakes, her trust once again misplaced. She was resolved. There was nothing left for her here. Not Frederick, not his kind-hearted grandmother, not even the fleeting peace she had thought she'd found.

As she entered the house, a footman approached her, bowing slightly. "Lady Treston and Miss Elizabeth are resting in their chambers, miss. The Duchess asked that I ensure their comfort."

Gemma simply nodded, barely hearing him. She didn't want to see her mother or Elizabeth, and she didn't want to see Vivian. She could only imagine the pity and confusion on the Duchess' face, and she wasn't ready to confront it.

She made her way to a small alcove by the stairs, intending to collect her thoughts, when she heard a gentle yet concerned voice behind her.

"Gemma," Vivian's voice was soft and filled with worry laced her tone. "I know you are hurt, but will you not talk to me? Please, darling, do not shut yourself away."

Gemma clenched her fists, her nails biting into her palms. Shame burned in her chest; she was behaving terribly toward Vivian, who had shown her nothing but kindness since the day

they met. But it was difficult to believe in kindness when everything felt so twisted, like another trap waiting to spring.

“I will be leaving tomorrow,” she said quietly, unable to meet Vivian’s gaze. Her voice was calm, but the resolve in her tone was unmistakable.

Vivian’s face fell, her mouth slightly agape. “Leaving? With that...that horrible woman who calls herself your mother?” she asked in disbelief. “After everything she has put you through? Gemma, you deserve far better than that.”

Gemma shook her head, barely holding back her frustration. “Where else am I to go?” Her voice shook as she turned, finally looking at her. “I have no friends and no family. There is nowhere else for me to go.”

The pain she saw in Vivian’s eyes was almost unbearable. Gemma wanted nothing more than to accept the warmth the older woman offered, but she pushed the thought away. She couldn’t afford to let herself get drawn in, only to be cast aside once more.

“Gemma, you are wrong,” Vivian said softly, the hurt plain in her voice. “You are not alone. I am here for you. I thought you understood that.”

“Please, Your Grace,” Gemma replied, her voice wavering as she tried to remain composed. “It is best for everyone. You have done more than enough for me, and I will only bring more trouble to your doorstep if I stay.”

The tension in the air thickened as heavy footsteps approached. Frederick’s tall frame appeared in the doorway, his expression shifting from curiosity to unsettled confusion.

“Going somewhere, are we?” he asked, his voice laced with irritation and incredulity.

Gemma’s throat tightened and her cheeks flushed with anger. She forced herself to remain steady, ignoring the way her chest ached at the mere sight of him.

“Yes,” she replied curtly, keeping her tone clipped. “With my mother. Tomorrow.”

Frederick's brows furrowed, and a muscle in his cheek twitched as he absorbed her words. "And why," he asked, his voice icy, "would you want to leave with her? She treats you like nothing more than a burden."

"Because I *am* a burden," Gemma snapped, feeling her own words like daggers in her heart. "It appears I am a burden to everyone."

Frederick's gaze eased momentarily, but then his eyes grew hard again, his tone biting.

"You have friends here, Gemma," he insisted, stepping closer, his gaze intense. "Why must you always make everything so difficult?"

His words were the last straw. Anger boiled over, mingling with the hurt and betrayal that had festered inside her since she had walked through the door and seen her mother sitting there.

"*I* am being difficult?" she scoffed, her voice shaking with anger. "You had no right to contact my mother without telling me. You went behind my back, as if you knew what was best for me, as if I was incapable of making my own choices."

He took a step back, clearly taken aback by her words. "I only wanted to help you," he said in a defensive, pleading voice.

"*Help* me?" She laughed, a bitter, humorless sound. "By bringing back the one person who has caused me more pain than anyone else in my life? If you had truly desired to help, you would not have invited her to waltz back into my life."

Frederick's expression darkened, his gaze hardening as he fought to keep his composure. "Perhaps if you were less stubborn, you would see that I did this for your own good. You may not like it, but facing her..."

"Oh, how *noble* of you!" she mocked, her voice trembling with fury. "Is that what this is to you, Frederick? Some grand act of charity? To give me what you think I need, regardless of what I actually want?"

Vivian stepped forward, her hand outstretched. "Gemma, please, let us not..."

But Gemma couldn't stop herself, her anger spilling over like a torrential river breaking through a dam. She looked back at Frederick, her gaze cold and wounded. "You do not understand a thing about me. You did this because you wanted me to go, did you not? Admit it, Frederick. You only reached out to her to get rid of me."

His face twisted, the words clearly cutting deep. "That is not true, Gemma, and you know it," he said, his tone almost desperate. But she didn't relent, her voice thick with disdain.

"Do I?" she shot back, her eyes flashing with hurt. "You have done nothing but push me away from the moment I arrived here. Do you think I did not see it? You do not know what you want, Frederick, except, apparently, to be rid of me. Congratulations, you have won. I am leaving tomorrow at first light."

His face fell, his brows knitting as though her words had dealt him a physical blow he hadn't anticipated. "That is not what I wanted," he murmured, his voice pained.

Gemma's bitter laughter filled the silence. "You do not even *know* what you want, Frederick. But I will tell you what you have made clear to me. You wanted me gone, and I will not inconvenience you any longer."

The Dowager Duchess reached out, her voice overflowing with worry and sorrow. "Gemma, please do not leave like this. Do not let your mother..."

But Gemma shook her head, unable to bear any more betrayal. She turned back to Frederick, her anger flaring again as a final, unforgivable thought struck her.

"Who knows?" she said, her voice filled with venom. "Maybe you will go as far as trying to bribe her to take me away. It would not be the first time you tried to buy my freedom with a sack of coin."

Frederick's face went pale, his mouth parting in shock as shame clouded his gaze. He didn't say a word, only looked at her, silenced by the gravity of her accusation.

Without another glance at him, she turned on her heel and stormed out, her steps echoing through the hall. Her heart pounded painfully in her chest, but she forced herself to keep going, refusing to look back, even though she heard Vivian calling after her.

When she reached the footman at the front door, her voice was steely and unyielding. “Have my belongings sent from the Duchess’ estate. I will be departing with my mother tomorrow morning.”

The footman nodded, taken aback by the determination in her voice, but Gemma didn’t wait for a response. She swept past him, her head held high, unwilling to let anyone see the cracks that were beginning to form in her cold facade.

Feeling the late afternoon air chill her skin, she could no longer ignore the painful ache in her heart, and the undeniable truth that pressed down on her.

Once again, she was alone.

CHAPTER 30



The fire in the hearth had dimmed to a quiet glow in Frederick's study.

He sat alone, one hand resting on a glass of brandy he barely tasted, the other clenched in frustration on the arm of his chair.

The events of the evening replayed in his mind. Gemma's resolute silence at dinner, the haunted look in her eyes, and the way her shoulders had trembled as she hugged his grandmother under the cold, moonlit sky.

She had looked so fragile, yet remained steadfast in her decision to leave, refusing even his grandmother's pleas to reconsider.

His heart clenched painfully at the memory and he tried to block it out. Gemma's belongings had arrived earlier, confirming what she'd already made clear. She was leaving with her mother in the morning.

He had tried to speak with her after dinner by cornering her outside the dining room, but she'd simply given him a hard, unyielding stare. The only words she spoke were soft. "I'll be retiring early. We have a long journey in the morning."

Frederick lifted the glass of brandy to his lips, though he barely registered its warmth as it ran down his throat.

He wanted to believe she'd come to her senses, that she'd realize she did not want to return to living under her mother's icy rule, that he could somehow convince her that he hadn't

intended to drive her away. However, he knew the truth. She was hurt, and he had been the cause.

The sound of soft footsteps echoed in the corridor outside his study, halting him mid-thought. His pulse quickened as he held his breath, hoping against all odds that it was Gemma finally willing to speak with him. Maybe she'd come to tell him she didn't truly want to leave, that there was a part of her that needed him as much as he now realized he needed her.

But his hope crumbled when the door burst open and his grandmother stormed into the room, her cane tapping sharply against the floor, her gaze fierce and unforgiving.

"Frederick Wyndham," she said angrily, "what on earth do you think you are doing?"

He sank back, sighing heavily. "Good evening to you as well, Grandmother," he muttered, though he knew his feigned indifference wouldn't fool her. He set his glass down, his expression darkening as he braced himself for the lecture that was sure to follow.

His grandmother's eyes narrowed, and she let the door click shut behind her. She approached him, the room's shadows sharpening the lines of her face as she gave him a look that would have sent a lesser man fleeing.

"Do *not* 'good evening' me," she snapped, the venom in her voice making him flinch. "I have been disappointed with you many times in my life, Frederick, but never like this."

Her words stung, slicing through his defenses. "I did what I thought was right," he said defensively, though the conviction in his voice sounded weak, even to his own ears.

"Did what was *right*?" she echoed, incredulous. "You did what you thought was right by involving that vile woman..." her lip curled in distaste, "...without so much as a *whisper* to Gemma? Did you ever stop to consider how that might make her feel?"

He looked away as he fought the surge of regret rising within him. "I did not think she would leave over it," he said, though the words felt hollow. "I thought... I thought she might find

closure, or, or some peace, perhaps. God knows she deserves it.”

The Dowager Duchess let out a frustrated huff, her cane tapping furiously against the floor as she paced.

“Closure? Peace? Frederick, look at me.” She waited until he met her hard and unforgiving gaze. “Gemma has already lived her life without the love of a mother or even a proper family. She found solace here, with us, and what did you do? You summoned the very woman who cast her aside as if she was nothing, and you expected her to *stay after that?*”

His throat tightened painfully and he shifted uncomfortably under her gaze. “I thought... I thought she would see it was time to let go of the past.”

Vivian shook her head slowly, her disappointment palpable. “It is not the past she needs to let go of, Frederick,” she said, her voice gentler now, though no less cutting. “It is the feeling of being unwanted, of being abandoned yet again, and I am afraid you just confirmed her worst fears.”

Frederick could barely hold her gaze. His stomach twisted painfully as the weight of her actions crashed over him. He had wanted to protect her, to give her some semblance of closure, yet all he had done was reopen the wounds she’d tried so desperately to heal.

“You care for her, do you not?” her voice softened, her eyes searching his face for a sign of truth. “Or did I imagine that, Frederick?”

He closed his eyes briefly, feeling the hollow ache in his chest deepen. “I... I do not know,” he admitted quietly, though even as he said the words, he knew they weren’t true. He did care for her. He cared for her more than he’d been willing to admit, even to himself.

Her gaze turned wistful, almost sad. “You have allowed happiness to slip through your fingers, Frederick,” she said softly. “And I fear it may be too late to retrieve it.”

Her words settled heavily in the room, each syllable like a blow he couldn’t avoid. He wanted to argue, to tell her that it

wasn't over, that he could still make things right. But as he sat there, the truth sank in like a stone—he'd made a grievous mistake, and Gemma's resolve to leave appeared insurmountable.

"I do not know what to say to her," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "She refuses to listen to me."

Her expression hardened once more. "She will not listen because you have not given her any reason to. You have spent so much effort keeping your heart guarded, and pushing people away, and now, when you finally find someone who could break down those walls, you treat her as if she was just another inconvenience."

His fists clenched as her words cut deep. "I never meant to make her feel that way."

"But you *did*," she said sharply. "And now, you will have to live with that. Perhaps if you had shown her even a fraction of the kindness she deserves, she would have stayed."

Frederick remained silent, the weight of his grandmother's words settling heavily on him. She was right; he had let his own fears and insecurities drive him to act thoughtlessly, and now he was losing the one person who had managed to make him feel something other than emptiness.

The Dowager studied him for a moment, the lines on her face deepening as she regarded him with abject disappointment.

"I will be returning to my estate in the morning," she said quietly, her voice devoid of its usual warmth. "And for quite some time to come, I do not believe I will be able to look at you without wondering how you could be so blind."

She didn't wait for his response, and simply turned and strode to through the door, leaving him sitting alone in the dim glow of the firelight. The click of the door echoed through the silence, a cold finality settling in the room as Frederick sank back into his chair.

He stared into the dying embers in the hearth, his thoughts a jumble of regret and shame. His grandmother's harsh admonishment reverberated in his mind, forcing him to

confront the truth he'd tried so hard to avoid. He'd spent years hiding behind his walls, guarding himself from pain and vulnerability, and now, the only person who had dared to look past his armor was slipping away.

The ache in his chest grew, a deep, hollow void he couldn't ignore. He'd made mistakes before, hurt people before, but this was far, far worse. Gemma had trusted him, had believed in him, and he'd shattered that trust with a single, thoughtless decision.

For the first time in years, Frederick truly felt lost. He closed his eyes, the enormity of his regret covering him like a heavy wet blanket, and he wondered if he would ever find a way to make things right.

But even as he sat there, a small, fearful voice in the back of his mind whispered the answer he dreaded most.

It is too late.

CHAPTER 31



The ballroom sparkled with golden candlelight and crystal chandeliers, but to Gemma, the glamour only underscored her discomfort.

She stood near the fringes, wearing a dress that once belonged to her mother, its fabric faded and its stitching loose. Though it had been altered to fit her smaller frame, the gown was undeniably old-fashioned. Surrounded by women dressed in the latest fashions of rich satins and delicate lace, she felt like a relic from another age.

Her mother had made certain she wouldn't be overlooked, taking Gemma's arm as they entered, presenting her to the crowd as if she was a rare curiosity.

A few guests gave her sidelong glances, barely disguising their disdain, while others whispered behind gloved hands. Gemma tried to ignore their sharp, assessing looks, the polite smiles that barely masked their scorn, and the way mothers pointedly steered their eligible sons in the opposite direction.

"Lady Gemma Bradford," one Dowager clucked to her friend, though the words drifted directly into Gemma's ears. "Almost a spinster now, is she not?"

"Indeed," the friend replied, her fan flicking open to cover a smirk. "Well, I suppose one can still hope, but at her age..." She gave a pitying shake of her head, her eyes passing over Gemma as though she was a painting hung askew.

Gemma turned away, her cheeks burning as she attempted to find solace in the thick velvet curtains that lined the room's

edges, but her mother's grip tightened on her arm.

"Smile, Gemma," Lady Treton hissed softly, her lips barely moving. "You look as if you are here to mourn rather than mingle."

Gemma forced a strained smile onto her face, casting her eyes downward so she wouldn't have to look at anyone. Her mother released her and patted her hand, her voice turning cloyingly sweet as she addressed a nearby matron. "Lady Pendergast! How lovely to see you!"

The woman's eyes darted to Gemma. "Is this your eldest, Lady Treton?" Her tone was pleasant, but her smile betrayed her disinterest.

"Yes, indeed." Lady Treton's smile sharpened. "My Gemma. So quiet and devoted. She was in a nunnery for the longest time, you know. I believe she is content without a husband. I have my hands full with Elizabeth, though, as you can imagine."

Gemma bit her lip, resisting the urge to respond, but Lady Pendergast's eyes had already moved past her, dismissing her as unworthy of any further attention.

The conversations continued around her, filled with subtle remarks that stung like nettles; reminders that, at twenty-three, she was already past her prime. To society, she was practically invisible, her presence tolerated only as a reason to gossip about her mother's supposed charity.

It didn't get better as the days wore on. Her mother dragged her to private luncheons and garden parties where wealthy matrons offered thinly veiled insults and strained pleasantries. They would complement her dress, their fingers grazing its fraying edges to emphasize its shabbiness. A hostess would ask her opinion on the latest novels, only to interrupt before she could answer, her interest clearly feigned.

"How marvelous you still enjoy books," one lady observed with false enthusiasm. "At your age, I would have thought you would be too busy with other matters, of course... if not a husband, then perhaps...well...other interests."

The ladies around her tittered, and Gemma looked away, willing herself to remain silent, reminding herself that this was all temporary.

One rare afternoon, as they returned from yet another exhausting tea, Gemma managed to steal away to the family study. Her heart lifted slightly when she saw Elizabeth there, perched by the window, eagerly awaiting her.

“Gemma!” Elizabeth’s face brightened, and she gestured to a nearby chair. “You promised to read to me today, remember?”

“Of course I remember.” Gemma smiled, her spirits momentarily lifted. She settled into the chair and began reading aloud, letting the words whisk her away from the stifling world outside. Elizabeth listened intently, her fingers pressed to her lips, her eyes wide with excitement as Gemma wove the tale to life.

They were so engrossed in the story that neither of them heard Lady Treston enter the room. Her sharp voice cut through the calm, startling them both.

“Gemma! What on earth are you doing?”

Gemma looked up, startled. “I... I was reading to Elizabeth.”

Lady Treston’s gaze hardened, her lips pursing in disapproval. “Elizabeth does not need fanciful tales and nonsense. She needs proper instruction, not idle diversions.” Her voice dripped with disdain, her eyes narrowing as she looked Gemma over.

Elizabeth, visibly upset, piped up. “But Mama, it is just a story. Gemma was...”

“Enough, Elizabeth!” Lady Treston snapped, silencing her daughter. “You may leave the room.”

Elizabeth looked torn, casting a worried glance at Gemma. But with a nod from her mother, she quickly stood and scurried out, her expression one of reluctant obedience.

Lady Treston turned her full attention to Gemma, her face cold and unreadable. “I took you in, Gemma, hoping you would absorb some decorum, some refinement. I do not wish you to

waste your time filling your sister's head with tales of fantasy.”

Gemma swallowed, her spine stiffening as she held her mother's gaze. “Elizabeth enjoys stories. She has a lively mind. I did not think it was a crime to encourage her imagination.”

Her mother's expression hardened further. “That attitude is precisely why you are so utterly unsuited for marriage. Why do you think no respectable man will have you? You are willful, undisciplined and altogether too focused on silly dreams instead of reality.”

The sting of her mother's words pierced her deeply, but Gemma refused to let it show. “I am sorry that you see it that way,” she said tightly. “But I do not believe kindness and imagination are flaws.”

Lady Treston let out a harsh laugh, the sound echoing coldly in the room. “Of course you do not. You think you know better than everyone, just like your father did.” She took a step closer, her voice dropping to a bitter whisper. “But mark my words, Gemma. You are *my* responsibility now, and you will do as I say. You will behave with decorum, attend the functions, and not bring any further shame upon this family. Do I make myself clear?”

Gemma bit back the words rising to her lips, knowing they'd only worsen her situation. “Yes, Mother.”

Lady Treston's eyes lingered on her for a long, tense moment before she finally stepped back, nodding in satisfaction. “Good. And do not waste any more of your time—or Elizabeth's—with those pointless stories.”

Without another word she turned and swept out of the room, her presence leaving a chill in the air. Gemma let out a shaky breath, her hands trembling slightly as she sank back into the chair, the harshness of her mother's words still ringing in her ears.

Elizabeth reappeared in the doorway, her small face filled with worry. “Gemma, I am so sorry... I did not mean to get you

into trouble.”

“It is not your fault, Elizabeth.” Gemma managed a weak smile, patting her sister’s hand. “Our mother... has her ways. And her reasons.”

Elizabeth’s eyes were sad as she looked at Gemma, as though she understood far more than a seventeen-year-old should. “I wish you did not have to endure this,” she whispered.

Gemma squeezed her hand, giving her a gentle smile. “Thank you, Elizabeth. You have always been kind to me. That is enough.”

Once Elizabeth had reluctantly left, Gemma’s brave face faltered. She climbed the stairs to her room, her footsteps slow and heavy, her heart sinking as she passed the grand chambers occupied by her mother and sister. Her own room was at the far end of the hall, small and undecorated, with plain walls and a simple bed. There was no warmth there, and no comfort; just a cold, empty silence.

Gemma closed the door behind her, finally allowing herself a moment of vulnerability. She sank onto the bed, her shoulders trembling as she buried her face in her hands. She had allowed herself to hope for happiness, to believe that she had found a place where she was wanted, but it had been nothing more than an illusion. She was back in a world that neither wanted nor understood her, surrounded by people who saw her as a burden and a misfit.

Her chest tightened painfully as a tear rolled down her cheek. She drew in a shaky breath, trying to lessen the ache that filled her, refusing to let herself cry.

Reaching for the worn book she had brought with her from the Dowager’s, she forced herself to continue reading, clinging to each word as though it was a lifeline out of endless loneliness.

Yet, even as she read, the words blurred, her mind drifting back to the life she’d left behind.

The quiet estate, the gardens, and Frederick.

CHAPTER 32



Frederick sat alone in his study, staring at the untouched glass of brandy on the table in front of him.

Shadows from the low-burning fire cast a melancholy air over the walls that now felt too vast and vacant. Every sound seemed to echo painfully in the quiet. The crackle of the fire, the distant whistle of the wind against the windows, the ticking of the clock.

He had thought he would find some peace once Gemma left, and that the overwhelming emotions her presence stirred up in him would settle once she was no longer near. However, her absence only exacerbated how he felt, leaving him restless and irritable, haunted by her laughter, her scent, and the echo of her voice.

A knock at the door broke his reverie, and he straightened as Andrew strode in without waiting for an invitation, wearing his usual confident smirk.

“You look terrible, Fred,” Andrew said, crossing his arms. “It has barely been a month since she left, and you look as if you have been at war with yourself.”

“Good evening to you as well, Andrew,” Frederick replied dryly. He didn’t bother to mask the bitterness in his tone. “Did you come to offer your usual wisdom or merely to disrupt my peace?”

“Ahh, what peace?” Andrew scoffed, casting an appraising eye around the gloomy room. “This is hardly a refuge. More of a tomb, if I am to be honest.”

Frederick didn't respond, his gaze drifting back to the fire, but Andrew wasn't about to let him sink further into silence. "Come on, Fred. Get your coat, your bow, and your dog. We are going hunting. You need to clear your head."

Frederick sighed. "I have no interest in a hunt today."

"Nor did you the last time I suggested it, or the time before that." Andrew crossed his arms, lifting his brow with a mix of exasperation and determination. "But we are doing this. You have moped in here long enough. It is either a hunt, or I will drag you by the ear to London. Imagine that—balls, soirées, endless chatter. I can be quite convincing."

Frederick gave him a sharp look, though a hint of a smirk flickered in his eyes. "Spare me the theatrics, Andrew. Fine. We will hunt."

He rose, and they made their way down to the stables. The familiar earthy scent of straw and leather greeted them, and the stable hands immediately set about preparing the horses, saddling Frederick's large, black stallion, Arrow, and Andrew's chestnut mare, Daisy.

Arrow tossed his head, whinnying softly as Frederick approached, his dark coat gleaming in the torchlight, and Frederick allowed himself a rare moment of calm as he ran a hand down the horse's sleek neck.

"You have neglected him, too," Andrew commented, eyeing Frederick's stallion. "Just think, he has been just as cooped up as you."

Frederick shot Andrew a warning glance but mounted Arrow without a word. The two friends rode side by side, leading the hunting party with a few servants and hounds following behind, eager for the day's pursuit.

The air was crisp, and the rolling fields stretched out under the early autumn sky, the colors fading from vibrant green to a more muted palette as the season edged towards winter.

They rode in silence for a while, the quiet broken only by the rhythmic clop of hooves and the occasional bark of the hounds. Andrew finally spoke, his voice low and

conversational. “Tell me, Fred, was it worth it? Calling on Gemma’s family?”

Frederick stiffened, gripping the reins tightly. “What was I supposed to do, Andrew? Leave her to suffer indefinitely?”

“No, but...” Andrew trailed off, glancing sidelong at Frederick. “You could have handled it differently. She is in London now, practically out of reach.”

Frederick’s jaw clenched. “And how, pray tell, should I have handled it? You seem to know all the answers.”

Andrew chuckled, shaking his head. “You are impossible. And as stubborn as an ox.”

“Then save me the lecture, Andrew. I am in no mood.”

“Not in the mood for anything but Gemma, I imagine,” Andrew replied, his tone turning teasing as he nudged Frederick’s arm.

“Andrew.” Frederick’s voice was low and hard, a clear warning.

But Andrew simply laughed. “Relax. You are going to have to pull yourself out of this state eventually. Either go after her or stay here, brooding like some cursed ghost of Blackridge. Just... pick one.”

“Do you think I have not considered it?” Frederick snapped, irritated by Andrew’s unyielding cheerfulness.

“Not seriously,” Andrew said, his gaze steady and clear. “You have not considered going to her because you are afraid. Of what, I cannot imagine. But if you do nothing, this—” he gestured at Frederick, as though presenting evidence, “—will be your life. And we both know that is not what you want.”

Frederick fell silent, looking away. The hounds barked excitedly as they neared a wooded area, sensing game nearby, but Andrew pressed on, undeterred.

“You will be miserable if you do not at least try, Fred. Your grandmother will have your head if you let her go without a fight.”

Frederick's expression tightened at the mention of his grandmother. He could still see her disappointed gaze and hear her words from that night.

He shook his head, hating the helplessness that had taken root inside of him. "And what would you have me do? Write her a letter? I doubt she would even bother to read it."

Andrew sighed, rolling his eyes. "Yes, a letter, you oaf. Women enjoy letters. A simple inquiry into her well-being would be a start. Might just be the olive branch you need."

Frederick snorted, though the idea took root in his mind, a sliver of hope he couldn't quite ignore. He was about to respond when the hounds suddenly burst forward, catching a scent. The deer, alerted to the presence of hunters, darted out from behind a grove of trees, and Frederick and Andrew spurred their horses, racing after it.

The thrill of the hunt surged through Frederick as Arrow leapt forward, his muscles taut and powerful under Frederick's command. He could feel the wind against his face, and the adrenaline pumping through his veins as he focused on the movement of the deer, watching its sleek form as it wove through the forest.

Andrew was beside him, his bow drawn, and with a steady aim he released an arrow, striking the deer cleanly. The animal stumbled and dropped, collapsing into the damp leaves. Frederick slowed Arrow to a halt, his gaze fixed on the still form of the animal as the servants approached to dress the deer.

But as he dismounted and drew closer, something in the creature's lifeless eyes stirred an unsettling feeling within him. The dark, vacant gaze mirrored the haunted look he had seen in Gemma's eyes that last night in the gardens, full of hurt and betrayal.

The image settled heavily in his chest, a sense of hollowness overtaking the thrill of the hunt. He felt a bitter ache, as though something vital had been lost, left bleeding and mortally wounded. The servants set to work on the deer,

flashes of steel entering the animal's hide. Frederick could hardly stand to look.

Andrew glanced at him, his gaze shrewd as he noticed the change in Frederick's expression. "Fred? You look as if you have just seen a ghost."

Frederick shook his head, forcing himself to step back, his face a mask of indifference. "It's nothing. I am fine."

But Andrew wasn't convinced, his gaze lingering. "Perhaps that letter is not such a ridiculous idea after all, is it?"

Frederick's jaw tightened, but he said nothing, watching as the servants finished their work, the blood staining the forest floor a stark red against the fading leaves.

When Andrew mounted his horse again he clapped Frederick on the shoulder, his gaze sympathetic. "Think about it, Fred. And if you cannot do it for yourself, then do it for her."

Frederick nodded mutely, his gaze lingering on the path ahead, his heart heavy as he remounted Arrow. The thrill of the hunt, the sense of purpose that had once driven him, felt meaningless now.

All he could see was the pain in Gemma's eyes, and how her absence would overshadow the days and years that stretched gloomily before him.

CHAPTER 33



The inclement weather matched Frederick's mood. A grey and somber sky threatened rain, the clouds heavy and low as he walked through the estate grounds toward the family graveyard.

His letter to Gemma remained unanswered, days passing slowly without even a hint of a response. Her continued silence consumed him.

Today of all days, the constant hollow ache in his chest seemed unbearable. The anniversary of Helen's death loomed over him with a heavy shadow, and the thought of Helen, her bright eyes and laughter snuffed out far too early, stung him in ways he hadn't allowed himself to feel for a long time.

He paused at the entrance to the graveyard, his heart tightening at the sight of his grandmother already kneeling by Helen's grave, arranging a small bouquet of pale lilies—their sister's favorite flowers.

She wore her grief quietly, a touch of sadness softened by the grace that always accompanied her, but Frederick saw the way her hand lingered over Helen's name, the tremble as she brushed a finger across the carved letters.

The Dowager Duchess looked up as he approached, her gaze filled with unspoken words. She rose carefully, leaning on her cane as she nodded in greeting, her voice soft and tender.

"Frederick."

"Grandmother," he replied, bowing his head slightly, his voice rougher than usual. He opened his mouth to say something,

anything, but her eyes told him that words would be unnecessary, perhaps even unwelcome.

For a moment, they stood together in silence, the chill of the wind rustling the fallen leaves around them. She placed a gloved hand gently on his arm, squeezing it with a strength that belied her years.

“I will leave you with her,” she murmured, her voice barely more than a whisper. She lingered, her gaze holding his, and Frederick could see a trace of sadness there that was reserved solely for him. “Take your time.”

Frederick nodded, feeling a pang of regret for the hurt he had caused her by sending Gemma away. He knew his grandmother had seen something in Gemma that no other woman possessed; something she had longed to see in him, too, perhaps. But he held his silence as she turned and made her way back down the path, her small figure disappearing into the misty shroud of trees.

He knelt beside Helen’s grave, running his fingers over the delicate carvings, the memories of their childhood flooding back to him. Her laughter, her defiance, and her joy that had once made Blackridge feel like a true home. It had been over a decade, but the pain was as raw as ever.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, the words breaking through the tightness in his chest. “If I could change things... if I could bring you back, I would. Every day I think of what he did to you—of what I let happen.”

The quiet was thick, the words echoing through his mind with each breath, each one laden with shame, with anger, and with a yearning that had no end. He leaned against the cold stone, feeling an emptiness that went beyond grief and guilt.

“I no longer know what I am doing, Helen,” he confessed, his voice breaking. “I feel as though I am constantly chasing after what I have lost and holding onto the things that haunt me, and I fear I am losing myself.”

He closed his eyes, his thoughts drifting to Gemma, to the ache her absence had left behind. She had, in her quiet,

stubborn way, filled a part of him he hadn't realized was empty until she was gone. And now, all he was left with were the memories, just as it was with Helen.

The sound of approaching footsteps pulled him from his thoughts. He turned to see the Baron Rowen, Peter Stanhope—Helen's love, and the father of Helen's child, if the infant had survived—standing nearby, dressed somberly, his gaze resting on the grave.

Frederick hadn't seen him since last year's anniversary, yet the baron had always come without fail, honoring the woman he'd loved in the only way he could.

"Frederick," Peter said softly, inclining his head in greeting. "It is good to see you."

Frederick rose, nodding in return. "Peter. I was not certain you would come this year."

Peter managed a small, wistful smile. "I made a promise to her once that I would never forget. It is a promise I have kept all these years, though it has grown harder with time." He sighed, his gaze softening. "But I see you have not forgotten her either."

Frederick shook his head, feeling the familiar pang of regret. "No. And I do not believe that I ever will."

They fell silent, both men connected by a mutual grief, bound by the memory of a woman they had each lost in their own way. Peter broke the silence, his gaze steady as he looked at Frederick.

"You loved her deeply," Peter said, his tone gentle. "But you have punished yourself long enough. You were young, and powerless to change what happened. Holding on to that guilt... it will not bring her back."

"It is not so simple, Peter. I made another poor choice involving someone else... someone who reminded me of Helen in her strength and her resolve. And because of that choice I have driven her away, just as my father did Helen."

Peter's expression softened, his gaze sharpening with a touch of understanding. "It is a woman you are referring to, is it

not?”

Frederick hesitated, then nodded, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “I made a decision that forced her to go away, thinking it would save her. But now... I cannot bear her absence. I find myself regretting it more than I can say.”

Peter placed a firm hand on Frederick’s shoulder, his voice filled with quiet conviction. “Then go to her. Do not make the same mistakes your father did. Helen would not want you to waste your life in the same way.”

Frederick met his gaze, seeing a spark of hope in Peter’s eyes that he hadn’t seen in years. The baron’s words resonated, peeling away the layers of guilt and fear that had held him back. He realized he was, indeed, punishing himself, binding himself to the past when he had a chance to live and to love.

Peter patted Frederick on the back, his touch comforting. “Frederick, you deserve happiness, and I believe Helen would also want that for you. More than anything, she would want you to truly live your life, to find someone who brings you the joy she never had. Let go of the past, my friend.”

Frederick swallowed, the weight of Peter’s words was a soothing balm to his burning soul, easing the hurt that had lodged itself in his heart for too long. For the first time since Gemma had left, he felt a glimmer of clarity; a sense of purpose that had eluded him.

“Thank you, Peter,” he said quietly, his voice thick with emotion. “For everything.”

Peter gave him a small, reassuring smile, then stepped back, nodding once more before taking his leave. As he walked away, Frederick stood there, his gaze fixed on Helen’s grave, a sudden surge of determination swelling within him.

It was time to let go. Time to leave the ghosts behind.

With a final, lingering glance at Helen’s grave, Frederick turned and made his way back to the estate, his heart pounding with a renewed sense of purpose. He moved quickly, as though the very act of deciding had given him strength. When he

entered Blackridge he went straight to his study, ordering his valet to prepare for an immediate journey.

As he sat at his desk, penning a note to his grandmother to explain his sudden departure, a feeling of anticipation filled him. He didn't know what he would find when he reached London—whether Gemma would forgive him, whether she would even see him—but he knew he couldn't live another day without trying to rectify his mistake.

He folded the letter, sealing it carefully, then rose to his feet. His heart was now resolute, fueled by a desperate glimmer of hope and certainty.

He could not allow another moment to slip by without fighting for the woman he loved.



In less than an hour, Frederick mounted his horse, riding south with a single purpose, leaving the shadowed halls of Blackridge behind him, his mind and heart both fixed firmly on Gemma and the chance to make things right.

The road stretched monotonously before him, each day riding alongside his carriage, his impatience simmering with every mile. The sky was clouded, trees thick on either side of the narrow road as they navigated the rugged countryside. Frederick's thoughts drifted constantly to Gemma, to the way her laughter had always brightened his darkest days, how her clever words often left him unable to keep up his guarded facade.

Each inn they stopped at brought him rest, but no relief. His nights were restless, plagued by memories of her—their quiet walks, the moments he had let himself become vulnerable.

Now he was impatient, nearly desperate to reach her, the memory of her trust in him yanking on his conscience.

Days stretched into nearly a week, and by the time they reached London, Frederick's weariness became eclipsed by the rush of knowing that he was close.

He barely allowed himself to settle into his family's house on Grosvenor Square before setting out to find answers. Just after dark, he made his way to the gentlemen's club, keeping his questions discreet as he inquired about the Clarke family and Treston estate.

A familiar face—a half-drunk noble whose name escaped him—overheard his inquiries and stumbled over with a broad, hazy grin.

“Oh, you are looking for the Treston estate, are you?” the man asked, slurring his words as he swayed unsteadily. “I know the place, went to a soirée there just last week, though not much of a party, if you ask me. The place is close to Salisbury, if you are that keen.”

Frederick offered a smile, hiding his relief.

“Thank you,” he said, signaling to the barkeep. “A drink for my friend here.”

The man's eyes sparkled as he accepted. Frederick made polite conversation, watching his companion drift off into his drink before thanking him and leaving.

Back at Grosvenor Square he barely touched his supper, his mind filled with anticipation.

He retired early, though sleep was elusive, every creak and shift in the silent house a reminder of how close he was to her.

CHAPTER 34



The next morning dawned grey and damp, yet the chill didn't bother Frederick as he saddled his horse. Hours slipped by as they traveled narrow roads, passed through villages and over rain-washed hills, the scenery blurring past him, every mile drawing him closer.

Frederick's thoughts were fixed on her face, her voice, the soft light in her eyes as she had looked at him that last evening before they had parted ways. He clung to those memories, to the hope that she might forgive him, that she might still be waiting for him.

The long day passed in a blur, and by the time Frederick finally arrived, the late afternoon light cast long shadows across the grounds.

The estate was vast but austere, a grand but imposing structure that reminded him more of a monastery than a family home. It felt cold, almost unwelcoming, the surrounding gardens tangled with weeds and left to go to seed.

Frederick dismounted, taking a deep breath to steady himself. His heart quickened with the knowledge that she was here, just within these walls. He approached the large front door and knocked firmly.

After a long pause, the door opened to reveal a tall, elderly butler. The man's expression was impeccably neutral, although he took in Frederick's presence with a quick, assessing glance, his gaze lingering on the Duke's travel-worn attire.

Frederick inclined his head. "I am here to see Lady Gemma. Please inform her that the Duke of Blackridge has arrived and wishes to speak with her."

The butler's face remained unreadable, though he dipped his head in acknowledgment. "Of course, Your Grace. Please, do step inside."

Frederick crossed the threshold into the dimly lit foyer, his eyes adjusting to the gloom as he took in the bare stone walls and cold marble floors. The air felt thick and stagnant, as if the house itself was reluctant to let in light or warmth. He noted the starkness of the space, its oppressive silence settling over him with a chill.

The butler shut the door and gestured toward a nearby hallway. "If you would please follow me, Your Grace, I shall inform the lady of the house of your arrival."

Frederick nodded, holding back the impatience that clawed at him. "Thank you," he replied, his voice betraying none of the urgency he felt.

The butler led him through a series of hallways, each more dimly lit and somber than the last, until they reached a large, sparsely furnished sitting room. A faint musty scent lingered in the air, and the few paintings on the walls seemed dark and foreboding.

"Please make yourself comfortable, Your Grace," the butler said, gesturing toward an armchair near the cold, empty fireplace. "I shall return shortly."

Frederick nodded, though he couldn't resist a quick glance around the room, hoping to catch sight of Gemma's familiar figure. But the space remained empty and silent as the butler disappeared into the dimly lit corridor.

Left alone, Frederick found himself pacing the length of the room, his thoughts racing.

He wondered how Gemma had fared in the days since their separation. Did she resent him, he wondered? Would she even agree to see him? He had prepared himself for the possibility

that she might refuse, that she might send him away before he had a chance to speak to her.

He knew he couldn't leave without trying. He needed to see her, to offer her an explanation for his actions and, if she would allow it, to bring her back with him. He needed her back to Blackridge with him, for his home was empty without her, its halls cold and silent in a way they hadn't been after she had entered his life. He had spent enough time resisting his feelings, hiding behind his pride and his duty, but he could no longer deny the truth.

Footsteps echoed down the hall, interrupting his reverie. Frederick straightened, his heart soaring with anticipation as he turned toward the doorway.

The door to the sitting room opened again, this time with a quiet creak that echoed in the tense silence.

Lady Anna Clarke, better known as Lady Treston, entered the room first, her posture rigid and her expression one of controlled disdain. She was impeccably dressed, her gown a mirror of the latest fashion, but there was something about her that felt stiff and unwelcoming, like a carefully crafted facade without warmth or substance to it.

Elizabeth dawdled behind Lady Treston, her hesitant steps betraying her discomfort with the situation. She glanced around the room, her eyes briefly meeting Frederick's before she quickly looked away, her lips pressed into a tight line.

Frederick stood as they entered, his greeting courteous but lacking any enthusiasm. "Lady Treston, Elizabeth, it is lovely to see you again."

"Your Grace, how unexpected," Lady Treston said with a touch of condescension in her voice. "I trust your journey was not too exhausting?" she added with a cool smile, her eyes quickly scanning Frederick's appearance as if evaluating his worth.

Frederick gave a slight smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. "It has been long, but I am glad to have arrived."

Lady Treston glanced at Elizabeth before turning her sharp gaze back on Frederick. “But, of course, I must assume you did not come all this way simply for pleasantries. You must have matters of importance to discuss. Perhaps with Elizabeth?”

She waved a hand in the direction of her daughter, who had already taken a few steps back, clearly uncomfortable at being in the spotlight.

Elizabeth immediately stiffened, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment and reluctance.

“Mother, please...” she murmured, her eyes darting toward the door as if she might escape any moment.

Frederick turned his gaze toward Elizabeth, then back to Lady Treston with a firm, but respectful, shake of his head.

“I came to speak with Lady Gemma,” he said quietly, his words hanging in the air. “I am afraid I have little to discuss with anyone else at this time.”

Lady Treston’s smile faltered for a fraction of a second before she regained her composure. “Gemma?” she repeated with a faint chuckle. “My dear, I do understand your sentiment, but surely you know that it is she who must be available to speak with you, not the other way around.”

Frederick’s expression remained unchanged, but the faint tightening of his jaw was enough to signal his displeasure. “I am well aware of that,” he replied, his tone cold. “But she is the only person I have come to see.”

Elizabeth glanced between them nervously, her discomfort growing by the second. Lady Treston’s gaze, however, seemed to harden.

She took a small step closer to Frederick, her voice lowering as she tried to convince him. “I must admit, Your Grace, you might find it more advantageous to speak with Elizabeth,” she said, her tone silky and tinged with a hint of suggestion. “She is younger, more capable, and her future is, after all, the one you should be most concerned with. Why waste your time on someone like Gemma?”

At that, Frederick's eyes narrowed, and the muscles in his shoulders tensed as if he had been slapped. He could hear the undertone of cruelty in Lady Treston's words, the way she spoke of Gemma as if she were an inconvenience to be dealt with rather than a person worthy of respect.

He could tolerate much, but this was too far.

"Enough," Frederick said, his voice low but firm, carrying with it the weight of finality. "You will not speak of her that way."

Lady Treston's eyes widened, momentarily taken aback by the sudden force in his words. "I beg your pardon?" she said, a false sweetness returning to her voice as she tried to regain control of the conversation.

"No, Lady Treston," Frederick continued, his voice becoming sharper, more intense. "I will not let you diminish Gemma's worth. She is not some..." he paused, the words catching in his throat as he struggled to restrain the anger he felt. "She is intelligent, kind, capable and strong. More than any of you will ever give her credit for. She deserves better than the treatment you give her, and if you cannot see that, then it is you who is blind, not her."

Lady Treston stood frozen for a moment, her face flushed with the surprise of being spoken to so boldly. Her lips twisted into a crooked, reptilian smile. "How *dare* you..." she began, but before she could continue, Elizabeth stepped forward and raised a hesitant hand in an attempt to prevent her mother from speaking further.

"Mother, please," Elizabeth said softly, her voice trembling as she tried to calm the growing tension. "This is not helping. You can see that the Duke means to speak with Gemma. Let him. There is no reason for all of this..."

Frederick, ignoring the exchange between mother and daughter, turned his attention fully to Lady Treston. "I have said my piece," he said with quiet authority. "Now, I am here to speak with Gemma, and I will not leave until I have been granted that opportunity."

Lady Treston gave a final, exasperated sigh, her lips pressed into a thin line. She glanced at Elizabeth, who avoided her gaze, and then back at Frederick. “Very well, Your Grace,” she said bitterly. “I shall inform her that you are here. But I assure you, I hope you will not waste too much of her time. She has other responsibilities to deal with.”

Frederick didn’t respond, his eyes locked onto hers with a cold intensity. He simply nodded and took a step back, his posture still erect and resolute. Lady Treston gave a dismissive gesture to Elizabeth before sweeping out of the room, leaving her daughter to linger in the doorway.

Elizabeth’s indecisive eyes met Frederick’s, clearly wanting to impart something, but she lowered her head in defeat and followed her mother.

Frederick remained in place, his mind racing as he paced slowly across the room. He could feel the hum of his anticipation, and the pounding of his heart as he waited for the woman he had ridden all the way from Blackridge to see.

He saw the way Lady Treston had looked at him, her words cutting through him with a precision that made his stomach turn. But the more he thought about it, the harder his resolve solidified. He was here for Gemma. He would see her, and nothing would stop him.

Moments later, the door to the sitting room opened again, this time more quietly, with a soft rustling of fabric that drew Frederick’s attention. His heart stopped.

There she was. Gemma.

The sight of her nearly took his breath away. Her presence was like a breath of fresh air, even in this cold, oppressive house. She stood in the doorway, her expression unreadable at first, her eyes meeting his with surprise, hesitation, and a naked longing that still connected them despite all the time that had passed.

For the first time in over a month, their eyes locked.

And, in that instant, nothing else mattered.

CHAPTER 35



Gemma stood still in the doorway, her breath catching in her chest as she took in the sight of Frederick.

His tall, imposing figure filled the room, but it was the intensity in his eyes, the *sincerity*, that stopped her in her tracks. She could feel the silence between them, as if the air itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to break.

It was clear that he had said something brusque to Lady Treston and Elizabeth earlier. Gemma had overheard the tail end of his defense of her. The words had come as a shock; she hadn't expected him to speak out on her behalf, especially not in such a potent way. His fierce tone and the strength in his words had left a lasting impression on her.

She couldn't deny it—a large part of her had wanted him to fight for her, and here he was, doing exactly that.

Frederick's eyes lit up as she stepped further into the room, his hands clasping in front of him as if unsure what to do next. He seemed momentarily at a loss for words, but after taking a deep breath, he spoke, his voice steady but rich with emotion.

"Gemma," he said, his voice low and sincere. "I need to apologize. I have made so many mistakes, and I have wronged you in more ways than I care to count. I was foolish, and I let my pride get in the way. But I cannot deny how I feel about you any longer. I regret every moment I spent pushing you away, every moment I did not make you feel like you mattered."

Gemma's chest tightened at his words, a swirl of emotions rising up in her. Regret. Guilt. Longing. She had tried to convince herself she no longer cared about him, that he had no place in her life anymore, but hearing him speak like that, with such raw vulnerability, cracked open a hatch inside of her that she knew she could never again seal.

Frederick continued, his gaze unwavering. "You mean more to me than anything else in my life. I am not asking for your forgiveness just for the sake of it; I know I do not deserve it. But I am asking you, Gemma, if you can find it in your heart to give me another chance, to let me make things right. I want to marry you and make you my wife if you will have me."

In the aftermath of his declaration, Gemma could only stare at him in utter shock. She hadn't expected this—hadn't expected him to be so open, so vulnerable. The man who had once been so distant and closed off was standing before her, offering her everything he had. It was overwhelming, and yet it was the most honest thing she had ever heard.

But doubt lingered at the edges of her heart. She wanted to believe him, she wanted to reach for the future he was offering, but the pain from all her years of being abandoned, of being treated as if she were an inconvenience was not easily forgotten.

Gemma's voice trembled and she swallowed hard, trying to steady herself. "I do not know if I can forgive you. I do not know if I can just forget what happened; what you said, and what you did."

Frederick took a step forward, his expression earnest and determined. "I do not want you to forget it, Gemma. I just want the chance to prove to you that I have changed, that I am willing to fight for you, for us. I will do whatever it takes."

Her heart ached at the honesty in his voice and the desperation in his eyes. It was nothing she had ever expected would come from him. It was more than just words—it was a promise.

But before Gemma could respond, a voice interrupted, sharp and dismissive.

“This is ridiculous,” Lady Treston said, her voice filled with scorn as she stepped forward, clearly annoyed by the turn of events. “Gemma, you have already had your moment. You cannot expect to just—”

But Elizabeth, who had been standing near the door, suddenly moved forward, her hands raised to stop her mother.

“Mother, please,” Elizabeth said, her voice quiet but firm. “Let Gemma speak. You can no longer treat her in this way.”

Lady Treston shot Elizabeth a look of pure irritation, her eyes narrowing. “You think you can tell me what to do now? You, who cannot even manage your own affairs—”

“Enough!” Gemma’s voice rang out, startling them both. Her heart was pounding in her chest, but she could feel the anger rising within her, the years of suppression finally breaking free. She turned to her mother, her voice sharp with years of pent-up resentment.

“I have had enough of you, Mother. You have *always* treated me like I was nothing. You have made me feel like I am a burden, and for what? Because you could not stand to have me around?”

Lady Treston’s eyes widened in shock at Gemma’s outburst, and for a moment, Gemma thought she might be struck down for daring to speak so boldly to her, but she no longer cared. Not about the rules, not about her mother’s anger. She was done with being silenced.

“You left me at a convent,” Gemma continued, her voice trembling with the force of her words. “You abandoned me, and I had to grow up there alone, unwanted. And now you stand here, pretending you have any right to tell me what to do with my life. You do not *deserve* to be called my mother.”

Lady Treston’s face flushed with fury, but Gemma pressed on. “You treat Elizabeth the same way you treated me. You try to make her into something she is not, forcing her into a mold that she does not fit. You only care about your own reputation and about how things look to the ton, and you do not care who gets hurt in the process.”

“Gemma,” Lady Treston began, her voice dripping with venom, “you are a willful child, and you always have been. There were no other options. You do not understand—”

“No,” Gemma cut in, her voice trembling with raw emotion. “It is *you* who does not understand. You never cared to. You were too busy trying to climb your way to the top, leaving your own children behind in the process.”

Frederick stood silent, his eyes blazing with anger, his hands clenched at his sides. Gemma could see the fury on his face; his protectiveness, his frustration with the way Lady Treston had treated her and was now treating Elizabeth. Gemma glanced at him briefly, and he met her gaze, his jaw tight, his expression one of barely contained rage.

But before he could speak, Lady Treston took a step forward, her face contorted with fury. “You are wrong, Gemma. You always have been. I did what I had to do. You *were* a burden, and your behavior left me with no choice.”

At that, Frederick’s fury was palpable, his stance shifting from foot to foot as though he wanted to pummel Lady Treston. But Gemma’s voice stopped him.

“Enough,” she said, her tone final, as she turned to face her mother. “You no longer have the right to justify your actions. I know the truth, and so do you.”

For the first time in her life, Gemma felt the burden on her shoulders vanish, as if by magic.

Gemma stood there, her heart still pounding from the confrontation. Her words had cut through the pretense and lies in the room like a knife, but it wasn’t over yet. Lady Treston’s face was a mask of fury, her lips forcibly crushed together as she struggled to maintain her composure. The air crackled with the weight of their exchange, and for a moment, it seemed that her mother would retaliate with another venomous tirade.

Before she could open her mouth, Frederick, who had been watching the scene unfold with an air of patient restraint,

stepped forward. His black eyes shot daggers of raw fury and his entire body stood tensed for combat.

“I have heard *enough* out of you!” Frederick shouted at Lady Treston. He could no longer contain his rage. His voice contained a ferocity that Gemma had never heard him use before, but in that moment it was clear that he was no longer interested in decorum. His anger was palpable; a raw force that sent a shiver down Gemma’s spine.

Lady Treston’s mouth opened to unleash another scathing retort, but Frederick cut her off with the force of a lion’s roar.

“*No!*” he said, his voice low and deadly, his fury unmistakable. “You *will not* speak again.”

Gemma watched in stunned silence as Frederick moved closer, his every step radiating power. He was a force to be reckoned with, and there was no mistaking his intention.

Lady Treston’s face paled as Frederick’s words hit her like a blow. She once again opened her mouth to protest, but he wasn’t having it.

“Your behavior toward Gemma is *appalling*,” Frederick spat, “and I will not stand by and let it continue. You have no right to treat your daughter in such a way. You are a *disgrace*.”

The words seemed to land like fists, each one striking her mother’s carefully curated image of control. Lady Treston’s eyes narrowed with white-hot fury, but she knew she was powerless against him.

“I will ensure that you face consequences for your actions, Lady Treston,” Frederick said, his voice growing colder. “Your reputation will be tarnished beyond repair, and you will no longer have any influence or standing in society. The ton will know exactly what kind of woman you truly are.”

Lady Treston took a step back, her composure crumbling under his threats. Her mouth moved but no words came out, her protests dying in her throat as she realized Frederick had judged her and had handed down her social death sentence. There was no escape. She had crossed an unforgivable line and Frederick was going to make sure she paid for it.

“You will leave this country immediately,” Frederick said, his voice final. “And you will never return.”

“How dare you order this on *my* property?”

“I do dare, Lady Treston. Do not test me. You do not want to see the consequences.”

The command was as sharp as a sword, and Gemma could see the battle raging behind her mother’s eyes. She wanted to argue, to shout, to try and regain control, but there was no room for that any longer. Frederick had made up his mind, and there was nothing Lady Treston could do about it.

“Do you understand?” Frederick’s tone was a final warning, his gaze never leaving Lady Treston’s.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the words caught in her throat. Finally, with a tight, furious shake of her head, she stepped back, her eyes blazing with defiance.

“You will regret this, Duke,” she spat, her voice trembling with fury.

Frederick didn’t flinch. He merely gave her a look that could freeze water. “I doubt that.”

With that, Lady Treston turned, her steps stiff with indignation as she made her way toward the door. Her departure was swift and filled with a strange finality. She was defeated, powerless in the face of Frederick’s unwavering determination to end her rule of terror.

When the door closed behind her, Gemma let a breath out. She finally felt free. For the first time in her life, she felt that she was no longer being held captive by her mother’s cruelty.

But it wasn’t over yet.

Frederick was still standing there, his back turned to her mother’s retreating form. When he turned back to Gemma his expression softened, though the storm still brewed in his eyes.

He took a step toward Elizabeth, who had been silent throughout the exchange, her gaze bouncing between her mother’s exit and Frederick.

“I do not know what your plans are, Lady Elizabeth,” Frederick began, his voice gentler now. “But I will not stand by and watch you suffer under your mother’s control. I would like to offer you a different life. A life away from her manipulation and cruelty.”

Elizabeth looked up at him, her eyes wide with surprise. She clearly had not expected this.

“I have a home at Blackridge, and you are welcome to come and live with us, under my grandmother’s care,” Frederick continued. “You will have a home where you are respected and treated with kindness. I know this is a lot to digest, but I believe it is the best option for you.”

Gemma could see Elizabeth’s hesitation, the uncertainty in her eyes. But there was something else there too—hope. Hope that perhaps someone would genuinely care about her and for her, rather than simply treating her as her mother’s puppet.

“I will send a carriage to collect your belongings,” Frederick said, turning to leave the room. “Take your time. There is no rush. But know that the offer stands.”

Elizabeth, her voice barely above a whisper, nodded. “Thank you, Your Grace. I... I will think about it.”

Frederick gave her a small smile before turning back to Gemma. His eyes were calm now, no longer filled with the fury that had driven him to defend her.

“I know this is a lot to take in,” he said quietly, his gaze never leaving hers. “But I meant every word. I will fight for you, Gemma. I will not let anything stand in the way of us.”

Gemma felt her heart swell. It wasn’t just the promise of a future, of a life together, but the understanding that he was willing to go to such lengths for her, and for them.

“I... I do not know what to say,” Gemma admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

“You do not need to say anything right now,” Frederick replied, his voice tender. “Just know that I am here, and I will not leave you.”

The silence that followed was thick but comfortable, and contained the promise of a new beginning.

CHAPTER 36



“This is so much more than I ever expected,” Elizabeth said, her voice light with excitement. “I thought I would be confined to that dreadful house forever. But now, we are free, Gemma. We can go anywhere we want.”

Gemma couldn't help but smile as she sat in the carriage with Elizabeth, watching the countryside roll by through the small window.

The excitement in the air was contagious, and her sister's joy was palpable. Elizabeth had never experienced anything like this before—the freedom to simply go where she pleased, away from their mother's watchful eye. She was practically bubbling with enthusiasm, chattering away as they rode along the winding road.

Gemma smiled warmly at her, grateful that Elizabeth was finding happiness in this new chapter of their lives. “We will make sure you have a better life, Lizzy. No more worrying about what Mother thinks, says or wants.”

Elizabeth beamed at her sister, then glanced back out of the window. “And the best part is, we are heading toward Blackridge. It sounds wonderful. I cannot wait to see what living there will be like.”

The mention of Blackridge made Gemma's heart flutter. Frederick was waiting for them there, and it felt like a lifetime since she had been with him.

The thought of seeing him again, of being in his arms, made her ache with longing. She glanced out of the window,

catching sight of him riding alongside the carriage on his magnificent horse. His presence was commanding, and his gaze, whenever it grazed over her, made her pulse quicken.

Elizabeth continued to talk, but Gemma found herself lost in thought, her mind wandering to the man she couldn't wait to be with again. The way he looked at her with such intensity and tenderness made her feel alive and wanted.

Every so often, Frederick would glance at the carriage, offering her a smile that set her heart racing. His face was a little more relaxed than it had been over the past few days.

There was something about the calm rhythm of the road that made it easier to breathe and enjoy the moment. Gemma could feel her desire for him stirring once more, and each glance from him made it more difficult to ignore the pull she felt towards him.

At one point, Frederick rode closer to the carriage and leaned down. He reached inside and took her hand gently, bringing it to his lips. His kiss on her knuckles was soft, tender and full of promise.

"I have missed you dearly," he said, his voice hushed but filled with longing.

Gemma smiled, her heart fluttering. "The road ahead may be long, but being with you again is worth the drive," she replied, squeezing his hand. "Will we soon arrive at an inn?"

"Yes, just a few more hours," Frederick said. "We will stop for the night and then continue our journey. We will be back at Blackridge in a few days."

Gemma nodded, excitement growing in her chest. She knew she should be thinking about the road ahead, but all she could think about was the feeling of being in Frederick's arms once more. The image of his strength and the way his body moved with such purpose made her want him more than ever.

It was hard to focus on anything else.

The carriage jolted slightly as they continued on their way, and Elizabeth looked over at Gemma, noticing her gaze was locked on Frederick. A mischievous grin crossed her face.

“You are staring at him,” Elizabeth teased, her voice light but observant.

Gemma’s cheeks flushed, but she couldn’t help the smile that formed on her lips.

“I cannot help it,” she said with a sigh. “He is simply... everything.”

“I can see that,” Elizabeth teased further, winking at her. “Do not worry, one day I will find someone just like him. Then you will be the one teasing *me*.”

Gemma laughed, feeling a warmth in her chest. “One day, Lizzy. I promise you will also find someone who makes your heart race.”

They continued talking and laughing as the carriage rolled on. The sun soon began to dip beneath the horizon, lengthening the shadows of the trees around them.

They passed through a small town where the inn awaited them. The simple structure looked cozy and welcoming, like a cottage nestled in the heart of the countryside.

After settling into their rooms, Gemma and Elizabeth eagerly went down for dinner. The innkeeper had prepared a nourishing meal that was simple but satisfying. They were served bread, and a rich stew of fresh vegetables and roasted meats. It was not like the fancy meals served by the ton, but it was nourishing and warm, and just what they needed after a long day of travel.

Elizabeth smiled at the food, clearly delighted by the hearty meal.

“This is wonderful,” she said, her voice full of appreciation. “I have never eaten anything so delicious.”

Gemma couldn’t help but smile at her sister’s reaction. “I am pleased that you like it,” she said, savoring a bite of the stew. “It is nice to be treated so well, is it not?”

Frederick, who had been sitting with them, nodded. “Eat as much as you like,” he said with a smile. “Do not worry about the cost. Tonight, you are free to enjoy yourselves.”

Elizabeth's eyes lit up. "Really? I can have more?"

"Of course," Frederick replied, his tone warm and encouraging. "The meal is yours to enjoy. And do not forget the baths afterward."

The mention of baths made both girls look at one another eagerly. After a day on the chilly road, they both longed for the luxury of a hot bath.

Once they had finished their meal, Elizabeth hurried off to take her bath first, leaving Gemma to relax by the fire.

It was a quiet moment as she sat in silence and listened to the wood crackle musically in the grate.

Gemma leaned back in her chair, her thoughts turning once more to Frederick. She could not wait to be in his arms again. Her body ached for him, and the thought of his strong hands caressing her body and his lips kissing hers made her restless with need.

When Elizabeth finally emerged, her face rosy from the warmth of the bath, Gemma smiled at her sister.

"All clean?" she asked.

Elizabeth grinned. "Yes, and I feel like a new person. Now it is your turn."

"All right, but you look exhausted, Lizzy," she smiled, moving with her to the bed. "Get some sleep, all right?"

"I am a bit sleepy..."

"I do not blame you. After all the excitement and the long road behind us, you need a good night's sleep."

"So do you... Gemma... I... I am sorry about how mother treated you..."

"Do not worry yourself about it. It was never your fault and, honestly, it is now in the past where it belongs. We never have to look back, Lizzy."

Elizabeth yawned, nodding as she slipped under the covers. Gemma watched her, sitting next to her on the bed until she drifted into a peaceful slumber.

Gemma could have watched her forever, really. But she needed that bath. She stood up and walked to the room's washbasin. It didn't take long to slip into the tepid water, and she scrubbed herself as best she could.

She lingered as she washed, touching herself gently, imagining Frederick's rough touch and demanding pace. Going over the exquisite details of her times with him was something she hadn't allowed herself to think about since she left Blackridge.

After leaving the warmth of the bath, she began to dress when an irresistible desire overcame her. She could not wait any longer, not when Frederick was so close.

She grabbed a long chemise and a robe, slipped out of her room and made her way toward his.

The halls were quiet, and the night air felt alive with promise. She needed him, she wanted him, and she would let him ravage her all night if that was what he wanted.



When she reached Frederick's door, she knocked lightly. A moment later it swung open, and there he stood, shirtless and freshly cleaned from his own bath, steam still rising from his skin. His gaze locked with hers and she propelled herself into his arms.

Without a word, Frederick's lips crashed down on hers in a kiss that was hungry and deep, and full of weeks of pent-up longing. As the door clicked shut behind them, Gemma grasped onto him tightly and let everything she had been holding back pour out of her and into their all-consuming kiss.

"Gemma..." he whispered as his lips traced the contours of her collarbone. "Gemma."

"I want you," she responded.

He didn't need any further encouragement. Frederick bent down and lifted her up hastily, cupping his hand on her backside as he did. She wrapped her legs around his hips and could feel his arousal, desperate for him to touch her everywhere.

He laid her on the bed and impatiently kicked off his breeches, while Gemma hastily removing the robe and lifted the chemise over her head. His mouth immediately went to her breasts, lavishing them with his attention until her nipples were hard and sore. She loved the sensation, the lightning that shot through her when his warm, wet mouth and his rough fingers sucked, teased and pulled on her.

“More,” Gemma demanded, Frederick chuckling as his hot breath met her lips.

He captured them again, their lips never parting as he reclined onto his back and she sat astride him. Their naked bodies pressed together as she straddled him, feeling his manhood bulge against her wet opening, her shyness disappearing as she ground her hips against him.

“More,” she demanded again.

“Touch me,” he retorted, bucking his hips and tossing her gently upwards. “Touch me fully.”

She didn’t hesitate, reaching her hands between their joined legs and moving lower so she was able to fully grasp him in both hands. He was rigid and smooth, the head of his shaft pink and searching.

Frederick groaned with pleasure as Gemma grazed the tip of his member with one thumb and drew slow, sensual circles under and around its ridge while grasping his shaft firmly with her other hand, stroking him from root to tip.

His eyes slowly closed and his lips parted in a soundless O, as she continued to pleasure him.

“Put me in your mouth,” he demanded, his voice gruff and full of want.

“Yes, my lord...”

With a slow smile, Gemma lowered her head and placed her lips around him, sucking and swirling her tongue and feeling the bulging ridges that lined his shaft swell as his need to release grew.

Frederick bucked his hips towards her, forcing the full length of him into her mouth as he gripped the back of her head and pushed her down on him. Gemma gripped his buttocks and sucked enthusiastically on his glistening rod as he writhed in intense pleasure at her ministrations.

He pulled away from her and shimmied into a sitting position, then picked her up by her waist and placed himself inside of her.

“You are amazing,” he moaned, bucking hard as she bounced atop him.

She loved it when he praised her. It was a heated exchange, their breaths mingling, their bodies touching as sweat beaded and their shared climax built.

“Lay on the bed,” he demanded again, this time rolling her over so she was pinned to the bed, facedown.

“Yes... my... lord,” she moaned as he hoisted up her backside and thrust into her. “Yes...”

“Yes, you take me so well, darling...”

“Oh my God...Frederick...” she moaned.

She could feel his weight and his fingers digging into her hips as he thrust. It was everything she wanted, everything she needed, and she could feel her orgasm building as his fingers slipped between her legs to stroke her from behind as he continued to plunge into her.

“Oh... I am... I cannot...”

“Yes, Gemma. You’re such a good girl,” he moaned into her ear, thrusting a few more times before his fingers pressed roughly against her center.

She shook and moaned out in pleasure, feeling him throb and release his seed inside her. Their shared pleasure melted around them as they regained their senses, molding into one another’s arms, and she fell into a restful, but short sleep.

Gemma would wake him twice again that night, eager for more of his attentions.

EPILOGUE



THREE MONTHS LATER

The day of Gemma and Frederick's wedding arrived and the air was thick with excitement. Blackridge had never looked more alive.

The grand estate had been decorated in white and gold, with flowers from the surrounding countryside filling every corner. The ceremony would take place in the chapel on the grounds, a breathtaking structure that seemed to glow with warmth and joy, as if it too was celebrating their union.

Guests from all corners of the ton were in attendance and the atmosphere was vibrant, bustling with laughter, music, and the soft murmur of excited conversation.

It was unlike anything Gemma had ever experienced, the kind of spectacle she had once thought impossible for her. Yet here she was; the center of it all, poised to marry Frederick. Her love, her protector, and the man who had shown her what real happiness was.

As the guests mingled, Gemma caught sight of Elizabeth standing by the large window overlooking the garden. She was deep in conversation with the Dowager Duchess, who was laughing softly at something Elizabeth had said. The two women seemed to be getting along wonderfully, their personalities complementing each other beautifully.

Elizabeth's eyes sparkled as she leaned in to share something, and the Dowager's quick wit and humor drew more laughter from her. They were a delightful pair, and Gemma felt a sense

of relief and happiness knowing that her sister was starting to feel more at home in her new life.

“Gemma, come join us!” Elizabeth called out with a grin.

Gemma smiled and walked towards them, but as she did, she caught sight of Andrew standing by the refreshment table. He was deep in conversation with a few men, but his eyes flickered over to Elizabeth and her grandmother-in-law, when he caught sight of the young lady with the bright smile.

There was something in Andrew’s gaze—something that suggested more than just a friendly interest. Gemma raised an eyebrow, amused, but didn’t say anything as she approached.

Elizabeth also noticed, and without hesitation, she made her way toward him, her curiosity piqued. There was an instant spark between the two of them, and Gemma couldn’t help but smile as she watched their flirtation unfold. Elizabeth had always been a bit shy around men, but Andrew’s easygoing manner seemed to bring out a confidence in her.

“You two are practically glowing,” Vivian teased Gemma. “I am also glad to see Elizabeth so happy.”

“She deserves it,” Gemma said, her voice warm. “She has been through so much, and I am thrilled that she has begun a new chapter in her life. Perhaps Andrew will be part of it.”

The Dowager raised her eyebrows. “Andrew? That could be interesting. He has always been a bit of a flirt.”

Gemma laughed. “I think Elizabeth can handle him. She is certainly no wallflower.”

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, Peter had found his way to Frederick. He clasped his old friend on the shoulder with a solemn smile.

“I must say, Frederick, your sister would be so proud of you,” Peter said, his voice thick with emotion. “Helen always wanted you to find happiness, and I think she would be delighted to see that in you now.”

Frederick gave him a small, bittersweet smile, his eyes softening. “I know she would, Peter. It is still hard, though, to

think of her, to know she cannot be here to see this. But I will carry her memory with me always, especially today.”

Peter nodded in understanding, a silent agreement passing between them. They had both suffered losses, and though they could not bring Helen back, they could honor her legacy by living their lives to the full. For Frederick, that meant embracing the love and joy he had now found with Gemma.

Turning his attention to Gemma, Peter smiled warmly. “I must say, madam, you are even more beautiful than I could have imagined. Helen would have adored you.”

Gemma’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “Thank you, Peter. I have heard so much about her from Frederick, and I am sorry for your loss, too. It seems we have all had to face grief in different ways.”

Peter nodded. “We have, but I know she would have wanted us to find happiness. And I believe she would have been overjoyed to see what you and Frederick have found in each other.”

As the ceremony began, Gemma felt a surge of emotion wash over her. She was standing before the altar, holding Frederick’s hand, surrounded by the people she loved most.

The officiant’s voice rang out clearly. “Wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony?”

Gemma glanced up at Frederick, seeing the depth of his emotion in his eyes.

“I will,” she said softly.

When it was Frederick’s turn, his gaze never wavered from hers.

“I, Frederick, take thee, Gemma, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish, till death us do part.”

Gemma’s voice was steady, though her heart felt like it might burst with emotion as she repeated the vows.

“I, Gemma, take thee, Frederick, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part.”

The officiant smiled warmly. “With this ring, I thee wed,” he prompted.

Frederick’s hand was sure as he slipped the ring onto her finger, murmuring the words of the ancient promise.

The chapel felt alive with a sacred energy, and as the officiant pronounced them husband and wife, the room erupted into applause. Frederick leaned down to kiss Gemma, sealing their union with a gentle yet fervent kiss, one filled with all the love he held for her in his heart.



The celebrations that followed were just as grand as the ceremony. The ballroom at Blackridge was alight with golden chandeliers, and the floor was alive with dancing. Laughter filled the air as guests enjoyed themselves, celebrating the couple’s union in the grandest of ways. Gemma had never seen anything like it—the food, the music, the decorations—it was all breathtaking.

As the evening wore on, Gemma and Frederick found themselves a quiet corner of the room holding glasses of champagne. He smiled at her, his eyes soft and filled with love.

They had danced earlier, lost in each other’s arms, but now, in this moment of quiet, they could reflect on everything they had gone through to get to where they now were.

“I can hardly believe it,” Gemma said softly. “I never imagined I would find happiness like this. I have had so many years of pain, of feeling like I did not belong... and now, here we are, together.”

Frederick’s gaze softened, and he took her hand. “You belong here, Gemma. You always have. I know we have both had our share of battles, but this makes everything worth it.”

She smiled, squeezing his hand tightly. “And we will face whatever comes next, together. With you by my side, I know I can face anything.”

The sound of soft laughter reached their ears, and Gemma turned to see Juliet, now the Duchess of Islington, and her husband Hector approaching.

Juliet, with her bright smile and lively energy, pulled Gemma into a warm hug.

“I am so happy for you, Gemma,” Juliet said. “It is clear how much Frederick loves you. And you are such a beautiful bride.

Frederick laced his fingers with Gemma’s, then turned to Juliet. “I want to also congratulate you, Duchess. St. Catherine’s will be a much-improved place with you running it, that much is certain.”

Gemma’s eyes widened in surprise. “You are now running St. Catherine’s?”

Juliet nodded, a fierce determination in her voice. “Yes, I have taken over. I know it was not the easiest place, but I promise you, Gemma, it is going to be different. I will make sure no one else has to go through what you did.”

As Juliet spoke, Gemma noticed the Duke of Islington’s eyes gleaming with pride. How fortunate were they to have found men they loved—both of them. And from what Gemma had heard, Ciara and Penelope—two ladies with equal strife in their lives, now both duchesses—had found their happiness too.

Gemma’s heart swelled with gratitude. “Thank you. That means more to me than you can imagine. I am glad to know the convent will be in good hands. In kind hands, above all.”

Frederick slipped his arm around Gemma’s waist, his presence grounding her.

Together, they turned back to the guests and watched as the festivities continued around them.

It was a moment of pure happiness, a celebration not just of their love, but of the future they were building together.

A future that would be full of joy, laughter and love.



As the evening wore on, Gemma and Frederick slipped away to a quiet garden outside, taking a moment to themselves.

The stars above were clear and bright, the air cool and soothing. They stood together, hands clasped, and hearts full.

“I am so thankful for everything we have,” Gemma said, her voice barely a whisper.

Frederick pressed a kiss to her forehead. “And I am thankful for you, Gemma. For your strength, your love, and everything you have brought into my life.”

They stood there for a long while, simply enjoying the peace and quiet of the night, knowing that together, they could face anything the future held.

The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE



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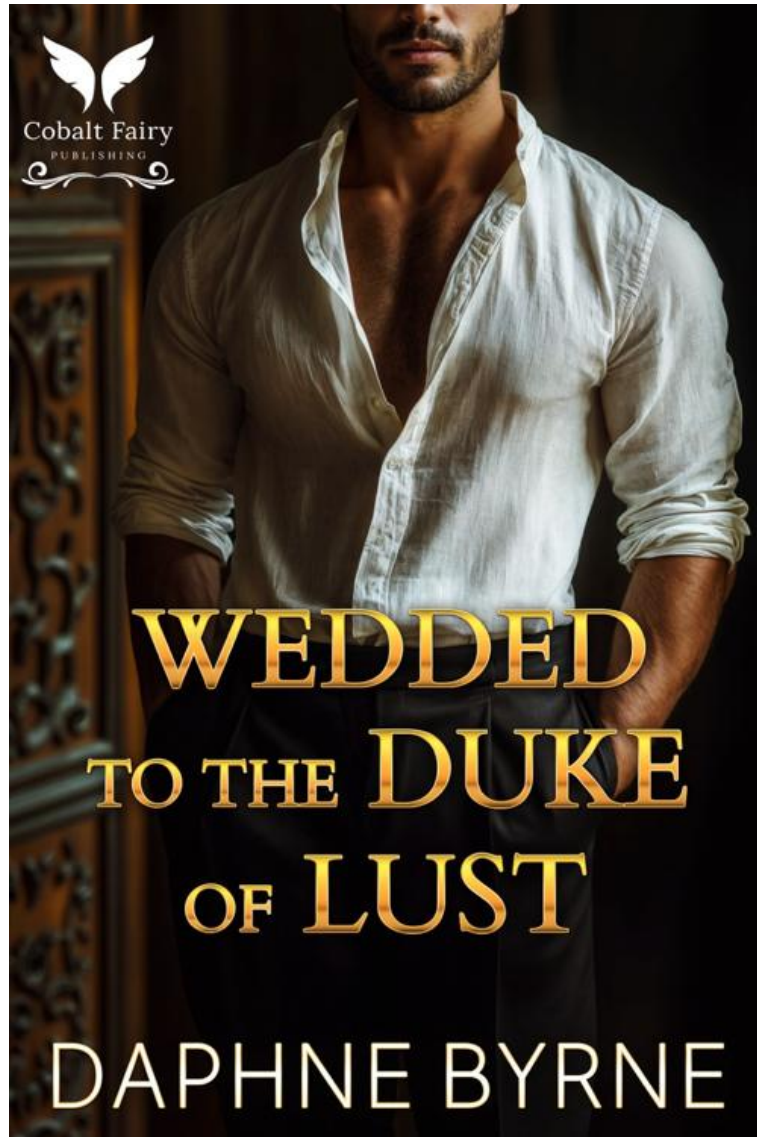
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PREVIEW: WEDDED TO THE
DUKE OF LUST



CHAPTER 1



“So, we’re sitting at the dining table. It’s all terribly awkward with this bedraggled woman, her hair stuck on her face from riding in the rain, shivering at the foot of the table, her hands on a little ragamuffin boy with Lord Morgan’s face!”

Seraphina Milbourne, the Duchess of Irondale, just gaped at her friend Rosalind, the Countess of Portswick, completely riveted by the story she was telling. “Then what happened?”

“Well, Lord Morgan, very red faced, his eyes flashing with anger, got to his feet, nodded to the table and asked us to excuse him. He marched to the foot of the table, grabbed the woman by the arm and manhandled her out of the room, the boy tripping along behind. I was so hoping they’d have their confrontation outside the dining room door but no, he took her to his study. We heard the door slam.”

“Damn it. It sounds as if it might have been extremely juicy.”

“Yes. The woman was clearly sitting on the penniless bench, but her eyes were determined and so was her jaw. I have a feeling she gave as good as she got.”

“Did you see her again?” Seraphina asked.

Rosalind took a sip of her port. “No. Not a hide nor hair of her or the boy. I dispatched my maid to learn more at the market this morning, but she didn’t return with any news yet. We try again tomorrow.”

“How...” Seraphina shook her head, lacking words.

“Yes. You did miss quite an entertaining evening by staying at home.” Rosalind tapped Seraphina’s arm with her fan.

Seraphina sighed. “Yes well...he did insist on couples and my husband...”

Rosalind gave her a sympathetic look. “Is His Grace still in Irondale? Such a pity that he’s so busy.”

Seraphina grimaced. She was grateful that her friend kept up the fiction that the only reason Gerard stayed away was that he was busy with work. The truth was that she and Gerard were as good as estranged. She hadn’t seen him except for fleeting moments in the last year that they had been married.

It shouldn’t bother me. We both agreed it was a marriage of convenience.

She had needed to get out of her father’s house, and he needed a bride to fulfill his responsibilities as Duke of Irondale. The irony was that one of those duties was producing an heir. Seraphina was very puzzled as to how he aimed to achieve that when they did not even live in the same house.

“Yes well, you know how extensive his holdings are. He cannot take his eye off them for a moment,” she muttered, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Rosalind rubbed her arm consolingly and then her lips spread into a sociable smile. Seraphina looked up to see Lady Stanton approaching. She sighed inwardly. The dowager viscountess had put herself out to be a friend to Seraphina and it was not her fault that Seraphina found her so tiresome.

“Lady Stanton!” she exclaimed with as much energy as she could muster, “how wonderful to see you.”

She let the dowager viscountess of Stanton kiss her cheeks in the French manner. Lady Stanton liked to put on airs and graces.

“My dear duchess. I was hoping to see you.” She looked around pointedly, “His Grace did not accompany you?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Seraphina saw Rosalind wince. She grabbed a glass of wine from a passing waiter and downed

it. “No, the duke is not in London,” she said with a fake smile of her own.

“Oh? Where is he? Don’t tell me he’s still ensconced in Irondale?” Peggy gave her an incredulous look. “Surely, he must realize how much he is neglecting you. Men are all the same, I do declare.”

Seraphina looked to Rosalind who was simply smiling politely. “Not all men. Lord Portswick is quite the attentive husband.” She tapped Rosalind with her fan and gave her a genuinely warm look. “He is a man among men.”

Rosalind blushed, hiding her face behind her fan. “Don’t be silly. William can be just as infuriating as any other man.”

“Infuriating, yes. Inattentive, no.”

As if summoned, the man himself appeared. “I saw that your glass was empty my dear. Shall I bring you another or will you dance with me?”

Rosalind’s blushes deepened as she giggled at her husband. She gave Seraphina a nod and a wave before allowing the earl to take her hand and lead her to the dance floor.

Seraphina and Peggy watched as William swept his wife around the dance floor, their movements graceful and synchronized.

Seraphina sighed, not wanting to feel jealous of her friend but knowing that there were no circumstances in which Gerard would do the same for her.

Peggy gave her a look. “Don’t be jealous my dear,” she said much to Seraphina’s chagrin, “Not every marriage can be entered into for love. Why you should have seen my late husband—no more decrepit and pitiful man could you find. Were it not for his money there would have been no way for him to secure a bride. You are fortunate that the duke is at least a young personable man...or maybe not. Have you thought perhaps about taking a lover?”

“Lady Stanton!” Seraphina gasped, genuinely shocked that the dowager viscountess would bring up such a thing.

“Oh hush, don’t pretend to be shocked. We are amongst friends are we not? I can help you find—”

“You’ll have to excuse me. I need to visit the powder room.” Seraphina hurried away as fast as she could go.

She honestly had no idea why Lady Stanton insisted on sticking to her like a burr at every social occasion. They had nothing in common and Seraphina was getting quite tired of her jibes.

Grabbing another glass, she joined another group of married ladies, getting lost in their gossip as she drank more wine than perhaps was wise.



Gerard Milbourne, the Duke of Irondale, was quite tired, having spent the night going through the household accounts. Not only was he tired, but he was also extremely annoyed. He stretched in his chair, taking a pensive look around his study.

Lady Seraphina Pennington had struck him as a quite shy and retiring woman when he met her at last year’s marriage mart. She hadn’t had much to say for herself and had seemed eager to leave her father’s dissolute, unpredictable presence in exchange for some peace and quiet.

Gerard swept his hands through the endless modiste bills, the mountain of food and drink consumed at a myriad of dinner parties, and other bits of entertainment thrown at his residence without his knowledge or permission.

This isn’t the woman I married.

He had expected to be able to forget about his duchess once the formalities were completed, not to have this thorn in his side disturbing *his* peace. That’s why he’d made the decision to come to Eldridge House, his townhouse, and find out once and for all what was going on.

When he’d left his wife in London, it was because he had been sure she’d be bored at Irondale, and she had wanted to stay close to her sister.

This is how she repays my kindness?

He heard a bump and shuffle somewhere along the corridor and checked the time.

Four hours past midnight.

The footmen would have already gone to bed, and it was too early for the kitchen staff to be up. It wasn't as if they had cows to milk in the city.

He got up and went to the door. Peering down the darkened corridor he saw a figure bumping against the walls and giggling.

He could not help the smile that spread across his face as he watched her. She was clearly enjoying herself thoroughly, her long brown hair swaying as she bumped from one wall to the other and laughed to herself, tripping over her own feet, her shoes in her hand. She was wearing a straight gown, which blended with the darkness and left nothing but a silhouette for him to see until she came in range of the candlelight.

Then he could see that her gown was a soft brown with gold accents along her low-slung square neckline and short belled sleeves. She wore long golden gloves on her hands that reached almost to the beginning of her upper arms. Her hair seemed to have been held up with a diadem, but it had now escaped its bindings and was a mess of curls framing her head like a halo.

She looked impossibly ethereal in the candlelight, like a creature come from the fairy realm to tempt him to sin. Her blue eyes gleamed as she finally set them on him and she stopped short, gaping and blinking.

The urge to laugh was strong. She looked quite comical swaying from side to side, trying to comprehend him.

“Look what the cat dragged in. Irondale took it's claws out of you?” she said.

Gerard frowned. “What the devil is that supposed to mean?”

“It means...what are you doing here lurking in the dark like an apparition?”

“The last I heard, Eldridge House belongs to *me* so I can come and go as I please.”

“Does it? Does it belong to *you*? Because I would have sworn, I’ve been living here alone for the past year with no interference from *you*.”

Anger sparked in Gerard’s chest, and he took a step towards her. “Yes, you have been living here. And bleeding freely with my money I see.” He thrust the invoice he still held in his hand at her feet. “Had I known who I was marrying, I would have kept searching.”

Seraphina threw back her head and screamed with laughter. “You think you would have found anyone willing to live in these conditions? I welcome you to try.”

“These conditions?” he took a step closer to her, his ire climbing. “Is your every need not provided for? Have I put a ceiling in how much money you can spend? No. That was clearly a mistake.”

“Oh, you are such a bore! What was I meant to do with my time as I languished here on my own?”

“Languish? You have to be joking,” he huffed in derision. “And forgive me for boring you to death by making sure my business interests were taken care of. We cannot all be social butterflies. Someone has to slave away to earn all the money you spend.”

“Did you just call me a butterfly?” she giggled.

He caught hold of her hand and pulled her against him.

“That’s not my point! My point is that you shall not disrespect me like that,” he snarled into her face.

She lifted her hand and covered his face with it. “Your breath is foul. Have you thought to use tooth powder in the mornings?”

Gerard’s anger burst forth and he slapped her hand away. “Do you think your drunken breath smells any sweeter?”

Obnoxiously, she leaned slowly into him and blew a breath into his face.

“I do,” she whispered, her mouth so close to him that he could feel her breath ghost on his skin.

Goosebumps rose as he shivered, his mouth falling open involuntarily and he caught his breath, torn between being taken aback and aroused by her actions.

He turned and met her eyes as she straightened up slowly. His gaze dropped to her mouth and then back to her eyes. The temptation to lean in and...taste, it was almost overwhelming.

But Gerard didn't want to give her ideas.

Who does this woman think she is?

Suddenly she heaved, body arching with the force of it. Then, she snatched her hand away from him and ran down the corridor.

Gerard watched her go with bemusement. A moment after she stepped in the powder room, he could hear her retching.

Shaking his head, he turned and walked slowly back to his study.

Whatever conversation needed to be had between them, clearly now was not a good time.

CHAPTER 2



“*R*ise and shine, Your Grace!”

Seraphina jerked, hitting her head on the headboard as her lady’s maid drew the curtains, letting in the morning light.

She groaned. “Must you do that right now?”

Leticia hummed as she bent over beside Seraphina’s bed. “You’ll feel better after your bath, if you’ll forgive my saying so.”

Seraphina opened one eye and then almost screamed as sunlight assaulted her eyes.

She burrowed under the blankets moaning in misery as she listened to her maid drag out the chamber pot from under her bed, the nauseating scent of vomitus filling the room. She heaved and swallowed spit holding her breath until she heard the door open and close.

Her head was pounding as if an entire marching band was drumming beneath her skull. She clutched her temples trying to rub the pain away, her eyes scrunched closed. She could feel the sunlight on her skin.

Where’s a nice dark cloudy morning when you need it?

The thought of opening her eyes and experiencing daylight was almost too much to bear. She would have berated herself for her behavior that night before —drinking so indiscriminately—but she lacked the energy to do so.

The door opened again. “Your bath is ready Your Grace,” her maid announced in what Seraphina considered was an

unnecessarily loud voice.

She nodded very slowly, crawling out of bed like an infant and then standing still to let her maid relieve her of her nightgown, and then lead her slowly towards the bath.

She sank into it with a sigh of relief, having managed thus far without opening her eyes.

Leticia, her maid, very gently soaped her up, taking special care to massage her head as she washed Seraphina's hair.

As she rose out of the bath, Seraphina tentatively blinked her eyes open, allowing herself to squint as she got used to the light.

"Thank you, Leticia," she murmured gratefully, as her maid dried her slowly before going to the wardrobe to choose a suitable morning gown.

Seraphina remembered that her husband was in residence, she blushed deeply, remembering how she'd spoken to him the night before. She had no excuse, except that she was rather annoyed at him for his abandonment of her.

This was not what she had signed up for.

Everyone in the *Bon Ton* pitied her—everyone knew how neglected she was.

It was embarrassing to say the least.

She hated that even with all that, when he had bothered to grace her with his presence it had been to berate her. Who did he think he was to judge her? All she had done was have some dinners, buy some clothes, and replenish the wine cellar. How dare he call her extravagant for that? She happened to know that he had all his suits handmade by a specific designer in London. Just one of those suits was enough to feed the entire household for a month. She didn't understand where he got the nerve.

By the time she was finished stewing, her headache had disappeared, helped along by the special tea brought to her by Leticia, and brewed by the housekeeper.

The irony was that it was she who had taught the housekeeper to make the tea, having had many an occasion to make it for her father. It filled her with horror to do anything that could be taken as following in her father's footsteps—another thing she had to blame Gerard for.

She straightened her gown ready to go out and face her husband, but then Leticia came back into the room, a note in hand.

She held it out to Seraphina, "This came from Pennington House, Your Grace. The messenger said it was urgent."

Seraphina slouched the note from her and opened it quickly, her eyes flew over it, chest constricting and fear.

Darling girl,

*I need you. I don't know what to do. You have to help us.
Please come now.*

Tessa.

Seraphina's stomach dropped. There wasn't much in the note to tell her what the matter might be so of course her mind took her to the worst things that could have happened.

At least I know that Tessa is still alive or was when she wrote this note.

She pushed past Leticia grabbing her cloak. "I have to go. Should His Grace ask after me, tell him I don't know when I'll be back."

Leticia curtsied. "Yes, Your Grace."

She swept out of the room and down the stairs.



"Good morning, Uncle," Gerard said as he entered the dining room and took his seat at the head of the table.

His uncle, the Earl of Astor and his late mother's older brother, was already sitting at the foot of the table, nursing a coffee.

Lord Astor was not much of an eater in the morning, but he was a stickler for making an appearance at the breakfast table.

“Morning Gerard. I understand from my valet that there was some kerfuffle with your wife last night. I take it you beat her into submission?”

Gerard rolled his eyes as he indicated with a nod that the footman should indeed pour him coffee. “I think she will suffer enough this morning from the hangover she undoubtedly has. No need to cause her more pain.”

“I thought we arrived in the city to remind her of her place. Surely, you’re not about to abnegate?”

Gerard gave a put-upon sigh. “Of course not, Uncle Erasmus. Do not be obtuse.”

“Well then? How do you intend to handle her?”

“That is certainly none of your business.”

“Is it not? Well then, fine. What of the harvest? While you gallivant about the city, are you sure of the hands you’ve left that job in?”

“Harrison has been my steward for years.”

“Indeed. But he never expected he’d be serving a *duke*. Irondale is a much larger proposition than Hampshire ever would have been.”

Gerard glared at him. “Are you saying he’s incapable?”

“I am saying you should be there, supervising.”

“Do you not think I know that? But I must deal with this woman before she spends all the money I have yet to make.”

He looked up to see the subject of their conversation walking past the dining hall.

He stood up and called to her, “Your Grace?”

Seraphina stopped short and peered into the dining hall, a frown on her forehead. It cleared when she saw who was there.

“Your Grace,” she said, taking a step towards the door, “Lord Astor. Good morning,” her voice was subdued, a very different aura from the one she’d exuded the night before.

“Good morning,” Gerard answered, his gaze sweeping over her frame, from her expertly coiffed brunette hair to her square cut, periwinkle blue morning gown, her black walking boots and white gloves. “Are you going out?”

She straightened up and lifted her chin. “Yes, I am.”

“Where are you going?”

Pink spots appeared on her cheeks. “I do not believe that is any of your business.”

“I have no interest in your beliefs, merely your activities. Where are you going and how much is it going to cost me?” Gerard demanded, feeling a surge of anger go through him at her refusal to divulge her plans.

Is she meeting a gentleman?

“Such rudeness is uncalled for,” she said coldly.

He laughed, walking towards her. “Rudeness? You mistake me. I merely meant to emphasize to you that I am in earnest. Where are you going?”

She took a deep breath looking annoyed. “I am headed to my father’s house. I shall be back before dinner.”

“Your father?” Gerard said skeptically. “I thought you hated the man.”

“What has that to do with anything?”

“Why would you go there? Tell me the truth!” Gerard’s voice echoed with the force of his ire.

He felt compelled to grab onto Seraphina and *forbid* her to go anywhere. To remind her who she belonged to.

He could not fathom where this need had come from.

Seraphina’s face twisted, “Are you calling me a liar? I assure you sir, I am not. Now if I am to be back before dinner, I need to go. Excuse me,” she said curtly before turning away and marching off.

Gerard looked after her in disbelief.

Who was this woman he’d married?



Seraphina felt quite offended at the way her husband had spoken to her.

What reason have I given for him to be suspicious of me? She thought resentfully as she walked along at a fast clip down the street to the main road.

She could have taken the carriage but with Gerard's suspicions, she didn't want to. She flagged down a hackney instead and took that to Pennington House.

There was no footman at the door and when she hit the knocker, it took a while for someone to come and let her in. With her anxiety spiking, she opened her mouth to ask for her sister.

"Seraphina!"

She turned to see Tessa hurrying down the corridor and held her hands out towards her sister. "Tessa! What's wrong?"

Tessa clasped her hands, breathing hard. "Come with me." She pulled her towards the drawing room.

"Where's Father?" Seraphina asked in a low voice.

"Passed out in his study. He's ape-drunk from dipping deep all last night and this morning." Tessa's face twisted with disgust.

Seraphina felt a pang of remorse because of her own imbibing. "Is that what's the matter? Was he...a nuisance?"

Tessa gave a deep sigh. "Father making a fool of himself is normal but this morning, we got a letter from the accountants today essentially telling me to reconsider having a Season. There's no money for it! There's no money for anything!" she burst into tears.

Seraphina held her close, patting her hair and murmuring soothing words as Tessa cried, while also trying to think of a solution to this dilemma.

When Tessa had graduated from sobbing to hiccupping, Seraphina put her aside, searching her face. "Tell me exactly what happened."

Tessa took a deep breath. “Well, Father was his usual dissolute self, drinking and gambling and bleeding freely of cash he really didn’t have, over and over. It’s gotten worse since you were wed, Seraphina. I didn’t want to tell you because you had escaped this hell but if I am honest...” she sighed, “We can’t pay the maids, we had to let go of all but one footman, we have just a cook instead of a chef and housekeeper. It has not been easy. And now...I am to be denied the chance to escape too?”

A single tear escaped her eye.

Seraphina rubbed her sister’s shoulder absently as she tried to think of a way out of this quagmire. Aside from the anger she felt at her father for squandering what should have been their inheritance, she knew she couldn’t leave her sister alone in this house for much longer. She did not need Tessa to paint her a picture to know that the viscount was as abusive as ever.

“What happened last night that made you change your mind about telling me what was happening?” she asked Tessa.

Her sister hiccupped and then sniffed wiping the tears from her eyes. “Yesterday when he came home, he was shouting a lot, throwing things about and cursing at me. I was so scared Seraphina.”

“Did he hit you?” Seraphina asked with concern, her eyes flying over her sister’s face looking for any sign of injury.

Tessa shook her head. “No, he didn’t touch me. He didn’t have to. It was terrifying enough watching him tear the house apart accusing us of all sorts of things. I didn’t know what to do.”

Seraphina rubbed her back harder, “You were right to call me. There’s nothing we can do about him. But I promise you I will get you out of this house.”

“How? I cannot have a season with no money.”

“My husband and I will sponsor your season,” Seraphina said with her confidence she was not really feeling.

Her husband’s words from that morning echoed in her mind. She would have her work cut out for her to convince him to go along with this idea, especially since he already thought she

spent too much of his money. Now she would be proposing to spend more.

She shrugged inwardly.

It's not as if there's an alternative. I cannot leave Tessa in this house to be consumed by the evil that dwells here.

“Are you sure?” Tessa asked, looking at Seraphina so hopefully that it broke her heart.

“I am more than sure. I promise you I will make this happen for you. By the end of this season, you will have a husband and leave this house forever.”

Tessa sighed with relief. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you so much.”

Seraphina gathered her sister into her arms. “Of course, darling. There's no need to thank me. I am happy to do this for you. And so will my husband.”

She crossed her fingers, hoping her lie wasn't too great.

CHAPTER 3



“Oh, pardon me,” Seraphina said with a nervous laugh as she ran into Lord Astor at the front door of Eldridge House.

The older lord looked her up and down as he sneered, “I see you’re back from your sojourn. Was it worth the shouting match you had with my nephew this morning?”

Seraphina pinkened. “Hardly a shouting match. It was more of a difference of opinion.”

“And were you raised to have differences of opinions with your husband?”

Seraphina gave him a strange look. “No, I was not. However, I don’t see what business this is of yours.”

Lord Astor puffed his chest out. “The duke is my nephew. I have his welfare at heart.”

“Yes, well, the duke is my husband. So, I am equally worried about his welfare.”

“Are you? That is not the impression you gave.”

“I cannot be responsible for your impressions of me. Perhaps you should examine your prejudices. They might better inform your opinion.”

“Well, I never! How dare you say such a thing to me?”

“What, tell you the truth?”

Lord Astor snorted. “Your family does not have much of a relationship with truth.”

Seraphina puffed out her chest in anger. “I beg your *pardon*? How dare you besmirch my family in such a way? You do not even know them.”

“Your father is well known in town as a degenerate gambler.”

Seraphina gasped in shock and paled as she gaped at Lord Astor. While it was true that her father was as the earl described him, it was such a faux pas to say so.

“All right, all right,” Gerard’s voice had them both turning to see him come striding down the corridor. “What is all this fracas about? Uncle Erasmus, you’re not harassing my wife, are you?”

Lord Astor looked both disgruntled and shamefaced, “Of course not. I would not do such a thing.”

Seraphina growled deep in her throat, her disagreement obvious.

“Well, I suggest that for now we all retreat to our respective corners. Your Grace, if you would come with me...”

Gerard held out a hand to Seraphina. She took it, albeit reluctantly, and let him lead her to the parlor. He let go of her hand, crossed over to the bar and poured them both a drink.

Handing it to her, he made a toast, “Your good health,” before gulping the alcohol down.

Seraphina did the same, wincing when the bitter spirit hit the back of her throat. In spite of her shenanigans the night before, she was not much of a drinker thanks to her father and his example.

“I do not need you to find my battles for me,” she said a tad bitterly as she lowered her glass.

“Battles? I wasn’t aware you had any.”

Seraphina narrowed her eyes at him. “Do not pretend not to know what I am talking about. It is obtuse and facetious.”

Gerard chuckled, “Are you chastising me? How novel.”

“Are you making a game out of me? How childish.”

Gerard threw back his head and laughed. “Oh, I was not aware there was such a vixen hiding beneath your quiet veneer.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I am no vixen.”

He took a step closer to her, his eyes raking her frame. “Undoubtedly, you would not think of yourself as such.”

He extended the hand still holding the glass and ran his index finger down her cheek. She was startled and wanted to shy away, but she didn’t want him to think she was afraid, so she stood still and let him play with a strand of her hair.

Her heart was racing—out of fear, of course—he had never been that close to her before.

“But I see you have used our year of marriage to come out of your shell.” His eyes dropped to her bosom, and he licked his lips. “I think I might enjoy getting to know this version of you.”

Her breath stopped, caught in the surprise of the moment, her lips parted as she lifted her head to his. She could feel his breath ghosting against the skin of her nose.

Suddenly he straightened up. “Tonight, you and I will have dinner, at eight sharp. Do not be late.”

With that, he put down his glass and strode out of the room. Seraphina gaped after him in some surprise. She slowly lifted her glass to her lips and downed the whisky before putting it down on the table. Her heart beat slowed down as she took a breath, and she lifted her skirts, stumbling out of the room and towards her bed chambers.

According to the clock, she had approximately an hour to prepare for dinner. She had a feeling that she would need every minute of it.



Seraphina’s ice blue gown matched her eyes perfectly. It was made of thin muslin that swirled around her like a cloud, the diamond brooch around her throat, adding its own sparkle to her outfit. A silver comb holding her chestnut hair in an untidy mop atop her head completed the picture.

She had thought about adding some color in her pale cheeks but was too embarrassed about what Gerard might say about her efforts.

She came to a stop just inside the door of the dining room, silver slippers clicking together at the abruptness of it. Her eyes flew across the table, noting that only two places were set. Gerard stood at the head of the table. He executed an elegant bow before stepping away from the table to pull a chair out for her, on his right side.

Tripping a little with nerves, Seraphina walked towards him, nodding in thanks as she took her seat.

He resumed his own, his eyes never leaving her. "You look well this evening. It is good to see that if you are spending my money at least you are doing it with taste."

Seraphina narrowed her eyes at him, and pouted before she remembered that she was supposed to be buttering him up so that he could help her sister.

She plastered a smile on her face. "Thank you," she murmured though she had to stop herself from wincing in pain.

He gave her a strange look but did not comment.

The butler announced the first course, "Creamy mushroom soup with freshly baked bread, generously buttered," he said as the bowls and plates were put down before them.

Seraphina was rather startled because when she was on her own, the butler never bothered with such formalities. Still, she picked up a warm soft bun and took a bite, appreciating how it melted in her mouth as she washed it down with the soup.

They mostly ate in silence, and Seraphina was afraid that they might get through dinner without saying a word to each other.

We cannot have that.

She cast her around for a safe topic of conversation to get them started. Everything she thought of seemed fraught with potholes ready to trip them up.

"Shall we play a game?" she asked as the soup course was replaced with roasted pigeon in a bed of rice.

“A game?” he asked skeptically. “Are we not a bit too old for that?”

“You play cards, do you not?”

“Absolutely not. I do not play any games of chance.”

Seraphina frowned. Before she had married him, she knew that the duke had been a bit of a rake in his relative youth. She was quite sure that he had been in quite a few gambling dens in his heyday. But he seemed genuinely disgusted by the thought of games of chance. It was an interesting paradox she meant to unravel if she could.

“Well, the game I propose to play is not one of chance. In fact, it is the opposite, because it gives you the chance to decide what you mean to do.”

“What game is this?” he asked with an irritable frown.

“It’s quite simple really. I ask you a question, and you have the choice of answering the question or taking a drink.”

The furrow in his brow deepened. “What *kind* of question?”

She grinned at him mischievously. “Whatever kind of question I can think of. The objective of the game, however, is to get to know the other person better. So, the questions might be a bit... personal.”

“What if I have no wish to know you better?”

She leaned towards him and smiled, “Surely you have *some* questions for me?”

He blinked at her and his eyes grew thoughtful. Picking up his glass he took a sip of port. “Very well then. Let us play. *I’ll* start, shall I?”

Seraphina made a gesture for him to go ahead.

“All right then. Explain to me why you are spending so much of my money.”

Seraphina rolled her eyes. “I do not spend a lot of your money. I live well within our means. But you married me and then you went off to Irondale without a word.”

“It is my home. I was needed.”

“You were also needed here, by your new wife.”

“That was not part of our arrangement. I do not recall any clause where I was to wait on you hand and foot.”

“I didn’t say that there was. But I was a newlywed with nothing much to do except twiddle my thumbs I had to pass the time somehow.”

“And you choose what? Buying gowns and importing furniture?”

Seraphina gave a much put-upon sigh. “I bought *one* painting from France. And yes, I took it upon myself to entertain, to have lively dinners with interesting people who could help me pass the time. Did you expect me to sit in the dark, knitting shawls for non-existent relatives?”

“You have a sister.”

“She doesn’t wear shawls,” Seraphina shot back but the reminder of Tessa brought to the forefront of her mind the fact that she needed Gerard’s support to sponsor her season.

She gave her husband a strained smile. “I do not want to fight. If I promise to be less of a spendthrift in the future, can we put this behind us?”

“That is all I ask,” Gerard said.

“Then consider it done,” Seraphina smiled at him.

His lip twitched as if he meant to smile back, but he ducked his head focusing on his pigeon.

“It’s my turn to ask a question,” Seraphina said.

Gerard looked up warily. “What’s your question?”

“Why do you not like games of chance, Your Grace?”

His lip twitched again. This time she was sure it was almost a smile.

“Because they’re already rigged, my dear. You will always be destined to lose more than you win.”

“A surprisingly philosophical answer. Your turn.”

Gerard sipped his port thoughtfully, his eyes on her. “Were you always gregarious or is that something that you have developed in the last year?”

She laughed. “I have never been gregarious. In fact, it is many of the same people who populate most of my dinner parties. I enjoy very specific company.”

“Is that so? And would I make the criteria for the company you enjoy?”

“Ah ah!” She wagged her finger at him, “Those are two questions. It is my turn now.”

He chuckled indulgently. “Go ahead then.”

“All right. Were it not for the expectations of society, what kind of woman would you want?”

He quirked an eyebrow, looking surprised. “Aha! What a question.” He squinted thoughtfully. “I have never thought about it. My life has not been about what I want. It has been about duty, and expectations.”

She blinked at him, surprised at the candidness of his answer. “Indeed.”

He gave her a look, “I ask you the same question. What kind of man would you have wanted?”

“One who is not dissolute. A kind man. Honest,” she said at once.

He blinked at her in surprise. “Well... I think you lucked out then.”

She laughed. “If you say so.”

“Don’t you believe me?”

“I don’t know. We have hardly spent any time in each other’s company.”

“Yes, but when we met, I made you a promise and kept it. Is that not honest? I rescued you from your father. Was that not kind?”

Seraphina snorted derisively. “Did you really? Don’t pretend that marrying me was not about fulfilling your *own* obligations. I was merely convenient and easy.”

“Easy?” he scoffed, “You clearly have no idea what that word means.”

“Oh, was it so difficult taking two days out of your busy schedule to arrange a wedding? Because that is all the effort you have put in this marriage.”

“So ungrateful. Do you think that when you buy clothes, buy furniture, hold dinner parties, that the money comes from trees? I work hard so that you might be comfortable!”

“Ungrateful? Should I be grateful for being *abandoned*? For having to make up stories about why my husband is never with me? Do you think it has been easy for me?”

Gerard rolled his eyes. “I see that you feel the need to be right.”

Seraphina laughed pouring more port in their empty glasses. “Of course I do.”

They both drank. “Your turn,” Gerard said.

Seraphina giggled. “All right then, next question. Over in Irondale, what do you do for entertainment?”

Gerard tilted his head to the side as if thinking. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugged one-shouldered. “Curiosity.”

“You are curious about Irondale?”

“No. I’m curious about *you*.”

Gerard reared back a bit, staring at her like he was seeing her for the first time. “Well, my dear friends Dorian and Leo do keep me company now and then. Though Leo is currently out of the country. We have a drink, we hunt, we box... sometimes we just sit and talk.” He shrugged.

Seraphina smiled. “I think I recall them from the wedding breakfast. Dorian is a boisterous fellow, is he not?”

“Ah ah... those are two questions,” Gerard grinned at her triumphantly.

She snorted. “Very well then. Ask your questions.”

“You have an interesting collection of books. Pray do tell, where did you get them?”

Seraphina choked on her port. She had a bit of a coughing fit and she put her glass down.

“What books?” she asked, her cheeks heating with embarrassment.

“Oh, I think you know what books. I found your lady’s maid giggling over a passage she read aloud to a milkmaid and a footman in the library yesterday. An interesting introduction to the household I must say. I do hope the servants are not having orgies in the pantry.”

Seraphina covered her face in mortification. She made a note to speak with Leticia about how she chose to pass her time.

“Those books were gifted to me by a good friend,” she murmured into her hands.

“A good friend you say?” Gerard peered at her bent head, trying to meet her eyes. “What kind of good friend? The kind that keeps your bed warm at night?”

Seraphina’s head shot up her eyes wide and outraged. “What? No of course not! Why would you ask me that?”

“Well, you have complained at length about how I have left you alone for a whole year, and how you have sought to pass the time with friends. Can I be blamed for thinking...”

“Yes. Yes, you can be blamed. I didn’t ask you to leave me on my own. And I do assure you I have not broken my vows. Are you saying that you have?”

He gave her a strained smile. “No, I have not. Mistresses are nothing but trouble. I’m not looking to complicate my life in such a way. Also, as I said earlier, I am an honest man. A man of duty. I would not go against my vows in such a way. But we digress. We were speaking of your books and where you got them.”

“I, like you, have bosom friends. And my good friend Rosalind is the one who supplies me with those books. You are right about a lover being complicated—especially when there are other ways to quench one’s desires.”

His eyebrow rose almost to his hairline. “I beg your pardon? Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I cannot read your mind, so I do not know what you think.”

Gerard got to his feet, stalking towards her like a predator. He put his hand caressingly on her shoulder, bending down to whisper in her ear.

“Do you touch yourself intimately as you read, wife?”

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.

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