



A Duchess to Reclaim

Author: Violet Hamers

Category: Erotic, Adult, Historical

Description: "A year apart hasn't taught you anything. Now I'll show you what it means to be mine..."

Amelia never expected her cruel father to auction her off. Let alone that the ruthless Duke of Ellsworth would buy her hand. Yet here she is, married and abandoned on her wedding night.

For a whole year, Dominic has tried to forget his wife. Even though she is set on ruining his reputation. Until she dares to attend The Devil's Masquerade and now he must remind the vixen who she belongs to...

One taste of her lips and he knows he shouldn't have returned. For what starts as a punishment turns into an obsession... to see his wife burn, one lustful touch at a time...

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then A Duchess to Reclaim is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 95

CHAPTERONE

“Iam waiting,” Lord Robin stated, his grip tightening on Amelia’s hand.

Amelia Hollowcroft, eldest daughter to the Viscount Hodge, blinked as her brows drew together, and she followed the Lord’s lead into the dance’s steps.

“For what, Lord Robin?” Amelia asked.

She flexed her fingers, trying to signal that his hold was too tight. He either did not notice or ignored it.

“For your gratitude, Miss Hollowcroft. For saving you from a night completely stuck to the wall,” Lord Robin replied.

He led her into a twirl, just as the other dancers were doing with their partners, but the force of his efforts had Amelia struggling to keep up. It did not help that his behavior, though kind at first, was now quickly crumbling into one that was most unbecoming of a gentleman.

“I have thanked you for the dance, Lord Robin,” she answered, her tone sweet and steady. “However, I willingly thank you again.”

It was not what she truly wished to say. She would have much rather preferred to push herself out of his embrace and tell him she preferred the wall to such behavior- but she could not. At least not right now. Not with her father watching like a hawk.

It had been three years since Roland, her former betrothed, had left her. Three years since he ran away to Italy with bruises on his face and a woman on his arm the very day of their wedding- at least according to the gossip. She hadn't paid much attention to what was said about him though, not with her own tattered reputation to worry about.

A week ago, on the anniversary of her greatest shame, her father, Felton Hollowcroft, had come to her with a warning. She was to tarry by the wall no longer, but stop her moping and find a husband or at least a serious suitor within the week, or he was going to arrange a suitor for her. Amelia had tried in earnest to obey, despite loathing the idea, and had thus far failed in completing the task. Tonight was her last night, and though she did not want to, she had to put forth the effort to sway Lord Robin. Even if only to buy her a little more time.

"Please, my lord, tell me about yourself?" Amelia implored sweetly. "Do you enjoy your duties? I hear as a second son of a viscount, they can still be rather demanding."

Lord Robin looked almost flattered as he twirled her again.

"Indeed," he replied readily, "Most do not believe that the second born bears much responsibility, but we certainly do. Family affairs, keeping my younger siblings in order, all the while preparing for the possibility of suddenly having to take on the eldest son's responsibilities should any misfortune befall him. It is most stressful."

"I am certain it is," Amelia replied, trying to sound compassionate despite her hidden lack of interest. "I am sure whoever you choose to marry may also need to take on such responsibilities as well. One might never know if or when the title of Viscountess might befall her."

Lord Robin smirked.

“Do you have interest in discovering such responsibilities?” He asked.

Not at all, Amelia thought, but kept her smile firmly on her lips.

“Oh, yes,” she answered, “Though my mother has already trained me extensively on the duties of being a Lady of the House. I feel I would be quite capable.”

Lord Robin’s smirk transformed into a grin that made Amelia’s stomach tighten and twist. His hands grew tighter on her person, and she felt her skin heat with shame as they also furtively moved lower.

“And what other duties might you be capable of, Miss Amelia?”

It was a question that had been one of the many reasons she had placed herself on the wall at parties. Since Roland had left her, the most salacious rumors had been spread. One of which was that she’d given her virtue too early. Some said it was such a poor performance it did not please the young lord. Others whispered that it was so exemplary that it intimidated him into running away. It was obvious which one Lord Robin believed at present.

“Would you be so kind as to be more direct with your question, Lord Robin?” She asked, batting her lashes as a bit of venom escaped into her voice. “Just so as I know exactly what it is you are asking.”

Lord Robin’s devilish grin faltered for a moment, but he composed himself and flexed his fingers at her bottom. Even through the fabric of her lavender gown, she felt the grossness of it.

“I have heard that you are a very educated woman, Lady Amelia. In all sorts of areas.”

He’d danced her into the far corner of the dance floor, away from the others and

hidden by the moving bodies so that when he gripped her backside and pushed her flush to his rigid manhood, no one saw.

Bile rose up in Amelia's throat as she felt the disgusting shape press into her, and not able to keep her act up anymore, she wrenched her hand from his and pushed him away. The shove barely made him move, and only seemed to entertain him as he let out a chuckle and smiled with all his teeth.

"What a wild thing you are," he mused, reaching for her again. "You like the chase, don't you? Very well then, I can manage that."

"The only wild thing here is the assumption you make, Lord Robin," she spat out, stepping away from his grip. "I do not have the education you speak of yet even if I did, I certainly would not share that with you!"

Her voice had risen from a seething whisper to an incredulous shout, drawing attention from nearly every other attendee in the ballroom. Some even stopping their conversation or dancing.

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Realizing her transgression, Amelia looked away from Lord Robin's furious expression and toward her father, only to find an equally savage look on his face. She blushed wildly, fighting the urge to scream, and attempted to salvage the situation.

"Lord Robin, I apologize, I-"

"I knew better than to dance with a ruined flower," Lord Robin interrupted, his tone vicious. "I only did so because your father offered me money. Clearly you are not worth the price."

Amelia flinched at the hostility of his words, and watched with deepening embarrassment as he drew his composure, bowed stiffly, and walked away toward a group of men. Her heart hammered in her chest as Lord Robin immediately began whispering to them, and they turned their narrowed eyes toward her in apparent disgust.

She hated this. Hatedallof it. Hated pretending that her reputation could be salvaged. Hated that she was forced to appear as if she actually cared. She had been ruined when Roland had left her. She knew it, embraced it, even if her parents didn't, and she wished for nothing more than to be able to accept spinsterhood and go hide the rest of her life away in the country.

It would not be so bad. Her dear friend Ophelia would be by her side; another young noble woman who did not wish to marry. And her other dear friends Theo, Rosamund, and Seraphina would visit her frequently.

"What in heaven's name do you think you are doing?" Her father seethed, grabbing

her tightly around her upper arm as he appeared by her side.

“Papa, I am sorry,” she whispered, sweat forming on her forehead as her blush grew into a fever, “It is not my fault, he was being so unseemly, I could not-”

“I told you this was your last chance,” Felton hissed through gritted teeth.

Though he was furious, the calm expression on his face did not even show a hint of it. He’d learned to appear as such while his voice whispered of punishment through years of keeping up with the social standards of the London ton. If only the others knew what volatile anger laid beneath the disguise of such an unbothered look.

Dread filled Amelia as Felton led them casually through the staring crowd, nodding and smiling politely at every gaze he met. Though she had been grateful for her friends’ absence at the party at first, she suddenly wished they had been able to come. Perhaps their intervention would stay whatever punishment was certainly awaiting her in the carriage.

But alas, Seraphina was with her new husband and baby girls in Vanderbilt, Theo was at home once more nursing her mother’s slowly failing health, Ophelia was visiting her aunt in the country, and Rosamund was at another ball with her own mother across town. She was alone.

Amelia waited until they were in the confines of the carriage before she spoke to her father again, immediately begging for his forgiveness and time.

“Papa, please, you must know this was not my fault! Roland left my reputation in tatters and now the only men that show interest are the most crude,” Amelia insisted.

“Stop blaming everything on Roland,” Felton commanded, his face twisting into a look of pure fury. “You have had three years. Three years to prove those rumors wrong

and you have failed impeccably.”

Amelia flinched, her lithe body tightening at the damnation, but she did not refute it.

“Very well. I have failed,” she admitted, “You still have two other daughters who could yet marry well. Allow me to retire to the country where I will be out of sight and out of mind to all. By the time Sarah comes of age, they will have forgotten all about me.”

Felton laughed darkly, shaking his head.

“No one will forget about you, darling girl,” his voice a clanging juxtaposition to the kind moniker. “Not after the scenes you have caused. And tonight’s was the last one. For the sake of our family name and your sisters’ future, I am taking care of this matter once and for all tonight.”

Amelia felt herself grow pale as a coldness seeped into her body. She stared at her father in disbelief, wide-eyed and mouth agape. He had not always been this harsh. In fact at one time he was a man that would call to her to sit on his knee, who would tickle under her chin to make her laugh and ask her what she learned that day. But when Roland had left her that night, after he had made the very public announcement at their party, it was as if her father’s personality had been stolen away, and in its place a demon had taken host.

He had not looked at her with true kindness since. Had not had anything but harsh words and reprimands for her. Had she truly done that to him? Had she somehow stolen her father’s joy by being made a fool on what was supposed to be the most exciting night of her life?

Amelia’s throat bobbed as she took in a gulp of air, trying her best to steady her fraying nerves.

“If you will not allow me to disappear to the country,” she said slowly, calmly, “Then will you at least tell me who you have arranged for me to marry? Do I not deserve to know that much?”

Felton stared at her, not a trace of emotion whatsoever in his eyes.

“How can I answer that?” he stated, his tone calm for once, “When I do not know the answer myself?”

Pain sliced through her chest, a sense of danger filling the air.

“What- what do you mean?” She asked. “Where are you taking me?”

The carriage stopped and her father flung open the door before the footman could get to it. For a moment she felt relief as she saw the front of their house. Perhaps her father was just trying to scare her. Perhaps he was-

“Go upstairs, put on your best dress, and come back to the carriage right away,” her father demanded quietly. “Do not talk to anyone. Do not tarry. If I have to come in after you, child, you will not like it. Now go.”

* * *

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“Fancy a bid on me, My Lord?” A sweet voice spoke from Dominic’s side.

Dominic lowered the champagne flute from his lips and through the black mask hiding his upper face, he looked down at the sweet-voiced woman. Her lips were painted a garish red, her messy curls thrown into a heap atop her head. She was in nothing more than a corset that matched her lips and a black skirt, hiked up nearly to her hips.

“Polly, is it not?” He asked, remembering her from another time.

The dark rouge on her cheeks seemed to grow darker as she smiled, revealing stains of lip paint on her teeth.

“You remember me, My Lord?” She asked, her tone hopeful and giddy.

He remembered her as he remembered all of his conquests. His memory was excellent; a tool that had helped in many ways. However, when he had last won Polly, she had looked...different. She was fresh then, had a glow about her that he had thoroughly enjoyed. But time had not been kind to her. And apparently neither had the customers that had come after him. Though she was still young, probably not yet even thirty, she had a tired look about her that silently begged for rest and a different life.

“Of course I do,” he answered politely, “But I am not bidding tonight. The owner of this establishment is a friend of mine, and I am simply here to make sure that the winners pay for their prizes.”

Polly did not do well with hiding her disappointment; suddenly looking as if she were about to weep.

“Surely you jest, My Lord,” she attempted. “There are others who can see to such matters so you may have a bit of fun.”

Dominic felt a small slither of pity for the woman, but he would not be moved.

“You misunderstand, Polly,” he said, his tone insistent, “Controlling others is my fun. I wish you the best of luck on tonight’s bid. Perhaps this time you will find yourself bought by a noble seeking a mistress.”

Polly curtsied to him, her chin nearly touching her pushed up ample bosom as she did so.

“From your lips to God’s ears, My Lord,” she murmured, her voice full of disappointment.

Dominic bowed his head politely, then let out a slow sigh as he watched her walk to another masked gentleman, no doubt trying to find exactly what he had proposed. There were many men tonight, all of them masked just as he to protect their identities. Some were there to buy whores for the night. Others to buy mistresses for a few years. A small few were even there to buy their future wives- those not willing to give the women a choice to refuse.

While he had found the market amusing in his youth, now that he was eight-and twenty, Dominic found it sad and a bit barbaric. It had been at least two years since he’d attended an auction, but when Wallace, the owner of the brothel had asked for his help in supervising and maintaining order, he was rather thrilled to come assist. It brought him an excess of coin and he loved the freedom of breaking a few bones without chance of reprimand when the time came to it.

By most he was known as a refined if not intimidating Duke with a penchant for command and success. By others, however- those that preferred to find their success in the dark of the night- his strength and air of brutality likened him to that of a common brute. He wore a mask, always, when handling the responsibilities of the latter, and rather enjoyed the stark duality of his rolls. It kept his hands firmly grasped in both worlds.

“We’re about to start,” Wallace stated when Dominic approached him with the collected member fees, “Are we ready?”

“Everyone has paid their due,” Dominic replied, handing over the thick envelope. “I will allow you to pay me my twenty percent at the end.”

Knowing better than to argue with Dominic, Wallace nodded, and handed off the funds to an associate.

“You are still comfortable with participating in the bidding war?” Wallace asked, getting up from his seat.

Dominic nodded. Another task he enjoyed. He would act as a participant to drive up the prices. Thanks to his intimidating stature and the mysterious air added by the mask, men would often bid against him, trying to prove themselves by using their wallets against his. It was a tactic that earned both him, and the house, much more money.

“Let us begin then,” Wallace stated, then nodded toward the stage.

The emcee, a robust, masked woman in a bright pink corset and a black and white striped skirt that rose startlingly to her knees, nodded back, and blew a whistle to the crowd. Silence immediately fell over the room as all the men turned toward her; eager to get started. Dominic walked, his powerful body striding through the crowd

with a regal, lethal grace, and took his spot in the middle.

“Welcome, welcome dearest gentlemen!” The lady in pink greeted loudly, smiling through her golden mask at the crowd.

“Tonight we have a most vivid and wide selection available for purchase. But first let us go over the rules. As always place your bids by raising your black card high in the air when you see something you like, and the highest bidder wins the woman! No shouting or fighting over bids or you shall be immediately removed. Payments will be collected before you take your purchases home, and as always, discretion is mandatory. Are we in agreement?”

A chorus of cheers rang through the room, sending a shot of excitement through Dominic as the general energy of the room became instantly filled with a carnal exhilaration and anticipation. A moment later the men around him erupted into roars and whistles of glee as the long line of women were walked out on stage.

Dominic’s excitement suddenly stilled as his body stiffened, his eyes going wide as he saw a familiar face in the line. His hands clenched at his sides as he inhaled sharply. There, near the end of the line of soon-to-be- auctioned women- was Amelia Hollowcroft.

Damn it.

CHAPTER TWO

“Please,” Amelia begged, her body trembling with fear as she clutched the woman’s hand to her left, “I do not wish to be here!”

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“Quiet, princess,” the woman hissed through her wide smile, jutting her corseted chest further toward the excited crowd. “There’s no talking in the line!”

Amelia’s heart hammered wildly as she looked to her right, and saw the other women in line flaunting themselves just as the woman to her left did. It was clear that unlike her, they very much wanted to be on this stage before all these strange, masked men. There would be no help from them. But she should have known that the moment they had all narrowed their eyes and glared at her when her father had dragged her toward them behind the stage.

Her dread for what her father had in store for her had only amplified when she’d returned to the carriage in her favorite silk lilac-hued dress. He had immediately frowned as he saw the chaste cut of the neck line, the matching elbow length gloves and delicate ivory cameo she had pinned at the center of her throat.

“I suppose it’ll do,” he had grumbled. “It shall certainly make you stand out.”

“Papa, please. Where are you taking me?” Amelia had asked, her right leg bouncing anxiously.

“To finally have you dealt with,” he muttered back, then had refused to say anything else, despite her begging for more information.

When the carriage had stopped in front of a large, particularly normal-looking stone building she had felt a bit of relief, but her anxiety had quickly returned when her father pulled on a black mask and had forced her inside.

Inside, dark red walls and a matching ceiling closed the large space in, a long, gold and dark wood polished bar lining the far opposite one. Smoke choked the air, and dim, sparse lights alighted tables. The only real light came from a stage to her far right. Which, for some reason, made her skin crawl when she saw it. Something told her that that stage was not for a play, but an entirely different sort of performance.

Though she'd never stepped foot in a brothel before, she'd read enough books to surmise that was where she was based on not just the decor but the many masked men that were milling excitedly about. There were a few women sprinkled among them, too. Some scantily clad in just their corsets and skirts, others in slightly more modest but still provocative dresses. And none of them looked like her.

Her father's grip tight on her wrist, she was forced to follow him through the crowd, her stomach growing more uneasy with every step and look she received. Some simply stared at her and scoffed before turning back to their conversation, while others took long, lingering looks at her; smirking wickedly when they finally caught her eyes.

"My Lord," A man greeted her father as he finally stopped at a table close to a raised stage. "Your guest must be masked as well. You know the rules."

"She's not a guest," her father had answered gruffly, then pushed her roughly toward the table. "She's for sale."

The masked man then gave her a long, studious look, as if inspecting her for any damages.

"You are late," he said at last. "We usually request the women arrive an hour early so that they may mingle with the gentlemen and win favor."

"It does not matter," her father replied promptly. "Sell her. Tonight."

The man took another look at Amelia's frightened expression, and she could have sworn that a look of pity passed through his brown eyes.

"Papa, no," Amelia breathed; growing dizzy with fear.

"Quiet!" He hissed.

"You understand that I cannot guarantee she will be sold for marriage?" The man had asked Felton. "Though most of our clientele is nobility, most come here for mistresses. Some even just for one night. Once she's in line, she will be sold to the highest bidder, no matter what he wants to do with her."

"Papa, please," Amelia sobbed, pulling at his grip.

"Quiet!" He seethed through gritted teeth as he snapped his head in her direction. "I warned you that you had one final week to find a match on your own, it is not my fault that you have failed!"

He yanked her forward then, and as she became unsteady on her feet, he pushed her backward; hitting a strange man's chest. Before she could right herself, she felt hands clasp around her upper arms.

"Take her to the back and put her in line with the others," Felton demanded.

The man in charge drew in a long, steady breath before holding out his hand.

"There is a seller's fee, My Lord," he drawled, flexing his fingers. "You have to pay just as the rest do."

A look of pure annoyance flashed across Lord Hollowcroft's face, but he pulled out his wallet.

“How much?” He demanded.

“One hundred pounds,” the man replied in that same drawling inflection.

“One hundred pounds!” Hollowcroft seethed. “That is ridiculous! Surely these women do not pay such an amount for your services!”

“These women follow my house rules perfectly, My Lord, and they are here of their own volition. Something tells me this young lady is not. The large fee is to bypass the rules and provide insurance for any...disruptions she may cause,” the man explained, then shrugged.

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“Pay the fee or get out, it matters not to me. But make your decision now. My man just rounded up the last of the members fees and we are to start momentarily.”

Amelia watched with dreaded horror as her father muttered a string of curses, then proceeded to put the notes in the man’s outstretched hand.

“Take her to the back,” the man said, closing his fist around the money.

He then glanced over to Amelia, and again, that slight pity passed through his eyes.

“Best of luck, my dear.”

Amelia had then been guided, surprisingly more gently than her father had done, to the back of the stage, where she was put into a long line of women and tied to their hands. She hadn’t even a moment to beg for help before the lead woman began walking, tugging the others along with her out onto the stage.

No, she mentally screamed as the emcee started calling out prices for the first woman. No, this cannot be happening! I do not belong here! Someone please, stop this!

She thought, for a moment, to scream such things aloud, to beg for help from the audience before her, but she was too frightened to do so. What if they liked her fear? She’d heard some men were attracted to that. And even if they didn’t, would any of them care enough to actually get her out of there?

“Sold for seventy pounds!” The emcee shouted, clapping her hands together.

“Please go to our dear coordinator and pay your fees to collect your prize. Next we have...”

Amelia’s anxiety and fear only grew as the line of women before her seemed to dwindle faster and faster. Seventy pounds. Sixty pounds. Eight-five. One-hundred and twenty. Forty pounds. Three-hundred and seventy-five pounds. Each woman went for a different price, and when the emcee clapped her hands, they hurried excitedly off the stage toward their winner.

Silent tears began to track down her cheeks as the line grew shorter; her thoughts a jumble of self pity. She should have tried harder to find a husband. She should have kept her temper in check when it came to the rumors spread about her. She should have-

“All right, gentlemen, would you look at this beautiful young lady!” The emcee shouted as Amelia’s turn came far too suddenly.

“Obviously from noble birth. Fair skin, healthy hair, and surely we must admire her figure! A chaste woman, no doubt, so a special treat lies ahead for her winner! Let us start her bidding off at one-hundred pounds!”

Heat flushed through Amelia’s cheeks as dozens of black cards shot up into the air.

“Two-hundred?”

Again she saw a multitude of cards go up in the air, but slightly less this time.

Higher and higher the number went, with less cards being held up each time.

Finally, when the emcee reached eight-hundred pounds- the highest price of the evening thus far- only two cards remained.

“Enough of this nonsense!” One of the men shouted, glaring through the card at the other man bidding against him. “A thousand pounds for the girl!”

A collective gasp went through the crowd, followed by shocked murmurs as the emcee yelled out, “Sir, might I remind you this is a silent auction! Decorum is mandatory. One more outburst and I shall-”

“Three thousand pounds,” the other man shouted, striding through the crowd toward the stage.

The entire room suddenly went silent again, and this time no scolding was delivered by the emcee. Even Amelia looked at the man in stunned, wide-eyed silence as he came closer.

“Three thousand pounds,” the man stated again, coming to the edge of the stage. “For this young lady. And a five-hundred pound donation to the house for me breaking the rules of your silent auction.”

Grey eyes flashed like liquid silver through that black mask as he looked at Amelia; and she suddenly quivered at their familiarity. She knew this man.

“W-well,” the emcee breathed out, clearly still startled at the offer.

“There we have it! Thirty-five hundred pounds for this lovely bird. Does anyone wish to counter?” She then asked, her voice loud and clear.

A tense silence was the only answer, and after a few seconds, the emcee nodded.

“Very well, My Lord,” the emcee announced, clapping her hands with finality. “We not only have our winner, but our highest bid ever!”

Amelia drew in a shallow breath as they all then turned to her. She knew she should move. But she couldn't. Her feet refused to do so.

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“Go on, girl,” the emcee ordered, clearly trying to hide her frustration as she nodded toward the masked man waiting. “Go to your winner. He has earned you.”

Seconds stretched with tension as Amelia still felt herself unable to move, save to meet her winner’s eyes. She knew those eyes. Had looked into them before. But when? Where?

A hushed rumble came through the crowd as she remained frozen with fear, and the emcee’s smile slipped into a look of irritation. She looked ready to unleash some most unkind words when the winner suddenly climbed the stairs of the stage and walked with a powerful confidence toward her, and then held out his hand just a scant space above her.

“Amelia,” he said calmly, startling her greatly as he said her name. “Come.”

That command. That small, one-word command spoken in that deep, patient tone, sent a shot of startling heat through every vein in her body, and as if her body had chosen without her mental will, she stretched out her hand, and took his.

* * *

“What a curious twist to the evening,” Wallace mused as Dominic approached him.

Amelia, pale as a ghost, had said nothing after he’d led her off the stage, and was moving with stiff, strange steps as he held her hand. He was worried she was going to collapse at any moment, so he tampered his annoyance at Wallace’s wit, and nodded.

“Indeed it is,” he replied. “Take my cut from this evening, and if there is anything left owed, send the invoice to my office. It will be paid within the day.”

“Your cut will cover her cost and we shall call it even,” Wallace replied, surprising him. It was not like him to round out payments; to not make sure he received every cent.

When he gave him a questioning look, Wallace merely replied, “My conscience was bothered by this one. Consider it my penance for accepting her.”

“Who brought her in?” Dominic asked. He glanced at Amelia again, and immediately regretted asking. He had to get her out of there. Now.

“Her father,” Wallace answered, looking perturbed.

Fury laced through Dominic as he heard this, but he bit back any further questions he had and bid Wallace farewell. Amelia’s hand was limp and cold in his hand, only serving to worry him farther as he led her through the crowd and to the exit.

To his surprise, once they made outside, Amelia spoke.

“I know you, my lord,” she said, her voice hollow.

“You do.” He confirmed, waving a hand at his driver parked down the street. “And you are safe.”

“How do I know you?” She asked.

“Into the carriage,” he commanded as his driver stopped the horses right before them.

“Who are you, my lord??” She shouted.

“Amelia,” Dominic growled, losing his patience over the situation. He let loose her hand only to snatch her by her waist and lift her up into his arms.

“I said get into the bloody carriage.”

He ignored her sudden struggle with ease, and carried her inside the moment the driver opened the door.

“Take us to an empty street and stay there until I give you further direction,” he commanded to the driver.

“Let me go!” She demanded, squirming in his grasp.

He did so the moment the door shut, and Amelia sent herself sprawling onto the floor from the momentum of her struggling.

“Serves you right,” he barked, ignoring the flash of guilt that moved through him as he watched her scramble up and into the seat opposite, her back pressing tightly to the cushions as she tried to put as much space as possible between them.

“I am not doing this,” she declared, her nostrils flared, honey eyes wide.

She looked like a feral kit trapped by hunter; trying to appear vicious in spite of her fear. Dominic admired her for that, but it did nothing to temper his annoyance. He roughly pulled off his mask, flinging it at her, and leaned forward on his knees so she could see his face plainly in the carriage’s lamplight.

Somehow, her eyes widened even further and her mouth dropped open.

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“Dominic?” She whispered.

“Yes,” he hissed through gritted teeth. “Soglad you remembered me.”

“You?Youbought me?” She asked. Then she shouted loudly “WHY?!”

“What else was I supposed to do?” He snarled back, “You are the best friend of my best friend’s wife, and a dear friend to my other best friend’s sister. You think I would allow you to be sold at auction to someone who might turn you into a mistress or worse?”

His explanation seemed to calm her, if only a little, and her rigid shoulders dropped.

“Now tell me how you ended up in that place,” he demanded.

“My father forced me,” she replied, her brows furrowing with disdain. Still a flash of hurt passed through her eyes. “What wereyoudoing in that place?”

“That is none of your concern,” he shot back, leaning back. He let out a sigh as he brushed a hand through his hair, shaking his head.

“What kind of father- especially one of noble blood, sells his eldest daughter in a place like this? No short answers, Amelia. Youwilltell me everything.”

He glared at her warningly, and though she stiffened again, she began tell her story.

“My reputation never recovered from my failed engagement,” she explained. “Over

the years, I never could put forth the proper effort in finding a replacement. I had hoped as time passed I would become better, but instead I- I suppose I just became more weary with the process of finding a husband. And with dealing with rumors. Instead of trying to better my reputation I simply put myself against the wall. Avoided dealing with any of it.

“I knew my father’s patience was growing thin with me, but when he told me last week I only had seven more days to find a husband or he would handle it, I could have never suspected this is what he meant.”

As she spoke the last part her voice broke and her chin began to quiver. Dominic sneered at her reaction, not comfortable with such displays of emotion. He’d rather her fight him again than this. Still, he pulled his kerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

“No offense to you, but no self-respecting father sells their child at an auction,” he said, his tone grating, “The circumstances are not ideal, but perhaps it is best that you are now free of him.”

“How?” Amelia sobbed, then blew her nose into the kerchief. “How is this better? I was sold like chattel!”

“Yes but you were sold tome,” Dominic retorted, “And I am arrogant enough to admit that my circumstances are much better than his. I can at least provide an assurance that you will never go through such an ordeal again. Unlike the others who might have bought you. Nor will I turn you into any sort of paramour. I am not fond of dallying with the unwilling.”

“Christ,” Dominic then swore. “What was he thinking? Only a handful of those men actually make the women they purchase their wives! And even so the mask policy has its limitations when it comes to identity protection. Word would have gotten out that

he had sold you. It still might.”

Amelia’s tear-filled eyes widened once more and she shook her head vigorously.

“No. No it cannot get out,” she pleaded. “Not even for my own reputation, but for my sisters. If such a rumor would spread they would never be courted, and my father would do the same to them. He said as much!”

Disgust bloomed in Dominic’s stomach. Of all the messes he’d been entangled in through his life, this one was by far the trickiest. He took a ragged breath, pushing through his rage, and nodded his head.

“There is one way that can be avoided,” he said quietly. Even as he said it, his soul balked at the idea. He was of the right age for it. A part of him even felt inclined to it. But this was never how he wanted it.

“Tell me,” Amelia urged, leaning toward him. “Tell me what to do and I will. I cannot let this happen to my sisters.”

Dominic looked up at her, his gaze wary.

“We will marry.”

CHAPTER THREE

“No,” Amelia blurted out, then blushed. A tiny sense of guilt flitted through her.

Dominic, of all people, had saved her and had already assured her that no force of inappropriate relations would be put upon her. Still, she balked at the idea.

Dominic’s dark brows flew up at her response and his jaw tightened at her response.

“You think it is something I wish for?” He asked. “When I thought of taking a wife I did not think I would be purchasing her.”

“Why not?” She replied haughtily, her fear slowly draining from her body. “Is that not what parents of daughters do? Offer a dowry to noble men to marry them? It is really all the same. Just in a different environment.”

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Dominic's silver eyes darkened as he stared at her, and Amelia immediately cooled her temper. When he then spoke his tone was low. Calm. And yet- there was a lethal edge to it.

"I understand you have had a rather awful evening. But you will speak to me with respect, Amelia. I am attempting to offer solution to this issue, even at my own inconvenience."

Amelia cast her eyes away from his, took a steadying breath, and mentally went through the last two hours and wild series of events. I have not been sold to a stranger. I have been sold to a friend that wants to help me. I am angry. But I do not need to be angry at him. I will listen.

"I apologize," she said as calmly as she could, looking back up at him. "Please tell me your plan."

Dominic's pinning, cold stare made her want to squirm in her seat, but she clasped her hands and held herself tightly. A moment later the carriage stopped, and the driver tapped on the roof.

"We are here, Your Grace," he announced.

Still keeping his piercing gaze on Amelia, Dominic said loudly, "Walk twenty paces away from us. Keep watch to make sure we are not interrupted. I shall call you back when we are ready to leave."

"Yes, Your Grace," the driver announced, and silence then stretched as they felt the

carriage sway slightly as the man climbed down, then listened as his crunching footsteps faded away.

“What do you know of my reputation, Amelia?” Dominic asked at last.

The question took her off guard. It was not at all what she thought he was going to ask.

“I- well, I have heard occasionally of your successes in your Dukedom from Theo and Seraphina. I have heard your witty comments between our friend group,” she explained.

A single dark brow of his rose.

“You’ve not heard any other gossip about me?” He asked.

Amelia let out a dry, mirthless laugh.

“People talk about me, Your Grace. Nottome. The only ones who have deigned to truly converse are the women in my close circle of friends.”

She paused, suddenly curious as to why he would ask and added, “Why?”

Dominic glanced away from her as he stretched his large body from a casual sitting position to one more refined.

“I am known to be quite ruthless in business,” he answered, reaching for his silver cuff link on his black shirt sleeve.

She watched as he twisted it with his fingers, as if adjusting it back into place even though it was properly seated.

“I am successful at everything I do and I am known to work with favors,” he went on. “I am knowledgeable in many things and I know the when, where, and why before most do.”

It was Amelia’s turn to raise a brow. Certainly quite confident in himself, too, she thought, growing frustrated.

“Congratulations?” She said, giving him a questioning look. “What does this have to do with my predicament?”

To her surprise, Dominic let out what sounded like an amused huff as his lips twitched.

“What it means is that I am powerful, Amelia. Powerful enough that everyone of importance wants to be an ally. Therefore if I take you on as my wife, even if some of the men back there did know who you were, they would not dare speak a word of it to anyone.”

Amelia’s brows flew up.

“You are that well liked?” She asked.

He chuckled, and shook his head.

“It is not about being liked. I am formidable. Being on my bad side can tend to get dangerous. For multiple reasons.”

Though curious, Amelia did not ask for further information. Something in the calm, unbothered way he stated these things told her that it was nothing but the truth.

“Very well,” she said quietly, then drew in a breath.

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“If I marry you I shall have a certain protection. That certainly is appreciated. But what else?”

Again those sculpted lips of his twitched.

“What else?” He echoed calmly.

“That is what you are willing to do for me,” she replied. “I am assuming this is a deal. What is it that you want me to do for you?”

That small ghost of a smile faded quickly from Dominic’s lips and it made Amelia grow rigid.

“As I said earlier, I have no proclivity for an unwilling paramour. This deal will not brokered by forced sexual favors.” He replied with a bitter note in his voice.

Amelia felt her cheeks flush at the provocative word, not expecting the bluntness of it. Suddenly she wondered if the very thought of participating in such acts with her were off-putting to her, and she felt a bitter shot of disappointment.

Yes, she had put off finding a husband because of her bruised feelings toward men and her ever-floundering reputation, but some small part of her had hoped that if she could marry, it would be with a man that would show her not just love, but passion. The kind she read of so often in her books.

“Excluding that,” she said slowly, dismissing her feelings, “There must be something you want from me.”

“If we were to be married you would be a duchess,” he clarified, “Therefore it would stand to reason that you step in and fill the roles as such.”

Amelia nodded. That was a fair and rational request. After all if he was willing to act as her husband, she should be willing in some capacity to act as his wife. And she had been trained extensively by her mother to undertake such duties; though there would be a learning curve when it came to the esteemed status of a duchess. More hosting, more delegating. But she could handle it. For the life he’d just spared her. She could do this.

“Very well,” she said at last, clasping her hands tightly together.

“And you stay out of London,” he dictated. “Out of sight and out of mind from the town. You will accept your new life at Ellsworth.”

“Why would I want to return here anyway?” She scoffed.

Dominic gave a simple nod.

“I remember a vague conversation you and I had at Seraphina’s baby shower,” he went on. “You stated that you wanted to be a woman that could do whatever she wanted. There will be rules to our unorthodox marriage. You cannot damage my reputation, and I will not damage yours. That being said, however, given the agreement we just settled on, if you use discretion you may go after a bit of the freedom you spoke of.”

Amelia’s brows flew to her forehead as her lips parted in shock.

“Truly?” She asked.

Dominic shrugged his powerful shoulders.

“If you respect my privacy and my freedoms, I shall respect yours. Can you agree on that?”

Perhaps this is a better bargain than I thought, she mused silently as she nodded.

“Very good,” Dominic stated, then reached for the door.

She stared at him in strange wonder as he called the driver back to them, and gave him Theo’s address.

“What are we going there for?” She asked as they started to move again.

“You are certainly not going back to your father’s house,” Dominic said with a rueful chuckle, “And you cannot yet come back to mine. A private residence, I suspect, would be too isolating for you after the night you had. Theo is your dear friend and her parents are very tolerant to overnight guests. Therefore you will stay with Theo until we are married.”

“And when will that be?” Amelia asked.

“I have certain connections,” Dominic replied. “We can have the license and ceremony in three days.”

* * *

“Sarah! Lydia!” Amelia gasped.

The wedding ceremony had come and gone in a blur, her mind so addled that she hadn’t noticed who was and was not among the small crowd of guests. She still hadn’t mentally recovered from the night of the auction; her fear often taking hold of her at random moments and stealing her away for bouts of time. When she would

come out of it, she often had to take a moment to prove to herself that it was over, she was safe, and would have to re-familiarize herself with wherever she was and whatever she was doing.

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Unfortunately, such a thing had happened just as she'd stepped onto the altar to marry Dominic.

She smiled widely, heart pouring with relief as she saw her sisters running toward her, and she opened her arms to embrace them. As she did so, she looked up, and a chill ran down her spine as she saw her father watching from afar.

She had not expected that they would be able to come; and she hated that her father had. Dominic, she suspected, must have paid a visit to him. She knew he had, for one of the wagons outside the church was loaded with her belongings.

Amelia suppressed a shudder as she thought of what that conversation would have been like. What their two fierce personalities clashing meeting had come about.

"Amelia, we cannot believe it!" Fourteen-year-old Sarah giggled, holding her tight. "When we last saw you we were so worried, but now here you are, getting married to a Duke! Why did you not tell us?"

Because I had no idea that was going to happen, she thought. But she refused to share the frightening details of that horrid night her father took her to auction.

"Oh, well, I wanted it to be surprise," Amelia laughed instead, pulling away so she could take a good look at them. It had only been three days since she'd last seen them, but she'd missed and worried for them so much.

"Your wedding dress is beautiful," Lydia gushed, her small hands delicately running over the lace. "Can I have one like this when I get married?"

Amelia smiled at her ten-year-old sister warmly.

“I am sure when that day comes you will have the dress of your dreams, my darling,” she replied.

Though Dominic did not know it yet, Amelia had decided that in the future she would ask him to help her take her sisters under their care so that they would never go through what she had. There was still much she did not know about her husband, but seeing as how he had commanded the auction room, how quickly he acquired their marriage license, and how he’d managed to get her sisters to come to the ceremony, she was starting to realize that he had indeed been truthful when he told her he was a powerful man.

“When will you come home?” Lydia asked.

“When can we come visit you?” Sarah asked before Amelia could reply.

“Why does Father seem so angry?” Lydia piped up.

“Now that you are a duchess, will you get to wear a crown?” Sarah added.

Her sisters peppered her with one question after another, and as Amelia kept looking back and forth between them, she felt her heartbeat start to spike again; her breathing become more difficult. Heat spiked in her face as her limbs went cold and numb, and suddenly her dress felt far too tight. The room began to spin as Amelia’s knees wobbled, and the edges of her vision began to fade to black.

“Good day.”

A strong, deep voice rang clear through the chorus of the two, smaller, more feminine ones, silencing them at once. A hand, firm yet gentle slid around Amelia’s back and

made purchase on her hip; holding her up just as she thought she was about to go down. Startled, she looked to the man pressing to her side, and saw Dominic's silver gaze and calm expression.

Easy, his eyes seemed to say, You can breathe.

Amelia drew a sudden breath in, her lungs quivering, and she began to make her way back from her terror.

"You must be Sarah and Lydia," Dominic said, turning his attention to the little ones.

He bowed his head toward them and held out a hand.

"It is a pleasure to meet you both."

Feeling more herself now, Amelia smiled assuringly down at her little sisters, who seemed slightly intimidated by the large man standing beside their big sister.

"Young ladies, this is your new brother-in-law, Dominic Astorfield, Duke of Ellsworth. Do be polite and return his warm greeting," she urged them gently.

Though still appearing shy, each little girl took a brief hold of Dominic's hand as they curtsied; his much larger hand swallowing their tiny fingers up.

"Will we be allowed to visit our sister, Your Grace?" Sarah asked, still sounding a bit frightened.

Amelia looked to him and saw that though he did not smile, there was a kind expression on his face.

"Of course you may. Whenever you wish," he replied. "I will even send a carriage for

you if you so need it.”

“May we go with you now?” Lydia asked, and to Amelia’s surprise, a chuckle left Dominic’s lips.

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“Perhaps you would be so kind as to allow your big sister to settle in first,” he replied. “What about next week?”

“What are you talking about with my children?” Felton demanded, appearing behind the two young girls.

He glared at both Amelia and Dominic aggressively.

Yes, Amelia decided quietly, their conversation must have been quite intense. I wonder if he has any regret for what he did at all?

Amelia immediately bristled again as her heart began to hammer, but Dominic only looked at him with a cold calm.

“We are discussing a visit, Lord Hollowcroft,” he replied smoothly.

Felton bared his teeth as he said, “I will not-”

“You will not lose your temper at our wedding, Felton,” Dominic finished for him.

Amelia was startled as her new husband used her father's first name.

“Nor will you keep sisters apart.”

Tension filled the air as the two men glared at one another. One roiling with apparent, fiery anger. The other as cool and hard as ice. Then, as if deciding to be done with him, Dominic turned his back to Felton and focused on the three sisters.

“I am afraid we must be going now,” Dominic said to Lydia and Sarah. “Your papa appears tired and needs to go home for some rest, and we have a journey to take. But we will see you next week.”

“You will not speak to my children about me in that-”

Felton’s words were cut off as Dominic whirled and clutched his hand in what appeared to be a cordial handshake, and held him closer.

“You will not assume control anymore,” Dominic whispered, barely loud enough for Amelia to hear and surely not enough for the younger girls to hear. “You lost that when you sold your daughter. Do not forget who I am and what I am capable of, Felton. Now regain control of yourself. Congratulate your daughter on her marriage, and leave.”

Stunned, Amelia slowly reached down and took her sisters’ hands as Dominic released their father’s hand and took a step back. When he did so, Amelia could see that her father’s face had turned bright red, but there was no anger left in his expression.

“Congratulations, daughter,” Felton stated, his voice clipped, “On your marriage. I wish you all happiness.”

“Good,” Dominic breathed.

“Girls, come along,” Felton said then, “It is time to go home. You shall see your sister next week.”

Both girls turned in toward Amelia, and she bent down once more to embrace them tightly.

“See you soon,” she promised them.

As she watched them leave Amelia turned to Dominic with a questioning gaze.

“Who are you, Dominic?” She whispered.

Dominic took a long breath in through his nostrils as he crooked his arm and once more fiddled with his silver cuff- just as he had the night he’d bought her.

“I am the Duke of Ellsworth,” he replied calmly, “And your husband. Now come. It is time for us to go home.”

Amelia blinked in surprise as the footman opened the door and she found Theo, Rosamund, and Ophelia already in the carriage.

“Gorgeous darling!” Theo chirped warmly.

“Come right in,” Rosamund insisted, motioning for her to do so.

“Such a beautiful wedding,” Ophelia praised.

“What is this?” She asked of them, then turned to Dominic.

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“I have my own business to attend to when we reach Ellsworth, so I arranged for your friends to keep you company while you get to know your way around the staff and house,” he replied smoothly.

Amelia smiled at her friends, then reached for Dominic’s arm to pull him to the side.

“Dominic, I have questions,” she insisted in a whisper. “I was hoping we would at least have the carriage ride to discuss them.”

“You will have your life to lead, and I will have my own,” he replied. “As I indicated before. There will be no need for pretense in our home, so why bother starting off that way?”

The cold way he said it made her flinch, and her hand slipped from his arm.

“You are safe now, Amelia,” he stated pragmatically, steepling his fingers together. “That is all that matters. Now your friends are waiting.”

With that, he turned from her and walked to the carriage behind hers; only leaving her with more questions.

“Well, wasn’t that a whirlwind!” Rosamund said with awe when Amelia eventually got into the carriage.

“Do finally explain how this all came about,” Ophelia urged. “I know you and the Duke flirted once at Seraphina’s baby shower, but I assumed it was a just a simple act of brazen defiance.”

She forced a smile as her eyes darted to Theo, who gave her a comforting, subtle nod. They had not shared the truth with the other friends.

“Yes, well, when there is a spark, sometimes it grows into a flame,” Amelia replied forcing a laugh.

“How delicious,” Rosamund giggled.

“The Duke and I simply understand what each other wants,” she lied, “and we came to an agreement that would suit us both. He shall have his life. I shall have mine. And we will work together whenever necessary.”

“Well,” Ophelia chortled, “That is slightly less delicious.”

“What I find delicious is that His Grace has invited us all to be with you as you settle in,” Theo piped up. “It is obvious he is a busy man and I think it is most gracious that he allowed us to aid you in taking on your new responsibilities.”

“Yes,” Amelia said readily, hoping to change the topic, “That is indeed most welcome. My mother prepared me extensively for taking on the responsibility of a house, but I hear my husband’s estate is far more vast than most. Come, give me any advice you can.”

As the carriage rolled toward Ellsworth, Amelia pushed her mind to not wander toward her new husband, but her friends’ suggestions; thankfully eating up the time it took to get there. When they arrived, she noted that Dominic’s carriage was already heading toward the stables, with him nowhere to be found on the large expanse of marble steps that led to the main entrance.

CHAPTERFOUR

The estate, she discovered, was indeed quite monstrous as she stood before it; appearing almost church-like in its design of multiple steeped roofs, dark grey stone, and curved archways that held several dark wood double doors. She tried, for a moment, to count the windows, but lost track after thirty.

“My, what a house,” Rose sighed, looking up at it.

“So easy to get lost in, I am sure,” Ophelia stated, fanning her skyward tipped face.

“We will help you learn it,” Theo said supportively, looping her arm through Amelia’s.

Amelia gave her an appreciative smile, and together, the four of them made their way up the long steps. Inside they all gasped at the auspiciousness of the foyer; a sweeping, vast room with a cathedral ceiling, dark grey walls, and polished black metal sconces all lining the walls; all of them lit and actively trying to battle the natural darkness of the place.

“This isn’t an estate, this is a castle,” Ophelia joked.

“A rather dreary one at that,” Rose muttered, her eyes on the many shadows.

“Do not worry,” Theo whispered in Amelia’s ear as she suddenly felt overwhelmed.

“We shall brighten it up if that is what you wish.”

Amelia tried to smile, but a grimace was all she could muster. For the first time, she started to wonder if accepting Dominic’s deal was a mistake.

Before her mind could run too far in that direction, a set of double dark wood doors opened up to their left, and two long lines of servants came marching out in perfect time, forming a half circle around the ladies. Once the half circle was formed, a

matronly woman with a kind face, and a small, eager looking young woman stepped out of rank and curtsied deeply.

“Your Grace,” the young woman greeted, her voice thick with reverence, “It is our sincere honor to welcome you to your new home. My name is Ada, the housekeeper’s speaker, and this Mrs. Morbate, the Ellsworth estate housekeeper.”

“Speaker?” Amelia asked, curious.

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“Mrs. Morbate lost her ability to speak some years ago,” Ada explained, “But I assure you, Your Grace, she is vastly capable of her duties. I simply am able to translate to the others on her behalf when needed.”

“How fascinating,” Amelia breathed, “Is there a language you learned to help her-you-” she paused, casting a kind glance to Mrs. Morbate to let her know she was speaking to both of them, “how to go on with your duties?”

Mrs. Morbate smiled beautifully and nodded as Ada replied, “Yes, Your Grace. It took time to accomplish, but now I understand her perfectly.”

“Well, I would greatly appreciate to be taught this mysterious language,” Amelia said to them.

Mrs. Morbate bowed her head as Ada replied, “As you wish, Your Grace, we would be delighted.”

Dominic could have simply let Mrs. Morbate go when she lost her ability to speak, yet he chose to keep her on and hire Ada to help her. Most interesting, she mused silently.

“A pleasure to meet you both,” Amelia replied, “Might I introduce you to my dear friends, Lady Theodosia, Lady Rosamund, and Lady Ophelia. They will be my frequent guests. I would prefer it if rooms be ready for them at any given time. My friend, the Duchess of Vanderbilt may be visiting occasionally as well.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Ada replied as Mrs. Morbate nodded. “His Grace has

already informed us of this news and their rooms are already prepared. They are positioned in the Duchess wing, with rooms adjoining yours.”

Amelia blinked in surprise.

“He did?” She asked.

“A wing?” Theo asked, turning her head quickly to Amelia. “You get an entire wing?”

“If I may continue with the rest of the introductions, Your Grace,” Ada urged respectfully as Mrs. Morbate beckoned toward a man to her left. Like Mrs. Morbate, he was older, probably in his late fifties or early sixties, and had a kind face above his slightly rotund belly.

“This is Mr. Morbate,” Ada continued, “The head butler and Mrs. Morbate’s husband. He also at times, acts as somewhat of an overseer of the estate when His Grace is away.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Morbate,” Amelia said.

Immediately she wanted to corral the man into a room and ask the many questions she had about her husband- though something told her the kind-face butler would not speak much on his master. Like Mrs. Morbate, there was a look of deep devotion in his eyes.

“Lastly I would like you to meet Eve, your personal maid. His Grace informed us you would not be bringing one from your home. She is widely knowledgeable in her craft, but if she is not a good fit, do let us know so that we may find a more suitable arrangement.”

“I am sure that will not be necessary,” Amelia stated, looking around the circle for

the maid in question.

Another thin, pale, pretty young woman stepped forward, a lock of stark black hair falling from her cap and nearly covering her left eye. She had large dark brown, almost black eyes that were hauntingly captivating. Her dark pink lips spread into a smile as she curtsied toward Amelia.

“It would be a pleasure to serve you, Your Grace. I am eager to attend to whatever needs you request.”

Though she couldn't quite pinpoint why, Amelia liked her immediately.

“I am sure you will learn them swiftly,” she replied.

“We have also acquired handmaids for your friends, Your Grace,” Ada continued, and four more women, all pretty, all with unique features, stepped forward.

“This is Bessie, Nell, Hattie, and Nora. They have many other duties they are able to perform when your guests are not here, so please do not fret over their practicality. All of us are skilled in being multifaceted.”

A curious way to put it, Amelia noted.

“Ooooh, how exciting!” Ophelia squealed.

“Thank you for considering my friends, it is greatly appreciated!” Amelia replied, ending with a laugh of surprise.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Ada said as she and Mrs. Morbate curtsied once more.

“Now if you would like, Mrs. Morbate and I would like to help you settle in. The

others are secondary staff, and you may meet them individually at your leisure if you wish.”

“Yes,” Amelia agreed, thankful she didn’t have to memorize so many names at once. There were at the very least fifty other people in uniform.

“I think that would be best. If you would allow me to rest this evening, my friends and I would be happy to start a tour and hold our first meetings tomorrow.”

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“As you wish, Your Grace,” Ada replied, both her and Mrs. Morbate once more bowing deeply.

“Mr. Morbate?” Amelia called as the other servants were silently dismissed.

“Your Grace,” he answered with a bow.

“Would you please deliver a message to my husband, wherever he may be in this grand place, and tell him I request his presence over a late dinner in my quarters?” Amelia asked. There was much she wanted to discuss, to learn. Now more than ever.

The butler gave her a sympathetic look, and gave a slight shake of his head.

“I am afraid His Grace is unreachable, My Lady.”

Amelia’s brows knitted together as she felt a well of disappointment.

“And why is that?” She asked.

“Because, Your Grace, he has already departed.”

* * *

“Eve,” Amelia called out from her bath, “May I ask you something?”

She had spent the evening with her friends, trying to get over the shock and disappointment of Dominic’s departure. They had explored the rooms in the Duchess

wing, chattered and gossiped about the mixture of beauty and dark mystery of not just the house itself, but the staff as well. They had all tried, at great length, to speak to Ada and Mrs. Morbate about Dominic, but answers, though kind and polite, eluded to no great details.

They had all dined together, then deciding to not call on their maids, helped one another dress for bed and undo the intricate styles put into their hair for the auspicious day. They'd then chatted and giggled long into the night, nibbling on fruits and sipping on wine, until one by one, Rose, Ophelia, and eventually Theo, retired back to their rooms with sleepy eyes and heavy footsteps.

Amelia had tried to go to sleep in the vast, soft expanse that was her new bed, but it was a task she could not complete. Finally she gave up, rang for Eve, and requested a bath.

"Yes, Your Grace, of course," Eve answered presently, looking up from her stitching. "Do you need me to wash your back? Or perhaps fetch you a different bath oil?"

"No, no, please stay," Amelia answered, sitting up in the large copper tub, "I want to ask you about your master. My husband."

Eve went rigid for a moment, her needle freezing just before it was about to delve into the fabric, then her shoulders relaxed, and she continued.

"I do not know much about him, Your Grace," she said politely. "As Ada told you, I have only recently come into employ at the house."

"Yes, but you must know something," Amelia insisted.

"Perhaps you should ask Mrs. Morbate--"

“I have already tried,” Amelia replied, her tone more curt than intended.

She took a deep breath, gathered her senses, and sunk lower into the warm water until the bottom of her chin touched the surface.

“I only want to know who I am married to, Eve,” she said softly, speaking to her more as a friend than an employer. “I thought he was just another Duke with an inflated sense of self, but there is something different about Dominic. Something...more than the nobility that his title provides him. I want to know what that is.”

Silence stretched between them for a long moment before Amelia heard Eve sigh softly, and then the maid put her stitching down to come kneel by the large tub.

“I truthfully do not know your husband, Your Grace,” she said quietly, “But I can tell you my story, and how our paths crossed, if you wish.”

Amelia sat back up, excitement shooting through her as she quickly nodded.

“Until a few months ago, I was a maid in another house for another esteemed family. Not one so regal as the Duke, but still one of nobility. The Lord of that house had...” she stopped, blushing, and Amelia felt her stomach twist.

She knew what happened to many pretty maids. Knew because she’d seen her father corner more than a few.

“Go on,” she urged softly. “I will not judge you, and your employment is not in any danger from me.”

A look of appreciation passed over Eve’s face, and she continued.

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“-Had found an interest in me. For quite a while I was able to curb his chase. I’d learned his schedule, made sure to be one step ahead so that I would not be cornered. I thought I was being quite crafty by keeping away from him in his house, but I forgot about the outside. I forgot, or maybe did not even think, that he could possibly follow me while I was out.

“I was visiting a friend one night in the shopping district in London, her mistress was a modiste, and they lived in the apartment above her shop. I left one night, late, and before I took three steps into the alley, he was there, pinning me up against the wall. I fought. I screamed. But even as others could hear me from the outer street, no one came. At one point I was able to wrench my wrist free, and I dug my nails into my master’s face, no longer caring if I lost my position.

I was able to get in a solid good scratch before he pulled out his pistol and clocked me to the head right well.”

Eve pulled back her lock of black hair then, revealing a jagged, lightning-like scar that stretched from her temple to her eyelid, and Amelia winced at the horror of it.

“Oh, Eve,” Amelia whispered, “I am so sorry.”

“I did not faint, but for a long moment I could not see or move my body. But I was awake as he took me to the ground and started tearing at my skirts. I thought it was over, that I had lost and was about to lose my most precious thing. And then suddenly he was gone. Off of me. Then I heard the sound of pain-filled moans and fists against flesh, and then running footsteps.

“I was so tired, so disoriented from the fight that I could not do anything when I was lifted up again other than open my eyes. For a moment, I thought the man was going to finish what my master started, but instead he pressed a kerchief to my head, and asked me if I would like a new place of work.”

Amelia’s brows flew up.

“My husband saved you?” She asked.

Eve nodded.

“He brought me here that very night, where Ada and Mrs. Morbate took me in and nursed me back to health. I have not seen but a glimpse of His Grace once every so often ever since. He is, as Mr. Morbate explained, a very busy man.”

Amelia thought on Eve’s story for a long moment as the water in her bath grew cool.

“Do others who work in this house have similar stories, Eve?” She asked after a while.

Eve was silent for a moment before she replied, “I have not yet spoken to every worker in this house and those that have shared their secrets with me are even less...but yes, it does seem so, Your Grace. And like myself, they rarely catch glimpses of or deal directly with His Grace. He seems to take us in, and as long as we are apt at our duties, allows us freedoms. It is why we are all so dedicated. Why we’re all willing to complete whatever task he asks of us. Even if it is a bit strange.”

“Strange?” Amelia asked. “How so?”

“Sometimes he directs us to disguise ourselves and go to London. To listen to certain people. To bring him information. It feels dangerous sometimes, but he always pays

us handsomely for it.”

“But he is kind to you?”

Eve let out a laugh that startled her.

“Oh, Your Grace, I would not go that far,” Eve replied. “He is protective, surely, and he does provide more than most employers. But his disposition is um...surly. Calm, yes, but also quite gruff and a bit-” she paused, as if trying to find the right word. “Feral? Like a trained wolf. Lovable but you never get too close for fear his primal nature will take over.”

Yes, I can certainly agree to that description of him, Amelia thought.

She was quiet for another moment before she said, “Thank you for your story, Eve, and your time. It is growing late. You may go.”

“Are you sure I cannot help you out of the tub?” Eve asked, reaching for the bath sheet.

“I shall be fine doing it myself,” she replied. “I need to think on what I have learned.”

“Are you angry with me, Your Grace?” Eve asked, a worried expression glimmering over her beautiful face.

“Not at all,” Amelia replied, her tone reassuring. “I am most grateful. It seems, actually, that our circumstances to arriving at this house are similar and I must decide how to move forward. Do try to sleep well for we have much to do tomorrow. I shall see you in the morning.”

Eve curtsied deeply to her then, and after whispering goodnight, left Amelia to her

requested privacy. As she stepped out of the tub and began lathering herself in oils, Amelia thought of her circumstances, her future, and everything Eve had told her.

Dominic had mentioned twice now that they were allowed to lead separate lives, that, as long as she could perform her duties as a Duchess, he would ask nothing else of her. Just as he had done with the servants. He'd saved her. Saved them all, it seemed, but aside from honest work, wanted nothing in return.

After slipping back into her nightdress and sliding back into her massive, empty bed, Amelia felt a burst of euphoria undulate through her spine. She could have the life she truly wanted. Not as a constant plaything for a husband or an ousted spinster that only found solace in the space of a country house. She could live a life of adventure; of exploration. All she had to do was pay her due.

As sleep began to tingle its way through her body, Amelia found herself smiling. Her husband might not be doting or in love with her, it was true. But perhaps...perhaps he'd given her something far more precious.

CHAPTERFIVE

Eleven Months Later

“It has been a while since we have spoken, Dominic,” Tristan stated. “How goes your new life as a husband?”

“I would not know,” Dominic replied, his tone dismissive as he signed his signature for the hundredth time in the last hour, “I have been traveling up until yesterday, I only just arrived back.”

While it was true that his trade ventures had taken him out of the country for several months, what he left out was that he had received constant updates from his staff regarding the status of his new wife. According to them, she seemed to be doing well. Mrs. Morbate wrote flattering words regarding Amelia accepting the duties as Duchess. That she and her friends hosted dignitaries and his associates with grace and a welcoming air. He also knew that the conversation he had with Felton before departing was well taken and understood, for her sisters remained on a dedicated schedule of visiting Amelia on the weekends without fail.

Dominic pulled the next contract from the pile as he sat at his desk in the office of his London home, and read over the contents. There was much to do since his return. Work to catch up on, new deals to make. Word had reached him that Seraphina’s estranged father, the Duke of Caldermere, had passed, and that a relative of his would be taking the title.

The former Duke had refused to do business with him; cutting him out of trade deals that would be most lucrative to his territory. With the new heir in place, he hoped to remedy that. He was about to make his one-hundred-and-first signature when the

contract was pulled beneath him, forcing him to scratch a long, black line of ink down the paper and onto the top of his desk.

His eyes shot up in a warning glare at Tristan, and a low growl of displeasure rumbled in his chest.

“Do you mind? I am trying to work. I have missed much while away on business,” he grit out.

“I do not mind, actually,” Tristan retorted, looking completely unbothered by Dominic’s warning glare. “Are you telling me that you have not seen your wife for a year?”

“I fail to see how that is any business of yours, Tristan,” Dominic stated, “She is well taken care of and that is all you need to know.”

“People are not pets or plants you just accrue and abandon, Dominic,” Tristan replied, his brows creasing. “Especially women. They have needs, both physical and emotional!”

“And Amelia has the freedom to tend to those needs as desired as long as she uses discretion,” Dominic said as he rose to his feet and snatched the contract from Tristan’s hands.

“I cannot believe this,” Tristan sighed. “A year. You’ve been gone nearly a year this whole time? I thought you’d just been busy with work. I thought Theo would have told me that you had been absent from all those visits she pays to Amelia.”

“She probably didn’t tell you because you’ve become rather emotional for a man,” Dominic muttered, making his signature. Then in a clearer voice added, “And I have been busy with work. The deals I made in Italy, Spain, and France? I have

contracts for exports from my Dukedom for a full decade. Contracts that will keep my people employed, with the ability to keep their coffers and their bellies full. I have gotten my percentage of destitutes in Ellsworth down to three percent because of what I have done. Are you saying that is not worthy work?"

Tristan's brows rose as he muttered, "Three percent? Truly?"

"Shall I fetch my overseer for you?" Dominic asked sarcastically. "Have him bring in the numbers of last year's census?"

Tristan gave him a look that screamed for him to be more sensible, only serving to further darken Dominic's mood.

"What has become of you, Tristan?" He asked. "Your emotions are all over the place. Putting your nose in other's people's business has become worse than ever."

Tristan sighed, suddenly looking weary, and sank into the chair across from Dominic.

"It is my mother," he explained. "Her health continues to hang on by a thread. Theo is home even less now, and Seraphina, who used to come and help us often, is now at Vanderbilt with Hugo, her hands full with her own children."

Dominic took a calming breath. Yes, he'd known about Lady Briarwood's failing health. One of his many little spies had collected and sent the information to him while he was away. She'd been plagued by an unknown disease that affected not just the body, but the mind.

"I met a new type of physician in Milan. I will send for him if you wish," Dominic offered.

Tristan's shoulders slumped.

“Thank you,” his friend said quietly. “This...diseased, ailment- whatever, is tearing her apart. There are days when she screams at the servants to leave her be. Believes I am Father. Or does not recognize me at all. I want to be there for her, to help her, but taking over his responsibilities since he’s passed has kept me far too busy. I can’t seem to gain a proper hold on either and I- I feel like I’m slipping away too.”

Dominic let loose a sigh, and finally put down his pen, willing to put his work on pause for the first time. Yes, he’d heard that, too. His friend was not doing well. At all. His mother’s health was failing with some strange illness, and his father had passed before Seraphina’s twins were born of a burst appendix.

“Tristan that sounds horrible,” he conceded. “I am sorry to hear this.”

Tristan rubbed a hand over his face, looking more tired than ever.

“It is not just that. It is Theo. I fear she is traversing into dangerous territory.”

Dominic’s body suddenly grew rigid. That was something he had not heard. And certainly something he should have if Theo was staying consistently at Ellsworth.

“If she is constantly with my wife I do not understand how that could be true,” Dominic murmured, feeling his anger tick up once more.

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“Perhaps that is why I was so bothered when you revealed to me that you have been absent from her,” Tristan confessed, glancing up at Dominic with worry-filled eyes. “I have heard rumors. I thought that Amelia had been with you. That you had gone together. And though I was uncomfortable with the idea of Theo being there, too, I was at least comforted in knowing that you were there. In case any trouble unfolded. You have...you have a way of taking care of things. Of making issues disappear.”

Dominic’s brow furrowed as he sat on the edge of his seat. Were his little spies keeping something from him?

“Speak plainly, Tristan. No more subtleties.”

Tristan looked back at him, his eyes growing dark as a grim line settled on his mouth.

“The Devil’s Masquerades,” Tristan replied. “It is being said that Amelia and Theo, possibly, and Ophelia and Rose too, have been spotted at them.”

Fury trembled and seeped into Dominic’s muscles, sending them into a rigid tension.

“Tell me everything you know,” Dominic demanded, his tone low and deadly.

“Now.”

* * *

“Oh, Theo,” Amelia whispered worriedly under her breath. “What on earth were you thinking?”

A nervous tremor passed through Amelia's arms as she once more reached into her bag and opened her small mirror to inspect herself. These parties- strictly for the willing- were a far cry from the debased auction she'd found herself forced into nearly a year ago, yet her mind still frayed slightly when approaching. The last thing she ever wanted was to be there again.

She shook her head subtly and focused on her reflection; needing to make sure everything was perfectly in place. That she looked nothing like herself. It was, as always, a requirement for parties such as this.

In the mirror she studied her black kohl rimmed eyes that bled perfectly into the black cat-eye mask she wore. The clay powder she used to disguise her porcelain skin was still intact, giving her a warm, sun-kissed glow; shimmering thanks to the powdered pearl she'd added to it. Her cheeks were tinted with a delicate flush, and her lips, painted a deep shade of crimson, appeared most exquisite. With practice, she'd learned techniques to make her lips look poutier, plumper, so that she looked completely unlike herself.

Carefully, she touched the slick backed updo that held her cascading curls almost in a tail; which were framed perfectly by the delicate, branchlike black horns of her mask. As usual for such parties, she'd also forsaken her favorite purples for a tighter black dress that hugged her figure in a most seductive fashion. A calling card, she imagined, that she always knew where she was and what she was doing. Even if at first she hadn't.

"We have arrived, madam," Her driver called as the carriage came to a stop.

"Thank you, Salty," Amelia called back, drawing on her black silk cloak.

Though she was referred to as "Your Grace" and would have her door opened for her under normal circumstances, things operated differently when she was attending

a Devil's Masquerade night. There were no proper addresses, no proof that she was royalty, a guest, or a worker. It was one of the many rules if one wanted to maintain an invitation to the devious and elusive parties. No one was to know anything about who one was truly was in their other life. They were all to be wrapped in mystery.

After successfully procuring an invitation nearly ten months ago, Amelia and her friends had gone excitedly and willingly to these parties. However, tonight was different. She was going because her little spies- well, her and her husband's little spies, had discovered that Theo was going to tonight's party alone. Had been to others on her own. And that her caution in being nameless and faceless was starting to slip.

Amelia slid herself gracefully from the carriage seat and out into the empty, quiet, and unassuming street, and walked with her hood up and head down to the lone man that stood outside the door to the townhouse that blended perfectly with the rest on the street. Like the others it appeared clean and mundane.

"Welcome, Madam Artemis," the man murmured, bowing his head slightly before knocking in a specific order on the door.

"Thank you, Sulta," Amelia murmured back, stepping through the dark threshold.

She walked the normal few paces in total darkness and silence, her head raising elegantly as she drew back her shoulders and removed her hood; approaching another threshold where a masked servant stood on either end of the red-curtained entrance.

One accepted her cloak, then together they parted the curtains for her as they bowed, and she stepped into the Devil's Masquerade.

Soft, undulating music greeted her ears and a warm, red light bathed over her as she stepped into the front room of the party. A hum of sensual excitement skittered over

her skin as she stepped into the place where her freedom had soared.

People; some in couples, others in groups, all dressed in divine dark colors and masks, danced and clustered as they were carried by the hypnotic music and provided libations. The parties were centered around freedom and lowering one's inhibitions, and everyone who received an invitation expected such.

Amelia moved with a feline grace through the room, nodding to those who raised their glasses to her. She had become rather respected in this circle; known not for the acts she committed within such walls, but the wit and sharp tongue she displayed when conversing such matters.

She had grown much in the past year. In a way, had come into her own regality now that rumors and sundering were worries for her. Still, she had yet to find the right partner to dally with. Her purity, ironically enough, still meant something to her, and she was not willing to give it to someone lightly. Even if her husband did not care. She did.

Amelia searched the rooms slowly, careful not to draw too much attention to herself, and finally found Theo. Shock and discomfort rippled through her as she saw her friend had slid her mask up to her forehead as she sat on a gentleman's lap, her arm wrapped around his shoulders as he traced a lazy finger over her abdomen as they quietly talked.

Amelia slid her eyes toward the others in the room, and noticed that several were watching Theo as well; probably shocked that someone was openly breaking one of the most important house rules. Despite her frustration though, Amelia walked to her with her usual laidback grace, and reached down, sensually touching Theo's chin and directing it to look at her.

"Calypso, my darling," she purred, "How lovely to see you here. Might I have a

word?”

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Theo's eyes grew wide in the dim, crimson light, clearly startled that Amelia was there, but she quickly recovered, and smiled as she rose from the man's lap. As she did so, Amelia reached for her friend's mask, and smoothly pulled it back down over her face.

"Excuse us, Dionysus," Theo said, her tone seductive as she joined Amelia by her side.

The man nodded, obviously undeterred by the interruption, and beckoned toward a group of women. Two came forward willingly, each perching on his knees, and he resumed his evening without another word.

Silently, Amelia and Theo walked side by side until Amelia found an empty room, and the two slipped inside.

"I had hoped it was not true," Amelia began immediately, closing the door behind them.

"That you were not coming to these parties alone."

"So what if I am?" Theo asked, her tone immediately defensive as she pulled off her mask.

Amelia stopped her immediately, all but slapping it back onto her face.

"Keep. Your Mask. On," Amelia ground out. "Whether we are alone or not. That is a rule of this place and one of good thumb in general."

“Why does it matter if everyone invited here is sworn to secrecy?” Theo retorted.

Amelia’s eyes narrowed, shocked at her friend’s immature response.

“How did we find out about these parties, Theo?” She asked. “Did a masked person come to tell us? No, we found out through gossip that they exist. People talk, whether they are supposed to or not, and if they are willing to talk about the parties they are certainly willing to talk about a woman who is openly breaking the rules!”

Theo’s lips drew into a pout and her shoulders slumped.

“I know,” she sighed.

“Furthermore, we all promised each other we would never come to the Masquerade alone,” Amelia went on, her anger and fear unfurling slowly.

“I said I know!” Theo snapped, her teeth bared as she cast a sharp glance at Amelia through her mask. With the feline shape of it, her friend looked downright predatory.

Amelia reached for Theo’s hand, attempting to soothe her, but she shook it off.

“Why are you doing this, Theo?” Amelia said. “Why are you putting yourself in danger like this? Not just with the rumors, but with your person? You know what goes on here, you know how persuasive such men that are invited here can be? We come together to keep one another in check. To make sure the seduction we receive does not take us too far.”

“I just need this, Amelia. I need to feel free, fully free, for a little while!” Theo replied in a rushed whisper. “I want- I need a few hours every few weeks to not care about anything than my desires.”

Sympathy poured through Amelia as she watched her dear friend fall apart. She knew that Theo's mother was fading; that she was straddling two lines. One between life and death. The other between sanity and lunacy. It had been hard on Theo, on Tristan too. She had hoped that providing Theo with an open invitation to Ellsworth Manor, she would feel that freedom she so craved- but it was obviously not enough.

"We will figure something else out," Amelia said gently.

She reached out, and this time Theo did not push her away, but let her friend wrap her arms around her shoulders. She slumped into Amelia's embrace, quiet sob racking her body.

"This just cannot be the way," Amelia added, rubbing soothing circles into her friend's back.

"I know," Theo whispered through her sobs. "I know."

Amelia held Theo for a long time, letting her friend get her tears out before they eventually pulled away. Amelia then reached into her handbag, pulled out a kerchief- the one Dominic had given her to wipe her own tears years ago, and dabbed the runny, ruined cosmetics that had dribbled down Theo's exposed chin.

"Come home with me tonight," Amelia encouraged. "You can help me with the new aviary I am putting in. Then when it is finished we will both come back to London and stay with your mother for a while."

Theo nodded, and with her more composed, Amelia faced the door to the room and opened it. She was greeted by a hulking form of man standing there, his hand braced to turn the knob. His silver eyes flashed with rage behind his black devil's mask, and sculpted lips formed into a smile. Amelia's heart nearly stopped as she looked up him; her mind racing as she tried to find her words.

“Hello,wife,”Dominic’s deep tone snarled.

CHAPTERSIX

“Dominic,” Amelia breathed, her soft voice sliding like silk over his mind.

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His eyes raked possessively over the woman standing before him; a stark contrast to the prim woman in purple he'd married almost a year ago. Her costume was...exquisite. A perfect, seductive look that immediately teased his mind and tightened his breeches. Those lips. The mask. That dress. God it made her look ethereally perfect.

However Dominic pushed the sudden and carnal thoughts away, knowing there was a bigger issue at hand to contend with.

"Outside," he growled out. "Now."

Even with a mask, Dominic recognized Theo's frame, and watched as his best friend's sister and his wife both jumped. For a moment a look of pure fury passed through Amelia's kohl-rimmed eyes, but she pressed her lips together, grabbed Theo's hand, and began to move.

He walked one pace behind them, allowing them to find their own way out, and stared down any man that attempted to come their way. He remained silent and composed until they reached the street and escorted them both into the carriage. Once the door was shut and they were on their way, however, he exploded.

"What in heaven's name do you think you two are doing?" He roared. "Risking your reputations? Your families? Mine?"

"You have been gone almost a year," Amelia answered with equal ferocity, startling him. Yes. She had changed quite a bit.

“You said I would have the freedom to do as I wished as long as I maintained my duties as a Duchess and I have!”

It took a moment for Dominic to quell the frustrating sense of pride he felt in his wife’s strong voice- a voice, not one year ago, that had been full of tears and fright.

“Yes,” he grit out, “As long as you handled yourself responsibly.”

Amelia’s red mouth opened as if to retort, but she snapped it shut, her rouged cheeks growing redder from the blush beneath.

“I am waiting,” he egged on, leaning forward toward them. “Come, do tell me how you have been so wise and mature with your new found freedom.”

It was Theo that spoke next.

“Do not blame her, Dominic,” she insisted. “It is I that have broken the rules. Amelia only came here tonight to gather me up and take me home. If you want to be mad at anyone, be mad at me.”

“Oh, I am,” he answered gravely, sliding off his mask. “Believe me, when I deposit you to your brother, trust that he will have words for you as well. This stops.Immediately.”

“Youcannotjust disappear from my life for a year and expect me to obey your commands,” Amelia shot back at him. “You did not even have the stones to say goodbye!”

A low growl rumbled in Dominic’s chest as anger shot through his bloodstream. He disliked being talked to with a tone- but hehatedbeing called out by the truth even less. It happenedsovery rarely.

The carriage stopped then, and the driver announced that they had arrived at Tristan's.

"I am escorting you inside," Dominic told Theo, then pinned his eyes on Amelia. "And you had better still be in this carriage when I get back. I swear to God, Amelia, if I have to run through the streets to catch you, you will be punished."

Both women stiffened, but neither said anything as Dominic stepped out of the carriage and held his hand out for Theo. She and Amelia exchanged a long look, then embraced silently before she slid out of the carriage and accepted Dominic's hand.

Tristan opened his front door just as Dominic and Theo made it through the gate, his face set in apparent anger.

"Get inside and go to my study," Tristan ordered Theo. "And you better pray to high heaven Mother and Father don't find out about this. Things for them are bad enough."

Theo said nothing as she walked out of Dominic's grasp, passed Tristan, and straight into the house.

"It was handled with discretion," Dominic said to Tristan when she was gone. "You have nothing to worry about."

Tristan gave him a nod.

"Thank you for taking care of this," his friend replied. "I am quite certain that I would have handled it poorly."

"As I have told you countless times before, I am here to help whenever I can," Dominic replied.

Tristan then nodded toward the carriage.

“How are you going to handle that ride home?” He asked.

Dominic hissed out a breath as he flexed his hands and looked back at the carriage. He didn’t have the slightest idea.

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“It depends,” he replied, “It seems my wife has changed quite a bit since I’ve left. Not the soft mouse I married. She seems to have transformed into something far more vicious.”

“Best of luck,” Tristan scoffed.

“And to you as well,” Dominic retorted.

The two of them shook hands, then Dominic strode back to the carriage. He held his breath as he opened the door again, expecting to see his wife gone, but relief flooded through him as he saw her still perched on the seat.

He couldn’t help but sweep his eyes down her form once again; a hunger roaring up inside as he took in Amelia’s new look. She was positively delicious.

“Are you going to get in?” She asked him, crossing her arms, “Or are you going to stand there with the door open, exposing me to the world like this?”

His temper immediately ate through his arousal, and Dominic grit his teeth as he hauled himself back into the carriage.

“So when did you get back?” She asked the moment the door was shut.

“Yesterday,” he ground out. “I didn’t have a full day before I heard of your transgressions.”

Amelia seemed unbothered by the slight he’d tossed at her and haughtily asked,

“Where did you go? What did you do? It must have been gravely important to leave me alone and abandoned at your manor for almost a year!”

“It was important and my life does not stop just because I had to save you from the auction block!” He slung back.

Amelia flinched, her haughty demeanor slipping, and Dominic clamped his teeth together and exhaled sharply through his nostrils, struggling greatly to regain control.

He hadn't expected this. Hadn't expected to get hit with a deadly amount of primal hunger the moment he saw his wife again. She had always been beautiful, yes. Like many other women of the ton seemed to hold a certain amount of beauty. But now, she looked more than beautiful. More than seductive. She had a look that made a man's mouth water and his cock swell and stir to the point of pain. And in that moment, he loathed her for it.

“I truly did have important business for my people to sort out,” Dominic stated, straining to maintain composure. “Perhaps it was wrong of me to leave without an apology or an explanation, but I knew my staff would take good care of you and guide you properly. Am I wrong?”

Amelia's gaze fell to the floor of the carriage.

“No,” she said softly. “They have been most helpful. Exemplary, really.”

Dominic let a long, cooling breath through his lips, feeling more in control now.

“I send missives to Mr. Morbath bi-weekly. I had assumed he had shared those with you, but I never demanded it from him.”

“I am aware of the missives,” Amelia replied, “But seeing as none of them were of

concern over me, I stopped paying attention to their arrival after the first two months.”

Guilt slithered through his heart. It was true. He never once asked about her specifically. He never had to, knowing his faithful Mr. Morbate would report everything that was going on. Well- at least everything he was aware of. Amelia must have been using at least some discretion, if it meant her little adventures had slid by unnoticed by his staff. Either that...or she had won their favor more than he had. Whatever it was, he would get to the bottom of it.

Silence stretched between them for a long time as the carriage traversed on the long, dark road back to Ellsworth. It wasn't often that Dominic was left speechless, but with Amelia, with this matter, he suddenly and frustratingly found himself at odds. Finally, he spoke again.

“I understand that I gave you a promise of freedom before I left, Amelia,” he stated calmly, “And I meant it. Perhaps, if you had went on this little journey alone, it might have still remained a secret. But pulling Theo, Rose, and Ophelia into it was dangerous. It is much easier to disguise one person than it is four, that much, surely, must be plain to you.”

He paused, his mind whirling, then added, “That being said, I am glad you did not go into this alone.”

“So what was I supposed to do then?” Amelia remarked. “It was not as if you were here for me to ask for advice.”

She stared at him as if he had three heads and if he was honest with himself, he didn't blame her. He'd clearly contradicted himself, essentially damning her no matter what she chose.

“You could have written to me,” Amelia decided to say. “Mr. Morbate always knows how to get word to me. You could have let me know what you wanted. Perhaps I could have taken a break from my work and come home to assist you.”

“And what was I supposed to write?” She asked, her anger clearly rising again.

“My estranged darling. Just a quick thing. I want to go to the Devil’s Masquerade. Even though you ran off on me on our wedding night, might you consider returning home—for the sole purpose of escorting me to a fleshly fête?”

Dominic’s own mood quickly shifted to anger again as that particular word slipped so easily from her lips. He remembered once how she’d blushed so deeply when he’d said that word, and now she spoke it as if she did so often. She was right. She had clearly learned much because the sobbing panicked woman he’d saved was nowhere to be seen.

And damn him if it didn’t arouse every sensation in his already equally hardened mind and body. He reached forward, moving so fast that Amelia had no chance to evade his touch, and grabbed her by the throat. She gasped at the force of it, but after a second of being caught off guard her eyes narrowed at him and she inclined her chin.

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Her pulse thrummed into his palm excitedly, betraying the look of contempt she was giving him. Dominic smirked, tilting his head as he studied her.

“Such a mouth on you now,” he remarked, his deep voice low and raspy.

“I have grown in the solitude you pushed me into, husband,” she answered icily.

Her honey-brown suddenly blazed into pure gold as a sensually wicked smile spread across her painted red lips.

“I suppose I should thank you for that.”

Dominic let out a single deep chuckle.

“You haven’t shown an ounce of gratitude yet,” he replied. “Why start now?”

Again her golden eyes flashed with some exuberant feeling, but she said nothing.

Tension crackled between them like sparks of lightning as silence filled the carriage. Then, overcome with the thought of showing her exactly who was in control, Dominic’s hand slipped from her throat to her chin. He slid his thumb to her plump, red lips, and slowly marred the carefully painted cosmetic.

He thought the silent insult would make him feel better, but instead it only heightened his arousal and flooded his brain with thoughts of leaping forward and further ruining the lipstick with his mouth.

“What’s the matter, Dominic?” Amelia whispered, her eyes ablaze with challenge as she stayed perfectly still.

“Didn’t like the color?”

A damning mixture of arousal, anger, and again, that unusual jealousy simmered across his skin. His manhood was hardened to the point of pain beneath the fabric of his trousers and he had a good mind to show her exactly what was wrong with him. Instead, he released her jaw with a slight push, and slid himself all the way back on the carriage seat.

“What do you do at those parties, Amelia?” He asked, staring at her with icy contempt.

Amelia’s spine straightened. She drew her gaze away from him to her nails, inspecting them; doing nothing to tidy her ruined lips.

“I don’t see how that is any of your business, Dominic,” she answered offhandedly. “You made it clear by leaving that you had no interest in taking care of my needs yourself.”

Dominic felt as if he’d suddenly been rammed into a brick wall by that response. How could he argue that? Even though he felt a strange and unwelcome sense of jealousy flare, he switched topics.

“You don’t want to talk about the parties? Fine. But you will tell me how you convinced my faithful servants to keep this from me.”

Amelia crossed her arms and shrugged, still not looking at him.

“Perhaps they like me better.”

“I doubt that.”

Amelia let out a haughty laugh.

“You’ve been gone, Dominic. Much has changed. It is their mistress they serve now. Not their master.”

Dominic grit his teeth and balled his fists as the carriage finally pulled up Ellsworth drive. Not once in his life had he been made a fool. And now here he was. Bested by his own wife.

The helpless little kitten he’d rescued had transformed into a vixen in his absence, and he’d led her right into his henhouse.

CHAPTERSEVEN

“You thought I would not find out?” Dominic asked.

Before him Mr. Morbate, Mrs. Morbate, Ada, and Eve stood silent, heads bowed, hands behind their back. The tension in the house had been thick since he’d arrived the night before with Amelia. Their eyes had grown as wide as saucers as they saw him stride back through the doors of Ellsworth manor; their faces growing several shades of white as he walked silently past all of them.

Trouble. Theyknewthey were in trouble.

“How did she get to you?” Dominic asked, looking at each of their faces as he walked down the line.

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“Was it money? Because her money is my money. Was it coercion? Because I taught you better than that. I have trained you all personally and know what you can withstand. Your wills are adamant because I have made them so. So tell me. How did she get you to betray me?”

Mrs. Morbate lifted her chin up high, letting out a sigh as she shook her head and made a signal with her hands.

“You most certainly did betray me, Mrs. Morbate,” Dominic retorted. He didn’t need Ada to translate. He knew the woman better than she ever would.

“If we did so it was not intentional, Your Grace,” Ada spoke, raising her head now too. “The Duchess in many ways is much like you. Her will is iron. She spoke so surely that we assumed you’d known.”

Dominic narrowed his eyes. Amelia? Like him? Hardly.

“You were fooled,” he stated. “All of you. And in being so have made me vulnerable. I have worked diligently to keep the name of this house clean despite my double life and have been successful for nigh on a decade. Thanks to your silence that is all now in jeopardy. Word is spreading that my wife has been spotted with nefarious company; making me out to look as a cuckold.”

“She does not treat you as a cuckold, Your Grace,” Eve spoke boldly, surprising him.

“Her Grace speaks of you with great reverence to the estate’s lawyers and accountants, always. Any dignitaries she has hosted have heard nothing but tales of

glory regarding you, I assure you.”

“If we were concerned about her behaviors we would have let you know immediately,” Ada spoke up, “But she has handled her-reputation with utmost care. We knew about the parties, yes, but she has everything proper to keep her identity secret.”

Their words took Dominic aback. Relations had stayed strong with his local associates while he’d been away. He had assumed that Ameliadid have something to do with that. But if she was not the one making mistakes, how had she been discovered at the parties?

Had she let her guard down with one of her paramours? Had she let her heart grow a little too fond of a sensual stranger and let something slip?

His mood darkened at the thought, and again, that black wisp of jealousy he wasn’t used to curled around him like smoke.

“Now that I am back there will be no choosing of favorites,” he grit out. “You will obey my commands and mine only. I am the Master of this house. Do you understand?”

The four of them nodded, bowing to him.

“Go,” he said, waving a dismissive hand. “Get back to work. Except for you, Mr. Morbate. You stay.”

The three women left in a hurry without a word as the butler remained in place.

“You really didn’t think to tell me of my wife’s dealings?” He asked when they were alone.

Mr. Morbate bowed his head respectfully.

“She truly is a fierce woman, Your Grace. We truly did not know that she was acting without your permission.”

Dominic let out a long breath through his nostrils, rubbed his temples.

“I want you to send Parker, Billy, and Felix into London tonight. Find out what else is being said about my wife. The usual places. White’s. The salons. I want names.”

And vengeance.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mr. Morbate replied, bowing deeply.

Dominic waved his hand in dismissal and Mr. Morbate headed toward the office door. Just as he was about to leave he turned back to Dominic.

“If I may say, Your Grace. It is good to have you home again.”

Dominic flicked a glance toward the butler, and his temper dampened as he saw the utter devotion in the man’s eyes. Suddenly it was very clear that his loyal servants truly hadn’t meant to disappoint him.

“Thank you, Mr. Morbate,” he sighed.

Left alone, Dominic began to look over the papers his accountants had sent him. After seeing Amelia in that black dress last night, he’d expected to see large expenses from the local dressmakers and jewelers. He spotted a few, but what drew his attention more was to money spent on builders, their supplies, and new furniture. And...statues?

A sum here for an architect. Another for a designer. Several for builders and quite a bit for construction supplies. He'd been so angry when he'd gotten home last night, he hadn't glanced at the house.

Another secret kept from me,he fumed silently.

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Deciding he needed to see what sort of changes had been going on in his own house, Dominic left his office and went to go investigate. At first he noted nothing. The halls and most rooms appearing the same. But as he stepped into the foyer; his brows flew up in surprise.

“What in heaven’s name?” He muttered, slowly circling around the vast room. How did I not notice this last night? Because his rage and arousal had clouded his vision, that’s why. By the time he’d left the carriage and Amelia with her scintillating new appearance; his arousal had intertwined with his rage and had left him in a most frustrating state.

Several large, artfully carved marble statues now stood in the foyer; all of which depicted the beautiful form of the naked human body. None debaucherous or crude, but instead in elegant, slightly sensual poses. And the eyes. The stone eyes conveyed so much it caused something to stir within him. There was longing. Ache. A need to be understood.

He walked slowly around each one, wondering how the delegates that had visited his house while he was gone had felt about them. He noticed the windows next. Large, delicate and transparent light purple curtains had been hung upon the open portals; creating a strange yet somehow fitting contrast between them and the dark grey stone walls.

He walked into the parlor next and found more of the same. The space was by no means cluttered and had still had that bare, organized look he liked so much. But some of the black chairs and couches had been replaced with the purple couches in the same shade as the curtains in the foyer and adjoining halls; bringing light into the

otherwise dark rooms.

On and on he went through the house, finding similar changes in the library, the ballroom, and second parlor. His dark fixtures had all remained, but now they were stained with a splash of that purple light.

Just as he was about to leave the second parlor and head back to his office, he heard a racket of noise from outside the terrace doors, followed by Amelia's voice. Not taking a moment to think, Dominic opened the doors and stepped outside. He was confronted by the sight of a large, bare, octagonal structure that no doubt stretched from the second parlor's terrace to the one that led off the library.

Several men were pounding away at the tall beams of the structure, following Amelia's instructions as if they were law. Dominic noticed the look of hunger in their eyes as they took glimpses of her; as if even an angry shout sated some desire in him.

The edges of his vision grew red as he focused his gaze on his wife, and strode toward her. She was out of that scintillating black dress from the night before, but the light purple one she wore now still showed off the spectacular curves and assets of her feature. Her dark brown hair was down, curling and brushing against her lower back as a gentle breeze flowed through it.

"And what in God's name is this monstrosity?" He demanded, walking right up to her.

Her honey-brown eyes turned from the workers to him, and she looked him up and down with amusement; only serving to further frustrate him.

"It is not a monstrosity," she sweetly. "It is an aviary."

He flexed his jaw.

“A what?”

“It is a giant birdcage.”

“I know what an aviary is, Amelia,” he growled back, “What I don’t know is why you’re building such a thing.”

Amelia let loose a sigh, as if unfazed by the hardness in his voice.

“I have grown a fondness for birds. Lady Violet Walldrake brings her macaw with her when she and her husband come to do business and it is the most colorful, wonderful thing. So I decided I shall have my own.”

He waved a hand around the large structure.

“All this for one bird?” He barked.

She laughed. Laughed at him.

“Oh goodness no,” she replied, turning her eyes back to the structure forming around them. “I shall have a dozen at least. Several different sorts of macaws. Perhaps some African Greys. And it must be large for I have no intention of clipping their wings.”

“You’ve gone insane,” he stated, shaking his head. “I thought leaving you to your devices would sprout some sort of shopping addiction or perhaps turn you into a hermit. But this is by far more outrageous.”

“What is insane about a wild, beautiful thing given the space to spread their wings, My Lord?” She asked, batting her long lashes at him.

“You are provoking me,” he warned.

“And what are you going to do about it? She asked haughtily, “Leave me again?”

As if his body had a will of its own, Dominic’s arms shot out before Amelia had a chance to determine what was happening, hauled her close, and kissed her.

* * *

The world blurred as Dominic’s lips came crashing down possessively on hers; startling her. His one arm drew tight around her lower back as the other fisted in her hair; preventing any chance she had of pushing him away. Not that she could anyway. His sculpted lips were hot and demanding, forcing her own apart so he could lay claim with his teeth; his tongue. For a moment, all her fury and loneliness came to a sudden stop, and she felt nothing but the heavy mantle of arousal spread down through her entire body.

Heat burst through her, consuming her in a liquid fire as as Dominic’s teeth captured her bottom lip and bit down. It was only when the pain burst through her lips that she truly realized what had happened. Embarrassment and anger colored her cheeks as her eyes flew open, and balled her hands into fists to attempted to push them between her and Dominic.

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Like the statues she'd put in the foyer, his body was rock solid and unmoving. In fact her attempt to fight away from him only seemed to make his build grow harder, and she felt as if she were fighting stone.

"Let go," she fumed against his mouth. But even as she said it her body betrayed her. The tighter he held her to him the hotter her fever grew. With another swipe of his tongue, her legs began to tremble and a sluicing of sudden moisture trickled down her thighs. His teeth then nipped her lips again, softer this time, and she couldn't help the moan that slipped from her lips as her nipples hardened to the point of pain.

As if knowing what he was doing to her, Dominic's hand smoothed from her waist up to her ribcage and cupped her left breast, his thumb grazing over her nipple so hard that she could feel it even through the layers of her dress and camisole. The moment she felt it her lower abdomen quivered and tightened, and another gush of moisture splashed against her inner thighs.

Her fury seemed to leave her body with that heated liquid between her legs, and she sagged against him; moaning into his mouth; giving in to him.

And then suddenly he stopped. The world tilted as his arms and lips left her to sway on her own feet; her head swimming with clashing thoughts of fury and need. Amelia drew in a grounding breath, as she opened her eyes; trying to make sense of what had just happened to her.

She saw Dominic first, standing a pace away. He had a hard, unreadable look on his face but it was clear that he was fighting for his breath just as much as she was. Then she noticed that the clamor of work had ceased. Even the chirping of the wild birds and

hum of insects had seemed to stop. She looked up, and saw every worker had seemed to be frozen in place, staring down at them.

“Leave us!” She yelled, her rage returning as quicker than it had left her.

All at once the workers began to move; abandoning their tools and work until the area was vacant save for her and Dominic. Then she grit her teeth, stepped forward, and slapped him. His head barely moved as a painful stinging sensation exploded through her entire hand, only serving to make her angrier.

“What in the bloody hell was that?” She demanded.

“A reminder,” Dominic snapped back. “To them and you that you are my wife.”

“You didn’t care about that before,” she shot back.

“You weren’t being so flagrant with our reputation before,” he retorted.

Amelia sneered as she drew her hand back to slap him again, but Dominic caught her wrist and dragged her to him.

“Let go!” She yelled, hating how quickly her body responded to him again.

“What’s the matter?” He snarled. “The hands of a masked stranger are good enough to touch you but your husband’s aren’t?”

Amelia narrowed her eyes at him. He’d never once acted as if he’d wanted her, but now he was jealous? She could hear it in his voice; see it in those silver eyes that now made her core quake with feeling.

“I thought you said you had no interest in unwilling paramours?” She shot back.

Something like hurt flickered through those silver eyes, and Dominic released her so quickly that she stumbled.

Aroused, angry, and confused, Amelia righted herself and smoothed her hands down the front of her dress.

“Just so we are clear, husband, I have not allowed any stranger to touch me.”

Dominic gave her a suspicious look, but said nothing.

“Those parties provide me with a particular sense of freedom, yes. But not one that involves my body.”

Dominic’s nostrils flared.

“But you were looking, weren’t you? You would have been open to the opportunity if it had presented itself.”

A fleeting shred of guilt passed through her as she was called out.

“Yes,” she admitted begrudgingly. “If the opportunity had presented itself. But might I remind you that that is only because you made it so clear on our wedding day that you did not want me.”

Dominic stared at her for a long, hard moment, and she shivered at how deep his eyes seemed to penetrate her very soul. It was as if he could see everything she’d ever tried to hide. From the ton. From the family. From herself.

“Chaos has erupted in London,” he said at last, taking his eyes off of her.

“Rumors and your friends are running wild. Theo and Tristan’s mother is in failing

health. And Seraphina's father has passed. His title is being handed down to the man next in line. One Allistair Harleigh. He hasn't been spotted yet but I need to sink my claws in the moment he is."

"Sounds like you will be busy," Amelia replied, a sense of bitterness overcoming her. "Off you go again."

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Dominic turned back to her with a devilish smile so handsome it made her shiver.

“Oh no, dear wife,” he said, sliding his hands into his pockets. “You are coming with me.”

Amelia’s eyes widened as a sense of true fear- her first in nearly a year, crept over her body.

“Dominic, no,” she whispered, dropping her haughty air. “I can’t go back there. To them.”

“You had no issue visiting the city when attending the Devil’s Masquerade,” he pointed out. “Besides, were you not just telling me last night that you have changed? No longer the cowering woman I rescued or something like that?”

Amelia opened her mouth but quickly snapped it shut. Yes, she’d changed. Or least she thought she had. And she had no yearning to test that theory by going back to London.

“That was different,” she replied carefully, taking a step toward him. “It was a few hours at most, and I wasn’t with them. Please, Dominic, don’t make me go back to those horrid people.”

A fleeting look of sympathy passed through Dominic’s eyes.

“Believe it or not I am not thrilled over having you return to London either,” he replied, that sympathy coming through in his deep voice.

“We have to clean these rumors up now, though. Make the proper appearances. And I say again, Theo’s mother is in failing health. Surely you won’t turn your back on your friend’s needs at a time like this?”

Feeling defeated, Amelia’s shoulders sank. No. She certainly didn’t want to do that. It was why she’d offered to have Theo and even her mother come to Ellsworth. Though it was only Theo that ever appeared, and even then she spoke so briefly about her mother. She now wondered if she had been helping her friend by giving her a place to escape- or hurting her by giving her an opportunity to ignore the real world.

She also knew that if rumors truly were circulating about her being in the red rooms of the Devil’s Masquerade with strangers, then the only way to dissolve them was to appear in public by Dominic’s side looking happier and confident than ever.

“When do we leave?” She muttered in agonizing resignation.

“Tonight,” Dominic told her. “We’re going to organize a ball, invite everyone who’s of importance, and you, myself, and my little spies are going to get to find who’s responsible for this entire mess.”

“But...my aviary,” Amelia sighed, looking back at the partially finished cage. She hated how small and adolescent she sounded. But there wasn’t a single part of her that was ready or willing to go back to her old life in London. The life of stuck up parties, degrading rumors and pitying, condescending looks.

“You can have the workers continue their work if you like,” Dominic said to her surprise. “Perhaps they’ll have it finished by the time we come back.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Amelia, I’m so sorry,” Theo said, opening her arms to Amelia.

“You’re sorry?” Amelia’s voice trembled, “No, darling, I’m sorry. This was all handled so poorly.”

As the two of them embraced, Ophelia and Rose came around behind them, all four of them moving into a group hug.

“Tristan told me what he’d heard of us,” Theo explained, pulling away. “I really was careless in my behavior.”

“Come,” Amelia urged, leading them all to the table in the sunroom, “Let us sit and talk. Figure a way out of this awful mess.”

Dominic’s London house was vastly different from the Ellsworth estate. Like the other grand houses on the street, it was made of sand-hued stone and the light-colored painted walls inside caught all of the light through the windows.

It appeared warmer than the one in Ellsworth, but when she’d first stepped into it, her body already tense with anxiety, she felt nothing but cold pretense. It was a ruse; a way to make all the other members often think that Dominic was just like them. Already she wanted to venture back into the dark space of the vast monetary-like home she’d grown to love over the past year.

“First things first,” Amelia said, reaching for Theo’s hand. “How is your mother?”

Theo’s eyes grew red as her chin wobbled.

“She grows worse by the day. I missed much by escaping to Ellsworth with you. She rarely recognizes me any more.”

“What have the physicians have to say?” Rose asked.

Theo's brows furrowed.

“Physicians,” she scoffed, folding her arms. “More like torturers. They suggest the most cruel treatments. None I suspect will actually help my mother get better.”

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Amelia watched as a shiver ran down her friend's spine, and she wished more than anything she could take the worry away. No wonder she came to me so often, she thought.

"Tristan says Dominic is looking for a better physician." Theo said.

Amelia's brows flew up in surprise.

"He is?" She asked.

Theo nodded.

"One he'd met on his travels within this last year, according to Tristan. It will take him some time to get here. Apparently he runs a facility in Italy. He should be here in a couple of months. If my mother is still alive by then."

Amelia paused. She'd never known Dominic to be so kind. Not that she knew him much at all. And the parts of him that he did show her- well. They were nothing short of confusing. Saving her. Abandoning her. Growling at her. And then that kiss...that kiss so passionate that it had swept everything away from her but that aching need that had done nothing but build up in her body for the last year.

She told herself that it was because she was getting older. That, after reading romance novels for so long, her mind was yearning for what she fantasized. Part of her though...part of her felt that it was more than that. And she didn't know whether to be curious or terrified.

Her husband was a handsome man, there was no denying it. But he'd made his disinterest in her known from the beginning. He'd done her a favor. That was all. Still, the longing to be kissed by him had been plaguing her the last two days; making it hard to even look at him.

Feeling her mood darken again, Amelia mentally shoved away her thoughts, and chose to speak of something else.

"Dominic has advised we host a party at the end of this week," she said, picking up her cup of tea. "To alert society that he has returned."

"Yes, we all received invitations," Ophelia said, smiling with excitement.

"The entire town is abuzz with it," Rose added. "I heard people talking when I was out shopping with Mother. The Duke of Ellsworth rarely invites people into his home, so absolutely everyone is coming."

"We can help," Theo replied eagerly. "I could use the distraction."

"Oh, yes, let us help," Rose added, clapping her hands.

"I would love that," Amelia agreed, "Dominic stated he would have certain demands for the party, but has not given them to me yet. As soon as he does though we can get started."

"He'd better hurry," Ophelia laughed. "It is only four days away now. How fast does he expect you to move?"

Amelia smirked.

"I know very little about my husband, but one thing I do know is that once a

command is given, it is expected to be obeyed with haste.”

While Amelia laughed- though she didn’t know why, her friends gave her tense looks.

“How is it,” Theo asked gently, “Having him home?”

Amelia squirmed uncomfortably in her chair and shook her head.

“I do not wish to talk of such things,” she replied. “In fact I do not wish to talk anymore at all. Let us take a break from chatter and play a game.”

“Oh, but I only just arrived,” A lovely familiar voice rang from the sunroom door. “I want to hear all the chatter!”

Amelia and the others turned, and bright happy smiles sprung from their faces as they saw Seraphina.

“Seraphina!” They all sang in unison, rushing out of their chairs.

A chorus of giggles erupted from them as a smiling Seraphina opened her arms and embraced them tightly.

“Oh, my darling girls,” Seraphina gushed, “How I have missed you!”

“And we have missed you,” Amelia answered, followed quickly by the others.

“I am so sorry it has been so long,” Seraphina sighed as she looked lovingly to each of her friends. “I meant to come visit you in Ellsworth, but the babies needed me much.”

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“Don’t ever apologize for taking care of your children,” Amelia replied quickly, leading her into the room.

After the childhood Seraphina had, she chose a different path than most noble ladies when it came to raising her children. Instead of hiring nannies and a wet nurse, she had taken over the care of her children herself; no doubt showering them with the love and attention she’d never received from her own mother, Mary.

“How are Percy and Persephone?” Amelia asked.

At the gathering they had all had a good row about whether or not Seraphina would have a boy or a girl; then God played the ultimate card and gave her both.

“Beautiful. Wonderful,” Seraphina sighed happily, “And tiring.”

She erupted into giggles and the rest of them joined her.

“They are under the care of their Aunt Leah this week while I join Hugo here in the city.”

Her smile dipped a little and she squirmed slightly in her seat.

“I must say though, being back does not exactly fill me with excitement. Not that I am not beyond thrilled to see you ladies, but I am already ready to go home.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Amelia sighed.

Seraphina looked at her with her kind blue eyes and reached out to keep Amelia's cheek.

"You and I will speak later of our married lives," she promised, her eyes searching Amelia's face.

"For now though, I can see that a game is certainly warranted."

Relief poured through Amelia, appreciating so much that her friends could read her so well.

"Come," Seraphina said, clapping her hands together. "What shall we play?"

"And what shall we drink?" Ophelia giggled, getting up.

Amelia tensed as her friends all cheered in agreement.

"I don't know," she said slowly, "Perhaps I shouldn't. Being back in London, I feel as if I should keep my wits about me."

"Oh, pish-posh," Seraphina teased. "You are with your friends! There is no need for wits with us. Wine, I think. At least to start. Then some fantastic punch my cook makes. My maid knows the recipe, she shall deliver it downstairs."

"Oh, yes," Ophelia replied willingly, looking at Amelia with wide, pleading eyes.

"Come, darling, the rest of the week will be so tense. Have a bit of fun with us before it starts, hmmm?"

Amelia looked around at the warm, loving faces of her friends, all silently egging her on to have some enjoyment; and she couldn't help but break into a smile.

“All right,” she conceded with a laugh, “But if you are choosing the drink then I am choosing the game. And I want to play Blind Man’s Bluff.”

A chorus of cheers and happy claps rose from Amelia’s friends, and she called for Eve to bring them all wine.

* * *

“Welcome back, old boy,” Everett boomed, sliding his hand into Dominic’s.

Dominic smirked and raised a brow as his friend drew close; a cloud of whiskey-scented air along with him.

“Jesus, Everett, I see you’ve been keeping White’s in business while I’ve been away,” Dominic teased, giving his friend a playful shove.

Everett grinned from ear to ear as he fell back into his chair, nearly toppling over.

“Of course I have,” he boasted, “It is a responsibility. And I-hiccup-take my responsibilities very seriously.”

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“Obviously,” Dominic chuckled, then turned to Hugo.

He smiled wide at his old friend, amazed at the transformation he’d gone through. There was a smile- agenuinesmile on his face, and there was a lightness to his air that had never been there before.

“Look at this big man,” Dominic boasted, clapping him on the back. “Tell me, how is it being a father?”

Hugo gave him a solid pat on the back in kind and waved an arm toward the empty chair at their usual table in White’s.

“Incredible,” he replied. “I’m so glad I took the time off to be with them and Seraphina. I swear the twins learn something new everyday. It’s astounding to watch them in their discovery of the world.”

“I’m happy to hear it old friend,” Dominic replied, and meant it.

Hugo’s past had been filled with nothing but darkness before he’d met Seraphina. The man had denied having feelings for her even after they were married, but Dominic had known otherwise. Not just from his little spies, but from the small changes that had taken over Hugo’s behavior. He was beyond relieved that with Seraphina’s help and love, his friend had stepped out of the darkened torment of the past and into the light of a bright future.

“I received word from that physician friend of yours,” Tristan muttered to his side.

“Your intervention is most appreciated, old friend.”

“Think nothing of it,” Dominic murmured back, and meant it.

Tristan was the most sentimental of their group, and though he’d been able to spare some feelings for his friend before, Dominic had no interest in doing so again tonight.

Dominic glanced around the full, darkened room at the clusters of men surrounding them. He spotted three of his spies. Felix, Parker, and Billy, disguised as waiters, and gave them all a subtle nod. They nodded back, and he knew that they’d have information for him by the morning. He had to gather as much as he could to stay ahead of the rumors.

“So you abandoned your lovely bride to go gallivanting around the world,” Everett slurred, pouring them fresh whiskeys, “How was it?”

“Jesus, Everett,” Tristan muttered, and Hugo rolled his eyes.

“It was exemplary,” Dominic replied, unfazed. “Much was accomplished. “How was drinking yourself into another bottle?”

Everett gave him a look of great offense and pressed his hand flat to his chest.

“I beg your deepest pardon, Your Grace, but that is not all I have done,” he answered dramatically.

Dominic, Tristan, and Hugo all looked at him with a raised brow.

“I have also kept the beds warm for many young ladies,” he went on, smiling wide. “It is a full time responsibility. And as I said earlier, I take my responsibilities very seriously.”

The three of them chuckled and shook their heads.

“I take it your steward is still handling most of the affairs of your title?” Dominic mused.

“Why not?” Everett said with a shrug, “He does such a good job.”

“You will have to grow up at some point,” Hugo noted.

“Aye, that may be true,” Everett said with a nod, “But today is not that day. Enough about me, you’re souring my drinking. Tell us about your trip, Dominic. Don’t spare the details. Don’t forget that I have invested in your abilities.”

“Here, here,” Hugo agreed, “How is our money doing?”

While Hugo’s ability to take money and turn it into more money was well known, it was Dominic who held the true talent. Hugo had once gained his investors by menace and skill. But Dominic chose a different path. Information could be turned into wealth when whispered into the right ears.

“You’re going to have a new buyer for cotton by your next harvest, Hugo,” Dominic replied, “You’ll want to expand your crops next year. Our new friend in Versailles was made aware of some unsavory business dealings with the Duke of Awsbury and no longer wants to do business with him.”

“How much expansion?” Hugo asked with anticipation.

“Double your planting,” Dominic replied, and Hugo clapped his hands and snapped his fingers with excitement.

“What about me?” Tristan asked, suddenly sounding more sober than before.

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Dominic reached into his inner breast pocket and pulled out a folded stack of papers.

“You now own your favorite whiskey brewery in Dublin. I’ve already spoken to the owner of White’s, to Ezra, and a few other places in town. You’ll be their new distributor from now on,” he explained, handing Everett the deed.

“Bloody hell you are good,” Everett praised, his eyes wide with wonder as he accepted the paperwork.

“Yes I know,” Dominic arrogantly agreed, grinning, “Which is why a percentage of your sales will go to me.”

“Right, right,” Everett said hastily, clearly not caring about the cut.

Dominic loved this part of his work. Making the dots connect; cutting the strings of other connections that got in his way. It was ruthless and questionably moral, but he reveled in it.

He finished his drink, then got up.

“You’re not leaving!” Everett exclaimed. “You just got here!”

“Indeed I am,” Dominic replied, smirking.

He’d come to be spotted by the others. Now that Everett’s loud welcome had got him noticed and he’d handed his friends their information, it was time to go. He knew that the real gossip began after a person left, and that his little spies would fast at work

gathering up the rumors.

“I should go too, honestly,” Hugo said, rising with him.

“Indeed,” Tristan agreed. “Theo has had enough time with her friends today, it is time I gather her up and take her home.”

“I believe they are with my wife,” Dominic stated, “You can come with me to collect them.”

“You’re all leaving me?” Everett asked, looking up at them with disdain.

“Surely there’s a wench’s bed mourning your absence,” Dominic scoffed.

“True,” Everett muttered, rising as well. “Will I see you before your party on Saturday?”

“Doubtful,” Dominic replied, “Now that I am back I have several things to put into motion.”

“Busy, busy, busy,” Everett tsked.

“Don’t worry, old chap,” Hugo teased, clapping him on the back. “One day you’ll grow up too.”

“Heaven forbid,” Everett muttered, and they all chuckled as they left.

* * *

“I hear you breathing,” Amelia called out, smiling wide.

A hiccup sounded to her left, followed by a cacophony of giggles. Blindfolded and arms outstretched, Amelia followed the sound. Without her sight the world blurred more than usual, and she stumbled, nearly falling over.

“Careful, darling!” One of her friends laughed.

The wine was good. But the punch, Amelia thought, might have been a mistake. Though it was delicious going down, the effects of it were slamming into her. Hard.

She rose to her feet, swaying a little, and took another step forward.

Something brushed against her fingertips and she jumped at it, but found purchase on nothing but a curtain.

More giggles erupted, followed by nearby gasp.

“Am I close?” Amelia called out, stretching her hands out again.

“Ummm...” Someone said.

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She took another step, feeling a warmth before her.

“Um, Amelia-” one started to say, followed quickly by a severe “shhh!”

“I am getting close,” Amelia crowed, grinning. “I’m tired of being the blind man. Would one of you just stand still and let me catch you?”

No one answered, and she took another step toward the warmth.

“I’m going to catch you,” she laughed, and sprung forward.

Her hands collided with a hard, broad chest; the shape of which none of her friends bore. A moment later large hands gripped at her elbows, holding her in place. She tried to pull away, frowning, and stepped over her own feet.

“What in heaven’s-”

Her blindfold was suddenly pulled off and she squeezed her eyes against the brightness of the lights. When she opened them again, she gasped and blushed as she saw Dominic.

The barest look of amusement was shining through his otherwise hardened gaze, a dark brow raised as he looked down at her.

“Having fun?” He asked, his tone condescending.

She furrowed her brows and wrenched her arms from his hold; stumbling as she took

a step back.

“I was,” she retorted. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here, darling,” Dominic replied, his tone coated in sarcasm as he said the last word.

Amelia took a look around, and blushed once more as she saw that he had not come alone. Hugo had arrived as well, his arms laced lovingly around Seraphina’s waist, and Tristan was standing beside Theo.

“You ladies have been having some fun I see,” Hugo chuckled, running the tip of his nose up Seraphina’s neck. “You had their cook make the punch.

She giggled in his arms and leaned further into her husband’s embrace; sending a shot of envy deep through Amelia as she watched the obvious outpour of affection.

“It really is the most wonderful concoction,” Seraphina giggled.

“I can see that,” Dominic said, his eyes still fixed on Amelia.

“How drunk are you ladies?” Tristan asked, looking curiously from his sister to Ophelia, to Rose. Even he had a slight grin on his face- a vast change from the deep frown he’d worn the last time Amelia had seen him.

“Oh,” Ophelia sang, plopping rather unladylike into the nearby seat cushions, “Just a few cups in.”

“Or bottles,” Seraphina muttered, and the others erupted into a fit of giggles.

Though a moment ago Amelia would have joined them in their laughter, she now

stood silent; feeling strangely sober despite having ample to drink.

“Let us see you home,” Tristan sighed, helping Rose up.

“We have our carriage waiting outside,” Ophelia stated, looking at him with offense.
“We are fine.”

Tristan bristled at her.

“All the same, we shall accompany you. Won’t we, Hugo?” He said after a moment.

“Indeed,” Hugo agreed, beckoning toward Rose.

“Rose, you’ll come with us. Ophelia you go with Tristan and Theo.”

“Oh, but we were playing,” Seraphina pouted, turning in her husband’s arms so she could look at him.

“And you shall play again,” he answered warmly, moving his hands up to cup her cheeks.

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Amelia watched through her peripherals as her friend was kissed passionately by her husband; apparent love shining from their both.

“Will you play with me when we get home?” Seraphina slurred, and Hugo immediately chuckled.

“Without a doubt,” he answered, a sensual tone lacing his voice.

“Ugh, enough you two,” Tristan pleaded, followed by Theo and Ophelia making sounds of kissing; making it apparent that they were all really quite drunk.

Again that vile feeling of envy slithered through Amelia, and she turned away from the scene.

“Go on, let them take you home,” she said with a commanding air. “We shall see each other tomorrow.”

They all said their goodbyes, hiccuping and giggling as they did so, and the four women allowed Tristan and Hugo to lead them outside.

“Looks like being back in London isn’t so bad,” Dominic mused once they were alone.

“That’s because I haven’t been forced into society yet,” Amelia grumbled; her jubilant feelings now long gone.

She finally turned her back to him, meaning to put some space between them, but

Dominic followed close behind.

“And don’t you dare judge me,” she slurred slightly, moving to pick up her half-empty cup of punch. “You smell of whiskey.”

“I’m not,” Dominic stated, grinning as he held his hands up. It only served to annoy her even more.

She stared at him as she brought her cup to her lips and took a deep swallow.

“Go away.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because we have matters to discuss.”

Dominic closed the space between them, plucked the cup from her hands and, with his eyes still on her, downed the rest of its contents.

“Mmm,” he hummed, his tongue darting out to lap at his bottom lip. “That is quite good. And strong. No wonder you’re so knackered.”

Amelia felt her cheeks fuse with heat as she glared at him. She hated the way he’d licked his bottom lip. It reminded her of how he’d teased hers and how it presently made her entire body spark with need.

“I am not!” She protested, and Dominic chuckled.

“I am perfectly fine,” she insisted. “Go on. Discuss your matters.”

She pushed out a hand as a gesture for him to speak, but the act made the world spin again. Dominic must have noticed because he caught her waist before she could even stumble, and pulled her into his lap; taking a seat by the table. For a moment she thought of fighting him, but it felt too good, too comfortable in his embrace to break away from it.

Steadying her with one hand, he pulled a pamphlet of papers from his breast pocket with the other, and placed them on the table.

“Instructions for the party we are throwing this Saturday,” he explained, tapping them with two fingers. “I want everything to be precise. Can you do it?”

“Did I not take care of everything while you were gone?” She answered.

Surprise shone in Dominic’s eyes, but he grinned wickedly.

“Everything but your own reputation,” he retorted. “Which I must now save.”

“Well, aren’t you the hero,” Amelia scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Dominic’s hand was around her throat in a second, causing another burst of that annoying heat to soak through her skin and clear into her bones.

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“Careful,” his deep voice warned.

Exhilaration coursed through Amelia’s veins. There was a whisper of threat in his tone. And instead of being afraid of it- she wanted to play with it.

“Or what?” She whispered, pushing her throat further into his hold. “You’ll punish me with another weak kiss?”

White flames erupted in Dominic’s eyes as a growl escaped his chest. The primal sound against her ears made her entire body grow weak and she suddenly lost some of her fight.

“Weak?” He seethed.

Arousal beat down on her, so intense she couldn’t speak so she only nodded.

Don’t stop, she silently begged, Please don’t stop. She hated herself then. Hated how much the man that so clearly didn’t want anything to do with her was driving her body wild. Shame curled up through her growing need. Why. Why hadn’t he wanted to at least try to be with her? Did he pity her that much?

“Let’s see who the weak one is, Amelia,” Dominic replied, his voice dipping into a sensually deep tone.

His words pulled her from her darkening thoughts, and she gasped as the hand around her throat tightened and brought her lips to his. His kiss was rough, demanding. He ravaged her mouth with his teeth and tongue, coaxing her into absolute submission.

He nipped, making her gasp, then would kiss so long and languidly that she'd moan and whimper. Then more pain would erupt; either on her lips her tongue, springing tears to her eyes, then he'd her again soothe with his lips until the pain was forgotten.

Dominic sank further into the chair, letting his thickly muscled legs splay wide before he shifted her until she was straddling his lap. His hand let loose of her throat then, only to reach down between them and move the bunched up skirts of her gown away from them.

He then caught the back of her hair with a firm grip, and still kissing her demanded, "ride."

Lost in his kiss Amelia blindly obeyed, letting her hips began to writhe back and forth against the already thick, rigid outline of his manhood. She moaned deeply at the sensation, stars bursting behind her eyes as a pleasure she'd never found lay open for her to discover.

She'd attempted to touch herself in the past. After reading certain passages in her books it had left her hot and uncomfortable; and she was aware she had a certain spot between her legs that was supposed to be able to release such discomfort. She had never found it though, and would only end up more frustrated after such experiments.

This, Dominic's hard, pulsing length gliding over her soaked center, was exactly how what she'd tried to make herself feel. It was what she had been missing, and now that she had it, she worked at him with fervor.

"Keep your mouth on mine," he commanded, his tone thick and vicious when she suddenly threw her head back and moaned.

Again she obeyed immediately, too caught in the fervor, and he hungrily attacked her lips again as he wrapped a hand around the back of her neck.

So intent on the pleasure spreading through her parted legs, Amelia didn't notice the sound of ripping fabric as Dominic tore her dress from neck to navel. It wasn't until she felt the scrape of his fingertips against her taut nipples that she realized she had been made bare, and she whimpered against his mouth in a slight protest.

"Don't stop," Dominic rasped against her lips, seizing her left nipple in a painful pinch. "You're not there yet."

His wicked words only served to heighten her pleasure, and Amelia felt herself let go completely. She undulated her hips against his, pressed her breast further into the palm of his hand. Her breath grew into short, even, needy gasps as she brought herself closer, closer to that great abyss where she somehow just knew a pool of pleasure awaited her fall.

And then...

"Stop."

Amelia ignored it, so close to her release that her entire body was shivering, and she thrust her hips again.

Her sex didn't find its usual purchase, though, as a vice-like grip came down on both her hips and she was pulled backward. Dominic's lips were next to be torn away, and as quickly as she had been swept into his lap, she suddenly trembling on her own two feet; swaying from the intensity. She forced open her eyes; staring at him with utter indignation.

Dominic's silver eyes were so dilated that they were practically black as he peered up at her from his seat; hunger and his own need apparent on his handsome face.

Amelia drew in a ragged breath; the world coming crashing down on her all at once. She glanced down, saw the ruined state her dress was left in, and slowly brought her trembling arms up to cover herself. In a flash Dominic was on his feet; his height looming over her as he grabbed her wrists and forced them down.

“You will learn not to goad me, Amelia,” he rasped; his own need still apparent despite his dangerous tone.

She tried to speak, but her words- her thoughts, seemed to refuse to form.

He took a shuddering breath, his lips so close that she thought he was going to kiss her again.

“I may have a likeness for you,” he whispered against her lips, “But don’t ever believe I am weak. Not even for you.”

He released her then, the absence of his presence so intense that she swayed again, and left her standing in her ruined dress in the sunroom.

CHAPTERNINE

“If you appeared this nervous in the red rooms, no wonder you drew attention to yourself,” Dominic muttered, appearing by Amelia’s side.

His hand slid along her back, and with it came a spark of heat that nearly made her gasp.

It had been several days since he’d left her panting and trembling with need in the sunroom and her body had still yet to recover. Her nights had been plagued by feverish dreams with the darkest of acts; leaving her with no sleep and emphasized her discomfort. But that wasn’t why she was nervous.

“I do not get nervous at the Devil’s Masquerade, Your Grace,” Amelia said quietly under her breath, looking over their sea of guests. “It is where my heart feels most free. This-”

She paused, waving a hand toward the party, “- is my hell.”

Dominic chuckled, chuckled at her, and of all things, leaned down to kiss her temple. A show, no doubt, to their guests that they were a dedicated couple.

“If you would have been more careful we could have avoided this,” he murmured, making lazy strokes with his finger at her lower back. “Perhaps you should remember that in the future.”

Amelia’s eyes began to narrow with despise, but she stopped herself before her full

snarl could set upon her face. They had an act to perform tonight, and she would be damned if she was the reason it was unbelievable.

As per his request, she had laid out the party to his exact specifications. The rooms were assigned to different party activities. They had a cigar room, a ladies card room, the gathering salon, and the ballroom; all of which had live music. There were also several games being coordinated on the lawn, for those to spend their time in the evening sun.

The vittles and libations were also made to the order. Delicate, delightful little treats that barely needed a single bite to accomplish, and small glasses of fresh lemonade and sparkling white wine.

The London house was even decorated with the season's acceptable colors; a powder blue, pearl white, and sandy brown. She'd had a new dress made to match. A white satin base with a golden lace overlay on the skirt, and a powder blue bodice. Not a stitch of her favorite color was to be found- only serving to make her more uncomfortable.

Still, she thought Dominic no one was surely more uncomfortable than Dominic. He too had given her orders to have a suit tailored to match hers, and seeing him outside his usual dark colors gave her just the tiniest taste of revenge. He was trying to hide it; trying to pretend he didn't care. But she'd caught him tugging at his pale blue cravat twice and fisting the edges of his sandy-brown jacket to straighten an imaginary crease. The pale colors did nothing for his dark hair or silver eyes; making him appear almost...normal.

Good, Amelia thought. If she had to suffer, at least he was suffering a little too. She smiled at the idea, and reached up a hand to wave down to one of the guests who was waving up to her- a lady's name she couldn't recall, but a face she recognized as one who had once adored gossiping about Amelia's failed first marriage.

“How long do we have to do this for?” She asked through her smile.

“Until we put any and all rumors of you straying from me to bed,” Dominic replied in the same fashion.

“And how are we to do that?” Amelia asked with a sigh.

“We pretend we are a happy, normal couple, and put any unsavory questions to bed with a smile and rational explanation. And if that does not work, I pull them aside and make them aware that their darkest secrets are mine to do with as I please.”

She glanced at him. He’d spoken so softly, so normally, as if he hadn’t just spoken of vengeance but of the weather.

“You’ve done this before,” she said, realization dawning on her.

“I have done what I needed to win,” Dominic replied, returning her glance. “And I always win.”

“Now smile dear,” he instructed, taking her hand. “I am about to make our welcome speech.”

He then gestured to the nearby servant, who rang a bell. The crowded foyer came to a silence as all of their guests looked up toward them. Everyone had come.

“Friends,” Dominic shouted, his tone more cordial than she’d ever heard it, “My beautiful wife and I thank you deeply for attending our little soiree. The Duchess and I welcome you into our home. Today we celebrate many things...”

A round of surprisingly loud applause went through the air after Dominic finished his speech, as if the people below had never once spoken ill words of her behind her

back. Before she knew it Amelia and Dominic were walking into the crowd, being parted by the guests that eagerly waited to talk to them.

“I’ve got you,” Rose whispered, pressing herself against Amelia’s side as a group of ladies came toward them.

“As do I,” Theo promised, appearing at her other side.

Amelia gave her friends a smile of appreciation, and though her entire body rebelled against it, she went into the fray, and started conversing.

* * *

“We’re midway through this gaudy ruse. What have you heard?” Dominic asked, shutting his study’s door.

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With a simple motion of his hand he'd rounded up the spies he had circulating the party and they all had reported to the location as told.

"Some are conflicted," Eve answered first. "I heard some ladies say that there must have been a mistake regarding Her Grace being spotted at the Devil's Masquerade. They are now assured of her innocence, after appearing so beautiful and composed today."

"And the others?" Dominic asked. Eve blushed, but answered.

"Others say that this party is but a mere attempt to cover a blemish, Your Grace. That Her Grace was ruined by her previous betrothed, and ruined is all she'll ever be. Some have even said..."

Eve's words trailed off and Dominic tensed.

"Out with it," he commanded.

"Some have said that our mistress is even being paid to attend the Devil's Masquerade as an entertainer."

Fury flared through Dominic's veins, but his iron will tampered it.

"Ada? What have you heard?" He asked, turning to her.

"Similar remarks, Your Grace," Ada answered, "though more so those that incline our mistress toward innocence. And one rumor of you."

“Proceed,” he granted.

“That you left the country because your mistress abroad had a child,” she reported.

Dominic barked out a laugh, unfazed by the rumor. It wasn’t the first time something like that had been said and he doubted that it would be the last. Many men disliked his ability to gain what they could not. That sort could be handled easily.

“Their names?” He asked, and Ada delivered them. Eve then gave her list as well, and Dominic quickly jotted them down.

“Felix, anything?” He then asked, turning to the manservant.

Felix gave him a wary glance.

“No reports on rumors, Your Grace, but something should be mentioned of the Duchess,” he replied.

Dominic’s brows drew down. They’d made it halfway through the party so far, and although he’d been busy making his own headway, every time he’d looked over at Amelia she’d seemed cheerful and successful.

“Well, don’t keep me waiting,” he insisted.

“I believe she’s fading, Your Grace,” Felix replied. “She is starting to look most uncomfortable. I was sure there were even tears in her eyes at one point.”

Concern, strange and new, rippled through Dominic. He’d known she hadn’t wanted to do this, but tears?

“Did anyone else see?” He demanded.

“I don’t believe so, Your Grace, one of her friends was quick to cover her so she could dry her eyes,” Felix replied.

Dominic gave a single nod.

“I’ll take care of it,” he stated. “Go, get back to your work.”

His servants bowed , and after being left alone, Dominic took a moment to himself. He’d grown quite well at balancing the Duke and the brute within him, and now, it was time to practice the delicate art of performing both. He studied the names, drew in a deep breath, fixed a handsome smile on his face, and returned to the party.

One by one he visited his targets, putting on a show of absolute decorum as he approached with all respect. Then, when the moment was perfect, he leaned in and sought his vengeance. He whispered into their ears like a lover, letting them know he was aware of each of their darkest secrets.

How is your footman, Lady Harley? The one you bring to your bed every third Thursday of the month.

Your husband misses you, Lady Stark, perhaps I can speak with him about leaving his mistress’s bed on your behalf?

Your debt at the underground salon has grown quite high, Lady Chilton. Perhaps I could speak to your husband about it for you?

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A twisted glee filled him as he watched the happy looks of superiority slacken and pale with each fact he delivered. That was the thing about him. He did not trade in rumors, but in facts, and he had enough to damn them all.

“Pray you keep that to yourself, Your Grace.”

“Your Grace I beseech you, what do you mean?”

“I am at your mercy, Your Grace, please do not speak further of this!”

Their pleas all came to him whispered and hurried; a look of stark fear on their faces.

“Say no more of my wife’s falsities, and we are settled,” he advised them all.

Andoh, how quickly those gossiping hens changed their tunes.

He waited another half hour, carrying on a half-hearted conversation with Hugo and Everett as he watched the ladies that had just been destroying his wife’s reputation now flock to her side with praises.

“What have you done?” Hugo asked, catching Dominic’s intent stare.

Dominic sipped from his drink.

“I do not know what you are talking about,” Dominic answered smoothly.

Hugo raised a brow.

“Mhmm.”

Everett turned the conversation toward his new whiskey distribution business in a moment of stunning sobriety, but Dominic kept his eyes on his wife. He waited for the tense expression on her face to slide into something more gleeful, but it never came. She still appeared as anxious as ever to be among them again; even with her friends by her side. Fidgeting and frightened, just as she had been the night he'd purchased her from auction. As he watched her grow paler by the second, he realized he needed to intervene.

Excusing himself, Dominic left his friends and made his way toward his wife.

“Pardon me, Ladies,” he said politely, giving them all charming smiles as he approached Amelia.

He held his hand out to her, tilting his head in a slight bow.

“It dawned on me that I have not danced with my beautiful wife, and that simply will not do.”

Amelia looked at him, eyes strangely glazed and narrowed as his hand remained outstretched to her.

Play along, he silently demanded, his eyes tensing just enough to convey the message. Amelia forced a smile and finally slipped a hand into his.

“Of course, husband. I would be utterly delighted,” she said sweetly, allowing him to pull her away.

Hushed murmurs surrounded them as Lords and Ladies alike turned their heads to watch them go to the dance floor.

“You have to get ahold of yourself,” he murmured, spinning her out gently from him as the dance began.

Amelia drew in a ragged breath as she twirled back toward him, her small, free hand formed into a fist as it came into punching contact with his chest.

“I hate you for this,” she seethed quietly though her outward smile.

“That’s fine,” he murmured, pulling her into the dance.

He reached up to her fist, his larger hand easily unfurling her tight fingers, and held the hand tight. She tried to fight him, but one firm hand on her waist kept her from doing so.

“You wouldn’t believe the things I’ve heard about myself,” she whispered on. “Not just about the red rooms, but my previous engagement. Awful, despicable things. You promised I wouldn’t have to be around these people again.”

Dominic glanced up at the people around them, then back down to Amelia. If he had it his way he’d eviscerate them all right there with their truths with a public brutality. But that was not how their world worked. Stealth, patience, was required.

In his arms Amelia suddenly swayed against the music, her face growing deathly pale as another ragged breath drew from her lips. She was going to faint.

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“Listen to me,” he whispered, taking total control of her steps, “Close your eyes, and picture yourself at the Devil’s Masquerade.”

* * *

“What?” Amelia hissed, her breaths growing more uneven. Her heart was hammering at an uneven pace; her stomach lurched and roiled in discomfort as the room closed in on her.

“Do it,” he demanded, and Amelia’s lashes fluttered shut.

“You are in the dark,” he whispered, his tone velvety and hypnotic in her ear. “In that gorgeous black dress of yours. Around you our masked friends stare in hunger and envy as they see you slide into my lap. They want you, respect you, for the utter vixen that you are. But it is my hands that slide over your waist and warm your loins.”

Amelia exhaled deeply through her lips, her trembling slowly starting to abate.

“Your hips move on mine, undulating with the music as you feel that dark sense of freedom take over you,” Dominic whispered on, his hands now guiding her in the steps. “Can you feel it? Feel how warm and alive all of your senses are?”

“Yes,” she breathed slowly, her heart beat starting to fall into its natural rhythm.

“Your seductive power springs free, and everyone watching wants you. I want you. And my fingertips begin to glide up your waist, your breasts, your throat,” Dominic’s deep

voice whispered, carrying her through the dance.

She was just a body in his control now; moving in steps simply because he moved her there. The sounds of the party, the harsh, bright light; it all faded away as Dominic's voice carried her to a place she felt in control and powerful.

"That's it my little vixen," he praised, sliding a hand up to the back of her neck, "Breathe for me. Move for me. You can do this. You can show them you are above them in every way."

His fingers flexed at her neck, just enough to send a shot of pleasure straight down her spine and into her lower belly.

"Now open your eyes. Forget them. And dance with me." Dominic commanded.

Amelia's eyes fluttered open, feeling more herself than she had in days, and sweeping force of strength filled her as she met Dominic's silver gaze. An absolute devilishly handsome grin slid slowly onto his lips as he watched her survive.

"There you are," he whispered. "Now show me. Show them, what you have become."

Amelia pulled in a smooth, even breath from her nostrils as she grasped properly onto Dominic's hands, and as the music continued, she danced with utter grace and skill. Around them the whispers stopped as they began to hold their audience in rapt attention; everyone around them too curious, too transfixed to mutter another word.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Dominic smirked.

"See what happens when you don't toy with me? I can be quite helpful."

Amelia let out a sarcastic laugh.

“To play with you, Your Grace?” She asked, letting him spin her around. “I am certain it is the other way around.”

“Are you still angry about the other night?” He asked, a smile twitching on his lips.

“You needed to be taught your lesson. You practically begged for it.”

Her anxiety now completely gone, Amelia felt that flare of usual annoyance she now associated with being in her husband’s presence.

“Next you’ll be saying I begged for your absence too,” she scoffed.

Dominic rose an amused brow.

“Did you not?” He mused. “You wanted freedom. I gave it to you. And look how you flourished. Even if you did make some mistakes.”

“It was not I that made mistakes,” she bit back quickly, then thought on his words. He now knew what she had been doing while he had been gone. But did not know what he had been in up in her absence.

“What were you doing while you were away, anyway? She asked in a teasing tone, “Visiting your willing international paramours?”

She’d expected him to scowl at her, but to her surprise, he chuckled almost ruefully.

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“I do not need to go international to find willing paramours, darling wife,” he said so low only she could hear, “I was doing what I always do when I am abroad. Finding new business, making new connections. Discovering more powerful information.”

“That’s all you have been doing since you have returned as well,” she replied. “Do you not do anything else?”

The dance was ending soon, and though she’d hated that he’d pulled her to be center of attention, she was realizing that she didn’t want it to end yet.

“I prefer to dedicate my time to meaningful transactions,” he replied, taking her for a final spin.

“That is not all there is to life,” she replied.

“That is all mine is,” he replied as the song ended.

They came to stop, and Dominic lowered his head to kiss her hand.

“Even our marriage,” she murmured, watching him carefully.

He smirked, but did not reply.

“Go back to the party,” he commanded instead, his tone soft but firm. “Our work is almost finished.”

Amelia felt her anxiety rise again as she walked once more back into the fray. But

this time, instead of hearing whispers of deceit, she heard nothing but praises.

Did they not look beautiful?

How refreshing to witness a couple in love.

I daresay those rumors about her former fiance seem quite unfounded.

Amelia looked at them oddly, wondering what it was that had changed. Then looked back at her husband. She'd seen him flittering about early. Leaning close to the women who had just been besmirching her name.

Had he said something to them? Done something? She wondered.

"That was a lovely dance, Amelia," Seraphina praised as she returned to her friends.

"And you look much better," Theo sighed, giving her a kind look.

"We were growing worried about you," Rose remarked.

"I'm fine," Amelia assured them with a smile.

"Good," Seraphina sighed, "If you are feeling better I would like to introduce you to my married ladies' group. We don't meet often, but we..."

As Amelia half listened and agreed to meeting Seraphina's new group, her attention turned back to Dominic. She hated him. For making her do this. For abandoning her. For the state he'd left her in the other night. And yet...through it all, she began to feel a glimmer of gratitude toward him.

CHAPTER TEN

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Andrew, the London house butler greeted her the next morning.

“Good morning, Andrew,” Amelia replied, offering a small smile as her breakfast plate was placed before her.

“If I may say so, Your Grace, you look much recovered from last night.”

Amelia’s smile froze, but she nodded. She’d made it through the party without hearing any more rumors. By the end of it though she’d felt more than exhausted, and had gone to bed without even attempting to look for Dominic. Space, she decided, was what she needed from him. And luckily for her, there were a few days before she would be forced into appearing as the wife while socializing with the ton again. Today she would focus on happier matters.

“Have the reports from Ellsworth arrived yet?” She asked, picking up her fork.

“Indeed they have, Your Grace. I have them right here for you. His Grace has already looked them over.”

Andrew laid the portfolio by her plate, and as she began to eat her breakfast, she perused through the information. She paid her usual attention to the farming and staffing issues, skimming over them with bare interest, then began to flip through the portfolio for the section of the house updates.

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Her brows furrowed and she paused mid-chew when she saw the stop action order that had been placed on her aviary.

“Andrew,” she called, pointing to the letter. “What is this?”

Andrew read the letter over her shoulder and said, “I believe it says that work on the aviary has stopped, Your Grace.”

She dropped her fork, no longer hungry, and glared up at him.

“And why do you think that would be?” She asked.

Andrew gave her a pleading look as he shrugged his shoulders.

“I would not know, Your Grace, but it appears to be His Grace’s signature at the bottom of the form. Perhaps he would know.”

Annoyance bristled through her as Amelia abandoned her breakfast and stalked toward Dominic’s study. Without pretense she shoved the door open with so much force it bounced off the wall with a resounding moan. Dominic, his solicitor, and Hugo all looked at her. The last two looked at her with wide-eyed astonishment, but Dominic glared with forthright impatience.

“I believe that finalizes things,” Hugo said, picking up his portfolio. “We shall leave you two to your morning.”

“You don’t need to go anywhere,” Dominic said, still glaring at Amelia.

“I know what happens when wives burst in like that,” Hugo replied, coming around Dominic’s desk, “Trust me, I do. Good to see you, Amelia. Excellent party yesterday.”

“Please tell Seraphina I shall join her at her married ladies club later today,” Amelia said as he passed, not taking her eyes off of her husband.

Hugo mumbled his agreement, and made his way out of the office; closing the door behind him.

“I feel as if I have been quite patient with you, Amelia, but one thing I won’t tolerate is a business deal interruption,” Dominic told her, rising from his chair. “As I told you last night, my life is all about transactions.”

“I remember,” she said icily.

She stalked toward him and threw the morning’s portfolio on his desk.

“Explain this at once. Why did you stop my work on the aviary? I wanted it completed by the time we got back.”

“Because it is an outrageous waste of money,” Dominic retorted, coming round to sit on the edge of his desk.

She noted how he’d gone quickly back to his black suits, and despised how her body responded to how well he wore them.

I wonder how he looks beneath his clothes?The thought suddenly bloomed in her mind.Are his muscles as rigid as they feel through the fabric?

“Amelia.”

Amelia wrenched her eyes away from his torso, realizing she'd been staring, and blushed wildly as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"I want that aviary, Dominic," she stated, "I want my birds. They are symbolic to me."

He raised an amused brow as he tilted his chin.

"How so?" He inquired.

"Because they remind me of myself." She said, and even as she spoke the words, she realized how selfish she sounded. Dominic must have too, for he let out a demeaning laugh.

"So you'll cage wild, beautiful animals meant to be free just so that you may have a visual representation of yourself to look upon?" He asked.

"That does not sound kind, Amelia."

"What would you know about kindness?" She flung back, suddenly feeling small and hurt.

Dominic's brows dipped into a frown as he got up from the edge of his desk to stand before her. Her legs began to quake as he towered over her, but damn her if she couldn't tell if it were out of fear or arousal. Being this close to him, catching his masculine scent of wild sea air and fir trees- images of their dance last night flashed through her mind; making her shiver.

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His voice had been so hypnotic. His words perfectly sensual as he created a mental picture of peace for her to hang on to.

She grit her teeth in frustration, but when she went to move a step back, Dominic's hand reached out and caught her arm; keeping her in place.

“Where do you think you're going?” He asked.

“Back to Ellsworth,” she told him.

She tried to shake off his hand but he wouldn't budge. Instead his other hand reached out and snaked around her back, pinning her to him.

“I don't think so,” he replied, shaking his head as he stared down at her. “Those men you hired were doing more ogling at you than actual work. Even if I did agree to resume work on the aviary, it's not going to be while you're there. The fools would probably build it subpar, and what would happen to your precious birds if their new gilded cage collapsed in on them? Besides, you and I have more work to do here. Last night was a good start but we are far from done.”

Amelia felt her face redden with frustration as she heard his condescending tone, but she forced herself to think. If she didn't know any better she might have thought him jealous. But she knew her husband only enjoyed her when torturing her. Almost as much as he enjoyed business.

Business, she thought, an idea forming in her head. He liked business more than anything. Perhaps that was something she could work with.

“I should like to strike a deal with you then,” she said.

Amelia un-balled her fist and ran her hand smoothly down the front of his shirt. She could have sworn she heard Dominic’s breath hitch as she did so; and most certainly noted how quickly even more heat began to radiate from him.

“What sort of deal?” He murmured.

His hand gripping at her back lost some of its firmness, and something like a caress swept up her spine. She tried to ignore the shiver of pleasure it brought her and pressed forward.

“I will promise to stay here, away from the so-called ogling workers. And I will put more effort into swaying the town that we are perfect husband and wife. In return, you will allow the workers to continue on with the aviary. They have the plans. I suppose I don’t really need to be there. And Mrs. Morbate can send me updates. If any changes need to be made, she can alert me and I can correct them from here.”

Dominic looked down at her a long moment, his hand continuing that trailing caress up and down her spine so effortlessly, she wondered if he even knew he was doing it. Did he like touching her? Did she want her to touch him? They had argued so much since he’d returned, and they’d discussed so little when before he’d left.

Could it be possible- could they both possibly have an inclination toward one another? Even if they barely knew the other?

“Tell me something,” he said, startling her out of her reverie.

She blinked, nodded. I have to stop getting distracted like this. But why does he feel so damned good?

“The rumors,” he murmured, reaching up to stroke a stray lock of hair from her eyes. “Is that truly all that you fear from these people? Yesterday you looked ready to drop dead in my arms.”

That mental shield of protection she’d worked so hard to put up the past year began to waver, and she felt her body relax a little into his.

“You wouldn’t understand,” she whispered, tremble running through her.

“Try me,” he replied evenly.

She took a deep breath, feeling her heart begin to hammer. Could she trust him with the truth?

“I know word never got out of me being sold because of you,” she said softly. “And though I don’t always act like it, I am grateful. You don’t understand what that would have done to my reputation had you prevented it.”

“Because of your former betrothed,” Dominic answered, his jaw tightening, “And the rumors he spread about you and your...willingness. I could see how adding being sold would amplify the ability to call you a few harsh words.”

“It’s not just the rumors I have been fighting,” Amelia murmured. “It’s the memories.”

Dominic’s eyes narrowed in curiosity as he looked down at her. She tried to look away, but he caught her chin and held her still.

“What memories?” He asked.

Amelia swallowed. Even now she felt a vile tremor shiver through her as she recalled

Roland's rough hands and painful kisses.

"It was not I that was so willing to start our marriage rites early," she forced out, feeling shame tint her cheeks. "It was him. He wanted...he tried..."

Amelia tried to find the right words, but in doing so it caused her throat to close and her eyes to burn.

“It hurt,” she rasped out.

Dominic’s body grew rigid as a murderous rage filled his silver eyes.

“Amelia,” he bit out, “I need you to be clear. Did he take your virtue without your permission?”

“No,” she half-sobbed, half-breathed. “No he did not get that far but he tried. And ever since...ever since I have tried to regain some control, some right back to my own body. It’s why I like the Devil’s Masquerade. I can feel beautiful and vulnerable, but yet I still have full control of myself. No one can touch me without my permission. And I...I have come to love withholding that permission.”

Dominic was silent a long moment as they stayed locked together, but after a few moments, Amelia was dying to know what he was thinking. Feeling.

“I need to know something right now,” he forced out, his tone vibrating with an edge. “No teasing, no pretense. Amelia. Did you feel that way- the way you did when Roland touched you- when I kissed you?”

Heat fanned over Amelia’s cheeks as she trembled in his arms.

“No,” she confessed. “No one has made me feel what you have made me feel. And I may hate that, but I...” She couldn’t believe what she was about to confess... “But I also enjoy it.”

Dominic’s rigid body released a deep breath, and to her surprise, he pulled his hands

away from her and took a step back.

“You may have your aviary,” he stated calmly, walking back around his desk. “I will send word to Ellsworth to resume construction. I accept your deal.”

Amelia was left to stand on her own, feeling strangely cold and discontent as she watched Dominic go back to work.

“My sisters sent word that my father is out of town for a few days,” she said, changing the subject. “If you don’t have anything planned for today, I think I shall go visit them. It’s been a week since they’ve come to Ellsworth.”

“Go,” he said dismissively, not looking up from his paperwork. “Have a pleasant time.”

* * *

“Sister!” Lydia and Sarah called in unison as they raced down the stairs.

Amelia mentally pushed away the immediate dread she felt upon stepping into her father’s house. Memories of the last time she’d been inside plagued her mind. The fear, the worry she felt as she’d put on her best dress; knowing absolutely nothing of where she was being taken or what was about to happen to her.

“My darlings!” Amelia gushed, opening her arms to hold them close. She smiled wide as she held them, the painful memories from earlier already sliding away.

“I can’t believe you came back to London,” Lydia said excitedly. “Are you going to be here more often?”

“Oh, I think not,” Amelia sighed, taking their hands. “But I am here for the time

being, so I thought I'd hold our lessons here. Have you been practicing your finger work since your last visit?"

"Yes," they both chirped as they led her to the parlor where the pianoforte sat.

"Go warm up with a few scales," she encouraged them both, "while I have a quick word with your governesses."

Amelia waited until they were both seated on the piano bench and focused on the keys before she turned to her sisters' governesses, Miss Chiron and Miss Gerhardt.

"How have they been?" She asked.

"Lydia is staying on task with all of her lessons and is excelling in her reading and piano," Miss Chiron stated proudly.

"Sarah is quite taken by books as well, but her musical talent lies more in singing. She's also taken quite an interest in lacemaking," Miss Gerhardt replied with a warm smile.

"That is wonderful news," Amelia sighed with relief. "I am happy to hear it. And my father? Is he still balking against the idea of you being here, or has he accepted your presence?"

Worried that her father had given up raising his daughters properly after he'd been so low to take her to auction, Amelia had hired the governesses to not only help them with their education, but to keep watchful eyes on her sisters while she could not. She had been sure when she'd first sent them that her father was going to retaliate, but she'd never heard from him.

"The Lord is gone most days," Miss Chiron replied, her smile waning a little. "But he

does spend time with the girls when he is home.”

“How is he with them?” Amelia asked quickly, worried.

The governesses shared a brief, tense look.

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“He is cordial,” Miss Gerhardt answered. “Though when they return from their visits with you he questions them. And us.”

“And what do you report?” Amelia answered anxiously.

“Only of your lessons. Where they are with their education. The girls speak of what they learn. Nothing about you.”

Amelia forced herself to breathe.

“Good. That is good.”

“There...there is something else though,” Miss Chiron added apprehensively. “Your father has had guests.”

Amelia looked at her quizzically.

“Gentlemen guests,” Miss Chiron went on. “For the girls. He won’t tell us a thing, but we believe he is trying to arrange marriages.”

Amelia paled. Sarah still had at least three more years before the marriage mart, and Lydia several more.

“Are these guests...fathers of eligible gentlemen?” She asked. It wasn’t so uncommon for parents to arrange marriages, even at her sisters’ young ages.

Miss Chiron looked down.

“No, Your Grace. They’re not bachelors. Some quite on in age.”

Fear and disgust slithered through Amelia’s bloodstream, making her knees weak.

“Very well,” she whispered, trying to gather herself. “I shall see what I can do about that. Thank you, ladies, for looking over my sisters.”

“It is the least we can do,” Miss Gerhardt said softly. “They are such good girls.”

“And with the increased rate your husband has given us recently, we have the most prized positions in all of London now.”

Amelia glanced at them in surprise.

“My husband increased your salaries?” She asked. She hadn’t even been aware that Dominic knew that she’d hired the governesses.

“Just a week or so ago,” Miss Gerhardt answered. “Around the time he returned to London.”

Amelia thought on this for a moment, not sure how to feel about it.

“Thank you, ladies,” she said politely, giving them a dismissive nod. “For everything. I believe I shall spend time with my sisters now.”

The two governesses curtsied, and left her to attend to Sarah and Lydia. They practiced piano for a time, then Sarah sang her a new song that Lydia had written her. The day passed with warmth and laughter, and though there was a heaviness in her heart the entire time, Amelia smiled lovingly and purely with her sisters.

Before she took her leave though and after Miss Chiron and Miss Gerhardt had taken

them away for supper, Amelia decided to go upstairs to her old room. Standing in it, she looked around at the completely new arrangement. All of her old things had been cleaned out, even her bed. Not a stitch of her remained in what now appeared to be just another guest room.

She then walked downstairs, going once more into the parlor and then library. Her little crafts, the embroidered pieces that once graced small spaces in the rooms. They were all gone as well.

Suddenly feeling as if the vast space was closing in on her, Amelia hurried from the house, tears wavering in her eyes, and demanded the driver to take her home. She had to get her sisters away from her father, she decided then and there. Permanently. Or she feared they would be erased just as she had.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Amelia seems to be doing much better,” Hugo stated.

Dominic lifted his eyes back toward his wife for the hundredth time that evening. They’d barely spoken since their conversation a week ago in his study. After discovering what her past had been like with Fraser, he’d given her a wide berth. They seemed to be slipping into an odd place when it came to touch, and though he’d never admit it, he didn’t know where he stood with Amelia.

At times she seemed to want him. And he’d certainly developed an attraction to her; but there was so much chaos between them, and he was too busy with work and fixing their reputation to wade through it all. The garden party they were at presently was one such thing; a way to prove to the world that any unsavory rumors were unfounded.

“She does indeed,” Dominic lied.

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He knew her well enough now to know that she despised society's fashions. Even donned in her favorite color she would forgo the gloves and hats and tight knots of women's hairstyles if she could. He thought of her that day standing in the center of the aviary's bare structure. Hair unbound. Shoulders exposed. Free.

Still, despite being allowed to wear her choice of clothes, Amelia's countenance did seem much improved. She no longer appeared tense or frightened as she stood among the mass of elites, but instead blended quite well into them.

Perhaps after another week I should take her home, he thought, give her a break. Let her see how the aviary is coming along.

"Hugo, Dominic," Tristan greeted them with a nod, joining them under large white tent where the drinks were being served.

"How goes it Tristan?" Dominic asked casually.

"You never joined me at White's last night," Tristan accused, waving his hand for a drink.

"My meetings ran long," Dominic explained, smirking, "Shall I send an apology bouquet to your house for standing you up?"

Hugo and Dominic chuckled, but Tristan only narrowed his eyes.

"Amelia's father came looking for you."

Dominic's humor vanished at once, and the three of them walked off to a more private spot.

"What the bloody hell did he want?" Dominic demanded, his tone low.

His eyes roamed over the crowded lawn. One to make sure they weren't going to be interrupted, two to make sure he could still keep an eye on Amelia.

A gentleman he didn't know had approached her and her friends, and while their conversation appeared cordial, he got a strange feeling in his gut as he watched.

"He was roaring drunk," Tristan explained, "Wouldn't tell me much. Just that there's an unsettled debt between you two."

Dominic glanced away from Amelia and toward his friend.

"That's ridiculous," he stated, "there is no debt."

"That's not what he says," Tristan replied, grimacing.

Dominic noted it right away and asked him what else he said.

"Not much else about you," Tristan replied, swirling the whiskey around in his glass, "But what he said about Theo nearly had me knocking his block off right there in front of everyone."

"What did he say?" Dominic demanded, feeling his anger grow.

"Said if my parents and I were tired of waiting around to marry off my poor, scarred sister, he had a way of getting her taken care of quick."

Dominic's nostrils flared with rage. Tristan was the only one who knew the truth of how he and Amelia had been married, so he knew his friend would have been absolutely livid at the idea of someone suggesting he take her to auction.

"You should have hit him," Dominic growled, "I would have made the rumor go away for you. I heard he's making more enemies by the day anyway."

"What did he mean by that?" Hugo asked, looking at them suspiciously. "Surely he's not suggesting something like Seraphina's mother had? Pushing her to get caught in a scandal."

Worse, Dominic wanted to say, but the less people that knew about the auction the better. It was a practice he hadn't minded for many years, but now he was quickly starting to loathe its existence.

"Some people really shouldn't have children," Dominic muttered in response to Hugo's question.

To Tristan he said, "I'll take care of Hoge. Just stay out of White's for a while. All of you. Until I get this sorted."

"Good luck giving that order to Everett," Hugo scoffed. "That's probably where he is now."

"Wasn't there last night," Tristan spoke up. They all looked at him with surprise.

"Who knows," He said with a shrug, "Maybe all that razzing about him being a drunkard got to him."

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Dominic and Hugo both chortled as they rolled their eyes, then turned their attention back to their wives. They did so just in time to see Theo and Seraphina appearing to try to keep Amelia in place, while she, with a frown on her face, seemed to be insisting they let her go.

“That can’t be good,” Hugo muttered, his eyes focused on the concerned look upon his wife’s face.

“Everything was going so well,” Tristan mused, “I wonder what happened?”

“Who was that man?” Dominic asked, following Amelia with his eyes as she headed toward the host’s house.

“What man?” Tristan asked.

“The one they were talking to,” Dominic replied.

“I didn’t notice him,” Tristan replied.

“Me neither,” Hugo confessed.

Dominic let loose a sigh of frustration, then drained his glass.

“Keep an eye on them,” he commanded, heading in the same direction Amelia had left. “Let me know if a man in a grey suit approaches them.”

Despite his darkening mood, Dominic pulled on a charming smile as he made his way

through the throng of garden party guests. Most lifted their smiles toward him and waved, some bowed their heads. A small few watched him warily, like he were a wild animal stalking through instead of a man. He made a mental note of those faces, knowing he would deal with them later.

He searched the first floor of the house for Amelia, visiting all of the usual open spots guests may go. The parlor, the sitting room, the library and small gallery the house hosted. But she was nowhere to be found. Next he searched the second floor.

That strange slither of possessiveness slid through him as he pictured opening a bedroom door and finding her with another man. He knew he shouldn't care. Their marriage was not romantic. But the very idea had his blood pumping and teeth sitting on edge.

But he didn't find her there either. Or on the third floor. He went back to the first floor, ready to search the kitchens next, when he heard a rhythmic thumping coming from behind a set of double doors just off the kitchen wing. He paused immediately at the door, pressing his ear to it as his hand circled around the knob.

Thump, thump, thump- ouch! Blast it! Thump, thump- uggghhh! Why do men find this enjoyable?

Recognizing Amelia's voice, Dominic opened the door. His brows rose with curiosity at what he saw. Amelia swiftly turned her head toward him; breathing hard as a suspended punching swayed back and forth before her. Her hands, he noted, were balled up into tight fists, and glimmer of sweat speckled across her brow. He couldn't help the chuckle that burst from his lips.

"What are you laughing at?" She spat out, still trying to catch her breath.

"I'm still trying to figure that out," Dominic chuckled, closing the door behind him.

His grin was wide as he approached, not able to help but find the sight he'd walked in on nothing short of comical.

"I suppose I have just never seen a boxer in a dress before," he said, shaking his head as he stopped before.

She bared her teeth at him, but Dominic raised a pointed finger to the air.

"Actually that's not true. I persuaded a drunken Everett to wear one during a match, but I must admit he didn't look as good as you."

Amelia rolled her eyes at him as she grimaced, then turned back to the swaying punching bag.

"Leave me alone, Dominic," she said, her tone weary as she brought her fists up again. "I'll be back out to prove our love to the ton again in just a moment."

"Someone said something to you," he said, ignoring her command.

"Just the usual," Amelia murmured, then threw a punch into the bag.

He steepled his fingers together before him, watching her with a quiet observance.

"And what is the usual?" He asked smoothly.

"Oh, you know. How talented I must be to gain the attention from a Duke like you. How well trained Roland must have had me to be so appealing to someone with as much 'experience' as you."

Amelia then seethed out a few angry breaths as she delivered several punches to the bag in a row.

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Dominic's mood darkened as he thought of the man he saw talking to her earlier. The damned scoundrel must be quite full of himself to talk to a married woman this way. His married woman.

"Did he mention the Devil's Masquerade?" He asked calmly.

"No," Amelia grunted, throwing another punch.

"You realize attending those parties, for whatever reason, only put you at risk of confirming your previous rumored reputation.

"I know!" She yelled, then threw another punch, this time with her entire body.

He saw the mistake before the fist even landed, and was at her side by the time she let out a painful yep and hugged her wrist to herself.

"Stop," he commanded, taking her injured wrist into his own hands. "You're not doing it properly."

"Apparently I cannot do anything properly," she huffed, trying to yank her wrist from his hold.

His eyes flicked to hers in warning, and his grip on her injured wrist tightened. Amelia's face pinched in sorrow as she stopped fighting and then lowered her head. With gentle fingertips, he began to inspect the red, swollen joint.

"If you want to take your frustrations out on a bag I can teach you how," he

murmured, checking for a break.

She hissed out a breath of pain as he touched a tender spot and winced.

“I was not aware that throwing a punch into a bag of sand was something that needed to be taught,” she replied bitterly.

Dominic let out a huff of a laugh as he began to loosen his cravat with one hand.

“The bag of sand is to impersonate a body,” he explained, “So that the fighter can experience what it’s like to hit something solid as such. We train for years with wrappings and gloves before we fight barehanded so as not to accrue such injuries.”

Pulling the cravat from his throat, he gently bandaged it around her injured wrist, binding it tight.

“You have sprained your wrist,” he explained. “Cold compresses will help. And rest. Try not to use it for a day or two.”

Amelia sighed, her brows tensing as she closed her eyes. Her look of defeat was so apparent it softened some of those rough edges within Dominic. Before he knew it, he was wrapping his arm around her, pulling her back into his chest. Though at one time it would have pleased him, it now worried him that she took the comfort so readily.

“It is my dominant hand, though,” she whispered, leaning into him.

“Another trick I shall teach you,” he said softly, caressing a finger over her injury. “Striking with your other hand.”

He felt her shoulders begin to spasm, and his heart clenched strangely as he realized she was crying.

“I hate this,” she sobbed. “I hate being here. No matter what we do, what you do, people will always remember me as a ruined woman. You trying to fix this is hopeless.”

“You do not know me that well,” he replied, daring a chuckle, “My methods can be quite effective.”

“Not with me,” she sobbed.

Her body sagged into him even more, and, unable to take it, he turned her into his body and cradled her head into his chest. He did not know the man that so tenderly shushed her sobs and stroked her hair. Did not recognize the gentleness he displayed, or understand where the ability had come from.

“I’m sorry I went to the Devil’s Masquerade,” she sobbed into his chest. “I’m sorry I made matters worse. I won’t do it ever again, I swear. Just please, let me get away from these people.”

“What happened to you?” He asked, perhaps a tad crass. “What happened to the haughty woman in the carriage who declared her strength?”

“It’s gone,” she whispered, shaking her head against him. “My strength. Everything I thought I was. It’s gone.”

“Hush now,” he urged, lifting her chin with the crook of his finger.

He raised her eyes so he could look at her, and his heart clenched again as he took in her shining honey-brown eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

“That’s not true,” he found himself saying, stroking away some of her tears. “You are not the helpless woman from the auction, Amelia. You are the beautiful,

forthright,stubbornwoman I pulled out of theDevil's Masqueradethe other week.”

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His heart fluttered strangely as a choked laugh broke from Amelia's lips at the word stubborn, and he couldn't help but smile.

“And you will do this. You can do this.”

Amelia's attempt to smile, to prove him right, spurred a prideful arousal within him, and before he could think, he slipped his hand around her throat and tilted her lips to his.

Unlike before he was gentle with his possession, suckling at her lips and tongue as if they'd been dipped in honey with deep, languid strokes. Amelia sighed into his mouth as she relaxed fully into his arms, and he backed her up into the punching bag; gripping her waist with one hand; the bag in the other so that it wouldn't sway away from them.

Her arms wound around his neck as she pressed herself deeper into him; her thigh brushing teasingly over his already rigid and swollen cock. Unable to help himself, he groaned at the pleasure; reveling in the way it heated his blood and sent white stars bursting behind his eyes.

“Perhaps I have been too harsh with you,” he rasped, going down to his knees. “Bringing you to town. Punishing your body for your spiteful tongue.”

“What are you doing?” Amelia rasped, her eyes hazy as she watched him lower himself.

Dominic gathered her skirts as he met her eyes, and braced to lift them.

“Do you want relief, Amelia?” He asked, voice thick as his body raged.

Torment, fear, and need flashed through her eyes as she looked down, only urging his arousal on.

“I...”

“Tell me,” he coaxed, his fingers bunching in the fabric. “I need to hear you say yes.”

Amelia’s arms slowly reached back, her fingers digging into the thick rope that suspended the bag.

“Yes,” she whispered, her eyes melting into to pure liquid honey, “Please, Dominic.”

He moaned at her plea, and lifted her skirts. He found her mons already slick with need and pulsing as he pressed the flat of his tongue against her turgid clitoris, and his blood sang with desire as he heard her throaty gasp and felt her arch into his mouth. Her sweet musk filled his nostrils as he licked again, then nuzzled into her hot center. A growl escaped his throat as she bucked into his mouth, and with a powerful grip, he lifted her leg up over his shoulder and cupped her buttocks tightly.

Amelia’s needy moans and whimpers filled the still air as he began to feast on her with abandon.

He’d tasted women before. He didn’t mind it; enjoyed the product of it much more than the actual act. But with Amelia, he became immediately addicted to the taste. Sweet, warm, liquid gushes that coated his needy throat, sating the hunger that raged in his loins.

* * *

“Dominic,” she whispered, her breaths growing heavier with every lick.

She clung to the rope suspending the punching for dear life; fearing if she’d let go she’d fall to the floor and it swallow her up. Of all the things she expected to happen today this was not one of them- but she’d be lying to herself if she denied the craving Dominic had started within her from that first punishing kiss.

“That’s it my little vixen,” Dominic whispered against her mons, pushing her more toward his mouth. “Let go for me.”

His thick, deep voice only further pushed her toward that quickly approaching cliff, and Amelia felt her entire body begin to quiver. Every worry, from her reputation to her sisters dissolved as Dominic’s tongue languished her with attention, until her only thought was of how good he felt.

Her hands trembled at the rope, a weakness sliding throughout her entire body as he continued-but she did not dare let go. Everything about her seemed to be transforming into liquid, and it was only by her grip that she didn’t disappear entirely into a puddle.

It was not just the pleasure from Dominic’s skilled tongue that was dissolving her; but the hungry, aching sounds from his throat as he devoured her. He sounded like a feral beast that had been parched for days, and acted as if her body was the only fountain he had to drink from. The very idea spurred a wicked glee within her, and she boldly let go of the rope with one hand to place atop his thick black and silver hair.

A bestial growl erupted from Dominic’s throat as she clenched her fingers around the thick, silky strands, and she gasped sharply as his fingers clenched even tighter to her backside.

Then all too suddenly her pleasure approached the edge of that mysterious cliff, and before she could help it, she was tumbling into it. Her entire body released into trembles of pleasure as a low, keening sound she didn't recognize left her throat. Amelia lost her grip on the rope, and, having no strength to hold herself up, slid down the punching toward the floor.

Dominic's arms were suddenly like a cage around her, lifting her up before her knees could hit the cold marble. His hand was like a vise as he caught the back of her neck and ravaged her with a kiss; and she gasped as she tasted herself on his glistening lips.

Sweet and salty she was, and Amelia blushed wildly as she accepted what she was tasting on his lips. Dominic's demanding kiss seemed to last for ages, but she had no desire to stop it. Instead, she gave him full control, and felt comfort in the loss of it.

Eventually though, the kiss slowed, and when at last he pulled away from her swollen, bruised lips, she felt as if she'd forgotten how to breathe on her own.

"You're going home," Dominic's deep voice commanded.

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Air suddenly rushed into Amelia's lungs and her eyes flew open; still blurry from the pleasure.

She whimpered at the sight of Dominic's hard, handsome features; the liquid silver of his eyes as he stared deeply into her own. Her lashes fluttered again and she blinked, not at all sure that she had heard her correctly.

"Wh-what?" She stammered.

Dominic slowly let her go; but he flinched as he saw her stumble- as if ready to catch her.

"I'm sending you home," he stated, then wiped his mouth with his kerchief. "You need a small break. Three days."

Something about the way he did it spurred a sudden insecurity within her, and she blushed and took a small step back. It was exactly what she wanted to hear- what she had been praying for, and yet she couldn't shake the sense that she was being dismissed.

"I- I thought you needed me here?" She asked, her pleasure slipping away by the second.

"Not like this. Not running away and cowering every time someone upsets you," Dominic said. The slight tone of distaste made her flinch.

"Go back to Ellsworth. Check on your precious aviary, and gather yourself. When

you come back, we will finish this together. And then we will move on.”

Move on. In all the commotion, she'd forgotten that there would be an afteronce the rumors were settled. What would happen then? Would he leave again? Would she be left to the solitude of Ellsworth manor? Suddenly the thought didn't seem as appealing as before.

“What will you do?” She asked, not sure what else to say.

Dominic tucked his kerchief back into his pocket and straightened his jacket, already looking as if nothing had happened.

“What I always do,” he replied, turning away from her to leave, “I will handle my business.”

CHAPTERTWELVE

“I want you to say that again,” Dominic commanded, “And this time speak slowly. I want you to truly hear your words as you say them.”

The Viscount before him shrunk in his chair, his face paling. Dominic was in a foul mood. Had been ever since he'd sent Amelia away. He knew it was for her own good, but the state he'd been left in since pleasuring her had put his body through an abominable torture. His loins ached constantly from being left un-sated, and though they'd by no means been spending frequent time together, Amelia's absence was something he noted every time he stepped into his London house.

The information he'd just been given had only further served to darken his temper, and for the first time since his youth, he felt on the urge of losing his otherwise forthright self-control.

“These silk merchants work for me, Your Grace,” Viscount Tally said nervously. “It is my seal that embosses their crates; my name that is attached to these fabrics. If I continue to business with someone like you-”

The Viscount stopped as the pen in Dominic’s hands snapped in two, spilling ink down his fingers.

“Say it,” he growled out, ignoring the black, viscous liquid coating his hands.

“Your Grace, I-”

Dominic rose to his feet, and the Viscount visibly flinched.

“Your wife has a reputation of being loose, Your Grace,” he hurried out. “If your name is attached to mine no self-respecting seamstress or designer in Mayfair will want to purchase my fabrics. They’ll be maligned with prostitutes more than ladies.”

It sounded just as foul the second time as it did the first, and only served to exacerbate Dominic’s anger. He came around his desk with a quickness, seizing the Viscount by the jaw with his ink-stained hand.

“You disgust me, Tally” he growled out, his finger’s biting into the man’s flesh.

“As someone who impregnated a maid and now pay secret funds to keep the mother and pup quiet, I would expect you to be more careful with how you throw around such lascivious rumors. You see what you just said about my wife? I know it is false. But your situation, young Lord? Yours is far too verifiable.”

Viscount Tally’s eyes now bulged from their sockets; his face growing so pale Dominic could see the faint blue lines of his eyelids.

“How do you know that?” He rasped.

“I know all truths,” Dominic grit out, shoving the man’s face away from him. The black ink left a smeared handprint across his lower face; a brand of Dominic’s power.

“Get out of my office,” he then commanded, “If you are this weak, then I want nothing to do with your business anyhow.”

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Tally rose from his chair only to go down to his knees, his hands coming together in a prayer.

“Your Grace, please, do not tell anyone of this. If my wife found out- if my family did-”

“You’d what?” Dominic snapped, “Be burned just as you have tried to burn me? We are finished here.”

“Your Grace I misspoke,” Tally said hurriedly, reaching for Dominic’s coat tails. “I was foolish to believe such gossip, please, let me remedy this.”

Dominic craved the ability to reach down and throw Tally out of his office himself, but in the business district he was situated in, it would not do be seen doing such things by those on the street.

Instead he called for Trayton, one of the Irish thugs he paid for assistance, and had him drag Tally to his feet and out the door.

“Ye have a choice, me lord,” Trayton’s deep Irish brogue said as Tally attempted to find his footing. “Ye can walk out or I can toss ye. And trust me if I be doin’ that, there’ll be more t’an t’at ink marrin’ ye noble face.”

“I’m going, I’m going!” Dominic heard Tally cry from beyond his office door.

Turning away from the door, Dominic went to washstand in the corner of his office and began washing his hands. He’d just started to towel them dry when Trayton

returned.

“Did he walk himself out?” Dominic asked.

“His legs be like jelly they did, but he managed to leave on his own,” Trayton replied.

Dominic gave a terse nod. He hated losing out on deals; especially those regarding trade. He might have been able to save this one with a calmer approach, but he was absolutely out of tranquility.

“What’s the news on the man from the garden party?” He asked, bracing himself on the edge of his desk. “Have we found him yet?”

Trayton nodded.

“We tink so. We’ll need ye eyes to confirm it, though. He be at te’ gamblin’ hell as we speak. Te’ one ran be ye friends.”

Dominic raised a curious brow.

“In the middle of the day?” He asked.

“If it be him,” Trayton said with a shrug. “My guess is he be a second or third born son; nothin’ to do but spend his daddy’s money.”

“Let us go gambling then,” Dominic said, pushing away from his desk.

As he did so his office door opened, and Hugo walked in. He raised his brow as he looked from Trayton to Dominic, and leaned in the doorway.

“I just saw Tally hustling down the street with wild eyes and a black handprint on his

face,” he said casually, looking Dominic up and down. “Something told me you might have had something to do with it.”

“Bastard pushed me out of a deal,” Dominic barked defensively.

Hugo gave a careless shrug.

“He should have known better then,” his friend replied.

Dominic smirked. Of the three of his friends, Hugo was most like him. While he didn’t share the utterly horrific traumatic childhood Hugo had, the two of them more feared than Everett or Tristan. Hugo by his reputation of being a literal beast, and Dominic’s by his seeming ability to know everything about anyone at any given time.

“If you are finished here come have lunch with me,” Hugo urged.

“I would,” Dominic replied, once more the gnawing sensation in his gut. It wasn’t for food, but he wasn’t going to tell Hugo that, “But I am heading to Ezra’s. It seems my little spies might have found the man from the garden party.”

Hugo brandished a devilish smile and stood straight.

“Let us be off then,” he answered readily.

“You don’t have to,” Dominic replied, “I can handle it.”

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Hugo gave him a devilish grin.

“Oh, come on,” He urged. “It’s been too long since I’ve had the opportunity to unleash that savage part of me. Don’t deny me the pleasure.”

Dominic’s brow perked up in amusement. He thought he was the only yearning for a fight.

“I suppose we could convince him to a round of boxing,” Dominic mused. “Make him think he can take either one of us. After all there would not be much for him to talk about if he got his beating in the ring.”

“Now you’re thinking properly,” Hugo said with a savage smile. “Let us get to it then. We’ll get something to eat after.”

* * *

“It is lovely, Your Grace,” Eve sighed at Amelia’s side.

Amelia’s smile was wide and genuine as she looked up at the nearly finished aviary. So much work had been completed since she’d left, and the workers were now installing that stained glass windows into the domed structure.

“It truly is, isn’t it?” She marveled. “Once it is completed I shall have some trees brought in, and a fireplace to keep the room warm during the winter months After that I shall be able to order the birds. Imagine, Eve. Imagine all of the beautifully colored wings that shall be spread within here.”

It had been two days since she'd left Dominic in London, and though she wasn't completely comfortable with the way they'd left things, she felt much improved. When she'd arrived back in Ellsworth she hadn't expected to want to go back to London, but now that she was feeling better, she was eager to get back.

What had happened between her and Dominic in the boxing room had been passionate and almost loving- which sprung all sorts of questions into her mind. Their marriage was supposed to be a business transaction...yet it seemed to be transforming into something much more than that. Even now her skin heated at the thought of him; a yearning to feel his touch sung in her veins. She had to get to the bottom of it. Even if the idea of going back into society made her stomach twist with anxiety.

"Ada and Mrs. Morbate wanted to speak with you, Your Grace," Eve said as they both turned away from the aviary. "They are preparing your things and just need your input on a few things."

Amelia nodded, then stopped in her tracks as a familiar figure rounded the corner of the terrace and stalked toward her. Ice fractured in her veins, freezing her to the spot as her father came angrily toward her.

"Who are you, sir? What are you doing here?" Eve asked, taking a protective step in front of Amelia, then shouted for Mr. Morbate.

"Shut your mouth, woman," Felton seethed moving to push Eve out of the way.

Amelia let loose from her stillness in an instant, blocking her father before his hands could touch Eve.

"Don't you lay a hand on her!" She snarled, glaring up at her father. He stopped, actually looking surprised.

“She has every right to be wary of you,” Amelia went on, “We have guards surrounding the property. How did you get past them?”

Felton cast a dark gaze over Eve’s figure, a strange light flickering in his eyes before he turned back to Amelia.

“I am your father, ingrate,” he snapped. “Or have you forgotten so quickly how you got here?”

“Trust I will never forget,” she bit back.

Her body started to tremble with fear as memories of that fated night came tumbling back, and she prayed he did not notice.

“That still does not answer Eve’s question,” she stated as Mr. Morbate and two guards rounded the corner. “What are you doing here?”

Now that he had the attention of an audience, Felton seemed to gain control of his rage. He fixed his jacket as he sneered, and slipped his hands into his pockets.

“I am here to see your husband,” he answered. “We have unfinished business.”

Amelia’s brows tensed.

“I highly doubt that,” she replied. “Seeing as how you had no dealings with him directly. You handed that- and me- off to someone else, remember?”

Felton’s face twisted into a look of anger, his nostrils flaring as he grit his teeth.

“He may have paid the auction owner for you,” he said, his tone deep and dark as he took a step toward her, “But he never paid me.”

Amelia barked out an unamused laugh.

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“That is not dowry’s work, Father,” she retorted. “It is you that would normally pay him.”

Felton closed the space between them but as he withdrew a hand from his pocket and reached for her, Mr. Morbate and one of the guards moved between them. He threw a disgusted glance at them, but stopped.

“I’ll get what I’m owed,” he ground out. “I hear your reputation has been causing him some trouble in London. If he doesn’t want anymore, he will pay me for my silence. I’m sure neither of you would want the truth of why you got married getting out, would you?”

Anger snarled and lashed through Amelia’s veins.

“If you try to damn us with what you did, you will only damn yourself,” she hissed. “Do not forget, Father, it was you that placed me on that auction block.”

A crude smile formed on Felton’s lips, and he huffed as he took a step back.

“And who would blame me, daughter? A single father, at his wits end with a ruined daughter? Our society is ruled by men and what they think, and no gentleman of London would judge me for how I chose to deal with a daughter like you.”

Amelia stared at her father with pure hatred.

“You would help spread such a rumor about me? For money?”

She shook her head in disgust.

“Did you ever love me at all, Father?”

Felton sneered at her.

“I needed boys,” he spit it. “But your mother gave me three useless girls instead. Then had the audacity to die giving birth to the third one. She was purposeless. You all are.”

“You are a vile, vileman,” Amelia seethed out, feeling the utter urge to lunge at him and dig her nails into his face. Instead, she straightened her spine and raised an accusing finger toward him.

“You won’t see one cent from my husband. You will destroy everything you grasp, Father. Everything you want will turn to ash. You will get nothing but what you are due.”

A look of pure rage came over Felton’s face, but as he tried to move toward her, the guards and Mr. Morbata upon him again; making it impossible for him to touch her.

“You curse me, witch?” He hissed. “Tell your husband he needs to meet with me. Or it will not be the auction block you stand on, but the hangman’s. It is men like me that sway the ton. Not you. Not him. Me.”

“Like hell it is.”

Dominic’s enraged tone jarred Amelia as he came stalking toward them, and even her father seemed to pale a little as the Duke in question made his presence known. Then suddenly she felt a flood of relief so intense that it wobbled her knees; the frustration she’d felt for her husband temporarily gone.

“Dominic,” she sighed.

But he barely threw a glance at her before heading toward Felton.

“Your Grace,” Felton stammered, stumbling as the guards and Mr. Morbate let him go.

“Men like you in control?” Dominic bit out as he looked down at Amelia’s father. “You are nothing compared to my wife, even in status alone. She is a Duchess and has risen far above any station you will ever reach.”

Amelia watched as embarrassment colored Felton’s face and felt a certain glee in seeing her father wither before Dominic.

“This is not about her,” Felton argued weakly. “This is about you. You owe me for marrying my daughter.”

“We owe you nothing!” Amelia shouted, curling her hands into fists as she took a step toward him.

Before she could take another, Dominic’s hand was at her abdomen with the lightest touch as he kept his eyes on Felton. It not only stopped her in her tracks, but sent a wave of peace ebbing through her body. She looked back at him in shock.

“Normally, I would take pleasure in hearing how you would think so,” Dominic said to Felton. “But I will agree to paying you.”

“Dominic, no!” Amelia breathed, hurt crashing through the brief sense of peace.

“If-” Dominic went on before she could say anything more.

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The hand on her abdomen went to her hand then, and that wave turned into a spark. It traveled up her arm as he laced his fingers through hers and pulled her to her side. Despite the tension of the moment, heat coursed through her veins as he pressed her back to his chest, laid their joined hands across her abdomen, and rested his chin on her shoulder.

“You can recognize your daughter for what she is,” Dominic went on, “A duchess. A lady above your own station. Bow to her as she is owed. Refer to her as ‘Your Grace’ as you do so with a true sense of fealty. You do that. I shall pay you whatever you wish.”

Amelia felt another brief moment of pure glee at Dominic’s command, but it quickly faded as she watched her father bristle before them. Though Amelia’s face with right beside Dominic’s, it was notherFelton was looking at. The red shame that had stained his cheeks only a moment ago seeped out of his complexion as his eyes remained trained on Dominic’s face.

She could not see the expression on her husband's face, but she could tell by the one on her father's that it was a dangerous one. He was frightened, truly frightened at whatever he saw.

“Go on,” Dominic’s said by her ear, his voice strangely seductive.

But Felton said nothing. Instead he closed his open mouth and took a step back. Then another. And without a word, he turned around and left the property at a quick pace.

“Cowardly man,” Dominic said with disgust as they watched him leave.

He then stepped back and twirled her around to face him, both hands framing her jaw. There was a hardness to his intense gaze as he looked over slowly.

She'd forgotten. In her anger toward him for leaving her. For making her return to London the moment he got back. For confusing her senses. She'd forgotten that Dominic was dangerous. Ruthless. He was a man not to be angered.

He had saved her. Saved Eve, and nearly every person in his house. But he was not gentle; had not done so out of the generosity of his heart. He'd saved them all with a string attached.

"Did he hurt you?" He asked, a snarl in his voice.

"I forgot," she whispered.

"What?"

She blushed as she realized she'd just spoken her thought aloud, and stepped out of his grasp.

"Nothing. I meant to say no. He didn't hurt me. Mr. Morbate and the guards stopped him before he could."

"Glad to know they're still doing their jobs," Dominic grunted. "Though I am certainly going to have a discussion with them about Felton being able to make it onto the property at all."

Amelia took another step away from him, her thoughts churning over her realization. She should be afraid too. And yet as she reached for the feeling, she grasped nothing of the sort. If anything, she felt her desire for him to return.

Dominic eyed her suspiciously.

“Are you sure you are all right?” He asked her.

He reached for her again and although she very much wanted to feel his touch, she stepped back.

“I’m perfectly fine,” she lied.

Though it was not her father’s visit she was now worried about, but her feelings for the man before her.

“I need to go check on Eve,” she said when Dominic’s look of suspicion grew more intense.

“We must get started on my packing if we are returning tonight.”

“No,” he said quickly, making her pause as she turned away from him.

“I promised you three days. We shall leave tomorrow afternoon.”

Gratitude washed over her, and again she felt that tug on her heart. Ignoring it, she simply nodded and continued to walk away.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I understand, Your Grace. It will not happen again.”

“Be sure that it doesn’t,” Dominic insisted gruffly as Mr. Morbate poured his tea.

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“Hire a few more guards. I want them stationed around the house at all times. No more windows of opportunity for self-righteous beggars.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Mr. Morbate replied, bowing.

“That is all for this morning then. You may go. You have more important things to do than pour my tea,” Dominic instructed.

Mr. Morbate bowed again and silently left the dining room. As he walked out of the room to Dominic’s surprise, Amelia walked into it. He knew from the staff’s reports that she awoke later than he did and broke her fast well after he started work in his office.

He cast his eyes over body in approval. She was back to wearing her usual gowns. The tighter waist, the lower bodice. This one today was a startling black with a wide lavender satin ribbon wound just above her hips, showing off her deliciously delicate curves. He also took pleasure in seeing those long, wild, dark brown curls cascading down her back and over her shoulders yet again- much better, he thought, than the strict up-dos she wore when in London.

Her honey brown eyes were on him as his eyes finally flicked up to study her face, and he felt a jolt of desire within his loins.

“Good morning,” he said, his tone curious as he watched her walk to the chair directly to his right and take a seat.

“Good morning,” she replied, her voice still husky from sleep.

The sound of it sent a rather wicked shiver over the back of his neck. He took a deep inhale through his nostrils to find control, but it only damned him further as he caught her scent of lilacs, honeysuckle, and something spicy mixed in with the sweet.

It made his mouth water and his thoughts run wild.

“This is...odd,” he stated, looking her up and down.

“I thought I would break fast with you this morning,” she replied, motioning for the servant.

A plate of toast, broiled fish, and two boiled eggs balanced on silver egg cups was given to her almost immediately while another servant came forward to pour her tea.

“How did you sleep?” She asked, tapping the top of an egg with a small silver spoon.

Dominic’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. She’d left him rather coldly the evening before and hadn’t seen her since.

“Fine,” he said, drawing the word out.

“Good.” She replied.

Dominic sat down his cup and laced his fingers together before him.

“You are quite unamicable this morning,” he stated. “It’s not like you.”

Amelia’s eyes darted toward him, and he felt a comfort in seeing the fire that usually lived there.

“I am not the one that is unamicable, Dominic,” she replied haughtily. “It is your

behavior that lacks warmth, not mine.”

Dominic snorted.

“Yes you’ve been an absolute ray of sunshine, darling,” he replied, his tone dry.

Amelia looked as if she was about to throw an equally sarcastic retort at him, then she closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. He tried not to chuckle, but he couldn’t help the sound that slipped from his lips.

“I am trying to thank you,” she breathed out, opening her eyes as she turned to look at him.

Dominic’s humor faded, the smirk on his lips falling as he raised a brow.

“For yesterday. For interfering with my father,” she explained.

Dominic sat up a little straighter as he heard the tinge of fear in her voice. She’d been frightened yesterday. She hadn’t admitted it, but he’d felt it radiating off of her.

Of Felton or of me? He silently wondered.

“Of course I did,” he replied, his tone serious. “You’re mine. I protect what’s mine.”

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Dominic could have sworn he saw warmth and pleasure bloom in Amelia's honey-brown eyes as she looked at him; causing a stir of something similar in his own.

He didn't like it.

"For whatever reason, thank you," she replied softly.

Dominic grunted, broke eye contact, then unfolded his hands so he could finish eating his own breakfast.

"I can appreciate your gratitude but it was my duty as the Master of this house," he told her. "And unlike you, I don't break contracts."

"I never broke my contract," Amelia replied coolly, "I simply found a loophole you were not wise enough to cover."

Dominic's gaze snapped up to her, grinding his jaw. He tried to think of a retort but he truly had none. She had been wily with stepping around his rules, and in doing so had outsmarted him.

"Will you be ready to leave by two this afternoon?" He asked, changing the subject.

"I will," she replied, sounding strong. "Thank you for the reprieve. I feel quite refreshed."

Again with the thanks. He didn't like how warm it made him feel. He needed loyalty, not gratitude. He needed to stop it.

“I believe you require a dance lesson before we return,” he said brusquely. “Your performance at our party was quite lacking and since we are certainly going to have to do it again, I must insist that you get better.”

Amelia tsked her tongue and scowled at him.

Ah. That’s better. He enjoyed it better when they fought.

“I can dance just fine,” she shot back.

“That remains to be seen,” he chuckled.

“I was not well, you know that.”

“You will have the same circumstances of our last dance no matter which party we go to,” he pointed out. “You will need to dance despite your nerves, I cannot whisper those dirty scenes in your ear every time you start to panic. Someone is bound to notice that eventually.”

A delicious crimson blush filled her cheeks and Dominic felt his manhood harden instantly at the sight. He’d rather liked that part of the dance, but wasn’t about to admit that to her.

“I can dance,” she insisted again.

“You will have to prove that to me,” he said with a shrug.

“And if I do?” She asked quickly.

He raised a brow; amused.

“You want to strike another deal?” He asked.

“Seems the only way to get what I want,” she answered with slight venom.

Dominic smirked, and he could have sworn he saw her squirm in her seat.

“Very well then. Your terms?” He asked.

“If I can prove to you I can dance, you will teach me how to box this evening after we return to London.”

He looked at her with surprise.

“You already offered to teach me,” she reminded him. “I am simply imposing on the invitation.”

Thoughts of what he’d done to her the last time they were near a punching bag flooded Dominic’s mind; and his already hardened manhood began to pulse and ache. He wondered if he would ever look at the sport the same again after what he’d done.

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“Well, Your Grace,” Amelia asked haughtily. “Does my deal suit you?”

“It does,” he said, rising to his feet. “But I warn you, my expectations of your dancing are quite high. I doubt you’ll be able to prove that you don’t need my direction.”

Annoyance and challenge filled Amelia’s gaze as she rose to her feet as well; the smile on her face both cocky and wickedly sensual.

“We shall see about that, Your Grace,” she answered sweetly.

* * *

“What did I tell you?” Amelia asked him grinning from ear to ear.

In the privacy of their Ellsworth home she felt no tension; no fear of wary eyes, and she had danced beautifully. Her steps had been precise, her movements smooth; despite the little tendrils of excitement she felt every time Dominic gripped her or pulled her close. She had proven him wrong, and that was all she cared about.

“You do fine on the practiced steps,” Dominic admitted, walking toward the small ensemble of musicians. “But let us see how you do when the dance has not been memorized.”

Amelia’s brows dipped.

“What does that mean?” She asked as the violinist drew his bow and strings into a sweet tone.

The alluring sound made the hair on her arms raise; sent an enticing shiver down her spine. The piano came next, adding a layer to the sensual sounds of the violin. It was followed by a trombone, which laid a bass undertone softly between soprano-esque instruments.

“The question is,” Dominic replied, rolling up his sleeves with a smirk, “Can you follow my lead without already knowing where I am going to take you?”

Amelia raised a brow; instantly enjoying the way Dominic’s bare, muscled forearms looked as he rolled first one sleeve, then the other.

“We won’t be performing any such dance in London,” she retorted, “So why bother practicing it?”

Dominic’s grin was both cocky and handsome; sending that familiar combination of annoyance and desire through her veins.

“What’s the matter?” He teased, stretching out a hand to her. “Afraid you can’t keep up?”

Something competitive sparked within Amelia, and with a determined look, she took his hand. She gasped as he twirled her into him with a quickness, pushing her back against his chest; the force of the embrace making her stumble.

“Careful,” he teased in her ear as he took her other hand, “Looks as if you’re already going to fall.”

“You wish I would fall, don’t you?” She hissed, “If only to prove yourself right.”

Dominic only chuckled as his hand gripped hers harder and made his next move. This time though, she was intent on not being caught off guard. She felt his muscled

forearms ripple before he turned her out of his chest. She let his subtle yet powerful movements guide her this time and she didn't stumble.

Concentrating on his movements more than her own, she began to move with him. Giving up her control, she allowed him to sway her left, right. Another turn; a dip. Her body began to relax further as a trust for him started to form, and despite herself, she was smiling again.

"That's it," he coaxed, his deep voice gentle, "Let your body feel it out."

He spun her back into him again, hand laced tight in her own as he pressed into her abdomen. Hypnotized by the moves he was leading her into, Amelia laid the back of her head on his shoulder, and let her hips sway with his.

"You actually can take direction," he whispered devilishly into her ear, "I am so surprised."

For a moment Amelia went rigid as she was ready to turn around and quip back. But then Dominic's free hand traced down the arm of her free hand; sending delicious sparks into her flesh, and she melted into him again. His slow, tracing touch traveled from the top of her shoulder down to fingertips, where he then laced his fingers through hers.

She felt like warm liquid as he guided her arm to up and to the back of his neck. Amelia let out a breathy whimper as he pressed her palm to the warm, naked flesh nestled behind his thick, black hair, and as he released her fingers, she couldn't help but tighten her own into those silky tendrils.

She heard Dominic's husky rumble in his chest just as she felt the vibrations of it into her back, and her smile turned sensual. Feeling the power begin to shift a little, she moved her hips in a slow circle, and was rewarded with a sudden hard object pressed

into her backside.

Dominic let out a dark chuckle; as if knowing immediately what she was trying to do.

“Vixen,” he rasped.

He trailed his free hand back up her arm, pulling her fingers from his hair and with a sudden push, Amelia was spinning out of his embrace. He then twirled her again, even using her skirts to keep her in motion, and then dipped her. For a moment her body rebelled at the sudden shift in movement, but knowing that’s what Dominic wanted, she closed her eyes and calmed herself, letting her body bend like melted sugar back into the hand holding her lower back so far that the ends of her curls brushed the floor.

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She opened her eyes just enough to look at his face, and she smiled as she saw his face was tense with both frustration and desire.

“You’ll have to try better than that,” she whispered, teasing him as she batted her lashes.

A soft growl escaped from Dominic’s chest as white sparks shot behind his silver eyes, and suddenly she was pulled up to her feet again, being guided into a flurry of circles and twirls. When the song ended, they were both panting and warm from the movements; caught in one another’s gazes. Even the sound of someone clearing their throat didn’t have them looking away from one another.

“What song shall we play next, Your Grace?” A voice asked.

Chest heaving, nostrils flaring; Dominic looked more beast than man as he kept his eyes pinned on Amelia. The hungry, possessive look sent a deep pleasure shooting through her veins; and she couldn’t help but smirk as she stared right back in challenge.

I am not afraid. Not of you.

It was a fact she had struggled with the night before. She’d stayed up late wondering if she was an absolute dolt for not being more fearful of him. But now, she realized why. He was the physical representation of the strength she wanted inside herself.

“Leave us,” Dominic commanded.

Static seemed to form between he and Amelia as the musician made quick work of gathering their instruments and swiftly left the room.

“I win,” Amelia whispered, tilting her chin slightly as her smirk grew into a sensual smile.

Pure white light seemed to blaze through Dominic’s eyes as she made the statement, and in the blink of an eye, his body was wrapped around hers. She gasped as his hand fisted in her hair and drew her face to his as the other locked him to his waist. His mouth descended on hers before she could even take another breath; devouring her like a man starving.

This time instead of mewling and melting into him, Amelia’s hands funneled into his silky black hair and she kissed him back with equal fervor. Their lips and teeth gnashed against one another savagely; each trying to claim the other.

Then just as quickly as the kiss started- it stopped. Dominic pulled away from her with a ragged breath, making her world spin as he let her go.

Amelia blinked, trying to fight the lust-filled haze that had filled her mind. She drank in the positively ravaged look of her husband; no longer appearing as a man in total control; but one on the brink of losing his humanity. It gave her a wicked glee, and she gave him a vulpine smile as she fluffed her hair and straightened her skirts.

“It’s almost two,” she told him, still breathing heavy herself as she began to walk to the door. “Shall we go?”

“What?” He croaked.

She looked at him over her shoulder, tossing her curls.

“To London,” she replied. “You owe me a lesson.”

CHAPTERFOURTEEN

“Give me your hand,” Dominic commanded, his tone harsh.

Amelia gave him that same sensual, vulpine smile she’d given him back at Ellworth, and placed her right wrist in his palm. Her silent obedience only served to amplify his arousal, and he had to bite back the wolfish growl trying to force its way out of his throat.

He undid women. That’s what he’d always done, it’s who he was. His dominance turned their minds and bodies into his personal playthingsnotthe other way around. And yet at Ellsworth, that was exactly what Amelia had done.

He had not finished with that kiss. It was supposed to be a reprimand for her sarcasm, but instead she’d somehow turned the punishment around on him. The carriage ride back to London had been full of silent tension and while Amelia had seemed quite content with it and kept a smiling face on the scenery; it had caused averydifferent effect on him.

While she had no trouble keeping her eyes off of him he hadn’t been able to take his off of hers. He’d studied everything about her. The tilt of her small chin, the curve of her milk and honey cheeks; the slope of her delicate nose and the way her brows and thick lashes highlighted her almond-shaped golden-honey eyes.

She’d changed back into one of her more appropriate London gowns, and he despised the high collar and looser fit of it; keeping him from appreciating the small swell of her natural curves.

“Are you sure this gown is what you want to practice in,” he ground out presently,

winding the wrap around her wrist and hand. “It is not exactly practical.”

“It is what I would be wearing if I would have to throw a punch at someone,” Amelia countered. “Might as well learn with the same restrictions.”

Her logic and obvious ability to think more clearly than himself only darkened his mood, and he ground his teeth against the onslaught of need coursing through him.

“Other hand,” he commanded when finished with the first. She did so, and even giggled, giggled at the way he jerked and wound the wrap with frustration.

“Stop that,” he snapped, fastening the end of the wrap in place. “You won’t be giggling like a school girl when you’re about to punch someone.”

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Amelia pressed her lips and appeared unbothered as she pulled her wrist away from him and rose to her feet. She turned away from him without a word and toward the punching bag, and gave it a hit.

“No, no, not like that,” he chastised. “God, you’re just going to get ground into the dirt if you hit someone like that.”

“Well then tell me what to do, oh wise instructor,” she replied haughtily, crossing her arms as she glanced back at him. “How do I not get ground into the dirt?”

She was mocking him again. Only this time it was blatantly heightening his arousal as well as his annoyance. He took a stand behind her, gripped her neck, and forced her to look forward at the punching bag. He then moved his hands down to her wrists and pulled her arms away from one another.

“First thing you need to understand is that your size is already working against you if seeking to hit a man,” he replied, kicking her feet wider apart. “Even a man as short as you is going to be stronger, more balanced.”

“I am taller than most women,” Amelia retorted. “I’m only shorter to you because you’re a giant.”

Her comment made him scoff, but he fought the urge to grin.

“Secondly,” he pushed forward, twisting her hips with his hands so her right leg went further back, “You need to understand that if you’re ever in a situation where you have to punch a man, you’re most likely only going to get one good hit. Don’t stay

around and let him knock you down. Throw all of your power into one great hit, and run.”

“Where do I run to?” She asked.

He pushed down on her hips so she would bend her knees as he said, “To me.”

Amelia glanced back at him, some of that haughtiness fading.

“Eyes on your target,” he chastised, turning her head back to the punching bag.

He ignored the emotional slither of warmth he’d felt at the appreciation he’d seen in his eyes.

“When you’re throwing that punch you need to take a proper stance. It will help you not just with balance but force. Keep your knees bent, and your right foot slightly back. When you’re ready to hit lean back slightly on your foot and then send all your strength forward into your fist. Like this.”

He stopped talking for a moment and took his own stance by her side, then demonstrated. The bag sailed backward from the force of his punch, and Amelia’s eyes widened. Dominic then caught the bag as swung back toward them, stilling it.

“Your power is going to travel from your foot all the way to your fist. Very much like how a hammer in a pistol does to a bullet,” he explained.

Excitement glittered in her eyes as she quickly turned her head toward him.

“Will you teach me how to shoot next?” She asked eagerly.

The very idea of her wielding a gun had a strange effect on him, and Dominic

grumbled up a prayer as arousal surged through him yet again.

“Let us get through this season first,” he muttered.

Dominic then showed her how to properly hold her fists, and then proceeded to let her throw a few punches at the bag. His irritation slowly turned into satisfaction as Amelia dropped her teasing attitude and took his instruction seriously.

“Where did you learn to do this?” Amelia panted fifteen minutes later. “Why did you learn to do this?”

Dominic chuckled.

“Not as easy as it looks, is it?” He asked, genuinely enjoying himself now.

She shook her head, still trying to catch her breath.

“My mates and I needed an outlet at school and fencing did not have quite the edge we needed, I suppose,” Dominic told her.

Since her hands were wrapped, he picked up her glass of water and brought it to her lips. Their eyes locked as he gently tipped the glass, letting the water slide gradually into her mouth. Something about it made his arousal return with a vengeance, and he grew tense again. He pulled the glass away more roughly than intended, causing some water to dribble down her chin.

“Why did you need the edge?” She asked, ignoring the drops of water.

Dominic, however, could not, and reached up to swipe them away from his thumb. As he did so Amelia’s cheeks flushed brightly, and he felt a wicked glee in seeing her turn colors.

“We all had our reasons,” he replied, letting his fingers rest on her chin.

“What were yours?”

He shrugged.

“Nothing too awful I suppose. My father nearly dragged our finances to the ground before he died and the short time my uncle took over while I was in school did not help matters. I would concentrate on my studies a bit too much. Get wrapped up in the material and end up sitting hunched over my desk for hours. It created a sort of pent up frustration when I would finally rise.”

“So nothing’s changed,” she teased, and he smirked as he gave her chin the gentlest of shoves.

“Was it hard?” She asked next, her tone softer. “Losing your father?”

Dominic shrugged.

“I barely knew the man. Or my mother. I was raised mostly by nannies and tutors so when they died, there was not much to miss.”

The sympathy pouring from his gaze made him bristle at first, but then he stopped himself as he remembered Amelia’s own loss.

“You lost your mother as well,” he said slowly. “That’s why your father was able to sell you. There was no one in his way.”

Hurt laced through Amelia’s eyes but Dominic wasn’t deterred.

“Use that,” he said quickly, reaching up and pointing at her expression, using that moment to take her back to the lesson.

“That anger. Not with your moves, but the strength within your moves.”

“I have no idea what that means!” She replied in an exasperated tone.

He put both hands up, flexing his fingers.

“Right, left, right,” he called out.

Amelia quickly got back into her stance and threw three ill-aimed punches into his palms. He felt her aggression but not her strength.

“Wrong,” he told her, putting his hands down and sliding them into his pockets. “You’re going to want to hit when you’re angry but if you throw punches like that you’ll get knocked flat.”

“Well, I don’t know what you mean!” She retorted again. “Your teaching makes no sense!”

“Your father’s standing before you right now, readying your chains and I’m not there to stop it this time,” he said, raising left hand once more. “Now show me how you’re going to stop him.”

Amelia’s fist shot out toward his face instead of his hand. He easily side-stepped it and with a surprisingly graceful twist, wrapped his body around hers, his hand going to wrist as he moved her toward the punching bag.

“You’re a fool!” She snapped at him, trying to break free from his grip.

“Maybe so,” he chuckled into her ear, “But I’m a fool that’s going to teach you to control your temper in a fight. You had all your strength coming at me in that punch and you missed. You think the person you’re fighting is going to give you an opportunity to right yourself and try again?”

She huffed several angry breaths, but shook her head as she glared at the punching bag.

“Now this time sink back into your body and move with me. I can show you what I mean,” he promised.

This time she did not banter with him; did not question, but took his advice with silence and a look of concentration. In doing so every punch she landed got better; each hit landing with more impact, precision, and quickness. Eventually he backed away from her, letting her stand on her own as he continued to call out shots. By the time they finished an hour later, he was downright impressed.

“So you cantake direction,” he teased, his mood now lighter as he began to unwrap her hands.

“When it is important,” she retorted, and as he looked up at her through his lashes, he saw she was yet again giving him that haughty grin.

He huffed out a laugh and smirked as he shook his head and continued unwrapping.

“So is knocking your father out the reason why you want to learn this skill?” He asked.

He thought she’d at least chuckle, but Amelia only shook her head as Dominic pulled away the loose wrap and began massaging her wrist and palm. As he did so, he felt a shiver go up her arm. In turn, pleasure spiked through him. Not with as much

aggression as before, but instead with satisfaction.

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“I always thought it was a useful skill,” Amelia confessed, “I just never understood why it was only taught to boys. I feel that women would have more need of it.”

Dominic’s brow drew up as he tilted his chin to look at her face, and saw that her expression was contemplative.

“Why so?” He asked, flexing her wrist gently up and down.

“Because more women are attacked by men than men are” she answered. “Because we have to protect our virtue while men are encouraged to give it away. Because sometimes- too many times- the men who supposedly protect us try to force it from us. When they are successful, even when they are not, it is women who are considered tarnished. Yet are punished by society if we fight back.”

Dominic frowned at the emotionless, matter-of-fact way Amelia described her reasons. He couldn’t combat a single one of them because he knew it all to be true.

“Perhaps you are right,” he said, placing her right hand back into her lap before picking up her left, “Perhaps it is a skill better served by women.”

“You have no idea how much I wish could go back in time to use this skill,” Amelia replied, her tone suddenly thick.

Dominic slowed his unwrapping of her left wrist and looked at her again. Sadness had started to bleed into her far-off gaze.

“What would you do if you could?” He asked, his voice gentle.

“I would deliver a sharp blow to Roland the moment he’d tried to force me,” she replied viciously. “I wouldn’t have been afraid to either, because I would have known what to do. And my father- I would have beaten his head in the night he brought me to that auction.”

Sympathy poured through Dominic as he pulled away the second wrap and repeated the massage on her wrist. There was so much fury in her voice. So much pain. He’d taught her how to turn that into power, but still, the urge to do something about her discomfort was overwhelming him.

“Roland is gone and your father holds no power over you now,” he told her, his thumbs moving in firm but gentle circles over her wrists. “And if he is foolish enough to try to regain it, I assure you someone will certainly beat his head in.”

He was hoping for a smile, but Amelia’s frown only deepened as she shook her head.

“It is not me I am worried for any longer. It is my sisters. He wants to be rid of them already. Whatever money troubles he’s facing, he’s taking it out on them.”

“We will not let that happen,” Dominic replied quickly, his tone gruffer than intended.

Amelia’s eyes snapped back to his, those honey-gold orbs swirling with pain and disgust.

“What can we do?” She asked, her tone accusing. “If we took them he could accuse us of abduction. Even if we explained to the constables that it was for the girls’ protection the law still states that they are owned by their father until he signs them off to a husband.”

Dominic thought for a moment. He’d known since their wedding day that Amelia’s

sisters were important to her, but he'd been so busy with carrying on his own life that he hadn't truly given them a thought more than that.

"I will speak with my people," he answered finally. "See what we can do. Since your father is so driven by money, perhaps I could even purchase them."

"They will not be sold!" Amelia shot back, pulling her hand away from his.

She looked at him with narrowed, distrusting eyes; as if ready to run away from him at any second.

"That is not what I meant and you know it," Dominic said patiently, holding her gaze. "I am saying that if money will incentivize him to hand over parental rights to you, then we should consider it. They would not be my property just as you are not my property."

"That's not what you said this morning," she hissed back.

"I meant that you are my responsibility, Amelia," he retorted just as quickly. "And I am certainly not your enemy here."

Guilt flashed through Amelia's eyes her brows dipped and her plump lips pressed tightly together.

"I know that," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

Although he'd been greatly annoyed at her confidence from the morning's dance lesson, Dominic suddenly craved it. He'd rather her be haughty and difficult with him than so despondent.

"All right," he sighed, rising to his feet. "I shall do it."

Amelia looked up at him in confusion as walked toward the door.

“Do what?” She asked.

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“Show you how to fire a pistol,” he replied.

Excitement ate away at Amelia’s saddened eyes, and she shot to her feet.

“Really?!”

“Notwith ammunition,” he specified. “We are in city limits and to do so would be dangerous. But I will show you how to hold it, the proper stance, and how to aim.”

The brilliant smile that spread across her face sent his heart throbbing and he couldn’t help but chuckle at her as she pranced eagerly to his side. He fished the key from his pocket they left through the side door of his in-home boxing practice room, which led directly to his armory. It was the only room in the house that did not have a direct entryway into the main hall, and he always kept it locked.

Amelia gasped as he lit a few lamps in the darkened room, and she peered around at his vast collection. Just as he enjoyed collecting truths, he was the same with weapons. Some were of present design, but he prided himself on the ones he’d been able to collect from not just the past, but all over the world.

* * *

“There are so many!” Amelia exclaimed, looking among the many tables and cases filled with them. “And so organized.”

Dominic chuckled as he took her hand and led her over to his small arms table.

“I like to know where everything is at all times,” he explained, then in almost boyish enthusiasm he added, “I also quite like how they look all laid out like this.”

“They’re beautiful,” Amelia breathed, waving a hand over the gun-laden table.

He drew up a curious brow.

“You truly think so?” He asked.

Amelia nodded.

“Oh yes. Not just the designs, but the power you just know they are capable of.”

She then looked away from the table toward him. You are like these guns, she thought. Beautiful. Powerful. Deadly.

Amelia raked her gaze further down his body. He’d removed his jacket for their boxing lesson and had once more rolled up his sleeves like he had during their dancing lesson. Only this time he’d taken it a step further and undone three or four of the buttons at the top of his white shirt. It allowed a swath of dark chest hair to peek through in a rather enticing way. Slowly she brought her eyes up further and when she reached his face, she found an amused smirk on her lips.

“Already feeling better I see,” he said.

It was true. Her emotions had dipped heavily toward sadness as she recalled her past and her current fears, but somehow, surrounded by Dominic and guns, she felt that sadness melt away.

“I will feel better when I get to hold one like you promised,” she replied.

Dominic's smirk grew into a grin, and he chuckled as he stepped closer to her side. One hand went to the small of his waist as the other reached down toward the table and picked up the smallest gun.

"This is a Derringer," he explained to her, holding it out before her. "While many English men carry them now, it was actually created by an American man in 1786. It is a single barrel pistol that shoots a .41 caliber bullet with black powder. It is not dueling gun but is best used at close range."

Dominic then drew his hand away from her lower back to wrap his body around hers and pick up her hand. With the other, he carefully placed the weapon in her palm. Pleasure, not only from his touch but the feel of the pistol as well, tingled through her fingertips as he guided her hands with his own; showing her how to hold it.

"See that little ridge at the end of the barrel?" He asked, his breath warm against her ear.

Amelia nodded, feeling her body relax further into his.

"That is how one takes aim. You raise the pistol up; arms outstretched, elbows slightly bent. Spread your feet a little farther apart- yes just like that."

Dominic's voice dipped into a deeper, huskier tone as he added that little note of praise, and the anger she'd felt only a few moments earlier bled completely away.

"Now line your sight up with that little ridge," he commanded her.

Amelia followed his instructions, her heartbeat feeling more pronounced as the thrill from holding the pistol interlaced with the pleasure from being held closely by Dominic.

“Very good,” he praised softly into her ear. “Now find your target.”

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Amelia looked around the room at her options. There were several animal heads lining the upper walls of the room toward the ceiling. Different species of deer. A wolf. Large cats and other predators. She chose the boar's head directly across from her.

"Just a little higher," Dominic advise, tilting her arms up. "There. Perfect."

He pulled the hammer down at the top of the gun, then wrapped his pointer finger around hers at the trigger.

"Bang."

A whimper escaped Amelia's lips as the rumbled word brushed against her ear and her nipples hardened to the point of pain. Her arousal had been a terror to deal with lately, and now was even effecting the way she looked at guns. Yet the very idea emboldened her somehow.

She let her grip loosen on the Derringer so that it was cradled completely in Dominic's strong hands, then turned in his arms. Unable to help herself, she curled her fingers around the open hems of his parted shirt, and felt another bout of desire course through her as her knuckles brushed against his chest hair.

"Promise me," she whispered, searching his eyes imploringly. "After this season is over. After this whole mess is over, you take me back to Ellsworth and show me how to properly shoot."

Dominic's silver eyes searched hers as he lowered the pistol the table, and she nearly

whimpered again as his hands rested on her hips.

“You truly think you would enjoy it?” He asked.

“I think I’m learning to enjoy many things,” she murmured, pressing herself closer to him.

Dominic’s fingers tightened at her hips as a low growl escaped his chest.

“Amelia Hollowcroft, you are without a doubt the most confusing woman I have ever met,” he told her, a smile tugging at his lips.

She smirked as she slid the fingers of her right hand fully into his chest hair.

“It is Astorfield now, Your Grace,” she purred, and tugged at the hair in her fingers.

A growl erupted from Dominic’s chest and in an instant she was losing herself to his kiss. She tried, for a moment to battle his dominance but all too quickly she found herself submitting her control to him; reveling in the way it felt to be able to hand her needs and body someone else.

“Tell me stop,” Dominic commanded between kisses, his tone ragged.

“No,” she moaned, and in her own need to touch him, she ripped at his shirt; sending buttons flying everywhere.

Their sexual tension had been building all day and she needed it released- they both did. The “why’s” and “how’s” of what their relationship was dissolved, and Amelia gave herself over to her desires.

She dragged Dominic’s shirt down his muscled shoulders and he helped her rip the

rest of it off him before his hands came back to her body. His fingers clawed at the buttons of her high-collared blouse, and the moment he was able to undo the ones down to the hollow of her throat, he gripped the loosened edges and ripped.

The sound of her dress being torn in two made Amelia whimper with need; and she could barely stand staying still long enough to let him finish the work. The moment she was able to step away from it they flew to another again, their kisses hard and equally possessive as their hands ran rampantly over one another.

“You have vexed me all day, you know that?” Dominic voice quaked with need as he added her corset to the growing pile of ruined clothes.

“You loved it,” she whispered wickedly against his lips as her fingernails bit into his pectoral muscles.

“Damn you but I did, you wicked woman,” he rasped.

He then seized her by the throat with a quickness that only furthered her arousal, and he forced her stand away from him. Dominic’s silver eyes were bright as they traveled down slowly down her naked form. She should have been ashamed, she realized then. Perhaps even shy over being seen like this by a man for the first time...but she didn’t.

There was too much approval, too much need glittering in Dominic’s eyes to feel any shame at all. As he examined her she took the opportunity to examine him, too. Though she’d never admit it she’d spent a night or two imagining what her husband would like naked- and her mind had not done him justice.

His muscles were thicker and more well-defined than her imagination had conjured. Ropes of solid strength wrapped perfectly around his torso and arms; covered only by a spread of black, curly hair that almost formed an upside down triangle that started at

his broad chest and ended at his navel.

Her mouth watered as she thought of what it would taste like to run her tongue over every part of him; even down to what his trousers left covered.

“You like what you see?” Dominic asked.

Despite the eagerness of the moment, Amelia blushed at the blunt question as she raised her eyes to his. She met a look of pure desire that was very obviously barely contained. She licked her lips, her grip on his wrist pulsing a little.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Do you like what you see?”

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In response Dominic's grip loosened only slightly around her throat before he pulled her to him again; claiming her lips once more.

"You are so bloody beautiful it makes my entire body ache," he groaned between kisses.

Amelia's restraint ceased completely as she heard his words, and as he picked her up to lay her down on the floor, she didn't even think to stop him. Spread out below him like a feast, Dominic's mouth traveled from her lips to her neck, his teeth and tongue hungrily tasting every inch of her. Pleasure deep and intense had her whimpering, shivering and pressing him into her when he bit a particular part of her neck; but she shouted outoh!and arched her back against the floor when made it to her breasts.

She marveled at how different the sensations could be; wanting more of both.

"Dominic," she breathed, her fingers tight in his hair.

He let out a deep growl of pleasure before he nipped at her breast.

"Again," he commanded, his voice low and raspy.

She moaned before she could repeat herself, and was punished by a harsh brushing of his teeth to her nipple.

"Dominic!" She moaned, arching herself into his mouth.

A sound of pure, masculine pleasure erupted from Dominic's chest as she spoke his

name louder, and he continued his path down her waist. His tongue dipped into her navel, making her shiver and writhe like an animal in heat, and her legs spread wider of their own volition.

A deep chuckle rumbled from his throat as he leaned up on his elbows and caressed his fingertips over the contours of her left hip and down between her legs.

“Oh, little wife,” he groaned, his fingers brushing sensually over her petals, “You’re already drenched for me. Tell me. Did you think of me while you were in Ellsworth?”

Amelia bit her lip, her brows tensing as she left the briefly left felt the intoxication of their arousal leave her. She couldn’t admit that she had thought of him every moment, couldn’t-

His fingertips glided over her petals, up to her swollen bud, and lightly pinched the delicate bundle of nerves.

“I’m waiting.”

“Yes,” she gasped, tears springing to her eyes as pleasure flooded through. “Yes, alright? I couldn’t help it. Couldn’t stop thinking about what you did to me in the boxing room.”

Dominic chuckled, the sound downright devilish as he lowered himself to her mons.

“Such a needy little wife,” he teased.

She was ready to stay stop then, to pull him by the hair from between her legs- but then his tongue descended upon her at the exact moment a single one of his fingers thrust into her heated, soaking core.

All thought ceased as pleasure burst through her, and she let out a deep moan of gratitude as all of her pent up need finally found an outlet. His attention made her mind go blessedly blank; erasing the fears of her Father, of the ton. All of it just...vanished. And she was nothing but a meal for her husband to devour.

His fingers and tongue coaxed and pleased in rhythmic time. Dominic was an expert lover. She'd never thought otherwise. Didn't even have to listen to the whispers of the ton to know that. The way he carried himself; the way he handled everyone around him so elegantly and with precision- it was obvious.

Her orgasm rushed forth with intensity and a swiftness, sending stars shooting behind her eyes as she trembled and moaned. Dominic rose from between her legs with an assured smirk and she immediately bristled inside. He might be more experienced, but she had certainly read more books, and some of them had been written like a road map to a man's pleasure. Now was the perfect time to put her knowledge to the test.

She waited until he glided his body up hers, unable to withhold the shiver of pleasure she felt as he purposely dragged his muscled torso up hers, and clenched her legs tight around his waist. Mustering all of her courage, she rolled.

Dominic's eyes sparkled with alarm as she suddenly took seat atop him.

"What are you doing?" He rasped, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Simply returning the favor, husband," she purred, then dipped her mouth to his.

Dominic's jaw was tight and his teeth were clamped as she kissed him; bristling with distrust. But in less than a second his body was softening, and the forceful, stinging grip he had on her hips became coaxing; urging her to do as she pleased.

She nearly lost herself all over again when she heard his deep, utterly masculine

moan as she pressed her kisses from his lips to his throat; finding a particular sensitive spot near his collar bone. When she scraped her teeth there a second time, his entire body tensed as if he'd been hit by lightning, and a deep sense of both accomplishment and pleasure filled her.

Amelia continued her exploration, letting Dominic's heady moans and gasps guide her toward his most sensitive places until she reached his thick, hardened root. He was straining so hard against his trousers that she felt a bout of sympathy as she untied his stays with trembling fingertips.

His need, she realized as she sprang him free, was just as intense as hers.

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“Amelia,” he growled as she flicked her tongue over his deep purple mushroomed tip- andGoddid she love the tortured way he said it.

“Again,” she whispered, her tone as luring and sweet as a siren. Not at all demanding like he had been. Yet he obeyed her all the same.

This time her name was whispered out like a prayer as his hands fisted into her curls and trembled like two small earthquakes. He didn’t shove her down atop him; didn't demand a thing. If anything, it seemed like he was holding on to her to restrain himself.

Which, in turn, only made her want to continue even more. Dominic writhed and hissed as she took her time with her lips and tongue; exploring his hardened length with a wicked yet innocent curiosity. When she finally decided to slide her mouth down upon him, a low, guttural, almost begging sound tore from Dominic’s throat.

She gagged on his length; unable to take him all at the same time. The edges of her mouth burned as she tried to stretch her lips fully around him; and she felt another sluice of juices gush between her thighs as she thought of how it would feel if he were plunging into her sex and taking her purity. It would be incredibly painful, she imagined- and yet undeniably wonderful at the same time.

Amelia clenched her thighs together as if the motion could stop her from feeling so much gathering need, and focused on Dominic’s cock in her mouth. Every deep, primal sound only spurred her to explore him more, and the words she’d once memorized from her books vanished as her body became in tune with Dominic’s singular needs.

Right before his release she felt his entire body tense with such rigidity that she wondered if he might shatter. Then with a deep moan that nearly made her orgasm again, he exploded into her mouth. His fingers clenched tightly in her hair, locking her into place as jet after jet of his seed released into the back of her throat. Almost immediately after she finished his rigid form melted into the floor, and with a breathy moan of ecstasy, his taut fingers released into a caress; stroking over her scalp in an almost loving gesture.

When she released him his trembling hands moved to her arms, and he pulled her up his body and cradled her tightly to his chest; whispering words of praise as his breaths slowly returned to normal. Tears formed in her eyes as he did so, as if something within her rejected the tenderness of the moment.

“Beautiful, wicked woman,” he murmured, stroking her hair.

She closed her eyes, focusing on the slowing beat of his heart.

“The things you make me feel...sensations I’ve never experienced,” he whispered on.

She laughed, half-happy and half-heartbroken. At least that she could relate to. Never had a man made her feel this way. Not even Roland before he had attempted his assault.

Amelia allowed herself to revel in the pleasure of his warm embrace for a moment, but when she felt her heart began to throb, she pulled away; trembling with renewed need as she searched for her ruined clothes.

“Amelia?” Concern laced through Dominic’s deep, sated tone, sending another deep pulse through her heart, and she bit her lip as she worked to pull her torn dress around her. She couldn’t look at him.

This entire time she knew they'd been battling for dominance in their unique relationship, and at times it was fun- but now she was feeling something else. Something she knew would not be returned.

"Are we done?" She asked.

Her fingers raced under her eyes, swiping betraying tears away from her cheeks. Behind her Dominic sat up and though she didn't look, she could feel his silver eyes boring into her as he laced up his trousers.

"What do you mean are we done?" He demanded.

"I mean I'm tired," she replied. "Can I go?"

She tried to say it as carefree as possible, but her voice trembled at the very end; betraying her.

Suddenly she felt his hand wrap around her arm and whirled her around. His other hand came to her chin and before she could stop it, he was forcing her to look directly up into his eyes. More tears threatened to spill from her own as she caught his stark worry shining through as he stared down at her; his handsome face set into a look of pure concern.

"Amelia, what's wrong?" He demanded, his tone harsh. "Was I too rough?"

The way the pad of his thumb reached up to stroke another one of her tears away was too much, and she pulled her chin out of his grasp and took a step back.

"Stop," she said.

"Stop, what?" He asked, frustration growing in his tone.

“Stop acting like you care!” She burst out. “Our relationship is just a bargain, remember? Stop acting like you genuinely want anything to do with me when I know you don’t!”

Dominic’s narrowed eyes grew wide.

“I...” He didn’t finish his sentence. Perhaps he couldn’t.

He’d left her. Saved her only to abandon her for nearly an entire year, and then showed back up just give her a string of demands that would save their reputation. There was no care. Just duty that they both had to protect the Astorfield name.

She turned away from again, needing to get out of the armory and somewhere far away from him because her body still hummed with the need for his touch.

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“Don’t worry,” she rasped, heading toward the door. “I know we have an act to put on. I will perform better this time around. I am much more determined to get the show over with so I assure you, you won’t have to rescue me again.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Dominic’s gruff tone made her stop and flinch just as her hand touched the door.

“Tomorrow evening we have a ball at the Crawfords and a garden party on Friday. Saturday we are to be at another one of Tristan’s dinner parties. I am having a dress made for the occasion. You will wear it.”

There was no empathy in his tone, no pleading for her to obey. Just a stiff demand. She nodded, her throat too pained and tight to say anything, and left the room.

CHAPTERFIFTEEN

“The aviary is coming along beautifully,” Amelia said pleasantly, “Promise me that you’ll all come out to see it when I finally return to Ellsworth.”

“Oh, I can hardly wait,” Theo replied.

“Me either,” Ophelia replied, “Have you ordered your birds yet?”

Amelia smiled as she chatted with her friends, masking her true feelings with cheer and eagerness. When they could be alone, she would tell them how truly tumultuous her last week had been, but for now, with Tristan and Theo’s home full of society’s

members, she did as she had promised Dominic- and played pretend.

So far her time back in London was going perfectly. Her nerves were behaving far better than they had before she took her reprieve- as was the tonic seemed. She and Dominic had arrived nearly three hours ago and as of yet, no one had spoken an ill word to or about her, same as their last two social engagements. Not that Dominic gave them the chance.

Though she wouldn't call their appearance outwardly intimate, he had stayed close by her throughout the evening; oftentimes placing a hand on her back or wrapping his arm around her own to lead her wherever they were going. And with his charming smile and her pleasant one, no one would know that they had barely spoken to one another since their tense ending the night before.

Part of Amelia had wished that Dominic would have followed her to her quarters that night while the other was relieved. She'd needed the space to distance herself from her feelings. Needed to remember who he was; even if another side of him seemed to come out when they were alone.

He'd never finished his sentence that started with "I..." and she had wondered with increasing aggravation what he would or could have said had she waited for him to gather his thoughts.

But he hadn't come, and when morning arrived she'd discovered that he'd left the house quite early. For business as usual, she assumed. He repeated that pattern the rest of the week, only coming in just enough time to retrieve her for a party. Then afterward, he'd take her home and disappear again.

He barely looked at her those times, but tonight when she'd come down the stairs wearing the dress he had made for her his cold eyes had sparked to life as he slowly dragged his gaze down her figure. When he finished, she was rewarded with a curt

nod of approval, then stiffly offered her his arm.

The gown he'd designed for her was such a pale purple that it was nearly silver; the cut of it a perfect mixture between her preferred style and the more modest one accepted by the ton. Though she'd already decided not to tell him, it had immediately become her new favorite gown.

"Theo how is your mother?" Amelia asked presently, needing a break from being the subject of conversation. "Has she improved at all?"

Rose, Ophelia, and Seraphina went quiet as Theo gave her a weak smile.

"The new physician Dominic sent for her from Italy has been able to make some improvements regarding her comfort. It is how we were able to host the party tonight. She's upstairs resting deeply now."

A silence settled over their small group as soft chatter and laughter surrounded them. Amelia had wondered about that- how the party would affect the poor woman who now so rarely remembered what day it was let alone who the people of her station were.

"How is Tristan dealing with it all?" Ophelia asked, raising her champagne to his lips.

Theo let out a bark of a laugh.

"My compassionate brother seems more unsettled over moving back in with Mama and I after Papa's passing than he is over her failing condition," she replied in a low voice, flicking her eyes over to the man in question.

Though she chose not to retort, Amelia did not believe that for a second. Tristan was one of the most compassionate men she'd ever known, and such a statement couldn't

seem true. Ophelia, however, chuckled bitterly and shook her head.

“Of course he is,” she scoffed. “I knew he wasn’t as charming as he makes himself out to be. He’s just like the rest of the men of our society. Pompous and selfish.”

Amelia grew warm as the talk between Dominic and Tristan just a few paces behind her ceased. She turned her head just enough to see that the two of them had bristled and stared at Ophelia with contempt. To which Ophelia only stared back in challenge.

“Now, now,” Seraphina chastised softly, laying a hand over Ophelia’s. “Not all men. Hugo has come quite a long way from those days.”

“Well, he may be the only exception,” Ophelia muttered as she raised her glass once more to her lips.

Amelia was thinking about changing the subject to the married women’s group she had joined with Seraphina when she saw Hugo and Everett move toward them through the crowd at a rather quick pace. Hugo’s hand brushed lovingly against the back of Seraphina’s neck as she passed, sending another shot of envy through her as she watched her friend’s eyes alight.

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Both men stopped at Dominic's side, and Everett whispered something in his ear as Hugo leaned forward and did the same to Tristan. Amelia raised a brow as she watched all four of their faces grow serious, then lean toward one another as the whispering continued.

"What's going on with them?" Theo murmured at her side.

Amelia glanced at her friends and saw that they had all noticed the subtle shift in the four men and were watching them as closely as she was.

"I do not know," she murmured back as the four men broke away from another.

Tristan went to Theo's side.

"We've had a successful evening, but it is time to end the party," he told her.

"Why?" Theo asked.

Amelia turned away from them as Dominic came to her side and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"It is time for you to go home," he commanded. "Seraphina and Hugo are leaving as well, they will take you."

She bristled at his command.

"You are not escorting me home?" She asked.

Dominic's gaze was flat and unreadable as he looked down at her and shook his head.

"No. Everett and I have business to attend to."

She scoffed.

"Of course you do," she muttered.

She felt Dominic's hand tighten on her shoulder, and she felt a sliver of guilt for speaking so frankly.

"Go home," he commanded again in a low, even tone, ignoring her comment.

"I will meet you there later."

Knowing it would not do to negate him while being surrounded by the people they were trying to impress, Amelia reached for first Theo, then Ophelia, then Rose to hug them all goodbye. She promised to see them soon, then she allowed Hugo to lead her and Seraphina out of the ballroom.

"What is going on, darling?" Seraphina asked Hugo when the three of them were situated in the carriage.

"Dominic is just taking care of some much-needed business, my love," he replied, his tone coated with affection. "There is nothing to worry about, I assure you."

Amelia said nothing on the ride home, contempt for her husband's busy work life only growing. When they arrived she hugged Seraphina goodbye and thanked Hugo for escorting her home, and went inside.

Eve had just finished helping her into her dressing gown and was taking the many

pins and gems out of Amelia's piled up curls when a commotion erupted from the first floor of the house. Familiar, feminine voices rose from the foyer and up the staircase, and Amelia's heart leapt as she got to her feet and hurried from her rooms.

She gasped, tears forming in her eyes as she saw Lydia and Sarah each racing up the stairs toward her.

"Sister!" They shouted excitedly in unison.

"My darlings," Amelia choked out, opening her arms wide to embrace them. "What are you doing here?"

"Dominic came to fetch us," Lydia answered.

"He says we are to live with you now," Sarah added. "Is that not so very lovely?"

"Papa wasn't even mad," Lydia piped up.

Amelia's eyes flicked to Dominic as he ascended the stairs; Miss Chiron and Miss Gerhardt flanking him. The three of them stopped as they reached the landing, and Dominic calmly thrust his hands into his pockets. Questions flooded her mind but it was as if her mouth refused to form the words. Dominic's hard gaze softened as he looked away from her and toward her two younger sisters.

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“Girls, why don’t you go pick out your rooms? You may share or choose separately, it is your decision,” he said, his tone shockingly gentle.

“Really? We can pick?” Lydia asked, her tone absolutely humming with excitement.

“Mhmm. My quarters are on the third floor and it is best to stay away from those, but you may pick any rooms on this floor. That way you can be close to your sister if you may need her,” Dominic replied.

Both girls flew away from Amelia and toward him, their arms wrapping tightly around his waist. Amelia went rigid as she saw Dominic raise his arms, freeze, and widen his eyes at the sudden burst of physical affection. But then he relaxed, placing a hand on each of their heads, and gave them a small smile.

“Girls,” Amelia urged, and her tone spoke for her.

They let go of Dominic’s waist swiftly and came to her side.

“Go on,” she urged gently. “Take Miss Chiron and Miss Gerhardt with you. I’ll be along shortly to help you settle in.”

“You are the best brother-in-law in the world,” Lydia said, beaming at Dominic.

“In the whole world!” Sarah piped up.

Then the two ran down the hall, giggling excitedly as they began to open up doors.

“We shall help the girls in the meantime,” Miss Chiron stated, her and Miss Gerhardt leaving Dominic’s sides.

Amelia gave them a nod of thanks and waited until they too disappeared down the hallway.

“Dominic, what has happened? What did you do?” She asked, taking a step toward him.

“Everything is legal,” he murmured calmly. “My solicitor and I took care of it today. There are some papers you will need to sign but that can wait until the morning.”

Gratitude flooded through Amelia, but she fought the sudden urge to hug him and pushed on with her questions.

“What exactly was legal?” She asked. “And if you took care of it earlier today, why did you wait so late in the evening to go get them?”

“It means once you sign the papers you and I will have full, guardianship of your sisters until you allow them to get married. My name is on the documents simply because our laws demand it so, but they are yours now, Amelia. I will not interfere in your plans to raised them.

“As for this evening, there were some issues that needed worked around but it was taken care of. That is all you need to know.”

Amelia’s brows furrowed as she became torn between gratitude and annoyance, and she crossed her arms. She knew by the tone in his voice that he wouldn’t tell her more even if she threw an absolute tantrum.

“Why did you do this, Dominic?” She asked. “I’m grateful but I do not understand.”

You don't care about me. You said as much the other night with your silence.

Dominic's brow tensed as he looked her up and down, his jaw working as if he were chewing over thoughts.

"Because I knew it would make you happy."

Amelia's arms fell to her sides as her lips slowly dropped away from each other; her eyes going wide.

"Take the next few days to get your sisters settled. I'll attend some social events for the gentlemen and spread our tale of love and commitment there, and you do the same at the married women's club or whatever it is Seraphina brought you into. If it is still necessary, we will resume going to parties together in a week or so. For now though I believe we have accomplished enough so that we can work separately."

Discomfort overcame her as Dominic then took a step back.

"You are leaving?" She asked.

"It is for the best," Dominic replied, turning his gaze from her. "I have guards surrounding the house. You have nothing to fear."

She watched, emotions churning as he began to descend the stairs. Before she could stop herself, Amelia went after him, capturing his hand in her own before he could make it very far. When he turned to look at her his silver eyes were dark with a guarded expression, but he paused and waited. She didn't know what to do, what to say, so she put her head on his chest and wrapped both arms around her waist; hugging him.

"Thank you," she whispered, tears forming in her eyes.

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Dominic remained as still as a statue for a moment, but just as she was about to pull away, his one arm slid around her back while his other hand reached up to cradle the back of her head; pressing her even further into him.

“You are welcome,” he rasped, and placed a quick, gentle kiss on the side of her head.

He held her tightly a moment more, then released her, careful so as she would not lose her balance on the stairs. Without another word he continued down the steps and disappeared toward the foyer.

Sadness suddenly overwhelmed Amelia as she stood there and watched him go. The urge to tell him to wait, to plead for him not to leave her again was roaring inside of her like a beast. He had done it. He had gotten the girls. For her. And it hadn't taken weeks or months. It had taken mere days.

“Amelia?” Lydia's voice called from the landing. “We found our rooms! Will you come see?”

Amelia drew in a shuddering breath, and wiped her eyes, realizing only then that she had shed more than a couple tears. She pushed her confusing feelings for Dominic aside, and turned with the brightest smile she could muster.

“Of course, my darlings,” she called, walking back up the stairs. “Oh, you have no idea how happy I am that you are here!”

* * *

Everett's fist landed squarely on Dominic's jaw, sending stars bursting in his eyes. He staggered back from the force of the hit, then toppled to the ground.

"Christ, old boy," Everett cursed, going down to Dominic's side to help him up. "I was coming right at you, I thought you were going to block it! You always block it!"

Pain surged through Dominic's jaw, making him wince and growl. He pushed away Everett's attempt to help and got to his feet on his own. He'd been so deep in thought about Amelia that he'd completely forgotten where he was and what he was doing. The boxing practice had been proposed to help him focus, but instead, all it did was remind him of her.

"I'm fine," Dominic bit out, touching his fingers tentatively to his jaw.

"Lucky for me your hits are about as powerful as a bee sting."

Everett made a face as if asking "really?" and rolled his eyes as he walked back to his corner.

"I'm done," Dominic stated, walking toward the ropes.

"But we only made it two rounds!" Everett said, clearly exasperated.

"Tristan can take my place," Dominic grumbled, and nodded to his friend as he approached the table set up outside the ring.

Tristan nodded back readily and immediately got up. He had his own reasons for wanting a spar and he looked eager to get the work in. As he climbed into the ring, Dominic took his chair and sat down heavily. He'd barely had time to work up a sweat before he'd called it quits but he felt weary and out of breath.

“You can ask me, you know,” Hugo said. He reached for the bottle of whiskey sitting atop the table and poured Dominic a glass. “Seraphina tells me everything.”

Dominic cast a narrowed glance up at his friend as he accepted the drink; his lips set in a grim line. It had been three days since he’d dropped Lydia and Sarah off at his London house. Three days since he’d seen Amelia or talked to her. And it was driving him mad.

Her words the night of her boxing lesson had cut right through him. The pleasure she’d brought him from her mouth only moments before had him even further confounded. He’d been with many women; had been brought pleasure many ways, but his release that night had been the most intense in his life. The combination of the two things had left him feeling uncomfortable and irritable; with barely enough sense to muddle through his work.

This evening he’d been so distracted that his friends had finally urged him to take a break and practice for the first time in weeks. Now here he was, not even able to make it two rounds in without being plagued by more memories of his estranged wife. He hated this. Every single part of it. Still-

“What does she tell you?” Dominic asked, then downed the contents of the glass.

“Amelia and the girls are just fine,” Hugo replied calmly. “The two have settled in quite well. Seraphina, Theo, Ophelia, and Rose have all come over several times to help with your wife’s new mothering responsibilities and all seem to be having a grand time.”

“And her other duties?” Dominic asked sharply.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want her take time to acclimate to being the girls’ guardian but they still had a ruse to put on; even if they were not doing so together.

“Seraphina has taken her to two separate married ladies gatherings and from what she says, Amelia is handling them very well,” Hugo replied. “Singing your praises as a dutiful husband, putting rumors to bed, and batting away inappropriate questions with ease.”

Dominic raised a brow.

“What do you mean inappropriate questions?” He asked.

Hugo shrugged.

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“The same ones Seraphina is asked regarding me,” he explained. “Many husbands send their wives as spies to these sorts of things to report any information that may be useful. About our business practices; our success. It is nothing to worry about.”

“Our work is perfectly legal,” Dominic bit out.

“Which is why it is nothing to worry about, Dominic,” Hugo replied calmly, giving him a warning look.

Dominic grit his teeth but he made a conscious effort to damper his rising temper. He knew his friend was only trying to help, and it wasn’t his fault that Dominic was as on edge as a carving knife thrust into a butcher block.

“Have you heard anything from her father?” Hugo asked. “Any more problems?”

Dominic shook his head. He wasn’t too keen on the trades he had to sign over to the bastard, nor the rather large chunk of outright money he’d given to him; but it had finally bought the man’s silence and thus far, Felton was leaving Dominic and the young ladies alone. He knew that because of the daily reports he required from the guards he’d assigned to his house.

“The father is taken care of. The rumors are dying down,” Hugo murmured, crossing his arms on the table top, “Looks like you’ll be done in London soon if you want to be, old boy.”

“I do,” Dominic grunted, peering over at the boxing match unfolding between Tristan and Everett.

He really did, but even if his work had been accomplished, he was hesitant to leave his friends. Tristan was fraying at the seams and something he couldn't quite figure out was going on with Everett. Even his little spies had heard nothing.

“Seraphina and I have decided to go back home and collect the children and Leah. We plan to stay in London through the fall,” Hugo informed him.

Dominic raised a brow, wondering why his friend was mentioning this.

“You’ve played big brother to our friends for quite some time, old man,” Hugo went on, “Why don’t you let me take over for a while? I can also manage your businesses. I’m a partner in most of them anyway. You should some time off, acclimate to your new life as a husband and brother-in-law slash father figure. It would do you some good.”

Dominic cast his gaze to the tale, not responding.

“You know that I know, right?” Hugo quietly stated after several tense moments.

Dominic’s brow tensed as his mental barricades rose up.

“Be specific,” he commanded.

“I know how you and Amelia truly came to be married. Not the fairy tale story you’re peddling to the ton. The raw, ugly truth. It’s part of the reason why I was so willing to help with the custody situation. Though I would have preferred it if we would have had Lord Hollowcroft suffer an unfortunate, more serious accident.”

Dominic smirked. The thought had certainly crossed his mind. Several hundred times in fact. But his brief bout of humor quickly vanished.

“How did you find out?” He asked quietly.

“Amelia told Seraphina. Seraphina told me. It will not leave us. Not even Leah will know,” Hugo answered in the same quiet tone. “You will have nothing to fear from us, old boy.”

Dominic took a deep breath in through his nostrils, but he wasn’t quite able to let it out.

“Listen I know that the circumstances might not have been...ideal. Certainly not planned. But there is something between you and Amelia. The entire reason you can play so well to the public is because there is a genuine connection between you two,” Hugo said.

“Go back to her. Figure out what that is. We all know why you’re being so awful. It’s because you miss her.”

Dominic slowly let his held breath out through his mouth. Feelings was not something he was necessarily good at. Since he’d had to take on so much responsibility at such a young age and watched other men be weakened by them; he’d told himself he wouldn’t give way to such proclivities.

But Amelia had stirred something awake in him. From the very first night at the auction, when she’d fought him so fiercely before he revealed who he was. Her strength and bravery despite her fear had done much more than impress him. It was the reason why he’d left so abruptly after their wedding.

He’d needed a wife soon anyway and it didn’t bother him much to get married. He knew it was a duty he was expected to fill. But before Amelia he never pictured himself actually growing attached to his wife.

Amelia, though...she was different from any woman he'd ever met. She was a delicate balance between fearful and fearless.

"Go home, Dominic," Hugo commanded. "Stop torturing yourself. You know you want to see her."

CHAPTERSIXTEEN

"Your Grace!" Miss Chiron's startled whisper broke through the silence of Amelia's darkened sitting room. He'd awoken her when he'd opened the door from her slumber on the couch, but Miss Gerhardt was still sleeping soundly on the one opposite of her

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He put a finger to his mouth, and she sighed in relief.

“What are you doing in here?” He whispered.

“We were all playing with the children and then Her Grace was reading them a story,” she whispered back, starting to get off the couch. “I suppose we fell asleep as we listened through the opened door. We shall go now.”

She moved toward Miss Gerhardt as if to shake her, but Dominic stopped her.

“Would you mind staying a little longer?” He asked her, looking toward the door to Amelia’s bedroom. “I must talk with my wife.”

“Of course,” she whispered back, settling herself on the couch again.

Dominic gave her a nod of thanks and quietly went through the open doorway to Amelia’s bedroom. A single lamp was still lit, casting a soft yellow glow around the elegant room. In the bed laid Sarah and Lydia, their small nightdress-clad bodies spread out in comical shapes as if they’d dropped asleep mid-play. He found Amelia curled up in the nearby settee, sleeping soundly with a book still clutched in her hand.

He knelt down by her face, a smile drawing across his face as he took in her features. She looked exhausted, but peaceful. Having her sisters fully in her life was obviously doing wonders.

An ache formed in his chest as he continued to look over her face. He couldn’t deny it. He had missed her. Carefully, he pried the book from her hands and laid it quietly

on the nearby table, then picked her up.

A soft, breathy whimper left Amelia's lips as he drew her toward his chest, and his heart wrenched painfully when she immediately nestled into his arms. She was soft, warm, and light in his grasp; her hair cascading down over his arm like a shield- as if someone so small could protect him.

Dominic swallowed silently as he studied her features in the dim light. Could he do this? Could he actually let himself fall in love?

No. The answer came as quickly as the questions had. He was not a man to fall in love. He was barely a man that could show affection. To anyone, really, not just Amelia. And she deserved affection more than anyone he'd ever met.

Silently he carried her out of the rooms, up the stairs, and to his own quarters. It wasn't until he was softly closing his bedroom door with his heel that Amelia stirred again; her long lashes fluttering as she squirmed a little in his arms. Slowly her eyes opened as she became aware that she was being held, and immediately he felt her shift from pliant to rigid.

"It's all right, shhh," he soothed, holding her closer. "It's me."

Amelia immediately relaxed in his arms again as she blinked several times; a look of confusion crossing her beautiful face.

"Dominic?" Her voice was so soft and still filled with sleep; creating the perfect sultry combination that immediately made his knees grow weak. "Where am I? What are you doing?"

"You fell asleep on the settee," he explained. "You needed a proper bed, so I brought you to mine."

Amelia awakened a little more at that, but didn't try to fight his grasp.

Put her down, his mind screamed as his grip grew tighter. Put her down and walk away.

"You...you brought me to your room? You've never done that before."

Dominic swallowed, feeling the tight mental grip on himself begin to slide away.

Amelia's hazel eyes studied him in the dim light; affection, perhaps even worry shining through them.

He felt her slide her fingers to his jaw, and he winced as her delicate touch caressed over his flesh. Not out of pain. He wished it was pain. But out of the sheer gentleness she displaying for him.

"What's this?" She whispered.

Dominic closed his eyes and let out a breath through his nose, fighting the carnal urges rising within him...but it was more than that, wasn't it? It was more than carnal. It was emotional. The unfeeling man feeling everything. Because of this woman.

"Boxing practice," he replied, his voice suddenly hoarse. "Couldn't concentrate. Caught myself a solid blow to the face."

"Does it hurt?"

"It's nothing," he replied, and it really was. It was not his jaw that bothered him.

Amelia continued to look at him, those golden-hued orbs full of quiet contemplation

seemed to break through his walls of muscled strength and mental absolution and look into his very soul. Everything that was him seemed visible to her.

“I’m not like Hugo, you know,” he told her, his last level of resistance rising up to protect him. “There was no childhood atrocity for me that took away my happiness. This is who I have always been; how I have always thought.”

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“My cold king,” she murmured, her gentle touch moving to his neck. It laced fire through his veins and he grunted at the pleasure. He hated that he loved her touch.

“The Duke of Truth and Vernacular. You know all of the bare truths of how things come to be. So why would you believe that I thought of you any other way?”

“I am just explaining that there is no little boy to save. No man to change as I always have and always will be this way.” He said, his tone growing gruff.

He wanted her to fight with him. To grow those sharp little fangs and use her wicked tongue. He could handle her that way. Handle anyone that way. What he couldn't take was her acceptance. No one, save for his friends, accepted him for who he was.

“I do not want to change you, Dominic,” she whispered, her soft voice undoing him as she caressed her touch up over her his ear then down the back of his neck, “I want to know you. And I think I am starting to.”

Dominic grit his teeth, suddenly wary.

“What is it you think you know?” He demanded, pulling away from her touch. “Hmm? Shall you now paint me as some redeemer as so many have tried? Because I assure you I am not.”

“No, you are not,” Amelia murmured.

Her answer surprised him, and when she reached to touch him again, he didn't pull away.

“You are pragmatic. Calculated. You coordinate people as if they were chess pieces. You don’t make mistakes. You don’t make messes. You simply clean them up and use them to your advantage. You take those that have been discarded and give them new purpose. But it is not out of altruism that you do this. No. You simply see what those you give new purpose to can do for you.”

Dominic stared silently at her; stunned. There was no ‘but you’re a good person’ no ‘you just don’t want to admit it’. Just acceptance. Pure and true to who he was.

For a moment longer he stood there with her in his arms, torn between the need to put her down and walk away that instant or pull her closer and finally give in to those mounting needs that had consumed his every thought.

“When you rescued me that night you told me that I would be safe if I married you,” Amelia went on, those fingers of her absolutely undoing him; “Did you ever consider that if given the chance you could be safe with me too?”

Dominic’s resolve bottomed out then. Him. She wanted to protect him? Not begging for safety but trying to provide it? No one had ever offered that to him before.

No longer able to help himself, a groan poured from his throat as he pulled her closer and kissed her lips. Amelia gasped at the ferocity, growing rigid again another for another moment, then she softened again as she brought her arms around his neck and kissed him back. His body instantly reacted to the soft touch of her lips, and every craving he’d been building up the last three days came pouring out of him and into that kiss.

He suckled her lips, her tongue, savoring her sweet taste. He walked them forward until his knees brushed against the edge of his bed, and as he laid her down he blanketed her body with his own. Amelia’s hands moved from his neck to his

shoulders, smoothing down the tense muscles of his back and he arched into her touch.

Stop. Stop. This is not what you came here for. A voice in his mind demanded. But his hunger over rode that voice, and he deepened his kiss as his hands wrapped around Amelia's rib cage just under her breasts. He groaned as he felt the soft undersides fill his palms and he squeezed greedily.

Amelia broke away from his lips, her head tossing back as she let out a moan. He took the opportunity to run his tongue down her throat then catch the loose fabric of her nightgown in his teeth. He tugged it down until her turgid nipples were exposed and began lapping at them like a man starved.

He could make her burst like this, he realized as Amelia writhed beneath him; her moans growing throatier and more desperate as her hands fisted into his hair. He could make her do so all sorts of ways, and he desperately wanted to. He wanted to touch and lick and bite her body everywhere and every way until he knew every little avenue that would bring her pleasure.

Dominic was startled at his thoughts. He'd never had this much need for just one person. But just as he was about to pull away; to take a breath and rethink what he was doing, Amelia's hand slipped between their tightly pressed hips, and he felt her palm glide over his rigidness and cup him through his trousers.

Other women had wanted to touch him before. He knew he was an attractive man. Most of the time he was very willing to oblige and was rewarded for such. But Amelia's touch was different. Still new and exploring, but she was able to reach into some sort of dark hidden place within him and bring him great pleasure wherever her fingers chose to graze.

Dominic's hips twitched as she pressed her palm against him yet again; his body

begging for more. He hadn't been with a woman since they'd gotten married. Even when his urges arose swift and strong; he'd poured himself into his work instead.

"Dominic," Amelia moaned, bringing his attention forward. He'd been so lost in the pleasure of her hand he hadn't realized that he was still lavishing attention to her breasts.

Beneath him Amelia's body hips began to move faster, needier against her own knuckles of the hand that palmed his manhood. He had hersovery close to the edge and he wanted to send her over with an almighty push.

To his body's disappointment, he drew Amelia's hand from between them; pressing it firmly into the bed. Amelia whimpered in equal disappointment as he did so, but Dominic quickly repositioned his hips, and he slid his rigidity over her mons. Amelia's entire body shivered and bucked at the sensation, and he suckled and stroked her harder until her breath suddenly ceased and her back froze in an arch.

Then she released all at once, her body crashing down into the mattress as new breath flooded into her body. Immediately he felt her juices soaking through his trousers and he groaned at the evidence of her pleasure. Her relief was so evident that it caused him to follow. His manhood swelled and grew rigid to the point of pain within the confines of his trousers- and then he was emptying himself into them.

He let out a ragged groan as he burst, nuzzling his face into Amelia's breasts as his cock pulsed and he shot his seed into his trousers; making an utter mess of them.

Still, it did nothing to calm him down or lessen his need.

More. He wantedmore.

Dominic drew his head up to capture Amelia's mouth again, and as he did so, their

hands attacked one another's clothes. They tore and tugged until there wasn't a stitch of fabric left between them, and they both breathed a heavy sigh of relief when their bare skin finally slid against one another.

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“I want to taste you again,” Amelia breathed, her eyes hazy and dilated when he was able to finally rip away from their kiss. Her lips were bruised and swollen from his onslaught; glistening from one another’s mouthwatering need.

“You’ll have to wait, little vixen,” he rasped, then slammed his mouth down on hers again.

Her nails drug up his naked back, making him shiver and thrust his hips forward. As he did so the tip of his cock nudged against her dripping petals and he moaned into her mouth at the sensation. It took everything he had to drag himself away, to not simply lift her hips and drive himself deep into her center- but he did.

He did so and retraced the path his lips had just taken down to her breasts, then over her taut belly and finally between her legs. A bestial growl rumbled through his chest as he suffused his mouth her mons; eating and lapping at her with abandon.

Keening sounds of pleasure erupted from Amelia’s lips as she threw her legs over his shoulders and arched her back into his greedy mouth. Within a minute he felt her thighs tremble then tighten around his head just a scant moment before her juices flooded over his tongue. He slurped and drank her like a man dying of thirst; needing several long moments before he could slow his pace and take long, languid licks over her still quivering mons.

He wanted more, wanted to feel her burst on his tongue again, but then he felt Amelia’s claw-like nails dig into his shoulder blades and pull. He allowed her to drag him up, following the small spikes of pleasure-filled pain, then let out a dark chuckle as she pushed at his shoulders and made him roll over onto his back.

Unlike him, she spared no time tracing over his chest or abdomen. He was thankful for it, for he needed no such seduction tonight, and imagined such would only drive him further into a frenzy. Instead her wet, velvety tongue dipped immediately toward the thick, pulse tip of his rigid cock, and she tasted him.

Dominic let out a hissing breath as he felt her flat tongue mold into an arrow and flick mercilessly over his mushroomed head; hungrily drawing out the beads of pre-cum that had gathered and began to drip down his length. There was no question that her need was as great as his own by the way she hungrily swallowed him and hollowed her cheeks to create suction.

He gathered her hair in fists, not to control her mouth but so he could watch himself be thrust so viciously in and out from between her stretched lips. The sight of her was the absolute picture of carnal hunger; and it was his undoing. He tossed his head back as his release roared through him, and he held her to his cock as he pumped rope after thick rope of seed down her throat.

* * *

In the depths of Amelia's mind she heard a tiny voice attempting to speak reason.

Stop now. No further. You know what he's about to do.

And she did. They'd perhaps only spent a short amount of time together since Dominic returned from abroad but she was a perceptive person. They would get close and then one of them would run. First it was him, then her, then him, then her, and the pattern would go on and on because as much as she knew he was afraid to get to close to her, she was just as frightened to get close to him. Life had taught her not to lean on men.

The only time they didn't seem to want to run from another was whenever they

allowed their bodies to speak for them. So yes. She knew that this was the time to rise from the bed despite her trembling legs and walk away- and yet instead she felt herself slide up his waist; her legs straddling his hips in such a way that his still rigid manhood strained against her entrance.

Dominic's eyes were flashing pure liquid silver as he looked up at her; a scant trace of alarm passing through his expression.

"What are you doing?" He whispered, pressing her hips away, "You will hurt yourself."

"Only for a moment," she whispered back, then tried to move his hands.

His hold on her only tightened, and he shook his head.

"No," he rasped, pulled her down to his chest before he rolled.

"We should stop. Amelia, we need to talk."

"You're saying goodbye," she stated, nudging his hips closer to hers with her opened thighs.

Dominic's eyes widened and the hint of regret that sparkled there confirmed she was right.

"It's all right," she whispered, running a hand down his chest.

Yet even as she said it, she felt her heart break in two.

"As I said earlier. I know who you are. I know I cannot change you. Nor do I want to. Now that the rumors about me are gone you will be sending the girls and I back to

Ellsworth I suspect, and you won't be joining us. Am I wrong?"

Dominic's brow tensed as if he wanted to negate her, but he shook his head; sparing her the hurt of a lie. Truth. He always bartered in truth. And she respected him for that.

"I have done much thinking since you left after bringing me the girls," Amelia went on, her hands smoothing over his back, his chest, his neck as he stayed locked atop her.

"And I think perhaps this distance you want between us could be a good thing. You would not be happy with us, and I don't want my sisters around unhappy men anymore. They have dealt with that enough."

"And what of your needs?" He asked, his tone sounding wary.

"I have thought of those as well," she replied, "And I have come to this conclusion. I have curiosities, yes, but I do not want to visit the Devil's Masquerade anymore. Nor try to find another partner to quench my desires either. I want it to be you. My husband. The man who rescued me from uncertain horrors. Even if it is only once."

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Amelia felt Dominic's muscles grow rigid above her at the mention of the Devil's Masquerade. It was where he found her again. Standing tall and graceful and beautiful; a vivid contrast from how he'd last seen her. But it was true. The experience of the parties and the power she felt from them paled in comparison to being wanted by this man.

No one would make her feel what he made her feel. Hundreds of eyes all trained and filled with need were nothing compared to his heated silver gaze.

"Give me this," she whispered, tilting her chin slightly as her fingernails dragged lightly over his scalp. "Let me be with you before you go."

Some indiscernible emotion passed through Dominic's gaze as he stared down at her, and to her relief, he dipped his head and placed the sweetest, most sensual kiss on her lips.

"If we are going to do this," he whispered against her mouth. "We are going to do this right."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Thank you."

Amelia breathed the words, her entire body relaxing beneath him as he gave in to her plea. His heart cleaved in two at her gratitude, but he swallowed the pain and poured himself fully into the moment. The world around them dissolved like sugar in warm water; leaving nothing but him and her.

His kisses grew long and languid as he made love to her mouth. He no longer demanded, he coaxed. He was going to draw out every ounce of pleasure she had within her.

Dominic kissed her until nothing but weak, mewling sounds poured from her throat, and only then did he kiss a path down her neck. This time he didn't focus his mouth on just her nipples and cleavage; but everywhere. He made a blueprint with his mouth, memorizing every dip and curve of her body and noting every shiver of pleasure.

When he dipped his head between her legs once more, his fingers and tongue drew forth her orgasm like a bear used its tongue to coax honey out of a comb; gliding into every sacred space and collecting the precious dew from within.

This time Amelia's release body did not burst forth like a flash flood breaking through a dam, but instead she overflowed like a pool that had gathered too much rain. Her body writhed and trembled with a different form of slow sensuality as her release created a large puddle on his bed.

He whispered words of praise and awe as he then kissed over her soaked petals and trembling inner thighs, wanting her to know just how pleased he was with the mess she'd made for him.

Dominic's cock was throbbing and aching with need by the time he slid his chest up her body, but even still, he refused to move fast. Pleasure surged through him as he saw the tears that had slipped down cheeks from the force of her orgasm, and he could not help but gather each and every one of the salty drops with his tongue.

"Arms around me, little vixen," he gently commanded, nestling himself between her thighs. "I want you to hold onto me and not let go."

Excitement and gratitude shone in her eyes as she obeyed with not just her arms around his neck, but her legs around his waist.

“You are so beautiful,” he praised, brushing her curls tenderly from the side of her face as he angled the tip of his cock against her slick center.

He kissed her again, swallowing her whimper of need, then pressed his forehead against hers.

“Breathe in for me,” he whispered, and as she did so, he surged his hips forward.

Amelia let out a pain-filled whimper as her exhale burst from her at the invasion. Pleasure so intense it darkened his vision and sent white hot stars shooting behind his eyes gathered in his loins as he felt her hot wetness tightly choke his cock, and he had to pause for a moment to gather his control.

“Dominic,” she breathed, panic lacing her voice as she shut her eyes to the virginal pain.

“I’m here,” he whispered reverently, placing soft kisses over her lashes. “Open your eyes, sweetheart. Let me see you.”

Amelia’s lashes fluttered open, a tear sliding down her temple as she drew in another shaky breath. He tilted his hips back, pulling out of her slightly, and then slowly surged forward again. Again she gasped, her entire body shivering around him.

“Breathe,” he coaxed, undulating his hips slowly, stretching her further. “And relax. I’ve got you.”

Amelia pulled in another shuddering breath, and he felt her entire body sink into the bed.

* * *

It hurt as she knew it would. That first thrust that would take away her maidenhood. But Dominic's deep, gentle voice coaxing her through the first few moments had that pain ebbing away within a few seconds. In its place gathered a pleasure she'd often read about but until that moment could never truly fathom. He was a part of her, like this. Placing a mark within her that would never be worn away.

Slowly she began to undulate beneath him, feeling her body come back together one deep thrust at a time.

“Amelia.”

Her name ripped from his lips like a prayer as they began to move together. More tears of ecstasy slipped from her eyes as she drew him closer. She couldn't touch him enough. Couldn't be wrapped around him enough to sate that need inside of her.

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“More,” she pleaded, burrowing her fingers into his thick hair, and a deep moan poured from Dominic’s chest in response.

“Anything,” he whispered, hiking her legs higher on his waist, “Anything you want.”

Just the simple act of him tilting her hips gave him deeper access, and they both gasped at the new blooming pleasure. Her hand traveled from his hair to his back, where she raked her nails down his spine and toward his chiseled backside. When she tightened her fingernails there Dominic gave another powerful thrust and he once more said her name in a trembling, need-filled voice.

She had wanted this, had all but begged for it. But now that she felt this insurmountable pleasure rising within her, she began to feel her heart break even more. How was she going to live without him this close?

She shook her head, not wanting to think of the unavoidable loss, and leaned up to kiss him. Dominic responded immediately, opening his mouth and letting her tongue go wherever she wished it as his thrusts grew faster and more powerful.

“Dominic,” she gasped, breaking away from his kiss when the pleasure became too much. She tossed her head back into the pillows, her toes curling as that great wave steadily rose.

“Wait,” he commanded, moving faster, “Wait for me, my vixen. We go together.”

Amelia whimpered then bit her bottom lip, trying desperately to control the rising intensity with an ever-weakening grip. Then, just when she was about to lose it all

she felt Dominic's manhood harden and swell even more, and the word now ripped from his lips.

She let out a gasp, followed quickly by a deep moan as she let go. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed into her womb as she felt her release and his at the same time. They pulsed together as he pressed his forehead against hers, her womanhood squeezing and suckling him tight as he spilled his seed within her.

Their breathing heavy, bodies slick with sweat, they remained locked together and trembling for several long moments. In the still silence she felt and heard her own heartbeat, followed by a thrum of a deeper bass. It was then she realized it was Dominic's, beating in time with her own.

* * *

The sun was coming up. Breaking away the dark gray clouds with shards of purple and yellow. And yet they didn't move. Dominic wondered if either of them had blinked or even breathed after they finally stopped making love.

Their first time had been a revelation, but it had awoken even more desire for another, and he had spent the better part of the darkened morning hours buried deep inside of her; listening and feeding off of her sounds of ecstasy.

Now they laid together on their sides facing another, Amelia's head resting on his arm with her leg thrown over hip. Their eyes hadn't left another; even as the night faded away into morning. He was exhausted, and he could tell by the small, dark circles under Amelia's honey brown eyes and her blurry gaze that she was too. But he couldn't sleep, and it was obvious that neither could she.

They hadn't spoken yet. About what they'd just shared or what he was about to do; but in that silence he still heard everything. His doubts. Her own. The questions of

their future. And there was a mourning of sorts; one he continuously pushed away for if he lingered on it too long; it would swallow him whole.

She knew him. Truly knew him. Like no other woman did or ever would. And she accepted him and his incapacities when it came to certain forms of human emotion.

Amelia drew in a deep breath, her head lolling slightly. It was just enough motion to allow a wild curl to tumble over her eyes. He reached up immediately, brushing it away with his fingertips. The moment he touched her flesh pleasure sparked through him, and he drew his thumb over her cheek, her lips, then opened his palm and flexed his fingers around her throat.

She gasped lightly at his touch; instantly awakening the arousal they had only recently been able to put to sleep.

Stay. A voice whispered in his mind.

Hurt laced through his heart at the thought, and he forced himself to withdraw his touch.

“You should get some sleep,” he whispered.

He tried to keep his hand at his side but within seconds he was touching her again, running gentle fingertips over her arm, down her hip.

“So should you,” she murmured, her tone sleepy.

She then reached out to touch his face, tracing her thumb delicately over the hollows under his eyes that matched hers, then cupped her palm to his jaw. Unable to help himself, he turned into her touch and placed a kiss in her palm.

“Our work here is done,” he told her, bringing his hand up to cover hers. “You don’t need to stay in London any longer. Take the girls and go back to Ellsworth. It’s yours. As are my accounts. Build one hundred aviaries if you wish. Buy the girls anything their hearts desire. Spoil them rotten. Spoil yourself.”

Pain flashed in Amelia’s eyes at his words, but she nodded.

“What shall you do?” She asked. “Are you going abroad again?”

Dominic shook his head.

“I will remain here. Along with handling other business, I will make sure your father doesn’t try any more extreme measures to make a profit.”

Felton Hollowcroft was satisfied with the deal Dominic had struck now, but men like him were never truly able to grasp the concept of building wealth. The next time he ran out of money, Dominic wanted to be able to make sure that he wouldn’t go after Amelia or his other daughters again.

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“I cannot thank you enough for what you’ve done, Dominic. Not just for me, but for my sisters,” Amelia said. “You’ve changed our lives.”

The heartache laced beneath her calm tone undid him, and he swallowed the lump of emotion gathering in his throat.

“I have never met someone more worthy of my help than you,” he replied, tracing his fingers over hers, down her arm, and up to her face. “You deserve far more than I can give.”

“You’ve given me everything you can,” she whispered, and then her breath broke into a sob as her eyes misted.

Dominic pulled her closer, tucking her head into his chest as her hot tears splashed over him. He closed his eyes tightly as he grit his teeth; wishing he was a better man. Wishing he was someone he could never be. Even in Amelia’s heartache she was not asking him to stay or change, and that created a feeling of self-hatred Dominic had never encountered before.

He needed to leave; needed to stop dragging out the inevitable and let her begin her new life. The original life he’d promised her. One of peace and freedom away from the society he was shackled to by birthright and responsibility. It took everything within him to pull his arms away from her, to push his body away from the bed and stand on his own two feet.

He did it though, and as he got dressed, Amelia sat up, wiped at her tears, and forced her beautiful face into a mask of calm reflection.

“You really should get some sleep,” he couldn’t resist saying. The urge to care for her was too great not to.

But Amelia shook her head as she drew her sheet-covered knees up to her chest.

“The girls will be awake soon and I need to return to my rooms before they come looking for me. They’ll be excited to know that we are leaving London but will no doubt want to go shopping for a few more things before we depart,” she replied, her voice strained.

“When will you go?” He asked, pulling a clean pair of trousers on.

“Before the sun sets this evening,” she replied, then gave a nod seemingly more to himself than him. “I think that would be best.”

He nodded in return, making a mental note to stay out the rest of the day. He didn’t want to make things any harder by popping back in and out as they were preparing to leave. A single, firm goodbye was going to be best.

As he finished dressing, his mind went back to what Hugo had told him the night before. His friend had given him solid advice, and for anyone else it might have worked- but he wasn’t just anyone else. He was a strange, albeit successful pragmatic man who knew how to use people. There truly wasn’t a good bone in Dominic’s body, and he knew it.

“Make sure to have Theo and the others out to Ellsworth often,” he told her, tying his cravat. “There will be servants and plenty of guards to keep you safe, but your friends should be there too if their families can spare them. I’ll speak to Tristan and Hugo to ensure at least Theo and Seraphina make frequent visits.”

Amelia only nodded. He was now fully dressed, jacket in hand, and nothing left to do

but walk out the door. And yet as he tried to will his body toward it, he couldn't yet face away from Amelia.

"If you need anything, Amelia," he said, his tone soft as he scrunched his jacket tightly in his fingers. "Write to me. Whatever you need, I will happily provide."

Something flashed in Amelia's honey eyes. Words he didn't need to hear to understand.

Except you.

She gave him another silent nod.

Realizing that he wasn't going to get to hear voice at least one more time, Dominic nodded in turn, and left. There was no begging. No screaming, no accusations of unfairness as he walked away in silence. There was nothing but the space he created.

CHAPTEREIGHTEEN

Four weeks later

"You really do make an amazing mother, you know that?"

Amelia turned to Rose as she felt her friend's hand rub down down her back and gave her and her other friends a weak smile.

"I am not so sure," she replied. "Our mothers all pushed us so hard toward education that I thought that giving the girls a nice long break would be good. But sometimes I wonder if it's what I should be doing."

She turned back to the girls, her smile growing a little stronger. Since returning to

Ellsworth, Amelia had chosen to pause their studies. Not just their academics, but their societal training. They had gone on a different adventure every day, exploring Ellsworth's grand private property until they learned every part. Though they kept a respective distance, guards followed them everywhere. A directive, no doubt from her husband.

This morning the girls had requested she take them back to the lake and dock they'd found and she readily agreed. Now Sarah and Lydia were stripped down to their chemises, splashing and giggling in the water. It was just shallow enough for it come up to Sarah's shoulders, which was perfect since none of the ladies knew how to swim.

"Do not doubt yourself, Amelia," Rose said. "You have no idea how often I have wished my mother would give me a break like this. To be able to not worry about being a lady or even a woman, and just relax in nature."

"It is quite extraordinary out here," Ophelia said in agreement. "Perhaps this is what I shall do when my mother finally gives up on marrying me off and allow me to become a spinster."

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Amelia let out a soft, singular laugh that had no real trace of mirth. She at one time had wished for a similar life, and now that she practically had it, it left her feeling empty. There was no doubt that having her sisters with her and away from their father forever had given her a deep and unbudging happiness, but she found it didn't even begin touch the loss she felt from no longer having Dominic in her life. At least not in the physical sense.

Missives came from him almost daily; his name and London address scribbled in his handwriting across the front. But those were for Mr. Morbate or other members of the staff.

He sent gifts though. Several each week. Dresses, all in shades of her favorite purple and created in her favorite designs. Shoes as well. Combs. Jewelry. Little trinkets and baubles that either shone brightly or created a deep wonder over their origin. There was even Olga, a rather large, intimidating woman with the arms of a man and a thick Russian accent that was sent to continue Amelia's boxing lessons. But never letters.

At her side Theo elbowed her gently and leaned toward her.

"Are you all right, love?" She whispered.

"Fine," Amelia lied. She knew what Theo was truly asking. Do you miss him?

But Dominic was a topic she refused to speak on.

Knowing that not just Theo but the rest of her friends would ask her more questions if she carried on her contemplative silence for too long, she said, "Really I am quite

exemplary. As long as the girls are happy then so am I. And perhaps you are all right. There's no harm in a little break. They can pick up their studies when winter settles in."

They all smiled at her and nodded.

"Tell me about you," she urged, looking at Theo first. While Ophelia and Seraphina had been visiting since two days before, Theo and Rose had only just arrived that morning after nearly a week of absence and would only be staying until the evening.

Theo's small smile wilted as she cast her eyes to the green grass.

"The physician says Mother is fading. Another month perhaps. Maybe two. Tristan has taken over making all of the preparations for her funeral and has pushed most of his duties on to his steward so he can be with her more. And he has agreed to allow me to put a pause on my husband catching so that I can spend more time with her as well. That, and being here has been my only two forms of relief."

Sympathy poured through Amelia. Her own mother's death had been sudden and heartbreaking, but she wondered if that had been better than knowing than the alternative. Knowing seemed a burden all its own.

"Is she in very much pain?" Amelia asked gently. Theo shook her head.

"Not very much anymore. The physician's treatments keep her calm. It makes being with her better, even if she no longer recognizes who I am," Theo replied.

She then shook her head, as if trying to shed some unspoken thought or feeling, and turned to Rosamund.

"Let us move on," Theo said, "Rose, tell us about you? Your mother still pushing you

to parties?”

Rose let out a dry laugh.

“Of course she is. I believe she has a very romantic idea of how I will catch my husband. One look and the gentleman of my dreams shall fall head over heels for me in an instant.”

“Surely cannot truly believe that is realistic?” Ophelia asked, grimacing.

“I am afraid so,” Rose laughed, “It’s why she casting me onto a wider circle. She is certain there is a gentleman out there who has not seen and ignored my presence.”

She sighed and shook her head.

“It is rather exhausting, but I am grateful that she allows me to come to visit out here every so often. It is a reprieve most sorely needed.”

“Well you are always welcome here, darling,” Amelia assured her.

They all turned to Seraphina next, who seemed to be in a daydreaming state. It took Amelia calling her name and Ophelia giving her a gentle shove to bring her out of it.

“Hmm? What’s that?” She asked, and Amelia and the others laughed softly.

Seraphina smiled at them, wide and genuine.

“Hugo and the children are wonderful. It has been a blessing for us to be back together again. I just miss them when I am away as all.”

She paused, then reached for Amelia’s hand before quickly adding, “Not that I don’t

adore spending time with you darlings, I positively do. I apologize if that made me sound unhappy to be here.”

“Not at all,” Amelia replied, squeezing her friend’s hand warmly. “We are all so very happy that you are happy, darling. Are we not, ladies?”

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Theo, Ophelia, and Rose were all quick to agree.

“How is being back in London?” Amelia then asked.

Seraphina let out a sigh.

“The first week was a bit awful. I felt like I couldn’t quite settle. My mysterious cousin who inherited my father’s title still has yet to make himself known and far too many people believe I have the answer to his whereabouts.

“Things are better now, though. Having Leah there helps. And there are more children for twins to play with.”

The urge to ask if Seraphina had seen Dominic at all was sudden and great, and she had to fight herself to stop from saying something. She didn’t need to know. Didn’t want to know.

“Ophelia? You?” Amelia asked, turning to face her.

Her friend smiled smugly and shimmied her shoulders.

“I have been stalwart in my refusal to attend any more parties this season and have been proven to be successful. Mother and Father have seemingly given up, for this year at least, and I have been filling my free time with painting.”

Amelia gave her wide smile. Ophelia had a true talent for painting, even if her parents currently refused to allow her to enter any of her work in the London Galleries.

“Would you mind giving Sarah and Lydia a painting lesson while you are visiting?” Amelia asked. “I believe they would love it.”

Ophelia’s smile widened.

“I would love to,” she replied, leaning forward to slap a hand gently over Amelia’s knee. “We can do it as soon as we get back to the manor. How does that sound?”

They stayed at the lake a little while longer, but as the sun started to dip to the west, Amelia called Sarah and Lydia from the water, and the guards came forward to help pack up their picnic. Light, fun chatter filled the air as they meandered back to the manor.

The gates were opening for them when Amelia caught something moving in her peripherals, sending a shiver down her spine. Quickly she whipped her head toward the movement, and caught the back of a man’s jacket disappearing behind a tall arbor tree. Wariness filled her. Was it her father? Dominic had warned her that men like him were never satisfied. Had he come for more money?

“Jonathan,” she called, summoning the head guard to her side.

He came to her right away and bowed.

“Your Grace?”

She nodded toward the arbor tree on the other side of the gate.

“Someone is out there. I saw him. Dispatch him immediately,” Amelia commanded.

Whether it was her father or not, she was taking no risks when it came to her sisters.

Jonathan gave her a furtive nod and subtly gathered two more of his men.

“Come along, girls, let us get you inside,” Amelia insisted, quickening her steps, “We must get you out of those wet clothes.”

“I am afraid this is where we must depart, darling,” Rose said sadly as they approached the manor’s front steps.

Amelia frowned as she noted the waiting carriage.

“Already?” She asked, “You cannot stay for supper?”

“Rose is right,” Theo sighed. “The day got away from us. It is best we leave now so we may make it back to London by sundown.”

Though disappointed, Amelia nodded, and moved in to hug them both. Ophelia and Seraphina were right behind her to bid their goodbyes.

“Come back soon,” Amelia insisted, giving Theo an extra hard squeeze.

“As soon as I can,” Theo promised.

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As she pulled away, she laced her arm through Amelia's and nodded toward the back of the carriage.

"Walk with me to the other side?"

"Of course," Amelia agreed, falling in step with her.

They made it to the back of the carriage, but before they rounded the other side, Theo stopped them, and peered around the side.

"What are you doing?" Amelia asked.

"Making sure that Rose is in the carriage and Ophelia and Seraphina are inside," Theo replied in a hurried whisper.

Amelia's brows dipped as Theo's lips pursed and she began to fidget.

"Theo, what's wrong?" she asked, gripping Theo's hands.

"I'm going back," Theo blurted out.

Amelia stared at her in confusion.

"Yes," she said slowly, then nodded to the carriage.

"No, no, I don't mean back home. I'm going back to the Devil's Masquerade," Theo whispered urgently.

Amelia's heart twisted with worry and she shook her head.

"No," she demanded. "Theo? No. You cannot go back there. We just finished cleaning those rumors up, you cannot make a mess of things again!"

"The only reason we got caught last time was because I was not following the rules," Theo replied quickly, her eyes dancing back and forth between Amelia and the manor, "I know better now, and I will be careful. I'm going."

Amelia shook her head, still not believing her ears.

"Why?" She asked, "Why would you risk it again?"

"Because I cannot take this anymore!" Theo burst out. Then she quickly pressed her lips together as she once more looked around to make sure they were still alone.

Sympathy poured through Amelia as she watched her friend unravel.

"I cannot take the present. I cannot take watching my mother die a slow, horrible death, I cannot take seeing my brother break a little more everyday under his responsibilities, and I cannot-"

Theo drew in a deep breath through her nose as she closed her eyes, her hands tightening on Amelia's.

"I cannot keep seeing you pretending to cover up your pain," she finished, her tone low and remorseful.

Amelia felt her headache worsen at her friend's words. She blinked back the sudden wave of tears, saying nothing. What could she say? She was trying to hide her agony as much as she could but she knew all of her friends saw it. They were just kind

enough to pretend otherwise.

“I am sorry, Amelia. But I cannot take it anymore. I need a reprieve. A few moments where I am not me. Where I am simply...beautiful and wanted. I want to be Calypso again!”

Amelia shook her head slowly, looking at her friend with pitying eyes.

“It is obvious that you are not going to let me stop you,” she said at last. “You will do as you please. I beg you though, be careful. If someone identifies you again it could create chaos worse than before.”

She tried to pull her hands away from Theo’s but her friend tightened her grip.

“I won’t,” Theo replied. “Because you are going to be there right beside me to ensure that I don’t act foolish.”

Amelia’s jaw dropped and this time despite Theo’s tightened grip, she yanked her hands away.

“Do not be ridiculous, Theo! There is no chance I am going to do this again,” she whispered furiously. “Do you have any idea how much it would hurt Dominic if he found out?”

Theo tsked and scowled.

“You mean the man who ripped your heart out and stomped on it?” She retorted.

“The man that gave me my sisters!” Amelia hissed.

“He. Still. Hurt. You. Amelia,” Theo replied, enunciating every word.

No longer able to hold them back, tears began to slip down Amelia’s cheeks. Her friend’s words were as painful as they were true. No matter how numbly she’d told Dominic she understood his needs. It still hurt that she hadn’t been enough to change them.

Theo suddenly grabbed Amelia’s shoulders and pulled her into a tight hug.

“Please do this for me,” she whispered in a pleading tone. “Please, Amelia. Just one last time. I won’t ask you to do this ever again, I swear. But I need this. I need the freedom.”

Amelia pressed her eyes shut as her chin wobbled. Her heart, already in pieces, felt like it was being torn into even smaller bits. Theo needed her. Just as she had needed Theo when Dominic had left right after their wedding. Risky or not, she knew she needed to help her friend.

“Very well,” she whispered into Theo’s ear.

She gently untangled herself from her friend’s grasp, and was grateful that Theo

allowed her to do. As she pulled away, Theo let out a huff of a relief and her shoulders sagged.

“You mean it?” She asked, her eyes shining with hope.

Feeling defeated and cornered, Amelia nodded.

“One last time,” she replied, holding up a finger. “And I mean it, Theo. No more. I am so, so sorry for what you are going through, but I cannot let this become a constant. We go. We forget our worries and woes for a few hours. And then we go back to reality because that is what we must do. We must face our lives. Even if we don’t want to.”

“Thank you,” Theo breathed, starting to bounce on her feet. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Amelia only nodded, already feeling as if she made a mistake.

“When are we going?” She asked.

“Can you be in London on Friday?” Theo asked.

Amelia nodded again, her tattered heart sinking further.

Theo gripped her shoulders and pulled her forward, kissing both Amelia’s cheeks.

“You are a true friend, Amelia,” she replied excitedly. “I will owe you forever this.”

“You certainly will,” Amelia retorted, gently pushing her friend away. “Now you best get in the carriage. Rose is no doubt wondering where you’ve gone.”

“I will see you Friday,” Theo replied, taking steps to round the carriage. “Eleven o’clock at our usual place.”

Amelia wiped away her tears as the carriage pulled away, drawing in deep breaths to fight the ache in her chest. Straightening her shoulders, she pulled herself together and began walking toward the steps.

“Pardon, Your Grace,” Jonathan said, walking up to her.

“Yes, what is it?” She asked.

Jonathan nodded toward the gate.

“We searched the premises, but there was no one out there. Are you sure you saw someone?”

Amelia let out a sigh. She’d been so caught off guard by Theo’s words that she’d completely forgotten that she had seen someone...but had she really? She’d been so distracted lately. Perhaps she’d hoped it was Dominic coming back.

She shook her head, wanting now more than ever to go inside and go directly to bed. She was sure Ophelia wouldn’t mind giving her painting lesson to the girls alone.

“Perhaps my eyes were just playing tricks on me, Jonathan. Apologies for sending you on a wild goose chase.”

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“No apologies necessary, Your Grace,” Jonathan answered immediately. “We are under strict orders to protect you at any costs. Any time you feel unsafe, you must tell us right away.”

Tears filled Amelia’s eyes again, and she turned her head away from him to hide them.

“Thank you, Jonathan,” she replied, her tone wavering. Without another word, she finished walking up the steps, paused inside only briefly to speak with Ophelia, and went to bed for the rest of the night.

CHAPTERNINETEEN

“Bloody hell, get out my way,” Dominic slurred, shoving the object that had stoved his foot. His hands connected with solid wood and he blinked his blurry eyes; the shape of a bureau coming into view.

It hadn’t been a person that had hurt him. It was a damned piece of furniture. Sighing wearily, Dominic leaned against the chest of drawers. The world spun as he looked over Amelia’s abandoned bedroom; misery beating down on him.

She was gone. He’d hoped as the days of her absence grew into weeks that the hurt in his chest would go away- but instead it had only worsened. He missed her. Terribly.

And every time he got drunk- which was now quite often, he ended up here. In her rooms. He hadn’t slept in his own bed in days. Instead opting to fall drunk and unconscious into Amelia’s old sheets, which he refused to allow the maids to strip

away.

Amelia had given him everything he wanted by accepting who he was. He should be happy, grateful. But instead he felt nothing but contempt for the woman that had made him feel.

Dominic righted himself, then stumbled toward the front of the bureau. She'd taken most of her things, leaving the top of the bureau empty. Even though he suspected the drawers to be the same, he opened them anyway; hoping for something he could not quite identify.

When he found the drawers empty Dominic felt another surge of anger, and he slammed his hands down onto the bureau, cursing. As he did so, the top right drawer let loose atop, and the bottom sprung open. Dominic swayed on his feet as he ripped the false bottom out of the drawer, and there, hidden away, was a stack of letters.

Gathering them up, he stumbled toward the bed, and fell awkwardly into the twisted sheets.

“What is this?” He grumbled, fumbling with the first letter atop the stack.

Through his drunken haze he mangled the envelope until he finally got the letter loose, then his heart stopped as his eyes alighted on the daintily scribbled words.

Dear Dominic,

I know these words will never reach you, as I will never send them. Even if I would, I doubt you would read them. But I need an outlet, so this is for me, not you.

Through his drunken sadness Dominic smiled, picturing the no-doubt haughty look his wife probably had on her face as she wrote such taunting words.

I do not know if I will ever see you again. From what I hear, it is doubtful. I have been told that you have a certain way you do things, and that you do not deviate from them for anyone. So I do not expect you to deviate for me, even if we are now married.

Since I did not get the opportunity to do this in person I will take it here now: Thank you. Thank you for saving me from the auction. From my father. I am angry with you for leaving so quickly after our wedding, but that does not mean I not grateful for the new path you have placed me on. Ellsworth manor is beautiful, and as peaceful as you promised.

Even with your absence and obvious lack of affection for me, I believe I will find happiness here. Speaking of your absence, since you are not here to negate me I have decided to do a little redecorating...

Dominic felt his sobriety slowly return as he read through the later. At the bottom it was signed, Your Wife, Amelia.

He tore open another, hungry for her words. The second one had more vitriol than the first as she felt more comfortable revealing her angry feelings toward him. Still, after she'd written her curses out, she'd described her days. What she'd done to the manor thus far, what she'd discovered. Signed again with Your Wife, Amelia.

He read through them all, finally getting a true glimpse into the world he'd abandoned Amelia in. Her hostility toward him was clear, yes- but so was her intense gratitude. Even when she wrote vile curses directed at him, they all ended in thanks.

When he finished the last letter Dominic's stomach was in painful knots, and it had nothing to do with the vast amounts of whiskey he drank. He'd done this. Left her. Again. Only this time he hadn't just hurt his wife. He'd hurt himself. Filled with savage regret and self-pity, Dominic lowered his head to Amelia's pillow and

wallowed in her lingering scent. It was fading by the day. Soon it wouldn't be there at all, and he would be left with nothing but the letters filled with curses and thanks.

“Dominic? Dominic! Where the bloody hell are you, man?!”

Dominic's head shot up too quickly, making the whole world spin. He scrambled off the bed just in time to spare the sheets from his onslaught, and wretched onto the floor. He let out an agonizing groan as two sets of footsteps came hurriedly into the room.

“Jesus,” Everett's voice seemed to boom from above.

Dominic winced at the loudness, his head starting to split in two.

“Not so loud,” he groaned, shaking his head.

Everett sighed as he and Tristan came to Dominic's sides, and they both pulled him to his feet.

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“I’m not being loud, old boy, you’re simply far too drunk for your own good,” Everett replied, shaking his head. “I thought I was the drunken fool in our group? Why are you trying to steal my title?”

Dominic let out a bitter laugh as he let his friends help him out of Amelia’s room.

“Yes, well, you weren’t living up to your title as of late,” Dominic slurred, “So I thought I’d sweep in and take your crown.”

Everett let out a huff of a laugh and shook his head.

“First I was drinking too much. Now not enough. You’ve got to make up your mind, old boy. I’m too simple to be pulled into so many directions.”

Dominic chuckled again, but Tristan didn’t seem to find it so funny.

“Jesus, he smells,” he muttered from Dominic’s other side.

“Yes, well, when you have nothing but whiskey in your veins that will happen,” Everett retorted, “I speak from experience.”

“Do not talk of me as if I am not here,” Dominic said bitterly, throwing a glare toward Tristan.

“Are you here?” Tristan asked, he and Everett slowly taking him down the stairs. “We wouldn’t know that to be true as of late. You’re never in meetings anymore. We don’t see you at White’s- though it is obvious you’re getting your whiskey

somewhere- and you haven't set foot in a boxing ring ever since Everett planted you that blow."

Through his drunken sorrow Dominic felt a different sort of guilt. One for worrying his friends.

"Leave me alone," he said bitterly. "I am coping with sorrows."

"Sorrows?" Everett laughed. "As in feelings? Do you hear that Tristan? Sounds as if our Cold King has finally found some emotion."

Dominic bristled at the moniker, and shoved away from his hands grips.

"Do not call me that," he yelled, stumbling down the last two steps. "Shecalled me that." He lowered his head and muttered, "It was a term of endearment."

Tristan and Everett put their hands on their hips and shook their heads.

"I was trying to handle this with my usual witty banter but this is just too sad," Everett said.

"Dominic," Tristan said, his tone loud and firm, "Enough of this. Go back to Ellsworth. Go back to your wife. You're miserable!"

"I'm fine!" Dominic shouted, then immediately groaned and held his aching head.

Tristan snorted as he and Everett grabbed his arms again, hauling him toward the back of the house.

"If you are fine than I am a lady," Tristan retorted. "Seeing as how I have a prick between my legs, I highly doubt that you are fine."

“We don’t know that,” Dominic retorted, “We’ve never seen it.”

He chortled at his own joke and then frowned.

“That was poor form. Apologies,” he slurred. “Where are you two taking me?”

“Outside,” Everett said, pushing open the rear doors that led to the terrace. “You reek of spirits and you need some fresh air. Some food too.”

“I told you I’m fine-”

“For heaven’s sake, you are not fine!” Tristan boomed, roughly pushing Dominic into one of the chairs beneath the moonlight.

“I have lost my father, I am losing my mother, my sister is coming undone by the stress, and curse it I cannot have you coming undone too!”

A stunning sense of sobriety overtook Dominic as he finally took in his friend’s face. He looked ravaged with sleep deprivation and stress, and though he couldn’t dare to look in the mirror, Dominic imagined he didn’t look as bad as Tristan did. Because unlike him, Tristan was facing his problems sober and outright. Like a man was supposed to do.

“Tristan, forgive me,” Dominic replied. “I never meant to become another one of your problems.”

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“You know what, I’m going inside to fetch some food,” Everett said, “Give you two time to talk.”

Tristan sighed wearily as he and Dominic were left alone. Dominic rubbed his temples, wishing for the first time in weeks that he was actually sober.

“This isn’t you, Dominic,” Tristan said, his voice more restrained, “You and I. We face our lives head on. We don’t hide between whiskey like Everett or use our secrets as shields like Hugo. We, we face life! We wrangle and force it to bend to our will.”

“If I were drunk I would take offense to that,” Everett piped up, coming back out with a tray of food and a pitcher of water, “But now that I am sober most of the time I can see how you would arrive to that conclusion.”

He sat down the tray, poured Dominic a glass of water, and sat a hunk of bread before him.

“The young Earl is right, you know,” he added, nodding toward Tristan.

“You let Amelia go because you were afraid she was going to try to change you. But you already changed yourself. Personally I’d rather have you lovestruck and changed than-”

He paused, waving a hand at Dominic, “-whatever this version of you is.”

Dominic narrowed his red-rimmed eyes toward Everett.

“Since when did you become so wise?” He asked.

Everett flashed a charming smile and shrugged his shoulders.

“Someone told me that there was more to life than whiskey and morally questionable women,” he replied. “Turns out they were right.”

Dominic huffed out a laugh, feeling clearer than he had in weeks.

“I have been foolish,” he stated.

“Perhaps,” Tristan said with a smirk. “But do not dwell on the past. It is time to prepare for the future. Something you are very good at.”

He sat down next to Dominic and pushed the hunk of bread toward him a little closer.

“So get something in your stomach to sop up all that whiskey, get some fresh air, and then for the sake of us all, wash the stink off of you. I adore you, old boy, but you smell worse than the fish market.”

Dominic lowered his nose to his armpit and nearly made himself retch.

“Jesus,” he muttered, jerking his head away. “I had no idea.”

Everett and Tristan laughed at Dominic’s expression as Tristan slapped him on the back. They were right, he realized. About everything. He needed to get himself together, get to Ellsworth, and beg for forgiveness. And though she had no reason to, he prayed to God that Amelia would let him come back.

As he worked at eating the bread and drinking the water, which was a task all its own since he had nothing in his system but whiskey for the last several days, he sat in the

moonlight as Everett and Tristan filled him in on all the business he'd missed.

He was astounded by the amount of covering his friends had done for him, the deals they'd been able to save as he wallowed in misery and self-pity. They had truly been there for him when he'd fallen, and though he'd always cherished his friends, he had never expected they would go so far to protect him when his luck would turn.

After an hour of conversing, breathing in the cool, refreshing night air, and eating nearly two loaves of bread, Dominic's head had stopped throbbing, he'd stopped shaking, and his vision was much clearer. He was just about to get up to go get a much-needed bath when the butler stepped through the terrace doors. Dominic rose to his feet as he saw the man's anxious expression and felt another pit form in his stomach.

"What is it?" He asked, Tristan and Everett rising at his sides.

"There is a man from Ellsworth here to see you, Your Grace," Alex replied. "He says he is the captain of the guard there, and has some urgent news."

Dominic felt the world spin again- this time for a very different reason.

"Where is he?" he demanded.

"He is waiting for you in the foyer, Your Grace," Alex replied, bowing toward Dominic.

Not waiting to hear anything else, Dominic hurried past the butler, Everett and Tristan right behind him, and made his way to the entrance hall.

"Jonathan," he said, greeting the head guard with a nod. "What are you doing here? You are supposed to be watching my wife."

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Though the head guard was an entire head and a half taller than Dominic and far more broad, the man paled at Dominic's gruff tone, and bowed.

"Apologies, Your Grace, I did not know what to do about Her Grace and Miss Briarwood," he replied.

"About what?"

"Theo?!"

Dominic and Tristan spoke at the same time.

"Where is my wife?" Dominic demanded.

"She is here, Your Grace," Jonathan answered quickly, "In London."

For all he had missed her Dominic wanted to feel relieved at the news that she was so close...but something wasn't right. If she were here with good reason, Jonathan would not look so worried.

"I ask again," he said slowly, his voice dipping several tones as he clenched his fists.

"Where. Is. My. Wife?"

"She left Ellsworth earlier today and demanded I stay to watch over the children," Jonathan answered. "I know I was wrong to disobey her orders, Your Grace, but something was not right. I followed her, and when she got out of her carriage to meet Miss Briarwood she looked...different. And she was wearing a mask."

Anger, hot and white shot through Dominic's so fiercely that for a moment he struggled to breathe. She wouldn't- not after everything they'd been through, everything they'd said to one another- would she?

A sense of betrayal hit him square in the chest shortly after, and he shut his eyes to the pain. Too late. He was too late to make things right. She'd gone back to the one thing that had given her power: the Devil's Masquerade. Would she find a paramour this time?

"Your Grace," Jonathan said, his tone full of worry.

"Dominic, you open your damn eyes right now and look at me," Tristan demanded, his tone seething with anger.

Dominic's eyes flew open and he glared at his friend.

"Something tells me my sister is responsible for this," Tristan huffed, working his jaw back and forth with obvious frustration. "But we can figure out whether that is true or not after we go in and get them out."

Through his pain Dominic felt the truth of Tristan's words, and nodded.

"Where are you going?" Tristan called as Dominic walked toward the stairs.

"To wash up," Dominic called back, taking determined steps, "If I'm going to go get my wife, I have to look much better than this."

In the bath he washed himself, rubbing his skin almost raw with soap and cloth, then pulled on his favorite black on black suit. From his closet he then retrieved a box he hadn't opened in ages, and took out the black horned mask.

If his wife wanted to meet a devil, he would give her one.

CHAPTERTWENTY

“This was a mistake,” Amelia whispered, staring out into the red-light drenched ballroom.

Her stomach had been in terrible knots for the last two days, and now that she was standing at the threshold of the Devil’s Masquerade, she felt like she was going to vomit. No longer did she feel the rush of excitement or power that she used to by coming to the illusive party, but a strong sense of foreboding.

At her side Theo gripped her hand. She was practically dancing in place with excitement, and the constant movement at Amelia’s side only worsened her sickened feeling.

“You worry too much,” Theo whispered back, peering over the groups of entwined people through her mask. “I feel better already. Don’t you remember how fun this was? Come on, let us go find some gentlemen to mingle with.”

Though she’d made Theo promise that they would stick together, Amelia felt unable to move.

“You go on,” Amelia replied, shaking her head. “I will keep watch of you from afar.”

Theo looked toward her with a frown.

“Your husband broke your heart,” her friend replied. “Not once, but twice. You owe him nothing. Now you look amazing. Your dress has never looked better on you and you are practically glowing from behind your mask. Come with me. Find someone tonight who can nurse your broken heart, or at least provide you a distraction.”

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Amelia ached upon hearing Theo's words. On some level she was sure her friend was right...and yet she still found herself immovable.

"Go on," she urged, her tone full of sorrow. "I will join you when I am ready."

Theo looked into her eyes for a long, steady moment; her pity clear even in the dim light. After a while though she sighed, nodded, and let go of Amelia's hand.

"It is all right to move on from heart ache, Amelia," she said, stepping away. "That is what I am doing. And you should too."

Amelia said nothing as she watched her friend walk to a nearby group of masked men; all of whom had been intently watching the two women from the moment they'd walked in. They parted for Theo immediately, and one laced an arm around her lower back as they all eagerly began to talk to her.

A few months ago, Amelia would have willingly walked into the group, and would have felt a surge of immense power as she pulled those men into her thrall. Now, though, all she could think of was Dominic, and how much she wanted to be in his arms.

He was so close! Had the carriage drove a few more minutes to the west she could have arrived at his London house, walked through the door, and saw him. But she was terrified of what she would find if she did so. Had he moved on already? Was there a woman in his bed right now? Two? Wrapped around him and enjoying his expert skills of seduction?

She shook her head at the thought, knowing she was only hurting herself more by imagining such things. Amelia drew in a shaky breath, doing her best to push the heartache away, and forced herself to take another step into the room.

Perhaps Theo is right, she thought, braving another step. Perhaps this is how I move on from my broken heart.

“What a beautiful dress,” a masculine voice purred into her left ear.

Amelia jerked at the sound, then cursed herself for not paying attention. She knew better than to let her mind wander in a place like this.

“Thank you,” she replied, turning toward the man.

A shiver went down her spine as she took in the man’s well-tailored navy blue jacket and the tamed sandy-colored curls that framed his simple black eye mask. He smiled at her, his thin lips spreading even thinner as he showed off his white teeth. There was something familiar about this man...

He held up a champagne drink in each hand, and offered one to her.

“A beautiful woman like you deserves to always have a drink in her hand,” he said, “It is a shame no one has brought you one already.”

“The drinks here are a little too strong for my liking,” she replied, forcing a smile as she stepped away. “Besides, I am not thirsty. Thank you, though.”

“Oh, come now,” he said in a patronizing tone, following her. “A strong drink helps lower our inhibitions. You want to relax, do you not?”

Another shiver went down Amelia’s spine as she wracked her brain. His voice was

familiar as well. She knew this man. And while at one time that would have amused her, she now grew nervous over the fact.

“Not at present, sir,” she replied, less polite this time.

She glanced back at where Theo had just stood, and she began to tremble with worry as she saw that she was nowhere to be found.

“If you’ll pardon me, I promised to keep an eye on my friend, but I have lost track of her,” she told him, walking away.

“Allow me to help you,” he replied.

“No,” she demanded, her tone harsh as she began to take more determined steps.

“This room is full of willing women, sir. I suggest you go find one who wants your company.”

Not caring if she offended him or not, Amelia straightened her shoulders and walked away with purpose. Familiar or not, she wanted nothing to do with him, and now she had to make sure her focus was entirely on finding Theo. She walked by each group in the main ballroom, studying the masks carefully at a distance so that she wouldn’t have to interact with anyone. When she found no trace of Theo, her heart sank even further. Now she would have to leave the main room and look through the private ones, and Lord knows what she would stumble upon in there.

She had just finished checking the second room to no avail when, as she was stepping back into the hall, was grabbed by the arm. Amelia’s head whipped toward the person with the tight grip, and her alarm turned to anger as she saw the man from before.

“I am not interested!” She seethed. She tried to wrench her arm out of his grip but it

was too tight.

Her effort only made the man's smile grow wider.

“You are here, are you not?” He asked, pushing her against the wall. “That immediately makes your statement untrue. Or is this your game? You like telling men no. Men that have a right to you. So that they must force you. Is that it, Amelia? Did I play my game too softly with you before?”

Amelia's blood ran cold as she heard her true name leave the man's lips. Suddenly all of the points of familiarity connected, and she realized who the man was. She reached up her free hand with a quickness and pulled the man's mask off; confirming her suspicion.

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“Roland,” she whispered, dropping his mask to the floor.

“Did you miss me, darling?” Her former betrothed asked, pulling her closer. “I need something from you. And you are going to give it to me.”

“Get off of me!” She seethed, pushing at his chest. It was no use. His grip was much stronger than hers, and he pinned her to his body easily.

“I missed you,” he went on, ignoring her outburst. “You wouldn’t believe what that little harlot did to me overseas.”

“Whatever she did you deserved it,” Amelia shot back, still struggling against him.

“What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Roland replied, a sick amusement glittering in his eyes.

“All this time I thought you were a prude. So you see I was quite surprised when I arrived back in London and find you not only here, but a favored visitor to the Devil’s Masquerade. Men loved when you came here, even when you gave them nothing but charm and conversation. When I saw that, I simply had to start talking. Let people know once and for all you weren’t as innocent as you acted.”

The pit in Amelia’s stomach worsened for many reasons. Him? It was him that started the rumors? That had caused chaos in their lives? And now he was here, revealing himself to her and demanding what she had refused all those years go.

Still she lifted her chin, refusing to show her fear.

“I should thank you, Roland,” she replied icily. “The rumors you spread only served to bring my husband and I closer.”

“Oh, really?” He scoffed, “Where is he then?”

Amelia lost some of her bravery, realizing that she truly was alone. Even with her shouting, no one had come out of the rooms to check on the raucous. And since Dominic had no idea where she was...

It is not what you think,” she told him, her trembling tone betraying her. “I am not here to offer anyone anything. Especially you. Now you are going to let me go. I am going to find my friend. And then I am going to leave.”

Roland’s blue eyes grew dark as a sneer formed on his thin lips.

“You mock me, woman?” He asked, giving her a shake that made her gasp with fear. “Every one can have you but me, is that it?”

“My husband is the only one that can have me!” She shouted, “And he will destroy you if you do not let me go right now!”

Roland’s sneer deepened as his grip on her remained firm.

“He must not be much of a husband if he allows to you frequent places like this alone,” he replied, then tilted his head as he raised a brow.

“Or have you made him a cuckold as you so obviously made me?”

Fury sparked through Amelia’s veins at Roland’s words.

If you are going to square up to a man you better make your first hit good. It will probably be your only one.

Dominic's words rang clear in Amelia's mind, and as he taught her, she pulled the energy of her anger into one precise move, and swung with all her might.

It was vastly more difficult than her training, as Roland was holding most of her body captive against his own. But Amelia's fist managed to find some momentum from her side, and her knuckles connected powerfully to the bottom of Roland's chin. Pain screamed through her fist as bone connected with bone, but the shock of the hit was enough to jar Roland.

He stumbled back, letting go of her waist, and she immediately lunged away from him. His grip on her other wrist never broke though, and before she could get very far, she felt pain surge up her arm as he roughly yanked her back to him.

"Teasing whore," he seethed through bloody lips, capturing her jaw with his other hand.

"I'm going to make you pay for that."

"The hell she is," a familiar voice came from behind, and as Amelia began to weep with relief, Dominic's arm came around Roland's neck, dragging him backward.

* * *

"Dominic!" He heard Amelia cry as he dragged the disgusting man from his wife. From around the corner came Tristan and Everett, who quickly worked to free Amelia from Roland's grip.

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The moment he saw she was loose from him, Dominic wrenched the man around and shoved a fist directly into his nose.

“Oh, I have been looking for you,” Dominic chuckled darkly, gripping Roland’s lapels as he cocked his fist back again.

“You filthy vermin. You poor excuse for a man. I had a feeling it was you spreading these rumors.”

His fist landed again, forcing a cry to break from Roland’s lips.

“You must have hid in the worst places if you were able to keep away from my spies. Like the cockroach you truly are.”

Another hit. Another painful moan from Roland’s busted lips.

“You put your hands on my wife? MY WIFE?!” he screamed, his fury and pent up pain finally finding an outlet.

He stopped punching only to grab a hold of Roland’s limp hand, and crushed.

“I will make sure your hands are not fit to put on anyone!” He boomed into Roland’s bloody, wailing face.

He let go of the man’s ruined fingers and cocked his fist again, but before he could punch him another time, Tristan and Everett flew at him. He was wrestled to the ground as he let out a roar of rage, and the once-empty hallway suddenly filled with

curious onlookers.

“Easy, man,” Everett growled, hauling Dominic off of the floor. “He’s had enough!”

“Theo?!” He heard Tristan roar next.

Dominic stopped fighting his friends’ hold as he heard the worry and rage in Tristan’s voice. He finally saw through the red mist that had clouded his vision, and saw his wife and Theo a few steps away, holding one another tightly.

“I’m fine,” Dominic said, his voice ragged from screaming.

Tristan and Everett let him go, and Dominic walked across Roland’s crumpled up, sobbing figure and directly to Amelia. Rage, hurt, and jealousy still flooded his veins- but beneath it all was a relief that was quickly overpowering them all.

“Dominic,” Amelia breathed, and to his surprise, she flew into him; her arms going tight around his neck.

“It is not what you think, I did not want to come, I swear, I-”

Unable to help himself, Dominic grabbed a fistful of her hair, pulled her head back, and roughly planted his lips down onto hers. A sob broke from Amelia’s throat as he kissed her and he gathered her closer to him. She was there. In front of him and in his arms. How that came to be suddenly did not matter to him.

“Dominic, old boy,” Everett said, gripping his shoulder, “It is not that I am thrilled that you two are making up, but we need to get out of here. Now.”

Knowing his friend was right, Dominic forced himself to end the kiss and gripped Amelia’s hand tightly. Tristan appeared by Theo’s side, taking her hand as well, and

they allowed Everett to lead them outside.

“Dominic, this was me, this was all my fault,” Theo said as soon as they back out in the quiet night air.

“Confound it, Theo, what were you thinking?” Tristan seethed, shoving her hand away now that they were out of the melee. “After everything these two just had to fix!”

“Do not yell at her!” Amelia shouted, surprising them all. “We are ignored day in and day out by the men in our lives. We are told not to have the feelings we are born with, we are told ignore our most inner needs to make the world easier for you.”

Dominic swallowed, shame pouring through him as he remained silent to his wife’s tirade.

“We are in pain,” she went on, her voice breaking as she ripped the mask from her beautiful face, “And you do nothing but ignore it for the sake of your fortunes and titles.”

She let go of Dominic’s hand and walked to Theo, who looked absolutely broken, and put her arms around her.

“I knew this was the wrong way to feel better,” Theo sobbed, looking from Tristan to Dominic, “I knew it. But I needed something more to feel than this terrible reality.”

Dominic’s eyes flicked to Tristan, who seemed to have lost much of his anger.

“It might have been a mistake, but the ladies have a point,” Everett murmured, “We distract ourselves with drinking and fighting and dallying. The only difference is we are clapped on the back for it instead of punished.”

Dominic's eyes flicked back to Amelia, and she was looking at him with a pleading expression.

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“I did not participate in anything,” she said, her tone trembling with emotion. “I only came to watch over her. We have both been in so much pain. And I didn’t want to lose her the way I lost you.”

Dominic knew it was true. There was not a doubt in his mind that she had remained faithful even after he had broken her heart. And that very fact hurt him worst of all. That despite her pain, she was still trying to protect those she loved. And she was doing it alone.

“We need to get out of the street,” Tristan said, fiddling with own mask. “Even with our masks on inside Roland knew who we all were, and those no telling what that lecher is spouting.”

“If he can even talk,” Everett retorted, smirking. “Dominic just about knocked out all his teeth, didn’t you, old boy?”

“No use waiting around to find out,” Tristan said before Dominic could reply.

“Theo, I am taking you home and you are going to have alongtalk.”

Dominic watched as Theo and Amelia turned toward another and hugged fiercely. Then brother and sister walked side by side to the Briarwood carriage.

“Where will you go?” Amelia asked, turning to Dominic as their friends drove away.

“Weare going to Ellsworth,” he replied, stepping toward her to take her hands. “And we are going to sort this out.”

Relief filled Amelia's eyes as he looked down at her, and she nodded as tears began to trickle down her cheeks. Pain struck his heart as he watched her cry. It was he that had caused this, not Theo. He that had put those tears in his wife's eyes.

He was still viciously angry over the two of them putting them in such danger, but for now, all he wanted to do was get into the carriage with her and touch her the entire way home.

"Everett," he said, turning to his friend as Amelia tucked herself into his chest. "You should come with us. Get out of London for a few days."

"I will join you later," his friend replied, sliding his hands into his pockets as he took a step back. "I am going to get Roland, make sure his mouth will not be a problem anymore. Pay off the other guests so they won't say a word. This business ends here."

Dominic nodded, and led Amelia their carriage. Once inside, he pulled her into his arms, grasped a fistful of her hair, and held her tightly to his chest. His heart pulsed with joy as she placed a kiss upon his neck and snuggled in. Tomorrow they would argue. For now, though...for now they would celebrate being together again.

CHAPTERTWENTY-ONE

"You understand why I am angry," Dominic stated, his silver eyes hard as he looked at her.

"Of course I do," Amelia replied, her fingers fidgeting as she sat across from him.

She couldn't stop taking him in; hated that the table between them was blocking half of the view of his body. She hadn't forgotten how handsome he was, probably never could, but after weeks apart, he looked absolutely God-like.

Though, she did notice some things. He'd lost weight. His eyes weren't as clear as they used to be. Another one of those rakish yet sophisticated silver grey streaks and formed in his hair; streaking from his left earlobe to the back of his head.

Had he been as miserable as she had been while they were apart?

They'd spent the entire carriage ride the night before in silence; using that time instead to hold each other, kiss each other. When they arrived back at Ellsworth, Dominic had taken her hand while still in the carriage and hadn't let go of it until he had her sealed up with him in his quarters.

Once there he'd stripped her down, then himself, but instead of making love like she'd hoped, he'd pulled her into bed with him, tucked her tight against his body, and they'd fallen asleep wrapped around one another.

It was morning, though, and it was time to finally break their silence.

"Tell me why I am angry," Dominic demanded.

"I risked our reputation again," Amelia replied, feeling a surge of shame as she said so. "I risked your businesses; everything that we had just worked so hard to get back."

Dominic's brows furrowed as he put his elbows on the table and leaned forward.

"You think that is why I am angry?" He asked.

Amelia looked at him, confused.

"Yes?"

Dominic sucked his teeth as he pushed back from the table. His handsome face twisted into a sneer that bared his teeth; making it obvious that she had given him a wrong answer.

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“I am angry, Amelia, because of the danger you put yourself in!” He boomed, slamming his fist on the table.

Amelia instantly bristled against his tone and sneered right back at him.

“How was I supposed to know Roland was going to be there? That he was the one that had started it all?” She demanded to know.

“If you would have stayed here as you were supposed to you wouldn’t have had to find that at all!” He replied. “Christ, Amelia, do you have any idea how terrified I was to see you cornered in that hall like that? Did you not see the look in his eyes? He was going to-”

Dominic cut himself off, his nostrils flaring as he slammed his lips shut and rubbed his hands together

“If I had not been there,” he said eventually, his tone low and trembling, “He would have hurt you in irreparable ways, Amelia, and I would have never forgiven myself for that.”

Love poured through Amelia as she heard the utter fear in her husband’s voice. Love. She loved this man, she realized. And whether he could admit or not, it was obvious he loved her too.

“But you were there, Dominic,” she replied, “And you destroyed our threat. You only have half the facts, though, and I am sorry to tell you that your theory is wrong. I was in danger no matter where I was.”

Dominic's frown deepened.

"You need to tell me everything. Now," he demanded.

Amelia drew in a steadying breath, and spoke.

"These last two weeks or so, I have had this strange feeling that the girls and I were being watched. At first I thought it was because I kept hoping to see you come around a random corner and back into our lives, but the day Theo asked me to accompany her to the Devil's Masquerade, I actually saw someone. I knew it wasn't you, and it scared me greatly. I thought it was our father and I immediately sent the guards out to investigate."

"Roland was here?" Dominic snarled.

Amelia nodded.

"The guards didn't find anyone, but after what happened, I know it was him. Roland might have decided to strike at the Devil's Masquerade but he was waiting for any opportune moment. Whether I had went with Theo or not, he would have made a move. And I know you are mad at me for going. I am mad at myself! But if I hadn't gone, he would have attacked at a time where you were nowhere near."

Tears brimmed in her eyes as she remembered the utter fear and desperation she'd felt the night before. Roland, she realized, had never been a good man, but he had changed over the years into someone far worse than who she'd been engaged to. The look in his eyes had told her everything- he was willing to do whatever he needed to bend her to his will.

"I remembered what you taught me," she rasped, her throat feeling tight. "About getting one good punch in. It wasn't enough to stop him, but I hit him good."

Dominic's hard gaze softened almost instantly, and in a second he was out his chair, coming toward with his kerchief. He pulled her out of her seat and gently dabbed the cloth under her eyes.

"I saw," he replied, a ghost of smile on his lips. "Even with the disadvantage of your stance it was still amightyhit."

A laugh broke through Amelia's sobs as she felt her body sink into his arms.

"I wassoproud of you," he whispered, peppering her hair with kisses.

Amelia felt her heart throb with a mixture of pain and relief, and her fingers clenched around his vest.

"Please do not leave again," she whispered. "I know I said I could handle it, but I have been miserable. I missed you. I missed you so much. We can argue every day if you want. You can growl and demand and I will hiss and fight back until we are miserable. But please don't go."

Amelia gasped as Dominic suddenly gripped her face and forced her eyes up to his. She saw nothing but affection pour from those bright silver orbs.

"I am not going anywhere," he replied, his tone absolute. "And if I do, you will be right by my side. I am not letting anything happen to you ever again, Amelia."

She felt her eyes begin to water again.

"Truly?" She whispered.

"I have tried to push away these feelings for you," he replied, stroking her cheek, "I have tried to go back to the way I was, but you have changed me. Not in the way I

always feared a woman would. But for the better.”

He leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on her lips, so sweet another sob ripped from her throat.

“I love you, Amelia,” he whispered against her lips. “When you make me feel pleasure and when you have me wanting to rip my own damn hair out. I love you.”

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The flickering joy she'd felt in her heart burst into a full flame and she pulled him back in for another kiss.

"I love you, Dominic," she breathed, pulling him closer. "I love you so much."

* * *

With their lips still fused together, Dominic cupped his hands around Amelia's backside and lifted her onto the table. He was sure there was much more to discuss but for now their argument was over, and he'd be damned if he wasn't going to celebrate it.

Their affectionate kiss grew needy and desperate as their hands began to work at one another's clothes, and as their tongues danced and their teeth gnashed, they undressed each other. He broke away from the kiss and tossed his head back with a gruff moan as Amelia tore his shirt from his chest. She dragged her nails down his abdomen, sending a surging pleasure throughout his body as she bit down on his neck.

He lingered in the cocktail of pleased pain for a moment before he grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head back. He took another possessive kiss, then bit and kissed down her neck until he reached her exposed breasts.

He'd missed her body so much that even through his depressed state, he had still felt that yearning desire to touch her again. He reveled in the sounds of Amelia's moans as he lavished attention on first one breast, then the other, before he left a hot trail of kisses down her abdomen. Amelia arched her back and threw her legs atop his shoulders as he got to his knees at the edge of the table. Her sweet mons were already

slick and pulsing with heat as he first licked her, and when he felt her gush against his tongue, he groaned with pleasure and began to devour her.

From the table Amelia writhed with pleasure as her fingers tangled in his hair. He reached up, grasping her ample breasts as he let her pull his head closer to her sex, then ran his hand over her abdomen, upper thighs, and finally let his fingers dig into her hips so he could hold her still.

His manhood jumped and pulsed against his navel, leaving drops of moisture on his flesh when her moans of pleasure grew more high-pitched as she reached her end. He flicked his eyes up to her as he felt her back begin to arch, and watched just in time as her release came crashing over her. He reveled in the sight of her pleasure; was grateful for it. But now he needed his own.

He rose from his knees on trembling knees and without further preamble, lifted her hips and thrust himself deep.

* * *

Amelia screamed Dominic's name as she felt his cock surge into her hot, tight core. She had known she had missed his body but it wasn't until this very moment that realized just how much. Something clicked into place inside of her. Some piece that had been broken when she'd left him in London, and now she was whole again.

Dominic leaned forward as he drove his hips in and out. It felt as if his hands and mouth were everywhere- and she still could not get enough.

"Harder," she demanded through gritted teeth, digging her nails into his forearms. They could be slow and gentle later, but for now, she wanted to feel nothing but the sheer force of his powerful existence.

Dominic gave her a wickedly handsome grin as he gripped her hips. He slowed down then, taking a torturous amount of time to slowly drag himself from her sheath until his thick tip rested at her entrance. She squirmed, impatient as she looked pleadingly into his liquid silver eyes, then screamed as he suddenly slammed himself fully back into her.

Hot liquid gushed from her core as the table beneath her began to sway and creak; threatening to break apart from the force. She didn't care. Let it break. Let it all come crashing down so that they could finally start to rebuild something better and stronger.

"I'm going to bruise you if I don't slow down," Dominic panted, starting to slow his hips.

"Bruise me then," Amelia breathed, then leaned up to lace her arms around his neck. "Bruise me. Mark me. Make me yours."

A savage groan tore from Dominic's parted lips as his grip on her tightened once more and he resumed his powerful thrusts. Amelia's lashes fluttered as her eyes rolled back shortly after, and she let out a moan of pure pleasure as her second orgasm came crashing around her.

Dominic leaned down, picked up her limp, ecstasy-riddled body, and pulled her entirely into his arms. His fingertips dug into her waist and shoulder where he held her as his thrust became harder and faster, and with one more bestial growl, his orgasm followed.

They held onto another tightly for the next several moments, their bodies twitching in post coital bliss as they pressed their foreheads together. Eventually their desperate panting became even breaths, and Dominic carefully lowered Amelia to her feet.

She let out a shaky laugh as she stumbled, and Dominic smiled as he caught her- as he'd always caught her when she had been about to fall. Together they walked back to his bed, and they collapsed in one another's arms on top of it.

"So does this mean we are done arguing now?" Amelia asked, burrowing her head into his chest.

Another chuckle broke from Dominic's chest, the sweet sound rumbling into her ear. He stroked a hand over her ravaged hair and kissed the top of her head.

"I highly doubt it," he replied. "We'll no doubt have something else to argue about by tomorrow."

"That's fine," she sighed, tracing the tip of her nose up his neck. "As long as you're here to argue with, we can fight about whatever you want."

His chest rumbled with laughter yet again, and he laced his fingers around her throat. He tilted her mouth up to his and gave her a deep kiss.

"I'll be here," he promised.

"AMELIA!!!"

"WHERE ARE YOU?"

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Amelia groaned as she dropped her head back down to Dominic's chest.

"What was that?" Dominic asked, looking toward the door.

"The girls," she replied. She burrowed deep into his arms one last time, kissed the center of his chest, and then, begrudgingly, pushed herself out of the bed to gather her clothes.

"I usually join them for breakfast so they are probably worried that they haven't seen me yet," she explained. "I should go before they find their way in here."

She turned back around just in time to see Dominic watching her intently from his bed, and smiled seductively. He gave a charming smile back, and rose to help her string her corset.

"I should come, too," he told her as he tightened her strings, "They should know that their brother-in-law is officially- and permanently going to be living with them."

Amelia's smile widened as the word permanent was emphasized; her heart overflowing with happiness.

"Be prepared," she warned him, "They will want to show you everything. All of their new clothes, their projects. Papa- Felton- was never good at showing them much attention. Your approval will be important to them."

"And they will have it," he told her, helping her into her gown next.

“Speaking of projects. How is your aviary coming along?”

“It is finished,” she said proudly, turning to face him. “The girls and I ordered the birds together and they should be coming any day. We should be receiving our first Scarlet Macaw, a Cynopsitta, a Hahns Macaw, and a Black Parrot.”

“Aside from the Black Parrot I cannot fathom what the others look like,” Dominic confessed as he dressed.

“One is red, one is blue, and one is green,” Amelia explained, grinning wide.

Dominic chuckled, and pulled her in for another kiss.

“AMELIAAAA!!! WHERE ARE YOU?!?!”

They broke from their kiss with laughter, and together, they left Dominic’s bedroom to go search for Lydia and Sarah.

* * *

“Where is he?” Dominic demanded, back to his usual gruff demeanor.

From across his desk Everett looked just as on edge as Dominic felt. It was two days later, and Everett had finally joined them in Ellsworth. Dominic had spent the last two days dividing his time between making love to Amelia, and learning how to be a guardian two young ladies. Now, though, it was time to deal with what had happened in London.

“I put him on a ship booked for the Americas myself,” Tristan reported. “I had to pay him off a bit.”

Dominic bristled.

“You rewarded him for assaulting my wife?”

“Trust me it wasn’t a reward,” Everett said, his deep tone assuring. “Old Rollie and I had a chat before he departed. The reason why he made Amelia a target again was because he was quietly disinherited for crimes he committed in Italy. Had some sort of blackmail plan I could not quite follow. He hasn’t been off vacationing in the sunny valleys. He’s been in prison, and his family has been paying everyone off to keep it quiet.”

“For what?” Dominic demanded.

Everett raised a brow.

“What do you think?”

Dominic didn’t have to say a word. After what Roland had try to do to Amelia, it was obvious.

“I gave him the money- which was a pittance, I might add, because he was threatening to go to the constable over what you did to him,” Tristan explained.

“With everything you and Amelia just dragged yourself out of I did not think it would be prudent to have an investigation regarding you two going on. Besides, with him being in America we won’t have to worry about him coming back. Getting out of prison. Or making any more messes. He is simply gone.”

Dominic would have preferred to make Roland disappear another way, but he had to admit that what Everett’s plan was solid.

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“Thank you,” he said, reaching across the desk.

His friend leaned forward as well and the two shook hands.

“How is Amelia doing anyway?” Everett asked, walking toward the drink cart.

“Roland hadn’t been able to do much more than shake her around a little bit,” Dominic replied, “Thank you for asking about her.”

“Well she is completely and surely your wife now,” Everett sighed. “I suppose I need to get to know her better.”

“And the children,” Dominic pointed out. “You will need to get to know Sarah and Lydia. I suppose you shall be there honorary uncle now.”

Tristan grimaced.

“Children,” he repeated slowly. “I do not have much experience with those.”

Dominic chuckled.

“Me either, old man, but we have to grow up at some point.”

As if they knew they were the topic of discussion, the door of Dominic’s study burst open and the two girls came running in. They both screeched with joy upon finding Dominic, and flew to him; wrapping their arms around his waist. Everett balked at the sight and took an almost intimidated step away from the obvious show of affection.

“Is your meeting over yet, brother?” Lydia asked. She stepped away from him and fluffed her light brown hair. She then turned to Everett and rose a curious brow.

“Who is this?” She asked next.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Dominic replied, then waved a hand toward Everett. “Girls, this is your uncle Everett.”

“Uncle!” They both shouted in unison, and flung themselves onto Everett.

Everett positively paled as he threw his hands upward while the girls wrapped their arms around his waist. Dominic could not help but laugh at his friend’s obvious discomfort.

“Um...children,” he answered awkwardly.

He tentatively reached down, as if they would somehow burn him, and patted their heads in two quick taps. Everett then looked up at Dominic with a confused look.

“Are they always this tiny?” He asked.

Sarah immediately pulled away from with a deep frown.

“I am not tiny,” she retorted, obviously offended.

She tossed her hair again and crossed her arms.

“I am fourteen, Uncle Everett, and I shall soon be a lady.”

“Noted,” Everett grumbled, then pointed to Lydia.

“I like the smaller one better.”

“Ha ha!” Lydia teased, sticking her tongue out at Sarah.

“Girls,” Amelia chastised, walking in just as Sarah looked to fight her younger sister. “What are you doing in here? I told you you mustn’t bother Dominic when he is in his office.”

Dominic felt his heart swell with joy as he saw his wife walk toward him, and he immediately reached for her. Since his return he’d found himself unable to keep his hands off of her when in the same vicinity. Her smile made his breath hitched as she went into his arms, and he couldn’t help but grin as she rose on her toes to kiss his jaw.

“Apologies, darling,” she whispered.

“It’s fine,” he whispered back, kissing her forehead.

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“They were done anyway,” Sarah replied, her tone matter-of-fact.

“We wanted to show Brother the birds,” Lydia added.

She let go of Everett’s waist only to quickly snatch up his hand.

“Come, Uncle Everett, you must see them too,” she insisted. “They are so very lovely!”

Everett looked to Dominic with a silent plea for help, but Dominic only chuckled as he shook his head.

“They came already?” Dominic asked, looking down at Amelia.

She nodded, smiling up at him.

“We did order them a while ago, you know,” she replied, her tone teasing.

“Come, come!” Sarah urged, growing impatient.

“Must I?” Everett grumbled to Dominic as Lydia began pulling him out of the room.

“Afraid so, old boy,” Dominic muttered under his breath.

He was still getting used to having children around, and the truth was it wasn’t always easy to deal with their urgency. One thing he kept in mind, however, was just how neglectful their father had been with them. How little they’d received attention

or affection once Amelia had left their home. Such knowledge had dampened his impatience quite a bit, and he found himself making leniencies for their behavior every day.

With Amelia wrapped under his arm, and Lydia's hand wrapped like a vise around Everett's hand, Sarah lead them out of the office, through the house and toward the back patio, where the newly finished aviary stood in all its glory. He had doubted Amelia's vision for it at first, but now that it was complete, Dominic had to admit that it truly was a beautiful addition to the grounds.

"We must be careful going in," Sarah warned, approaching the door. "They can fly rather fast and we do not want them getting out. And do not forget the gloves. We have them hanging up just inside."

"Gloves?" Dominic asked.

"Sister has been reading to us from her books about large birds," Sarah explained, "Their claws are very different from the small sparrows that flit about. They can slice your arm in an instant if you don't have the gloves. Especially since they are not quite tame yet."

"This is starting to sound like an awful idea," Everett said. "I am not sure that I-"

"Oh, don't be a baby, Uncle Everett, you shall be fine!" Lydia cut him off, pulling him toward the door.

Everett looked back at Dominic and glared.

"These children are monsters. Are you sure they are not yours?"

Dominic laughed as he reached forward and pushed Everett along, and as a group,

they all stepped quickly into the aviary. Inside, Dominic and Everett stepped toward the high walls while Amelia, Lydia, and Sarah fearlessly pulled on the thick gloves and moved to stand in the center of the domed structure.

From above, the large, brightly colored birds let out strangely beautiful and oddly human like sounds as they flittered from one large beam to the next.

“Come my darlings!” Amelia called up to them, holding one gloved hand up high while the other held up a walnut.

“Come Sarah! Come Lydia!” Sarah fearlessly called next, following her big sisters actions.

“You named them after yourselves?” Dominic asked as the red macaw and the large, bright blue parrot flew down to perch on Sarah’s glove. She quickly gave them each a walnut, and reached out to stroke their heads.

“Amelia is the bluish- purple one here,” Sarah explained, “They do not know their names yet. Lydia is the red one, and Sarah is the green one. You’re the black one.”

“Sister thought it was most suitable,” Lydia stated as the large green parrot landed on her glove.

Just then, a shadow passed over from above, and Dominic looked up to see the large black bird swoop down from its perch. Its silver eyes flashed at him as it landed gracefully on Amelia’s gloved hand, and Dominic felt something stir in his heart.

“You handsome,” Amelia cooed to the massive bird.

The thing daintily took the walnut from Amelia’s other hand in its large, powerful beak, and the sound of the nut cracking filled the air. Dominic watched, fascinated as

it used its long talons to pick the meat from the shell and eat it.

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The bird was large and intimidating, and yet it seemed so gentle. It let out a strange purring sound as it finished eating the nut, and then, to Dominic's amazement, it walked up Amelia's arm. Worry laced through him as he saw those sharp talons move from the protective glove to the fabric of Amelia's dress. He could see how easy it would be for it to rip through the silk and shred his wife's arm.

But Amelia stayed calm and unbothered as she whispered words of praise to the large bird until it reached her shoulder. When it did so, the bird nuzzled its head to Amelia's and made that strange purring sound again.

"I thought you said that these birds were not yet tamed?" He asked, taking a cautionary step toward her.

"They are not," Amelia replied, turning her gaze toward him. A small, mischievous smile graced her lips.

"But I discovered I am quite good at calming wild beasts."

EPILOGUE

A month and a half later

"Very good."

Dominic's whispered praise tickled Amelia's ear, and even though she knew she was supposed to be concentrating on her target, her mind and body reacted to her husband's deep voice.

She turned her head slightly and slowly grazed her eyes over him.

Dominic chuckled as he lifted a hand to her chin, and turned her head forward once more.

“No distractions, love,” he scolded, “Keep your eyes on your target like I told you.”

“Even if you are the distraction?” She teased.

Dominic pressed himself even closer to her body, and she could feel the smile on his lips as he kissed her neck.

“Especially if I am the distraction,” he replied, his tone dripping with seduction. “Now come, show these fools what I have taught you.”

Amelia shook off the growing arousal that had clouded her thoughts, and took a steadying breath. She raised her arms and found the center of the target with the sight. Keeping her body loose as Dominic had taught her, she found her center, and pulled the trigger of the Derringer.

The loud shot rang in her ears as the small recoil reverberated through her arms. The scent of fresh gun powder stung her nostrils. From behind her she heard Dominic’s holler of victory, and she smiled wide as she lowered the pistol and took in the perfect hole at the very center of her target.

“Well done, darling, well done!” Dominic praised, pulling her fully into her arms to smother her neck with kisses.

“What did I tell you, old boys? My wife is a natural!”

Amelia giggled as she sat the gun carefully down on the table, and turned in

Dominic's arms to hug him.

"I do not like this," Everett grunted. "Women shooting guns? What is next?"

"Do not even think about it," Tristan said, turning his head to Theo.

Amelia giggled as she saw her friend frown at her brother.

"I will think about whatever I like, thank you very much," she retorted, pushing at his arm.

"Besides if you will not teach me Dominic will. Won't you, Dominic?" Theo asked.

"Me first, me first," Ophelia insisted, already rising from her chair.

She walked with excitement toward Amelia and Dominic and reached for the pistol. Before she could lay a hand on it though Dominic snatched it back.

"Ladies, please," he scolded, his tone full of sarcasm, "Pistols are not to be played with. You can't just go snatching them up as they were a purse or pair of gloves."

"That sounds a bit outdated, Your Grace," Theo retorted, joining them. "According to my blue-stockings meetings, women can do anything a man can. And they certainly should not be categorized to objects such as purses or gloves."

Tristan groaned and covered his face with his hands.

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“Enough about your meetings, Theo. I beg you. They are all you talk about.”

Theo smiled sweetly at her brother.

“Would you prefer I talk about the Devil’s Masquerade?” She asked, her tone laced with sarcasm.

“God help me,” Tristan groaned.

Amelia chuckled as she shook her head. The siblings had reached a compromise with Theo’s free time. She had promised to stop attending the masquerade if Tristan allowed her to attend more speeches and meetings of the blue stockings. And, now that their mother had sadly passed, she was going to more and more of them instead of going to balls and parties.

The passing of Lady Briarwood had been an uncomfortable mixture of great sadness and relief. Toward the end, Amelia had traveled to London often to be with Theo and her mother, and each time the once sweet woman appeared as more of a shell than the brilliant soul she once was.

Theo’s way of grieving was to spend more of her time pushing for women’s rights, and though Amelia agreed that they deserved more freedom, she found herself unable to be as stalwart for the cause as Theo or Ophelia.

Tristan’s way of grieving, she had discovered through talking with Dominic, was to throw himself into his responsibilities as an Earl. One such in particular was finding a wife. Amelia worried that trying to accomplish such a thing while dealing with such

heartbreak would be unwise, but she'd kept such opinions to herself.

Especially since her marriage, though tumultuous at first, had ultimately saved her.

"Well if Dominic is not going to teach me how to shoot and Tristan won't, you must do so, Everett," Ophelia said turning to him.

"Come on lazy bones, get up and show me what to do."

"I shall teach you," Hugo spoke up.

"No," Everett and Tristan said in unison as Hugo leaned over to kiss Seraphina.

Everyone but the two men chuckled.

"He is an excellent instructor," Seraphina told them, bouncing Penelope on her lap.

"Here, Everett," Hugo said, placing Preston onto Everett's lap.

Everett grimaced at the smiling toddler, and immediately got up before Hugo could let his son go.

"On second thought I shall play instructor after all," Everett said quickly, walking to Dominic, his hand outstretched for the pistol. "I don't know why you people keep pressing me to spend time with your children. It is most unnatural."

Dominic handed Everett the pistol and leather bag of ammunition, and together he and Amelia walked back over to the outdoor table shaded by the trees, where the rest of their friends all sat. The leaves above them were starting to turn shades of brilliant yellow as fall settled in, but they still had warm days from time to time.

“Where are your little monsters today anyway?” Tristan asked, preparing the pistol for another shot as Ophelia excitedly bounced on her feet by his side.

“They are out shopping with their governesses,” Amelia explained, sitting on Dominic’s lap, “We thought since it has been a while since we could all get together for some fun that perhaps they should be out.”

“A wise decision, apparently,” Everett retorted, waving the pistol for emphasis, “Though the way you ladies are acting, it still feels like excitable little girls are indeed underfoot.”

“Would you stop complaining and show me what to do already?” Ophelia insisted.

Amelia giggled as Everett and Ophelia glared at one another. Slowly, they were all getting to know one another better. Even though Tristan had been friends with the other four men for years, her, Theo, Rose, and Ophelia, really hadn’t interacted with any of them until Seraphina and Hugo had gotten married. Now they all seemed to act like siblings; constantly picking on one another and driving the other mad.

“I miss Rose,” Seraphina sighed.

“She will be here later on,” Amelia promised, “Her mother was taking her to an early luncheon of some sort.”

“That poor girl,” Seraphina said, shaking her head. “I am so grateful that I am no longer in her position. Please tell me you are not going to be that way with Lydia and Sarah.”

“Heaven’s no,” Amelia retorted. “Though Sarah is not like us. She still has a couple of years, but she is most looking forward to being on the marriage mart. And as Lydia likes to mimic everything Sarah does she feels the same way.”

“And you, old man?” Hugo asked Dominic. “How do you enjoy your new father-figure role?”

Dominic and Amelia both smirked. It had surprised them both how quickly her husband had stepped into the role of over-protective father figure for the girls. He was still very much himself when it came to handling things in a business-like, somewhat stiff manner, but the girls were certainly flourishing under his attention.

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They had balked quite a bit when he had told them they would be resuming their studies earlier than they expected, but each evening after their family dinner, the girls would go to his office and report everything they learned. Amelia often sat in on these, amused with how business-like their little meetings appeared.

“It is not so bad,” Dominic answered presently. “I have even started teaching them a few things about business. More for my enjoyment than theirs, I am sure.”

“They love it,” Amelia interjected, and Dominic smiled at her.

“And their real father?” Everett asked.

“I have heard nothing of him. Have you?”

Amelia’s smile faded as Dominic shook his head.

“No,” he replied, “and I hope it stays that way. The business I gave him was strong. It would take quite a lot of mismanagement for him to run it into the ground.”

Amelia felt a tinge of guilt as Dominic said this. He would not speak much on what he’d had to do to get her father to sign over custody, but she had no doubt that it had cost her husband a great deal.

Soon, perhaps, they would have a child of their own to add to the family. But she wanted to wait until she was sure her father would not cause any more problems for them. For now they were simply enjoying being together, and get used to becoming guardians for two young ladies. As promised, Dominic had yet to travel without her.

He now took most of his meetings there in Ellsworth, and when he absolutely had to go into London, Amelia was with him.

She would mostly visit with Theo, Rose, Ophelia, or Seraphina while he conducted his business; sometimes they would all gather together as they always had. At the end of the day, though, Dominic would always come to collect her, and they would travel home. Often using the privacy of the long carriage ride to give in to their raging desires.

Another gun shot went off, and as they all looked toward the sound, they saw Ophelia deposit the pistol into Everett's hand and quickly walk away.

"I changed my mind," she said, stomping toward the picnic table. "I do not like that."

Amelia couldn't help but chuckle at Ophelia's frown as she took a seat and picked up a scone; looking absolutely appalled by the experience.

"We tried to warn you," Tristan teased.

Ophelia glared at him.

"Hush, you. I need your taunting like I need a husband."

Tristan glowered right back at her, making everyone chortle at the exchange.

Everett carefully put the pistol back in the wooden box Dominic had used to carry it outside, locked it, and brought it back to the table.

"How do you enjoy that?" Ophelia asked, turning to Amelia.

Smiling, Amelia shrugged.

“I do not know,” she replied, “I suppose I like a lot of things I’m not supposed to.”

At her side Dominic choked on his food. He knew she was talking about much more than guns or her growing enthusiasm for boxing. They had tried quite a few new things in the bedroom as of late; many acts that Amelia was sure her blue-stockings friends would find most degrading. She however, found them quite wonderful.

“Back to the topic of business,” he choked out, bringing his cup of tea to his lips to clear his throat, “I have discovered the location of the mysterious new Caldermere heir, Allistair Harleigh.”

“My cousin?” Seraphina asked quickly, appearing interested at the new information.

Dominic nodded.

“Where is he?” She asked.

“In Scotland,” Dominic replied. “He has established himself quite well there and it is taking longer than predicted to get everything sorted. It will still be a while before he can come to London and claim his inheritance. But he has offered me a meeting, so Amelia and I are going to go in a few weeks.”

He then looked around at his friends with a grin.

“In addition I have found another brewery for sale there. I’ve already put in the bid and will be touring it when I go. Anyone else want to buy in if I secure it?”

“I do,” Everett answered quickly. “Business is soaring with the other, and I have found a few more venues that are looking to partner with me. It would be good to provide some options.”

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“Where?” Tristan asked, leaning forward. “You have almost every gentleman’s club in London buying from you.”

Everett gave him a devilish grin.

“While the lot of you have given up your time at the Devil’s Masquerade, I have not. They are in need of a new vendor for their libations and I have managed to speak with the owner about it.”

Tristan groaned and leaned forward, putting a hand to the side of his face to block out the view of Theo.

“Could you please not mention that place in front of her?” He asked. “Knowing that she has been there as a guest, I can never go back again.”

“I can hear you, you dolt,” Theo retorted, reaching out to slap her brother’s shoulder. “And you do not need to worry about my attendance there. For a while, at least.”

“What do you mean for a while?” Tristan asked, and the siblings soon ensued in an argument.

“Ophelia, darling,” Amelia said, reaching out to touch her friend’s hand as the argument went on, “I was hoping to ask you a favor.”

Though Ophelia seemed more interested in the argument between Tristan and Theo, she gradually pulled her gaze from them and focused on Amelia.

“Of course, darling. What is it?” She asked.

“I want Amelia to come with me to Scotland,” Dominic answered. “As a small honeymoon of sorts. We were hoping you would keep watch over Sarah and Lydia while we were gone.”

Ophelia smiled brightly and quickly nodded her head.

“I would love to!” She readily replied. “Oh, we would have so much fun. We could paint. I could teach them so many things about the equality movement happening!”

Tristan whipped his head toward her mid argument and once more glowered at her.

“Not everyone thinks men are as useless you do, Ophelia,” he told her. “Could you please keep such torrid opinions away from young minds?”

“What I do and do not do is none of your concern, Tristan Briarwood,” she shot back, “Besides, there is nothing wrong with a more modern education. Women need to start learning to be more independent. Times are changing.”

“For God’s sake, between you and my sister, I swear...” Tristan’s words became lost in a melee of two feminine voices arguing with him at once; all three of them speaking so vehemently that their words overlapped one another in a confusing, muddled squabble.

“On that note, I think I shall go for a ride,” Everett said, rising from his chair. “Anyone want to come?”

“I would but Seraphina and I need to go put the twins down for their nap,” Hugo said, helping his wife to her feet.

Everett made a face.

“Is that not what nannies are for?” He asked.

“We like to do it ourselves when we can,” Hugo replied, giving his friend a knowing smile. “You will understand when you have your own.”

“I certainly will not,” Everett retorted, looking most disturbed at the accusation. “Fine then. Dominic?”

Amelia looked to her husband and bit back a smile as he made a show of yawning and stretching his arms.

“I am actually quite tired,” he replied. “I believe I shall take a nap instead, that way I am rested up for the evenings games. I hear we are playing Blind Man’s Bluff and imbibing in that special brew Hugo and Seraphina’s chef makes. You ladies remember the last time you played that game, don’t you?”

Dominic asked with a knowing grin.

Amelia tried to bite her lip but her smile but a giggle burst out instead and she playfully slapped at his shoulder. How could she ever forget that?

“I do not know what this is,” Everett said, pointing a finger back and forth between the two, “But something tells me it is much naughtier than it sounds. I am going now. Have fun with your...nap.”

As Everett began to meander toward the stables, Dominic and Amelia headed toward the manor; leaving the three squabbling others to their argument. They were still arguing so intensely that Amelia even wondered if they had noticed the rest of their friends had left.

The moment they were inside the library, Dominic pushed Amelia against the rows of books and kissed her deeply. She sighed softly as her body instantly responded to his touch, and melted.

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“There is something so devilishly arousing about you firing a pistol,” Dominic confessed, pulling her deeper into the library. “Especially since you are so good at it.”

Amelia’s sultry smile widened as she let her husband lead her to a more private space.

“Is that so?” She mused, “Perhaps we should practice more often then.”

“We certainly should,” Dominic replied, then whirled around to capture her again.

Heat poured through her body as Dominic pressed her close and lavished kisses and soft bites to her neck. Wanting him just as much as he wanted her, Amelia’s hands went to his trousers, tugging the hem of his shirt away. She smiled with satisfaction as he pulled it away and she saw the evidence of her hunger from the night before. Thin red trails her nails had left. If he turned, she’d find the same on his back.

As if he knew what she was smiling at, he untied her corset, and placed gentle kisses over the bite and suckling marks he’d left on her breasts.

His. Hers. Theirs.

They owned one another wholly, and the marks of their possessiveness covered them both.

Their lovemaking was quick and savage as Dominic held Amelia against the fastened bookshelves, and as they both orgasmed, their teeth left imprints in one another’s flesh. Dominic’s on her neck; hers on his shoulder.

“You shall have to run up to your room to retrieve a scarf for this,” Dominic said after, running gentle fingers over the fresh bruise. “I don’t believe your dress will cover it.”

On the makeshift bed of discarded clothes, Amelia smiled as she stretched by Dominic’s side, then draped an arm over his naked chest.

“Let them see,” she sighed. “It is not as if our friends are unaware of such decadent acts. You heard Everett. And Theo, though untested, is just as wild as he is. Or at least will be when she finds the proper gentleman to discover such things with.”

Dominic chuckled and nuzzled the top of her head.

“And what of Ophelia and Tristan?” He asked. “They are tad more...stringent.”

“Ophelia, perhaps, but I am not sure about Tristan. Everett and I have become good friends in this short time and he’s told me stories of what the four of you used to partake in.”

Amelia looked up in time to see Dominic grimace, and she let out a laugh.

“What? As if I did not already have my own suspicions? You came to the Masquerade with a mask, Dominic, it was obvious that you had been familiar with the place.”

“Still,” he grunted, “I would prefer he keep his mouth shut about such things.”

Amelia moved to lay body atop his and rested her cheek on her hands as she looked down at him.

“It does not bother me, you know. That you had a life before we fell in love. In a way

it is sort of...comical, to know that the Devil's Masquerade deserved both of us; even if that service was for different reasons."

Dominic studied her face, a soft smile on his lips as he stroked gentle fingers through her hair.

"Hmmm?" She asked. "I know that face. What are you thinking, husband?"

"It is a radical idea," he warned her.

"Interesting," Amelia mused with a smile. "Tell, tell."

Dominic's smile grew seductive as his silver eyes flashed with heat.

"I know we made a promise to each other that we would not go back. But when we did so we were speaking of us going separately. What if...what if after we returned from Scotland we went together?"

Curiosity piqued within Amelia, followed by a burning trail of excitement. She'd never considered it before but such an idea was immediately compelling.

"What would we do there?" She asked, turning round to catch sight of her rosy buttocks, still sore from the spanking she'd received the night before.

"Not that," Dominic assured her, chuckling, "That pleasure is for us alone. Besides, no one else but me deserves to hear those delicious sounds you make when my hand stings your flesh."

Amelia's cheeks flushed at his words and she leaned forward to kiss his lips. They had tried many things in the last month and a half they had been living together, and spankings were just many new favorites.

“What then?” She asked.

“A scenario, perhaps,” he offered, his hands going down to massage her pink hind quarters. “Two strangers meeting for the first time, possibly?”

Amelia raised a brow as her lips twitched.

“Hmmm, that could be very interesting,” she replied, drawing her last word out into a seductive moan.

Dominic groaned at the sound, and lifted his head to kiss her deeply.

“What do you think? Shall we try going together? See what the Masquerade can offer us as a couple?” He asked when he pulled back.

Amelia nodded, feeling her own arousal- and his, begin to heighten again with their conversation.

“With you, Dominic, I am willing to try anything.”

Dominic let loose another groan from his throat as his hand threaded through her hair. He pulled her up to him as he gave her another deep kiss, then rolled them both until he was the one on top. Amelia let out a strangled sound of ecstasy as his once more hardened manhood drove deep into her pulsing, moist center, and she wrapped her legs tightly around his waist.

“I love you, little vixen,” he panted as he took her with long, deep strokes.

“I love you more,” she moaned back, then threw her head back and opened her mouth in silent scream as he made her orgasm yet again.

He made her finish twice more before he found his own bliss, then on shaking legs they rose from their makeshift bed and helped one another dress. Dominic pulled his kerchief from his pocket and after folding it diagonally, wrapped it around itself and tied it carefully to Amelia’s neck.

“I should go get a scarf,” she protested weakly through Dominic’s kisses.

“We should go back outside before our friends return,” he said between kisses, “And right now I could not have bare to leave my side. Even if it was only for a few minutes.”

Amelia threw her arms around his neck and Dominic deepened their kiss. With effort, they finally pulled away from another, took hold of one another’s hand, and made their way back outside.

The End?